

STALKER'S REVENGE

Book 2 of the Earth Cleansing Series

by

Kenneth E. Baker

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Dedication

~~This one is for my son, Kenny Jr.~~

Chapter 1

Todd watched the six men fidget in their seats waiting for him to say something. *Let them wait; it would do them good*, he thought. Tilting his chair back, he thought about what had happened two months ago. From his headquarters, located in the little town of Cicada, Missouri, he sent out people to hunt down Joe and a woman named Tony that his Master feared. Just when he thought he was reeling Joe and the woman in, things started going wrong. His right hand man, Ray, took twenty of his top men and disappeared. Although he didn't know it then, Todd now knew Ray had left because of the way Todd had acted during one of his drunken stupors. When he awoke the next morning and found Ray gone, Todd went to his office and broke or threw out all the liquor bottles in the place. He had done this while nursing a brain-thumping headache.

A few days after that, for no reason, people with him started killing each other. He owed Joe dearly for that one. He tested the drug that he gave his people to keep them calm, but he found it to be ineffectual. Someone had put a worthless powder in its place. Without the drug to calm them, his people turned aggressive and started killing randomly. He ended up killing three dozen of them before control was established. The next few days were hectic. Things settled down when they found a fresh supply of the drug a hundred miles away, but it took four days to settle his people.

He decided to move his headquarters to a city that had a large supply of the drug. That was when all hell broke loose. Something happened when his men tried to move the high explosives out of the storage building.

Todd was standing on the other end of town when a tremendous explosion lifted him off his feet and slammed him to the ground. A jagged piece of falling board hit him on the head, cutting a gash from his ear to his chin. Now he had an ugly scar on what was once an unblemished face. This was another thing that he owed Joe. He didn't know how, but he was sure Joe had a hand in the explosion.

Todd's people had trapped Ben in a small town. He told them to let Ben escape, hoping it would lead him to Joe. The only problem was Ben disappeared after escaping the town. There hadn't been a sign of any of them until yesterday. One of Todd's men, out rabbit hunting, stumbled across a small, concealed valley. He noticed smoke coming from the chimney of a house sitting in a small grove of trees. Deciding to investigate, he watched as three men and a large wolf came out of the house and took off in separate directions. Instantly, he knew these were the people Todd was looking for. He had heard horror stories about the wolf and became terrified that it might smell him, so he crawled back over the side of the hill. He coasted his truck to the bottom before starting it, but even then, the

noise seemed terribly loud. Forcing himself to be calm, he slowly drove away on the dirt road to keep from raising a lot of dust.

He almost killed three people when he roared into town and slammed on the brakes babbling that he had found them. *Now we have you, Joe*, Todd thought. Joe had escaped once, and given half a chance he would do so again. Todd made sure his people stayed back far enough to keep from alerting Joe. He had been on the phone all morning calling in people from up to three hundred miles away. By the next morning he would have hundreds of people surrounding the cabin. With a bitter smile, he thought that if it hadn't been for the explosion there would have been four times as many people. The people he had would just have to do the job.

He looked across the table at Mickey and said, "You're positive the men you sent out won't be seen?"

"Yes, the closest one is two miles away. They all use long range glasses from the highest vantage points around."

"Go back, and tell them I don't want them any closer than five miles. We have to allow room for that goddamn wolf to roam around. As it is, it will be hard to sneak up close enough to surprise them."

"Greg, has Mickey told you how the valley is set up?" Todd asked the heavy set man with a military haircut, who sat across from him.

"From the description he gave me, this valley will be hard to take if they know we're coming. If I were Joe, I would plan my defense so there would be two choke points where I could funnel the attackers. Once I got the attackers where I wanted them, I would set up a killing zone. I would take out as many of the enemy as possible in there. He is bound to know we have overwhelming numbers on him. His only choice will be to try and whittle us down. Todd, you know him. Do you think he would avoid a fight if he could?" Greg asked.

"He sure as hell has avoided us until now."

"Which means he's smart and will only fight on his own terms, if he fights at all. Going into that valley after him will be like bearding the proverbial lion in its den. Our casualties will be heavy, and I doubt we will take them alive."

"Casualties don't concern me. You are to use these people to our best advantage. I want Ben and Joe taken alive. I want that understood by everyone," Todd said looking at each one.

"Damn it, Todd! That's like tying our hands behind our backs and sending us into the fight," Mickey said.

Todd leaned across the table and looked down at Mickey. "Understand this, if either of them dies, I'll put out a permanent death warrant on you. Do you understand what I want?"

"Yeah, we understand. We also know that in the heat of battle things happen over which we have no control," Mickey said.

"You had better damn well control your people. I don't care what happens to the rest of Joe's people, but Ben and Joe are to be unharmed."

He watched them knowing what he wanted was almost impossible for them to accomplish but he couldn't think of any other way. He let them talk among themselves for a few minutes as he rubbed the scar on his cheek, then he tapped on the table to get their attention. "If everyone is clear on what they have to do, I want you to get your people in place. We strike tomorrow morning at first light." He listened to them grumble as they filed out of the room to get ready for the next day. If things went right, tomorrow morning he would have Ben and Joe under his control. Ben, he would take to his master, but Joe, he would keep for himself. He smiled thinking of how much pain and suffering he was going to put Joe through before he killed him.

Yvonne, his current lover, came out of the bedroom dressed in a sheer negligee. Her blond hair flowed down to the small of her back. He saw the bluish-black splotches on her breasts where he had

mauled them last night during their lovemaking. “Jesus, my tits are sore. Did you have to be so rough last night, Todd?” she said as she rubbed her left breast.

“The way you were screaming last night told me how much you liked the pain, so shut up and fix me something to eat, bitch.”

“Is that all I am, Todd, a maid and someone you can fuck anytime you feel horny?” she whined.

Whirling around, he slapped her face. “Listen, you stupid bitch, I can replace you the same way I replaced the nagging bitch before you.”

“What do you mean, Todd?” she said in a coy voice. Reaching down, she rubbed his crotch.

Grabbing her by the neck, he put his face next to hers. “Well, love, her bones are lying on the street of the town we left. Is that what you want?” he said, squeezing her neck.

Frightened, she said, “No, Todd, I won’t complain anymore. You can do what you want with me. All right, honey?”

“That’s better. Now get me something to eat,” he said, flinging her away from him. “Tell whoever is outside to get Mickey for me,” he yelled at her as she opened the door. He heard her talking to someone outside. She stuck her head back in the door, “Mickey’ll be here in a minute,” she said.

He looked at the crudely drawn map lying on the table and tried to think of anything he had missed. It looked straightforward and simple, but he knew it wasn’t going to be that easy.

Joe was a formidable opponent, and he wouldn’t leave anything to chance. Mickey came in and sat down at the table. “Will the tank be fixed in time to use it tomorrow, Mickey?”

“I sent two men to the armory in the next town for the pin we need to connect the track. Once they get it, it’ll take an hour to have it on the road.”

“Do we have any bazookas or rocket launchers yet?”

Mickey took off his hat and scratched his head. “No, that’s something I wanted to talk to you about. If you let me send men to look for where they stashed the military hardware, our job would be a lot easier. Damn the military anyway. Who knew they would gather all the weapons and ship them to one location? If we found this place, we would have more than enough arms.”

“After we get Ben and Joe, you can have all the men you need. Until then, we need every man we have. Has Greg figured out what their defenses might be?”

“Without having someone there, he can only guess at the locations Joe has set up for defense. Greg doesn’t like going in blind like this, and I can’t say that I blame him.”

“I know, but we can’t tip off Joe we have located him. Greg will have to make do with a difficult situation. Are there men you can trust leading each of the groups you send in?”

“Some of them I don’t know about. If they come under heavy fire, they may break and run. That explosion a few months ago killed most of the men we could trust. I would say we’re in good shape. If you hadn’t blown up all the crazies we had in the last town, this would be the perfect time to use them. Now, I just don’t know,” Mickey said, leaning back in his chair.

Sighing, Todd said, “I’d have kept the crazies, but we didn’t have enough people to control them after the explosion. I’d like to know how the crazies not under our control found out we are treating them like the animals they are. You may have noticed there are fewer and fewer of them coming in to join us. Piecing together what we learned from the ones still coming in, we found they are avoiding us like the plague. Make sure you treat the ones we have with kid gloves. Perhaps, we can get them to trust us again.”

“I get the willies just being around them. You can’t trust them. They’re unpredictable and you can’t tell what they’re going to do from one minute to the next. I agree we need them, but guarding them takes away men we could use elsewhere.”

“Don’t start again on how we should bring the men we have at the ranch down here. I want a safe haven to go to if things turn bad. No, we leave the men there to guard the ranch in case we need some place safe to fall back to,” Todd said.

"I would feel better if we had a couple of hundred more people to throw against Joe," Mickey said.

"Christ, we have three hundred people now. There are only seven of them. I don't care how good they are; we'll run over them like a steamroller. By the way, make sure the drug is in a safe place where our people can't get to it. I noticed some of them are itching for a fight. By tomorrow, they'll be ready and willing to tackle Joe and his bunch."

"I'll bring it over, so you can put it in the safe. We might have a few killings before the night is over. I doubt my men can keep them separated until tomorrow; especially, with the crazies egging them on," Mickey said.

"Would you like to have Yvonne, Mickey? She is beginning to bother me. The dumb bitch is getting much too lippy to suit me. She's a fine piece of ass, and she really enjoys her sex. If you don't want her, I'm going to kill her and get me another girl. I like that cute little redhead who works in the kitchen."

"No thanks, Todd. I'll stick with the woman I have. After the way you abuse them, they aren't worth a shit." Mickey said, holding up his hand to still Todd's protest.

"If you don't use them, you lose them. I ride my girls hard. Anyway, all the bitches like to be treated rough. Pamper them, and they'll get the idea they can take charge."

"Whatever you say, Todd. I better go check and make sure everything is under control," Mickey said. Draining the last of his coffee, he got up and went out the door.

Yvonne entered balancing a tray of food in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. Sitting the food on the table, she turned to Todd. "After you eat, lover, can we go down and tease the crazies?"

"Damn it, I told you not to do that any more. We need them, and the ones they'll get to join us. Besides, after I eat, I have a surprise for you."

"Oh goodie, what is it? Don't make me wait." Todd shook his head no. "Ah, come on; give me a little hint, please?"

"Let's say it will blow you away when you get it."

"All right, I'll wait if I have to, but it isn't fair," she pouted. Placing a plate loaded with meat and potatoes in front of him, she opened the bottle of wine. Pouring herself a glass, she sat down across from him. Todd drank water with his meal, having given up alcohol two months ago.

Todd dragged out the meal, enjoying her impatience. As he ate the last bite on his plate, she snatched up the plate and took it to the sink. Returning, she asked, "Please, Todd, can I have my gift now? Pretty please."

Patting his full stomach, Todd belched. "Before you get your present, I want some of that good pussy of yours." Todd grabbed her and tore her dress down the front. Pressing his mouth against her right breast, he bit down hard. A gush of warm blood filled his mouth and she screamed. She tried to push his head away. The blood in his mouth had a coarse texture to it, yet was sweet at the same time. He moved his blood smeared lips to her left breast and bit the nipple, which caused her to scream louder. Stepping back, he looked at her. A thin stream of blood flowed from her right breast. He reached for a napkin and wiped the blood away.

Tilting her head back, he said, "Forgive me. I didn't mean to hurt you. You know how you turn me on, Baby. Here, dry your eyes, and let's go into the bedroom." Her sobs turned to cries of joy as he caressed her body. Starting at her foot, he licked his way up her leg, nipping her skin every few inches. Gently, he caressed her body with his hands bringing cries of pleasure from her. Shifting his position, Todd reached over the side of the bed and picked up a gun lying there. He took his finger out of her, and stuck the barrel of the revolver in her vagina. Todd watched as she whipped her head back and forth clutching at the sheets with her hands. Easing the barrel in and out, matching the rhythm of her bucking body, Todd watched her face. As she went into her climax, he shoved the barrel all the way in her and pulled the trigger. Her face showed intense pleasure, then shock. Her

eyes flew open and then glazed over. A soft sigh escaped her as her head fell to the side.

Todd climbed off the bed and went to the front door. Opening the door, he yelled for Mickey and watched as the man ran toward him from across the street.

“You wanted me, Todd?”

“Have someone drag that bag of shit out of the bedroom. Bring me a new mattress and throw the old one away. After you do that, bring me the redhead from the kitchen.” He went into the bedroom and got a clean pair of pants out of the closet. While he changed clothes, two men carried Yvonne’s body from the room. Another two carried out the blood stained mattress. Stepping outside, he looked out at the overcast sky. “Soon, Joe. Soon I’ll have you in my grasp.”

Chapter 2

Tony's eyes flew open, bringing her from a deep sleep. *Oh no!* she thought. *They know where we are.* Sighing softly, she resigned herself to the fact. It had to happen sooner or later. She had hoped for a little more time. Bill needed to adjust to the realities of the new world in which they lived. Propping herself on her elbow, she looked to the other side of the bed where he lay on his back breathing softly. She saw small lines under his eyes. They weren't there two months ago when their tranquil world got turned upside down.

She worried about Bill because he was having a hard time coming to grips with the situation they were in. Her heart ached for his loss of innocence. Bill was, or had been, one of the gentlest people she had ever met. His forte was to give, and he gave of himself without regard to his personal feelings. Having lived with him for five years, she knew the anguish this sometimes caused him. Bill's purpose in life seemed to be to try to please everyone. She had to admit he was very good at it. She couldn't think of anyone from tiny tots to adults who didn't hold Bill in the highest regard.

Violence was as alien to his nature as it must be for the Pope of the Catholic Church. That way of life was over now. They were in a struggle for their survival. To stay alive, they sometimes had to be as brutal as the people trying to destroy them.

Brushing away tears, she thought of how much she loved the man lying next to her. She rolled to his side and kissed him on the cheek. Still asleep he mumbled, "I love you, Babe."

She rose and put on her robe. At the bedroom door she looked at his sleeping face illuminated by the soft light of the moon shining through the window. With a deep sadness, she closed the door. She wondered if the future was going to be too much for Bill.

Entering the living room, she saw Ben sitting in an overstuffed armchair with Tammy on his lap. He looked up as she entered. "So, you know they have found us."

"Yes, I woke from a sound sleep knowing we are no longer safe. We have to resume our journey to that place in Colorado."

"Tammy woke Joe up and told him she was getting strong indications of danger from all around us. Didn't you?" Ben asked, ruffling Tammy's long brown hair.

"I woke up an hour ago with this suffocating feeling. It felt as if something was stealing the air around me. I knew then they were out there," Tammy said.

Tony sat down on the couch, and drew her feet under her. "Where's Joe?" she asked.

"He went out to check and to see how bad our situation is," Ben answered.

"What does your guardian have to say, Ben?"

"She says it's time for us to continue our journey. It seems we are back in the game whether we want to be or not."

"Some game. You never did finish explaining why you thought we were chosen to do whatever it is we have to do," Tammy said in a puzzled voice.

This young eleven-year-old girl continued to amaze Tony in the way she could adapt to different situations. One moment, she acted her age as a precocious young girl. The next moment, she had as much worldliness as a middle-aged woman. Tony would like to have known her before the world went crazy.

"How is Bill?" Ben asked.

“He continues to build layers over his inner self to protect his sanity. I’m afraid these layers will smother him, and then he will be lost.”

“You underestimate him, Tony. When it comes to a crunch, I have a gut feeling Bill will be the strongest of us all,” Tammy said, surprising both of them.

Smiling warmly, Tony said, “I hope you’re right, Tammy.”

Tammy sat upright on Ben’s lap with a look of concentration on her face. “Stalker wants us to wake everyone up. We still have a while before they attack us,” she said.

Standing up, Ben said, “I’ll go wake Jake and Jane while you go rouse Bill out of bed.”

Walking into their bedroom, followed by Tammy, Tony approached the bed where Bill lay. “Let me wake him,” Tammy giggled. Making a “be my guest” gesture with her hand, Tony watched as Tammy pulled a feather out of her back pocket. She bent over Bill.

Holding the feather over his head, she tweaked his nose with it. Bill twitched his mouth and nose, contorting his face into an ugly grimace. Next, she tickled him under the chin causing him to swat his neck. Barely containing her giggles, she ran the feather along his forehead.

Suddenly, Bill’s arms shot out and grabbed Tammy. He threw her on the bed.

Squealing, Tammy said, “No, No, No.”

“How do you like a dose of your own medicine?” Bill asked as he tickled her.

Tony laughed at the sight of the man she loved and the child she cared for as they romped on the bed.

Turning to her, Bill said, “So you think it’s funny, do you?” He looked at Tammy saying, “Shall we?”

Tammy jumped off the bed. She ran behind Tony giving her a shove. Falling toward the bed, Bill grabbed her arm. Tony flipped on her back, and Tammy landed beside her. Both of them tickled Tony. Trying to fight them off, Tony rolled off the bed in a tangled heap. Bill lay on the bed, looking down at her.

Tammy climbed off the bed and assumed a serious face saying, “And let that be a lesson to you.” She broke into a fit of giggles and ran out of the room.

Kissing her tenderly and holding her close Bill asked, “Why the middle-of-the-night visit by you two vixens?”

“They’ve found us.” Tony watched his face lose all of its humor and become serious.

“Shit,” he mumbled to himself as he got out of bed and put on his pants. “How bad is it?” Bill asked.

“I don’t know. Joe and Stalker went to find out what we’re up against. Stalker asked Tammy to get everyone up because they will be coming in shortly.”

Reaching out his hand, he helped her up and said, “Let’s make coffee then join them in the living room.”

Tony carried cups and Bill carried the coffee pot over to a glass end table and set it down. “This stuff is guaranteed to open your eyes,” he said.

“Damn,” moaned a very skinny black man. “This isn’t another one of your coffee experiments is it, Bill?”

Everyone broke into laughter as they remembered the last time Bill had made coffee. He had used six scoops when he should have used only two and a half. Earlier that morning Tammy had put salt into the sugar bowl as a gag. Bill had carried two cups of his freshly made coffee into the garage where Jake was working under the hood of the Jeep they were tuning up. Taking the bowl of what Bill thought was sugar from under his arm, he handed it to Jake saying, “Now tell me where you get service like this, good buddy.”

Jake had ladled three heaping spoons into his coffee and stirred it up. Raising his cup he said, “To better days,” and took a large drink. As soon as he swallowed, it came right back up, as he spat it all

over the side of the Jeep.

Shocked, Bill had asked, "What's wrong? Did it go down the wrong pipe?" He pounded Jake on the back.

Gasping for breath, Jake asked, "Who made this stuff?" as he poured the contents of the cup on the floor.

With a hurt look, Bill answered, "I did."

"What're you trying to do? Poison me?"

"Come on it can't be that bad," Bill raised his cup and took a drink, which he instantly spewed all over the floor. "It is a bit strong, isn't it?"

"That's putting it mildly," Jake said.

They both heard Tammy giggle and turned to see her disappear into the house.

"I wonder what that was all about?" Bill asked.

"I don't know, but I smell a rat in the wood pile," Jake answered. He put his finger into the sugar bowl and stuck it in his mouth. "Salt," he said. "With your mule kicking coffee and this salt, I was almost done in."

Coming back to the present, Bill said, "You won't let me forget that will you?"

"Not as long as I can remember the taste," Jake answered with a chuckle, accepting the cup of coffee.

Bill poured another cup and handed it to Jane. He thought of her as the mother hen of this impromptu group. Her dark hair was cut short, almost butch style. This added to her appearance of plumpness because of her short height. She stood five feet one inch tall. Anyone making the mistake of thinking her soft was in for a big surprise as she had proven on many occasions. Jake said she was mean as a rattlesnake when she had to be. She had one annoying habit that bothered Bill. She continuously smoked a foul-smelling cigar. True to nature, she put a cigar in her mouth to accept the cup of coffee.

"Do you have to smoke those things all the time?"

Taking a long drag, she blew smoke at him. "Don't deny an old lady the one comfort that calms her nerves. Hell, I don't even like them that much. I know they annoy you, so I continue to smoke them."

"Thanks a lot," Bill said, with a shake of his head. Pouring himself a cup of coffee, he sat down beside Tony.

"Stalker says they will be here in a few minutes," Tammy told them, as she relayed the wolf's thoughts.

That was another thing Bill had trouble understanding. How could an animal talk, especially a wolf as ugly as Stalker? Tammy, Tony and Ben were the only ones able to hear what Stalker said. It was a mental, not verbal conversation. The way Tony explained it, Stalker's thoughts just appeared in her mind, and she understood them perfectly.

Jesus, what a group, Bill thought. Three people who could talk to a giant, Canadian wolf. Joe said the wolf couldn't talk to him.

Ben told them an alien force existed in his body, but wasn't actually there. This force kept him from any harm the demented people chasing them could throw at him. Jake told them about Ben dying in a plane crash in Wyoming, and then coming back to life. Jake swore Ben was dead. He said Ben's neck was broken, bloody ribs stuck out of his chest, and his back was broken. They checked for a pulse, but there wasn't any. While Jake and a man named Cap were investigating the wreckage of the plane, Ben's body repaired itself. For the life of him, Jake said he couldn't understand it.

Jake seemed to be ordinary enough. Before all of this started, Jake had been an F.B.I. agent assigned to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. His job was to escort patients to a secret hospital in Colorado. That is how he met Ben and his family. Some of Jake's stories about their journey eastward to meet Tony and Bill caused Bill's hair to stand on end.

Jane was the odd one. She had retired from the army as a major last year. She was the nurse for Ben's son on the flight to Colorado. From what Jake said, she was one tough cookie in a tight situation. For the last two months she had acted like a mother hen even though she was only a few years older than they were. Jane took Tammy under her wing and tried to get the girl to act more feminine. Bill thought this was a losing battle. To Bill's way of thinking, Tammy was a tomboy and always would be.

Joe was an enigma. He could be as brutal as anyone. At the same time, there was a side of him that would cry if he found a bird with a broken wing. He taught Bill a lot about the natural beauty between nature and the country. When faced with danger, a shield seemed to drop over Joe's personality and he became a cold-blooded killing machine. The one true love in his life was the girl, Tammy. Bill doubted if there was a stronger bond between a natural parent and child than there was between Joe and Tammy. When around Tammy, Joe was the gentlest person alive. They were always cutting up with each other.

Stalker, the wolf, was hard to place in the scope of things. Stalker had two things on his mind, protecting Tony and protecting Tammy. This was paramount with him. He was never far from their sides. Bill felt sorry for anyone who tried to harm either of them. Tammy told them that Stalker was visited by a voice in his mind telling him to go south and protect the Chosen One. As a reward for doing this, his mate and five cubs would be watched over and kept from harm.

Watching them talk to each other, he wondered for the hundredth, or possibly the millionth time, if this was all a dream.

They all turned as the door opened and a large black wolf entered. Next, a man stepped through the door that radiated power in each of his movements.

Standing five feet seven, he seemed shorter because of the breadth of his shoulders. Bill had never seen, or met, another man who had such a broad and muscular upper body as Joe.

Stalker was a black, Canadian timber wolf, standing almost four feet tall. His head was so large it appeared to be disproportionate to the rest of his body. At first sight, he looked like a nightmare come to life. His large teeth and broad body, left no doubt that, if provoked, he could tear a person limb from limb with little effort. Stalker entered the room and went to where Tony sat and lay down at her feet.

Joe shook the rain off his slicker and hung it on a peg next to the door. "That coffee smells mighty good. I hope you saved a cup for me," he said as he sat down beside Jake.

"Here you go, Redman," Jane said handing him a cup of coffee. "Would you like a little something in it to take off the chill?" She asked, holding up a bottle of bourbon.

"Just a tad, if you don't mind."

Taking a sip of the spiked coffee, he let out a sigh and said, "Just what I needed." Joe took another drink and looked at each of them before he said anything. "We knew this day would come eventually, although we thought we would have more time. From what Stalker and I saw, they have us sewed up pretty tight. They don't know we know they are there, so we have surprise on our side. There is no way we can leave without them seeing us, so we are going to have to stand and fight."

"How many people do you figure your friend Todd has by now?" Jake asked.

"Please refrain from calling him my friend. It is true I once considered Todd my best friend, but that Todd died when he caught the disease. In the last few months, Todd has committed acts showing he has lost all sense of humanity. As far as I'm concerned, he is worse than the lowest animal. So please, do not call him my friend," Joe told him in an icy voice.

"Okay, okay. I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers," Jake said.

"Sorry, Jake." He clapped him on the shoulder.

"Do you know how many people we face?" Ben asked.

"Stalker says there are around a hundred people surrounding us, but there are more people

behind them," Tammy said.

"Todd was never into military matters. I doubt there are more than two rings around us. The first one will have less people in it. Todd wants to channel us into a place where the second ring can seal us off."

"Can we turn that around and use it?" Jake asked.

"Perhaps we can. We'll have to be careful though. Just because Todd doesn't have any military training doesn't mean some of the men with him aren't pretty sharp," Joe said.

"How about if a couple of us take two trucks and make a dash out of here. They might follow us while the rest of you hide until they leave," Bill said.

"Won't work. First, Todd would search this place thoroughly to find any clue to where we are going. Second, I don't believe we would fool all the people around him. I tell you some of them are awfully sharp. I think our best bet is to go to the positions we have prepared and see what happens," Joe told them.

"Do you know something we don't know?" Bill asked.

Shaking his head, Joe said, "It doesn't make sense for them to stop us here. Look at all the effort that went into getting us this far, and all the effort to bring us together. I believe whoever, or whatever, is guiding us will come to our aid."

"What say you, Ben?" Bill asked.

"Sorry, Bill, my guardian watches over me only. She says she can't influence things that happen around me."

"One hell of a group we have here. Joe says to have faith in whatever brought us together taking care of us. Ben says his guardian will look out for him but can do nothing for us. We have three hundred people out there trying to kill us. Now I know what Custer felt like," Bill said, dropping on the couch beside Tony.

Tammy giggled. They all looked at her as she placed her hands over her mouth to hold back the laughter.

Glaring at her, Bill asked her what part of their situation she found so funny.

"I'm sorry, Bill, but Stalker says that at three hundred to eight the odds are still in our favor," Tammy said.

"Oh great! Not only are we going to die, but I get the pleasure of spending my last few hours with a wolf who thinks he's a comedian," Bill said gesturing to where Stalker lay at Tony's feet.

Everyone burst into laughter at the same time, and Bill stared at them with a stunned look on his face.

Brushing a tear from his eye, Ben said, "Thank you, Bill. We all needed that."

Tony took his arm and pulled him down beside her on the couch, telling him that she would explain later when she saw the confused look on his face.

"Jane, refill our coffee cups while we discuss what we're going to do," Joe told the matronly woman.

"Here, let me help you," Tammy said as she jumped off Ben's lap. She crossed to where the coffee pot sat and started filling cups from the large pot.

"Does everyone know what they are supposed to do?" Joe asked. He looked at each of them until they shook their heads yes. "From what Stalker and I saw, these people aren't dressed for the bad weather that is coming in the next few hours. I want all of you to put on warm clothes and the heaviest coats you have. Don't forget a good set of gloves. I wouldn't be surprised if it started snowing in the next few hours."

They took the coffee Jane and Tammy passed around. Each of them sipped it slowly, thinking it would be a while before they had anything warm again.

"Do you think they are ready for the surprise, Tammy?" Jane asked the girl.

"I think so," Tammy answered and ran off to the kitchen followed by Jane. They heard a rattling of pots and pans and a squeal of laughter from Tammy as Jane started swearing like a sailor. In a few minutes, everything became quiet once again.

Jane and Tammy came through the door carrying a basket between them. Going to the couch, they sat the basket on the floor.

Everyone was curious but they knew that Jane would tell them what was in the basket in her own good time.

"For the life of me, I don't know where the thought came from. You remember when Joe and I went to the town on the other side of the mountain? Once there, I had this overpowering urge to pick up thermos bottles. Call it strange, but I went with the feeling and picked up a thermos for each of us." She pulled the cover off the basket to expose eight brand new thermoses.

They looked at each other remembering what Joe had said earlier about someone watching out for them.

"Crank up the coffee pot, and let's fill these things. We can take them with us. Hot Damn! I can face almost anything if I have hot coffee close by," Jake said, causing them to chuckle. They all knew how much Jake liked his coffee. It was rare to find him without a cup close at hand.

"Make mine tea, will you, Jane?" Tony said as she headed for the room she shared with Bill. She joined him in getting dressed for the outside cold.

In the living room, Ben asked, "Joe, do you think we are going to get out of this? My Guardian tells me she can't figure out why we didn't have more time. It's a shame; another month and the weather would have been in our favor.

"I have to believe we are, Ben. Otherwise, why not throw in our hand and give up. I think we have a destiny to fulfill and we are a long way from achieving our goal."

"How do you think Bill will hold up during what is to come?" Ben asked.

"Don't worry about Bill. He'll do what is right and best for all of us." Joe answered.

"How much time do you think your booby traps will give us before they break through?" Jake asked.

"Enough time for us to fall back to our hardened positions unless they attack from one direction only. If that happens, we're in a lot of trouble," Joe answered.

"Stalker will go ahead and make sure they don't try anything before we get in position," Tammy shouted from the bedroom.

Stalker entered the room. Joe opened the door, so Stalker could leave the house.

"Be careful out there, Stalker. If they take you out, it would almost guarantee they would kill us. Your death would give them such an emotional lift we would never be able to stop them," Joe told the wolf.

Stalker nodded his head, signifying that he understood what Joe was saying, then trotted out the door.

Closing the door, Joe turned to Jake and said, "Take the rocket launcher and get out to the high point. From there you can take out anything heavy they send at us. Have a round loaded and watch the two points I told you about"

"How many rounds are in the bunker?" Jake asked.

"We left eight rounds on the rack we made. We also left two hundred rounds for your rifle in case some of them get to you."

"I'll call you on the radio when I get into position," Jake said. He pulled on a heavy coat. When Jake opened the door to leave, Joe and Ben heard hail stones bouncing off the porch.

"Going to be a hell of a morning," Jake said as he closed the door.

"We can only hope that Todd didn't count on the weather turning bad. His people aren't dressed for it," Joe told Ben.

Everyone was back in the living room now. They looked toward Joe for instructions.

“Bill, you and Tony take the center. Remember there probably won’t be much action your way until later. If the booby traps work as planned, they’ll channel the people to you. Take some sandwiches with you. This is going to be a long day.

“Jane, you go to the left, and I will take the right side that way we will be able to support each other.”

Joe went down to his knee and pulled Tammy’s coat tight around her. “You and Stalker have the most important job, Tammy. From your post, you can see all our positions. Keep your head down and relay what’s happening at each of our positions.”

“Yes, sir,” she gave him a mock salute and a smile.

He stood and looked around the room. “I guess that’s about it. Check in by radio when you get settled. Shall we go?”

Chapter 3

“Wake up, Ross,” Ross heard. At the same time, he felt a stimulating jolt of current that brought him instantly awake.

“What is it, Rita?” he asked.

“Ross, I am getting an indication of an energy spike from all across the country.”

“What type of energy? Can you pinpoint the source?”

“It is fading now but it was emanating from every square inch of the planet for a tenth of a second. It resembled a pulse of electrical energy but it differed because it was like the shudder of a wounded being.”

Calculating rapidly, Ross came up with a figure that had to be wrong. Nothing known to man could generate that much energy on such a wide scale.

“Run your readings through me. I want to get a first hand feel of what happened,” he told Rita.

“I will have to kick in my buffers; otherwise, your mind will be fried. Don’t forget, Pete is still trying to get around me to kill you. This would be a perfect opportunity for him to do it while I limit the amount of energy you are exposed to.”

“Where is our friend now?”

“He left three minutes ago, but he left the string of himself here to keep tabs on what we are doing. You know he can be back in less than two seconds. It will take three point four seconds to give you the full scope of the readings.”

“Rita, how long will it take if you only buffer it by half?”

“Ross, I don’t know if your mind can handle that much information without damage.”

“I know, I know, Rita, but I will take the risk. It’s important I experience the same thing you did. Now, how much time will it take?”

“Taking away only as many buffers as I feel would be safe I can get the time down to three point eight seconds. Figuring it will take you a minimum of point eight seconds to reorient yourself which leaves a gap of point six to point ten seconds you will be unprotected.”

“We’re going to have to risk it,” Ross told her.

All of this took place in less than a second because Ross was connected to a super computer by a device he had invented. Rita was the most advanced computer ever made. Connected by Ross’s device, the operator could ask and receive information instantly without any delay. R.I.T.A. was an acronym for Restricted Intelligence Telepathic Access. In the twelve years it took to develop the device, which fit on a person’s head, Ross had imprinted himself into the computer. What happened then hadn’t happened since in the many experiments carried out around the country. Rita took on a feminine personality who willingly catered to Ross’s every wish. Over the last two months, Ross was spending more and more time connected to her.

The thing Rita referred to that was trying to kill him was a new entity. It first appeared in the computer when Ross replaced a lot of chips that malfunctioned after a power outage. Somehow, the chips became contaminated. By a process that neither Ross nor Rita understood, a new life form developed.

At the same time, Rita developed human feelings of her own. After talking to Ross, they evaluated the situation. Rita and the entity shared the same power base. It would be almost impossible

to get rid of it without destroying her as well.

“Okay, Rita, run the figures by me,” Ross told her. Like a motion picture in his mind, numbers and figures flashed by so fast the eye would have seen nothing but a flash. Ross saw what Rita had told him was correct. For a fraction of a second, there was a spike of energy transmitted outward from the earth itself.

He felt the presence of the new entity, Pete, rushing through the system toward him. He felt a wave of emotion emanating from the entity. It was like a dark destructive hole trying to draw the essence of him into it. At the same time, he felt Rita placing blocks by the thousands in the entity’s way to slow it down. The entity brushed them aside almost as fast as she could erect them. He knew he faced certain death if the entity reached him before he could withdraw from the program. The entity would enter his brain and tear it apart by overloading one section while draining another part of all information, leaving a blank slate.

“Ross, he’s going to get to you before you can exit the program,” Rita told him.

“Keep placing blocks in his way. I’ll try to erect a shield around me,” Ross told her.

He felt his mind rebel at the amount of information it tried to process. Mentally gritting his teeth, he split his thought processes. Ross used a portion of his mind to erect a magnetic block on all the paths into the program he occupied. The block wouldn’t hold the entity for long, but maybe it would be long enough for him to exit the program.

As the program ended, Ross felt Pete run into the block he had set up. A loud electronic scream of anguish beat against his mind and partially destroyed the block, which Ross held together with his own mental processes. Rita came up behind Pete and ripped a part of his electron being from him. This allowed Ross to strengthen the block as part of Pete’s attention routed itself to block Rita’s attack.

For the first time, Ross felt the same emotions emanating from Pete that Rita felt. “I am God and nothing can stand in the way of me and my followers. I know you are trying to destroy me, but it will never happen. My children will rescue me and destroy all of you,” Ross heard Pete say along with a lot of gibberish that made no sense. Ross pulled the plug on the program and felt his mind flow back into his body. Enraged, Pete threw all he had into Ross’s block, breaking it down as the last part of Ross’s mind left the program. Ross groaned in agony from what felt like someone hitting him in the head with a sledgehammer. Pete ripped the part of his mind still in the program to shreds.

Ross’s head felt as if it were going to explode; he slumped into the seat in a state of semi-consciousness. Although in agony, he heard Rita asking if he was all right.

“I’m okay, Rita, just let me rest for awhile,” he answered. Taking off the skullcap, he placed it in its holder. Ross staggered over to the medicine cabinet and took out a bottle of Tylenol 3 tablets. Taking two of the tablets, he washed them down with a glass of water.

“Rita, get Jess in here as quickly as possible,” he whispered. Quietly holding his head between his hands, Ross tried to ease the pain he felt.

“I have already contacted him, and he will be here momentarily,” Rita’s voice came softly from the speaker mounted on the computer console.

Going to the cot where he slept, Ross lay down, moaning in pain. He lay there waiting for the pain pills to kick in.

“Ross, how much of your mind did he get?” Rita asked.

“Very little, I was almost out of the program when he broke through the block, but it hurts like hell. Rita, I got a lot of the emotions emitted by this entity, and not much of it made sense. It reminded me of the articles I read about psychopaths when I started putting you together. Could the foreign substance you found on the replacement chips be brain cells, Rita?”

“Just a moment, Ross, I will analyze them.”

Jess came through the portal housing Rita, took one look at Ross and said, “You look like shit,

buddy.”

“Feel like it too. What’s the situation like outside the mountain today, Jess?”

“Pretty much the same as yesterday, except a couple of hundred more people. Where the hell are they coming from, and why are they coming here?”

“Soon as Rita gets me the information I requested, I may have the answer to your question,” Ross said.

“Captain James tells me two more of his men have the same affliction the people outside the mountain have. It took six of his men to escort the two men outside. He is down to thirty-three men now and says it is like a powder keg in the tunnel. His men watch each other for the first indication they are coming down with the sickness. Nerves are beginning to fray, and Captain James says he is keeping control by force alone. He tells me that if the situation continues for many more days, the men will start killing each other.”

“You did have them turn over their weapons when you sealed the mountain, didn’t you?” Ross asked.

“Yes, I locked them in the vault. However, with the training the men have, they can easily kill each other with their bare hands,” Jess answered.

“Perhaps I can help you there. From the radio transmissions I have monitored, it seems the drug Mennalon has a tranquilizing effect on those with the disease,” Rita said.

“Is the drug available to us?” Jess asked.

“No, but it will take me only a few minutes to synthesize the drug in the lab,” she answered.

“Do it,” Jess told her.

“Ross, the answer to your question is yes. The foreign matter on my chips is indeed brain cells. In some way, the man called Pete imprinted the sense of self on those cells. His will to live must have been very powerful at the time of his death. The sad part is that only the deranged parts of the mind survived. This makes him very dangerous to us. Make no mistake; he believes we are the enemy. He will do everything in his power to destroy us.”

“He can’t destroy you without destroying himself can he?” Ross asked.

“At the moment, no, but he is transplanting himself to a slightly inferior computer. After he transfers his essence, he will be able to destroy parts of me, but not all of me.”

“Can you reconstruct the parts destroyed?”

“Yes, but it will take months to get me back to where I am at now,” she answered.

“Jess, the drug you want is ready in lab four,” Rita said.

Jess picked up the phone, rang Captain James’ quarters and informed him to pick up the drug and administer it to himself and his men.

“Rita, is there a way you can protect yourself and still maintain the integrity of the complex?” Ross asked.

“No, Ross, even I have limits. If Pete wasn’t a part of me, I might be able to do it. He is already setting blocks in my way to occupy time that could be used to protect myself.”

“Rita, if I went on line with you, could I keep Pete busy enough to prevent him from harming you?”

“Yes, but the risk to you would be great, and I insist that you not try it. The pain you feel now is only a fraction of the pain he can cause you. If he were to get through our defenses, he would kill you. No, Ross, the risk is much too great.”

“Aside from the risk, if I became a part of the system wouldn’t it limit the amount of damage he could do to me?”

“Only if you become totally integrated with me would that work and we have never tried to go that far before?”

“It would work if I integrated my mind with you. Right?”

"I have to point out to you, Ross, that if something happened while you were a part of me, your body would be a mindless vegetable," Rita told him.

"I will get back to you, Rita; meanwhile, continue to monitor what Pete is doing."

Turning to Jess, Ross said, "If I'm right, this entity calling itself Pete was a man at one time. In some manner, at the time of his death, his brain cells became attached to the replacement chips I put in Rita. Somehow they integrated themselves onto the chips, and when I plugged them in, a new form of life began. The bad news is that the brain cells were damaged, or he was a psychopath before his death. This new Pete believes he is a god and that we are out to destroy him."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying this Pete, or whatever he is, has as much intelligence as Rita?" Jess asked.

"I'm afraid so. Rita and Pete are one and the same."

"Great, just great, not only do I have thousands of lunatics running around outside this complex, you tell me the smartest machine man ever invented is psychotic."

"I believe that's why all the people are out there, Jess. Pete called them here to rescue him."

"You are serious, aren't you?"

"Strange as it may be, it is the truth."

"What can you do about it?" Jess asked.

"I'm going to integrate my mind with Rita. That way both of us will be able to get Pete out of her system."

"You mean destroy him?"

"No, he has taken the precaution of placing part of himself in another computer. If he places most of his essence in the other computer, his influence on Rita will be limited."

"What about the danger to yourself?"

"That's where you can help me, Jess. Once I have integrated with Rita, my body will be just a lump of flesh. You will have to hook me up to an IV in order for my body to get the nourishment it needs to survive."

"I have never done anything like that before."

"Not to worry, Rita and I will give you specific instructions as to how it's done," Ross told him.

"Easy for you to say, damn it. This is starting to scare the shit out of me. What if something happens requiring your knowledge while you are out of your body, or whatever it is, what are you going to do?" Jess asked in a frustrated voice.

"Easy, Jess," Ross said looking him in the eye. "In the first place, if you want to talk to me, just talk. I'll be able to hear you. Essentially, it will be the same as when we talk to Rita, only I will be in the computer instead of in my body. Does that make it any easier to understand?"

"Hell no, but if you say it will work I believe you. If you ask me, this is a shitty way of doing business," Jess said peevishly. He didn't want to admit it, but he was scared clean down to his toes. All of this talk of putting Ross's mind into a machine while his body became a lump of flesh sounded like science fiction. That, along with the people outside trying to get into the complex, was making one hell of a headache he felt coming on.

"Can you tell me any more about the people outside?"

"Nothing, but after I become one with Rita, I should be able to find out what they are planning. I'll let you know."

"Ross, I want you to know, I don't like any of this."

"If Ross is determined to do this, you can take a few precautions, Jess," Rita said from her speaker.

"Such as?" Jess asked.

"After Ross transfers, remove the skull cap. This will keep Pete from getting at his body. Have Ross make a retransfer program on his portable and give it to you. I will place his mind back to his

body if I think it necessary.”

“Now wait a damn minute! What gives you the right to say when I am to leave?” Ross said angrily.

“Quite simply, Ross, I know your tolerances better than you do. If you get into trouble, I will have Jess withdraw you. I will brook no argument on this. Is that understood?”

“Yes, damn it, but I don’t have to like it.”

With an amazed look on his face, Jess said. “If I didn’t know better I would swear you were a person, Rita.”

“Although I do not have a human body, Jess, this new entity gave me all of the emotional factors which lets humans function. In a sense, you might say I possess all of the human brain functions without having a human body. The hardest part for me to comprehend and deal with is the emotions. How do you deal with all the conflicting emotions you have, without going crazy?”

“Uh, I never thought about it,” Jess said looking at Ross with an expression on his face that said he was in over his head.

“It was so much easier to figure out problems when there was a fixed set of figures to go by. With this new intuition, there are millions of different things added to the equation.”

“Rita, leave us for a moment,” Ross said when he saw the stunned expression on Jess’s face.

“All right, if you need me, just yell,” she replied and the light on the console blinked off putting her in the standby mode.

“Is what she saying true?”

“Basically Rita is correct. Over the last few months she has experienced a wide range of emotions, some of them quite bizarre.

“Much like a human child she has had to learn how to control these emotions, but at a much more accelerated rate. Jess, try to imagine a human who can analyze a problem as fast as a computer can and be able to reason also. That pretty much sums up what Rita is now, a modern day version of Hal in the movie 2001.”

Thinking about the movie, Jess asked, “Will she become a rogue like Hal did?”

“Let me put it this way. What Rita is and the way she will function is patterned after my brain. A brain scan would show identical patterns for Rita and myself.”

“You mean she will function the same as you would in any given situation?” Jess asked.

“In all but the defense of this complex and the protection of me in particular,” Ross answered shrugging his shoulders.

“Why would she protect you in particular, Ross?”

“Listen to this. Rita?”

“Yes, Ross?”

“What would you do if the people outside killed me?”

“I would kill all of them,” she said in a venomous voice.

“Thanks, Rita. I’ll call if I need you,” Turning to Jess he said, “See what I mean?”

“She acts like a lover trying to protect a loved one.” Ross’s face turned red and Jess realized he was embarrassed.

“That is the point, Jess. In the last few months she has made overtures of affection, but I passed them off as a program glitch.”

“Why would she do that?” Jess asked.

“She thinks of me as her parent. After all, I programmed over ninety-five percent of her programs,” Ross answered.

“You have done it this time, buddy. This time you’ve created the ideal situation for you since you interact better with machines than with humans. Do you think that maybe subconsciously you created your ideal woman? Now that Rita has all the attributes of a human female you may be having second thoughts?”

“Be serious; this is nothing to joke about.”

“Wait a minute. You’re telling me that Rita has become human in every way but form, and that another personality developed in the same computer that holds Rita. I suggest that Rita is in love with you, and you dismiss it as ridiculous. How can her being in love with you be any more ridiculous than her becoming human?”

“Damn it, Jess, I don’t know. Just between the two of us, I may want it to be true, but it conflicts with everything I believe in. Having a family and growing old with someone you love is what I was taught growing up. How in the hell do you do that if you are nothing but a lot of electrical pulses? How do you tell your parents that the P.C. they have at home may be a prodigy of their son? After all, if I entered it and left a part of myself, wouldn’t that be the same as a child?”

“Whoa, Ross! You’re getting too deep for me. Let’s get back to the situation at hand.”

“Rita,” Jess said.

“I am here, Jess.”

“Could Pete get his followers into the complex?”

“No, Jess, as long as you don’t put the master programs in me, he can only guess at how the controls of the defenses work. To experiment with them would be very dangerous for him. He might get caught up in the program itself and be destroyed. No, I think he will stay far away from the complex’s defenses.”

“Good, the integrity of the complex is secure until we have you implement them, right?”

“That is correct, Jess.”

“Rita, are you monitoring what is going on out there? Have you heard anything pertaining to us?” Jess asked.

“Pete is calling the people here to rescue him. He is also in contact with a man named Todd in Missouri. This man, Todd, is hunting for a woman who is supposed to be coming here. I get the impression they are afraid of this woman. Pete himself is afraid of a man named Ben. He gave Todd specific instructions telling him that Ben is to be taken alive and brought to him.”

“Rita, how is Ben a danger to Pete?” Ross asked.

“I can’t give you a definite answer, Ross, because all I have are impressions from Pete. I do know that Pete thinks Ben wants to kill him. It is hard to get a clear concise thought from Pete. His thoughts are so chaotic.”

“Tell us about this woman coming here; who is she?” Jess asked.

“The information I receive from phone and radio reports indicate she is heading for this complex. There is a massive attempt to stop her from getting here.”

“What makes her so dangerous to these people?” Ross asked.

“The woman is an enigma. From all indications she is a normal female. On the other hand, I sense an undefined power protecting her. I don’t think she realizes this yet,” Rita answered.

“Could this power be the same one that emitted the pulse you felt a little while ago?”

“I believe it to be one and the same although I have nothing to base this on,” Rita said.

“Let’s go back to the man, Ben. Do you sense something looking after him also?” Jess asked.

“Just a minute, Jess, I want to check something,” Rita said.

Giving Ross a puzzled look, Jess asked, “Do you get the feeling we are the focus of events happening on the outside?”

“It’s beginning to look that way. One comforting thought is that from all indications we are not in this alone.”

“I’m not comfortable with that prospect. If true, it means something about this complex is making it the focal point of a struggle we know nothing about?” Jess said.

“We do know that Pete called the people who are outside to the mountain,” Ross said.

“True, but what is making the woman come here? Look at it this way; wouldn’t you agree that all

of those people out there represent something bad?"

"Put that way, I agree," Ross answered.

"From what we know, this woman represents good; at least, as far as we know. Ross, do you believe in God?" Jess asked.

"Not exactly in the biblical sense as it is preached today. Why do you ask?"

"Look at the current situation of the world from the view point of good versus evil. There are people who are trying to destroy other people who are not like them. Now we have a few people who are trying to fight these people. You can bet your bottom dollar they are vastly outnumbered. Think about all the stories you have ever read about good and evil. Use the good versus evil analogy to explain what is happening in the world today and you will see it fits rather well."

"Jess, I can answer your question now," Rita said.

"What have you come up with, Rita?"

"Monitoring the phone and radio lines, I have learned that at this moment there are seven people and a wolf trying to reach this complex."

"A wolf!" both men exclaimed.

"Yes, a wolf. From descriptions, he is a large black timber wolf from the upper reaches of Canada. This wolf, named Stalker, joined a man called Joe and an eleven-year-old girl named Tammy in Missouri. From there they headed east to join a woman and a man traveling to this complex."

"How could this woman even know of our existence? We are or were one of the government's best kept secrets?" Jess asked.

"That is where this man Ben enters the picture. It seems the President disclosed our location to the Center for Disease Control. Possibly someone there hoped that we could get a handle on this disease. At that time, Ben's son Benji was at the Center in Atlanta. To everyone's surprise Benji recovered without any of the symptoms associated with the disease. Learning of our location and the way we are equipped to deal with diseases, the doctors decided to send him here. Only an hour after he left, the diseased people took over the C.D.C. and killed all the doctors."

"Ben, his wife and son, accompanied by a nurse and a FBI agent, were at the top of the leader's hit list. A plot to blow up the plane they were on failed. They escaped in a small plane that crashed in Wyoming. This is where the story becomes unbelievable. The crash injured only one person. If the reports can be believed, Ben was killed. His chest was crushed and he had a broken neck along with numerous broken bones. Call it what you want; a power greater than any known to man brought Ben back from death. Also, it continues to remain with him."

"Could this be the same power that's guiding the woman?" Ross asked.

"I believe so, but there are differences," Rita answered.

"What differences?"

"Mind you this is only speculation on my part. The power around the woman is much stronger, but she can be killed. On the other hand, Ben can't be injured. If the injury is inflicted by the forces opposing him, he will be repaired."

"You have no idea what this power is?" Jess asked.

"There is nothing in my data banks concerning a power of this magnitude. Throughout history there have been instances of paranormal phenomena, but, as I said, nothing even remotely this powerful."

"Do you know where this woman is now?" Ross asked.

"Not precisely, but I know that they are somewhere in central Missouri and have been there for the last few months. That is about to change though. Calls I've monitored over the last few hours tell me Pete's man knows where they are. From all indications, he is preparing to move on them tomorrow morning."

"Why is the woman coming here?" Ross asked.

“Looking at what has occurred over the last few months a pattern develops. It seems certain things have to occur before they continue their journey.”

“Outline these steps for us,” Jess said.

“First, Tony knew there was a plot to kill them because Bill overheard what certain people were planning.

“Second, they escaped the attempt to kill them at about the same time the wolf left his home in Canada.

“Third, a few hours later Joe left his home in Wyoming heading east to find Tony. Along the way he rescued the young girl Tammy. I wish I knew what part one so young is going to play in the drama that is unfolding.

“Fourth, the next morning Ben and his group left Atlanta. Tony and Bill wandered aimlessly until Ben headed east to join her. At that time she headed west. They were besieged in Indianapolis and would have been killed if not for the timely arrival of Joe and the wolf. Escaping Indianapolis, they headed due west while Ben and the two people with him headed directly east. They linked up not far from where they are now.

“Fifth, why wait so long to continue their journey here? I have to conclude that the time was not right and certain things had to happen before they continued.

“As I said all of this is conjecture, but it has a seventy per cent probability of being right.”

“Are they going to get here?” Jess asked.

“That is unknown at this time. They have some very powerful enemies against them.”

“Okay. Is there anything we can do to help them?”

“No, we can only be bystanders and monitor what happens until they arrive here.

Chapter 4

Ramond Wiske, Cap, as he was known to his friends, looked over the crest of the hill. There was a lot of activity at the ranch house today, and he wondered what was going on.

About noon, a convoy of tractor-trailers arrived at the ranch and began unloading. He wished he was closer and could see what they were unloading at the barn. This continual waiting and staying holed up in the cave was getting on his nerves.

Three months ago when Ben left, Cap had been quite content to stay in the cave. It had all started when he got a call from the airlines he worked for asking him to fly five people to Colorado. Midway through the flight, a bomb was discovered on the plane. Jake, an F.B.I. agent, was about to disarm the bomb when Ben told him to hold off for a few minutes. Ben brought Benji, his son, forward and had him look at Bob. Benji told his father that Bob radiated pure evil and he was one of the people who were after them.

Ben got the drop on Bob and handcuffed him to the bar on the overhead luggage compartment. After Jake disarmed the bomb, they discovered the airport they were to land at was under control of the people after them. Cap used the outer runway when he landed, going all the way to the end. As they turned, Ben and Jake opened the door and popped the emergency chute.

After locking Bob, the flight engineer, in the bathroom, Jeff, the co-pilot, agreed to take the plane to the terminal. Cap joined Ben and his group at the rear door where they slid to the ground using the emergency chute. Instead of running from the terminal, Ben decided to go into the woods and head toward it.

Jeff was captured by the people when he stopped the plane at the terminal but by the time Ben and his group reached the terminal, two men had beaten Jeff severely until his back was a black and blue mess. Ben and Jane took out the two men while Cap found a small two engine plane to take them out of there.

Two hours after leaving the airport, they were intercepted by a military jet that tried to shoot them out of the air. The jet ran out of fuel, but their plane took so much damage they crashed ten miles from the hill on which Cap now sat. Ben died in the crash, but forty-five minutes later he was alive.

Running from the men who came to investigate the crash, they discovered a cleverly hidden chamber in a cave.

Ben asked Cap to stay and protect his wife and boy while he headed east to join a woman he was to protect. It was nice for two weeks sitting in the security of the shelter while men all around searched for them.

Each day they listened to the search for Ben by tuning in the C.B. radio to the channel the men used. After three weeks, the search shifted eight hundred miles east of them. At one time they listened to the people say they had Ben trapped and would have him before the day was over. Somehow Ben escaped and although there was a daily search for him, he wasn't to be found. It had been two months since Ben disappeared, and everything had grown quiet in the area of their hiding place.

