

FOREVER FREE

LAST MAN STANDING



ERIC MEYER

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BEYOND ENLIGHTENANCE

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

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FOREVER FREE (BOOK 1-3)

By Eric Meyer

Part of the ***FOREVER FREE*** series

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CHAPTER ONE

Oz felt the familiar sense of freedom.

I'm in control. Like always when I come to this special place, where I'm the master of all I survey, almost like a king.

A moment later he dismissed the thought. He wasn't a king. He shared this place with many other inhabitants, bears, deer, rabbits, small mammals, rats, and voles; birds, grouse, wild turkey, and scores of different species that called the West Virginian Appalachians home.

Some folks said they'd sighted cougars over the past months. The cougar was a nocturnal animal, and so far he hadn't seen one up close. He was quite happy to keep things that way and give the big cats a wide berth. Fatal attacks were rare, so people said, unless you unwittingly entered their territory, which really pissed them off. He still carried the Remington Model 700, just like the rifle he'd carried in Iraq. The weapon was chambered for the .308 Winchester cartridge, a close match to the 7.62mm military round; accurate, lethal, and familiar, the sniper's mantra.

He stared over the swaying green canopy of trees carpeting the slope for what seemed like as far as the eye could see, thinking about Eleanor, his wife of five years. He never forgot the extraordinary day he met the extraordinary girl. They day he learned about the unknown.

* * *

He was attending a neighborhood barbecue at the house of Danny Blanchard, a fellow Marine, and a good friend. Like Oz, he became a Marine sergeant, and they served together in Iraq. Years later, Danny was one of the guys who didn't make it back, but that was all in the future. At the time they were two fit young men in their early twenties, both with a love of the outdoors, and happy to be part of the warm community of Copperville.

He stared across the yard, chewing on a rib, and his world shifted on its axis. She was looking his way, and by coincidence she had green eyes, just like him. A great pickup line, and he moved closer.

"We have something in common." She raised her eyebrows, and he hurried on before he drowned in those deep pools. The mirrors to the soul, "Green eyes. Say, I was just going to freshen my drink, can I get you something?"

She'd stared at him for several seconds, her expression serious. He wondered if she liked what she saw. Or not. Oz Porter was a fit, lean man of twenty-four years. So far so good, but he was of no more than average height. Five feet seven, and apart from his green eyes, considered himself an Average Joe. Weather-beaten complexion, after a life spent outdoors. A pleasant face, people said. He'd called it ordinary, like his hair, the color of old straw. His nose was not an asset. Broken several years ago when he'd fought and lost a street fight. Five kids attacked him when he refused to hand over his new cellphone. He'd delivered them some hard licks, so they hadn't got away easily. He'd also managed to hold onto his cellphone, a victory of sorts.

She was still looking at him, and a tiny shiver ran down his spine. Like she'd just peered inside his head. Her reply was a surprise. "What took you so long?"

"Excuse me?"

"When I saw you arrive, I thought you'd come right over. You didn't."

"How come?"

"I just knew."

He was certain this pretty, mysterious girl would send him away. She was slight, almost tiny; with skin so pale it was appeared translucent. Her hair was rich auburn, the color of flame, and when she moved her head, she tossed it around like a wave.

"Uh, right." He was lost for words, "My name's Oz. Oz Porter."

"Eleanor O'Brien." She held out a tiny, cool hand, "Pleased to meet you, Oz."

They shook, and he was curious. "How come you knew we'd meet up, Eleanor?"

"I see things."

He hid the smile, knowing it would be a mistake. "You mean you see things that haven't yet happened? How is that?"

Her face remained serious, so he could tell she wasn't kidding. "My father was the seventh son of a seventh son. In Ireland, they say that makes you special. The ability to see things."

"But you're obviously not a son."

The serious expression softened a fraction. "Pa had six sons, and if I'd been born a boy, I'd have been the seventh son of the seventh son of the seventh son. Powerful stuff, but my mother gave birth to a girl. Even so, I

sometimes see things. Like I knew I'd run into you, Oscar Porter."

She knew his real name. No real trick to that, but still, she was... different.

He grinned. "What else can you predict?"

"You're gonna take me out for dinner on Saturday night."

Not a problem.

"Sure I am." He held the smile, playing the game, "Anything else?"

She'd stared at him for long moments, and that shivery feeling returned. "You know the answer to that one, Oz. You don't need to ask me."

He did know. The thunderbolt had struck him with the force of a meteor impact. She was the girl for him, and there was no other. Four months later, she became Mrs. Eleanor Porter.

More surprises were in store after they settled down in a small house in Copperville. He'd always been an enthusiastic backwoodsman, with a keen interest in survival skills, and she soon developed a similar interest. It started when they were finishing dinner. All of a sudden, her talk came around to survival. Prepping for the bad times, for the unknown.

"We should prepare for the worst, Oz."

A strange quality in her voice made him pay attention. "What've you seen?"

"I'm not sure. It's just, a feeling. We need a place to go if...you know. Something happens."

"A place? You mean the cabin?"

"Yes. You've been talking about it for several months. We should make a start."

He'd acquired the lease on the tiny plot of land and had the permit to build a hunter's cabin in his pocket. But he kept putting off the building work, especially the cellar, which would take weeks of backbreaking digging.

"That's exactly what I mean. We should be prepared."

It was the way she'd said it. Her voice was serious, as if she knew more than she was letting on. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

That odd look again. "If I knew for sure I'd tell you, but I don't. It's just a feeling, you know..."

He'd chuckled. "Like you feel the force, Princess Leah?"

She gave him an irritated glance. Eleanor didn't like it when he made light of her abilities. "No, nothing like that. Oz, I don't know what it is. I don't know where it'll happen. Just that it will."

“When?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t know.” She smiled then, “That’s why I call it the unknown.”

The following week they started humping building materials up the slope from the Ranger Station, where he parked the Bronco. They had no choice but to continue up the slope on foot. He believed her warning, and besides, any sensible person would take precautions. Like she’d said, it was coming. The unknown.

* * *

They spent most of their spare time building and stocking the cabin. Enjoying the peace and isolation of the woods. They were the best times of his life, times they spent working together, and he wished she were here with him now. Although up here he couldn’t hide anything from her. He didn’t want her worried, and he’d come here to fix his problem. He still had a way to go, but things were getting better. The episodes still came, but not so often.

He looked down the mountain, savoring the clean air and peaceful tranquility. He couldn’t see all the way, but he was aware the treeline petered out almost ten miles away at the bottom of the slope. A little further away lay the Ranger Station. Beyond that, roads, civilization, people. Things he was up here to avoid, to flush the episodes from his mind. Lately, he’d even had the occasional night of blissful sleep, the first in a long time. Mornings when he didn’t wake up bathed in perspiration, when he hadn’t relived the nightmare. It was a start.

Up here on the peak he could look down and see the roof of his half-hidden shack, five hundred yards below. Covered with thick layers of green tarpaper, making it another part of the mountain, rather than an alien intruder. A wisp of smoke curled out of the chimney, and if he were nearer, he’d smell the stew he’d left cooking over the stove. He was still too far away for the odor to reach him, but his stomach rumbled, and he smiled.

Automatic reflex. My brain just sent my belly a message. That stew’s gonna be a good one, so get your ass moving, and get down there fast.

Oz Porter took pride in cooking up good, basic food. He killed the game that went into the pot, cooked up tasty nutritious stews, and enjoyed eating the fruits of his labors. He always felt good sitting at the crude table they’d built, on one of two matching chairs. He and Eleanor had built the cabin of split logs, single story, with a small window on either side of the solid door.

Creepers had grown up around the walls, and some snaked all the way over the roof. The overgrowth, the brown timber, and green tarpaper roof made it look like it belonged. As if two thousand years ago, the place would look just like it did now.

The last time they'd come here, she'd squealed with delight when she saw how much the foliage had grown all around. It appeared almost magical as they crossed the last clearing and their refuge lay in front of them, their safe house, and in the nights, their love nest. Everything was better up here. Including the flashbacks, the episodes.

He'd spent the past three weeks working to drive out the devils that haunted his mind. He'd kept busy, working to improve their hideaway, maintaining the traps and hunting gear, and sharing the forests and pristine air of the mountains with his immediate neighbors; creatures that also called this place home, and perhaps to whisper to them his secret. Maybe he'd tell them about Iraq, never to be repeated to a single human being; although lately the game was becoming scarce, as if forewarned of some event, something bad coming their way.

* * *

Iraq had been an unknown, difficult for a Marine to prepare himself for. Little different to other wars, maybe, but the sheer scale of the brutal ferocity was hard to take. Men went away from home, women, too. Leaving their loved ones behind, to wait and worry. He went with Danny, his neighbor and friend, filled with optimism for the future. They arrived in hell. The enemy tried to kill them, and they tried to kill the enemy. People died on both sides, and not all his pals made it out. He'd been lucky to escape unscathed, although not mentally.

It was that last day when he'd received the call. "Alpha Three, this is Firebase Alpha. Confirm your position."

He'd touched the transmit button. "Alpha Three, receiving you loud and clear. Position is thirteen hundred and fifty meters west of target. No sign of hostiles."

A grunt of acknowledgment, "You soon will, Sergeant. Our boys are due in anytime now."

It happened so fast. He watched every second, every bullet, every rocket, and every missile through the scope fixed to the mount on his M700. The Black Hawk descended from the sky. They should have been five

hundred meters from the target. Someone had fouled up, and the helicopter dropped behind a part-wrecked stone building. A second later, all hell erupted. They never found out the reasons why. A mistake, faulty intelligence, a clever ambush, it made no difference. Men died, and Danny was amongst them. The Black Hawk took off, using the door gun to lay down suppressing fire, but the enemy was waiting, and the missile struck the fuselage when they were still clawing for height.

Below, the Marines were taking heavy fire, and Oz leapt out from cover, running toward the battle. No use waiting for a shot, they were out of sight behind that building. Legs pounding, breath searing through his lungs, he made almost a mile in full kit, under the blazing sun, in less than seven minutes. They were pinned down, and he began to look for targets. They were well dug in, and he climbed to the top of the derelict stone building to survey the area.

Almost at once he saw them, insurgents, turbans, beards, and a motley array of weapons. He ignored them, for he'd found a more lethal target, the guy holding the missile launcher ready to take another shot. He put him in the crosshairs and fired a single round. His missile launching days were over, for good. A second later a bullet thumped into his side just below the armored vest. He ignored it. He had work to do. Keeping up a steady stream of shots, he worked around the enemy positions. The Marines had recovered and were returning heavy fire, enough to convince the Arabs it was time to get out of Dodge. It all went quiet, one moment gunfire, screams, and explosions, the next, an eerie silence.

Two medevac choppers came in to land in a whirlwind of sand. Medics raced to the casualties to start the process of triage, and emergency shots of morphine. They'd bundle them into the chopper and move on to the next. There were so many. Amongst them they found Danny Blanchard. They hadn't bothered with the morphine. There was no need. He was gone.

He took another hit from a nearby sniper, and he was unconscious even as he fell from the roof. He'd seen too many friends die that day, fellow Marines, men from his own unit. He experienced a peculiar guilt. They called it survivor's guilt. He'd come through alive, and others hadn't. They'd awarded him a chest full of medals, but he didn't want to distract attention from the dead. Which was why he hadn't come home wearing the glittering decorations he'd earned during the fighting. He knew he'd made the right decision after the big Lockheed C-5 Galaxy landed, and he descended the

stairs.

They were waiting. The families of those who hadn't made it, and every man and woman on that aircraft had been aware of the line of coffins in the curtained off area at the rear. Families who braved the icy gusts of wind and snow flurries to honor their loved ones as their remains were wheeled down the ramp in aluminum coffins. They'd mourn for those they'd lost, and he wished to respect their sorrow. He mourned in private, and the hell of the flashbacks started. The episodes.

* * *

Eleanor taught chemistry in Copperville Junior High. Copperville, a small town in West Virginia they were glad to call home. He'd been grateful to get back when his tour in Iraq ended. Except the flashbacks never ended. There were times when they possessed him body and soul. They'd grip his mind and body, like a vice from which there was no escape. He'd shiver uncontrollably, the sweat pouring from every pore in his body.

When he'd told Eleanor he needed three weeks away to get things together, and give him time to think, she didn't need to think about it. The answer came without hesitation. She was like that, and he kept a mental picture of her stored in his memory. A petite, feisty descendant of Irish immigrants who'd fought every obstacle to make a good life in the New World. Eyes as green as the Emerald Isle itself.

"Of course you must go, Oz. I'll be fine. How are things in the cabin, is there much we need to finish?"

He gave her a keen glance. "Why do you ask? Have you seen something?"

She was unsure, which was strange for her. "I'm not sure. Oz, we may not have long. It's just a feeling. I can't describe it, just that we need to be ready."

"Sure. The unknown, I guess."

"Yes."

It wasn't just a cabin in the woods, perched high in the Appalachians. They'd spent much of their spare time preparing for an event they couldn't name. If someone had asked preparing for what, they'd both have shrugged, giving a vague answer that would leave the questioner unsatisfied. They were preparing for the unknown. They didn't mind, even though the cabin represented a considerable amount of time, money, and effort. Every cent,

every tired muscle, and every minute had been more than worth it. This was their refuge, to relax during the good times, and to shelter them if the bad times came. Solid, secure, and filled with the necessities of survival.

The basement store was well stocked. He'd lined it with rocks carefully chosen to fit tight to one another, with heavy planks of timber to create a level, dry floor. Everything they'd need for a long stay was down there. Canned and bottled food, sacks of dried goods, weapons and ammunition, hunting traps, and the scores of little items you never knew you'd need until you needed them.

Like tools and implements to keep the cabin maintained. Spare wicks for the lamps, cans of kerosene, and many of the normal necessities of life. Like soap and shampoo. Unscented, for here, scent was alien. A long stay in the cabin meant becoming one with nature. Nothing to tilt the ecology of the place, nothing to upset the game he hunted and shared the lush, tree-covered slopes with. More especially, nothing to alert an intruder, should they come near.

The apex predator was man. Forget the bears, cougars, and poisonous snakes. He feared none of them, nor did Eleanor. If they were wary of anything, it would be the most dangerous predator that walked the earth. Man. Infinitely capable of creating the conditions for catastrophe. If someone came here with hostile intentions, they'd need to defend what was theirs. If the worst happened, the unknown, their supplies would have a value beyond price.

He breathed in the clean, fresh air. Copperville was fifty-five miles to the east. Ten miles away at the bottom of the long slope, his truck was tucked away behind the Ranger Station. He drove a mid-eighties Ford Bronco, the paintwork a polished, gleaming red; a tough, rugged truck that could cope with the worst terrain, and ferry their supplies and materials to the foot of the mountain.

Sometimes they laughed, saying they took it much too seriously, to get a life, and even Eleanor went along with it. He didn't care. They had a gut feeling that one day, they'd need all the stuff. All the hard work, the preparations, and the money they spent, it would all be worthwhile. When it happened. Would it ever happen? Eleanor said yes, and he trusted her instincts.

As he wandered back down to the cabin, he felt a warm feeling inside. Somewhere he could forget a place called Iraq. Except in his nightmares,

when the flashbacks hit him like enemy artillery. He'd been a Marine Corps sniper. Sergeant Oz Porter, Oz, short for Oscar, he hated folks calling him Oscar. When they needed someone to take out a difficult target, the word went back down the line. Call Oz, he'll take care of it. He always did. Until that last day, and he forced his mind away from it, to think of other things. Better things, like the mountains and the forests.

He always hunted game for the pot, never for sport. He ate what he shot or trapped, fresh meat for the larder. If he had too much, he'd smoke it and keep the meat in the underground store beneath the cabin. Ready for when he needed it.

He continued down the steep, narrow path, looking forward to a cup of hot Java to wash down the lunchtime stew, until he felt it coming on. Another flashback, an episode, he called them. They'd told him they had another name. PTSD. Soldiers sometimes suffered with after experiencing extreme battle conditions. He'd deal with it himself, and not rely on doctors and drugs to do it for him. He managed to reach the front door, and already it was fading. This time he'd fought it off. He'd pushed away the jagged kaleidoscope of bloody images, and the after-darkness that descended on him to blot all consciousness. He entered the cabin; happy he'd beaten this one, and smelled the stew he'd left bubbling on the stove.

Like always, it was delicious. A potent mixture of meat, vegetables, and every herb and spice he could find to throw into the mix. He ate it slowly, enjoying every bite. When he inspected the stew pot it was empty. It meant he'd go hunting tomorrow.

Which made him think back to a strange phenomenon he'd noticed of late, the game, or rather the lack of game. For several days the animals he hunted had been scarce. Rabbit, deer, were usually up here for the taking. He ate fresh meat every day, and the pot was always spilling over with his latest stew. Whenever he returned to find it bubbling on the stove, he felt a satisfaction, even a oneness with the animal he was about to eat. As if in some way its spirit would join with his when he devoured the meal. Part of a deep reverence he felt for this place.

Maybe the game will come back. I'll worry about that tomorrow.

He slept better that night, and the nightmares didn't come. He left early while it was still dark, hiking along a narrow game trail. In the distance, he heard the screeching of an animal taken by a larger predator. Lately, he'd wondered about cougars. There were a few of them wandering around, and

they preyed on small animals. They were savage and wild if cornered, and he kept his eyes open. If he encountered Mr. Cougar, there was one way to handle it. Backtrack, and find another route.

He continued walking, and then felt the first indication. His legs started to wobble, and the perspiration began to ooze from the pores of his skin. It was happening. He wanted to go back, but he couldn't move. He fell, struggling to breathe, his body frozen in paralysis.

This time the episode was powerful, and he had to fight. Had to refuse to give in, not allow the blackness to overcome him, leaving him helpless. He'd never let anyone see his problem, not even Eleanor, or the animals he shared this place with. Predators didn't show weakness. It was in the genes. Out here, hunting for game, he was a predator. He was a man, therefore an apex predator, yet he lived by their rules. Show no weakness. Then again, if a cougar appeared, that could change. It wouldn't be the first time he'd run like crazy. Run like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were chasing your ass. He hefted the Remington, but would it be enough?

I can fight the episodes and keep fighting. A cougar? That could be a tad more difficult.

Oz finally passed out on the narrow path. When he awoke, the first rays of dawn shone down on him through the trees. He still felt weak and staggered to his feet to get back. On the way he had a stroke of luck. A rabbit appeared fifty yards away. He'd been walking so silently, the creature didn't know he was there until the bark of his M-70 rifle echoed across the forest, and the animal was dead. He picked it up and carried it back to the cabin, where he skinned and prepared it for that day's food. As he worked, he looked up at the sky. It was blue, without a single cloud. But it wasn't the absence of clouds he found puzzling, but the absence of aircraft.

This was the third week of his vacation, and something was wrong. For several days he hadn't seen or heard a single aircraft, more than several days, close to ten days. He hadn't heard any hunters, and even the game seemed to have abandoned the area. He heard no sound of locomotives using the distant railroad, their horns loud when the wind blew his way. Nothing. Although three days ago, he had heard gunfire, gunfire that took him back to when he was in Iraq. Not hunters, and it sounded more like a firefight.

He'd liked to have called the Ranger Station, the nearest point of civilization, to advise them something strange was going on, but he had no way of communicating with them. There were no cellphone towers locally,

and his cellphone would be useless until he got back to the Ranger Station, which had a tower close enough to make a call. His first task would be to call Eleanor to tell her he was on his way home.

Besides, I want to hear her voice, and make sure she's okay. Not that there's any reason she shouldn't be. Copperville's a peaceful, small town, and what could be safer than working in the local Junior High? Still, she may know more about what's going on. Unless it's just my imagination, except it isn't. Things are different.

He took his backpack and stuffed it with everything he'd need, food, water, and spare ammunition for the rifle. He also strapped on his handgun, a Kimber Custom in a leather holster. They'd chambered the Colt 1911 variant for the .45 ACP round, and carried ten in the magazine. A heavy, solid, and proven weapon, and if he'd no idea what he was going back to, it could come in mighty useful.

Last of all, he locked the cabin. Not that a simple lock would prevent intruders, but they were rare around there. Besides, the most important part of his hideaway was the basement store, and that was well hidden. If anyone did break in, chances were they wouldn't find it.

On a whim he decided to try his cellphone again. Sometimes atmospheric conditions were such that he was able to reach a distant cell tower, but when he switched on, there was still nothing. He started walking, ten miles downhill through thick forest to the Ranger Station. He'd get a signal there, call Eleanor, and talk to the Rangers. If people wanted to shoot the crap out of each other, they should do it in their hometowns and cities. The places they call civilized. The places he avoided.

He was almost halfway when he stopped. He'd stumbled on a small piece of aluminum, and he picked it up. It looked like a piece of an aircraft, and he assumed it had fallen off in flight. As he went further, he understood the truth. It hadn't fallen off in flight; the bulk of the fuselage of a Gulfstream G550 executive jet was strewn around the forest floor. The fuselage and cockpit were largely intact, wedged in a gap between the trees. Everything was silent, and he could smell that peculiar odor he'd last sensed in Iraq. Death. When he entered the aircraft through the gaping split in the fuselage, the four passengers were all dead, still strapped in the seats. He went forward to the cockpit, and the two pilots were dead, also strapped in. Several small animals scurried away, and he ignored them.

He stepped out of the aircraft, using the GPS on his phone to make a

note of the position. When he reached the Ranger Station, he'd tell them what he'd found, so they could send crash investigators to examine the wreckage; as well as a team with body bags to bring down the dead. He kept staring at the wreckage. There was something strange, the absence of the distinctive odor of jet fuel, of aviation kerosene. He knew without looking the plane had fallen out of the sky through lack of fuel.

That's crazy. Why take off with insufficient fuel for the flight? Unless someone stole it, drained the tanks, but why? Stealing fuel from an aircraft is insane. Why would anyone stoop so low? Whatever the reason, the fuel tanks were empty when it crashed, which has to be the reason for catastrophic engine failure. It doesn't make sense. Who would do such a thing, and why? It isn't as if there's a shortage of aviation kerosene.

He studied the wreckage for a while longer, and an episode hit without warning. That last day in Iraq, and he was embroiled in a heavy firefight, with machine gun fire and missiles streaking around him.

The Black Hawk flying toward him, flaring for a landing. The missile streaking up from the ground before the pilot of the helicopter had a chance to respond, and it slammed into the fuselage. The missile exploded, and he watched chunks of metal, engine parts, and burning bodies dropping out of the sky in front of his eyes.

By some miracle, the pilot, severely wounded in the blast, managed to autorotate the wrecked helicopter to the ground. He and the crew chief were alive when they hit, although badly hurt. He rushed to help, but smoke and flames erupted inside the stricken Black Hawk. He was trapped, and the burning helicopter was his balefire.

He passed out in the Gulfstream, dreaming his body being consumed by flames. A ring of insurgents was dancing in a crazed circle around the wreckage, their shouts an echo from the very depths of hell. They were singing an old Johnny Cash country song, Ring of Fire.

How did they know I like that song?

CHAPTER TWO

He awoke late in the day, feeling the sweat that coated his body, and the ache in his limbs after he'd thrashed around. When he checked his watch, it was 14.00. He needed to make a start to the Ranger Station. Otherwise, he'd be stumbling through the forest in the dark. A man could get lost up there, and the last thing he wanted was to spend a cold uncomfortable night in the forest. He hefted his Remington and started walking, leaving the plane wreck behind.

He was still thinking about it, the strange absence of fuel, trying and failing to work out any logical reason for the empty fuel tanks. He didn't like leaving the bodies unburied, but he didn't have a choice. He needed to continue down the slope, and besides, the National Transportation Safety Board would want to examine the wreck as he'd found it, without interference. It was still light, and he made good time.

Within two hours, he came in sight of the Ranger Station. He spotted his Ford Bronco, safe and sound, still parked where he'd left it. The paintwork was a little dulled by three weeks accumulation of dirt and dust. The chrome work had similarly suffered, but he'd soon fix that, after he'd talked to the Rangers. He felt better, knowing he was minutes away from the answers he needed.

As he drew nearer, his feeling of well-being began to leave him. Something was wrong. On a cold day such as this, smoke should have been curling out of the chimney, yet there was nothing. Even the Rangers' SUV was missing, and the place appeared silent and deserted. He felt a growing unease, a prickling in the scalp. Enough to unsling his rifle and load a round into the chamber. On the ground outside the building, he identified two blood trails. He put his hand down to test them. The blood was recent. There were no bodies, but when he searched the area, he found bullet casings. Not the rounds he'd expect from hunting rifles. These were military rounds, 5.56mm NATO standard cartridges.

What's the military doing here? Even more important, what were they shooting at, and why?

There was no reason for soldiers to be conducting an exercise this close to the Ranger Station. Even more ominous was the total stillness, the absence of any life around the building. Why hadn't someone come out to greet the new arrival, like they always did? He decided to take a look and strolled

through the unlocked door. The rooms were all deserted, and they'd been ransacked. Furniture overturned, documents strewn on the floor, and more bloodstains. Nothing else, no life. Suddenly, he heard the noise of an engine, and he walked outside. The vehicle was strange, obviously once a police cruiser. The blue and red light array on the roof was the giveaway, but everything else was different. Somebody had repainted it matt black, and they'd done the job in a hurry. He could see odd streaks of white where they hadn't covered the original finish, and a splash of red on the front fender.

Blood?

Even stranger was the logo painted on the doors and the roof. A single Greek Omega, nothing else. He'd never seen it before on any kind of vehicle, and it posed another question

Who are these guys?

The cruiser stopped, and two men climbed out. They weren't cops, at least, not like any cops he'd seen before. Both wore black combat gear, matching Kevlar vests and helmets. On the front of each vest was the same emblem as on the cruiser. An Omega.

He didn't spend too much time wondering what it all meant, for he had another concern. Another question to stack up with all the others. The assault rifles, M4A1 carbines, and he'd seen plenty of them in Iraq. ACOG optical sight and a vertical forward grip, magazine loaded with thirty 5.56mm NATO rounds, a good gun, accurate to five hundred yards or more. They were that close they could shoot with their eyes shut, and he'd be dead.

Why are they pointing their guns at me? Do they think because I carry a rifle I've committed a crime? No, that's crap. I'd look strange if I didn't carry a rifle in these parts.

He waited for them to approach. When they were ten yards away, one barked an order, "Drop your weapon, Mister."

He wasn't pointing his rifle at them. He had the Remington tucked under his arm, pointed at the ground. Not threatening them, but ready to shoot if the occasion demanded. They'd know that, and with no overt threat, there was no need for anyone to pull the trigger. After all, he'd done nothing wrong. He was just curious.

All I want is to find out what happened here and go find Eleanor.

He plastered a pleasant smile on his face. People had told him he had a friendly smile. He hoped they were right. "Hey, guys, take it easy. I've been looking around, and there's something strange going on here. The Rangers

have disappeared, and I can see blood trails inside, so there's obviously been some kind of a fight. I could do with some answers, and my first question is who are you? Where are you from?"

They stared at him for long moments, as if he'd just landed from Mars. "You don't know?"

He shrugged. "I've been up in the woods for three weeks. What don't I know?"

The man grimaced. Her didn't look much like a cop, more like a merc. A gun for hire, tall, muscular, hard face, all angular lines. His partner was shorter and thinner. More like a weasel, although weasels didn't carry M4s.

"You've been out of it, huh? That explains it. Everything's gone crazy, and nobody knows the reasons why. It's all down. Power, water, communications, you name it. There's rioting in the cities, killing and looting, and they called us in to keep order."

"But I've only been away three weeks. How in hell could things get so bad in such a short time?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. It just kinda happened. They just called us in to stop it getting any worse."

"Who are you?"

The man took a step closer, and he'd done talking. His face reddened. "You don't need to worry who we are, just drop the rifle. Right now, we're the law, and if you want to be safe, all you need do is obey our instructions. We won't tell you again, Mister. Drop the rifle, or we start blasting."

He didn't drop the rifle. Something was wrong, very wrong. If he handed over his weapon to these unknown men, he'd be giving them power of life or death over him. He thought of Eleanor.

How has this mysterious Omega outfit turned up, claiming to be the legitimate authority for law and order? I don't trust them, not one bit. I need to get home as fast as possible. Something tells me if I hand over the Remington I'll never make it.

The man who hadn't yet spoken threw his assault rifle to his shoulder and fired off a single round, spitting up dust a few inches from his boots. The other one said, "We won't tell you again. Last warning, drop it or we shoot."

A noise came from inside the Ranger Station, and they looked away for a fraction of a second, enough of an opening for a trained sniper to make his play. He acted on instinct, and was rolling away, racking a round into the chamber. He fired a shot, followed by another. He didn't aim to miss. The

Marines hadn't trained him to miss. When someone starts shooting at you, there's just one response for that kind of situation. You shoot back.

He didn't go for a lethal shot. He still hoped to make sense of the crazy situation. The first two shots slammed into the Kevlar vest of the man who'd fired, and he sent two more rounds in quick succession at his buddy's vest. When a rifle bullet slams into a man's chest, Kevlar or no Kevlar, it carries a kick like a mule. They both went down, one thrown backward from the kinetic force of the bullet, and he fell to the ground. The other wobbled, stopped himself from falling, and sank to his knees. Oz was already up and running, darting behind the Ranger Station, and heading out toward the nearby treeline. Shoot and scoot. Get off the shots, and get out of Dodge.

He raced into the thick, lush foliage. Bullets peppered the trees and leaves where he'd passed, shredding leaves and small branches as he made his way deeper into the forest, but not too deep. He circled around and reached the edge of the treeline, one hundred yards to the south of where he'd entered. He dropped to the ground and crawled forward, his rifle held ready to fire. They'd no idea he'd got away. Both men were blundering around at the edge of the forest. Poking the bushes and piled up fallen branches with their rifle barrels. As if he'd been stupid enough to hide and wait for them to come and kill him.

He'd decided to give them one more chance. The rules of battle dictated he should take them both out, and he could have finished them inside of a second. But this wasn't a battle. This was something else. He thought of Eleanor again, and her vision of something weird going down, something she couldn't explain.

This surely is that something. How she could have known I can't understand, only that she was right. The unknown is here. I must find her and take her to the safety of the cabin.

He crawled closer to the two men until he was fifty yards away, and they did something stupid.

One shouted to the other. "Hey, Earl, I saw something move in there. I think it's him. He's getting away, the sonofabitch."

Oz's lips tightened in a grim smile. These gun happy morons were ready to shoot at anything that moved. They opened up on full auto, blazing away into the deep forest, and at that moment, all bets were off. No matter what he did, no matter how he tried to reason with them, they wanted to kill him. That left him a single option; kill them first.

They made so much noise he could have walked up behind them, and they wouldn't have heard him. They fired magazine after magazine into the thick woods, and when they finally gave up and decided he'd got away, they stopped and glanced at each other.

"The fucker got away, Dillon. Damn, we fired enough lead into those woods to take down a platoon, and somehow we still missed him."

The other man, Earl, peered into the dark foliage. "I don't see how. Nah, I reckon we capped him, so we don't need to go looking for the body. He's as dead as a fucking dinosaur."

"Dinosaur, Earl? I don't get it."

"Never mind."

They said something about staking out the Ranger Station to see if anyone else turned up. If they did, they'd teach them a hard lesson. Not to play games with Omega.

Bushwhacking sonsofbitches.

He could have taken them then, but decided to give them a chance, and stepped out into the open.

"Freeze! I'd advise you not to make any sudden moves."

In spite of the warning, they started to turn, and he worked the bolt on the Remington. Just in case they didn't weren't taking him seriously enough.

He shouted a second warning.

"I've asked nicely, but I won't ask again. You guys have pissed me off. I don't like people trying to kill me, and I promise you I won't hesitate to pull the trigger if you keep moving. Your choice, guys."

One man turned all the way to face him, and he scowled. "You dope, don't you recognize a Kevlar vest when you see one? You already hit us twice, and we're still standing. What makes you think the next time will be any different?" He gave his companion a quick glance. "Shoot the bastard. Kill him, and let's get out of here."

Oz fired twice, two shots, with the smallest fraction of a second in between to work the bolt and pump the next round into the chamber. He aimed for the head in each case, and he didn't miss. The bullets drilled through the center of each man's face, and they fell instantly, dropping their weapons as the lead bored through their brains. He walked over to them and sighed.

"You stupid bastards, what made you think I wouldn't aim for the head?"

He shook his head in disbelief and began searching the bodies. He needed answers, and if they carried documents, it may start to fill in the gaps.

I already have a name, Omega, but who the hell are they? Where did they come from, and where are the regular law enforcement cops? Where are the Forest Rangers?

As he bent over the first body, he saw a flashy slogan embroidered beneath the Omega logo. 'Liberty and Security under One Flag.'

Not bad, but what does it mean? We've all the liberty and security we want, what with local and national law enforcement, as well as the National Guard to back them up in the case of disasters. We have the Army, Air Force, and Navy, so what's this 'Liberty and Security under One Flag' shit?

He found nothing else of interest and took out his cellphone. There was always a signal there, but when he checked the screen, there was nothing. Just the no signal message, so he couldn't contact the sheriff in Copperville to advise him what had happened. And to find out what was going on. He walked back to the Ranger Station and went inside.

He found something he hadn't noticed before, a poster nailed to the wall.

'Proclamation of a State of Emergency, signed by the duly appointed official, FBI SAC Barry Mendez, Acting Chief Officer, Omega.'

Beneath the headline, the text read-

'All citizens must comply with the orders issued by SAC Mendez and his appointed deputies. This State of Emergency is indefinite, and will last until civilian order is restored. Under these emergency powers, officials may arrest any person without a warrant. They have the authority to hold them in a secure place until such time as they decide whether to charge or release them. In all cases the decision of Omega will be final.'

Another mystery. More than mystery, as if someone had taken over the entire government, staged a coup. But that was impossible in the United States of America. There were too many checks and balances, and if anyone tried it, they'd be sure to fail. Mown down by the firepower of the most advanced military and police entity in history.

He rummaged through closets and drawers, finding nothing to throw any light on the situation. At least he had transport, so he could leave. His Ford Bronco was outside, and he moved toward the door. It was time to get back to Copperville and start asking questions. Had the madness spread to his hometown? Whatever it was, it was something worse than bad. The

unknown, coming out of nowhere. Gunmen dressed in black, going around threatening people, shooting to kill. He had a single priority, get back and find Eleanor. He didn't make it through the door.

"Hold it. Put up those hands."

He didn't let go the Remington, but he turned his head slowly. An old guy was there, and he recognized Irvin Cobb. The Ranger was holding a Browning automatic shotgun pointed right at his head.

The world is going mad. This is as bad as Iraq, no worse. This is America. What the hell are these people playing at?

The Ranger was almost unrecognizable, his uniform creased, torn, and dirty, eyes wild, and his chin covered in stubble. But still, it was him, and they were almost friends. Had been, once.

"Irvin, it's me, Oz Porter. You know, I have the Bronco parked out back."

He didn't lower the gun. "I heard shooting. What's going on?"

"I wish I knew. Two guys dressed all in black came here and tried to kill me. Irvin, why would they do that?"

"I wish I knew."

He finally lowered the scattergun, and Oz brought up the Remington to end the confrontation. "Look, why don't you put the gun down. I'm not going to kill you, but there're way too many people around here pointing guns at me."

Cobb lowered the Browning, gently putting it on the floor, and chuckled. "There never was any danger. It's empty. They took the ammo."

"You mind telling me about it?"

The Ranger sat down on a chair. He looked tired and numb with anxiety.

"I wish I knew. After you went on up the mountain, a couple of Rangers turned up and took my SUV. They said they needed it because theirs was almost out of gas. They left me with a couple of new trainees and no transport. An hour or so later, the power went down, and I've had no cellphone signal for several days. This morning some guys turned up, one dressed in that black uniform with the Omega badge. The others looked like some kind of civilian militia. You know, dressed in ordinary clothes, some in combats, more like hunters. Except for the guns they carried, and they weren't hunting rifles. More like assault rifles, as if they'd come here to fight a war. The trainee Rangers went outside to find out what they wanted, and

they didn't stand a chance."

He wiped away a tear, and Oz felt the depths of his misery.

"They shot them down like dogs. Didn't give them a chance, didn't even say anything. The poor bastards, all they carried were handguns, and they never left their holsters. They didn't draw a weapon, didn't even threaten them. These Omega people just shot them."

"How many of them?"

He scratched his head. "There must've been around fifteen, and they arrived in three vehicles. A couple of trucks, and in the lead a car, it looked like it had once been a cop cruiser, but they'd painted it black. After they killed them, they dragged the bodies to the trucks and threw them inside. Then they came in here. I guess looking to see if anyone was still here, and I hid in a closet."

"You didn't have any choice, Irvin."

The tears streamed down his face. Survivor's guilt. "When I came out, all I could find to defend myself was the unloaded scattergun. Those guys must've taken away every round of ammunition and every gun in the place. I stayed in that closet after they left. I didn't know what else to do or where to go."

He grinned. "You weren't tempted to take my Bronco parked out back?"

The Ranger gave him an emphatic shake of the head. "Not my style, buddy. I don't steal people's wheels, no matter what."

* * *

Everything had gone to hell. Over the past few days chaos had descended on Copperville. The power went first, then the fresh water stopped pumping through the taps, and communications became non-existent. No landlines, no cell phones, nothing. People were panicking, reduced to eking out what few supplies they had left in their larders, and struggling to find clean water to drink.

The local stream quickly became polluted after the sewerage system failed, and the first signs of illness swept through the town. She expected the first death to come soon. Eleanor was relying on the supply of bottled water she had inside the house. She worked out her supplies of food. It would last for a week, maybe two, but most of their supplies they'd taken to the cabin in the Appalachians.

The first bodies appeared in the streets, and all day and all night she

heard gunshots. Men and women roamed the streets carrying guns, some pushing supermarket trolleys laden with looted goods. They also carried their fear with them, like a heavy burden weighing them down. Their eyes staring, terrified, looking for answers and not getting any.

She thought she had an idea what was happening. The event she'd seen before, when she persuaded Oz to start building the cabin. The unknown. Except it was starting to reveal itself, an ugly face. The reasons were unknown, but the effects were obvious, panic, neighbor attacking neighbor, desperation, and death. She'd come home from school when no children turned up.

They'd prepared for this moment. She took her bug-out bag from the closet and checked the contents, dried food, bottled water, and two boxes of ammunition. One for the handgun she'd carried concealed under her coat for the past couple of days, and one for the rifle, her Ruger M77 Hawkeye All-Weather. It was time to head for the hills, where Oz would be waiting. The planning was about to become reality.

Her first task was to drive to the Ranger Station where Oz parked the Bronco, and on the way out of town she'd check on her aunt who lived just outside. Her mother's sister lived with another old lady, a more distant relation. It wouldn't take long to make sure they were okay. Her car was a battered old Rabbit, and she climbed in and inserted the key. The engine cranked for several minutes, but didn't start, and her eyes strayed to the gas gauge. Empty, and yet she knew she'd filled up recently, before all this started to happen.

Some bastard stolen my gas, and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. Except get out and find Oz.

She shouldered the bug-out bag, held the rifle in the crook of her arm, and started walking toward her aunt's home. A half-hour later she reached the wisteria-clad house. She knocked on the door, and after a long wait, Aunt Edith opened, giving her a beaming smile of welcome.

"Eleanor, how nice to see you. Have you come for dinner?"

The old lady was a tad woolly at times, and she put a reassuring hand on her arm. "Aunt Edith, that was two weeks ago."

"Really? I must have confused you with someone else. What are you doing here?"

"I'm leaving town, and I wanted to make sure you're okay. Do you have food and water?"

"Yes, I do, we have everything we need. My, that bag looks heavy. Leave it on the verandah and come inside."

She dumped the pack, and they went through to the living room. The other elderly lady who shared the house with her was kneeling before a makeshift altar. It was set up on a narrow console table at the far end of the room. A small wooden cross, a colored picture of Jesus, and a scented candle burning. Her mouth was moving, and Eleanor realized she was praying. She looked at her aunt. "What's up with Charlotte? Why is she praying?"

She gave her a beaming smile. "My dear, don't you know? We're waiting for rapture. Haven't you been watching the events of the past few days? It's really happening, there's no doubt. Can't you see?"

She pointed at the open Bible, and a verse underlined in pencil.

'And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.'

"Yes, I see it, Aunt Edith, but you ought to leave. You know what's happening in the town, you must've heard the shooting."

Her aunt was still smiling. "Of course we heard the shooting. Like the Bible says, it's the end of days, the end times. The beast is walking the earth, and we must wait for the Second Coming, and the gates of Paradise to open."

She cajoled and argued trying to get the two ladies to leave with her, to find somewhere they'd be safe. In this house on the edge of town they could easily fall prey to robbers, rapists, and murderers, a target for any lowlifes who happened by. They were adamant, and no matter how much she tried, she couldn't change their minds. But she'd still do her best for them.

"At least let me leave you some water. I have some in my pack on the verandah."

"Thank you, Eleanor, that would be very kind. If we're really worried we will go to the church."

She went outside, and in the few minutes since she'd left it outside, it had gone. She sobbed in despair. Everything had disappeared, her supplies of food and water, ammunition for the guns, stolen. It was a message that triple underlined what she faced. Not a simple catastrophe that could be explained in some way. This was the real thing. Civilization breaking down, and after another ten minutes of fruitlessly trying to persuade them to find somewhere safer, she continued her journey.

To find Oz, and if he didn't know already, tell him the unknown had finally arrived. Except now, she had an idea of the form it would take. Whatever had caused the breakdown of infrastructure; the effect was the same, looting, violence, shooting, and death.

I must find him and warn him.

The walk was long, and when the light faded, she kept walking, following the road by the light of the moon. Knowing that when she was too tired to go on, she'd have to find somewhere secluded to sleep, where she could be confident of not being attacked by a gang. The light had faded after clouds passed in front of the moon, and she used the stars to keep going. The faint illumination lit up the road just enough to see where she was going. And then she sighed with relief.

Dark shapes of buildings had appeared in front of her. She was coming to a small town or village, and surely there'd be somewhere she could bed down for a few hours. They might even give her a drink of water. She was so thirsty after the loss of her pack. She gripped her rifle, loaded a round into the chamber, just in case, and kept walking. There was no reason why they shouldn't help a lone woman. All she wanted was a drink of water and a place to lie down for the night. She thought of Oz, wishing he was safe. Praying he'd stayed in the cabin, knowing those old women were at least partly right. The beasts of the earth had been unleashed, and all hell was breaking loose. Except these weren't biblical beasts on the loose. They were man's greatest enemy. Other men.

She stumbled on, and at last came into a pool of light cast by a gasoline lantern fastened to the branch of a tree overhanging the road. The lantern threw a surprising spread of light, enough for her to spot the two armed men staring at her. Her first thought was she'd screwed up and walked into a gang of criminals. Then she sighed with relief, for they weren't robbers, rapists, or murderers. Neither were they looters. They wore the uniform of the Copperville Police Department, and she recognized both men. With a smile, she stepped forward.

"Guys, I'm so glad to see you. I'm looking for somewhere to bed down for the night. Can you spare a cup of water?"

One cop, she didn't know his name, pulled the trigger of his rifle, and fired a single shot into the sky. A warning shot. The meaning was clear.

"Get out of here, Ma'am. The next shot will be into your heart. We won't warn you again. Turn back."

She felt stunned with astonishment. "Listen, I have to get past. At least let me through, even if you won't spare me a drink or a place to stay."

The cop's expression was hard. "Last warning. I'll give you a count of five, and if you're still here, we open fire."

She felt a terrible black despair washing over her. She'd lost, and she was about to give up. About to tell them she was going past, no matter what they did. Knowing they'd kill her, and she didn't care.

Abruptly, she had a mental flash, like she sometimes did.

Oz is alive. He's okay, and he's coming to find me.

CHAPTER THREE

Oz was thinking about things. Whatever else, he had a single priority.

Find Eleanor and make sure she's safe. But right now, I face another dilemma. Irvin Cobb. It looks like the entire countryside's gone mad, so can I trust him? He appears to be honest, and he didn't steal the Bronco. Still, I need to know more about him. The way to find out is to ask.

"Irvin, how come you wound up as a game warden? What's the story?"

He frowned. "I didn't intend on that kind of career. I used to be a city boy. But everything changed when I joined up."

"Which branch of the service?"

They chatted for several minutes, and it turned out he'd been a grunt, a Marine. He was much older, in his mid-fifties, and took part in the Invasion of Panama in 1989. He smiled, recalling better days.

"Those were good days, and when I left, I was finished with the city for good. I enjoyed the outdoors, country folk, a feeling of belonging to the land. When I saw the vacancy for the Rangers, I signed on the dotted line."

"No regrets?"

"Not one." A quick grin, "At least, not until now. Say, Oz, I don't have any transport, no means to get out of this place. I'd like to go with you. After all, two is better than one."

He nodded. That may be true, unless the second man didn't have a gun to his name. And then he remembered, the two men he'd shot, and pointed to their bodies.

"That works for me, but you'd better pick up the guns. One of those guys had a handgun on his belt. I'd take that, too, if I were you. You never know."

He nodded and went to collect the rifles, searching them for spare magazines, and anything else he could find that may be useful. He came back, grinning with his finds.

"They both carried water bottles, and I brought them with me. I have a feeling fresh, clean water isn't going to be too plentiful, if power is off, and the pumps stop working."

He nodded. "They'll be useful. Irvin, this is all about survival from here on in."

He nodded uncertainly. "But why? And how?"

"The reasons don't matter. What does matter is we keep moving. Keep living. The worse things get, the more valuable the weapons, ammo, food, and potable water become."

"Yeah, I get it. Does that mean we're agreed?"

"Agreed." He held out his hand and they shook, "Semper fi, buddy. Now let's get on the road."

"What about that black cruiser? Could we use it?"

"Nope, it would stick out like a sore thumb. Besides, it doesn't belong to us. I don't know how those guys persuaded the cops to part with a cruiser, but that's their business. At least it was their business; they won't be worrying about it anymore. There's something else. We may have to go off-road, and the Bronco can handle it. It can handle anything."

He started the engine, and they drove away, heading toward Copperville. Oz kept trying the cellphone, but there was still no signal. Not that he'd expected one. The electricity was clearly out over a wide area, and without power, the cell towers were only useful as temporary perches for migrating birds. He drove fast, and they passed groups of stragglers. Frightened people, most carrying a few possessions in bundles strapped to their backs, some in wheelbarrows and handcarts. No doubt fleeing the towns and cities. Some disappeared into the trees when they saw the Bronco approach. A few tried to flag them down, but he didn't stop. Couldn't stop. His mind fixated on a single objective. Eleanor.

Twenty miles outside Copperville, he had no choice. Two men had set up a roadblock, a car slewed across the road to make it difficult to get past. Something about the car was odd, the rear hung down lower than the front. In addition, the wheels looked twisted out of alignment.

He recognized both men. One was the local sheriff, Bob Miller, and the other the owner of the Copperville gun shop, Ron's Rifles. His name was Ron Foley, and Oz had bought ammo from him on several occasions. He'd never been that friendly, giving the impression he'd been destined for better things than running a gun store.

Friendly or not, there was little to lose by talking to them, and maybe a lot to gain. If they'd had contact with the outside world, they may know what had caused the loss of power, water, and communications. He noticed both men had rifles tucked under their arms; nothing wrong with that, although the weapons were assault rifles, and he felt suspicious. Especially when Ron Foley aimed his weapon at the Bronco.

As he slowed, he drew the Kimber Custom, holding it out of sight. He brought the Bronco to a halt and waited as the Sheriff approached. They'd recognized him, for sure. But there was no smile of greeting or friendly wave, like he'd expect. They looked serious, their faces set in expressions he concluded were hostile. Which made the feel of the Kimber comforting. He had his finger curled around the trigger, pointed the muzzle in the general direction of the Sheriff, and waited for him to make his move.

He still had his rifle pointed down, but he didn't need it. Foley had them covered.

"Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle?"

* * *

She was all in, tired, hungry, and worst of all, thirsty. She had nothing to lose, and she felt the anger grow inside her. What the hell were these two clowns doing? They were supposed to be cops, protecting the townspeople. Yet here they were, threatening to shoot her, and she was unsure how to respond, whether to bluster her way past or go back. There was an alternative. She was a good shot, and Oz had trained her to be fast and accurate. She put that one on the back burner. For now.

