

J.A. Bland

THE LEGEND OF BURROUGHS' RANGERS

A Novel

By J.A. Bland

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JEFF BLAND PRESS
Littleton CO 80128
www.jabland.com

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ISBN-13: 978-0615724782 (Jeff Bland Press)
ISBN-10: 0615724787
Designed by: Lisa Maine, GreetScape Inc.,
in association with Word Journeys, Inc.
Cover: Elizabeth Moisan and Lisa Maine
Cartography designed by J.A. Bland

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Printed in the United States of America
First Edition 2012

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places, and incidents either
are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any
resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

J.A. Bland

For all those who choose to believe...

In the Beginning

Many of us remember the stories from our childhood. There is the Legend; some say myth, of a one-legged old man, a red-headed boy, and a handful of soldiers.

They traveled the land that remained after the cataclysm, bringing hope to the hopeless and protecting the helpless. As they traveled, they built camps for the survivors. Those camps became villages, and from those villages, our civilization was rebuilt.

This is the year 2253 of the Gregorian calendar. We also know that, more than 240 years ago, our planet's magnetic poles shifted nearly 40 degrees over a period of several years, and the land was devastated. The knowledge of thousands of years died; what remained was passed from father to son and mother to daughter by word of mouth alone.

Yet, one legend remained with us. One legend endured....

Thirteen years before I put stylus to this parchment, a small group of explorers stumbled upon the remains of a large sailing vessel of ancient design, built of materials unknown to them. In the rotting hulk of that ship were found several trunks, many still water-tight. Those trunks contained scores of books. The collection of tomes formed a large library that offered a wealth of knowledge about the world and life before the polar shift.

We have poured over the books and papers. We've worked day and night to decipher the undecipherable, to re-learn what was forgotten, and to gather the knowledge that today allows us to understand who we are and where we came from.

J.A. Bland

We know the legend was real. We know there *was* an old man and a red-headed boy who struggled to find a place called home in a ravaged world with a small handful of soldiers.

What follows, in the words of that man himself, is that story: *The Legend of Burroughs' Rangers*.

High Ground
March 20, 0000

If you are reading this, you know the power went out on the first day and never came back on. You lived through the chaos, looting, starvation, and floods. You survived the gangs of marauders who pillaged, burned, and killed.

The continents as we knew them are gone. North America has been ripped apart; no semblance remains of its previous contour or topography.

What remains of the majesty of the Andes are scattered bits of raw, naked stone awash in a hostile sea. The once-mighty Himalayas are mere foothills sunk into the vastness of an ocean that covers more than 95 percent of the planet.

You know that mankind is nearly extinct... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

My name is Bill Burroughs. This is my story, as best as I can tell it:

A tale of survival and of my journey home.

Chapter I

I love watching the sunrise over the ocean. It's kind of funny, though, sitting here at the top of the world: Laguna Mountain. The sun rises over a blue-green vastness where the greatest desert in North America used to be. The surging body of water stretches as far as the eye can see. This will be the last sunrise I survey from my post atop this windy perch.

I bask in the growing light as the sun's golden orb breaks the distant horizon, breathing deeply the crisp coolness of the morning air. It's only six miles to the western shore, to the flooded remains of what was Pine Valley. There is nothing worth scavenging there any longer.

Last year at this time, it would have been a fifty-mile drive to reach the coast. I can only imagine what the rest of the world's coastlines look like as this same sunrise creeps across the planet.

The new Mojave Sea is at my feet, at the bottom of a four thousand-foot cliff. This vast ocean stretches to the east and south. To the west, beyond Pine Valley, lies nothing but open water.

Laguna Mountain is an island now, one of only a handful of islands that used to be majestic mountaintops stretching from the Sierra de Juarez in old Mexico, north through the Laguna, Santa Rosa, Santa Ana, San Jacinto, and on up to the San Bernardino and San Gabriel Mountains, and California's greater Sierra Nevada...

Now, all are islands. Or pretty much so.

I am no geologist, but there must have been a massive gravitational shift or something of the sort. We know the poles

shifted and perhaps continue to shift. If humans survive the next few decades, we might figure it out. What I've seen could only be explained by a change in the tectonic drift as the poles shifted.

With these old binoculars, I can see a few tiny scattered bits of land that have not become submerged yet. For a while, smoke rose from a couple of those islands like thin, crooked fingers clawing feebly at the sky before being shredded in the wind.

I haven't seen any smoke for about eighty days now, give or take. Not since the solar storms hit. Many of us didn't survive the storms. They still plague us from time to time.

I've had no contact with anyone farther away than Idyllwild, seventy miles to the north, except for one man. There is a small group of survivors at Julian, about fifteen miles from here, on the northern tip of this island. There's a larger group in the hills above Lake Henshaw, across the channel. I'll pass through each of them as I head north again, but this time, I'm not turning back.

I'm headed home. With my companion, Hector, we'll find a way home or die trying.

The sun is full now and climbing fast; the glare off the water hurts my eyes. It's time to break camp and get going. I have two fresh hog carcasses hanging in the trees. I need to get them slung onto the packhorses, which is difficult these days with only one good leg. The most plentiful game that remains on Laguna is those damn feral hogs. I can trade the hogs off for dried fruit, apples, or apricots in Julian or a boatload of jerked venison in the village at Henshaw on my way north. We'll need to swim the horses across the Banner Channel to get from Laguna to the Vulcan Mountains, but it is safe enough now at low tide.

Today is March 20, the spring equinox. It's been 150 days, give or take, since the world as we knew it turned inside out.

I thought I'd seen it all. As a young man, I did a couple of tours in 'Nam, MACV-SOG. I was in the Battle of Khe Sanh during the Tet Offensive in '68. I was eighteen years old. I was

still there in '69 and again in '70. I was back again when they closed the doors at the embassy in Saigon.

I earned my licks the hard way, along with thousands of other young marines. I spent a couple of years raising hell after leaving the Corps, then went onto the U.S. Marshals Service, where I served another twenty years before retiring.

Now, I am a... well, I *was* a security consultant. I specialized in small operations, some corporate work, personal security details, and bail-retrieval jobs. I was a bodyguard and a man-hunter for hire.

I was born and raised in these parts but relocated to the mountains west of Denver many years ago. On that fateful night, however, I was back in Oceanside again for a quick trip, three days, and then back home to my wife, Suzanne. I was conducting a security audit for a firm in Carlsbad.

I had flown into Lindbergh Field in San Diego on Friday morning, November 30th. I picked up a rental car at the airport and drove the thirty-odd miles north up Interstate 5 to Carlsbad. Arriving at my client's location by late morning, I began my audit. After a full day, I checked in late at the hotel, another couple of miles away, in Oceanside.

Damn, Oceanside, Carlsbad...Saigon. Those places don't even exist any longer.

The earthquakes began at 1 a.m. on the first of December. As one who grew up in Southern California, they were no big deal to me, I thought.

When the first quake hit, I was just dozing off after a long day. I had a room on the 10th floor of a Pacific Street hotel overlooking the Oceanside pier. I was relaxing on the bed after a 12-ounce, medium-rare ribeye, and several gin and tonics. As the day's findings finally faded from my head, the windows exploded as if a concussion grenade had gone off on the windowsill.

I instinctively grabbed for my pistol and found myself bouncing across the floor like popcorn poppin'. It couldn't have lasted more than a minute until everything stopped moving, but it seemed like a lifetime. People screamed, and car alarms squawked and screeched on the street below and through the window, through the shredded drapes whipping in the wind. The lights on the pier flickered and went out.

Suddenly, all light from outside vanished. The darkness was complete, a thick, inky blackness. In that instant, I knew we were in trouble.

Panic began to rise in my chest. The wind shifted, and the cool, salty breeze blew across my face, chilling the sheen of sweat on my forehead. I sat for a moment, my eyes closed tightly, breathing deeply, slowly. Gradually, my heart rate slowed as I considered the situation. My first point of necessity: get the hell out of this 10th-floor hotel room!

I opened my eyes.

The small amount of starlight that found its way through the window allowed me to throw what few things I had with me in my pack. I headed out into the corridor and found the door jammed.

Jesus, I can't open the fucking door!

The realization spurred me into action.

Remembering my cell phone, I flipped it open. Zero bars, no service, damn cell towers must have been knocked out, too. From the light of the cell phone, I could see long, jagged cracks in the walls. The door jamb had settled, crushed, and twisted. The door was lodged tightly in the opening. When I hit the light switch, there was nothing.

Odd... emergency power has not come on.

I went to the window and looked out, down ten stories, into the pitch-black darkness.

Damn!

I surveyed my options. There was one king-size bed, mattress, and box spring, along with a flat sheet, one fitted sheet, one synthetic thermal blanket, one bedspread, and two pillows with pillowcases. I had my pack, three days' worth of clothes, a worthless cell phone, one folding pocket knife, and my Walther P99 semi-automatic .40 Caliber pistol.

The screaming of a few moments before quieted to a subdued sobbing. Suddenly, the fire alarm began to screech and flash brightly; I smelled smoke. It seemed like time had stopped. I looked at the phone again:

1:15 a.m...

The smoke began to sting my eyes. "I need to get out of here – *fast!*" I said to myself.

Standing on the blanket, I easily tore a hole in it with my fingertips. It was useless. The bedspread, made of several pieces of cloth sewn together, separated at the seams with little effort. I ripped both sheets lengthwise into two pieces and rolled each, tying them together. It felt like it might hold my 6-foot-2, 240-pound frame... if I was lucky.

Quickly, I measured their combined length with my arms. 6, 12, 18, 24, 30, 36, 42... 42 feet, *I'm still 40-45 feet short, maybe more, getting down from a window ten stories high.*

I managed to wedge the mattress through the shattered window. It sounded like it landed on some bushes. *Maybe that will break my fall. Maybe....*

I decided the risk of dropping 50 feet into the darkness was not worth it. But the smoke was beginning to burn my nose and throat, stinging my eyes. I was running out of time.

The sobbing stopped. Above the din of the car alarms and rustle of the shredded drapes that remained hanging at the window, I heard a low-pitched rumbling. Strange... I should be hearing the

familiar rhythmic crashing of the surf on the beach seventy yards away and sixty feet down the cliff side.

I glanced at my phone again: 1:28 a.m.

In the blinding strobe of the fire alarm, I could see the smoke wafting around the door. I crossed the room, ten paces from door to window. A decent-looking commercial-grade carpet covered the floor. Working quickly in the thickening smoke, I managed to pull up and cut several strips of carpet.

Using the bed frame as an anchor along with the rope of sheets and strips of carpet, I fashioned a ladder of sorts, climbed out of the window, and made my way down to terra firma.

While climbing down, smoke billowed from windows above and below me. *Maybe I was lucky that door was jammed shut.*

On the ground, several people milled about the street, trying to figure out what to do. Suddenly, a man jumped from a window high above. He hit the ground; he was not moving. He was not breathing.

What seemed to be a thick, seething fog roiled above the rows of condos that lined the beach below the cliff. Up the coast a few hundred yards, flames appeared to be floating in the fog.

People screamed from the windows above, and debris from the crumbling building crashed all around me.

Escaping the falling wreckage, I headed north towards the flames in the fog. As I passed from the deep shadow of the high rise, flames exploded from several hotel windows behind me in rapid succession. The screaming reached a crescendo and then died away.

As the view to the east unfolded past the hotel, there were numerous fires, large and small, scattered across the hills as far as I could see. I heard the *pop, pop, popping* of small explosions, like random gunfire, in the distance.

The bright blue flame in the fog ahead looked surreal as it hissed and roared in the mist. Must be a ruptured gas line. As I drew closer, I began to see more clearly from the light of the fire itself. This wasn't a roiling coastal fog, but flotsam, as far as I could see in the glare of the blaze. Flotsam on a flood! *My God!* It was wood and trash, pieces of buildings, an umbrella, the backend of a car bobbing. It was thick enough to walk on.

Except it was floating... on the ocean.

The sea level had risen sixty feet in an hour. There were hundreds of homes down there... thousands of people...

My head cleared in an instant as I spun around. I made a dead run for my car. Thank God the underground parking structure was full when I got to the hotel the night before.

The headlights of a few vehicles moved about chaotically in the distance. As I swung out of the parking lot, headlights shone across the sea of debris. The pier... gone! I'd always wanted my ashes scattered off the end of that pier when my days were done.

Would that be today?

I needed to get to higher ground. I had to move inland—fast. Everyone had seen the news in the last few years: the earthquake in Indonesia, the destruction of Santiago, devastation in Japan. I knew what a coastal earthquake meant, for Christ's sake. *Tsunami!* I didn't know what was going on, but I wasn't going to wait for the sea to rise again.

As I pulled onto the Coast Highway and into the center of Oceanside, people were looting everywhere. Didn't they know what was going on? The road was nearly blocked in several places with rubble from crumbling buildings. Smoke choked the air. A couple of bodies lay in the street at one intersection.

I heard a gunshot. At the same instant, my windshield and passenger side window shattered. *Maybe a stray shot.* A second bullet followed the first. *So much for that thought.*

I floored the accelerator as several more shots rang out in the darkness. Two, maybe three rounds impacted the rear of the car and shattered the rear window as I barreled south.

Unholstering my .40-caliber, I tallied my defensive resources—two thirteen-round magazines and the remainder of a box of shells in my pack. I had a total of fifty rounds. God only knew what loomed ahead.

While crossing the slough near Loma Alta marsh, I could see that the ocean had surged and receded. Reaching Vista Way, I headed east towards Interstate 5 and Highway 78. Up ahead, I saw headlights, taillights, and cars turning off on side streets.

I wasn't the only one trying to get away from the coast. As I approached the junction at I-5, the roadway became blocked with all manner of vehicles.

I pulled to the curb to consider my options. A man and woman walked out of the darkness. "It's no use." The man called to me. "The whole valley is flooded. There's no way out."

My God, thousands of homes are in that valley!

There was no way South across Buena Vista Creek or east on Highway 78. "Hop in," I called to them. "I'll find a way inland."

As they approached the car, a glint of light flashed from the barrel of a gun. The man raised his arm toward me. *Son of a bitch!*

I cut the wheel hard, pressing the accelerator to the floor and throwing my door open. As I sideswiped the son of a bitch, the door slammed him to the ground. The car jumped as he fell under the rear wheel. *Fuck these people! They can burn in hell, for all I care!* The woman's screams faded behind me as I sped away.

The side streets were choked with abandoned cars; I was forced to backtrack up the Coast Highway. As I crossed the slough near the marsh again, I saw the high water mark.

Not good. I needed to push inland. I made my way north in hopes of avoiding the gauntlet downtown from which I'd barely escaped the first time; I took a chance and cut east at the first

intersection. I would have to travel up that same slough for nearly a half mile before reaching higher ground.

The ravages of the tidal surge were visible all around me, but fortunately, the water had receded. The I-5 overpass was still standing. I breathed a sigh of relief as I crossed under the massive concrete edifice and sped east toward higher ground.

I glanced at the clock on the dash: 2:46 a.m. Then I noticed the fuel gauge: only a little better than a quarter tank. My mind raced ahead into the darkness. I really could have used another gin and tonic.

Many more people were on the streets now, walking aimlessly, lost. I cradled my .40 in my lap. *These sons a bitches won't catch me sleeping a second time.* A few more vehicles moved around; some, like me, were heading east. But where? I thought of the closest high ground where I could hope to assess the situation and get some news of what was happening: Escondido. The city stood twenty miles ahead. At least I would be further from the coast and a little bit higher in elevation.

I crossed El Camino Real, gradually gaining altitude, one precious foot at a time. At the intersection ahead, a pile of tires burned in the road. Thick, choking clouds of black oily smoke curled into the sky, while angry red flames licked hungrily at anything within reach. As I slowed to circle the blazing pile, several people ran from the shadows toward me. I could see weapons in the hands of many of them.

Firing from my lap, I put three rounds through the door and took down the punk on my near side. Deafened by the roar of my pistol inside the car, I leveled the .40 on the sons of bitches out the shattered passenger side window. I hit two or three of them as I slammed through the group; another went down under the car. As I clipped the pile of burning tires, flaming debris scattered across the intersection. More gunfire rang out behind me.

Racing ahead, I reached the next intersection and headed south again, praying the water hadn't come this far inland. Two miles east of the coastline — the old coastline — Highway 78 was still dry. Thank God the overpass was still intact.

The traffic thickened as more and more vehicles headed inland. At that moment, I was at four hundred feet above sea level... but what was sea level anymore? I ejected an empty magazine from my .40, then slammed home a full one. Holstering the weapon, I wheeled the car onto the highway, stomped the throttle to the floor, and headed east.

Vehicles moved east at a fair clip, a steady forward movement with no apparent panic. The clock on the dashboard shone dimly: 3:20 a.m. It dawned on me to turn on the radio to see if anyone was broadcasting. Pure static buzzed on the FM band. Worrisome. Switching to AM, the static was chilling as I spun the tuner.

There was some variation in the squawk; then, the signal came in stronger. I caught the emergency broadcast channel. It was a recording: "Massive earthquakes are reported from Santiago, Chile to the Aleutian Islands. Please be advised to move to higher ground. Evacuate low-lying coastal areas immediately. The National Guard has been mobilized to assist. Please remain calm." And then it repeated, over and over...

God help us. The entire Pacific coastal regions of North and South America were affected. "The National Guard has been mobilized." The statement ran through my head.

The National Guard...*Right!*

And then the second quake hit....

Chapter II

Ahead of me, straight twin rows of taillights came undone like a giant zipper. Brake lights flashed and swayed from side to side, bouncing off each other before plunging off the highway. The road rolled in waves as I fought to keep the car on the asphalt. The stream of taillights began to pile up and explode.

Up ahead, the overpass collapsed. A road sign waved like a flag in the wind. "Nordahl Road," I read as it went down. I pushed the car onto the shoulder and accelerated past the chaos of brake lights and then followed three sets of taillights that had managed to get to the off-ramp.

On the highway below, vehicles piled into the rapidly growing mass of wreckage. The three vehicles ahead pulled to the shoulder as I raced past them, past the crumbling bridge abutment, down the ramp, and back onto the highway.

As far as I could see, the stream of taillights appeared to move forward. Maybe the massive fly-over at I-15 was still standing... there it was! Amazingly enough, I could see headlights on the fly-over heading north, taillights on the ramp sweeping south. Others continued straight ahead. *Damn, I should have bought a lottery ticket!* I laughed to myself. *Get under this mass of concrete, over one last bridge, and I would be in the clear.*

The emergency broadcast that had been droning on and on suddenly stopped. As the fly-over loomed overhead and then behind me, I spun the tuner on the radio.

Static. Nothing but static...

As I crossed the last bridge, I started to breathe a bit easier. Only a half dozen vehicles were ahead of me, while a string of headlights continued into the distance in my rear view mirror.

Then the third quake hit.

I stomped the throttle to the floor as the bridge began to collapse under me. The hot shot in the Hummer next to me hit his accelerator as his lane buckled; he went airborne. I was still several yards from the base of the bridge when the Hummer hit the pavement and launched sideways into my right front quarter panel. The airbag exploded in my face as the car pitched up and began to roll over. In an instant, the car was full of broken glass, flying rocks, and choking dirt.

Everything went black.

I woke, hanging in the seat belt. The car came to rest on its rooftop. As my eyes began to focus, the neon blue glare of the clock on the dash cast a faint glow: 4:12 a.m.

My head pounded. I tasted blood and dirt in my mouth. I smelled gasoline. *Fuck*. I could barely raise my arm, but I managed to get the seat belt released and dropped down on my shoulder.

Damn, that hurt!

Lying on the upturned roof of the car, I sized things up. I could curl my toes in my shoes, and I could clench both fists. It felt like I might have cracked a rib or two... maybe... no, it was just my pistol digging into my rib cage. I couldn't find my damn cell phone; it wasn't much use, anyway.

I managed to squirm out through the window opening and drag myself to my feet. The Hummer was about 30 yards away, down the opposite shoulder and burning like all get out. I could see a few people gathered in the firelight, watching the blaze. *Moths to a flame*, I thought.

Ahead, a dozen or more cars were piled up. Some gang-bangers reached into a low-rider, trying to help someone inside. Or so I thought. Instead, they were trying to drag someone out of the

car when a woman began screaming. The interior of the car lit up with the muzzle flash of a handgun. *Pop, pop, pop...* one SOB lurched back and collapsed to the ground. Several of his buddies opened fire on the car. The screaming stopped.

I pulled the .40 from its holster and quietly chambered a round. Easing myself down the bank and out of the firelight, I tripped and fell right on my damn face.

Groping in the darkness, I found my pack. *Christ! I should have bought that damn lottery ticket!* I nearly laughed out loud, the thought flashing through my head as I made my way through the darkness between the abandoned cars and across the intersection, heading east.

Further up the road, several buildings were ablaze. I could see a fire truck, lights flashing, sitting in place as if abandoned. Behind me, the intersection began to buzz with voices, yelling, arguing ... more gunfire!

I'm out of here! I thought as I scurried into the night.

Crouched over in the drainage ditch alongside the roadway, feeling my way in the darkness, my mind raced. I'd made my way to Escondido, but a nagging voice in my head kept repeating over and over, *Get to higher ground! Get to higher ground!*

It was three maybe four miles to the end of the valley and the foothills ahead.

Escondido was about six hundred feet above sea level. I started calculating. At a steady pace, it would be an hour's walk to the foothills and another hour to Valley Center, another 1,000 feet above sea level. It was well past 4 a.m. The first quake hit three hours ago. This valley ran straight to the ocean, twenty maybe thirty miles away...

Gotta get moving!

Slinging my pack over one shoulder, I checked the safety on my .40 and crawled out of the ditch. In the darkness, I could feel the solid ground under my feet as I began to jog into the

unknown. *Three miles to high ground.* I kept repeating to myself, *three miles to high ground.* As I moved forward into the darkness, senses straining, the earth continued to vibrate, rumbling harder, then subsiding before rumbling again. "This isn't over yet!" I said aloud.

Behind me now, maybe four hundred yards, the intersection erupted into an all-out gun battle. Up ahead, I heard voices. Someone was crying softly, a child perhaps. Without warning, I ran smack into a group of people huddled in the darkness in the middle of the road. They were whispering, crying, scared, confused, lost in the night. In another heartbeat, I was through the small crowd, hopefully in the clear again. I could've used a drink, but by maintaining this pace, I'd have high ground in thirty minutes and could worry about water then.

Small crowds gathered in the light of the burning buildings as I passed. Occasionally, I heard screams in the darkness as the ground shook harder again for a moment. Then, ahead to my right, I heard what sounded like a freight train in the distance.

Funny. There were no train tracks on this side of town.

The rumble became a roar and then passed and faded behind me; I heard the rush of water. Then I remembered a creek ran parallel to my route, two blocks or so to the south, normally dry this time of year. The dams at nearby Dixon Reservoir or Lake Wolford, maybe both, must have failed.

Jesus! There must be hundreds of homes downstream of those dams!

I'd been on the move for fifteen minutes or so since slipping through that intersection and away from the madness in the light of the burning Hummer. Fifteen minutes more to the hills, maybe, but I was getting pretty winded. *Gotta keep moving.* But who was I kidding? I was sixty-three goddamn years old and sure as hell not in the same shape as I was back in the day. I stopped to

catch my breath and picture the road ahead. I knew of a little liquor store close ahead. It couldn't be far.

I continued my way east toward the hills of Valley Center. Slowing my pace a bit, peering intently into the smoky blackness, I could make out faint shapes looming in the darkness. I spotted the once familiar facade. Approaching the little store, broken glass crunched under my feet. Pausing to listen sharply, I did not detect any movement or sound that might warn of danger close.

The storefront windows were shattered, the glass littering my path as I stepped through and made my way cautiously into the wreckage covering the floor. Groping blindly in the darkness, I stumbled over something and cut my palm as I caught myself, then smiled as I felt the comforting shape of a butane lighter in my grasp. This simple find instantly improved my situation.

In the flickering light cast by the tiny flame, I pulled a sock from my pack to bandage my hand and looked around. Sure enough, looters had come and gone. Oddly, or maybe not so oddly, the shelves were still full of bottles of water!

That would not be the last time I wondered about the choices people make.

Washing the dirt and blood from my mouth and face and splashing the cool water down my neck, I drank deeply, quenching my thirst. I stuffed six or eight bottles of water into my pack, grabbed a canister full of beef jerky, and made my way through the mess. I took one last quick look, but I'll be damned if I could find a single unbroken bottle of gin.

Slinging my pack across my back and cinching it tight against the added weight, I considered the additions to my resources. A gallon or better of water, a couple of pounds of beef jerky, a half dozen butane lighters... not bad given the current situation. I headed east into the darkness. My fifteen or twenty minutes at the liquor store were well worth the trouble.

The voice in my head started up again: *Get to higher ground!* Freshened and fortified by my finds, I quickened my pace. There was still another hour and a half, maybe two hours, until sunrise.

Remembering my days in the Corps, I settled into the task at hand: ten minutes on the run, five minutes at the walk. Run ten, walk five. Run ten, walk five. "This ain't gonna be much fun," I grumbled aloud as the grade toward Valley Center began to rise. My lungs burned.

Surprisingly, a few vehicles were making their way down the grade, heading west. *Why?* I wondered.

Every now and again, a vehicle passed by, roaring up the grade. I attempted to hitch a ride as I jogged up the hill but got no takers as they blew past me. As I marked time to distance with my cadence, my mind wandered again to Suzanne. *What might have happened at home? Is she safe?*

Brake lights glared in my face as a passing pickup slowed. "Hurry up, the damn truck is overheating," a man's voice called out in the darkness.

Catching the tailgate, I swung myself aboard and banged the fender a couple of times. My new best friend stomped the throttle, and we headed on up the hill. *Not a moment too soon,* I thought as I laid back onto a musty smelling canvas tarp, my lungs on fire, my chest heaving.

This old warhorse is just about give in!

The cold air whipped my sweat-soaked shirt as we gained speed up the hill. As the chill passed, I pulled a bottle of water from my pack and focused on the gravity of the situation: Three massive quakes right here ... in San Diego County! At least one tidal surge took out the pier and cut off part of the coast from inland. How bad was it?

That surge was nearly sixty feet high. If that wave was traveling across the Pacific basin, it could take a couple, maybe

three hours, before casting back toward the U.S. coastline. In four, maybe five hours after the initial earthquake, another tidal surge could hit. We were past the four-hour mark. The clock was ticking.

But surely a tsunami could not reach here, right? It could not possibly reach thirty miles inland and six hundred feet in elevation ... *right?*

How little I knew. How little any of us really knew.

I was roused by the sound of the radiator cap popping and the angry hiss of steam escaping the overheated motor in the old truck. The driver pulled onto the shoulder as a torrent of language, foul enough to make any drill instructor proud, burst from his mouth. Braking to a stop, my chauffeur jumped out and yanked the hood open as a cloud of steam engulfed the red Ford. I rolled out of the truck bed. Moving to the front, I encountered a stout black man, five foot nine or ten inches tall, 180 to 190 pounds, with close-cropped hair.

Shrouded in a cloud of steam in the glare of the headlights, I couldn't get much more of a read on him. "Jimmy," he yelled, "bring me that flashlight, please, son!"

Well, that gave me a read. In spite of being enraged, the man was calm and collected, polite to Jimmy. A squeaky little voice replied, "Yes sir, daddy!"

That impressed me.

The man turned to me and extended his hand. "James. James Day." He nodded toward the truck. "My boy, Jimmy. Glad to meet you."

"William Burroughs," I replied, meeting his strong, calloused hand with a firm handshake. "Just call me Bill. Very glad to make your acquaintance."