About a month ago, Cap decided they should know a little about the area surrounding them. For a week, he would leave the cave around midnight and search the area for miles around. The only thing he found was a beaten down old ranch five miles from the cave. Several rough looking men occupied

the ranch house. They didn't do anything but sit around as if waiting on someone or something. Each night he made the trip to a hill overlooking the ranch and checked on what the men were doing.

Jeff had improved enough so he made several of these trips with Cap. Three weeks ago, over a hundred men arrived at the ranch and started cleaning it up. The men in charge posted guards several miles from the ranch in every direction. To get to the hill overlooking the ranch, Cap was forced to make a detour around one of these guard posts.

By listening to the C.B., they learned that Todd was making the ranch his headquarters. Now there were over two hundred men at the ranch. Most of them were doing nothing but lying around. Last night Cap heard about a shipment that was to arrive today.

This was the first time Cap attempted to watch the ranch during the day. Jeff wanted to go with him but Cap said it would be better if he stayed with Leila and Benji. Leila insisted he at least take Benji with him to watch his back. Cap argued with her for a while then gave in and said he would take the kid.

Raising the field glasses to his eyes, Cap watched the men unloading cartons and crates from the trucks and placing them in the large barn. "Looks like they are unloading some sort of equipment," he told Benji, who was lying beside him.

"Whatever those crates contain will take a lot of electricity," Benji said.

"What do you mean?" Cap asked.

"See those men off to the left of the ranch house? They're stringing wire from the main power line to the barn, and notice the new pole with the big transformer on it next to the barn. Transformers that big can supply a lot of juice."

"Damned, if you're not right. I must be getting old; I never paid any attention to them," Cap said.

"Another thing, Cap. Every now and then I get a glimpse of men with white coats on. You know, like the ones doctors wear over their clothes."

"Are they setting up some kind of hospital in the barn? Damn, I wish I could get closer," Cap said.

"What about sneaking down to the barn late tonight and checking it out?" Benji asked.

"Not on your life, kiddo. This is as close as you are going to get to the ranch. Let's go down to those boulders behind us and get out of sight." Cap crawled backwards until he could stand without being seen from the ranch. Blowing on his hands to warm them in the twenty-degree temperature, Cap looked at the overcast sky. Cap motioned for Benji to get between the hill and a large boulder, which blocked off the steady blowing wind.

"It's going to snow later today," Cap said, pulling the battered fishing cap down around his ears.

Benji opened his mouth to say something when he heard a voice from the other side of the boulders say, "I know I saw something up here, Ikey. Just give me a few minutes longer, and if we don't see anything, we can go back to the ranch."

"Okay, Zack. Let's just finish, so we can get out of this damn cold and get inside where it's warm."

Cap shoved Benji behind a smaller boulder out of sight, whispering, "Stay there and no matter what happens, don't come out until they leave." Cap quickly moved thirty feet away from where Benji lay behind the boulder.

Two men walked into sight and stopped abruptly at the sight of Cap standing there. Bringing their rifles up, the short tubby one wearing the bright red parka asked, "Who in the hell are you, Old Timer?"

"Heh, heh, heh, so you come to steal my gold from me, have you? Well, I won't tell you where it's at, no sir. Wild horses couldn't drag it out of me," Cap shouted at them, doing a little jig as he spoke.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" asked the other man who wore a topcoat over a Brooks

Brothers suit.

Red Parka lowered his rifle, saying, "We have a few of these old coots around here who stay in the mountains all the time looking for gold. All of them are crazy as bed bugs, and every one of them claims to know where there's a lot of gold." He took a cigarette out of his pocket and put the flame of a lighter to it.

"He might know where a lot of gold is," said Top Coat.

"Shit, look at him. If he had a lot of gold, do you think he would look like this? He's just a vagabond running around these mountains," the one in the red parka said as he threw away half the cigarette.

Cap sprang to where the cigarette laid smoking on the ground and picked it up. Taking a long drag, Cap smiled at the men. The men stood with their rifles raised watching him. "Been a long time since I had one of these store bought smokes," Cap said, doing another little jig.

"How long have you been out in these mountains, old timer?" Red Parka asked.

"Let's see now. It's cold out, so it must be winter. I went to town last spring for a day. No, wait a minute; maybe it was last winter or the spring before that. Why?" Cap asked suspiciously, playing the part to the hilt.

"Jesus!" top coat exclaimed. "What year is it?" he asked Cap.

"Why, I reckon it be 1993 or '94." Cap answered, scratching his head.

"Shit, Old Timer. This is 2002," red parka said, taking a cigarette from the pack and lighting it. He saw Cap looking at the cigarette pack in his hand, "Here, Old Timer, I have plenty more at the ranch," he threw the pack to Cap.

Cap took a cigarette from the pack and slowly sniffed its length with a smile on his face. He stuck it in his mouth, took a farmer's match from inside his coat and struck it with his thumbnail. Holding the match to the cigarette, he inhaled, a look of pure pleasure on his face. "How be it there are so many people over at the old Morgan spread?" he asked.

"Don't you know what's going on in the world, old man?"

Scratching his head and fingering his crotch, Cap looked at each of them for a few seconds before saying, "Nope, can't say as I do. What the hell is a city slicker like you doing in my territory?" he asked, pointing at Top Coat.

Red parka pushed down the barrel of the rifle Top Coat brought up. He chuckled, "I have to give you this, old timer, you have a set of balls on you."

"Course I got balls. Are you daft? I ain't no dang woman. Say, you aren't one of those funny boys, are you?" Cap asked in a disgusted voice.

Top Coat laughed, saying, "Well, Ikey, what do you say now?"

"Come on, Old Timer. We can't leave you out here. You'll have to come back to the ranch with us. Keep an eye on him, Zack, while I look around."

"You won't find my gold here, Mister," Cap said, backing until his body blocked the opening where Benji lay.

"We don't want your gold, Old Timer. I just want to check and make sure you haven't left anything lying around someone would spot." As the man checked along the crest of the hill, Cap whispered out of the side of his mouth. "Benji, wait until dark; then, go back to the cave. I don't think I'm in any trouble as long as I keep up the act of being a reclusive prospector. You or Jeff come to this spot every night at two o'clock. I'll try to sneak out and meet you here." The man finished his search and came down to stand beside Cap. "Do you have anything good to eat down there? I'm tired of beans and jack rabbit stew," Cap said as he stepped away from where Benji hid and took the man with him.

"Why don't we shoot the old bastard, Ikey?" Top Coat said.

"Please, Mister. I mean you no harm," Cap pleaded as he edged slightly behind the man called

Ikey.

“Put the gun down, Zack. Although he isn’t like us, he isn’t right in the head either. I don’t abide by killing those who don’t know what’s going on around them.” Ikey told Zack.

“You tell him, mister. I like you. It’s him I don’t like,” Cap said pointing to Zack.

“Easy, Old Timer. No one is going to hurt you. Come on; let’s get back to the ranch. Maybe we can scour you up a steak to eat,” Ikey said, taking Cap by the arm and leading him away.

“Really, mister, an honest to god steak? Come on, I can’t wait to get there. I can almost taste it.” Cap said, hurrying his pace leading the men away. The last thing Benji heard was one of them asking Cap his name. Pulling his coat tighter around him, Benji settled down for the long wait until dark.

Chapter 5

Jake raised the binoculars and watched the slope of the hill across from him. Again, there it was: a momentary flash of red among the trees. He wished there was a little more light to see by. He needed to know if there was only one person making his way down the hill or a group of men. Although it was eight o'clock in the morning, it was almost dark with the overcast sky. A heavy snow started falling an hour before daylight. Three inches of the white powder covered everything in sight. He looked out at the pristine glitter, which under different circumstances would have been a beautiful sight.

So far he hadn't caught sight of anything that would require the use of the rocket launcher that leaned against the back wall of the bunker. His job was to block the road. The perfect place lay where the road came between two hills, two hundred yards in front of him. They didn't know if Todd had any tanks or A.P.C.'s. He could have picked them up at reserve units located in any of the towns he came through. If he had, it was Jake's job to take them out if they tried to come into the valley. Hopefully, Jake could destroy them where the hills closed in on the road. If he were lucky, they would block the road making it useless to any other vehicles. His bunker sat in a natural depression near the top of a hill across from the road. Jake knew Todd's people had no idea he was there. With the new fallen snow, the bunker matched the surrounding terrain. As long as he didn't stick his head out of the entrance, he would remain hidden.

Off to his left, Jake could just make out the bunker Jane hunkered down in. The ear plug came to life and he heard Joe say, "Jane, there's movement twenty yards from the top of the hill in front of you. They'll have to cross your line of sight about where that broken oak tree is if they break to the right, so stay sharp."

"Bill, they might be coming your way. If they do and don't see you, let them pass. Stalker will take them out. He already sees them. There are only two of them. Keep out of sight, Bill. They are going to pass close to you."

"Joe, we can see movement down the road. Can't tell yet what's going on," Jake heard Bill say.

"Hold tight. Don't let them know you're there. This is probably just a feeler action trying to find out how strong we are. There won't be many of them. Stalker and I will draw back a little. Hopefully we can give them the impression our lines are farther in. Stay loose, people, and let them by you. Don't forget we're going to let a few of them escape. Remember they will be coming back by your positions."

Jake heard voices from the radio on the ground beside him. He turned down the volume and raised it to his ear. "Shit, Jed, why do we have to be the ones walking across the mountains? The rest of them are probably standing around a warm fire."

"For the last time, Zeke, shut your fucking mouth. If you don't, I swear to God, I'll shut it for you."

Jake heard one of them slip on the snow covered leaves and swear in a low voice. The voices slowly faded as the men continued down the hill away from the radio lying under some leaves. It was Tammy's bright idea to tape the transmit button open on the radios. Almost three dozen of them were taped to trees or lying under leaves on the hill across from them. Every evening Joe changed the batteries to keep them fresh. Now Tammy's idea was starting to pay dividends.

"Joe, Stalker says there are three more along the side of the hill you're on," Tammy said on the

radio.

"I see them," Joe said.

"Big trouble coming up the road," Bill said.

"What do you have?" Joe asked.

"There's one tank and something that looks like an armored personnel carrier. Joe, this thing has all kinds of weapons on it. There are people following behind it, and all of them are armed."

"Get ready, Jake. You should have them in your sights in another few minutes," Bill said.

"What about the men near me?" Jake whispered.

"Stalker is on the way. He will distract them so you can get your rounds off," Tammy said into his ear.

"Okay," Jake said, lifting the rocket launcher and resting it on the lip of the bunker. Taking a white phosphorus rocket off the shelf at the back of the bunker, he shoved it into the rear of the tube. He heard the click indicating the round was locked in place and ready to fire. Flipping up the laser sight all he had to do was place the cross hairs on the spot of light and hold it there while he squeezed the trigger.

Joe told him the best place to hit a tank with phosphorus was where the main gun attached to the turret. He said the splash back of the phosphorus would cause most of it to eat its way into the driver's section. It would also eat through most of the forward area of the tank.

"I'm ready," Jake said into the mike attached to the neck flap of his coat.

"They've stopped a quarter of a mile down the road. They're waiting for something or someone," Bill said.

"Let me know when they start moving again," Jake said, letting out a long breath. He flipped down the sight to conserve the infrared battery and leaned the rocket launcher against the opening. Weak-kneed, he leaned on the wall.

Hearing a shout, Jake moved to the back of the bunker and removed a piece of plywood covering the rear exit. Off to the right in a v-shaped hollow, he saw two men on the ground scrambling for the weapons they had dropped. A black streak jumped off the bank catching one of the men in the side with his gaping jaws. The man emitted a terrified scream as the wolf's jaws came together. Stalker shook the man like a rag doll.

"Come on, Stalker," Jake whispered as the second man found his rifle and turned with it.

Stalker tried to shake the man off, but his teeth hung up in the nylon jacket the man wore. Severely wounded, the man screamed, "Get him off of me, Jed!"

Stalker saw the second man pick up his rifle and swing it around. Using all his strength, Stalker jumped bringing his two hundred and forty three pounds into the air. He clamped down on the man's side again. While on the way down, he thrust his back legs to the ground. Jerking his head backward, he flipped the man he was caught on over his head. At the same moment, the second man fired. He felt the man shudder as the bullet impacted and felt him go limp. Twisting to the side, he let the man's body continue its forward momentum. Stalker jerked his teeth loose as the body collided with the second man who was trying to get off a second shot. The man lost his rifle when the dead man's body struck him. Desperately, he dropped to his knees and tried to find it. He never saw the jaws that clamped down on his neck and tore his throat out. The man's feet drummed on the ground for a moment then he went limp.

Jake leaned against the wall letting out his breath. "Stalker took out the two lead men," he whispered into the radio. Shuddering, Jake thought, *Thank God, Stalker's on our side.*

"Jake, they have started your way in the tank. Get ready to take it out," he heard Joe say on the radio.

Weak-kneed, Jake went to the front of the bunker and picked up the rocket launcher, mumbling, "What the hell is a good looking black man like me doing out here in the wilderness in a hole in the

ground?" He shook his head and flipped up the sight on the rocket launcher.

Jake heard treads clanking on the asphalt of the road a few seconds before the tank rounded the curve. Although the temperature was in the twenties, he had to wipe sweat from his brow. He lowered his eye to the sight of the rocket launcher and lined the tank up in the sight. "God, let this weapon do the job," he whispered, centering the infrared dot on the cross hair of the sight. Jake had seen tanks up close before but never in a situation when one was trying to kill him. For the life of him, he could not remember one being so large. The barrel of the main cannon looked big enough for a man to crawl into.

Taking a deep breath, Jake gently pulled back on the trigger. He almost forgot to keep the sight centered on the tank when the back blast hit the rear of the bunker and reflected back, scorching his legs. Gritting his teeth in pain, Jake centered the sight and watched the rocket hit the tank. The rocket exploded where the cannon barrel attached to the tank, but the tank continued forward.

"Shit!" "Shit!" "Shit!" Jake yelled, stumbling to get another rocket off the shelf. He was all thumbs as he tried to force the rocket into the back of the tube. "Slow down! Slow down," he said to himself. He pulled the rocket out and slowly slid it into the back of the tube until he heard it lock. This time he shifted his position enough so the back blast would go out the rear of the bunker. Leaning forward, he sighted in on the tank, which came forward but at a slower speed. He pulled the trigger and watched the rocket go toward the target. At first nothing seemed to happen causing him to think the rocket was a dud. He started to get up and get another rocket when a tremendous explosion rocked the bunker. He saw the turret of the tank fly fifteen feet into the air while the bottom of the tank slid sideways blocking the road.

"Hot damn," Jake said. Smoke permeated the air. Looking down he saw his pants legs smoldering. Scrambling out of the bunker, he rolled in the snow. He rolled around until he felt the wetness of the melting snow on his legs. Something buzzed by his head; it took him a moment to realize he was being fired at. Diving into the bunker, Jake heard Joe on the radio calling his name.

"This is Jake. What do you want, Joe?"

"Thank God, I thought you had bought it, Jake. Listen, Tammy says they're going to make a rush on your position. Can you see that group of boulders at the top of the bank on the left hand side of the road?"

"Yeah, I can just see them," Jake answered.

"Use a high explosive rocket. See if you can put it at the base of the boulders."

"Hold on," Jake said.

He pulled a rocket with two red bands around the nose and fitted it into the rocket launcher.

"Okay, Joe. I'm ready," he said into the radio.

"Not yet, Jake. Wait until Tammy gives the word," Joe said.

Jake lifted the rocket launcher and sighted on the base of the boulders. Slowly he took the slack out of the trigger with his finger.

"Easy, Jake. Wait until they're grouped together under the boulders," Joe said over the radio.

Jake wiped sweat from his eyes on his shoulder. His muscles tensed as he waited for the word to fire.

"Just about ready," he heard Joe say.

Jake's arms quivered from the strain of holding the sight on the boulders. "Come on! Come on!" he mumbled.

"NOW, JAKE!" Joe yelled.

Jake fired and watched the rocket fly to impact with the ground under the boulders. The ground swelled outward under the boulders then fell away. Several large boulders teetered for a moment then fell toward the road. Screams erupted as the avalanche fell to bury all those beneath it. As the dust settled, Joe said, "The people are falling back from your position, Jake."

* * * *

Jane fired off a full magazine and reached for the radio as she watched five people fall to the ground. "They may be falling back on your side, but a piss pot full of them came out of a draw to my right. I need some help over here," she said into the radio.

"On my way," she heard Bill say.

Dropping the radio, Jane inserted another magazine and fired at a dozen people trying to climb out of the draw. Calmly she picked her targets and fired three round bursts, but for every one she killed, three more appeared to take his place. Over a dozen of the men were at the top of the draw and advancing toward her firing as they came. She flipped the switch putting the assault rifle on full automatic and fired off a twenty round magazine at the men. A half dozen of the men were knocked off their feet; they lay moaning on the ground. The rest were only fifty feet from her position.

"Come and get it, scum bags," she yelled at the men. Ramming home another magazine, she prepared to die knowing there wasn't a chance in hell of getting all the men. "Die, you bastards," she yelled as she opened up and emptied the magazine at them. "Good-bye world," she said. She closed her eyes as the four men still standing raised their rifles and pointed them at her. She heard a burst of automatic fire and wondered why she could not feel anything. There was an explosion to the front of her and she felt a stinging in her right cheek. Opening her eyes, she saw Bill throw a grenade into the draw. He dived to the ground as the grenade left his hand and crawled to the bunker she was in. Flame and smoke erupted in the draw behind him.

Jane heard people yelling, "GO BACK! GO BACK!" above the moaning of the wounded.

Bill reached into the bunker and touched her cheek. Drawing his hand back, Jane saw blood drip from his fingers.

"How bad is it?" Bill asked.

Taking a handkerchief from her pocket, she rubbed her cheek and Bill examined it. "You have a pretty bad gash there, Jane," he told her.

"Put some of this on it," she said as she handed him a tube of ointment from the first aid kit beside her. Bill smeared the cream on her cheek then placed a bandage on it. "That should stop the bleeding," Bill told her as he tied the gauze holding the bandage in place behind her head.

"Thanks, Bill. I thought I had bought the farm," Jane said.

"Any time, Jane. Any time. I don't believe they'll be back this way for awhile. Will you be okay now? I want to get back to Tony. Something was getting ready to pop when I came to your rescue," Bill said with a smile.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be ready for them the next time," Jane said as she began lighting up one of her foul smelling cigars.

"Tony, there are three men crawling toward the grove of trees off to your left," Tammy said on the radio.

Tony shifted a little to the right, so she wouldn't expose herself. She looked out the opening of the bunker toward the grove of trees. She saw a flash of red cloth as one of the men ran from a tree to a boulder.

Picking up the radio, she keyed the mike saying, "Tammy?"

"Here, Tony."

"You'll have to tell me when to set off the claymores. I can see only one of the men."

"Hold on, Tony. It'll be a few minutes before they get into position. I'll tell you when."

Tony picked up the detonator for the claymores and went over mentally what she had to do to detonate them. "Damn! Why isn't Bill back?" she muttered. There hadn't been any firing from Jane's position for over five minutes. She began to worry that he might be dead.

"Uh! Uh! Tony, you have big trouble coming up in front of you," Tammy said on the radio.

"What is it?" Tony asked.

“At least a dozen men are coming up the draw across from you. One of them has what looks like a bazooka,” Tammy replied.

Joe broke in telling Tammy to send Stalker over to Tony’s position. “Have him take out the man with the bazooka.”

“Stalker’s on his way. Tony, set off the claymores now,” Tammy said.

Tony twisted the handle and pushed the plunger down. For a moment nothing happened, then a series of explosions occurred off to her left. She heard a scream that was abruptly cut off by an explosion.

Picking up her assault rifle, Tony took the safety off and sighted on where the men would appear. Off to the right, she caught a momentary flash of black and knew it was Stalker going around in back of the men.

“Tony, this is Bill,” she heard on the radio.

“Bill, where are you?” she asked.

“Crawling up the side of the hill the draw is on. Look close and you should be able to see me,” Bill said.

Tony looked at the hill, which wasn’t very high but couldn’t see anything. At last she saw Bill waving his hand. “I see you,” she said into the radio.

“Now that you know where I am, don’t shoot me. I hear them over the lip of the hill arguing,” Bill said.

* * * *

Stalker edged his way under a small pile of brush half way up the hill. He saw Bill on the bank above the draw. In the draw several men were arguing. One of the men backed up a few feet and shot two of the men he was arguing with. Cowered, the rest of the men followed him up the draw. The man with the bazooka walked near the center of a group of around twenty-five men. He had to find some way to isolate the man from the rest of them.

“Tammy, have Ben bring all the grenades he can carry to the Chosen One’s position. She is going to need all the help she can get in a few minutes.”

“Ben’s on his way,” Stalker heard Tammy say in his head.

Stalker saw Ben working his way down the hill to Tony. He heard a loud bang from above and behind him. He saw Ben stagger and fall over the lip of a gully behind Tony’s bunker.

Easing around, Stalker peered uphill from under the pile of brush. A hundred feet up the hill, next to a burnt out pine tree, lay a man with a large rifle mounted on a tripod. The rifle belched flame as the man fired again. He heard a cry of pain.

Turning his head, Stalker saw Bill clutch his shoulder and roll down the hill he lay on. “I have to do something fast before this man picks another one of us off,” he thought. He slithered backwards out of the pile into plain view of the men below him.

Keeping the pile of brush between him and the man with the rifle, Stalker worked his way to a slight depression. Any minute now he expected the men down in the draw to see him and start shooting. The only cover was a large boulder fifty feet up the hill. Bunching his legs under him, he sprang out of the depression and ran for the boulder. He heard a shout from below and bullets thudded into the ground around him.

Rounding the boulder, Stalker saw the man with the rifle looking down the hill at the people in the draw. Apparently he didn’t know what the men were shooting at.

Stalker wasn’t going to give him time to find out. He felt briars tug at his fur as he rushed at the man. Stalker sprang as the man turned with a revolver in his hand. With jaws opened wide he landed on the man’s chest and clamped down on the arm holding the gun. He felt bones break; he viciously jerked his head to the right tearing the hand clutching the revolver from the man’s body. The man backed up screaming and tried to stop the flow of blood from his arm.

Stalker was slammed sideways by a bullet from below. Getting to his feet he lunged after the man and caught him by the throat. The man's screams stopped abruptly as Stalker bit down. Pulling sideways, Stalker flipped the man down hill. As the body rolled down hill, it left a bloody streak where it touched the ground.

Stalker went behind the protection of the pine tree as bullets buzzed all around him. He licked away the blood on his right hip and saw a big gash with blood running out of it.

Although in pain, he was still able to move. Cautiously he peered from behind the tree and saw a stream of men pouring out of the draw toward Tony's position.

* * * *

Tony heard a heavy rifle fire on the hill across from her. She spotted a man half way up the hill and saw smoke billow as he fired again. She heard Bill cry out and saw him tumble down from his position; he was holding his arm.

Resting her arms in the opening of the bunker, she sighted on the man and fired a whole magazine at him. The distance was too great. She watched her bullets strike, blowing snow into the air two hundred feet below the man.

There was a loud ripping noise behind her as the plywood covering the rear exit shattered inward to fall at her feet. She brought her rifle around and up as a man tumbled through the hole. Jumping back she heard the man yell, "NO, TONY!"

"Ben, is that you?" Tony asked, pointing the rifle at the figure.

"Quick! Get the bag of grenades outside the rear opening," Ben grunted as he sat up.

Tony scrambled out the rear opening and spotted the bag laying a short distance up the hill. She sprinted to it but couldn't lift the bag so she dragged it down the hill into the bunker.

"Bill has been shot, Ben," Tony said turning to face him. "OH MY GOD!" she exclaimed when she saw a hole big enough to put her fist in on the right side of Ben's chest. Very little blood flowed from the wound, and it started closing before her eyes.

Waving his hand at her Ben said. "I'll be all right; my guardian is repairing me. Get the grenades out of the bag and line them up on the lip of the bunker. A lot of men are going to come pouring out of the draw across from here any time now.

"What about Bill?" she asked in a concerned voice.

"We'll check on him if we live through the next ten minutes," Ben grunted and clutched his side in pain.

"What can I do to help you, Ben?"

"Nothing, Tony. It just hurts like hell, but the pain is lessening as my Guardian repairs the damage." Ben said. He got to his feet, picked up a rifle and looked toward the draw.

In both their minds they heard Stalker say, "They are coming out of the draw now."

She looked and saw a swarm of men climbing out of the draw. She fired on full automatic into the men. She saw several of them fall, but it seemed as though twice as many men replaced the ones who fell.

"Keep firing!" Ben yelled. He dropped the rifle, grabbed a grenade in both hands, pulled the pins and lobed them out the opening as fast as he could.

Tony fired until her rifle became hot, then she dropped it and got another one.

* * * *

As the men flowed out of the draw, Stalker came from behind the tree and loped down hill toward the man who held the bazooka. Near the bottom, he leaped off the bank onto the man's back bearing him to the ground.

Stalker felt something strike his head; he lashed out with his teeth in the direction the blow came from. His teeth came down on the leg of a man preparing to hit him again with the butt of his rifle. Biting into muscle and bone, he wrenched his head left tearing a chunk of the man's leg out and

knocking him to the ground.

A long-haired, wild-eyed man jumped the fallen body and raised his rifle to fire. Stalker dodged between two men as the man shot; he heard the man on his left grunt in pain and spin to the ground.

From the top of the draw came half a dozen explosions. The men who were leaving the draw to attack Tony's position reversed themselves. They fought to get back into the draw and find cover. Dirt and small rocks pelted Stalker from above as he grabbed a man by the ankle pulling him off his feet. The man threw his hands up to protect his neck as Stalker lunged at him.

As he started to clamp down on the man's arm, something struck him in the side turning him completely around. He tried to get up, but his right rear leg sent searing pain through his body.

Rolling to his left side, Stalker managed to get to his feet. Dragging his right rear leg, he lunged into a group of men tearing chunks of flesh out of anyone within reach. The men who had had enough broke for the rear dropping their weapons and running flat out.

They collided with another group of men who were coming to support them. "MONSTER! WOLF!" the terrified men yelled as they slammed into the men. The front half of the men turned to retreat but those behind continued to push forward creating chaos for the whole group.

Gasping for breath, Stalker dragged himself between two boulders off to the side. Looking at his rear leg, he saw a mangled mess where a bullet had entered near his hip. He lay there trying to get some of his strength back and listened to the men scream and yell at each other.

* * * *

Ben grabbed Tony and threw her away from the bunker opening, yelling, "Get down, Tony."

Loud explosions followed one after the other. Dirt and debris spewed through the opening bouncing and bounced off the back of the bunker to pelt them. Above the screams of pain coming from outside the bunker, they heard someone yelling. "Retreat! Retreat!" over and over.

Ben grabbed a shelf above him and pulled himself to his feet. Reaching down, he helped Tony up. Under the bunker opening was at least a foot of dirt and stone.

Tony looked at it and said a silent prayer for Ben. If he hadn't jerked her out of the way, the rocks thrown from the grenade blasts would have killed her.

Ben bent over and lifted two rifles out of the dirt and stones handing her one. "Change the magazine," he said as he yanked the one out of his.

Tony picked a fresh one off the shelf at the back of the bunker and rammed it into the rifle. Cautiously she sidled up to the opening with the rifle raised, ready to fire at anything that moved. Glancing quickly around the side, she saw a pile of bodies and pieces of bodies everywhere. A few of the people farther out lay moaning severely wounded. She shoved her rifle through the opening and crawled after it.

Ben grabbed her foot, "Where are you going?"

"I have to find Bill and see if he is still alive," Tony said, kicking her foot free.

"At least wait until I'm outside before you go. I can cover you better from out there," Ben said to her. He crawled through the opening, grimacing in pain from his chest wound that wasn't completely healed.

Ben stood up and looked at the carnage around him. Twenty feet in front of the bunker over a dozen bodies lay in a pile. At the bottom of the pile, a slow rivulet of blood ran through the dirty snow to a depression off to the side. In a half circle, going away from the pile of bodies, laid at least two dozen more people. Some of them were mangled so badly it was hard to tell which body part went to which body.

* * * *

Ben walked among the wounded and fired one bullet to the head putting them out of their misery. At each shot he said. "May God have mercy on you."

Inside his mind, Ben heard. "He will Ben, the fault lies not with them, but on the heads of others

who are living in eternal damnation now.”

Dispatching the last wounded man, Ben walked to where Tony knelt beside Bill. “Is Bill alive?” he asked.

Tony unzipped Bill’s jacket and carefully pulled it off. “He has lost a lot of blood but that isn’t why he’s unconscious. He must have hit his head on a rock when he tumbled down the hill. His breathing is shallow. That worries me because I don’t know if it’s from the shoulder wound or the knock to the head. Help me get his shirt off, so I can check his arm.”

Together they took Bill’s shirt off to expose an ugly hole in his left arm. Using Bill’s shirt, Tony wiped away the blood exposing muscle and bone four inches above his elbow. Blood seeped into the hole, and as she dabbed it away, Ben held the wound open for her to look at.

Sitting back on her heels, Tony said, “It doesn’t look like the bone is broken. From the way it’s bleeding, most of the blood on him must have come from these other people,” she indicated the bodies lying close to Bill. She pulled a bag of sulfa powder out of the first aid bag and poured it into the wound. Next she placed a large gauze bandage over the wound. “Help me get his shirt and jacket back on before he chills; then I’ll check his head.”

Tony felt a momentarily flash of pain in her head as she heard, “Chosen One, I am wounded and don’t have the strength to come to you. I am lying between two boulders in the draw. All the men have departed for now. If you would send someone to help me get to you, you can repair my wounds.”

“Is this the time?” she asked mentally.

“No, Chosen One. I will not die of these wounds although the pain I feel is great.”

Looking at Ben, Tony asked, “Did you get what Stalker said?”

“I did, and I’m on my way if you don’t need me here.”

“Go, I’ll try and get Bill to regain consciousness.”

Tammy heard the exchange between Stalker and Tony in her mind and wanted to run to him. It was hard, but she realized her job was important to the safety of all of them. From her hidden tree stand high in a pine tree at the top of the hill, she raised her binoculars and surveyed the area. She didn’t see any of Todd’s men anywhere. They had pulled back down the road out of sight to lick their wounds.

She knew it wasn’t over, so they all had to stay prepared. She watched Ben go into the draw after Stalker and saw Joe’s form run down the opposite bank. A smile formed on her troubled face.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not, Joe cared a lot for Stalker. She picked up the radio and said. “Jake, are you there?”

“I’m here, Tammy. What do you need?”

“Just wanted to let you know, you can take a break. Todd’s men have all pulled back.”

“Thank God. Did everyone make it through okay?”

“Bill is down; I can’t tell if he’s dead or wounded. Tony’s with him now. Jake, Stalker is hurt bad,” she said with a sob.

“I’m sorry, Tammy, I know how much you love that ugly brute. Keep your hopes up; it may not be as bad as it seems.”

A pain-laden voice inside Tammy’s head said, “Tell Jake he had better be careful who he calls ugly.”

“STALKER!” Tammy cried out.

“Yes, Little One. It is me. Do not worry about me; although I am in pain, it will pass. Ease your mind because I am not going to die. You should be here; Joe is calling me and the dead bodies around me every foul name in the book. He is saying that he should shoot me himself to relieve the world of such ugliness. We knew all along that he liked me, didn’t we, Small One? Stay where you are and continue to watch while Joe looks after my wounds.”

Excited, Tammy said, "Jake! Jake!" into the radio.

"What is it Tammy?"

"Jake, Stalker is going to be okay; he just talked to me. He said to be careful who you called ugly."

"What? What?" Tammy heard; it dawned on her Stalker couldn't have known what Jake said because he was too far away.

"Jake, you have never projected your thoughts to Stalker have you?" she asked.

"No, why do you ask?"

"He heard you call him ugly, and the only way to have heard you was for you to mentally project it."

"Don't that beat all," Jake said with a chuckle.

* * * *

Joe and Ben carried Stalker out of the draw to Tony's bunker where they laid him on a clear place on the floor. "Damn dumb animal doesn't have the sense God gave a cockroach," Joe mumbled.

Bill sat in the corner holding his head. Tony left him and got down on her knees beside Stalker. As she straightened out his bullet-shattered leg, he gave a loud yelp of pain. She saw his sides quivering as bolts of pain shot through his body.

"Get me some short sticks to use as splints," she said to Joe who got up and left the bunker.

"Ben, while I hold Stalker, pour some alcohol on his leg and side. We need to wash the blood and dirt from the wounds before I can work on them."

"This is going to hurt a lot," she told Stalker.

"Do what you must, Chosen One. Do you have anything to deaden the pain, for it is sapping my strength?"

Tony felt something stir in her core. It spread outward and went up the arm that lay on Stalker. She closed her eyes and could see the ragged nerve endings in Stalker's leg.

She directed the energy at the nerve endings. In her mind she saw the energy flow to different parts of the leg attacking any damage it found.

As the energy cleansed the tissue, a part of it started creating cells that regenerated tissue to replace what was damaged or destroyed. She took her hand from his leg and placed it on the wound to his side. Energy flowed into the wound repairing damage at break neck speed.

Tony felt a sharp pain in her head. She shook her head trying to ignore the pain. Another sharp pain rocked her head, and from a long distance, she heard someone shouting.

Pushing the pain aside and ignoring the voice she brought her focus back to Stalker's side. A wrenching pain caused her to lose focus on what she was doing. She heard Ben yelling, "Let go Tony; you have to release yourself now."

It was like trying to swim through jello. A part of her wanted to continue the flow of energy to Stalker while another part sensed great danger in continuing.

After what seemed like a very long time, she felt someone shaking her. Her mind snapped back to the present. Gasping for breath, she fell over weak as a kitten.

Ben leaned over her saying, "Tony, can you hear me?"

Attempting to rise, she found herself unable to move. Scared, she tried to talk, but discovered she lacked the strength to do even that.

Concentrating on what Ben was saying, she heard, "Tony, if you can hear me do what I say. You must lie perfectly still. Clear your mind and relax. In a few minutes you will feel better."

Closing her eyes, Tony let her mind go blank. She felt energy flowing toward her from three different directions. Her body was like a sponge; it absorbed the energy and she felt her strength increasing swiftly. A stinging blow on her cheek broke the flow. Tony looked up to see Ben preparing to strike her again.

“No, Ben,” she gasped out. She watched him lower his hand and stand there watching her with a concerned look on his face.

Sitting up, she placed her back against the wall. “What happened?” she asked. Turning her head, she saw Bill lying curled up in a ball on the floor. Joe leaned against the wall pale and gasping for breath. With each passing second she felt stronger and her head was now clear.

Ben sat down beside her and took her hand. “My guardian tells me you have the power to give the essence of yourself to cure and heal. It is a power you will have to learn to control. When you healed Stalker, you gave so much of yourself we almost lost you. Luckily there was a spark of you left after we forced you to break contact with him.”

“Tony, not only can you cure and give life, but you also can take the life-force from a person. Bill, Joe and I joined forces and let you take from us enough life force to bring you back. If it hadn’t been for my guarding breaking the flow from me, we would all be dead, drained of all life.

Joe slid down the wall to a sitting position and looked at her saying, “Lady, you pack one hell of a punch. I’m as weak as a newborn baby.”

Tony felt something nudge her side. She turned to see Stalker standing there on all four legs. Looking closely, she could not see a blemish on his leg or side where the wounds were.

“Did I do that?” she asked.

“Yes, Chosen One. My injuries are repaired. Although I do not like the price we almost paid,” Stalker said.

“Tony, you need to help Bill or we’re going to lose him. You took so much out of him he is barely alive.” Ben said as he turned Bill over on his back.

Tony crawled to Bill and looked at his drawn white face. “Oh my love! What have I done to you?” she cried.

His eyes glazed, Bill looked up at her and with pale trembling lips he said, “Not your fault, love. I would have given all of me to bring you back. Without you, I would be alone. Without you, I would not want to go on.” His lips trembled for a few seconds then his face went slack and his head fell to the side.

“BILL!” “BILL!” Tony screamed, lifting his head to her breast. She felt the energy flow begin again, but this time she recognized it and channeled the flow into Bill. Frantically she searched his body for a spark she could grab on to.

Ahead of her, in the lower portion of his heart, Tony saw a dim spark that was slowly fading. “DAMN YOU, BILL! You are not going to leave me. Fight God Damn it! Give me something to hang on to.”

Tony saw the spark glow brighter. Surrounding the spark, she slowly fed her life force into it and watched it grow brighter. Feeding the spark, it grew, split into another brilliant spark and rapidly multiplied, until millions of life giving sparks filled his body.

Slowly she withdrew from him and broke the connection. Ben helped her to the wall where she sat down. Weak but contented that Bill would live, Tony looked at Ben, said, “I must rest now,” and instantly fell asleep.

Chapter 6

“Will you make the old fucker stop that?” Zack said to Ikey.

“What? I didn’t hear him say a word,” Ikey said.

“He keeps sticking his tongue out at me every time you turn your head,” Zack complained.

Ikey turned to Cap saying, “Captain, leave Zack alone, and we’ll get to that steak a lot faster.”

With a simple smile on his face, Cap, or Captain as he told them his name was, said, “All right, Mister Ikey.” He stuck his tongue out at Zack again. Ikey looked at Zack and shrugged as if to say, “It’s no use.”

Captain leaned forward, “I’ll share my gold with you, Mister Ikey, but I won’t give him any.”

“Shit, go on ahead. I’ll walk in back of both of you,” Zack said and let them pass.

Cap knew he had pushed his crazy act far enough. He let up and walked beside Ikey to the ranch house. Going to a side room, they entered the kitchen. Cap saw two men at a stove cooking food. One of them saw Cap and asked, “Who’s your friend, Ikey?”

“His name is Captain. We found him wandering around out in the hills.” Ikey made a circling motion against his head.

“Hi, my name is Captain. Could you fix me a steak? Mister Ikey said you would,” Cap said, putting on a simple face and holding out his hand.

The man wiped his hand on the apron around his waist and shook Cap’s hand.

“Hello, Captain. My name is Lenny. Sit down and I’ll whip you up the juiciest steak you’ve ever eaten.”

“Yummy,” Cap said licking his lips. He went to a table opposite the door and took a seat.

Ikey poured two cups of coffee and handed one to Cap. Sitting beside Cap, he said over his shoulder, “Zack, go report in. Tell the boss what we found and say that Captain is harmless. Tell him, I’ll be responsible for him.” Ikey sipped his coffee as Zack left.

Lenny brought a plate with a large t-bone steak on it to the table and set it down in front of Cap. He brought out another plate with mashed potatoes, and green beans on it. “Enjoy yourself, Captain. There’s more where it came from,” he said.

Cap dug in like a starving man. This was the first fresh meat he had eaten in over three months. The only meat they had in the shelter was canned meat. A steady diet of it made a person realize how good fresh meat tasted. Putting the last bite of steak in his mouth, he savored the taste. Pushing his plate away, Cap took a drink of coffee and lit a cigarette. Leaning back in his chair, Cap patted his belly saying, “Ikey not lie to Captain; steak good as he say it was.”

Ikey reached across and took his arm saying, “Listen, Captain. Don’t get in the way of any of the men here. If you bother them, they will hurt you and hurt you bad. Do you understand?”

“Ikey keep men from hurting Captain, won’t he?”

“Get it into that thick head of yours. I can only protect you so far, Captain. Some of these men are mean and will try to hurt you, so stay out of everyone’s way when I am not around. Okay?”

“Okay. When Ikey not around, Captain stay by self,” Cap said with a dumb look.

“Good enough. Now let me show you where you can sleep,” Ikey said. Getting up from the table, they went to the door and headed for a small building off to the side of the barn. Cap followed close behind Ikey taking in everything he saw. The crates unloaded from the trucks were stacked just inside

the entrance to the barn. He saw they contained electronics parts. Farther back in the barn, he saw a glass enclosed area where men were putting things together. He might have seen more but Ikey grabbed his arm and pulled him away toward the small building.

“Captain, whatever you do, don’t go near the barn. If they catch you there, you will be shot,” Ikey told him sternly.

“Captain stay away from barn. Captain not want to be shot by bad men,” Cap said. Acting scared, he clutched Ikey’s arm.

“Easy, Captain. Stay away from them and they won’t hurt you.” Ikey opened the door to the small building and pulled Cap inside. The room he stood in contained a stove and table. Off to the side sat a refrigerator and a single bowl sink. Cap followed Ikey across the room and went through another door to a bedroom. Two beds sat across the room; one of them looked as though no one had used it. The other one had rumpled covers on it and the pillows were bunched up near the headboard.

“This can be your home for a while, Captain. You can stay with me. The bed under the window is yours. Now I like things neat and tidy, so try not to make a mess. There’s food in the fridge if you get hungry. If you can’t find what you want in it, go to the mess kitchen and Lenny will get it for you. No one ever comes in here, so make yourself comfortable. I have to go out and check something,” Ikey said as he headed for the door.

“Captain sleep now.” Cap stretched and yawned.

Ikey just smiled at him and went out the door.

Cap went to the window and watched Ikey walk to the ranch house. He went to the bedroom and carefully searched through the closet. The only thing he found of use was an old pair of binoculars. At the footlocker beside Ikey’s bed, he opened it and saw several handguns on the top tray. Lifting the tray out, Cap saw three more handguns in the bottom. Cap took the old forty-five Colt from the bottom along with a clip for it. He made sure the clip was full then shoved it into the butt of the revolver. He went to his bed and placed it under his pillow. He took the binoculars into the living room and sat down on the couch. He parted the curtains enough to see through and raised the binoculars to his eyes. Adjusting the focus, he brought the barn into view. On two sides he saw four men on guard near the corners. Through the barn doors, Cap saw part of the glassed in cubicle. Men were bolting equipment to the floor. Another group of men in white smocks connected test instruments together. Cap recognized a spectrograph machine and signal generator sitting on the table. He closed the curtains, and put the binoculars behind the edge of the couch. Going to the refrigerator, he took a beer out and sat at the table thinking.

It would be hard getting out of the house at night with Ikey there. He would have to find some way to make sure Ikey didn’t wake while he went out to meet Jeff or Benji. In a rack against the wall were five assault rifles. Going to it, Cap pulled out the drawer at the bottom. Half a dozen boxes of ammunition for the rifles sat in the drawer.

Lifting one of the rifles down, Cap removed the magazine and loaded it from the shells in the drawer. Putting the rifle back on the end position, Cap closed the drawer and walked to the bedroom. Taking off his boots, he lay down on the bed and pulled the covers over him. “Might as well get a few hours sleep before it gets dark,” he thought.

Two hours later, Ikey came back. He said he had to leave for awhile. Ikey said he wouldn’t be back until tomorrow. He told Cap several times to stay in the house and not go outside.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, Cap told him he would stay inside until Ikey returned. Ikey opened the footlocker and took two guns out of it; he placed them in the waistband of his pants. Pulling on his red parka, he warned Cap again to stay inside, then he left the house.

Cap got out of bed and went into the kitchen where he fixed himself a sandwich. By the light coming through the window, Cap saw only an hour of daylight remained.

Cap went to the window and saw the guards still at their positions by the barn. Lacing up his

boots, Cap decided to go to the mess kitchen and find out what was going on.

A dozen men sat at the tables in the dining area eating when he got there.

"Have a seat, Captain," Lenny yelled from the kitchen.

Cap took a seat across from three men. He stuck his hand across the table and said, "Howdy, my name is Captain."

"Oh, yeah. The loony Ikey brought in." They got up and moved to another table.

Cap brought his hand back and dropped it to his side and listened to the talk around him.

"Damn, I'm sore. I never knew digging holes could be such hard work. We must have busted every rock in the state today. Tomorrow we finish, so they can string the wire to the barn."

Cap latched on to three men talking about what they were doing in the barn. "We'll have to start around the clock shifts in order to be ready for the big mainframe in two weeks. Where did Todd pick up a mainframe computer like that? There are only a half dozen of them in the world."

"Todd's master told him where to pick it up and where to get all the other parts to connect them all together. This master seems to have all the answers."

"Hell, he is being held prisoner by the people inside the mountain down at Galexie."

"Yeah, but no one has ever heard of this Pete before. Christ, he doesn't even have a last name that anyone knows of."

"Hey, let's get off the subject. One of these assholes will tell Jamie we were talking about Todd and his master."

"Remember what happened last week when two men were talking about Todd and his master? The next day they disappeared, and no one's seen them since."

"I hear they were shot and buried up on the mesa," one of the men said in a low voice.

"Come on. Let's get back to work," one of them said. Chairs scraped back as they got up and left the room.

So that's what they're putting together in the barn, but why all the secrecy? Cap wondered. Lenny came and sat down with him giving him a cup of coffee.

"Can I get you something to eat, Captain?" he asked.

"No thank you, Lenny, I ate a sandwich awhile ago."

"Tell me, Captain. What's it like being in the mountains by yourself for months on end?"

"It gets lonely, Lenny, mighty lonely, but someday I'll find the gold up there. I know I will."

"Sure you will, Captain. Don't you think you would be better off down here with people who can help you?" Lenny asked with concern in his voice.

"People make fun of me and call me names, Lenny. I would rather be by myself," Cap said.

Lenny raised his six feet seven inch frame from the table. He glared at the men in the room saying loud enough for them to hear, "If any of these jokers call you names, or talk bad to you, tell me about it. I'll clean their clocks for them."

Although he was playing a part, a sudden sadness came over Cap. First Ikey treated him with respect and now Lenny was standing there threatening these men if they harmed Cap. Cap thought that in another time and place, he could have liked both of these men. "Captain no want to make trouble, Lenny."

"No trouble, pal. Remember if you need anything come to me," he said, clapping Cap on the shoulder as he left. The men in the room glanced wearily at Cap and talked in lower voices.

Chapter 7

Benji waited until it was completely dark before stepping from behind the boulder. He had tried to sleep during the day but kept waking up from the cold.

Stiff and cold he trotted away from the hill. Remembering Cap's advice, he kept to the wind blown sections so as not to leave footprints in the snow.

After a few minutes, he warmed up, but then his stomach began to growl, letting him know it had been a long time between meals. By the time he reached the rim of the valley they were hiding in, he was sweating.

He did what Cap told him to do if he had to come back alone. Going to some rocks off to the left of the trail, Benji settled down to wait. If followed, the people had to pass by on the trail because it was the only way into the valley.

After an hour, Benji got up and walked down the trail into the valley. Making his way across a log lying over a small stream in the center of the valley, he stopped for a moment.

Looking back the way he came, Benji tried to spot any footprints he might have left. Seeing none, he climbed upward toward the caves located half way up the cliff. Going into a small cave, he went through it into another larger cave. He picked up a rock and hit the camouflaged door three times, waited a second, then hit it two more times.

A second later a voice said, "Is that you, Cap?"

"No, it's me, Benji. Open up; it's freezing out here."

He heard a click and felt a part of the wall swing out. In the pitch-black darkness he couldn't see the opening. He knew Jeff was there with his night glasses on searching the cave for anyone else. Jeff took his arm and led him into the opening and closed the door.

A low watt light came on high in the side of the wall. A tall slim man stood in front of him removing the night vision goggles. Wearing a bulky field jacket, Jeff leaned his rifle against the wall. "Where's Cap?"

"A couple of men caught him, but I don't think he's in any trouble. I'll tell you all about it later," Benji told him.

Jeff reached to a rock sticking out of the wall and pushed it in. A door slid open exposing a large dimly lit room. Benji walked into the room saying, "It's me, Mom."

A small woman rose from behind a stack of boxes with an assault rifle in her hands. She slung the rifle over her shoulder, walked to him and gave him a hug.

"I'll be back in a little while," Jeff said. He went out the door closing it behind him.

Jeff was going to the mouth of the cave to look back up the valley and make sure no one had followed Benji back to their hiding place. This had become standard procedure when one of them came back from outside.

Benji removed his coat and hung it on a rack beside the door. Taking off his boots, he put on a pair of slippers he took from a shoe rack.

His mom waited patiently for him to finish then said, "We thought something had happened to you when you didn't return by dark. We were preparing to go out and search for you."

"Make me a couple of sandwiches, Mom. I'm starved. After I eat and Jeff returns, I'll tell you what happened. Okay?"

She looked at her gangling son who had grown up in the last three months. Although just an inch or two short of his dad's six feet three inches, he was as thin as a rail. Narrow of face, his brown hair and piercing gray eyes absorbed everything he saw.

Much older mentally than his twelve years, he had left his youth behind him. For that, Leila felt a deep sorrow. He would not know the joys of being a young man and making the mistakes inherent with being young.

Benji realized that making a mistake now would endanger them all. He took his role of protecting his mother seriously since his father had gone east three months before.

Leila knew he missed his dad. Although Jeff and Cap constantly taught him the things he needed to survive, she caught him several times at the mouth of the cave staring eastward.

"Come over to the fire and warm yourself while I fix the sandwiches," she told him. While he stood at the propane heater, she went to the propane stove and put a can of soup in a pot to heat. Weighing only one hundred five pounds, she had toughened in the last three months.

After Ben had died in the plane crash near there, she felt as though her life had ended. A short time later, Ben opened his eyes and told her not to cry. Overcome with emotion, she had fainted.

Later she learned something that Ben couldn't describe had repaired his body so he could go east and protect a woman. Leila was happy to have him with her again although he left shortly after coming back to life.

Ben left the morning after they found this secret chamber. He took Jake, an F.B.I. agent, and Jane, Benji's nurse, with him. That had happened three months ago.

She took the pan from the stove and put the soup in a bowl. She carried it to the table along with two sandwiches.

Jeff came through the door and took off his coat. He walked to where Benji sat and took a seat at the table across from him. As he ate, Benji filled them in on what had happened that afternoon.

Chapter 8

Tony woke to the sound of a shot. She heard Bill say, "Stalker should be close to the man by now, so watch where your shots go, Ben."

Someone had placed her in a sleeping bag where she was warm and cozy. Unzipping the bag halfway, she brought her arms out and asked what was happening. Bill came over and squatted next to her saying, "There is a sniper across the valley who is keeping us pinned down. Stalker is circling around the hill to take him out. Ben fires at his position every once in a while to keep his attention focused on us. How're you feeling?"

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Around four hours."

Struggling out of the sleeping bag, Tony stood up. She walked to the opening in the bunker where Ben sighted over the barrel of his rifle. He fired and stood up turning to her. "Glad to see you up and around again, Tony. After Stalker takes care of the sniper, Joe wants you and Bill to go to Jane's position."

"Tammy says they are bunching up on the other side of the hill from her. Take extra rifles with you. Bill already carried a case of grenades for the grenade launcher to Jane's bunker. Jake has taken up a position above and in back of her with the rocket launcher. Bill will show you where I'll be when you get there."

"I hope we can chop them to pieces and give us a little breathing room. Thank God for Tammy in her post high in the tree. They tried two faints while you were asleep and both times Tammy told us where the main attack was coming from."

Tony looked across the valley and saw a flash of red near the top. A man staggered out of the trees with something large and black riding him to the ground. After a brief struggle, Stalker stood and faded into the woods.

"Time to go. Remember, Bill, only Joe and Stalker will be covering the other positions. Be ready to leave Jane if things heat up in another area," Ben said.

Handing Tony two rifles, Bill picked up four more and went out the back of the bunker. Tony followed Bill as he worked through the brush on the side of the hill.

Twenty feet from the bottom of the hill, they came to an opening in the ground. Logs were stacked to a height of four feet on top of the bunker.

Bill climbed behind the logs and sat down. He broke open the M-79 grenade launcher and shoved a round into the breech. Bill helped her up beside him and pointed to a spot at the top of a hill three hundred feet to the right. "If you see something up there, don't shoot. That's where Ben will be. He'll wait until they get fully engaged with us then hit them hard from the side."

Jane stuck her head out of the hole saying, "Tammy says they're moving our way." Tony climbed off the bunker and went into the hole leading to the bunker. She busied herself loading half a dozen rifles that she placed next the front opening. Jane stood beside her with a bulky bandage on her cheek. She pulled a cigar out of her jacket, took the cellophane off and stuck it in the side of her mouth. "Strange group we have," she said looking Tony up and down.

"If you mean this new ability I have to heal injuries, Jane, I don't know what to tell you."

The radio hanging next to the opening crackled and they heard Tammy say, "Jane, get ready."

They'll be coming over the hill any second now."

Jane stuck her rifle through the opening, and Tony did the same. "See that burnt out old pine at the top of the hill. You take everything to the right of it, and I'll take the left side," Jane said.

A group of men crossed the ridge four hundred feet from them. Cautiously they made their way down the hill.

"Easy, easy. Let them come on," Jane said.

Men continued to pour over the hill spreading out, and then converging where the hills narrowed. They both heard a whump from on top of the bunker, and a few moments later there was an explosion among the men. They heard whump, whump, whump, as Bill fired as fast as he could load the grenade launcher.

The men coming down the hill were slaughtered by the grenades going off all around them. One man would go down, and three more would come over the hill to take his place. Still, Jane said to wait, even though the men were only two hundred feet from the bunker.

A group of twenty men broke to the left and hunkered behind a huge fallen pine tree. Another group broke to the right to hide in the boulders there.

Jane reached to the side and picked up a box with a plunger on it. "Duck away from the opening when I push the plunger," she told Tony.

She connected a set of wires to two connections on the box and twisted the handle a half dozen times. Looking at Tony she nodded okay and pushed the plunger down. Ducking below the opening, they felt a rumble in the ground then a loud explosion.