The cop who she didn't know ratcheted a round into his rifle. "I told you, Ma'am, turn around and go back where you came from."

Emmett still hadn't spoken, and she glanced at him. At least he looked a bit embarrassed. She wasn't that worried about him; sure he wouldn't hurt his daughter's schoolteacher. But his pal looked as if he couldn't wait to pull the trigger. Probably wanted to prove his worth to whoever was giving them their orders. She didn't answer, and they were at an impasse. While she waited for them to either step aside or start shooting, she looked beyond them. Seeing a huddle of buildings, one larger than the others, and in better repair. Not a house, but more like barn. Or a storehouse, and her suspicions grew. They were guarding something, something more valuable than gold. Right now that meant one thing, supplies, foodstuffs, bottled water, weapons, and ammunition, the difference between life and death. Life for who possessed them, death for who didn't.

She gave them the benefit of her scornful glance. "You bastards, you've stolen food from the town and brought it here. Is that right?" She stared hard at Emmett, "Am I right, Officer O'Donnell? You've taken the food from

peoples' larders, helped yourselves to their supplies? Is that what you're guarding here?"

His face was bright red with embarrassment, confirming her guess, but still he didn't speak. The other cop started to say something, but she cut him off.

"Listen to me, you bastards. The reason I'm thirsty is because a thief stole my supplies. I had everything I needed for several days, and some lowdown rattlesnake took it. Like you two men took other people's stuff." The shuffled their feet, "I don't give a shit if you shoot me, just give me a drink of water. Dammit, Emmett, I taught your daughter Becky. What is it with you?"

He couldn't meet her gaze. "I'm really sorry, Eleanor, but you have to move on. Those are our orders."

"Whose orders? Who told you to prevent people from passing?"

"The Mayor." He nodded to the storehouse, "He's inside."

She nodded. "Is that a fact? The Mayor, cozying up to those stolen supplies, and I guess he'll have plenty of bottled water." He gave a faint nod, "Emmett, you sonofabitch. How much is it to ask for a drink of water?"

Both men looked at each other, and Emmett murmured a command to the cop with the gun pointed at her. He lowered the weapon, and she wondered whether to bring up her rifle to cover them while she disarmed them. She could do it. She was fast, and a good shot. But it hadn't come to that yet. She and the two cops stared at each other, waiting for something to happen.

It happened. A man stepped out of the storehouse, a familiar figure, and one she recognized, the Mayor of Copperville, Chuck Chandler. He shouted at the cops.

"Men, stand down. Let Mrs. Porter pass, and give her some water."

She nodded her thanks, walked past them, and entered the storehouse unchallenged. Three small cartons were on the floor containing food and a dozen bottles of water, perhaps enough to fill the trunk of a police cruiser. She drank her fill from a bottle she found still sealed, so she knew it was safe, and sat on a wooden crate, wondering how much she could trust Chandler.

Was he involved with the problems that hit the town, or is he as much in the dark as the rest of us? He did run, so maybe he's in the same situation as everybody else. Frightened and confused, or maybe not. But he sure looks scared.

"Mayor Chandler, what can you tell me about this thing that's hit us. When is it going to end? When will the power come on, and when will the water flow through the taps?"

"I don't know." His voice was low, and she sensed tiredness and desperation in him, "Eleanor, with no communications, people are in a state of panic. We've seen armed gangs shooting at each other. Law and order has broken down, and before we left town, men dressed in black uniforms turned up claiming to be from some outfit empowered to restore law and order. We don't know whether to trust them or not. We don't know whether to trust anyone."

"Who are these people? FBI?"

"I don't think so. They call themselves Omega, and they said they were going to paste proclamations around the town explaining the new State of Emergency."

"Omega? I've never heard of them. What do you know about them?"

He looked even more despairing. "Not much. No, that's not true. I don't know anything about them. They could have invented the whole thing, so they could go around robbing folks. Or then again, they could be on the level. We don't know."

"Mr. Mayor, why did you leave the town in the hands of these people? Surely you and the local cops could've maintained law and order."

"I wish. Most of the cops ran, and even the police chief disappeared. He went to the local gun shop to replenish the ammunition. I mean, it looked like we were going to need every bullet we could get, and the bastard never came back. These two cops are the last, the only ones who didn't run. They came with me in a cruiser, but five miles out of town we hit a tree lying across the road, and it ripped out the rear axle."

He stopped, as if out of breath.

"That wasn't the end of it. The tree was a trap. Two men appeared, both wearing civilian clothes, and they claimed to be Omega deputies. They told us we were to go back to town, and they pointed assault rifles at us. My two cops held them off while we unloaded our supplies. They didn't like it, said they needed to put them in a central store, but we refused. Then we started walking back to town, but when we were out of sight, we doubled back through the trees until we reached this place."

He went silent, and she realized he had nothing more to say. He knew nothing, and he'd run like the rest of them. Abruptly, the door opened with a

crash, and Emmett O'Donnell rushed inside.

"Mr. Mayor, there're vehicles headed this way. Three trucks, and they're all painted with this Omega logo on the hood. Just like the people we ran into when our car hit the tree. The trucks are filled with armed men, and my guess is they're coming for our supplies.

"You can't let them take them," Eleanor said quickly, "Without supplies, you'll die."

They went outside and watched the three trucks drive into the yard. The armed men in the back of each truck weren't wearing any uniform, but a motley collection of civilian and hunting clothes. A rabble, and several were swigging beer from cans. The vehicles stopped, and a man stepped out from the passenger side of the lead truck. He looked different, black camos, Kevlar vest, and helmet. Omega.

* * *

He wound down the window. "Hi, Sheriff. What's the problem?"

His expression was neutral. "Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle? We're checking everyone traveling in or out of town."

He didn't move. "Sheriff, you know who I am, so what's the deal?"

Ron Foley was standing a few yards away, and he didn't like the expression on his face. The guy wasn't the most popular man in town, although he was the sheriff's drinking buddy. None of which mattered. What did matter was he wouldn't meet his eyes. That worried him.

"You know what's going on. Everything's gone to hell, and people are scared a war's going to break out. I guess you've heard about Martial Law? Like I said, my duty is to check everything going in or out of town."

"Check for what?"

He didn't answer, but Oz had a good idea. He'd be disappointed if he thought he was going to take his stuff. Not that he had much to take. "Okay, you've checked. You know me, so why don't you let us pass?"

He leaned in to look at the passenger. "Who's the other guy? I don't recognize him."

He explained about Irvin Cobb. "He's all right, Sheriff, one of the good guys, ex-Marine Corps and currently a Ranger. I can vouch for him."

"Is that so? You say you're headed back to Copperville?"

He nodded. "That's correct. To find my wife, and make sure she's okay. We're not staying in town, so you don't need to worry about us. We'll wait

out this crazy situation up in the mountains. I have a place there. Unless you think the power's about to go back on, Sheriff."

He avoided the question. "Where is this place, exactly?"

Something in his voice alerted him. He was trying too hard to make the question sound casual. No way would he give up the location. Especially to a guy holding a gun on him.

"Listen, we'll just head on into Copperville, and I'll look for my wife."

"I don't think so. I'd prefer you to stay here. You could join us, Oz. I could deputize you, and your friend. You know the score, the safety in numbers, at least until we find out what's behind this business. Stick together."

He shook his head. "Can't happen. I have to find my wife. That takes priority."

"No, it doesn't. I want you to stay here, Oz. That's an order."

They'd done talking, and he waited for them to make the first move. Either they'd start shooting, or they wouldn't. He'd soon know. When he made no move to dismount from the truck, his lips tightened.

"I'm not offering you an option here. I'm running security, and you're not going any further." He tried to form his lips into a smile, and it wasn't convincing, "You know it makes sense. With everything that's happening around here, we need to look after each other. If one of these armed gangs roaming the area decided to hit us, we'd find it easier to handle them with more men."

The smile disappeared. "Step out of the truck. Last warning."

"No, Sherriff, we can't do that."

He swung his assault rifle up, so the muzzle pointed at his chest. It was so close he could see the selector lever set to full auto. Oz gave Irvin a significant look. Cobb replied with a blink. He knew what to do; he'd been a Marine. Oz looked back, working out angles and fields of fire, still trying to work out how to get out of this without killing the local sheriff. Too late, Bob Miller had made up his mind.

"I want to see your hands in the open now, and they'd better not be holding a weapon. When you step out, face the vehicle, hands on the hood, and feet spread apart."

His gaze was hard and brittle, and Oz had all the information he needed. The guy wanted something. He'd worked it out and guessed it was the truck. The seconds ticked past, and the two men's fingers were on the triggers. They

were seconds away from a shootout, and death.

* * *

Emmett wore an expression of panic. "There're too many for us to deal with, Mr. Mayor."

Chandler glanced at his officer, and then stared at the vehicles halted fifty yards away. The passenger door of the lead vehicle opened, and a man stepped out. Unlike the rabble behind the trucks, he was dressed all in black. An Omega logo on his vest, and she knew the worst. She was looking at the new face of law and order. Omega, and so far, no one knew who they were, where they'd come from, and how far to trust them. On balance, she decided. Not far at all.

He produced a loudhailer.

"I represent Omega, the duly appointed authority for law and order. I can show you copies of the State of Emergency, and if you have any sense, and if you know how to read, I suggest you come and look at them. Lower your weapons, and put up your hands until we can confirm your identities. A bunch of prisoners escaped from the local maximum-security prison when the electronic systems went down. That's why we're not taking any chances, so drop the weapons, and put up your hands. Just relax, and nobody will get hurt. Come over here. You can inspect the proclamations, and you'll know we're on the level."

Mayor Chandler was already shaking his head in disbelief he shouted back, "Who authorized this State of Emergency? Who gave you the right to threaten the Mayor of Copperville and his police with guns?"

The man lowered the loudhailer and looked around at his men. They were climbing down from the trucks, forming a line, some still clutching their cans of beer. All of them ready to start blasting if the need arose. He gave them a slight shake of the head and turned back to Chandler.

"The name's Wayne Garrett. Omega recruited me to supervise the deputies to restore order."

"So where do you come from, and what experience do you have? FBI, State Trooper, what?"

"No, none of those."

"So what did you do before you joined this Omega outfit?"

There was a long pause. "I, uh, sold used cars."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this," Chandler shouted back at him,

"Who's the man in charge? Who's the man at the top?"

He brought up the loudhailer.

"My boss is Barry Mendez, and he was an SAC with the FBI. I can tell you he's a man with a great deal of experience."

"Not another used car salesman?"

Garrett ignored the sarcasm. "Because of his experience, he took over responsibility for law enforcement across the State." He forced a smile, as if they came in peace, determined to keep things friendly. The men standing behind him in a long line, guns drawn, didn't make it look any more convincing, "Guys, we're on your side. Our orders are to pool all the medical supplies, food, and water we can find. Then we take them to a central supply depot, and hand them out according to need. It's for the common good, the only way we can get through this. You must see it makes sense."

Emmett scowled. "Fucking communists. It's always for the common good, and then they steal everything for themselves."

Chandler glanced at him for a second, and then turned to Eleanor. "What do you think?"

She gave him a slight shake of the head. He nodded his understanding and shouted back to the Omega man. "You're not taking our supplies. As elected MMayor, I'm telling you to get out of my jurisdiction."

Garrett shook his head. "That's not gonna happen. I've given you a legitimate order, and we're wasting time. Drop the weapons."

Eleanor grabbed Chandler's sleeve to attract his attention "Sir, we should start to ease back. We're out in the open, and if they start shooting, we'll need to take cover fast."

He gave her an incredulous glance. "You think they mean it?"

"You want to take a chance on that?"

Before he could reply, the other cop murmured, "Mr. Mayor, there're too many of them, and we can't fight them all. I think we should do as they say."

Eleanor gave him a hard glance. "If you think that, you must be crazy. I'm not surrendering my gun to anyone, not in a million years."

"But..."

She turned to Chandler. "You give them your guns, and they'll take everything. They'll leave us defenseless. Do you want to kill us all?"

Something in her words helped him make up his mind. "Right or wrong, we should play safe. At least until we know who's on which side. We'll start

to move back to the storehouse.”

The cop still didn't look convinced. “Sir, those guys mean business. If we don't give them what they want, they'll start shooting.”

“It's possible, but we'll play for time. Tell them we're discussing it. While they think we're talking it over, we'll get ready to move out. Eleanor, I recall you know this area. Is it possible to give them the slip?”

She smiled. “In these forests? No problem, especially as we'll be on foot. We'll need to take as many supplies as we can carry, food, water, even a gallon of gasoline if we can manage it. Warm clothing, hunting traps, weapons, and ammo that should be enough.”

He blanched. “On foot, carrying that lot through the forest?”

She met his eyes. “Unless you want to die out here.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“In that case, we should make a start. Don't worry, Mr. Mayor, we'll make it.”

She worked hard to produce a confident expression, and they relaxed, at least someone knew what they were doing. The problem was, she didn't.

Sure, I know the area, and how to slip through the forest unseen. But where's safe, and where isn't? And where's Oz? Is it possible I've missed him somewhere, and he's gone to town to look for me? Or is he at the cabin? I just don't know.

She looked at the trucks behind the Omega rabble, and an idea began to form in her mind.

“Mayor Chandler, I may have a better idea. How about we borrow a truck?”

He looked aghast. “You mean take one of those? How the hell could we get away with it?”

She'd worked out an idea and explained it to him. “It'll be risky. You'll need to lay down covering fire. I'll slip behind them, take one of their vehicles, and drive toward Copperville. When you see me go, shoot out the tires in the other trucks, and then make your way through the woods. Meet me a few hundred yards along the road.”

“But, we're not going to Copperville.”

“Maybe, maybe not. What we're doing is getting away from these bastards.”

“By stealing an Omega truck?”

“Not stealing.” She gave him a sweet smile, “They stole those trucks

from other people, and they sure as hell don't belong to them. When this is over, I'll make damn certain to trace the owner and return their vehicle to them. Do you think Omega plan to hand it back?"

"No, no, I don't."

"Well, then. Two minutes, and I want you to start shooting."

"They'll shoot back. We could be hit. What then?"

"If a bullet hits a vital organ, you die. Any other questions?"

"Uh, no."

"Two minutes."

She sprinted away into the darkness.

* * *

He didn't want to kill anyone, but no way was he going to change his plans. He could have put a bullet into Sheriff Miller at any time, straight through the thin paneling of the driver's door and into his body, but still he hesitated. The sheriff probably thought he was doing the right thing. Besides, he didn't want to put a hole in the paintwork. Better save the trouble and expense and reason with him.

"Sheriff, this is crazy. You've known me for all the time I've lived in the town, and you know I'm not a robber or a rapist."

"I know that, but you need to see things from my side. Omega is running things, period. And their boss Barry Mendez made it clear we have to do what they say. Otherwise, they'll send someone else to keep order, and they won't be as friendly as the locals. We have to make sure folks don't go running around looting and shooting up the place."

He kept his voice calm, although inside he was boiling.

Looting, who the fuck does he think he's calling a looter?

"Sheriff, you know that's not me."

"You're absolutely right. I know you're not like that, and I also know you're a decorated war hero. But I still have to obey the rules."

Oz gave him a skeptical glance, and he hurried on, "Look, I have an idea. I'll deputize you and your buddy, so you can join us. Join Omega. The rest of the cops ran, and we can keep this local. With you two men as my deputies, you'll have full authority to do what you want. Maintain the law and stop the looting. Arrest anyone you want." He paused, "Provided you clear it with me first, and I'll always green light any action you take."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Bob, but that doesn't work for me. I'm

going to find my wife, and not you, not Omega, not anyone is going to stop me."

Miller had the rifle pointed at his chest, and he'd clearly made the decision to pull the trigger. He could see him taking up first pressure on the trigger.

"Get out of the truck, and hand me the keys."

"The keys?"

"Like I said, we lost the axle on our cruiser, so we'll need transport. I'm sequestering your truck, and to be on the safe side, I'll take the guns as well."

"A moment ago, you were talking about deputizing us, Sheriff. Now you want to disarm us and steal my truck?"

"I just don't want any trouble. Last chance, Oz."

He stared back at him. "Bob, if you want our guns and my truck, you'll have to pull those triggers. You won't get them any other way."

Miller's gaze hardened, but suddenly they heard the noise of approaching vehicles, and he looked away. As they drew near, he smiled and relaxed. "That clinches it. The Omega guys are here. Now you don't have a choice. I suggest you do as I say before they get here. Those guys can play very rough."

The oncoming vehicles braked to a halt, and he took advantage of the momentary confusion to seize the advantage. He jerked his arm and slammed the steel door of the Bronco open. It hit the Sheriff in the chest, and his rifle went off, scattering a short burst into the trees before he managed to extricate his finger from the trigger. Ron Foley was slow to react. Besides, he wasn't sure if his shots would hit the sheriff, hit the Omega guys tumbling out of the trucks, or hit Oz Porter. His delay was fatal.

Oz drew a bead on him and pulled the trigger. The Kimber Custom wasn't the most accurate of weapons, but Foley was thirty yards away, and the shot a no-brainer for a skilled military sniper. The bullet slammed into his belly, and he went down screaming in agony, creating confusion just as he'd planned. Irvin had already acted, and pumped a bullet into the Sheriff, who'd recovered and was shouting for the Omegas to open fire.

"Kill the bastards. Don't let them get away."

The engine of the Bronco was still running. Oz stamped on the gas pedal, and they shot away. Three seconds later the first shots whined past them, and he heard the roar of engines as they accelerated after him to give chase. The road curved ahead, and he saw a narrow forest track on the right.

He took the corner on two wheels, and they bumped uphill, heading deeper into the trees. The headlamps lit the route for them, but he switched them off. He glanced at Irvin who shouted in fear, as they appeared to be running blind through a thick forest.

"If we travel with the lights on they can follow us easily. This is our best chance."

A second later the truck plunged into a deep ditch and out the other side. Irvin bounced on the seat, banging his head on the roof of the cab.

"I hear you, but it could cause a problem or two."

"There's Tylenol in the glove box. Take as many as you want."

"Appreciated."

They continued uphill, lurching deeper into the forest, and there was no sign of any vehicles in the rear. When he felt they'd gone far enough, he swung the wheel over to take a sharp left turn, retracing the route to their original destination.

They made good time, and Irvin only banged his head three more times before he turned again, five miles from of the town. They descended another little used trail and hit the main road again.

If she's there, I'll find her. If she isn't, I'll still find her. Eleanor, hang in there a little longer. Stay safe.

An hour later, he was outside their home. She wasn't there. Nobody was there. The town was deserted, apart from the bodies in the street. Crows picking at the rotting flesh, and they took to the sky, screeching in fury as he drove past, disturbing their rich feast.

CHAPTER FOUR

Despite all the chaos he'd encountered since coming down from the cabin, and the skirmishes with Omega, arriving in the town was a shock. In the past three weeks it'd changed from a thriving community to a ghost town. The place had been home to three thousand people. Now it was home to nothing but predators, carrion eating birds, rats, even coyotes had come down out of the hills to feast on the spoils.

On the outskirts of Copperville, he passed a body on the sidewalk, unburied, abandoned. When they drove closer to the town center, they came across more bodies. Some were strewn on the road, most with signs of gunshot wounds. He could hardly believe people had used guns to fight one another in this sleepy community. A child's tricycle lay in the center of the road, and he moved the wheel automatically to steer past. Outside the houses, front yards were littered with the detritus of hurried escape, boxes, suitcases, blankets, bedding, and clothes strewn everywhere. As if people had rummaged to find what suited a sharp exit, abandoning the rest to travel light.

He'd left this place when he went to fight in Iraq, and people gave him and his pals a warm farewell. Back then there were three of them, him and Danny Blanchard, and an older man, Rick Devine. He still remembered feeling so proud as they climbed onto the bus, and it seemed like half the town had turned up to wave them off. The homecoming was different.

He was alone and recovered, at least in body. They told him to relax and take it easy, not to let memories of Iraq haunt him, but he found it impossible. How could you almost turn your back on your pals and celebrate your homecoming? Danny, dead on the blood-soaked sands, and Devine in a military hospital, where they were patching him up after taking two bullets in the same firefight on that final day.

He felt the familiar dark cloud swirling around him and fought against it. He felt himself losing control and stopped the truck. Irvin eyed him curiously.

"Why are we stopping?"

He couldn't explain, didn't want to. His mind was already in lockdown, skin sweating profusely, and inside his head, his brain rerunning it all. He saw the Black Hawk coming in, and he was crouched behind his rifle. He saw the enemy, the Isis fighters pounce, the missile, bullets blazing through the

air, and men going down. Good men, decent men. Once again, the enemy was dancing around the funeral pyre of the Black Hawk, and once again, he was inside. He could feel the flames licking at his flesh, and it was burning; the terrible searing pain, and like someone slowly digging a knife through his brain, causing unbelievable agony. It went on forever, and they were dancing, and he shouted at them.

"For Christ's sake, stop dancing. We're dying in here."

Johnny Cash was singing Ring of Fire, and he was standing to one side. Just all in trademark black, strumming his guitar, and when Oz shouted at him, he shrugged.

"I'm sorry about this, Sergeant. We're nearly finished. Gimme another hour, and the song will be over."

"Ring of Fire isn't that long. It's a few minutes."

Cash stared back at him. "No doubt here, friend. In this place, death is long and hard."

He was screaming at him, and someone else was shouting at him. They were attacking him, and he fought back, lashing out with his fists.

"It's okay. It's me, Irvin. Calm down."

He opened his eyes. His clothes were drenched with sweat, already cooling on his body. At first, he had to wrench his brain away from the nightmare flashback, and he looked up at Irvin. "I'm sorry. It's nothing special. A nightmare is all."

"Some fucking nightmare. You want to tell me about it, Oz?"

"No." He didn't want to tell anyone about it. Not Irvin, Eleanor, anyone. Somehow, he'd get over it, "How long was I out?"

"About fifteen minutes, are you okay to go on?"

"I'm fine. Like I said, nothing special. People get nightmares all the time."

He gave him a skeptical glance. "That's true, but usually in their sleep."

Oz drove on, and the roads were becoming more difficult to get through. More abandoned possessions, toys, suitcases, and even cars left in the center of the street. He checked the first one, and it had run out of gas. He guessed the others were the same. People had started to drive away to escape whatever catastrophe had struck the town. They would have stopped for lack of fuel, and the evidence was there. The numbers of locking fuel caps jimmied open, and a discarded gasoline can next to a length of rubber tube. It was almost like being back in Iraq. People killing each other, people robbing

and stealing, but here, in Copperville? Three weeks ago, he'd have said never. Now he was in the middle of a whole, strange new world.

He drove on, getting nearer to his home, a small house on the south side of the town where they'd had so many good times. The home he'd come back to after Iraq. As they were driving along, Cobb asked him about the name he called out during his nightmare.

"It sounded like Devine. What's the story, Oz?"

Rick Devine, there's no reason he shouldn't know, another casualty of war.

"He was one of the guys I went out to Iraq with, local man. About five years older than me and Danny Blanchard, and he was wounded on the last day. I came back to a warm welcome in the town, but Devine didn't make it."

"He was dead?"

"Not dead, a wound. He spent almost a month in hospital out there. Then they shipped him home, and he spent another two months recovering after he took two bullets."

Cobb smiled. "It sounds like he was lucky, getting out of there with a wound. Three months in hospital, pretty nurses running around after him. I guess they gave him another big welcome when he got home?"

"He never made it home. He was driving back from hospital on the day they discharged him when he was involved in an auto accident. The car caught fire, and he was badly burned. They were only able to identify him from his watch and his wedding band. It was tragic. Rick was a good guy."

Irvin sobered. "Not so lucky, I guess. Did he have a wife?"

"He did, yes. He left her comfortable after he died, well provided for. Rick took out a big life insurance policy three weeks before the accident, almost as if he had a premonition about his impending death. I believe the figure was around five million dollars, enough for her to have no worries about her future."

He grunted a reply, and moments later, Oz pulled up outside his house. It was unrecognizable. Inside, he called her name. There was no reply, and his voice echoed around the abandoned rooms. His gaze fell on the remainder of their furnishings. She'd spent so much time choosing them, like the retro fabrics. Sewing new drapes and taking pleasure in choosing the furniture, much of it secondhand, some even antique. She had an eye for fine detail, so their home was a balance of old style and new. No, that wasn't right. It used to be like that. Now it was semi-derelict.

He searched everywhere, but she wasn't there. Neither were there any looters, they'd had everything they could carry away, and trashed everything else. Like the patterned sofas and the stove in the kitchen they'd smashed beyond repair. He felt sad, knowing things would never be the same again. Although when he came across a photo of him and Eleanor, taken on vacation last year outside their cabin in the Appalachians, he felt better. Somehow, he'd find her, and if she wasn't here, there was only one place she could be. The cabin. Somehow, they'd crossed paths, but he was convinced that's where he'd find her.

He was about to call to Irvin who was standing out in the front yard, when he noticed a photo of Rick Devine. He recalled asking his widow for something he could remember his old Marine buddy by. Rick was standing next to a Ford Mustang, with a cheesy grin on his face. The car was bright red, the 5.0 liter V8 model. Brutally powerful, and who wouldn't be proud to own such a vehicle.

"Irvin, there's nothing here for us. We need to go back."

He looked surprised. "Back? You mean to that place of yours on top of the mountain?"

"That's what I mean, yep. If she's not here, it means I missed her, and the only place she'd have gone is the cabin. Either she made it there, or she's on the way."

Cobb didn't answer first, and then he nodded. "If that's what you think is best, it's not a problem with me. But going back there isn't going to be easy. There are enough bad guys out there to stop us reaching it, and I don't know if we ought to think about finding somewhere to hold up and wait for things to die down."

"Irvin, I'm going back. If you don't want to come, that's your choice. You do what you think is best."

"I didn't mean it like that," he said hastily, "I understand how you feel, and if you want to get back to her, I'll do my damndest to help. All I'm saying is, it won't be easy."

"I never thought it would be. Okay, why don't we get started?"

They climbed back into the Bronco, and with a last look at his home, wrecked, looted and abandoned, he drove away. He didn't get far, didn't get past the end of the street. They were there, a ragged bunch of men, most armed with rifles, a few with handguns, and some with baseball bats and garden spades.

"What the hell? How did those Omega guys find us so fast?"

But Irvin was looking at them closely, staring from man to man, and he shook his head.

"They're not Omega. Look at their clothes. You remember what they said about those escape prisoners? We've just run into them."

"Shit!"

There was no need to consider whether their intentions were friendly or hostile. So far they hadn't started shooting, but it was a question of when, not if. He glanced in the mirror. Another bunch was coming down the street towards them, about twenty men in front, and at least that number behind. Irvin saw the direction of his gaze and glanced around.

"It's a trap. Jesus, we don't have any way out. If you try and go through them, they'll tear us apart. We can't fight that many."

The adage from Iraq came back to him then. The sniper's motto, the often-repeated reminder that kept them alive when close to the battlefield, shoot and scoot.

He looked at Cobb. "Are you loaded?"

"I sure am, and the magazine's full."

"Okay, here's how this works. We'll slip through the middle. When I holler, start shooting. Shoot to kill, because sure as hell, those guys are itching to kill us. They'll want the Bronco with a tank of gas, and to get their hands on any weapons and supplies we have. You ready?"

"Ready."

"Fire!"

It happened all at once. He stamped on the gas, put the truck broadside to the enemy, and he was driving for the narrow drive at the side of his house. Irvin opened fire, put the muzzle of his 700 through the open window, and pulled the trigger. Every time a bullet left the chamber, he took his hand off the wheel, worked the bolt, put his hand back on the wheel, and pulled the trigger again. He got off four shots, and Irvin emptied the magazine of the M4.

They lost sight of the hostiles. They'd been quick, too quick, and only by fate they avoided taking any serious hits; serious being any that would stop the Bronco. The tough truck plowed on past the rear yard, and he ran it straight through the fence at the end. Across the field, and he bumped across a narrow creek, knowing it would only hold a few inches of water. On the other side, he went flat out across the field, heading toward a large building

several hundred yards away. A few shots cracked out from behind, and a couple of bullets whistled past, but no more hit them. He looked at Irvin.

"We're heading for the school up ahead. We can get out of sight behind the buildings, and try to find another way through. Back there we were lucky not to take any hits.

"Not that lucky." Oz glanced at Irvin, and his face was screwed up in pain.

"Where did it get you?"

"Just a graze, nothing too bad, through my left side. I'll be okay. It didn't hit anything vital. When we stop, I'll put something over it to cover it up. Don't worry about me. Just get us out of here."

He drove on, flattening the fence into the schoolyard, and he was in the middle of the buildings. Before he reached the front entrance he stopped, put the truck into reverse, and eased back out of sight. A convoy of vehicles had stopped inside the school gates. An ancient bus that looked like they'd salvaged it from a junkyard, several passenger cars, and even a motorcycle.

It looked like they'd run out of gas, probably food and drinking water as well, and stopped to ransack the school. A few people were milling around, and they'd lit a fire in a rusting oil drum. They were feeding wood to the flames, and he recognized the shelves from the Junior High Library. Either side a solid stone wall enclosed the schoolyard. He doubted the Bronco would bust through, but there was no other way.

"We're screwed," Cobb said, "Is there another way out of this place?"

He shook his head. "Nothing I'm aware of, but now would be a good time to look. I'll hide the vehicle, and we'll scout around."

He reversed the Bronco through the huge, smashed windows of the foyer and switched off the engine. Everything was quiet. He reloaded the Remington, and Cobb inserted a full magazine into the M4.

The place was eerie, no noise of children running, shouting, the admonishments of teachers, telling them to slow down and not to run in the corridors. 'Don't be late for your lesson, and where's that homework you promised me? I told you to bring in this morning, so where is it?'

The silence mocked them, as if they'd walked into a tomb, and the place had been taken over by ghosts. The building was on two floors, and they searched all of them thoroughly. He felt a pang when they came to Eleanor's chemistry lab, but he put it behind him. There was no point in worrying. What they needed was a way out of the trap they'd driven into. He glanced at

Irvin.

"We've struck out, so I guess the only way out is back the way we came."

"Except for the gang blocking the road."

"They'll get bored and move on before long. Give it an hour, time for them to go away, and we'll head out."

They started back to the Bronco, but both men stopped, and he held up his hand. A noise from somewhere, and he remembered there was a storage basement under the school. The boilers that heated the place were down there as well. He pointed to the door and put a finger to his lips.

"I'll go down first." He kept his voice to a low murmur, "Watch my back, and make sure you know who you're shooting at before you pull the trigger. This is a school. We don't want to go killing any innocents."

"Copy that."

He eased down the stairs, keeping his footsteps as soft as possible. He wasn't entirely successfully. Broken glass and other debris littered the staircase, and he couldn't avoid making a noise. The place smelled musty and damp, so presumably they hadn't fired up the boilers for some time. His guess was confirmed when he reached the bottom, and the gauge on the big oil tank showed empty.

He was careful, tiptoeing around the dim basement, recalling the sound they both heard from up top. There was someone here, or something. It could be a wild animal, come down there to turn the place into its new lair. It could even be a human, and he made sure he had a round in the chamber, ready to shoot. At the far end of the room a door led to the huge boiler that in better times warmed the school. He opened the door, took a step inside, and stopped in astonishment. People. Staring at him, their eyes bright through the gloom, almost thirty men, women, and children, and they all shared something in common. That terrified look in their eyes.

A young girl, she couldn't have been more than five-years-old, came forward to meet him. "Mister, have you come to kill us?"

He realized he had the rifle pointed straight at her, and he lowered the barrel. "No, I'm not here to kill you. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

A woman came forward. He estimated her age at about thirty-years-old, and she scooped the girl up in her arms. "Are you sure you're not like the others? You're not here to kill us?"

"No, I'm not. Like which others?"

"Out in the street. When they came in, we didn't know what they planned, but they opened fire on us without warning."

A voice piped up from the back, "I know that guy. He's the U.S. Marine, you remember, the guy who came back from Iraq. Oz Porter. Damn, are we glad to see you! Did you come here to help us get to safety?"

He heard a sound behind him, and he jerked around, but it was Irvin, who'd come cautiously into the room and stood covering the entry.

He reassured them. "It's okay. He's with me, a friend. What's going on here?"

The woman with the child in her arms replied, "What's going on is they suckered us. We were leaving town with the rest, but during the night, someone stole the gas from our vehicles, most of our vehicles. There must've been a lot of them draining our tanks, because out of almost a hundred cars, we only had ten with gas in the tanks. The people that owned them saddled up and left town. They said they'd come back for us, but they never did."

He suspected Omega was at back of it. Leaving the people on foot, to wander the countryside. No food, no water, and no transport. No hope. "Did anyone else turn up?"

"Yes, they did. We heard shooting, and then these people turned up. They wore black outfits, and said they were here to keep order."

Omega, just as I suspected.

"You don't sound as if they did."

She shook her head. "They brought along some guys, they called them deputies, although they looked to me like local lowlives, the kind you'd lock your door at night to make sure they didn't get into your house and steal your stuff."

"And rape your daughters," someone shouted from the back.

He didn't need to ask. The sad, bitter voice told him everything. She had girls, and they'd abused them.

The same woman spoke again, "They took everything away and said they'd keep it in a central store. They promised to come back with ration cards, so we could ask for our own food to be handed back to us. They never came. The only secure place we could find to take shelter was in here. We have no heat or light, but we managed to scavenge the last few gallons of oil from the tank, and one of us brought in a kerosene stove. It was better than nothing, until the oil ran out. Since then, we've been waiting for help. What

did they say your name was? Oz?"

"Oz, yes."

"Are you here from the government, or the cops? Have you come to save us?"

He didn't want to disappoint them, but he didn't have anything to offer them.

"Ma'am if you want help, forget the government or the cops. From what I've seen, everyone is in the same situation. Total chaos, and food and water are getting mighty rare. If you're going to get any help, you have to find it within yourselves."

"But we have to get out. Have you seen those people out there, the escaped prisoners? "

"We saw them."

"God only knows what they're up to. If they see us, we won't get out of here alive. Mister, you have to help us."

He felt the weight of responsibility bearing down on him. He needed to strike out for the cabin to find Eleanor. He and Irvin had more than enough problems reaching the safety of the Appalachians, to taste the clean, mountain air, and live on the supplies he'd stashed there. The obstacles were piling up, and they'd be lucky to make it halfway, without carrying any passengers.

And yet these folks were his neighbors, and he couldn't just abandon them to a fate that was too terrible to contemplate.

"Give me a few minutes. I need to think about this."

He went outside the boiler room and beckoned for Irvin to join him.

"We have a problem."

He chuckled. "You not kidding me. You're not leaving those people to the mercy of those animals upstairs, are you?"

"I can't walk out them, but I have to reach the cabin, and I just don't know how to do both."

Irvin nodded. Some mess, isn't it? The way I see things, there's only one way forward. We have to take them with us."

"To the cabin! But..."

"Hear me out," Cobb said quickly, "All I'm saying is up there in the mountains people can hide out in the forests, and wait for this to blow over. Not rely on anyone claiming to represent law and see them steal their supplies. They can build their own shelters. There's game up there, so they

won't starve."

He shrugged. "The game was scarce when I left, but I guess it'll return sooner or later."

"Right. You can show these people how to survive. Dammit, you're the expert. You told me you built that cabin. You and Eleanor filled it with supplies, traps, and so on. Ready for things just like what's happening now. We could build a small community of survivors, away from all this looting and murder. Somewhere people can feel safe, and live like human beings. All they need is a little education in how to survive."

He didn't answer at first. His number one priority was Eleanor, and if he went along with Irvin's idea, that could interfere with his search. He didn't like the idea of trying to get thirty men, women, and children out of the town, and up into the mountains. Sooner or later, they'd run into the Omega patrols. It could be the difference between reaching Eleanor in time or failing in his quest.

On the other hand, how could he abandon these people he'd grown up with? To leave them at the mercy of the brutal, bloodthirsty gangs roaming the area, and maximum-security prisoners, the violent dregs of society. Omega, who were more than happy to sequester peoples' supplies and leave them with nothing to eat, nothing to help them survive other than false promises.

Irvin's right. I don't have a choice. Somehow, I'll get them out of this trap, and find Eleanor. Then take them up into the mountains, where they can be free of this shit. Learn how to survive until things go back to normal. Will they ever go back to normal? No, I'm not prepared to tackle that one, not yet.

He walked back to Irvin. "Okay, they come with us."

"They won't all fit in the Bronco."

"We'll carry the very young and old in the back, and travel at walking pace. Put out flankers, Irvin. You were in the service, in the Corps, so you take point. We'll put some to watch our six, and we'll do this Marine style."

When he explained how they were going to get them out, there were mixed emotions, some of relief, and others of deep apprehension. One guy put the question they all wanted the answer to. Including him.

"Mister, I appreciate what you say, but how do you plan getting us past those people outside? Like the lady said, we can only guess at what they'll do if they catch us. Probably kill the men, and as for the women and children..."

He didn't need to elaborate further.

"That's a good question. We have a vehicle outside, a Ford Bronco truck. It's big enough to take some of you, those that are too sick or weak. The rest will have to walk, and before you ask, yes, we're sure to hit trouble. Which means you'll have to fight. If you want freedom, there's no other way. Either you fight for it, or you go down."

"We don't have guns," the woman holding the child said, "How in hell do you expect us to go up against those people without weapons?"

"If you had weapons, would you fight?"

Her jaw tightened. "You're damn right we'd fight. But what's the use if we don't have any guns?"

"We soon will. Irvin, how long would you estimate before it gets dark?"

He checked his wristwatch. "A couple of hours."

"That's good enough. We'll find us some weapons."

"Find them where?"

"From people that have them. Like those guys outside."

He cracked a grin. "You mean steal them?"

"Nope. They're the enemy, and they have guns pointed at us, and we know they'll use them if we give them the chance. It's a legitimate rule of war, to disarm your enemy. Take their guns away from them. That's what we'll do."

They waited until the light had almost gone. The prisoners outside the school gates had made a huge fire in the street and were warming themselves on the flames. It made everything that much easier. Oz had brought the people up from the basement, and they were waiting by the Bronco, the less able loaded in the back. The light from the fire ruined their night vision, and he and Irvin were able to walk up to a man holding a rifle, presumably on sentry duty.

It was almost too easy. He was swigging out of an almost empty vodka bottle and halfway to being insensible. Irvin tapped him on the head, and Oz grabbed his rifle as he fell.

More men were sitting in a separate group, and when they approached, they heard the female moans. They'd taken a teenage girl prisoner, and stripped her half naked, prior to enjoying her body. She was whimpering like a wounded animal, but she wasn't wounded; just scared out of her wits knowing what they were about to do. There were five men, and although he didn't like it, he waited until the first man took down his pants and started raping the girl. It put him out of action for a few seconds, and he and Irvin

took two each of the others watching the action.

The plan was simple. Creep up behind them, and slam their rifle butts over the head of the nearest man. Threaten the other man, disarm him, and hit him hard enough to put him out of action. Oz saved the last man for himself. He was busy pumping in and out of the girl, and his brutal enjoyment was about to be short lived. So was his life.

It went like clockwork. The first two men went down, the other two jerked around and stopped, eyes wide when they saw the rifles pointed at them. Their hands went up. Oz and Irvin slammed the rifle butts into them. Sensing something was wrong; the man on top of the girl interrupted what he was doing and looked up. Oz saved the hardest blow for him. He hit him so hard, he felt his skull giving way, and if he wasn't dead or dying, Irvin followed up with another hard blow that finished him off. They made sure the other four were unconscious, and he helped the girl up. She pulled her torn dress around her and gave him a stunned look. She was unable to speak, and he spoke to her in soothing tones.

"It's okay. We're here to help you."

She stared at him with wild eyes. "I...I...I..."

"It's okay. We have women back there. You'll be fine. You're amongst friends."

She still didn't respond, but he figured she'd be okay when she joined the women. They scooped up the dropped weapons, four rifles and two handguns, both Glock 17s. They helped her back to the truck, and into the cab with a woman to take care of her. They distributed the weapons. The rifles to two men and two women who said they knew how to use them. He gave the handguns to two other women who looked eager to start blasting.

"This is the way it works, folks. If we start the engine they'll hear us, so we'll have to push her. We'll go out the back way, and when we're far enough away, we'll start the engine and drive away."

He stared at them, wondering if they were up to it. Or if they'd lose their nerve, and decide skulking in a basement boiler room was the better option.

"Can you do it? Push the Bronco across the field, or do you want to stay here?"

"I can push it up a mountain and down the other side if that's what it takes," one guy said. He was clutching one of the rifles they'd taken from the prisoners, an M-16. Oz nodded, that was the right attitude.

"What're we waiting for? Let's go."

Half the adults were pushing the heavily laden truck. Oz had the driver's window open, so he could steer and push at the same time. They made it across the field until he reached his backyard. There was no one in sight. He started the engine and eased out of the yard onto the road. He kept the motor idling at no more than walking pace. At first they had no trouble, and they walked on, with just the sound of their footsteps and the quiet murmur of the Ford motor.

CHAPTER FIVE

It almost worked. She was fast and agile, slipping through the woods like in a race, unseen. She had almost reached the truck furthest away when Mayor Chandler and his two cops started shooting. She smiled. That was progress. The guy had kept his word. The rabble besieging the storehouse immediately flung themselves down and returned fire. The night became a fury of bullets whistling everywhere. She climbed into the truck, and as she suspected, the key was still in the ignition. She waited until the firing crescendoed, took a deep breath, and saying a quick prayer that the engine would start straight away, turned the key.

The motor was still warm, and it came to life instantly. She pushed the lever into drive, stamped on the gas pedal, and did a fast U-turn. She turned away from the gunfire and headed back down to the main road, hoping she'd made the right decision. A storm of gunfire tore past her, but none of it hit the truck. Whatever else they were, they were lousy shots. From the amount of beer she'd seen them drinking, it was not very surprising. There was no sign of them at first, and she didn't want to switch on the headlamps to look for them. Then all of a sudden she saw movement at the side of the road, and they were there, three men. They'd had the sense to bring backpacks, and they'd be loaded with vital supplies.

Thank the Lord someone used their common sense.

She jammed on the brakes. The Mayor climbed into the passenger seat and the two cops in the back. She drove off, heading fast toward Copperville.

They'd know where they were going, and they'd come after them, after they'd searched the place for food, water, and weapons. That would at least give them some grace. Perhaps as much as a half-hour, but the timing would be critical. Drive to Copperville, see if Oz was there, and then find a way to the cabin without taking the main road. There were dozens of logging trails, and she felt certain they'd manage to find a way through. If not, they'd have to walk.

Mayor Chandler smiled at her. "Eleanor, that was a good move. What worries me is what do we do when we finally manage to get away. I was thinking about your cabin in the mountains, maybe we could come up there with you."

"First of all, I need to locate my husband. I have to find Oz."

He smiled. "Over the rainbow?"

She didn't smile. She'd heard variations of the same pun on a number of occasions. Part of being married to a man nicknamed Oz.

"Listen, Mr. Mayor. What you need to understand is this. I'll do anything I can to help you. We'll find a way out together, hopefully make it up into the mountains, and I'm hoping they won't follow us up there. But you need to understand we built that cabin ourselves, prepping it for two people to survive. Which means you'll have to find your own place, kill your own game, and learn how to survive."

He was silent for several minutes. When he spoke, he sounded like a whipped dog. "You mean we're on our own?"

"I just told you; we'll help out as much as we can. But it's up to you to learn, and learn fast if you want to survive. Until things get back to normal, that's what this is all about. Survival. Do you understand me?"

She hadn't meant to sound like a schoolteacher, but that's what she was. Talking to the naughty kid who hadn't done his homework. She hid a smile and drove on. They reached the outskirts of town and heard shooting. Four ragged and wild-looking men rushed out on the road, pointing their guns at the truck. She kept her foot flat down on the floor, and the two cops opened fire. The men went down in a hail of bullets, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Maybe there're no more like them inside the town.

She drove toward the center, and in front of them was the spire of the church. Her cottage lay a half-mile the other side, and she was about to drive past, but someone had parked vehicles across the road to form a roadblock. She slowed to find another way through.

She started to turn, but Emmett shouted from the back, "Eleanor, we can't go back that way. Look behind you."

She tried to stay calm. The four men they'd encountered on the way in were just the first of many. A gang of wild-looking men was approaching, more than twenty, maybe as many as thirty, and they carried a variety of weapons. They advanced silently toward them. She knew in the next few seconds they'd start shooting when they got near enough to make sure they couldn't miss. She looked to left and right, and there was no way through. No way forward, and no way back.

"Where do we go?" Chandler asked, "Those people will tear us apart." She'd already made her mind up. Every route was blocked.

"We're going nowhere. There's no way out."

* * *

The pace of the Bronco was a slow crawl, so those walking could keep up. On the back, the sick, young, and elderly were packed in together, and men and women walked either side like outriders in a Presidential motorcade. Although they knew if they ran into one of the gangs, they were in deep trouble. Once again, he wondered if they were fooling themselves; escaped prisoners, Omega deputies, half of them drunk on stolen booze, and they were everywhere, maybe hundreds of them.

It's like being in a war zone. No, we are in a war zone, and I need to keep that in my mind.

He drove around the corner. Ahead the gaunt outline of the church spire was a visible reminder of what had once been good and decent in this place. And then he braked to a halt. They'd blocked the road with a line of vehicles, and he heard a shout from behind him. The prisoners outside the school must have seen them leave. They were behind them and filling the road, making any escape difficult. He had no choice. This was war, and they needed a strong point, a fortification, somewhere they could defend, thick, stone walls that would withstand the bullet. He came to a snap decision.

"Get everyone out. We're going to the church."

"The church? How will that help us?"

"It'll keep us alive. That's how it will help. We'll worry about getting out afterward."

He stopped next to the church and people swarmed to unload the truck, helping those unable to walk. He noticed another truck parked nearby. He and Irvin covered them as they filed into the church, but so far, no one started shooting. He walked through the heavy oak door, already sizing it up. It would withstand gunfire. With a last glance around, he slammed the door shut, and pushed the heavy iron bolts across. He walked into the interior, and a voice called across to him.

"Oz?"

The voice he'd been praying he would hear again. Eleanor Porter, his wife, who he'd been searching for, and he'd found her. He rushed to her and flung his arms around her.

"Eleanor! Thank God you're safe."

"You, too."

But Irvin came toward them. "You call this safe?"

They looked at each other, and then around the place. Outside they could hear the shouts of men who were already laying siege to the church.

"I guess not. We'll get out of here."

She glanced at him. "How?"

He tried to put a confident smile on his face. "I'll figure it out. Don't worry, we'll make it back to the cabin, and sit it out until it's all over."

She gazed back at him. She didn't believe him, any more than he believed himself. Minutes later, the shooting started, and a long burst smacked against the oak door. Oz was glad he'd confirmed it was sufficiently solid to prevent the rounds penetrating.

A moment later, a voice shouted from outside.

"You in there. We don't want to hurt you. We just want to talk."

They all looked at Mayor Chandler. He was still the elected authority in Copperville, and he took the hint and walked to the door.

"What is it you want?"

"Like I said, we want to talk. Maybe we can join forces, and work this out together. Safety in numbers."

"One moment, will think about it. Give me five minutes." He came back and looked at Oz. "What do you think?"

"I think it stinks. Mr. Mayor, think about it. Those guys out there are escaped prisoners from a maximum-security jail. What kind of people do you think they are? They want to rob us of everything we have, and when they've killed the men, they'll start on the women. You're not seriously suggesting we should trust them?"

"I know it's hard, but we have to get along as best we can."

Eleanor gave him the full benefit of her ice-cold glare. "You want to get along, Mr. Mayor. You have to make sure they can't hurt us. That means killing them, because sure as hell, they'll try to kill us. Those are our options. Kill or be killed. And remember, dead men can't pull a trigger."

He gave her an astonished look. "Mrs. Porter, I can hardly believe you're saying this."