Out of the swirling cloud of steam, the bright beam of a flashlight played up and down, and roundabout as a little boy stepped into the headlights' glare. Jimmy was a thin little boy of six or seven, with pale white skin, a splash of freckles across his

cheeks, and fiery red hair. His eyes flashed bright blue in the harsh light. His smile was a mile wide as he handed the flashlight to the man. "Is it a bad one, daddy?" he asked.

The man watched as my glance switched from the boy to him and back to the boy. He made no comment as he turned his attention back to the boy. "No son, Ol' Doug should have had his radiator serviced a long time ago, I guess, but there are no leaks that I can see. Just have to let the old girl cool down a bit."

I could see the worry in James' eyes, but his voice did not convey that concern to the young boy. "Grab that bag of chips and some water. We'll rest for a few minutes while the engine cools down." James looked me in the eye as the boy returned to the cab to fetch the chips and water. "We have got to get to higher ground!"

"Lord, I cannot agree more," I replied.

James leaned against the side of the truck as Jimmy sat on the running board, enjoying his chips in the light of the flashlight. James began to recount the events of the last few hours. He told me that he and Jimmy rented space from "Old Doug" in Elfin Forest, a rural wooded area about twenty miles from where we stood. *A great place for a young boy to grow up*, I thought.

Now in his mid to late thirties, James had served with the Marine Corps since he was eighteen. He had fought in the first Gulf War and a couple of smaller engagements since. James had met Kristine, the girl that would be his wife, in Oceanside in 2003.

Three months later, Kristine died, giving birth to little Jimmy. He gave up his career in the Corps and dedicated himself to raising the boy. Things had been hard for them, like a lot of folks around the country. But since hooking up with old Doug a couple of years back, things were slowly looking better for the man and his son.

According to James, Old Doug was a crabby old cuss, a former Marine, as were James and I. Being a bit of a fatalist, he

possessed a small arsenal, a couple of cases of MRE's, and a load of bottled water stashed at his place. The old man was ready for anything.

Well, just about anything.

As the first quake subsided, Old Doug was already on the move. He loaded the pickup with bedrolls, canvas and rope, water and food, kerosene lanterns and a camp stove, a rifle with ammo and fishing gear. The old man's plan was tight, James said. With Jimmy in tow, he tossed on a few personal items. Then they headed out for Valley Center, where his parents owned a small cabin overlooking a creek in the valley in the hills.

"Good plan," I said. "I would've done nearly the same." *I would like to meet this old man*, I thought.

With James and the boy loaded up, Doug drove into Escondido. They were confronted at a roadblock. Things went bad fast. Men at the roadblock were confiscating whatever they chose from each vehicle they stopped. Doug was having none of it, but by the time they rolled to a stop, several punks were already scrambling into the back of the truck.

The old man slung his door open and stepping out, letting a couple of rounds from his Marine Corps issue .45 light up the night sky. Those punks scattered into the dark like rats, but before he could climb back into the truck, he took several rounds to the body and went down. "Go!" He yelled as he collapsed on the running board, firing his Colt into the darkness. James crawled over his small son behind the steering wheel and sped away as a withering volley of gunfire silenced Doug's .45.

Semper Fi, old man.

I could see that it had been a hard thing for James to leave his friend behind as he went down, but he had to think of his son. Now, the toll of losing old Doug began to hit him hard as he described the incident to me. Something about the man moved me; I placed an arm across his heaving shoulders as he sobbed silently.

Thankfully, the small boy was oblivious to his father's pain as he sat merrily munching from his bag of chips. The moment was short but powerful as the bond between me, this man, and his young son instantly grew stronger. I surely would have liked to have met Ol' Doug, I thought, as visions of the fray played through my mind.

A car roared by, blaring its horn. Without a word, we worked to get the truck running and back on the road. I dumped a couple of bottles of water into the radiator and twisted the cap tight. Then, at the direction of his father, Jimmy grabbed my hand. His little fingers could only manage to wrap around three of mine, but the little fella had one hell of a grip.

James turned the key, and the motor growled a moment, then stopped. He tried again and again, but the damn truck just would not start. He let the truck roll back a bit and dumped the clutch. The old red hulk jumped and popped a time or two but still failed to start. He let the truck roll further, picking up a little more speed before dumping the clutch again. Finally, the old Ford jumped and backfired; a lick of flame spewed from the tailpipe. After a cough and shudder, the motor roared back to life.

As the truck pulled up alongside us, I climbed into the cab, and Jimmy leapt across the seat, hugging his father as if he hadn't seen him in a year. The boy settled back against the seat, standing to see over the dashboard. James pulled away and climbed the grade. Reaching the crest of the hill, he pulled to the shoulder again and turned the old truck off.

To the east, the sky began to gather light beyond Palomar Mountain as James climbed out of the truck and took a few steps back to the lip of the grade. After a few moments, Jimmy climbed out and joined him. A moment later, I followed the little guy.

As I approached the man and his son, the boy, small and frail as he was, reached up and grabbed his father's hand. I swear he grew two inches as he straightened himself up and took his

place next to his father. The man spoke softly to the boy; then, they stood together in silence.

James waved me forward. As I reached his side, he said, "We're saying goodbye to our good friend Doug Masters," and fell silent again.

As the rising sun began to warm my neck, our silence was accentuated by the noticeable absence of other vehicles heading up the grade. Seconds became minutes, and the sunlight began to wash into the canyon below us. Looking at his wristwatch, James noted the time, "Zero-Six-Two-five hours," he said. "The first day of the rest of our lives."

The wind quickened in our faces before we heard the sound. Don't get me wrong: I have seen many things that have made strong men fail. I have seen things that made the hardest men shudder. But what we saw in the growing light, as the noise grew louder and the wind blew stronger, made the blood run cold in my veins: raging toward us, rising up the canyon, was a wall of water, thirty to forty feet high, with a body of water behind it as far as could be seen. The leading edge of the wave, choked with trees, brush, and pieces of buildings, crashed towards us as the oak and sycamore forest blanketing the canyon floor disappeared beneath the rising water.

I realized there wasn't any ground much higher than where we were, except the peaks behind us that rose another seventy-five to one hundred feet. As I scrambled into the Manzanita and scrub oak, I hollered back to James to hand Jimmy to me.

We climbed through the brush, trying to gain every foot we could. Branches whipped and tore at our faces, snagging our clothes, slowing our advance.

The roar of the rising wave sounded like a descending tornado as we drove ourselves harder for the high ground. With Jimmy clinging to my back like a tick on a dog's ear and James pushing from behind, we reached the bare granite knob atop the

mountain's crest and braced ourselves. We turned to confront our fate.

To our amazement, the advancing wave slowed, halting its relentless advance not fifty yards from the old red pick-up truck below us. James tossed Jimmy high into the air and let out a banshee's wail. Hell, I think I may have even let out a good old rebel yell myself.

Chapter III

For more than an hour, we remained perched on that lofty spire like a couple of buzzards on their roost, watching in anticipation, waiting for the water to subside. Instead, the sea boiled and surged just below us, the carpet of debris pushed higher and higher with each wave. The piles of wreckage formed into a mountainous ridge all along the water's edge, but the water did not retreat in the least.

Looking west from our high vantage point, the sea appeared endless. Not yards from the old truck abandoned below me, the detritus-laden, muddy, blue-green ocean spread to the horizon, still dark in the distance, awaiting the morning sun. Watching in disbelief, I could hardly grasp the reality of what we were witnessing. Millions of people's lives had just been extinguished like the candle flame pinched between finger and thumb. Another sixty yards and that surging wave would have spilled into the valley behind us.

Was it luck that we had survived? Or were the lucky ones those who had perished? *God help us if another of these things is on the way*, I thought.

Eventually, we worked our way back down to the truck. As little Jimmy sat on the tailgate, marveling at the sight in front of him, nursing a bottle of cool water, James and I considered our options. Since there is strength in numbers, we decided to band together. His parents' place was just down Woods Valley Road, a windy, tree-covered lane along the bank of a small creek. We

figured to rest there, tally our resources, and scout the valley for other survivors.

Stepping to the back of the truck, James found his son curled up on the tailgate, sound asleep. It had been a long night. James scooped up the boy and slid into the passenger side as I climbed behind the wheel. After a couple of false starts, the old truck rumbled to life, and we headed down into the valley below.

Not a hundred yards down the gentle slope, we turned onto Woods Valley Road. I hadn't been down that road in forty years; except for a new house here or there, it looked exactly as I remembered. But nearly all of those homes had been completely demolished. Most were smoldering ruins.

We worked our way slowly over the twisted and broken asphalt. We saw no one. It was nearing 10:00 a.m. I wondered what this day would be called in the years to come.

A small herd of horses milled about in a lush green pasture, down to the left, edged by live oak and sycamore groves. Several were grazing, others simply standing in the trickle of the nearly dry creek, a couple of foals kicking and jumping and prancing around. To the right was the ridge of solid blue granite that saved our hides earlier. My eyes wandered from the road to the top of the massive stone monument.

Here is heaven. Over that ridge is hell, a watery grave to millions. I was struck by the gravity, the immensity, the near incomprehensibility of what had just happened.

James nudged my arm, pointing to a road that dropped into the creek bed. Cranking the wheel hard, the old truck lurched onto the dirt track and across the creek. Gravel crunched loudly under our wheels.

Jimmy woke in the commotion. Standing in the seat to see ahead, he grew excited as he recognized the familiar section of woods leading to his grandparents' house. To the boys' delight, James confirmed that we were just around the bend from their little

cabin up the slope, above the creek. I gunned the truck up the bank before hitting the brakes and pulling up short. In front of us lay a tumbled-down ruin, the remains of the security we were seeking.

“Jesus Christ,” James said in barely a whisper as he visibly slumped in the seat. “What am I going to do now? What am I going to do now?”

I jumped from the truck. “Come on, James!” I headed for the shattered remains of the house. “We need to recon for supplies.”

My words seemed to turn the moment. James snapped to and jumped from the truck, his son on his heels. He was somber as we began rummaging through the wreckage of the memories of his childhood. Jimmy was right there, digging away as much as his small frame would allow.

He found something in the rubble. “Daddy.” He held up what appeared to be a broken picture frame. “It’s gram and gramps.” He gently plucked a photo from the broken frame. Smiling widely, he made his way to his father and presented the picture proudly. “I think they would be happy if they knew we were here. Don’t you, Daddy?” the boy asked with a hopeful, comforting tone.

Interesting thing for such a young child to say, I thought as James picked up his son. Holding him close to his chest, he did not try to hide the tears that fell onto the boy's shoulder.

“We’ll be okay, won’t we, Daddy?”

The man held his small son at arm's length. “You n’ me Jimmy. You n’ me, we’re gonna be just fine, son.”

I had to turn away as tears welled in my own eyes. *Christ, some kinda soft touch you are these days, you old fool*. I thought.

We managed to gather up a load of canned goods, cereal, dried potatoes, condensed milk, rice and beans, and soap, among other things. It would be good for the boy to have everything we could find as time went on. Unfortunately, I didn’t think we could

look for any assistance anytime soon... probably, none at all. Stowing our finds in the truck, we pulled away from the ruin. "We're heading for the old ranch," I told James as we lurched across the creek bed and back onto the road to town.

My dad owned a horse ranch fifty years ago, not a mile as the crow flies over the ridge to the north, three or four miles by road across the valley. I used to ride like the devil on horseback over all of these hills and across the valley. I knew every trickle of water in every ditch. I knew every ridgeline and every grove of trees. Back then, there was only a small grocery store with a pharmacy counter and a gas station, a grade school, a small county library, a little motel, a liquor store, a diner, and a feed store.

Memories flooded my mind. Once familiar scenery opened before us as we headed back to Valley Center Road, the main highway through the valley.

At one time, Valley Center had been a small farming and ranching community. Not anymore. Nearly everyone now worked down in Escondido, San Marcos, Vista, or even all the way down in San Diego. Valley Center was a small, safe, clean little town. The old dairy barely functioned anymore, but many horse ranches were scattered around the valley, with citrus and avocado groves here and there.

Over on Woods Valley Road lay the remains of the Old Butterfield Stage Station, the Nut Farm, and several ranches. Woods Valley ran east and west between two massive granite ridges – the ridge to the south, where James, the boy, and I had scrambled to high ground, and the northern ridge, which separated Woods Valley from Valley Center itself. Lake Wolford was nestled in the hills just to the south and east of the southern ridge.

Beyond Lake Wolford was Guejito, once a massive cattle ranch, now crisscrossed with roads and a scattering of homes and Hellhole Canyon Preserve. Hellhole Canyon was nothing but wilderness with game trails crossing its canyons and hills that rose

up the shoulder of Pine Mountain to the south and west of Palomar Mountain.

To the north of the valley, the land dropped precipitously, more than one thousand feet down Cole Grade Rd. into Pauma Valley and the Rincon Indian Reservation along the headwaters of the San Luis Rey River. Pauma Valley wrapped around to the east at the base of Palomar Mountain along a massive gash in the earth, the southern reaches of the Elsinore Seismic Fault line.

Pauma Valley followed the San Luis Rey river valley as it wandered through Fallbrook, Bonsall, and Oceanside on its way to the sea. Beyond the ridgeline, shy of Pauma Valley, to the west and northwest, were Burnt Mountain, Turner Lake, and Hidden Meadows. Out Old Castle and Lilac roads, the land dropped as well, toward the coast.

As we made our way past the post office, which had been reduced to rubble, the flagpole canted over, about 50 degrees off-kilter. A broken gas pipe spewed a long blue flame into the air, the hiss and roar of the flame rising and fading as the gusting wind came and went. The small commercial sector that had built up around the post office was also in complete ruins.

The road was in bad shape; the asphalt buckled here and there. Massive wounds in the earth slashed across the valley. Gaps opened across the road made for painfully slow going. Neither of us had seen a soul so far.

There was nothing left standing within my view across the valley, only great piles of debris where homes once sat. I could see smoke rising at many points around the surrounding hills. Tiny gray tendrils shredded in the wind, and large plumes of greasy black smoke marred the horizon. Cattle and horses grazed nervously across the wide pastures adjacent to the old dairy. Most of the massive, ancient eucalyptus trees lining the road had toppled over, making it difficult to move through them.

The old motel at the bend was on fire, as were several houses and outbuildings close by. It appeared that very little had survived the three massive earthquakes while tremors and aftershocks continued.

Off to the south of the road, several large sycamore trees began to topple over. It was almost comical, as the trees swayed back and forth, as though in slow motion, then heeled to one side before finishing their long fall.

Coming to a complete stop, I realized a powerful aftershock was rippling across the landscape as still more trees danced and crashed to the ground. Down the valley ahead of us, power poles swayed and snapped. Dust spouts erupted in lines around the valley as landmasses ground against one another. The remains of a burning building suddenly vanished as the ground opened and swallowed the flaming wreckage.

After several minutes, the tremors subsided, and we began to creep forward again. It took nearly two hours to cover the three miles to the center of town.

We reached the main intersection at about noon. Pulling into the edge of the crowded parking lot, we collected our wits and set out to see what could be learned from the gathering of a hundred or so people there. What we heard was not good: the vast majority of homes and commercial buildings had suffered significant damage and were uninhabitable or unsafe to use for shelter.

The people disagreed heartily about what should be done and who should be doing it.

We also found out quickly that no one was aware of the tidal wave that nearly washed into the valley. As James and I explained the morning's events, half the crowd headed to the valley's west end to see for themselves. They learned what we already knew: we were stranded on a virtual island. The water level had risen and appeared to be holding just shy of 1,200 feet

above sea level. Small groups of people fanned out east, north and south to see where the rising water had reached.

A man named Rector wanted to take charge, but not many were buying it. Rector was the vice principal at the elementary school and a deacon at a local church. The majority of these people didn't appear to like him much, but there were fifteen or twenty men and women that seemed to cower behind him.

James suggested looking for survivors and scavenging for supplies. Groups began fanning out across the valley. Shortly, a camp of sorts began to take shape in the open field south of the road. Most people were glad to have something constructive and necessary to do... those others, not so much.

"Those others," Rector's people, along with fifteen or eighteen young men and older boys, now decided they would take control. But, before they had an opportunity to force their case, the renegades found themselves surrounded by fifty or sixty men and women, all armed to the teeth, insisting rather firmly that they disarm themselves, find a hole in another corner of the valley, and crawl into it.

The malcontents dropped their weapons and slunk away to the north, out Cole Grade Road. I hoped like hell we wouldn't have to deal with these yahoos again, but it was a small valley, very nearly surrounded by water.

For good measure, James had fetched an AK-47 from the truck. Jimmy donned old Doug's heavy canvas coat, a small backpack of supplies slung across his small shoulders. Though the coat sleeves were rolled to the elbow, I couldn't see the boy's fingertips. The coattail slapped at his ankles.

James smiled and ran his fingers through his son's bright red hair. "Doug kept telling him always to be prepared!"

There's not much getting by this lad. I thought.

Everyone moved out on task and agreed to rendezvous at the crossroads three hours later, at 3 p.m. Several teams circled the

valley looking for any other survivors while James and I headed for the ranch. This little side-trip was more than a case of nostalgia. James, Jimmy, and I needed a place to lay up and devise a plan.

"Son of a gun, there it is!" I said aloud. Just ahead, a huge wooden sign dangling from a single hinge read, "Irish Oaks"; the old ranch road was just as I remembered it. Jesus, it seemed like a million years ago and only yesterday, all at the same time. While I drove up the mile-long road to the ranch, a newer, large metal structure stood in the distance. The old stable I worked as a kid was still there, but the big old hay barn had collapsed completely.

We rounded a bend and came under the canopy of ancient live oak trees. Thirty to forty head of horses grazed in the large pastures or stood in various pens. The newer metal structure, a massive barn, appeared fully intact.

Making our way through the woods, past the pond, and up the hill towards the main house, I smelt smoke on the wind again. As we left the shelter of the trees, smoke rose from where the old house should be. *Christ*. I nearly choked on the word as we topped the hill to see the place that had stood there for nearly a century was a complete wreck, the remains a smoking ruin.

As I stopped and climbed out of the truck, a young red Queensland Heeler, maybe ten months old, came running from the shadows and damn near knocked me over. Scratching his head a bit, I saw his coat was singed, his ears and muzzle badly burnt.

The exuberant pup ran all over the place but kept making a loop to the edge of the smoldering rubble. James circled to the far side of the wreckage, and I headed in the direction the pup had been running.

The young dog showed me where his people were. Huddled together were the bodies of an elderly man and woman. It looked like the old guy was trying to drag the woman away from the burning building, but sadly, they never made it. Both bodies were

badly scorched. The pup kept nosing the old man, whining loudly as if to wake him from his mid-day nap.

“He isn’t getting up for you anymore, pup,” I said as I draped my jacket over the bodies, trying to give them a little dignity in death.

I scooped up the dog and dropped him in Jimmy’s lap as we headed back to the store and our rendezvous. “Think you can take care of this pup for me, Jimmy?” I asked.

Jimmy looked from me to his father, wide-eyed. “Can I really keep this puppy, Dad?”

“Well, if Mr. Bill thinks it’s a good idea, then I don’t see why not.” The boy wrapped his arms around the pup, thrilled with his father’s response.

“I’ll call him Red!” he said proudly as we drove down the hill, away from the burnt-out ranch house. I left my jacket where it lay. Surely, I would find another.

Back at the crossroad, the crowd continued to grow as the folks that had headed to the top of the grade returned. Scouting parties also began to trickle back in. Unfortunately, the news they shared wasn’t good. The ocean ran up into the creek bed along Cool Valley Road, just over the shallow ridgeline to the north. Northwest along Old Lilac Road, the scouts saw nothing but ocean dotted with a few scattered islands. To the west lay nothing but a few bits of land above water – and no further signs of life.

Pauma Valley was a seething ocean of debris two or three miles wide, with Palomar Mountain rising above it on the far shore. Back to the south, Guejito Road was underwater. There was high ground at Hellhole Canyon to the east and south, but no roads left to escape to safety... only game trails into the mountains.

Search groups began returning with surprisingly few survivors. Roads were impassable all across the valley, and several vehicles were running low on fuel. Scout teams went out again to bring in riding horses. Reassembling, they headed back out to

scour assigned areas for survivors, log possible shelter sites, and identify locations to recover supplies for retrieval as manpower allowed. They began releasing penned-up livestock to fend for themselves.

As the day dragged on and scout teams returned to the rally point, the list of the dead began to grow.

Several people had already begun to set up tents in the center of the valley, along a dry creek bed, out in the open fields. No one wanted to risk sheltering in any of the buildings or lingering near the groves of oak, sycamore, and cottonwood. So we created a pen of cars and trucks parked bumper-to-bumper and corralled all of the collected riding stock. The impromptu camp was assembled without much organization, but it would work for the night.

As the sun fell beyond the western ridge, a chill wind began to blow. The waning crescent moon rose before sundown. The cook fires cast stark shadows against the tents and onto the tall grass that fanned out across the valley.

There were nearly 200 people in our camp, assuming duties as they saw fit – gathering food and water, cooking, setting up shelters, and trying to be strong where few felt any strength at all. Gradually, the moon crept across the southern sky, and the cook fires burned low. The people, thankful for their survival, made themselves as comfortable as they could.

As exhausted as I was, I could not sleep. I lay in the grass thirty yards from camp, wrapped in canvas against the cooling night air, wondering how Suzanne was doing.

At home, we were situated very well. The house was dug into the hillside on a south-facing slope, 200 feet above the valley floor in Park County, Colorado. Our nearest neighbor, cranky old Harold, lived further back around the shoulder of the mountain. Harold was much like James' friend Doug had been, set up to survive near anything. Harold had himself a short wave radio too!

As the day's events unfolded, I had not taken the time to consider... a short wave radio! I'd check with the group in the morning.

The ground rumbled softly beneath me as I finally dozed off.

Day 2...

Sometime during the night, I guess about four o'clock in the morning, judging from the stars, the Heeler pup found me. His squirming woke me as he tried to get inside the tarp. I eased around a bit so he could slip under the canvas. Laying there, feeling the cool air on my face, watching the stars and marveling at their brightness, the pup's warm body against my side, my mind wandered again to home and Suzanne.

Suddenly I froze: something in the darkness. I didn't know what it was, but I was alert, fully awake in an instant. Lying on my back, dead still, I listened to the grass rustling in the wind as the ground rumbled beneath me. I smelled the smoke from the smoldering cook fires and heard someone snoring in the camp. I raised my head slightly and looked toward the cluster of tents and odd shelters.

Everything seemed okay, but... Something out of the corner of my eye... something... No...

Damn!

Someone was crouched low, creeping past one of the fires. As the wind blew, the embers in the fire pit glowed brightly, and I saw the glint of metal. The son of a bitch had a weapon and was creeping into a tent...

"Fuckin' gooks in the wire!" A voice screamed in my head, the blood pounding in my temples.

Ever so slightly, I rolled to my side and pulled the .40 from under my arm. Glancing up behind me, I saw three shadows looming in the darkness, silhouettes in the starlight not thirty feet

from me, moving slowly toward the camp, *toward me!* The sound of the safety on my .40 moving into the fire position sounded like a clap of thunder to my ears. But the dark shadows continued to creep toward me, appearing not to notice at all. Two of them eased by me, several feet to the left. The third was right on top of me.

As a foot softly crunched dry grass, inches from my head, I grabbed the barrel of his rifle, pulling it down and away from me. It discharged. I jammed the Walther into the dark shape looming above me and squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession. Two 180-grain JHP .40 caliber slugs threw the body up and away from me.

In his haste, one of the other interlopers discharged his shotgun at his feet as he turned toward my position. The blast from the muzzle lit up the darkness. I fired a couple of quick shots in his direction.

The second trespasser fired several rounds, hitting the ground a few yards from me. I heard the nasty whine of a couple of bullets whipping through the air near me.

I returned fire and was rewarded by the thud of a bullet impacting meat and a low groan, followed by the sound of a body hitting the ground. The commotion of three or four people crashing through the camp and across the grassy field toward the north would have awoken everyone in the camp if not for the gunfire.

The camp came alive instantly. Flashlight beams pierced the darkness, lanterns were lit, and campfires stoked. I hollered to the camp to avoid being shot myself.

As the first few folks came my way, they located one of our visitors in the grass. He had taken a round under his left arm into his chest, and he was bleeding out pretty fast. Next to me, the other one wasn't moving. My two rounds had ripped through his guts and into his chest. He was dead before he hit the ground.

As people began to gather around, it became apparent that these were some of Rector's boys. "Jesus Christ, these clowns are

all done up in camo and face paint," someone in the gathering crowd observed, "like they were some badass commandos or something!"

The wounded boy, about nineteen, lasted long enough to tell us his group was holed up out on the east end of Cool Valley Road. "We're going to have to deal with this bullshit hard and fast," I said, "or they will be back."

A blood trail was found in the grass... another one was wounded! "Maybe they will think twice before hitting us again," I said.

James appeared by my side in the darkness. "Only if luck will have us!" he said.

Slowly, the sun began to lighten the eastern sky. Finally, the camp was fully awake and mobilized. Everyone began to look to me for answers. "*Jesus H. Christ!* Don't you people have a mayor or something around here?" I asked.

It turned out that the Chairman of the Town Council had died when his home collapsed in the quakes. His entire family had perished with him, except for his oldest son. That son had died this morning when two rounds from my .40 had torn the life from his body.

The crowd pressed closely around me. The air seemed much heavier than it did only a moment before. Little Jimmy found me then as he worked his way through the mob, cradling a cup of hot coffee in both hands. *Something about this boy*, I thought, watching as the crowd parted to let him through.

Jimmy reached up and presented the cup to me. Accepting the coffee from him, I realized that this small gesture had just become a token of my new authority. As the boy took a stand beside me and folded his arms across his chest, a wave of calm and quiet moved slowly back through the crowd. James, my "*Segundo*," stepped up beside his son with his AK-47 at the ready.

"When will they come help us?" a woman asked in the growing light.

I nearly choked as I spat a response. "Let's get this straight right now, everybody. There isn't any *they* out there anymore! Do you understand? *They* no longer exist! It is us and whomever we may stumble across *if* we live out the week. There is no one left out there to come help! Get *that* into your heads! We have only ourselves to look to, so suck it up."

Faces in the crowd looked from one to the other and back again. They tightened with renewed fear and worry. Momentarily they all looked back at me, fearful, questioning eyes probing my own. Asking without speaking, their eyes pleading. "Help us!" they all said.

I had no desire to lead these people. I only wanted to find a way home. But something inside me would not let me turn away and leave these people to their fate.

I made my decision without a word. I was now the leader of this "collective." Once that was determined, I wasted no time getting my charges in order.

With a nod and a wave of my hand, the fresh dead were stripped of everything but their socks and underwear and moved to the edge of the woods.

When I asked for volunteers, several men stepped forward. Walking through the group, Jimmy and James at my six, I looked in their faces. "You, you, you and you," I pointed to each individual, "with me."

I had just selected my "lieutenants"—Bob Occer, Walter Ranck, George French, Billy Greentree, and Hector Ramirez. I assigned each man responsibilities for the organization of the camp: shelter, food, and water; organization of the supplies and meals; defense of the encampment; management of the livestock; and last but certainly not least, the search for a path to higher ground.

Bob Occer was a short, stout man, about fifty years old. Five-foot five or six inches tall, about 180 pounds with a barrel chest and broad shoulders and huge, heavily calloused hands, he looked like he'd be hell in a fistfight. Bob had been the "Yardman" at the Feed and Farm Supply Store. While he had no security experience, his presence was commanding.

Several men stepped up to join his team. Walter "Wally" Ranck was a thin old man in his seventies. He had plenty of construction experience, and as a retired carpenter, he was the ideal candidate to head up the shelter detail. George French, a retired accountant, was nobody's fool, about sixty-five and as tall as my six-foot-two inches at least. If anybody could organize the supplies, it should be him.