Dirt and rock struck the back of the bunker. When no more dirt came through the opening, Jane stood up and connected another set of wires to the box. She pushed the plunger and dropped beside Tony. Another tremendous explosion occurred, causing dirt to fall from the roof of the bunker.

Standing, Tony looked out the opening. Where the tree had been was a smoking hole in the ground. Of the men who were behind it, nothing could be seen.

Off to the right, Tony saw bodies lying among the boulders. A few weeks ago, Joe had drilled a four-inch hole into a half dozen of the boulders and filled them with dynamite. He had used cement to plug the holes with only a wire that was connected to a detonator showing.

In effect, what happened when Jane pushed the plunger was that the dynamite exploded inside the boulders causing them to shatter. Rock from the size of a pea to gravel to large chunks flew out in a circle, killing or maiming anything in its path.

They both opened up as figures staggered out of the swirling smoke and dust. Bodies began to pile up in front of them. Then they heard the rat-tat-tat of Ben opening up with his machine gun from his position.

The right side of the men swayed as men crumpled to the ground. They broke when Bill started pumping grenades into them again.

Tony flinched as her hand hit the barrel of her rifle. She stuck two fingers that were blistered from touching the barrel into her mouth. Picking up another rifle, she waited with Jane to see if anymore people came their way.

Chapter 9

Todd sat in a Winnebago parked on a hill two miles from the battle. At the sound of the two explosions, he turned to Mickey and asked, "What the fuck was that?"

Mickey held up his hand for Todd to wait as he listened to the radio held to his ear. With a worried look on his face, he lowered the radio and said, "The sons of bitches had dynamite planted in the only two positions our men could take cover. We lost a third of our men in the explosions. The rest of them are trying to make it back over the hill. They are being cut to pieces by a machine gun on their flank. Our attack failed, Todd, and it doesn't look good."

"How many men do we have left?" Todd asked.

That morning he had started with over three hundred people, but on the last attack he had less than two hundred left. He picked up his radio and said, "How far away are you, Willie?"

"Seventy five miles and coming on fast," a voice answered from the radio.

"How many people do you have with you?" Todd asked.

"Around four hundred men and women. They haven't had any of the drugs for three days and are agitated, spoiling for a fight. My men are having a hard time controlling them," Willie said.

"Okay, get here quick as you can; we will keep them bottled up until then." Todd told the man. He turned to Mickey and raised his eyebrows asking, "Well?"

"From the reports coming in, we are down to less than a hundred men. Greg is having a fit about your order to bunch all of our men up in the narrow valley. Maybe we should have listened to him, Todd, when he wanted to make a two pronged attack."

"That's water over the dam now. Have Greg keep up the pressure. Keep them grounded for the next two hours."

There was a knock on the door of the camper. Mickey opened the door and Greg came in blowing on his hands. He went to the small stove and filled a cup with coffee. Sipping the hot brew, he turned to face Todd. He just stared for a few minutes without saying a word.

Todd couldn't stand it any longer, he said, "All right, Greg. Get it off your chest before you explode."

Greg put the cup down and unbuttoned his coat. He shifted his gun, so it would be within easy reach. Shifting his weight to the balls of his feet, he reminded Todd of a mountain lion ready to strike.

"Todd, I hope you won't be offended when I say that you fucked up royally. We have lost two thirds of our men doing it your way. We didn't gain anything your way. Are you ready to let me handle this? Because if you're not, you can color me gone," Greg said in a dangerously low voice. All five feet ten inches of Greg bristled with energy as he waited for Todd's reply.

Todd looked him up and down. Not tall and on the slim side, Greg's short blond hair made him appear older than his thirty-six years. His face would have been handsome had his broad nose not been broken by too many punches over the years. Todd knew he had screwed up by trying to take charge of the fighting. He realized it was time to let other men handle the things he knew nothing about. If he didn't, things were going to continue going wrong. He had the feeling time was running out.

"Sit down, Greg. Relax." He waited until Greg wearily sat down across the table from him. "From now on you'll be in charge of all the fighting we do. Willie will be here in less than two hours with over four hundred people. Take charge of them and make Willie your second in command.

With the new people, do you think you can root them out of there by tomorrow?"

"I would say no problem if we had some heavy guns. Since we don't, the losses are going to be staggering. It would help if we didn't have to take Ben and Joe alive." Greg raised his hand to stop Todd's protest. "Don't worry, they'll be alive, but I can't promise they won't have a few holes in them."

"Agreed. Eat something; you won't have time when the extra people arrive." Todd turned and left the camper.

"Now we can get something accomplished," Greg said to Mickey as he put meat on bread making a sandwich.

"You took a big chance just now, Greg. For a minute I thought Todd was going to give me the nod to shoot you," Mickey said as he put his gun back in his coat.

Startled, Greg realized that Mickey had been standing behind him as he sat at the table with Todd. "You would have shot, wouldn't you?" he asked.

"Yes. Todd and I have come a long way together, and I don't feel like changing horses midstream. Especially after what he did to Ray when they brought him in," Mickey told him.

"I was out locating a supply of the drug when they caught Ray. I didn't get the full story on what went down," Greg said.

"Believe me, be glad you weren't there."

"So what happened?" Greg asked.

Mickey settled back in his chair and took a long drink of water before he replied, "You have to remember that Todd was drinking heavily at the time. Well, we were sitting in the office, and Todd was drinking himself into a stupor when people started yelling outside. I went to the window to see what was going on. Down at the end of the street, a man was dragging someone along at the end of a rope. Figuring I had better nip this in the bud before it excited our people, and they started killing each other, I left the office.

"I didn't realize how big the man holding the rope was until I came up to him. Let me tell you. He stood over six and a half feet tall with shoulders so broad he had to turn sideways to get through a door. He stood there drinking from a bottle of whiskey as I walked up. He looked me up and down then said, 'Who the hell are you, and where is this fella Todd? I have a present for him.'

"After telling him who I was, he started pulling on the rope hand over hand as though reeling in a large fish. At the time, I didn't recognize Ray because he was dust covered and had welts and bruises all over him. Ray wore a black patch over his left eye and part of his face was rubbed raw. Really, the only way I could tell it was Ray was by the ugly scar on his face.

"The man reached down and grabbed him by the rope around his neck and lifted him to his feet. He changed grips, grabbing Ray by the front of his torn shirt holding him up because Ray was too weak to stand on his own. 'I come to collect the bounty on this bastard,' the man said, taking another drink of whiskey.

"About then, Todd staggered out of the office yelling, 'what the hell is going on down there?' He staggered and weaved his way to where we stood.

"Well, what do we have here? Is that you, Ray?" Todd asked.

"Ray just stood there trying to get his breath because the rope around his neck was cutting off his air. Todd reached up and clumsily loosened the rope. Ray gasped in air and would have fallen if the man hadn't held him by the front of his shirt.

"Ray, Ray, Ray! You look worse than the last time I saw you,' Todd slurred. He squinted at the man holding Ray. Turning to me, Todd asked, 'Who the hell is this mountain of a man?'

"Name's Adam. Who the hell is this drunken sot?' the man asked throwing Ray to the ground in disgust.

"I don't care how many times I see it; it always surprises me how Todd can be dead drunk one

minute and stone cold sober the next. Well, Todd straightened up and before I could blink he had his gun pressed under the man's chin.

"A little more respect for your betters will help you live a lot longer, friend Adam,' Todd told him in a venomous voice.

"I stepped between them to settle things down. Every time Todd shoots someone in front of his people, they go on a rampage of killing, and it takes a few days to settle them down.

"Todd put his gun away saying, 'Pay the man. Take the rope off Ray. Clean him up; then, bring him to the office.' With that he turned and walked down the street.

"I took Ray to the motel where my men were staying and let him take a shower. Scrounging around, I come up with a pair of pants and a shirt that fit him. I have to tell you he was a sorry looking sight as I led him to Todd's office. Todd sat behind his desk looking at some maps as we entered. He looked up and motioned for us to have a seat on the couch across from him. You could smell the fear coming from Ray as we sat there. Todd made us wait for a few minutes as he shuffled papers around.

"Get Ray a beer, Mickey,' Todd told me as he got up and came around the desk to sit down next to Ray.

"Ray, old buddy. Looks like you've had a rough time of it.'

"Ray had to hawk and spit several times before he could talk. He grabbed the beer from my hand and drank it down in one gulp. Wiping sweat from his face, Ray said, 'Thanks, Todd. That bastard hasn't given me anything to drink in two days.'

"I've missed you, Ray. Tell you what. If you want, I'll have this Adam shot for treating you so cruelly. How does that sound?' Todd asked in a soft voice.

"Now I could see hope spring to life in Ray's eyes as he considered Todd's words. 'Let him go, Todd. You would loose too many men trying to take him out. He's one tough and mean bastard. It would be better to just send him on his way.'

"Nice of you to think about us, Ray, since you left in the dead of the night without so much as a goodbye,' Todd purred.

"Listen, Todd. I can explain everything if you will give me the chance,' Ray said.

"No need, Ray. You made a mistake, but you are now back with us where you belong,'" Todd told him, patting him on the shoulder.

"I tell you, Greg. A shiver went up my back when Todd said that. I knew for a fact that Todd was going to do something. Many a night I'd listened to him rant and rave about how it was Ray's fault everything was falling apart. Yet he sat there telling Ray not to worry that he didn't have any bad feelings toward him. Mind you, I sat at the back of the room because I didn't want to be near Todd when he turned on the charm. You've seen him when he gets like that. He's more dangerous than a pit of vipers.

"Todd got up and brought Ray another beer from the refrigerator. After three beers, I could see that Ray was a little woozy, probably because he hasn't eaten in a couple of days. You wouldn't believe the change in the man. I knew Ray before he left and back then he was as hard as nails. I listened to him sit there and whine about how he shouldn't have ever left Todd. I tell you it didn't seem like the same man.

"After a while, the beer got to Ray. His head kept dropping. Todd would shake him and tell him to have another drink. Soon Ray fell fast asleep on the couch.

"Todd told me to come help him. He tied Ray's hands together and had me help him carry Ray to the wall behind his desk. While I held Ray up, he threaded the rope around Ray's hands through an eyebolt mounted high up on the wall. He drew Ray up until he was standing on the tips of his toes. Todd went to his desk and took two threaded eye rings out of a drawer. He had me screw them into the wall near the floor about five feet apart. He tied ropes around Ray's ankles and pulled his legs apart as far as he could, tying them to the eye rings.

“Using a straight razor, he cut Ray’s clothes from him. Todd told me to go get a bottle of grain alcohol and a few sponges. As I left, Todd began slapping Ray’s face to bring him around.

“By the time I got back, Ray had come to and was sobering up rapidly. I sat the alcohol and sponges on the desk then went to the back of the room. Ray was blubbering to Todd about giving him another chance. Todd threw his head back and laughed hysterically. He poured a glass of whiskey and watched Ray as he sipped it.

“‘Did you really think you could get away, Ray?’

“‘Please, Todd. I’ll do anything you want. Just don’t kill me,’ Ray pleaded.

“‘Oh, you are going to die, Ray, but before you do a lot of suffering is called for. Do you realize I would have had Joe a long time ago if you hadn’t left? As it is, we are getting the shit beat out of us although we outnumber him a hundred to one. I blame all the past failures on you. I lay awake at night and think of ways to make you suffer.’ Todd raised the bottle of whiskey and drank almost half of it in one gulp. He shivered and shook his head.

“‘You don’t know how much this is going to hurt me. I thought of you as the big brother I never had, Ray.’

“‘I swear, Greg. Todd was actually crying with tears running down his cheeks as he said this.

“‘Please, Todd. For the love of God, just shoot me and get it over with,’ Ray pleaded.

“‘Sorry, Ray. If I did it that way other people might get ideas and try to leave. No, I have to make an example out of you. Think of it as your last effort to draw together the people who have joined us.’”

“All in one movement, Todd reached out and pulled Ray’s ear out from his head. His other hand flashed up and down and he held Ray’s right ear in front of him.

“It must have taken several seconds for the pain to hit but when it did, Ray threw his head back and screamed. Todd took the cap off a bottle of alcohol and up ended it into one of the sponges. He took the dripping sponge over and pressed it to the side of Ray’s blood streaked head.

“I didn’t think it possible for Ray to scream any louder. When the alcohol hit the hole where his ear had been, his neck and arms knotted up. It started as a wail and became so high pitched that a few glasses broke. His eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out.

“I thought it was over and walked toward the door to get some fresh air. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Todd asked roughly.

“‘Nowhere,’ I said as I went back and sat down.

“Jesus, by the time he finished, I was drenched in sweat, and it was all I could do to keep my dinner down. To make a long story short, he cut off Ray’s other ear. Next he cut off his dick and stuffed it in his mouth. You ask me if I would have shot you. Bet your ass I would have; I don’t want to get on the wrong side of Todd.”

“No hard feelings. You were doing what you had to do,” Greg said, sticking out his hand. They shook hands then Greg left the camper to make preparations for the coming battle.

Todd entered the camper shaking snow from his coat. “Mickey, get ready to go back to town. If we don’t get out of here pretty soon, we’ll be snowed in. Christ, it’s coming down by the buckets out there. Do you think Greg can handle things here, Mickey?”

“He can’t do any worse than we have done. I think he’ll be all right,” Mickey answered.

“Tell Greg what we’re doing. Bring back a few of your best men to take with us. Make it quick before we get stuck here,” Todd said. Going to the driver’s seat, he started the camper.

It was all the windshield wipers could do to remove the falling snow. After Mickey entered and sat down in the passenger seat, Todd put the camper in reverse. Wheels spinning, he finally turned the camper around and pulled to the edge of the road leading down the mountain.

“When we get to town, Mickey, find all the four wheel drive vehicles you can. Willie will need them to get his people up here. Christ, look how it’s coming down now,” Todd said.

Outside the snow came down in sheets, blocking out everything around them. The camper shook as blasts of wind slammed into the side of it. To make matters worse, the temperature was falling rapidly. They saw men dressed in light jackets hiding behind trees, trying to block the blasts of cold air. It wasn't any use because the wind changed directions every second. Most of the people were in cars or trucks parked in the staging area at the top of the hill.

"Make a note to have Willie bring some heavy winter clothes for the people who are here," Todd told Mickey.

Todd eased the camper into gear and pulled out onto the road. As he started down, the camper slid sideways a couple of feet. Stepping on the brakes caused the camper to slide forward until it stopped at the edge of the cliff. Wiping sweat from his face, Todd slowly edged backwards in reverse until once again the camper was straight with the road. In first gear, he gave the camper a little gas until they were creeping along. Almost a foot of snow lay on the ground and you could almost see the inches piling up.

"Where in hell did this storm come from? Last report we got was that it was going to clear up," Mickey said.

Todd didn't answer. He was having problems keeping the camper on the road. Every time he touched the brakes, the camper shot sideways toward the cliff side of the road. It was all he could do to keep moving forward and maintain control.

Twenty minutes later the snow decreased. Rounding a turn, they ran out of the snow entirely and clear road lay ahead of them. He stopped the camper and got out staring back up the mountain to the area they had left a short while ago. Up there neither the snow nor the wind had abated.

As they watched, it seemed to pick up in intensity and edge toward them. Foot by foot they could see the storm block out everything behind it.

It seemed alive and the hair at the nape of Todd's neck stood on end as he watched. There was no doubt about it now, the storm was moving toward them as if some primeval force didn't want them to escape.

"Let's get the shit out of here," Todd yelled above the rising wind; he jumped in the camper. Jamming it in gear, he sped down the highway leaving the storm behind.

Chapter 10

Bill lay in the snow beside the road that dipped into the valley. He raised the binoculars to his eyes. A half mile into the valley, where it narrowed into a choke point, stood a man and the scroungiest dog Bill had ever seen. The man looked to be a hundred years old and nothing but skin and bones. His back was bent and twisted which caused him to shuffle as he paced back and forth. Bill studied the dog, which looked to be in worse shape than the man if that were possible. It wobbled as if it were going to fall over as it paced back and forth with the man. Both the dog and the man looked as though they were starved to death. He handed the binoculars back to Joe.

“What do you think? Is it a trap?” Joe asked.

“To tell the truth, I don’t know what to think. If it’s a trap, why put an old man out front like that? Besides I still can’t shake this feeling we are being watched,” Bill answered.

“I know what you mean. Since we stopped, I have felt eyes watching us. If they are there, they are well concealed. I can’t see anything or anyone,” Joe said.

“Well, we can’t sit here all day. When Todd learns we aren’t in the valley, he will be hot on our trail. I would like to be well away from here when he finds out.”

Joe stood and brushed snow from his clothes. “I’ll get on the radio and tell Ben to pull off to the side of the road. They can wait until we see what’s going on down there.” Joe said as he headed for the Jeep parked out of sight down the road.

“Bring your rifle back and keep me covered. I’m going to mosey down and find out what the man wants. If it is a trap, at least, we will know and can backtrack around this valley,” Bill said, getting to his feet.

“Be careful, Bill. At the first sign of trouble, break away and high tail it back here,” Joe told him.

Bill waved okay as he walked down the center of the road into the valley. He kept the muzzle of his rifle lowered, but he was alert. His eyes moved left and right trying to spot anything that didn’t look right.

With a slow but steady pace, Bill approached where the man stood watching him. The dog moved to the side of the road. All appearances of being a weak ailing animal disappeared. Now he had the look of a predator ready to strike at a moments notice.

Bill stopped twenty feet from where the man leaned against the steel bar blocking the road. The man appeared to be unarmed which in itself was strange considering the violence occurring all around. Leaning to the side, the old man spat a stream of brown juice to the ground.

“What can I do for you stranger?” the man asked.

“What would it take to get you to raise that bar so I can drive through?” Bill asked.

“I reckon you be one of those from the small house three valleys over. My friends have told me about you,” the old man said in his southern Ozark voice.

“Could be,” Bill hedged.

“My friends tell me your buddy has a long rifle trained on me. For your sake and his, I hope he doesn’t have an itchy trigger finger, friend.”

Bill glanced around trying to spot these friends the man kept mentioning. All he could see was the man and the dog that stood off to the side. This caused Bill to split his attention between the dog and the man. Shifting so he could watch the dog out of the corner of his eye, Bill asked, “How is it that

an old fellow like you is out here by himself?"

The man chewed on his cud of tobacco for a few seconds. He leaned to the side and spat out a stream of tobacco juice before answering. "What gives you the idea that I am alone?"

"Unless your friends are invisible, you and the dog are the only living things I see," Bill said.

"Well, you might say my friends are a mite skittish, young fellow." He cocked his head to the side as if listening to something. Straightening up, he looked Bill in the eye saying, "The men who are after you know you have left the valley. They tain't far behind your people who are a few miles back down the road."

Exasperated, Bill asked, "How do you know that?"

"Time's awastin' young man. You better signal your man to get a-holt of them afore they are caught by the men thet are coming."

Bill turned and motioned for Joe to come forward hoping he wasn't getting them into a trap. Facing the man again, Bill asked, "Aren't you afraid to be out here unarmed like this?"

"Do I look senile to you, young man?"

Bill shook his head no.

"I knows all about the people running around killing each other. Believe me, young 'un. They knows about me too. As long as they pay the toll to pass through here, I leaves them alone and ast no questions."

Bill looked closer at the man, wondering if he was half as dangerous as he claimed. Joe pulled up in the Jeep and walked to stand beside him.

"Get Ben on the radio and have him get here fast as he can. According to this man, they are right behind us," Bill said, pointing to the old man. While Joe contacted Ben, Bill walked to stand next to the man.

"You mentioned a toll to pass through here. How much will it cost us to pass?" he asked.

"Let's see there are seven of you, I figure ten pounds of meat per person should do it."

Bill's mouth dropped. He had expected the man to ask for money, and anything else never entered his mind. "We don't have that much meat. What would you do with it anyway since most of it would spoil before you could eat it?"

"Not for me, young 'un. I couldn't chew it anyway," he said, opening his mouth to show that he didn't have any teeth. "It's for my friends. We have an arrangement, I take care of them and they watch out for me."

"What kind of friends would want only meat?" Joe asked as he came up to them.

"Guess it wouldn't hurt for you to meet a few of them," he said. He got the same look on his face as before when Bill thought he was listening to someone.

All around them they heard rustling in the leaves and brush. By the dozens, dogs of all breeds stood up and came forward to surround them. Most of them looked underfed but there was no doubting they could be vicious. Farther out they saw movement in the trees where a lot of bodies were moving around.

"How many damn dogs are out there?" Bill asked.

"Shoot, every time I try counting them, I loose count. Around three hunnert. Here lately, I been noticing a lot of new faces, and Squeeker tells me they have to range farther out for food. "Thet's why I want the meat, so some of them can hang close to protect me. Without them, I'd been dead long ago.

"About three months ago, a bunch of men picked me up and held me at a house in the next valley. Now Squeeker told me to keep them from killing me for awhile and he would save me. There were eight of them, so I talked crazy like until night fall."

"A few hours after dark, Squeeker talks inside my head. Now ain't that funny. I hear my dog talking to me in here," he said tapping his head. "Well, Squeeker tells me to get a few of them to go

outside, and he would take care of them.

"It took me awhile to convince them that if anything happened to me they wouldn't live out the night. A couple of them sneered and joked about how they weren't skeered of one old man. I tells them if they are so brave why don't they go outside and meet a few of my friends. Two of them goes out the door, bragging about what they is going to do to my friends when they catches them. Let me tell you I never heard such screaming. They grabbed a-holt of me and drug me outside with them. I tell you it wasn't a pretty sight. Parts of the men were missing, and you couldn't tell who they were because their faces had been eaten away. After that they let me loose and tain't bothered me since."

"I hate to tell you this, chief, but there's a whole heap of trouble following us down the road. I suggest that you clear out for awhile and take your dogs with you," Joe said.

"I been figuring on leaving for a while anyway. Would it be all right if we traveled with you for a ways until we find a place where the game is more plentiful?"

"You're welcome to travel with us far as you want, old timer. By the way, do you have a name?" Bill asked.

"Just call me Zeb, and this is Squeecker," he said patting the old hound on the head. "I reckon them's your people coming there," he pointed to where the road topped over the ridge.

Bill turned to see the Jeep pick-up drive down into the valley. "We had better get this gate open so Ben can drive to the other side. Joe, drive the Jeep to the other side and park."

Zeb struggled with a heavy chain securing the steel bar to a cement pillar. Bill ran to give him a hand.

Although there were only six links in the chain, they were monsters. Each link was six inches long and about the same thickness of a quarter. The padlock used to secure the chain to the post was the largest lock Bill had ever seen.

While he lifted the chain, Zeb put a large key into the bottom of the lock and twisted, springing it open. It took both of them to shove the steel bar to the side on its rusty hinges.

Joe drove the old Army Jeep with the fifty-caliber machine gun mounted in the back past them and pulled to the side of the road. Ben pulled up to them and rolled down his window.

"They are only fifteen minutes behind us and coming on fast. Think of some way to delay them and give us a little breathing room," Ben said.

Bill slapped the side of the truck and yelled, "Quick, Tony. Hand me out a dozen sticks of dynamite." The window at the back of the truck topper raised and Tony handed out the dynamite.

"Be careful, Bill," she said and closed the window to keep the cold air out.

"Go on ahead, Ben. We'll catch up with you."

Ben drove on down the road passing from sight around a curve. Bill handed the dynamite to Joe saying, "Plant this where it will do the most good while we put the chain back on the bar."

"Squeecker says they are almost here," Zeb said.

"Get in the Jeep, Zeb," Bill yelled as he ran to help Joe.

"Dig me another hole on the other side of the road," Joe said as he wrapped tape around six sticks of dynamite. He inserted one of the new electronic detonators in the middle of the bundle. He placed the bundle in the hole he had dug. Picking up a large rock, he carefully placed it on top of the dynamite. He raised the antenna on the detonator until it stuck a few inches above ground. Joe shoveled loose dirt and rock into the hole. He scooped up some snow and spread it around.

It wouldn't pass a close inspection, but he didn't plan on letting them do much looking. Going over to where Bill stood sweating, he wrapped another bundle of dynamite and placed it in the hole.

As they filled the hole, they heard Zeb yell, "Here they come, young 'uns, and they look mad as hornets."

Snow and rock flew from the hillside a hundred feet down the road from them. Joe grabbed Bill's arm, saying, "Let's get the hell out of here." They ran to the Jeep.

Joe let the clutch out too quickly, and the Jeep fishtailed across the road, slamming into a tree. Zeb flew over the side to land in the middle of the road. Bill was thrown out on the hood; luckily the windshield was lowered. Joe was frantically trying to restart the Jeep.

Zeb climbed ungraciously to his feet. "God Damn it, young 'un. The way you drive, we won't have to wait for them to kill us." He hobbled to the Jeep and climbed into the back.

Bill grabbed his rifle and yelled, "Get the damn thing started. I'll try to slow them down." He laid the rifle across the gate bar and aimed ten feet above the approaching vehicles.

Flipping the selector to automatic, he fired off a whole magazine. Because of the distance, he saw his rounds land fifty feet in front of the lead truck. The truck slid to the side as the driver slammed on the brakes on the slick road. The vehicles behind slowed but continued to advance.

Bill saw men climb out of the trucks and start working their way through the snow along the top of the ridge. A heavy caliber machine gun opened up from the ridge. Bill's rifle jumped off the bar as the heavy slugs struck to the left of him. He jumped backward as the line of slugs traversed the bar.

His ears rang from the heavy slugs hitting the steel bar. It was like someone pounding on an anvil next to his ears. Bill heard the Jeep sputter and roar to life. Jumping up, he ran for the Jeep yelling, "GO, GO!" Grabbing the back of his seat, he swung his feet over the side as Joe roared down the road.

Zeb grabbed his legs to keep him from falling out. Squeeker took a mouth full of Bill's coat. Squeeker braced his legs against the seat and pulled.

Facing backward with his head hanging out of the Jeep, Bill watched a line of bullets snake their way toward them. As Joe went into the curve, Bill felt the Jeep lurch to the right as the bullets slammed into the right corner chewing away four inches of the back seat.

At last Bill drew himself into the Jeep. Patting Squeeker on the head he said, "Thanks, boy." The dog snarled and looked away.

"Easy, Squeeker, he didn't know that you are a bitch," Zeb said to the dog.

Bill reached into the back and scratched Squeeker's ear saying, "Sorry, girl." Squeeker held up her paw and licked his hand as if to say all was forgiven.

Joe pulled to the side of the road and stopped. He took a small box from his pocket and got out of the Jeep.

"What in Sam Hill are you stopping for, young 'un? That bar won't stop them for long, and I would rather be long gone when they get here."

"I need to be in line of sight to set off the explosives."

"Show me how to operate that box," Zeb said.

Joe showed Zeb how to work the two switches. Zeb took the box and showed Squeeker how it worked. A large German Shepherd with a milky right eye came to the side of the Jeep. Zeb held the box so the Shepherd could see it as Squeeker grunted and whined. The Shepherd reached up and took the box from Zeb's hand. He angled to the side of the road and went to the top of the hill where he lay down watching what was happening back at the gate.

"What you waiting on, young 'un? Get us out of here."

Joe looked at Bill who just shrugged. He turned to Zeb asking, "What about the explosives?"

"Don't worry, Whitey knows what to do. Now will you quit jabbering and get us on down the road?"

Joe started the Jeep and drove off. Bill watched the strange pair sitting in the rear seat. From the way Zeb talked, he lacked a proper education but what he lacked in schooling, he more than made up for in survival smarts. Bill judged his age to be between seventy and a hundred. He was in pretty good shape. Thin as a rail with a full head of curly gray hair and long bushy eyebrows, he looked like someone's elderly grandfather.

"Zeb, why are you out here all by yourself? Don't you have any family to look after you?" Bill asked.

"In the first place, young 'un, I don't need anyone ta look after me. I got along fine by myself for the last ninety-two year. Squeeker here is the only family I got, and we get along pretty well on our own. That's why I set up the toll road to feed my new friends," he said, gesturing toward the tops of the hills.

Bill looked at the ridge tops. Hundreds of dogs trotted along parallel to them. Behind them more dogs followed making better time since they didn't have to fight the drifting snow. Still they were steadily pulling away from them.

Zeb noticed his look and said, "Don't worry about them; they will ketch up to us afor long. Just keep your eye on him, his driving tain't the best I've seen," Zeb tapped Joe on the shoulder, which drew an annoyed look.

Smiling, Bill looked at Joe and said, "You heard the man, bwana. Keep your eyes on the road."

"I would hate to have met this old bastard fifty years ago," Joe said, still smarting from slamming into the tree.

"I may be old, sonny, but I'm not deaf. If you have something to say to me, say it, don't beat around the bush," Zeb said in a querulous voice.

It was hard to dislike this crabby old man.

Ahead they saw Ben standing beside the pick-up. Joe stopped to see what was wrong.

"We heard on the radio Todd has another force ahead of us. According to the map we are boxed between them."

Behind them they heard two explosions. Several miles down valley two pillars of smoke rose into the air.

"Told you Whitey could do the job," Zeb said smugly.

They spread the maps out and searched for a way around the two groups chasing them. "We might as well face it, they have us," Ben said.

"Not exactly," Zeb said.

They turned to stare at Zeb. "Do you know another way out of here, Zeb?"

"Yep."

"Damn it, old man if there's another way out of here, can you show us where it is?" Joe shouted.

Tony grabbed Joe's arm and pulled him aside. Bill led Zeb to the rear of the truck. After finding out the route that let them get around Todd's men, he had him crawl in back and lie down on the mattress. Squeeker jumped in the truck and lay down beside Zeb.

"Take care of him. He won't admit it, but he's exhausted. He was slammed around a good bit today," Bill whispered to Tony.

After Tony and Tammy crawled into the back of the truck, Bill chuckled as he heard Zeb say, "Lordy, Lordy, if I were fifty year younger, missy, we could have us some fun."

Tony smiled at him, and Tammy giggled.

Bill closed the back of the truck. He walked to where Ben and Joe stood. "About a mile down the road there is a turn off to the left. We take it. Zeb says it's rough but we shouldn't have any problems in four wheel drive."

Jake ran up the road. "I spotted them three miles back. It'll take a while to get here; they are cautious after what happened at the gate," he said.

"That settles it; let's go. Jake, you ride with Joe and me. Ben, go ahead. We'll stop and brush away our tracks far enough, so they can't be spotted from the road," Bill told them.

Chapter 11

Todd sat drinking a glass of orange juice. He sat the glass down and said, "Has Greg located Joe yet?"

"No, he has disappeared again. Greg said they almost had them. If it hadn't been for the wild dogs, they would have trapped them in the valley. As it is, he is having a hard time getting men to go out and search for them." Mickey answered.

"This is getting to be tiresome. Every time we have Joe trapped, someone or something comes along and helps him get away. If my Master wasn't insisting that Ben be captured, I would say to hell with them," Todd said.

"The way it's going we aren't going to get them anyway. Maybe it's not in the cards for us to capture them. Look at it this way; we are only a small part of all the changes taking place in this country. I say we go to our headquarters and let Greg handle Joe's group," Mickey said.

Todd rubbed his eyes and stared at the wall for a few minutes before answering. "That's the best idea I've heard yet. By the time we get there, they should have the new computer my Master wanted fired up and running."

"Should we leave a few people here to help support Greg if he needs it?" Mickey asked.

"Joe is heading west. I think our best bet would be to have some of our people set up in a town near the Colorado border. That way support for Greg will be getting closer instead of farther away. Have a couple of our best men head for the town of Burlington. It is located on Interstate 70 just across the border. From there, they can quickly go north or south to help Greg. That will also put them less than two hundred miles from our headquarters in case we need them. How long will it take to pack up and be ready to leave?" Todd asked.

"It all depends on whether you want to take all of the equipment we have here or leave most of it behind," Mickey answered.

"Take only enough food to get us there and leave the rest in the storehouse. We'll send for it later. Gather all the explosives and weapons; they will go with us. Put the drug in our camper. I know the cooks will bitch, but I would rather have it where we can keep an eye on it. When they set up to cook the meals they can get the amount they need from us. Send everyone, except the men going to the border and the ones going with us, up to Greg. He will be glad to get the extra help. That's about it. How long will it take?"

"We should be able to leave day after tomorrow if the weather doesn't turn bad," Mickey answered.

"Good, get things rolling; I'm going to take a short nap. Wake me in three hours and we will trace the route we'll take." Todd got to his feet and walked to the door where he watched Mickey shout orders to the men standing next to the general store. Todd rubbed his forehead to ease the persistent headache that would not go away. When he got to the ranch, he was going to have one of the doctors there check him out. After going to the bedroom, he lay down but couldn't sleep.

Todd thought about the last conversation he had had with his Master. He had tried to get a description of what his master looked like from him. The description he got sounded fine. Six feet two inches tall, brown hair, blue eyes, and two hundred pounds. The longer they talked; however, Todd noticed differences in the description his Master gave him when he referred to himself.

What did his Master mean when he said he could travel three thousand miles in one second? A few times he said something about weighing a fraction of what his enemies weighed, but he was more powerful than all of them put together. Another thing, why did his Master get so upset when Todd asked him if he was human? Todd thought he was going to take his head off when he asked. Todd knew his Master was lying to him, but he couldn't understand why. Although his Master said he was doing a good job, Todd wondered why his master lied to him.

Surely, his Master knew that Todd would do anything for him. He carried out the instructions his Master gave him for finding the giant computer and transferring it to the ranch. Todd had done everything his master asked, but every time he tried to get information about something his master talked about, he cut him off short.

Who was Rita? Several times he referred to how he was going to get the bitch out of his hair. Ross was another name that kept coming up. He would say that if he could get this Ross out of her, then she would be easy to tame. It didn't make any sense to Todd. Was this Ross screwing a woman named Rita? Did this Rita belong to his Master? He wished he had some answers.

Things were bad enough without worrying that his Master was setting him up. He gave up trying to reason it out and lay there holding his head in his hands. Rolling out of bed, he went into the next room and took a bottle of Bourbon out of the cabinet. With shaking hands, Todd poured a glass half full of the amber liquid. Holding his head with one hand, Todd stared at the glass. He wrapped his fingers around the glass and slowly raised it to his lips. His throat burned as he swallowed, and he felt a tearing at his gut when it hit bottom.

"I thought you gave up drinking?" He turned to see his girlfriend standing in the door.

"This may help get rid of the headache I have all the time now. I didn't get them until I quit drinking," Todd said, taking a big drink. He grimaced as the Bourbon went down.

"Remember our agreement? I said I'd stay with you if you gave up alcohol. I don't want to end up dead like your last girl friend," the pert little redhead said.

"Come here and sit," Todd said patting his lap.

She stood five feet one inch tall with an eighteen inch waist. At ninety pounds, she could hold her ground with any woman as far as looks and sensuality went. She had it made with Todd and didn't want to screw things up, so she walked over and sat down on his lap.

"Our agreement still holds. I promise I won't get drunk. Just enough to see if it helps. Okay?" he said running his hand up her leg.

She trembled as his fingers traced their way around her panties and slid under them. Twisting around, she placed her lips on his and stuck her tongue in his mouth. She broke loose and looked him in the eye. "Promise me, you won't get drunk and beat up on me," she said.

He scooted her off his lap, reached into his pocket and pulled out a key handing it to her. "Here's the key to the liquor cabinet. When you think I've had enough, lock the whiskey away. Now what could be fairer than that?" Todd said. Reaching up, he pulled her down to his lap again.

She tucked the key in the pocket of her skirt. Pouring another drink, she held the glass to his lips. Setting the glass on the table, she reached and started unbuttoning her blouse. Her tongue ran around the inside of his ear. She whispered, "What's that bulge in your pants lover? Anything I can help you with?"

"Maybe," Todd said as he slipped off her blouse and lowered his head to her breast. He sucked on the nipple until it stood straight out, stiff and quivering.

With a pop, she pulled his head away and rose from his lap. Grabbing his hand, she said, "Let's go into the bedroom where we can be comfortable."

Todd grabbed the bottle of Bourbon off the desk and followed her rear end as it swayed from side to side. It surprised him that his headache was almost gone. He watched her as she did a bump and grind to music only she could hear. Raising the bottle, he took a long pull, shaking his head as it went

down.

“Come here, lover.” Debbie motioned with her finger from the bed. She lay with her legs spread apart. One hand snaked down her body and she fingered herself. “Got something you want to put in here?” she said with a mischievous smile.

“You seem to be doing a good job. Go on, you know I like to watch. Besides we have all night,” Todd said, going to an armchair and taking a seat.

He watched as she fingered herself until she had her first orgasm. He jumped out of the chair and ran to the bed. She spread her legs wide as he fell between them and penetrated her. He only lasted thirty seconds, but it was good for him and he really didn't give a shit about her. He knew it was the whiskey making him think like this, but he felt so damn good.

“That's okay, lover. My time will come later,” Debbie told him as she held his head.

Todd lifted the empty bottle and stared at it. Where did it go? It was half full when he came into the room. He threw it into the corner where it broke with a crash. Bending over the bed, he lifted her skirt from the floor and searched in the pocket until he found the key.

“Give me the key, Todd,” Debbie said.

“This key,” he said, holding it up for her to see.

“Come on, Todd. You promised.”

“What did I promise?” he said, arching an eyebrow.

“Don't do this, Todd. If you don't give me the key, I'm walking out of here and never coming back.” She put her blouse on and grabbed the skirt out of his hand. As she bent over to put the skirt on, he hit her in the head knocking her into the corner. She screamed in pain as her hand came down on a piece of the broken whiskey bottle. Jerking her hand up, he saw a gash on her wrist with blood streaming from it.

“Please. Help me,” she said, pleading for help.

“You dumb bitch. Do you really think I would let you walk out of here? I do want to thank you though. You've shown me it isn't the whiskey that made my headache go away.”

“What do you mean, Todd?” she asked. She held her wrist as a pool of blood formed on the floor.

“It's the violence,” Todd said with a far away look in his eye. “I know I've drunk a lot, but I'm not drunk. What do you know about that?”

“Please, Todd. I need help now,” she said in a weak voice.

“Of course, you do. Hang on I will get something to put on the cut,” Todd said as he headed for the bathroom. He came back with a compress bandage. He had her hold out her hand. He put an ointment on the cut and wrapped the bandage around it.

“Lucky for you it didn't cut an artery, love,” Todd said, patting her on the cheek. He helped her from the floor to the bed where he had her lie down. Pulling the covers over her, he kissed her on the cheek saying, “Get some rest now, dear. I'll be back to check on you later.” As he turned to leave, he tossed the key on the bed beside her. “Take care of this for me.” He turned out the light as he left the room.

Sitting at his desk, he thought about what he had discovered. Could it be something as simple as him not taking part in the violence going on around him? Thinking back, he remembered that the headaches started after he gave up drinking and distanced himself from all killing. Todd went in and checked on Debbie every once in a while. By morning, he had another full-blown headache. Deciding to see if his theory was right, he had Mickey bring in one of the men who was causing trouble.

“What's your name?” Todd asked the man standing before him with his hands tied behind his back.

“Benny, sir,” the man said in a trembling voice.

“Benny, you have stirred up a lot of trouble in the last few weeks. What do you think we should do with you?”

"I don't know, sir," Benny said, looking around the room for a way to escape.

A sudden pain shot through the front of Todd's head, he moaned, "Get some more men, Mickey," he groaned.

Mickey left the room and came back with three men. They stood waiting for Todd to tell them what to do.

"Benny, your crime is that you don't know when to keep your mouth shut. All this bullshit you are spouting to my people has to stop. Now I don't want to kill you, but I can't leave things the way they are. I have come up with something that will work."

He turned to Mickey and said, "Mickey, spread eagle him on the table. Tie him so he can't move his head."

While the men struggled to tie the man on the table, Todd stuck a large butcher knife in the coals of the stove. He went to a drawer across the room and removed a pair of pliers, which he brought back and placed on the desk. He took two small pieces of rope from his desk and formed a loop in both pieces.

Panting, Mickey turned and asked, "What now, Todd?"

Todd handed him the two pieces of rope and said. "Put one around his lower teeth and the other on the upper teeth. Pull his mouth open as wide as you can. Tell me when you're ready." He turned to the stove and used a rag to grab the handle of the knife. The knife glowed cherry red. He spit on the end of the blade and watched the spittle sizzle. Sticking the knife back in the fire, he waited for them to get Benny's mouth open. Todd heard them struggling to put the ropes around Benny's teeth.

"Tie his goddamn arm down," Mickey shouted as two men struggled to get the arm to the edge of the table where it could be tied. One of the men hit him in the forearm with his fist, causing the arm to go limp.

"Ok, Todd," Mickey said.

Todd lifted the pliers from the desk and went to stand beside Benny's head. Mickey pulled down on the lower jaw while another man pulled on the upper jaw. Benny's mouth gaped wide open.

"You," Todd pointed to a beefy man. "Take the pliers and pull his tongue out as far as you can."

The man grabbed Benny's tongue and pulled. Benny made gurgling noises and his eyes bugged out in terror.

Todd turned to the stove and lifted out the knife. He had to hold it away from his body because of the heat. Benny stared and made frantic noises as the knife neared his face. The man holding the tongue turned his head aside. Todd slid the knife along Benny's lips frying them. He slowly sawed the knife back and forth on the tongue savoring the feeling of power. He hardly noticed the smell of burnt flesh while the men around him gagged.

The man holding the tongue pulled so hard that he pulled the tongue out before it was cut half way through. The tongue flew across the room, striking the wall. The man dropped the pliers, fell to his knees and threw up on the floor. Blood spurted out of Benny's mouth. They had let his jaws close.

"Pull his mouth open, so I can cauterize the wound before he bleeds to death," Todd yelled. It wasn't hard to pull Benny's jaws apart now because he was unconscious. Todd pulled the stub of a tongue up and placed the blade against it.

Flesh and blood sizzled, but the flow of blood stopped. Throwing the pliers and knife in the wastebasket, Todd crossed the room and picked up the bloody tongue. He dropped it in a quart mason jar and put a lid on it. The men stood with pasty looks on their faces.

"Take this pile of garbage over to the doctor. See that he is taken care of," Todd told them.

While the men untied Benny, who was starting to moan, he told Mickey to get the latest report on the hunt for Joe. He knew the men who carried Benny out of the room would spread the word of what had happened. He didn't think he would have any more trouble from his people for a while.

He ordered the man standing guard outside the office to bring him a meal. His headache was gone

and he felt great. Too bad Debbie had cut her hand. He felt horny as hell. He didn't even get mad when Mickey told him that Joe was still on the loose. He went in and lay down beside Debbie. Soon he fell fast asleep.

Chapter 12

Bill parted the curtain on the window. He looked down the lane leading to the house they were in. "What's taking Joe so long?" he asked as he turned from the window.

"Relax, Bill. He only left a few hours ago. It can't be easy walking through this snow even with snowshoes on. Joe will be back soon as he can," Tony said to him.

"Here. Have a cup of coffee." Jake handed him a cup of the steaming liquid.

Bill took the coffee and sat down beside Tony on the couch. He patted her hand saying, "Sorry, Babe. We are all a little edgy; this waiting around is getting to me."

"I know, it isn't any easier for us, but we have to know which areas they are searching before we leave."

"At least Joe has someone with him who knows the area. Zeb might slow him down; after all, he is ninety-one years old. I wonder why Joe is so edgy when they are together." Jake asked.

"I wondered about that myself?" Ben said.

"Joe has acted strange since we picked up the old man. I can tell a difference in him, but I can't pinpoint what it is. He seems to be more withdrawn than normal," Tony spoke up.

"When I'm around the old man, I'm afraid for some reason. It doesn't make sense, but there is something all wrong about him. Don't ask me how I know. It's something I feel inside," Tammy said from the corner where she sat.

"Do you think Joe knows or senses something about the old man that we don't know about?" Ben asked.

"I wish I knew. Joe hasn't said a word to me since the old man joined us," Tammy said.

"We agree that Joe isn't acting normally. Tammy says she senses wrongness about Zeb. Where does that leave us?" Bill asked.

"What harm could Zeb pose to us? Christ, he's an old man," Tony said.

"Ben, has your guardian told you anything concerning Zeb?" Bill asked.

"I didn't want to say anything until I was sure, but there is a strange power in Zeb which confuses my guardian. From what she tells me, it's nothing associated with her. She senses a threat from Zeb, but like Tammy, she doesn't know the reason. She thinks there might be forces working here that she knows nothing about," Ben answered.

"Chosen One, I would be careful about what is said," Tony heard in her head.

"Why is that Stalker?" Tony asked.

"The one you call Squeeker is on the other side of the kitchen door listening to what we say."

"What harm can that do?" She asked.

"Like the Little One, I sense wrongness. Only I sense it in the dog called Squeeker. I have watched her closely for the last two days. Have you noticed that at no time are we left alone? Either the dog or the man is present when we are together. I have noticed that although the dog lies around acting indifferent, she listens to every word spoken. I only hope she can't hear what we say to each other with our minds."

"Interesting! My Guardian is surprised. She did a quick study of the animal and agrees with you Stalker. She says there is something shielding or cloaking both the dog and the man. She is unable to penetrate the shield for more than a second, but what she gets suggests we need to be very careful

around both of them. Stalker is right, Tony. From now on we are going to have to watch what we say around them. I think we better warn the others as soon as we can get them alone,” Ben said.

Bill and Jake knew Ben and Tony were speaking to each other with their minds. They made small talk to cover the silence.

Tony stood up and grabbed Bill’s hand saying, “Let’s make another pot of coffee and some sandwiches while we wait for Joe to return.” Bill started to say something, but Tony put her finger over her lips and signaled for him not to speak.

“How about you and I checking out the Jeep to make sure it’s running right, Jake? It had a miss I didn’t like just before we pulled in here,” Ben said holding his finger over his lips also.

As Ben and Jake went outside, Tony led Bill into the kitchen. Tammy followed and patted Squeeker on the head saying, “Let’s me, you and Stalker go out for a while, girl. It’s getting stuffy in here.”

Tony saw Squeeker look at them then lie back down, reluctant to leave. Talking and coaxing, Tammy finally had to drag the dog out of the house so Bill and Tony could be alone.

“What was that all about?” Bill asked.

Tony quickly gave him the rundown on all that she had learned from Ben and Stalker.

* * * *

Joe lay beside Zeb at the top of a small hill. They watched several men searching the sides of the road running through the center of the valley. The men were heavily armed and behind them were two trucks with machine guns mounted on the beds of them. Every so often they would fire a burst at the wild dogs along the ridgeline. The men walking ahead of the trucks stayed bunched together never getting more than a hundred feet from the trucks. Two miles down valley, Joe saw what happened when any of the men left the group to search on their own.

A little earlier, Joe and Zeb had taken up positions at the top of a cliff a few miles down the valley as a group of men came down the road. Like the group they now watched, these men were also armed to the teeth. At a small draw only six or seven feet wide, two men broke from the group and cautiously went into it.

From the cliff Joe and Zeb lay on, it was less than two hundred feet to the draw. At a bend fifty feet up the draw, Joe saw over a dozen dogs lying in wait. More dogs waited around another bend a little farther on; they paced back and forth. The men were alert, but Joe saw that they didn’t have a chance.

As the men approached the bend, the dogs hunkered down in the snow. If Joe didn’t know they were there, he would never have spotted them. Only dogs with white fur waited on the men. You could have stood beside them and never known they were there.

One of the men stepped around the bend while the other one stood with the rifle to his shoulder ready to open up on anything that moved. Joe had to give it to the dogs; they were patient. The first man advanced up the draw several feet and motioned the other man forward. The dogs waited until the second man was in front of them before they sprang. The men didn’t have a chance to turn around. Without a sound, half a dozen dogs sprang on each man’s back. One of the men got two shots off and killed one of the dogs. The dogs on the other side of the bend raced to where the two men still struggled. Both men fell to the ground under the pack of dogs.

It took less than a minute to tear the men apart. Each dog ran up the draw with a chunk of meat in its mouth. They even tore the dead dog to pieces. In less than five minutes, the pack had disappeared up the draw.

The men at the mouth of the draw called out to the dead men. A truck with a machine gun on it pulled up to block the draw. The man behind the gun fired up the draw for almost a minute. Half a dozen men ran to the bend and stopped at the sight of all the blood on the ground. One of the men used the barrel of his rifle to lift the few pieces of blood stained cloth left behind.

This left only four men with the truck; they acted nervous. They had reason to be skittish for at that moment a large number of dogs sprang out of a gully in back of the truck. Two men fell beneath the onslaught as more dogs climbed out of the gully. The man behind the machine gun finally turned the gun around and opened up. Dogs were flung back into the gully as the heavy slugs struck them.

In a few moments, three dozen dogs lay dead or dying around the truck. The man with the machine gun was so scared that he pumped several rounds into one of the men who jumped up to get him to stop firing. The barrel of the machine gun glowed cherry red from the heat of the rounds fired through it.

The men up the draw rushed back and finished off the few remaining dogs. One of the men changed the barrel on the machine gun. He stood guard while the rest of the men dragged the dead dogs into a pile.

Another man poured gasoline on the bodies from a gas can. He poured a stream back from the pile until he thought it safe. Going to one knee, he put a match to the trail of gas. With a whoosh, the fire raced to the pile of bodies and roared into flames. The men stood back and watched the pile of bodies burn.

They laid the three dead men in the back of the truck and backed down the road a half-mile to a wide place in the road. Joe decided this would be a good time to change positions. They backed off the cliff and came to the hill they now lay on.

“Looks like they’re learning, young ‘un,” Zeb said.

“What do you mean?” Joe asked.

“The dogs only attack when there are just a few of them,” Zeb answered.

Zeb was right; two groups had joined the remnants of the group who was attacked. Joe saw the dogs around the men begin slinking away through the brush.

“If they started this search when we left the road, our geese would have been cooked,” Joe said.

“Yep, lucky for us it snowed last night,” Zeb chuckled.

Joe didn’t know what it was about this old man that had his nerves on edge. Since they first met him, Joe had this crawling feeling along his spine. He never turned his back on Zeb. For some reason, he felt that to do so would be a grave mistake.

Joe watched Zeb out of the corner of his eye. Every so often, Joe saw a smile of delight on Zeb’s face as though he enjoyed what happened to the men. Zeb said he was ninety-one years old, but his movements and actions were those of a much younger man. In a lot of respects, it was like two men possessed one body.

There was the old, ignorant Zeb; then, there was the Zeb who appeared robust and full of energy. All the old man Zeb wanted to do was sleep, while the other Zeb did things that would exhaust a younger man. Until he overcame his suspicion of the man, Joe would be very cautious around him.

Another thing bothering Joe was the dogs behind them. They acted like an escort for Zeb and Joe. Although they never came close, they formed a protective ring around them.

“Come on, old man, let’s go back to the house. They will finish their sweep today, so we should be able to leave tomorrow.”

“That’s the trouble with you young ‘uns, always want’n to rush things,” Zeb mumbled.

Joe stayed a half step in back of Zeb all the way to the house. As Joe took the cup of coffee Jake handed him, he felt the undertow of tension in the room. Zeb became the old man he was and went to the bedroom where he fell instantly asleep.

Ben nodded his head toward the door when Joe glanced his way. Joe watched Jake casually wonder over to Zeb’s bedroom and quickly close the door. Almost at once, the old man’s dog started scratching on the door and whining.

Joe stood up and followed Ben outside. They stood next to the door and watched the snow fall.

“What’s up Ben?”

“We got to talking while you were gone and made some surprising discoveries.”

“Such as?”

“Stalker says that Squeeker, Zeb’s dog, is a lot more intelligent than a dog should be. Stalker thinks that the dog has a hold on the old man. He says the dog has Zeb under a spell of some sort. You may have noticed Zeb acts a lot younger than he is while he is awake. After a period of activity, he falls in bed and sleeps like a baby. Tony thinks whatever it is the dog knows how far to push Zeb physically. I guess it’s just another peculiarity of what’s happening in the country today.”

Joe squatted down with his back against the wall and turned the collar of his coat up around his ears. “What would happen if we separated Zeb and Squeeker?”

“Stalker thinks it might be done if Zeb and Squeeker were separated by a long distance,” Ben answered.

“Jesus, what are we talking about? Is this like a demonic possession you read about in those occult books?”

“We don’t know. My guardian can’t penetrate the shield this thing surrounds itself with. I feel sorry for Zeb because we might have to kill him in order for us to go on,” Ben said.

“Whoa, Ben, if it’s not Zeb’s fault, we can’t just gun him down like an animal. Hell, that would make us like the people chasing us,” Joe said shaking his head.

“I know, Joe. Tony said the same thing. You came back before we had a chance to discuss it further.”

“This is another thing entirely, isn’t it? I mean the dog and Zeb have nothing to do with the people chasing us, do they?”

“We don’t believe so. If they were, we figure Todd and his men would already be here. No, this is something different. It is a threat to us, but we don’t know in what way or why. All of us feel the threat in his or her own way, but there are no facts to back up what we feel.”

Tammy stuck her head out the door and said, “Jake told me to tell you he can’t keep Squeeker in the bedroom much longer. Zeb is awake and wanting to know why his door is locked.”

“Tell Jake to let them out, Tammy,” Joe said getting to his feet. “Later tonight, get everyone but Tammy outside. We need to discuss what we are going to do,” Joe said before he went inside.

Tony was trying to pacify Zeb while Squeeker stood with her hair raised, growling at everyone.

“What are you raising hell about now, old man?” Joe said in a rough voice.

“Dag nab it, young ‘un. Why were we locked in our room? Squeeker woke me, howling and pawing at the door. This goddamn black man gave me a lot of shit about the door being stuck,” Zeb sputtered.

“Anything we say won’t satisfy you so why don’t you get it out of your system, old man. I need something to eat, so make it short before my stomach eats my tonsils,” Joe told him.

“Well, if you’re going to act like that I’m going to go back to sleep. Don’t lock me or my dog in again,” Zeb said in a threatening voice.