"You'd better believe it. Like I said on the way in, it's all about survival. Life or death, eat or starve. Fire a bullet or take a bullet. Those are the choices."

He looked ashen. "You're serious?"

"They're like rabid dogs. Murderers, psychos, you name it. They'll keep coming at us until we're dead, you can be sure of that. Look around you, Sir.

The people here are unable to defend themselves. Some are sick, some are weak, and there are young children. How are they going to manage if those guys come at us?"

"There's always Omega," he said tentatively, "They said they'd take care of things."

Is this guy for real? Am I glad I never went into politics if it means dealing with people like him.

"You cannot be serious. We've just escaped from an Omega trap, and now you think they're gonna become our friends and help us?"

"They could tackle those persons for us, yes, it's possible. Maybe we can make a deal."

"No deals." Oz's voice was flat, not allowing for any disagreement, "If anyone wants to go out there and get themselves hacked to pieces, good luck to them. We stay, and we fight."

Chandler eventually saw sense, and he nodded his head. "Very well, in that case, we'd better make sure we have the place covered, so there's no way they can get inside."

"Now you're talking."

Oz detailed men and women to hunt around the church, although most knew it well from regular Sunday attendances, and they had every entrance and exit figured out. The windows were a problem, and he detailed a person with a gun to stand well back behind a barricade of wooden pews, just in case they tried to come in that way.

There was no basement, just the spire, and he climbed the long flight of steps to reach the top. He was standing underneath the bell, looking out, and what he saw wasn't good. They were an undisciplined rabble, no question, but at least one or two of them must have had military experience, for they'd established a perimeter around the church. They hadn't seen him, but he could men stationed close to his truck and the other truck, hiding in a dark patch of bushes. An ambush, and they'd shoot dead anyone who tried to make a getaway in one of the trucks.

He still had his rifle, the Remington M700. He could take out some of them from up there, except the moment he started shooting they'd be alerted. He'd keep that one on the back burner in case he needed to deliver them a nasty surprise later. When he'd satisfied himself he knew where they all were, he went back down. They were waiting for him.

"They're all around us, and they have the vehicles covered, so the way it

looks at the moment, there's no way out."

"So we're fucked," Emmett said.

A couple of women squirmed in embarrassment. Or had he forgotten he still wore the uniform of a cop.

His buddy, Duane Foster, sneered. "You've led us into a trap, you idiots. What the hell do you know? You should have left it to us, the professionals."

He didn't give the comment a moment's thought. If the guy wanted to talk bullshit, he was more than welcome.

"I have an idea to get us away from here. Here's how we'll play it. It's dark now, and we know they're drinking heavily. When it gets to the early hours of the morning, most of them will be asleep. I'd say about 03.00 should do it. I can pick off the men guarding the trucks from up on the church tower, and I want you to be ready. We charge out, climb into the trucks, and escape."

"How can we get everyone into just two vehicles? We'll have to leave half of them behind, the ones who can't walk or fight."

He turned a savage glance on Foster. "We don't leave anyone behind. We'll pack 'em in. It'll be like the rush-hour subway in one of the big cities. What the hell, they manage, and so will we. In the meantime, I suggest everyone gets some rest. Eat some food and drink some water. Make sure you're familiar with your weapons. Ensure they're fully loaded, and all we can do then is wait. At 03.00, we go."

They dispersed, muttering to themselves, although no one came up with any better ideas. He hadn't told them the rest of it. They'd have to fight their way through Omega to escape up into the mountains. Time enough to remind them of that fact later.

He settled down close to the front door, figuring they might try to break through. Eleanor stayed with him, cradling a handgun. Irvin, too, and they talked about the plan to get away. Knowing it all depended on whether they'd run into the Omegas, and find themselves battling against overwhelming odds.

They were silent for a few minutes, with nothing more to say. Until Irvin asked the question that'd been eating him up. "Why us? Why don't they leave us alone?"

She replied first. "Because they want what we have. They didn't prepare, and they want to rob from folks like us who did."

He nodded. "I guess."

Eleanor found some dry biscuits and strips of jerky, and they washed them down with bottled water. He felt better and sat with his back against the wall of the lobby, holding his rifle loosely in his hand. He started to doze, and the explosion sent him all the way back. He tried to open his eyes, but his body was shaking, sweating, and his mind was flashing like someone turned on a strobe.

He was back in Iraq, looking down at the body of Danny Blanchard, and a few yards away, Rick was shouting something to him, but he couldn't hear. The enemy were everywhere, coming at them in a long skirmish line, blazing away with their assault rifles, bullets whistling, buzzing, and whining all around them, and they were taking hits. They smacked against his armored vest, punched all the way through and out the other side, but it was strange, he didn't hear them.

Danny was down, Rick was still shouting, trying to reach him, and he was in trouble, a bullet wound in the leg. He went to reach him, but in the chaos of smoke and flame, he went the wrong way. Next he stumbled into the cabin of the burning Black Hawk. He screamed at them to turn off the music, to turn off the radio, but it wasn't the radio. Johnny Cash was standing out there, black clothes, strumming his guitar and singing, Ring of Fire. The skirmish line reached the Black Hawk, and the Iraqis formed a ring to dance around. Laughing, kicking their legs in joy as they watched the enemy burn, and he didn't want to burn.

"Rick, I tried to reach you. Danny, what's wrong? Why aren't you breathing?"

He didn't know why he was talking to them. They were not there, besides, he was burning. His body was in flames, and he wanted to stop. The music, the flames, and every time he shouted, they laughed at him. He wanted to pull the trigger, to kill them, and keep killing them, until they were all dead. But for some reason, when he fired he didn't manage to hit anything, and it looked like he loaded his gun with blanks. Why would he do that?

They danced faster, men with guns, shrill cries in Arabic, and all the time, the music. Ring of Fire, and the flames were all around him, an impenetrable circle. It became too much, the flames, the agony, the dancing men, and he passed out.

When he came to, Eleanor was leaning over him. There was no sign of Irvin, and when he looked around, she understood.

"I sent him away."

But she'd been watching. "What did you see?"

"You were back there, in Iraq. It was that last day, wasn't it? When you came back, you'd changed. Like you left your soul back in that terrible place. Ever since you've been healing, but it's a long, slow process. Up in the cabin, you're different. It's like... The old Oz Porter is back with me."

"How much did you know already?"

A shrug. "I guessed. How can you live with someone, sleep with them, eat with them, and not see what's going on? It's something we have to deal with, buster. You brought it back from the Middle East, and I'd like to pack it up in a box and return it to them, express mail. The bastards are welcome to it."

"It's not as easy as that."

"I know. But we'll beat it."

"This is personal, Eleanor. It's my fight, and I don't need any help."

She grimaced. "That's crazy talk, Oz. Everyone needs help at some time in their lives. Remember when we got married, for better or worse? That's what's happening to you, the worse. It's also what's happening out there, and it's no different, we have to deal with it. It's just bad luck the place we prepped is so far away, but we'll get there. Even if these gangs do their best to stop us, we'll make it. Force a way through, and help each other survive, you and me. And if these other folks need help, we'll show 'em how to help themselves. If those bastards out there think they've got us beat, they can forget it. Together, we'll make it. We'll steamroller our way past them. Get into the mountains, and hole up until this is all over."

He grinned at her confidence.

Is there any other way to live your life, other than being sure you'll overcome every obstacle, no matter what? No, there isn't.

He happened to glance into the church and saw Irvin. "The guy who came in with me, Irvin Cobb, he runs the Ranger Station, or at least used to."

"I remember him. Nice guy, he was always helpful."

"Yes, he was. I said I'd help him. He's a former Marine."

"In that case we'll do what we can. He could build a cabin close to ours, and if he was a Marine, he'll know a fair bit about survival. I bet he's a damn good shot."

"Good enough."

"So it's no problem. Besides, Irvin was helpful when you were trying to

get here and find me. We can't just abandon him."

"No, but I didn't know what you'd think about it."

"What's that motto you Marines use? Semper fi?"

"Yeah, Semper fi. Always loyal."

"Enough said. Always loyal to your buddies, and he's a buddy. Don't worry about it. We have enough on our plates as it is. Oz, although Mayor Chandler is nominally in charge, they're looking to you to lead them. If you're up to it, now would be a good time to talk to them." She gave him a supportive smile, "You know, one of those stirring, eve of battle speeches. So they know they're going to win."

"That's not my style."

"You'd better make it your style. They need you, and they need to hear they're gonna win from your own lips."

"What time is it?"

"01.30."

"Not long to go. Okay, I'll do my best and go talk to them."

He walked into the church, and they were all waiting. As if some telepathic sense had swept around the room, warning them to be ready to hear what he had to say.

"Listen to me. I can't offer you much. Like a great man said, just blood, toil, tears, and sweat."

"Churchill," someone piped up.

"Right, Winston Churchill, the Brit Prime Minister. It was World War II, and they were up against it. Everyone said they were going to lose. Like now, if you're expecting me to work miracles, you're looking at the wrong guy."

Their faces fell, all except for Eleanor's. She understood what he was doing. Spell out the hardships, and then tell them how they'd get over them. Easy. At least, that's what he'd worked out to make them believe. They needed confidence in him as a leader, and confidence in themselves, his shock troops. He wouldn't inspire confidence by telling people they'd lost before they even started.

"We're going up into the mountains. We'll get past those bastards outside the church, and if they try to stop us, we'll blow them away. If we run into these Omega people, they'll try to tell us they have responsibility for law and order. I say it's a crock of shit. Someone has put themselves in charge, and it's what I'd call a coup. They're recruiting every man who can carry a

gun, and..."

"What about women?"

It was the young woman they'd raped.

"No, we haven't seen any women with Omega."

"Motherfuckers."

"Uh, yeah. What they're doing is going around stealing people's stuff to help them get through this emergency. Gas for their vehicles, bullets for their guns, and every ounce of food and point of bottled water they can get their greedy hands on."

He stared at them, and they were waiting expectantly. Someone shouted, "We can take everything we want, before they get their hands on it."

He held up a hand. "No, that's not what we're going to do. We're civilized people, and I don't know about any of you, but I wasn't brought up to steal. I'd guess most of you weren't either. We'll need to forage for food and other supplies. That's true. But when we find something that someone has abandoned, we'll leave payment, or at the very least IOUs, with our names on, spelling out we intend to repay when this emergency is over. Let me make one thing clear. We will not become thieves. Not ever."

People were nodding their heads, and he figured he'd said almost enough.

"We leave on the dot of 03.00. It's quiet out there, and I'll go up into the spire and take out the men watching the trucks. The moment you hear me shoot, you leave the church by the side door, and get to the vehicles. Get everyone aboard, and I mean everyone. We don't leave anyone behind, and I don't care if those trucks are loaded down so low they sink into the mud. We go together. Any questions?"

Irvin held up his rifle. "I say we grind the bastards into the dust. They've pushed our heads into the shit and got away with theft, rape, and murder. It's time for payback."

As a war cry, it was what they needed, and people grinned, as if they'd already made it out. The girl they'd rescued from the rape nodded and punched the air with one hand. The other held her pistol, and she was just itching for an excuse to pull the trigger.

He felt his head start to go woozy, and he worried he might be about to experience another episode. He forced it down, using the strength of his will, determined it wasn't gonna happen. No one noticed the moment of weakness, except Eleanor, and she leaned over to give him a kiss. He held her in his

arms, never wanting to let her go, until Irvin approached.

"It's time."

He kissed her again. "Good luck. Say, Eleanor..."

"What is it?"

"Tell me what you see. Are we going to make it?"

"Oz, you know I can't..."

"Just this once. Try."

She stared at him for several seconds. "I'm sorry, Oz. I know you'll do everything you can."

"You, too."

Has she seen something, some obstacle that will sink us all? Or does she really not know? Dammit, women can be so mysterious, especially the seventh daughter of the seventh son of a seventh son.

He watched her walk to the front and reach the side door. The plan was for her to be first out, and she'd drive the truck they taken from the Omegas. He'd drive his Bronco. They waited by the side door, and he ran up the steps to the tower, just below the spire. When he looked over the low parapet, he could still see the men crouched down in the bushes close to the trucks. There were only two there now.

He felt relieved to see they were fortifying themselves with more cans of beer. One guy was ripping off chunks from what looked like a full loaf of bread, and stuffing them into his mouth. They were anything but alert, and he was determined they wouldn't get off a shot before he killed them both.

He found the best position to cover them, took careful aim, and squeezed the trigger. He worked the bolt, just like he'd done so many times before, chambered another round, and fired again. Then he was racing back down the stone steps, knowing the sentries wouldn't cause any trouble, not for anyone, not ever. He raced out the side door, and they were already moving, stumbling toward the trucks. People were clambering into the back of each vehicle, so crowded they held onto each other to stop them falling out. Eleanor had the engine started on the one truck, and Emmett was sitting in the shotgun seat. Oz leapt into the Bronco and nodded to Irvin, sitting beside him in the passenger seat.

"It's time to roll."

"Don't slow down for anything. If they stand in the way, drive right over them."

"Right. Those people in back, do they know what to do?"

"They know."

CHAPTER SIX

He'd worked out the route, using the back roads and little-known trails, at least as much as he could remember them. Many of them would be new to him, and they'd have to guess. They drove fast, leaving the town behind. The rabble of prisoners fired several poorly aimed bursts after them. Once again, the booze had helped them. Men aroused from a deep, drunken sleep are not likely to take a great deal of trouble with their shooting. He drove fast, with no headlights on, and from time to time when shafts of moonlight lit up the road, he saw Eleanor's truck following. For the first time, his hopes rose. With no one behind them, they had a good chance of getting away and reaching the mountains.

They were doing well when suddenly the clouds blotted out the moon, and the Bronco slammed into a deep ditch. He jumped out. He'd burst a tire. He had a spare in back, but it would take time to change, and there was still no sign of the clouds clearing. They'd come into a clearing, one he remembered well, next to the road they'd built an agricultural supplies warehouse. They couldn't go on in the pitch dark, even after they'd changed the tire. He worked out they'd rest up for a short time, change the wheel, and wait for the clouds to clear.

Using headlamps was a nonstarter. Unless they wanted one of the marauding gangs to ambush them. He drove slowly toward the double doors that gave entry to the building, and Irwin climbed out to get them open. To his surprise, they were unlocked, and when he drove inside, he assumed he'd find the place looted. To his surprise, it was untouched, his best guess the owners had gone away and left it unlocked. If looters came and found it locked, they'd smash the door open and cause extensive damage. They'd steal the contents whether the owner left it locked or not.

Eleanor followed the Bronco inside, and they switched off the engines. Men rushed to close the doors, and Emmett found a kerosene lantern, which he lit. Irvin helped him jack up the Bronco to change the wheel. After a few minutes, he cursed himself. He'd been a Marine, and yet he'd failed to take the most elementary precautions.

He shouted over to Emmett. "We need a couple of sentries outside, just in case they try to surprise us. How about you get that buddy of yours, Duane Foster, to join you. Take the first watch. I'll give you an hour and send someone to relieve you."

The cop kicked some dust with his shoe and looked away for a few seconds, obviously embarrassed. When he turned back, his voice was low, "He didn't make it."

"Who didn't make it?"

"Duane. He was behind me when we were running toward the trucks, but after that I didn't see him. There were a few shots, so maybe he caught a bullet."

Oz recalled there wasn't any shooting, not until they were driving away from the church. He wondered about Duane Foster, and there were several possibilities. He could have decided to stay in his hometown, not liking the idea of going up into the mountains. He could have tripped and fallen, and banged his head. Easily done in the darkness, in which case he felt sorry for him. When those people back there got hold of him, they'd give him a hard time. Maximum-security prisoners and cops were a volatile mix.

The other possibility was one he had to face. He looked at Emmett. "Do you think he could have deserted?"

"Deserted to that rabble? Never."

"Not the prisoners. But we know there was a sizeable Omega group outside of town, and he could have gone to join them, thinking he'd be better off. Maybe he believed the bullshit line about them being legitimate law enforcement."

Or maybe he saw some advantage in selling us out.

He thought about how much Duane knew. Was he aware of the route they intended to take? He couldn't be sure. When he'd spelled it out to them, he'd been with Irvin, Eleanor, and the Mayor. There could have been a couple of other people within earshot, he couldn't say. It was possible he hadn't overheard anything important, in which case he couldn't do them much harm.

He could tell them they were heading for the mountains, but the Appalachians covered a vast expanse of territory. They could spend their lives searching and not find them. Lots of people had cabins, and it was a million-to-one shot they'd ever find them.

He put the problem behind him. On balance, he felt it unlikely the cop knew the route. And if he did, that was too bad. They'd have to deal with it.

If it happened, the most likely scenario was an ambush, and they could blast them into pieces from behind cover. He wracked his brains thinking of alternative routes. There were other logging trails, although they'd be hard going in the overloaded trucks. He spoke quietly to Eleanor.

"In case we get separated, I want you to know I've worked out another route. When we leave this place, we turn off west about a mile along the road. Drive up through the forest. Work a way round them."

"You think that cop could sell us out?"

"Anything is possible. It won't hurt to take precautions."

He finished changing the wheel, and they'd managed to find a kerosene camping stove and heated up some water. They passed around hot coffee, and he felt grateful for the warmth pouring through his veins, and for the caffeine. Soon, they'd have to go out there again, and it would be a long hard drive.

The Mayor and Emmett joined him, and a girl in her mid-twenties, he hadn't noticed before.

"Listen, I'm still worried about taking to the hills, without knowing what happened. We don't even know if it's local, just West Virginia and maybe a couple of surrounding States, or is it national? Why our country has gone to hell, and how long will it last."

The girl spoke. She was dressed like a Goth, blue lipstick, and trendy as hell.

"I was working for Microsoft in Redmond. My name's Kate Young, and when it started I headed south to look up my folks in Virginia. I never found them."

"Microsoft? You must have had some idea of what was going on."

"You'd think. We have the most powerful computer systems in the world. Apart from the NSA, I guess. When things started to go wrong, our people tried to find answers, but one by one, the power systems went down, and by the time the last computer died, they weren't any the wiser. Except for one thing. You're wondering if this was a local problem. I can tell you the phenomenon isn't local. It's affected the whole of America. Because of the breakdown in communications, some people believe it could be the same across the whole world."

Eleanor stared at her. "If you worked at Microsoft, you must have an inkling as to what caused it? Is it possible someone attacked the infrastructure, the power systems, the Internet, all at once? A concerted attack?"

"Anything's possible." She mulled it over, "If you had a truly brilliant group of programmers, like the Russian troll factories, yeah, they could do it. But they'd want a bundle of cash in return."

"You mean they'd bring down their own country?"

"It wouldn't have been intentional, I guess, but if that's the way it happened, it could have got out of hand. Like a forest fire, one tree catches the next, and before you know where you are, half the State is burning."

"And you say this could be worldwide?"

"It looked that way. Although without communications, we couldn't be sure."

Mayor Chandler looked appalled. "You can't be serious? If it's worldwide, there's no hope for any of us."

"There's always hope," Eleanor retorted, "Mr. Mayor, some of us have seen this coming for a long time. It's true we had no idea of what would cause it, but a breakdown in technology and communications seemed inevitable. The reasons don't matter, not so much. It could be more, it could be some virus or bug, or it could just be everything overloaded at once, a global coincidence that caused the shutdown. That's why some of us have prepared. We can survive. It's a question of doing the right things, and knowing the right skills. If you don't know anything, you'll have to learn fast."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Eleanor's aunt raised her hand. "I can tell you what's happening."

Mayor Chandler gave her polite smile. "Very well, what do you have to tell us?"

"It is the Second Coming, of course. We've been waiting a long time for this, for rapture, and now, at last, it's here. Our Lord is about to return to earth, and we're nearing the end of days. In the meantime, all we can do is endure, just like our Lord when he died on the cross."

She swept her gaze around them, nodded in satisfaction, and then returned to sit on a straw bale. No one spoke at first until Oz cleared his throat.

"Ma'am, we hear what you have to say, and it's good news. But there is something we should consider. The Good Lord may need some help from us so we can survive the end of days, and I've little doubt he'd be more than pleased to see us keep moving. Just in case the rapture doesn't come as soon as you hope. We can head up to the mountains..."

"Where we'd be nearer to God," she said, giving him a bright smile.

"That's true, we would. We'll also manage to survive up there, away from the bloody fights that are going on down here. If we stay around, will die, sooner or later."

She seemed satisfied with his answer and closed her eyes. He saw her mouth moving as she prayed.

Nothing wrong with that, there's no situation where prayer does anyone any harm. It may even do some good, who am I to say?

An hour had gone by, and he opened the door a crack to see if there was sufficient moonlight for them to continue on the journey. The clouds had cleared, but he saw something else, and they were in trouble. Omega had arrived in force, and then he saw Wayne Garrett, the Omega bigshot, standing on the road below the building, looking up at him. Standing next to him was the cop, Duane Foster.

So that's how they found us. When the shooting starts, he'll be the first to go down.

He crossed to the other side of the building and looked out. More Omegas were watching the building from about two hundred yards away. He went back into the main warehouse where they were waiting. Watching him, they sensed bad news. He stood in the center of the room.

"I have bad news, folks. Omega has come, and they're all around us. Getting out of here is going to be next to impossible. The moment we try, they'll start shooting."

"So how do we get out?" Chandler demanded, his expression red with anger, "Is there a way, or have you led us into a trap?"

"I brought you this way because it was the safest route. At least, it was until one of your cops ratted us out."

The Mayor looked stunned, and Eleanor shoved him aside.

"So how do we get out? We have weapons, rifles, and pistols, so we're able to defend ourselves."

He shook his head. "Eleanor, rifles and pistols won't cut it. They're out there in strength, twenty or thirty men on each side of the building. The moment we try, they'll cut loose with everything they have. Sure, we'll take them by surprise when we drive out, but they'll come after us, raking the trucks with gunfire. We'll be lucky if any of us survive."

"So how can we fight them?"

He grimaced. "What we need is what we don't have. Something heavy, like a mortar, or a heavy machine gun." He smiled, "A gunship would be even better. Or a fighter bomber to unload its ordnance on their heads."

"You mean a bomb, something explosive?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Something big and heavy, something we

don't have."

She shook her head. "That's not entirely true. You know this is an agricultural store, and that means nitrates. With sufficient nitrates and other components, I'm certain I can cobble something together. I could make a bomb."

"A bomb? You sure?"

She sighed with exasperation. "I was a teacher, remember. I'd have been a lousy chemistry teacher if I didn't know how to assemble simple explosives."

"Big enough to blast a way out of here?"

"Yes, as big as you want. There are several sets of nitrates around, more than we need."

Irvin joined them, having heard the last part. "Did I hear right, she's going to make a bomb?"

"That's what the lady says."

"That's amazing. Just one thing, how do we deliver it?"

They looked at Eleanor who shrugged. "I'm the chemist, not the military man. You have to work that one out yourselves. There's something else, the detonator. A bomb is about the limit of my knowledge. As to the detonator, I don't have a clue."

"I do." Kate Young had joined them and stood next to Irvin, "That's what I did at Microsoft, assembling and testing electronic components, and boy, did we put together some weird stuff. I can have a look around, and I'm sure to find enough to make a primitive detonator."

"See what you can do. Eleanor, you, too, and there's something else. A simple bomb won't stop them. An explosion will rip apart the steel drum, but it won't be enough. We need to hurt them so hard, it'll take them a long time before they get themselves together to come after us again."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Do you know what a Claymore mine is?"

"Nope."

"It's a piece of military ordnance, an electrically fired fragmentation mine. Packed with ball bearings, enough to rip through an enemy force. That's what we need. Can you do it?"

She shuddered. "I don't like it, Oz. It sounds...barbaric."

"It would also save our lives."

She sighed. "Very well, there'll be plenty of nuts, bolts, and nails in

here. I'll pack them around the drum. Just be certain to stay well clear when it goes up."

"You won't see me for dust. Okay, let's move, people. We need to leave the moment it's done. I'll find a good place to plant it, and I'll stay out there. They'll try to follow when they see you leaving, and I'll detonate it as they go past."

They dispersed, and Kate began work on the detonator. Irvin found telephone wire to attach it to the bomb, and Emmett hunted around for ironmongery to build the huge Claymore mine.

They hit further problems. Once she'd filled the container with explosive, and packed the nuts and bolts around it, the device was too heavy to carry through the Omega lines without being spotted. Irvin solved it by attaching the drum to a sack dolly. He wanted to plant it himself, but Oz was having none of it.

"Irvin, you've been wounded, so you drive the Bronco. Eleanor can take the other truck, and I'll be out there ready to detonate the bomb. You'll have to drive out fast and take them by surprise. There'll be some shooting, but you should get away before they have time to respond. As soon as they come next to the bomb, I'll hit the detonator, and you can wait for me while I catch up."

They weren't happy. None of them were happy. The detonator attached to the drum looked precarious, as if a strong wind would detach it from the metal, and the telephone wire was thin. As if it had been out in the open so long it had deteriorated.

The minutes ticked past, and it was 02.00 when they were set to go. He kissed her goodbye and wished her luck. Once again, he asked what she could see, and if they had a chance, but again she shook her head.

He tried pressing her harder. "You must have some ideas. In the past you've always seen most things."

"Not most, no, some, that's all. Right now, everything's dark, as if the future is unwritten. Either we'll get out, or we won't, but there are no certainties. It's up to us, and if we don't give it our best shot, we won't make it halfway. You go bomb the bastards, and we'll see you the other side after it's done. How long before we leave?"

"Give me ten minutes. That should be enough."

"I love you."

"Me, too."

"And, Eleanor...when you go, don't stop for anything."

“We have to wait for you, remember?”

“There’ll be a lot of shooting. Drive fast, and get these people away from here.”

“I’ll be there for you, Oz Porter. We’ll all be there for you. Be safe.”

Irvin helped him manhandle the heavy dolly with the drum strapped to it through a side window, and they lowered it to the ground. He slipped out after it and scanned the area, looking for any sign the enemy. None were closer than fifty yards away. He could make out the shadowy shapes of men walking around. Two men, a clumsy attempt at mounting a patrol, and they left big gaps for him to sneak through. He had to crawl, for the moment he stood up they’d see the shadowy movement, and they’d start shooting.

He pushed the cart ahead of him, crawling along the ground, inch by inch. Every time he bumped against an unseen obstacle, the wheels made a loud thud. He was convinced it would be enough to alert them. But he was lucky, and once again, the booze helped him. Some of them were swigging from cans and bottles. If they’d been professional soldiers, they wouldn’t have stood a chance. But they weren’t, they were men out for sport, for a bit of a laugh, and to hunt and kill human prey. Probably the most entertainment they’d had in their miserable lives.

I’ll give you entertainment. Just wait until this little surprise blows up in your faces.

He found a good spot at the side of the road where they’d have to drive out, and used some of the spare telephone wire to fasten the metal drum to a tree. It was almost invisible in the dark, and he continued down the road, paying out the cable until he was fifty yards away. He ducked into the shadows and waited.

He didn’t have long to wait. It happened so fast. The engines started inside the store, the double doors swung open, and they were roaring away, the Bronco in front and Eleanor’s truck behind. The Omegas were slow to react, but still a few shots pursued them. He’d no idea who they’d hit, his best hope the guys were confused with too much alcohol, and their shots had gone anywhere but the target.

And then they were away, speeding toward him, and the Bronco went past. Eleanor’s truck hit an obstacle and skidded on the road into the side, and he could hardly believe it. Her front wheel caught the telephone wire and ripped it out. She didn’t realize, and she thundered past him. At least she was away, and his job was to make sure they got well clear before the Omegas

pursued them.

In the darkness, he could hardly see the drum, but he'd already worked out there was a single way to detonate the bomb, a shot from the Remington to slam into the detonator and set off the explosion. One problem, though, the detonator was invisible, and so he had to get close.

He started running. When he was less than twenty yards away, he could see it, just. He was about to sprint forward and get nearer, knowing he'd be inside the lethal blast area, when headlamps came on, and the first truck sped out to go after them. The headlamps lit up the fuse, and he didn't need to get any closer. He knelt at the side of a tree, not caring whether they saw him or not, and took careful aim. A gentle, slow rhythm of breathing, and he forced himself to become calm. But this time, it didn't work. It was coming back, an episode.

The shots fired, the danger to those he loved, and the explosion he knew would come when he pulled that trigger, brought it all back. The machine gun fire, the helicopter coming down, the man with the missile standing up, and he felt the sweat soaking into his clothes. But this time, it was different. It wasn't gonna happen, and he forced himself to get over it. Like fighting a dark, hideous monster, huge, and forbidding, and yet he fought. A battle inside his mind, and a battle he was determined not to lose.

Give it your best shot, motherfucker. You want to beat me. You have to kill me. Otherwise, what was it Eleanor said? Put it in a box, and send it all the way back to Iraq. Express mail. Yeah, that'll do it.

It was astonishing, the mere act of visualizing the terrible black attacks that took over his body started to go. He saw them in a wooden crate, and he hammered in the nails. Handed it to the mailman, and it was flying all the way back to the Middle East.

He could hardly believe what was happening to him, other than it was time for the most accurate shooting of his life. He forced the icy calm to come over him, controlled his breathing, squinted through the sight, took up the first pressure on the trigger, and then squeezed, gently. Oh, so gently.

The explosion was massive, and almost instantly, a shower of scrap metal blew out from the drum like a metal hurricane. It knocked him over, and he felt the jagged chunks of metal slice through his flesh. The force of the blast had thrown him to the ground, but he was still able to see. The lead truck literally leapt into the air, and men screamed as the metal tore them apart. Tore through the vehicle, and blew it onto its side, spilling out the

bodies of the dead and dying.

He tried to push himself up, but for some reason he couldn't move. He knew then he taken several hits from the shrapnel, and he'd been too close inside the lethal area. He was dying, and when he looked to one side, he could see blood trickling from his body into the snow.

Go, Eleanor. Go you guys, all of you. Get out of here. I'm one man. Save yourselves.

Minutes later, he felt strong arms taking hold of him, and he thought they'd come for him. But it was Irvin Cobb. He'd come back.

"Take it easy, buddy. We'll carry you to the truck. They're are all waiting for you."

He looked up. "You're a good man, Irvin."

He grinned. "Semper fi, buddy."

They gently placed him in the cab of Eleanor's truck. She sat next to him, tending to his wounds. Someone found a bottle of booze, and it was fiery whiskey. It could have been moonshine, although he was wandering half in and half out of consciousness.

Is it to ease the pain?

They carried on driving, and Eleanor ripped most of his clothes away to find the wound sites, bandaging them with improvised strips of cloth. After a while, he slept, despite the constant lurching and bumping of the vehicles. They'd taken the route he'd suggested, off the main road, and heading up through the logging trails. The journey was long and arduous, along remote tracks, many almost invisible from overgrowth, for the rest of the night and all the next day. They arrived at the Ranger Station by early evening, and they stopped. He looked up at the place where they'd built the cabin, although he couldn't see it.

They'd be there soon, and the supplies they needed to survive. Yet he knew the Omegas would come after them. They couldn't possibly allow the attack on their authority. A questionable authority they'd seized for themselves, and they were unlikely to let it go. The war had only just started, and they'd yet to defend themselves from what was to come.

All the time, no one knew the reasons why, except they had to keep going. Keep living. Survive. And look for answers. He'd asked Eleanor, and her powers of prescience had deserted her at the crucial time. Or maybe she was deliberately holding something back. Refusing for some reason to give them the answers they needed.

Why?

BEYOND ENDURANCE

By Eric Meyer

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CHAPTER ONE

Oz Porter stared down the thickly wooded slope, his gaze fixed on the endless panorama of green, trees, swaying in the slight breeze. The place had a definite odor, the sweet freshness of pine. He breathed it all in, savoring the familiar tang, the underlying musty aroma of undergrowth and leaf mold. Slowly disintegrating into mulch that would carpet the forest floor and nurture the new growth. He called this place home, but it wasn't. Home was the small town of Copperville, before they'd been forced to flee and make their homes here. The pangs of nostalgia wouldn't leave his thoughts. He'd lived at this high altitude for almost ten months with his wife Eleanor, and a community of people who'd escaped the town. They'd named the settlement Endurance.

They fled because everything had gone. Collapsed. Power, water, communications, transport, everything disappeared almost overnight. What replaced it was chaos. Anarchy. Men who hadn't prepared for the worst quickly found a remedy for their lack of planning. Theft and murder.

Some men formed a quasi-legitimate force known as Omega, its avowed mission to restore law and order. Behind the façade, they were simply thieves and looters. Recruiting legions of deputies to act as their shock troops, they raped and pillaged their way across the beleaguered towns and villages. Some fought back. Outnumbered and outgunned, they died in a hail of bullets. Others had prepared, like Oz and Eleanor. Their cabin, close to the summit of the Appalachians, became the anchor of a new colony. A temporary home to those people prepared to learn the art of survival, until order was restored, and they could go back to Copperville.

He surveyed the cluster of structures and shelters that surrounded his timber cabin. During their time on the mountain, everything had changed, and yet nothing had changed. The tired, worn, and frightened residents of Copperville had worked hard to build new homes. They'd survived and recovered much of their lost pride. They still had a civic leader, Mayor Chandler, the man they'd voted for back in Copperville. Yet with winter approaching, every man, woman, and child knew things would be different.

The air had taken on the sword-sharp edge of a deep winter chill. The leaves had fallen, a sign of an early, bitter winter. The animals returned to the forests during the temperate months, but as winter loomed, and freezing air once again took the mountain in its harsh grip, the game became scarcer.

Lower down they'd face danger and death. Yet up here they had little to fall back on. No stores of dried food, and almost out of kerosene for heating and cooking. Lighting a wood fire would mean smoke, and smoke would alert the enemy to their presence. An enemy who wanted them dead, wanted to steal everything they owned. An enemy called Omega.

He walked down the path, and Eleanor met him. She'd changed in some ways, like her pregnancy, seven months gone, and the bulge showed large beneath her insulated coat. She was still the pretty, gamin girl he'd fallen for. Behind her vivid green eyes lay a world of wisdom. Something they had in common, not the wisdom, but green eyes. With her flawless skin and a body in perfect proportions, he constantly wondered what she'd seen in him.

She smiled, but with food running low and the demands of her pregnancy, she looked exhausted. "Admiring the view?"

"I was admiring you and thinking about the baby. Thinking about going back. The birth could be hard up here."

She frowned at her husband, the tough former Marine sniper, medium height, rangy and muscular, with a handsome face bearing the scars of battle. When Oz was around, she felt safe. "What about Omega?"

Oz Porter had been here in the Appalachians, recovering from debilitating bouts of PTSD when everything went to hell. Part of that hell was Omega. They claimed to be lawful authority, their mission to prevent riots, looting, and murder. The reality was different.

"They're getting closer. We've seen the signs. The question is where we fight them. Here or back home in Copperville?"

She frowned. "Do you think they're still hunting for us?"

"We gave them a bloody nose last time, so yes, they'll come, and in force."

"What can we do?"

"I just don't know." He tried to lighten her somber mood, "We should go back to the cabin. There's a stew on the stove. If we don't hurry, Irvin will start on it, and that guy sure has an appetite."

She smiled, thinking of their friend Irvin Cobb, another former Marine. He was much older than Oz, almost fifty, whereas Oz was just past thirty. Also battered, and where Oz was stringy, almost thin, Irvin was stocky; shorter than Oz, but wider, with shoulders like library shelves. "He's a good man to have around, especially if..."

She didn't continue. A shadow was sweeping across the tops of the

trees, and instinctively they both looked up. An enormous object, a hot air balloon floated overhead, painted in bright, gaudy colors, a reminder of better times. They watched as it came nearer, and Oz suddenly felt a churning in his guts. Painted on the side of the basket was a black Omega logo. Two men were inside, staring down at them from about one thousand feet. One man said something to the other, who nodded and bent to adjust the burner. Flames jetted up to give the balloon more lift, and it rose to catch an air current. They'd continue their journey and report what they'd seen.

Omega had found them.

"What do we do now?"

He pointed to their cabin. "It'll take them time to report they've found us. Those things have to go with the wind. We have time for food, and while we're eating, we'll discuss our next move."

Irvin was waiting outside the door, and he didn't look happy. "You saw it?"

"Yes. I reckon we have a couple of days before they come. If we pack everything today, we can leave at first light tomorrow."

Cobb was aghast. "We can't leave all this." He waved a hand around the settlement they'd built.

"Irvin, we both know what happens next. They'll come here in force, for two reasons. First, they'll want our supplies. Second, they want revenge after the beating we gave them last time. Irvin, we're an armed group, self-supporting and self-reliant, and we're competing for what few resources are left. No way in hell will they leave us alone." He grinned, "We'll handle it, don't worry. Dish up the stew, and we can enjoy our last meal in this place. When we've eaten, we'll talk to the others."

They ate in silence, and when they'd finished, they went outside. The rest of their community had congregated around the cabin. Including a few stragglers who'd happened along, they numbered around forty people. With food scarce, they weren't getting enough to eat, and they all looked half starved. The winter had only just started, and he didn't need to tell them what they faced. Starvation, a frozen end.

He glanced around, and he had their attention. "You've all seen the balloon, and now we know they've found us."

"That don't mean nothing," a man shouted. He pushed through to confront Oz. Mayor Chandler, the pudgy, elected leader of Copperville. He looked different to the others. Rounder and well fed, although the food hadn't

prevented the remainder of his sparse hair falling out after the disaster. He was bald, but most times, like now, he wore a hunter's woolen watch cap. Chandler looked angry, which was no surprise. He always looked angry if he thought people were ignoring him, "There's no reason for them to come up here."

"There's no reason for them to send a surveillance balloon over here either, but they did. They'll come. Count on it."

He shook his head, mumbling how it was stupid to think about moving when they'd worked so hard for what they had, but others shouted him down. Over the intervening months, people took less and less notice of the man they'd elected just over a year ago. Up here, things were different. What a man said was less important than his ability to put food into the pot, and his ability to shoot straight when men were coming to take the little they had left.

They didn't have a couple of days. Oz slept that night, and it happened again, the nightmares he called episodes. Others called it PTSD. The flashbacks he'd experienced since he came back from Iraq. That last fateful firefight, when he'd lost good friends, kept replaying in his mind. He'd seen a Black Hawk go down in flames, and most of the crew burned. His best friend died in the firefight, and another friend, Rick Levine, was badly wounded. They shipped him back to the States, and he spent a long time recovering. He was driving back to Copperville after discharge from hospital when his car was involved in an accident. The vehicle caught fire, and when they got him out, all that remained was charred remains.

The flames and smoke were vivid as he tossed and turned, sweating through every pore. He was inside the Black Hawk, trying to pull the crew out before the flames took them, but he became trapped. His camos were on fire, his helmet glowing red-hot. He was dying, and outside the enemy was rejoicing. A ring of insurgents danced around the helicopter, waving their rifles in glee, firing shots into the air. A demonstration of Islamic culture, burning their enemies. In the States, they had any amount of entertainment, but in Iraq, they had death. Gory, agonizing death.

He was shouting at them to stop, to help him evacuate the crew from the burning fuselage. The more he shouted, the faster they danced, and the more they laughed. Singing a song and it sounded familiar. He screamed louder.

"Oz, it's me. You're okay."

His eyes flicked open, his body drenched with sweat. Someone was leaning over him, and he wanted to shout it wasn't okay. Men were dying.

But in time, he recognized Eleanor. He'd had another episode.

"I wish you hadn't seen that."

"Never mind about that, Oz. We have a problem. The forest is on fire."

"On fire? No, that was just a dream."

"Not a dream. They've set light to the forest. Omega is here."

He jerked awake, and he could smell the smoke. Not a flaming Black Hawk but wood smoke, and he could hear the crackle of blazing trees. He'd slept dressed because of the cold, and he raced outside. The scene he encountered was chaos, an inferno of smoke and flame.

People were running everywhere, and some had buckets of water. It would be like trying to repair a dam wall with chewing gum. The wall of smoke and flame was racing toward them, at least two hundred yards wide, maybe more. Some were staring in disbelief, too shocked to move, until the shooting started.

He ducked as a shot whistled past, followed by several more. They were shooting blind through the smoke. Trying to panic them, like stampeding a herd of cattle, and it was working. Some were racing away from the settlement. Leaving everything behind. Once again, running from Omega.

Irvin Cobb appeared beside him. "Thank Christ you're here. I've been looking for you."

"I was asleep."

"You what?"

"Never mind. Get them moving. We'll head up to the summit and escape along the top. Tell 'em to wear warm clothes, and take whatever food they can carry. It's gonna be long and hard. And weapons. Omega will follow, no question, so we'll need plenty of ammo. Move it!"

He gaped. "You mean abandon our stuff? Leave behind everything we've worked for?"

"Either lose that or our lives. Those're the choices, and we don't have much time to decide."

"I'm on the way."

Oz grabbed his rifle, the Remington M700, and the handgun he'd taken off an Omega deputy he'd killed, a Ruger Super Redhawk .480 caliber. He had plenty of ammo for rifle and revolver. He filled a pack with bottled water and packets of dried food, and he ran to help Irvin get them moving. People ran forward, backward, and all ways in their terror. He herded them into a group and pushed them away up the slope, toward the summit, the flames

roaring nearer. Eleanor was supervising her elderly aunt Edith Merryweather and her equally elderly companion Charlotte Daggett, despite the objections of the women. Both stick thin, and neither taller than five feet.

Edith was adamant. "My dear, this is part of the plan. You must have seen it in Revelations. The fiery horsemen, the end of days, it's upon us. Our savior is coming."

"Aunt Edith, he'll come just as fast if you get away from the flames. Follow those people, and don't slow for anything."

"What about our clothes, and our bedding?"

"What about your lives? Go!" She pointed up the slope, "Follow the others, and don't stop for anything. Run!"

"There's no need to speak to us like that."

"I'm trying to save your lives. Now go!"

She still didn't move, when a volley of shots cracked overhead. She ran.

Oz was rousting out the last of the laggards, unable to shake the feeling they were doomed. They should have been safe here, settling down to face a long, hard winter after months of arduous preparations. Now they were running yet again, and he ran from cabin to cabin, from shelter to shelter, making sure they were all out. When he was satisfied, he sprinted after them, heading for the summit. Eleanor and Irvin were waiting for him, and she pointed to the south.

"We should trek just inside the treeline to keep out of sight. The trick will be keeping a safe distance from the flames."

"They'll have to hurry. If anyone slows, they'll die."

Irvin nodded. "We get that, buddy."

They reached the summit of the slope, which was bare of trees, and Oz looked back. A half-dozen men had skirted the lower edge of the fire and come into view. He recognized Duane Foster, the cop who'd ratted them out and gone over to Omega. There was Wayne Garrett, the former used car salesman who claimed to be running local law enforcement. Another man was next to him. He looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place him. Whoever he was, he was Omega, and they were coming.

They jogged along the narrow path, and after several hundred yards, he turned to look at their back trail. The Omegas had gone. The flames and smoke were nearer and forcing them back. They must have assumed the fire would finish them, so why take the chance of being caught up in a forest fire? He caught up with the back markers struggling to keep up. Eleanor had

joined the old ladies, urging them along, but they were struggling.

“We have to rest,” the Aunt Edith gasped, “I can’t go another step, and neither can my friend.”

He looked at Irvin, and without a word they scooped the women on their shoulders in a fireman’s lift and kept moving. Battling to keep ahead of the flames, it was fortunate both women weighed little. Otherwise, he reckoned they wouldn’t have made it.

They raced along the summit, most of it rock, with little to catch fire, but they pressed on until he figured they’d cleared the danger area, finally calling a halt. They were exhausted, panting for breath. Gratefully, they slumped on the ground, rubbing their sore muscles.

He took time studying their back trail and worked out the fire had unexpectedly helped them. The blaze had curved around to form a natural barrier between them and their pursuers. The wind had also swung around and was blowing the smoke back toward their abandoned settlement, directly in the faces of the enemy.

A small advantage, but better than none. At least until the smoke clears, then they’ll come.

“We’ll rest here for a couple of hours and work out which direction to follow next.”

He saw shoulders slump in relief, and he shared that relief. The episode he’d suffered the night before had left him drained of energy, and he needed the break just as much as they did.

They couldn’t rest for long. There was no point in pussyfooting around. They were in a race for survival. The survival of the fittest, like when humans first emerged from the primeval slime to become hunter-gatherers. Those strong and fast enough to hunt and kill survived, those that couldn’t, died. A simple equation.

Omega had worked it out when the American infrastructure collapsed. They knew whoever controlled those things in short supply, like food, potable water, and weapons, was in charge. Everyone else would be at the bottom of the heap, frequently hungry, thirsty, and cold during the winter, yet considering themselves fortunate to survive.

Mayor Chandler had that indignant look on his face again. “For God’s sake, what do these people want? We abandoned the town, and they’re still chasing us.”

“They want everything. All of it.”

He shook his head. "Surely we can talk. That's the way people resolve their difficulties, the way the world works."

"Not anymore, Mr. Mayor. Any time you want to try, that's up to you. But go on your own, and don't take any valuable food with you. Leave it with us, so we can make use of it after you're dead."

He frowned but didn't reply. Oz decided they'd rested enough.

"Everyone on your feet. We need to keep moving."

"Surely it'll be night in a few hours. Why can't we bed down here?"

The woman who'd spoken was haggard, her wrinkled face making her look prematurely aged. She was carrying a young infant, and he knew she'd be exhausted. He made a note to get someone to help her, but he shook his head.

"We won't stop for the night. We have to keep going, until we've put enough distance between us and the enemy."

"The whole night?" She looked about to weep, "Most of us won't make it through to dawn. We're all in, surely you can see that?"

He shrugged. "You have a simple choice. Keep going or die."

Mayor Chandler stepped forward. "That's bullshit! You have to give us a chance to recover."

"I can't force you. If you wait here for them to catch up, they'll take everything. Food, supplies, water, weapons, and ammo. It might be better if they shot you, because you wouldn't survive with nothing."

The woman hugged her infant closer. "You're sure? They'd take everything, leave us to die?"

"They'll take anything they can make use of. You're a woman, work it out."

She understood and gave him a tired nod. "Okay, I guess we'll make it, somehow."

They'd lost two or three people during the escape. Faces that should have been there, and he assumed they'd perished in the flames, or been unable to keep going. He wanted to go back and check, but he couldn't do it. He was responsible for the small community, and for Eleanor, his pregnant wife.

If I slow our escape, she could fall victim to the Omegas. Or even the forest fire, should it loop around and go past us. If that happens, it'll block us off. Best not to think about that.

"Okay, the discussion's over. Move out."

The journey through the forest was a nightmare. He and Irvin helped carry those who couldn't go on, several children and two adults who'd fallen and sprained their ankles. They also took turns with Eleanor's Aunt Edith and her friend Charlotte. They were running from hell, from men who would set fire to an entire mountainside to kill them. When dawn broke, he looked back over the ground they'd covered. Almost thirty miles and he figured it was far enough. Any more, and the woman who'd objected the night before would be proved right. They'd all be dead.

They collapsed exhausted, and some fell asleep, lying on hard lumps of rock and rough, uneven ground. They would have slept on a fence rail given the chance. He had it in mind to find somewhere they could start again, but this time to plan things differently. A settlement well hidden from the Omegas, and that meant being deep beneath the forest canopy. They'd also have to build a stockade around it, to defend themselves from surprise attacks. And to put out regular patrols, to make sure their enemy never got near.

There is another alternative. Not under the forest canopy, but defensible. A place we know. Home, Copperville.

He lay on the ground, racked with the aches and pains from the scramble through the night.

It'll be hard starting again, but if we find the right place, we can hunt and trap provisions for the winter. Shelter and food are the prime requirements. Somehow, we'll find them, provided we don't run into further problems. It doesn't feel like a good bet.

Eleanor lay beside him, and he was worried about. Her face was red from exertion, and when he put his hand on her belly, he was sure he could feel the baby kicking. The big question was whether it was kicking as a normal part of pregnancy or a sign that things weren't straightforward. He mentioned it to her, and she shrugged away his concerns.

"I'm okay, Oz." She looked at him, understanding what was going through his head.

"I just wish we had a midwife here, but we don't even have a nurse."