Billy Greentree was a Native American from the Rincon Reservation. He would be responsible for Camp Defense & Livestock. Billy was of medium build, five foot nine or ten inches tall, and slender at about 150 pounds. With long, glistening black hair, he looked the spittin' image of the pictures I had seen of the Sioux Chief Red Cloud, presenting a very stern, powerful countenance.

The final lieutenant, Hector Ramirez, was shorter than Bob Occer by an inch or so, yet even more stout. I couldn't see an ounce of fat on the man. He was in his early forties, with a broad face and wide-set eyes, the look of a man with some Apache blood.

Everyone knew Hector and liked and respected him. He was a simple ranch hand and had worked on nearly every farm and ranch in the valley at one time or another. He knew this land like the back of his hand.

I had a feeling that this valley would not remain a safe haven for long, and Hector's job was the most important of all... finding a path to higher ground.

Over coffee, James organized a detail to locate bodies across the valley and pay due respect. We honored the people we

found as best we could, reciting their names as the funeral pyres roared. Liz Banks, the librarian, insisted on logging the names of the dead. For sanitary reasons, all of the bodies were buried where they were found.

The weather, normally relatively dry, was anything but. Maybe it was from the rise in the sea level or a change in the ocean's temperature. Typically cloudless skies were heavy with the threat of rain. We needed water, but situated out in the open in tents and makeshift shelters, we didn't need rain. After a lengthy discussion, the group voted to remain in the field for the time being, alongside the dry creek bed.

I believed we needed to move out of the valley floor to the shelter of the ridge to the south, nearer the ranch. If the weather broke bad, that ridge would shield us from the wind. Out in the open, we were at the mercy of whatever might come down upon us. However, my arguments were of no use: the majority of the people were too afraid to move from the wide-open fields.

Scavenger teams returned with large amounts of goods. The piles of supplies were growing rapidly; sorting of the booty got underway. I placed highest importance on medicines and first-aid supplies, weapons and ammo, bedding, and anything that would shed water—tarps, canvas, plastic sheeting, and anything else that would keep us and the supplies dry.

We sorted and stacked piles of non-perishable food while perishable goods were set up for immediate use. Pots and pans, utensils of all sorts, barbeque grills, a couple of chain saws, clothes, shoes, and other assorted goods were brought to the rally point.

Back on the ranch, the old stables and big metal barn were intact. Both buildings appeared to be safe with no sign of imminent collapse. The barn had an office of sorts in it, and the stable included a little studio apartment set up for use as the groom's quarters. Hell, I had slept in that very apartment when I was a kid!

The barn and stable both received stock water by gravity feed from a large cistern up the hill. There was maybe 2,000 gallons of water in it. Of course, the water would need boiling to be safe for drinking, but it was good enough for me. Furthermore, the stock ponds would work fine for an occasional bath when the need arose.

After a thorough inspection, I decided we would begin moving supplies to the barn the following day. The pastures were more than ample to manage all of the riding stock that was accumulating, and the structures could house as many people as wanted to risk it.

James, Jimmy, and I set up our headquarters at the old ranch and settled in at the end of the short but busy day.

Chapter IV

The morning of the third day, we served breakfast for 200 souls near about, including eggs and sausage, bacon, biscuits and gravy, and juice from concentrate. It was a great feast but exhausted all of our perishable food except for some grapefruit and oranges that would keep for several more days.

Nevertheless, we had to eat the food before it spoiled, so we made a grand to-do about it. It started the day well and boosted morale, given the circumstances.

No rain fell overnight, but water began to percolate to the surface in the “dry” creek bed at the encampment. The people still refused to move out of the open, but we did relocate the shelters closest to the water to “higher” ground. That was all of maybe three feet higher, but now the encampment was 100 yards away from the creek bed. I breathed a little easier, but the appearance of water oozing into the creek bed was puzzling and alarming.

Our store of food and supplies continued to grow. As more supplies arrived, we hauled them directly to the ranch. George French kept the supply situation well in hand and was at the ranch supervising the relocation.

Some supplies were of more value than others. The kerosene and propane were luxuries that could not be replaced. With winter coming, we decided to save it for the worst of times ahead. Only one of the two chain saws salvaged was working, and we possessed precious little two-stroke oil. I assigned a group to begin stockpiling wood for the cook fires. Half of the able-bodied

not already on task fanned out and packed in dry wood for the cook fires and salvaged lumber for building material.

With all the vehicles running low on fuel and passage across the valley nearly impossible, we patched together dozens of travois. Then, we moved supplies the mile and a half from the open field to the barn at the ranch using pure horsepower. If the structure could stand up to the continuing tremors and aftershocks, our supplies would be safe there for the time being.

There was no short wave radio, but I was told there was one at the Ranger Station at Lake Henshaw. Scavengers had located a couple of CB radios, and security set up a detail in an attempt to contact any other survivors. A two-man team alternately transmitted and monitored every channel every hour, hoping for any response.

Hector took six riders and supplies for several days and headed southeast across Hellhole Canyon, looking for a path through the mountains to Warner Springs. He carried a message for the ranger at Lake Henshaw – if he was still there. Warner Springs was the nearest town of any size on higher ground. If a passage through the foothills could be found, perhaps we would find a safe haven there.

There were also campgrounds on Palomar Mountain that we might utilize. If the Observatory was still standing, someone might be there as well. If we were lucky enough to find survivors at the Observatory, I hoped to learn some hard facts about what had happened and what was going on. At that moment, the unknown far outweighed what we did know. I needed to correct that situation as soon as possible.

Water continued to gather in the creek bed. While there had not been another large earthquake for thirty-six hours, the ground never stopped rumbling. At times, you could see the trees sway as the earth moved beneath them. I was beginning to believe we would not be safe there much longer.

An enterprising young fellow, Bobby Roland, collected hundreds of CDs. His little car was a rolling boom box, and he began playing requests, one CD on the hour, first come, first served, for as long as the gas and batteries held out. The sound of music wafting across the valley helped keep the people calm and the morale high.

A sense of routine began to settle in at the encampment. Security patrols were out around the clock but saw neither hide nor hair of the group of renegades. But they had to be out there somewhere.

A handful of veterans were assigned to work the security teams. I felt confident they would take care of any threat. Search parties had managed to locate another few dozen survivors and had brought them into the camp. As a result, our headcount was approaching 250 men, women, and children.

James, Jimmy, and I settled in at the ranch. Many others had moved from the encampment and converted the stables into a bunkhouse of sorts. The massive metal structure was fast becoming a city in itself. The barn appeared to be solid as a rock, containing forty or fifty stalls along each of the outer walls and another forty or so arranged in a central corridor where we stockpiled the supplies. With a bit of luck and no more rising water, it would serve us well through the winter... if we could remain there that long.

I selected several horses for James, the boy, and me. A couple of good saddle horses each and a half dozen pack horses. We kept them separate and secure in the barn along with several others, maybe thirty head in all, with plenty of hay and grain. With all of the other animals turned out into the pastures, we kept these ready for whatever may come.

Yet, even with all of the “comforts” we were beginning to enjoy, the hair on the back of my neck stayed on end. I felt a strong need to be prepared to move—*quickly*. James felt the same

uneasiness that I did, and we continued to formulate our plans for the next move, whenever that might be.

There were two large ponds on the ranch, in the pastures about a quarter-mile below the barns. One of the younger boys rushed in after finding fish floating on the surface of one of the lower ponds. Concerned, his mother brought a bucket full of bluegill and a few small bass to me.

None of the horses showed any signs of distress as I headed down to the ponds, but I noticed that none were congregated near the lower pond. By the time I reached the water's edge, many more fish had floated to the surface. Standing there for a moment, I saw fish gasping at the surface as others bobbed to the surface, dead. Then, more bubbles popped to the surface. I smelled rotten eggs...

Sulfur! I dipped my fingertips into the water; it was warm and stank to high heaven. Within minutes, steam rose from the water's surface. After running the 200 yards to the second pond, I felt the water, still cool and fresh, with no dead fish.

Several people had made their way to the ponds as they noticed the steam rising from the water. We moved all of the livestock to the upper pasture. I had never been aware of any kind of hot spring or geothermal activity right here, but it appeared that we had just witnessed the birth of a hot spring. That was not a good sign.

James saddled up and rode west along the adjacent creek bed and found three ponds still fresh. A similar survey to the east uncovered bad news, though. Two ponds were hot and stinking—one beginning to boil. Three of the seven potential water sources in the valley were already contaminated, and the other four were now suspect.

Bob Occer, my security chief, galloped up the road on his Palomino. Arriving out of breath, flushed and excited, he informed me that scouts reported that steam was beginning to rise from the "ocean" to the east, between Palomar Mountain and us. "Christ

almighty," I said. "That has to be 600 or 700 feet deep, and steam is rising from the *surface*?"

After saddling up a big bay gelding, we headed out for the shoreline to the east, about a mile and a half away. As the wind shifted, I could smell the nauseating stench of sulfur again. By the time I reached the shoreline at the cliff's edge, it was apparent that something bad was happening. The surface of the water, which had been slowly clearing as the trash and rubble became waterlogged and sank, was now churning from below. The roar of the turbulent water was deafening as debris exploded from the surface. A colossal cottonwood, *the whole friggin' tree*, violently burst from the surface of the water, then sank again. "Jesus, the Ocean is *boiling*!" I yelled above the din.

"No shit," James muttered in reply.

Leaving our vantage point above the churning sea, we followed the creek bed to the west. It was easy to see the fault line across the valley. The surface of the soil was only slightly disturbed in some places, while in others, the lateral shift was significant.

The first fence line we came to revealed that the northern side of the fault was creeping west while the southern side appeared to remain stationary. There were several places where hot air was rising from the fault. We located three normally dry holes where hot bubbling mud oozed slowly from below. The fault ran the entire length of the valley as it gradually drained into the massive canyon where the sea was churning in what had been Pauma Valley and the Rincon Reservation.

Following the creek bed, we arrived back at the encampment. The rising water was just beginning to flow down toward Pauma Valley and growing warm as well.

This time, we didn't take a vote. I decided to relocate everyone to the ranch, pronto. We spent the remainder of the day and well into the night moving the entire encampment and all

remaining supplies to the ranch, well above the widening fissure along the fault line in the valley floor.

Day 4...

By noon, all of the livestock had been moved to the south side of the granite ridge and pushed into the hills of Hellhole Canyon, beyond Woods Valley. Returning scouts told us how the land beyond the ridge to the north of Cool Valley Road was sloughing off into the ocean. Hidden Meadows had become an island, slowly sinking.

The northern edges of our little enclave were closing in on us. The water in the creek along Woods Valley Road was still good, but what remained of Lake Wolford was a stinking mud hole on the edge of the surging, muddy ocean. Nearly all remaining groundwater had become polluted and stank of sulfur.

As the landmass to the north continued to crumble into the sea, we were forced to abandon the ranch and move everything to the opposite side of the ridge.

Now, we were wedged between the two granite ridges, huddled in the trees along the road. We were all out in the open again, patching together shelters to keep us safe from the threat of rain.

Billy Greentree's sister, Rowena, had taken an interest in James. First, she set up a shelter to share with little Jimmy; now, she made space for James and me as well. "Nice to have a woman around," James said as she passed him a plate of boiled greens. I nodded in reply as I accepted a plate too.

While eating, I peered into the flickering campfire that hissed and popped as a gust of wind drove a spattering of raindrops into the flames. More than ever, I wished Suzanne were in my arms.

Day 5...

At about 6 a.m., the quakes began again in earnest. Thunderous, rolling shockwaves rocked what remained of the valley. Every forty minutes or so, another wave of tremors swept through. The surviving wildlife had been moving into Hellhole Canyon for several days; the only thing left was our riding stock and us. All of the livestock had been pushed into the hills of Hellhole Canyon toward higher ground.

Wedge between these two granite ridges, the impact of the tremors was lessened a little bit, but we were still tossed around a good bit. The mass of granite protected us from the ground that would have otherwise liquefied beneath our feet. The old ranch was now completely gone, along with any other structure that had not been lost in the first rounds of quakes.

The dry creek bed had grown into a gaping fissure eight to twelve feet wide. The land north of that crumbled into the sea all the way up Valley Center Road, where our original meeting had taken place just a few days before.

The land was disappearing at an accelerating pace.

Hector and his patrol returned with a rare bit of good news. They had located a safe path through Hellhole Canyon into the mountains and onto Lake Henshaw. Chuck Daniels, the Ranger at the lake, had organized a small group of survivors there.

However, the news crackling across the shortwave radio was tragic. There had been massive devastation on a global scale. There were no functional governmental bodies nor organized national armies. There were only scattered pockets of survivors and gangs of looters marauding, pillaging, and killing.

South of Lake Henshaw, Harbison Canyon was flooded, Alpine was gone, and a fault opened parallel with Interstate-8. The entire landmass to the south sank into the sea. Poway, Ramona, Lakeside, El Cajon, El Capitan Reservoir, nearly all of San Diego County was underwater. Where we stood was an island or, at best, the southern end of a peninsula.

Hector's patrol had also survived a run-in with bandits. They'd been ambushed on the trek back to the valley. Hector believed some of those men were Mexican nationals, maybe part of a drug cartel. Their weapons indicated as much, but not their experience.

The handful of veterans with Hector overcame the assault reasonably quickly, but not without casualties—one dead and two wounded. The dead were stripped of everything and buried on the trail. The wounded men would recover, though fear of infection was high. It was hard on Hector to lose any of his men.

Hopefully, none of the renegades had escaped to warn others of our presence.

Hector brought back a fine Mexican saddle and some captured weapons. They included a selective fire M-14 with a detachable scope bolted to a composite stock and a matching pair of Coonan .357 semi-autos in a double-cross draw shoulder rig. The harness had some bullet damage and dried blood, but nothing that couldn't be remedied. I didn't care for the polished stainless finish and Pearl grips. Sunlight flashing off that stainless steel could get a man killed, but I accepted his gifts graciously.

Hector reported that he had delivered my message to Chuck at Henshaw. Warner Springs had been razed to the ground, there would be no safe haven there, nor at Ranchita, but there was shelter near Henshaw. Hector's patrol also found an open fissure between Hellhole Canyon and Lake Henshaw that threatened to cut off any retreat to the mountains. On hearing Hector's report, I decided that we would move quickly through Hellhole Canyon, across the fault line, and on to the lake.

Transporting the supplies was a logistical nightmare. There were no roads across Hellhole Canyon. We were packing the supplies on horseback and piled onto travois. We divided ourselves into five sections, with the supplies apportioned equally between each. Any one section could survive on its own. The loss of a

single section wouldn't deprive the remainder of any necessary supplies. We drove any livestock we found ahead of us as we moved along.

In the process of loading supplies, people loyal to Rector were discovered stealing food. Tempers flared. Before security could get a handle on it, someone in Rector's crew wounded a teenage boy in a struggle over canned milk for his baby sister.

When I arrived on the scene, five security boys held Rector's people under guard. Their shooter was dead, and three or four others suffered from serious injuries. Rector had snuck into the camp. But now, he was bellowing like a bull as his hands were secured behind his back. He appeared harmless.

The entire encampment witnessed the confrontation. The boy, who had caught some shotgun pellets, would be fine, but his mother, with a baby on her hip, was fit to be tied. Rector and his rabble had been stealing from these people, and now they wanted blood.

I was not well suited to the administrative or diplomatic duties to which I had found myself relegated. My patience ran very thin. Now Rector had to be dealt with again. The people were churning into a mob. Those who felt most grievously wronged were at the forefront, demanding a final solution. We were not in a position to banish anyone; the situation with the renegades had proven that already. *God Almighty! Solomon, I am not!* We could not keep anyone confined or under guard, and we were on the move.

I decided to release Rector and his people after confiscating their weapons. I had no other choice. As Bob Occer cut Rector loose, he grabbed a weapon from someone in the crowd.

"Look out, Mr. Bill!" Jimmy Day's little voice shrieked.

As I turned, I heard the roar of the shotgun and felt the sting of lead shot as something hit me just below the hips. As I fell, I heard a rapid volley from James' AK-47.

Little Jimmy had taken nearly the full blast of the 12-gauge and was lying next to me, unconscious. The shotgun blast had blown the pack from his back and knocked him flying into me, but the pack and the heavy coat protected his body. He was bleeding only slightly where pellets had struck unprotected skin.

Then the rain began to fall.

Raindrops sizzled on the hot barrel of James' AK-47, the steam wafting in the breeze. Rector was dead, and three of his men were wounded. The mob seized them and carried them off. I never saw any of them again.

Getting to my feet, I followed James with Jimmy in his arms, headed for the meager shelter of an oak tree close at hand. Old Donnie Banks, the librarian's husband, had been an Army medic in 'Nam. His actions belied his seventy-odd years as he was suddenly back in the jungle again, treating a wounded soldier.

The boy regained consciousness while Donnie busily plucked shot from his neck and scalp. Holding up a pellet, he squinted in the dim light. "Birdshot. Number seven, I'd say."

"Damn good thing it wasn't buckshot," I said.

While watching Donnie work, my adrenalin rush subsided. I felt the sting of birdshot under my own hide and realized that this little boy might well have just saved my life! Standing there in the rain, the cold water running down my collar, I looked at the boy and wondered again; *Just what was it that made him... different?*

The rain began about 2 o'clock in the afternoon on the 5th day. It came with a vengeance, threatening to wash away all those who had survived the quakes. The repeated aftershocks churned the earth into a quagmire.

Transporting our supplies across the rugged terrain of Hellhole Canyon was a sore test for all of us. Hector's scouts rode ahead and marked the trail, checking for new dangers and scouting for renegades as the rain continued to fall without reprieve. Very soon, every low-lying area was a pool, every ditch full to running,

and the earth, loosened by the ravages of the quakes, a sea of mud that threatened to swallow us whole. The horses were belly deep in the muck, constantly struggling, straining under their loads, pushing for higher ground. The people were exhausted, wet, cold, and hungry for a hot meal.

For six days, we struggled through the mountains. We spent every daylight hour on the trail, huddling in our wet blankets at night, draped with canvas to shield against the relentless rain. There was no dry wood, no tinder, no fire.

We lost old Doug's camp stove the first day when a packhorse lost its footing and fell into a gaping chasm. Cold camp for five nights in the pouring rain made for a miserable trek.

As the rain pounded the earth, saturating the ground, seeping deeper into cracks and crevices, steam rose at random spots across the slopes. Making our way east and south while climbing higher into the hills of Hellhole Canyon, we saw huge geysers of steam rising from deeper fissures to one side, then the other. We wound our way through the maze, following the markers left by Hector's scouts.

We lost two more horses and their loads on the third day when the earth collapsed beneath them. The weight of the travois they were pulling dragged them into the hole before any of us could do anything to help them.

Our party moved forward, slowly but relentlessly. Most of the children and several adults grew ill from the cold and wet. The little Baker twins looked like they would both succumb to pneumonia before the trip was over. Unfortunately, we had only a few medical supplies scavenged in the Valley and no means to treat them.

On the seventh day, we began to catch up to the livestock we had pushed out of the valley ahead of us. There were cattle, horses, goats, sheep, pigs, and a few llamas. We marveled at some geese and a handful of chickens on the trail ahead of us.

Mired in the mud, huddled together against the rain and the cold, exhausted from the struggle. They had bunched up against the edge of a massive fissure, maybe forty feet wide at this point and at least as deep. It looked like the fissure had opened in just the last day or so after the scouts had passed, just as Hector had warned. The trail markers continued undisturbed on the far side of the chasm.

With an uncanny knack for survival, one of the llamas seemed to sense the path to safety. With a nasty old Banty rooster clinging to her back, she headed south with forty or more sheep following on her heels. As the sheep headed south, cattle began to follow and our pack train just naturally headed on south behind them.

One of Hector's riders, Jelly Wilson, caught up with the column. He had been scouting the fissure to the north and reported that it continually widened all the way to the sea. The water was quickly creeping south toward us, even as we tried to make our way around it.

We followed the livestock south onto higher ground, more solid, not so many fonts of steam blasting from the earth, the mud not quite so deep. Small, scattered herds of wildlife were headed south as well, trying to escape the threatening sea.

We took nearly the entire day to struggle another two or three miles, managing to reach the top of the ridgeline that paralleled what used to be Highway 76. We could see Lake Henshaw across the wide crack in the earth. In the distance, herds of mule deer, rabbit, fox, and coyote made their way across the fissure to the east, toward the higher mountains.

As we began to cross the ridgeline, gunfire erupted. It had to be the men who ambushed Hector and his scouts.

Shooters were clustered in the boulders down the ridge to the south, eighty or ninety yards away. Another group scattered in

the rock outcroppings down the eastern slope, a hundred yards off, opened fire.

They played their ambush poorly.

The attack was also very poorly timed, with no coordination. They'd opened fire too soon. Pockmarks appeared in the mud, making "plopping" sounds as the bullets fell short and struck the wet ground several yards ahead of us. For the moment, we retreated down the western slope for shelter and to regroup. Hector took his scouts to the north to sweep over the ridge and clean out the rats on the eastern slope. Billy Greentree took control of security for the caravan as James, and I circled the boulder outcropping to our south with fifteen men and women.

Using the terrain for cover, we fanned out unnoticed across the shoulder of the mountain, working our way up to the outcropping. As we covered the last twenty yards, I cautioned the assault team to conserve their ammunition and make every shot count... "One shot, one kill!" I admonished. I checked the magazine in the Coonan under my right arm, ensured that the safety was on, then pulled the Coonan from under my left arm, checked the magazine, and set the safety to the fire position.

As another burst of gunfire from the north erupted, we made a silent charge on the men sheltered in the outcropping. Scrambling over the rough rampart, we caught our assailants completely off guard. My command for them to surrender set off a brief but heated gun battle. We waded into them; I took careful aim and unloaded my primary weapon as we swept the clearing. There was little resistance to our assault, and none were left alive.

However, one of our group, Tom Hurst, took a bullet through his upper thigh. My right ear got clipped, splashing blood on my coat. I wondered how long our luck would hold out.

After securing the weapons and stripping the dead, my team headed north to assist in the continuing fray there. I signaled to Billy to start the caravan moving again, over the ridge, toward

Lake Henshaw. We left nine dead men on the granite knob behind us.

Judging from the gunfire, there were another four or five *asesinos* in the scattered boulders surrounded by Hector and his boys. As we closed in on the attackers' second position, the last two decided to surrender rather than fight. Neither of these men nor their *compadres* was known to any of us. Some wore coveralls from the jail at Otay Mesa. The survivors weren't talking, which meant there had to be more renegades bent on taking what we had.

The herds of wildlife and livestock continued on the march, giving no notice to the roar of gunfire. By the time we secured the prisoners and weapons and returned to the caravan, the lead riders were crossing the head of the fissure, not a minute too soon.

On the last day of our trek, our caravan had become strung-out, nearly two miles long, stretching back across the ridge to the northwest, disappearing in the rain and mist as thick clouds of steam swirled about the column. The five sections of thirty to forty horses and their riders or handlers were staggered several hundred yards apart. Horses, burdened with women and children, supplies of all kinds strapped across saddles or tied to travois, struggled through the deep mud, men trudging beside them.

The first section reached the high ground at Lake Henshaw. Then, as the second section scrambled up the last slope, the ground began to heave again. The earth liquefied into quicksand and swallowed the entire fifth section in an instant. The screams of the horses could be heard across the distance as the ground rumbled louder and louder. Bob Occer and the rear guard went down with them, disappearing in the seething clouds of mist and steaming fog that blanketed the landscape. "Goddammit," I moaned as a gap in the curtain of steam revealed their fate.

Forty souls, fifty horses, and all of their supplies—gone in the blink of an eye. The fog swirled in the wind.

The first two sections were safe, but as the earthquake continued and grew stronger, the third and fourth groups were in grave danger. The wind carried the screams and cries of the women and children. Men and women could be heard yelling and whistling, whips cracking and horses screaming as they pressed harder through the muddy earth while it tried to suck them under.

The fissure below us filled rapidly with water. The head of the third section was scrambling up the last rise when several riders and packhorses slid into the fissure as the ground collapsed under them. They vanished into the rising sea. The remainder of the section detoured farther south to skirt the widening chasm as it grew to block their path.

The fourth section was luckier. With a final push, they made the high ground safely. As the last few horses scrambled over the crest, I saw Bob Occer struggling to hold on to his Palomino, the only survivor of the fifth section, our rear guard. By some miracle, his horse had managed to swim and claw its way out of the muck with Bob clinging to its tail.

Safe again on solid ground, exhausted and gasping for air, we watched as Pine Mountain slowly sank into the water. The ocean swallowed all of the lands we had struggled so desperately to cross.

A headcount revealed we had lost sixty-eight men, women, and children, along with sixty or more horses and all their supplies. On the other hand, about 180 of us had made it, along with 120 horses and the supplies they carried.

The peak of Angel Mountain still held firm to the south, rising two thousand feet above the water. We could see Laguna Mountain further south through the rain and clouds of steam, still rising above the water. Sea level was now 2,500 feet above where I had stood no more than fourteen days before.

J.A. Bland

Lookouts from the camp at Lake Henshaw spotted us. A group of riders led by Chuck Daniels greeted us warmly, and we were escorted to the Ranger Station on the north shore.

Chapter V

The remaining shelter at Henshaw consisted of a boathouse, the Park ranger's cabin, and a couple of other outbuildings and equipment sheds. But, for the moment, the smell of hot coffee and the roar of the fire in the boathouse hearth was all that concerned me.

As the sun set over the turbulent, muddy ocean, Chuck Daniels gave me a rundown of the events since the earthquakes started. "These granite mountains must have deep roots," he said. "The quakes wreaked havoc roundabout, but not much damage here at the station. In the past two weeks, though, a gang of thieves and murderers have been killing people, stealing everything, and burning every single structure still standing. I don't think they even knew we were here until yesterday."

He said that only fifty or so people remained of the 1,000 inhabitants of Warner Springs; attacks by raiders had burned out the town and killed the rest that had survived the quakes. The two renegades captured during the failed ambush at the ridge were part of the group that attacked Warner Springs.

As I warmed myself by the fire, enjoying a cup of coffee, I heard gunfire in the distance. I learned later that those two "prisoners" had just been executed and dumped in the ocean. Damn... I needed to question them. I needed to know what we were up against. But, I could only surmise the worst and try to be prepared for any eventuality.

The survivors from Warner Springs had made their way to the Ranger station at Lake Henshaw nearly a week earlier. There were maybe forty-five people at Henshaw before they had arrived; now, 100 people were there ahead of us, with almost no provisions. With the combined numbers, our total headcount was around 280. So we would have to be very careful with our remaining supplies.

As he splashed some gin into my coffee, Chuck continued his account. “When the first quake hit, people scrambled, I guess, some headed to the coast, some headed to the desert. But, hell, it looks like this turned out to be the only goddamned place to be!” His eyebrows rose. “You are the first we’ve seen since the folks from Warner Springs showed up.”

The ranger station maintained an old hand-crank, single-cylinder, diesel generator with about 200 gallons of fuel remaining in its tanks. Day and night, Chuck had remained on his short wave radio since the earthquake launched this catastrophe. After getting my message from Hector, he miraculously managed to contact my neighbor Harold and found that Suzanne was safe.

Chuck also picked up shortwave “skip” from around the globe. He told me about earthquakes, volcanic activity, and massive floods on a global scale. Avalanches and landslides in the Himalayas had cascaded to the lowlands of the Indian sub-continent, now under the ocean.