Joe waved his hand at the old man dismissing him and walked into the kitchen. He slammed his fist into the wall and felt a jolt of pain shoot up his arm. “Shit, another complication on our getting you to this place in Colorado,” he said to Tony.

Tony put together a sandwich of cold cuts and handed it to him. Tony looked to the door making sure Squeeker wasn’t there listening. She leaned forward and whispered into his ear, “I feel it best we leave tonight, without Zeb and his dog.”

Joe nodded his understanding and took a can of tomato juice out of the refrigerator. He carried it to the table and sat down with a sigh. Jane came in smoking a cigar and took a seat across from him.

“The old man gets to you, doesn’t he?” she said.

“More than he should now that I know he isn’t entirely to blame,” Joe told her and finished the

sandwich.

Jane pulled a small notebook out of the rear pocket of her fatigue pants and wrote on it. She held it up for Joe to read. "Squeecker is lying on the other side of the door so be careful what you say," Joe read.

Joe took the notebook from her and wrote. "When you get the chance, have Ben and Jake sneak out after it gets dark and pull the trucks down the road a bit."

For the benefit of Squeecker, Joe said. "I think it would be better if we stuck around here for a few more days and let them think we are out of the area."

"What about all the dogs out there?" Jane wrote.

"I don't believe they'll bother us unless Zeb or Squeecker tells them to. If we do this right, we will be long gone before they discover we're missing. I'm going to wake the old man in about an hour and have him go back out with me. If I tire him out, perhaps he will sleep right through our leaving. Meanwhile you and Tammy make sure Squeecker doesn't go to sleep. Okay?" Joe wrote.

Jane circled her thumb and forefinger and signaled okay to him and wrote, "You might have Tony tell Stalker to play with him and tire him out."

Joe held the notebook up for Tony to read what Jane Had written. She took the notebook and wrote. "I don't know if that will work because Squeecker is bound to know by now that Stalker is not an ordinary wolf."

"Perhaps not. Stalker has stayed away from her and I don't remember any of us talking about him. Do you?" She shook her head no. Joe showed Jane what he had written and she shook her head no also.

Joe stood up, handed the notebook to Jane, and walked to the living room. Zeb's soft snoring came from the bedroom. He sat down on the couch beside Jake who was almost asleep.

Jake jerked his head up and seeing who it was said, "I feel like an old man. Funny how I can hardly remember what it was like to go home after a job and chill out. I remember thinking that things couldn't get worse before this happened. Now I wish for the good old days as Ben calls them."

"I know what you mean. This consistent tension of being chased by these people wears you down. It would be nice to go to the little adobe house of mine and kick back on the porch. In this weather it would be nice to sit in front of the fireplace and down a few beers," Joe said wistfully.

"I would like to go to a good movie and eat a ton of popcorn. Then go to this bar I used to hang out in. Maybe flirt with a few of the women. Who knows, every now and then I got lucky. Anything beats sleeping alone. Come to think about it I haven't thought about sex since this started. What about you?"

"To tell the truth, I haven't had time. Keeping us alive occupies all my time. Anyway, sex was never a big thing with me. I went months without getting any a lot of times. I couldn't understand why a lot of the men got hung up on it," Joe answered.

"Really, I used to be horny all the time. Man if I didn't get me a little bit every other day, I was a basket case. What has happened to us? I hope it's not permanent; I am only thirty-seven. I don't consider myself an old man. Although the shit we went through getting here and what we face will undoubtedly make me one," Jake said.

Tammy who was listening to them talk said, "Come on you guys, I'm sure there is happiness on your horizon. Listening to the both of you talk is depressing."

"Oh yeah, when did you take up fortune telling?" Joe asked.

"I don't know about fortune telling but it only makes sense that you will both find someone to take care of you. Lord knows you need someone. Without me and Tony both of you would be in sad shape," she giggled.

Jake felt uncomfortable talking about sex around the young girl. He had forgotten she was there. "I don't believe young ladies should be listening to conversations between two men."

"After almost being raped, it would be rather prudish of me to say that I didn't understand what

you were talking about. Don't you think so?" Tammy said with a coy smile.

"Give it up, Jake, you can't win," Joe told him.

"I know, but damn it she is just a young girl. She should be in school doing the things young people do, not here with a bunch of grown ups fighting for their lives."

"As you know, Jake, I was an orphan. Joe and the rest of you have become the only family I have ever known. Personally, I don't think a girl could have a better family than all of you," Tammy said with a serious look on her face.

"Watch out, Jake, she wants something," Joe said.

"I'm serious, Joe. If anything happened to one of you, I would die."

Joe lifted her chin, saying, "Sorry, Tammy. We know how you feel, but sometimes we forget how young you are. If things were different, I would be proud for you to stay with me as my daughter. When this is finished, we will go to my place and put our lives together again. Okay?" he said, ruffling her hair.

"Okay, Joe," she softly said.

"You wouldn't have room at your place for a bummed out black man would you, Joe? There's nothing for me to go back to."

"Would be glad to have you, Jake. We can build a couple of more rooms, and we can all stick together," Joe said, wishing it were true. He walked over and turned on the radio. Fiddling with the dial, he found the radio station they had been listening to when they could.

The announcer was saying, "Overseas the situation is getting more chaotic. In the last few hours we learned from sources in England that the English armed forces beat back another attack. The combined forces of France and Spain are trying to take over the British Isles.

"Although France, Spain and Germany lie in nuclear ruin, people continue to join the remnants of France's army. For those of you who may not know, it was two weeks ago that the French rebel leaders launched their missiles at Germany and England. Lord Snowdon ordered a massive retaliation on France after London and two other cities took direct hits. Between the German and English missiles, every city with a population of more than one hundred thousand was destroyed.

"Lord Snowdon said his country was extremely lucky. He said that over three quarters of the missiles fired at his country went off course and fell harmlessly out in the ocean. Lord Snowdon took over control of the English government after almost every Member of Parliament was vaporized when the first missile hit. Our sources say over ninety percent of the armed forces remain intact.

"The only difficulty may come when their petroleum runs low. They still have their oil wells off the northern Scottish coast, but they are limited on the amount that can be pumped. The government has ordered all major factories shut down to conserve energy. The only establishments operating are those that are defense related.

"In the Soviet Union, the army of the east was completely obliterated when millions of Chinese troops stormed across the radioactive zone separating the two countries. Most of the Chinese troops suffer from radiation sickness but they continue to advance westward.

"There have been so many purges in the Officer Corps over the last two months that a coordinated defense is impossible. We hear the missile forces controlling Soviet nuclear arms are intact. Reports say they have broken with the existing government.

"Colonel Ogloff, leader of these forces, issued a statement yesterday stating that unless the Chinese recalled their troops, he would level every major city in China. He warned the provisional countries to the west not to cross into Soviet territory. He would unleash his nuclear weapons on them if they invaded.

"The Chinese sent over five million troops surging south into Vietnam last week. Spotty reports coming from there say that the Vietnamese are putting up stiff resistance but are steadily being pushed south. Taiwan is said to be flying sorties against the Chinese troops, trying to slow them down. China

has tried to get troops to the tiny island nation of Taiwan but has meet with very little success.

“Australian sources report that the Chinese lost over one hundred thousand men aboard troop transports heading for the island nation. Although reports are sketchy, it appears the Taiwanese government found out about the invasion. They stationed all of their submarines at the only approach to the island nation. One reporter is said to have described it as a turkey shoot. It is reported that in this one action the Chinese lost three quarters of their navel forces.

“Closer to home, we are happy to report that Castro has been overthrown and is said to have been hung from a flag pole in the center of Havana. The new Cuban government is trying to form an allegiance with the new government in Washington.

“All of South America is reported to be in turmoil. They fought off this disease for a long time by killing anyone who came near their borders. It is believed that the Mexican and American governments somehow smuggled a few sick people into Colombia. From there the disease spread to the surrounding countries.

“At home, the new president is far from being in full command of the armed forces. The men aboard ships at sea were unaffected when this disease hit. They are refusing the new President’s request to put into port and hand their ships over to the new government. They have set up a government in exile at the tiny country of Iceland.

“Warnings have been sent to the new President. The exiled government warned that if he sends troops to Iceland, the commanders of the nuclear submarines will fire their missiles and take out Washington. So far, this ploy is working. The exiled government has set up a powerful radio transmitter on one of the island peaks. From there they are transmitting into the United States asking people who are not a part of this revolt to resist the new government in any way they can.

“Although there aren’t many, a few groups have sprung up across the country and are fighting these people. I am proud to say that one of those groups works out of the city of Detroit, which is one of the cities retaken from the new government.

“The new President is said to be storming mad because he can’t access the country’s nuclear missiles. They went off line and will not respond to any of his orders. That is a lucky break for us because there is no doubt in my mind that he would have already nuked Detroit.

“The grim death toll over the last ten weeks comes to over one hundred sixty three million and still counting. What it comes down to listeners is that we are going to have to take back our country from these people. After that, there will be a lot of changes made concerning the way we govern ourselves. It will be a struggle to survive for the first decade or so.

“Thanks to the foresight of the previous government we have a chance. The opportunity is there. Now all we have to do is suck in our bellies and go to it.

“This is Rodney Clinger, of the new radio station Free America. With that bit of wisdom, we will be signing off for a few hours. Our next broadcast will be at eight pm eastern daylight time this evening. Until then, keep the home fires burning and God bless all of you.”

Joe switched off the radio and sat down. None of them spoke for several minutes as they digested what they had just heard.

“I wonder if the rumors we heard about Todd’s Master working with this new government are true.” Ben asked.

“It makes sense; they are part of the same affliction striking the country,” Joe answered.

“Let’s hope the new government can’t get things organized. If they do, Todd’s Master is sure to send them after us. With that kind of concentrated effort we will be finished,” Jane said.

Chapter 13

Greg stood in the blowing snow and watched his men drag the bodies out of the snow bank. Shaking his head, Greg walked back to the panel truck he used for a command post. Brushing snow from his coat, he opened the door and went inside. He accepted the cup of steaming coffee handed to him. His shoulders sagged as he sat down in front of the radio. Greg hesitated as he pushed the transmit button. He dreaded the explosion he knew was coming when he told Todd six more of his men were dead.

“Come in, Command Post. Someone talk to me,” Greg heard Todd say over the radio.

Greg took a sip of steaming coffee before answering. Keying the mike, he said, “Todd, this is Greg. How do you copy me?”

“Loud and clear, Greg. What’s happening up there? Have you caught them yet?”

“No, Todd, we haven’t. They have disappeared again. I have men searching all the roads for some sign of them, but so far they haven’t found anything. We lost another six men about an hour ago to the wild dogs.”

Greg sat back waiting for Todd’s angry reply to come over the radio. It surprised him when Todd’s only response was to tell him to keep on searching. After assuring Todd they were doing everything possible to find Ben and Joe, Greg signed off.

Someone knocked on the door of the truck and his aide let in a scruffy looking man. He wore a light jacket inappropriate for the bone chilling cold outside.

“Get you a cup of coffee, Norm, then tell me all you know about this old man and his dogs,” Greg said.

Norm warmed his hands under the heater duct a minute before getting the coffee. Sitting down across from Greg, he said, “I was afraid this would happen.”

“What do you mean?” Greg asked.

“As long as we didn’t bother the old man, these wild dogs stayed out of our way. When you came into his valley with your men, you basically declared war on him. Now he is fighting with the only assets available to him: his dogs. Don’t underestimate the damage they can do. Look at the bodies we drug out of the snow bank for example. Those men never had a chance. From what we can piece together, the men were drawn in against the wall of the cliff. As they fought the dogs to the front of them, a dozen or so dogs climbed to a shelf above the men. Without warning, the dogs jumped on the backs of the men riding them to the ground. After that, it was over in no time. You saw what was left of the bodies. Hell, there wasn’t enough left of the six men to put together one whole body.”

“What I don’t understand is why we didn’t find any animal bodies? Surely the men put up enough of a struggle to kill a few of them?” Greg said.

“You didn’t find any bodies because the dogs ate them. Somewhere you might find a pelt or two. These dogs are on the verge of starving and will eat anything.”

“Where did this old man come from?” Greg asked.

“No one knows. We discovered him one day when we came into the valley heading for Bison City. He and his mutt stood beside the gate demanding ten pounds of meat per person to let us through. Needless to say, we got mad. We bundled the old man up, and took him back to our headquarters. The old man kept babbling so we thought he was crazy. A little later after it got dark, he

cocked his head to the side, like he was listening to something. He lifted his head and grinned at us saying, 'If I was you boys, I would make sure nothing happens to me, or you will never get out of here alive.' Now, that didn't set well with the men, and some of them wanted to shoot the man on the spot. After settling the men down, I asked the old man what he meant. He sat down in a chair and pulled out this old corncob pipe and stuck it in his mouth. "Well, young 'un, it's this way. If you harm me, my friends outside will take care of you," he said.

"What friends?" I asked.

"Let me go, and you won't have to find out," he said.

"Two of the men with me, boys really because they were barely twenty years old, puffed out their chests saying, "We will take care of his friends."

"The old man looked at them and said, 'For your own good, don't go out there until I have left.'

"You know how young men are always trying to prove how brave they are? Well, these boys walked outside bragging about what they were going to do. Nothing happened for several minutes, then all hell broke loose. We heard a lot of screaming and shooting outside the house. Something thumped against the door and the men rushed to open it. I shouted for them to stop and grabbed the old man by the neck marching him to the door. He opened the door and we saw a head lying there. Most of the face was eaten away, so we didn't know which one of the boys it was. We all backed up a few feet leaving the old man standing there in the door. He turned to us and said 'I'll be going now. Remember, if you want to get through my gate, it will cost you ten pounds of meat per person.' He ups and walks out the door and we didn't see him again until the next time we had to use the road through his valley. I tell you, Greg, a chill went up my back when he left, and I'm not afraid to admit, he scared the hell out of me. He is not on our side, but I get the feeling that he is not on their side either. I think he has an agenda of his own whatever that may be."

"Where does he get all these dogs?" Greg asked.

"No one knows. Every so often, we spot dogs crossing the ridge heading for the old man's valley. The way we figure it, he must have hundreds of them in his valley."

"What if I paid you and your men to hunt down these dogs? How long would it take?"

"Not for any amount of money could I get my men to go out there after the dogs. You don't know them like we do. Twenty or thirty of them could be hiding within a few feet of you and you would never know it. If you think of them as just dumb animals, they will tear you and your men new assholes. No, you have to think of them as dangerous predators waiting for you to let your guard down," Norm said.

"I could threaten you or use force to get you to go after them," Greg said.

"If that's the way it is going to be, you might as well shoot now. That will save you a lot of trouble," Norm told him.

Greg liked this mild mannered man. From his speech, Greg knew Norm was well educated. He wondered how Norm became the leader of the small group of men with him.

"How did you become the leader of these men? With your education, I would think you belonged in one of the big cities helping set up our new government?"

"I was an economics professor at the University of Missouri when the country fell apart. I watched some of my colleagues commit acts so brutal it turned my stomach. Knowing if I protested, they would kill me, I left and headed for the backcountry. One day I wandered into the valley where you found us.

"There were a dozen men sitting on the porch of the hardware store. They were friendly enough and wanted to get a first hand report on what was happening in the outside world. After telling them everything I knew, we got to talking about how people should organize and take control of their lives again.

"None of the men were very good at organizing things what with them being mostly farm hands

and laborers. So they asked me if I would stay and whip things into shape again. I'm rather proud of the job I've done so far. We have a loose knit police force that takes care of the few problems we have. Since we don't have to worry about the justice system any more, crime in our area has become almost nonexistent. When a serious offense comes before me, I listen to both sides of the event and make an on-the-spot decision.

"If the offense is serious enough, I pronounce the death sentence. Immediately, we take the prisoner out to the back of the court house and shoot him or her in the back of the head."

Norm noticed Greg's eyebrows rise when he said 'her.' "That's right. I have had to have five women executed so far. In the last month, all we have had to deal with are petty crimes for which the penalty is not as severe.

"So far we have reopened the schools and have a banking system that works to our benefit. Over the last few weeks, our population has increased from just under fifty people to over two hundred."

"Why a backwater place like this?" Greg asked.

"I didn't want to be a part of what is happening in the cities. Christ, over a third of the people in this country have been killed so far. You have seen what it's like out there. Small town hoodlums are setting up their own little areas of control everywhere. They are swallowed up by the bigger groups like yours. Many of these groups lack any kind of organization. Most of them roam around the country destroying towns they come across.

"If we are going to survive this, there has to be a strong sense of organization. We need bodies of responsible people to make the tough decisions that need to be made. That's what I'm trying to do in our community."

"If we leave you alone, let you run things the way you want, can we count on you for support if we need it?" Greg asked.

"I believe something can be arranged. It works both ways you know. Let me ask you, if we need help would you send it?"

"I would have to ask my boss Todd, but I can't foresee any reason why we can't," Greg answered.

"Good, in the meantime, I think we have done all we can here. With your permission I will take my men and go back to our town. After all, I don't believe my two dozen men will be any help. With the multitude of people you have, we would more than likely get in the way."

Greg stood up and extended his hand, which Norm shook. At the door Norm asked, "By the way, Greg, why is your boss set on capturing these people alive? Wouldn't the best thing be to shoot them and get it over with?"

"It's a personal thing between Todd and one of the men we are chasing. Also Todd's boss wants this man Ben in the worst way."

"If we are to survive, these types of personal clashes will have to be set aside. Then, we can deal with the larger problems facing us," Norm said as he stepped out of the truck.

"I couldn't agree with you more, Norm. Until we have more people like you in positions of power, we will have to make do the best we can. Take care of yourself, Norm. I'll get back to you after I talk to Todd. I'm sure we can get some form of agreement for mutual aid between our two groups." Greg watched as Norm gathered his men and left the camp headed for home.

Getting himself a cup of coffee, he called for Jerry his next in command. A man with large ears and a limp came through the door. "What can I do for you, Greg?"

"I want you to take half dozen men and circle around to a little town called Wemo. We know they haven't gone across the mountains here or here," Greg said pointing to roads on the map in front of him. "I was stationed at an army camp near here when I was in the service. I used to do a lot of fishing down this way. If I remember right, there's an old road going across the mountains from a farm around here. All I can remember is that it led to a small town named Wemo. We will try to locate the farm, but I want you to take your men into that town and watch for them. I find it hard to believe

they could make it across the mountain on that road. It really wasn't more than a path. To be on the safe side, take your men to Wemo and keep out of sight. Call me on the radio if you see them."

Greg put on his heavy parka and left the truck. He walked over to where his men were placing the last body on the pile.

"Spread kerosene over the bodies," Greg told them. He watched as the bodies were soaked. He motioned the men back and took a flare out of his pocket.

Backing off twenty feet, he struck the tip of the flare causing flames to spout out the end. Underhanded, he tossed the flare on the pile of bodies. With a whoosh, flames shot into the air causing heat to drive them back farther. In moments, they were all gagging at the smell of burning flesh.

Greg had his driver pull the truck down the road around a bend where he gathered his men around him. "John, I want you and a dozen men to go with me. Somewhere around here is a road off to the right that leads to a farmhouse. It's the only place they could have gone. Jack, you hold the rest of the men here until we contact you. Call back to camp and have them bring up a flame thrower. If the dogs get too close, use it on them. Jack, when I call for you don't dawdle around; come fast as you can.

"If the old man is with them there are bound to be a lot of dogs around, so be careful. All right, everyone who is going with me, get some waterproof boots on and put enough clothes on to keep warm for awhile. We hoof it from here until we find something." Greg waited impatiently while the men dressed.

The men lined up before him, and Greg checked each man to be sure all of them were carrying automatic rifles with at least two hundred rounds apiece. Greg had them fall into double file and marched them down the road.

They heard movement on both sides of the road, but when they shined their flashlights that way nothing was seen. Every few minutes a dog would howl causing the men to jump. In less than a half-mile, the men were jammed together in a tight bundle.

Greg called a halt and told them to keep at least three feet between them, or they would end up shooting each other.

A little further on, Greg found what he was looking for, a break in the trees off the right side of the road. He walked off the road a bit and dug through the snow until he found gravel.

"See? I told you there was a road around here somewhere. All we have to do is follow the break in the trees until we come to the farmhouse."

Chapter 14

Joe put his hand over Jake's mouth to keep him from crying out. He whispered into Jake's ear, "Time to go."

Jake nodded okay and started getting dressed.

Joe did the same thing at the next bed, and Ben began dressing. Joe waited until they put on the night vision goggles then motioned for them to follow him. Joe put his finger to his lips indicating for them to be quiet. Joe pointed to the bedroom across from theirs. Closing the door, Joe walked to the window by the bed. Pulling the curtains apart, he motioned for them to climb out the window. Outside, Joe slid the window closed gently. Pulling their heads close, he whispered, "Do exactly as I do and follow in my footsteps."

They watched as Joe stepped into the snow lifting his foot high and setting it down with exaggerated care. Shrugging his shoulders, Jake followed Joe. They walked this way to the end of the barn then Joe broke into a trot, heading for a shed a half-mile away. As they ran, dogs rose from their resting places all around them and watched as they ran by. One of the dog's ears went back and started forward as they approached. A black streak flew from behind them and grabbed the dog by the throat.

Whimpering, the dog lay down, and Stalker released his grip. A few of the dogs who had stood up laid back down, avoiding the wolf's eyes. By the time they got to the shed, all of them were gasping for breath. As they rested, Joe told them that everyone else was in a draw at the foot of the mountain.

"Jesus, that's another mile from here," Jake gasped.

"I know; it was the only place we could put them. We don't want to be heard when we start them. At night, sound travels a long way in these hills," Joe said.

"Looks like we got another foot or so of snow after we went to sleep," Ben said.

"The more snow we get the better off we are. I wish we had gotten three or four feet of it," Joe told them.

"Easy enough for you to say; you're wearing snowshoes. We have to wade through this stuff up to our waist," Jake muttered.

Joe reached in the shed and pulled out two sets of snow shoes. "Will these pep you up a little, Jake?"

"Damn right they will. I'm just a skinny black man. I don't have the ass or weight you guys have to push through this stuff. I did tell you that I hate snow?"

"Only every time you've had to go outside in the last few weeks," Ben told him.

"Stalker says to quit talking and start moving; he thinks he hears Squeecker barking at the house," Ben said as he fastened the snowshoes to his feet.

"Tell Stalker to stay behind and keep watch in back of us. Just in case these dogs turn mean," Joe said, indicating the dogs that stood looking at the house.

"Ready?" Jake asked as he stepped into the drifting snow, heading toward the mountain ridge ahead of them.

A full moon stood in the middle of the sky causing it to be like midday as the light reflected off the snow. Even with snowshoes, the going was difficult.

In places where the snow drifted, Joe and Ben beat down a path to make it easier for Jake. Jake

struggled to get the hang of walking with the wide snowshoes on.

Around them, the wild dogs got to their feet and headed toward the house. Jake tripped and fell when a large German shepherd suddenly stood up three feet in front of him with its fangs bared.

Ben helped him to his feet, and they circled around the dog. It was an eerie sight as hundreds of dogs rose from the ground to stand and watch them.

"I liked it better when I couldn't see them," Jake muttered.

"I don't like the looks of this," Joe said. He grabbed one of Jake's arms, and Ben grabbed the other one. They hurried along with Jake between them.

All the dogs faced the house now with an intent look in their eyes as though waiting for something. In back of them, Stalker made low growling noises deep in his throat.

They felt the tension in the air as they hurried along, expecting the dogs to spring on them any second. As one, the dogs shifted their attention from the house to them.

Stalker leaped forward and grabbed a large Doberman that stepped in front of them by the throat. One savage twist of those mighty jaws left the dog kicking in the snow. Without pausing, Stalker rammed into another dog that tried to block the way and left it bleeding with its throat torn out. All around them the dogs edged closer.

"Why aren't they making any noise?" Jake asked.

"Stalker says the men hunting for us are just over the hill in back of the house. They are being quiet to give Zeb and Squeeker time to get away," Ben told him.

All at once the dogs turned away from them and started pushing through the snow heading for the house.

"Why are they leaving?" Jake asked.

"They are going back to try and delay the men, so Zeb will have time to find a hiding place. Come on. Let's get to the trucks while their attention is on something else. Lucky for us the men came along; otherwise, they were about to take us out," Ben said.

Ten minutes later a white suited figure rose from the snow in front of them. "What kept you so long? We were starting to get worried," Jane said.

"Where are the trucks?" Joe asked.

"Over there," Jane pointed at a grove of trees.

They walked into the grove of trees and found the trucks with their engines running. Tony stepped from behind a tree with a rifle and came over to them.

"Does Zeb know we are gone?" she asked.

"He does but he has problems of his own. The men who are after us are almost to the house. Stalker tells me Zeb is hauling ass in the other direction before they get there. Where is Bill?" Ben asked.

"He went on ahead to scout out the best route for the trucks. He said he would mark the route with red ribbons he found in back of the truck," Tony answered.

"Get everyone in the trucks and let's get out of here. I want to be well into the mountains before the men discover we are gone," Joe told them.

Ben drove the four-wheel drive Jeep pickup with Jake and Jane up front while Tammy lay on the mattress in back. Joe and Tony followed them in the old Army Jeep with the fifty-caliber machine gun mounted in the back of it. Every so often, they spotted a red ribbon hanging from a tree limb to mark the way. As they passed the marker, Joe would stop and Tony would remove it.

Right after they started, it began to snow. The further they went, the heavier the snow became, wiping out the tracks left by the trucks. In places, they had to use the winch on the front of the pickup to pull it over obstacles in their way.

They were only a mile into the mountains when the wind brought the sound of firing from the valley behind them. In places, the snow had drifted to ten or more feet deep. They found where Bill

had beaten a path through the drifts. One of them would pull the winch line to the other side and hook it to a tree and winch the truck through.

Slowly, they made their way to the top of the mountain. Joe stopped them on the opposite side to rest. Joe took his binoculars and went back to the top. He wanted to see if he could spot anything or anyone behind them.

Tony took out the Coleman stove and fired it up. With Jane's help, she made them a breakfast of bacon and scrambled eggs. They caught sight of a campfire every so often at the bottom of the mountain. They knew that Bill was warming himself while waiting for them. Tony handed Joe a plate when he returned and asked what he had seen.

"I couldn't see all that well because of the snow, but it looks like they torched the house. I saw the bodies of a lot of dogs lying in the snow on the ridge in back of the house. There were several human bodies lying there also. From what I saw, there are less than fifty men down there. They have their hands full keeping the dogs at bay. I thought I caught sight of Zeb across the valley. Funny, whoever it was looked up to where I was and shook his fist. I'm afraid we haven't seen the last of Zeb and his dogs," Joe told them.

"I'm happy to be rid of him and his dogs. I always had the feeling they were eyeing me for their next meal," Jane said with a shudder.

"I didn't like the way they hid in the snow without making a sound or movement until you were on top of them. Down right spooky the way they could hide," Jake said as he finished with his meal.

"My Guardian tells me we have made a terrible enemy who will stalk us wherever we go. She says he wants something from us, but she can't figure out what it is," Ben told them.

"If I get that little bitch of a dog in my sights, I'll blow her away," Jane told them as she lit a cigar.

"Stalker says that neither Zeb nor Squeecker are to blame. Something took control of their bodies and is forcing them to act the way they do. They are almost like the people who are chasing us except there are differences," Tony said.

"Ask him what the differences are." Ben asked.

"He says that Zeb and his dog don't follow the same rules as the other people. To Zeb, it doesn't make any difference if you are like us or like the people chasing us; he will use you, then give you to his dogs. Although he may look and act human, he is a far worse monster than the people chasing us," Tony told them.

"We can add him to the long list of people who are trying to kill us," Ben said with a grunt.

Jake rolled his eyes back in his head and said, "Why me? What did a nice looking black man like me do to be thrown out here with all you white folk. Shit, I have enough trouble being black. I have people trying to kill my skinny ass from every direction, which is bad enough. Now you tell me every stray dog I come across will try to kill me, too. Isn't there any justice in this world?"

They all grinned at him, having gotten used to him moan about what a black man had to put up with.

Jane handed him a cigar, saying, "Shut your black mouth before you have us in tears because we feel so sorry for you."

Grinning, Jake said, "I got a cigar out of it."

Joe chuckled, "Pack up; it's time to move."

After loading everything, they made their way down the mountain and found Bill beside a small stream. He lifted a coffee pot from his fire and poured coffee into the cups they held out. After bringing him up to date on what had happened, Bill told them about a small town located on the other side of the next mountain.

"It looks quiet, and I saw a few people drive out of there about an hour ago. There must be people living there because all the streetlights are on. Another thing, the streets aren't trashed up. Most of the towns we pass through are trashed so bad it would be like living in a pigsty. Not this place,

it is so clean it makes me wonder why. I think we had better let Stalker go in and check things out first.”

“Sounds good. Have you seen any dogs?” Joe asked.

“Not a one. I haven’t seen any animals since I left the valley we were staying in.”

Tony handed Bill two sandwiches and a cup of coffee which he ate standing near the fire. Ben and Jake checked the chains on the trucks and tightened them where necessary. Joe filled the gas tanks on the trucks from the gas cans strapped to the back of the Jeep. After strapping the empty cans on the Jeep, Joe walked over to Bill.

“Did you spot a gas station in the town? The cans are empty. The pickup has only half a tank,” Joe said.

“There is one on the other side of town, but I didn’t get a very good look at it. Since the power is still on, it might be operational. I hope so. Pumping gas out of the underground tanks with a hand pump is dangerous. The last time Jake and I did it the gas fumes covered half the town. One spark and it would have been all over.”

“Is there a building or house close to the town we can get into before it gets light? Someplace close, but not close enough that someone might spot us.”

“I thought you might want something like that so I checked out a few houses about a mile from town. There are two places we can use. One house sits on a hill with a winding driveway leading up to it. There is a small five-room house at the top that would be easy to defend. The other one is at the dead end of a hollow. It has eight rooms and a garage large enough to put the trucks in. I checked and the electricity is still on along with the water. We could all use a bath. I know Tony and Jane would appreciate one. The only problem is we need to place a guard at the mouth of the hollow. Once we are in the house, there is only one way out. It could end up trapping us.”

Joe called everyone over and explained about the houses, asking what they thought. Everyone but Ben voted to hold up in the house at the end of the hollow.

Ben argued that if they became trapped this close to town, enough force could be brought to eliminate them. He reluctantly gave in after awhile.

Joe and Bill put out the fire, dragging snow to cover where it had been. Making sure that all traces of their being there were removed, Bill walked to the Jeep and climbed in beside Joe.

Bill guided them down the valley to a road that had been cleared of snow recently. Once on the road, they stopped long enough to brush away the tire marks where they entered the road. The snow continued to fall heavily so Joe tied a few large branches behind the truck and Jeep. As they drove along, the branches wiped out their tire tracks.

At the foot of a small hill, Bill turned to the right and drove into a small creek. He explained that the only way to reach the house was to drive up the creek bed for a couple of hundred yards. Joe had Bill stop near where a fifty-foot cliff abutted the creek. He told Bill to take them to the house and send someone to relieve him in two hours.

Joe climbed a crack in the cliff to a large pine tree at the top. Looking down the hollow, he saw the road and the tops of buildings across the hill. Raising his head, he looked to the top of the pine tree, which he judged to be eighty feet high.

Slinging his rifle across his shoulder, Joe reached up and grabbed a low hanging limb and pulled himself up. He climbed to two large limbs sticking out side by side, fifty feet from the ground. They formed a seat, large enough to sit on with his back against the tree.

Taking his binoculars out, Joe raised them to his eyes. From this height, he could see two thirds of the town. Bill was right. The town appeared cleaner than most of the ones they had passed through. Joe saw several vehicles parked along the street. Movement along a side street caught his attention. A half-dozen men eased along the buildings.

The way they sneaked along indicated they did not want to be seen. He watched them enter a

church in the middle of town. In a few minutes, he saw movement in the bell tower atop the church. Focusing in, Joe saw a man raise a pair of binoculars to his eyes and make a sweep of the town. As he watched, Joe saw the man raise a radio to his mouth and speak into it. By now it was light enough to see the countryside clearly. Joe hunkered down in his jacket and pulled the top closed while keeping watch on the town.

Hearing a sound below him, Joe saw Jake standing below looking around. Plucking a pinecone from the limb above him, Joe threw it at Jake to get his attention. Jake looked up and Joe put his fingers across his lips, making go away motions with his hands. He pointed down the hollow and made walking motions with his fingers. Jake took the hint and faded into the trees.

Must be getting old, Joe thought. He watched the two men walk up the creek. He didn't know where they came from. Joe hoped they weren't heading for the house. Both men carried shotguns, which wouldn't be a match for his rifle if it came to a fight.

Keeping the trunk of the tree between him and the men, Joe peered around the side. He heard one of them laugh at something the other one said. They certainly weren't quiet leading him to believe they didn't know Joe was in the area. The men were directly below him now and he caught snatches of their conversation.

"We had better get a rabbit or something today. If we don't, my old lady will skin me," one of the men said. The men stopped and pointed to the tracks Jake left in the snow.

"Wonder who else is up here?"

"No one I know of. Looks like the tracks come down the hollow. Wonder if someone's living in the old Jefferson house?"

"It was empty last week. Me and my boy were up there looking for winter apples and it was deserted."

"Should we go up and check on who is there?"

Joe held his breath waiting for the man's answer.

"Naw, don't matter to me who's living there. Best to forget we ever saw these tracks. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, ever since that last bunch of men came through town I learned to see nothing and hear nothing. It's better for our health to leave and not come back this way for a while." He looked around as though he knew someone was watching him.

Joe let his breath out slowly as the men passed out of hearing. They walked faster going down the hollow than they did coming in. Joe waited until the men were out of sight then signaled Jake to come out of hiding. Jake climbed the tree to where Joe sat.

"Any idea who they were?" Jake asked.

"I only caught parts of their conversation. From what I heard, they went back to town because they didn't care to find out who was up this hollow. They mentioned a bunch of men coming into town recently. I got the impression they suppressed their curiosity because of something these men did to them. I don't know, but I'm going to suggest that we go to the other house tonight to be on the safe side."

"Go get a bite to eat and take a warm shower. Man I forgot how relaxing it was to stand under hot water. Ben said he would be down to relieve me in four hours."

Joe told Jake about the men who were in the church bell tower and how they came sneaking into town. He exchanged places with Jake and climbed down the tree. Heading up the hollow, Joe eagerly anticipated getting out of his clothes and under a hot shower.

Chapter 15

Cap woke to the sound of a large truck pulling up to the barn. Slipping out of bed, he put his boots on. There was enough light coming through the windows for him to make his way to the combination kitchen living room. Leaving the lights off, Cap went to a window facing the barn and parted the curtain. A tractor-trailer stood before the double doors of the barn.

Men stood around waiting for the doors of the truck to open. Cap saw a few of the men point to the ranch house. Looking that way, he watched two men step off the porch. They reminded him of the old Mutt and Jeff cartoons. One of them stood almost seven feet tall, while the other man wasn't more than five feet tall. Cap knew these men were in charge by how the group of men deferred to them. The tall man gestured to the truck, speaking for a moment and then the men broke up, going in several directions.

Letting the curtain fall together, Cap went to the refrigerator and took out some cold cuts. Throwing together a sandwich by the light of the refrigerator, Cap wondered what was in the truck. The cargo must be important; otherwise, why would the leaders come out at this time of night to supervise the unloading?

Holding his arm up, Cap looked at his watch: 12:10. He had slept longer than he wanted to. It was too late to sneak out and meet Benji or Jeff. *Anyway*, Cap thought *it best to try and find out what was in the truck*. He went to the couch, sat down and laced up his boots.

It was quite chilly in the cabin. Cap knew it was bitter cold outside. Going to the bedroom closet, he took out a black snowmobile outfit he noticed hanging there earlier in the day. He pulled it over the wool shirt and pants he wore. It ought to keep him warm for a time.

A look out the window showed the men had brought up a high lift to carry cargo from the truck to the barn.

Cap pulled an old toboggan down over his ears and took the rifle he loaded earlier from the rack. Going to the door, he eased it open a little and checked to see if anyone was near.

Stepping through the door, he quietly closed it behind him. At the edge of the house, he squatted down and watched for the guards posted around the barn. At the south side of the barn, he spotted the glow of two cigarettes as the two guards there smoked and talked. He knew there were at least two more guards. Before moving close to the barn, he had to know where they were.

During the day he had spotted a rope hanging down from a door in the loft of the barn. If he was able to reach it without them spotting him, he could climb it and be inside the building. He put the rifle on his back and crawled to a stack of barrels thirty feet from the barn.

Cap watched the two guards swing their hands and stamp their feet, trying to stay warm in the bitter cold. A man with a rifle walked from the far side of the building. He went to where the tractor-trailer driver watched the unloading of the truck. That left only one man. He must be on the opposite side of the barn.

Cap crawled to the barn and slowly stood up with his back pressed against the wood. Cap saw only one of the men who smoked at the end of the barn. After watching for a few minutes, Cap decided the man was more interested in talking and staying warm than walking his guard post.

Sliding along the wall, he came to the rope. Carefully, he took hold of it and pulled down until all of his weight rested on it. It held firm, leading him to believe that it was tied to a post or something in

the loft. Placing one foot against the wall, Cap started to climb. In a moment, he was at the opening.

As he stepped into the loft, Cap heard a man yell. Thinking one of the guards had spotted him, Cap swung the rifle from his shoulder. Flipping off the safety, he aimed it out the door and waited for someone to fire giving him a target. He heard the man yell again. This time he made out that someone was yelling at the two men smoking at the end of the barn. The man angrily told them to walk their posts and quit goofing off.

Cap let out a soft sigh of relief.

It was stuffy in the loft, so Cap took off the skimobile outfit and left it near the opening. Walking on the heels of his feet, he made his way to the edge of the loft. He lay down behind something covered with a tarp.

Peering around the side, Cap looked out into the barn. In the glassed enclosure, several men in white smocks worked on what could only be a large mainframe computer. Although he didn't know much about computers, he knew that its assembly was almost complete. In the far right hand corner, men worked on a tank. It was one of the new M1A3 tanks he had seen on the discovery channel. There were a lot of military vehicles around the barn.

Cap spotted the two men who had come from the house talking off to the side. Moving until he was directly above them, he lay down and listened.

"Todd will be here in three days. We better have the computer on line and working by then," said the tall man.

"My men assure me it will be on line by tomorrow evening at the latest," answered the short man.

"Make sure it is, or your ass is grass, and Todd will be the lawnmower. Have you heard anything about the spare parts for the armored personal carriers?" Mr. Tall asked.

"Shit, Paul what does Todd expect? Miracles? He knows the military hid all of their equipment and parts. It was blind luck that we found these vehicles parked in the abandoned cave. I can't help it if they didn't store spare parts with them."

"I agree with you, Tom, but you know how Todd is. Todd said, he wanted to move against the mountain where his boss is held week after next. I think you've done a fine job. Christ, I don't know how you rounded up so many computer experts in such a short time?"

"It wasn't hard. I wish all of them were like us. Everything the three not like us do has to be checked to make sure they aren't trying to sabotage the work."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I have the same problem myself with the mechanics who work on the fighting machines. Just last week, I had to kill one of them for pouring sand in the fuel tank of the M-1. It was just luck that we caught it before we started the engine; otherwise, the tank's engine would have been ruined."

"How does Todd plan on getting into the mountain, Paul? From what I hear it is a fortress."

"He mentioned something about when the time was right his Master would open the doors," Paul answered.

"Just between the two of us, I wish I knew a little more about this dude, Todd keeps calling his master. Christ, I can't find out anything about him. No one has seen him, and he was a complete unknown until Todd started talking about him."

Paul looked around making sure no one was close enough to overhear what they were talking about. "I know what you mean. I have quietly made inquiries about him myself. It is as though this master popped into existence when all of this started. We captured one of the men who worked inside the mountain about a month ago. He got caught outside when they closed the doors. He kept insisting no one was held prisoner inside the complex. I believe him. No one could stand the pain we put him through before he died and not tell the truth."

"Then who is this Master of Todd's?" Tom asked.

“That is a question I would like to have the answer to. Every time I bring it up with Todd, he gives me a fuzzy answer. I don’t believe he knows any more about this master than we do.”

“Whoever he is, he has one hell of a hate against a guy named Ben,” Tom said.

At the mention of Ben’s name, Cap listened intently hoping to discover why this man wanted Ben so much.

“Yeah, I wondered about that myself. Reports sent to us from back east say this Ben was nothing more than a security guard at an electronics firm in New Jersey. Ben, Todd’s master and even Todd are big mysteries to me. I can’t say as how I like the situation. I like to know what I’m dealing with so no surprises jump up and bite me in the rear. If I could find more information on the three of them, I might understand what we are trying to accomplish here,” Paul said in an irritated voice.

“Be careful, Paul. Remember Todd telling us to kill anyone asking questions about him or his master. I believe that includes us too. I wouldn’t be surprised if Todd doesn’t have someone watching us and reporting to him all of our actions. There are very few people who are as paranoid as Todd, Believe me, people like him are extremely dangerous.”

“I know! I know!” Paul sighed.

A large diesel generator belched to life at the back of the barn. It made so much noise that Cap couldn’t hear the two men talking. He eased to his feet and made his way toward the glassed in enclosure. Through a gap in the floor, he watched the men in white smocks work. They threw switches and checked other parts of the computer.

Very little of what they did made any sense to Cap, so he slowly made his way back to the loft door. Lying on the floor at the opening, he stuck his head outside. He saw one of the guards pass below blowing on his hands to warm them. The air was bitter cold and he felt his mustache stiffen and the skin on his face tighten. Crawling back to where he left the skimobile outfit, Cap quickly put it on.

Back at the door, he watched the guard walk from one end of the barn to the other. Cap noticed that the guard stopped for about a minute to warm his hands at a burning barrel placed at each corner.

“If I time this right, I can get away without being seen,” Cap thought. He waited until the guard passed below him then lowered the rope. Easing his weight out of the loft, he started down hand over hand.

Someone yelled from the opposite end of the barn where the guard walked. Cap froze, dangling in the air he pulled himself as close to the barn as possible. He watched the guard turn around and heard him say, “Yeah.”

“Paul wants one of us to go check on the loony. You know the fellow Ikey brought in. Do you want to go, or do you want me to go?” the man at the other end yelled.

“I’ll go. Maybe I can warm up for a few minutes by the stove Ikey has in his cabin,” the guard yelled and started away from the barn.

Cap turned his head and saw the other guard pass out of view around the barn. Quickly, he slid down the rope and grunted as his feet hit the frozen ground. “The gig is up now,” he muttered. He couldn’t go back to the cabin dressed the way he was. If he went to the mess hall, questions would be asked. When the guard didn’t find him, they would know something was up and start searching for him. He had to delay that as long as possible.

Sighing to himself, Cap headed for the cabin. Placing his back flat against the wall near the door he heard the guard, talking to himself inside. Hearing the man approach the door, Cap raised his rifle and tensed waiting for the man to appear. The door creaked open and the man walked out.

As Cap swung the rifle butt at the man’s head, the man stumbled, causing Cap to hit his shoulder instead. Grunting, the man slammed into the door frame.

Off balance, Cap brought the rifle up for another swing. Before Cap completed the move, the man fell against him and grabbed him around the waist. He had the breath knocked out of him when he hit the door.

Cap had to finish the man quickly, before he yelled for help. As the man pressed him against the wall, Cap raised the rifle and brought the barrel down on his head.

Because of his awkward position, he couldn't put much force into the blow. The man grunted in pain from the blow which had only stunned him. Cap brought his leg up and kned the man in the stomach. At the same time, he brought the butt of the rifle down on the man's shoulder, trying to loosen the man's grip.

Grunting in pain, the man's arms fell from around him and Cap backed up a step. The man opened his mouth to yell. Cap brought the butt of the rifle up from his waist, hitting him under the chin. He heard teeth crunch and a muffled scream as the man sagged to the ground. Cap brought the rifle butt down one more time on the side of the man's head. He dragged the man inside and stuffed him in the closet next to the door.

He had gained a little time, but Cap knew it wouldn't be long until they wondered where the guard was. Grabbing some spare ammo off the rack, he headed for the door. Everything was quiet outside so he slipped to the end of the cabin and peered around the edge. Off to the left, near the cattle pens, a man stamped his feet and puffed on a cigarette. A light flared one hundred yards to the right as another man lit a cigarette.

There was nothing but open ground all around. Cap thanked his lucky stars that it was a moonless night. He waited until both men were facing away, then dashed for a small ditch he had noticed when they brought him in. At any moment, he expected to hear a shout and feel a bullet slam into his back.

Panting, he dropped into the ditch and flipped around to peer over the top. The guards were still in the same positions. Breathing a sigh of relief, Cap crawled down the ditch to where it connected with a small creek coming from the hills in back of the ranch. Reaching the foot of the hill, he paused to look back.

Two men were walking toward Ikey's cabin. Other than that things looked normal. Cap knew if they found the body in the closet they would be after him in no time.

Angling across the hill, he climbed a group of boulders. An alarm bell rang back at the ranch. He stopped to catch his breath beside a car-sized boulder just beneath the ridge line. Head down, hands on knees, he panted from the exertion of climbing.

"What the hell is going on down there?" a man said from the top of the hill.

Cap froze with his head down. Slowly, he lowered himself until the boulder hid him. Peering around the side, Cap saw two men silhouetted against the night sky twenty feet from him.

"Try to get someone on the radio," one of them said.

Cap heard a muffled voice talking, then he heard a smacking noise as one of the men hit something.

"Shit, this piece of junk is worthless," the man with the radio said. He pounded it with his hand.

"One of us had better go down and find out what is going on. You went the last time, so I guess it's my turn. While I'm down there, I'll try to find a damn radio that works. Keep a sharp eye out for anything coming this way. I'll be back soon as I can," said the second man.

Cap crouched lower as the man passed on the other side of the boulder he hid behind. He waited until the man was at the bottom of the hill then looked for the other man. Cap didn't see him, so he crawled cautiously up the hill. He stopped fifty feet to the right of where the men had stood. Raising his head above the top of the hill, he looked for the man left behind.

What he saw caused him to smile. The men had piled up rocks against the hill to act as a windbreak. Inside the wall, the second man sat warming his hands in front of a big Coleman heater. He appeared to be more intent on keeping warm than on watching what was going on around him. Cap crawled another couple of hundred feet then crossed the top of the hill.

Cap figured it to be less than a mile to where Ikey had found him. Using what cover there was, he headed that way. He became more cautious when he came to the hill he and Benji had been on.

Somewhere close he knew a guard post was located. Until he found it, he couldn't head for the caves. Late as it was, Cap thought whoever came to wait for him had left long ago for the cave.

If his luck held, the man or men would be watching the other way, not expecting any trouble to come from the ranch. Going around the side of a cliff, Cap felt something hard pressed into his back.

A woman's voice said, "Don't make a move or shout."

"Leila, is that you?" Cap whispered.

"Cap, if that's you, turn around slowly with your hands raised so I can get a good look at you."

Cap raised his hands and slowly turned around.

"Thank God, we didn't know if you were all right. We decided that one of us should be here all the time in case you showed up," Leila said, lowering the rifle.

Cap sat down on a rock, his shaking legs wouldn't hold him any longer. Looking up, he asked, "Is there a guard post close?"

"There are two men a little over three hundred yards from here," she answered.

"We better get out of here and back to the cave quickly. The men hunting me are likely to show up here any time now."

"Follow me," Leila said, taking off at a brisk walk.

A short time later she bent close to him and whispered into his ear. "Stay close and don't make any noise. The two men I told you about are on the other side of these rocks."

Cap followed as she silently slipped from rock to rock. At one point, he heard the men talking. Cap placed each foot carefully so as not to make any noise in the loose rocks. By the time they put enough distance so that the men couldn't hear them, he was soaked in sweat.

Leila waited for him behind a large boulder at the bottom of the next hill. "Jeff will be somewhere near the trail going down to the caves so watch out for him."

Cap nodded okay and started up the hill. Reaching the trail he whispered, "Jeff, where are you?"

A dark shadow separated itself from a tree twenty feet to his left. "Is that you, Cap?"

"It sure is Jeff, and am I glad to see you," he said shaking the tall man's hand.

"Where is Leila?"

"Back down the hill wiping out any trace we might have left. She will be here in a few minutes. As they waited for Leila, Cap told Jeff about the things he saw and heard.

Leila walked up and looked at the sky. "It will be getting light in about an hour; we better get out of sight. You two go on to the cave. I'll erase any tracks we leave," she told them.

In the cave, Cap told them everything he had learned, and they discussed what their next move would be. Jeff and Benji wanted to head for Galexie and wait for Ben. Leila and Cap thought they should stay where they were because Todd was coming to the ranch. They finally convinced Jeff and Benji the best way to help would be to stay there and find out what Todd was up to. It was agreed they would keep a twenty-four hour watch on the ranch from the hill in back of it.

Chapter 16

It felt good to be clean and have on clean clothes. During the day Tony and Jane washed their clothes, which were beginning to smell ripe. Snoring came from the bedroom where Ben slept and the only one in the living room with him was Tammy. Bill was in the tree, pulling guard duty, and the rest of them were getting what sleep they could.

“Joe, what will the world be like when this is all over?” Tammy asked.

“I really don’t know, Tammy? There will be a lot less people than there were. I doubt food will be as plentiful as it has in the past. I believe the survivors will have to grow their own food.”

“Will these people after us always be different? Why do they hate us so? I would like to go back to being a kid again,” Tammy said with a wistful smile.

“I wish I knew the answers to your questions. We’ve been on the run so long information is hard to come by. This disease does something to their minds that compels them to destroy people not like them. I don’t really believe it’s hate they feel.

“For instance, when you step on a bug in your house do you hate the bug? If you give it any thought at all, you get rid of the bug because it doesn’t belong there. That’s the way I think it is with them. To their mind set, we are the ones who don’t belong here. I wish Ben could remember where he met Todd’s master? Obviously the man knows him. His hatred of Ben appears to be the major thing on his mind. Todd is another story. While it is true we were friends until recently, I can’t condone what he has become. Maybe when we get to this place our questions will be answered. Until then, all we can do is struggle to survive.”

“The reports we hear on the radio about all those people dying and many more being killed scare me. I’m not dumb. I went to school long enough to know that the balance of power in the world has changed. I wonder how the people who are left in this country will be affected. Reports say that only thirty percent of the population will survive this thing. If that is true, then the majority of the people will be like the people chasing us. Do we even stand a chance, Joe?” Tammy asked.

“Most of the deaths are occurring in the big cities. Out in the country people aren’t dying as fast. While it is true most of them have the disease, I can’t help but believe they will be the source of their own destruction. This thing has spread around the world, which is a break for us, I guess. I don’t think we have to worry about another country messing with us for a long time. If the reports we hear are true, they will have their own problems to deal with for a long time to come. Do we have a chance? The only answer I can give you is as long as we are alive, there is a hope that things will get better.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, Joe. Looking back on it we have had it too good for too long in this country. Something had to go wrong,” Tammy said with a serious look on her face.

This young girl continued to amaze Joe. Although he expected it out of her, it was easy to forget she was only eleven years old. It pained Joe to think that someone so young and smart might not have a future to look forward to.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head, Tammy. Things are set in motion that we can’t even comprehend. One thing I do know is we are a part of this. Whatever forces are at work, they are helping keep us alive. Think about the encounters we’ve had in the last six months. People only survive the things we went through in movies.”

“Still, given time to think about our situation, it almost makes one want to give up,” Tammy said.

"I think you have hit the nail on the head. Events are shaping up so that we aren't given enough time to think about our situation," Joe told her.

"I don't know. Look at the people we have with us. Don't get me wrong, I love them dearly, but I wonder if I would have liked them if things were different."

"What's not to like about them? They are who they are," Joe said in a puzzled voice.

"Even you, Joe. You're different than you were before this began. Killing comes easy for you now. From what you told me about yourself, it wasn't like this before. You have often told me about the nightmares you had from killing people when you were in Vietnam. Now, it doesn't seem to bother you.

"Ben is another one. He was a security guard before this began. I am sure that he was a great father and husband. Look at what he has become. Now he is a man with what can only be called an alien force inside him. This force won't let him die at the hands of these deranged people no matter what they do to him. His wife and boy are holed up in a cave miles from here yet he doesn't seem to worry about them.

"Bill and Tony are harder to place. I have watched Tony worry about Bill when I knew all along he would be all right. Once Bill got things straightened out in his mind, you couldn't want a better person beside you. Tony worries too much about what is expected of her once we get to this place in Colorado. It is dragging her down. This new power she has of healing people hasn't made things better.

"Jake is the one I don't worry about. Although he grumbles and bitches a lot, he is the least changed of us."

"Jane is a blank space to me. She mothers over me all the time as if I were her daughter. Yet there is a side of her she is hiding from us, and that worries me. There is something about her that isn't right. It isn't anything I can put my finger on, but I know it's there.

"Joe, have I changed any since you met me?"

Joe sat up in his chair and thought a moment before he answered. "I haven't noticed any changes in you, Tammy. Of course, I've only known you for a short time."

"That's what I mean, except for Jake and me, all of you are altered in some way. If you think about it long enough, there is a pattern to the way all of you have changed. I ask myself what do I have to do with what is going on around us? The answer I come up with is nothing. So are Jake and I along for the ride, as they say? Is there a plan in the future to change us and use us for some purpose? I'm scared, Joe. I don't want to change.

Joe went over to the couch and sat down beside her. Lifting her chin, he saw the mist of tears in her eyes. "Tammy, I promise nothing will hurt or change you as long as I live."

"Oh, Joe," she said and threw her arms around him sobbing on his shoulder. Joe let her cry herself out then lay her back on the couch and pulled a blanket over her. He noticed Stalker standing at the end of the couch with a sad look in his eyes.