She smiled gently. "I'm a woman, and I think I'd know if something was wrong. Don't worry about me. As long as we don't hit any more serious trouble, I'll be okay. We can rebuild, Oz."

"It depends how far behind us they are."

She nodded. "That's the big question. Where are they?"

“Eleanor, you often see what lies ahead of us, what the future holds.”

She frowned, and it was as well he couldn't see what was in her head. She'd had a vision, and it wasn't one she cared to share. A body lying on the ground riddled with bullets, and nearby, a rifle, a Remington M700. Oz's rifle.

Do I tell my husband I've seen his death? Absolutely not.

“I wish I could, but lately I don't know. Since my pregnancy, I haven't seen much of anything.”

“You must have seen something. What aren't you telling me?”

“Oz, I...”

He held up a hand. He'd felt something cold touch his cheek. The wind would be circulating sparks and charred fragments from the fire. They'd flutter over the entire mountain range according to the prevailing air currents. But they shouldn't have been cold. Another cold fragment hit him, and another. A minute later, the snowstorm struck in its full fury.

One moment they'd been able to see for miles across West Virginia, and now they were blind. A raging blanket of snow had blanketed them in a coating of white. They were like zombies, floundering around in the snow that quickly settled, blotting out all traces of the path they'd been following.

“Get moving!” he shouted, “We have to get into shelter before it gets too bad. We'll go deep into the forest but keep heading south.”

People climbed to their feet, massaging life into their exhausted limbs to get the blood circulation moving. The calories that fueled their bodies were reduced to starvation levels, and yet they went on. Moving deep into the forest, and even here the snow penetrated. Where there was a clearing in the trees, the snow found gaps and did its best to cover everything with a thick coating of white. They were so cold they were turning blue. Where the snow drifted they had to fight their way through, wading knee deep and in places waist deep. They were beyond tired. They were dead men walking. Stumbling along on the road to nowhere.

They made five painful miles, and he called another halt. The foliage was thick overhead, and only small quantities of snow penetrated. They fell to the ground, most asleep within seconds. He wanted to join them, but he'd been working out their next move, and he'd reduced their options to a factor of one. They needed food and shelter from the bitter cold. With the onset of winter, the mountainside was unlikely to give them the means for either. Their food stores consisted of what they'd grabbed in their haste to escape,

enough to last a day or two at most.

The snow would also make hunting difficult, having to plow through deep drifts to find game, assuming there was any to find. If there was an upside, it was the provision of water. They could drink snowmelt and use it to replenish the water they'd had no choice but to leave behind. He wanted to explain his idea, but most were sleeping, and he waited.

The temperature dropped, and when they finally awoke, he looked at them and shuddered. Some showed signs of early frostbite, and none had eaten properly for some time. They were hungry, beaten, exhausted, and shivering to death in the freezing mountain air. They had the look of people who'd given up, people waiting to die. Beaten people.

"We have to do something," Eleanor said, looking around and seeing the same signs of defeat, "We can't go on like this. If we stay up here, we don't stand a chance."

"You're right." He signaled to Irvin, who joined them. "Listen up, the way I figure is this. We must go back. Back down the mountain and find shelter on familiar ground."

"Down the mountain? You mean the Ranger Station? I doubt there's anything left for us there. And if you're thinking of the trucks, you're wasting your time. They'll have stolen them, and if they didn't need them, they'd have drained the tanks of gas, so they won't go anywhere. Going down the mountain won't help us. We need to think of something else."

"I didn't mean the Ranger Station. Eleanor, you must tell us what you've seen. Anything to help us know what lies ahead."

She frowned. She had seen something, several things. But she wouldn't share them all. The vision of the body next to the M700 was something she kept deep in her mind, and not for any public airing. Not for Oz to know.

"You're right. I have seen a way out, but not up here, not in the forest. It's a town, but it's still hazy. I'm sorry. I don't know the details. I, uh..."

He sensed her holding back. "What haven't you told us, Eleanor? What do you see?"

She sighed and told him part of it. "There's something I don't understand. I see something about God."

"God? A miracle?"

"I'm just telling you what I see. Oz, what're we going to do? We're dying on this mountainside."

"We're going down the mountain, but not to the Ranger Station. We'd

be wasting our time. Eleanor, we're going back to where we started."

"You're not serious? You mean..."

"You know what I mean. These bastards have kicked us around for long enough. We're going home. Back to Copperville."

CHAPTER TWO

They rested that night, freezing cold and with little to eat. He made sure Eleanor had part of his food, as much as he could persuade her to eat. She didn't like it, but she was carrying an infant, and she needed it more than him. Huddled under a blanket they cradled each other to share their warmth. The makeshift encampment in the snow-covered forest was almost silent, people too shocked and stunned by the sudden attack on their homes. Snow still fell, and they became irregular shapes in the carpet of white. If they moved, it was to shiver.

"You need to sleep," she murmured in the early hours, "We have much to do tomorrow, and a long distance to cover. You won't be any good to yourself or anyone else if you're too tired to lead us."

"I can't sleep. I have to make plans."

He didn't tell her the real reason, and probably she already knew. He dreaded the return of the flashbacks. The episodes. She pulled him closer, and he was grateful for the soft warmth of her body, careful not to put pressure on her growing belly. Eventually, he slept, covered in snow, with the acrid stench of smoke blowing in the wind.

The nightmare returned. This time, it wasn't Iraq. He was looking at Wayne Garrett, used car salesman and now the local supremo of Omega. He held a lighter in his hand, and he was chuckling.

"You're screwed, Porter. If you think you're getting out of this one, forget it. This is goodbye."

Oz realized he was standing in a pool of gasoline, and he had a stupid thought. What a waste of valuable fuel if Garrett set fire to it. The next moment, he clicked the lighter, and it burst into flame. With a powerful throw, he tossed it into the puddle of gasoline. It exploded with a huge 'whump.' Flames surrounded him, licking up his body. His clothes, his flesh, and his hair were on fire. He screamed for help and tried to run to find water to extinguish the flames. The agony was terrible, flesh peeling off him, and he recalled Rick dying in a car crash when his vehicle caught fire. He'd burned until his body was a crisp.

He was still running, searching for any way to end the agony, and behind Garrett he glimpsed another man. The same man he'd seen when the forest was on fire. Just a shadowy, dark figure, a silhouette, but he knew the man was important. He also knew he was dying.

“Oz, snap out of it.”

Eleanor was shaking him, her face inches away, trying to reason with him, to bring him out of it. He tried, but he couldn't move his arms.

Irvin shouted, “Take it easy. You were going crazy back there.” Cobb was behind him, holding him in a lockdown.

“I'm okay now. You can let me go.” The grip on his arms relaxed, and he massaged life back into the muscles. Irvin's grip was powerful.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He saw concern in the former Marine. Since the disaster they'd become close friends. Semper fi. Some things were personal. Some battles he had to fight on his own. “It was just a nightmare.”

Irvin understood and moved away. The smell of smoke still lingered, and he saw the snow had settled, already two feet deep and still coming down.

Eleanor was waiting close by. “You want a drink of water?”

“Thanks, I could use it.”

She brought him a stainless-steel mug. “Tell me what you saw.”

“Saw?”

“Your dream. Your nightmare.”

A shrug. “It was nothing. No, not nothing, I was on fire.”

“Back in Iraq?”

“Not Iraq. It was here, and I was burning. Someone doused me with gasoline. I burned up.”

“You mean like that friend of yours who died in the auto crash?”

“Something like that, yeah. What time is it?”

“Just past 08.00. It's time we moved off, before our people are too frozen to move their muscles. The snow's getting thicker, and it's going to be hard getting through. Very hard.”

Oz took point and floundered on exhausted after the energy-sapping nightmare. He was colder than he'd ever been in his life. During his nightmare, sweat oozed from his skin and froze on his body. He had to stay up front. In the rear he risked falling behind. He needed to know there were people following him. Relying on him. The snow was again knee deep, the going murderous. They didn't stand a chance of making it through the day, let alone reaching Copperville. The men, women, and children were exhausted; most were likely to collapse from cold and hunger before midday.

Irvin caught up with him. “Oz, they can't go on much further. They

need food in their bellies, and they need to get warm. Dry their clothes out, and get some proper rest, not lying awake all night shivering in the bitter cold.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Irvin chuckled. “Where I grew up we had a small cottage on the edge of town, and it was always warm. My Pa kept a blazing coal fire going all winter. We need to get warm.”

“We don’t have a cottage, and we don’t have any coal, so…”

He was thinking hard. West Virginia was a state famous for its coal mines.

Coal mines! If we could find one close enough to the surface, we’d have shelter and coal. We could light a fire and shield it from the Omegas. Get ourselves warm, dry out our clothes, and we’d soon recover. Find the energy to hunt, to find food. And resume our trek back to Copperville.

“Change of plan, Irvin. We’ll veer to the southeast and find ourselves some coal.”

“How come?”

“Because that’s where they mine it. A mine dug into the side of the hill would provide us with everything we need. A chance to rest up and get warm before we continue.”

“You’re aiming to turn us into coal miners?”

“If that’s what it takes, yeah. They learned to hunt for food. They can learn to mine coal. If that’s what it takes to keep us alive. When we’re rested, we’ll continue to the town.”

“And if it’s occupied by hostiles, what then?”

“If anyone gets in our way, we fight them. Omega, escaped prisoners, I don’t care who they are. It’s our town. We take back what belongs to us. We don’t rob. We don’t steal. We just want what’s ours.”

He nodded. “It could work. I’ll go tell the others.”

When he explained where they were heading, and what it meant, people were enthusiastic. If he’d allowed them to descend into the fires of hell to get warm, they’d have gone for it. They climbed to their feet once again and continued their plodding march, until he estimated they were less than five miles from the nearest mine. They struggled to make one mile in each hour, and when the snow had drifted, they barely made a half-mile. They kept going, against all the odds, helping the weak and the faltering, but always moving forward to their goal. The golden prospect they never thought they’d

experience again. Warmth.

The shots came out of nowhere. His instinct made Oz dive for cover, and he rolled behind a tree. The rest of them panicked, floundering through the snow, and one took a bullet. A woman of around fifty, she was too slow to get behind cover. He unslung the Remington and crawled forward to locate the shooters. They weren't difficult to find in the freezing air. Their warm breath condensed, sending up clouds of steam, and he pinpointed them immediately. About eighty yards away, hiding behind a log that had fallen to the forest floor.

He wrapped his scarf tighter around his mouth to prevent his condensed breath giving him away and circled around to take them on the flank. They were amateurs, that he had little doubt, after easy pickings. They'd seen the line of desperate people and assumed they'd be able to pick them off like ducks in a shooting gallery. They reckoned without a Marine sniper. He saw movement on the opposite flank and spied Irvin attempting to take them from the opposite side.

The former Marine popped his head up for a second and ducked back down as a fusillade of shots smacked into the snow around him. He realized what he was doing. Decoying them away from him, to give him a chance, a clever move, and a brave one. He'd have to show himself, and the tiniest miscalculation, they'd blow his head off. He redoubled his efforts, and kept low, almost carving a trench through the soft snow as he went forward. More shots rang out, and he heard Irvin shout, "Is that the best you can do? You couldn't shoot the side of a barn if you were inside it. I'm gonna roast your asses, motherfuckers."

He was taunting them, to keep them from seeing Oz, and it worked. Their entire attention was focused on Irvin, and he crawled past their flank. When he had them both covered, he ratcheted a round into the chamber of the Remington and called out.

"Throw down your guns. I've got the drop on you. Stand up and put your hands in the air."

One man quickly turned, swinging up his rifle as fast as a striking snake. He was wasting his time. Oz put a bullet into his face, and he smacked back down on the snow. Red blood spilled out to form an irregular stain on the pristine white surface. Almost like a Jackson Pollock painting, except in two colors, red and white. The other man turned more slowly, and his hands were coming up.

“I said drop the weapon!”

“Okay, okay, give me a moment. Say, buddy, we need to talk about this. There’s no need for any shooting.”

He didn’t drop his weapon, and Oz didn’t need to be a fortuneteller to know what was coming next. The clowns always thought they could win. Even when they’d just seen a sample of his shooting. They always lost.

Oz saw it happen almost in slow motion. He brought up the rifle up to take aim, and simultaneously dodged to the side, where he’d be hidden behind a tree while he took the shot. He didn’t make it. Oz fired a second time, and because the guy was moving, he aimed for the larger target, which happened to be his chest. The heavy bullet flung him down onto the snow, to land a few yards from his buddy. This time, the pattern of red was more abstract, for the bullet had struck him in the lung. He was struggling to breathe, spitting out great gobs of blood. Too late, he dropped the rifle. Too late, because he was dying.

Irvin had reached the body. He bent down to look at him and shook his head. “He won’t last long. Nice shooting, by the way, but a pity he didn’t surrender. We could have used some news from the outside.”

Oz knelt beside him. “Who are you, and what are you doing up here?”

He croaked out something unintelligible. Oz reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a cheap plastic wallet, with an equally cheap printed card inside. He read it and handed it Irvin. “I’d say our problems just got a whole lot worse.”

Irvin read the words aloud. “Chase Company. What the hell is Chase Company?”

He pointed to the smaller lettering at the bottom of the card. The printing was poor, so it was hard to read, but he spotted the crudely drawn Omega symbol.

“It says ‘This man is a legal deputy of Omega, charged to investigate those people who hoard supplies, and to sequester anything found and hand it to Omega.’ Most folks would call it bullshit. I’d call it licensed theft.”

The man with the bullet in his lung gasped his last breath, and bubbles of blood spewed from his mouth. He wore a variety of clothing, hardly suitable for the forest in winter. Cheap combat jacket and pants, and instead of decent boots cheap imported trainers. The other man was dressed similarly. Both has lined, sallow and hard faces, like men who’d done hard time.

“They’re third rate mercenaries. It’s easy to work out from this tacky piece of card. They’re sending them out to locate people who’ve escaped or refused Omega’s grasp. They’ll steal their stuff and leave them without the means to survive. If they try to object, well, you can see what they tried here. They threw down on us and killed that woman without warning. They’re bounty hunters. I expect they’re paid according to what they bring in. And what kind of a body count they rack up.”

Mayor Chandler joined them and looked down at the bodies. “Were they really trying to kill us?”

“In the case of the woman back there they succeeded,” Oz retorted. He moved closer to Chandler and lowered his voice, “They’re bounty hunters, scum recruited by Omega to chase people like us down. And they’ll send more, you can bet your bottom dollar.”

Chandler shook his head. “Perhaps we should have tried talking to them.” He looked smug, what Oz would have called oily, “I’m not happy about what happened here. I’m the elected Mayor, Mr. Porter, and I believe it’s time the people see me taking my rightful place. And that includes not killing every stranger we meet.”

Oz worked hard not to smile. “I’m sure you’re right, Sir.”

He looked surprised. “Don’t take offense, Porter. We’re all grateful for everything you’ve done so far, but I think it’s time for the appointed leader to take charge.”

“Of course, Sir, you won’t get any argument from me. Where do we go next, Mr. Mayor? If you’d like to take point, we’ll just follow along.”

He looked around, and he was at a loss. Too late, he saw the trap Oz had led him into. People nearby were already smiling at his embarrassment. “I, uh, I’m not sure.” He looked around wildly, as if seeking inspiration. All he saw was snow, and behind him, men, women, and children waiting for his ‘leadership.’

“Mr. Porter, you can carry on for now. I’ll take over later.”

“No problem.”

Oz exchanged a grin with Irvin. A moment later, he injected his voice with all the snap and authority of a Marine drill sergeant.

“The show’s over, folks. On your feet and get moving. We still have a long way to go.” A collective groan went up, but he was ready for it, “When we get there, we’ll light a roaring coal fire to warm and dry us out.”

A few cheered, but most dragged themselves to their feet in total silence

and staggered on through the snow. The evening wore on, darkness fell, and still they struggled on. They went past the Ranger Station, which was a charred ruin, and both trucks had disappeared. They continued walking to the southeast, and he figured they must be inside a half-mile from their destination, the coal mine. They were running on their last reserves. Everyone blue with cold, wet, shivering, and starving hungry. Some were ready to lie down and die in the snow rather than go another yard. At their lowest point, and vulnerable to anything.

He should have been more careful, but it happened unexpectedly. Oz became aware of a face staring at him through the trees, and as he swung up his rifle, he saw more faces. Twenty men, and there were more. All men, all bearded, and all carrying rifles. So far, they weren't pointing them in a threatening way.

Things could change.

He stared at the man he'd seen first, and the guy stepped from behind the tree. He kept his rifle pointed firmly at the ground.

Promising.

"Greetings, brother, and welcome to our community."

The tone and the words sounded biblical, like a revivalist preacher was standing in front of him. They seemed friendly enough, and he took a gamble on trusting them.

"Greetings to you. Who are you?"

The face stared at him, and the lips parted in a slight smile. The smile didn't reach the eyes. "I am Bishop Robert Mason, the leader of this community. We are the Brethren of the Risen God, and since the disaster, we've built our community here."

"Where is here?"

"You are in the coal mining region of West Virginia. We took over an abandoned mine, and we work it to extract the fruits of the earth. God's bounty, to give us warmth, and fuel our cooking fires."

"Digging coal is hard work."

The look he returned was strange. "We manage. Friend, you look as if you've come from far away."

"At a guess I'd say forty miles."

His eyebrows rose. "Forty miles in these conditions is a long way. I can offer you a place by our fire to warm yourselves, and a hot meal. Come, our community house is not far away, a ten-minute walk. You are welcome to

enjoy our hospitality, and you can recover in comfort from the arduous nature of your journey.”

He was a big man, with the weather-beaten face of an outdoorsman. He looked honest enough. His long beard gave him the look of an Old Testament prophet. If

Oz had suspicions, it was because of the eyes. A piercing blue, magnetic, some would say the eyes of a fanatic, or a dictator. Then again, after the way their lives had crumbled to dust, maybe that’s what some people needed. A man with the single-minded fanaticism of the true believer to drive his people on and lift them out of despair.

They needed no urging, and they almost ran to follow the man who promised them so much. They waded knee deep through more snowdrifts that threatened to come up to their waists, and yet they didn’t slow. Until the trees ended, and there was a clearing with a huge barn-like structure in the center, and a cluster of smaller buildings nearby. On the slope of the hillside, the mouth of the mine was a jet-black scar against the snow-covered hill. Several small hills surrounded it. The coal they’d mined, or perhaps waste slag.

They entered the barn, the community house, and they’d constructed a huge open fireplace from blocks of stone. The blaze drew them like bees to honey, and as they drew nearer, the icy chill of the past two days began to thaw. He counted around forty men and women in the building, with a few children. They were seated at a huge table, men on one side, the women and children on the other. Everyone smiled a welcome, and he found it eerie. The smiles looked contrived, less warm than the roaring coal fire, although he was tired, and put it down to his imagination.

“Sit down, sit down.” Bishop Mason was warm and friendly, but the eyes still bothered him.

He reminds me of Jim Jones, the charismatic leader of the cult that committed suicide in Jonestown, Guyana. Although there’s no sign these people are like that. They looked healthy, well fed, happy, and well adjusted.

He took a seat with Irvin on one side and Mayor Chandler on the other. Eleanor dutifully sat with the women on the other side of the table. Other women brought steaming bowls of stew, and they ladled it onto plates. He grabbed the spoon to push it down his throat, but Bishop Mason climbed to his feet, and everyone went quiet.

“A prayer to our Lord, and we thank him for this bountiful fare.”

He froze the spoon before he took a gulp, and the prayer appeared to go

on forever. He glanced at Irvin and shrugged. All they wanted was to spoon the hot food into their bellies, but they waited. Eventually, Bishop Mason finished, and they spooned it down like starving men. They were starving men. They were all starving. The community studied them with some amusement, watching them eat like they hadn't eaten in months. Women brought around second, third, and even fourth helpings, until they were replete.

He felt tired, so tired he could sleep for a week, and it was understandable. He reached for the water jug, filled his earthenware mug in front of him, and drank it down. Immediately, a woman came in and refilled it yet again. Something was strange in this place, and for the first time he realized people weren't talking. They were watching them, as if waiting for something. He grinned to himself for imagining things.

This is a religious community. They're waiting for us to sprout horns.

The tiredness became worse, and he battled to keep his eyes open. At one time his head fell forward and banged on the table before he jerked back into wakefulness. He was confused, finding it hard to work out why he felt so bad, and he noticed some had fallen asleep with their heads resting on the table. His brain shrilled a warning.

This shouldn't be happening. Despite our epic, nightmare flight from the mountain, we shouldn't all feel so bad. We've been poisoned, but why?

He passed into unconsciousness, and when he awoke, he was freezing cold. They weren't in the barn where they'd eaten dinner. They were in a concrete blockhouse, with a hard, cold stone floor and walls constructed from cement blocks. The roof was corrugated iron. There were no windows, and only a little light filtered through cracks around the door. His limbs were stiff, and he couldn't move them. He looked down and understood the reason.

Someone had locked manacles on his wrists and ankles, linked together with a length of chain. With six inches of movement between his ankles, it wouldn't allow him to walk. All he'd manage was to shuffle along. Otherwise he was helpless. Irvin blinked his eyes in astonishment as he realized he was similarly manacled. They all were.

"What the hell! What's going on here?" he rasped to anyone who may be listening, "Oz, what have they done to us?"

They were packed into the small, freezing cold space like cordwood piled for the winter. Shoulder to shoulder, and if one person moved, their neighbor had to move with them to give them space.

The bolts rattled, and the door opened. Daylight flooded into the building, and Bishop Robert Mason stared at them. The smile had gone from his face. The searing, intense scrutiny was ominous. Oz opened his mouth to fire off the obvious question, but he spoke first.

“The Lord has brought you here to work for our community. You have eaten food at our table, and now it’s time for you to repay us for our kindness. You already know why we have established our community here. It is because of the coal, which gives us fuel essential for our survival if we are to continue to worship the Risen God. He has ordained you’ll provide us with your labor, so we may spend our time more usefully in acts of worship. Until I decide otherwise, you will spend your days working in the mine, cutting coal.”

“Hold it, buddy!” Oz snapped, “You can’t do this. We have people who are elderly, sick, and some are children. There’s something else. My wife is pregnant. For Christ’s sake, what do you think you’re doing? They abolished slavery a long time ago.”

The Bishop nodded to a man standing behind him. He rushed in carrying a baseball bat, stepped over to Oz, and smashed the bat over his head, leaving a deep gash and blood dripping down his forehead. If they hadn’t been so tightly packed together, he’d have keeled over with the hard blow.

“You will not question my word. As for taking the Lord’s name in vain, I warn you I will not allow it to go unpunished. Soon, my men will lead you across to the mine and instruct you in your new tasks. You work until they tell you the day’s labors are over. You will say prayers before they reattach your chains and allow you to eat the evening meal.”

Chandler struggled and failed to get his feet, but he attracted the Bishop’s attention by waving his arms.

“Listen to me, Sir. I’m the elected Mayor of this community, and I can tell you what you’re doing is categorically against the law. I’ll give you a chance to unlock these chains and let us go. Otherwise, I promise you I’ll bring the full weight of the law down on your heads. You’ll wish you’d never been born.”

Bishop Mason merely nodded and continued, as if he’d never spoken. “My men will show you to your place of work. Obey them, work hard, and in time we may release you. Disobey an order, and you will suffer. Don’t even think of trying to escape. The punishment for that is death. Get up. It is time

to go to the mine.” He gave them a faint smile, but the eyes remained cold, “You are about to become coal miners.”

The man with the baseball bat re-entered the room and flailed around at random, beating heads and bodies. They got to their feet, and Oz understood the answer to a question that had puzzled him since they’d arrived. How come men who operated a coal mine had clean hands? He’d known coal miners, and there was always a residue of black coal dust no matter how hard they scrubbed. These people had a simple solution, slavery, under the pretext of worship.

Some worship!

As they shuffled across to the mine entrance, Eleanor contrived to get next to him.

“I didn’t see this coming. I’m sorry. What are we going to do?”

“You said you saw something to do with God. Not that God is part of this setup. It’s just a pretext for taking slaves to do their hard work.”

“You didn’t answer my question. What are we going to do?”

He was already thinking about it. Working out ways. Thinking about how to kill these bastards. He wouldn’t think twice about killing them, they didn’t deserve better. Like Omega, they preyed on ordinary folk just trying to survive the disaster. Omega took their supplies; these people took their labor.

He looked at a man standing on top of a conveyor that would once have carried coal to pile on the heap. The conveyor had long ceased operating, but now he was using it as a lookout post. The heap was around one hundred feet high, and the top of the conveyor just touched the top, so the sentry could see all around the compound. He had a rifle in his hands, and he was watching them carefully. Oz had made up his mind to kill him.

“You see that guy up there with the rifle?”

She nodded. “I see him, yes.”

“I’m gonna take it off him, and he goes down. When I’m finished with him, I’ll start killing the rest of these bastards, and I’ll keep killing until we get out of here.”

“You’re forgetting something. Our shackles. How can we remove them?”

“They’ll have to unfasten the chains so we can work inside the mine. Which gives us our chance.” He stared into her eyes, and he could see she was frightened. Frightened for their unborn child, and she needed reassurance, “I promise you this. No matter what happens, we won’t be

spending much time in this place. And when I get us out, these bastards are gonna regret the day they tried to make slaves of us.”

Chandler was listening. He rushed forward and gripped his arm. “You have a plan?”

He still didn’t trust him, not overly. After all, he was a politician, and he shook his head. “I’m working on it, Mr. Mayor. As soon as I come up with something, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Okay. Don’t take too long.”

They entered the mine, and a man with a rifle stood either side of the entrance, covering each manacled slave while a third man, unarmed, unlocked the steel on their wrists and ankles. He pushed the slave inside the mine and moved to the next person. The whole process was well rehearsed, and as they unfastened his irons and pushed him into the dark tunnel, Oz understood why. There were more slaves, dozens of people, staring at him. Haggard, thin, emaciated, their faces black with coal dust. He didn’t like to think how long they’d have been here. Only that it was a long time. And their expressions were without hope, knowing their chances of release were zero.

Eleanor was staring at them, appalled. “Oz, what is this?”

“We’ve arrived in a circle of hell. Dante’s Inferno, and they’ll never let us out.”

CHAPTER THREE

They handed them old, rusting picks and shovels, and some tried to resist. Irvin made a lunge for the guard sneering at him as he thrust a heavy pickaxe into his hands, and he was waiting. They'd been through it all before, and the guard stepped back as Irvin aimed a blow at him. He missed him by several inches. The guard dragged a billyclub from his belt, smacked it over his head, and Irvin crumpled to his knees. The guard chuckled.

"The Bishop told you, feller, if you obey you'll be fine. If you try to screw around, you'll find a world of pain waiting for you. And next time I'll keep hitting you until you're unconscious, and you'll stay inside the mine for the next seven days. No food, no water."

Oz helped the ex-Marine to his feet and murmured quietly, "Don't worry, buddy. I won't forget his face."

He picked up Irvin's pick and carried it, helping him as they stumbled deeper into the mine. A long, downhill slope, and the air was filled with dust, hard to breathe. The atmosphere was clammy and dank, with an overriding stench of coal dust, ordure, and human misery. In places, people were chipping at the coal, and others were shoveling it into bogies to push them up narrow gauge tracks to the surface.

"You think we'll get a chance to get out of here?"

"Sure. It's a case of waiting for the right moment. Irvin, when we go, that bastard who hit you with the club is going to get what's coming to him."

The tunnel veered sharply downward. Ahead of them, four men, like ghosts, pale and haggard, struggled to push a loaded bogie of coal up to the mine entrance. They stood aside for them and carried on down. "How deep can this mine be?"

"I guess we'll soon find out."

They reached the bottom, the end of the shaft, and in front the coalface was a dull black. Another emaciated man stood there, and he gave them a nod of greeting.

"You'll be the new people. The work is simple. You chip away at the coal, and when the bogie comes back down, you shovel it in. Then you keep going for the next bogie."

He held out his hand. "My name is Oz. This is Irvin."

"I'm Henry. I wish I could say I'm pleased to meet you, but you've arrived in a place you could never have imagined existed."

“How long have you been here?”

A shrug. “I think around five months. I’m one of the old-timers. Not many last long in here. We get roof falls, and with the poor diet and absence of sunlight and fresh air, the life expectancy is low. Most don’t last beyond three months.”

“Is that a fact?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Mister. But you’d better start work. If that bogie arrives and there’s no coal, they’ll put you on starvation rations for the following day. Bread and water, and sometimes the bread doesn’t arrive.”

They hacked at the hard coal, and after a few minutes Chandler and Emmett O’Donnell joined them. They continued through the morning, and each time they had enough coal a bogie appeared. They shoveled the coal into the empty truck, and men began the long push up to the mine entrance. Twice, guards came down the tunnel to check they were working, and they were armed with baseball bats and billyclubs. They could have taken them, but when they got to the mine entrance, they knew they’d be waiting, and they’d be riddled with bullets before they got to the outside.

The Mayor was the first to say what was on all their minds. “Porter, we can’t take much more of this. We’ll be too weak to do anything. You’re the survival expert, have you got a plan to get us out of here?”

“I told you. I’ll let you know when I’ve worked it out.”

“Just make it quick.”

He continued picking at the coal, but Mayor Chandler was an administrator, a bureaucrat, and his feeble efforts were risible. The other three men more than made up for his lack of effort, and they kept filling the bogies. They stopped when someone clanged a bell from the surface, and men put down their tools. Women brought pannikins of water, and they took a drink and rested for a short time. He was wondering about Eleanor when she materialized out of the gloom, carrying an oil lamp.

Her face was lined with worry. “Two of our women are already sick. They can’t go on. They’re too weak, and the work is killing them.”

He nodded. “They need a rest and a doctor. I don’t suppose they have medical benefits in this place.”

She managed a wan smile. “Not that I’ve seen. Tell me your plan.”

“What makes you think I have one? Everyone keeps asking me the same question.”

“Because you’re my husband, and I usually know what you’re thinking

before you know yourself. Tell me, Oz. We need hope.”

He looked around to make sure no one was in earshot and beckoned Irvin to come close. In a quiet voice he outlined his plans, and the bell tolled. Tolling for the end of their break. People obeyed the call and shuffled back to their endless, backbreaking toil.

* * *

It would soon be dark, and they continued the search for the fugitive Oz Porter. Guards scoured every part of the compound, and several went down into the mine to search every tunnel, niche, and corner. They even forced a group of slaves to empty a filled bogie in case he was hiding beneath the coal. He wasn't there. As the evening drew on, and they'd safely shackled the slaves, and locked them into their concrete prisons, the search tailed off. A few men with oil lamps still hunted and poked around, but they had little enthusiasm. Most were of the opinion he was long gone, although how he'd escaped the mine they had no idea.

He watched the last of the searchers give up and go into the barn for their hot supper. They'd been correct. He had hidden in the bottom of a bogie, with a rotting plank of wood over him. Eleanor and Irvin placed a thin layer of coal on top. They pushed the bogie out of the mine and across to the coal heap. The slaves shoveling coal looked astonished when he suddenly appeared. Black, covered in coal dust, he was almost invisible against the fresh coal they were shoveling. The four emaciated men stared at him for long seconds. Their expressions finally changed from astonishment to hope, and one man said, “Be real careful, buddy. If you manage to find a weapon, kill a few for us.”

One was clutching a pry bar, used for freeing rusted machinery. Oz pointed to it. “I could do with one of those.”

He handed it over. “You're welcome to it. You gonna use it to make these bastards suffer?”

“They'll suffer, I promise. I'm going to free all of you, and they're all yours.”

His eyes widened, and tears rolled down his coal-blackened skin. “You are truly an angel from heaven.”

A guard shouted from across the compound, and they turned and started back toward the mine. Trundling the empty bogie ahead of them, they disappeared into the dark tunnel. Oz stayed half-buried in the coal until

twilight darkened the sky, and he started to ascend the heap. If he'd climbed up the open, snow-covered face, his coal-blackened clothes would have exposed him. He'd worked out another way.

The coal conveyor was close, and when he was certain no one was looking his way, he dove underneath it. He was out of sight and kept crawling upward, getting closer to the sentry at the top. When he was within three yards of his objective, he waited.

A relief guard walked up the conveyor to swap with the man on duty. He wore a thick, sheepskin coat that reached to his knees, and a Russian style fur cap. The two men muttered about how they'd put a bullet through the bastard who'd escaped and caused them so much trouble. The man going off duty walked back down the conveyor.

With the change of sentry, he had time before the next man came on duty. The moment it was dark enough he crawled the last three yards to the top. Through a crack in the steel belt, he could see the man's dark outline. He waited a few minutes more, until his gaze turned to look down toward the mine. As if the escaped prisoner was about to run out into the open, so he could shoot him dead.

He was only four feet away from the sentry, and he had no choice but to do it fast. If he tried crawling the last few feet to the top, he'd hear him. At the very least he could get off a warning shot. He pumped air into his lungs and flexed his muscles, ready for a burst of action. He was ready, and he jumped, a flying leap onto the top. The man was turning when he hit him with all the force he could muster.

He went down, but he still had the rifle in his hands, and his mouth was opening to bellow a cry of warning. Oz buried his fist into the man's mouth, breaking his teeth and stifling the cry. A split second later he had his hands around the throat. He jammed his knee into his opponent's chest, and the breath whooshed out of his wounded mouth. But he still had the rifle. Oz looked into his eyes and saw the flicker of movement. He was about to pull the trigger. He jammed his finger into the trigger guard, wrenched the man's finger away, breaking it in the process, and snatched away the rifle. His opponent was still trying to cry out, and he jammed the muzzle into his throat.

With the steel barrel of a rifle jammed into the back of a man's throat, crying out is very difficult. But Oz hadn't finished. He kept pushing, the man gurgled, and reached up with his hand to drag the obstruction away so he

could draw breath. A waste of time, he was dealing with a man who had no reason to leave him alive. A man who'd seen his wife brutalized and enslaved, and he had every reason to kill him. He slammed his knee into his chest again, and the guy gasped in extreme agony.

He flipped the rifle over and slammed the butt down on his head. A massive blow, and he didn't need a second. He was dead or dying, his eyes staring up at the sky and seeing nothing. Blood and brain tissue leaked out to trickle down onto the freshly mined coal. He stripped off the man's coat and hat, shrugged into them, and took hold of the rifle. He was now the sentry, impossible to distinguish from the real thing in the night.

When he was certain he wasn't under observation, he scrambled down to the concrete building holding Eleanor and the other prisoners.

They're not prisoners. They're slaves.

Two more concrete blockhouses were nearby, and he assumed the other slaves were inside. He wanted to free them, but right now he didn't have time. There'd be time to free them later. Assuming everything went the way he'd planned. If not, he'd be dead, and the rest consigned to a lingering death in the hellish black maw of the earth.

The prison was unguarded, and there were no locks on the door. Just two huge iron bolts slid across top and bottom, impossible to open from inside. He slid them across, opened the door, and whispered into the darkness.

"It's me, Oz. I'm getting you out of here."

People murmured to each other, hardly believing their salvation was near. A second later they came out. Chains rattled, and he motioned for them to keep quiet.

He began with Irvin's manacles, wrenching them open with the pry bar, and moved to Eleanor. Chandler pushed to the front, muttering he was the Mayor and should be first. He ignored him and made him wait until he'd done a dozen more. Finally, they were all unshackled, and he murmured for silence.

"The next bit is the hard bit. I'm going up on top of the conveyor. We'll rouse the camp, and I can snipe at them when they come out into the open. I'm gonna need help."

"You plan to kill them?" Chandler muttered, "Shouldn't you should give them a chance to give themselves up first?"

He grimaced, and he noticed Eleanor doing her best to hide her cynical

smile.

Are all politicians this naive?

“Mr. Mayor, I’ll give them the same chance as they gave us. They invited us to a meal, and then drugged us and put us in chains. Now listen up all of you. I have one rifle, and there are more of them than I have bullets. They’re not stupid, and they’ll know I can’t shoot them all. Which means they’re liable to do anything; including holding you as hostages and threatening to kill you if I don’t give myself up. The question is this. Do you want to go back into the mine tomorrow, or not?”

Chandler murmured, “Okay, we’ll play it your way.” The others just nodded.

He outlined the plan, and the first part was simple. Snatch weapons from the sentries. He’d seen two patrolling the perimeter of the compound.

“I’ll shoot them both, and any others I see. When they go down, grab their rifles. I need those of you with weapons to guard the barn. When the shooting starts, they’ll come running out. I’ll be able to put down another two or three, that’s two or three more guns for you to scoop up. The rest are sure to retreat inside the building. Irvin, I want you to take charge of guarding the doors, and remember; if they get out, we’re finished. The rest of you can free the other slaves. Then we’re leaving.”

A man called out, “Surely you don’t plan to leave those bastards alive after what they’ve done to us. And what about our gear? Weapons, supplies, we’ll need it all to survive.”

He has a point.

“There’s a larger building across the compound, and I’m willing to bet that’s the Bishop’s house. I’m pretty sure that’s where we’ll find our guns, and possibly our supplies. Irvin, when you’ve secured the barn, we’ll pay our friendly Bishop a visit.”

He looked doubtful. “You may have forgotten something, Oz. A flaw in your plan, these religious lunatics will try to come after us, and they’ll be vengeful. We’re still weak after what we’ve been through, and we’d be easy meat for them.”

“They won’t come after us, trust me.”

Eleanor looked curious. “You have a plan?”

“Not so much a plan, more of a racing certainty.”

He gave her a quick kiss, told her everything would be okay, and ran to the top of the conveyor. He still wore the sheepskin coat and the Russian fur

hat. As far as anyone knew, he was the sentry, standing his watch, just like he was supposed to be. He searched through the gloom for the other sentries and found none. He worried he'd missed them, but after a few minutes they walked out of the shadows and stood under a hurricane lamp, smoking their crudely fashioned pipes. He took aim, squinting down the barrel, and gently squeezed the trigger. The rifle wasn't a patch on his Remington, but at short-range it was no problem. The bullet cracked out of the barrel. One man went down, and then the other. He saw Irvin and Eleanor run out to grab their rifles.

They raced across to the barn and reached it just in time. The door crashed open, and men came running out. Three men burst out, and then another two more, and he started shooting. Three went down, and the other two, realizing they were vulnerable, tried to duck back inside. He put down one and Irvin leapt on top of the other, wrestling him to the ground. When a man has endured a day's labor, forced into brutal slavery, he's not likely to go easy on his opponent. Irvin repeatedly smashed a fist into the man's face until it was a bleeding mush. He grabbed his rifle and slammed the butt against his skull. The crack of breaking bone was loud in the night air.

The rest of the Brethren had forced the doors of the barn shut, giving up on trying to get out until they knew what they faced. The compound was empty of hostiles, and he raced back down the conveyor to join them at the barn.

"Are we all secure here?" he asked Irvin.

Five of their people had joined them guarding the doors, and Irvin nodded. They'd picked up the dropped weapons, and all five looked like they were keen for any excuse to start blasting.

"I reckon so."

"Let's go and see our friend Bishop Mason. I'm sure he'll give us a friendly welcome."

"I'm coming with you," Eleanor piped up.

He didn't argue, although he didn't like it. Her pregnancy was well advanced, and she'd been through an incredible strain in the past couple of days. He didn't want her hurt just when they were close to getting out and reaching their objective. Home, Copperville.

"What about the slaves in the other buildings, did you tell them to release them?"

She nodded. "A dozen of our people have gone to open them up, and

they've taken the pry bar to remove the shackles. What do you think they'll do when they're free?"

"The same as you and me would do. It won't be pretty. Let's get this done."

He reached the door of the small cottage, slammed a boot into the woodwork close to the lock, and the door sprung open. They rushed inside, rifles leveled, in time to meet Bishop Mason coming from an inner room. He wore a furious expression. They'd breached his inner sanctum, and the self-appointed Bishop didn't like it one bit.

"What is the meaning of this? I am..."

They weren't interested in what he was. Irvin used the rifle butt to good effect, and the Bishop went down choking for breath. Eleanor went through the door he'd just emerged from, and they heard her cry of astonishment.

Oz ran toward her. "Cover him. I'll see what's up."

He went through, and Eleanor was paralyzed with astonishment. It was a bedroom, like no other room in this austere place. Lined with fabrics around the walls, like a room in a Turkish harem. The bed was enormous, big enough for a maharaja and his harem, and so it was with Bishop Mason. Lying on the bed were six females. Six young females, and Eleanor was staring at one she recognized.

"Kelsey Chandler! What are you doing here?"

The girl started guiltily, climbing out of bed before she realized she was naked, and she pulled a cover around her. "Mrs. Porter, I'm sorry. This wasn't my fault."

"What's going on? You can't be more than sixteen-years-old, and a couple of these girls look younger."

"We're Bishop Mason's disciples, Miss. We didn't have any choice. He made us do it."

She sighed. "Are your clothes here?"

"In the closet."

"Get them on, all of you. We're leaving."

Six young female voices cried out in joy, and she snapped at them to shut up and listen. "It's warm in here, but very cold out there, so grab everything you can to put on."

"What about the Bishop? He said he'd punish us if we tried to escape."

"The Bishop has other worries," Oz answered, "He's out in the main room, and I think his days of leading a cult are over. Today is his

Revelations, and there's a big, bad bastard about to come along on a Pale Horse, and he won't be gentle."

When they'd dressed, they swarmed out to find Irvin still had Mason held under the muzzle of his rifle. The blue fanatic eyes blazed with fury, and he was spitting insults, so vitriolic the spittle dripped down his chin.

"This is an insult to God! You will suffer the fiery depths of hell for what you are doing."

"I reckon not, pal." Eleanor had picked up an iron poker from the fireplace, where the remains of the coal fire still smoldered. She hit him with it so hard Oz winced. She'd opened the floodgates, and the girls he'd taken to satisfy his lusts fell on him like hyenas on a chunk of raw meat. They kicked, they punched, and when one looked around wildly for something to hit him with, Eleanor passed her the poker without a word. They shared it around, taking turns. Each girl aimed several hard blows at his body with the heavy iron and passed it to the next. When they finally stood back, he wasn't moving, a Prophet no longer, at least not a live one. No more slaves to hew coal to keep him warm, and no more forcing young girls to become his whores. His earthly reign had ended. All that remained for him was to make a deal with the Devil.

They left the building and stopped. Irvin shook his head.

"Jesus Christ. I can hardly believe it. What's the matter with them?" He was staring at the compound, filled with running, screaming, shouting, emaciated figures, their skin dark with the coal dust they'd lived with for so many months. Small groups were chasing Brethren, and when they caught up with them, it was better not to look. They used anything that came to hand. Shovels, picks, dropped weapons, kitchen knives, anything that would inflict pain, "Why don't they escape?"

"You haven't been through what they have. Wouldn't you want some payback for what these bastards had put them through?"

He nodded. "I get it. Yeah, I'd be the same. Damn, they're killing them all."

Eleanor put her hand through Oz's arm. "You'd already worked this out, hadn't you?"

"I had."

"It doesn't bother you they're embarking on a killing rampage?"

"Not at all. Like I said, it means they won't be coming after us. They won't be coming after anybody, not ever. Their slave-owning days are over."

Mayor Chandler could hardly believe it when he met his daughter. “Kelsey, where did you come from? I lost you back in Copperville, and I thought you’d left with your mother.”

“Ma didn’t make it, Dad. They killed her while we were trying to escape, and I wandered for several days, until these people took me prisoner. I’ve been here ever since.”

“Doing what?”

Eleanor answered for her, “Bishop Mason kept Kelsey as a servant, Mr. Mayor.”

He was not a complete fool. “A servant doing what?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Dad.”

He growled like a wounded bear. “I’ll kill the bastards, all of them.” No one smiled.

The escaped slaves were butchering the cult members, and the sight was sickening, though nothing more than they deserved. They took out their anger on the men, but spared the women, herding them into a group to take with them when they left. The Brethren of the Risen God had been a patriarchal community, and the women would have had little or no say in what went on.

Before they left, someone shouted from inside the Bishop’s house. Emmett O’Donnell had been taking a last look around, and he was holding up a rifle.

“I found it in a closet with another rifle, a Winchester, and plenty of spare ammunition. I thought you’d like it back.”

He took the familiar weapon. Holding the M700 in his hands he felt more able to defend them, to get them to Copperville, to overcome every obstacle, and most important, to take care of Eleanor. To his surprise they’d found two wheelbarrows, used to carry coal from the heap to the fireplace inside the barn. They put them to a different use, and each carried one of the old ladies, Aunt Edith and her friend Charlotte. Both women smiled like they were traveling in a carriage with horses.

He felt he’d forgotten something, and then he remembered. The coal mine represented evil, an evil that ought to be destroyed.

“Eleanor, this is a mine, which means they’ll have explosives stashed somewhere. I want to bring the roof down, so the hill collapses on top of that terrible place. We shouldn’t leave it for someone else to be tempted.”

“People need coal, Oz. Especially now.”

“This is West Virginia. There’re plenty of coal mines. They can find

another one. This place carries the taint of slavery and death.”

“I understand. No problem, I’ll rig something up.”

She and Kelsey Chandler, who knew the layout of the place, went to a small store close to the perimeter and brought out two small cases of explosive. They carried them to the mine entrance and took them inside. They emerged unraveling a long coil of wire, and Eleanor connected it to a detonator with a plunger. They took cover behind the coal heap, and a moment later a thunderous explosion echoed around the compound. Tons of dust and plumes of smoke spewed out the side of the hill, and when it cleared, the mine was no more.

Oz led them away, taking them toward Copperville. People laughed and joked amongst themselves. They were going home. He didn’t tell them the rest, what they would face when they got there. He didn’t want to crush their hopes, not yet. But he talked quietly with Eleanor and Irvin. They had some thinking to do.

“Copperville is a small town in a remote area, easily defended.”

She nodded. “That’s true. That’s why we’re going there, apart from the fact it’s our home.”

“Right, but do you think we’re the only ones who understand its strategic value? We’re sure to find the place occupied. When we left there were two separate groups trying to take over, the escapees from the penitentiary, and Omega. I don’t want to take any bets on who won, but one or the other is sure to be holding the town. That means if we’re to kick them out, and take back what’s ours, we’ll have to fight.”

“We’ll fight,” Irvin said, his face set in a grim expression, “We don’t have a choice. Either we fight them, or we go under. Not much of a choice.”

“Okay. When we’re a couple of miles outside the town, I’ll go in and recce the situation. We can work it out from there, depending on what I find.”

Eleanor looked worried. “Oz, what if there’re more of them than we can handle? What do we have? Around forty, including women and children, which means we could be taking on more than we can chew. There is an alternative, you know.”

“Go on.” He knew what she would say, but she was entitled to say it.

“We could find somewhere else. After the disaster, there must be any number of abandoned towns and villages. We could find one to make our own and start from scratch.”

“We have a town that’s our own. It’s called Copperville, and I promise

you, no bastard is going to keep us out of it. If it's a fight they want, we'll give them a fight. I don't care if there's one hundred or two hundred, there's no way we're going to lie down and take it. If the town is occupied, as I expect, we attack and either kill them or drive them out. We'll keep attacking until we win." He took her in his arms, "Eleanor, I'm not talking about charging the enemy guns, dying in front of the wire like they did back in the trenches in the First World War. This'll be different. We'll hit them where they least expect it. Asymmetric warfare, and I promise you this. We'll have the advantage. No matter how many of them there are."

She gave him a look. "You're talking bullshit. You know we won't have the advantage, no matter your asymmetric warfare or any other warfare. The odds are against us, and we may as well face it. We could all die in the attempt."

He tried to make light of it.

"I'm serious. I believe we can beat them. Eleanor, now would be a good time to tell us what we're facing. You must have some idea."

She shook her head. "Lately, it's been more difficult. I've lost the ability, or whatever it was. I see nothing."

*Does she mean she's seen nothing, or the future holds nothing for us?
Or is it something else?*

When it came to him, the truth struck him like a thunderbolt.

She's seen my death.

CHAPTER FOUR

Progress was slow, hiking toward the town. Although it had stopped snowing, thick snow still blanketed the ground, making every step an effort. They were fighting exhaustion brought on by too much suffering and too little food. During the night, Eleanor vanished.