The loss of life around the planet was beyond reckoning. Not a single town or city across the U.S. escaped massive damage. The New Madrid Fault had ripped the continent in two. The Mississippi River, from the Great Lakes to New Orleans, was now an arm of the ocean hundreds of miles wide, reaching from what was the Gulf of Mexico deep into the Canadian wilderness. In the Pacific Northwest, the coastline no longer existed. In the Cascades, Mounts Rainier, St. Helen’s, Shasta, and Hood erupted and continued to belch fire, smoke, and ash skyward. Their combined lava flows exploding as they poured into the sea. The volcanic

fallout blanketed everything to the east. The Yellowstone caldera collapsed into a gaping volcanic hole near 400 miles in diameter. The lava flows nearly as wide as the entire state of Wyoming, moving in an east by southeasterly direction. The creeping river of molten rock threatened what survived of Denver, hundreds of miles away.

The eastern seaboard was inundated. No one knew exactly what was left above the waterline. There was some high ground in the Appalachians and the Adirondacks, but there was no confirmation of the number of survivors. With the last rise in sea level, the entire eastern United States was under thousands of feet of ocean. At 1,250 feet tall, the Empire State Building would be under another 1,000 feet of water—twice its own height!

Across the planet, everything below 2,000 feet or so was submerged. There were no borders anymore, no national sovereignty. Only those who made it to high ground and those who could manage to hold that high ground remained.

For now, out of the rain, warmed by the fire, I could rest for the first time in two weeks. With the knowledge that Suzanne was safe, and my belly full of warm food and cool gin, I let my eyes close.

December 13...

I awoke to a dark gloom. Outside, the rain was still falling. James was stirring the fire back to life. I had been asleep for two nights and a day.

Red, the heeler pup, was tangled up in my bedding, some goo smeared all over his burnt face and ears. Jimmy was asleep next to me. Rowena, working on breakfast, told me he had stood guard for hours while I slept.

The smell of meat frying perked me up. I stripped to my skivvies and washed the layers of mud off in the rain. I was surprised at the temperature; it was quite warm for mid-December.

Returning to the boathouse washed and refreshed, I found a pile of “new” clothes laid out. “Your clothes were in rags,” Rowena said. “The people decided you needed something better.”

I pulled on a pair of clean, used jeans. Cinching my belt snugly, I realized I’d shed several pounds since this ordeal began. Suzanne would have been impressed.

I pulled on a snug-fitting pair of boots and shouldered my gun rig. I saw someone had patched the webbing and sewn a pouch for the M-14's scope onto the harness too.

Meanwhile, James and George French had taken stock of the supplies that survived the trip from Valley Center. We were dangerously low on medical supplies. Nonperishable food, considering our current headcount, could last eighty, maybe ninety days with care.

The weapons and ammunition had also been sorted. We had managed to salvage a decent-sized arsenal, but the ammunition was a finite resource we would need to manage carefully. I carried the only available .40 caliber in my pack with little ammo, so my beautiful Walther was virtually obsolete. On the other hand, there was enough ammunition for the shotguns to last for years. James had collected a large quantity of .308 and .357 ammo for me and an entire case of 7.62x39 for his AK.

I selected an old USMC issue “Village Blacksmith” jungle knife and a long, heavy-bladed machete from the stockpile of weapons. Then I grabbed a Remington pump-gun and as much ammo for it as I could carry, about three hundred rounds of double-ought Buckshot and half as many slugs.

As I washed scorched pork and biscuits down with some hot coffee, one of the younger boys came to find me with a message from Chuck. He had Harold on the short wave again, along with Suzanne!

I hustled to the station. Within seconds, I heard her voice. “That big boulder up the hill crushed the generator shack, but the

house is alright," she said. "The solar and wind systems are working, so I have power and water, and there is food for months. That ancient volcanic ridge south of the valley erupted, but the lava flow is headed south toward the Arkansas River and downslope toward Salida."

She paused briefly to catch her breath while I filled her in on what I had been up to. She was horrified when I mentioned the renegades. "It'll all be fine, sweetheart." I assured her, "You know I can take care of myself. I'm worried about these folks though, there are a few with sand, but they are lost in the woods for the most part. I have my doubts about how long they can survive without help. But finish telling me about home. How are *you*?"

"Well," she began again, "over Kenosha pass, along Highway 285, all the way to Denver, most everything has been destroyed. Landslides in the Canyon have blocked access to the flatland. We hear that there wasn't anything left standing in Denver, and after days with no food or water, riots have left most of the survivors dead. It took Harold's boys four days to make their way here from the city, but they are safe now too.

"People are hanging on in Fairplay, but over near Hoosier Pass, avalanches and landslides have destroyed Alma and most of Breckenridge and Dillon. Georgetown was completely buried when the mountainside collapsed into the canyon. Interstate 70 is blocked in many places west of Denver, and there was no longer any passage through the mountains east or west. But at our place, everything is okay." She paused. "Harold is fully stocked, and with his boys here to help around the place, we will be good and safe."

"Sit tight and keep your head down. I'll make my way home somehow as soon as I can. We can stay in touch on this radio for now and tell Harold to keep an eye peeled for trouble. I love you, sweetheart. Stay safe."

As we said our goodbyes, James showed up at the door with three men, all soaking wet. Judging from their worn boots,

jeans, and hats, they were working cowhands. One fella, his head swathed in bandages, was missing his hat. They worked on a ranch down the valley near Ranchita—well, they used to work there. Six of them had started out on horseback the day before, headed for the high ground near the Palomar Observatory. They had been ambushed by ten or twelve riders, who gave them a running fight all the way up the Valley. Three of them had gone down on the run; the fourth man had been wounded.

Their attackers were part of a larger group ransacking homes and ranches on the high ground that remained. Their tale confirmed that we were not alone here.

December 15...

A group of Indians, twenty-five or thirty strong, made their way to the lake. They also reported groups of marauders burning and pillaging everything and anything left standing. Rowena knew several of these people, and we made them all welcome.

Our Native American friends totaled about fifty now. They came from the reservations of these mountains, the Soboba, Agua Caliente, Pala, Rincon, La Jolla, Los Coyotes, Santa Ysabel, and Cahuilla. They were good people, and we were lucky to have them in our midst. I thought their knowledge of these mountains might prove essential to our survival.

With these newest additions, we were a little better than 300 strong.

December 17...

Mason Holt, the “leader” of the cowboys, sorted the livestock. Anyone twelve years old or older and was fit to work was put to task. Several people joined Mason in pushing the stock to graze and guarding the herds against raiders. There was nearly 800 head of cattle. Horses totaled 300 head, and a wide variety of other animals gathered from the surrounding area.

Billy Greentree managed security at the lake, George French was busy resorting supplies and devising a rationing plan, and Wally Ranck looked over the shelter situation. "We'll pow-wow when I return from the Observatory," I told them.

I needed to reach the Observatory on Palomar Mountain, look for survivors, and try to understand the overall situation.

Chuck had not attempted the eighteen-mile trip to the Observatory yet, so we packed up. Along with James, Hector and Bob, and a half dozen of Hector's scouts, we headed out at 7 a.m. The rain continued to fall, masking the countryside in dreary tones of gray that mimicked the lowering sky. It was very rugged, mountainous terrain, and Chuck estimated it would take the entire day just to reach the Observatory.

As we worked our way higher onto the mountain, we found the old road unusable for automobiles, but it allowed us to cover ground quickly on horseback. Downslope, we could see numerous burned-out homes and buildings. There hadn't been a tremendous amount of quake damage in these mountains. It had to be raiders.

Amazingly, the small group of people at the lake had not come under attack as well. We would have to scour the hills for survivors or supplies we could use, but for now, Hector and Bob were mapping the ruins as best as they could when we spotted them.

Climbing the peak above Parayne Hill, we had an unobstructed view to the west. Though the visibility was limited in the rain and steam rising from the ocean, we could not see even a hint of any landmass. The land dropped down the slope into a valley to the east before vanishing in the mist and falling rain. South of us, we saw the lake and maybe a half-mile across the valley toward Warner Springs. It appeared our "Island," if that's what it was, could be fairly large.

About 2 p.m., while topping the peak at Birch Hill, the sun flashed through the clouds for a moment, and we caught the dull

sheen of the observatory's pale dome beyond Palomar Mountain, several miles to the north. Hector and Bob had mapped nearly forty homes that had been burnt down. I couldn't imagine what we would find when we arrived.

It was impossible to tell at first sight if the structure still stood, but it looked promising. Climbing the last slope to the Observatory, we divided our forces and cautiously approached up the flanks of the mountain. I could see the shutter for the 200-inch telescope was closed and all of the doors were shut.

There were signs that fires had been set against the concrete structure, but other than black soot scarring the site, it didn't appear that the fires had taken hold. The curved walls of the circular structure were pocked with a multitude of bullet holes, but it did not appear that the attackers were successful in breaching its massive concrete walls or the immense steel plate dome standing over 130 feet tall.

Next to me on his blue roan mule, Chuck began to holler, "Gaspar! Martin! Hans! Is anyone there?" He turned to me. "Those highbrow astronomer types...never can tell what they might be doin'! I hope like hell they made it okay."

Almost immediately, a frail-sounding female voice replied, "Mr. Daniels! Is that you down there? This is Lynne, Lynne Baber. How are you?"

"We're good," Chuck called back. "What is your condition?"

"Who is that with you?" the woman asked, caution riding her voice like a clenched fist.

"Fer Christ sake, Lynne, open the flippin' door; it's safe!"

"Chuck, is that you?" A heavily accented man's voice.

"Open the damn door, Gaspar!" Within a few moments, the west-facing door opened, and a woman ventured out, followed by several men. Riding up to the building, I was in awe of its monumental size.

"Come in and welcome." Their voices were heavy with foreign accents. "We thought you were the same people who attacked us two days ago," said one of the men, extending his hand.

"I am Gaspar Portolo. I am astronomer here," he said, waving a hand across the facade of the Observatory. "Welcome!"

Bob and Hector took the scouts and spread out into the forest surrounding the Observatory. They already knew the danger and quickly set up a perimeter.

Upon entering the massive structure, I was staggered by the expanse of the dome overhead and the gigantic telescope still perched in its rack. Apparently, there had been no damage from the earthquakes here. As the rain continued outside, I slapped the water from my hat against my leg and peeled my slicker off. Everyone was trying to speak at once, but I was unable to understand a word.

As Chuck found a chair to perch in, I raised my hand and asked everyone to please quiet down, but they simply grew louder. "Quiet!" I yelled, my voice echoing across the cavernous interior of the Observatory. "Quiet, please!"

Immediately, they were all silent.

"Thank you. My name is Bill Burroughs, and I am glad to find you all here safe. But as you know, we may not remain safe for long."

The uproar began again the moment the echo of my voice died away. Christ! Now I understood what Chuck had meant about these folks. I slapped my hat loudly against my leg and shouted again. "QUIET! You have a choice to stay forted up here or come with us. It is your decision," I continued. "Right now, I need to know what the fuck is going on out in the world. What can you tell me?"

Lynne Baber stepped up. "Until our backup generator ran out of fuel, we were able to communicate with a handful of other

Observatories around the world on our satellite phone.” She dragged a couple of chairs across the floor and sat down next to me. She waved a hand, indicating that I should make use of the other chair. “The Himalayas are gone, the Urals in Russia are islands, as we are here. Nearly all of Western Europe is underwater.” She hesitated. “Worst yet, the Magnetic Poles continue to shift.”

My eyebrows threatened to lift my forehead off my face. “Continue to shift?”

“Yes. Before we lost power, we were able to track the transition as the weather allowed. So you are standing on or at least very near the Equator.”

I had to rest my head in my hand to settle myself. “On the Equator... God Almighty.”

“But,” she continued, “When the alignment occurs, it could cause these gravitational shifts to accelerate. We can only postulate how this might affect the orbit of the Moon.”

“The alignment? What is the alignment?”

“An astronomical event that will occur on the Winter Solstice,” she said. “*Four days from now.*”

“Go on,” I prodded.

“It is a rare astronomical alignment determined by precession. The alignment occurs when the Winter Solstice sun conjuncts the crossing point of the Milky Way and the elliptic of Sagittarius.”

“Pardon me, ma’am, but what the *fuck* does that mean?”

“Simply stated, the Sun and the Earth will line up with 'The Dark Rift,' the center of our Galaxy.”

“Oh...Can you tell me how this is supposed to affect us?”

“Theoretically, mind you, the gravitational forces could be either diminished, or they could possibly increase. Any drastic change in these gravitational forces could cause the Magnetic Poles to shift further. It could cause massive earthquakes and the

shifting or realignment of the tectonic plates of the Earth's surface....”

“Isn’t that what is already happening?” I asked.

She nodded. “We did not expect any of these theoretical events actually to occur, let alone begin before the alignment. This is not our biggest concern, however....”

Lynne’s theory exasperated Gaspar. “The ‘Alignment’ is complete fallacy!” he burst in. “It is complete hoax! There is *NO* alignment! I cannot believe you are still babbling on about this total idiocy!”

Something Lynne said blazed in my mind. Holding a hand up to quiet him, I turned away from Gaspar, back toward her. “Whoa! *This is not our biggest concern?*”

Lynne glared madly at Gaspar. “There have been a series of very large sunspots detected, solar flares erupting from the surface of the Sun. These solar flares drive the solar wind. Normally the magnetosphere and our atmosphere protect the Earth from the devastating effects of this solar radiation.”

“Solar wind? You mean like the Northern Lights? The *Aurora Borealis*?”

“Well, yes, the *Aurora Borealis* is the Northern Lights, and the *Aurora Australis* are the Southern Lights,” she replied. “The *Aurora* usually occurs at or near the poles where the magnetosphere dips closer to the planet. It is feared that these solar flares are so powerful that they could possibly overpower the magnetosphere, and the Solar Plasma would sweep across the planet's surface.”

She paused as I sat back, slack-jawed.

“If the Solar Radiation does, in fact, contact the surface of the planet in elevated levels, the effect on any organic matter, any living organism that it contacts, could be lethal.”

“Holy living shit, lady! You mean lethal, like dead lethal?”

She settled back in her chair, folding her hands in her lap. "Yes. There is published research on the phenomenon." I held my breath as she paused, methodically examining every wrinkle and crease across the back of her hand. She finally looked up. "A geologist, a Dr. *Robert Schoch*, determined that Solar Plasma abruptly ended the last Ice Age some ten thousand years ago. Greenland Ice cores, if I recall. The polar ice caps melted. It could have taken several years or a matter of hours. He cited ancient indigenous writings and rock carvings that described a massive Plasma Event. That Plasma Event, about 9,700 BC, wiped out most advanced civilizations and may have led to the rise of the Atlantis myths and the epic Flood events in the histories of several ancient civilizations," she finished matter of factly.

Lynne was a relatively short woman, five feet two or three inches and about forty-five years old, not overly attractive. She'd probably tip the scale at a plump 150 or 160 pounds with thinning dark brown hair going to gray. She had a kind, soft voice, but sitting in a daze, her voice sounded like the thundering hooves of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

"What can we do?" I asked.

"There's nothing we can do at all," she replied quietly. Her male colleagues remained silent. "Our peers at the Big Bear Solar Observatory," she paused for a moment, absently pointing northward toward Big Bear Lake in the San Bernardino mountains, "detected the first group of flares three days ago. They are predicted to continue erupting unabated. We ran out of fuel last night, but we know that the first wave could cross the Earth's orbit past that sector of the Sun on the 25th. The last report we had was of a massive X-class flare yesterday afternoon. It was so large, the explosion so great, that it may catch up with or even overrun the first storm and reach our atmosphere first."

Stunned, I could only repeat her words: "There's nothing we can do at all?"

“You could go underground,” she replied, “but if the radiation is great enough, it will penetrate well below the surface of the planet. Maybe, well, we just don’t know. If it is a glancing blow, maybe something as simple as sheet metal might be all the protection needed. Maybe a wave of radiation could sweep across the landscape a mile away, and we wouldn’t be affected at all.” She looked at the floor, shaking her head, then up at me. “We just don’t know.”

For the moment, all I could think about was Suzanne. I had to get word to Suzanne to get underground!

Meantime, unnoticed by me, Lynne left for a moment, returning with a cup of hot tea. “Sorry, we’re out of sugar and milk,” she said, handing me a chipped cup brimming with steaming liquid. “You’ll just have to drink it black.” She walked away again.

Chuck sat down in the chair next to me. While the men at the Observatory mumbled about their business, he asked, “What have you got in mind, Bill?”

All I could do for a moment was look into his green eyes while my mind spun. Then, without answering him directly, I took to my feet and spoke to the group. “You can gather your goods and come down to the lake with us or stay here. It is your choice. We were attacked on our way up from Valley Center, and I have no doubt those that attacked us were party to those that attacked you all. So make up your mind now. We’re leaving in fifteen minutes.”

We had to return to the lake as soon as possible. Descending by the same route we used to climb the mountain would prove difficult after sundown. I didn’t want to waste any time.

All five astronomers chose to stay. Chuck and I wished them well and headed outside. We called for Bob and Hector; within moments, they appeared silently out of the mist. I gave orders for the scouts to station themselves in an arc from the shore

to the north along the mountain's shoulder, down into the valley to the east. A good horse should be able to make a dash from the valley below to the lake in an hour or so. If the need arose, that might give us enough time to meet any trouble.

After dispatching the scouts, we headed south. They set mantraps and other booby-traps for defense and early warning. The scouts were all Army and Marine veterans. Considering the raiders we had encountered so far, I didn't have any fear that they could get past our boys.

As we headed out, Gasper reminded us of the solar flares again and added an interesting note. "We have corrected our calendar."

"You what?" I asked.

"It is the year Zero." He paused. "December 17th. The 17th day of the year Zero."

We left the Observatory around 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Even in the continuing rain and mist, we made decent time.

December 18, Year Zero...

We arrived at the lake just past Sunup, about 5 a.m. James and Billy were informed of our approach down Parayne Hill by night pickets coming in for breakfast. They greeted us as we made our way down the last steep slope. Rowena and Jimmy followed along, riding double on a sorrel mule. The red heeler pup ran along beside the mule.

"What's this?" I asked Jimmy with a wink and a nod toward the mule as they swung into line with the rest of us.

"This is Katy. She's *my* mule!" he said with a wide grin.

Rowena pointed to a brand on the mule's flank with a smile. "Rocking K bar T, Katy!"

I couldn't help but laugh aloud. It felt good to laugh.

As we ate, the rain continued. The lake rose at an alarming rate. After a quick survey, Chuck estimated that it could rise

another forty feet or so before topping out over the high shelf to the west and spilling into the ocean.

The surface area grew fast, forcing us to abandon most of the sheds and outbuildings and move tents and temporary shelters to higher ground on the north slope.

I was told that the lake had been nearly dry before the rains began, and the boathouse sat some three hundred yards from the water's edge. Not anymore. It was now nearly swamped and being dismantled and moved to higher ground. So we began to formulate a plan for more permanent shelter further up the shoulder of Parayne Hill, above the threat of high water, where we also would have a more defensible position.

In the evening, I called a gathering to inform the people of our findings at the Observatory. I was amazed at how stoic most of the group was. When I finished, there was only one question: "When do we start building shelter up the hill?"

The next day, the rain stopped. The wind tore open the remaining clouds overhead, the sky began to clear, and we welcomed the sunshine for the first time in 14 days. But, far to the north, a red-brown haze darkened the sky, "Volcanic ash?" Chuck speculated as we hiked up the ridge along Parayne Hill.

From the ridgeline, we had a clear view to the west. I saw nothing but open ocean. Just offshore, near where Valley Center had been, a massive font of steam rose from the water, shrouding all of Palomar Mountain in mist. It provided sure evidence that some kind of geothermal or volcanic activity was underway. To the north and west, a point of land was just visible on the horizon. Elsinore Peak? Angel Mountain was now a spike of green jutting above the surging water to the south, and beyond the Vulcan Mountains rose Laguna Peak.

We could see smoke rising from Laguna. "Maybe there are survivors at Julian," I said. At the base of the Vulcan Mountains was a channel where the town of Banner used to stand. The

channel, about a quarter-mile wide, separated Laguna Island from us. How could we cross that span of raging water to look for survivors? Was it possible?

From our vantage point, it looked as if a tidal cycle had set in. The high-water line looked to be seventy or eighty feet above the current level, and the tide appeared to be receding. Chuck logged the time: 9:12 a.m. December 19th.

Year Zero. Gaspar's proclamation still dazed me.

With the clearing weather, Chuck rounded up a tractor to drag several old shipping containers from across the valley to the high ground on the ridge above the lake, just shy of the tree line. Though we were all slogging in the mud, the sunshine brightened our spirits as the day heated up. James and I took a handful of men down to the valley floor and zeroed the scoped weapons we had with us.

My M-14 was a formidable weapon; with the Swaffa 16X scope, it was a tack driver. With the MilDot reticule, I zeroed the rifle at 400 yards but could easily range out to 1,000. James was a crack shot, but the M-14 made it easy to demonstrate that I was still an expert shot myself.

With the forest at our back, our new location on the shoulder of the ridge gave a view across the entire valley. In another lifetime, this would be a beautiful vista to sit and enjoy. Now, however, we busily assembled shelter and scanned for dangers in the distance.

December 20...

Before sunrise, gunfire was heard to the east. Bob Occer and a dozen riders scouted the north end of the valley and hooked up with the patrol we left on Palomar Mountain. There were still unknown numbers of renegades about; we needed to remain vigilant.

That point was proven at 8:00 a.m. when Chuck picked up a call for help on the shortwave. Survivors on San Jacinto Peak above Idyllwild were under attack; suddenly, the radio went dead. We didn't know if they could reach us by land from Idyllwild, but we had to assume the worst. We would know more when Bob returned from his patrol up the valley, but I sent another dozen men to search across the mountain behind us to be safe. James and Hector set up observation posts to watch the approaches from the north and east.

I made my way down to the lake for some lunch. The warming breeze off the ocean was laden with the stench of rotting flesh. As the tide dropped, the shoreline became littered with the carcasses of thousands of animals and human corpses. The entire western shore was littered with dead bodies.

Within an hour, the stench had grown so strong everyone moved up the ridge to escape the horrible reminder of the fate that may be awaiting all of us. The sky was darkened by flocks of seagulls and all manner of land birds feasting on the carrion. None of us would be able to endure this sight for long.

With all of the people working on the shelters, we created a new village in quick time. High above the lake, in a good defensible position, our shelter could accommodate all of our 300 people and provisions. So, once again, we began to move our precious supplies to a new location.

With the polar shift, the rotational axis of the planet was shifting, too. As a result, the sun traveled very high in the sky, remaining high on the western horizon at 7:00 p.m. when Bob and his patrol returned. They found the remains of a small camp and the bodies of seven men and a woman. "Judging by the signs, they had been set upon by a group with fifteen or twenty horses," Bob said. "Most had all been killed in their sleep from the look of it."

The patrol tracked the marauders to a narrow land bridge between Lookout Mountain and San Jacinto. It led straight to

Idyllwild and the San Jacinto Mountains. Bob left four men to watch the crossing and warn of any further incursion in our direction.

Rowena and Jimmy had already moved all of our gear up the ridge. As we sat with the valley spread out below us, a wedge of campfires flickered in the fading light along the lakeshore marking the old camp. We watched the sunset over the ocean.

It was 10:00 p.m.

With a belly full of fresh beef, my feet warmed by the fire, and my clothes fully dry for the first time in weeks, I fell asleep to the sight of embers glowing in the breeze.

December 21...

Something tickled my ear, waking me. It was dark, the deep, deep darkness just before dawn. James squatted next to me. "Gunfire in the east," he said, speaking softly.

Jimmy was huddled in a camp chair beside me with Red in his lap. The creaking chair roused the dog, and Jimmy awoke as I rose. The pale starlight glinted from the barrel of James' AK. Without a word, Jimmy held the pup closer in his arms and settled back in his chair.

James handed my pair of Coonans to me. I strapped them across my chest as another burst of gunfire rattled in the distance. As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, James leaned close. "Billy and a dozen of our Indian friends have already set out on foot," he said. Several shapes loomed closer in the darkness. Twelve or fifteen men were close by, readying mounts.

Behind us and downslope at the lake, both camps remained dark. "Guards woke me at 02:50," James said, "I let you sleep a few extra minutes." The humor in his voice lightened the moment, but more gunfire shattered the silence before I could reply.

Without a sound plan, we were at a disadvantage, but forewarned is forearmed. We set out as quietly as possible along

the tree line as another burst of gunfire crackled in the darkness across the valley. This time, we saw muzzle flashes across the valley, then more muzzle flash, higher up. Someone was being pursued as they scrambled down the slope and across the valley toward us.

"Two shooters chasing a third down into the valley looks like, headed this way!" I mounted one of the horses.

We proceeded slowly in the thick darkness. Then, trusting our mounts rather than our own senses, we dropped down from the tree line and headed across the valley floor—more gunfire, followed by rapid return fire. The hunted must have been shooting blindly at the sound of whoever was pursuing them.

Who was being chased? Bob Occer had left four men at the Land Bridge...

Ahead, we heard another short burst of gunfire, followed by the screams of men. Distant voices called into the darkness; then, someone started a fire. Several minutes later, Billy Greentree called us to meet him at the fire. Billy and his men had laid in wait and ambushed three men as they fled out of the trees and into the valley. Our boys captured one while killing two others.

Two of the men that had been watching the Land Bridge were with Billy. "At high tide, that land bridge is submerged," Paul Riker said. "We smelt smoke and discovered six men with a dozen or so horses camped on the shore. We killed three of them when they rushed us, and these three headed into the hills. Glenn and I trailed 'em." Paul nodded to the other man. "The Jackson boys are back at the Bridge."

Billy questioned the survivor. The men were raiding the eastern shore toward Borrego Springs and were waiting for the tide to recede. Billy sent his men ahead on foot to reinforce the Jackson brothers at the land bridge. The gunfire had awoken us; surely, it had alerted others as well. Now, the lone survivor was dying. It was our sheer luck that he was still breathing. According to him,

there weren't any other bad men on this side of the land bridge, but could he be trusted?

"At Idyllwild, there is sixty or seventy of us, and we have thirty or forty women and girls captive. So you all had better watch out now because they are going to be coming for you!" he whimpered.

"Sixty or seventy armed men... Raiders, thieves, killers...." I said aloud. I turned to the dying piece of trash. "What do they know of us?"

"Hell, we didn't even know you all was here!" he blurted out, to my relief. "But Holt will come lookin' for us soon. You all are DEAD!"

He struggled to his feet. My hair stood on end. "Holt!" I said, as I grabbed him by the throat. "What did you say about Holt?"

"You bet, goddamn it! Leo Holt is the baddest son of a bitch in Hemet, and he'll cut your heart out!"

"Holy Mother of God," Billy said, crossing himself. "This is bad, boss; this is very bad!"

The alarm in Billy's voice disturbed me, but I wasn't jumping to any conclusions. We had a Holt in our camp, Mason Holt, our lead ranch hand. "Any relation to our Holt?" I asked Billy.

"Cousin," he replied.

I released my grip on the raider's throat. He lunged at me then crumpled to the ground as Billy cracked him upside the head with the butt of his rifle. This piece of human garbage died an hour later without regaining consciousness.

The sun rose as we headed back to the Village. Damn unnerving. At this latitude, the sun should be rising well to the southeast this time of year, not due east. Not for another hour or so, either.

Now, we had good news and bad. We *were* on an island. There weren't any "known" raiders on our island. But there was a large party of very bad men to the north at Idyllwild, and they held captives. They would take others as they saw fit, I was sure of it. I tried not to imagine what those women must be enduring.

By the time we reached the Village, the sun sat well up in the eastern sky. It was 05:40. I sent six riders that had joined me to the land bridge. Hector had ridden ahead to the Village and assembled another group of riders with supplies and weapons to guard the bridge. The tide was going out, and we did not yet know how much time we had before another crossing would be attempted.