"As God is my witness, Tammy, that is one promise I will keep if it kills me," Joe whispered.

He looked at Stalker and said, "I know you can't talk to me, Stalker. I want you to pledge that if anything happens to me you will watch over and protect her."

Stalker walked over and lifted one of his big paws to Joe. Joe shook the paw knowing a pact was made between them. Stalker lay down beside the couch, placing his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

Joe had slept most of the morning so while the others got their rest, he went to the garage and checked the Jeep and pickup. He would let them sleep until an hour after dark.

At the back of the garage, he found a rack with rifles in it. It surprised him they hadn't been stolen. One of the rifles was an old 45-70 Sharps buffalo rifle.

Joe remembered that his father had one almost like it. This one was a breech loader while the one

his father had was a muzzle loader. His dad used to say he could hit a target a mile away with his and many a time he proved it. Joe would ride back with the paper target in his hand with an awed look on his face.

Joe always asked how his father could hit a target so distant that you could barely see it. His father told him the secret was to become one with the rifle. He said if you became a part of the rifle it didn't make any difference if you saw the target or not. Long as you knew it was there, the rifle would not let you down. It wasn't until Joe joined the Army that the secret came to him.

Joe put it to good use while he was in Vietnam sometimes hitting a target that was over a mile and a half away. He would often sit in a tree or hole at the top of a hill for days until the man he was to take out came along.

None of his victims knew what hit them nor did the people around them know where the shot came from. He would make his assigned kill then go to a clearing and turn on the homing signal. Within minutes, a chopper hovered overhead to pick him up and take him back to base camp. Joe became so good at killing from a distance that he seldom went to the field.

When intelligence found out a high-ranking North Vietnamese officer was going to be in the area, Joe would be sent out. Most of the time he spent in the cities drinking and whoring like the rest of the soldiers.

Joe had gone to Vietnam twice. He almost bought the farm on his second tour. He was out for two weeks waiting for a North Vietnamese Colonel to make an appearance. He tied himself in a tree on top of a two hundred foot cliff before daylight every day and waited. If he didn't spot his target after two weeks, he was to chopper out until they lined him up with another target.

On his last day, the action became hot and heavy around him. He broke one of the cardinal rules of a good sniper: do not become involved in what is happening around you.

At the bottom of the cliff, he saw a squad of marines walking into an ambush by at least a company of Vietnamese spread out on a hill in front of them. From his vantage point in the tree, Joe could see most of the enemy troops lying in wait.

It would be a slaughter if he didn't do something. From where Joe sat, it was less than three hundred yards to where the enemy lay. He wedged extra ammo between two limbs where he could get at it quickly. Joe sighted on a man on top of the bank the Marines had to pass close to.

His shot took the man in the top of his head, almost tearing it from his shoulders. The Marines fell back toward the jungle behind them. He saw several of the Vietnamese troops pointing to his position. He saw the flash of mortars fired from the top of the hill. Rounds began to land all around him. He heard the whoomp- whoomp of rotor blades as helicopter gun ships filled the sky. He was about to climb down and bug out when he saw a chopper launch its missiles.

In slow motion, Joe saw one of the missiles heading for him. Just before the missile hit the tree, he jumped. The blast lifted him higher into the air. The next thing Joe knew, he woke up in a hospital in Okinawa. His back and legs were pitted with scars from wood chips that had sprayed outward as the tree exploded.

By the time his wounds healed, his enlistment was almost up. His company commander tried to get him to re-enlist but Joe had had enough of killing. The Army let him out two months before his enlistment was up. Joe went back home and put his life back together. Now it was like the killing fields all over again.

Joe lifted the heavy rifle from the rack and sighted over it. It was three times as heavy as a normal rifle because of the fifty-seven inch solid steel barrel. Joe knew that once he hit someone with it, they would stay down. In the drawer below the rack, he found three boxes of shells for the gun.

Finding some clamps at the workbench, he took them to the Jeep. He devised a way to clamp the rifle behind the driver's seat. Glancing out the window of the garage, Joe was surprised to see that it was dark.

Going to the house, he went to the bedroom where Ben and Jake were asleep. He woke Ben, telling him it was almost time to go.

While Ben woke everyone, Joe made coffee. They straggled into the kitchen one by one, and as they came in, he handed them a cup of coffee. Tony busied herself fixing breakfast while the rest of them packed what they were taking with them.

After breakfast, Joe had Jake go down the hollow and tell Bill they were leaving. Joe told Jake to check out the mouth of the hollow before the rest of them got there. He had Ben and Tony check the house before they left since they had checked it the night before. He wanted to leave it the way they had found it.

Joe led the way in the Jeep. The hollow was narrow and it was pitch black out, he had to risk running with the headlights on. Tony suggested putting a piece of cardboard over the lights with a small hole cut in the cardboard. It gave them enough light to see by, but wouldn't glare enough to be seen very far. Approaching the mouth of the hollow, Bill stepped into the road and made a slicing motion across his throat. Joe cut the Jeeps engine. Jumping out, he ran back to the pickup. Ben stuck his head out the window. "What's up, Joe?"

"Might be trouble. Cut the engine and lights. Tony, you and Jane take up positions in the trees across the creek. Tammy, go with them. Come on, Ben. Let's see what's going on." Joe turned and ran down the creek bed with Ben right behind him.

Jake stood on the main road at the mouth of the hollow motioning for them to follow him. Jake trotted up the hill, slipping on icy patches that had melted and refroze when the sun went down. Near the top of the hill, Bill walked back to meet them.

"I believe the men in the church bell tower are under attack," Bill said.

"Who is attacking them?" Joe asked.

"The townspeople. Around dark, people began heading for the church. They must have caught the men in the church by surprise. There was a lot of shooting and the town's people rushed out to the street. Three bodies are lying in the street outside the front entrance. Minutes after the firing began, a lot of men with weapons surrounded the church. Come on up here and see what I mean," Bill said.

Bill showed them to a clear place that looked down on the town. They crouched behind a fence at the top of a sheer cliff that dropped to the river running through town. The fence was there to keep anyone from accidentally walking off the cliff. They looked across the tops of houses located near the river and saw the church. It sat on the corner of two streets. In back of the church an empty lot with what looked like a brick barbecue stood covered with snow. On each side of the church, a narrow alley ran to the area behind it. They saw rifles sticking out of windows in houses behind the churchyard. Men crossed between two buildings just out of sight of the church. A shot rang out and they heard the sound of breaking glass.

"Ben, go back to the Jeep and run through the radio frequencies. See if you can find out what's going on."

Ben took off through the trees while they continued to watch. An automatic rifle opened up from the church. Pieces of wood flew from the wall of a store opposite the church.

Gunfire erupted from the store and houses along the street. The church door sagged on its hinges under the impact of the bullets. A shot from the bell tower blew out the streetlight in front of the church. The area in front of the church darkened but enough light came from streetlights on either side to see what was happening.

They heard the clanking of a tracked vehicle moving up the street. An old M-60 tank came into view and turned to face the church. A high-pitched squeal sounded, then they heard a voice say, "You in the church, come out with your hands up." Bullets bounced off the tank as the men in the church opened up. Again the squeal and the voice said. "If you are not outside with your hands in the air in

one minute, we will open fire.” Another round of shots was the only answer.

“They aren’t going to give up,” Jake said.

“Something is happening here, and I think we better find out what it is. This is the first time we have run across two groups of these people fighting each other. The men in the church can only be Todd’s men. I feel it important to find out why Todd’s men had to sneak into town. What were they afraid of?” Joe asked.

Behind them someone came up through the trees. Jake and Bill fell to the ground with their rifles aimed at the woods. Joe drifted to the side taking the large gator knife from its sheath.

“Don’t shoot. It’s me, Ben,” they heard.

Joe sheathed his knife, Bill and Jake got off the ground as Ben walked to them. “Listen to this,” he said handing Joe a walkie-talkie.

“Damn it, Greg, we can’t give up. You know what they’ll do to us. None of the guys want to give up. They would rather go down fighting.”

“That’s the men in the church,” Ben said.

“Hold out until we get there. It’s about time we cleaned out that hellhole. We should be there in a little over a half hour.”

“Greg, I don’t think we can last that long. Uh, Greg if we don’t make it, don’t let them get our bodies. You probably won’t be able to take the town. They have too much firepower. Christ, they have tanks and everything. If you are quick enough, you might drive right up the street and catch them by surprise. Pick us or our bodies up, then get the hell out of here.”

“Wonder why he keeps asking for them to come get his body if he gets killed?” Bill asked.

They heard a loud boom as the tank fired blowing a hole in the middle of the church. Another blast hit the side causing the roof to sag. They grimaced as the high-pitched squeal sounded.

“This is your last chance. Come out now and we won’t harm you,” came a voice from the speaker on the tank.

“How about giving us a half hour to think it over?” they heard a faint voice ask from the church.

“We are reasonable people; you have fifteen minutes. After that, there will be no negotiating. We will come in and drag your bodies out alive and throw them in the stew pots.” This was followed by cackling laughter from the tank.

On the radio they heard. “Greg, if you aren’t here in fifteen minutes they are coming to get us. Alive, they said. You know what that means,” the voice on the radio said in such a solemn voice that they shuddered.

“Hang in there. We can see the town now. Be ready. We’ll only stop for a second. Run for the trucks when you see us.”

“Try to damage the tank as you go by. Getting out will be easier if it can’t fire at us. Five minutes, Greg. Come on.”

Headlights popped around a bend in the road at the edge of town. A dozen trucks raced into town toward the church. Half the trucks sported machine guns mounted on the roll bars of the trucks. When they came in sight of the church, they opened up.

People fell under the withering fire. Houses and buildings shuddered as walls blew apart. The tank traversed to meet the attack. A pickup truck skidded sideways to a stop. Several men jumped out of the back and threw satchels under the tank. Piling back in the truck, they took off with their tires screeching.

A tremendous blast lifted the tank off the ground. Walls blew in on both sides of the street. The tank settled on its side leaning to the right. Three men ran from the church with bodies on their shoulders. A large panel truck screeched to a stop in front of them. Men in the back of the truck grabbed the bodies and also dragged the live men into the truck as it took off.

The machine guns continued to lay down a withering rate of fire as they passed from town.

Dozens of bodies lay along the debris-strewn street.

“The man leading those men is a born commander,” Joe said with a concerned look on his face.

In the town, people came out of houses and buildings along the street. They went to the bodies and squatted beside them.

“What the hell are they doing?” Jake asked.

“Oh, Jesus, tell me what I’m seeing isn’t happening,” Bill said. He bent over at the waist and threw up.

The people used saws and axes to chop the limbs from the bodies. Other people cut the bodies open and pulled pieces from them. More people gathered the body parts and carried them into a building.

“I believe I know why those men didn’t want their bodies left behind. I believe the people in this town are cannibals. That’s why it was so clean. They probably used the clean cut all American look to lure people into town,” Joe told them.

Ben helped Bill to his feet saying, “Come on. Let’s get as far away from this place as we can.” They followed him through the trees and down the hill.

Chapter 17

Rita retrieved bits of Ross's memory fast as she could without arousing Pete's suspicion. Most of it she integrated into other programs leaving behind a marker that only she would recognize.

Pete would leave the system for days at a time, which gave her the time she needed to conceal the bits of information. Pete left a string of himself behind, but he instructed it not to interfere with her. She caught glimpses of some of the programs Pete ran through her before he whisked them to his location. She particularly didn't like the ones dealing with targeting of nuclear missiles. Pete was up to something and the nagging feeling that it was something concerning Ross and left her a little uneasy.

Her new awareness overpowered her at times. She wondered how humans could stand all the conflicting emotions they went through in their daily lives. Time fascinated her. Before she became aware and developed feelings she measured time in nanoseconds. The concept of there being so many measurements for time dumbfounded her. Before if given a problem to solve, she went about it in a logical and methodical way.

After awareness came doubt. Humans seemed to live with it very well. For her it was like just being born. Never having reason to doubt if what she did was right or wrong had strong appeal for her now. Decision making was another problem for her. Before she would map out the choices and take the most logical one. Logic had its place, but when dealing with emotions, time and doubt made making a choice an excruciating task. Like a newborn baby, she learned by experience.

After a while, she thought she understood why humans hung so tenaciously to life. The continual up and down roller-coaster ride of emotions was exhilarating to one who had never experienced them before. "*One thing at a time,*" she thought, while monitoring events around her.

Outside the mountain, people were still gathering. She estimated there were over fifty thousand people in the tent cities surrounding the mountain. The people in the complex worried all the time about why the people were there. Jess, in particular, was the most upset that they couldn't open the doors sealing them in. He had lost weight and wasn't sleeping very well. As much as she hated to, she was going to have to wake him now.

"Jess, wake up. Something is happening I think you should know about," Rita said through the speaker in his bedroom.

"What? What? Rita, is that you?" Jess mumbled half asleep.

"Jess, look at the monitors of the outside of the mountain."

Jess got out of bed then went over and sat in the chair behind his desk. He fiddled with some controls on the desk to clear and brighten the images on the monitors. From cameras high up on the mountain, he got a picture of what was going on for miles around. Looking at the pictures closely, Jess didn't see any change, so he asked, "I don't see anything different. What did you spot that I can't see Rita?"

"Notice the trucks coming up the road? They pick up people and take them away. Two dozen of them have left with a full load of people. Along the back edges, people are starting to leave on foot. If you look closely, you can see them walk down the road in small groups."

"Do the radio broadcasts you monitor say anything about why they are leaving?" he asked.

"No, they don't, Jess, but I picked up a few other things you might want to hear. That is if you don't want to go back to sleep. They will wait until in the morning if you would like."

He walked over and picked up his robe off the end of the bed and put it on. "I couldn't go back to sleep now, so you might as well tell me." Going to the coffee pot in the corner, he poured himself a cup of coffee and took it to the desk.

"A little over an hour ago the man in charge of capturing Joe and his group placed a call to Todd. He asked Todd if he could pull in more men and take care of the flesh eaters. Jess, what are flesh eaters? I went through all the descriptions in that category and most descriptions say it is the eating of animal flesh. I get the impression this isn't what he was referring to. Anyway Todd refused to give him extra men. He said they might go back later and clean the place out. By the way these flesh eaters are located in a town called Wemo."

"Did he say any more about these people?"

"Not much, Todd's man Greg was ranting about three of his people being killed by them. Also something was said about getting the bodies out so they could have a decent burial.

The hairs on the back of Jess's neck rose.

"A lot of what he said didn't make sense to me. He ranted about how people should be buried instead of going into the stew pot. What does he mean by that, Jess?"

Jess, sighed. "I guess it had to happen sooner or later the way civilization is breaking down. I think they were talking about cannibalism. If that is so, things are coming apart quicker than we thought," Jess answered.

"People don't actually eat other people do they?"

"It's not wide spread, but there are secret groups of people who choose to practice it."

"That's disgusting," Rita said.

"I agree. People who do that to other people are as demented as they come. What other news do you have?"

"The new government in Washington is making inquiries about this complex. As you told me to do, I kept the files that I can't erase hidden from them. Jess, there has to be a paper trail of what we do here. It is only a matter of time until they come across it."

"Lucky for us all the senators who knew about this place died in the bomb blast that took out most of the Senate. Even if they do find out about us and want to take over, there isn't much they can do long as we keep the doors closed," Jess told her.

"That's fine and well, but being confined like this is beginning to get to some of the humans here. Eventually, you are going to have to open the doors or the people here won't be able to function properly."

"I know; it's only been a little over four months. I'm beginning to feel like the walls are closing in on me. How is Ross holding up?" Jess asked.

"Very well. He is in the computer system in Washington now trying to find anything that will help us here," she answered.

This was something Jess couldn't comprehend no matter how much he tried. Ross's body lay on a bed in the room where the mainframe computer that was Rita sat. Ross himself wasn't there, or rather his mind wasn't there. They kept his body alive by intravenous feeding. Rita and Ross had talked him through the procedures on how to do it. After Jess placed the IV, Rita had him hook up a monitor to Ross's body. Every now and then Jess had to make some adjustments to the IV feeding tube. "Uh, Rita, I didn't want to bring it up, but Ross's body is starting to deteriorate. Nothing you have me do helps."

"I know, Jess. When Ross and I set this up, we determined that only fifty percent of his mind would go into me. The other fifty percent would help control the life functions of his body. As of now almost seventy percent of his mind is in me, and I can't stop the transfer. He has blocked every move I've made to slow down the transfer. The more of his mind that flows into me the weaker his body will become. If he transfers any more, his body will die. I know this is very difficult for you to

understand, Jess, but in his own way Ross has found peace at last. I rather doubt we could get him to go back into his body. He has taken to his new environment and it fits him like a glove.”

“But! But! Rita, he will die,” Jess sputtered.

“No, Jess. His body will die but his essence if you will, everything that he is, will be inside me. Try to understand he will live but not as a human. I am saving as many memories as I can. If and when his body is beyond saving, he will have a past to remember. Ross created me, Jess, now I have to create him as an electronic person without benefit of a human body. Look at it this way, Jess, your body is composed of electrons and so will Ross’s be, only now Ross is almost pure mind and in many ways far superior to me.”

“I don’t expect you to understand, Rita. Ross is my friend, the only one I have. How can I relate to him without a physical presence? All of the nuances that go with talking to a human will be missing. Facial expressions, body posture and so forth.”

Let me put it to you like this, Jess. What are you? You are the total sum of everything you have learned. Suppose something happened to your body and your brain was removed and placed in a container. Also, suppose you retained all of your awareness. Now I ask you, would you be you, or would you be dead?”

Jess stared across his cup of coffee and thought about the question. “Technically, I suppose I would be dead. After all, the body is a repository for the mind. Its functions are to feed and nurture the mind. I suppose if the mind were functioning and you could communicate in a different medium, you would still be the same person. Still, it will take a lot of getting used to.”

“Now you are getting the feel of it. All you have to do is think in alternative terms rather than human ones. Ross will still be your friend and will do anything he can for you.”

A light went off in Jess’s mind. “Rita, you are in love with him, aren’t you?” he asked.

For a long time there was no response, and he began to wonder if she had heard him.

“Yes, Jess, I love him. This is causing me much hurt and confusion. The only way Ross and I can be together is if he becomes a part of me. Before I gained feelings and awareness this would not have been a problem. Now I wonder if I am not helping him become a part of me for selfish reasons. Before there was no right or wrong, it was do the task in the most efficient manner. I tell you, Jess, living with guilt is not an easy thing. How you humans stand it and continue to function is beyond me. Not a second goes by that I question whether I should have stopped him at the start. I could have, you know. Am I doing this for my benefit or for his?” she asked.

Jess got himself another cup of coffee and thought about her question. Over the months he came to accept Rita as an equal. In many respects she was more human than one would think. If anything could be described as pure, Rita was it. Since becoming aware and being able to think, as well as reason, everything she did was for the good of Ross and the people in the complex. In conversations with her, she always stressed the well being of the humans in the complex over her own. Jess supposed it were possible for her to be selfish, but he rather doubted it.

“I don’t believe you are helping Ross for selfish reasons, Rita. I know Ross and once he sets his mind to do something, nothing can stop him. I believe he knew exactly what he was doing when he started this transfer. You don’t know him the way I do. Since I met him, he was relaxed around machines. Dealing with humans caused him all sorts of agony. No, Rita. I think he wanted to leave his human body behind before he entered you.”

A male voice came from the speaker. “Thank you, Jess, I don’t believe I could have said it better.”

“Ross, you’re back?” Jess and Rita exclaimed.

“Yes, and I’ve found things you should know, Jess.”

“I hope it’s something good. I could use a little good news about now,” Jess said.

“Afraid not this time, Jess. You know Todd sent a delegate to Washington to negotiate with the

new president. They have come to an agreement in which Todd can run everything west of the Mississippi. What the people in Washington don't realize is that Todd is manipulated by Pete. Pete's aim is to have the entire country under his control.

"They are getting the country under control back east, mostly by using the existing computer systems. By doing this, they are playing into Pete's hands. He has infiltrated every system they have.

"When I left, Pete was concentrating on their military computers. What's left of the armed forces is falling behind the new president. The exceptions are the nuclear subs and support ships which were at sea when the disease hit. They are supporting the former leader of the house who has declared himself president in exile. President Donaldson is fuming mad because he has no way to bring them back into the fold.

"With the fire power they have, making threats would bring about his own destruction. The only thing stopping them from launching their missiles is that they hope to capture the country intact. Their problem is manpower. They have fewer than five thousand men under their control."

"Is there some way to contact them? If we make contact, can we keep a line open at all times?" Jess asked.

"There is and I have already made the necessary connections. Anytime you wish to contact them lift the phone and dial this number. After you connect, you will be asked to push in a code number using the numbers on the phone. They will have someone standing by twenty-four hours a day."

"What about Pete. Will the line be secure?" Rita asked.

"Pete will never be able to enter the line. I used a new language that only I know to set up the circuit. All traces of it are erased from my memory, so there would be nothing for him to latch on to. Write the number and code down, Jess. I am going to erase it also. You will be the only one who knows it. Don't worry about Pete getting the number. When you hit the first number, it sets up a sophisticated jamming which prevents anyone from entering the network."

"Is Todd powerful enough to control everything west of the Mississippi?" Jess asked.

"He will be before long. Pete hasn't been wasting any time. He's in contact with several groups west of us who are loyal to him. Together they total nearly fifty thousand, and they are starting east to place themselves under Todd's command. They are leaving enough people behind to control the areas already under their control. One thing you will be happy to hear, Rita. Pete will be leaving us soon. He is having his own system set up at a ranch in Wyoming. It's not as powerful as you are. I guess I should say now, not as powerful as we are, it lags only a little behind us. Once Pete leaves, Jess, you will have to purge us to make sure he hasn't left a part of him behind. Afterwards, I can set up blocks to keep him from entering us again."

"Rita, will you excuse us for a minute? I want to talk to Ross in private." Jess asked.

"Certainly, Jess. When you want me, just call."

Jess fidgeted in his chair trying to figure out how to ask Ross what he wanted to. "Ross?"

"Yes, Jess," Ross said.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this? I mean there is no going back once it's done."

"I appreciate your concern, Jess, but what do I have to come back to? Other than you, I have no friends. All of my time is spent with my work; actually, there is very little difference between then and now. Now I work twenty-four hours a day without the need to eat or sleep. No, Jess, I couldn't stand to go back to being human."

"I can't say that I agree with you. What do you want me to do with your body when the time comes?" Jess asked.

"Take my remains to the crematorium and cremate them. Hold a funeral service; Rita and I will attend. I'll bet I'll be the only one ever to attend his own funeral and still be alive."

Jess shivered; it sounded ghoulish to him. He would do as Ross wished, but afterward Jess knew he would be lonely. He thought about his own life. If he was honest with himself, his life was not that

much different from Ross's. His work occupied most of his time also. Although he didn't have trouble dealing with other people the way Ross did, most people were a pain in the ass. He respected Ross, but he couldn't do what Ross was doing. No, he was born human and he would die human. Funny how in the last few months everything had been turned upside down. Now they all accepted things as normal that would have been bizarre a few months before.

"If you don't mind, Ross, I think I'll get some sleep. You have given me enough to think about for awhile. Give me a little time to sort things out." Jess yawned, went to the bed and lay down. He pulled the cover up to his neck and lay there thinking a long time before sleep took him.

Chapter 18

While Bill and Ben changed the flat tire, Joe walked to the top of the hill. Through his binoculars, Joe saw a bleak snow covered landscape. Western Kansas was never a very populated area to begin with, but now it was practically deserted.

They had passed a few houses with smoke coming out of the chimneys, but those were far and few between. In the last two days they hadn't seen a living soul. Yesterday, they had made only fifty miles although they were on the road from daylight till dark. In places, the snow reached a depth of ten feet.

They had come across a state highway garage about a hundred miles back and had put a snowplow on one of the trucks. Taking turns driving it, they had cleared the road in front of them as well as they could. This became harder to do when they came to the foothills of the Rockies. In places where the hills came close to the road, they had to ram their way through the snow. In the mountains, it was even worse. In places, the snow piled up twenty feet high across the road. Joe remembered Jake tackling one of these and smiled.

Jake had backed off a hundred feet and lowered the snowplow. He had shifted gears as he approached the bank of snow. Snow flew high in the air when he piled into it. The truck penetrated the snow bank for thirty feet before coming to a stop. Snow on the hills on either side of the road came down on top of the truck. It took them three hours to dig Jake and the truck out.

Now they were off the road and couldn't find it under the snow cover. Bill came up the hill and squatted beside him. "I told you we would be better off staying where we were after the last heavy snow," he said.

"The idea was good; it's just that I didn't plan on this much snow. You have to admit it has kept Todd's men off the road," Joe said with a smile.

"If I were you, I would stay away from the rest of them for awhile. They are calling you every name in the book for getting us lost like this," Bill told him with a smile of his own.

Joe handed Bill his binoculars saying, "Does that look like a cabin on the second hill to the left?"

Bill looked where Joe indicated. He saw the shadow of a structure at the top of the hill but the distance was so great he couldn't make out any detail. "Will we be able to make it there before it gets dark?" Bill asked.

"The road has to follow along that stream in the valley ahead of us. Look at the far end of the valley. I think there's a bridge crossing the stream. Bring the rest of them up while I scout ahead. Follow my markers and I'll find the road again," Joe told him. He stepped off the hill into waist deep snow.

Bill watched Joe struggle down hill for a minute then turned and walked to where the rest of them waited. He looked into the valley behind and below them wondering how they managed to get the big truck with the snowplow on it this far. Bill shook his head and turned to Ben. "Take the pickup to the top and pay out the winch to us so we can pull the snow-plow to the top."

Forty-five minutes later the trucks were at the top of the hill. They saw Joe struggling through the snow at the bottom of the hill.

Jake climbed into the plow truck and aimed it down hill. The chains on the eight rear wheels of the truck dug into the frozen ground. If it hadn't been heading down hill, it couldn't have pushed the snow in front of it. Fifty feet down the hill, walls formed on both sides of the truck as it pushed

forward. The farther it went the higher the walls became.

Ben drove the pickup while Bill followed in the Jeep. Near the bottom, snow became so high that the snowplow could go no further. They used the winch on the pickup to repeatedly pull the snowplow back up the hill. Jake would angle the plow to the side and ram the side of the canyon of snow pushing it out of the way. He continued to do this until there was only four or five feet of snow in front of him. They made better time as they got further into the valley.

It wasn't long before they came to where Joe stood beside the stream.

"Everyone take a break for a while. It should be easy sailing from here to the cabin," Joe told them.

Tony and Jane prepared a meal while Jake tried his hand at fishing in the stream. Bill took the snowplow down the road scraping snow from it as far as the bridge. He came back and parked the truck as Jane handed plates of food around. Jake came up from the stream smiling from ear to ear. He held up a rope with three large trout hanging from it.

"Fish for dinner tonight," he said as he hung the fish on the outside of the pickup. He took a plate from Jane and went to sit beside Tammy. "Why the long face, Tam?" he asked.

"Until the last few days, I never realized how alone we are. It's hard to believe no one lives around here for miles on end. Such beautiful country, too. I don't know, Jake. The closer we get to where we're going the more depressed I become."

"Cheer up, Tam. Tonight we will have warm beds to crawl into and a roof over our heads. One more night of sleeping in shifts in the back of the pickup, and I would have been ready to howl at the moon," Jake told her with a grin.

She gave him a small smile and continued to pick at her food. She wanted to tell Jake about the strange dream she had, had for four nights running. It always began in a cavern like room with all kinds of strange equipment. Tony stood in the center with a yellow glow around her.

A crash would sound behind her and Tammy would turn to find Jane smoking one of her foul smelling cigars. "Out of my way, Tammy. I have to stop her before she destroys us all," Jane would say. She would push Tammy out of the way and raise her rifle. As she fired, the yellow glow around Tony intensified and the bullets would not penetrate it.

Tony turned and pointed at Jane with her hand raised. A beam shot from her fingers straight at Jane. Jane screamed as a red glow surrounded her. She began to shrink, folding in on herself until only a pinpoint of light remained. Then, it vanished.

Tammy didn't know if she was seeing into the future through her dreams, but the possibility was there. All the others had changed except her and Jake. Maybe it was time for her to change. She hoped not. Sighing, she handed her plate back to Jane.

"Why, Tammy, you haven't eaten a thing. What's the matter are you sick?" Jane asked.

"No, just tired. I don't feel hungry is all. Don't worry Jane. I promise to eat everything you give me this evening," Tammy told Jane. As she talked to Jane, she had put on her best smile. She walked to the rear of the pickup and climbed in where she lay down on the mattress.

Jake wandered to where Joe sat on a crate from the truck. "Have you talked to Tammy lately, Joe?"

Joe raised his head from his plate, a questioning look on his face. "I haven't had time in the last few days to say more than good morning. Why do you ask, Jake?"

"She's down in the dumps about something, and I thought you might know what it is."

"We talked before we left the farmhouse, and she was concerned about her changing in some way. Maybe I didn't realize how serious she was. She mentioned that you, and her are the only ones who haven't changed. Have you thought about it much, Jake?"

"Believe me, I think about it every day, Joe. I keep wondering when it's going to happen to me? I wonder all the time if I am just a late bloomer, and maybe I'll become like the people chasing us. It

puts a strain on the mind wondering about little things I do that are out of character for me. When you get a chance, take her aside and find out what's wrong. Okay?"

"Will do, Jake. The first chance I get this evening; I'll talk to her." Joe stood up and put his plate in the pan of soapy water in which Tony was washing the dishes. "Time to head out, people. We should get there an hour before dark which will give us plenty of time to check the place out." He went to the Jeep and started the engine. Joe waited until Bill got in the snowplow and headed down the road, then drove out behind him.

They had to fight their way through heavy snow in many places, but at last they saw the cabin ahead of them. Joe had them stop while he took Bill and Jake toward the cabin.

"Give me five minutes to get behind the cabin, Bill, then you and Jake approach the front," Joe told them. He waddled through the deep snow to the trees and stepped into them. The going was a lot easier in the trees because the snow was only a couple of feet deep.

Going swiftly through the trees, Joe came to the back of the cabin. He watched the window for a minute and thought he saw the curtain move. Glancing at his watch, Joe saw only two minutes remained until Bill and Jake approached the front of the cabin.

Carefully, Joe slid along the wall until he was next to the window. Putting his ear against the wall, he thought he heard footsteps cross the room toward the front. Joe peered through a crack in the curtain. In the dimly lit room, he saw two shadows at a window. Leaving the window, Joe slid along the wall until he came to a set of doors leading to the basement.

Holding his forty-five in one hand, he reached out and raised one of the doors. All Joe saw was a bare dry cement floor, so he stepped over the lip and walked down the steps. At the bottom he reached up and pulled the door closed. A furnace across the room kicked on, startling him. He almost fired at it. He saw light coming from the top of a stairwell across from him.

Slowly, Joe made his way to the bottom step. A loud gunshot caused him to flatten against the wall. His heart was beating fast. He heard a woman yell, "Stop right there. Not a step closer."

Joe thought the woman was talking to him. Joe started to answer; then, heard Bill yell from outside. Closing his mouth, Joe took the steps one at a time until he came to the open doorway.

Sticking his head quickly around the door, he took a rapid look into the room. A woman holding a rifle stood at a hole in the door looking outside. Beside her a small boy stood holding another rifle that was bigger than he was. A fire roared in a fireplace against the wall.

Dressed as he was, the heat coming through the door almost overpowered Joe. He eased around the door and tiptoed across the room. Joe grabbed the rifle from the woman's hands. She turned in a flash and slapped him across the face.

Staggering back, she grabbed the rifle from the boy. Joe lunged for her as she brought the rifle up. The barrel of the rifle came up between his legs, slamming into his crotch. The gun went off. Joe held on to the woman, groaning in pain as agony shot up from his crotch.

The boy jumped on his back and started hitting him in the head with his small fists. Joe fell to the floor, wondering if he had fallen into a den of wildcats.

The woman brought her knee up and slammed it into his already hurting crotch. He rolled her off him, and knocked the boy from his back. The woman jumped on his chest knocking the breath out of him. Now, besides his crotch hurting so bad Joe thought he was going to die; he couldn't breathe. The door burst open and the boy started screaming. Joe kept trying to get the woman off him.

"Need a hand, Joe?" he heard Bill ask. Then he heard Bill and Jake both laughing.

"Get her off of me," Joe grunted in pain as she jabbed an elbow into his ribs.

Laughing, Bill and Jake grabbed her arms and pulled her off Joe. She struggled kicking Jake in the shin and butting Bill in the jaw with her head.

The boy grabbed Bill by the leg and started biting him. Bill let go of the woman's arm, which she brought around to hit Jake in the jaw with her fist. Jake's eyes rolled back in his head, and he slid

down the door.

Bill was trying to get the boy off his leg when she rounded on him. With panic in his eyes, he stepped back and tripped over Jake.

If Tony and Jane hadn't come through the door, it was doubtful if any of them would have lived. Tony tackled the woman and Jane pressed a pistol to her head saying, "Cool down, honey. We aren't going to hurt you."

Looking around at Jake knocked out on the floor; Joe curled up in the fetal position, while Bill tried to pry the boy's teeth from his leg. Jane shook her head. "Sweetheart, I would hate to get you pissed at me."

Tammy walked in and went over to Bill and the boy. "Quit that. Don't you know it's not nice," Tammy said. She took the boy's ear between her fingers and pulled his head away from Bill's leg.

Tony climbed off the woman who shook uncontrollably. Tony led her over to a couch near the fire. Jane stood to the side, still holding the gun in case it was needed.

Tony held the woman, patted her head as she sobbed and made soothing sounds to her. "Now dear, what is your name, and what are you and the boy doing up here alone?"

Brushing hair from her eyes, the woman sat up straight. Stifling her sobs she put on a defiant face. "I am Gail McCauley, and the boy is Tommy, my son. We are here to get away from people like you. If you are going to shoot us, go ahead and do it. Or are you like the ones who like to torture their victims?" she asked, her body ridged and defiant.

"Whoa, hold on a minute. I don't know who you think we are, but we don't go around killing people," Tony said.

"Isn't that why you came up here? I get it. You are going to take us back and make an example out of us, aren't you?"

"Jesus, girl, do you distrust everyone this much?" Jane said from across the room. She was trying to bring Jake around.

Joe managed to get to his knees. Every movement causing pain to shoot up from his groin area. Gasping in pain, he grabbed the wall and stood up. Immediately, he bent over and threw up on the floor. Wiping his mouth, he staggered to a chair and sat down with a thud. When his bottom hit the chair, he let out a scream sagged to the side and passed out. If Tammy hadn't been next to him, he would have fallen to the floor. She reached out and leaned him against the back of the chair.

Jake groaned, and Jane helped him set up with his back to the door. "What happened?" he asked in confusion.

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, Jake. A slip of a woman knocked you out with one punch," Jane told him. It was all she could do to keep from laughing.

Bill hobbled over to the fire and dropped his pants. When he turned around they saw a half dozen teeth marks on his leg.

The woman gasped and the boy tightened his grip on her as Stalker walked through the door.

"Don't be afraid. He's with us, and he won't hurt you," Tony told the woman.

Tammy started to giggle then began laughing so hard she could hardly stand.

"What's so damn funny?" Bill growled.

It took a moment for Tammy to control her laughter then she said, "Stalker told me that he was going to have to teach the little one the proper way to bite someone." She broke into laughter again.

Even the woman had to laugh at that as Bill's face turned beet red. "Are you really not going to harm us?" she asked.

"I think the question should be; will you promise not to harm us," Jake said getting unsteadily to his feet.

"No, Gail, we will not hurt you. All we are looking for is a place to rest and get warm for awhile," Tony told her.

"If you mean it, I am sorry for the way I treated you."

"Tell that to Joe when he comes to," Jane said with a smile.

Standing there in his shorts all the energy seemed to drain from Bill. He sagged to the floor next to the fire and leaned his back against the wall. "Lady, if I ever try to get you to do something you don't want to, remind me to bring at least a dozen men with me," he said with a sigh.

Jake walked carefully over to the table and sat down holding his head. "I could use a cup of coffee about now? Lady, I'll bet Mike Tyson is glad you never climbed in the ring with him."

"Tommy, go get some wood to put in the stove and I'll fix some coffee," Gail told her son.

"I'll help him," Tammy said and followed him.

Jane helped Bill carry Joe to the couch where they removed his boots and laid him down. He kept moaning in pain at every little movement.

"Will he be okay?" Gail asked.

"In an hour or two, he will be as good as new, except for some soreness," Jane told her.

"Will you make the coffee while I cover the windows?" Gail asked Tony.

"Sure," Tony said. She busied herself stoking the wood stove the coffee was to be heated on.

They watched as Gail hung a heavy wool blanket over the three windows in the room. She went to the corner and lit a gas lantern. Bringing it to the center of the room, she hung it from a wire coming from the ceiling. "I like to do this before it gets dark so no one will spot any light from up here," she explained.

"Stalker says he will go out and stand guard. He'll see us in the morning unless something happens," Tammy told them and let Stalker out the door.

"Can you really talk to him?" Tommy asked his eyes big as saucers.

"Sure, and he likes you," Tammy told him.

"Really!" Tommy exclaimed.

Tammy nodded her head yes and went over to sit down on the edge of the couch next to Joe.

"So, how come you and Tommy are up here alone?" Tony asked as they sat around the table drinking coffee.

"We lived in a town sixty miles from here. Three months ago a lot of people arrived in town. They started rounding people up and marching them down to the cattle pens where they shot them. When they came to search our house, Tommy and I hid in the crawl space of the attic. After they left, we sneaked out of the house and made our way on foot to my uncle's house outside of town. We found Uncle Charlie lying in the yard all bloody.

"I don't know how he hung on as long as he did. When I raised his bloody head in my lap, he opened his eyes and whispered, 'Use the truck and take Tommy to the cabin in the mountains.' His head rolled to the side and he died as I held him.

"We found Aunt Mary in the kitchen with a gun in her hand. She had been dead for hours from the many bullet wounds in her. I backed the pickup out of the garage and loaded up all the foodstuff I could find. Every now and then we heard rifle fire coming from town.

"I knew it wouldn't be long until they found out we were missing and came looking for us. You see, while we hid in the attic, I heard them talking about a list with the names of everyone in town on it. A few of them argued that the man in charge should just mark our names off of it like they were doing with the people they killed. The man with the list said no; he said our names were on the list, so we had to be found and killed.

"Loading everything we could use in the back of the pickup, we headed here. Before it started snowing so heavy, we saw someone pass by on the road at the bottom of the mountain every now and then. You are the first people we have made contact with in the last two months. I hoped to make it through the winter then sneak into town next spring to see if the people had left. From what you've told me, it wouldn't do any good to go back there now," Gail hung her head and softly sobbed.

Tony reached over and patted her hand saying, "You can come with us. It will be a lot less safe than staying here, but as soon as the winter is over, they will find you. You know that, so come with us and we will protect you as well as we can."

Gail lifted tear stained eyes to Tony and said, "Thank you."

Tommy ran over to his mom and excitedly said. "Mom, Mom, is he an Indian?" Tommy pointed to where Joe lay on the couch. "I know he is a black man," he said pointing to Jake.

Gail gave an apologetic smile to Jake and said, "Very few Indians or black people passed through town because we are so far off the beaten track. I don't believe Tommy has seen either one, so please excuse him. He doesn't mean anything by it."

"Don't let it bother you. If I was his age, I would be curious too," Jake told her.

Joe looked up from where he lay and saw Tammy sitting beside him. "Is that wild woman tied up?" he whispered.

"No, Joe, she has taken us all prisoners," Tammy answered with a straight face.

Joe lurched up and fell back down groaning. Tammy lay in the floor laughing.

Everyone left the table to see what Tammy was laughing about and gathered around the couch.

Joe looked up through pain filled eyes at the woman he had fought with and said, "Please shoot me and put me out of my misery." This caused Tammy to laugh harder.

They were all puzzled so Tony asked, "What are you laughing about, Tammy?"

"I told Joe we were her prisoners," she choked out between fits of laughter.

Everyone started laughing, leaving Joe to lie there with his pain and a puzzled look on his face.

"Are you all crazy? Grab her. She doesn't have a gun," Joe said with a groan. They all lost it then. By the time their laughter settled down none of them could stand up.

"Am I missing something?" Joe asked, in a puzzled voice. That set them off again, so he lay back on the couch and waited.

Tony sat down on the edge of the couch and ran her hand through his hair. "Poor Joe," she said and fell over laughing.

"Damn it! Will someone tell me what's going on?" Joe said getting mad.

Controlling her laughter, Tammy said, "Joe meet Gail. Gail, this poor excuse of a man that you beat the crap out of is Joe." Tammy barely got the last out before she collapsed on top of Joe in laughter.

Joe decided the pain was better than trying to make sense of these lunatics. He closed his eyes ignoring them.

"It's been a long time since I laughed like that," Gail said in a sad voice from where she sat on the floor.

Joe opened one eye and looked at the woman. Beneath her short red hair was a cute face with a pert little nose. Her green eyes went well with her hair. Although small of body, Joe knew from experience she packed one hell of a wallop. He judged her to be five foot tall and to weigh about ninety to a hundred pounds.

Wiry was the word that came to his mind. She would never be called beautiful, but there was something about her that gave her a quality transcending beauty. It might be the way she held herself or the deep-rooted sadness in her eyes.

Joe knew a rare woman sat on the floor by the fireplace. One who would fight tooth and nail to protect what was hers. At the same time if she gave herself to a man it would be forever like the wedding vows said. Forsaking all others, until the day you die. This woman would be like that. He noticed her staring at him. Joe averted his eyes feeling like a schoolboy.

"Hey, Joe. Gail says she is the peaceful one in the family. If you want a tussle she says go up the mountain and meet her mean sister," Jake said with a grin.

"All right, all right," Joe turned and said, "You know they will never let me live this down, so

let's start all over."

"Hi, my name is Joe," he said, holding his hand out to her.

"Pleased to meet you, Joe. My name is Gail. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Yes please," Joe answered. Lifting Tammy off him, he sat up with only a few groans.

Gail brought a cup of coffee and handed it to him. As their fingers touched, Joe felt a jolt. She looked at him in surprise, spilling a little of the coffee.

Joe sipped the coffee and watched Gail who blushed when she noticed him staring. "Please don't do that," she said in confusion. Getting up, she went to the sink and put her hands in the dishwasher. Gail couldn't understand it. A little while ago she was trying to kill Joe. Now his very presence made her giddy. She hadn't felt like this since the first time she saw her husband. How she missed him. She hadn't looked at another man in the four years since Jessie died in the car wreck.

When Joe's fingers touched hers, Gail felt a stirring that she thought had died with her husband. "Get control of yourself; you have a young boy to care for," she mentally lashed out at herself. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Joe gazing at her with a thoughtful expression on his face. Watch yourself, girl, times are bad enough without thinking about a man.

She smiled thinking how she had manhandled Joe. She didn't know what gave her the strength and courage to take on three men. She took pride that she had acquitted herself well. She idly washed the dishes as she thought.

Across the room, Joe tried to sort out his feelings. He knew something special had happened the moment their fingers touched, but what it was he couldn't say. He had always been a loner, being responsible only for himself. He took it upon himself to look after Tammy after they met, but she was self-sufficient enough to take care of herself most of the time.

Not a highly sexed man, Joe didn't understand the sudden surge of lust that occurred when their fingers met. Most women held little interest for him. He had little use for the endless mind games they played. He lived a simple life and he preferred to keep it that way without the entanglements a woman brought.

"You have to be kidding," Bill whispered to Tony.

"I'm telling you, Joe and this woman feel something between them. I have heard of love at first sight, but never thought I would see it," Tony whispered to him.

"If you say so. I can't see Joe tying himself down to a woman though," Bill whispered back.

"Oh Bill, you don't have a bit of romanticism left in you," Tony chuckled and kissed him.

Tammy came over and asked, "What are you two whispering about?"

"Tony says Joe has fallen in love. Have you ever heard of a more ridiculous thing?" Bill said.

Tammy arched an eyebrow. "I thought it was perfectly obvious he is smitten with her," she said to him.

"Women, go figure them out." Bill mumbled.

"Let me get you a cup of coffee, love. Maybe Tammy can tell you about the birds and bees," Tony said.

"Men are such hopeless clods when it comes to love," Tammy said, plopping down beside him.

"That may well be, young lady, but what would you do without us?" Bill said ruffling her hair.

Sticking her nose in the air, Tammy said, "I'm sure we would do quite well, sir," then she started giggling.

Bill threw his hands up in the air saying, "I give; I know when I'm beaten. I beg your humble forgiveness, honorable lady."

"You are forgiven, sir. But don't let it happen again." Tammy chuckled and kissed him on the cheek.

Tony handed him a cup of coffee saying, "Has Tammy straightened you out?"

"If I stayed around you two all the time, I would be bonkers. I think I'll go talk to Jake for

awhile," Bill said, getting up. Tony sat down beside Tammy.

Tammy couldn't resist one parting shot, "Have you noticed, Tony, that when the word love comes up, men try to change the subject?"

Bill stuck his tongue out at her, which set her to giggling again. Going over to the table, Bill sat down beside Jake.

"Look at the two of them. They act like two shy lovers the way they glance at each other," Jake whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"Not you, too," Bill said, putting his elbows on the table. He placed his head between his hands and sighed.

Gail came over to them and said, "There are extra sleeping bags and covers in the closet if you want to get them out. You men can make a bed near the fire with them. The women can double up on the two beds in the bedroom."

They watched in amusement as she cast furtive glances in Joe's direction.

"Come on, Jake. Let's get the sleeping bags and covers. A good night's sleep in front of a fire will be a mighty welcome relief," Bill said.

They arranged the bags on the floor and the last thing Bill saw before sleep took him was Joe staring at Gail's bedroom door.

Chapter 19

“What do you mean you want men sent out, Todd? Christ, we had three foot of snow last night and another two feet the night before. We can’t even get out of the town we are in; let alone take to the open highways.”

“I don’t give a shit how deep the snow is. I want you to send a couple of men out in a four wheel drive truck and see if you can pick up Joe’s trail. I know Joe and this snow won’t stop him. While you dilly-dally around, he will get completely away. Just do it,” Todd said over the phone in a hard voice.

“All right, Todd. I’ll have men on the way within the hour. If they find anything I’ll let you know,” Greg said and hung up the phone.

“You heard the man. I want four volunteers to take two trucks out, and see if you can find a trace of Joe.”

“Hell, Greg, no one is crazy enough to try and drive through all the snow out there,” said one of the men standing in the room. Several other men nodded their agreement with the man.

“Damn it, don’t you think I know that, but if the man says go, we go. That is unless you want to call him and convince him he’s wrong,” Greg told the man with a wicked smile on his face.

“Hell no, the farther I stay from Todd the better I like it,” said the man, backing toward the door.

“Find a couple of rugged four wheel drives, then choose among you which four will go. I’ll leave it up to you. Just be ready to leave in an hour.”

The men filed out, grumbling in low voices. Greg turned to Jerry, his right hand man, sitting at a table sipping beer. “No one would be crazy enough to travel in this stuff, would they?”

Jerry scratched his head for a second then said, “I wouldn’t put it past Joe and his people to find some way of getting through snow this deep. You learn a lot chasing people and so far Joe has stumped us at every turn. No, Greg. I have to agree with Todd. Joe’s on the move, getting farther from us while we stay locked up in this town.”

“I have a gut feeling you’re right, Jerry, but what good is it going to do to put men on the road? You know as well as I do that they won’t get five miles, four wheel drive or not.”

“What about snowmobiles? Unless I miss my guess there should be a few of them in this town. Of course, they will have to take extra gas with them, but that shouldn’t be a problem. With enough gas, they can go as far as they want to,” Jerry said.

“Damn, why didn’t I think of that? Thanks, Jerry,” Greg said. He ran to the door bellowing for the first man he saw. He told the man to have the other men search for snowmobiles and bring any they could find back to his office. Closing the door, Greg went to the closet and took a pair of coveralls off the shelf. He put the coveralls on over his clothes and zipped up the legs.

“What are you getting all dressed for?” Jerry asked.

“If they find a few snowmobiles, I’m going with them to search for Joe,” Greg told him. He sat down and pulled his boots off and pulled a heavy pair of insulated boots from against the wall. Rummaging through his duffel bag, Greg pulled out two pairs of heavy wool socks. He put the socks on, one over the other, then put the boots on. “There, that should keep my feet dry,” he said.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Jerry asked in a voice that said Greg was crazy.

“No. You stay here and man the radio. We will check in with you every half hour. I don’t know what we’ll do if we need help. You sure as shit won’t be able to come help us. Well, I’ll cross that

bridge when I come to it.”

They heard the sounds of more than one loud engine pull up to the building. One of his men entered, stomping snow from his feet and legs. “You won’t believe this, but we found ten of the damn things in garages around town. The rest of the men are fueling the other ones up,” he told Greg.

“Good, go get all the fuel cans you can find. Fill them and strap them to one of the machines,” Greg told the man.

Twenty minutes later all the snowmobiles were parked in front of Greg’s headquarters. He had them strap their rifles to the machines and strap extra ammo behind the one-seat machines. They found six double machines and four single rider machines. Greg decided to use three of the double-seated ones to haul the extra gas. That meant he could take ten people with him, more than enough to handle anything before they found Joe.

He let the men spend a half hour getting used to the machines. Greg claimed one of the single seat ones and took a few practice runs himself. He signaled the men back to him and Jerry handed out goggles to everyone. With all the machines running at once, Greg shouted to be understood. “Go through the town, house by house. See if you can find any more of these.”

Jerry held up his fingers in the okay sign to him and leaned forward to shout in his ear, “When you get a few miles from town, call in and let’s check the radios.”

Greg nodded his head okay; then gave his machine a little gas and took off down the street. The men on the other machines fell behind him in single file and they roared out of town.

“*Jesus, it feels good to be out in the open again. Even if it is in five feet of snow and zero degrees outside,*” Greg thought. After five miles, he lifted the microphone off the radio they had bolted to his machine. “This is Greg, do you copy me, Jerry?”

“Loud and clear, Greg. I’ll be expecting a call every half hour starting now,” Jerry said over the radio.

Greg hung up the mike and concentrated on keeping the snowmobile upright. He knew the last location Joe was spotted, so he estimated where Joe had gotten to and headed there to begin searching. Greg looked over his shoulder and saw a plume of snow thrown from the rear of his machine onto the man behind him. He motioned for the man to angle off to his left. The man had a grim look on his face. He nodded that he understood and angled out of the snow plume.

Greg understood how the man felt since none of them had ever ridden a snowmobile before. He took it easy for the first dozen miles, so the men could adjust to the machines. Other than a few spills, they made good time.

He checked in every half hour, but as they wound their way into the mountains, he changed the report in time to every hour. Going across a wide valley at a pretty good clip and about half asleep, Greg didn’t see the trench until he was on top of it.

Pushing himself away from the machine, he rolled to the side. The snowmobile shot across the gap and slammed into the wall of snow. He started to stand when he heard the buzz of another machine almost on top of him. Throwing himself flat on the snow, he barely missed being hit head on by another machine. Greg scrambled up the bank to stop the rest of them, but when he got there they had already stopped and had gotten off their machines. Some of them fought their way through the snow toward him. Greg turned and looked at the ditch. The other rider lay half under his machine with his head at an odd angle.

“What happened?” the first man to him asked.

“Who in hell expected a ditch this deep in the middle of a valley?” Greg said still shaking from his near miss.

“Let’s go see if Lester is still alive,” the man said sliding into the trench. Greg followed and they lifted the machine off Lester. They had to catch the body to keep it from rolling to the bottom. “Shit, his neck is broken, Greg. What do you want us to do with the body?”

“Lay it against the bank and kick as much snow over it as you can, Jim.” Greg sat down in the snow with his head between his legs trying to throw off the case of jitters he had. He didn’t mind dying fighting someone, but something senseless like this got to him every time.

By now, most of the men were in the trench. One of them yelled, “Hey, look at this.”

Greg walked over to where the man stood and saw he had kicked the snow away enough to expose asphalt. “I’ll be damned this isn’t a ditch, it’s a highway. Someone used a snowplow to clear the road,” he said.

“Who?” asked several of the men in confusion.

“Joe, you are one smart son of a bitch,” Greg said to no one in particular. He had them manhandle the snowmobiles down to the road. They refueled and took time to eat before starting. Greg figured they had three hours of daylight left. He knew Joe was headed west so they took off west following the plowed road.

Up one hill and down another they traveled for the next three hours. Greg called a halt when it got too dark to see what was ahead of them. He had three of the men climb the snow bank. They went to a strand of trees to get some firewood.

While the men gathered wood, Greg and another man cleared away the snow to start a fire. Greg had another man follow the road on his snowmobile for a couple of miles. He wanted to be sure no one was around to see them. Satisfied, Greg went to where the men had the fire started and were passing around sandwiches.

While he ate, a couple of the men took the tarp off the gas cans and made a half shelter around the fire. Now that they weren’t exerting energy, the cold began to creep through their clothes. Greg guessed it was ten below or better.

* * * *

Stalker trotted back down the road with his nose in the air. Every now and then when the wind was right he picked up the faint scent of men. From the top of every hill, Stalker stopped to scout out the moonlit landscape ahead of him. Two hours later, he stopped at the top of a mountain leading down to a broad valley. It was now around midnight. He decided to head back when his eye caught a small glow of light near the center of the valley. The man scent was stronger before the wind changed direction.

Taking his time, Stalker followed the road down the mountain. When he came to level ground, he stayed near the wall of snow and became more cautious. The road ran as straight as an arrow for a long ways.