Almost an hour gone by before he realized she wasn't with them. They'd passed several forks in the track, and it seemed likely she'd stumbled in the wrong direction. Oz announced he was going back.

"She could wander around all night trying to find us, and that's not going to happen. I'll retrace our steps and find which way she's gone."

"I'll come with you," Irvin said at once, "Two sets of eyes are better than one. I'll carry a kerosene lamp, and with any luck we'll pick up her tracks."

He nodded his thanks, and Chandler stepped toward them, his face set in a grim expression. They waited for his objection, but he surprised them.

"I can find the way to the town from here. Like I said before, it's time these people looked to their elected representative for leadership. Don't worry about a thing. Just find your pregnant wife, and we'll wait outside the town for you."

"You may find Omega awaiting there, Mr. Mayor. I wouldn't get too close."

He smiled. "Not everyone has a good opinion of politicians, Porter, but I assure you I can handle Omega. If they're there, I'll deal with them. Preferably without killing any more people."

It was the nearest Chandler had come to an open criticism of the things he'd had to do to survive this far. He wasn't too worried.

If people aren't happy with my approach, that's fine with me. Let someone else hold the reins, someone like Chandler.

"I'm sure you're right, Sir." He looked at Irvin. "Times a-wastin'. We should make a start."

They backtracked for almost an hour until they saw footprints leading west, a narrow path, and easy to take the wrong turn in the darkness. She'd probably been walking in her sleep, as some of them had. Three people had cuts and grazes from walking into trees. Irvin played the lantern around the path, and there was no mistake. A single set of footprints in the snow, those of a woman, and they followed them.

They reached another branch in the path, and the trail told a different story. As well as Eleanor's tracks there were four sets of larger prints, those of men. In one place the snow was scuffed, as if there'd been a fight, or at least a struggle. Oz tasted despair.

"Someone's taken her, and if they had a vehicle, they could be miles away by now. We'll never find her."

Irvin shook his head. "You're not thinking straight. No one has any gasoline, so they must travel on foot. Don't worry, we'll find her. That's a promise."

He swallowed his despair. "Yeah, I hope you're right."

They followed, and it was an easy trail to make out. The four sets of male footprints were clear. Eleanor's were less clear, as if at times they'd carried her. Which meant she was alive. More than alive, she was refusing to walk, putting up a fight. Slowing them down, as if she knew he'd be coming back for her.

Of course she knows, and she'll be giving them a hard time. That's my girl.

They walked for two hours through the freezing night, following the trail etched in the snow. The narrow path came to a wider highway, which once would have been busy with passing traffic. Now it was empty. Not even a single set of wheel tracks marked the snow, just the four sets of prints. They continued to follow, and within a mile came to a building that in happier times had been a diner, serving truckers and other travelers. The large windows that once offered the tempting prospect of decent food and hot coffee were no longer clear. Someone had covered them with black paint, and above the door a crude, hand-painted sign stated this was the House of Love. Best and cleanest girls in the State.

His rage came like a tsunami. "They've kidnapped her to put her in a brothel!"

Irvin put a reassuring hand on his arm. "Relax, she couldn't have got here more than a couple of hours ago. Not long enough for anything bad to happen to her. We'll just go on in and get her out. No fuss, no muss."

"I'm gonna kill them all." He surveyed the building and noted the lights were on inside. He was thinking about what he'd find in there, his fury like turbulent waves lashing a storm-tossed beach, "Irvin, go around back. We know there are four guys in there, and there could be more. I'll go in through the front. If there's any rough stuff, you know what to do. But remember, my

wife is in that place.”

“I’ll be careful. I guarantee it.”

He jogged around to the rear, and Oz racked a round into his Remington. He felt murderous, and he pushed through the front door. Inside it was gloomy. They’d painted the walls a rich shade of red, and the tables and chairs were still in place from when they’d served breakfasts and lunches to travelers. The counter was still there as well. Behind it sat a blowsy-looking woman, about one hundred pounds overweight, squeezed into a tight pink dress barely covering her breasts. Hair once bottle blonde was now in dire need of bleach. She wore enough make-up to decorate a troupe of dancing girls, and when she turned her head and smiled at him, he was surprised cracks didn’t start to appear.

“What can I do for you, Mister? If you’re looking for a clean girl, someone young and pretty, you’ve come to the right place.”

He didn’t answer at first, but his eyes were taking everything in. The counter she sat behind, and on the wall at the back, full-width mirrors. Enough to see the scattergun she held out of sight beneath the counter, pointed at his belly. If she decided he was a threat, she’d pull the trigger. It was in the eyes, hard as flint. A woman who’d lived a tough life, and used to dealing out violence to anyone who threatened her business.

“I’m looking for someone special. Real special.”

The grin stayed pasted on her face. “I’m sure we can accommodate you. What kind of special did you have in mind?”

“My wife. Your people kidnapped her a few hours ago, and she’s in this place.”

If he hadn’t seen the reflection in the mirror, she’d have had him. But he’d been watching for it, and as he saw the slight movement of the hand about to squeeze the trigger, he leveled the rifle and put a shot into her chest. The aiming point was no contest, right in the center of those pneumatic breasts. The bullet smashed into her heart and threw her off the stool, dead.

He ran to the door that led to the rear of the premises. What had once been a spacious back room had been curtained into booths with a variety of fabrics, no doubt stolen from people’s houses. Two men came running out, guns leveled, and the Remington spoke again. A harsh bellow of two gunshots, and both went down. He pulled aside the first curtain. A girl was lying on the bed, almost naked, wearing just a pair of panties and a bra. She wasn’t Eleanor.

He rushed on to the next cubicle and found another half-naked girl. He left her and ran to the next. Dragged the curtain aside, and she was there.

“Eleanor! What have they done to you?”

She was naked, lying on her back, spread-eagled on the bed. Wrists and ankles tied to the four corners. Yet she appeared calm. Unsurprised.

“Oz, I knew you’d come.”

He didn’t stop to reply. A rough, male voice shouted a challenge from outside the booth, and two men materialized from the end booth, one at a disadvantage, with his pants around his ankles. He was hopping on one leg, trying to hoist them up with one hand, and draw a pistol with the other. The other man was dressed, probably waiting his turn. He also had a handgun, and he squeezed off a quick shot. The guy trying to pull on his pants was behind him and nudged him at the last moment, spoiling his aim. The bullet buried itself in Oz’s leg, a few inches above the knee.

He grinned. “You shouldn’t have come. We have a way to deal with assholes like you.”

He leveled the gun for a follow-up shot, and Oz’s rifle tangled in the flowing layers of fabric. He was dragging out the handgun when Irvin’s weapon thundered from inside the rear door. The man went down. The heavy bullet had blown off half of his head, and he lay on the floor, blood and fluids leaking onto the chipped linoleum. The other man cringed, still without his pants, and he held up his empty hand.

“Don’t kill me. I never meant to do anything bad. I’m unarmed.”

It wasn’t quite true, and Oz leaned down and removed his pistol, then gave him a kick in the groin for good measure. While he was screaming in pain, he went back to Eleanor.

“Do you know what they did with your clothes?”

“Oz, cut me loose. Then I’ll look for my clothes. Unless you’re enjoying the view?”

He grimaced. “Sorry about that.”

He raced back to the front, found a sharp knife, and returned to slice through her bonds. He found her clothes bundled in a heap under the bed where they’d thrown them when they stripped her. She began to dress and about to pull on her pants when her gaze fell on his leg, and she mouthed a cry of alarm.

“They shot you! You’re bleeding.”

“I’ll put something on it before we leave. You want me to help you

finish dressing?”

“I can manage. Sit yourself on the bed.”

When she had her coat on, she bent to look at the wound. “I want you to try walking on it.”

He climbed to his feet. Within minutes the muscles had stiffened, and he dropped back down. “Give me a minute. I just need to get some feeling back into it.”

She snorted. “Can’t you see, the blood is pouring out of the wound? Your muscles have stiffened, for sure, but the blood loss is more serious. You need to drink plenty of fluid to replace it, and I’ll fix a dressing to stop the bleeding. Even then you’ll need to rest until the blood congeals. Several hours at least.”

“I don’t have several hours. Mayor Chandler is leading them back to Copperville, and I think we know he’ll run into trouble. He won’t wait for us, I’m sure. He’s going to need all the help he can get.”

“I can deal with it. Stay here with Eleanor, and I’ll go after them.”

He looked at Irvin. “If they run into Omega, there’s gonna be shooting, and one man won’t be enough to hack it.”

“You forget I used to be a Marine like you. You know what that means. Always first in.” He grinned, “I’ll find Chandler and see what kind of a mess he’s made of things. You stay here and let Eleanor deal with your wound. I expect she’ll also need some time to recover. It can’t have been easy. A pregnant woman, kidnapped, and dragged through the forest by that bunch of yahoos.”

He argued, but Eleanor weighed in on his side. He made sure Irvin went off with a spare rifle from the dead kidnappers and two handguns stuffed into his belt. But still, he chafed when the man who’d become a good friend, his best friend, disappeared into the night. He had no choice but to lie on the bed and rest the leg while she cleaned and dressed it. Meanwhile, she made him drink several pints of water to compensate for the fluids he lost from the bleeding. Almost a half-hour had gone by when he suddenly thought of the fourth man, the man who’d been unable to fight because of his pants around his ankles. He tried to get up, but she pushed him back down.

“What is it?”

“The other guy, the fourth man. What happened to him?”

“I’ll take a look.” She poked her head around the curtain and was back a few moments later, with a wide grin on her face, “The girls are taking care of

him.”

“They mean to kill him?”

“No, they haven’t touched him, but they made him strip naked, and they sent him on his way.”

“Without any clothes, in this weather, in the dead of night?”

“Don’t forget that’s what they did to me. Stripped me naked. A taste of his own medicine won’t do him any harm.”

“It could kill him.”

She shrugged. “I don’t think they’re too worried. Wait a minute. I’ll ask them to come in. I know they want to thank you.”

Three of the girls pushed through the curtain, giggling at the way they’d left their captive outside. No longer cowed, beaten prostitutes, they’d regained some of their dignity. Part of the healing process the way they’d handled the guy they’d pushed naked into the snow.

“Mister, we wanted to thank you. I guess you can imagine what they were putting us through.”

“I can.”

He felt a wave of pity wash over him, pity for them, for Eleanor, and even for himself. Pity for the people who’d suffered, and those who’d died. In a matter of months, Americans had been forced into a brutal existence. The strongest took everything, leaving the weak with little or nothing. They’d seen slavery at the mine, and kidnap and forced prostitution here in the brothel. It seemed incredible such a powerful, civilized, and cultured nation as America could have succumbed in such a short time.

As usual, Eleanor read his thoughts. “It won’t always be like this. Once things get back to normal, things will be the way they were.”

Will they? And even if things do return the way they were, how long will it take? Months? Years? And still, we don’t have any answers. What caused it? And why?

He looked at Eleanor. The last thing she needed was to believe she faced a dark, cruel, and violent future for her and her baby. He forced a smile.

“Sure they will.”

They heard howling and screaming coming from outside. Eleanor poked her head outside the curtain.

“It looks like the guy tried to get back inside. They booted him back out on the road. I guess he’ll think again before he kidnaps and forces women into prostitution. Besides, his balls will be frozen solid, which will take the

edge off his libido.”

Eleanor took another look at the wound and shook her head. “The bleeding hasn’t congealed, and that means you’ll need more time to rest. Another two hours. Oz, you should get some sleep. That bullet took more out of you than you realize.”

“I don’t need sleep. I need to get Copperville.”

“Not yet, you don’t.”

He lay on the bed in the squalid whorehouse. He must have dozed off, for when he awoke, there was just Eleanor, and he asked about the girls. They’d taken everything they could carry and left. All they wanted was to leave the brothel behind, and they’d made Eleanor promise them one thing.

“They want me to burn the place down when we leave, so no one else can use it.”

“I can’t argue with that. But we need to leave now, the wound’s fine.”

She took a last look and nodded approvingly. “You’re right. The blood has congealed. You should be okay if you take it slowly. No violent movements, and I’ll help you walk. You can lean on my shoulder.”

Leaning on her shoulder was the last thing on his mind, but he didn’t argue. Eleanor made a pile of combustible materials in the center of the main room. Every piece of paper and cloth they could find, and although there was no gas or kerosene to accelerate the fire, there were five half-empty bottles of booze on the shelf behind the counter. She poured them on their pile of kindling, and as they went through the front door, struck a match. A flame caught and quickly spread to make a small bonfire. Soon the furnishings and drapes ignited.

They watched from fifty yards away, and they could feel the heat of the fire as the place went up. The flames spread to the roof, and after a few minutes it collapsed. They were reluctant to move on, and leave that precious source of warmth behind, but they had somewhere else they needed to be. A town named Copperville. Home.

He was in trouble. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the flames, and he was falling, sinking into territory familiar in its fearsome violence. Sweat poured from his body, and he was back on the battlefield people called Iraq. The Black Hawk was burning. They were all burning. Eleanor was burning, and he cried out, screaming for it to stop. No one answered as he plummeted deeper into the black pit of his subconscious, screaming one word, over and over. Why?

CHAPTER FIVE

Wayne Garrett finished his patrol of the town, satisfied with what he'd seen. Every road blocked with cars and trucks they'd pushed across the streets, and at each intersection one man stood guard with a rifle. Their instructions were simple. If someone approached, anyone, the task was to put a bullet in them. As soon as they heard a shot, more men would come running, and they'd fight them off.

No one was welcome in the town. Although those who'd returned earlier would come in useful. They'd offered the men a choice. Give their allegiance to Omega and become deputies. Or they'd put them to work on menial tasks, like reinforcing the defensive barriers and carrying out essential repairs to the buildings. As for the women, they'd signed them up to other tasks. Cooking, cleaning, and certain other things women did best.

Mayor Chandler was an eager recruit, although he argued about his daughter's assignment. The argument ended when they explained the alternatives, and he quickly gave in. He told people his duty was to cooperate with the new rulers of Copperville. Because of his standing in the original community, they let his daughter off lightly. Soon, she would become the companion of their leader, the CEO, and share his home. They ordered her to make the move in another two weeks, time for him to eject the previous companion and make space in his bed.

The man who ran Omega across several States, the Chief Executive Officer, had made his headquarters in the small West Virginian town. Another mystery was his name. They called him the Chief. He was a man who rarely showed himself, and in public he normally wore a ski mask. No one asked him why. The Chief had a brutal way of dealing with people who asked too many questions. A bullet in the neck was a powerful deterrent.

Garrett assumed his choice of Copperville was because of the strategic position the town occupied; easily defensible and surrounded by plentiful natural resources, fresh running water, forests of trees, and coal.

He knocked on the door of the Chief's house. The imposing building that had once been the home of the Mayor. Chandler had attempted to reclaim it, assuming he'd pick up the threads of his life now he was reconciled with Omega. The Chief soon disabused him of that notion, and Chandler occupied a guest cottage in the grounds, where they could keep an

eye on him.

The door swung open, and a young woman looked out. She was pretty, but the vivid bruise on her cheek marred her good looks. "Can I help you?"

"I've come to see the Chief. It's urgent."

"Do you have an appointment?"

A pause. "Not exactly, no. But he'll want to know what I have to tell him."

Without a word, she closed the door, and returned a few seconds later, holding a notebook and pen. "He can see you at 11.30. You want me to write it in?"

"I'd sooner talk to him now."

She stared at him. "You know standing orders. Do you want the appointment or not?"

"Uh, sure. 11.30, I'll be here."

He walked away, wondering how they could best deal with the threat. He'd talked to the new arrivals, most of them the original residents of the town. People who'd escaped with Porter up to the mountains, and when they torched their dwellings, they'd come back to reclaim what they assumed was theirs. He grinned to himself, no way would they succeed. There'd be considerable dissent, but that was too bad. People didn't like being told they couldn't occupy their own houses. Not that it worried him overly. They were a beaten and hungry rabble. Not in any position to cause trouble. Porter was something else.

He recalled the tough, rugged, former Marine sniper he'd faced on the road, and he couldn't help but feel a shiver of fear. Garrett had been a slick used car salesman, and instinctively knew how to impose his will on others. Like convincing them to buy the car he'd decided was right for them. He knew he'd never sell a car to Oz Porter. There were leaders, and there were followers. There were those who earned a peaceful living, and those who were warriors. Porter was a leader and a warrior. If he came back to the town, he'd cause them big trouble. After talking to Chandler, they had to face reality, and he had to warn the CEO. Porter was coming back.

Without clearing it with the Chief, he'd stiffened the defenses. At the first barricade, the sentry gave him a friendly nod.

"Mr. Garrett, everything's peaceful here. No problems."

"It may not last. I'm expecting trouble. I'll send another man to join you, and until further notice, we'll double the guards."

“You don’t need to worry. We’re ready for anything.”

The Omega deputy didn’t inspire any confidence in him. He wore camo pants, ragged baseball cap, Nike trainers, and a paint-stained North Face coat. Like he’d be happiest working on his truck, swigging down cans of beer, and swapping yarns with his buddies.

“I doubt you’re ready for this.”

“What kind of trouble are we talking about, Sir? Do you think there’ll be an attack?”

“It’s possible.”

“Jesus Christ, how many of them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one.”

“One! And that worries you?”

“It’d better worry you. Keep your eyes skinned. Don’t forget, if you see anything, shoot first, and ask questions afterward. Got it?”

“Sure, Mr. Garrett.”

“You’d better. I’d hate for the Chief to spell it out to you.”

His sallow skin paled. “It won’t be a problem, Mr. Garrett. I’ve got it.”

He nodded and moved on to the next barricade. That was the best way to handle these men, scum most of them. Use fear, and if they feared one man, it was the Chief. They should also fear another man. Oz Porter. He was coming; no question, and he’d be mean and pissed. If they didn’t put a bullet in him the first time they saw him, they were unlikely to get another chance. He had a reputation as a shooter who was fast and accurate. A military-trained sniper, the kind of guy you wouldn’t see coming until the bullet flew toward you. By then it’d be too late.

He finished doing his rounds, and it was almost time for his appointment with the Chief. He returned to the big house, and at the exact time knocked on the door. This time the woman allowed him to enter. He went through into the big office. The carved oak desk that once belonged to Chandler dominated the room, and the Chief was sitting behind it. He was writing in a book, and at first took no notice of the visitor. At last he finished, closed the book, and looked up. “What is it?”

Garrett wondered what kind of mood he was in. The CEO was a mystery. Where he’d come from, what was his background. He had the battered and scarred face of a man who’d seen his fair share of action. A curious ring of black spots showed above the left eye, as if he’d been close to a weapon when someone pulled the trigger, and lucky to escape without

taking a bullet. He was a proud man, with the physique of a prizefighter. He wore his long hair gathered in a ponytail, and Garrett briefly wondered why he didn't style it to cover those black marks. Maybe it was because he bore them proudly, trophies to testify to his bravery, like Purple Heart awards.

"It's about Oz Porter."

The eyes became alert. "What about Oz Porter?"

"I was talking to Mayor Chandler about what happened to them after we drove them off the mountain. He said Porter was leading them, but they separated before they got here. Sir, do you know this man?"

He ignored the question.

"He was a Marine sniper, and he's highly dangerous. They train them to come out of nowhere, hit their targets, and disappear into thin air. A man like that could cause us trouble."

"I've doubled the guards on the barricades, Sir. If he approaches, I ordered them to shoot without warning."

"You won't get him that way. Tell me, Garrett, who's your best shot?"

He didn't need to think about that. "Old Jeff Pearce, no question."

"Is he any good?"

"He's the best. Jeff was an experienced hunter, and he spent most of his time illegally poaching game. That guy could take the eye out of a deer at two hundred yards. He is getting on now. Old Jeff is nearly fifty-years-old, but he can still shoot straighter than any of our other people."

The Chief nodded. "Put him at the top of the church spire. I want him up there twenty-four-seven, and assign four men to back him up. They can spot for him and keep him supplied with food. Tell him to stay there until Porter is dead. I don't care if it takes a day, a week, or a year. He has one job, and that's to kill Oz Porter."

Garrett whistled. "Is he that dangerous?"

"He is."

"I see. Sir, you didn't tell me how you knew him."

"No, I didn't. Dismissed."

Garrett left the big house and went to find Pearce. The old man was happy to be given a job where he didn't have to overly exert himself. When he learned he'd have four men to spot for him and bring him food, he allowed himself a rare smile.

"I'll take up some of those men's magazines we found. Something to pass the time while I'm waiting."

“You’d better stay alert, Jeff. The Chief is worried about this man.”

He snorted. “One man? If he comes near the town, he’s as good as dead.”

“He’d better be. Get up there now, and I’ll send your men to you in the next half-hour.”

The old poacher walked away, and Garrett went to select four men he could rely on to stay awake and keep their eyes peeled. He was still wondering about Oz Porter, and how the Chief knew him.

What was that all about?

* * *

Ever since the disaster struck, she’d been cold. Even worse, everything they’d struggled and built over the preceding months in Endurance had gone up in flames. Now, she was even colder. It wasn’t just the temperature, which was below freezing. Her husband was shaking, shivering like a man possessed by demons. The demons of Iraq possessed him, had taken his soul. The terrible things he’d witnessed on that last day had claimed him for their own. A day when men close to him had burned alive, and he’d returned with a healthy body and a sick mind. Plagued by survivor’s guilt.

She wanted to return to the still-burning building for warmth, but didn’t want to move him. He’d curled up on the snowy ground, his arms looped around him, and his body soaked with sweat. At times he screamed, and other times he mumbled strange words. Sometimes, he said things she understood, and then it was like he was speaking in tongues. She knew inside his head the killing was still going on.

Eleanor lay on the ground with him, pulling his body into hers, clutching him in a tight embrace. She murmured gentle words she hoped he could hear. Telling him she was with him, and she’d always be there. No matter what happened, they’d be okay. No one was burning.

Whether he understood her, the attack eventually eased, and he slept. She’d never told him, but she’d seen it happen before. He would be unconscious for several hours after such a severe bout. All she could do was stay with him in the snow and comfort him. He was the bravest man she’d ever known. Ready to take on any opponent, and any battle. Yet the monsters inside his head were harder to beat.

They lay out in the open, at the mercy of the cruel weather that caused her body to lose all feeling. She massaged Oz’s limbs, working to restore his

circulation, and when she'd done everything possible, worked on her own limbs. She had to keep the ability to move, to walk. He needed her.

If she couldn't keep him from freezing to death, she was prepared to freeze with him. He'd fought through hell to save her, done everything, and risked everything. Like saving her from the brothel, taking a bullet for her. Suffering another nightmare episode for her. She'd never leave him, and besides, she'd had that vision again. This time while she was spread-eagled on that stinking bed in the brothel. He wasn't destined to die with her.

She hadn't lied when she told him about the bodies she'd seen lying in the street. But she hadn't told him the rest of it. A Remington M700 lying next to one of the bodies. The face was wreathed in swirling mist, and she couldn't make it out. Besides, she didn't want to look closer. She already knew who it was, the Remington enough to identify him. It was also enough to fire a poisoned dart through her heart.

Oz, I can't tell you what the future holds. It's too terrible.

Whatever the future held, they'd continue to fight and struggle against all the odds. Not just give in and surrender to the bitter, freezing night. They'd keep fighting for a future together, even if she'd seen the end.

She felt something wet touching her leg. It was blood. His wound had opened again after walking just a few hundred yards, probably because of him threshing around during the episode. The blood loss was slow, maybe because of the intense cold. It didn't look like it would stop anytime soon. She wrapped another strip of cloth around it and fastened it tight. All she could do was hold him close. And hope he'd awake before they both died out here.

* * *

Irvin sneaked inside the town and almost bumped into Emmett O'Donnell. He was chatting to the Mayor's daughter outside the police station. He'd first met her when they sprung the girls from Bishop Mason's harem. Kelsey Chandler, and she and the cop looked mighty friendly. He wasn't too sure about approaching them, but he had to talk to someone. He'd sneaked past the deadbeats Omega had recruited to guard the entrances, but he was a stranger to Copperville. He needed to talk to local people and discover what they were up against. How many men they had stationed inside the town, and most important, which of the original residents were prepared to fight. Who could they rely on, and who could they not trust? When he popped out in

front of them, they jerked in surprise.

“Irvin!” Emmett exclaimed, “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing. The town’s occupied by Omega, and yet here you are walking around freely with your girlfriend. Have you thrown in with them?”

He reddened, looked at Kelsey, and back at him. “It’s nothing like that. But listen, they have guards everywhere. They’re looking for Oz. Where is he?”

“Not too far away. So what’s the deal, what’s happening?”

“My father has thrown in with them,” the girl said, “He didn’t wait for Oz and brought us into town. When we arrived, they asked for people to join them, and to become deputies. He thought it was a great idea, provided everyone would continue to call him Mr. Mayor.”

She grimaced, “I’m ashamed of him. And as for Emmett here, he’s a cop, kind of in the middle. He hasn’t joined them, and he hasn’t said he won’t.”

“It’s a matter of law and order,” the cop said, palms up to protest his innocence, “Irvin, you know how I feel about Omega, but I figured the thing I can do is to keep doing my job. When the time comes, I can help.”

“You won’t have long to wait. I need to know how many of them there are. And how many of our people we can rely on.”

“So Oz is coming? What about Eleanor, did he find her?”

“I’ll let you know later.” He still didn’t trust O’Donnell. Maybe because he was a cop, or because he was inside a town filled with Omega deputies.

Emmett nodded, understanding his reluctance to trust him. “Irvin, you’re out in the open here. Anyone can see you. You should come inside.”

The cop pointed to the tiny one-room police station. He guessed Emmett and Kelsey had been making out inside. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. We’ll go on in, and you can give me those figures I asked for.”

“Sure.” They were walking towards the door of the small building, “At a guess, I’d say around thirty-five to forty Omega deputies.”

Irvin paused. “What about the townspeople, how many can we rely on?”

He was framed in the doorway, and he paused, waiting for a reply.

* * *

“Jeff, you’d better come and look at this.”

He’d been perusing a year-old copy of Penthouse, ogling the largest pair

of breasts he'd seen in a long time. He put the magazine down and picked up the rifle, a Weatherby All-Star Vanguard Series 2. He'd hunted with it, poached game with it, and over the past months, shot five men dead with it. Pearce was proud of his achievements and looking forward to claiming another scalp. Although he doubted it was about to happen. The men Garrett had allocated to him were a bunch of no-goods, happy to have an easy job, sitting on top of the spire, and watching the approaches to the town.

One of them turned to look inside of the town, wondering if a girl he'd taken a shine to was nearby, so he could spy on her with the scope of Jeff's rifle. He didn't see the girl, but he saw a new face. A stranger, and that made him a target. Pearce picked up the rifle and squinted through the scope.

"Well, lookee here. We have ourselves a target."

"Is it him, Porter?"

A shrug. "No idea. But he's a stranger, which means he takes a bullet. That'll make it six."

They looked puzzled, and he didn't enlighten them. He focused on the man talking to the cop Emmett O'Donnell, who was with his girlfriend, and took up the pressure on the trigger.

* * *

O'Donnell was looking up and down the street as he thought about his reply. The truth was he didn't know how many he could count on. Whatever he told Irvin Cobb would be a guess. A flash caught his eye from on top of the church spire. Automatically, he looked up, and to his horror he saw the rifle pointing over the top. A man was sighting down the scope, about to take the shot, and it pointed right at Irvin. His reaction was automatic, and he dove forward to push Cobb out of the path of the bullet. He was successful, and he was unsuccessful. The bullet intended for Cobb tore through his back, into his chest, lodging inside his heart. He was already dead when his body hit the ground.

Kelsey voiced a loud scream and ran to her lover. Irvin tried to drag her away and get her into cover. She resisted, but he struggled and pushed her through the door of the police station, still screaming. The delay gave Jeff Pearce a chance to increase his score by another factor of one. The bullet cracked out from above and tore into his body. He was in the doorway and crawled inside the building to get out of the line of fire. The shock of the

bullet slowed him, but Kelsey recovered and dragged him inside, slamming the door shut. Two more bullets hammered into the woodwork, but she ignored them. She looked at Irvin, her eyes streaming with tears.

“Why did they kill him? He didn’t do anything against them. He told them he’d stay just to protect the townspeople. All they did was put a bullet in him. My father has to take some responsibility for his death. He’s supposed to be the fucking Mayor, and he’s about as useful as an ashtray on a motorcycle. He’d better sort this one out, or I’ll do something I’ll regret.”

She got no reply, and she leaned down closer. Blood was dripping on the floor. She wanted to find her father and get him to do something about the man who’d killed Emmett, but the wounded man needed her help first. He was one of those who’d freed her and the other girls from Bishop Mason’s house, and at the very least she owed him. The medical first aid cabinet was still intact on the wall, and she dragged out bandages, dressings, antiseptics, and anything else she could find. Still weeping floods of tears, she knelt on the floor next to the man and applied wadding to stop the blood pumping out of his back. Not knowing if he was alive or dead, and if he was alive, whether he’d survive. He’d saved her before, and she’d do her utmost to return the favor. She saw him move, and he looked up at her.

“What happened? Where are we?”

“Relax, I’ll take care of you.” She inspected the wound again and realized she’d been wrong. In her panic she’d thought he was dying, but the bullet seemed to have missed the vital organs and looked messier than it was, “Keep quiet. They’re coming. I’ll handle them.”

Footsteps came from outside, and she bent over the bloody body as three men hurtled through the door, Wayne Garrett in the lead.

“What happened? Is he dead?”

She looked up, her eyes still streaming with tears. “Him and Emmett, both dead. No pulse.”

He smiled. “That was damn good shooting by Jeff Pearce.”

“You mean when he shot and killed a cop, Emmett O’Donnell? I wouldn’t call that good shooting. More like murder.”

“It was an accident is all.”

She gave him a frigid glare. “Is that what you call it? Dammit, he was a cop.”

A shrug. “A brave man, I’ll grant you. He died in the line of duty, but at least we got the intruder. Get some of the locals to cart the bodies away. They

can dig a grave in the cemetery for O'Donnell. As for the other guy, tell 'em to dig a hole anywhere and toss him in. No marker."

He spun on his heel and muttered to his men, "Let's go."

Kelsey got to her feet and gazed at Emmett's body outside. She looked to where the other body lay and put her lips close to his ear.

"They've gone. How bad is it?"

* * *

She must have slept, because when she opened her eyes, they were covered in snow. She pushed it away from her face. They were buried beneath six inches of snow, which meant she'd slept for a long time. Her first thought was for Oz. She knew the importance of keeping his limbs massaged, to stop the deadly onset of cold, and subsequent hypothermia that would kill him as easily as a rifle bullet. At first, she couldn't hear any breathing, but when she shook him hard, he stirred, and he sucked in to breathe. His eyes opened, and he stared at her.

"Who are you?" The voice was slurred, and she worried he was far-gone if he couldn't recognize her. And then a hand came up and brushed the snow off her face. She realized it had been partially obscured, "Eleanor?"

"It's me. How do you feel?"

"Like I could sleep for a week. It's warm here."

"Oz, it's not warm. We're in a snowdrift, and if we don't start moving, we're both gonna get frostbite. Start moving your arms and legs."

A moment later, "I can't move my legs."

Fuck.

"You have to move. Let me help you up. We'll do some walking."

"It's no good, Eleanor. They just won't move. I guess I should have drunk some antifreeze."

He managed a grin, and she felt a flare of hope.

How could a man crack a joke if he's close to death?

"I don't give a shit whether they can move or not. Get yourself up out of the snow, and start moving, Oscar Porter."

"Don't call me Oscar Porter."

"I'll call you anything I damn like until you start moving. What are you? A Marine or an ordinary man."

"Marines aren't ordinary men. You know that."

"Then fucking act like one."

Her voice was a whipcrack, and he visibly winced. Slowly, painfully, he moved, and she helped drag him to his feet, feeling the agony in her own limbs, but refusing to accept the pain.

“I can’t do this.”

“You must do it. That’s an order, Sergeant. Move your lily-livered ass. Let’s see some action. Do something, jog, dance, anything.”

His voice was hoarse as he struggled to move. “Ring of Fire.”

“You what?”

“They were dancing. Johnny Cash was singing Ring of Fire.”

“I know the song. If that’s what gets you moving, that’s fine with me. Move it, Marine. Shake your ass. Love is a burning thing.”

He took up the song as a low, tuneless murmur. “And it makes a fiery ring...Eleanor, they were dancing, and we were burning.”

“I know,” she soothed, “It’s okay now. Try to walk. You must walk. Otherwise...” she tailed off.

They came out of the forest, eight men and two women. Dressed in a colorful variety of warm clothing. Camo pants, multi-hued ski outfits, heavy fur boots, and one guy looked a bit like Davey Crockett, complete with coonskin cap. They had one thing in common, no shortage of weapons. They carried hunting and assault rifles, and pistols pushed into their belts. Some had bandoliers of ammo slung over their shoulders.

She leaned close to him. “Oz, we have a problem.”

“What is it?” his voice was still slurred.

“Ten people just appeared out of the forest. They look mean.”

“Who are they?”

“They could be Omega deputies.”

* * *

Irvin was lucky. The bullet had struck high on the left side, missing the vital organs and exiting from his back, leaving a bloody hole. Kelsey wadded a strip of fabric, a scarf she’d worn against the cold, and told him to lie still while she went for help.

“We’ll find somewhere warm to shelter you and fix that wound properly.”

He nodded his thanks. “Miss, why are you doing this? Aren’t you the Mayor’s daughter? I thought...”

“Kelsey Chandler, yes. Forget my father. He’s an ass. But there are

people here who are loyal to the town, and I'll go find someone who can help you."

"I'm sorry about that cop. He was a good friend?"

"Yes." A small sob escaped her, and then she was gone, racing out the door, and closing it behind her. She was back inside of ten minutes with three people, a girl in her mid-twenties, and two men. The girl, an obvious Goth in better times, and with an intelligent gaze, gave the orders.

"Help him up, and we'll take him out the back way. I have a small cottage. He can stay there."

They helped him to his feet, and he groaned in pain. The girl inspected the wound and looked at Kelsey. "You did a good job there. It'll stop the worst of the bleeding. The good news is you're not gonna die."

"That is good news. Name's Irvin Cobb, by the way."

She gave him a friendly smile. "Kate Young, we've met before a while ago."

"Are you a doctor or a nurse?"

She chuckled. "Not hardly, I used to work for Microsoft in Redmond. What with the power going down, I'm kinda out of a job. I came back to town after you all left. Thought I'd be more useful here. But I learned basic first aid, and I know enough to keep you alive. Don't worry about Omega. They've gone off to patrol outside the town limits. They believe an attack is coming in. You scared the pants off them. They thought you were Oz Porter."

"Not quite."

Kelsey intervened. "Is he coming? Oz, I mean."

"Maybe." He still didn't know whether to trust her. She'd saved him from the Omegas, but she was still the Mayor's daughter, and Chandler made his loyalties clear. Or rather, lack of them.

"What about Eleanor?"

"The last time I saw her she was okay."

She frowned. "It's my dad, isn't it? You think I might be on his side."

"You saved me, Miss, so I doubt you're on his side. I'd like to get to this cottage. I feel exposed out here."

"Sure, I'll lend a hand. And, Irvin..."

"What is it?"

"Just so you know, I want to smash Omega. I want to see them all dead, or at least out of our town. Especially after they killed Emmett. They're animals. We're on the same side, believe me."

“Sure.”

Kelsey led them along narrow paths behind the houses to Kate’s temporary home. A small house at the end of the main street, the owners presumed dead after a gun battle at the start of the disaster. Two hundred yards past the house, a barricade blocked the entrance to the town. Two men with rifles stood guard, looking out, and they didn’t see them arrive. Kate pushed him inside, and then helped make him comfortable on the couch.

The two girls fussed over him like he was some kind of a hero, and he tried to disillusion them. “Hey, I didn’t do anything. It was your boyfriend who stopped the bullet intended for me.”

Kate was boiling water on a woodfire she’d lit in the brick fireplace. She left for a few minutes to fetch more water from the rainwater barrel in the yard. Kelsey stopped working on the wound and stood back to gaze at him.

“Irvin, don’t get the wrong idea.”

Uh, uh.

“About what?”

“I know what happened when that bastard shot Emmett. He was a hero for saving your life.”

“The guy deserves a medal. He was very brave.”

“He does. The thing is, I know you’re here to save us. When Oz comes, and I know he’ll come, you’ll drive these Omega sonsofbitches out of town.”

He nodded. “Maybe, maybe not. Either way, your dad won’t be too happy.”

“He can leave with them, the lowdown rattlesnake. Get out with his Omega pals.”

“You want him gone.”

She smiled. “Now you get it. And you and Oz are the men to do it.”

She leaned down and kissed him gently on the cheek. “I won’t forget what you did at the mine. You’re my hero, Irvin Cobb. I wish you were my dad.”

He didn’t reply. Couldn’t reply, he was at a loss for words. He’d never had a daughter, but if he had, he’d wish it were someone like Kelsey Chandler. He felt the glow of her praise, and it was a good feeling.

Being a father could be the best thing in the world. Mayor Chandler’s an idiot throwing it all away.

* * *

“Well, well, what do we have here? Was it you who torched that building?”

Oz was trying to focus on the man who spoke. He was big, a mountain man, long, black, shaggy hair, weather-beaten skin, and a peculiar scar that ran from his forehead to the side of the mouth. All the way through the left eye, which was missing. Just a ruined collection of scar tissue was all that remained. He wore scuffed leather pants, high boots, and a three-quarter coat, fashioned from animal fur. It looked real. As did the weapon he cradled in his arms, like a double-barreled shotgun. A second glance showed it to be a double rifle, a Heym Model 89B. A gun designed for taking down elephant. And anything else that walked on two or four legs.

While he was trying to collect himself, Eleanor replied, “I set fire to it, and not before time. They were running a brothel.”

A shrug. “So?”

“Trafficking kidnapped women.”

“And you know this how?”

“Because I was one of them. My husband rescued me. I’m Eleanor Porter. He’s Oz.”

He relaxed. “In that case, they got what they deserved. What about the people who ran the operation?”

“They won’t be kidnapping and whoring any more women.”

“I get it.”

“Who are you people?”

He was more genial now he’d established they weren’t looters.

“Gene Cassidy, and this is my wife Jane. The other lady is her sister, and these’re my friends.”

He held out a hand, but she ignored it. “I wasn’t asking your names. I was asking who you’re working with. Omega, Chasers, or what? Do you plan to kill us here, or take us in?”

He guffawed. “I can tell you we’re not Omega, or any of their creatures. There were more of us, almost sixty, and they came after us. They demanded we hand over our supplies, and we’ve been fighting running battles with them ever since. What’s your story?”

She relaxed and shook his hand. “Much the same, we’ve been up in the Appalachians, waiting out the disaster until the power comes back on.”

“Cold up there, this time of year.”

“It was warmer when they set fire to our cabins. So you’re not going to kill or rob us?”

“We don’t hold with stealing or murder, Ma’am. We’re just looking for somewhere we can set up home and start over. At least that’s what we hope for. And you?”

“We’re going home, to Copperville. The town is sure to be garrisoned by Omega, so it won’t be easy. They could have any number of men in there, at least thirty or forty.”

He whistled. “That’s a lot for a girl and a sick puppy like your husband.”

“He’s killed plenty of them already. What you see now is temporary. He had a bad time in Iraq.”

“PTSD?” She nodded.

“My son was in Iraq, and he had the same problem.”

“Did he get over it?”

“He died, swallowed his pistol.”

“I’m sorry.”

He gave her a nod. “We’ve seen so much death this past few months, and it kind of fades into the background. Say, are you expecting a baby?”

“In two months.”

“You’ve picked a bad time to travel.”

“We have to go home. It’s all we have.”

He was thoughtful for a few moments, and he turned to the people waiting behind him. “I reckon we’ll rest here. Josh, build a fire. We’ll brew some coffee.”

A boy in his late teens went to gather firewood, and soon they were sitting around a roaring fire, drinking hot coffee. They were lucky. Snowmelt was plentiful. Food wasn’t, and he noticed for all his size, Gene Cassidy was like the rest. His face lined and worn, the face of a starving man. They were all starving.

The boy got the fire going, and they heated the coffee. Eleanor moved Oz close to the fire and gave him small sips of coffee. As the day wore on, he began to recover his strength. They had no food, but the strangers had brought along a sack of coffee beans and a hand grinder. The coffee revived him, almost as much as a hot meal. He sat with his back to a tree, grateful for the warmth of the fire. Gene Cassidy was sitting nearby, drinking his third mug of coffee, and they had plenty in common. Which meant they had much to talk about.

“What’s the story, Gene? How come you wound up here?”

He sighed. "We lived in a suburb of Charleston when the disaster struck. We weren't prepared. None of us expected it to happen."

"Most folks didn't. They thought us preppers were crazies."

He grimaced. "You were right. We were wrong, all of us."

"What made you leave Charleston?"

"They came in the early dawn, scores of them. Four men to each house, and they threatened us with assault rifles. We were all in bed, and before we had time to react, they were all over us. Held us at gunpoint, and took everything we owned. All our food, guns and ammo, warm clothing, you name it. When they left, they torched our houses, and we had to leave. We were outside in the cold with nothing, and they tried to kill us when we protested at what they were doing. We had no choice but to make a run for it. Fifty-eight souls, and this is what we have left." He swept a hand around their group, "Ten of us, and we've been fighting Omega ever since."

"It looks like you got some of your gear back, weapons and so on."

His eyes closed briefly. "At a cost. We had to fight for them, and for every one of them we killed we lost two of ours. But we did get these guns, some clothing, and until it ran out, food. It's been hell, sheer, bloody hell. All we had left was to keep running and keep fighting. And to hold on to our dignity. All we've taken from them is what they stole from us."

"Where are you headed? You must have something in mind."

He frowned. "I guess you don't know it, but Omega is everywhere. Wherever we go, south, north, east, or west, we're pretty sure they'll be there. No, we've all decided to keep moving, keep fighting, and wherever we find Omega, to keep killing them. Until we're all dead."

Eleanor looked at him, aghast. "You plan to die? Is that it?"

A shrug. "What else is there? Nowhere is safe."

She swapped a glance with Oz, who gave her a slight nod. What these people lacked was a home, a refuge. Copperville could offer a refuge to anyone willing to fight for it. What they lacked was shooters to go up against Omega and take back was theirs.

"What if there was an alternative?"

Jane Cassidy gave him a sad glance. "Even if there was, I think we'd all swap it for a hot meal."

"I'm serious. A home. A community, somewhere you could stay. A place you could be safe once we've dealt with Omega."

"That's just a dream. There ain't nowhere like that."

“There’s Copperville.”

“Where?”

“Our hometown. It used to be home to a lot of other folks, but most of them are dead. Which means there’s space for good, honest people.”

The woman squinted her eyes in suspicion. “What’s the snag?”

“You’d have to fight for it.”

“Fight who?”

“Omega.”

“How many of them?”

“Around fifty or sixty is our best guess.”

“And there’s ten of us. Plus a seven-month pregnant woman, and a sick Iraq vet.”

“Yep.”

She glanced at her husband, and they both grinned. “Those odds sound pretty damn good to me. Killing Omegas, you said?”

“Yep.”

“Unless they kill us first.”

“There’s always that.”

CHAPTER SIX

They got to within five hundred yards of the town and stopped. Armed men were everywhere, and they hunkered down out of sight. Gene Cassidy sent his son Josh to recce the outskirts, and he returned after almost an hour.

“They’re everywhere. I don’t see any way through, other than blasting them out of the way with gunfire.”

“And that’d bring them swarming out like angry bees. There must be another way.”

A new voice intruded, and they swung round in alarm. The girl had crept up on them almost without a sound. “I can help you.”

Oz recognized her from the mine. “You’re the Mayor’s daughter we released from Bishop Mason’s house. Kelsey?”

“Right.” She looked at him and saw distrust in his eyes, “I’m not responsible for my father, not Omega. I’d like to see them all gone. Who are these people?”

Eleanor supplied the answer. “They’re friends, Kelsey. People displaced by the disaster, and they’re looking for somewhere safe to set up home. How can you help us?”

“First, you need to know Irvin Cobb is safe inside the town.” She explained how he’d taken a bullet, but the wound wasn’t serious.

“What about the rest of the townspeople?”

A shrug. “We’re all prisoners, but everyone is safe. They let me out to forage for food, mushrooms, and things like that. Because I’m the Mayor’s daughter, they trust me a bit more, and besides, they have plans for me.”

Her voice shook, and Eleanor didn’t press her for details. “Go on, Kelsey.”

“I came out to warn you. They’re expecting you. They’re in hiding around the approaches to the town, and they plan to ambush you when show yourselves.”

“Can you get us inside the town without them seeing us?”

She shook her head. “Not a chance. I may be able to get one person in, especially a woman, but no more.” She regarded Eleanor’s belly, “A pregnant woman isn’t likely to arouse any suspicions, but you’d have to go unarmed. If they found a gun on you, they’d lock you up. Or worse.”

Oz was thinking hard, and he looked at Eleanor. “If you went in, would

it be possible to rig up an explosive? Could you find any materials you could use?”

“It’s not like the mine, Oz. I’m not certain there’d be any reason to store explosives in the town. Although...” She thought for a few seconds, “The groundskeeper’s hut on the school playing field. He always kept bags of nitrate weed killer, and I daresay I could find something to mix with it. Sulfur, charcoal, stuff like that. Yes, it’s possible. What did you have in mind?”

“I want you to make a small bomb and place it somewhere it’ll attract attention. Who’s in charge? Is it Wayne Garrett?”

She shook her head. “Not him. A guy lives in what used to be my father’s house. They call him the Chief Executive Officer. He gives the orders, and Garrett passes them on.”

He remembered the shadowy figure he’d glimpsed through the smoke after they fired the forest.

“I want you to plant a bomb next to his house. Rig up a time delay fuse for about one hour, and as soon as the countdown starts, get Kelsey to come back out and warn us. We’ll do the rest.”

Cassidy grinned. “I get it. When the bomb goes off, they’ll run like crazy to find out if their head honcho is under attack. We’ll be able to sneak in when they’re not looking and hit them from behind.”

“That’s the theory, but things can go wrong. Kelsey, what about the townspeople? Can we count on them for help if we need it?”

She looked scornful. “I doubt it. They’re terrified of Omega and spend most of their time hiding inside their houses. No, you can forget them.”

“Noted. We’ll have to manage. Make sure you find Eleanor a good place to hide for after the bomb goes off.”

“That’s no problem. She can stay in Kate’s house with Irvin. He’ll take care of her. He’ll take care of anything.”

There was an element of hero worship in her gaze, and he wondered what she saw in the Marine vet. A conventional relationship would have been absurd, but it came to him then.

She feels betrayed by her father. In Irvin Cobb she sees a substitute parent, a tough, reliable man she can count on, who won’t let her or the town down. I wonder what Irvin feels about it.

“Irvin’s okay. You ladies had better get moving. It’ll take time to find the materials for the bomb. Kelsey, whatever else you do, keep Eleanor safe,

and let us know when the clock starts ticking.”

“I will.”

* * *

They passed the first barrier of vehicles across the road, and the two men with rifles just nodded to them. When they’d gone past, Kelsey nodded toward a house twenty yards inside the barrier.

“If you look at the basement window, you’ll see rifle barrels pointing out. They expect an assault to get past the roadblock, but when the attackers come abreast of this building, the plan is to open fire and kill Oz.”

“Why Oz?”

“He’s become something of a legend.” She chuckled, “A bit like Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. He led the townspeople up to the Appalachians and kept them alive for almost a year. When they destroyed the settlement, he led them home. Some say he’s unbeatable. The Omegas reckon the only way to stop him is to kill him.”

Eleanor shuddered, thinking of what he’d face when he entered the town, although he had one thing going in his favor, Gene Cassidy and his people. He wouldn’t be on his own, but they were nothing like enough.

“How many men do they have?”

“At least fifty, maybe sixty.”

“A pity the locals aren’t inclined to lend a hand.”

“They’re frightened. I doubt they can help it.”

“You’re not frightened, Kelsey.”

“I have a bigger reason to want them dead. I’d like to kill them myself.”