As the remainder of our party reached the Village, Hector and his riders headed out at full gallop. It was roughly twenty miles to the bridge as the crow flies. It would be a fast ride up the valley, but the trek through the mountains could be rough. It would take two, maybe three hours, for the riders to reach the crossing.

With luck, we would have forty or more guns at the bridge before the marauders' next attempt to cross.

After a hasty meal, another group of riders geared up and headed for the crossing, led by Bob. If that piece of trash told the truth before he died, I thought we were safe as long as we could hold that crossing.

Could we hold it?

The people busily moved supplies and gear from the lake to the new location on the ridge. The Village had begun to assume a defensive posture, and a bulwark of sorts was being assembled on the slope below as ground was leveled here and there, fallen trees were dragged from the forest, and a parapet was thrown up for protection. We would need to constantly patrol the one remaining blind spot, the forest that blanketed the shoulder of Palomar Mountain behind us.

During the night, the tide turned. As sunlight warmed the morning, the tide continued to drop, and the wind freshened from the west. The stench of rotting flesh began to choke the valley again. The cacophony of noise from the flocks of birds rang in our ears. I almost wished for the rain to return, to wash the stench from the air and drive the birds to cover.

Out to sea, a massive flotilla of debris grew rapidly. In several areas, fires raged, whether from oil or gasoline on the water or simply the carpet of trash and flotsam that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. A westerly wind blew the choking smoke over the island.

Near mid-morning, even our heartiest souls could no longer fight the putrid wind. So everyone retreated to the ridge. High above the stench and clouds of smoke blowing across the valley, the focus of everyone on the Village on the hill allowed for rapid progress.

The Village was semi-circular in layout, radiating out from seven 40-foot shipping containers. The containers were set in a rough semi-circle 10 feet apart with a roof and walls built between them into one continuous structure with many rooms for storage and sleeping space.

The remaining structures, which stepped down the slope in two semi-circular rows, were comprised of salvaged wood and sheet metal. They fanned out over 200 degrees across the shoulder of the hill, overlooking the valley and any approach from below. Only the narrow ridge behind offered direct access from above. We were in a good position here, I hoped.

With no word from the group at the land bridge by the afternoon, I sent four riders to station themselves along the route between the crossing and Henshaw. If trouble came, these riders could relay a warning with gunfire. I instructed them on the cadence: three shots in a measured volley—a pause—then three

more shots. If they followed suit, we would have ample warning of any trouble headed our way.

At my command, James ventured out and returned with Mason Holt in tow. Mason didn't know of the information we had gleaned from the dying man and was unaware of our knowledge about his cousin Leo.

"How we doin' this afternoon, Chief?" Mason asked with a smile as he swung down from his mount.

Mason was a thin man, maybe thirty-five years old. Tough as leather, he had worked the surrounding mountain ranches all of his life. His exposed skin tanned dark and coarse from his years under the sun, accentuating his curly brown hair and brown eyes.

"We're doing alright, Mason," I replied, "but we have a situation."

"What's goin' on, Chief?"

"You heard the gunfire before dawn this morning, didn't you?"

"Sure enough, Chief, I was out south of the lake ridin' Night Hawk on the herd when I heard the commotion. What's up?"

I informed Mason of the land bridge to the San Jacinto Mountains. He appeared excited to learn that we might be able to travel to Idyllwild but was concerned to hear of the raiders there. "My momma and little sister are in Idyllwild," he blurted out. "I gotta go see if I can find them!"

I put my hand in the air. "Hold up a minute, Mason... there's more," I told him of the one survivor and what he said before he died.

A horrified look crossed his face. "God Almighty! Leo is my goddamned cousin!"

I nodded. "Do I need to be concerned about that?"

"He's the craziest sumbitch I have ever seen. He's been down in Otay Mesa for six months, waiting to go to trial for

murder. He stabbed his own brother to death in a fight over a pack o' smokes at a bar in Hemet!

"This is bad, Chief," Mason added. "We have to help those folks! We have to get those people safely away from Leo. I have to go find my momma and my baby sister."

"We have even bigger concerns right now," I said. "We've got 300 people here we have to take care of first."

As I explained the information the astronomers at the Observatory had given us, Mason sat on the ground, listening. "I have got to go find my momma, Chief!" he exclaimed.

"Give us a few days, Mason. We'll see if we can't go help those folks after we get this place secure."

Mason's reaction left no doubt in my mind: he was sincere. I know what it is like to have the curse of a black sheep slung around your neck. So I sent Mason back to the herds but assigned two of the original security detail from Valley Center to ride along with him, just to cover all the bases.

All the gear and supplies had been moved up to the "new" village by the end of the day. Someone had discovered some late corn in a garden plot outside one of the burnt-out homes on the mountain. We made a nice community meal with the remainder of the steer from the night before and some boiled rice.

I am not a religious man, but I bowed my head along with the rest as Donnie Banks stood and gave thanks for our survival and for the bounty we shared amongst us.

After eating our fill, Chuck broke out the last of the gin he had been hoarding. Then, with a slice of lime found floating on the lakeshore, we enjoyed our beverages and watched the sun dip into the ocean.

Little Jimmy sat in my lap and began to talk about his mule. He had walked the mile or so out to the herd with Red taggin' along, he said. Just to see what he could see. This mule began to follow, and Red began to nose around with the mule on

the walk back. “I saw that Red and the mule were the same color, so I stopped to pet him. Red really liked him, and the mule was letting him lick him all over his nose.” He paused to pet the dog for a moment. “I saw his butt. It said ‘KT,’ so I called him Katy, and he kinda followed me all the way back to camp.”

“Right!” James interrupted with a laugh. “That bit of rope on his neck didn’t have anything to do with that, did it Jimmy?”

Jimmy blushed a little. “Heck no, Dad! Katy followed me up here!”

Somehow, Jimmy managed to climb up on that mule. Then, with nothing more than a piece of rope looped on its lower jaw, he rode the animal all over camp.

They were an instant hit. The dog’s red fur nearly matched the mule’s sorrel coat and the boy’s fiery hair. The three looked as though they were meant to be together. The mule seemed to have adopted the boy and the dog, and now they both followed the boy everywhere.

As the last bit of daylight flickered on the water, Chuck and I finished the gin. James and Rowena sat together across the fire from us. The mule stood guard over Jimmy and the pup, just at the edge of the firelight.

With no alarms from the north or east, everything seemed good for now. I dozed off as a cooling breeze stirred the fire at my feet.

Chapter VI

December 22...

I was rudely awakened about 2:20 a.m. by another round of earthquakes. The doors on the shipping containers from which we had built our shelters began to rattle and clang. They crashed and rang like the very gates of hell as the tremors grew in strength.

Within moments, the rumbling of the earth echoed across the valley, amplified by the granite mountains. In the darkness, I could hear a great disturbance in the ocean, as if some gargantuan creature were thrashing about, fighting for its very life.

By the time I got to my feet, Jimmy was calling out to me. At the sound of his voice, the mule began to bray out in the darkness. I answered back, and Jimmy was at my side in an instant, his eyes wide in the starlight, Red at his heels. Soon, the entire village was awake, people coming out into the open, abandoning all shelter in the ruckus.

It was difficult to stay on my feet as I held Jimmy up by his shirt collar. James and Rowena appeared from one of the containers and joined us by the fire. The mule pulled its picket pin, made its way to us, and didn't stop that damn noise until it found Jimmy.

I can't fathom why that mule adopted the boy, but I am glad she did.

Down the slope, one or two of our new shelters collapsed. Children began to cry in the darkness. Then, after several minutes, the quake stopped. It just stopped. As quickly as it had begun, the

earthquake was over. Only the sound of the raging ocean continued in the darkness.

As soon as the quake ended, people stoked campfires and gathered in front of the main shelter where I had my sleeping quarters, at the “Council Fire.” In the darkness, we had no way of knowing the extent of any new damage, what the valley bottom might look like, or if any more mountaintops had tumbled down. We could hear the cattle lowing and the nervous whinny of horses.

Shortly, the light of a torch or lantern bounced up the slope toward the Village. At least someone still stood with the herds! Moments later, Mason Holt made his way to the central fire and reported that all of his riders were accounted for, and other than having the holy crap scared out of them, everyone and everything below was okay.

No one had any immediate interest in going back indoors, and directly I could smell coffee in the air. *How long could I expect that luxury to continue?*

Amongst our group were fifty children up to the age of 12 or 13. The youngest was not even two. Most were orphaned the night the first earthquakes hit. Fifteen still had at least one of their parents. Our entire community took responsibility for the children. Adults treated every child as their own, and the children called every adult mother or father, mom or dad, aunt or uncle, grandma or grandpa.

As the quake had subsided, all of the children were brought to the Council Fire, where we made up pallets to keep them off the ground. Soon, all of the children were bedded down around the fire under the stars. Gradually, they began to drift back to sleep as the rest of us quietly discussed what the immediate future might hold.

Several issues remained at hand: The need for security with respect to the renegade camp at Idyllwild and the captives there; the potential danger from the anticipated Solar Storms to come;

and the pros and cons of an attempt to cross the channel at Banner, where the orchards offered a possible food source.

All the while, the noise of the raging ocean continued.

I decided that a permanent “base” would be necessary to guard the Land Bridge to Idyllwild. So far as I knew, I carried the most military and security experience, with James a close second. James and I would head over to the crossing after sunup to lay things out.

We didn’t have any idea of what could be done about the potential for danger from the Solar Storms. I repeated what Lynne Baber had told me at the Observatory about what we could expect, theoretically. No one knew of any caves or other “underground” space to use for shelter, so, as soon as possible, we would gather as much sheet metal as we could from the abandoned and burnt-out homes and other structures.

We had seen smoke rising from at least two points on Laguna Island, so we knew there must be survivors there. No one had spotted anyone at the shore, but then again, no one had made a concerted effort. The channel looked to be about a half-mile wide at high tide, while at low tide, maybe only 200 to 250 yards wide. There were two wide, flat-bottomed “John Boats” at the lake. A couple of the older boys wanted to cross at low tide to determine the depth and try to chart a safe crossing.

By dawn, our most important tasks for the next few days were laid out. As the light in the eastern sky grew brighter, we batched together a meal of beans and rice and a bit of pan bread. “We are going to have to get more creative than this,” I said, just as Jimmy walked up and dropped a big dollop of honey atop my beans and rice.

I sat there for a moment looking at the mess, and Jimmy squeaked, “It’s really good, Mr. Bill!” He was so damn sincere I couldn’t help but chuckle at him as I wolfed down my first go-round of honey-coated navy beans and rice. Wasn’t all that bad.

Just took a bit of getting used to. Jimmy plopped down in the dirt next to me and began shoveling spoonful after spoonful into his mouth – or, should I say, all over his face. Red licked honey and beans and rice from the boy’s face, ducking around each spoonful.

The commotion attracted the mule. Pretty soon, that damned thing was slappin’ Jimmy and the dog with her big ol’ wet tongue try to get some of that honey herself! The whole damn camp was falling on the ground, roaring with laughter while watching our own little three-ring circus! Christ almighty, you could not have paid for better entertainment. The laughter was a welcome surprise for all of us, and everyone joined in.

It would be the last time we laughed like that for a long time.

While we ate breakfast and watched the mule, the boy, and his dog and laughed until we cried, the ground continued to rumble, and the ocean continued to roar.

The view south was beautiful: the thickly forested mountain top of Angel Island; the gray-green brush and dark green of the Ponderosa pines on the Vulcan Mountains superimposed against the deeper, darker green of the peak on the Laguna Island; and the vivid, bright hues of the pasture grass of the valley at our feet.

It was downright idyllic.

Then the western slope of the Vulcan Mountains began to crumble into the channel. Windblown ripples on the lake below grew into waves as a tremor rushed north toward us.

No one was laughing anymore.

While the first shock wave washed past us, the ocean began to convulse more and more violently. Out beyond Angel Island, it looked like a pod of whales might be breaching. The surface of the water bubbled and churned, while the center rose and then exploded upward. As the spray of water fell away, a massive piece of granite, hundreds of yards in diameter, glistened in the sunlight

as the water cascaded from its dome. Bursting from beneath the ocean, the massive block of stone continued to rise higher and higher.

Further offshore and in a line running back toward where Valley Center had been, a string of massive granite knobs rose above the surface of the ocean. We watched the spectacle in awe, one stone monument after another appearing like the skeletal spine of some ancient behemoth. After twenty or thirty minutes, the ocean quieted, then the enormous islets began to sink beneath the surface, in the same order they'd risen. As the granite monuments slowly slipped below the water's surface, the Earth rumbled softer and softer. As the last pillar of stone disappeared far offshore, the tremors stopped altogether.

We sat in silence until the children began to stir. Then, the camp came alive again as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. I wondered if the people were becoming inured to this kind of event or simply resigned to the fact that we could control nothing except our own fear. On the one hand, we were slipping down the ladder of geological history. On the other, we were growing from our shared exposure to the danger.

Only time would tell if our growth would survive the change.

George called for a crew to gather sheet metal. The boys set off to check out the channel and see what things looked like at the landslide on Vulcan Mountain. James and I rucked up for a ride to the crossing at the Land Bridge. I was pretty sure renegades no longer endangered us at the moment anyway, but there was no sense letting our guard down.

As we headed for the crossing, I had my Coonans fully stocked and onboard. My M-14 slung off my saddle, and the old Remington was strapped across my back. Of course, I carried enough ammo in the saddlebags to last a month, but what the hell: I'd rather have it and not need it than the other way around, right?

We made good time heading up the valley, covering the first four or five miles in 30 minutes or so. We checked with the pickets I'd sent out the day before and then crossed a heavily wooded saddle over the spine of the island. We headed due north after crossing the saddle, straight for the ocean to get the best lay of the land. I figured we'd reach the water and follow it east until we came to the land bridge. We'd then follow the route through the forest on the way back to get a better fix on the terrain.

After a fast run up the valley, we dismounted and set off at a brisk walk, letting the horses breathe a bit. We were silent as we walked for a while, and then James piped up. "I have a confession to make, Chief."

"What's goin' on, James?"

"Well, I wasn't telling the truth about Jimmy."

I turned toward him slightly and dipped my head a bit, looking over the top of my sunglasses. "I can see you're black as coal, James, and that Jimmy is white as a pearl, but you don't have to explain anything to me."

"I can't abide having dishonesty between us," he said. "My parents adopted me at birth. They were older white folks and could never have any kids of their own."

"You don't have to explain anything to me," I repeated.

"Yes, Bill, I have to. My folks were already pretty old when they adopted me. They raised me to be a good person. I try real hard to hold myself up to their expectation." He paused for several paces. "Mom passed away ten months ago. After Mom died, Pop didn't want to wait around any longer. Jimmy and I went to see him as often as we could, but it wasn't enough. He just didn't want to be here without Mom."

"He died four months after Mom, and I have not been able to bring myself to clearin' out the cottage in Valley Center."

"Sounds like your folks were good people, James," I said. "I think they raised a good man."

“There’s more, Chief. See, I was already in my 30s when I met Christine. She was only 23, but I fell in love with her the first time I laid eyes on her. She was working at a diner in Oceanside, not far from the main gate at Pendleton. She had been living with another jar-head. So when that SOB shipped out to the Middle East, he just left her hanging. She was already pregnant and trying to make it on her own.”

“Jimmy isn’t your boy? I can see that.”

“He may not be mine by blood, Bill, but he is a part of Christine. I raised him from an infant. No one could have been a better father to that boy than me!”

I smiled in a way that, I hoped, would put him at ease. “I don't doubt you one bit,” I said. “I pegged you for a good man that night on the road, running for high ground. Instead, you stopped to offer help to an old white man when you could have just kept on going.” My voice cracked a bit. “Thank you for your help, and thank you for your honesty.”

Without any prompting, I found myself telling James more about myself.

"My only son, Casey, would have been just about the same age as you, I'd guess. My boy was a career soldier. Enlisting in the Army at 18, he had been in the first Gulf War with the 173rd, then got his Ranger tab. He was assigned to the 2nd Ranger Battalion. I was real proud of him. Then, after the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center, he volunteered again and was one of the first to hit the ground in Afghanistan.

"He did four tours, off and on, before his number was up. Then, just three weeks before he was due to cycle home at the end of his 5th tour, he was killed in action. The news damn near killed Suzanne; she had never liked the idea of her only son being in the military, let alone making a career out of it. She's never really quit blaming me for his death."

I paused, memories of my son, his death, and Suzanne's reaction playing through my mind. "Casey never married. He had never had any children, and Suzanne never had her grandchildren. He was killed on a mountain with a name I can't pronounce in northern Afghanistan. He died on the snow-covered ground on a freezing cold January morning in 2008 fighting the good fight in a war for a powerful man's greed and a barrel of oil."

During our twenty minutes of walking and talking, the horses cooled down. Finally, we mounted up and lit out at an easy lope. The gelding I rode was a mousey gray with a black stripe running down his back. Some five or six years old, he was a sure-footed mountain horse. At 15 hands high, he was a bit small for my frame, but he didn't appear to mind the weight. This Mexican saddle Hector gave me sat nicely on the horse's back, and my backside sat just right in the saddle.

James was mounted on a pretty Chestnut mare that Rowena handpicked from the Remuda. The Chestnut was 15 hands tall and much better suited to James' height and weight. He sat an old Chittenberg Ferguson roper, a great saddle, but the stirrup leathers squeaked a bit too much for my liking.

It had been more than 40 years since I had been in a saddle. Now I was mounted every day. When I left the ranch as a kid, I never dreamed of riding again, let alone in a situation like this.

Coming within sight of the shore, we took a course parallel to it, ten or fifteen yards back into the woods. A mile or so of water separated us from another landmass to the north, the San Jacinto Mountains. The channel gradually narrowed to a quarter of that. We continued as we were for twenty minutes, pressing our mounts to a fast walk.

With James in the lead, about twenty feet ahead of me, we came into a spot where the forest was thinner. I thought we should step it up a mite and get across this clearing quickly, but before I could act, the buttstock of the shotgun across my back shattered as

I heard the report of a rifle from across the water. The impact nearly knocked me from the saddle; the gray bolted for the trees. James spun his horse around and came after us, but I heeled the gray down as several more shots rang out from across the water.

Reaching the relative shelter of the heavier forest, James sat on his horse and looked at me. He didn't say a word. The stock of my shotgun was blown all to hell, but I didn't have a scratch on me. I stepped off the gelding, tied the shotgun behind the saddle. Then pulled the M-14 from its binding and looked up at James. "Let's go!"

He smiled and stepped off of his mount. I grabbed four magazines for the 14 from my saddlebags. James stuffed four or five 30-round clips into his shirt, and we crept toward the shoreline. We weren't quite sure where the shots had come from, just that they had come from across the water.

Obviously, someone was watching the shoreline. What a fool I was not to be more careful! They had played the first hand. Fortunately, it was a hand I could work with. The heavily wooded terrain on the far shore appeared very steep, climbing sharply right from the water's edge. "Anybody over there will have a hard time moving quickly," I said.

On our side, the ground sloped gently up from the water's edge. Right in front of us, the forest thinned out where it was once the edge of a meadow. We crouched, concealed by a dense thicket of young Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir, the ground littered with fallen timber lying at all angles. It provided the best possible cover.

Only one problem: we didn't know right where our bad guys were. Using the MilDot on the scope, I ranged the far shore to be roughly 475 or 500 yards to the water's edge. It was too far for James' AK to be an effective direct-fire weapon, but it was loud enough and could reach far enough for what we needed. That range wouldn't be a problem for the 14. Whoever was over there was a damn good shot or lucky as hell.

It was time for us to change his luck. We surveyed 150 yards or so of our shoreline and came up with a plan. I hunkered down where one tree had fallen across another. The trees lay parallel to the water at a close angle, setting up a slit between them about six or seven feet long with a 24-inch log as a rampart to crouch behind. That log was covered by a second, about 16 or 18 inches in diameter. I was in shooters' heaven!

James worked his way back to the west 60 yards, or such a matter, where he found a good firing position. I couldn't get the grin off my face as I stacked my magazines on the log next to me and waited for James to start the show. Momentarily, I heard the *clack-clack-clack* of James' AK. Across the water, three rounds slapped the water about 200 yards from the far shore. *Clack-clack-clack!* James ripped loose three more rounds, and again I saw their splash. This time, they were right at the water's edge.

As the second burst splashed in the water, rifle fire opened up from two separate locations in the forest across the water. Marking the muzzle flash to my right, I threw two rounds directly into the shadows, then swung to my left and dropped two more rounds in the general vicinity of the second shooter.

Game on! Both shooters returned fire sixty yards to my left, where James was located. They had not seen that a second shooter was over here!

James gladly obliged by lobbing several more volleys at them. They continued to return his fire. Taking my time, I waited for another muzzle flash and adjusted for the shooter's position. *Crack-crack!* My M-14 ripped two quick shots across the water and into the trees.

The second shooter was still firing at James, but not the first. As I focused on the second shooter, I could just make out a bit of movement. But, christ, the fool was moving right onto the water's edge! He may have enjoyed cover between him and James' position, but this turkey was providing me with an unobstructed

broadside target. I flipped the Select Fire lever to “AUTO.” Damn, I almost felt guilty as I drew a bead on the top of his head and let a burst rip across the water. That son of a bitch never knew what hit him. His neck erupted in a shower of red mist as he collapsed and plopped into the water.

Suddenly, James was at my side. He could barely contain himself. “Great fucking shootin’, Bill!” He settled himself behind the big log next to me. “More fireworks?”

“Hell yeah, we’re just getting warmed up!”

As planned, James moved ten or fifteen yards to my right and worked his way to a new firing position. Once again, he lobbed a volley across the water. Immediately, there was return fire, but they didn’t know where James was. Their return fire rattled in the woods near his old position. Another volley from the AK arched out across the water, plopping near the far shore. The return fire was immediate but still toward the vicinity of James’ old position.

While the second round of return fire rattled the woods, I was able to locate the new shooters. Another volley from the 7.62x39, and I was eyes on the next burst of return fire. I squeezed the trigger. Bark flew, and a couple of branches fell, but no more gunfire returned from that position.

I’d forgotten what a fine weapon the M-14 was. Suddenly, wood chips flew, and splinters ripped into my left cheek and ear. *Fuck! That SOB has my position.*

I threw myself behind cover.

I rolled seven or eight turns to my right. Then, while lying on my belly, I eased the 14 into a firing position alongside a big, old Ponderosa Pine. James was on the move again. He hunkered down another fifteen or twenty yards farther away and began peppering the far shore with his AK. This drew all of the fire from across the water.

I eased up and started picking out targets. Finally, I squeezed the trigger and *Bap...* one round!

Goddamn it! My fucking magazine was empty! Dropping back behind cover, I grabbed another magazine and swapped them out. Jacking a round into the chamber, I eased back up again. James must have run through most of his ammo by then, but he wasn't done yet as he continued to fire on the far shore. I was able to locate a target and take it down, locate another and take it down. Just as I drew down on the last shooter, bullets began whipping through the branches and thudding into tree trucks around my position. I slowly inhaled, then exhaled and squeezed the trigger one more time. *Brrrrrrrap.*

All gunfire across the water stopped. I quickly tallied my downed targets—five, make that six shooters. Did that comprise their full contingent watching the crossing? There was no way of knowing, but if anyone else was over there, they were sure enough keeping their goddamn heads down!

James perched in the woods behind me, whistling softly. Then, scraping up the spent brass that lay close, I low-crawled back to the horses. I think James damn near wet his pants laughing as he watched me crawl, but I really didn't give a shit.

We climbed back in our saddles and headed for the crossing again. We covered another two or three miles.

"Freeze! Identify yourselves!"

"Bill Burroughs and James Day!" I called back. "Who are you?"

"It's Beth Dunning, Mr. Burroughs! Don't come any closer!" She was all of five feet tall, not an ounce more than 90 pounds, and only 22 years old, but was not one to be trifled with. "Christ almighty Beth! It's James and me!" I called back cautiously. She stepped from behind a tree twenty-five or thirty yards ahead.

"I see ya now. Come ahead!" she said sternly. "You scared the devil out of us. Is there only the two of you? Sounded like a damn war down there!"

James and I looked at each other and grinned. "Just a turkey shoot," James hollered back.

As we continued toward Beth, four or five other girls stepped from behind cover. All were in their late teens or early twenties, every one of them packing some kind of firearm.

"Hector and Mr. Occer are at the crossing, about three miles further on." Beth motioned toward the east. "I'd imagine they will be headed this way with all that shooting going on."

We all rode together. "You girls watching the far shoreline?"

"Yes," Beth replied. "There are twelve of us spread out from here back to the camp at the crossing. Hector thought we should keep watch in case they tried something."

"You girls keep well back in the woods. There may well be more shooters over there just waiting for another target," James said. "They sure as hell know somebody is over here now!"

We arrived at an outcropping of rock that ran perpendicular to the water's edge before disappearing into the trees. We circled wide to make our way around it.

Bob Occer approached quickly. "Bill! James! What's all the shooting?" he called from a distance, concern heavy in his voice.

While I explained how I had made a target of myself, James interrupted, "I suckered 'em, and Bill here clipped 'em. Just like a turkey shoot!"

Puzzled, Bob insisted on a play-by-play, and James was more than happy to fill him in. I rode along in silence, trying to pluck some of the slivers of wood from my cheek.

We had ridden well away from the water's edge and over the shoulder of a spur thick with Manzanita when I first caught

sight of some of our folks guarding the crossing. As we broke into the open, a dozen horses formed a picket line. I noticed a thin stream of smoke rising from the far side of a line of brush across a clearing.

“Leave your horses here,” Bob said, pulling up and dismounting near the string of horses. As I dismounted, a couple of men approached from the direction of the crossing. “Randy Jackson,” one of them said, extending a hand. “This is my kid brother Frank.” The second young man grabbed my hand in a firm grip.

“You’re the boys been holdin’ this place down from the beginning?” I asked.

“Yes, Sir!” Frank replied proudly. “We been watchin’ from cover. Don’t think they know how many of us are over here.”

“We let them see smoke to make sure they knew we were here,” Randy added.

“Was that you fellas with all that shootin’ a while ago?” Frank asked excitedly.

“Yep, that was us,” James replied. Then, he told the whole tale again.

“Get your story tellin’ done with, James,” I said as I nodded toward the crossing.

Bob and I headed down a faint trail in the grass toward the water’s edge. It was a good 100 yards from the little camp to the crossing. Coarse grasses covered the gentle slope, which ran to the water. Granite stones littered the way. For fifty-some yards, the stones gradually grew larger until they were bigger than a pickup truck. The stone field was about thirty-five or forty yards wide, bordered by scrub oak and Manzanita. The brush formed a thin barrier between the field of stones and the heavy Ponderosa forest.

As Hector spotted us heading his way, he came toward us in a crouch. He waved his hand in a downward motion: “Get down,

get down! They are moving around over there now! We have counted thirty, maybe forty people over there in the trees.”

Hector and Bob showed me around the situation at the crossing. “At low tide, the water drops a ways down the slope,” Hector said.

Bob continued. “When the tide goes out, the land bridge is exposed right down here in front of us.” He waved an arm back and forth where the field of stones ran into the water. “It looks like it might be twenty or thirty feet wide right here but gets a lot narrower on the far side.”

“How many horses side by side do you think could come across there at the same time?” I asked.

“Oh, no more than three or four over there,” Hector said, pointing to the far shore. “Seven or eight, maybe, on this side.”

“Do we know how long the crossing stays clear of water?”

“None of us has a watch,” Bob replied, apparently a little embarrassed.

“It is very hard to tell by the sun these days,” Hector said, “but I think four, maybe five hours.”