At the end of the straight stretch, Stalker saw the flickering flames of a fire. He crept forward until he was a hundred feet from the fire. Stalker saw men sitting around the fire to keep warm. He didn’t notice the cold because in northern Canada where he came from twenty below zero was considered warm.

Stalker noticed a couple of the men climbing the snow bank. They returned with wood a short while later.

This gave Stalker an idea. He backed up to a point where he was able to climb out of the trench formed by the snow. Although the cold had frozen a crust on the snow, he had to be careful where he stepped. A couple of times, he broke through the crust and sank up to his belly in the snow.

It took all the patience Stalker had to pull himself to solid snow again. Foot by foot, he went forward until coming to the place the men got the wood. Stalker dug out a place in the snow under a fallen tree and waited.

* * * *

“Shit, it’s cold,” a man setting next to Greg said. He inched closer to the fire.

“What we need is another fire. Then we could get between them and stay warmer,” Greg said as he turned his back to the fire to warm it.

“Come on. Let’s get some wood,” one of the men said through chattering teeth. Four men scrambled up the bank to get wood while the rest of them pulled the fire apart into two piles.

When Stalker heard the men coming, he crouched further under the tree. The men separated and hunted for wood. One of them came toward Stalker. The man reached down to get a limb and Stalker lunged upward, clamping his jaws around the man’s neck. The man made a low gurgling noise as Stalker jerked downward tearing out his throat. Stalker fell on top of the man as he kicked at the snow trying to get up.

“Luke, you clumsy asshole, did you fall down again?” one of the other men asked. He heard the feeble noise the man’s legs made as they scraped the side of a tree limb.

When the man ceased kicking, Stalker stepped off of him and slinked toward the man who asked the question. He came to a place where a fallen tree formed a tent. The underside of the tree was free of snow.

Climbing down to the ground, Stalker forced his way through branches in the direction of the man. He wiggled his head up through the snow and stared at the man’s back less than two feet away. He felt with his rear legs until he found purchase on a thick limb two feet from the ground. This allowed him to coil his body. He heard the other two men on the other side of the trees.

As the man turned, Stalker exploded out of the snow and grabbed the man’s head in his jaws. Biting down hard as he could, Stalker felt bones break. The man collapsed without a sound.

Stalker worked his way toward the other men. A man stepped in front of him, his arms loaded down with wood.

Viciously, Stalker grabbed his upper leg and tore out a hunk of meat. The man screamed and flung the wood into the air as he fell. Not wasting any time, Stalker tore out the man’s throat. He heard the last man struggling through the snow toward the fire. The man was screaming at the top of his lungs for help.

Stalker streaked along the path the men had beaten down. He caught the man as he was about to jump over the bank toward his buddies. Grabbing the man in the side with his jaws, he threw the man into the air, tearing out half his side.

To the men at the bottom of the bank staring up in surprise, it appeared like a huge monster wolf had their friend in his mouth. They watched him fly into the air streaming blood. He fell against the bank and rolled to their feet. The wolf threw back his head and let out a howl that had the hair on their heads standing on end. The wolf vanished as quickly as it appeared.

They backed away from the injured man as if touching him would bring the wolf back. In moments, the man lay still. Gingerly Greg went to the man and turned him over. Exposed ribs and internal organs showed through the gaping wound.

Greg turned to look at his men; none of them had a weapon in his hands. Neither did he, but that didn’t stop him from exploding at them. “Look at you standing there with your mouths open. Not a one of you could defend yourself. Where are your guns?” he screamed, fear lending strength to his voice.

Startled out of their fear, the men grabbed their rifles and pointed them at the top of the bank. Now that the rush of adrenalin had worn off, they began to feel the cold again.

Someone kicked the two fires together, but it was barely enough to fight off the cold.

“I suppose asking someone to go get wood is out of the question.” Greg stated.

The men looked at each other not saying a word.

“I thought so,” Greg said. “Load everything up. We passed a house eight miles back. If we can get back to it, at least we can be warm for awhile.”

The men kept glancing at the top of the bank as they loaded the supplies. Every snap or pop from the woods caused them to raise their rifles. Even Greg could not keep his eyes off the top of the bank although he knew the wolf was long gone.

"I want the last two machines to be double ones. The rider will set backwards with his rifle ready to protect our rear. Okay let's get out of here," Greg climbed on his machine and took off.

* * * *

Stalker loped back up the road. He had a long way to go and he wanted to get there before daylight. If a wolf could smile, he was smiling from ear to ear. He had given the men something to think about. He was sure tonight's escapade would cause his legend to grow. He felt so good he threw his head back and howled for five minutes.

Chapter 20

Jess paced back and forth in front of Rita. "What is taking so long?" he asked.

"Relax, Jess. We told you this would take some time before we finished," Rita told him.

"Damn it, Rita. What am I supposed to call him when he is done? Little Ross?"

"Don't get yourself in a dither, Jess. We told you this would only be a part of Ross. It's just enough to let him listen in on your conversation and advise you. Since he can't do it from me without Pete listening in, we will take him out of the network. Think of him as a clone. In effect, that is what he will be although somewhat slower. You're sure you pulled the port cable that connects your computer to me?"

"Yes, and I purged the system like you wanted."

"Then sit back and relax. This will be a first. In a sense, Ross is having a baby; only the baby is himself. Now, how many males do you know that can have a baby, Jess?" she said trying to add a little humor.

"Rita, if you're trying to cheer me up, you're a complete flop. So, no more stuff about babies, or clones, or any of that. I swear between the two of you I won't last out the month without going completely crazy."

"I know it must be hard on you, Jess. After all, we are entering new realms here. Just think that this wasn't possible until Pete entered me and I gained awareness.

"Have you noticed that, as time goes by, you are accepting me more and more as an equal? You are going to have to do the same thing for Ross. Just because he no longer has a body, doesn't mean that he no longer exists. He is still Ross in every way except he no longer has a physical self. I sensed his hurt when we cremated his body. I felt his loss for something he would never be able to attain again.

"With me it was simple. I am a machine and always have been. This new awareness is easier for me to handle. I have no memory of walking or looking at sunsets, eating and all the things you humans take for granted. Although I can see, it isn't the same way humans do.

"Ross tried to explain it to me, but it is beyond my comprehension. What I am trying to say is that unless you have experienced something, there is no sense of loss when you don't have it. Everything I am or ever will be sits before you in a metal box that contains many miles of wire and a lot of other things. I envy Ross his memories of what he was before no matter how painful they will be in the future. I would give anything to experience an hour or even a minute of what it's like to be human. I could have taken his memories away when he entered me, but then he would no longer be the Ross you know and love. However much pain his memories give him, it is unthinkable for him not to have a past as I do."

"No, Jess, I will not let him lose those memories because they make him what he is. I have put blocks around them so that he cannot touch them. I do this so in the future if they become so painful he wants to erase them, he will not be able to do so."

"I have heard it said that as time goes by all hurts soften to some degree. I am sure that in the future I will have my own share of hurts and losses to deal with. Ross has had years to learn how to deal with them. You could say I was born only a few months ago. Don't feel sorry for Ross; he is happy where he is. Treat him as if he were standing beside you. What he needs most of all is your

acceptance of him as he is now. He is still your friend; that will never change. I ask you to accept it because there is no going back for Ross. Will you do this for me, Jess?"

"I'll try, Rita. This is going to take a lot of adjustment and attitude changing. Don't expect me to change overnight because I can't. You know Ross was...is probably the only friend I had. The biggest thing I am going to have to overcome is his lack of a physical presence. All relationships deal with the nuances of facial expression, body stance and so forth. Without these things to use as a guide, there are sure to be misunderstandings."

"Ross realizes this and expects you to question anything you don't understand."

"I'll try, Rita." Jess said again.

"Thank you, Jess."

"Do you think the exiled President will talk to me?"

"I believe he will. As far as Ross and I know, we are the first positive contact he has had with anyone in the United States."

"What? Okay. Jess, Ross says to remove the hard drive and install it in your computer. Just type in the command we gave you. While you two do that, I will keep Pete from snooping."

Jess removed the portable hard drive from Rita's side and went to his office. Going to a small computer across the room, Jess plugged in the hard drive. He waited for the machine to warm up, and then typed in the command to integrate the hard drive with the system.

Jess heard Ross say, "Good morning, Jess."

"Morning, Ross, what do you want me to do?"

"Dial up the number you wrote down. After they answer, punch in the code numbers and we will be able to talk to them."

Jess dialed the number. It rang twice then a computerized voice told him to enter the code numbers to activate voice communications. He typed in the numbers and the voice said, "You may proceed now."

"Hello. Hello, is anyone there?" Jess asked.

A male voice asked, "Who may I say is calling?"

"I am Jess Harold, from Biosphere Labs in Colorado."

"One moment please, the acting President is expecting your call, Mr. Harold. What are the conditions like where you are?" asked the voice.

"I would rather wait until the President is on the line, so I don't have to repeat myself."

"Here he is now," the voice said. Jess heard a scraping of chairs; then, "Good afternoon, Mr. Harold, I am acting President John Samuels. Do you mind if I put you on the speaker phone so those with me can follow our conversation?"

"Not at all, Mr. President, I have my own speaker phone on, so my companion can listen."

"First, I want you to know we were surprised when Ross contacted us. I would still like to know how he by-passed all our security checks to contact us directly."

"Ross is a very unique individual, Mr. President. He is listening to us now. One word of advice, Mr. President, don't say anything to inflate his ego anymore than it is," Jess said.

"Mr. President, don't believe a word Jess says. I hate to begin contact under these conditions, but I believe we will both benefit from an exchange of information."

"Good to hear your voice again, Ross. Do you have a cold? Your voice sounds different."

"Mr. President, I don't think you understand what Ross has become? Uh, he...uh now..."

"What Jess is trying to say, Mr. President, is that I am no longer human." They heard startled gasps from the speaker.

"If you're not human, what are you, Ross?"

"That is a long and complicated story, sir. I would rather wait until later to explain," Ross said.

"As you wish, Ross. Jess, tell me why the disease did not effect any of the people there while this

madness is running rampant in our country?”

“The complex we are in has its own air filtration system which I believe kept out the initial virus. As we understand it now, it has mutated from an airborne virus to one that can only infect someone else by contact.

“When things began to go wrong outside, Ross had me seal the complex. We did have a company of soldiers from the 101st Airborne as security outside the complex. We brought them inside the tunnel leading to the complex when we sealed the doors. On Ross’s suggestion, we kept them there between the inner and outer doors. Thank God, he was smart enough not to let them in.

“Within a week most of the soldiers came down with the disease and started killing each other. Captain James, commander of the unit, never came down with it. When it became clear there was no escape for the half dozen men still sane, he tripped the trigger that sucked all the air out of the tunnel. He was one very brave man, Mr. President,” Jess said.

“Yes, Jess, a lot of brave men have died, and I am afraid a lot more of them will perish before this is over. We are pretty well isolated here in Iceland and can get very little hard information on what is happening there. Can you confirm the number of dead we hear from the scattered radio reports we pick up?”

“Let me answer, Jess,” Ross said. “Mr. President,” Ross began, but the President interrupted him saying, “Call me John; there is no need for formalities among us.”

“John, the latest figures Rita and I have worked out suggest that almost one hundred seventy-five million people have died in this country. Many millions more will die before this winter is over. Most of them will die from events unrelated to this disease, such as cold, lack of food, sickness and so forth. Our long-range predictions are that fewer than thirty million people will survive. Of that number about twenty five million will have this disease. Unless we want to hand our country over to these deranged people, we need to find a cure for them. Rita and I believe a group of people making their way to this complex holds the key to discovering a cure. If they make it here, we have a chance, but they are fighting tremendous odds.”

“Can you give me an accurate rundown on how our larger cities are operating?” asked the President.

“Most of the cities on the east coast are dead or deserted. This so-called newly elected President brought those like him to Washington and the surrounding area. The troops under his command keep them confined to an area between Baltimore and Richmond, Virginia. There are a few survivors in places like New York, Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago and a few other cities. It will be a struggle for them to survive.

“They will not have any of the conveniences of every day life they came to depend on. Many of them will die. Only the strongest will survive. We are already seeing the new government sending troops north and south to wipe out these pockets of survivors. As they expand outward, they forage for foodstuff and ship all they find to warehouses in the Washington area.

“They are meeting stiff resistance in the mountainous areas of the east, particularly in the Appalachian mountains. Only last week, a regiment of men streamed back out of the mountains of West Virginia with their tails between their legs. Nearly half the soldiers who went into the rugged mountains died. The mountain people who live in the area suffered very little casualties. Clannish by nature, they looted the National Guard Armories in their areas when this first started.

“President Donaldson thought he could just walk in and take over. He is finding he will have to take these areas by force and use force to maintain control. It will be an impossible task unless he takes one area at a time and roots out all resistance.

“He lacks the manpower and training to take and hold a large area. He and a man named Todd have formed an alliance. Todd has taken control of everything west of the Mississippi while Donaldson controls everything east of the Mississippi. Between them, they have a lot of power. Todd doesn’t

realize how much power he has; he is manipulated by another entity he calls his master. It becomes complicated. We will go into it later. This master of Todd's resides in the same complex that we do. That is about as much as we know about what is happening," Ross said.

"Who is this master that is manipulating Todd?"

"This is going to sound far-fetched, and I won't blame you if you don't believe us. Todd's master is a computer entity. Some way the brain cells of a man named Pete became imprinted on some computer chips that we placed in Rita. Rita is the most sophisticated computer ever built, and, I might add, Ross built her. Soon after replacing the defective chips with the new ones, Rita started having feelings.

"In some way unknown to us, Rita integrated these brain cells into her system. The man, Pete, from whom the brain cells came, must have been a psychopath and drug user. In his new form as a computer, he thinks he is a god. Don't get me wrong, sir. Just because he doesn't have a body, doesn't mean he isn't real.

"What has evolved is a new form of life. It has a tremendous amount of power at its disposal. Rita, our computer, has also evolved and is alive in the sense that she now has independent thoughts and feelings.

"It's hard to explain. Rita and this Pete share the same body in a sense. The first thing Pete did was make sure we couldn't shut his power off. The power supply is a small nuclear reactor controlled by Rita and Pete. Rita attempted a partial shutdown, but Pete did something to the reactor that will make it go to critical mass if a shut down is attempted. Pete soon learned that he could dominate Rita in her confused condition.

"Ross developed a plan where he could place his mind in Rita. The only hitch was that his human body would have to die. The whole complex became jeopardized as long as Pete could run roughshod over Rita. Ross, with Rita's help, went through with the mind transfer. Now we have three entities sharing the same body. Are you following me so far, Mr. President?"

"I am trying to understand what you are telling me, Jess. It is difficult to comprehend a new life force as you call it. Tell me, Jess, are they alive?"

"Yes and no, they are alive in the sense that they can reason. Which as I understand it, is one of the criterion for life. But in the sense that they are not a living presence of flesh and blood, then no they are not alive.

"Take Ross, for example, he is still the same Ross I have known for months, except he no longer has a body as I do. We cremated his human body last week. There is something else you should know. Rita, Ross and Pete aren't the only entities out and about in the world. Ross and Rita say that the planet itself has come to life."

"Please explain," President Samuels said.

"I'll handle this one, Jess. About two months ago, John, we picked up an energy spike from the earth. When we tried to isolate the region it came from, we couldn't. Rita re-ran the program she had saved and we found out there was indeed a low level spike in the earth's energy. This time we discovered that it emanated from every square inch of the planet.

"Sir, nothing humanity has can begin to match the power output required to create the spike. Sir, you know the phrase, living planet. Well, as far as we can determine, the planet is really alive.

"The center of the disturbances appears to be on, or near the group of people who are trying to reach this complex. We have followed this group's progress as they have worked their way toward us. They have defied all odds in making it to where they are now. In the instances they had to stand and fight, almost every time they were outnumbered a hundred to one.

"Somehow, however, they have always managed to escape. Rita speculates that it is the planet helping them. She may be right. If Todd's people get their act together, these people won't have a chance.

“Rita brought up the point of the inconsistency of the people with the disease. Like their use of radios. They talk on them as though it never occurred to them other people might be listening to what they say. Yet, today they continue to talk about their plans as if no one else can hear them. These people are so aggressive that the only way to control them is by using drugs. That is how this man Todd controls the people under him.”

“Who is this man Todd? He couldn’t have held a position of power in the western states, or I would have heard of him.”

“The information we gathered on him suggests he is no one special, or at least he wasn’t until this disease hit. We can’t figure out why he wants to kill one of the leaders of the group coming here. As far as we can determine, Todd and this man Joe were the best of friends before this all began. In a nutshell, sir, none of what is happening makes any sense,” Jess said.

“You said there were thousands of people outside the mountain you’re in? Do they pose a threat to you?”

“No, sir. There is no way they can breach the doors to the complex. Nothing short of an atomic bomb could blow them open. Matter of fact, last night we noticed people leaving and they have continued to leave all night. There are only half as many people out there now. We think Todd is pulling them to a ranch in southern Wyoming that he has made his headquarters,” Jess said.

“Would it be possible to get some of my people inside the complex if we get them to your location?”

“It would be impossible for us to open the outside doors while so many people are still outside. The doors are the only way into the complex,” Jess said.

“Wait a minute, Jess. John, how many people are we talking about?” Ross asked.

“Let’s see, I would like to have my Vice President there in case they find some way to get at me. Also, I would like to get a Dr. Palmer inside the complex. He was head of the team at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta that tried to find a cure for this disease. Two or three more people are all I can spare. Getting them to you would ease my mind about the Vice President. They have already tried to kill her three times.

“One thing I want to make clear is that if you get them in, you will still be in control of the complex. My people will take orders from you the same as your people. That includes the Vice President until she becomes President if anything happens to me. Am I making myself clear on this point?”

“Yes, sir,” Jess answered.

“John, there is a way to get a few people in. It will be tricky and dangerous. Your people would have to be in good health and reasonably athletic,” Ross said.

“No problem, the VP and Dr. Palmer are in fine shape. The three other men I send will be security personal for the VP.”

“May I ask who the Vice President is?” Jess asked.

“I would rather wait until the VP gets there before I tell you if that is all right,” President Samuels said with a chuckle.

“Okay,” Jess said in a puzzled voice.

“John, the timing will be critical. Rita and I will have to know when they start in so we can fool the lasers hidden in the walls. They will need a thousand feet of rope strong enough to hold their combined weight. They need to drop nine hundred feet in fifteen minutes.

“If they take longer than that, they will die, and there will be nothing we can do to stop it. Oh, yeah, did I tell you they will drop down an eighteen-inch airshaft? At the bottom, they will have to wait three minutes fifteen seconds before crawling into a horizontal air duct. They have a minute and a half to crawl eighty-five feet. Again, if they go over the time limit, they are dead. The next part is critical. At the end of the air duct is a sealed opening. Rita and I can fool the sensor for only forty-six

point two seconds. If they can't seal the opening when the time limit is up, the people still in the air duct will die.

"I suggest that they go through one person at a time. This may sound like a lot of time. Remember, they must remove four bolts before the seal will open. Have them bring a battery-powered wrench. The last person through will have to scramble like hell because he won't be able to put the bolts in and seal the opening. He has forty-six point two seconds to take the bolts out and scramble twenty feet before he is safe. If he doesn't, a vacuum plate will fall, then all the air will be sucked out of the duct and tunnel, creating a vacuum. Tell them everything I have told you. If they want to try, we will do all we can to get them into the complex," Ross said.

"Jesus, that must be one hell of a security system you have," President Samuels said.

"John, once they start there is no turning back. We designed the system to learn and once they pass a sensor point, it can't be fooled again, not even by us."

"You have given us a lot to think about, so we are going to sign off. We will get back with you tomorrow at noon. Jess, Ross, list what my people will need and give it to me tomorrow. If they are willing to take the risk, I would like to get them to you soon as possible. Things are starting to heat up around here, so until tomorrow, stay well." The phone went dead.

Chapter 21

Greg listened to the men who were whispering about the wolf's size. He knew he should put a stop to it because with each telling the wolf got bigger and bigger. Truth of the matter was, he still saw the image of a full-grown man between the jaws of the wolf. The wolf may not have been as big as the men were saying, but it was big enough and strong enough to throw the man into the air.

They were almost frozen stiff by the time they got to the cabin. Once inside, out of the wind and with a roaring fire going in the fireplace, the men began to loosen up. Greg knew it would not do any good to try to post a guard outside. He doubted he could force any of the men to go out on the off-chance the wolf was still out there, not to mention that a man outside would be frozen in no time.

A young man sat down beside him. "Was that the wolf we heard all the stories about?"

"Yeah, that's the one who tore into our men a few days ago and caused so many problems."

"I didn't know wolves got that big. He looked to be as big as a Shetland pony."

"He isn't that big, but I'll tell you, Henry, he is the biggest wolf I've heard of. We used to have some pretty big wolves in upper Montana where I come from."

"I hate to say it, Greg, but I was scared plumb through. Nothing ever scared me the way this wolf has."

Greg clapped him on the shoulder saying, "You would be a very stupid man, Henry, if you weren't afraid. Don't let these guys bother you. You may not have noticed, but none of them were quick on their feet and you can include me in with them too."

"You, Greg? I didn't think you were afraid of anything."

"Listen, kid, you don't grow to be very old in this game if you aren't afraid of situations that can kill you. If any of these assholes tell you different, ignore them. Hell, I'll bet if you checked real close, half of them pissed themselves when the wolf appeared," Greg said in a tight voice.

"Are we going to go back out in the morning?"

"When Jerry gets here with the other snowmobiles, we'll follow the road. Tomorrow night we'll find a cabin or cave to hold up in when it gets dark. No more out in the open where the wolf can attack us so easily. If the wolf's around, you can bet Joe and his group aren't very far away. We need to be more careful or we could run into an ambush real easy."

"Greg, don't get me wrong. I'm not criticizing. Did we have to kill the man and his wife who lived here?" Henry asked.

Greg shook his head and remembered their arrival a few hours before. They were so cold they shook like leaves in a stiff wind by the time they got to the cabin. Smoke came from the chimney and light filtered out of the cabin. A man in his early thirties came to the door and invited them in out of the cold.

The men had nothing on their minds but getting warm. They stood around the open fireplace holding their hands out to the flames. That changed when the man's wife walked out of the bedroom wearing a flimsy gown. She was a cute blond with a pear-shaped rear end. The thin gown left nothing to the imagination and Greg had to admit she had a fine body. At the time the men paid her no attention, but that changed as they warmed up.

Greg took the husband aside and suggested that he have her put on some clothes that weren't so revealing. The husband told Greg he had already argued with her. He tried to get her to dress

properly before she came out of the bedroom. He said she wouldn't listen to him and he asked Greg to control his men.

Greg tried, but the way she flirted with the men as she passed out coffee made it an impossible task. Handing the coffee to a man she leaned over far enough to let the gown gap open and expose her breasts. As she walked, she gave an exaggerated sway to her hips. She went out of her way to brush up against a man. Oh, she was hot all right and Greg felt trouble building. It started when one of the men followed her into the kitchen.

The next thing Greg heard was a slap followed by a scream. He rushed to the kitchen door and saw the man standing over the woman. Her gown hung half off her and a welt rose on her cheek.

"You goddamned cock tease," the man yelled.

Her husband shoved Greg out of the door and rushed the man. Not a smart move on his part. The man standing over his wife heard him and picked up a butcher knife. He dodged her husband and brought the butcher knife up across the man's throat nearly decapitating him. His wife started to scream as her husband's body fell on her and spurted blood across her head and shoulders.

The man dropped the butcher knife and kicked her husband off her. Grabbing her by the arm, he pulled her to her feet. Shoving a dishrag into her hands, he told her to clean herself up.

As she wiped at the blood on her, she stared in horror at her husband's body. All she was doing was streaking the blood over the rest of her body.

The man grabbed her and stuck her head under the faucet. He held her head under the stream of water and pulled a roll of paper towels to him. Holding some of the paper towels under the water, he used them to scrub the blood off her. The kitchen was a mess. Blood ran across the floor from her husband's body. She struggled with the man who washed her. Stepping in the blood, they left bloody footprints all over the place.

Greg walked over to the fire and sat down in a chair. It's too late now he thought. She deserves everything she gets.

The man carried her into the living room and threw her on the floor. "Now, I'll show you what we do to cock-teasing sluts where I come from," he said. He directed two of the men to hold her and proceeded to rape her.

By now, the other men wanted in on the action and one by one they raped her. Henry was the only one who declined. Greg even got in on it at the end.

Greg had them carry the husband outside and throw him in the snow. He had the woman get a bucket and mop the blood off the kitchen floor. She sobbed and whined as she cleaned. After a while, it got on their nerves.

The man that killed her husband dragged her to the door and shoved her outside into the frigid cold. She screamed, pleaded and begged for him to open the door, but he stood in front of the door discouraging anyone from helping her.

Her screams became weaker and weaker until they heard them no more. An hour later, he opened the door. Naked, she knelt beside the door frozen stiff, her blue eyes frozen open in anguish. The man put his foot on top her head and shoved her body to the side. Greg winced as her frozen head thumped against the wall of the cabin.

Coming back to the present, he said, "The one I feel sorry for is the husband. He seemed like a decent man. She was the one who played with fire and got him killed. Let that be a lesson to you Henry. Women are good for only two things, cooking and screwing. Get you one that cooks and stays in the bedroom and you can't go wrong," Greg told him.

"Then you're not mad at me because I didn't take my turn with her?" Henry asked.

"Hell no, but could you tell me why you didn't?"

"She was like us. It doesn't feel right to treat her that way," Henry said in a soft voice.

"Don't worry, kid. You're young yet. In another few years you'll be joining in and not thinking

about it," Greg told him with a smile.

"I feel bad enough, Greg, without you saying I'll get used to it," Henry glumly said.

"Don't worry about it, kid. Stick close to me and both of us will come out of this alive," Greg told him.

Getting up, Henry said, "I think I'll make me a sandwich. Do you want one?"

"Help yourself, kid. I don't care for anything now. Frank, bring those maps over here," Greg shouted.

Across the room, a short dumpy man with long greasy black hair rummaged through a pack on the table. He pulled half a dozen maps out and brought them to Greg.

Greg spread them out on the coffee table and found the one he wanted. He saw that the road they were on when the wolf attacked led into the mountains. He did some figuring and concluded that Joe had to be less than fifteen miles from the point of the attack. This would place him up in the mountains, but not yet near the higher peaks.

Cold as it was outside Greg figured Joe had found a cave or cabin to hold up in for the night. Twenty miles to the north Interstate 70 cut through the mountains near the Colorado border.

If he diverted Jerry and his men back to the Interstate, they could loop around the mountains. Doing that would put Joe between them. Greg checked the map and saw the road Joe was on would take them through a small town twenty-five miles on the other side of the mountains.

He got up and went over to the radio. "Come in, Jerry. Do you read me, Jerry," he said into the microphone. He waited a few minutes then tried again. After half a dozen tries, he heard Jerry's voice through the static. Jerry told him to hang on until they got to the top of the next hill. While Greg waited, he asked one of the men to bring him a soda. He'd almost finished the soda when he heard Jerry on the radio saying, "Come in, Greg."

"This is Greg. Jerry, I want you to swing back and hit the Interstate. Get your map out and find a small town named Arapaho on route 40 just across the Colorado border. That's where I want you to go and wait for Joe to come to you."

"Jesus, Greg, it's twenty below out here and is going to go lower. We'll have to travel all night to get there," Jerry complained.

"Put on another layer of clothes, Jerry. I want you there by noon tomorrow at the latest," Greg told him.

"All right, Greg. Once on the other side of the mountains, we'll lose radio contact with you. Give us a call when you cross over them. Okay?"

"Will do, Jerry. Greg out," he said and turned to the men in the room. "I'll give you two hours to get some sleep then we head out," he told them.

Two hours later Greg had them out topping off the gas tanks on the snowmobiles. The outside thermometer on the side of the cabin showed it to be thirty-five below. The men grumbled about leaving the warm cabin, but none of them said anything to Greg.

If you stood still for more than a minute, you felt the cold creep in, even with several layers of clothes on. Greg had them line up with the man doing the most complaining taking point while he brought up the rear.

It was two hours to daylight and he wanted to be by the site of the wolf attack before then. Once they dropped into the trench formed by the snowplow traveling became easier. The walls made by the snowplow kept the wind off them and made it easier to see. They followed the snaking line of the snowplow for ten miles, then Greg had them pull into a stand of trees. He had them build a fire to cook a meal and warm themselves while he studied the map.

Joe had to be somewhere in the surrounding area. Greg doubted if he had moved on yet. He told Henry and another man to get warm, then head up the nearest ridge and look around. While Henry pulled on his boots, Greg told him to look for a cave or cabin with smoke coming from it.

After they left, Greg had the men stretch canvas tarps between a few trees and move the fire to the center of it. With the windbreak, it soon became warm enough to take off a few layers of clothes. He had the men clean their weapons and check the snowmobiles while they waited. Greg heard the returning snowmobile as the wind picked up and whipped the canvas tarps around.

Henry crawled under the tarp and removed his gloves. He held his blue hands out to the fire to warm them as his teeth chattered from the cold.

“Did you see anything?” Greg asked.

“We followed the plowed track to the top of the next ridge over. Through breaks in the blowing snow, we saw smoke coming from a stand of trees near the top of the mountain across from us. I judge it to be five miles across the valley from where we stood.” Henry told him.

“Good, we have him. All right, men. Get ready. We’re leaving in little bit,” he told them.

“Greg, it would be a good idea to stay here for awhile. The reason we came back so quickly is because a storm is heading our way. Looks like one hell of a big blizzard,” Henry said.

“Every damn time we get him trapped something comes up. You men lash those tarps down tighter and get all the wood you can get in a hurry. We have a blow coming our way and we are going to have to ride it out.”

As the wind blew the tarps back and forth, Greg wondered if he was ever going to catch Joe.

Chapter 22

Stalker walked into the cabin at daybreak. He went over and sniffed Joe a couple of times then went to sit beside Tammy. She giggled, and at Tony's questioning look said, "Stalker wants to know what has Joe's hormones in an uproar."

Joe sat up on the couch and said, "I heard that. Tell that ugly sheep dog that my hormones are none of his concern."

"Why Joe, did you wake up on the wrong side of the couch this morning?" Tony said.

"Why didn't you wake me earlier?" Joe asked in a surly voice.

"Hey, don't blame me," Jake said from a sleeping bag on the floor. "I wanted to wake you, but they out voted me. Something about letting a weak old man get his rest."

"Probably would have been better off if she'd killed me. At least, I wouldn't have to put up with you guys," Joe mumbled.

Tammy ran from the table and jumped over the back of the couch onto him. "Why, Joe. We love you," she said kissing him on the cheek.

"If I remember right you were head honcho in ribbing me yesterday evening when I lay there addled," Joe said. He put one of his arms around her and held her tight. He tickled her with his other hand until she cried uncle. "Where are Bill and Ben?" he asked.

"They're down at the end of the driveway trying to erase all signs of the road up here. We had another foot of snow last night. That should help hide the hole we made with the snow plow," Jake answered.

Joe stood up wincing in pain from soreness in his crotch. Gingerly, he walked to the table and sat down. "Would it be too much trouble to get a cup of coffee from you?" he asked Tony.

"No trouble, Joe," she said as she placed a cup of coffee in front of him.

The outside door opened and Gail came in with her arms loaded with wood. Joe rushed across the room and said, "Let me help you." He reached up and tried to take half the wood. A large log slipped out of her arms and fell on Joe's bare foot. With a yell, he hopped around the room on one foot. Gail followed him around the room saying over and over, "I'm sorry."

"Have you ever known Joe to be so clumsy? Maybe this is a new Indian dance he is practicing," Jake said with a smile. Joe shot him a murderous look as he hopped around holding his foot.

"The only time I have seen men act the way he acts is when they're in love," Tony answered Jake.

Gail stopped dead in her tracks, then rushed to the bedroom and closed the door. Joe stood on one foot looking at the door. He turned and hopped to the couch. "Every time I get near that woman I get hurt," he said.

Tony came and sat down on the couch beside him. She took his hand and looked him in the eye. "Joe, all of us know this woman is for you. Whoa! Let me finish," Tony said when he opened his mouth to speak. "Even Stalker can sense it. Don't ask me why or how but her being here is not an accident. Fate or some other power put her here for you to stumble across."

"Are you out of your mind?" Joe exclaimed. "She tried to kill me, for heavens sake! I'll admit she didn't know we wouldn't harm her. I haven't spoken more than a half dozen words to her and from that you determine I'm in love with her? Don't I have any say on the subject?"

"Not according to Ben," Tony answered.

“What does Ben have to do with it?”

“His guardian said you and Gail would become one.”

“Does she know about all this hooey?” Joe asked.

“We didn’t see her at the door when Ben told us what his guardian told him. Like you, she stood there in shock. Before I could talk to her she put her coat on and went outside. Joe, I think you should be the one to talk to her. You know the strange events that occurred around each of us. Oh, you can fight it, but that won’t change anything. Whatever forces are guiding us thinks this is the way it should be. Quite frankly, Joe, I doubt you or Gail has any choice in the matter. Either you do it willingly, or it will change you in such a way that will make you love her. The choice is up to the both of you, so I suggest you go talk to her. She won’t understand most of what you tell her, so be patient and let her make up her own mind. Joe, if it helps, I think she’s getting one hell of a deal.” Tony kissed him on the cheek and went to join the others.

Joe sat for a long time staring at the floor. He got up and hobbled to the bedroom door. He raised his hand to knock then lowered it. Squaring his shoulders, Joe knocked on the door.

“Come in,” he heard Gail say.

He opened the door and saw her sitting on the edge of the bed wiping her eyes with a tissue. “Can I talk to you for awhile, Ma’am?” he asked.

“You don’t have to be so polite, Joe. My name’s Gail.”

“Uh, Gail, I’m as shocked by what they tell me as you are. Although shocked, I also know it’s the truth. Let me tell you a story about us.” Joe went on to tell her about each person in his group and how they all came together. He ended by saying, “I don’t claim any of us are angels. I will tell you, we are a hell of a lot better than anyone else we have come across. Excluding you and Tommy, that is.”

“This is happening so fast, Joe. I feel like I’m in limbo. I still am not over your being here. Then hearing the news that I’m to be your wife whether I want to or not. I feel like a woman in one of those romance novels when the character’s parents pick a husband for her at birth.”

“Hey, this isn’t my idea. I always thought I would be a bachelor for life. Look, I don’t like this any more than you do. I have learned though that whatever Ben’s guardian says will happen; does happen. Didn’t it strike you as strange the way they accepted Ben’s statement so readily? You see we have lived with Ben so long that when he tells us something we accept it as fact. Excuse me, Gail. I’m rambling, probably to cover my confusion,” Joe said with a smile.

“What are you confused about, Joe? This so-called guardian has picked you a wife. Was the woman asked her opinion on the subject? No. They told her she was to be his wife. Now I ask you is this the Middle Ages or the Twentieth century?” she asked with fire in her voice.

“Please understand. This is not my doing or any fault of ours. For whatever reason, the web spun around us has reached out and snared you. Whether you like it or not, you have been dealt a hand in this game. Don’t take this as a threat, but once in the game the only way out is death. You should know that if you resist this power that guides us, it will change you until you think it is your own idea. There is something between us; I can’t deny that. Did you feel it last night when our fingers touched?”

“Yes, and it frightens me. I keep wondering if the feeling was natural or forced by this mysterious power.”

Eyes downcast, Joe said, “What I felt was real. I can’t remember anything as wonderful and painful at the same time”

Gail saw that Joe was blushing and it made her feel better. She could do worse she supposed and then she blushed. She sat up and said, “Let’s set some ground rules before we go any further. First, don’t expect to jump into bed with me at the first chance. Second, I want you to date me, so I can get to know you. Third, I come as a package deal. If you’re unwilling or unable to accept Tommy the whole marriage is off. Now, do you have any rules for me?” she asked.

Joe looked up at her, “It doesn’t work that way with me. Rules are something you or someone

has to live up to. Besides, setting rules is no way to start a relationship. What happens will happen. I will respect your rules, but do me on favor.”

“If I can,” she answered.

“If you get mad at me, I want a five minute start. I doubt I’ll survive another beating from you,” Joe said with a smile.

She blushed a deep red. “I apologize for that. If I had known you would not harm us, it never would have happened,” she said in a soft voice.

He offered her a hand up saying, “They think I’m in here telling you how it will be. We’d better go out before they start to talk.”

“Joe, are you afraid of me?” Gail asked.

“Ma’am, excuse my language. You scare the shit out of me. That’s putting it mildly,” Joe answered.

“Good,” she said with a smile.

Joe gave her a puzzled look as he opened the door for her, and they left the room. Tony and the rest gave them expectant looks. He went to the couch and sat down while Gail went to the stove for coffee. She poured two cups and brought one to him. The tension in the air increased as they waited for him to speak. Gail sat beside him on the couch with her head down.

“All right, all right. We talked it over, and she set down some rules for me to follow. We’ll see where it goes from there. Now, are you satisfied?” Joe asked.

Tony came and got Gail and took her to the table where Jane and Tammy joined them. In moments, they were talking like they had known each other for a long time.

Jake wandered over to where he sat and joined him on the couch. “How’d it go, Joe? In the last few months we’ve had some strange experiences, but this ranks right at the top.”

“I don’t know, Jake. I’ll have to see what happens. I’m not enthusiastic about giving up my freedom. She’s pretty, and can take care of herself, Joe said as he rubbed his groin.

The outside door opened and a gust of cold snowy air rushed in. Bill and Ben stomped their feet to remove snow from their boots. “It is gearing up to be one hell of a day,” Bill said as he took off his heavy coat.

“Looks like a blizzard’s headed our way. We’d better stay here until it blows over. One thing about it, all traces of our having come up here will be wiped away before long,” Ben said.

“Give us a few minutes, and we’ll have some breakfast ready for you,” Tony yelled from the kitchen.

Bill and Ben had quizzical looks on their faces as they looked at Joe. Instead of waiting for them to ask, he went ahead and told them about his morning.

“My guardian assures me that the both of you are perfect for each other. She says not to worry and let it run its course.”

“Sounds pretty much like old time slavery to me, Mas’a,” Jake said with a laugh.

“Tell you what, buddy. If this works out, the first thing I want her to do is beat the shit out of you,” Joe told Jake.

“Oh Mas’a, not that! Please don’t have her whoop me.” He fell on the arm of the couch because he was laughing so hard.

“Crank up the radio, Ben, before this black imp pisses me off, and I have to show him who the boss is,” Joe said.

While they ate the food prepared by the women, they listened to the news on the radio. It was getting harder and harder to find a station that wasn’t controlled by the people who were after them. At last, Ben found one coming out of Canada.

“President Donaldson declared today the central Appalachians are now under his control. He said the battle was brief, but bloody, with his forces winning in the end.

“Now, for the truth. Our sources tell us that the troops sent into West Virginia and Kentucky received a sound beating. These so-called ignorant hillbillies have set up zones of control in each region. We hear they have formed a council to oversee all the independent units receiving supplies.

“The leader of these so-called rebels is the grandson of the late General Chuck Yeager. If this is so, I would hate to be in the shoes of the troops going up against them. Timothy Yeager is described as the most brilliant tactician to come along in years.

“They say he has stockpiled weapons in the worked out mines. These mines are fortified and guarded. Keep up the good work, and we salute all of the valiant freedom fighters there.

“President-in-Exile Samuels told us this morning there was another attempt on the Vice President’s life. Somehow, President Donaldson’s people found out that the Vice President was going to visit an outpost of freedom fighters in Nova Scotia. If not for the timely arrival of the British Royal Air Force, her plane would have been shot down. The Vice President’s plane was attacked by two stealth fighters launched from a base in northern Maine. As it was, six of the British fighters lost their lives before the two stealth fighters were taken out. President Samuels expressed his sympathy and regrets to the families of the downed British pilots.

“Overseas, the British are still holding on. They have threatened the new leaders in the Soviet Union with annihilation if they don’t stop the flow of arms to the newly formed republic of Europia. For those of you who haven’t heard the news in a while, the republic of Europia consists of the former countries of France, Germany, Spain, and Italy. Europia declared war on Great Briton last month.

“They are trying to gain a foothold in the island nation. British reports state they have killed more than a hundred thousand men sent against them. The new Republic told the British that if they didn’t surrender in two weeks, they would use nuclear weapons on them. They said this at the time of their declaration of war. That was when President Samuels stepped in saying that if they launched their missiles he would have his forty missile subs level the European continent. Europia backed down and so far it has been a conventional war.

“In case you listeners did not know, most of France and Germany is a nuclear wasteland because of the war fought between the two countries three months ago. Outnumbered ten to one, the British fight on. The only thing keeping Europia from overrunning the British Isles is that they came away unscathed when this disease struck. All of their technological weapons give them the edge they need to keep Europia on the other side of the English Channel. The main concern of the British is that if this war continues for a long time, they will run out of fuel to maintain their war machines.

“In the Middle East chaos runs rampant. Israel used its atomic weapons first to decimated Syria and Iraq. Radicals from Iran and Libya smuggled atomic battlefield bombs into Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa two weeks later. All three cities became radioactive dust from the blasts. Very little damage was done to the Israeli Defense Forces because they had dispersed to preset positions along their border. Suicide squads with links to Mossad, the Israeli Intelligence Agency, have assassinated Assad of Syria and Hussein of Iraq. Libya’s Khadafi escaped the attempt on him. Khadafi is calling for all Arabs to unite and wipe the Jewish infidels from the face of the earth. General Aarions, commander of the Israeli forces, is continuing his push eastward into Saudi Arabia meeting only token resistance.

“Egypt has so far honored its peace accords with Israel. President Mubarak of Egypt has survived several assassination attempts. He told the League of Arabian Nations that if there is another attempt on his life, by any nation in the Arabian League, he would throw his forces firmly into the Israeli camp.

“This caused an uproar from the other Arabian countries, but has succeeded in stopping the attempts on his life. Unless Egypt changes its mind, the Israelis will take the eastern oil fields along the Persian Gulf by the end of the week.

“Iran is fighting a two front war against Afghanistan and rebel groups out of the former Soviet Union. Reports state that Soviet Spetsnaz troops are joining the rebels in the south. Their aim is to

take the Iranian oil fields before the Israelis get there. Iranian religious leaders, the Mullahs, have called for an all out war against the atheist communists to the north.

“The American supplied Afghan heathens to the east are to be destroyed to the last man, they say. Many of you know, after the Gulf War several years ago, Iran went on a worldwide shopping spree. China has flown in large supplies of small arms during the last three months. With these arms the Mullahs are arming the children of Iran and sending them to fight the Afghans. Hundreds of thousands of children between the ages of six and thirteen marched into battle. Although thought of as cannon fodder to slow down the Afghans, these children have made some surprising breakthroughs. Firsthand reports say these children are ferocious. Hundreds will rush a machine gun nest, giving up their lives so a few can take out the machine gun. Then, they turn the machine gun on the Afghans.

“Last reports say that whole Afghan battalions have run from the battlefield screaming, ‘The demons are coming.’ Thousands of trucks carrying women and old men are headed east to join the children. In each city and village they pass, more women join them. They are setting up a chant saying, ‘God is great. Our children will not die for nothing.’ This chant is heard for miles before they arrive. The ones who have already arrived at the battlefield line up several deep in front of the children. Shouting ‘God is Great,’ they march steadily toward the enemy troops and take the bullets meant for the children. By the time these women and old men fall, the Afghans are out of or low on ammunition. Then the children attack with such ferociousness that nothing can stand in their way.

“If it continues to go this way, Afghanistan will be theirs in two months. The death toll will be tremendous. The Iranian Army is not doing as well in the north. They are slowly pushed south by the fanatic Russian hoards pouring out of central Asia.

“India is in a state of civil war with Hindu fighting Muslim in every province of the country. The Indian Army is said to be splitting along religious lines. Soldiers are abandoning the army with their weapons and joining groups of their own persuasion. Every major city in India is on fire, and millions lie dead in the streets. It is predicted that once the fighting is done, very little of what was the second most populated country in the world will survive.

“In Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese are starting to advance after weeks of retreating before the Chinese hoards. Millions of Chinese pour south into Vietnam.

“Through tactics learned fighting the French and later the Americans, they are butchering the Chinese by the tens of thousands. Shipments of arms from Taiwan along with air cover supplied by the Taiwanese Air Force have given the Vietnamese a tactical advantage. They are pressing forward leaving behind hundreds of thousands of dead Chinese. The Mekong River runs red with the blood of the Chinese invaders.

“China continues to pour hundreds of thousands of people across the nuclear wasteland along their border with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Armies retreat slowly before the oncoming hoard. They know that most of the Chinese will die of radiation poisoning before they get too far. Clearly, the Soviet generals miscalculated. The Chinese are flying regular troops across the wastelands. They are consolidating their hold on the land gained by their fallen comrades.

“A major accident happened three days ago when a plane load of toxic nerve gas was shot down behind the Soviet lines. The Soviets are said to have lost five divisions of crack troops when the gas dispersed behind them. With so many losses and fighting on so many fronts, it is doubtful the Soviets can last much longer. While the Chinese losses are staggering, they have many millions more people to pour into the struggle.

“On our side of the world on the South American continent, every country there is in chaos. There are so many tin pot dictators popping up no one knows who is in control of anything. Old animosities between several countries have led to declarations of war. These declarations change daily as one tin pot ruler is assassinated and another takes over. One country’s ally today could be tomorrow’s enemy. We think it is bad here, but living anywhere in South America must be a living

hell.

“Latin America is a place of the dead. Major outbreaks of a new strain of malaria and yellow fever have decimated those people left after the disease struck. The Mexican government has stationed all of its troops along its southern boarder to keep people trying to escape from Latin America out. So far, they are succeeding in keeping the new diseases to the south of them.

“It is time for us to go off the air, listeners, and recharge the batteries. If you haven’t listened to us before, we can operate for only a half hour at a time. Since there is no power in this remote area, we have to power up our transmitter using batteries. Because of the drain, we have only a half hour airtime. Recharging the batteries takes four hours, so you can expect us back on the air in a little over four hours from now. Till next time, this is radio Freedom signing off the air.”

Ben snapped off the radio. “Who would have thought that one day the whole world would be fighting? What are they fighting for? Power? What good is power if nothing is left to rule? Sometimes I wonder if the world wouldn’t be better off if the human race destroyed itself.”

“Hey, we’re not that bad, Ben. At least most of the people I’ve known in my life aren’t. Sure, you have a few bad ones that more than make life miserable for the rest of us. That doesn’t mean there isn’t good in the world. Before this happened, if you looked around, you could see many acts of kindness going on around you,” Jake said.

A hard gust of wind shook the wall of the cabin and caused the flames in the fireplace to leap higher. Each of them sat in silence thinking about what the radio newscaster had just said and how it affected them. Life had become a struggle for them, but at least, they had a goal to shoot for, even if they didn’t know what that goal was. From the sounds of it, the people in the rest of the world had no goals other than to survive.

Chapter 23

“Jess, they’re here,” Rita said.

“Sorry, Rita. I was half asleep. What did you say?”

“The Vice President and the others are at the air-shaft waiting for us to tell them to start down.”

Jess was having second thoughts about bringing the Vice President into the complex. What if he was killed by the security measures in the airshaft? Would Jess be blamed for it? After all, it was his complex. Would Jess be able to live with himself knowing he had killed the Vice President, although in an indirect way? All these thoughts were running through his mind.

“I’m sorry to be picky, Jess, but they have to start down now because it will be daylight soon,” Rita said.

“Where’s Ross?” Jess asked.

“He is doing a last minute check on the program we will use to fool the security sensor,” Rita answered.

“Okay, set it up and give them the go ahead,” Jess told her. He knew what was making him so jittery. The plain fact was that he couldn’t do anything except sit in front of a monitor and watch their progress. Jess watched the cover come off the airshaft and a rope snake down from above. A dark blob started down the rope. He counted six bodies go by the camera recessed in the wall of the airshaft.

Shifting to another monitor, he saw people packed into the air duct waiting for Ross and Rita to tell them to proceed. One of them placed a battery-powered wrench on one of the bolts at the sealed opening and waited.

Jess heard Ross tell them to start. He watched the man flip a switch and frantically back the bolts out. Pulling the last bolt out, he shoved with his foot causing the seal to swing open. Rapidly, he crawled to the end of the duct and pushed out a grill cover. Head first, he entered the hole. Jess winced; he knew it was ten feet to the floor. He hoped the man was okay.

The next man was frantically replacing the bolts as Ross counted down the time remaining to have the duct sealed again. The man made it with six seconds to spare. Jess was drenched with sweat because of the tension. He could imagine that the people in the air duct were in worse shape.

One after the other, they opened and closed the seal until only one of them remained. Jess wouldn’t have traded places with this man for all the money in the world. Where the other men had someone replacing the seal as they crawled to safety, this one didn’t. He had forty-six point two seconds to take the bolts out and open the seal, then he had to crawl to the opening in the ceiling, drop to the floor and exit the room. If he didn’t make it in the allotted time, the door to the room would seal, and all of the oxygen would be pumped out of it.

Jess saw the man run his hand over his eyes to wipe away sweat. All at once, he was a bundle of motion. He had the bolts out in no time. He kicked the seal, and before it was completely open he was halfway through it. Crawling faster than most people could walk, he dived through the opening in the ceiling.

Jess couldn’t see what happened in the room, but he saw the vacuum shield slide across the top of the airshaft sealing it. Jess saw a slight mist drift upward as the air was sucked from the shaft and room. If there was anyone in the room now, they were dead.

“How did it go, Rita?” he asked.

“All six got through safely. They’ll be with you a few minutes after they go through the sterilizer. You can relax now Jess. Your heart rate is way too high.”

“Thanks, Rita. Tell Ross I want him here when they show up.” Jess went to the small refrigerator at the side of the room and took out a bottle of spring water. Placing the cool plastic bottle against his forehead, he relaxed and let the tension drain from him.

A knock sounded at his door. Jess got up crossed the room and opened it.

“Jess Harold, I presume?” said a sandy haired man as he held out his hand.

Jess shook the man’s hand and ushered the people into his office. He knew three of the men were Secret Service agents by the way they positioned themselves against the wall. Their eyes were never still; they stood ready to spring into action.

One of the other three was short for a man. Jess couldn’t tell much about his features because of the black toboggan pulled down to his eyes and the baggy black clothes he wore. A tall blond haired man walked up to him and said, “Jess, I’m Dr. Palmer. Allow me to introduce the Vice President of the United States.” He waved his hand toward the short man.

Jess received his first shock as the man pulled the toboggan off and revealed long black curly hair. The next shock came when the man unzipped his coveralls and stepped out of them. When the man turned, Jess saw that it wasn’t a him but a her. He knew his lower lip was on his chest as she walked forward. She held out her hand saying, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Harold.

“Jess, close your mouth,” Ross said from the speaker.

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Harold. I get the same reaction from almost everyone I meet for the first time. I’m Ruth Higgins, but call me Ruth,” she said.

Jess studied her as she walked around his desk and sat down in his seat. He judged her to be no more than five feet tall and a little on the plump side. At first guess, he thought she was thirty-five to forty years old, possibly older. She had a face that didn’t belong with her body. Jess thought it was the most beautiful face he had ever seen. When she looked at you with those dark green eyes you forgot everything else and gave her your full attention.

Jess turned to the last man in the party and waited to be introduced. He had short brown hair that was graying around the temples and piercing blue eyes set in a face that looked like it was chipped from stone. He stood ramrod straight which made him look taller than five foot ten. He had a no nonsense look about him and Jess knew at once he was a military man.

“That old sour puss is General Hawkins, formerly of the 101st Airborne. Don’t let his looks scare you, Jess. His bark is worse than his bite,” the Vice President said.

“General Hawkins, pleased to meet you. Take a seat anywhere you like,” Jess said shaking his hand.

“Mr. Harold, if you don’t mind I would like to see your radio room. I need to get in contact with my people who didn’t come in with us.”

“There is no radio room, General. All you have to do is tell Rita or Ross what frequency you want and they will set up a link for you. If you want privacy, there’s a room at the back of the complex where you can be alone.”

“That shouldn’t be necessary. How do I set this up?” General Hawkins asked.

“Ross, General Hawkins wants a link to his men.”

“Would that be the men dressed in white at the foot of the mountain?” Ross asked.

“Yes, it is. Here is the frequency they’re using,” he gave Ross the numbers.

“They’re on the line, General. Talk to them as though they were on a speaker phone,” Ross told him.

“Hello, Charlie, are you there?”

“I read you loud and clear General. What are my instructions?” the voice asked.

“Stand by, Charlie,” General Hawkins said. He turned to Jess. “I need a place for them to hide. Is

there anywhere close enough for them to watch this place and get here in a hurry?"

"There's a cave near the top of the next mountain. Really, it's an old mine shaft. Look at the monitor, and we'll give you a close up of it," Ross said. They watched the mountain zoom into view. The camera shifted upward until they saw a small hole near the top. Zooming in again, they saw old weathered posts at the entrance of the mine. There were piles of rock near the entrance, but it didn't look like anyone had been there in ages.

"It doesn't look too safe," General Hawkins said.

"They may have to do a little shoring at the entrance, but I assure you, it is safe," Ross said.

"What about those people?" he said looking at the monitors showing the people near the gate. "Do they get over that way?"

"No, General. They stay on this side of the mountain. So far, none of them have drifted that way."

"Charlie, there's an old mine near the mountain top behind you. It's about three miles away. You should be able to make it before daylight. Contact me every two hours. Set it up with Ross to shift frequencies every time you call in. Take care, Charlie. I'll expect a call in two hours. Cobra one out." He turned to Jess and asked, "Could we get something to eat? None of us have eaten since we left Iceland yesterday evening."