“Because of your father?”

“That’s right. He’s a traitor, and he deserves everything he gets.”

They walked on, heading toward the school. As they rounded the last bend, a man came out of a building and almost walked into them. Mayor Chandler, and he looked as astonished as they.

“Kelsey! And Eleanor Porter, what are you doing here?”

“I, uh, I’m coming home, Mr. Mayor.”

“Where’s Oz? Is he with you?”

“Uh, no, he isn’t. I’m not sure where he is.”

His expression darkened. “You’re lying! You’d better come with me, and we’ll see what Wayne Garrett has to say.”

He grabbed her arm and began to drag her away. Kelsey stared at him in

horror, and everything she hated about him climaxed in that moment. This would be the last betrayal, and she snatched a blade from under her coat, a sharpened kitchen knife with a taped handle for a better grip. She jumped on his back and slashed the knife across the front of his throat.

The blade was razor sharp, and he took two more paces without understanding he'd suffered a mortal wound. Chandler struggled to suck in breath and looked down at his lifeblood dripping down to the street. For the first time he realized what had happened. His lips moved, but no sound came out. Just a gurgling, bubbling noise as blood poured out from the huge wound in his neck.

Enough fluid went down his windpipe to fill his lungs, and he sank to his knees. Drowning in his own blood, he gave his daughter a beseeching stare. Whether to ask her for help, or to ask her the reasons why, they'd never know. His body thrashed around, and his hands attempted to repair his ruined neck. He was too late by far. Chandler keeled over on his side and lay dead in a pool of his own blood.

Eleanor was curious about Kelsey. Wondering what it took to kill your own father, but the teenager just said, "Good riddance. He deserved to die. Help me drag the body into this building, and we'll carry on to the school."

They took a few moments to get the body off the street and continued to the playing field. The groundkeeper's hut was unlocked and partially ransacked. Kelsey found an abandoned shirt and wiped her father's blood from her forearms and hands.

"That's done, what about these materials?"

Eleanor was still stunned, reflecting on the changes of the past year, changes that had turned an ordinary teenager into a stone killer. Although it may help her survive when those around her were dying. In the future they'd all need every advantage they could get, like the ability to kill without remorse.

She found the sacks of ammonium nitrate unopened, and charcoal in a sack, probably a leftover from a summer barbecue. A further search revealed a sack of sulfur, and she had everything she needed. She mixed it in a stone sink and scooped the explosive into a ten-liter drum that had once contained paint. All that remained was the fuse. She experimented with some of the mixture until she found enough to burn for around an hour. She placed it in a small container topped with a thin piece of plastic that would burn through to ignite the improvised explosive after about an hour. It would have to do.

They put the drum in a handcart and Kelsey helped her push it to the house of the CEO. They planted the bomb in a lean-to outhouse. Eleanor put a match to the fuse and said one word, “Run.”

The girl led her to Kate’s house, and inside she found Irvin. He threw his arms around her, his expression fixed in a wide grin. “Eleanor, this is wonderful. Does this mean what I think it means?”

“It does. They’re waiting outside town, and inside an hour, they plan to attack.”

She explained about the bomb, and he nodded grimly. “That’s the best news I’ve heard in a long time. I’ll be ready.”

“And me,” Kate Young said, “I’ve nearly finished here.”

She had a collection of plastic and metal plates and containers on the kitchen table, a plastic bucket of liquid that smelled suspiciously like acid, and a car battery with the top cut off.

“What’re you doing? Making Molotov cocktails?”

She chuckled. “That’s an idea for another time. I’m working on a kind of battery, and a way to generate power without gasoline.”

“Uh, huh. Why?”

“It’s to make electricity. If this works, I can scale it up.”

“To power the lights?”

“I found an old laptop, and a portable radio. The radio to communicate with the outside world, and the laptop...” She looked embarrassed, “I dunno. It’s just a start. There has to be a way to get things back online. But even if it works it’ll be a long, slow process.”

Eleanor nodded. “Good luck with that. It’s good to see you again, Kate.”

Kelsey gave Irvin a hug. “My daddy’s dead. I’ll be with you. You won’t let anything happen to me, will you?”

What surprised Eleanor was Irvin’s reaction. He’d gained a daughter, and he didn’t look at all fazed. Quite the opposite, he appeared pleased to have acquired an instant family.

“I’ll take care of you. Guaranteed.”

Kelsey smiled and sped off to meet up with Oz to tell him the clock was running. Irvin wouldn’t hear of Eleanor joining the fighting, but Kate produced a rifle and declared herself ready to join in. Irvin insisted on making a stand in the house opposite, to draw fire away from the women. Kate elected to stay in her own home. In the event they attacked the house, she’d mount a last-ditch defense.

Before he left to take up his position, he gave Eleanor a fierce look. "You'll be okay. That's a promise."

* * *

When the bomb exploded, Oz led them forward in a rush. The Omegas emerged like woodlice from rotting timber, rushing to the scene of the explosion. They left the defenses apparently unguarded, and Oz led them past the barricade. They were in.

They hadn't all left the ambush site. A few had stayed behind, hidden in the basement, and the first indication of trouble was when several shots cracked out from a window level with the ground. Sheer instinct made him dive to the ground. After almost a year skirmishing with the enemy, Cassidy's men were just as fast.

More shots came from the building, and one man leaned out through the window to better target what he thought were beaten men. A bullet from Cassidy took him in the chest, and he spun and fell. Oz was crawling forward. He reached the side of the house and went around back to enter through a rear door. He slipped quietly down to the basement and pushed the door open. Two men were inside, both shouting to each other in excitement.

"Damn, they're too scared to get up and fight."

His partner didn't seem so sure. "There was one guy I saw moving. I thought he was coming this way, but I lost sight of him when I was reloading. Did you see him?"

"Nope, I reckon he's long gone."

They took aim and fired several more shots, ducking back inside as Cassidy's men returned fire.

"We can keep this up all day," one man chuckled to the other, "Until they're all dead, and I reckon the CEO will be more than happy to give us extra rations."

He decided it was time to intervene. "Fellas, there won't be any extra rations today."

They both spun, searching for a target, and he fired twice, working the bolt between shots. It was a reflexive action, so the Remington fired both shots like a semi-auto. They were both dead, and he picked up their rifles and left. Cassidy was waiting, and he didn't look happy.

"They're coming back."

"What?"

“Kelsey went ahead to make sure Eleanor was safe, and she came running back. The Omegas found out we were coming, and they’re on their way back. She took a shortcut, and she said they’d be here in a couple of minutes.”

“What about Eleanor? Is she safe?”

Kelsey was out of breath. “I think so. She’s still inside Kate’s house. I can take you there by the back way, but you’ll have to hurry. They’ll be here soon.”

He looked at Cassidy. “If they’re coming here, we should be elsewhere. I suggest we get moving.”

“I reckon that’d be a good idea.”

The girl sprinted away, and they followed. Too late, a shot came from behind, and before they were out of sight, the Omegas arrived. Bullets whistled all around them, another man went down, and the rest of them kept running. They reached Kate’s house and ran inside. Oz darted to the window. They were coming, and as Eleanor said something to him, he waved her to silence.

“I reckon there’s about thirty out there, so we’ll have to whittle down the numbers.”

They flung themselves to the windows, and their weapons barked messages of defiance. At first, the Omegas rushed at the house, returning fire, but when they realized they were losing men, they dove for cover. Oz saw movement in the house opposite, and he was about to pull the trigger when Kelsey stopped him.

“No, that’s Irvin. He’s waiting for the chance to give them a surprise.”

He grunted a reply and concentrated on targeting the enemy. They killed several more, but there were too many, with more rushing to join the fight. They moved in closer, pouring on rifle fire that forced them back from the windows. The enemy had learned the lessons. Learned the men they faced were no rookies. They moved from cover to cover, one group covering the other while they came forward in a rush. They took more casualties, but eventually made it outside the house, flattened against the walls, impossible to target. Soon they’d rush them, and it would be all over.

Irvin was ready and waiting, and he opened fire. At first, the surprise worked and they scattered, looking for cover. But they soon worked out he was just one man, and some ran back to finish him. They raked the house with gunfire, and while he ducked down to avoid getting hit, burst inside

spraying bullets every which way. He sprinted out the back way and circled the block. Minutes later, he joined them in the house, pursued by a hail of gunfire.

He grimaced, panting for breath. "That was a close one."

"Yeah." He looked at Kelsey, "There has to be a way out. I can't believe we're trapped."

"There's nothing, I'm sorry. I already looked." Her expression was atavistic. She was the gladiator in the arena. Blood smeared on her sword arm, uncaring of death, and waiting for the next man to fall on her blade, "We'll have to kill them all."

She had a few lessons to learn. The urge to kill your enemy was one thing, but the skills to do it were something else. He'd little doubt she'd pick them up before long. Else she'd die. Those were the choices.

The shooting suddenly stopped, and he called for them to hold their fire. A man was shouting at them from behind a stone wall across the front yard.

"Oz Porter, you need to give yourselves up. Otherwise, we can keep this up all day until you're all dead. Don't be stupid, man. Surrender now, and we'll let you live."

Irvin chuckled. "Yeah, right. These people have a reputation for fair play and honesty. What're we going to do, Oz?"

"Find a way out."

"You have an idea?"

"Maybe. First, I want someone to take a look out back and see how many of them are out there."

"I'll do it."

He nodded to Josh Cassidy, who returned two minutes later. "I can't see more than ten out there, and the guy in charge just joined them from the front."

"Wayne Garrett?"

"Yes."

"Put a bullet in him. It could shake them enough to make them give up and leave."

He looked at Gene Cassidy. "If you, me, and Irvin go out shooting, we could take them by surprise and clear them away from the rear of the house. We could even slip out that way. We may strike lucky and take out Garrett at the same time."

"I'll come, too," Josh said, "Four would be better than three."

Cassidy didn't like it, but neither could he find a good enough reason to say no. They were up against it; surrounded and outnumbered, and the chances were they'd die anyway. He nodded to his son. "That's fine, Josh, but you keep behind me."

Before they left, Eleanor went to Oz. "Do you have to do this?"

"I do."

"Oz, I'm frightened."

She was remembering the times she seen the body lying on the ground, next to the dropped Remington M700. She'd do anything to stop him, yet she knew it was impossible. He was the man they counted on to lead. The man who'd part the waters of the Red Sea when the Pharaoh's chariots were thundering after them, about to stampede them into the sands.

He smiled in return. "Nothing to be frightened of. It'll only take a moment."

She winced.

Or an eternity.

"I love you." She hugged him, knowing she was seeing him for the last time, and she couldn't do anything about it. If it weren't for the baby she carried in her belly, she'd go with him into the dark mists of the unknown. But risking an unborn child was impossible. She held him for a moment longer, "Oz, please live."

"I love you forever." He'd never experienced a vision, and he knew nothing of what she'd seen. Only that it was almost all over. What remained was the final reckoning. The butcher's bill. Who would live, and who would die.

They gathered at the rear door, holding their fire so as not to alert the enemy. He glanced back at Eleanor, who stood watching, white faced. "Let's go."

They burst out through the door, and they were in the open, racing toward the enemy. Bullets peppered the ground around them, and some whistled past. Incredibly, they all missed, until a single round slammed into Oz's Remington. The force of the impact knocked the rifle from his hands, and there was no time to pick it up. He had to get in amongst the enemy fast and kill them.

He dragged the handgun out of his belt and kept firing. They were almost there, and behind him he heard a cry as one of their number went down. He didn't have time to look. They were so close, and he dove through

the open window of the house where they sheltered. Already, men were fleeing through the rear of the building, an ill-disciplined scum too scared to face real fighting men. He snapped off a single shot, and one went down. The rest disappeared. He took off after them, and Wayne Garrett was running behind them, too slow.

He snapped off another shot that missed, and Garrett turned to shoot. Oz pulled the trigger again, and the gun was out of bullets. He flung it at the man's head, and he instinctively flinched, letting his rifle slip to the floor. He was close, and with a massive effort, he jumped and brought him down, pounding him with his fists. Garrett was a big, powerful man. He fought back to his feet and got his hands around Oz's neck. He kept hitting him, ignoring the pressure beginning to build on his windpipe.

He slammed punch after punch into his stomach and chest, and the pressure eased a fraction. He put up a hand to grip Garrett's hair, holding his head steady while he pounded a fist into the man's face. The pressure eased more. Garrett removed his hands to defend himself and hit back. Oz punched him again, but the Omega man had suckered him. He hadn't moved his hands to defend himself, but to allow his opponent to think he was beaten.

He wasn't beaten, and he slammed a low punch into his groin. Shards of pain tore through Oz's body. Garrett struck another fist into his groin, and the pain caused jagged shards of lightning to appear in front of his eyes. He opened them a fraction. The man was grabbing for his rifle.

Oz made a final, supreme effort. Although half blinded, he swiveled his body around and leapt in the air, kicking Garrett's legs from under him so he went down. He was still flailing for the rifle, but Oz grabbed it by the stock, aimed at the man's belly, and pulled the trigger. The bullet cracked out of the barrel, and Garrett screamed as hot metal seared through his gut. Oz moved the muzzle a fraction and fired again. The second shot took him in the heart, and he was dead.

He looked at the rear of the house, and another man was running a few hundred yards away. A man Garrett had been trying to join. The mystery man, the CEO, was getting away. Oz took aim, but as he pulled the trigger, a bullet chipped masonry from the wall next to him, and flecks of brick dust went into his eye, spoiling his aim. He used his hand to rub it, but too late, the man had disappeared.

He went back to a somber scene. Gene Cassidy was staring at a body lying on the ground. His wife was next to him, weeping. Josh Cassidy wasn't

moving. He'd fallen next to the Remington M700, and Eleanor knelt to check the body for vital signs. She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

Something in her expression was unreadable. As if she were surprised and sad the teenager had died, but there was another emotion.

Relief? She saw something, I'm sure of it. And I'm just as sure she'll never reveal the truth.

Oz was about to take her in his arms, but he ducked, pushing her down as a bullet whined past him. It was fired from the spire of the church, and Irvin raced out of the house, saw the reflection of the scope, and fired a snap shot that missed. The next time he pulled the trigger, nothing happened.

"Sonofabitch, I'm out. Hey, lend me the rifle."

The grief-stricken Gene Cassidy passed him the double rifle, and Irvin took aim. The shooter had ducked behind the concrete balustrade, and the heavy bullet, enough to kill an elephant, tore into the wall. It didn't stop but smashed all the way through and out the other side. He sighted again and fired. Another huge bullet smashed into the distant target, and slowly, a body tumbled out and fell a long way to earth. The shooter was still clutching a rifle with an attached scope.

Irvin gave a nod of satisfaction. "That'll teach the bastard not to take potshots at me." He passed the gun back to Cassidy, "Nice weapon. Thanks."

Gene took the gun absently, but he was staring along the street that led out of town. A rabble of men was racing away, as if pursued by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. "They're running."

Irvin chuckled. "Who'd have believed it, we've done it. You've done it, beaten them. The town is ours. Well, not mine. Yours."

Kelsey came to join him. "Yours, too, Irvin. You'll make your home here, won't you?"

He grinned at her. "Just try and stop me. We'll be fine."

Oz helped Eleanor up. "We made it. Garrett's dead, and their boss is running along with the rest of his scum. My guess is they'll keep running until they're a long way away. Omega is history in this town."

She looked at him and smiled, but her skin was still pale with shock. As if she'd witnessed the death of a loved one. He assumed it was something to do with her pregnancy, added to the stress of the fight. He kissed her but couldn't shake the idea in his head. He looked toward where he'd seen the man flee. He still couldn't place him, couldn't work out his identity. What he did know was he had unfinished business. Somehow, the events that had

blighted their lives were connected to him. Deep down, he knew as long as he lived, they'd never be safe. If they were to enjoy security, a future for Eleanor, the baby and him, he had to deal with him. Like an itch he had to scratch. Or in this case, kill.

He kissed her again; still puzzled by her strange response to Josh Cassidy's death, although he had to accept some things were beyond his understanding. She was shivering, and he calmed her, stroking her hair, and holding her close to him. The shivering stopped, and he said the words he hated himself for saying. But they had to be said.

"Eleanor, I have a job to do."

"I know. But please, Oz, wait the baby is born. At least see your son before you leave."

"It's a boy?" By way of reply, she gave him a mysterious smile, "I'll wait. You know I will. But when I know you're both okay, I have to find that guy and beat the truth out of him."

"Do you know him?"

"No."

"But you think he's behind everything that's happened?"

"He may be."

"Oz, at the end, I was talking to Kate. This thing she's building, it's much more sophisticated than a battery. She thinks if she can make it work, and connect it to what's left of the grid; she can get things going again. Power, communications, all of it."

He nodded. "You know it could take years. Decades. Does she even know what caused it?"

"No. But when it's operational, she may be able to find out."

"We can't wait, Eleanor. All I know is that guy is the key to it, and I intend to find out the truth. Then kill him."

"And then you'll come home? For good?"

"I'll come home."

She stared at him for what seemed like an eternity, many words passing unsaid between them. Any man powerful enough to bring about such destruction as had destroyed much of America would be a formidable adversary. And he was going to fight him alone. People may believe he was their Moses, the man who defeated the might of the Pharaohs in their awesome war chariots. But they both knew he was just a man. And like any man, he could lose.

Her voice was so low he almost missed. “Everything’s misty, Oz. I don’t know what’s ahead...”

“It makes no difference. It has to be done. You know that.”

She didn’t reply. There was that mysterious look in her eyes, and he didn’t like to think about what went on inside her head.

I’ll catch up with this man and end it. And find the answer to the question we’ve all been asking since the first day it happened. Why?

But for now, I have other things to deal with. Reclaim our home, and make it habitable for Eleanor and my son. We made it. Home.

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

By Eric Meyer

Part of the ***FOREVER FREE*** series

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CHAPTER ONE

Almost two years before, disaster struck North America. The power failed, and clean water stopped pumping. Communications went down as computer centers died, and the cell towers ceased to transmit. No one knows why, no one has any answers. Only that they must fight to survive. Some have prepared, have stocked up with food, bottled water, weapons, and ammunition. They call them Preppers. There are also those who have taken no precautions, and they will stop at nothing to pillage precious supplies, often committing murder in the process. They are the Predators.

"I count four hostiles, coming in from the west."

Oz Porter followed Kelsey's gaze. She had the sharp eyes of a hunter. "I concur. If we don't stop them, they could work their way behind us. I'll..."

"Leave it to me. I can take them."

He glanced at the girl, the daughter of the now dead Copperville Mayor Chuck Chandler. She was a pretty girl, although all traces of her youth had vanished over the past months. Her blue eyes were like chips of ice. Her blonde hair deliberately dyed dark brunette to make her more invisible when she hunted, and her body stringy with muscle after the sheer physical exertion of continual movement through the forest around Copperville. If she wasn't hunting animals for food, she was hunting the men who'd come to attack and pillage their homes. She'd become a tough, hardened fighter, one of the best, and she'd picked up scars along the way to prove it, like the two-inch scar on her forehead.

Before the disaster struck she'd been a normal teenage girl, spending her time on normal teenage girl pursuits, like boys, cosmetics, and pop music. When everything failed, the electricity, water supplies, gasoline, communications, her life disappeared like a puff of smoke in a strong wind. People resorted to primitive means to survive, and many turned to violence and murder. Tragedy struck when a fringe religious group kidnapped her, and the cult leader used her as a prostitute. That was before she killed him. They brought her back, and she dealt with her father, a man who'd betrayed them all. Kelsey killed him after his final act of treachery, when he promised her to the Omega boss as a sex slave.

She'd continued to develop her fighting skills and become an expert. The big combat knife she'd used on her father was still her preferred method of killing, but since then she'd acquired a pistol with a suppressor, a Ruger

Silent SR. A .22 caliber assassin's weapon, and she'd notched up seven kills with it at the last count. She also possessed a crossbow, a matt black tactical sniper's weapon. Designed by the Israelis for assassination missions requiring absolute silence, she rapidly became an expert in precision shooting. Kelsey always carried her weapons with her, and when she fired at animals or men, she rarely missed.

She answered questions with a fierce grin. "I'm just a girl, so I can't beat them physically. But I can still kill them, and they won't see it or hear it coming."

She crawled away toward the nearby woods. The ground was open for one hundred yards to create a free fire zone around the town. It didn't trouble Kelsey. She knew the ground intimately, and she made the trees without them spotting the lithe young girl crawling forward. She disappeared, and he focused his attention on the enemy. Another attack was coming in from the front, but they didn't show themselves. They came in behind wooden hay carts, pushing them as shields from the defenders' fire.

If they got close enough, they had sufficient numbers to hit them hard before they had a chance to respond. He glanced around at his own people, around twenty of them, and how to counter this latest move. They called these kinds of hostiles Raiders, a mixture of criminals, escaped prisoners, and thieving scum who'd banded together under local leaders. Instead of finding legitimate ways to survive, they'd taken to armed robbery, stealing what decent folk had built up.

This current Raider band was more aggressive than before. Usually, they came in the night, small groups of eight or ten men. They'd try to evade the sentries and start shooting up the town. Then carry off food and weapons as they retreated back into the dark, dripping forest that surrounded the town. Since the disaster, nature was reclaiming its own, and once prosperous fields were fast becoming overgrown jungle. Inevitably, they left two or three of their number dead, sometimes more, but each attack threatened to strip them of the food they desperately needed to survive the coming winter.

Abruptly, the nearest hay cart caught fire, and the men behind it pushed it faster, so it was heading toward the nearest of their cottages. The danger of fire was acute, but even more dangerous was the smoke that shielded them. A smokescreen they could use to press home an attack.

"Everybody back," he shouted, "Watch for them coming out of the smoke. We'll have to take them one on one, and hope none of them slip

through."

Two men charged out of the smoke. At the same time, the hay cart hit the nearest cottage, and immediately the dry timber of the wooden veranda caught fire. Within minutes the building would be completely ablaze.

There was no time to put out the fire. The man who came at him wore a savage expression, and he carried a rusty sawn-off shotgun. Oz snapped a shot at him and missed as he dodged a second man who carried a long handle ax. He was using the Beretta, and kept the Remington M700 on his back. It was close quarters battle, no place for a rifle.

The sawn-off peppered lead shot over a wide area. Two chunks of lead hit him, but missed any vital organ. He fired again, and the man with the scattergun went down. This time he hit him in the center of the chest. The spurt of blood announced he'd hit a vulnerable artery or the heart. But the axman was almost on him, swinging the lethal weapon, and he dodged aside to avoid the blow. A long handled ax is an unwieldy weapon. He aimed the Beretta to put a bullet in him, but he hadn't reckoned on the surprise move before he could pull the trigger.

He'd fitted a cast iron collar at the end of the handle, a lethal chunk of metal with sharp, pointed studs. The Raider kept the momentum going, and the sharp points whirled toward him. He rolled away, but he switched aim, and the weapon came toward him. He took aim again, but his shoulder strap snagged a chunk of stone, causing him to lose his grip on the pistol.

The man screamed a savage victory cry as he stood over him, knowing his opponent was finished. He was a fearsome creature, full-fleshed, with long, ragged hair, a straggly beard, and a mixture of civilian and military clothes. They were rank and stinking, their foul odor wafting across in a thick, choking miasma. He recalled tales of cannibalism attributed to the Raiders. Already he was dodging away again, and the ax blade whistled past. It buried itself in the ground where a split second before he'd been lying. The guy was off balance, and he lashed out with his boot, striking him in the groin. He moaned a weird noise; a groaning scream, and his animal gaze glowered at him with a fierce intensity.

"I'll kill you for that, Mister."

You're trying to kill me anyway, so what the hell?

The man wrenched the ax out of the ground, and Oz kicked him again in the same place. He put every ounce of his strength into the blow, and the guy hunched over, keening cries of agony as he dropped the ax, holding his hands

to cover his vulnerable groin.

He looked around and saw the Beretta two yards away. Dove on it, picked it up, and rolled over at the same time, aimed and fired. This time there was no mistake, and the guy went down. The other defenders were fighting their own battles, and the women were passing buckets of water along a chain to put out the fire. The battle abruptly switched focus when the Raiders abandoned the hay carts and swarmed to join what they assumed was a successful attack.

Two men fought like crazy to hold them at bay. The town blacksmith, Larry Greer, built like the proverbial, and he was like a one-man army, hurling back the attack as they came at him en masse. The other couldn't have been different. Bobby Cooper, the former librarian. Also a historian and academic, he was so weedy the word 'nerd' could have been invented just for him. But he had the guts of a lion, and he fought alongside Greer, using a long handled scythe like he was a born again Greek warrior.

Irvin Cobb was close, and he'd just dispatched a Raider with the point of a spear he'd made from a length of aluminum tube.

He grinned. "There's enough for all of us. With any luck, we'll hit them so hard this time they'll stop coming here, and..."

Bobby shouted the warning, "Behind you, Irvin!"

Another Raider was coming in, a machete held high to slash down across Irvin's neck. Cobb whirled, snatched the spear back, and thrust it into his guts. The guy went down. He ripped out the point and looked around for more men to kill. But the attack was almost over, and the survivors started to edge back, before they took off in full flight.

Irvin strode around going from body to body, making sure they were dead. The last thing they needed was for someone to fake death and make a sneak attack when they thought they were safe. He dispatched two who weren't dead before he rejoined them. He was a lean, stringy former Marine who'd joined the Forest Rangers. He was as tough as old boot leather, an outdoorsman who still sported a buzz cut over dark, piercing eyes that didn't miss much. He also had a short fuse when it came to people who tried to beat up on his friends and neighbors.

"I count eleven bodies. We did well. You all did well," he said, singling out Greer and Cooper, "They nearly had us that time. You know there'll be a next time."

Oz nodded. "They'll keep coming until they have what they want. Food,

women, the usual.”

Irvin nodded at his friend. Also a former Marine, Oz Porter was a fit, lean man in his late twenties. Of no more than average height, he managed to look taller, with an upright posture, thanks to the Marines. Apart from his straw-colored hair and green eyes, he considered himself an Average Joe, with a weather-beaten complexion after a life spent outdoors. People said he had a pleasant face, outside of the brief battles they fought almost daily to hold the town.

His nose was not an asset. Broken several years ago when he'd fought and lost a street fight. Five kids attacked him after he refused to hand over his new cellphone. He'd delivered some hard licks, and they hadn't got away easily. He'd also held onto his cellphone, an early victory of sorts.

The battle to hold the town had been a bloody affair for many months, ever since they returned from their refuge in the Appalachians.

"Next time, there could be more of them," Colonel Weaver said, striding up. He was around sixty, and he wore a military frock coat, part of his dress uniform, and the epaulettes gave his rank as full colonel. Colonel Aaron Weaver, and since the town mayor was dead, he'd assumed command of the town's defenses. No one objected, for he was a man who claimed to understand important military principles of strategy and tactics. Although there were those who said he was too timid. Fighting off the constant raids was effective, but what they needed was to stage pre-emptive attacks. To beat down the Raiders or any others attempting to crush them. He assessed the number of bodies and looked at Oz. "Did we lose any?"

He pointed at two bodies lying close to the burning house. When the hay cart struck, they'd rushed to put out the flames and walked into a Raider ambush. "We lost two, but it shouldn't have happened. We should have hit them first."

The Colonel blinked several times. "We need to strengthen our defenses."

"Colonel, we need to give them a good kicking before they get close."

"You know my feelings on that, Porter. Stay behind the defenses. In military terms, it gives us a distinct advantage."

"Tell that to the families of those two," he nodded at bodies of the fallen, "Colonel, if there's nothing else, I need to check on my wife."

"Give her my regards, Porter."

He walked to his cottage, and the stink of smoke hung over the town. He

had to work hard to keep his expression neutral. His wife, Eleanor Porter, was emaciated. He didn't need to look far for the reason, she was lying nearby in her cot, their daughter Abigail. Born four months earlier, and she was wasting away. Literally dying in front of their eyes. He'd called the nurse several times, for they had no doctor, and each time her reply was the same.

"She has some kind of a blockage in her stomach, and there's nothing I can do. She needs a surgeon, or at the very least, a qualified doctor. As well as a sterile operating room to carry out the procedure."

"We don't have an OR, sterile or otherwise. What's the alternative?"

She shrugged. "I'm sorry, there is no alternative."

"You're saying she's dying? For Christ's sake, tell us what we can do."

He'd shouted in anger and desperation, but she understood and gave him a sympathetic glance. "I don't think there's anything we can do."

He'd taken her back to the nurse each day to see if her diagnosis had changed, but her answer was always the same. Abigail needed an urgent procedure, carried out in a sterile environment. With a skilled surgeon, and the drugs to help her recover. They had none of it. In post-disaster America, they had almost nothing.

He put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "How're you holding up?"

She gave him a grave stare. "Oz, she's our daughter. We have to do something."

Absently, he reached down to where something had grazed his leg. A lead shotgun pellet had penetrated the skin. "Give me a minute. I have to deal with this."

"No, I'll do it."

She rose from the chair, and he noticed the way she walked, like an old woman, or a young woman who was dying. She found a pointed knife and held it over the flame of their wood-burning stove for several minutes to sterilize the blade. She came back and pulled up the leg of his pants. "This is going to hurt."

"It'll hurt a lot more if you don't get it out."

She nodded. Blood poisoning was a constant worry, with no antibiotics to fight infection. She dug for the pellet, and it felt like she'd stabbed him with a red-hot poker, which wasn't far from the truth. When she finished, she rinsed the knife and looked at him with a thoughtful expression. "Oz, it may be nothing, but I had a dream."

He jerked his head around. She had the power, and he'd learned not to

ignore it. "About Abigail?"

"I saw a medical facility. Abigail was on the table, and a surgeon was operating on her. I don't know if it was just me wanting it to happen, or it was real. I've felt so helpless lately I can't make sense of anything."

He held her at arm's length and stared into her eyes, ready to clutch at any hope, no matter what. Admiring her like he always did. "Tell me about it."

She was still the pretty, green-eyed, gamin girl he'd fallen for, and like always, he wondered how come she'd chosen him, when she could have had her pick of any number of suitors that flocked around her. Maybe her beauty had faded a little as the weight fell off her, and she even displayed a wrinkle or two, and a gray hair. But she was still Eleanor, the mysterious girl of Irish descent who'd made him the happiest man in the world.

"I've told you all I know. The rest is hidden in a fog. I'm so sorry, I don't see things like I used to."

Eleanor's father was the seventh son of a seventh son, who'd emigrated from Ireland two generations before. She should have been the next in line, the seventh son of the seventh son of the seventh son. Instead, her mother gave birth to a daughter. But still, some of the powers of prescience passed down through the family.

"Do you have any idea where we can find this place, and this surgeon?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I got the feeling it's not far away. Oh, yes, and one other thing. It was underground."

"How in hell does that help me?"

"Help us," she said sharply, "Do you think I don't care?"

He took her hand to comfort her. They were both exhausted, worn out by lack of food, constant worry about Abigail, and the unending fight to prevent others taking what little they had. To the south and west, the Raiders, like those that had attacked the town that day. To the north and east, Omega. The shadowy organization who'd assumed responsibility for law and order. They'd deputized every criminal, murderer, thief, and thug for hundreds of miles around, and virtually laid siege to Copperville. Periodically, they staged fierce attacks, just like the Raiders, although they hadn't come lately. The Omega strategy was different; lay siege and starve them of food and hope. Yet he had a much higher concern than Copperville. His daughter was dying, and his wife was losing the will to live.

"Eleanor, tell me," he almost shouted out of desperation, "You must

have some idea.”

"I'm trying. Oz, you're hurting me." He released her arms where he'd gripped them so hard and cursed himself for not realizing, "There may be something else. I don't know if it helps. I saw Kate Young, the former Microsoft programmer. It was just a glimpse, like she was trying to tell us something. Maybe you should talk to her."

He still couldn't rein in his frustration. "Talk to her about what? Some mythical place that could be anywhere inside a thousand square miles."

"Why don't you try her?"

A pause, and he finally nodded. "Okay, I'll go talk to her now. Even if it's a fool's errand."

"Oz..."

He ignored her, walked out of their cottage, and bumped into Kelsey about to knock the door.

"I was coming to let you know about those four Raiders."

He felt angry with himself. She'd gone off to take care of the infiltrators, and he'd forgotten about her. "I'm sorry, Kelsey, how did it go?"

He didn't need to ask. She was back, covered in blood, with the crossbow slung on her back, and weapons in her belt. The Ruger Silent SR-22 on one side, an assassin's weapon. On the other, a combat knife hung from a handmade leather sheath. Like an Amazon warrior, she'd trained herself to be a killer, and had proved her worth time after time.

He worried about what it had done to her. She'd painted vertical stripes of blood either side of her face, like a tribal rite of death. When she smiled, her teeth were also bloody.

What has it done to her, to all of us?

"Kelsey, you've done great. Now I suggest you get yourself cleaned up before you frighten the children."

She grinned. "I did more than frighten those Raiders, Oz. They won't be troubling us again."

"That's good. Listen, I have to visit Kate Young. Eleanor thinks she may be able to help."

"Help with what?"

"With Abigail."

"That would be something. I'll walk with you; our house is opposite."

She lived with Irvin Cobb. After she killed her father, she'd almost adopted Irvin as a surrogate father. The strange thing was the grizzled ex-

Marine had reciprocated, and took care of her like the daughter he'd never had. She was another casualty of the disaster, and he wondered where it was all going. When a man or woman would kill merely for a scrap of food. As for him, he had the greatest fight of all. His daughter was dying, and his wife was giving up. If he couldn't help them, what was it all about? Of one thing he was certain. He'd stay with them, alive or dead.

He knocked Kate's door, and a voice shouted for him to go in. He entered the living room and stopped. He'd seen something he'd thought he'd never see again. The flicker of a laptop screen, and he stared at the girl sitting in front of it like she was some kind of magician. Which was almost true. Kate Young was a former Microsoft programmer, and their resident expert in all things electronic.

"Tell me I'm seeing things. You booted your laptop?"

She grinned. "It was easy. Nothing that three months of hard work and fifty failures couldn't achieve. I built a battery. In fact, I built twenty batteries. I wired them in series, connected them to an old inverter, and hey presto, electricity."

"That's amazing. Does this mean..."

She was already shaking her head. "It means very little. I can keep the laptop running for an hour if I'm lucky, and then it'll take several days to get some juice back into the batteries. If you're thinking of lights or anything like that, there's no way."

"It's a start. Say, Eleanor had one of her dreams. I guess you know about them."

"What was it this time? Any chance things are getting back to normal?"

He grimaced. "Nothing like that. She saw an operating room, and a surgeon. With Abigail."

She pursed her lips. "An OR and a surgeon? Those things are mighty hard to find."

"She said it's an underground facility, and she said you may have a way to find it."

She looked puzzled. "I don't know about any underground facilities..." Her eyes widened, "How could she have known about the laptop? I only just got it booted."

He shrugged. "You know Eleanor, she has the sight. In the past she's been right more often than she's been wrong."

She looked thoughtful. "Before all this happened, I was working on

some data for the Federal authorities, compiling a list of their redundant facilities. I guess over time they lost track of them. So how Eleanor knew, I have no idea. But I have a database on this hard drive, with a list of Federal facilities. Maybe some have medical facilities. Let me have a look."

With rising hope he watched her key in 'medical facility.' She got nothing. She tried 'pharmacy.' Still nothing. Shaking her head, she said, "I can't believe they'd list an operating room, but I'll try it."

She leaned forward and whistled in surprise. "It's a hit. Who'd have believed it? According to this, there's something at Harpers Ferry. That was a Civil War site, I believe. Didn't they have a big battle there back in the day?"

He nodded. "Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army had invaded Maryland, and part of his army under Stonewall Jackson bombarded and captured the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. It was a major victory for the South. But how come they'd have a Federal facility there?"

She was reading the text as it scrolled across the screen, and already the limited power from the batteries was fading. The screen flashed, and she grabbed a pencil and wrote down a series of coordinates.

She frowned. "All that work, and it's starting to fizzle out. But I may have something. It says they built an underground shelter during the 1950s near Harpers Ferry, in case of a Soviet nuclear attack. It's remote, only two or three hundred inhabitants, and no reason for the Soviets to nuke it. The shelter is deep underground." She looked up, "Do you think that's what Eleanor saw in her dream? Oz, is it possible?"

He nodded. "This is Eleanor, and anything's possible. What else do you have?"

"Hmm, the database does mention a fully equipped OR, and a substantial inventory of drugs and sterile instruments. The rest of the place has stocks of," her eyebrows shot up, "Food. Stocks of dried and canned food, MREs, bottled water, you name it. Oz, this a goldmine. Damn, I've lost it. I think the batteries have gone."

"Kate, it might just be a goldmine that could keep Abigail alive. Let me have the coordinates." She wrote on a piece of paper and handed it to him. Suddenly, the computer flickered back into life, and she quickly glanced at the screen. Another program was running in the background, draining the last of the power.

"I loaded this first, trying to trace the main conduits and maybe find out why it all happened. But it's gone again. I need to keep working on how to

keep the batteries going."

"What the hell is a main conduit?"

She screwed up her forehead in thought. "It's the old cabled Internet, hundred of miles of cables that connect substations up and down the country. Most fell out of use after satellite and wireless Internet became the de facto standard, but the old cabling and control panels may still be there."

"How does that help us? "

"It depends what's left. I need you to find out."

"Kate, my priority is Abigail. She's dying."

She gave him a sympathetic look. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could do something."

"You've done enough by locating this place. I just hope it's still there."

"I hope so, too."

"I'll let you know when we get back."

She gave him a look, and he interpreted it correctly. "We'll be back. That's a promise."

"I know you will."

"You better believe it. I'll give Eleanor the good news, and we can start right away."

She looked out the window and sighed. "It's almost night. If you leave now you'll get lost inside the first few miles. You must wait until morning. Then there's the other problem. Harpers Ferry lies almost fifty miles to the north. It's a long way, and you know what's waiting outside the town."

"Omega."

"Right. Be careful you don't walk right into them. Especially with Abigail, she'll have to go with you. Oz, how on earth will you make it? It's so far. Eleanor is not so good either. She's not strong enough."

In his desperation he'd failed to see the obvious. They'd be carrying a sick infant across fifty miles of hostile territory. It wasn't as if they had an alternative.

"I don't know, but I have to try. I have no choice."

At that moment the door pushed open, and Kelsey walked in. She'd washed the worst of the blood off her face, but the look in her eyes hadn't changed. The look of a hunter seeking its next kill, man or beast.

"I came to see what was going on."

She looked at the laptop and at Kate. "You managed to get that thing going?"

"For a while, yes, but it was more than worth it."

She explained about the medical facility to help Abigail, and the main communications conduit. "Don't you see? We may be able to find out what happened, and even communicate with the outside world. Kelsey, this could be the breakthrough we've been waiting for."

"It could also save Abigail's life," Oz muttered, "We'll be leaving at dawn, me, Eleanor, and Abigail."

"You can include me," she said, "Don't think I'd let you do this without me. Your little girl means everything to all of us, and she's become something of a symbol of hope for Copperville. A life born out of the ruins of the old. If we're to give her a chance to live, let's do it right. And that means you'll need backup."

"Do what right?" They swung around as Irvin walked in, and she explained to her surrogate father what they'd been talking about.

His reply was immediate, "Count me in. Oz and Eleanor are my best friends in the world, and when I needed help, they were there for me. If I can return the favor, I'll do it if it kills me. Besides," he gave her a warm smile, "If my new daughter is going along, how could I stay home? No, we'll be along, me and Kelsey. We've got your backs."

He smiled his thanks. "I'll talk to Eleanor. It'll make all the difference. Then I'll see the nurse. I need to make sure she's okay with this."

"Okay with what?" Kate said.

"With the procedure on Abigail's stomach to find the blockage. Once she has access to a sterile OR, with all the drugs and instruments, surely she'll be able to..."

Kelsey was shaking her head. "Oz, it doesn't work like that. I'm sorry, but I had a cousin who had a baby with this sort of problem. I think it's called a pyloric stenosis, and it blocks any food from entering the small intestine. It could be something even more serious than that. Babies are tiny. Removing a blockage is a delicate operation, even for a very experienced pediatric surgeon. For a general surgeon, it may be possible, but even then, it's a risk. For a nurse, forget it. But didn't you say Eleanor saw a surgeon in this vision of hers?"

"That's right." He felt it all collapsing around him, "But we don't have one."

It was like someone had just thrown the Niagara Falls over him in midwinter. Crushing all hope, drowning it in an icy deluge. He tried once

more. "Are you sure about this? Surely it's a simple blockage, so the nurse should be able to take care of it."

Her headshake was emphatic. "No, Oz. Like I said, she'll need an experienced pediatric surgeon, or at least someone who knows what they are doing. During training all doctors do a certain amount of surgery, so it's just possible a medic without specific pediatric or surgical skills might manage at a pinch, although it'd be one hell of a risk."

"There's no risk," he snapped, "She's dying, that's the risk."

"I know, I know. But without a surgeon, it'll all be for nothing."

He left the house to return to Eleanor, to tell her the good news, and the bad news. Without the surgeon, an OR would be worthless. He heard footsteps, and Kelsey was running after him.

"I wanted to come with you and visit Eleanor, see how Abigail is doing. I thought you had it sorted, and now it's fallen apart. All for the lack of a surgeon."

He nodded. "You know what this means. If we don't find one, she dies. And she doesn't have long."

"I know."

He was rehearsing what to say to Eleanor. She had to know what they'd found. It was only fair. At the same time he had to tell her it was all for nothing. She'd been right about the underground facility. And wrong about the surgeon. He had the nightmarish thought he may soon be attending the funeral of his first and only child, with worse to come. If Eleanor continued to weaken, he could be attending a second funeral. His footsteps had slowed. He dreaded what was to come. To tell his wife they'd found hope, only to see it shattered.

She glanced at him as he walked inside, and Kelsey came in behind him. She knew what they had to tell her. Knew hope had died, and her baby was about to die. She'd seen the Grim Reaper bringing death into their lives.

CHAPTER TWO

She seemed to withdraw into herself as he spoke. Even her skin that was once creamy and glowing with health was visibly going gray in front of his eyes. He wanted to say something, to give her hope, but there was no hope to offer.

"Without a surgeon, taking her to Harpers Ferry would be all for nothing. Even if we did find this place, and that's a big if, and if it hasn't already been looted, we're stymied. Without someone to conduct the operation on Abigail, we may as well stay here. At least we can keep her comfortable."

He could have added keep her comfortable in her last days on earth, but he didn't. He'd said enough. She recognized his words of death and didn't need further explanation. Oz was facing Eleanor, and Kelsey stood just inside the door, all of them speechless, when the young girl suddenly started.

"You're wrong." They swiveled to look at her, the fun-loving kid who'd become a ruthless killer.

Eleanor froze. "Kelsey, I know you mean well, but you're not helping."

Oz held up a hand to stop here. He'd heard something in her voice. "What do you mean? What have we missed?"

"You said there's no one in Copperville who could carry out the operation."

"That's correct, just the nurse, Allison Knight. Remember, you said she couldn't do it."

Her voice was low when she replied. "There's Jason. Jason Lee."

Eleanor threw her up her hands in anger. "Jason Lee is a lush, a drunken bum, and besides, he's not even a doctor. Of all the people you could suggest, why him? I doubt he can manage to shave himself, he's always so drunk."

The girl stood her ground. "He was a final year medical student, and I happen to know he did a spell in surgery, so he knows more than any of us."

Eleanor shook her head. "He spends his days making moonshine. He drinks most of it himself, and trades the rest for food. He's a parasite. I wouldn't let him within a mile of Abigail."

Oz was thinking, and everything she said was true. But what Kelsey had said was also true.

Of all the men in town, Jason Lee's the only one with any experience of surgery. Sure, he's a drunk. But none of that matters, compared to what really matters. Could he do it? Or is he beyond help?

He looked at Kelsey. "Do you know where he is?"

She chuckled. "Sure, he'll be sleeping off a drinking session in his backyard. When he wakes up, he'll start drinking again. He usually collapses unconscious by mid-evening."

Eleanor shuddered, but he ignored her. "Kelsey, could you go and find him. Ask him to come here. Bring him at gunpoint if necessary."

"Sure." She walked out the door.

Eleanor took two steps toward Oz and grabbed hold of his jacket. "Are you mad? Talking about allowing a creature like Jason Lee loose on our baby?"

He was shocked at her vehemence, but he stood his ground. "I'm looking at the options, that's all. Without someone to do this she dies. It must be worth talking to him, and we'll take it from there. If he's smashed out of his brains, we'll write him off. But remember, drunks can sober up. They can get better. Abigail can't."

"We don't have the time!" she shouted, "Don't you see? Our baby is dying!"

"I know."

She slumped on the sofa, and he stayed standing, almost holding his breath waiting for them. When they arrived, he was shocked. Jason Lee was a wreck, less than thirty-years-old, his face was lined with broken, red blood vessels, the sign of a heavy drinker. His eyes were bloodshot, and as he walked into the house, he tripped and swayed, almost falling over. He gave them a lopsided grin. "Sorry."

He was an odd-looking man. Short and stocky, with pale, flabby skin that had wrinkled through lack of nutrients, lack of sunlight, and a life dedicated to drinking alcohol. He'd lost most of his hair, and had clearly had given up on hygiene. His skin was ingrained with dirt, which he didn't seem to notice. Neither did he notice people didn't get too close, due to his rank body odor.

He spent part of every day brewing moonshine, and the rest drinking it, apart from a small amount of time trading booze for food. Oz didn't want this man anywhere near his daughter. Yet there was no one else.

"Did Kelsey explain what we wanted?"

"Sure she did. She wants me to do a little bit of cutting. No problem, where's the patient?"

Oz pointed to the crib. "She's in there. Our daughter Abigail, she's four

months old, and we believe she has pyloric stenosis. We need someone to clear the blockage."

Lee guffawed. "Are you crazy? Do you know what that entails? You'd need instruments, anesthetics, a sterile operating room, and plenty of dressings. Saline drips, antibiotics, and a shitload of other stuff I can't even remember. Oh, yeah, and a competent OR nurse. Forget it, I thought you brought me here for something important."

He fought to control his temper. "We did bring you here for something important. If you had those things, could you do it?"

He stopped and turned. "You're not serious? Where in the entire U.S. of A. are you going to find a sterile environment and the equipment to carry out that kind of procedure?"

"We may know of a place. Not near here, it's about fifty miles away. The plan is to travel there with the baby, and if everything is still there, do the operation."

He waved his hands in either confusion or irritation. It was hard to tell which. Probably it was just the alcohol.

"Look, man, I've made a life here, and I don't plan to travel fifty miles for anything or anybody. Jesus Christ, in one direction we'd run into Raiders. In the other direction, we have Omega waiting for us. And they all want to kill us after they've robbed us of everything we own. No way, forget it. I'm going home. I need a drink."

Oz was on him in a second. He grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and pulled him to within three inches of his face. Lee shook in terror as he snarled at him.

"Listen to me, you little shit. This is my daughter's life we're talking about. Forget whether you want to go or not, just answer me one question. Could you do this procedure on an infant? I want a straight yes or no, and if you lie to me, I'll tear you apart, piece by piece, and throw what's left to the pigs."

He shuddered and appeared to sober.

"Let me think. Give me a minute. I need some fresh air."

Oz let him walk out the front door. He watched him carefully as he strolled around the frontyard. He was either trying to sober up enough to make a run for it, or trying to think it through. It took a full ten minutes before he came back inside.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, if the facilities exist like you said, I could attempt it. But I don't guarantee success. It's been a long time since I was at medical school, and my hands aren't as steady as they used to be."

He held up his right hand, and they couldn't fail to notice the tremble as he tried to hold it still. "Yeah, that's the way it is. You have your answer. I can do it, but it'd be the biggest gamble of your lives."

"The biggest gamble of our daughter's life," he muttered.

Jason nodded. "That's true."

Oz looked at his wife. "Eleanor, what do you think?"

Before she could reply, Lee interrupted. "Hey, I haven't said I'd do it. All I said was I could do it, and there'd be a slight chance of success. There'd also be a more than a slight chance of failure. Sorry, but that's the way it is. In any case, I'm not traveling to wherever this place is. You can tear me limb from limb if you like, but that's my final answer. Get the equipment here, we can clean up one of the rooms, and maybe give it a try."