James found us in the trees. He toted my M-14 and passed it to me, along with four magazines. Our hands brushed against each other as I took the magazines and rifle. James held tight. With both of us still grasping the gun, “Fellas, you remember my son, James, don’t you?”

Looking into my eyes with a quizzical expression, James slowly relaxed his grip on the rifle. As I took the weight of the weapon from him, he stepped close to me, draped an arm across my shoulders, and gave a quick squeeze. He didn’t say a word. Instead, he squeezed again, then turned away and started toward the water.

Bob and Hector looked at each other quizzically, then at James, then at me. “Sure Bill, we remember James,” they replied in unison.

We spent the better part of an hour looking over the situation at the crossing. According to James' watch, it was 6 p.m. The tide had been rising when we arrived, and the land bridge was already underwater, the water lapping at the field of stones. Fish splashed here or there, feeding on tidbits as the water crept up into the grass.

"At high tide, the water stretches nearly a quarter-mile across. I would estimate that the crossing is about twenty feet deep," Bob said. "The land drops away very steeply on both sides of the land bridge; at low tide, the water line drops about 100 feet altogether. It looks like the crossing is mostly granite, but there is a lot of mud still hung up in knots of roots, too, from what we can see from here. So there's no way to get across except right along the top of that finger of rock."

Hector handed me a pair of old binoculars. "There is a lot of brush on the slopes still," he said, "but there is no cover at all, all across the bridge. On the far side, the trail takes a steep climb into the forest. We cannot see more than a few feet into the trees, even with the binoculars."

When I scanned the forest across the water with the binoculars, I could see Hector had called it right. The forest was so dense that I couldn't imagine how anybody would be able to move around in it. I passed the binoculars to James, raised the 14, and dialed in the scope. The sun continued its slow descent, casting changing patterns of light and shadow that crept between the trees. As the patches of light moved slowly through the forest, I located two men crouched on the slope, watching.

The tide reached its highest point. If the tidal cycle was still anywhere near the 12½ to 13-hour pattern that existed before the earthquakes began, that would give us low tide between five and six a.m. The land bridge would be fully exposed long before 5 a.m. The sun would be rising at 5:15. If I was going to assault that

bridge, I would push across before full light, no later than 4:30 or 4:45. Time was short.

It was easy enough to lay out our defenses. The brush and trees on either side of the field of stones made for excellent cover and set up a good cross-fire. While keeping an eye on the far shore, James began mapping out firing positions in the woods and rocks.

Fortunately, there was only one way across, a bottleneck that led right into this field of fire. With concentrated fire on the stone bridge, there was no way to force a crossing.

The bad guys might be foolish enough to attempt a crossing once, maybe twice to test us. Such a move hinged on how much manpower that psycho, Leo Holt, was willing to lose. From Mason's comments, I figured he might be willing to waste a lot of men's lives. Despots and Tyrants will do anything to hang onto control.

We would need to keep a sizable force on hand around the clock. At high tide, the main watch could stand down and rest, work the camp and tend the livestock and such. Lookouts along the shoreline, such as Beth and her girls, would have to continue as well.

By 9 p.m., I could smell meat roasting over a fire as the breeze swirled gently between the peaks. I heard someone whistle – two short tweets, a pause, and two more. "*Venido coma!*" Hector called, "Come and eat!"

I was handed a plate of venison, crisp from the fire with juice oozing from it—a pile of some kind of greens and what turned out to be water chestnuts. Someone in the camp had been foraging, and now we all benefitted. "Fine Fixin's!" I called to the three or four boys and girls working the food line.

James sat beside me. Between mouthfuls of hot roasted venison, he proceeded with his situation report. "I've set up ten firing positions on the western side of the crossing and 12 on the eastern side. They don't all have to be manned; in fact, I have told

the guys at the crossing to remember to fire and relocate. So they can move between most of the positions without having to expose themselves to return fire.” He indicated each position on a map he had scratched onto a piece of long-dead wood. “We can keep several rifles positioned that will have a field of fire directly down onto the crossing.”

“Impressive,” I said.

“We can have thirty guns under cover applying crossfire on the bridge from the field of stones.” He tapped the map with a finger. “As well as these here with direct fire. There is no way anything can get across. We can keep a guard up around the clock, maybe six or eight per shift. Then, if they try to cross, we can have all of the positions manned quickly.”

“How long to man all of the positions?” I asked.

He chuckled and smiled broadly. “Quicker than it would take you to run the 100 yards to the shoreline, old man.”

“Good enough for me.”

After he finished supper, Hector gave me a rundown of current supplies and ammunition. “We have some canned meat and stuff here,” he said, indicating a neatly arranged stack of canned goods, enough to fill a shopping cart. “We are taking venison when we need it, and Paul Benson brought in a good-sized pig. We have plenty greens and some fish, too.”

“What about weapons and ammunition?” I asked.

Hector pointed to a tarp set up as a lean-to. “Everyone is carrying a *pistola* of some kind, and we have rifles and shotguns here, 30-30s mostly, but there are three 30-06s. Three rifles have good scopes.” He indicated a second lean-to. “We have many cases of ammo. I think we are in good shape, *jefe*, but we can go fetch more if you think we will need it.”

We now positioned forty-eight souls at the crossing. By my estimation, it was enough to hold against an attack. “I will send ten

more people up here to spell the first ten that need it the most,” I told Hector.

“*Bueno.*”

When we returned to the camp, Bob Occer had arrived for supper.

“Bob, James has mapped out firing positions.”

“Got it all from him already, Mr. Bill.”

“Good. I will send ten people up here when I get back to the village. You and Hector pick the first ten that need to rest the most and send them back. I will have the replacements bring up a few more supplies as well.”

I wanted to get a look at the crossing at low tide. So James and I took one last look at the set up at the crossing and bedded down for the night. As the sun dipped below the horizon, it was 10:22 pm – by James’ watch, 22:22 hours.

I shucked my boots and pulled my dirty socks off. Holding a clean pair in hand, my mind wandered home. Slowly pulling the clean socks on, I envisioned Suzanne. She must be fed and in bed by now, more than 1,000 miles as the crow flies, back home in the Rocky Mountains.

Chapter VII

When I opened my eyes, the deep, velvet darkness of the pre-dawn sky greeted me. James was squatting next to me, his hand on my shoulder. “Oh four hundred,” he said.

With a gentle squeeze on my shoulder, he stood and stepped back. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I could see the fire burning low, the aroma of coffee in the air. James stood in the darkness, holding my rig in his hand, waiting for me to rise. I pulled on my boots, grabbed his extended hand, and pulled myself to my feet. “I’m getting’ too goddamn old for this shit, James,” I said.

James smiled, his teeth bright in the darkness, and handed the Coonans to me—the pearl grips gleaming. “Sure enough, old man. You, me, and forty others! Let’s get some coffee and get down to the crossing before dawn.”

Reaching the position closest to the water on the western side of the path, Hector stepped toward us from the darkness ahead. “*Buenos Dias jefe!* Did you rest well?” Before I could answer, he continued, “Look, you can just see the wet stone shining there. The crossing has been exposed for about three hours now.”

Looking hard, I could just make out the difference between the wet stone of the crossing and the water’s surface, seventy feet below the bridge. The water was nearly as smooth as glass, with only an occasional ripple running across its surface, shimmering in

the dim starlight. *It is a damn good thing the moon set early last night.*

I could not detect any movement in the dark forest across the water. The wind did not carry the slightest scent of smoke as it blew from the northwest. If I did not know better, I would swear there no one was over there.

James directed me to one of the firing positions. There was a good dry place to crouch or kneel with ample room to lay flat-out if necessary, although you could not fire effectively in the prone position from this location. The man sitting the last watch at the adjacent position made his way over to us. "It has been quiet as a graveyard all night," he reported. "Kinda creepy. My shift is up pretty soon, but I'd like to hang around a bit if no one minds. I'm Gerald Pappaz." He grasped my hand with a firm handshake.

"Been waiting for a chance to meet you, Bill. Bill Burroughs, right? I heard you took out a dozen guys on your way up here yesterday!"

"I'm glad to meet you, Gerald, but I have to tell you, it was only a half dozen."

"Well, by God! That's a half dozen less we have to fuck with now!" he replied with great enthusiasm.

"Why don't you head on back and get some rest, Gerald? You may not be able to get much in the next couple of days."

As Gerald started back to the camp, the eastern sky lightened. Beyond the peaks, the sun's glow chased the darkness away as the starlight faded.

James silently grabbed my arm. When our eyes met, he moved his head sideways toward the water. "I swear I just saw somebody light a cigarette!" he whispered.

Quickly crouching behind the natural stone parapet at this position, I laid the forestock of the 14 across the rock and focused with my peripheral vision. It is a mean trick to learn, but you can

see things you might normally miss once you have it down. Looking into the darkness, the stars above came into focus. The barrel of the 14 glinted slightly. Across the channel, the water lapped silently at the shore.

There it was... just as James had said. I quickly made out the face of a bearded man as he raised the cigarette to his mouth and inhaled. He was positioned near the high-water mark. I scanned the far shore, slowly left to right, then dropped down and scanned back, right to left. Before the sun could light the sky, I had been able to spot four smokers, staggered from the high-water mark to the current water level. That poor bastard down in the mud must be hatin' life right now.

James marked their positions as I pointed out each of them. Then, as I continued to scan the far shore, James assigned guards to watch each smoker—and track them if they moved.

As the sun chased the shadows from the far shore, I was tempted to see if I could tag a couple of those boys but decided against it and worked my way back into the woods. I wanted to survey the crossing while the tide was out. From fifty yards west of the crossing, I could see almost the entire width of the granite ridge between the islands. It was about twenty feet below the highwater mark. At the far side, the forested slope dropped onto the stone bridge at a very steep angle. It would be a rough scramble up the slope.

The bridge itself was narrow, as Hector had said. I could see the granite spine of the crossing easily enough. A large amount of soil remained on the western shoulder, still clinging in the roots of the Manzanita and scrub oak that blanketed the slope. A few more tidal cycles and erosion would wash that soil away.

The far shore, at the highwater mark, was equally as steep as at the crossing. It continued unbroken for a couple of miles or so as it followed the mountain into the distance.

Making our way east, from firing hole to firing hole, each guard reported their latest observations. As the sun rose higher in the sky, I spotted movement across the slope, all the way to the higher mountain. That kind of movement suggested a large number of people. Any wild game would be avoiding the area due to all the man-stink in the air.

When we reached the worn grass path that marked the route to the crossing, I could tell from the tracks in the mud that there had been a lot of travel. How many people south of here had suffered or died at the hands of these madmen?

A survey of the crossing from the east revealed that nearly all of the brush had been pulled away by the changing tide. A single block of granite, its surface nearly unscarred, ran from the waterline to the top of the bridge and from shore to shore. It would be impossible to cross the gap on the water along this side.

Hector pointed to the west. "Anza and Aguanga were there," he said. "Pinyon Pines, Palm Desert, and the Salton Sea that way." He swung his arm to point between the peaks where we stood and the peaks across the water. "*Dios Mio!* The people *jefe*, all of those people."

I realized a crossing could only be made on the crest of the bridge. Any variance to either side and a horse or a man on foot would plunge 80 feet to the water. You'd be lucky to get three horses with riders across there, side by side. Cover fire could be laid down from any point across the wider slope. But they held the high ground.

I didn't know how many were good enough to actually hit what they were shooting at from 500 yards or so and at varying angles. It seemed to me this kind of trash would never take the time to learn to shoot well enough... but you never knew.

Bob had already gone to see about duties at the little camp. So, when James, Hector, and I finished our daylight tour of the crossing, we headed to camp as well. It was just past 8 o'clock, and

folks from the last guard shift were finishing breakfast. I could hear Bob holler something; by the time we walked into camp, we were all given tin plates heaping with rice and venison. With a pot of stiff coffee to wash it down, it made a fine meal.

As we ate, Hector and Bob were anxious to know what James and I thought and what plan we may have devised. "So, what are we going to do?" Bob asked as I drained my third cup of coffee.

"More coffee here!" I yelled. "Well, James, let's lay this out."

"Here's our shoreline," he said, drawing a gently waving line in the dirt, "and here's the crossing." He drew an intersecting line at 90 degrees. "These are the rocks big enough to use for cover. Here's the brush line and the tree line." He scratched away at his map. "I have a firing position here, here, and here on the west side. Each position has at least two firing holes, and there is cover to get from each position to the next, except between these two." He tapped his stick at each place. "On the east side, there are six positions, here, here, here and here... and here. All have a good field of fire here."

He drew lines from each position across the mark that represented the crossing. "With rifles posted here, here, and here," he continued, marking three locations directly in line with the crossing, "there is crossfire from three sides. Nothing coming across that bridge can get through that.

"You guys tell your guards, 'Always pick your target and make every shot count! Only fire three or four times from one firing hole, then move to the other and keep firing,'" he said firmly. "If they locate where you are, move to your next position and keep at it! When you're moving, let your people know you are moving, so they don't shoot you!"

Both men were impressed but wary. Though he had been in the military, Bob had seen little action. After several minutes, he

asked with a voice filled with angst, “Can we get one of you fellas to run through everything with the whole group? All this scares the shit out of me.”

“It scares the shit out of all of us, Bob,” I replied. “You just have to suck it up and carry on.”

“I’ll be glad to give everybody a good rundown about where we are now and what is expected from everyone,” James offered.

Immediately, Bob ran off to collect everyone not standing guard and brought them back to the camp. Thirty-two men, women, boys, and girls joined him, ranging in age from 14 or 15 into their 60s. Fear gripped the eyes of many of them. Everyone’s attention was sharply focused on James and me. “All of you gather close so you can see this,” James said.

He pointed to a patch of exposed dirt and began to cover all of the firing positions, the firing zone for each of them, how to use the firing holes, and move from position to position. He reviewed the situation for an hour. I sucked down coffee the whole time, listening to James explain what we were up against and how each of us would handle it. He went from face to face and addressed their fears, providing solid guidance. As he finished and stepped back from the group, he asked, “Any more questions?”

The expressions on the people’s faces showed fear and determination. They were scared but determined to face what may be coming at us. There was only one question. “What if we get captured?” Sherri Lamb asked.

“Never gonna happen,” James answered. Then, glancing over his shoulder in my direction, he said, “I will be staying here for the next few days to make sure.”

Damn, this guy is a great leader, I thought.

After dismissing the crowd, James confirmed his decision to stay on. “I have a feeling that that asshole Holt is going to try something soon, and these folks aren’t in any shape to take on a

group of sociopaths. I have to stay. At least I can make sure they know what to do and that Bob and Hector know what to expect.”

“I agree 100 percent,” I replied without hesitation. “I believe I’ll stay for a few days myself. If anything is going to happen, it will be here. I’ll send a rider to the village and let Chuck know what our plans are. You want to send word to Rowena and the boy?”

“I appreciate that. I think Jimmy would really enjoy a few words from you too... dad.”

We scratched our notes on the back of an envelope. I informed Chuck of the situation at the crossing and that James and I were staying for a few days. He needed to get ten riders and a list of supplies up here quickly to spell some of the older folks on the line.

I suggested that we might salvage some gasoline from the gas station in Warner Springs or siphoned from any abandoned vehicles and run it up to the Observatory. Better to have two shortwave radios and that satellite phone going if at all possible to try to contact anyone out there, see what is still above water and locate any more boats. Or any goddamn thing floating we could make functional.

Then I scratched a few words to Jimmy. “Your Dad and I are staying at the crossing for a few more days. I need you to keep an eye out on things in the village for me! Help Rowena with whatever she asks and take good care of Red and Katy.” I signed it, “Grampa Bill.”

By the time I was finished writing to Chuck and Jimmy, Hector had a rider ready to head for the village. Jaime Koch, was only fourteen years old, but she could ride anything with or without hair on it. I informed her of the four pickets between here and the village and to give them fair warning when she was getting close. "We don't need anyone getting shot by mistake!"

She carried a small Ruger .380 Auto automatic in her belt. When I asked, she let me know in no uncertain terms that she knew how to use it. She was happy as a March hare to be doing something more than sitting guard duty. She lit out like her little buckskin mare's tail was on fire. I knew she'd pace the horse and, barring a misstep over the saddle in the mountains, she'd arrive at the village in a couple of hours, possibly as early as 1 p.m.

I figured we would see our replacements before the sun dropped too far down the western sky.

James had sent a dozen people to map the shoreline both east and west of the crossing. The intent wasn't to map the terrain, per se, but to create a commotion in both directions. That would occupy at least a few of the bad guys who were trying to figure out our plans. With the hope that they were focused on the groups moving around in the forest, James set about fortifying the firing positions.

I rode with Hector along the eastern shoreline. The ocean was nearly two miles wide between the base of Santa Rosa Mountain and the southeastern spur of the San Jacintos. The sea wrapped around Santa Rosa, then back to the south and west toward Borrego Springs, now submerged under a thousand feet or more of water.

We could stay trapped on this island or push north and assist the people at Idyllwild and on San Jacinto.

From Hector's reckoning, this island was roughly the shape of a triangle, standing on its pointed end with a mountain ridge-line running from south to north on the western side, from the village to the Palomar Observatory. It proceeded from the Observatory to the east, past the crossing to the eastern shoulder of Santa Rosa Mountain and Toro Peak. Then it veered south again to San Ysidro Mountain, the ruins of Ranchita and the Vulcan Mountains. Across the wide valley, west of Ranchita, lay the remains of Warner Springs. The Vulcan Mountains rose above the southwestern point

of the whole layout. Julian, on Laguna Island, was just across the channel from the Vulcan Mountains.

There was nowhere to go but north.

Hector and I made our way back to camp near 8 p.m. The four-hour shifts were beginning to wear on these folks, but we didn't have any choice until the threat was removed. The people "mapping" the shoreline brought back a variety of objects they salvaged along the water's edge. Admittedly, it was mostly just trash, but these days, anything was a potential treasure. Two items were of great interest—a 55-gallon drum, the blue plastic kind, generally suitable for storing water, and a suitcase that had managed to float within a mile of the crossing.

Opening the suitcase proved to be a painful thing. It was apparent that whoever had packed it had done so in great haste, dumping a few bits of clothes and a small pair of shoes into it. There was also a bible and a new journal, this very book I am writing in now. The journal contained a single notation:

"November 30. Dear diary, I hope we will be good friends for a very long time." It was signed, "Debbie G. 12 years old." A little smiley face was sketched below the signature.

Everyone sat in silence for a moment. We all cried. That page remains in this journal, a reminder of the hope of humanity.

The treasure from the shoreline also included several plastic trash bags that the kids had filled with plastic bottles and jugs of all sizes. The bottles and jugs were spotted bobbing at the water's edge or stranded high and dry, left in the rocks and bushes as the tide dropped.

The tide brought a lot of driftwood as well, including logs and lumber, wood for fires and building material that we may be able to reuse, and a solid core door that had refused to sink. We also found a boat bumper, a float two feet long with 60 or 70 feet of rope still attached to it, and a large piece of Visqueen, heavy

plastic sheeting that had managed to stay afloat thanks to an air bubble trapped under it.

As we pored over our treasure, the replacements arrived to much hullabaloo. Billy Greentree and three of our Indians were among the fifteen riders. So was Jaime Koch, still riding her little Buckskin. "I rode back to make sure they found the right trail," she said when she saw the look on my face, anxious to avoid a tongue-lashing.

Billy sat his horse and grinned, giving a wink in my direction. "Brush that horse down and walk her dry," I admonished the girl. "We don't need any run-down animals!"

Billy immediately sought me out. "Chuck already had some fuel on the way up to the Observatory when Jamie got back to the village," he began. "The boys had managed to get across the channel to Laguna by lashing both boats together. At low tide, the current is much calmer. They met up with 23 folks that survived over there."

Of the communities I knew, only 23 people. Santa Isabel, Julian, Pine Valley, Alpine... all of the homes scattered around the mountain... only 23 people. "The folks at Julian are in bad shape for supplies except for the fruit trees. Chuck gave them some of our rice and beans but is waiting for you to return before handing over any more," Billy continued. "They have a doctor over there, too."

"We will have to work out a beneficial trade arrangement when I get back. Fresh fruit and a doctor? Christ, that could have been much worse!"

We mingled for an hour or so. The sun's orb touched the western horizon once again. It was about 10 p.m. "You replacements get with James," I said. "You folks getting ready to head back to the village will go on about your schedule until sun up. There's no need to travel in the dark."

Billy continued his report. He had relieved the pickets on the trail between here and the village, and the watch posts on Palomar Mountain were relocated to better observe the shoreline. They used the old tractor to pull the piles of logs and debris from the ocean's shore and opened a wide place with clear access to the sea. "Maybe we can get something a little different in our diet," he suggested.

With the addition of the fresh faces, a party atmosphere settled on the camp. Everyone was in good spirits. James schooled the Replacements as they made the rounds of our defenses.

As we finished our second rice and venison meal of the day, one of the girls came by and divided the last pot of boiled carrots between Billy, James, Hector, and myself. "A feast for a King!" Billy joked, shoveling his mouth full of rice.

"A feast fit for a king!" James agreed.

Abruptly, Billy walked to his saddlebags, returning with a bottle of Jack Daniels. Without a word, he passed the bottle to James. As James grabbed it, Billy grinned and nodded his head, giving James the go-ahead. James took a drink and snorted. Then, handing the bottle back to Billy, he waved to me and then passed the bottle my way. "I prefer gin," I said, "but this will do."

Touching my lips to the bottle, I splashed some whiskey in my mouth. "Whew!" I pressed the bottle to my lips again, took a big gulp, and swallowed it down. The liquor poured down my throat, exploding in my guts and sending fire out my nose. "Damn, that has a bite!" I sputtered, handing the bottle to Hector as the other men laughed.

"*Salud!*" Hector turned the bottle up to his lips. He choked worse than I did, but he enjoyed the whiskey just the same. As Bob Occer walked up, Hector passed the bottle to him. "On the house!" Billy said. Bob took a big slug from the bottle and smiled. The guy had an iron gut.

As daylight faded, we passed that bottle of Jack between us. Billy began eyeing the pile of treasure collected from the shore. “I have an idea, chief,” he said with a grin on his face.

“What might that be?”

“We need to scout that mountain, don’t we? Me and my boys have been all over these mountains. From reservation to reservation and town to town.”

“We don’t have any boats, Billy,” I said.

Billy cut me off. “We got everything we need right here.” He pointed to the pile of trash.

Suddenly, I saw what he was implying. There was the 55-gallon drum, rope, plastic bags, dozens of plastic bottles, and the door that refused to sink. With the large piece of Visqueen, we could float a friggin’ army to the far shore.

“I’ll take my three boys. We can cross to the east. I know right where we can put in,” he continued. “We can cross after dark after the tide has turned. I doubt they will be looking for anyone crossing the water.”

“That is a good mile or better across the water to the east,” I said.

Then James chimed in. “Like hell, you’re going to go recon over there without me!”

Suddenly Billy whistled, not a spoken word, just three or four notes. His three friends quickly appeared out of the darkness. After a brief discussion, Billy’s boys—Ramon Black Crow, Jerry Ballard, and French Dick (yes, French Dick)—picked through the pile of trash and carried away armloads of stuff. Billy grabbed the 55-gallon drum and disappeared into the darkness behind them.

The Jack Daniels warmed my innards but also made my head a bit fuzzy. As I sat near the fire, leaning back against a log, my eyes scanning the sky for the first stars to appear, my mind wandered... Would I ever see Suzanne again? Would I ever see my home overlooking South Park? How far north would a man

have to travel to get around the ocean? Could that even be done now? Could I carry enough supplies to make the trip? What about ammunition? What kinds of people remained alive between here and there? Was there a path from the San Jacintos to the San Bernardino Mountains? From the San Bernardinos to the San Gabriel Mountains? Could I possibly reach the Sierra Nevada?

How far north would I have to travel before I could head east toward home?

Billy softly kicked my foot. As I focused on his face in the firelight, he said, "You okay, Chief? You look a million miles away."

"Not quite a million. I was thinking about my Suzanne and home in the Rockies. Do you think a man could survive that trip in all of this?" I waved my arm into the darkness.

"Only one way to know." He replied. "Only one way to know. Come, take a look at this. I think you're going to like it."

He turned around and headed into the darkness. We covered a half-mile or better before Billy turned toward the shoreline. We came upon a small clearing, screened from the water by a Manzanita thicket. "We've rigged a float to get us across," he said, indicating the pile of trash at his feet.

I got on my hands and knees to inspect their creation in the darkness. Their work was ingenious. They tied a couple of 2x4's to the underside of the drum as it lay on its side. The other ends of the 2x4's came to a "V," lashed together where they crossed. Several trash bags were layered inside each other and filled with plastic jugs for a float. Two more 2x4's crossed the upper side of the drum lashed at the juncture of the first two 2x4's. "We can keep our gear above water while we hang onto the boards and just paddle across." As Billy said it, I saw the pride glowing in his eyes.

James emerged from the darkness. "It's perfect!" he pronounced. "We can get across without any noise. They won't

even know we are there.” He handed his watch to me. “Mind that for me, will you, Bill?”

He disappeared.

At 3 a.m., James, Ramon, Jerry, and French returned, all butt naked. As Billy stripped to his God-given and stuffed his clothes into one of the plastic bags, all of them grinned like Cheshire cats. They possessed plenty of firepower: James’ AK-47, two lever-action 30-30’s, two .38 pistols, and a single .45 auto. Definitely enough for a scouting party. As they secured their bags of gear across the top two 2x4’s, I cautioned, “Remember, boys, we don’t want them to know you are there.”

“Got it, Pop!” James replied. “Recon only.”

They picked up their float and quietly carried it to the shoreline. They did not hesitate before moving into the water. Then, with barely a splash between them, they disappeared into the darkness toward the far shore.

Groping my way through the darkness, I returned to camp by 03:30, made one last turn around our defenses, and turned in. Bob offered his bedroll. I didn’t hesitate to accept and was asleep by the time my head hit the ground.

Chapter VIII

December 25, Year Zero...

I awoke with the blankets pulled over my head. Someone was quietly rustling in the camp. As I pulled the bedding from my face, dawn was just breaking in the east, and the smell of coffee filled the air. *How long would that luxury hold out?* I wonder again.

I crawled out and rolled up Bob's bedroll. The wind blew in the sound of excited voices from the crossing. I splashed some water on my face and the back of my neck and grabbed the 14. Passing the cook fire, I stopped long enough to wrap my hand around a hot cup of coffee and then went to see what the commotion was all about.

Making my way to the closest firing position, it dawned on me... Today was Christmas Day!

Bob saw me coming before I saw him and greeted me as I arrived at the big rock that was the firing position farthest from the high tide mark. "There is a lot of activity over there," Bob started. "Jesus, it looks like there's a hundred sons of bitches in the woods. Some are right out in the open like they don't even give a shit if we see 'em or not."

Gulping down the last scalding mouthful of coffee, I sat the cup on the rock. "Let's go have a look-see," I choked, heading toward the next firing position. As I walked, I ejected the magazine in the 14 and checked to see how many rounds it held. Full up, I snapped it back into the weapon with a sharp metallic *clack*. I

crouched down while making my way from one firing position to the next. I could see what concerned Bob. There was a whole bunch of folks milling around in and out of the forest on the far shore.

Arriving at the firing hole closest to the water's edge, I settled down and started scanning the far shore. At least seventy men moved around in the open. How fucking many could not be seen? Then as the breeze gusted a bit, I heard a low metallic thump in the distance. I froze as the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I listened intently for several moments, then another muffled "Thump"... there it was again!

Fuck, these guys have a boat in the water! The "thumping" was the goddamn boat bumping against the rocks. There was no doubting it. I've never heard anything else making a similar sound.