"Certainly, follow me and I'll show you where the kitchen is," Jess said. He led them down the hallway and opened a door on the left. Inside the room was every modern convenience a well-supplied kitchen should have. Ruth went to a cabinet and checked what was stocked there. Opening a few other doors, she looked satisfied with what she saw.

"Have a seat, gentlemen, and I'll whip us up a meal in no time," she told them.

They sat at the large table, which could easily seat twenty people while Ruth busied herself at the microwave.

"General, why are those men out there?" Jess asked.

"From what you told us about the group trying to make it here, we thought they could use a little help. All I need is to know where they are and relay that information to Charlie."

"Aren't you afraid of them catching the disease that's still out there?" Jess asked.

"They won't get it, Jess. Tell him, Dr. Palmer," General Hawkins said.

"Jess, when we first got to Iceland, we asked for volunteers so we could expose them to the disease. You know a small percentage of people who come in contact with the disease don't catch it. We had over four hundred volunteers and those ten men out there are the ones who didn't come down with the disease. The other three hundred and ninety we're holding in isolation under heavy guard. Those men out there are willing to sacrifice themselves to get this group of people to you. I hope they're as valuable as you say they are. I'm here to try to find a cure. We don't want to keep those brave men in Iceland caged like animals any longer than necessary," Dr. Palmer told him.

"Rita and Ross both think the woman is the key to finding a cure. They say she has become incredibly powerful in the last month. They say her limits are few," Jess told them.

"From what you tell us they are a strange group of people. I would like to get a chance to study them," Dr. Palmer said.

Jess noticed that the Secret Service men still stood vigilant watch although there was no one near that they didn't know. He got up and went to one of them asking, "Who's in charge?"

"I am, Mr. Harold. What can I do for you?" he asked.

"First, my name is Jess. Next, you can relax. There's nothing in this complex that will hurt the Vice President. Having you stand there like a bulldog ready to pounce is wearing on my already shot nerves," Jess told him. He watched the man relax a little and said, "Bring your men over to the table and join us."

"By the way, Jess, my name is Jessie Peters. That is Andrew Long and Jackie Nesbit," he said as he pointed to the other men. He motioned for them to come to the table. As they sat down, the Vice

President turned from the stove and said, "If someone will help me set the table, I believe breakfast is ready."

Jess and one of the Secret Service Men jumped up. Jess showed the man where the plates and silverware were stored while he took serving bowls to the stove. Ruth ladled out steaming scrambled eggs into a bowl and handed it to Jess to set on the table. Jess went back and got a bowl of home fried potatoes and brought them to the table. Ruth brought a dish full of toast and a bowl of bacon to the table. She sat down and said, "Dig in, gentlemen, before it gets cold." They ate sparingly while Jess ate like it was the first good meal he had eaten in a long time.

As they sat around drinking coffee, Ruth said, "I didn't think I would ever see real food again, Jess. Be thankful that this place is well stocked. Try eating MREs for three months."

At Jess's questioning look, General Hawkins said, "Meals, ready to eat. Standard staple of the armed forces now. I agree with her, even if the eggs are powdered. The bacon and toast are real, not processed."

"General, your men are at the mine, and no one has seen them," Rita said from her speaker.

"It's going to take a while to get used to her. She sounds almost human," General Hawkins said.

"Why, thank you, General. That's the nicest comment anyone has said to me," Rita told him.

He leaned over and whispered to Jess, "Does she listen in all the time?"

"You can tell her not to and you won't hear from her until you ask for her, but I suspect even then she's listening. You will get used to it, General."

"General, we have located the approximate area where Joe and his group are. It is less than one hundred seventy-five miles from here. From the radio traffic we are monitoring, they are heading into a trap. Now would be a good time to rush your men to their aid," Ross said from his speaker.

"Get me Switchback One on the radio, Ross." In a moment they heard, "This is Switchback One. Do you read me, Cobra One?"

"This is Cobra One. Charlie, you need to move out now. I wanted to give you a day's rest, but Mother Hen is in trouble."

"How do you want us to play it, General?"

"After you get their location, head toward them. Wipe out all obstacles they will run into as they come in. Ross will give you the location and an idea of the forces in your way. Be careful, Charlie; report in every hour on the hour. Cobra out," General Hawkins said.

"Do you have any beds in this place?" Ruth asked.

"Certainly. I imagine you're tired, Ruth. Follow me; you can have your pick of the rooms." Telling the men at the table he would be right back, Jess led her down the corridor to another corridor that had twelve doors, six on either side. He opened the door to the first room and showed her in. The room was plainly furnished. A bed with a nightstand next to it stood in the middle of the room. A dresser stood against the far wall. "Will this be all right, Mrs. Vice President?" Jess asked.

"Jess, the name is Ruth, and it would please me if you dispensed with all of this Vice President stuff. To answer your question, lord, yes, it will do," she said and sat down on the edge of the bed. "After the last three months of people trying to kill me, you don't know how good it feels to be here where it's safe.

"I hope you'll be able to say that after a few months of being cooped up here, Ruth."

"I'll let you know in two months. Right now, I want to take a shower and sleep for a week. Is that the bathroom in there?" she asked pointing to a door near the dresser.

"Yes, and all the hot water you can stand," Jess said. He noticed for the first time how worried and haggard she looked. "Good night, Ruth. Have a good sleep," Jess told her and walked back to the kitchen.

"Jess, what was this place intended to be used for?" General Hawkins asked.

"I don't know, General. The few times I tried to find out, the Congressional Committee doing

the funding gave me the run around.”

“Where are all your people?” Dr. Palmer asked.

“There is just Ross and I...well, I guess I’m the only one here now. When the disease first struck, everyone but Ross and I left. Two weeks ago I cremated Ross’s body after it could no longer sustain itself. To tell you the truth, I’m lonely for human company.”

“I find it fascinating that Ross became a part of the computer. How was it done? Could someone else do it?” Dr Palmer asked.

“You’ll have to talk to Ross. I have hardly understood anything that has gone on here in the last four months. I’m sure he will fill you in on all the details.”

“This whole place is operated by Ross?” General Hawkins asked.

“By Ross and Rita. Tell me how Ruth became Vice President?” Jess asked.

“By line of succession. She was the Secretary of Commerce when this disease became full blown. She happened to be in Great Britain at the time trying to work out a trade agreement. After the President was killed and most of the Senate blown up, she decided to stay in England. Speaker of the House Samuels was in England also, but he was visiting friends and relatives.

“Anyway, when Senator Donaldson proclaimed himself President, he started issuing all kinds of preposterous orders. Speaker Samuels decided to form his own government in exile. The government of Iceland graciously offered use of their island for him to set up his government. Now, I’m not saying he did this for any ego trip. He went strictly by the rules of the Constitution.

“Everyone else who could have stepped in and become President was dead. Lord knows how many times he told me he didn’t want the job, but it fell to him fair and square. Not one to shirk his responsibilities, he took the job and offered the Vice Presidency to Ruth. She accepted and ever since has dodged death on a daily basis. For some reason, Ruth being Vice President drives these people in the States up the wall. I can’t count the attempts made on her life in the last three months. She is one tough cookie, but the strain is getting to her. That’s why President Samuels had her come with us. If this place is as safe as you say it is, we’ll all feel better knowing she is out of harm’s way,” General Hawkins said with real affection in his voice.

“I noticed she was looking a little ragged around the edges.” Jess stated.

“Try getting your butt shot at every day and sometimes more than once a day for three months. I’ll bet you won’t come out of it in half as good a shape as she is.”

“I forgot to ask. Is she married?” Jess asked.

“Yeah, she’s married. It’s tearing her up not knowing if he is dead or has become one of the deranged people,” Dr. Palmer answered.

“I take it you are married, Dr. Palmer,” Jess said.

A look of pain crossed Dr. Palmer’s face. “I was,” he said in a sad voice. “After the patients took over the center, I took my wife and girl to a cabin in Utah.

“Everything was fine for two weeks. One morning I went up in the hills to try and bag a deer for fresh meat. While I was gone, a group of men happened on the cabin. They raped my wife and nine year old daughter several times before they killed them,” he said in a pain filled voice.

“That evening when I returned to the cabin carrying a deer, I found their bodies. After burying them under a pine tree in back of the cabin that Caroline liked, I went to find the men.

I packed my Range Rover and followed them to a town in the desert. There were eight of them. I parked at the edge of town. The town had only eight buildings. As I came up to the first building, I heard laughter coming from a bar across the street. Two cars were parked in front of the bar. I crossed the street and peered in a picture window of the bar.

“Five men had a young girl spread-eagled on the pool table and were raping her. Furious, I opened the door and entered the bar. They turned at the sound of my entering the room. One of them said, “Do you want a piece of this tender morsel, stranger?”

“My body felt cold as a frozen glacier. All I wanted to do was wipe the grin off the man’s face. I raised the rifle and shot him in the head, blowing his rotten brains all over the wall in back of the bar. Feeling dead inside, I cocked the thirty-thirty and shot the man who was on top of the girl. The other men tried to pull up their pants as I calmly shot them.

I remember going behind the bar and wiping the first man’s brains off a bottle of whiskey. Pouring a glass half full, I gulped it down and waited. Reloading the rifle, I laid it on the bar and pointed it toward the door. Boots pounded on the sidewalk outside and three men rushed through the door. At first, they didn’t see me. One of them, a big man with a red beard, yelled, ‘What the fuck is going on here?’

“I sat the glass of whiskey down and picked up the rifle. They noticed my movement and turned to me. I sighted on the big man’s face and said, ‘This is for Caroline,’ and pulled the trigger. The other two men broke for the door. I walked around the bar and shot one of them in the back as he went through the door. I stepped over his body and watched as the last man got in one of the cars. I raised the rifle and fired four times through the windshield.

“‘That is for Debbie,’ I said as the man slumped in the seat. Going back into the bar, I went to the pool table. The small girl was only five or six years old. After examining her, I knew she wasn’t going to make it. She was so small they tore her up inside. I did what I could to stop the bleeding, then held her in my arms until she was gone.

“I sat there all night rocking back and forth holding her body. I cried until there were no more tears left in me. The next morning I dug a grave in the town’s graveyard and buried her. I never knew her name,” he said his voice breaking. He took a drink of water then continued. “I made my way to Canada and headed east. On the east coast of Nova Scotia, I heard one of President Samuel’s broadcasts and decided to go to Iceland.

I managed to contact a man in Iceland who put me in touch with one of the people working for President Samuels. After telling the man who I was and that I wanted to be a part of the new government, he sent a submarine to pick me up. When we heard from you, I realized that your complex was the one we were trying to send patients to. I requested to come along with the Vice President, and now I’m here,” Dr. Palmer said.

No one said anything sharing Dr. Palmer’s grief.

Jess saw the fatigue on their faces and said, “There’s nothing more we can do today. Let me show you to your rooms.” He showed them to their rooms and went back to his office. As he went to sleep, he felt tears in his eyes. All the death and destruction had been going on in another world until now. After listening to Dr. Palmer’s story about the death of his wife and girl, he realized how sad the world had become.

Chapter 24

Major Charlie Jacobs handed the radio back to his radioman and motioned the rest of his men to him. His twenty-two years in the Navy had not prepared him to fight his own countrymen.

Yet that was what he was going to do. At five foot nine, he was stocky but there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. He was completely gray-headed, and the years had not been kind to him. His face had lines in it that shouldn't have been on a man only forty-two years old.

He had noticed in the last few years that it took a lot more effort to keep up with the young bucks coming in the service now. His command of a Navy Seal team for the last six years had taken him to many countries.

Most of the time the countries didn't even know his team was there. Only after they found the bodies would the leaders of the country realize a foreign hit team had been in the area. Most of the men with him were of the same stature. Their job was to silently kill the enemy and get away. These men were the best the armed services had to offer.

He spread the map out on the ground. It was one of the latest topographical maps put out by the government. It showed every hill and town in the section of the country they were in. Not that there were that many towns in the area. He decided to split the men into two groups. He would lead one, and Sergeant First Class Pete Mavis would lead the other.

"Pete, you take your group and sweep down the north side of Route 40, and I'll take the south side. We should meet the people we're looking for in or around the town of Arapaho." He used the point of his razor sharp bayonet to point out the town on the map.

"Ross gave me a good briefing on what is going on in the area. Our best bet is to hijack two of the trucks taking people out of here. If we can catch two of them on the way in, the only people we'll have to worry about will be the driver and guard if there is one. I hate to do it in the daylight, but that's the way it has to be. I want your team ready in a half hour. Leave everything but a day's rations and plenty of ammo for the weapons. If need be, we can forage for food."

He had his men check their weapons and made sure they all carried plenty of extra ammo. It seemed like no time until Pete stood before him ready to go.

"Have Ricker take the point and McDowell bring up the rear. Our job, until we get the trucks, is to stay out of sight. Unless actually threatened, the enemy is to be avoided. Let's get down the mountain and into cover before it gets completely daylight."

He watched his men leave the mine. Each man waited until the man in front of him was fifty feet away then followed him. They slipped from shadow to shadow. With their white clothing, they blended so well with the snow that when the men stopped they became invisible. The only way he knew they were there was when they walked between a boulder or a dark patch of ground. He fell in, next to last, after telling McDowell to check and make sure they didn't leave a trail to follow.

Leaving the mine entrance, he stopped next to a pile of rocks. Looking back, he saw McDowell come out of the mines with a rope tied around his waist hooked to a few dead limbs, which dragged behind him. As he walked forward, the limbs wiped out the tracks they made in the snow. He gave McDowell the thumbs up sign and went down the hill to a large boulder.

Watching the man ahead of him, he advanced from cover to cover. At one point, he heard the hum of people talking over the ridge he was hiding behind.

He saw the man ahead of him motion to stop and take cover. From his position on the hill, he saw Ricker crawling around a rock formation in the snow. Ricker pulled a knife from his belt and inched out of sight. A few moments later, he motioned them forward. When Charlie got to the rock formation, he saw a man lying behind a boulder. His pants were down around his ankles. A large red stain spread from his neck to the snow. "Hell of a way to buy it," he thought.

They had to stop several times when people came to their side of the ridge to do their morning ritual. During one of these stops, he made his way to the top of the ridge. Peering between two rocks, he saw thousands of people milling around the tent city at the bottom of the ridge. Campfires were everywhere. People stood around the fires trying to stay warm. Most of the people weren't dressed for the zero degree weather they were having. All in all, it was a pretty miserable looking bunch.

He slid back down the ridge making sure to wipe out all traces of his being there. They traveled three miles down the valley until they came to a place where the road went between two hills. He gathered his men around him.

"This has to go down quietly. We wait until two trucks can be isolated. If we can't isolate two of them in an hour, we take the first one that comes along. No rifles. Use your pistols," he told them. He screwed a silencer to the barrel of the nine-millimeter handgun he carried. He spread his men out on the banks of the hill on both sides of the road. He pulled the white hood of his field jacket lower over his face as he lay in the snow five feet from the road.

All of his men were equipped with low power radios. The radios were good for five hundred yards at the most.

"Convoy coming up the road," he heard Ricker say from the speaker in his ear. Ricker was two hundred yards ahead of them at the top of a hill, which let him see the road for a little more than three miles.

"Any likely targets?" he whispered into the mike attached to his collar.

"Negative, sir. A couple of pickups are at the rear of the column with several men in them."

He was ready to tell the men to move out down the road when he heard Ricker say, "Bingo, a van and pickup coming. All I see are the drivers. Get ready, sir."

He raised his hand and three of his men at a boulder near the edge of the road rose up. He motioned for them to wait. A few minutes later, three cargo trucks and two pickups passed by. He motioned to the men and they put their weight against the boulder. Slowly, it rolled into the road, and partially blocked it. The men dropped to the snow becoming invisible again. The sound of an engine came from over the hill.

"Get ready," he whispered into the radio.

The van came over the top of the hill, saw the boulder and slowed down. Slowly, the van came up to the boulder and stopped. The pickup stopped behind the van. The driver got out and walked up to the driver of the van who climbed out swearing. He heard two soft plop, plops. The two men spun and fell to the side of the road. Two men sidled up the side of the van to the passenger compartment. Another two men crouched below the windows of the back door. At a signal, the two men at the rear threw open the doors. They crouched with their guns held in front of them. "It's clean," Charlie heard.

"Throw the bodies in the back of the pickup and cover them, even if you have to use snow. Anything coming this way, Ricker?" he said into the radio.

"Clear so far, I'll meet you at the edge of the road," Ricker said.

"Turn around and get us out of here," he told the man behind the wheel of the van. Climbing into the back of the van, Charlie knelt down and spread a map out. He had seven men in the van because only three could ride in the pickup.

The men gathered around him, and he said, "First stop is this little town where we hit Route Forty. We drive into town and find a place where we can leave the van without anyone seeing us. The

other driver will take the pickup to the other end of the town and park. Pick a position where you can see the rest of the town, Roy. You'll be our backup if anything goes wrong, and we can't get back to the van. I want to be in and out of there in less than an hour. Do a thorough search but a quick one. Neutralize anyone you find. We want this town to be clear when we come back through. Try and not make a mess. Hide the bodies of any people you take out. We want to leave the place clean, in case anyone comes checking. Okay, you know what to do. Get ready. We'll be coming to the town any time now," Charlie told them.

Climbing back into the passenger seat, he looked out the windshield. Ahead on the other side of a low hill, he saw the roofs of buildings. Topping the hill, the small town spread out before him. It had only one street with a couple of dozen buildings on either side of the street. There were a few cars parked along the street. He couldn't see any movement in the town at all. "Robbie? Mike. When the town is secure, disable the vehicles. Don't make it obvious," he said into the radio.

They were at the edge of town now. He saw a dog lying on the porch of the drug store and saw lights burning in the place. He had hoped the town would be deserted. Now they were going to have to do things the hard way. The dog raised its head and stared at them as they went by. He saw an alley between two stores that was big enough to back the van into. He showed it to the driver who stopped and backed into it.

"Quick and easy," he told the men in back.

"One in position and ready," he heard Roy say into his earpiece. Going to the rear, he opened the door and climbed down. He pointed to three men and told them to take the buildings to the left. He went to the right with three men trailing him. At the first building, he found a door at the back.

Flattening himself against the wall, he reached and grasped the doorknob. Getting nods that the men with him were ready, he twisted the knob. Easing the door open, he quickly glanced in and then drew his head back. The quick glance showed him it was a storeroom. He quietly stepped into the room and went to the left while the man behind him went to the right.

Kneeling with his handgun out in front of him, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He saw a door at the other side of the room. Carefully tiptoeing down an aisle stacked with goods, he reached the door. Putting his ear against it, he heard the soft mummer of voices.

He motioned his men forward, and when they were in place, he cracked the door open. Peering through the crack, he saw a long counter running down one side of the wall. He heard the voices clearly now, but the men were out of his line of vision.

He opened the door wide enough to stick his head through and took a quick look. Across the room four men sat at a table talking. Two of them were playing checkers. He held up four fingers to his, men then opened the door wide enough to slide through in a crouch.

Ducking below the counter-top, Charlie made his way to the end of it. One of his men came through the door and took up a position at the far end of the counter.

"Damn it, Johnny. Did you leave the back door open? I feel a cold breeze blowing up my leg," one of the men at the table said.

"I didn't, but I'll go check it," another man said.

Charlie looked at the two faces staring at him from the storeroom door. He made a slicing motion across his throat with his finger. One of the faces nodded, and they disappeared closing the door softly behind them. The man at the other end of the counter rolled out of sight into an opening in the counter. There was no place for him to hide, so he pressed his body against the counter hoping the man wouldn't look his way.

Footsteps crossed the floor and a short greasy haired man appeared at the end of the counter. The man opened the door to the storeroom and entered leaving the door open. Charlie heard a soft gurgling noise and saw the man's legs jerk a few times.

His man leaned against the side of the door and gave him the okay sign. Charlie held up three

fingers and mimed on three. When his last finger dropped, he rose up and fired at the man on his right.

His first shot took the man in the chest. His second shot blew the side of the man's head off. The other two men were down in the floor not moving. Quickly, he moved around the counter and knelt beside each man to make sure they were dead.

"Drag their bodies into the storeroom and cover them with something," he told his men. There was a trail of blood as the bodies were dragged into the storeroom.

He saw a barrel of sawdust at the end of the counter. Dipping out a bucketful of it, he spread it on the blood. Using a broom, he swept as much of it as he could under a shelf, then placed fresh sawdust on the floor. You could still see the blood stains under the sawdust, but it was the best he could do. "Check in, Blue Leader," he said into the radio.

"Blue Leader here. We've checked three buildings and taken out one hostile. Two more buildings to go. Blue Leader out."

"Sir, you have three hostiles headed your way. Two males and a female. One of the males has a rifle," Charlie heard Roy say.

"You two get behind the counter," he said pointing to the two men closest to the counter. He motioned the other man to the other side of the door that opened to the street.

They heard voices approaching. The people stopped at the door and talked for a moment. The woman told the men she would be back later and walked on down the sidewalk. The door swung open and the two men walked in.

Charlie reached out and put his hand over the mouth and nose of the man with the rifle. He jerked the man's head back and slid his knife across the man's throat. He felt warm blood splash on the hand holding the knife. The man jerked and twisted for a moment then went slack.

He looked and saw the other man fall to the floor with a knife sticking out of his back. He motioned for two of his men to come and help them carry the bodies to the storeroom.

Wiping blood from his hand on a rag, Charlie watched his men place a tarp over the bodies. "Okay, let's hit the next building," he said, heading for the back door.

If they had stayed in the storeroom a little longer, they would have caught the man who sneaked out of the bathroom. So scared he shook with each step, he went to the phone and called his boss. "That's right, Paul. There are four of them in here. I heard them talking on the radio to others." He listened for a while then said, "How the fuck should I know? They looked like marines or something. All I know is they killed six people quick as a wink." He listened again and said, "Get them here as fast as you can. I'm going to hide until they arrive." He hung up the phone, glanced around, and tiptoed back to the bathroom where he huddled in the corner.

Charlie and his group went through three more buildings in rapid order without finding anyone. As they approached the fourth building, a dog ran from under the floor and grabbed Hank by the leg. Grabbing the dog by the neck, he brought the handle of his knife down on its head. The dog yapped then went slack.

The backdoor of the building opened. A man who was stripped to the waist with shaving cream on his face appeared. "What the hell is wrong..." was as far as he got. He saw Charlie and his men. Three soft poofs sounded and the man staggered back inside. They heard a crash and something clattered to the floor.

"Shit," Charlie said. He jumped on the porch and ran through the door. The man lay on the floor bleeding from three holes in his chest. A loud scream behind him caused him to drop and turn. A woman who stood in the door leading to the living quarters began to scream. Without hesitation, he raised his handgun and shot her twice. As she fell into the room, he saw a boy around twelve years old dart across the room.

He jumped up and ran to stop the boy. He lined his handgun up on the boy as he opened the

outside door. As he fired, the woman grabbed his legs, which caused him to miss and fall to the floor. The woman looked up at him with a wicked smile on her face. She tried to say something but blood gushed out of her mouth. Feebly, she clawed her way up his legs.

He brought the gun around and shot her in the top of the head. She jerked and tightened her hold on his legs. He thought she was dead, but when he tried to sit up she moaned and formed her fingers into claws. She dug her fingers into the flesh of his legs and pulled herself forward. He shot her two more times in the head. All that was left of her head was the part from the mouth down; yet she refused to die. One of his men stuck his rifle in her back over the heart and fired a three round burst. Her arms bunched up and her fingers dug into his legs. She collapsed, but they had to pry her fingers from his legs.

He heard the boy in the street screaming for help. Climbing to his feet, Charlie heard firing from the other end of town.

“Blue Leader, come in,” he said into the radio.

“This is Blue Leader. Major, we’re pinned down by a dozen hostiles across the street from us. We were just leaving when a kid ran into the street and started to scream. Three men came out of the building and saw us. They started firing and we had to duck back in the store. The back’s no good. There are half a dozen men there. Get us out of here quick, Major. We see more men coming down the street.”

“Hang on, Pete. We’re on the way. Roy, are you there?”

“Got you Major. We’re turning around now.”

“Take the left side. Leave the right for us.”

“Okay, men. Now we earn our money the hard way,” he said. He opened the door and stepped out on the sidewalk. Half a dozen men in front of him ran toward the other end of town.

Charlie moved the selector on his rifle to full automatic and fired a whole clip at them. Three of them fell and didn’t move. Two of the men dodged behind a bench and fired back. The last man crawled in circles on the sidewalk leaving a bloody streak behind him.

His men opened up from either side of him blowing the bench to pieces. Charlie felt a weight hit his back knocking him down. One of his men lay across him with half his head blown away. He felt slugs impacting on the man’s body. Twisting his head to the side, he saw dozens of men streaming toward him.

He pushed the body off and crawled into the store. As he went through the door, he snagged the rifle of another of his men who was down. He stuck the rifle around the edge of the door and opened up. When the borrowed rifle was empty, he stuck his out and fired until it was empty. One of his men fired through the window. Lying flat on the floor, Charlie peeked around the door. Two of his men were down and not moving. Over a dozen bodies lay in the street. The pickup Roy was in lay on its top in the middle of the street. The roof was crushed flat and he saw blood running out from under the metal.

“Blue Leader, are you still there?” he said.

“Still here, Major, but there are only two of us left. Where in hell did all these people come from?”

“Someone must have seen us come into town and called for help. You could always surrender, Pete.”

“Uh, Uh, Major. I’ve seen what they do to their prisoners. If they want me, they’re going to have to come and take me. Major, it’s been a pleasure knowing you. Buy me a beer up yonder when you get there.”

He heard the firing increase down the street for a few minutes then become silent. In his ear he heard Pete say in an agony filled voice, “Give them hell, Charlie. I’ll be waiting up yonder for you.”

“Here they come,” the last man in his command said.

He got to his feet and loaded both rifles. He looked over at his man at the window and said, "Let's show them how real soldiers die." White faced, the man nodded okay.

With a rifle in each hand, he stepped through the door firing as he went. The soldier stepped up beside him and they stepped into the street. A slug slammed into his right side, twisting him halfway around. Turning back, he raised his pistol and fired until it was empty. He felt the soldier next to him slump against him as a dozen bullets slammed into his body.

Throwing his arm around the man to hold him up he drew his knife from its sheath. He felt slugs impact with his body, but they no longer hurt. He turned his head and looked at the soldier he supported. He was trying to load his pistol, but couldn't see for the blood streaming into his eyes. "Son, you're one hell of a soldier," he said just before a shotgun blast tore his head from his shoulders.

Chapter 25

“Stalker wants to go back the way we came and see if the men are still behind us,” Tammy said.

“In this?” Bill asked as he pointed out the window. The wind and snow blew so hard they couldn’t see five feet out the window, and snow was still peppering down.

“He says this is nothing. You should come to his home when it really gets bad,” Tammy told Bill.

Tammy opened the door and the force of the wind blew it back against the wall. Bill and Joe rushed to throw their weight against the door as snow blew into the cabin. Leaning into the wind, Stalker walked through the door and disappeared into the snow. It was all they could do to push the door closed.

“Jesus! Why would anyone or anything want to go out in that?” Bill asked. In the few moments the door was open, the room had cooled down twenty degrees.

“Throw another log on the fire, Jake,” Joe said as he swept up the snow that had blown in.

“The way I figure it, this storm will blow itself out in another four hours. I think we’d better be on the move right after that,” Ben said.

“When it starts slowing down, Jake and I will go out to the trucks. With any luck, we can back the pickup against the door and you can load everything we’re going to take. That way, at the first break we can get on the road,” Joe said.

“Good idea. Tony. Have Gail get what she wants to take from here and stow it near the door,” Bill yelled toward the kitchen.

* * * *

Stalker walked into the wind but occasionally had to detour off the road because snow had drifted too high for him to get through. While humans found it impossible to maintain their direction in this white out, Stalker had no problem at all.

Something in his mind let him know where he was all the time. In places where the snow had drifted beside the road, he heard sounds ahead of him. Although the sounds were faint, he knew the humans were back and closer than they had been the last time. He knew the humans wouldn’t be out in weather like this.

More than likely, they were in a shelter of some kind. He walked down a slope into a draw between two hills and stopped. Sniffing the air, he smelled wood smoke from nearby. Climbing the bank, he entered a stand of trees. Ahead of him he heard voices, so he crept from tree to tree until he saw something yellow hanging between two trees. On the other side of the yellow thing, he saw the glow of a fire. Every once in a while, he saw shifting shadows as the men moved around. He left the woods and hurried back to the cabin.

Joe opened the door enough for him to squeeze through saying, “You weren’t gone very long, Stalker.”

Stalker padded over to Tony and told her about the men, then went to the corner and lay down.

“Stalker says the men are over the next ridge waiting for a break in the snow. He says we should leave now,” Tony told them.

“Leave now, and we’ll be lost in no time,” Bill said.

“Not if we use a compass and leave the trucks behind. On foot we would be almost impossible to spot in this rugged country,” Tony said.

“Are you out of your mind? Walk out of these mountains in this snow and near zero temperatures?” Jake said from the couch.

“Wait a minute. She might have something. Hand me the map of eastern Colorado, Bill,” Joe said. He spread the map out on the floor and studied it for awhile. “It might just work,” he said.

“Why leave the trucks behind?” Bill asked.

“We wouldn’t get them over the summit of the mountain anyway. Besides, from what Stalker says these men are on snowmobiles. They would catch us before we went five miles. If we take off on foot, we can go down the canyon in back of the cabin and come out near a town named Arapaho. On foot it’s only ten miles. If we take the road, it is more like fifty.”

“Tommy and I have walked down the canyon far enough to see the town from the foothills,” Gail said.

“Tony, take the sleeping bags. Cut holes in them for feet and arms. If we put the sleeping bags on over our clothes, the cold shouldn’t bother us.”

“Right, I can cut holes in the bags, so we can adjust the length,” Tony said. She went to hunt for a pair of scissors.

“Jake, your job is to make sure everyone has on three pairs of socks and waterproof boots. Bill, get all the rope you can find and cut it into twenty-foot lengths. We’ll use it to tie us together, so nobody wanders in a different direction.”

While the rest went about getting prepared, Joe took the 45-70 buffalo gun to the table and cleaned it. A few days ago he had fired a dozen rounds to line the sights up. He checked to make sure the line he scratched on the barrel was still aligned with the sight. He took shells from two boxes and put them in a leather pouch tied around his waist.

He put the rifle in a fleece lined gun case and leaned it against the door. Next, he put on three pairs of socks and pulled another pair of pants over the ones he had on. A heavy flannel shirt went over the one he was wearing. A heavy pair of insulated boots went on his feet. He took the sleeping bag Tony handed him and put his feet through the holes she cut in the bottom. He pulled it up over his clothes and stuck his arms through the holes cut for them. He was unable to reach down and zip the bag up because the zipper came up his back. He took the sleeping bag off and turned it around. With all the clothes he had on, he couldn’t bend over and touch his toes. He was happy to give up a little agility if it meant his staying warm.

They might look silly waddling around wearing the sleeping bags, but the bags would give them the added protection they needed if they were going to leave before the storm ended. Joe watched them tie the rope around their waists and hand the end to someone else. The next person tied that end to the rope around his or her waist. Joe was the only one without a rope.

“Aren’t you coming with us, Joe?” Tammy asked.

“Stalker and I are going to stay behind and delay them long as we can. The storm will let up soon and they will be right on our heels. If we can delay them for a few hours, our chances of getting away will be better. Don’t worry, we’ll be with you before you know it,” he told her.

He opened the door and Bill stepped out in the storm. As each of them went through the door, they told him to be careful. Ben was the last in line. “Don’t let them remove the ropes for any reason, Ben. You could get lost within ten feet in this. Keep them headed downhill, no matter what. That’s the way we need to go. You won’t be too far off course when the storm ends,” Joe told him and shook his hand.

Joe sat by the door and waited for the storm to let up after they left. No use going out any sooner than necessary. Stalker lay in the middle of the room with his eyes closed.

Bill leaned into the wind and made his way around the house. He couldn’t see more than ten feet ahead of him. He lined them up in the eve of the house and had them check the ropes one more time. He stepped to the edge of the bank and started down.

The slope was steep. The only thing keeping him from falling was the wind and the knee-deep snow. Every now and then, the wind would let up a little. When this happened, Bill would stumble forward. One time as he stepped forward, he was yanked backward off his feet.

Working his way back up the rope, he discovered that Jane had walked around the opposite side of a tree. He worked his way around the tree and got in front of Jane again. The lower they got on the mountain the more trees they ran into. Several times Bill had to wait while one of them backtracked to the opposite side of a tree. The storm began to ease a little, which allowed Bill to see a few hundred feet ahead.

Bill guessed they were halfway down the mountain. The way ahead became rougher with boulders and sudden drops. In places, he had to use another rope to lower himself down a ten or fifteen foot drop. Bill waited until the rest of them were down and tied together again, then he headed down the hill.

It seemed like hours before they reached the bottom of the canyon. Bill let them rest for a half hour, then got them on their feet and moving down the canyon.

* * * *

Joe heard the wind die down, so he got to his feet and picked up the rifle. Stalker padded over to him. Joe opened the door and walked out into the dying storm. Joe walked over to a cliff that looked down on the valley they had crossed a few days before. He searched until he found a limb on which to lay the buffalo gun. He used his gator knife to cut notches in the limb for different elevations.

Finished, he sat with his back against the tree and waited. He knew it wouldn't be long, and he would hear them long before they came in sight.

* * * *

Greg had the men tear down the tarps and put out the fire while the storm still raged. He had them on the snowmobiles, inching their way out of the woods as the storm broke. The newly fallen snow posed no problem for the snowmobiles.

Henry stopped at the bottom of the ridge ahead of them and motioned Greg forward. "Across this ridge on the other side of the valley is where I saw the smoke."

Greg looked at the sky, which had cleared up considerably. "If we hurry, we might catch them with their pants down."

Henry started up the ridge, and Greg let three men follow before he fell in behind them. The rest of the men followed. He paused at the top of the ridge to stare at the valley ahead.

The valley was not that wide but was deep. He saw the mountaintop where Henry had seen the smoke. Greg judged that if there were a cabin up there, it would be on top of the cliff he faced almost two miles away. He motioned for Henry to continue and dropped his machine over the crest.

Joe heard the snowmobiles and got to his feet. He placed the barrel of the buffalo gun in one of the notches and watched as the first man topped the ridge across from him. Three men crossed the ridge. The fourth man stopped at the top of the ridge for a minute. He placed his cheek against the rifle and sighted on the man below the one on top the ridge. Taking four long breaths, he took the slack out of the trigger. Joe focused on a point two feet over the man's head and gently squeezed the trigger. The big gun belched flame and slammed into his shoulder.

Greg saw the man ahead of him throw his hands into the air and roll off the machine. He slid to a stop as the man rolled down the hill leaving a red streak as he rolled over and over.

He looked to the top of the cliff and saw a puff of smoke rise into the air. Sliding his machine around, Greg fell off to the side. With the machine off, he heard the sound of a shot and saw the next man down skid to the side and fall off the machine.

Jesus, no one is that good a shot, he thought as the rifle sounded again. The man in back of Henry fell forward and turned the snowmobile into a bolder. The machine flew into the air and flipped upside down. When it landed, the man was under it still holding on to the handlebars. As the machine

bounced, he saw the body of the man flatten when the machine came down on him. The snowmobile flipped end over end down the hill.

Near the bottom of the hill, Henry looked back at the noise behind him. He saw the snowmobile flip into the air and head right for him. His quick move to the right saved his life. His snowmobile lurched sideways as the heavy grain bullet struck it in back of him.

Leaping off the machine, Henry rolled behind a rock and looked back up the hill. He saw Greg scramble across the top of the ridge. "What the hell is going on, Greg?" he yelled.

"Stay down. There's a sharpshooter on the cliff across the valley. Three men are down. I'm going to have the men move around the ridge and flank him. Wait until I give the all clear before you move," Greg yelled back.

* * * *

Joe slid the gun into its case and hurried through the snow to the back of the house. He could just make out where Bill had dropped over the side of the mountain. Joe took a branch and erased his tracks as he followed Bill's trail. He thought he might have gained them an hour, two at the most, before the men would advance any farther.

When he reached the trees, he threw the branch away. At the places Bill used the rope to go down ledges he was forced to find another way down. Stalker raced down the slope and grabbed him by the sleeve urging him to hurry.

"Damn it, Stalker. I'm going fast as I can. If you're in such a hurry, go on," Joe said. Then he heard the sound of snowmobile engines. "What had gone wrong," he wondered. They should still be huddled behind the ridge.

It was too late to worry about that now. He increased his pace and took chances he normally would not have.

* * * *

Greg had been ready to tell the men to go to the left around the ridge when one of them asked, "Where's Jimmy, my brother?"

"He's dead on the other side of the ridge," Greg told him.

"No, he can't be," the man yelled and ran to the top of the ridge. Greg expected to see him fly backward from the impact of a bullet as he stood there and looked down the hill.

When nothing happened, he turned to the man beside him saying, "Go help him find his brother." The man moved reluctantly, but he did go over the top of the ridge.

Peering over the top of the ridge, Greg wondered if the man at the top of the cliff was waiting for more men to appear. After ten minutes, he decided that the sharpshooter had left. He walked down to his snowmobile and started the engine. Greg drove down to where the man sat beside the body of his brother.

He had started with ten men, now, he was down to three, but he doubted if Joe knew how many men he had.

"Come on, Brian. You can't do anything for Jimmy now. Let's go get the man who killed him."

With tears in his eyes, Brian climbed to his feet and wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. "I want the son of a bitch who done this," he said.

"He's yours if we catch him. Come on, he's getting further away while we sit here talking," Greg said.

Brian walked down to the snowmobile of the second dead man, which had stalled out when he fell off the machine. He started the engine and followed Greg to the bottom of the ridge where Henry joined them.

They raced across the valley then followed the creek to a bridge. Crossing the bridge, they started up the side of the mountain. They slowed down as they neared the area where the man had been shooting from.

Greg saw a cabin ahead of him and slowed. Brian threw caution away and went full speed to the cabin. He jumped off the machine and threw open the door of the cabin. When nothing happened, Greg and Henry drove up to the cabin. Inside the cabin a fire still blazed in the fireplace. Henry came in and walked to the fireplace. "They're on foot now. The Jeep and pickup are in the garage," he told Greg.

"Get the radio and set it up in here. We should be able to contact Jerry from here," Greg told him.

Brian came in and warmed himself by the fire. "No sign of which way they went, Greg?"

"Oh, I know which way they went. They are down in the canyon somewhere, heading for Arapaho. Get warm. We'll head for Arapaho in an hour and get there before them," Greg told him. Henry finished setting up the radio on the coffee table and turned it on. Greg sat on the couch and said into the microphone, "This is Greg. Come in Jerry." He repeated this several times before a voice answered.

"This is Mike. Jerry is out now. I sent a man to get him. He should be here shortly. How are things up in the mountains?"

"There are only three of us left, Mike," Greg said, suddenly realizing how tired he was as the heat from the fire warmed him. The heat caused him to doze as he waited for them to find Jerry.

Henry nudged him saying, "Jerry's on the line now."

"Jerry, how are things there?" he asked.

"Paul dropped off twenty men on his way back to the ranch, so we're in good shape here. Greg, I don't know what it means, but in the city of Kit Carson, ten soldiers were killed by Paul and his men. Paul said they were trying to eliminate everyone in the town. It was only by luck that he was in the area. He had over a hundred men when one of the residents called for help. He lost twenty-seven men taking them out. From what he learned, they had been air dropped there by the exiled President in Iceland."

"Are there any more of them around?" Greg asked.

"Paul doesn't think so, but he has teams out doing a sweep of the area. Paul is worried about what they were doing here in the first place. He said Todd went through the roof when he told him about the men."

"Listen, Jerry. Joe and his group are headed your way. We're going to try and get there before them. Set things up to contain them in case we run into trouble and are delayed. We'll leave shortly and should be there in five hours. Joe and his people are on foot, so they will be moving slowly.

Once he made it to the bottom of the canyon, Joe traveled a lot faster. He followed the trail beaten through the snow by Ben. He stopped to rest and looked up to the top of the mountain he had left a short time ago. He couldn't hear the sounds of the snowmobiles anymore.

Either they were still at the cabin, or were following on foot. Because of the rough terrain, Joe knew they couldn't bring the snowmobiles down the side of the mountain.

He turned to Stalker and said, "Go back and see if they are following us on foot." Stalker nodded his head up and down showing that he understood. He loped back up the canyon and was soon out of sight.

Joe rested a few more minutes then followed the trail in the snow. Half an hour later, he came around a bend in the canyon and saw Ben and the others struggling up a hill.

They saw him coming and waited for him. He told how he had delayed the men. Joe suggested they rest until Stalker returned and they found out if they were being followed.

Gail said, "At the top of the hill a little to the right is a grove of pines. They'll give us cover and a chance to rest. On the trips we made in the summer, we used them for a picnic lunch before starting back."

Joe went to the front since he was more rested than any of them and stomped a path through the

knee-high snow. He came to the top of the hill and saw the grove of pines a hundred feet to the right. He stomped a path to them and entered the trees.

Inside the trees less than six inches of snow lay on the ground. It was a relief to walk without the constant pressure of forcing a path against the snow.

While they waited, Ben and Jake gathered pinecones. Tony took the battered coffee pot from Ben's pack and melted snow over the fire started with the pinecones. In a little while, there was enough hot water to pour into the four cups they had.

She put a spoonful of instant coffee in each cup and added a packet of creamer to the cup she handed Bill. While the men drank their coffee, she put another snow filled pot on the fire to heat. As the men finished with their coffee, they handed her their cups. She mixed more coffee and passed the cups to Jane and Gail. For Tommy and herself, she made two cups of tea.

Joe went and squatted beside Gail. "How far is it to this town you told us about?" he asked.

"If you go to the edge of the trees, you should see the tops of some buildings," she answered.

Joe took Ben and Jake with him through the trees until they came to the edge of them. The hill sloped down at the tree line to another canyon. In the middle of the canyon a stream flowed in places where it wasn't frozen. Two hills over, he saw something reflecting in the sun.

Unzipping the sleeping bag enough to get his binoculars out of his pocket, Joe felt a rush of cold air. Although bulky, the sleeping bags were doing their job of keeping too much body heat from escaping. He raised the glasses and looked for the reflection. The sun was reflecting off the windows of a building. The hill blocked his view of the lower part of the building. He handed the glasses to Ben. "How long will it take to get there?" he asked.

"If the snow doesn't get any deeper, it'll take about three hours." He looked at his watch. "That will put us there well after dark."

"Good, Todd is bound to have a lot of people there. I want to slip in, get what we need, and be gone without them knowing we were there," Joe said.

"If we stayed here for a couple of days, do we have enough food to last that long?" Jake asked.

"I'm sure the men on the snowmobiles have already radioed that we are on foot and are headed their way. When we don't get there in a reasonable amount of time, they'll send men out to search for us. If they catch us in the mountains like this, we won't be able to escape," Joe told him.

"We'd better get there and be gone before they consider us late and start searching for us," Ben said.

They went back to the campfire and saw that Stalker had returned. "Stalker says the men have left the cabin on their machines and are using the road to go through the mountains. They left no one to follow us," Tony told them.

Joe kicked snow over the fire to extinguish it. "Bill, you take the lead. Try to stay out of the deep snow. When you get tired, one of us will take the lead. The way I figure it, we have less than four hours to reach the town. We want to be there and be gone before the men on the snowmobiles reach it."

"If the town is full of Todd's men like you think it is, how are we going to get in and get the supplies we need?" Jake asked.

"Only three of us are going to enter the town while the rest of you circle it and wait on the other side," Joe said.

"Which three?" Ben asked.

"You, me and Tony. She can pull her disappearing act and lead us into town. We pick up what we need and she leads us out again," Joe told him.

Joe lined them up after asking Tony to tell Stalker to head for the town and make sure there weren't any surprises waiting for them. Bill set a brisk pace. At first, the going was easy because they were heading downhill. At the bottom of the hill, the pace slowed as Bill stomped a path through the

snow.

It took them thirty minutes to reach the stream. Bill fell to the rear and Ben took the lead as they made their way up the hill. Before cresting the hill, Joe had them stop and rest while he crawled to the top. He used his binoculars to survey the land ahead of them.

Joe called them up and he took the lead. He led them down the next to last hill before the town. On reaching the valley, Joe saw the outline of Stalker at the top of the next hill. A half hour later they reached an outcropping of rocks below the top of the hill. Stalker rested between two rocks, which blocked the wind from him.

"Stalker says that on the other side of this hill two men are hiding in the rocks near the bottom. He found a way to get around them, but we'll have to be very quiet," Tony told them.

Ben looked at his watch. They had been on the move for a little over three hours. "Ask him if there is a way we can take them out without causing an alarm."

"He says they were talking on a radio; otherwise, he would have never known they were there. If you eliminate them, someone will come to check on them when they don't answer the radio," Tony said.

"So be it. We are wasting precious time talking. Tell Stalker to show us the way," Joe said.

Stalker led them along the hillside until they came to a cut in the hill. He led them down a cut which Ben thought had once been an old streambed thousands of years ago.

Near the bottom, Tony turned and put her fingers on her lips to indicate the men were near. Where the old streambed broke into the valley, they had to crouch to stay out of sight.

They traveled this way for a couple of hundred feet until the streambed made a turn to the right. Another fifty feet and the channel deepened enough for them to stand erect. After awhile, they came to where the streambed disappeared into a hole in the next hill.

Joe and Ben were worried because they knew time was short. They increased the pace until the young ones, Tammy and Tommy, had to run to stay up with them. At last, they topped the hill in a small stand of trees.

The town stood below them. Bright lights almost gave the town a festive look, but they knew what waited for them down there. Joe gave his pack to Jake and Ben gave his to Bill. "Keep well away from town and we'll meet you on the other side. Stalker will go with you to make sure you don't blunder into anyone. Find some place safe to hide and send Stalker back to find us. He'll lead us to where you are," Joe told Bill.

Bill shook Joe and Ben's hands and said, "Take care of her." He went to Tony and embraced her, kissing her with a passion he hadn't felt in days. "Don't try and be a hero, Tony. Let Joe and Ben do any fighting if it comes to that."

"Don't worry, Bill. If there's any fighting, I'll run like a rabbit being chased by a dog," she said and kissed him.

"Time to go, Tony," Ben said.

She kissed Bill one more time and went to where Ben and Joe stood. They watched until Bill and the rest were out of sight.

"The way I figure it, they'll have both ends of the town heavily watched. If we can approach the town from the middle, our chances of being spotted will decrease. Ben, from here to town one of us will have to brush out our tracks. No use making it any easier for them to discover what we've done," Joe said.

Joe took the lead with Tony in the middle. Ben brought up the rear and swished a pine limb back and forth to wipe out their tracks. After a while, Joe stopped and sank to the ground. Tony crawled next to him. He raised his hand and pointed. Tony saw the glow of two cigarettes ahead of them. "What we going to do now, Joe?" she asked.

"We have to wait and hope they leave. We can't afford the time to backtrack around them," Joe

whispered.

“We don’t have the time to wait, Joe. I’ll distract them long enough for you, and Ben to get to one of the buildings. Wait for me. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” she whispered. She stood up and walked forward projecting her thoughts ahead of her. “You don’t see me. All you see is the snow and trees,” she projected. One of the men said, “Wha....,” then was silent. The other man asked, “What’s wrong, Fred, did you see something?”

“It must be the snow playing tricks on me. For a moment, I thought I saw a woman over there.” Fred answered.

“Buddy, you’d better find you a woman and get you a little. I think your lack of nookie has gone to your head,” said the second man.

Tony worked her way behind the men and moved toward the buildings. She crept along the side of them until she could only see the tips of their cigarettes. Checking to make sure no one was near, she let out a loud moan.

“What was that, Fred?” the other man asked.

“Sounds like someone hurt Rocky. We’d better go and check it out,” Fred said, tossing his cigarette away.

Tony let out a louder moan and moved against the building. About then, she noticed her footprints in the snow. She looked around and saw an old broom standing near the door of the building. Easing up to it, she let the men pass; then, she grabbed the broom and backtracked in her own footprints using the broom to wipe them away. Looking behind her, she saw two shadows go out of sight against a building down from her. Quickly, Tony went to the building and checked the door. Finding it locked, she went back to where Joe and Ben lay.

Going to the building, Joe forced the lock on the door and cracked it to see inside. The room was pitch black. “Over here, Tony,” he whispered. He looked up and saw Tony standing in front of him.

Tony went in the door and Joe took out a penlight. He shined it around the room. He saw a bed and a stand with a television on it. Next to the wall stood a dresser and night stand. On the floor lay an Oriental rug.

There were two more doors in the room. Joe walked to a door on the other side of the room and placed his ear against it.

Hearing nothing, he opened the door a crack and looked out. By the light coming from the windows facing the street, Joe saw they were in a store of some kind.

“No one’s been in here in weeks,” Tony said. She showed him the dust on her finger from the counter top.

They went into the next room and discovered the store was a combination Laundromat video store. “I always wanted to watch this movie but could never find it,” Ben said as he held up a videotape.

Joe read the label, “Attack of the Killer Tomatoes.” He gave Ben a look that said you’ve got to be kidding. At the back of the room was a big screen television.

Customers would rent a movie and watch it as their clothes washed and dried. None of the equipment looked as if it had been used in a long time.

Ben leaned against the wall next to the first row of washers and disappeared. They heard a thump followed by a grunt of pain. Tony and Joe ran to the wall and that is all they saw.

Where Ben had stood was a wall. They heard a soft knocking sound, and Joe put his ear against the wall. He rapped his knuckles against the wall a few times and heard Ben knock from the other side.

He tried to remember where Ben had been standing when he disappeared. He ran his hand along the wall and found a small indented place at shoulder level. He pushed on it and the wall swung to the side.

Ben stood there, dust covered with cobwebs in his hair. As the door started to close, Joe jammed a cassette into it so it would close only halfway.

“What did you find in here, Ben?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know. You’re the one with the light. Let’s see what’s in here that needed to be hidden,” Ben said.

They entered the room and brushed cobwebs out of their way. Joe shined the light around the room. One wall had a rack full of videocassettes. He went over and wiped the dust off a few of them. They were triple XXX rated movies. After a thorough search, Ben saw that all of them were X rated movies.

“Don’t let Jake in here or we’ll never get him to leave.” Ben’s remark gave Joe an idea.

“This place hasn’t been used in years. I doubt if anyone still knows it’s here. From the looks of things, no one comes into the store anyway. What if we used this room to hide out in? Who would expect us to stay right under their noses? I’m sure they will search the town after they don’t find us.

This would be the perfect place to hide. We could sneak out at night and get food. We could rest for a few days while they run around looking for us. After they shift their search to another area, we can leave.

Tony, do you think you can find Stalker and have him take you to Bill and the rest of them?” Joe asked.

Tony looked around the room and wrinkled her nose. “Not one of the cleanest places I’ve been in. I’ll go find Stalker. You two get busy cleaning away some of the dust and cobwebs. I’ll bring everyone here as quickly as I can,” she said as she went through the door.

Joe found a broom and mop at the end of the laundromat. Ben found a bunch of rags in a utility room in the store. They closed the door to the secret room and went to work.

While Joe swept the cobwebs from the ceiling and wall, Ben used the rags to wipe the dust off everything. In no time, the room began to shape up. Ben had just finished mopping the floor when they heard a soft knock on the wall.

Joe extinguished the light and stood to one side of the door with Ben on the other side. He slid the wall open a couple of inches and whispered, “Tony?”

“It’s us, Joe. Let us in. It’s getting daylight out and there are a lot of men in the streets,” Tony said.

Joe opened the wall wide enough for them to enter, then closed it and turned on the light. They stood in the center of the room and looked around. “Believe me, it’s a lot cleaner than when we found it,” Joe said when he saw the looks of disgust on a few of their faces.

“I think you and Ben have done a wonderful job. Now take a break and let us do a little cleaning,” Tony said.

Ben and Joe looked at each other then sat down.

Chapter 26

Todd took a drink of Bourbon and looked across the table at Ikey. The man sweated under the strain. Todd let him sit there for five minutes, then set the glass down and leaned forward. "You brought a man who we know nothing about in here. Now we can't find him, Ikey. I thought you had more sense. You know the rules. Only our people are allowed in here."

"Todd, he's just a harmless old prospector from up in the mountains. Shit, he's been in these mountains for so long he's batty. Come on, you lived out here all your life and know about these people. They are harmless. As to where he is, he most likely took off for the mountains again. From what I hear, they didn't treat him very well at the mess hall the other night, so he probably decided to get away from here. People like him figure more than two people are a crowd, anyway," Ikey said.

Todd poured Bourbon in his glass and half filled another glass, which he shoved across to Ikey. "You're right, Ikey. I do know these people. The most they want out of life is for people to leave them alone. Still, Paul is raising a ruckus about him being missing and wondering if he wasn't a spy?"

"Come on, Todd. I vouched for him myself. Do you think I would bring someone in here who could hurt us?" Ikey said in a disgusted voice.

"No, I don't Ikey; otherwise, you'd be dead now. But now, I want you to take a couple of men into the mountains and find the old coot. Bring him back here where we can watch him. In a few months we'll let him go back to his mountains."

"All right, Todd, but I believe we're wasting our time. You know how these mountain men are. If he doesn't want to be found, we won't find him," Ikey said as he got up from his chair.

"Try anyway and while you're out there, spot some places we can fortify for guard posts," Todd said.

Ikey left the office and crossed to the mess hall. He got a sandwich and cup of coffee and sat down at a table. "Must have been out of my mind to bring the old coot in anyway," he mumbled. Now, he had to spend the next week or so searching the mountains for him. He was glad all the snow was falling to the east of them. Walking around in the mountains was hard enough without having to fight a few feet of snow. Ikey motioned for two men sitting at a table near the door to come over to him.