"I won't tear you limb from limb."

Jason looked at him. "You won't?"

"No. What I'll do is smash every part of your moonshine operation, and make sure you never brew another drop again."

His jaw dropped, and for the first time he looked terrified. "No, no, aw, no. You couldn't do that!"

"Try me. Now shut up and listen. Eleanor, what do you think?"

She looked up at him, and he was shocked at the way her face resembled that of an old woman. "Do we have a choice?" she whispered.

"No. We leave tomorrow. Jason, make sure you have a pack ready. We're pulling out at dawn."

"We'll be ready, Oz, me and Irvin. We won't let you down."

"And I'll have Abigail ready," Eleanor added. Her voice carried no conviction of anything other than failure. She was a woman who'd almost given up and resigned herself to death. Of Abigail, and of herself.

He left them then to return to Kate and collect the map of the location of the underground bunker. As he walked there, he thought about their chances of finding the place, as well as saving Abigail. They were almost zero.

Jason Lee's a problem, a drunken bum, but we can't do it without him. Then there's Eleanor, and Abigail, will she survive the trip? She's in a bad way, dying of starvation, and although the nurse talked about days, it could

come down to less. Yet our daughter deserves nothing less than the best I can offer.

He was still working out the obstacles they'd face when he encountered another obstacle. One he hadn't reckoned on.

"Mr. Porter, where do you think you're going?"

Colonel Aaron Weaver, formerly National Guard of West Virginia, had put himself forward himself as the man who led the defense of the town. So far he hadn't done a bad job. Apart from refusing to countenance a pre-emptive strike on the many enemies who'd gathered around them. He was a tall, ramrod erect man, slim, almost skeletal after their meager diet. He wore his hair long, with a stylish, drooping mustaches. Like he'd modeled himself on one of his Confederate forebears. A cold, precise man, very aware of his position, and he never let anyone forget he was in charge.

"Why do you want to know, Colonel?"

He sighed. "Porter, you know the answer to that. I heard about this foolish trip to find an old nuclear shelter that may or may not exist. Tell me it's not true."

"It's not a foolish trip, Sir."

He explained why they were going, and the urgent need for Abigail to undergo the surgery to save her life. Before he got the last word out, Weaver was already shaking his head.

"You're wasting your time. Even worse, you're putting your daughter's life in more danger by entrusting it to that idiot Jason Lee. Don't you know he's the town drunk? He spends his entire life distilling moonshine, which I find objectionable, and drinking most of his product, which is even worse."

Oz recalled the Colonel had sworn off alcohol many years ago, after his wife died. He didn't know the reason, and he didn't care. The guy was more than entitled to make his own choices and swear off anything he liked. But not to interfere with the choices others made.

"I know it's a risk, Colonel, but he's all we have. There's no one else in Copperville capable of helping us."

"Neither is Jason Lee. I'm sorry, Porter, but I have to forbid it. Quite apart from the risks to your daughter, the town needs every man to fight off the attacks. They came close this morning, and it was sheer luck we managed to hold them off."

"As I recall, it was Kelsey Chandler who fought hard to stop them getting in the town. As well Irvin Cobb, our blacksmith, Larry Greer, and the

librarian, Bobby Cooper.”

His lips twisted in a sneer. “Larry Greer is a good man, but Bobby Cooper isn’t fit for anything other than handing out library books. What did he do, throw his precious books at them?”

“Colonel, he fought like a lion. They all did.”

“I won’t argue with you. The answer is no. We need every man on the defenses.”

"I understand that, Sir, but I have to do this. You can object all you like, but we’re going, and that's final. Me, Eleanor, and the baby along with Irvin and Kelsey, and Jason Lee, as you know."

His expression turned angry. “I’ve told you, you’re risking everything, your daughter's life, your own lives, and the security of the town, all on a maybe. Do you even know how far it is to Harpers Ferry?”

Oz was fighting hard to control his anger. His daughter was dying, and this self-appointed blowhard was trying to stop him try to save her. "I know."

“If you get there, what are you going to find? Ghosts from the Civil War, that's about all. The population was little more than two hundred before the disaster, and I wouldn't mind betting the place is now ransacked and derelict. And that goes for this bunker. You’ll also have to fight your way past the Omega deputies, who have us hemmed in from the north, and the bands of Raiders wandering the countryside. You won’t make it halfway.”

"We can defend ourselves."

"I doubt it. And you’ll leave the town in a weakened state. It's a bad idea, Porter, a very bad idea. Nothing good will come of this."

He was shaking his head as he stalked away, and Oz carried on to Kate's house. She’d done well, using the few minutes when her laptop came alive to pull up every bit of information she could find before it died again. In a short time she’d drawn a comprehensive map of Harpers Ferry and the surrounding area. Marked on the map was a large X, and he grinned. "X marks the spot."

She nodded. "That's right, but how you’ll gain entry to the bunker, I've no idea. It's sure to be hidden, bearing in mind it was designed as a secret nuclear shelter for times of war. You’ll have to search for the entrance, and then you may not find it. I'm sorry I can't find out more."

"You've done enough, Kate. You've given us hope, when we had none."

"Then turn that hope into reality. There's something else you should know. Colonel Weaver is on the warpath."

He nodded. “I just met him, and he wasn't happy."

"No, he's not. I suspect he may try to stop you."

"He already tried."

"What I mean is, in some underhand way. Don't ask me how, I don't know. If I were you, I'd watch my back."

"Noted. Thanks again."

He left her house and crossed the road to visit Irvin and Kelsey. All he had to confirm was their departure, which would be at dawn. "And remember to pack food and ammunition."

Irvin grinned. "Don't worry. It's already done. We'll be there, a few minutes before dawn."

He left them and went home. Eleanor was busy packing their gear. Two backpacks, one for each of them to carry, and in hers she had the things they'd need for the baby. She looked at him. "I packed supplies for her, but she didn't need much."

She meant food, and he understood. She was eating nothing, and the best they'd been able to manage lately was for her to take a little water, so she didn't die of dehydration, although it was coming close. He checked his gear, the Remington M700 rifle, and his Beretta M9. He was making sure he'd have enough ammo, and he paused when someone knocked at the door.

Eleanor answered it. "We have visitors, Oz."

He went back to the living room, and two men were standing there, the huge blacksmith, Larry Greer, and Bobby Cooper, the town librarian. A head shorter and about one hundred and fifty pounds less in weight than Greer, Cooper had little to do, for most of the library's collection of books had been destroyed or stolen. Apart from those books people had used as kindling to start fires for cooking and to keep them warm. But still, Cooper worked at rebuilding the collection, searching everywhere to find where people had discarded his precious books.

Both men shook his hand, and Larry spoke first. "We heard about your problem with Weaver. What we came to say is, we'll make damn sure no one breaches the town defenses while you're away. Me and Bobby, we'll take it in turns. Twelve hours on and twelve hours off, and one of us will always be patrolling the perimeter. If anyone gets close, we'll rouse the town, and get everyone out to fight. What we're saying is don't worry about Copperville, nothing's going to happen while you're away. Find this bunker at Harpers Ferry, and make sure Jason Lee fixes your daughter. If he doesn't, I'll be having words with him when he gets back."

He smiled at the huge blacksmith, who was swinging a football-sized fist to demonstrate his meaning.

"It's appreciated, guys. Knowing you're taking care of things here means we can concentrate on the job and get help for Abigail."

"Good luck with that," Greer rumbled, and both men shook hands before they left.

He closed the door and spent time going over everything they'd need for the journey. It was precious little, for they had little, other than the essentials to survive. They finished off by candlelight and went to bed. Eleanor blew out the candle and lay apart from him, as if there was an invisible barrier between them. She blamed herself in some way, and she was like a stranger lately.

There's no cure for what ails her. Not until we cure Abigail, and that entails a perilous journey through territory controlled by the enemy, and a search for an old Federal facility that may no longer exist. Then there's Lee, the joker in the pack, and whether he can pull it off. He'd better.

Since he got back from the Iraq war, he'd suffered almost continuous nightmares. People called it PTSD, but he didn't want to attach a name to it that suggested it was a problem, so he called the bad dreams episodes. The day before his unit was due to return Stateside, they ran into an ambush, and he relived it, night after night. But this time, it was different. He was dreaming of Abigail, and she was lying on the operating table in a gleaming white, sterile room.

A doctor was bending over her, clutching a razor-sharp scalpel in his hand, and when he turned to look at Oz, he was grinning, a sick, malicious grin. The triumph of a man who has vowed to kill the enemies, men, women, or children, like the Islamic suicide bombers. Knowing he couldn't escape, knowing Oz would kill him first, but it made no difference. He couldn't reach him to stop him, and the surgeon was about to stand down when they heard the sound of a helicopter overhead. He looked up. The room had no roof, so he could see the Black Hawk descending, and it was in flames. Bodies were falling from the cabin, American bodies, his own men. Their camos were on fire, their hair was on fire, and they were screaming as they plunged to earth.

When he looked again, Abigail had vanished from the operating table, and a burning soldier had replaced her. He recognized Rick Devine; the man who'd made it back from Iraq, only to die in an auto accident. The surgeon raised his scalpel again, and he snapped off a shot. The guy was dead, but as

he fell, he realized he'd made a mistake. The man he'd killed was no Arab. He'd just shot Jason Lee, the drunken bum, former medical student, and Abigail's last and only hope. It was all wrong. He'd just signed Abigail's death warrant, and he was screaming, "No, no, no!"

Someone had their arms around him, and he was about to strike out to throw them off, until he smelled the familiar scent of his wife, Eleanor. She was speaking soothing words. "Oz, there's nothing wrong. You're all fine. We're in Copperville."

His eyes flicked open, and he nodded his understanding. "I'm sorry. I..."

"I know," she murmured gently. But just then the baby cried, not the full-blown lungs of a healthy infant, bellowing out a demand for attention, but a feeble whimper, and she went to her.

"Go back to sleep. I'll stay with her."

She was rocking the crib gently, and he wanted it to be normal. A healthy baby, a healthy wife, and not a hard scrabble existence, battling to grow and preserve what little food they could find, of fighting off the Predators who circled every day.

He didn't sleep, and an hour before dawn, he climbed out of bed and dressed. Their packs were ready. He watched Eleanor wrap Abigail in warm clothing, and with a blanket around her. She had a canvas baby carrier strapped to her front, and the baby was staring up at her mother. He'd lightened some of Eleanor's pack, and put more in his, but she made no comment when he handed it to her.

"You have a weapon?"

She nodded. "The pistol, and I've tucked it away under my coat. I don't like loaded weapons around children."

"Me neither, but if they hit us, we'll need every gun."

Irvin and Kelsey knocked on the door, and said they were ready to go. They both carried full packs, and they took them off while they waited to leave. Waiting for the most important member of the party, the man on whom it all depended. When he still hadn't turned up, Oz and Irvin went to his house. They knocked on the door, and there was no reply. Impatient to get going, Oz kicked the door open, and they searched inside. He wasn't there. They were about to leave and look elsewhere when he heard groaning from outside in the backyard.

Lee was lying on the ground, clutching an empty bottle that would have once contained moonshine.

"My head, dear God, I'm never going to do that again. Hey, I only meant to drink a couple of glasses to help me sleep. Somehow, I finished the bottle. You'll have to call it off for today. Maybe tomorrow I'll feel better."

Oz bent down, scooped him up, and stood him on his feet. "Jason, we're leaving now, and you're coming with us."

"Can't you see I'm ill? I'm not going anywhere."

"Too bad. Irvin, take one of his arms. Let's go."

They started dragging him along the street, and after the first hundred yards, Lee decided maybe he wasn't quite so sick after all. "I'm okay, I'm okay. Let me walk. It was just one of those things that came over me."

"It's called alcoholic poisoning. Hold us up again, and I'll bust your teeth."

"Sure, sure. No need for violence."

"There is every need for violence. Until we reach Harpers Ferry and find this bunker, and you operate on Abigail, I'll do whatever it takes. I don't mind who I hurt, whose bones I break, or who I kill. This is my daughter, she's dying, and you are her last hope. If violence is what it takes, so be it."

They let him get up and returned to where the others were waiting. They knew the area well, and he led them along narrow game trails, keeping to the overgrowth that had covered most of the state, and for all he knew, most of the country. People cut down trees for fuel, but what had once been tarmacked roads were overgrown with foliage, and no longer passable. Weeds and young saplings had pushed through the road surface and intertwined with abandoned vehicles, making an almost impassable barrier. Not that the roads were of any use to them. There were plenty of motor vehicles, but no fuel.

For the first few miles they walked fast and made good time, although Eleanor was tiring fast. He estimated they'd made no more than five miles, and ahead of them they had to pass through a narrow valley. Oz had been a Marine sniper and had acquired a nose for trouble. That nose was telling him trouble was waiting not too far ahead, and he looked Irvin.

"If I was going to ambush somebody, this is where I'd do it. Position men on either side of the valley."

Irvin nodded as he regarded the terrain. The valley was less than one hundred yards wide, and the high sides overgrown with thick greenery. "You could hide an army up there, but I don't know that we have an alternative other than to go through. Going around, well...."

They both looked at Eleanor, and even after such a short distance, she was gray with exhaustion. "We can't go around. We have to go this way. If we detour it could put twenty miles more on the journey, and that could kill her."

"I'll check it out," Kelsey murmured.

She slipped away before they could reply and disappeared into the undergrowth. They waited for a half-hour, and when she returned she appeared as if by magic. In a few months she'd trained herself to move like a Special Forces operative. It worried him a teenage girl had also learned to kill like one. She explained what she'd seen, and Oz had been right to call a halt.

"I count four men, two on either side of the valley. They're carrying assault rifles. I didn't see anything like sniper rifles, so I doubt they'll open fire until we're close enough for them to make sure they score hits."

"You did well, Kelsey. Leave it to us now. I'll go up there and deal with the two men on the west side of the valley. Irvin, take the east."

"You got it."

He put his pack on the ground, and Kelsey tried to argue. She said she could take them all, and once again, Oz wondered about her eagerness to taste blood. She was starting to enjoy violence and death, and that was bad. "I can do this. I know where they are."

He shook his head. "Stay here with Eleanor and Jason. If anything happens to us, it's all down to you. And make sure our medic doesn't try to leave."

Jason grimaced, and he still looked like he'd been drinking. "Hey, man, I'm not about to leave. I'm in this with you, and I'll see it through to the end. Besides, it wouldn't be worth my while not to..."

He stopped, and Oz gave him a curious glance. "Wouldn't be worth your while not to what?"

"Not to go with you, of course."

"Right." He pictured him lying in his backyard, sodden with drink, insensible, "If you do try to go back, Kelsey will kill you."

"I'll be here when you get back."

He almost sounded convincing. They split up, and Oz began to climb to the top of the bluff overlooking the valley. He moved in total silence, the way the Marines had trained him. He saw them, and he was grateful. Grateful the men waiting for them were amateurs. Trained professionals would never have allowed anyone to come at them the way he had. He was above them, looking

down on their position from a path. Once, it would have been popular with hikers. The track looped around as it descended to the lookout point, a scenic attraction. They'd chosen it for the same reason. And neglected to cover their backs.

He glanced across, and he saw movement. Irvin had lucked out, and he was forcing his way through dense overgrowth to reach them. The former Marine was good, but the terrain defeated him, and the two men had spotted him, or more likely heard him approach. Irvin hadn't seen them, and Oz quickly calculated the odds. He was in trouble, and he pulled the M700 off his back and lay on the path, already taking aim at the first of the men waiting to ambush Irvin. He could take them with two shots, and he had to take them. But the men below him would know he was there, and they'd come after him in a flash. He didn't want to fire the rifle, for fear it would bring more of them. He assumed they were Omegas, although there was no way of knowing. Omegas, Raiders, any of the robber bands who preyed on the survivors, they looked the same; a mix of camos and civilian clothes, feral eyes, and a readiness to pull the trigger on any innocent who stumbled across their path.

He took up first pressure on the trigger and squeezed a tad more. The bullet spat out the muzzle, and he knew he'd hit the target. His brain functioned on a higher plane, the muscle memory repeating something he'd done so many times before. He worked the bolt, racked another round into the breech chamber, sighted, and fired again. The second man was already starting to move when he heard the first shot, and Oz's second bullet only winged him, but he worked the bolt again, and this time hit him in the safety zone. The kill shot, the center of the chest, where the slug would rip through his heart, and he'd be dead within seconds.

Irvin looked around. He was astonished when he broke cover and saw Oz had fired the two shots. But he worked it out quickly and dove back into cover. They opened fire, and a hail of lead shattered the foliage around where Irvin had gone to ground. Their shooting was wide, and he was safe. Now Oz had his own problems. They knew he was there, and they disappeared, each man going in an opposite direction. He assumed they were trying to flank him, and he found a tangle of foliage for cover.

If they were working to come at him from either side, he'd meet one, and he paralleled the path, watching and listening. Before long, he heard a noise, and he stopped and waited. A few yards ahead of him, the bushes

swayed, a dark shape appeared, and he fired. Too late, a wild pig had been running away from the humans who'd invaded his territory, and Oz shot him dead. Which gave the man several yards behind him the opportunity, and an automatic fired in the bushes all around him. There was nothing he could do, nowhere he could go, and he flattened himself to the ground, waiting for the firing to stop. He was in trouble, and he had to do something.

The man in front knew where he was, which gave him the advantage. Plus, there was another one coming out somewhere from behind, and he had no help. He worked out the difficulties of using the rifle inside a thick tangle of trees and vines. Reluctantly, he swung it on his back and drew the Beretta. It was going to be close range work, and he began sliding through the bushes. Again, listening out for movement. But there was none, and the guy almost had him. If he fired, instead of moving into position for a better shot, Oz would be dead. But he reminded himself, the guy was an amateur, and he had time to fling himself to one side as bullets ripped through the bushes. They kicked up spurts of dirt and dust from where he'd been a second before.

He took aim with the Beretta, but once again the guy ducked out of sight. Maybe he wasn't as much an amateur as he thought, and he began climbing further up the hill. Gaining height, which would give him the advantage. Except he almost ran into the guy coming up from the other side, and more bullets buried themselves in the dirt, chewing branches from the trees and bushes around him. All he could do was lie flat and take it, and of all things that could happen, the worst was an episode. Yet he felt it coming on.

He was in Iraq, and there were no bushes. Just grinning Arabs, rotting teeth exposed as they waited for him to die, and a sea of flames surrounded him. Once again, he heard the sound of the helicopter, and he looked up. The dream abruptly ended, as though a switch had been thrown in his head, and he wasn't looking up at the blue desert sky, but the cloud and mist shrouded skies above West Virginia. What saved him was the sudden realization of where he was. That, and the knowledge the enemy were about to tear him into pieces with automatic fire.

With a superhuman effort, he dove through a small gap between two bushes. On the other side, he'd seen a narrow trench in the ground, and he plunged into it. More bullets tore up the foliage around him, and he lay in the narrow fold of ground, waiting for an opportunity. He heard a voice, a man muttering something about they'd clipped him, and that was good. If they

thought he was dead, he'd have the advantage over them, and he could turn the tables. He saw one from the south, and the other a few yards to the north. He prepared to take the one on the south side first, and he waited as he came nearer. A handgun is not the most accurate weapon in the world, and he had to be sure. Nearer, nearer, and he'd almost reached him when he put his head up to take the shot.

The bullet whined past his head. They definitely weren't amateurs. They'd set him up; one waiting to take the shot, while the other pretended to expose himself to enemy fire. Oz dropped back into the trench, but now he knew where the other man was, and he pulled backward until he was ten yards from where he'd been hiding, and he edged out of the trench. The man was close, although at first he couldn't see him. Until the muzzle of a rifle, a straight, geometric black tube, easy to spot against the irregular shapes and patterns of nature, poked out through the wet, green leaves, pointing away from him. Pointing to where he'd been, until he moved to his latest position, and Oz took careful aim. And waited. And waited some more.

When the shooter didn't find the target he'd expected, he made a mistake, his first and fatal. He pushed through the foliage, and first the head came into view. It was enough; also so close he took careful aim and put the bullet between his eyes. Then he dropped flat again and waited. The other guy was calling for his pal.

"Charlie, did you get him? Tell me where you are."

He was definitely the amateur. The man he'd shot had been more experienced at this kind of fighting. If this idiot didn't know the difference between a pistol shot and a rifle bullet, he deserved to go down.

He decided to take a chance. "Over here." He didn't know if it would work, and if the guy would fall for it, but he kept his voice low, little more than a hoarse murmur, and sure enough, he fell for it. A moment later, he came stumbling along the path, pushing his way through the overgrowth that made the going difficult, shouting to his friend.

"Charlie, where are you? Is he still out there?"

He came almost within touching distance, and he was standing behind a thick green bush. "Yes, he is."

He'd spoken as the guy stumbled past, and he whirled, but too slow. Besides, even if he'd been faster, he was carrying a rifle, and the very reason Oz had decided against using the Remington was also true for this guy. The muzzle caught in a tangle of vines, and Oz step closer, firing from three feet

away. A chest shot, the lead drilled into him, and he dropped, blood spurting out of the wound.

He turned as he heard someone else coming up the path, but it was Irvin, who'd retraced his steps and come to lend a hand. He looked down at the body. "What about the other one?"

"I did them both."

He whistled. "All four. You haven't lost your touch, my friend. We better get back and join the others."

They retraced their steps down the path and found the place where they'd left Eleanor and the baby, with Kelsey and Jason. Jason wasn't there.

"Where is he?"

Kelsey pointed to a clearing about twenty yards away. "He went there, and we assumed it was for the obvious, but that was fifteen minutes ago, and he hasn't come back."

"I'll check him out."

Oz threaded his way through the trees until he came to the tiny clearing. Jason Lee was lying on the ground, on his back. Staring up at the tree canopy above him, and he was blind drunk. Singing a song in a tuneless voice, and when he saw Oz, he waved the bottle and gave him an inane smile.

"Hi, buddy, how's it going? It's nice in here, how about a drink?"

He raised an arm to punch his teeth down his throat, but Kelsey was behind him, and she grabbed him to stop him.

"Hold it. We have visitors."

He held his arm high, not ready to let Lee off the hook. "What kind of visitors?"

"Horses, and we only know one outfit who still owns horses and uses them for mobile patrols."

He nodded. "Omega."

"Omega, yes. They're here."

CHAPTER THREE

They waited in absolute silence as the horses trotted past, no more than twenty yards from where they were hiding. Eleanor held her hand over the baby's mouth, ready to stifle any cry, but she needn't have worried. Abigail was fading fast, and she gave no sign of even having the energy to cry out. When the sound of the horses had receded into the distance, Oz got them up.

"We have to move on. There could be more of them around here."

"What about him?" Irvin was pointing at Lee, but he had a way to deal with him. When he was engaged in the fight with the two Omega deputies, he recalled the sound of a stream not too far away, and Irvin gave him a hand to drag the semi-conscious medic to the bank. The water bubbled past about three feet below them, and it didn't look too deep. He gave him the nod, and they tossed him in. The stream was deceptive, and the man went all the way under before he surfaced, splashing and splattering to catch his breath.

"You bastards. I could have drowned. You didn't bother to ask if I could swim."

"You want to know why, Jason? It's because I couldn't give a shit. Besides, it's a stream, not some bottomless ocean. Get out of there. We need to keep moving."

He pulled himself up the bank, and the ice-cold water had sobered him. He was still muttering threats and complaints about their treatment of him.

"After all, I'm a regular guy. All I did was take a couple drinks while you were busy elsewhere. Well, maybe more than a couple, but you know how it is. I need this stuff."

"And we need you!" Eleanor lashed at him, "Don't you care what happens to my baby? Doesn't it bother you that you could make a mistake when she's on the operating table and kill her?"

He looks chastened at first, but then he assumed a crafty expression.

"Mrs. Porter, there's a flaw in your argument. I don't think she'll ever make it to an operating table. There is no operating table, this is all so much smoke and mirrors. I don't know what you have in mind, but if you think we are going to reach this place and find it intact, assuming we find it at all, you're dreaming. What I think is..."

He didn't get any further. She leapt on him and gave him a slap across the face so hard it echoed through the forest.

"Ouch, that hurt!"

"It was intended to hurt. Listen, forget what Oz said, and listen to what I'm telling you. Either you make it all the way, and do your best to save her, or I'll kill you myself." She dragged out her little pistol, "Don't think I won't use this, because you wouldn't be the first man I've killed, and I doubt you'd be the last. Now, what is it going to be, do you cooperate or not?"

"I said I would." His voice was a whine, like that of a spoiled kid, "You don't need to worry about me."

"I hope not. There's something else. While you are lying drunk in that clearing, Abigail fitted. She went pale and she was shaking, and for a while I thought she would stop breathing. What you know about that?"

For once, he assumed a serious expression, and he looked down at her. He checked her eyes, looked at her tongue, and felt around her neck.

"I can't find anything wrong, so maybe it was one of those things. But if it was a fit, chances are she'll have another one. In which case this could all be a waste of time, and we ought to return to Copperville."

This time, Irvin had had enough, and he swung a punch that connected to his belly. Lee spewed the contents of his stomach over the forest floor, and once again he was hunched over, struggling to breathe. "I wouldn't say things like that, pal. Because I'll tell you, if Eleanor doesn't kill you, I will."

"But you need me."

"Yeah, that's right, we need you. Until you start acting like an asshole, and we stop needing you. You savvy?"

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. But you'll have to stop hitting me."

Irvin gave him a mirthless smile. "Why should I stop hitting you? I'm enjoying it."

They gave him a couple of minutes to recover, and Eleanor put the baby back into the carrier, and they continued on mile after mile. It started to get dark. It was time to halt. There was no moon, and the clouds were thick overhead. He was reluctant to allow them to stop, and he pressed them to keep going when it started to rain again, and they slowed. Everything was drenched, and a ghostly, damp mist was rising through the trees. It was almost impossible to pick their way through, and eventually, he called a halt. He covered Eleanor and the baby with his coat, and found a place to lie under a bush where the leaves were sufficient to keep the worst of the rain off him. He didn't want to sleep. He was worried about the Omega patrols, but he was desperate after the previous night, and eventually he succumbed. During the night, the nightmares return. He wasn't in Iraq, but underground, lost in a

labyrinth. A long way ahead, Abigail was crying, but he couldn't find her, and he ran and ran until his lungs were bursting. Shouting for her, "Abigail, where are you?"

He arrived at the cave, and Jason Lee was standing over the naked body of his daughter, and he wore the robes of an Islamic Mullah. In his right hand he held a long, curved dagger with a jeweled hilt, about to plunge it into her tiny, frail body. He ran to stop him, but he slipped, and fell into a deep pool of water he hadn't seen. He was sinking, drowning, going deeper and deeper, fighting for breath. He looked up to see how far he'd sunk below the surface.

His eyes opened and immediately filled with rainwater. It wasn't light rain, but a deluge. He rushed across to Eleanor. She was clutching the baby tight to her body, and both were shivering uncontrollably.

"Eleanor, tell me you're okay."

"Abigail is worse. A while ago I thought she was going to fit again, and I don't think we have much time left. If we stay here to shelter, she will die."

"And if we go on, we could go around in circles." She looked at him, and the mute appeal for him to believe her was in her eyes. He roused the others.

"We're pushing on. Get up, and get moving."

"It's the middle of the night," Jason objected, but he didn't say any more, when Irvin stood over him, poking him with the muzzle of his rifle. Kelsey was standing next to him, and she held a knife in her hand. The look on her face suggested she was looking for an excuse to use it.

They got to their feet and started stumbling along through the forest, fighting their way against the rain continually beating down on them. They had no way of knowing if the route they were on was the right one.

He dropped back to check on Eleanor, and she looked at him with her deep green eyes. "We're okay. This is the right way."

"You sure? You can tell?"

She nodded. "I can feel it getting closer. Earlier, while you are asleep, I had that dream again. I saw it, the bunker, with all the facilities we need to save our baby. I don't know what it is, but something inside me tells me we are getting nearer. It's like a sixth sense." She grinned, "Or maybe it's like that magnetic thing birds use to navigate."

"If you're sure, we'll keep going in this direction."

"I'm sure."

Her gaze was firm. Physically, she was weak, so weak he was scared

something bad would happen to her. But he had no doubts about what came out of her mind. Mentally, she was strong. And she had something indefinable. She still saw things, and she was rarely wrong.

The horses still worried him, and he couldn't work out how come they appeared to be following them. It was as if someone was telling them the exact route they were taking, and he had to put it down to luck. There were no radios, no cellphones, no way of communicating in post-disaster America. But it was strange, and he made sure they kept as quiet as possible.

Lee continually lagged behind, and Irvin made it his business to drag him along, if he thought he was falling too far back. But progress was so slow, and the rain made the trek even more miserable. He'd covered Eleanor and Abigail with everything he had, but if he draped another coat over her, she would have found it difficult to walk. He was cold. They were all cold, soaked through with the perpetual drizzle, and the mist rising out from the ground that made the landscape appear like they were crossing some ghostly netherworld. He was so preoccupied, struggling along blind, continually turning to make sure Eleanor hadn't fallen, that he almost missed it.

It was only because the rain stopped briefly, the clouds parted, and a shaft of moonlight lit up around no more than fifty yards ahead of him. He was staring at something he hadn't seen for a while, a barbed wire fence, but this was no ordinary barbed wire fence. The place looked like a penitentiary, but instead of the usual concrete and brick construction of the cellblocks, there were crude wooden huts. At each corner of the compound, they'd erected a guard tower with a covered roof, but without electricity, they had no means of lighting up the place at night. He wondered why they would have a prison there, and what kind of prisoners it held, and then he saw movement. He ducked down, but it wasn't a guard. He was inside the wire, a ragged scarecrow of a man, and he hadn't seen him.

He looked around again carefully for guards, but he assumed they were all sheltering from the rain, and he went forward. The guy saw him a few yards before he reached him and waved at him to get down. Oz reached the wire and crouched next to a post.

"Who are you?"

"Man, it's good to see someone from the outside. You are not Omega, are you?"

"I asked who are you? Before I tell you who I am, I want an answer."

"I'm a prisoner, like the rest of us in here."

"What kind of place is?"

"You don't know? This is the Omega re-education camp of West Virginia. We are all people who refused to hand over our supplies and goods, and so they took us prisoner. They're keeping us here until we convince them we accept Omega as the law and swear our loyalty."

"Conditions look bad."

His eyebrows rose. "Bad doesn't begin to cover it. The minimum sentence here is two years, and people only get out when they say they can trust them. Until that day, they rot in this place. Buddy, is there any way you can get us out of here?"

He was about to reply, but he thought back to Eleanor, waiting back there somewhere in the shadows; clutching the baby, protected by Irvin and Kelsey, and dragging along the drunken medic. He had problems of his own, the daughter who needed urgent help, and he was already shaking his head.

"I can't. My baby daughter is sick, and we have to reach this place we're heading for to save her."

"There must be something you can do. Friend, I haven't eaten in three days. Some of us longer."

He hesitated an instant more, then drew the Beretta, and handed it over to him. "This is the best I can do. Use it wisely, and it could be the key that opens the gates."

The man smiled and tucked the gun inside his rags. "It's mighty appreciated. With this, we can threaten one of the guards and take his rifle. With luck, we can get our hands on enough guns to break out."

"Good luck. I'll be seeing you." He stood up and started to walk away, but stopped as four men stepped into the open, blocking his way. Each carried an assault rifle.

"Where do you think you are going?"

Another one said, "Hey, he has a rifle. He's not a prisoner. He's too well-dressed."

"We'll soon sort that out," another voice said, "Mister, who are you? Where did you spring from?"

He was thinking rapidly, working out how to get past them. Without the pistol, all he had was the rifle on his back, which would take too long, and he'd be filled with lead before he shot the first man. The knife, too slow, and while he was still thinking they came nearer. One man came up behind him, slammed something heavy like a rifle butt over his head. While he was

reeling from the blow, they snatched the rifle off him, and started hassling him toward the prison gate. It opened, and they pushed him inside. He was trapped.

He felt the waves of desperation churning through his body, ripping him apart, and all he knew was the sense of failure. He had to get Abigail to Harpers Ferry and find that underground facility, or she'd die. Even assuming they could get there in time, and that was by no means certain. They continued pushing him toward the hut inside the gates. When he was inside, the rifle butt slammed down on his head again. He sank to his knees, and they attacked him. Hitting him with boots and clubs, and when he tried to stand to fight back, they came and even harder until he sank to the ground, too dizzy and confused to put up a fight.

He was facing the door, still trying to rise again, determined to fight back, when the door opened, and a man walked in. He had to be a prisoner, and he looked familiar. He recognized him as the prisoner he'd given the pistol to, and the Beretta suddenly appeared in his hand. The muzzle flamed as he fired and took down the first guard. He fired again, and a second man went down. Oz was already moving, ignoring the pain of the vicious beating.

He slammed a fist into the first guard, and another blow into the guts that left him retching. As he bent over, he took hold of his head and punched him on the nose. As he reeled back, he slammed his knee, and it connected a savage blow between his legs. The prisoner fired twice, and it was all over.

He looked at Oz. "Are you okay?"

He was struggling to regain his breath, but he managed to nod. "Sure, and thanks. Listen, I have to go. Like I said, my daughter needs urgent help." He picked up the Remington they'd leaned against the side of the hut, "I could do with the Beretta back. I'm kind of attached to that gun. Besides, you have four assault rifles now, and if you are half the man I think you are, you will get some of your pals in here to use them and finish what you started. But I wouldn't waste too much time. Those shots will have alerted the camp. How many guards are there here?"

"About ten, although four went out to hunt down an escaped prisoner, so there are only two more. Don't worry. We'll get them. And good luck to you, and thanks."

Oz nodded, raced outside, and opened the gate. In the distance, a guard was running through the camp, shouting for help. The prisoner who'd helped him was waiting, and he fired a short burst that stitched several bullets into

his belly. Oz didn't wait to find out what had happened to the last guard. He opened the gate and raced outside. They were waiting for him at the edge of the forest.

Eleanor ran to him and hugged him. "I thought you were dead."

"Not yet, but we need to get out of here before the other guards turn up."

"We can't do that. We can't. We have a problem."

He stared at Irvin. "Jason Lee?"

"He got separated from us in the dark, and we don't know where he is."

They found him less than half a mile away. Visibility was poor, but they didn't need to see him. They heard him. The drunken singing came from inside a clump of bushes, and he dragged him out, kicking and struggling.

"What do you think you're playing at?"

He tried to stand, wobbling on his feet as he brushed himself down.

"I was minding my own business, that's all. I needed a drink, somewhere quiet where I could enjoy it."

"I warned you, Jason. You continue pulling stunts like this, and you'll be looking for a dentist to supply you with new teeth."

He was still swaying, and he darted him a belligerent look. "You lay a finger on me, Porter, and I won't do the procedure."

He'd had enough. He hit him. Then, a hard driving punch into his belly, and as he folded, he slammed a double jab into his kidneys. He cried out in pain.

"You don't wanna listen, do you? You're doing this whether you like it or whether you don't. Now start walking."

They retraced their steps to where the women were waiting. The clamor from the prison camp was loud, men shouting, guns firing, and then ominously, the sound of hoof beats.

"They've arrived, the Omega patrol."

He looked sternly. "Which means we need to be out of here, somewhere else. Let's go."

They stumbled on, and Irvin kept a firm grip on Jason's collar so he couldn't escape or do anything else stupid. Like getting drunk again or trying to run. The noise receded in the distance, and they left the furor from the prison camp behind them. Or so they thought. He caught up with Eleanor, and he could see she looked even more worried.

"What is it?"

"I've been working it out, and at this rate, we won't make it. Do you

realize we've made barely ten miles in twenty-four hours? At this rate, it could take us at least a week to reach this place, probably longer, and then we have to find the bunker. She doesn't have a week. Look at her. I doubt she has more than a couple of days, even if we're lucky."

He stared at their baby. She was almost lifeless. He was shocked at the way in just a few short hours she'd faded so quickly. He had to do something, and he considered their options. There were none.

"We have to keep going. We'll speed up, and we don't stop for anything."

"We won't make it," she murmured, her voice sick with despair.

"We'll make it, Eleanor."

They walked on, and he knew in his head it was hopeless.

Yet what else do we have? Only to keep going, keep hoping, and keep praying. Yes, prayers can't do her any harm. Goddamnit, she needs something.

He silently prayed to God. He'd ignored him for such a long time, but was asking him for help, not for himself, but for a sick infant. He was trying to remember the words he learned as a child, the Lord's Prayer, for one. It had been so long, he only recalled snatches of it, although he did his best.

He was still trying to remember the last lines of the prayer when Irvin shouted, "I hear water. Somewhere off to the west."

"How does that help us?"

"It'll take a minute, and I want to give Lee a good ducking, see if it sobers him up."

"We don't have time."

Jason was shouting his objections, until Irvin thumped him. "Keep it quiet, Lee. We're in enemy territory. Give me a few minutes, and we'll be on our way. Believe me, it'll speed us up."

He reluctantly agreed, and they detoured along another path that headed to the west. It wasn't as close as they thought, and they passed a small village of abandoned houses. The skeletons of cattle lay in the fields where they'd starved to death, and the inevitable cars lying on overgrown highways, abandoned. As they passed, nesting birds took flight from inside.

"How far is this river, Irvin? We don't have time for this."

Irvin was striding along in front, dragging Lee with him.

"It's okay. We've arrived."

They gathered on the banks of the stretch of water, and it was more than

a stream, but less than a river. Tied to a rotting wooden landing stage was a handy sized rowing boat, which suggested it was navigable. Irvin climbed down the bank and tossed Lee into the water, and he went under. When he surfaced, spluttering to get his breath, Irvin pushed him under again. "That feel better?"

"That's it. I'm not doing this anymore."

"I say different. Cut out the booze, and get with the program, Jason. We've taken enough of your shit. Why don't you try doing things right from here on in?"

He gave him an angry glare, but he didn't argue. Instead, he sat down on the bank, his arms clamped around him to ward off the cold from his ducking. Oz walked past him and looked along the river, trying to work something out. He watched it for several minutes and looked at Irvin.

"Can you see what I can see? The direction the current is moving?"

Irvin studied it for a few moments. "North, I guess."

"North. Which happens to be where we're going. There's a boat we can use, and the current is flowing fast. It'll be quicker than walking, a damn sight quicker, and it may hide us from the Omega patrols."

He grinned for the first time in a long time. "You're right. Everybody, get in the boat. We're going for a sail."

Eleanor and Kelsey stared at it for a few moments, looked at each other, and shrugged. They stepped into the flimsy vessel. The three men followed them, and Irvin took the oars. They cast off the mooring line, and immediately the current swept them into the middle of the narrow river. Oz took the tiller to steer the boat while Irvin rowed strongly, but before they got far, they heard them again. Hoof beats. He'd been wrong, taking the boat wouldn't hide them from their pursuers.

A moment later the horsemen burst onto the bank, flung up their rifles, and shots splashed all around them. Two bullets tore chunks of wood from the side of the boat. Oz unslung his rifle and shouted at Jason to steer the boat for him. He let go the tiller and raised the Remington. He slid back the bolt with a smooth action, chambered a round, and fired. It was a quick shot, and he hadn't really been aiming, but he saw a man topple out of the saddle. The rest of them continued firing, and he chambered another round, aiming at a man sitting on a horse at the back. The horse was a fine, tall stallion, and the guy looked better dressed than the others. He was also wearing an armored vest he'd acquired from somewhere, and Oz spotted the insignia on his

epaulettes.

He couldn't make out what they were, but there was no doubt about it. He was the man in charge, and he needed to go down. He took careful aim and squeezed the trigger, but at the last second another rider blocked the path of the bullet, and the lead hit him instead. He tumbled off his horse, and by the time he'd reloaded, the target had spurred his horse into a thick clump of trees. The other men followed and began sniping at them from behind cover. They took no more hits, and Irvin pulled strongly on the oars, until they'd rounded a bend in the river, and they were out of sight.

"We lost them," Kelsey said. She'd unstrung the crossbow, loaded a fresh bolt, and was looking for a target. She seemed disappointed she couldn't see someone else to kill.

He nodded. "You're right, but not for long. They'll follow, and on horseback they can speed ahead and cut us off. Our problems haven't ended. They'll get worse the nearer we get to our destination. When we arrive, they'll be waiting for us."

"Can we still make it?" Eleanor asked him. Oz met her eyes, but he couldn't bring himself to answer her. Any reasonable calculation of the odds would give a straight no. All he could say was he'd keep trying, keep fighting.

If it's humanly possible to get there, we'll do it. That's the sixty-four-dollar question. Is it possible? Any sane person would opine the answer is no.

CHAPTER FOUR

They made good time, and the rowing boat sped downriver. Heading north, heading toward Harpers Ferry, and they began to regain some hope. Oz worked out with Irvin pulling hard on the oars, and him doing turn and about, and if the pace continued, in twelve hours they'd almost be there. They stood a chance of reaching the bunker in time for Abigail.

They were swinging around a wide bend in the river when the horsemen appeared again on the bank. The man he identified as their leader was positioned well back, where he could duck inside the tree cover if they started shooting. To their surprise, the Omegas didn't open fire. They were trying new tactic. The man cupped his hands to use them as a loudhailer and shouted for them to give it up.

"We know who you are, Porter. We also know what you're up to, and where you're going. Harpers Ferry, is that about right? Are you that stupid you thought you could hide if from us?"

Inside the boat, they tasted the prospect of defeat. If Omega knew where they were going, it would be easy for them to gallop ahead and be waiting for when they arrived.

He was puzzled about something he knew to be important. He recognized the voice, and yet the man was in the shadows, so he couldn't make out the face. And then it came to him. The former FBI SAC, Barry Mendez. A big shot in the Omega organization, and unlike the verminous deputies who surrounded him, wearing their distinctive black armbands with the Omega logo, Mendez sported the uniform of his organization. All black, black knee-high boots, pants, shirt, coat, and hat. Even his Kevlar vest was black, and if the intention was to look threatening, satanic, he pulled it off. They all knew what he was capable of, and if the Devil needed any competition, Mendez would be right up there to provide it.

He nodded to Irvin to pull harder, as he shouted back. "What you want, Mendez? We are not a threat to you."

He laughed, and it was like pebbles thrown at a brick wall, harsh, grating, threatening.

"We're not a threat to you, not to any of you. We're the law, and you must understand we can't have people like you in our rear. Setting up your own communities, able to hit us when we least expect it, and refusing to hand

over your supplies to our central supply chain. I've spoken my boss, and he's prepared to make a deal."

"Which boss? Who is he?"

"The name doesn't matter."

That was bullshit, and they both knew it. He'd recognized something about the shadowy figure who'd narrowly escaped after the attack on Copperville. Something was hidden deep in the back of his mind. He was convinced that finding out who he was, would go a long way toward solving the puzzle for which they all wanted the answer. Why?

How had the sophisticated American infrastructure collapsed, and most important, why? Was it an accident, someone pressed the wrong button and set in motion a chain of events? Or something more ominous. A deliberate attack on the systems that kept the nation running, and if that was the case, what was the reason? A foreign power, someone who'd decided on an underhand thrust into the belly of the U.S.

Russia was capable of all kinds of weird stuff when it came to attacking computer systems, and just before everything went down, there'd been rumors they'd breached the most secure systems in the nation, including the NSA and even Cheyenne Mountain.

Whether it was true or not didn't make a jot of difference. Their hacking outfits, some known as troll factories, were famous throughout the world. Maybe infamous would describe them better. There was North Korea, the perpetual enemy of freedom, and the enemy of America. They'd harbored a grudge ever since Kim's takeover of the North, and his unprovoked and bloodthirsty attack on South Korea. America had fought to defend South Korea, and her sons had shed blood to achieve victory. Ever since, North Korea had used a variety of methods to hit back, from commando attacks to a program of building strategic nuclear missiles, and like their pals in Russia, sophisticated hacking attacks on the nation's computer systems.

That was the problem, nobody knew. If they did, there was a chance they'd be able to start searching for ways to fix things. If it was an attack from outside, was it still ongoing? And there was the big question of America's strategic defenses. Had the disaster taken down the nuclear submarines, the Navy carrier battle fleets, and missile systems? On balance, Oz thought the answer was yes. Without electricity, without a system of computerized command and control, nothing would work. But still, there was no sign that any external enemy had invaded, and if that was their intention, surely they'd

have already seen foreign soldiers on American soil. Yet there had been none. Did that mean the attack came from inside. Maybe. But the only answer could give was there were no answers. Not yet.

"We're not a threat to you," he shouted back to Mendez, "I don't know what we can do to convince you, but all we want to do is get on with our lives and run our town. As for handing over supplies, you can forget it. If you people want to eat, you do the same as we do. You work damn hard to find your own."

"My boss won't accept that, Porter. It's like I said, he can't have a hostile force at his back, maybe preparing to stage attacks on our facilities and food stores. He just can't take that chance. Listen, pal, why don't you get with the program? Accept Omega is running things, and work with us."

"The answer is no. And if you want to fight us, I promise you, Mendez, we'll hit back twice as hard every time you try something."

"You are making a big mistake."

Behind him, he heard Kelsey mutter, "Fuck him."

The next moment, she let loose a bolt from her crossbow, and it flew unerringly toward the horsemen gathered around Mendez. The bolt took a man in the center of his head, and because the weapon was silent, at first they didn't realize what was happening. The rider's horse stepped away for a few paces, and they couldn't see the man was either dying or already dead, until he slumped, and they stared at the boat in alarm. Kelsey had already reloaded, and a second bolt flew. This time, she managed to hit a man in the shoulder, and then they were racing away in panic, Mendez shouting inaudible threats.

The rowing boat swept round the bend in the river, and once again they'd lost them. Knowing all they had to do was follow the course of the river, and soon they'd be ahead of them. Next time, their reception was sure to be hot.

The boat ate up the miles, and strangely, the horse belonging to the man Kelsey had shot followed them along the bank, trotting along and keeping pace with them. As if the animal had adopted them for some reason, and Kelsey chuckled.

"That horse knows who're the good guys, and he's joined us for the duration."

They weren't too sure about that, but maybe she was right. The horse showed no signs of leaving, and they traveled for hour after hour, and still it

stayed with them.

They traveled for the rest of that day, and through the night. Every hour, drawing nearer to their destination. The next attack came two hours after dawn. The river suddenly widened, with a wide-open area on either bank before the dark curtain of trees and overgrowth. They charged out like a line of cavalry, and he counted fifteen horsemen, and every rifle was firing at them. Immediately, he understood why they'd chosen that place. There was no cover on either side of the river for hundreds of yards, and if they'd managed to kill them during that maddened charge, or at least some of them, there'd have been no escape. Except to go ashore for them to pick them off as they crossed the open ground.

At the same time, they'd left themselves exposed, and whoever was leading that charge, and he soon recognized Barry Mendez, he'd made a big mistake. What was true for them was also true for the Omegas. They had no cover, and he and Irvin began to pick them off. Bolts flew from Kelsey's crossbow, and they'd taken down five horsemen before they swerved away and retreated. But they could see them, several hundred yards away, and once again the river narrowed. Soon they'd riddle the boat with bullets. Which should mean some of them would take hits, and he was devising a way to stop that happening.

He scanned the ground, and almost immediately he saw it. An innocuous log that when the water was high had floated down and then got stuck on dry land when it receded. The log was big enough for man to hide behind, about three feet high, and twenty feet long, with a straddle of roots at one end and branches at the other. He pointed it out to Irwin.

"You see that? We are going ashore, and I want you to hide behind it. We going to be near the men. It's the only way. We carry on, and they'll murder us when we go past that narrow stretch of river."

"I'm with you, buddy. What are you planning to do?"

We'll beach the boat and use it for cover. You go forward, keeping low, and get behind that log about fifty yards from the river. If they charge, you'll be in a position to hit them hard when they get near. With any luck, they'll panic and charge away, and we can carry on."

He shrugged. "It's worth a try. I guess we don't have anything else."