Taking my time now, I began to scan the waterline. Far to the west, the sky lit up in brilliant waves of colored light, then stopped. In a moment, it happened again, bright waves of white, green, yellow. An *Aurora*, I thought, but that can't be this far south. Not this far from the poles. Christ, we are supposed to be on the Equator now! Lynne Baber at the Observatory said it was possible, but *goddamn!* What else will we have to contend with?

The folks across the water saw the same lights I did. Several were animated as they talked and pointed toward the western sky. As I watched them through my scope, I caught a glimpse of something out of place on the water at the edge of a rock outcropping: a straight line and a sharp corner.

Then I saw a head. Someone was bobbing on the water in the damn boat! I had no doubt any longer; these sons of bitches had a boat. It couldn't be too terribly big, or I'd see more of it.

This changed the complexion of our situation drastically. I gave orders to watch that part of the shoreline and then worked my way back to the rock where I had left my coffee cup. While en route, I came upon Bob and Hector, watching the crowd grow

across the water. Waving for them to follow, I continued to the rock. I slapped the cold stone with my palm. "This is the Alamo." I pointed to the farthest firing position to the west. "That is Alpha, Bravo, Charlie." as I pointed first to one, then the next, and the next until I had named each firing position.

"If you hear me say Alamo at any time, don't think, don't say a fucking word, you just get your ass here *fast!* Understand?"

"*Entiendo jefe*, I understand," Hector said.

Bob nodded his head. "I understand."

A look of apprehension quickly spreading across their faces. "What is going on, *jefe*?" Hector asked.

I pointed to the far shore. "They have a fucking boat over there."

"What do you want us to do?" Hector asked.

"We need to get those girls back from the shore a bit further; we don't want them to become targets. Spread the word to be on the lookout for anything on the water, a log, a piece of trash blowing in the breeze, a clump of brush. Any fucking thing! Tell them to signal with their guns; **NOBODY** shows themselves, **NOBODY** tries to get back to camp. Two shots, then pause, then two more shots, then pause, then two more shots. Do you understand?"

"*Si jefe!*" Hector replied.

Bob nodded his head. "Yes, sir!"

"Remember, 'Alamo' means right here, right *now*." I slapped my palm hard against the rock again. "Right here, right now! Now get moving. Hector, go west. Bob, you go east. I think those mother fuckers are getting ready to try something."

The men stood rooted to the ground. "Move!" I shouted. They took off with their latest orders.

I made my way to "Delta," the firing position nearest Alamo on the west side. The rock was about 12 feet high with a fairly natural set of steps up the backside. I climbed the rock to

get a good view of the entire far shoreline. I glanced at James' watch: *05:17 hours*. The sky was clear with only a few scattered clouds, the morning sun still casting long shadows on the far shore. Scanning the shoreline with the riflescope in hand, I could see that the men were beginning to find cover. Some climbed the slope back into the forest, while others hunkered down behind rocks and deadfalls left by the dropping tide. They were getting ready for something that was certain.

Suddenly a single weapon fired on the far shore, back around the point to the east.

All hell broke loose. Eighty or ninety people began firing across the channel between us, the majority above the high water line near a quarter-mile away. None of the rounds reached us. Halfway across the water, it looked like it was raining from all of the bullets falling short, splashing into the water.

After some of those yahoos started to correct their fire, we began taking rounds into our positions. Luckily, they were just lobbing rounds across the distance. It didn't look like they were doing anything more than trying to keep our heads down.

Suddenly, to the west, I heard two shots, then a pause, two more shots and a pause, and two more shots. They were trying to cross the water. "ALAMO!" I bellowed at the top of my lungs. Bob and Hector came running. "Do not fire until something is in range. Keep your heads down and stay sharp. If anyone sees a boat, do *not* shoot the damn boat! Let everyone know. Go!"

Bob and Hector scrambled as I headed west to see what was on the water. I sprinted 50 or 60 yards through the forest, then made my way toward the shoreline. Snapping the scope back into its mount, I settled the rifle against the trunk of a massive fir tree and began scanning the water. Not seeing anything at first in the dim morning light, I located the spot where I had seen the boat at the rock outcropping. I began to scan back toward my position.

There it was. The boat looked maybe 15 feet long and was setting low in the water. Very low. It had to be packed with men. Four pairs of arms reached over the side, trying to paddle the boat towards us. The fucking boat was zigzagging from side to side. The fools had no idea what they were doing.

The gunfire continued from the far shore, but there had been no return fire, so I presumed that they were not attempting an assault across the bridge. Nor were there any other boats on the water. By the time I climbed to a suitable perch about 20 feet up an old ponderosa pine, the wind had blown them within 100 yards of our shoreline. Steadying myself against the tree, I held tight on the paddlers' position on the starboard side of the boat and waited.

The paddler raised his head to check their position. Curiosity seemed to have gotten the best of him. I blew half of his head off. Instantly, the other paddlers began beating the water like all get out, and half a dozen men rose up and began hammering the shoreline with gunfire.

I slowed my breathing and picked one of the shooters on the near side of the boat. I fired and missed. He jerked to one side as the bullet whipped by; I had been goddamn close! Aiming just above the gunnels and dead center of his chest, I squeezed the trigger again. Bulls-Eye! That asshole dropped backwards into the boat. I drew down on the guy next to him and squeezed the trigger. Bulls-Eye! That punk fell back as the guy behind him grabbed his chest.

The wind gusted. I realized these guys were trying to paddle the boat backward, against the wind, away from our shoreline. I lined the scope up with another shooter and tapped him in the chest. The others dropped into the boat and did their best to keep from exposing themselves. I whipped a few more rounds across the gunnels for good measure, then climbed down from the tree and headed to the water's edge.

Two of the guard girls caught up to me at the edge of the last bit of cover. “Oh my God!” one of the girls was crying, “You killed those guys!”

I gave her a stern look. “You heard about the girls they have captive at Idyllwild? You want to end up there?”

“No, sir.” She grew quiet.

I slung the 14 across my back, then took the girls’ shotgun and jacked a fresh round in the chamber. Catching the ejected shell, I looked at it. Number 4 shot. Good enough to put a man down and keep him there. I stuffed the shell back into the gun.

The wind drove the boat to within 20 yards of the shore. Angling the shotgun into the sky, I fired a round. Moments later, I saw the splash of the pellets falling back to the water. Correcting the angle a tad, I let another round. This time, the pellets splashed next to the boat. I let a third round off, and the pellets fell across the boat. That kept their heads down.

I passed the shotgun back to the girl. “Reload that.” As the boat bumped against the rocks, I pulled my primary weapon. The Coonan, stainless steel semi-automatic pistol chambered in .357 Magnum, is one mean gun. I sported a matched pair, thanks to Hector.

Stepping from cover, I shouted to the men in the boat to hold their weapons over their heads and stand up. *That* was a big mistake. Five men stood up. On my order, they began to climb gingerly out of the boat, one by one.

The crying girl with the shotgun was off to my right, 15 or 20 feet away, and the other girl was behind me, off to the left a bit. As the fourth man climbed from the boat, he dropped the muzzle of his rifle toward me and fired. He clipped me in the left shoulder, throwing me off balance.

My first shot splattered in the rocks at their feet. As I recovered, the scared little gal opened up her shotgun on the lot of them. She fired and reloaded, fired and reloaded, fired again,

taking a step closer with every shot. All five guys were down, but this kid kept pulling the trigger, working that pump and pulling the trigger, working the pump and pulling the trigger.

She was still working that pump on an empty gun as I walked over to her and put my hand around hers, gripping the slide. “Those mother fuckers aren’t going to take me captive!”

She pulled the shotgun from my grasp and walked back into the woods.

The gunfire from the crossing had stopped when the men in the boat had started shooting. As the girls walked back into the woods, the silence was deafening. The entire incident had unfolded without a single shot fired from our side at the crossing.

Hector hurried out of the woods with several replacements as I collected the weapons from the boat. There were ten bodies in the boat and on the rocks. We piled the bodies above the high water line. I’d have to send a party back to dispose of them before it grew too hot. I glanced at the watch: 05:45 hours. In 28 minutes, ten men were dead. I wondered how many more were willing to throw their lives away like this.

The replacements stacked the weapons in the boat and hoisted it off the ground. We headed back to camp. The bad guys could not be too pleased with this failure. Maybe they were testing us, probing our defenses? Their boat was a 14-foot aluminum open bow rowboat, with “Lake Hemet Boat Rental” painted across the bow. *Christ*, there could be dozens of these things floating around out there.

Arriving back at camp, breakfast was set for eatin’. Getting in line to get myself some, one of the women grabbed the tin plate from me and ripped my shirt sleeve up to my shoulder.

“Wait a goddamned minute!” I started as she sat me down on a log and started poking and prodding my wounded shoulder. “Ease up, woman,” I hollered as she pulled the cloth from the wound.

“You’re damn lucky, Mr. Bill,” she said. “The bullet went in and out, just here” as she poked her finger first in one hole, then the other.

“God Damn woman, take it easy!” I complained as I stood up again; I towered over her petite frame.

“Shut up, you sissy!” she said. She turned her face up to me ever so slightly; her pale blue eyes were cold as ice with resolve. “My name is *Rachel*, not *woman*! I was a Triage Nurse in the Big Sandy, so sit down.” She packed the holes with ointment and wrapped the sleeve she had torn from my shirt around my arm.

“Yes, ma’am,” I muttered and sat as commanded.

The bullet had struck high on my left shoulder, punching a hole through and through, just missing the humerus. Like she said, I was damn lucky.

After getting my arm patched up, I sat near the cook fire and slowly ate some rice and venison. I needed more fiber. I’d have to get some of that fruit in Julian when I returned to the village. The throbbing pain in my shoulder grew with each beat of my heart.

As I sat there contemplating my bowel issues, Bob sat down next to me. He had a bottle of Johnny Walker in his hand, dangling between his knees. “I got a taste for Johnny,” he said. “A bit more than a taste, really, but this is all that’s left.” He raised the bottle and held it up in front of me. “For the arm.”

“Thanks, Bob.” I raised the bottle to my lips without hesitation. “I appreciate it.”

I took a slug from the bottle and passed it back. He sat there for a moment, swirling the amber liquid in the bottle, watching the liquor sparkle in the sunlight. “To the end of a long relationship,” he said softly. He threw back his head and swallowed a couple of times.

As Bob passed the bottle back to me, Hector walked up. “Kill it!” Bob said. I grabbed the bottle and offered it to Hector. He

shook his head, “Kill it!” he said, repeating Bob’s words. Putting the bottle to my lips, I tipped my head back and swallowed hard three times before the bottle was empty.

I sat the bottle between my feet as the liquor exploded in my guts and tears welled in my eyes. “Appreciate that.” I croaked, “I surely do appreciate it.”

The three of us sat there for a bit, not saying anything. Bob kept stirring about, antsy like. “What you did this morning, Bill, that was really something,” he said. “I don’t think I could ever do anything like that.”

“Nonsense Bob. I think you’d do the same if the chips were down. Don’t short-change yourself. Having courage doesn’t mean you’re not scared, ya know. Having courage means you go at it even though you are afraid. Hell, we’re all scared, Bob. You just don’t know what you’d do until you have to.”

“I don’t know, Bill; I just don’t know.” He stood and walked away.

“What’s up with him?” I asked Hector.

“He was kicked out of the Marine Corps and has never tried to do much since. He has no confidence in himself, I think.”

“We’ll see about that soon enough.”

I checked the time—8:20 a.m.

With little sleep from the night before and a belly full of venison and bourbon, I searched for a spot away from the bustle of the camp. I found a big old Ponderosa with a bed of needles a foot thick beneath it. Spreading a saddle blanket under that Ponderosa, I laid down and watched the clouds dance through the branches. I thought again about Suzanne and home. I had to get back home. But I couldn’t just walk away from these people.

A cool, gentle breeze stirred in the shade of that Ponderosa as I dozed off again.

I was sleepin’ the sleep of the dead when something startled me. Instinctively, I grabbed my .357 from under my arm

and sat bolt upright in one motion, and damned near wet my friggin' pants as the pain in my shoulder ripped through me.

"Fuck, Fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!" I exclaimed, pulling my gun from its holster and resting my head against the back of my hand. "God damn, that hurts."

"I am sorry, *jefe*," Hector said. "It has been many hours since you laid down here. I thought to check on you, make sure you are okay. I am very sorry!"

"It's alright, Hector, be still." I motioned for him to sit down, "Be still."

Hector sat and looked at me like a child that had been scolded for no good reason. "I'm sorry," I said in an effort to console him. "That goddamn bourbon gave me one hell of a headache, and this arm is a son of a bitch. But thanks for checkin'. What's going on over there?" I nodded toward the crossing.

"*Nada, jefe*. There is a dozen or more men that stay in the open; we cannot see any others for a while."

"Help me up, Hector." Holstering my gun, I extended a hand toward him. Though I had to outweigh him by 100 pounds, he easily pulled me to my feet. Jesus, the guy was strong as an ox. My head spun from standing so quickly. "Let's go have a look."

Heading toward the crossing, Hector stepped up beside me as we walked the hundred yards to the Alamo. The hole in my shoulder started bleeding as the pain flared again. My arm was black and blue from elbow to ear. "Any sign of our boys went across the water last night?" I asked.

"*Nada, Jefe*, nothing so far. We can take a look from here." He stood next to the massive piece of granite. "Rest here, *jefe*, while I fix this for you."

He pulled a strip of cloth from a back pocket, obviously put there for the purpose. As he rigged a sling for my arm, he said, "They have cut down some trees, just there." He pointed to an opening in the trees two hundred yards up the slope. Finishing the

sling, he grabbed his binoculars from the rock and handed them to me. “Look, *jefe*, you can see. It looks like they are building something.”

Hector was right. They had cut down six or seven trees and stacked the long timber against two stumps left tall for the purpose. It looked like they were laying lumber from the stacked logs back to the mountainside. What the hell did they think they could do from up there?

I checked the position of the sun, then my watch. It was 18:13 hours, 13 minutes past 6 o’clock in the evening. The sun squatted on us, straight overhead. This shit was going to take some getting used to.

When we arrived, James had assisted Hector in tracking the tide by his watch. Now he asked me to help him translate the information into something we could use. He showed me a stick with a series of notches dug into the weathered wood. The stick was as big around as my forearm and about two feet long. Hector had begun marking the tide level and the sun's position by his best guess at every hour. I couldn’t figure out his markings, but sitting down, he began to decipher them for me.

Using Hector’s notes, we determined that the previous day’s high tide was at 6:21 p.m. The tide was dropping or rising at 8 or 9 feet an hour. Low tide this morning was at 6:33 a.m. The overall rise and fall of the tide was between 95 and 105 feet – *ten* times the normal tidal fluctuation on the Southern California coast before the earthquakes.

If I figured this right, we could now predict the tides to within minutes. Which meant we could determine precisely when the land bridge would be submerged and when it would be exposed. With the tide turning at 12 hours and 12 minutes, the rising tide was a foot to a foot and a half from its highest point at that moment. Low tide tomorrow should be at 06:45 hours, 6:45 am.

“Excellent work, Hector. I’m sure you understand what this information can do for us, don’t you?”

“*Si jefe,*” he replied with a smile on his face and pride in his eyes.

If their only means to attack us was across the land bridge, we could hold them at bay. We could time the tide with no need to post a full guard until necessary. As long as they didn’t have any more boats, we should be safe enough.

However, the platform on the mountainside worried me. It stood better than a quarter a mile across the water and at least 200 yards up the slope. What the hell could they do from up there but observe? A good marksman could apply direct fire on us, but we weren’t presenting any targets I was aware of, even from a 600-foot advantage in elevation.

A couple of the boys that had been foraging came into camp just before sundown. They carried on about the lights they had seen in the sky. Bob grabbed the boys and brought them to me. They carried a gunny sack half full of watercress and cattail roots that would add some variety to the stew pot tonight. *That might solve the fiber problem,* I thought wryly.

The boys related that they had seen waves of colored lights high up in the sky, just to the northeast. It went on so long they grew bored and returned to camp. I thanked them for their hard work and sent them on their way. “We shouldn’t be able to see any of those lights in the sky,” I thought out loud. “We are way too far south.”

“What will happen, *jefe,* if those lights come here?” Hector asked.

I paused for a moment, looking the man squarely in the eye, “We’ll die, Hector. We will die.”

I made my way to “India,” the farthest firing position to the east, and found a comfortable patch of dirt. Using Hector’s binoculars, I began scanning the far slope. I hoped to see some sign

of James and the boys. They had been gone near 15 hours, and I was concerned. I knew they would not risk crossing until after dark, so I did not need to be worried. It nagged me anyway.

With my arm aching and my butt cold from the damp ground, I managed to get to my feet and head back to camp. My arm had stopped bleeding while at rest, but moving around got it started again. As I walked up to the cook fire, Rachel stepped up and began to give me fits for the bleedin'. Quickly, she had it under control with a clean dressing all done up.

Just then, the oldest Jackson boy came up to me and handed over my shotgun. Christ, I had forgotten all about it. "I always carry a rasp, nippers, and a hammer in my saddlebags," he said.

"Always good to have a Farrier in camp," I remarked, noticing the horseshoe nails in his hatband.

"Fixed up your shotgun for you." He turned the butt end toward me.

"Well, son of a gun. That's a fine job!" He had shaped a pistol grip where the buttstock had been broken and splintered. The boy must have sat for hours working at the shattered walnut with his hoof rasp. I admired his handiwork. "Thank you! Thank you very much!"

That seemed to be enough for the boy. He nodded his head and turned away.

"Just about back to normal," I said to Rachel, flexing my arm, grimacing at the sharp pain. When I moved around, the bandage darkened. I got the hell outta there before she could pounce on me again.

Things were quiet again after supper. The new guards were getting ready to head out to relieve the others at the scheduled time of 20:00 hours. 8 p.m. "ALAMO, ALAMO, ALAMO!" The voice came from near, "Bravo."

Boom! The sound reverberated from across the water, echoing between the peaks. Slings the shotgun across my back

and grabbing the 14, I headed out. A large cloud of black smoke curled in the wind near the platform up the slope across the water.

Before I could figure what it was, I glimpsed movement in the sky. Flying toward us was a small object dropping out of the sky very fast. "Incoming! Incoming!" I yelled as loud as I could. "Take cover!"

The object skipped in the mud at the water's edge and came crashing toward Alamo, smashing into the top of a granite knob rising a foot and a half above the ground. The granite exploded in a shower of stones and dust before the object bounced and slammed into the massive block of granite.

A goddamn cannon...

"Look at this, Chief!" Bob said as he plopped down beside me a moment later. "Two and a half, two and three-quarter inch, zinc maybe judging from the weight." He tossed the ball up and down. "Smell it." He held the dull metal orb in front of my face. "Black powder."

"You don't look too surprised," I said. "What do you know about this?"

"Well, they must have gotten hold of somebody's cannon."

I was incredulous. "Somebody's cannon?"

"Sure! There is, err... There *was* a cannon club out of Hemet. I've been to a mess of shoots over to Lake Hemet now and again. I was a battery sergeant in the artillery when I was in the Corps."

"Really? Gunnery Sergeant 3rd Recon." I struck my chest with my thumb.

"Yes, *sir*, Gunny!" Bob replied with a distinct change in his demeanor.

"Incoming!" Someone hollered as the cannon boomed again.

“They're dialin' us in,” Bob said. A second cannonball slammed into the ground 30 feet from Alamo, bounced, and crashed into the massive stone again.

“This is bull shit.” I climbed up the backside of Alamo.

A cloud of smoke drifted into the wind off the edge of the platform. I laid my forearm on the rock and the 14 across my arm and hunkered down a bit, wincing from the pain and effort. Flipping the selective fire switch to “AUTO,” I drew a bead just over the lip of the platform and let rip three short bursts. The log and the lumber at the edge of the platform erupted in a shower of chips and splinters. I emptied the magazine. “Hector! Grab my saddlebags with the ammo for my 14, will you?”

“I already have them here, *jefe*.” Hector climbed up and set the saddlebags next to my rifle. He removed six magazines from the saddlebag and stacked them neatly on the rock.

Swapping mags, I settled down and began to blow the hell out of the front of that platform. I went through all six magazines before climbing down. My arm was bleeding like a son of a gun again.

They didn't shoot their cannon again, but I was worried. Our defenses were well within reach of it, and our firing positions closest to the water could not provide protection from incoming cannon fire.

Noticing the 120 spent .308 cases laying in the grass, I felt a pang of guilt. *Jesus, I can't be wasting ammo like that again!*

It was nearing 22:30 hours when the last of the sun's bright orb slid beneath the horizon. The ground had been rumbling softly most of the time since we watched the granite islands rise from the ocean then sink again, days ago. Now, it was not rumbling at all.

I didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

As the last rays of sunlight winked, a brilliant flash painted the sky, nearly due west of us. High in the atmosphere, the light flashed across the entire sky like waves of a gigantic flag rippling

in the wind. It was the *Aurora* again. *Borealis?* *Australis?* Whatever the name, it didn't make any sense. We were near the Equator now; *we shouldn't see it at all!*

As the light drew closer, it climbed higher into the sky. A storm cloud was moving across the ocean, racing toward us like the wind, faster even than the wind. The "cloud" of steam was a mile or so wide, hugging the surface of the water...racing toward us...the ocean boiling beneath it! The waves of light appeared to clip the surface of the water, then leap across the sky toward us.

In the blink of an eye, the "Stormcloud" shifted to the south and disappeared behind the dark mass of Palomar Mountain. The Aurora continued to light the sky as it rippled higher and higher.

Abruptly, the sky went dark.

When I returned to camp, I was directed to a spare bedroll. I laid down for the night, pondering what I had seen. It was hard to determine the actual size of that "Storm." It was harder still to determine how far away it was when it began or how many miles it traveled as it raced across the sky, boiling the waters beneath it. I could not even imagine what would happen if one of those things makes landfall.

December 26th

Waking to the light of late morning, I realized that no one had remembered that yesterday was Christmas. At least no one had made mention of it. Rolling to my side, I managed to struggle to my feet and saw my M-14 leaning against a log close by, sparkling clean! During the night, someone had cleaned it for me. Hooking the rifle's sling over my good shoulder, I started toward camp for some much-needed coffee. At the cook fire, I was greeted warmly by several people who had just come off guard duty. We sat together, nursing our coffee, waiting for some morning grub.

"Quiet night." one of the young men offered.

“Must have been,” I replied. “I can’t remember the last time I slept through the night.”

“I think you scared the livin’ shit out of em’ yesterday,” another said.

“I’ll bet they think we have a goddamn army over here!” a third added.

The frightened young lady from the shooting at the boat walked into the group. “Thank you for what you did yesterday, Mr. Burroughs,” she said. “I understand how lucky we are to have you here now.”

After breakfast, I made my rounds from Alpha to India. Pausing at India, I watched across the water toward where James and Billy, French Dick, Ramon Black Crow, and Jerry Ballard had disappeared into the darkness more than 30 hours ago. Cussing the pain and stiffness in my arm, I scanned the far shore with the scope on the 14. I searched every shadow and overhang, looking for any sign of the boys.

After 20 minutes, the chill from the dampness in the earth crept into my bones. As I struggled to get up, a strong hand grasped my good arm. Looking up, I saw James, along with Billy, French, Jerry, and Ramon. They wore fresh, dry clothes and grinned like kids in a candy store.

Stomping the blood back into my feet and legs, we headed toward Alamo. Behind the rock, there was a tarp draped over something roughly the size of a wheelbarrow. French and Ramon pulled the tarp back with a great flourish as we approached, revealing a cannon mounted on a rugged wooden framework with rubber-tired wheels.

“How the hell...” I looked from one face to the next. All beamed in the morning sun.

“I got some chamomile,” French said. “Let’s go fix some tea.”

They dragged the cannon toward camp. All I could do was follow.

While sitting on the log adjacent to the cook fire, James recounted their adventure. When the boys put into the water, they were swimming almost immediately as the land dropped from under their feet. They planned to maneuver straight across to the far shore, but as the tide continued to fall, the current carried them into the mouth of a large bay. They managed to reach the shoreline along the eastern shore, a mile or more from where they had planned. Covering the float with what brush they could manage quietly in the dark, they hiked straight up the shoulder of Butterfly Mountain that overlooked the Land Bridge.

They had worked their way up the mountainside when they crossed paths with two bad guys in the woods near the ridgeline. French Dick silenced one with his knife. The second fired off a single round before James followed French's example. "That shot went off, and all hell broke loose at the crossing," James said. "We weren't sure what was going on."

"We worked our way over the ridgeline, but we still couldn't see what was going on through the trees. Making our way down through the forest, we stumbled on the platform they were working on. There was no one there at that moment, but we could see what was happening from there. We just lay down and watched these guys blowing off ammo like it was the 4th of July! We couldn't see anyone on the south side of the channel. When the shots rang out from west of the crossing, we noticed the boat."

James stood up and became more animated. "When that M-14 opened up, we had no doubt it was you in the trees. We watched the whole damn thing happen from up there. Just as you got hit, a couple more of these bad guys came up on us, and we had a bit of a scrape."

"You all okay?" I asked.

“Hell, Bill, French, and Ramon are ex-recon too! Billy and Jerry were Rangers with the 2nd of the 75th! Those pieces of shit didn’t have a chance.”

“We worked our way back toward Idyllwild. We took out four more bad guys in the woods and hid the bodies, but they’ll surely be missed. No way they don’t know that somebody was thinnin’ their numbers by now. We crossed over the notch between Butterfly and Devil’s Rock Pile, then worked our way down to old Highway 74 and followed it north a bit. Hemet is gone. Everything west of the mountains is underwater, just like here.” He waved his arm toward the expanse of water. “We went north, then circled back to the east and came into Idyllwild from the northwest. Just at the edge of town, we caught a guy in the woods. The son of a bitch was beating a girl, beating her like a dog.”

As James spoke, I sized these guys up through a very different lens. No wonder they were such a tight bunch.

French picked up where James stopped, “The motherfucker was fixin’ to rape that girl, Chief, I swear!” He said. “Hell, I’d a killed him right there, but James stopped me. He snuck up there and laid the muzzle of his AK on that fucker’s neck. That punk jumped up n’ James smacked him down with the butt o’ that AK and put his foot on his goddamn throat!”

For an hour or more, they recapped their action, interrupting each other, filling in spots others may have missed. The bad guy told them of 90 men at the crossing, give or take. They had five rowboats that this piece of shit knew about and a huge cache of supplies they’d looted from every store and home in every town and village still standing. They tried to burn down every structure they found so no one else would have any shelter.

At Idyllwild, there were another hundred men and women under the leadership of Leo Holt. About 70 to 80 women and girls were being held captive. Most had already been victimized,

assaulted, and abused, just like the girl in the woods. The bad guy also told them about the cannon.

Billy pulled a big Bowie knife from his belt. Tossing it hard, he stuck it into the trunk of a tree 15 feet away; it struck the tree with a loud *thunk*. "I shut the fucker up when we were done with him," he said calmly. "We had no choice, Bill; we had to bring the girl back with us."

"We followed their trail to the platform," James continued as Billy retrieved his knife. "We heard the cannon fire twice, then that goddamn M-14 tearing it up for a while."

Ramon chimed in. "When we snuck back down to the platform, there were three guys there. We put them down and hid their bodies underneath. They'll find em' all when they start to stink."

"We grabbed the cannon and six balls. That's all they had, but we got two and a half cases of black powder and brought em' down to where their boats were. They had three tied to a piece of a dock that had ripped loose in the flooding, all the way over from Lake Hemet. There were two boats sunk below it, still tied up, too. We loaded everything in the boats and waited for sundown."

James, Billy, and the boys had retrieved vital information, freed a captive girl, and captured their cannon and three boats. I felt like dancin'... well, almost. The girl was in rough shape, but the ladies in the camp were tending to her. We couldn't do much with six cannon shot, but better it stays in our hands than theirs. With their boats in our possession, we had our own goddamn fleet.