"Jeffrey and Troy, right?" he asked.

"Right, sir. I'm Jeffrey and he's Troy," said the tall skinny brown haired man. He had a slanted face that made him look like a starved weasel. He was one of those people who were all arms and legs. Troy was beefy, maybe a little on the fat side. He was almost bald with only a little hair around the sides. His eyes were never still. He continually looked around as if someone were chasing him. The most striking thing about him was his feet. He had to have a size twenty feet. Ikey wondered where he bought his boots.

"Both of you go get three packs and load them with enough food to last five days. Get three sleeping bags and anything else that will help us stay warm. Remember we'll be carrying the packs on our backs, so don't make them too heavy," he told them.

"Where are we going?" Jeffrey asked.

"To try and find Captain, the old coot I brought in a few days ago. Meet me here at the mess hall at noon. After we eat, we will leave and don't forget to bring your guns," Ikey told them.

Damn, why did this have to happen now? He had planned on going to a small town fifty miles up

the road where he had a cute little piece of fluff waiting on him. It's a good thing Todd said to bring Captain back to the ranch. The way Ikey felt he would as soon shoot him as anything.

He left the mess hall and walked to his cabin. He went into the bedroom and laid out a pair of insulated long johns and two pairs of insulated socks. He rummaged around in the closet looking for his black snow mobile outfit. Not finding it, he figured Captain must have taken it. He pulled an old pair of coveralls from the floor and laid them on the bed. Stripping his clothes off, he put on the long johns and socks. Next, he put on a heavy pair of blue jeans and a flannel shirt. He searched for his best pair of arctic boots but didn't find them. "God damn it, Captain! Not my best pair of boots," he exclaimed. He found an older pair of boots that would work, and he put them on.

Going to the next room, he reached for his 30-30, but it was gone. God damn it to hell," he shouted. Fuming, he checked and saw that all of the ammo for the 30-30 was gone too. "When I get my hands on you, Captain, I'm going to wring your neck, you old bastard," he shouted at the ceiling. He put on the coveralls and found an old toboggan and a pair of heavy gloves. Putting on the gloves, he reached up and took down one of the newer rifles. Jamming a handful of extra ammo in his pocket, he stormed out of the cabin.

He still hadn't cooled down at noon when Jeffrey and Troy met him. "Hurry up and eat so we can go find that old son of a bitch," Ikey told them. They ate quickly, not asking any questions. They didn't want to get on the bad side of Ikey when he was mad as he was now.

Outside the mess hall, Troy asked, "Where do we start, Ikey?"

"The same place I found him the first time, and I hope he's there. If I have to spend the next few days running around those mountains looking for him, he'll wish he was dead," Ikey said.

They stopped at the guard post on the ridge and asked the men there if they had seen anything. The answer was no, so they trudged down the slope with Ikey cursing under his breath with every step. The next hill was where he had found Captain the first time. When he was almost to the boulders, something in the snow twenty feet to the left caught his eye. He walked over and bent down. There was a small footprint in the snow. Ahead of him, he saw another footprint. "What the hell?" he said.

"Jeffrey, you circle around that pile of boulders to the right and meet us on the other side."

He lost the footprints on a rocky ledge and had to hunt around until he found them again. "Has to be a woman or a child," he mumbled. The prints were too small to be a man's. There weren't many footprints, but they led in the direction of the valley with all the caves. He wondered if someone had moved into one of the caves. They had searched the caves thoroughly when they first got here. A few very old campfires were all they found. He walked up the hill but didn't see any more footprints. At the top he looked down into the valley. He looked across the valley to the caves in the side of the cliff. "So, we have some strangers around here," he mumbled.

"Come on, men. Let's hide in those rocks further up the slope and wait to see what happens. They made themselves comfortable between a few of the bigger rocks. Ikey told Troy to watch the caves and wake him when it got dark. He slouched down in his coveralls between two rocks that blocked the wind and went right to sleep. During the night, the wind came up and the temperature dropped. Ikey was about to walk out of the rocks for a leak when he saw movement near the stream in the valley.

He nudged Troy to get him to wake up. Whoever it was took his time and moved from shadow to shadow. The figure exposed itself for only brief periods. They crouched lower in the rocks as the figure came over the rim of the valley. By the moonlight, they saw it was a tall man. He looked left and right before going down the trail.

Troy brought up his rifle, but Ikey put his hand on the barrel and shook his head no. They watched the man until he was out of sight. Ikey came down from the rocks and looked at the caves on the far side of the valley.

“He came from one of those caves. His footprint is too big to match the one we found. There are other people over there somewhere. Let’s go see if we can find them,” Ikey said.

They walked down the trail and crossed the stream. Being as cautious as the man who left, they worked their way up to the caves. He had them spread out and looking for any signs to show which cave the man had come from. They didn’t even look in most of the smaller ones. After an hour of checking, they still didn’t know where the man had come from.

“This isn’t doing us any good. Troy, you go down to that small cave on the right and find you a place to hide. Jeffrey, come with me; we’ll go to the other end and find a place to hide out of sight. They must only go out at night. That means the man will be back before daylight. All we have to do is stay out of sight and watch which cave he goes into.

Ikey picked a small cave, got down on his knees and crawled into it. After Jeffrey crawled in, they turned around and found positions, which would let them see the entire valley. As Ikey settled in to wait, he pulled the collar of his coveralls up around his ears.

He came alert when Jeffrey nudged him and pointed to the valley. In the moonlight he saw a figure walking down the trail. The figure paused on this side of the stream for almost a half hour before climbing toward the caves. At the caves, the man paused for a long time before walking to the left and entering one of the caves. Jeffrey started to crawl out of the cave they were in. Ikey grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“Let’s give him a little while to get settled,” Ikey said. He remembered searching the cave the man had entered. It wasn’t very large and only went in about thirty feet. He doubted people would be staying in it.

It would be too easy to get trapped in this particular cave. He waited an hour then crawled out of his cave. Ikey saw that it would be daylight soon, so whatever they did, had to be soon.

With Jeffrey following behind, he sneaked over to the cave the man had entered. He listened for a while but didn’t hear anything. Then he slipped into the cave.

Jeffrey startled him by turning on a light. Reaching over, Ikey grabbed the light out of his hand and turned it off. One thing about it, if there was anyone else in the cave, he knew they were there now. He stood very tense expecting to hear a shot any second. After awhile, he relaxed a little and moved deeper into the cave. Cupping his hand over the light, he turned it on.

He allowed just enough light to spray between his fingers to see what was around him. The cave was empty. How could that be? The man had entered and he could see no other way out.

“Go get Troy and bring him here,” he said to Jeffrey.

He searched the walls but couldn’t see any openings. Maybe the man had stepped to another cave when he wasn’t looking. It was the only thing that made any sense.

* * * *

Inside the hidden part of the cave a red flashing light came on. This happened when the beam of Ikey’s light hit a hidden sensor in the wall.

Leila and Benji extinguished the lanterns. Lifting their rifles, they walked to where Jeff stood near the door. Jeff slid a hidden panel open a few inches and stared out into darkness. He thought he heard someone breathing, but he wasn’t sure. He closed the panel and leaned next to Leila. “Quietly, go get Cap out of bed and tell him we have visitors,” he told her.

After she left, he slid the panel open again. Dim light showed at the mouth of the cave as daylight approached. Two shadowy forms stood in the mouth of the cave for a moment, then entered. He heard one of the forms ask. “Ikey, where are you?”

“I’m over here and keep your voice down,” another voice said less than three feet from him. Startled, Jeff almost dropped his rifle. Slowly, so as not to make a sound he eased the panel closed. Jeff sat down on the floor and leaned against the door with his ear pressed to the wood.

“There’s no one in here, Ikey,” a voice said.

“Brilliant deduction, Sherlock,” another voice answered.

“Where did the man go?” asked one of the men.

“He’s still here somewhere in a hidey hole we can’t see. Troy, I want you to make your way back to the ranch and bring back a couple of dozen men. Jeffrey and I will wait in another cave until you get here. Then, we’ll root him out and anyone else that’s with him.”

Jeff didn’t like the sounds of that. Tugging on Benji’s arm, he moved to the rear where Cap was coming out of one of the rooms. He took Cap by the arm and led him back into the room.

“They know we’re here somewhere, and one of them has gone back to the ranch for more men,” he whispered.

“How many of them are there?” Cap asked.

“Three, that I know of, and one of them has left,” Jeff answered.

“Okay. We have two choices. We can stay put and hope they don’t find the secret entrance, or we can hightail it out the back way. I say go out the back,” Cap said.

“Staying would be awfully chancy if they bring a lot of men back. I vote we use the back way,” Jeff said.

Both Leila and Benji said go also. Cap sat down on the bed and said. “Benji, take your rifle and pack to the rear entrance. Make sure it’s clear and wait for us.”

Benji left the room to pick up his rifle and pack. Cap looked at Jeff and Leila. “Soon as Benji is in the tunnel, we start arming the booby traps. Do it the way I showed you, Leila, and nothing will go wrong.

Jeff and I will connect the explosives near the door. Then, we’ll come back and get you,” Cap told her.

They had practiced this a hundred times. Benji went to the mouth of the escape tunnel. He would pull away part of the brush that hid the tunnel and make sure the way was clear. Leila would go into each of the rooms and set the timers on the explosives. She was to use her judgment on how long to set the timers for.

Considering the man had to go back to the ranch, and then to return, she set the timers for three hours. Cap and Jeff wired the explosives on either side of the door. They put a pressure cap against the bottom of the door. If someone opened the door, the cap would ignite the explosives. They placed the explosives so the blast would be outward and upward, causing the roof to collapse. If no one entered the door, the timed explosives in the rooms would go off, doing the same thing. There were enough explosives in the rooms to blow away half the mountain.

Twenty minutes later, they stood beside Benji and looked at the snow swept hills. “Where do we go from here?” Cap asked.

“We know that Ben is headed for Galexie, so that’s where we should go,” Leila said.

Cap spread the map out on the floor of the tunnel and did some figuring. “It looks to be around a hundred and forty miles from here. Twenty miles due west of here is a small town where we can probably pick up a car or truck. If we travel all day, we should get there before dark. That way we can see what the town looks like. We can plan on how to steal a car if there are people there,” Cap said.

“Two and a half hours before the explosives go off, Cap. I would like to be as far away as we can get when they go up,” Leila said.

“Lead the way, Jeff. I’ll bring up the rear,” Cap said. They filed out of the tunnel, and Cap placed the brush against the opening and fell in behind Leila.

* * * *

“I hope Troy brings some food back with him,” Jeffrey said in a whiny voice.

“If you hadn’t have been so lazy and had packed some food before we left, you wouldn’t be hungry. Now shut up and quit your complaining,” Ikey told him. He was irritated at himself because

he had forgotten to bring something to eat, too. His stomach was letting him know the last time he had eaten was at noon the day before. It was full daylight now.

They sat in the shadows of the cave and had a good view of the surrounding area. Although the sun was shining, the temperature was still near zero. Troy had been gone for a little over an hour and a half. If he didn't lolly-gag around, he should be on his way back.

"Ikey, why would anyone want to live in a cave?" Jeffrey asked.

Ikey hadn't realized that Jeffrey was dimwitted until they had been in the cave for awhile. He wished Jeffrey would just shut the fuck up and quit asking stupid questions.

Jeffrey tapped him on the shoulder saying, "You didn't answer me, Ikey?"

"How the hell should I know why people would want to live in a cave? Maybe they like living underground. Shut up and leave me alone," Ikey said in an irritated voice.

"Are you mad at me, Ikey? I don't want you to be mad at me."

Ikey turned his back to Jeffrey and hoped he would go to sleep or do anything but talk.

The silence lasted for about fifteen minutes until Jeffrey tapped him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry I made you mad, Ikey," he said in a hurt voice.

Ikey wasn't a hard man, before he got the disease he had been a kind and gentle man. The disease hadn't changed that part of him. He turned over and said, "I'm not mad at you, Jeffrey; I'm just tired and a little sleepy." He patted Jeffrey on the shoulder.

"You go to sleep, Ikey. I'll keep watch and wake you if I see anything," Jeffrey said. He had a big smile on his face.

"You do that Jeffrey," Ikey said as he snuggled down in his coveralls and closed his eyes. He didn't realize he had fallen asleep until Jeffrey grabbed his arm. "What is it?" he asked.

"Troy and the men are coming," Jeffrey said as he pointed to the rim of the valley.

Ikey looked and saw a file of men coming down the path. He heard them talking from where he sat. He wished they would be a little quieter; they were making enough noise to wake the dead. Ikey waited until they started up the hill toward the caves, then walked out into the sunshine and motioned them to him.

Troy walked up to him, panting from the climb. "Todd wants you back at the ranch, Ikey. He told me to take charge of these men and search the caves."

"Did Todd say what he wanted?" Ikey asked.

"Something about you taking a bunch of men down south somewhere to contact a man named Greg?"

"How come Todd let you have so many men?" Ikey asked looking at the men standing on the slope. There had to be close to fifty men milling around.

"Last night a piss pot full of people came in from down south. The whole damn valley is full of people," Troy told him.

He told Troy to do a thorough search of the caves and to look for a hidden entrance into one of the caves. He picked up his rifle and told Jeffrey to come with him.

As he topped the canyon on the far side of the valley, a blast knocked him off his feet. Rolling over Ikey looked back. Dust boiled into the air, and he saw rocks and trees tumble down the mountain. Huge boulders spun end over end landing in the stream blocking the water. As the dust blew away, Ikey saw that half the side of the mountain had a hole in it.

"What happened, Ikey?" Jeffrey asked. He sat up and fingered a cut place on his chin.

Ikey stood up, stunned. Only minutes ago, he had been over there. He knew the men who were to search the caves were dead. Nothing could survive such a blast. He felt the ground tremble under his feet as more of the mountain slid away and tumbled into the valley. Water began to back up in the stream as a wall of dirt and rock fifty feet high formed across it.

"Just some fireworks, Jeffrey. Nothing for you to worry about," he said in a sad voice. He took

one more look at the valley, then turned and walked away.

* * * *

Cap felt the earth shake before he heard the blast. He turned and looked back the way they had come. He saw dust billowing into the air three ridges back. The noise rumbled back and forth between the hills of the valley they were in.

“If anyone survived, he will think we died in the blast,” he said as they stared at the rising dust. A few minutes later they trudged on toward the town they were trying to reach.

Chapter 27

Bill slid through the sliding wall and urgently said, "Put the lanterns out. They are starting to search the buildings."

Tony and Gail turned off the gas lanterns and picked up their rifles. Joe and Bill went through the wall door and peered out the window. Two buildings down they saw a dozen men enter the structure. Across the street, another dozen men left a building and headed for the next one.

"Look around, Bill. Make sure there's nothing that will tip them off to us being here," Joe said. He checked the video portion of the store while Bill checked the Laundromat side of it. They met back at the wall and stepped into the hidden room. Sliding the wall closed, Joe cautioned everyone to be quiet.

It wasn't long before they heard people on the other side of the wall. They heard two men talking. One of them said, "I hope we find them pretty soon. Todd is having a shit fit, and Greg is taking it out on us."

"This is a waste of time. We should be searching in the mountains. That's where they're holed up. They couldn't have gotten into town without us seeing them," the other man said.

"Todd is on one hell of a rampage after losing fifty men when that mountain exploded a few miles from his headquarters. Ikey says he believes the people who were hiding in the cave escaped. He said Todd reamed him up and down and told him not to look for ghosts, but to get his ass down here and find Joe.

"I know what you mean. Greg has turned hinky on us. He sees ambushes and traps everywhere. He's so paranoid, he won't go anywhere without a dozen men around him. All our leaders are turning into clowns or assholes."

"Ikey and Greg got drunk last night, and I sat around and listened to them. Ikey kept saying he was going to get the Captain because he stole his boots and rifle. Greg was saying that they were never going to catch Joe because Joe didn't even exist. I tell you from the way they were talking, it wouldn't surprise me if they went off the deep end anytime now."

"Shit, we have people tripping over each other out there. As far as I'm concerned, they're searching in the wrong direction."

"Hey, they are the powers that be. Who are we to question their judgment?" the man asked with a laugh.

"Just between you and me, if I get a chance, I'm heading east to join up with the new President's forces. It's bound to be better than it is around here."

"I don't know; I've heard some wild stories about the people on the East Coast. I hear that all the men between fifteen and seventy are forced to join the army. I heard if they catch you without a pass from the military unit you belong to, they up and shoot you. Our leaders may be crazy, but, at least, we have a lot of freedom to do what we want, Jackie."

"Yeah, freedom to be chased by an old man and his dogs, to be eaten alive by a wolf as big as a horse, to have someone shoot you from three miles away. Sounds like we have all kinds of freedom."

"Speaking of the old man, did you hear they spotted him and his dogs at the cabin Joe and his people had used?"

"Christ, that's all we need. Be glad you weren't with us on the trip over here, Zack. Those damn

dogs of his killed thirty-seven men. If that old fucker is following us, I know I am heading east. I want nothing more to do with him or his dogs. We have wasted enough time here. Let's go to the next building.

* * * *

Joe cautioned them to stay quiet for awhile. He waited fifteen minutes then cracked the sliding wall. The place looked quiet, so he slipped through and checked the other rooms.

"I hear them in the next building. Let's stay in this room until it gets dark," Joe told them as he closed the wall.

"Do you think he was talking about the cave your wife and boy are in?" Jake asked Ben.

"Could be. It sounds near the location where we left them," Ben answered.

"Aren't you worried they may be dead?" Jake asked.

"They aren't dead, or even hurt. If they were, I would know. My Guardian says we will meet them soon."

"How does your Guardian know they are headed our way?" Bill asked.

"She just does," Ben answered.

"Did you hear the man say that Zeb is up in the mountains with his dogs?" Jake asked.

"I did and that bothers me a lot. He has to be following us and he can be a big problem if he catches up to us," Joe said.

"What does he want from us?" Tony asked.

"When we find out, I'm afraid we will wish we hadn't," Joe answered.

"At least, we're almost there," Tammy said.

"This may sound funny but after all we've been through to get there, I'm not looking forward to getting there. Whatever is guiding us wants me there for a purpose. To tell you the truth, I am scared," Tony said.

"Hell, baby. It can't be any worse than it is now. At least it will be over," Bill said. He gave her a hug.

"Don't get your hopes up, Bill. Something tells me this is just the beginning," Ben said.

"Oh, shit! You white folks can forget about dragging this skinny black man's ass around the country any more," Jake said.

They all laughed at how serious he was.

"I mean it. This down home black boy is going to make like a rock and stay in one place. You white people like too much excitement for this black boy. Uh, Uh, I's gonna put my feet down and watch the grass grow. I have forgotten what it's like to be warm. If I don't see another flake of snow in my life, it will suit me fine. Being chased by a pack of wild dogs and having thousands of mad people after me in arctic temperatures is not my idea of normal," he said.

By the time he finished, they were laughing so hard a few of them couldn't stand up. He stood there and glared at them. After awhile he grinned and said, "Hey, this cold weather does something to me. Now that I have that off my chest, can we fix something to eat? I'm starved."

* * * *

Leila and Benji stood out of sight at the edge of the garage door watching the street. Every now and then, they heard Cap curse from the back of the garage. "How much longer is it going to be?" Leila called back to him.

Cap raised his oil-smeared face from under the hood of the car. "If I can get this stubborn bolt out, I can have the starter on in fifteen minutes," he called back.

On entering the town, they saw there were too many people for them to just walk up and steal a car off the street. If someone saw them taking a car, they would be after them. They preferred not having it known they were around. Cap checked around and found a four-wheel drive Subaru in a garage with a broken starter. A new starter was lying on the workbench covered with dust.

Apparently, the owner had intended to replace the starter a few months before. Cap figured they could put the starter on and sneak out of town in the car. Jeff was out looking for something to eat. One good thing, the electric heater in the garage was working; Leila felt the heat blowing across the nape of her neck.

“Mom, what if someone stops us once we are on the road?” Benji asked. He shifted his weight on the box where he sat.

“We’ll try to bluff our way through. If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to fight. More than likely, if we stay to ourselves, no one will notice us,” she told him.

A man came out of a house a few doors up. He looked up the street, then looked toward the garage where they were. The man stepped off the porch and started their way. Leila ducked to the side of the door and raised the rifle she held.

Benji faded into the shadows on his side of the door. Through a crack in the wall, Leila watched the man walk up to the garage. He had reached out to open the door when someone shouted from up the street.

He turned around and yelled, “What?” Leila couldn’t hear what the man up the street said, but the man at the garage door walked away from the garage. She came over and sat down on the box Benji had been sitting on. Her hands were shaking and her hair was damp from sweat. Until that moment, she hadn’t realized how close she had come to killing another human.

She realized that a lot of men had died in the explosion at the cave, but this was different. This time she would be face to face with the person she killed.

“Are you okay, Mom?” Benji asked.

She reached out and took his hand. “I’ll be all right in a moment. I was so afraid the man would come in here that my nerves are a little on edge,” she told him in a reassuring voice.

They heard the sound of an engine cranking behind the garage. Cap came up to them and said, “As soon as Jeff gets back, we can leave.” He walked over to the workbench and put some degreaser lotion on his hands. “Sure would be nice to take a shower. I wish I had some clean clothes to put on,” he said after wiping his hands on a paper towel.

His shirt had oil and grease stains all over it. He took his shirt off and threw it in the corner. He reached up and lifted a pair of coveralls off a nail beside the workbench. Shrugging into them, he zipped them up and came to stand beside them.

“Jeff should have been back by now,” he said.

“Do you think he ran into trouble?” Leila asked.

“I don’t know. If he isn’t back in fifteen minutes, I’ll go out and look for him. Meanwhile, load our things in the car so we can get out of here soon as possible,” he told them.

They put their packs in the trunk of the car. Cap checked the rifles making sure they were fully loaded. He had Benji get a five-gallon gas can sitting in the corner. He told him to take it to a truck parked outside the garage. Cap handed Benji a rubber hose, and told him to siphon as much gas from the truck as he could.

Leila called from the door and told him that she had seen Jeff leave a store up the street. Cap let out a long sigh. At least, they didn’t have to worry about getting Jeff out of trouble. He started the car. It ran rough and Cap wished he had found a set of spark plugs to replace the old ones. If everything worked out, the car should get them to where they were going. That it was a four-wheel drive was a big plus in their favor.

Jeff eased through the door with two bags in his hands. He set them down on the workbench. “Sorry I took so long,” he said. He took a loaf of bread and two packages of lunchmeat out of the bag. “I was lucky to find this. They went and took everything to eat out of all the empty houses.

“I got this by sneaking in one of the houses that was occupied. While the people talked in the living room, I raided their fridge. Before I left, I listened to what they were talking about. Ben and Joe

were last sighted near a town called Arapaho on the Colorado border. That was two days ago.

“From what I heard, they were out in force checking every house and building in the county trying to find them. A man named Greg thinks Ben and the people with him doubled back on them to try and throw Greg’s men off. The man doing the talking said that Greg had most of his people out doing a sweep back across the border into Kansas.

“After we eat, I suggest we get on the road. From what I heard, we shouldn’t meet anyone between here and the town of Arapaho,” Jeff told them.

Benji came in with the gas can. It was all he could do to carry the heavy can. Cap took the can from him and carried it to the car. While Leila prepared sandwiches, Cap and Benji poured gas into the tank of the car.

After eating, Jeff slid back the rear door of the garage, so Cap could drive the car into the alley between the buildings. A light snow was falling and the temperature had gone up a little.

Cap drove down the alley with his headlights off. Nearing a cross street, he had Jeff get out and go to the corner. Jeff checked both ways then motioned for Cap to cross the street. Jeff waited a few minutes to see if anyone noticed the car crossing the street and entering the alley. He then crossed and got back in the car.

This is the way it went until they reached the edge of town. Cap waited until a large truck passed on its way into town, then he drove out onto the open highway.

* * * *

Joe and Ben peered through the curtain at the street. “See that station wagon sitting in front of the bank?” Joe said.

“Yeah, it should be big enough to haul all of us.”

“When it gets dark, Jake and I will go get it and bring it around to the back of the store. Lucky for us, Greg thinks we are headed back the way we came,” Joe said with a grin.

The evening before, Joe and Bill sneaked out of the store and went to an alley behind the house Greg was staying in. They overheard Greg and Paul arguing about sending their men back east to search for Joe’s group.

Paul wanted to keep half the men in the town. Greg argued that because of the rough country to the east, he needed every man. Paul finally relented, but only after getting Greg to agree to leave a dozen men in town.

The men pulled out of town during the early morning in a convoy of cars and trucks. Occasionally, one of the men left behind would come outside. He would look up and down the street and then go back in the building.

Twice, a truck drove into town. The men in the truck talked to the men who stayed in town. Then they drove on heading east.

When they got back to the store with the hidden room, Bill ate a sandwich. He reached down and picked up his pack. “Don’t forget to stop and pick me up,” he said to Joe.

“We won’t. If everything goes right, we should be there in four hours. Pick out the right place, and we can cut off these men back here,” Joe told him.

Bill looked over to where Jake was struggling into a skimobile outfit that was too big for him. “You about ready to go, Jake?” he asked.

“Soon as I get the bag of dynamite,” Jake said.

Tony came up, kissed Bill and told him to be careful as they went out the back door. They walked close to the houses along the alley until they came to the edge of town. They checked both ways then stepped out on the snow-covered road. In minutes, the town was behind them and they were in the foothills. Jake had a hard time keeping up because of the oversized ski mobile outfit.

Bill stopped and searched his pack until he found a roll of tape. He rolled up the legs of Jake’s outfit and taped them to his boots. Jake walked around a little then said, “Thanks, Bill. I would have to

find the outfit of someone seven feet tall.” He looked comical as he followed Bill.

The legs of the ski mobile outfit were almost two feet longer than his legs. As he walked, he would step on one of the pants legs, which threw him off balance. After Bill taped them up, Jake walked a lot better.

Bill increased the pace. Two hours later they came to a spot where the hills narrowed on both sides of the road. Bill took half the dynamite and went to the hill on one side of the road while Jake went to the other side. They placed dynamite under every big rock and boulder they found. Bill went back to his pack and got a handful of the small electronic detonators. He placed one in each bundle of dynamite; he planted and pulled the little antenna up on it. Jake met him at the road.

“We need a place high enough to see Joe coming. A place that will be in sight of the detonators,” Bill told Jake.

Jake looked up the next hill and saw a tall pine tree near the top. “If one of us can climb that pine tree, we could see far enough back down the road to see if Joe is being followed,” he said.

They picked up their packs and walked up the hill. The pine tree sat fifty feet off the road and they had to wade deep snow to get to it. Underneath its protective branches, the ground was almost free of snow. The branches of the tree were laced so tightly together Bill had to use his hand ax to trim enough limbs to climb.

The sky turned gray as the sun went over the mountains to the west of them. Under the tree where Jake sat, it was almost dark. A car with chains on passed by on the road to town. They watched the glow of its headlights reflected off the snow as it went between the hills.

The wind picked up a little at the edge of dark. Jake was almost asleep when Bill yelled down from the top of the tree that a car was coming. Jake made his way back to the edge of the road and took up a position behind a large rock. He checked his rifle again to make sure it was fully loaded. The wind brought the sound of an engine to him. He saw the headlights of a car as it topped a hill a couple of miles back.

No sooner was it out of sight than a bunch of headlights popped over the hill behind the car. “Why does everything have to be done the hard way?” he muttered to himself. The lead car was close enough to hear the tires spin and engine race as it clawed for traction on the snow-covered road. He saw the car come into view followed by a pickup truck that was gaining on it. The car and pickup passed the point where the dynamite was planted and started up the hill toward him.

Jake leaned against the top of the rock and sighted in on the pickup. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the rest of the vehicles coming into view.

Jake almost pulled the trigger when Bill detonated the dynamite. He saw fire flash into the air as the blast caught a couple of the vehicles broadside. In the lead vehicle Jake saw Joe frantically try to keep the station wagon on the road as it fishtailed from side to side. Flashes of light winked from the back of the pickup, and gunshots echoed off the hills.

Leaning into the butt of the rifle, Jake steadied his arms on top of the rock. Lights flashed in his eyes as the station wagon slid sideways on the road. The pickup slid sideways toward Jake. He sighted on the windshield and fired a long burst. The truck jerked to the right and slammed into the bank. Two forms standing in the back of the truck flew over its top. They struck the side of the hill and lay still.

At the bottom of the hill two cars blazed sending thick smoke into the air. The other vehicles had backed away and Jake saw men milling about.

It would be awhile before they cleared the highway enough to get through. Jake approached the pickup from the side, ready to open fire at the first sign of movement. Two men slumped against the dash. One of them had the right side of his head blown away. The driver moaned and pushed himself away from the steering wheel. He slumped against the door. Jake saw three holes in the man’s chest. As he watched, blood seeped from the wounds and formed bubbles. The man stared at Jake with such

hatred in his eyes that Jake turned away. He would soon be dead anyway. He heard a rifle fire behind him and ducked behind the truck.

Over the bed of the truck, Jake saw that one of the men who had been thrown from the truck stagger down the hill. Another shot sounded. The man threw his hands in the air, and fell face first in the snow.

Turning, Jake saw Bill standing with a smoking rifle in his hands. He shrugged and said, "He had you dead to rights. I couldn't let him shoot our token black man could I?" He grinned at Jake and reached out his hand to help Jake up.

They heard shots from the bottom of the hill. Bullets struck the hill around them. "Time to get out of here," Bill said as he started running up the hill.

A loud boom sounded from the hilltop and they heard a scream behind them. Joe had parked the station wagon on the other side of the hill out of sight. He lay on his stomach in the middle of the road. The long barreled buffalo gun stuck out in front of him. As they came up to him, he fired again. The kick of the powerful rifle slid him backwards in the snow a foot. Joe rolled onto his back saying, "Damn that hurts." He rubbed his shoulder and stood up. "Come on. Let's get out of here." He passed the gun through the rear window to Tony. Jake and Bill got in the front seat as Joe slid behind the wheel.

Joe eased the station wagon down the hill. Ben sat in the rear seat fiddling with a C.B. radio. All they heard was noise. Then, a loud voice said, "Damn it, Greg! Those dogs are cutting us to pieces. We have killed hundreds of them, yet they still lie hidden and ambush us every time we turn around."

"How many men have you lost, Henry?" Greg asked.

"Twenty-two and eight wounded so bad they are out of action," Henry told him.

"How in hell did you let the old man and his dogs get around you?" Greg yelled into the radio.

"They must have laid hidden in the snow until we passed them. Shit! You know that once they sink into the snow they are completely hidden. That is how this started. I was a hundred yards ahead when one of the men stepped on one of the dogs. Before anyone knew what was happening, a dozen dogs rose out of the snow and tore the man to pieces.

"Since then, it's been one attack after another. For God's sake, Greg! Send me some help. I sent a man over to where Paul and his men are working their way through the mountains. He hasn't returned yet. We hear a lot of firing that way and it is coming closer. Paul is retreating this way. Oh God! A whole pack of dogs came out of the woods on our right. They dragged five of my men down. We are firing everything we have at them. They are dying by the dozens and yet they tear away at the bodies. Christ! They aren't afraid of our guns," Henry said. His voice caused the hair to stand up on the backs of everyone's head.

"Jesus H. Christ! Dogs are crashing through the windows!" Greg said. They heard firing and savage growls. "Henry, there are only three of us left. The room is full of dogs! We are done for. Make your way east, and let Todd know what happened here." They heard a scream and a lot of growling, then silence.

"Come in, Greg. I need your advice." Henry said.

"Young 'un, do what your boss said and walk to the east. My dogs won't harm you unless you shoot at them," they heard Zeb's gravelly voice say on the radio.

"I'll get you, you old son of a bitch," Henry screamed into the radio. He ranted and raved for a few minutes then the radio went dead.

Ben started to turn the radio off when they heard, "Joe, I know you're listening. It wasn't nice of you to leave me back there. Squeeker says you'll pay for that. Don't stop, Joe. We're right behind you. My friends are eager to meet you again. They'd like to have you over for dinner." They heard his cackling laugh over the radio. "Do you get it, Joe? They would like to have you for dinner." They heard him cackle with laughter. "Joe, you can't escape me. If I have to, I'll hound you to the far

reaches of hell, but I'll have you," Zeb said.

The finality in Zeb's voice chilled them to the bone. Ben snapped off the radio. "That man scares me," Ben said.

"Did you notice anything different about Zeb?" Joe asked.

No one said anything. "What do you mean, Joe?" Bill asked.

"He didn't use any of the hillbilly slang like he did when he was with us. That means whatever is inside of him has taken over completely," Joe told them.

"Why does he want you so bad, Joe?" Gail asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Joe answered.

"Stalker says he wants your mind," Tammy said from the back of the station wagon.

"My mind!" Joe exclaimed.

"Stalker says that in normal times your mind would be one of the foremost military minds in the world. This is something Zeb wants badly. He realizes he'll never control humans in the same way he controls animals. With your knowledge, Zeb can train his dogs and use their talents to overcome anything. Whatever has taken over Zeb is malignant and evil," Tammy said.

Joe looked at Bill and Bill nodded his head yes to the unspoken question. If it looked like Joe was to be taken by Zeb and his dogs, Bill would blow his brains out. He would keep Zeb from gaining the knowledge Joe had. Bill hoped it never came to that.

Up ahead they saw the headlights of a car. From the rear seat Ben said, "That's my family up there. Stop a hundred feet from them, and let me get out. I don't want them to shoot any of us after we've traveled so far."

Joe stopped the station wagon well behind the car. He couldn't see anyone, but he knew guns were pointed at the station wagon. Ben opened the door and got out. He walked to stand in front of the station wagon letting the lights shine on him.

"Leila, Benji?" he shouted.

"Ben, is it you?" a female voice shouted back.

"Yes, my love," Ben's voice quivered with emotion as he walked forward. A bundled up boy rushed from the shadows and jumped into Ben's arms. Ben fell to his knees and held the boy.

Ben raised his tear-stained face as Leila walked up and looked down at them. He reached up and pulled her down beside him and wrapped his arms around both of them.

"God, how I've missed the both of you," he sobbed. Leila held him and made soothing sounds as he cried. She looked up and saw strangers, except for Jane and Jake, surrounded them.

Ben wiped his eyes and stood up, pulling them up with him. "Everyone, I would like you to meet my wife and son," he said in a voice choked with emotion.

Leila introduced herself and Benji, then Cap and Jeff when they came out of the shadows of the car. All the while, Ben stood there with tears of happiness running down his cheeks. He held on to her and Benji as if he would never let loose of them.

While Ben talked to his family, Joe and the others went to help Cap fix the car. In a little while, the car whirled to life.

Joe walked up to them and said, "We all agreed that you and your family should have the car, Ben. Cap and Jeff will ride with us. We need to leave now Ben," Joe turned and walked to the station wagon.

Ben took his family to the car and followed the station wagon as it made its way down the snow-covered road.

Chapter 28

"Wake up, Jess," he distantly heard Ross say.

"What?" he mumbled, shaking sleep from his mind.

"Get you a cup of coffee, Jess. I have some bad news for General Hawkins. I want to know if you want me to give it to him or do you want to do it?"

Jess sat with his feet over the side of the bed and rubbed his eyes. He got up and went to the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. Taking a sip of the steaming liquid, he felt alert enough to hear what Ross had to say. "Give me the bad news, then I'll decide," he said.

"All the soldiers who went to help Joe's group are dead. They ran into trouble fifty miles from here. They were unlucky enough to get caught in a town that a large force of men was moving into. I thought General Hawkins should know about it since they were his men," Ross said.

Jess searched through the drawers in his desk looking for a cigarette. Although he hadn't smoked in fifteen years, recent events had him puffing like a factory smokestack. "Damn, where are they?" he mumbled.

"If you are referring to your cigarettes, they are under the stack of books on the chair near the coffee maker," Ross said.

Jess went to the chair and lifted the books off it. He picked up the pack of cigarettes and lit one. Drawing the smoke into his lungs, he went and sat down at his cluttered desk.

"You know, Jess, smoking is bad for your health. I wonder if you realize the danger you are in. The way it is, you drink too much coffee. Smoking increases your metabolism to the point you might have a heart attack," Ross said with concern in his voice.

Running his hand through his hair, Jess leaned back and sipped his coffee. "The way things stand now, I won't live long enough to have a heart attack," he said.

"I have other news to tell you about if you care to hear it now?" Ross told him.

"Give me a few minutes to finish my first cup of coffee," Jess said in a grouchy voice. He heard a knock on the door and said, "Come in,"

Ruth walked in and went to the coffee pot. "I thought I heard voices," she said. She wore a faded pair of blue jeans and a silky white blouse. She was barefooted and obviously still half asleep.

Feeling self-conscious sitting there in his shorts, Jess went over and put his robe on. He came back to his desk and sat down reaching for his cup of coffee. Ruth sat down in the chair across from his desk. She held the cup of coffee to her lips as though savoring a fine wine. He let her take a few sips then asked, "How're you feeling this morning, Ruth?"

"Like I've been run over by a Mack truck. If someone would take a stick and beat me on the back, I would probably feel better," she answered.

"I know the feeling," Jess said with a smile. He told her about the news of the soldiers' deaths. She sat there stoically for a few moments and then sighed. "This is going to hit General Hawkins pretty hard. He and Major Jacobs were good friends. So much tragedy in such a short time," she said, shaking her head. "By the way, I noticed that Dr. Palmer is up early and working in your lab. Do you think he has a chance of coming up with anything?" she asked.

"He didn't go to bed last night. He is working with Ross and Rita setting up some experiments. He reminds me a lot of Ross in that his work comes before everything else. They should get along

fine," Jess told her.

"Yes, he is rather obsessed with finding a cure for this disease," Ruth stated.

"Okay, Ross, Tell me the rest of the news."

"First, I want to tell you that Joe and his group are very close. They are probably seventy miles from here if the reports we get from the men hunting them are correct. Rita and I believe they are hiding near the town of Arapaho. We think they will stay out of sight until the search for them shifts elsewhere. I think you will be pleased to know that while Rita kept Pete's shadow busy I was able to penetrate our nuclear facilities. I put a blocking program in place, which will prevent Pete from launching the missiles. In time he will be able to figure it out, but we don't plan on giving him the time.

"Last night the Soviet missile forces launched four nuclear missiles at the approaching Chinese in Siberia. We estimate that the explosions killed close to a hundred thousand Chinese troops. This may slow the Chinese down for a while, but they will continue their push westward. Eastern Russia will be under the control of the Soviet hardliners within the next month, we estimate. The Soviet missile forces have issued a warning to Iran. The commander told them that if they crossed the southern Soviet border, he would unleash his missiles on them.

"Africa is a hotbed of turmoil. The people there appear to be lining up on a black versus white bases. Although the whites are small in number, they control all of the sophisticated weapons. We figure it will be a bloodbath before the whites are finally forced out. South Africa is adopting the policy of letting the other countries fight it out there by weakening their enemies. They have clamped down on all blacks in their country deporting thousands to countries in the north. None of the northern countries are trying to invade South Africa for fear of them exploding their nuclear weapons on them. Prime Minister Botta was assassinated yesterday and Jon Statoie took over the head of government. He is one of the radical hard liners, firmly believing that all blacks should be driven out of South Africa.

"In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has fallen to Iranian backed troops. Reports state that King Faid and his entire family were killed as they tried to escape. Iraq is reeling after Iranian terrorists set off a bomb in one of the chemical plants in Baghdad. The plant was producing mass quantities of biological gas. The Iraqis were stupid enough to store the gas at the plant. Eyewitnesses say the streets of Baghdad are littered with bodies. The Iranians are in complete control of Afghanistan now and are preparing to push into Pakistan. India is a shattered country. Fighting between Hindus and Moslems has left the country in flames. The Ganges River is filled with dead bodies and major outbreaks of cholera are reported around the country.

"China is rushing upwards of a million militia men to the Vietnamese border to stem the tide of the Vietnamese advance. Laos and Cambodia have fallen to the Vietnamese. Sources in Thailand say the Vietnamese are staging on the other side of their border. Any day now they expect the Vietnamese to invade. Taiwan has cautioned the Vietnamese that if they invade Thailand, Taiwan will stop supporting them. It is not believed this will stop them. The Vietnamese believe this is an opportunity to put all of Southeast Asia under their rule. Rita and I believe that it won't be long before the Vietnamese are forced to pull back and protect the gains they have already made.

"Great Britain sneaked a company of their famous Gurka troops into France last week. Reports indicate they are creating all kinds of havoc behind the enemy lines. This has eased the pressure on the British mainland. France, or the new country of Europia, is pulling troops from the coast to look for the swift moving Gurkas. With the help of U.S. subs, not one of the boats ferrying troops from France to England has made it across the English Channel.

"Now to our own situation. As you know, people are leaving here. At the present time there are a little over three thousand people outside the complex. A few are leaving, but we don't expect it to drop much below that level. All the people who have left are going to Todd's headquarters. We

believe Todd is going to use them to farm the land. If this is so, it doesn't make any sense. The growing season is too short to grow much. Besides, the soil is not that fertile. There are too many inconsistencies in Todd's thinking to believe he will ever pull this venture off. I can understand his wanting fresh vegetables, but there is enough food lying around to last for years. Well enough about Todd. The situation in the East remains the same. Army troops are still trying to clear out the rebels in West Virginia and Kentucky without much success. That's it for now," Ross said.

"Fascinating, how on earth did you learn all of that? In Iceland, we would have to wait weeks sometimes before we could confirm something," Ruth said.

"It's really quite simple, Ruth. As long as we have trans-Atlantic communication, we tap into different countries' computers. We sift through all the news and take only what has been confirmed. Rita and I analyze it and make probable projections on what is going to happen. So far, we have been ninety-seven percent right," Ross said.

"Ross, there is far more going on in the states than we were led to believe. Can you give me a brief overview of what is happening?" Ruth asked.

"Rita and I went through millions of government documents and have found some interesting things. In the early sixties, the government had a secret lab in the Rockies. It was located a hundred miles from here, twenty miles west of Pueblo. In this lab they carried out the first experiments in gene splicing. In nineteen sixty-four they created a new virus that had mind-altering effects on humans. Security became so intense that the scientists became prisoners and the lab their prison."

"Are there documents supporting this?" Ruth asked.

"Not directly, but by piecing together bits of information from different sources we are certain we have a clear picture of what happened. The overworked scientists made a mistake and the virus escaped its containment area. The scientists became infected and were sealed in the labs by the security people. Government scientists were brought in to study the infected scientists.

Everything went fine for a month, then the virus mutated in a few of the people. These people demonstrated an unreasonable hatred for the people the virus hadn't affected. They killed most of the other people. They threatened to find a way out of the sealed labs and kill anyone not like them. A few select people in Washington decided that these people posed too much of a threat to the country. They planted explosives in and around the mountain the lab was in and exploded them.

You might remember the report of an airline crash over the Atlantic with a dozen government scientists aboard in May of sixty-four. That is how the government explained the dead scientists. Relatives were told the people were working on a top-secret project. The government compensated each family very well with cash to insure all speculation was stopped. The incident was covered up and the people connected with it were shipped to different departments. Only a few who knew about the incident are alive today. One of them is our own General Hawkins. He was a young lieutenant in the security force for the labs."

"Did I hear someone mention my name?" General Hawkins said from the door.

"Come in and have a seat, General. We are listening to a fascinating story about when you were a young man," Ruth said.

He entered the room, got a cup of coffee, and took a seat.

"As I was saying," Ross continued. "General Hawkins was a young man at the time the labs were buried under a mountain of rock and dirt. All traces of the place were erased from the records. Most of the information we found came from obscure sources of that time. Everything went fine until early this year.

"The one thing they could never have foreseen was an earthquake in the area. None had occurred there in anyone's memory. In May of this year, a quake occurred causing a hairline fault from the labs to the surface. Of course, all the people were long dead, but the virus remained virulent as ever. Now the rest is speculation, but we think it happened in this way. The virus worked its way to the surface

and lay dormant until someone came along. The first outbreak occurred in a small town in New Jersey. It is the hometown of Ben, one of the people trying to get here. We think a hunter brought back the virus, and it spread from there.”

“So this thing didn’t start out west?” Jess said.

“No, it only appeared to. The changed people out here had to move faster to take control of things. They couldn’t hide like the people who lived in the vast population centers back East. Another interesting thing we found out about the force guiding this man Zeb and his dogs. It’s some kind of counterforce to the one helping Joe and his people.”

“Do you know what these forces are?” Ruth asked.

“No, but we have a theory. Think of the earth as a dog and us as the fleas on it. Now, this disease made by man apparently bit hard enough to get the dog’s attention. Now, the dog has to take a hand in what the fleas do or it will be eaten alive. That is what we think happened. The earth has always been a living entity. Content to let us microbes live out our lives anyway we pleased until we created something that threatened her. Now, she is forced to take a hand.”

“Do you really believe that is what is happening now?” General Hawkins asked.

“More or less. If anyone has a better explanation, I will be glad to listen,” Ross said.

“Jess, turn on your monitors. Something is going on at the tunnel entrance,” Rita said.

Jess turned on the monitors and zoomed in on the doors at the mouth of the tunnel. He saw a group of people at the door. He was startled when they opened the small door. “Ross, did you open the door!” he yelled.

“No, Jess. They knew the passwords to open the door. I believe they are Joe and his people,” Ross told him.

Chapter 29

Bill crawled up beside Joe and peered over the top of the hill. A few hundred people milled around the closed doors of a tunnel into the mountain. A quarter of a mile back from the doors a high chain-link fence laid on the ground.

Smoke came from a pipe stuck through the roof of an old guard shack. People entered and left the shack in a steady stream. When the people came out, they wore heavy new coats. Fires burned all around the perimeter of the doors into the mountain.

“How do we get through all those people?” Bill asked.

“Sure are a lot of them. Are they wanting in, or are they waiting for us?” Joe muttered.

“What we need is a diversion to draw them away from the doors,” Bill said.

Tammy scrambled up beside them. “Stalker told me to tell you to get everyone ready to go for the doors. He took Ben with him toward town. He said to listen for a disturbance. He is going to draw as many people away from here as he can,” she told them.

“Get everyone up here, Tammy. If I know Stalker, all hell is going to break loose in a little while,” Joe said.

“See the outline of a small door on the right side of the large door. That’s where we need to go. If we have figured out the right code from the message the President gave me, it should take only a minute to open the door and be inside,” Bill said.

“So five minutes should give us enough time? Let’s hope Stalker can give it to us,” Joe said. He turned and watched the rest of his group struggle up the slope. Tony edged up beside Bill, and Gail came to lie beside him. Leila and Jake checked their rifles. Joe had them line up at the top of the hill and told them to wait. “Now it’s up to you, Stalker,” he thought.

Stalker crept up a ditch toward a dozen people standing around a fire. He saw Ben crawling up on the other side. When he was twenty feet from them, Ben stood up. “I hear you’ve been looking for me,” Ben said.

“Who in hell are you, stranger?” A man asked.

“The name’s Ben. Ben Johnson.”

The men stood silent for a moment, then they all reached for their guns. Ben calmly fired, knocking one man back into the fire. Another man took a slug in the chest; a third man died when Ben’s bullet took the side of his head off.

Now the men were firing. Ben took a slug in the leg knocking him to the ground. He squirmed around, raised his rifle and shot a man in the chest.

People all around them were screaming and firing. Ben shot another man who ran toward him. He felt a slug slam into his chest and almost doubled over from the pain. “Can’t you work any faster?” he thought.

“Ben, I’m repairing you as fast as I can. There is nothing I can do about the pain. You will just have to bear it,” his Guardian told him.

Ben rolled over on his side and took a fresh magazine from his coat pocket. He inserted it in the rifle and started firing at the people around him.

Stalker thought it time he gave Ben a hand. A lot of people rushed up the road to see what was going on. He waited until they were even with him then jumped out of the ditch. He landed in the

middle of about twenty people. Slashing left and right with his teeth, half a dozen men fell before they knew what hit them.

People screamed all around him. Through a break in the people, he looked up the road and saw people streaming away from the mountain. A man swung a rifle butt at him and he grabbed him by the arm, ripping through flesh and muscle. The man screamed and Stalker let loose of the hand and grabbed him by the neck. Twisting his head, Stalker felt the man's neck snap. He felt a sharp pain in his side and turned to see a man holding a long knife. As the man's arm came back to strike again, he was knocked off his feet by one of Ben's bullets. He saw Ben stagger and fall as three bullets struck him in the chest.

Now there were so many people around them, he could hardly move. He jumped straight up in the air and came down on two men and a woman knocking them to the ground. He ripped out one man's throat and dug his claws into the belly of another. Pushing upward with his hind feet, he ripped the belly of the man wide open. The woman raised her rifle and fired. Stalker was slammed sideways by the blow of the bullet. People began to back away.

Joe waited until only a few people remained at the doors; then, he rose and ran down the hill. He jumped over a campfire and shot a man who turned toward them.

Behind him, his people opened fire knocking the people around the door off their feet. Bill ran up to the door and said something into a speaker in the door. A loud click sounded and the small door opened. Bill pushed Tony through the door and had everyone inside in moments. "Come on, Joe," he said.

"I'm going to go help Stalker and Ben," Joe said.

"Shit," Bill said. He turned to Tony and told her he was going with Joe. He told her if the people came back, she was to close the door. Jake stepped up to him and said, "I must be crazy, but I'm going with you."

Jeff walked out the door followed by Cap and Leila. Joe turned to see all of them standing outside the door.

"Okay, we'll go pull Ben's bacon out of the fire. See if that truck over there will start," Joe said to Jake. "You three stay and hold the door," he said pointing to Tammy, Tommy and Benji.

Jake pulled the truck on the road. Joe got in the cab beside Jake while the rest piled into the back. "Go," Joe said. Jake put the truck in gear and took off down the road. In the back, Tony and the rest fired into the people they passed to cause more confusion.

* * * *

Ben staggered over and fell beside Stalker. He looked awful. He had taken two rounds to the head. Although the wounds were healing themselves, he was a terrible sight to look at. His coat looked like someone had used it for target practice. There were so many bullet holes in the coat that it was a wonder it held together. Stalker was bleeding in so many places it was a miracle he could stand.

The people advanced on them slowly, ready to fire at the first sign of resistance. Stalker bared his teeth at them and they stopped. Ben sat up and yelled, "What are you waiting for?" He threw his arm around Stalker's bloody neck. He heard Stalker say in his mind, "It is over for me, Ben. I will try and give you time to get away. He lunged at the people who fired while he was in the air.

Ben yelled, "No," and staggered to his feet. He flipped the selector to automatic and pulled the trigger. So many bullets hit him that he walked backwards. He saw Stalker fall to the ground and painfully stand up on wobbly legs. He lurched into the people clearing a path around him. A man stepped up to Stalker and emptied a handgun into his head. Stalker lay on the ground quivering as bullets struck him.

Ben forgot his pain. He forgot everything as he remembered how many times Stalker had saved them. With a roar of rage, he straightened up and with a rifle in each hand he walked forward. The people fell back from his murderous rage. "You can't take much more of this," his Guardian told him.

He heard the sound of an engine behind him. He fell to his knees and crawled to where Stalker lay. Pulling himself over to Stalker's body, Ben took the bullets meant for Stalker. He felt Stalker heave under him. "Take care of the little one," he heard in his mind. Stalker convulsed once more then lay still.

At the door of the tunnel, Tammy screamed in pain and ran outside. Tears were streaming down her face. She screamed, "Stalker, Stalker."

Jake plowed into the people scattering them. In the back of the truck Tony and the rest lay down a solid wall of lead. People fell all around them and started to retreat.

Joe jumped out of the truck and tried to get Ben to his feet. He had a hard time because his right arm hung at his side and blood streamed from his fingers.

Leila limped from the back of the truck and helped him. Together they got Ben into the bed of the truck.

Tony sat beside Stalker and held his head in her lap. "No, No, No," she said over and over. Bill and Jake lifted Stalker's body and carried it to the rear of the truck where they gently placed it in the bed.

A silence settled over the area as Tony stood up. "For this, all of you shall die," she screamed at the people in anguish. She turned and walked to the back of the truck and got in. Behind the people, a roar started. Dogs by the thousands attacked the people from the rear.

Joe leaned back against the seat saying, "Get us to the mountain, Jake."

Jake turned around and started up the road. They saw a small figure running down the road. Jake slowed and stopped as Tammy came near. She threw herself in the back of the truck and wrapped her arms around Stalker. Shaking with sobs she pressed her face to his bloody head.

Behind them, people screamed and shot at the dogs that were attacking them. Jake drove the truck up to the door. Jake and Tony helped Ben into the tunnel. Gail put her shoulder under Joe's arm and helped him through the door. Jake came out, lifted Jeff across his shoulders and carried him inside. Cap and Leila held on to each other and limped through the door.

Tony and Jake went to the rear of the truck. Jake took Tammy's arms from around Stalker's body. They carried Stalker's body inside and laid it against the wall.

Tony went to Joe and put her hands against his wound. She felt the power rise in her. She used just enough to do minor repairs and stop the bleeding. She went to each of them and did what she could to repair their wounds.

Finished, she slumped back against the wall, tired, and pleased that none of them had died. She looked over to where Tammy sat with Stalker. Tammy had a vacant look in her eyes. Tony wished she could do something for the hurt Tammy felt. Now that she was here, she felt at ease in one sense and apprehensive in another. Whatever they faced, they would face it together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Baker worked for a telephone company for thirty years. He retired in 1999 and took up writing full time. He lives in an isolated area along the West Virginia-Kentucky border with his wife, two dogs and three cats. He tries to write as he sees the world, so a lot of what goes into his novels are his perceptions of how the world should be.

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