Oz steered for the shore, and they pulled the boat up onto the pebbles. Immediately, Irvin dove out and began sneaking toward the log. Oz reckoned it was unlikely they'd seen him, and he got the rest of them out of the boat

and crouched behind it. They waited, and at first he thought his plan had failed. And then they came. They were like a raiding party of Sioux Indians, charging down on them, whooping in triumph. They knew they had them, knew all they had to do was run them down with the horses, and it would all be over. Except it wasn't over.

When they were less than fifty yards from the log, Irvin opened fire. The semi-auto rifle cracked up a series of three short bursts, and the Marine vet made every one count. Before they realized what was happening, four of their number had tumbled off the horses. Kelsey took down another with a bolt from a crossbow, and Oz hit two more with precision shooting from the Remington. They'd had enough. They spurred their horses to a halt and swerved them around. One man tumbled off and fell to the ground, and they ran, streaking back for the cover of the trees. The man who'd fallen started to run, but Kelsey finished him off with another bolt from the crossbow, and all they had left was to scream threats at them.

"You are dead, Porter," Mendez screamed, "As I live and breathe, I won't stop. I won't rest until you and yours are all dead. Remember that. We'll be seeing you in Harpers Ferry."

They waited until certain they were gone, and Irvin climbed to his feet. He walked back to the boat. Oz shoved it back into the water, and they continued their journey along the river. They estimated they were around ten to fifteen miles from Harpers Ferry when the course of the river suddenly veered away to the east, toward the sea. They'd come as far as they could. Once again, they beached the boat, and this time they abandoned it. He was worried about Eleanor, who was worsening, almost keeping pace with the deterioration in Abigail's condition, and he doubted her ability to make even another few miles. Kelsey had an idea.

"The horse, he's still with us, and he has his saddle on. Look, over there."

The animal was grazing quietly a few yards away, every now and again looking at them. Not scared by them but making sure they weren't about to leave without him. Kelsey walked toward him, murmuring gentle words of encouragement. The horse pricked up its ears and slowly walked toward her. She took hold of the reins and led the horse back.

"Eleanor, this is for you. Do you think you can ride him?"

"Yes, of course, and thank you. Hold Abigail for a moment while I mount."

She didn't manage it, and Oz had to help her up, putting one foot in the stirrup and then pushing her body up so she could put her leg over the horse. When she was settled, he passed Abigail up, and she held her, and for the first time in a long time, smiled.

"Thank you, I never thought I would make it."

Oz nodded. "We need to move on. We won't get there before Omega, but at least but we don't need to give them time to set up a sophisticated ambush. With any luck, they'll still be preparing when we get there, and we'll deal with it."

They made it halfway when they heard the dogs. Irvin gave a look of exasperation.

"What the hell is it now? I thought we'd have a clear run for the next few miles, and now this. What is it, you reckon? A pack of wild dogs?"

"Not wild dogs." He gave him a look, "It's our friends. This is their latest move."

"Shit, and with only ten miles to go. We need to close up, and when we see them, we start shooting."

"Sure." He looked around, and he'd gone. "Where's Jason?"

He wasn't anywhere, and he told them to wait while he looked around for him. This time, he'd made almost a half-mile, and Oz was furious. They'd lost so much time. He was dead drunk, fully unconscious, and he'd had enough. He ripped off his backpack, and there was nothing in there, save for moonshine. Bottles, flasks, and he found an old baby's feeding bottle. In each case, it was filled with the same substance. Strong booze, and he tipped it away. Lee was still unconscious, and he abandoned the backpack and hoisted him on his shoulders. It took him awhile to walk back to where they waited, and Irvin greeted him with a mixture of relief and alarm.

"Thank Christ you found the drunken bum. I thought he was gone for good this time."

They appeared a few minutes later, and this time it wasn't Omega. These were Raiders. Eight men, and there was something about them that prickled the senses. Where most men and women were stringy, some even emaciated, most wrinkled through poor diet, and frequently no diet. These were full-fleshed, and not one of them was in any doubt.

"They're cannibals," Kelsey said, "Jesus Christ, we can't let them get their hands on us. They'll eat us, limb by limb, body part by body part."

"They are getting their hands on nobody. Hold your fire, and wait until

the dogs are real close. When they come, we'll hit them with everything we have."

They broke out into the open, a pack of around a dozen dogs of varying breeds. They all had one thing in common. They were savage, feral, barking and snarling; searching for human prey to attack, maul, savage, and hold for their masters to kill.

They were in a fight to the death, and this time, it wasn't so easy. The dogs moved fast, with an instinct for the hunt. Although their initial burst of firing brought down almost half the pack, the rest were undeterred, and they kept coming. Seconds later, the savage animals were in amongst them, the jaw snapping, barking in triumph, and then pain as they hit them. Oz threw down his rifle, pulled out the Beretta, and fired, holding his combat knife in his other hand. He stood over Eleanor, holding the baby in her arms.

A huge wolfhound leapt over the boat, and he was on them. Oz snapped off a shot. It took it in the flank, but in its savagery, the dog refused to back off. A split second later it was on him. He felt its hot breath close to his neck as the savage jaws opened, preparing to clamp shut on his jugular and rip out his throat. He couldn't bring the pistol to bear to get off another shot, for Eleanor had jumped back and pinioned his arm against the boat, so he brought up the combat knife and stabbed hard. Again, all he managed was a flesh wound, and the dog yelped in agony, but still it kept coming. Snarling and barking, its dripping jaws exposed, waiting to carry out its appointed task of inflicting mortal hurt on its prey.

Oz stabbed again, but the animal was moving, and the blow missed. Then the jaws clamped down on his arm. He couldn't move, couldn't bring the knife to bear, and he knew the next attack would be when it let go and lunged for his neck. Desperately, he made the only move he could think of and dropped the Beretta. With a frantic effort, he wrenched his arm free and took the knife from the arm clamped in the animal's jaws. Some instinct made the dog turn and understand what was about to happen. The jaws opened, and it made a dive for his throat. He stabbed frantically, the point going in beneath the dog, and once again he felt the hot, stinking breath of the predator carnivore so close they almost touched.

But his knife got there first, going deep into the animal's chest, and it screeched in agony, but he didn't stop. Kept the blade moving, seeking a vital organ. He wrenched even more, and the point found the heart. The dog jerked, a savage movement that almost ripped the knife in his hand, but it was

the final dying effort, and the animal fell to one side, dead. Another dog was racing toward him, and he wasn't sure if it was about to savage him or begin tearing strips of meat from the animal he'd just killed. He wasn't inclined to think about it and dove onto the Beretta, brought it up, and pumped three shots into the dog. They all hit, and the animal dropped to the ground without a sound.

Around him, the fight was coming to an end, but fifty yards in front of them, the Raiders were racing toward them. They carried a variety of weapons, rifles, shotguns, pistols, machetes, and even agricultural implements, scythes and hoes converted into spears. The attack was almost as fearsome as that of their dogs, and perhaps they were enraged. They'd killed their hunting pack, and they descended on them like a howling mob.

It reminded him of movies he'd seen about packs of zombies roaming the country after some biological disaster, and the thought flashed across his mind.

This could be similar. Are they human, or are they zombies?

He didn't spend too much time thinking about it, for human or zombie, their intention was clear. They were coming to kill them, and he knelt down next to the Remington, snatched it up, ratcheted a round into the chamber, and fired. He fired repeatedly until the magazine was empty, and there was no time to reload.

He put down the rifle and fired single shots from the Beretta. Kelsey and Irvin were blazing away with everything they had, and to increase the firepower, the girl was using her silenced pistol, firing shot after shot, not having time to reload the crossbow. She clutched the combat knife in her teeth, the warlike, warrior queen, all of seventeen-years-old. She watched them carefully as they drew nearer, and he understood. She was waiting for the moment when she could put her hand on the hilt and get in amongst them.

Stabbing, hacking and slashing, killing, and for a moment he thought she was wounded, until he realized she'd been showered with blood from the dogs during that epic fight, but he had no time to consider. Eleanor was crouched down, covering the baby with her body, and he left and took off. He was shoulder to shoulder with Irvin and Kelsey as they hit the Raider party head on.

The fight was like a prison riot. A few shots fired, men using fists, spear points, boots, any improvised weapon they could find. His opponent went down, only wounded, and he tried to clamp his teeth onto Oz's leg, so

desperate to hurt, maim, wound, and to kill. He snatched the leg away and kicked him hard in the throat. He clutched his neck, fighting to breathe. Oz leaned down as he ran past him and slashed with a knife. The red line opened up beneath his chin, and blood began to pour out. The guy wouldn't be any more trouble. He hit the next man, and this time it was a hard, slugging fight. The man also had a blade, but this was a two-foot-long machete, and they circled each other for several seconds, looking for an advantage. Then he came in, feinted with the blade, and lashed out with a fist. Oz narrowly avoided it and swiped the outstretched arm with his knife. He connected, and blood dripped from the wound, but the wild, savage-looking Raider just smiled at him.

"You'll need to do better than that, pilgrim. A flesh wound won't stop me. You were mine. I tell you, I can already taste you, and if that's your woman down there, she'll make a tasty second course."

He felt hot fury, catapulted up off the ground, and leapt at him. His head connected with the man's belly, and with a whoosh the air went out of him, and he went down. He jumped on him, bringing down the knife in a hard, stabbing blow to finish him, but he blocked it with the machete. The arm snapped back and brought the machete down for a killer lunge. He dodged, the blade whistled harmlessly past, and he attacked again, plunging the knife deep into his chest. Blood spurted out, and the man fell. Immediately, he looked around for another opponent, but the survivors were running, and they were already halfway across the open ground. Three dogs ran with them, animals that had somehow survived the fight. Perhaps they'd pull back, seeing they couldn't win.

He looked around, and they were panting heavily, fighting to get their breath back. Each of them covered in blood. Even Eleanor was covered in wet, red blotches.

"Is anyone hurt?"

Irvin grinned. "Not hardly, but you should see the other guys. What about you, are you sure you're not wounded?"

He looked down, and to his surprise, a knife had gouged his arm, and blood was dripping down.

"It's just a flesh wound. Hey, where's Jason?"

This time, he hadn't run. He'd found a shallow fold in the ground and was gripping the earth, face down, burbling in terror. "They can't kill me. They can't kill me. I need a drink, for God's sake. Where's my pack?"

Oz hauled him to his feet. "No one is going to kill you except me. Your pack's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone? That's very precious to me."

"Too bad, you lost it several miles back, remember? You were unconscious on the ground. I guess you mislaid it."

He wore a look of horror. Or perhaps terror was a better description. "No, no, you don't understand. It's valuable. I have to have it back. It's really important."

"It's gone, so forget it. We're moving on."

"I'll get the horse. I can see him grazing over there. The clever animal found a patch of grass."

Kelsey went for the horse, while Eleanor ripped off a strip of cloth and wrapped it around his arm.

"When we get to the bunker, I'll find some antiseptics. You need to be careful about that wound. If it gets infected, you will die."

"Yeah, when we get to the bunker, they'll have antiseptics, no question. We're not far away, Eleanor. Soon we'll be able to treat Abigail, and it'll all be over."

They helped her onto the horse and passed the baby up. They'd almost made it, and they walked with a new energy in their stride. Eleanor was riding the horse, which she named Pepper, and she rode it like a pro, with the baby clutched in the sling. Even Jason was walking instead of shambling, although they watched him carefully. He was a drunk, and they knew like a drug addict, he'd do anything, perhaps even kill, to get the fix his body craved. But they were nearly there. Harpers Ferry, and with luck, he estimated they'd make it in a little more than two hours.

Those two hours would be the longest of his life, all their lives. Apart from Eleanor, riding the horse, they were beyond exhaustion. They lacked sleep, they'd had little food, and the constant pressure of fighting off the attacks had taken its toll. He was almost in a dreamlike state when they stumbled on the barn. Once a farmer's pride and joy, an aluminum hay barn, now empty after everything had been looted. Not unusual, but the rain had started again, and he allowed them a ten-minute halt inside. They slumped down, almost insensible from total exhaustion, and he had to stand again to stop himself falling asleep.

He walked around the dark confines of the barn, just to keep himself awake, but after several circuits, he knew the truth. He wasn't awake. He'd

been almost sleepwalking. Moving under the brain's autopilot, and he had no idea of what he'd seen or heard for the past few minutes. He looked around. Kelsey was feeding the horse with some scraps of hay she'd found that the looters had missed. Eleanor was comforting the baby, murmuring soft words of reassurance that the dying infant may or may not have heard. Irvin sat with his back against the wall of the barn, fighting to stay awake. He walked up to him, and his eyes jerked open.

"What is it? Is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong. But we can't stay here for long; otherwise we'll fall asleep. Five more minutes, and then we have to move again."

He gave a simulated groan. "You are a slave driver, Porter. How about another ten minutes?"

"Five."

He turned away, and then looked back. "Where is he?"

Irvin was already scrambling to his feet. "No, don't tell me. Not again."

"He's gone. Dammit, I thought I was awake the whole time."

"Me, too, but he can't have gone far."

They went to the door and looked out. There was no sign of him. He told Kelsey to stay with Eleanor and keep watch. Then they set out to find him. Oz looked everywhere, to all four points of the compass, and there was nothing to go on, no indication of where he'd gone. And then he found a footprint in the ground, and he pointed to the south. "He went that way. The bastard's trying to go back."

"Let's go get him."

They followed the trail, and a thought that had been nagging at him surfaced, and he mulled it over.

"What is it with Jason Lee? Why does he keep trying to go back, when he knows what will happen? We've all made it quite clear if he screws with us, he's in deep shit. Yet he keeps trying, and it can't be for the booze, because he hasn't got any. Surely he knows if he tries to make it back to Copperville, he won't get halfway before either the Omegas pick him up, or the Raiders. Either way, he won't get a drop to drink, and he'll wind up in one of those prison camps, or worse."

Irvin shuddered. "By worse, you are talking about the Raiders. Jesus, I'd put a bullet in my head before I let them take me."

"Exactly, so what's behind it all? Why does he keep trying?"

Irvin supplied the only possible answer. "Because there is something

powerful pushing him along. My guess is he frightened of something. Or someone, but who?"

They came to the answer at the same time.

"Colonel Weaver."

Irvin nodded. "He never expected us to get this far, and I bet anything he ordered him to do everything possible to hold us up. I'll bet he encouraged him to bring along every drop of shine he could carry, and said all he needed to do was drink himself stupid. We'd have to turn back when we gave up trying to drag along the drunk."

"You're right. He warned me about having a drunk carry out the procedure on Abigail. The bastard pressured Jason to do this so we'd go back and bolster the Copperville garrison."

"And Abigail would have died."

He didn't want to add anything to that. The logical thread of the conversation was the conclusion was she could die anyway. Either before they got there, or on the operating table, under the trembling hands of the town drunk. But that ignored a basic tenet of both Porter and Cobb's philosophy and training. They'd been Marines, first in, last out, and Marines didn't tamely give up at the first sign of trouble. They kept fighting, and if necessary, went down fighting.

He doesn't get it," Irvin said, "He doesn't understand. Wasn't he a militia, the Colonel?" Oz nodded, "In which case he has no idea of how regular front-line troops operate. The bastard!"

Irvin stopped when he saw the expression on Oz's face.

"I know what you're thinking, and you should forget it. The only way to beat them is to reach Harpers Ferry, get Abigail to this bunker, and make sure the surgery is a success. Forget Weaver."

"I'll deal with Weaver. I don't plan to forget a man who's trying to get my daughter killed. Jason is a drunk, and he's not in his right mind. The Colonel doesn't drink, and he knows exactly what he's doing."

"Don't do anything stupid. There has to be another way, Oz."

"We'll see. Now let's find this bastard and get back on the road."

He wasn't drunk and insensible when he found him. Neither was he singing in an alcoholic funk. He was hiding behind a tree, wet and shivering with cold and fear. They came up on either side of him, and he whirled from one man to the other.

"I swear to God, I didn't mean it. I just got lost, is all. Don't hurt me.

Please don't hurt me."

"Was it Weaver?"

His eyes jerked up in surprise. "Weaver?" His expression seemed a look of cunning, "Why would you think that?"

"We are nearly there, so I can carry you the rest of the way," Oz snarled, "You can do everything we need to do with a busted knee."

He took out his Beretta and pointed it at his left knee. "I want a straight answer. Five seconds. Four, three, two..."

"Yes, it was," he screamed, "He threatened to destroy my business. You know I've been distilling moonshine. If he did that, and busted my stills, he even talked about passing a town ordinance to prevent the distillation of liquor. I'd be finished. Ruined, I don't know a way to survive. With nothing to drink, life wouldn't be worth living."

"Tell us what he told you."

"That's it. He said to take as much shine as I could carry in my pack, and drink as much and as often as I wanted. To hold you up, until you gave up trying for Harpers Ferry, and came back to Copperville. He said he couldn't stop you going, but he needed every man to defend the town, and it was the only way."

They began dragging him back, and he didn't resist. Oz pulled him close so he couldn't get away, and he made sure he'd stopped shaking enough to listen.

"This is the last time, pal. We're not going back, not for anything, and you're going to Harpers Ferry. If necessary, I'll carry your cold, dead body the rest of the way, but you should know whatever you try to pull, it won't work. We'll find this bunker, get Abigail into a sterile OR, and you'll save her. And, Jason...you don't want to know the alternative. Don't even think about it."

A few hours without alcohol had made him a changed man, and at last, he seemed prepared to listen. "Look, I was wrong, okay. You know the worst of what I've done, and I'll do everything possible to help the baby. There's just one thing you need to know."

He looked at him and waited. "What is it?"

"I can't do it sober. Man, look at my hands." He held them up, and they were shaking, like he had fever, "I need a drink to do it, just a small drink."

He thought it over and nodded. "A small one, and that's it. Let's go."

They resumed their trek north. Eleanor rode in front, high on the back of

the horse, clutching Abigail in the carrier. In the rear, Irvin and Oz were taking no chances, and they stayed closed to Jason. Just in case. They plodded on, mile after mile, and the ground became a misty haze. They no longer saw where they walked. They just followed the horse, and kept within arm's reach of Jason Lee. Eleanor abruptly turned around, her face wearing a broad smile.

"I can see it, the first of the houses at Harpers Ferry. We're nearly there. It can't be more than..."

The sound of the shot interrupted her. A single bullet, and Jason Lee went down with a single cry. He lay still on the wet ground. Oz raced forward to drag her off the horse and get her and the baby under cover. Although it had ended, the one man they couldn't manage without was lying lifeless in the mud. Eleanor huddled on the ground a few yards away, and she locked her gaze with him. He saw it in her eyes, and no doubt she saw it just as clearly in his own eyes.

This is the end. We're finished. Our baby is going to die.

CHAPTER FIVE

Irvin bent over the body, and he abruptly straightened. "He's alive! I don't know how, but look, he's moving."

They turned him over and inspected the wound. There was no blood. Oz reached inside his coat and came out with a hard, metal object. A hip flask, dented out of shape. He held it out for them to see. "Maybe the booze saved him after all."

"And saved Abigail," Eleanor murmured, "Is he conscious?"

Jason was groaning, and then his eyes open. "He's conscious, sure. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been kicked by a mule. First, something slammed into me, and when I fell, it was like I'd fallen onto a chunk of scrap metal."

"Metal? There shouldn't be any scrap metal around here."

He explored in the grass and weeds next to where he'd fallen, and sure enough, there was a rectangular sheet of metal embedded in the ground. About a yard on each side, and he had an idea.

"Give me a moment. I need to check the map."

He dragged it out of his pocket, the diagram Kate Young had drawn what seemed like a lifetime ago, and not just a couple of days. He found the line of the river, the place where she'd sketched in the town of Harpers Ferry, and he found the X. The X that marked the spot, the emergency entrance exit, and it was outside of the town, around five miles, although it was hard to tell. She'd hand drawn the map after seeing it briefly on the computer screen before it went dark, but his hopes soared.

"It can't be, can it? Surely, we come all this distance, and find it by mistake."

He cleared dirt and weeds from around the hatch. It was secure, rusted tight, and he looked around for something to free off the metal. He used the butt of the Beretta as a hammer and began chipping away at the rust. The hostiles were still out there, and he'd almost forgotten about them in the exhilaration of finding the entrance to the bunker. Several shots pinged over their heads, and he shouted at them to get down.

"Whoever it is, Raiders or Omega, they're still out there. Irvin, Kelsey, cover me while I free this hatch. If I can get it open, well be safe inside."

Eleanor was staring at him. "You think this is the entrance to the

bunker?"

"It can't be anything else. Stay down with Abigail. This won't take long. And keep that idiot's head down. If he takes a bullet, and there isn't a booze flask to stop it, we've wasted our time."

"I've got him."

She snaked out a hand, grabbed his coat, and pulled the medic down with her, thrusting his face into the dirt, despite his protests. Irvin returned fire, and Kelsey joined in, using the silenced pistol. He worked steadily, a continual hammering at the metalwork. His reward came when flakes of rust fell away, and at last the hatch moved. He felt elated, enough to try to get his fingers under the edge and pull up the hatch.

No go, it was still stuck fast. He searched for a way to apply more leverage to free it when he found the metal ring at the side of the hatch, a lifting point for the heavy door. He grabbed it with both hands and heaved. Still, it wouldn't move. He needed a lever to get it open. In desperation, he inserted the barrel of his Remington, using the stock to apply pressure on the fulcrum he'd created. He heaved and struggled, his muscles screaming with the strain, and suddenly something gave. The hatch opened, no more than an inch, but he heaved again, and suddenly it was free. He flung it all the way back. Below him, he could see an aluminum staircase leading down into the darkness. He looked at Eleanor.

"Get down there with Abigail, and take Jason. We'll follow you down."

She nodded, crawled towards the hatch, and disappeared into the depths, pulling the medic behind her. He shouted at Irvin and Kelsey to move it, and they snaked back across the ground. The shooting had increased, with more bullets flying overhead, and Oz pushed them down into the bunker ahead of him. He took a last look around, and they'd worked out they were about to lose them. Men were racing toward them, out in the open, firing burst after burst. He ducked into the hatch, just as the incoming fire became intense. He slammed it shut, and inside found a series of bolts that would lock it closed. He slammed them across, secured the locking mechanism, and continued down into the darkness. The staircase seemed to go on forever, but from the depths he heard Irvin call up to him.

"I can hear you coming down, and I reckon you have about fifty steps to go. It's a long way. They built this place deep, to withstand a nuclear blast."

"The deeper the better," he grunted. At the bottom they were in complete darkness, until Kelsey took out a candle from her pocket and

managed to light it. In the dim glow, they could see they were in what had to be an anteroom, and at the end a huge airtight door guarded what would presumably be the main bunker. They walked toward it, and he pulled it open. By the light of the candle, they could see they'd arrived. They both saw it at once, a door marked generator room. Kelsey led the way in, and she found a button marked start. She pressed it, and nothing happened.

"I reckon the batteries are flat. Damn! We need that generator."

"There's an auxiliary manual starter," Irvin called across to him. He'd been inspecting the engine that powered the generator, "I found a handle to spin it up. Give me a minute, and I'll crank it."

They gave him five minutes, while he grunted with the effort of swinging the handle, but suddenly the engine caught, backfired, coughed, and then throbbed into life. In the same moment, the lights came on, and for the first time in more than a year, they were inside a building flooded by electric light. They stared around them in wonder, as if they'd witnessed a miracle.

It's miracle we found this place. A miracle we've got inside and it's intact. I must talk to Kate Young, thank her for what she's achieved against all the odds, her homemade battery and managing to start her laptop.

They explored the facility, and Eleanor pushed open the door marked Medical Center.

"Oh, Oz, thank God! It's here, a sterile operating room!"

Inside, she found closets filled with medical supplies and dressings. "Everything's here, all sealed and sterile. Jason, get to work."

"Give me a minute."

He'd found what he wanted in the medical cabinet. A bottle of vintage brandy, labeled, 'for medicinal purposes only.' He swallowed half the contents, smiled in sheer pleasure, and he was already exploring another miracle, real fresh water, pouring out of the tap. The clear, fresh liquid pumped through to the tap using power from the generator. He washed his hands under the stream, washed them again to make sure, scrubbing them with the soap he'd found. He found a surgical gown, and Eleanor helped him put it on, and she did the same.

"I'll assist. You can't do this on your own."

"You've done this before?"

"No."

"I understand. The thing is, I'll need to use a general anesthetic, and that could be dangerous."

"Like the risk of her dying?"

He nodded. "Point taken. I'll tell you what to do, and you'll have to monitor the anesthetic. Close the door, and we'll get started."

They could do nothing, and they began to explore the bunker. The first discovery was the main conduits, a room festooned with cables and electronic panels. They'd burned out, everything useless. If Kate figured using them to try to diagnose the reason for the disaster, she'd have to think again and find somewhere else.

Kelsey made a valuable find. "Food! Boxes of the stuff, enough to keep us eating for a month."

"That's good, but we can only take what we can carry."

She grinned. "Then we'd better eat as much as we can before we leave."

Irvin walked down a long, illuminated passage with armored lights built into the walls. He pushed open the door at the end.

"Well, well, a limo. Kind of."

They stared in astonishment at an unusual vehicle. Six wheels, with fat bulbous tires, it resembled an AFV, an armored fighting vehicle, but without the usual turret-mounted autocannon.

"I read about these," Irvin said, "It's called a Rover, developed toward the end of the Cold War. They designed it to move around after a nuclear strike. It's shielded against radiation and biological weapons."

"Do you think it'll start?" Kelsey asked him, "It could take us back to Copperville, and unless I miss my guess, the hull is armored, so we won't have to worry about fighting them every inch of the way."

He nodded. "I'll check the engine, and see what happens."

He climbed inside, while Oz prowled around what was clearly a heavily shielded underground garage. The ramp to the surface sloped upward. If they could get the vehicle moving, it would be useless if the exit were blocked. There were plenty of reasons. Fallen trees and wrecked or abandoned vehicles. The ever-present vegetation that slowly and inexorably was taking back the countryside after centuries of arduous work to clear it for civilization. At the top of the ramp he found a sliding steel door, with a simple button marked open and close. He assumed the power would come from the generator inside the bunker, and with nothing to lose, pushed the button marked open. Somewhere beneath him, a motor rumbled into life, and slowly, the door began to slide aside. It was thick, almost four inches of solid steel plate, and he stepped out into the open.

He was standing on a narrow track, covered in a tangle of bushes and young trees. He doubted any of it would be enough to stop them driving out in the Rover, and he pressed the button to close the hatch. He was walking back down the ramp when the engine started. Simultaneously, an automatic system started a powerful extractor fan that roared to suck out the exhaust fumes. The engine stopped, and Irvin poked his head out from the vehicle, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hot damn, would you believe it. For some reason, the batteries had enough charge to start the engine. This baby should take us anywhere."

"Like back to Copperville," Kelsey smiled, "I can't wait to go home."

Oz felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. They'd found the medical facility, Jason and Eleanor were working on Abigail, and now they had transport to go home. They could fire as many bullets as they liked, and they'd bounce off the armored carapace of the Rover.

"Load all the supplies you can fit into the vehicle. Food, bottled water, weapons, and ammo, you know the kind of thing. When they're finished with Abigail, I'll bring out the medical supplies. I'm guessing she'll need them."

The girl looked at him, and he couldn't read the expression on her face. "When the operation's over, she won't be out of danger, Oz. You shouldn't raise too many hopes."

He looked Kelsey. "What do you mean?"

"I talked about it to Jason on the way here. She'll face several problems post-op, and the main ones are blood loss and infection. After all this time there must be bacteria everywhere."

She saw his face fall, and she put a hand on his arm to comfort him, "She may be okay. I'm just saying, is all."

He nodded. "I'll see how they're doing back there."

He rushed to the medical center, but the door was still closed. He didn't want to disturb them when they were working on such a delicate operation, so he killed the time by prowling around, opening doors and lockers; searching for anything useful to take back. He hit the motherlode when he opened a door. It was marked as the armory, and he stepped into a small room. The weapon racks carried a selection of assault rifles, M-16s. They would have been the current military issue while the place was still in use, in case the Cold War went hot. He also found a brace of M60s, with plenty of ammo belts, and boxes of hand grenades.

He carried them back to the vehicle, and Irvin whistled. "If we hit

trouble, those M60s will show them we mean business." The next time Oz returned carrying the boxes of grenades, his eyes opened even wider, "The Rover has ports we can open, I guess, for when the air is clean, and they'd be ideal for tossing out a grenade or two. I reckon our friends up top are in for a surprise when we drive out of here. How is Abigail doing?"

"They are still working on her. I don't know."

"She'll be fine. Just give it time, Oz."

The minutes ticked by, drifted by, and they became an hour. Still there was no news from inside the medical center. He didn't want to open the door and ask, didn't want to distract them, and after what Kelsey had said, risk allowing bacteria in. He roamed around some more and found a small galley with a stove. He checked the water coming out of the tap. It tasted okay, and he used the electric stove powered by the generator to brew a jug of coffee. When he carried it through, Irvin and Kelsey were still loading cartons into the vehicle.

They sat on the floor enjoying the first decent Java they'd had in a long time, and Kelsey glanced his way.

"How long will you give it? You have to find out if there's anything we can do to help."

"Another hour."

She nodded, and they drank their coffee in silence. When the time came, he walked slowly back to the medical center. His feet were dragging. He was in no hurry to hear bad news. When he knocked, Eleanor didn't sound happy. "Go away. We're not done."

"How long?"

This time Jason replied. "Fuck off, Porter. We're trying to work here."

He left and returned to the garage. He was at a loss, not knowing what he could do. He was a man of action, and waiting around was hard. They had a vehicle, they had supplies, and they had weapons. They could leave anytime without worrying about being shot at, except they couldn't go. Not until they were done. He was wondering how long to give it before he asked again when the banging started. It sounded like sledgehammers on the hatch. He'd slid the bolts across and locked them, but they wouldn't last long against a determined assault. He looked at Irvin. "The hatch will hold them for at least an hour."

He shrugged. "An hour tops. We'd better close the airlock door. That'll hold them a lot longer."

They raced back through the bunker and closed the huge, heavy door. Irvin grinned. "That'll stop them. They'd need explosives to get through that."

"Irvin, they may have explosives."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's a possibility, but there's nothing we can do about it. As long as they don't take too long in the medical room."

"And if they do take too long?"

"I don't want to think about that."

Irvin went to continue checking out the Rover. He didn't want to think about it either. Oz paced the bunker between the airlock door, the medical room, and the garage. He walked through the galley, not tempted by the food stored there. Stuff they didn't have room for in the Rover. He wasn't tempted by anything, except for that door to open and to hear his daughter would live. It remained resolutely shut, and he had to fight his impulse to knock again and ask.

They're having trouble, no question. They've been in there for over two hours, and still no news.

He kept pacing, and each time he walked into the garage, they couldn't meet his gaze. He resumed pacing, backward and forward, backward and forward, and the banging on the hatch continued. It lasted another hour before the banging stopped. When he put his ear to the armored door, he heard footsteps on the metal rungs of the staircase. They were inside, and the question now was whether they had explosives.

The banging on the airlock door started, a constant, rhythmic clanging that echoed throughout the bunker. It was like the drip, drip, drip of the Chinese water torture. Even Eleanor opened the door to find out what was going on.

"We're trying to work in here. Can't you do something about that noise?"

"They're trying to break through the door, and there's not a damn thing we can do to stop them. All we have in our favor is time. It'll take them many hours to get through that armored door."

"I hope so."

She went to shut the door, but he stopped her. "How is it going?"

She shook her head, and he stared at her. Her surgical gown was covered in blood, and she looked beyond exhaustion. "We're still working on her, Oz."

He nodded, not knowing what to say, and she closed the door.

He resumed pacing, back to the garage, through the bunker, passing through the galley, slowly past the medical center, and to the armored door that vibrated with the constant banging of sledgehammers. He was heartened they didn't have explosives. If they did, they'd have used them. He resumed pacing, backward and forward, backward and forward, his mind was a mess of anxiety. Worry about Abigail, worry they'd break through before the procedure was finished, and then he had a new idea. He returned to the garage.

"Irvin, I'll take one of the M60s. You've heard them trying to get through the door. I'll set it up this side, and if they do get in, get it open, at least we can hold them off for a short while.

"It's a plan. Why don't you take half a dozen grenades as well?"

"Yeah, I'll..." He stopped, "No, a grenade inside here would produce a blast wave. Although, give me a few, just in case."

"You don't know how it's going?"

"No."

There was nothing more to be said. He carried the M60 back through the bunker and set it up on the floor, twenty feet from the door. He placed the four grenades Irvin had given him into the pockets of his coat and resumed his pacing. This time, he didn't stray far from the machine gun. If they came, he'd be ready for them, and if they tried to get inside, he'd make sure they paid a very heavy price. He was trying to work out if it was night or day up top. He concluded it was the early hours of the morning, and soon it would be dawn. He started pacing again, and that was when the door to the medical room suddenly opened, and this time Jason Lee stepped out.

Like Eleanor, his surgical gown was covered in blood, and he looked exhausted.

"We're finished." He didn't sound happy.

He felt a lurch in his guts. "And?"

He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Look, man, I told you I haven't done this before, and so..."

"Tell me, for God's sake! Is she alive?"

He gave him a tired nod. "Yes, yes, she is, but okay, here's the deal. We opened her up, and I cleared the blockage. It was much worse than we expected, and her gut was badly infected. The infection likely caused her to fit. I've been trying to treat it, but I don't know if it will work."

"What does that mean?"

"We've rigged up a saline drip to keep her hydrated, and I'm giving her antibiotics to fight the infection, but it'll be touch and go for a while. At least we found antibiotics here, although I have no way of knowing if they're the right ones. But we had no blood. Hopefully the drip will help. And we need to see if she can tolerate milk. "

"What's a while, when will we know?"

He held up his hands to show he was helpless to answer. "A week, maybe two. Frankly, she needs to be on a high-dependency ward, the full works. We don't have that option, so all we can do is work with what we have. Regular antibiotics and monitor her condition."

"What if she worsens?"

He shrugged. "I'm sorry. I've done all I can."

Oz poked his head around the door. Eleanor was fixing a dressing on Abigail's stomach. She glanced around, sensing his presence. "Jason told you how it went?"

"He told me."

"Right. It'd be better if we could stay here, in case we need to operate again."

"You've heard the noise. They'll be inside in a few hours if not sooner. Irvin found a vehicle we can use to get away. There's gas in the tank, maybe even enough to take us back to Copperville. We have to leave."

She sighed. "If we must."

She stripped off her bloody gown and took Abigail gently in her arms. He showed her the way to the garage, and her eyes widened when she saw the Rover. "Does that mean they won't be able to take pot shots at us?"

Irvin grimaced. "They can try, but it won't do them any good. Settle the baby inside. I found plenty of blankets. You can make a crib for her, and I've put a mattress against the side of the hull. Just in case we hit any deep potholes, it'll ease the jarring."

She gave him a grateful look and stepped inside the vehicle. Kelsey was with her, and to his credit, Jason joined them and sat with an eye on his patient. Oz wondered about him.

What would have happened if he'd spent his time studying medicine instead of boozing?

They were ready to leave, and he looked at Irvin. "I'll open the outer door."

He climbed the ramp and pressed the button to open the outer door. It was still night. The rain had stopped, and the stars were a warm, friendly glow in the sky. The moon was behind a cloud, but as he watched, the cloud moved away and bathed the countryside in moonlight. The Rover climbed the ramp behind him. And Irvin beckoned for him to get aboard. He punched the button to close the door, and as it slowly slid back, he stepped into the vehicle.

The Rover was packed to capacity. It would have held eight people comfortably, maybe ten at a pinch. But not spilling over with cardboard cartons of supplies, and at the back, the improvised cot they'd made for Abigail, Jason crouched on one side, and Eleanor the other. Jason adjusted the drip bag suspended from an iron fitting in the roof, and he gave Oz a reassuring nod. "It's okay. We have it covered."

Irvin drove past new growth that had sprouted since the disaster. He cleared the worst of the obstacles until they were in open ground. He traveled without lights, but they weren't blind. Built into the vehicle were an array of instruments to help him; most useful was the compass inside a Perspex case, pointing the way. They knew where they were heading, due south, all the way home. Home to Copperville, where their friends waited, and where they could relax and enjoy a respite from the running battles they'd fought over the past days.

Irvin drove for an hour, and Oz could see by the set of his shoulders, he was worried about something. Eventually, he couldn't stand any more.

"What's up, you don't look happy."

"I've been keeping my eye on the gas gauge. Sorry, but I'm not sure we'll have enough to get home."

"How far do you think will get?"

It took a while to answer; "Okay, best guess is we'll get most of the way. The last five miles, I don't know. Maybe, maybe not."

"That doesn't sound so bad. If the gas does give out before we get there, we can walk the last few miles."

"And Abigail? How is she?"

"She is..." He had to think about that, and his reply was cautious, "She is as well as can be expected. Under the circumstances."

He understood. "That bad? I'll do what I can."

He thanked him and went back to Eleanor. She was beyond exhaustion, her face grey. They had plenty of food inside the Rover. He offered her some

biscuits. It said on the side of the pack they contained every nutrient necessary to maintain health. She shook her head. "I'll eat when she eats."

"She still not taking any milk?"

She held up the bottle with the rubber teat in the end and showed it to him. It was full. "Not a thing, but she's still very drowsy. Jason reckons it'll be a couple of days at least, and that's assuming nothing else goes wrong. You know about the infection?"

"He told me. Is there anything we can do to encourage her to take it?"

She smiled. "No. Oz, I'd give anything to feed her. But she is getting liquid from the drip, so that's an improvement at least."

He didn't question her any more, but he couldn't concentrate, thinking about that tiny body, starving for want of food, unable to take any. In addition, despite Irvin's skillful driving, they constantly hit bumps and objects strewn over the road.

They were driving in full daylight. Whether they were afraid of the armored vehicle or it had slipped past them, he had no way of knowing, but they saw no sign of the enemy. No Omegas and Raiders. He began to hope they might make it all the way. To pull up in triumph inside the town, and he pictured their friends and neighbors greeting them with smiles and hugs. The women turning out to offer their help with the baby, the town nurse full of apologies for not being able to do more. Offering to stay with her twenty-four seven.

It'll all be fine when we get home. Not long now.

They crested a hill, and he looked at Eleanor. "We'll soon be there."

She smiled, although even that small gesture cost her a huge effort.

"That's good. We can..."

The engine stopped suddenly, and the Rover slowed down. Irvin turned around, looking apologetic.

"I'm sorry, folks. This is as far as we go. We've been running on fumes for the last few miles, and we were lucky to get this far. How much further, Oz?"

"It's nothing. I'd say three miles, no more."

As the vehicle coasted to a stop, Irvin ran it into a thick clump of bushes, out of sight. Just in case.

"We'll have to leave the supplies, but we can always come back for them. At least the vehicle's out of sight, so it's not likely they'll find it and loot it. But we'd better take the weapons, especially the M60s and grenades.

If we run into any hostiles surrounding the town, we may have to fight to get back inside."

The two men picked up a machine gun each, draping ammunition belts over their shoulders.

Irvin grinned. "I feel stupid, like fucking Rambo."

"It won't be stupid if we have to fight."

He grinned. "In which case, I don't mind fighting like Rambo. Always providing we win."

"We'll win," he said grimly.

Even Jason helped, carrying a box of medical supplies in case someone looted the Rover before they got back. Kelsey slung the crossbow on her back and carried an M-16. They started walking the last stretch before the town. Kelsey was so overjoyed when she saw the barrier that she ran forward waving. And stopped. Armed men pointed their guns at them, and a man stood on the roof of a truck staring down at them like a stern, biblical prophet. They recognized Colonel Aaron Weaver.

"Don't come any further, or we'll open fire."

Oz felt irritated. They'd come this far and were getting such an unfriendly reception. He walked forward.

"Colonel, it's me, Oz. Eleanor is here with the baby, Jason, Kelsey, and Irvin. We made it. Now let us in."

"You don't live here anymore, and we don't allow strangers to come in. You have to find somewhere else."

"You're wrong, Colonel. Me and Eleanor have a house here in town, and Kelsey has lived here all her life. We have a sick baby who needs to be looked after. If we don't get inside, she could die."

He glared back at him. "I told you not to go, Porter, and you ignored me. Since you left, we've made other arrangements for our defense. We don't need you anymore. We don't want you."

"What arrangements?"

He didn't reply, and Oz looked at the men standing behind the barricade, his friends and neighbors, in his own town. It was then he saw the last thing he expected to see, and he felt an icy chill in his guts. Some were wearing black armbands, and he understood it all.

Weaver's sold us out, and the town is under the control of Omega.

"How much did they pay you, Colonel? What did you do with their food? How much do they have left, is it enough to see them through the next

winter?"

"I don't have anything to say to you. I'm just telling you to get out of here. You are no longer part of this town."

Kelsey glared up at him. "What are you going to do, Colonel Weaver? Shoot us if we try to get back to our homes?"

He didn't give her an answer. But some of the men cocked their rifles, and it was eloquent enough.

Oz stood for long minutes staring at them, still clutching the M60. It was like it almost spoke to him, urging him to pull the trigger. To sweep away the arrogant bastards blocking them from their homes, but he resisted the urge. This was the wrong time, in the wrong place. Most of the folks in the town wouldn't have had a choice, and he suspected Weaver had done an under the table deal to let them in.

I wonder what they gave him in return.

He swung on his heel. "There's nothing left for us here. Let's go."

He walked away with Eleanor at his side. Next to her, Jason Lee was carefully cradling the baby in an improvised carrier they'd devised to prevent any chafing on her wounds. Kelsey and Irvin walked behind them, all the way back to where they left the Rover. They spent some time throwing branches and foliage over the vehicle to hide it.

"We'll find somewhere to stay and come back for the supplies, but we'd better not leave it too long."

He had an idea of where they could go, a hunting lodge. He'd spent a vacation there several years before, a large house built on a low hill overlooking a lake. A position that would be easily defendable, seven miles from Copperville; far enough away to keep them from under the eyes of Omega, yet near enough for them to go back, should they feel the need. They started walking, and before they'd gone more than a half-mile, he heard footsteps running behind them. He signaled to Irvin to keep the others moving, and he dropped behind a bush. Whoever was following them came alongside him, and he leapt out, aiming the machine gun, and she gave a startled cry.

"Kate, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I heard what happened at the barrier, so I sneaked out to talk to you. I've been following you ever since you left the town. How is she?" She meant Abigail, and he explained what had happened.

"Oz, I sincerely hope she's okay. If there's anything I can do, all you

need do is tell me. You know where I live, and if you need to contact me, you won't have any trouble getting past the sentries, I know that."

"You did plenty, Kate, finding that bunker. It seemed at least they were able to clear the blockage in her stomach. It was more serious than we thought. What happens now is something we can't know. She needs rest and a great deal of care. After that, who knows?"

"What did you find at the bunker? The main conduits?"

He shook his head. "You were right. They were there, but all we found was burnt out wiring, and the control panels were just fused chunks of metal and plastic. There's nothing usable there, nothing at all."

"That's a pity, but I half expected it. The thing is, Oz, there is somewhere else, and if we can reach it, I'm positive it will be a back door into the communication systems, all of it. Internet, telephones, you name it."

She explained what she'd uncovered, and it took nearly a quarter of an hour until he had it all.

"I'll get back and talk to you when we're settled, and we'll work out our next move. Stay safe, Kate."

She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "You, too, Oz, and good luck to Abigail. I'll pray for her."

She sped off back through the woods, heading home to Copperville. Home. They no longer had a home, and he caught up with them and took the lead; finding the way through the unfamiliar paths on roads that had once been as easy to follow as going from one street to another inside the town, but were now overgrown and dark. When they reached it, they found the lodge was empty. Eleanor seemed to perk up when she stood on the terrace, looking at the beautiful view.

"Oz, it's wonderful. You sure we can stay here?"

He pointed inside. The place had been ransacked.

"It's abandoned, Eleanor. Whoever used to live here, they don't any more. If we don't move in, nature will take over, and in a year or two it'll be a derelict ruin. Yes, we'll stay here until we manage to get home."

"Do you think we'll ever go home, Oz?"

He didn't have an answer, none that would satisfy her. Before they could set a foot in Copperville, they had yet another series of battles to fight, to drive the dark tentacles of Omega from the place they once called home. All he could say was, "We have a long way to go, but eventually, we'll get there."

"What did Kate have to say?"

Before he could answer, Jason signaled them for them to come over.

"It's Abigail. She's running a temperature."

"Is that normal?"

He glanced at him. "Yes and no. The thing is, the temperature is much higher than it should be, which means the infection is still there, and the antibiotics are not working as well as they should."

"What can we do, Jason?"

He stared back at him, and Oz realized he was genuinely heartsick at this latest setback. He gave them a one-word answer, "Pray."

They did more than pray, although once again, he said a silent prayer, stumbling through the words he'd learned when he was young. Maybe it would work, maybe it wouldn't. One thing he was sure of, it couldn't do any harm. They went inside the lodge and picked out a bedroom for them. It had a panoramic window overlooking the lake. He didn't explain the reason for choosing the room was not so much for the view, but because he'd be able spot any enemy from a distance, if they came. They always came, sooner or later.

They spent some time clearing out the broken furniture. He managed to patch together a torn mattress enough for them to sleep on, and Eleanor swept the floor, so at least the living quarters were reasonably clean. Kelsey prowled around outside, standing sentry duty, and Oz had gone back to the Rover to pick up the first of their supplies. They spent the rest of the day securing their new home and transferring supplies and food. By the evening, they had a home of sorts where they could stay until things improved. Oz was thinking about that.

Nothing will improve until we make them improve.

They sat on the terrace, and although the night air was chilly, they were watching. They were looking over the lake, and the moon had cast beams of light that moved gently in the soft breeze. He decided he rarely seen anything more beautiful.

Nature at its best, and even better, no Raiders, and no Omegas.

Irvin brought up the inevitable question. "How long do we plan on staying here?"

It was then he decided to talk to them about what Kate had said. "Until we can get the power and utilities working."

His head jerked around. "Get them working? You mean there's a way?"

"Kate talked to me about what she found, and there may be a way. Although the cabling and control systems in the bunker were wrecked, she said there's a place where she may be able to patch things up, or at least understand what made it go down. Any time we're ready to go, she'll be along."

"That would be something," he nodded, impressed, "She's serious, there may be a way?"

"She said she's discovered someone installed a program in the main Internet and communications infrastructure that brought everything down. It was like a domino effect, possibly a virus, but it tripped out one system, that tripped out another, and it just went on and on and on until everything was down, and no one knew how to get it back."

"Okay, where is this place?"

"In Maryland. It's the headquarters of NSA."

They stared at him in astonishment. Jason said, "Man, NSA, that place is like a fortress. You can forget it."

"Maybe, maybe not." He looked at Eleanor. "How is she?"

"The temperature is still high. Oz, she is not recovering. What are we going to do? We can't go to Maryland, not with her like this."

"No, but when it's over, we don't have a choice. We're going to the NSA, and we'll get inside to help Kate get things running again."

"It may take a time before she's fit to travel."

Jason looked up then, and to his astonishment, he noticed his eyes were red, almost like he was in tears. "It won't be long, Eleanor. And then we'll know."

Oz looked away, staring once again across the lake. He sighed.

How can anything be so beautiful? Yet there is so much hatred, greed, and violence all around us. I will do everything I can to keep my family safe, but I can only pray to God to save our baby. She's in his hands now.

Inside, he was already making plans, working out times and distances, wondering if there was a way to find gas for the Rover. Before long, they'd have to embark on a road so long and dangerous it could well end in death, death for all of them.

Their world had collapsed, and they could be looking at nothing less than the mass extinction of the human race, at least in North America, and probably the rest of the world. Men and women fighting for scraps of food, until all that remained was a landscape littered with bodies.

All I have left is my family, and to keep fighting until things are right again. And if that never happens, I won't be around to tell the tale. None of us will.

There was something else, an idea he hadn't been able to shake, the man behind Omega.

Barry Mendez is close to the top, but someone else is calling the shots. I'm certain I've seen him before. One day, I'll work it out. And I'll find him and get answers.

FOREVER FREE WILL CONTINUE!