As the news spread throughout the camp, spirits were high. Bob Occer tracked me down. "I hear we have an artillery piece, Gunny!"

"I'm not a Gunnery Sergeant anymore, Bob."

"Yes, *SIR* Gunny! What about that artillery?"

"Sergeant..."

James came up beside me. “Gunny! We got us a Gunnery Sergeant? Sergeant Dick! Black Crow! Front and center!” He bellowed.

French Dick and Ramon Black Crow came at a sprint, ready for a fight. Billy and Jerry Ballard were hot on their heels.

“Gunnery Sergeant Burroughs,” he said, nodding to me, snapping to attention.

Bob Occer stepped up beside James. Including myself, we had four recon Marines, 2 Army Rangers, and 1 Marine battery sergeant with our own artillery. All five of them formed up in a row in front of me. Looking from one to the next, I began to formulate a plan of attack. We needed more intelligence, but we could certainly get started with what we already knew.

Chapter IX

14:20 Hours, 2:20 p.m., December 26, Year Zero...

On the fourth day at the crossing, events continued to unfold rapidly. We'd run out of fresh coffee and had been reusing the grounds for two days. Chuck had not sent another round of replacements up from the village, which concerned me. We still held a few more days' worth of canned goods, and the rice and beans would last for a week. Fresh venison and feral pig, along with everything the foragers gathered, would keep everyone fed. But I had expected to see replacements by now.

The girl rescued by the Recon Team provided considerable and much-needed intel about Holt's people. There were at least 200 people all told, more than two dozen of them women that had taken up with Holt. Every man that refused to join them was killed immediately. The women were being systematically abused; many had already died from their injuries. Holt's people scoured San Jacinto Island and had just recently begun systematically raiding Santa Rosa, too. They killed or captured everyone they found. The captives did not know if any other survivors were hiding in the mountains. The bad guys also had a very large number of weapons and "piles of ammo."

Holt was bent on destroying everything, she said.

During the afternoon, there was activity on the far side of the land bridge. I harbored no doubt that, with nearly a dozen men missing and the cannon and three boats gone, someone was paying hell over there. Bob Occer inventoried the artillery supplies and

assured me that we could unleash a lengthy barrage with the powder supply recovered. Only one thing: we only possessed the six cannonballs retrieved along with the two they'd fired at us.

Bob had already collected all of the empty tin cans from the cooks but still needed a few more essentials. Bob said we could construct "canisters" of ball bearings, chain links, nuts and bolts, and nails. With canisters of "grape shot," we could hold the crossing and defend against boats if needed.

With no replacements from the village, I gathered five or six of the most in need of relief and put Pappaz in charge with orders to send ten fresh bodies ASAP. I wanted anyone with military experience. I needed another two weeks' worth of rice, beans, and canned goods if they could be spared, and some coffee if there was any left.

Pappaz was instructed to check with each of the relay posts along the trail. If they had not been relieved, he was to send relief for them as well. I scratched a note to Chuck and sent them off with orders to push hard, to get to the village before sundown. I wanted those supplies and replacements by noon tomorrow.

20:00 hours...

Another earthquake hit, maybe an aftershock. I had no idea of the difference anymore. Away from any structures, it was hard to tell how destructive this quake really was, but it felt very violent. A great many trees fell in the forest. Ranging the far shore afterward, it looked like we were 30 or 40 yards closer together. I didn't know if it was our island or San Jacinto moving, or both, but the ground continued to creep.

I was exhausted. My shoulder hurt like hell, and my head was killing me. I wished so much to be at home with Suzanne. She has a way of settling things down for me; she always makes the headaches go away. If I left soon, the next few days, maybe I could

make it home before her birthday in March. Or....*or maybe I'd be fucking dead.*

December 27...

I woke up well before dawn. *I haven't hurt this bad since Saigon in '70.* I complained to myself. They'd had some damn good drugs at the hospital in Saigon; I sure could have used some morphine.

Hector sipped an ungodly awful concoction of herb tea, roots, bark, berries he had whipped up. God knows what all was in it. When offered, I accepted a cup of the brew hesitantly. "It will perk you up," he said. I choked down half of it and found it was not so bad after all.

As dawn fought its way into the dark sky, Hector stared into the yellow flames dancing fitfully in the pit. "*Mi familia está muerta,*" he said. "My family is all gone, *jefe*, all dead, I think. I have no home an' no one to go home to." He dug for something in a shirt pocket.

"I am sorry, Hector." I thought of Suzanne, hoping she was still safe.

"You and James, *jefe*. You and James have been my friends. You treat me with respect, and you trust me like no one before. Why do you do this, *jefe*? Why do you stand and fight for these people you do not even know? Why don't you go home *a su esposa, jefe*? To be with your wife?"

"I can't tell you how badly I want to go home," I said. "But there is too much to do here now. There is too much danger for these people." I waved my arm in the darkness. "A long time ago, a man named Edmund Burke said, 'All that is required for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing.'" I turned and looked into Hector's eyes. "I cannot leave these people to die here. Hell, I don't even know how far north I can get. I might just end up living out the rest of my life right here, for god's sake." I paused, trying to

see the path ahead in my mind's eye. "If I go and have to come back, I would rather know there is something to come back to."

The conversation turned back to Hector, "I am half Chiricahua Apache, *mi Madre era Apache*. I was born in a little village outside of Cerro Colorado, in Sonora. *Mi madre* told me I am descended from Geronimo, *jefe*. At one time, my Apache blood was a very proud people, but not now. I was *evitado*, shunned, by my Mexican brothers because I was Apache. Then I came to America, and I was just Mexican. I came to America when I was ten years old."

Hector paused for several moments. "I came to Nogales and snuck across the border, and over the years, I came to California, to Valley Center. I made a good home in the hills of Valley Center for many years. Now it is all gone, *jefe*, the Apaches, *mi familia* in Sonora, maybe *no* Chiricahua are left anymore. Maybe all of my people are under the sea now, too."

"You have a new home now, Hector," I said, indicating the dozen people bundled in their bedrolls as fire-cast shadows danced between the trees.

"I think I make my home with you, *jefe*," he replied, "I make a new home with you and James *y el pequeño muchacho pelirrojo*."

Hector began fiddling with something in his hands. I couldn't see what he was doing in the flickering light of the fire, but within a few moments, he raised a hand to his face and stuck a small bit of wood into the embers. Sitting down next to me again, Hector brought the flaming brand toward his face; a hand-rolled cigarette clamped between his lips. *Damn. Everyone has been out of tobacco for two weeks now.*

Hector inhaled deeply and held the smoke in his lungs for a moment. I smelled the pungent aroma of herbs, of *mota*, Marijuana. "This will ease the pain in your arm, *jefe*. Please, it will help."

He offered the cigarette to me. I only hesitated a moment before accepting the offer. I knew it would dull the pain. I hadn't sampled any good Ganja since before my stint in the Marshal's Service. Hector's herb was far superior to anything I remembered.

At 03:00, the cookfires were stoked for the change of the guard at 04:00. Billy Greentree appeared from the darkness, dramatically sniffing the air. "Hector!" he called loudly, "You gettin' Gunny stoned?"

"*Medicina para el dolor!*" Hector replied defensively. "Only for the pain, Mr. Billy."

"*Ningunas preocupaciones mi amigo; no worries my friend. I agree, it will kill the pain. Es un pensamiento muy bueno. It is a very good idea.*"

I passed the cigarette back to Hector, who waved me off. "It is for the pain, *jefe*, only for you this morning. Only for you today."

I felt a bit peculiar. The camp was waking up around us, the cooks were busily preparing food for the group... and I was getting stoned. No one seemed to notice or mind at all as they busied themselves with preparations for the day. After several deep drags from the joint, I noticed that the sharp, piercing pain in my shoulder began to diminish. I could even move my arm around more freely, clenching and unclenching my fist, flexing my elbow. It felt good to get the blood flowing again.

French, Jerry, and Ramon appeared out of the darkness during the guard change, just as quietly as Billy had, startling me a bit. "We have something we want to discuss with you, Gunny," French said.

"Let's have it." I pulled another lungful of "medicine" off the joint.

"We need to get offensive," Jerry said.

“Well, that is my thought exactly, gentlemen.” I exhaled slowly, savoring the warmth in my chest. “What do you have in mind?”

“We have the scoped .30-06’s,” Billy began.

Just then, James walked into the light of the cook fire. “We got a Remington 700 BLD with an old BSA 6x18 variable scope.” He handed one of the rifles to me. “This one is a pre-64 Winchester model 70 with a Leupold 6x24 variable; a heavy barrel. These will put down an Elk at 400 yards without flinching. And we’ve got 300 plus rounds of Remington Bronze-tip 180 grain ammo, too.”

I considered the arsenal. “Okay, and your plan is?”

James handed the second rifle to Jerry and sat beside me. “We have 15 hours of daylight, give or take, every day, and we have two sniper teams with one spotter and one shooter each. They can roam the shoreline at will and start taking down anything that moves. It shouldn’t take more than a day or two before they stay off that slope altogether. The more we take out, the better.”

“Once we have them pushed up the ridge,” Billy continued, “we can use the boats to cross over and take the fight right to ‘em!”

“Well, what do you think?” James and Billy asked in unison.

“Let’s see how many of our replacements have any military experience. Once they get up here, we’ll work on a plan, but I like it,” I said. “I like it a lot!”

“Outstanding,” James replied. “We’ll zero the weapons once the sun comes up. Fellas, let’s go map the terrain we covered yesterday.” They left together.

By 05:00, having finished smoking my pain medicine, drinking several more cups of Hector’s brew, and polishing off a plate of venison, rice, and wild mustard greens, I felt like a new man. I could hear James and the Recon Team zeroing the ‘06s.

Those boys were riki-tik; they were most definitely *not* wasting any time at all.

Bob Occer found me in camp and showed me a sample of his proposed “grapeshot” canisters. It was so basic and straightforward that I was taken aback. He simply laid a piece of cloth over the open end of the can, pushed the fabric into the can with his fingertips, then filled it with nails pulled from lumber on the shoreline. He pulled the edges of the cloth up and tied a simple knot to hold the contents in the filled can.

“We place a powder charge in the cannon, tamp in a bit of cloth for wading and drop one of these in,” Bob said. “Nails like this should be good for 30 or 40 yards. Ball bearings, nuts and bolts, heavier stuff will carry twice that far.”

“That’s not a whole lot of shrapnel, though, is it?” I asked.

“We can stack the cans like this.” He held two cans end to end to demonstrate. “We could tape them together, but we don’t have any tape. I think the cloth liner should hold them together if they are handled carefully, but once they are in the cannon, we don’t have to worry about that at all.”

“Outstanding, Bob. Any thoughts on explosive shot?” I asked.

“Well, Gunny, I just don’t know right off, but I’ll keep working on it. We are pretty limited on resources and equipment, ya know.”

“I know Bob, I know. We’ll just have to make do as best we can, but for anti-personnel, these will be great.” I tossed Bob’s demo canister in my hand. “These will be great!”

As the 08:00 guard change finished up, Shelby Woolley, the Sergeant of the Guard, so to speak, found me and proceeded with his SitRep, his Situation Report. “No movement across the water, Gunny.”

“Whoa, Shelby,” I interrupted. “What’s with the Gunny stuff?”

“You’re in command, sir, purely a show of respect. These kids need to know where their strength is. Your taking command gives all of them strength.”

I nodded, still reluctant. However, his logic made perfect sense. “Good enough. Carry on with your report.”

“No movement across the water until 05:30. Then the kids at Alpha picked up a lot of movement in the forest, moving down the western slope of the ridge, but we can’t see what they are up to. Nothing to report on the eastern side of the ridge. At least nothing has been spotted, sir.”

“Very good, Shelby, go get some food. Have your detail clean and check their weapons. We can’t afford to have dirty weapons failing when the shit hits. Got it?” My question was firm.

Shelby stood straighter for a moment, welcoming the firm directive. “Yes, Sir! Right away, Sir!” Turning sharply, he lit out at a sprint, calling to his detail.

If we could keep up this kind of morale, these people would do fine... If we could just keep morale up.

At 09:30, I headed west along the shore on foot, making sure to stay well back in the tree line. I needed a fresh perspective of our terrain as well as the terrain on the far shore. After 10 or 15 minutes, I realized that I was being followed; the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I crossed a small clearing and hunkered down behind some cover. Pulling my primary weapon, I sat on my heels, slowly working my left arm. *Gotta keep the blood flowing.*

Ten minutes passed. I neither heard nor saw anything I could ascertain as out of the ordinary, but I knew what I had felt.

My legs began to cramp as I grew impatient. “Show yourself!” I called into the forest across the clearing, “I know you’re following me. Show yourself!”

Behind me and to my right, away from the water’s edge, I heard rustling. Spinning crouched down, and my legs fast going to sleep, I fell onto my wounded shoulder. “Fuck!” I grimaced.

From a short distance, Hector's voice. "*Jefe! Jefe*, it is me, Hector! Do not shoot me *jefe!*"

"Hector! What the fuck are you doing following me like that? Hiding in the fucking woods, I could have killed you, for Christ sake."

"Please, *jefe*, please do not be angry with me. You are our leader. You are *el jefe*. I will watch for you now, *usted ahora es mi familia*. You are my family, *jefe*, and I will take care of you now."

Hector gently helped me to my feet. "I'm not a child," I replied. "I do not need a nursemaid."

"No *jefe*, No! Not a nursemaid. I am your man now; I will take care of you. Do you not understand what I say?"

"Okay." I began to understand what Hector meant.

"Anything you need, *jefe*, you just tell Hector. I will make sure that you are taken care of, from now on, *Si?*"

"Yes, Hector, *Si*. I understand." I tried to walk out the cramps from my legs.

From that moment on, Hector remained by my side unless I directed him otherwise.

By noon, we covered two and a half, maybe three miles before we heard a single shot behind us, toward the crossing. A few moments later, there was a second shot, definitely from a different weapon. Then a third. I looked at Hector and smiled. "Our Recon Team is already sniping the far shore," I said. "Let's head back to camp."

The sporadic gunfire continued as we walked back toward the crossing. Hector stopped every few minutes and trained his binoculars on the far shore. "Look there, *jefe!*" He handed me the binoculars and indicated a bare rock face maybe 30 feet tall. At the bottom of the rock face, three bodies lay at the water's edge. Our boys were busy. I calculated how long it would be before the tide picked up those bodies and carried them away.

"What a waste of humanity," I said aloud. "What a fucking waste."

A quarter-mile from camp, we were greeted by several riders from the Village. They had ridden hard, their horses drenched in sweat. As they were walking them dry, they fell in with Hector and me. "They warned us to watch out for you all," a young man said, offering a hand. "Sammy Russell. You must be Mr. Burroughs?"

"Bill Burroughs," I replied, shaking his hand. "This is Hector. What is your situation?"

"We are part of 16 replacements up from the village. Seven of us have military experience, like you asked. We've brought up some supplies, but you should know things are bad at the lake."

"Continue."

"Well, two days ago, a large group moved back down by the lake, mostly women and little children. They were scared of the continuing quakes and didn't like being up the slope or in the new shelters. That same night, one of those storms you warned us about came across Angel Island, across the southern shore of the lake and valley toward Ranchita."

"What happened?"

"I saw the forest on Angel Island burst into flame, the whole island all at once. Then the storm came off the ocean, and the valley all caught fire. It moved so fast, so fast no one could get out of the way. Everyone that had moved back to the lake was dead in an instant.

"It was bad, Mr. Burroughs, awful. Altogether, 153 people are dead, like they got baked in the oven. Half the cattle and a couple dozen horses are dead, too."

"They were all dried up like mummies!" another added.

It was worse than I could have imagined. Dried up like mummies? Surely these kids were exaggerating...

“What is the situation in the village?” I asked. “On the ridge?”

“Everything is normal on the ridge,” Sammy said. “The storm raked across the valley south of the lake, and nothing else was touched. Oh, Ranger Daniels says the radio is dead, too. Nothing electric works anymore.”

“What about the Observatory? What about their radio or Sat Phone?”

“Don’t know, Mr. Burroughs. Mr. Daniels sent riders to check on them, but they hadn’t come back before we left. We got here as fast as we could.”

“Thank you, Sammy.” I gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “You did good, son.”

As we walked and talked, we strayed closer to the water, away from cover. When we started again for the camp, a nasty whine zipped through the air, then the *craaack* of a gunshot from across the water.

Instantly, Hector slammed into me, knocking me to the ground, as one of the boys let out a grunt, and his horse reared and pulled away. The boy held the reins and was dragged several feet before the horse tore loose and bolted into the woods.

An instant later, a sustained volley of rifle fire began to pepper the far shore. Sharp pain in my back nearly caused me to blackout. *Did I get hit again?*

“Stay down, *jefe!*” Hector whispered in my ear.

I realized that the awful pain was my shotgun digging into me under the crushing weight of Hector lying on top of me. “I can’t breathe!” I gasped.

“Oh my God!” I heard a girl exclaim. “Archy is dead. Archy Phipps is dead!”

Hector kept me crushed beneath him as he scanned the forest. “Please, Hector!” I gasped again.

“*Un momento jefe, lay still!*” Hector shifted his weight slightly, allowing me to breathe again. “We must get back into the woods,” Hector told the group as he rolled off me.

Hector grabbed me under both arms and lifted me like a child. In the blink of an eye, we were 20 yards into the forest. Hector sat me down gently against the trunk of a giant fir tree and then started poking and pushing, twisting me from one side to the other. “*Jefe, are you shot?*”

“No, Hector, you damn near broke my back, though.” I tried to say it in a humorous tone but failed miserably.

“*Jefe lo siento por favor terrible. I am very sorry, jefe!* I only thought to protect you!”

“It’s okay, Hector, you did good, you did good,” I said, patting his shoulder. “Where are the replacements?”

“We’re here, sir,” Sammy Russell called. “Archy Phipps is dead, but the rest of us are alright.”

“Let’s see if we can recover his body and get to camp. My shoulder is bleeding like all get out again.”

Two boys from the group of replacements pulled the dead boy’s body to cover. “He was 14, sir,” Sammy said with a hollow tone in his voice. “He was only 14 years old.”

Fifteen minutes later, the somber group of kids walked their horses into camp with Hector and me. The other young replacements came running when they saw the boy’s body draped across the saddle of his horse. The celebratory atmosphere that followed the arrival of the replacements and needed supplies changed immediately. It was painfully obvious that this was *not* a game.

So much for morale.

Back at camp, Hector forced more of his Indian brew on me. It produced an amazing effect on my sense of well-being. My stomach issues were diminishing, and the headache I’d sported

for days was gone! In an ordinary world, I might consider packaging this stuff for sale.

Rachel noticed the blood-soaked bandages on my shoulder and came at me full force. She and Hector had a heated discussion, which only ended when Rachel walked off shaking her head and talking to herself. As soon as Rachel was out of sight, Hector began to peel the stiff, soiled bandages from my arm gently. He then washed the wound with the same brew I'd been drinking. He warmed some of the liquid in a tin cup and continued to bathe the wound. Gradually, the pain diminished more and more. He twisted another "medicinal cigarette," and as I puffed away, he dug something from the pouch he carried on his belt. He placed what looked to be a wad of leaves into his mouth. With a few sips of his brew, he merrily chewed away.

When my shoulder was well cleaned, Hector spat a large wad of the chewed leaves into the cup. Mixing it into a coarse paste, he plastered both the entrance and exit wounds with his poultice. Then he wrapped a cleaner strip of cloth snugly around my upper arm and over the shoulder, tying it tightly with a neat little knot. When he finished, he took a mouthful of the brew, swished it around in his mouth, and swallowed it. All I could do was sit and watch.

I pointed to his cup of brew, his pouch, and my freshly bandaged shoulder. "What in the hell is all this stuff?"

Pointing to my bandaged arm. "This is the leaf of the *mók ošu*." He replied and, reaching behind me, snapped a small leafy branch. "Manzanita. The Miwok people call it *mók ošu*. The Tea is Manzanita and Juniper berries with herbs and the bark from the woods and the field." He nodded his head toward the forest. "It will help you quickly."

He looked at the bandage, then at my face, cocking his head from one side to the other as if looking for something to

crawl out of my ear. “You are already a good color; you look much better!” He stood up and turned back to the fire.

As Hector busied himself gathering up the few items he used to doctor my arm, I realized he was barefoot again. He carried no firearms, either, but sported three knives that I could see. “You going native on me, Hector?”

“¿Qué usted significa el jefe? I do not understand.”

I pointed to his bare feet. “No shoes, Hector. Are you going native? Are you going *Indian*?”

“¡*Oh sí!*” he replied briskly. “I am the last of the Chiricahua maybe, *jefe*. I think maybe now I *BE Chiricahua*.”

I nodded. “It suits you, Hector. I am honored to have you with me.”

The new replacements left for duty with the people they would be replacing. James gave them a full rundown of the situation, as he did before every guard change.

Meantime, Archy Phipps was buried on a sunny slope to the south of camp. Kyle Abell, “Preacher,” they called him, said a few words over the boy’s grave. It seemed to comfort the younger folks. The day’s events bolstered their determination and resolve. While they were no longer boisterous and loud about camp, they were sociable and appeared ready to step up to the task at hand.

The news Sammy reported about the storm and the village was fleshed out by a report from Gabe Ford. Gabe, the leader of the new batch of replacements, was 35 or 40 maybe and had done a short stint in the Army. His group of replacements brought enough rice, beans, and canned goods to last at least two weeks, as well as four SKS rifles and three AK-47s in addition to their own weapons. They also packed in three cases of 7.62x39 ammunition. Each carried several pounds of fresh fruit from Julian as well.

Gabe filled in the details. Sammy had been correct: 153 dead on the lakeshore. A couple of hundred head of cattle and 32

horses were also dead. The Short Wave Radio was useless, and Chuck Daniels' electric razor wasn't working, either. *Electric razor?* Christ, I had been scraping my neck with a knife all these weeks, and Chuck had a goddamn electric razor? Go figure.

"Some of the dead were in bad shape, looked real sunburned like. Some of 'em just looked like they were sleeping, though," he said. "Almost all of the little children are gone, too."

Gabe added they had collected all of the bodies, piled them high with driftwood, doused the lot with diesel fuel, and set them alight. The fires were still burning when they left the village before dawn. Mason and company had been skinning cattle and horses nonstop, trying to salvage as many hides as they could before rot set in.

There were now only 103 people left alive back in the village. Counting us at the crossing, we were just shy of 160 souls plus the survivors at Julian... less than 200 in all.

Gabe also carried a message from Chuck and a note from Jimmy. Chuck's message recapped what Sammy and Gabe had reported. It went on to say that someone had been taking potshots at the cattle and at the people watching the herds. So far, no one had been hit. Mason and his cowboys had hunted the culprits without luck.

Gabe added that lookouts had noticed apparent signal fires on what we believed to be Elsinore Peak, maybe 20 miles north and west. A couple of the boys said it looked like an SOS; they'd learned about it in Boy Scouts. "We'll have to investigate," I said, "and I need to meet these Boy Scouts. It has been more than 30 years since I played with Morse Code."

Nothing electric functioned at all, though the old generator still ran. Chuck had sent a patrol to the Observatory on Palomar Mountain but received no report before these replacements headed north.

Jimmy's note read:

Dear Mr. Bill, we are fine. Rowena is writing this for me because I can't write very good yet. A lot of people are dead again, but I made sure Rowena stayed in our hut like you told me to. Red and Katy miss you. I miss you too. When are you and my dad coming back?

Love, Jimmy

PS. Are you my Grampa?

The tears welled in my eyes. I had to turn away, faking a cough and blowing my nose to hide it. Momentarily, I was able to get a handle on my emotions and turned back to Gabe. It was apparent I hadn't fooled him a bit. "No problem, Mr. Bill," Gabe said. "I lost my family in the first earthquake."

He laid a hand on my shoulder as he walked past, then disappeared into the woods at the edge of camp. I sat on a log at the edge of the clearing, watching the slow bustle of the camp, and thought again of Suzanne as Gabe's words echoed in my mind.

As sunset closed another long day, James and the Recon Team were eager to launch their covert assault. "We can go tonight if you say, Bill," he said anxiously.

"Not tonight, James." I thought about Jimmy's question in the note. "Let's give them another day to regret their existence with some more of that sniper fire." I turned to the rest of the men waiting in the shadows. "What do ya say, boys? Let's give it one more day."

"We'd really like to go tonight, Gunny; we're ready," Billy said. "Look here; we've mapped the ridge and our route from the other day."

He brought a flaming stick close for light. Someone had snatched a page from my journal and detailed the trail over the mountain, up the highway, and around Idyllwild from the northwest, then followed the path back to the platform up the slope. There were numerous notes regarding possible ambush

points and locations where booby-traps could be set. “We’ve all got an SKS or an AK now,” Billy continued, holding up the AK-47 with a 30-round clip in it that he held in his grasp. “I’ve got my .45; we’re prepped and ready to roll, Gunny!”

“One more...” I began but was cut short as Hector leaped from the shadows. The man moved without a sound and perched next to me, peering into the darkness of the forest. He crouched with one foot on the log, the other on the ground, his knee cocked, his left hand on my shoulder. “*Silencio!*” he hissed. In his right hand, he held a huge bowie knife, the long dark blade held along his forearm, ready to strike out at any moment.

“*Un momento mi hombre principal,*” he said, then “¿usted oyó eso?” He looked at Billy. “Did you hear that, Billy?”

“God damn, Billy! What the fuck was that?” I asked quietly. Before he could answer, Hector vanished into the forest.

“Don’t know, Gunny, I didn’t hear a thing out there. Did you hear what he called you?”

“*No habla español,* Billy,” I replied.

“He called you his main man. He called you his Chief, I mean like a real fucking Chief!”

I didn’t quite understand the full impact of that reference, but I knew Hector was more than a companion now. He was protecting me as though he was my bodyguard. “He told me he was the last Chiricahua. He’s gone back to his roots,” I said.

“Chiricahua? Jesus! I damn glad he’s on our side, Gunny. I would *not* want to have him hunting me,” Billy said.

James fidgeted, impatient. “What about a raid tonight?”

I held up an index finger. “One more day, boys.”

Several minutes later, all hell broke loose a hundred yards into the woods. Feral hogs had run these mountains for several years now; it sounded like a mountain lion had one by the tail. Within moments, we heard a final long, drawn-out squeal. The night went quiet again. The commotion awakened the whole camp.

You'd have thought an army of the walking dead had paraded through.

The chatter around the campfire abruptly hushed. "*Hola campo! Es Hector!*" Hector's voice called from the darkness, "Do not shoot, *por favor.*"

He appeared silently at the edge of the firelight, a dead hog slung over his shoulder. If you could hear a pin drop in the forest, you'd have heard one then as Hector walked into the light. "It was only *un cerdo, jefe*, just a pig."

He dropped the already gutted carcass next to the fire pit.

If anyone watched from the far shore, they would have wondered what was going on. All the fires were stoked to light the camp, and Hector's pig turned on a spit. Before the midnight change of the guard, everyone feasted on fresh wild pig.

Near 02:00, the camp quieted down again. Hector had not left my side since returning with the pig, but somehow he'd managed to build a pallet of pine boughs and needles for me. He directed me to my "suite." I fell asleep the moment my head hit the ground.

Chapter X

December 28, Year Zero...

I awoke without realizing it, the heavy scent of horse sweat all around me. Laying in the darkness on my bed of pine boughs and needles, I blinked a couple of times to put my surroundings in perspective.

There was quiet movement close by. Looking around me, my pallet was laid so that my head rested against the trunk of a massive ponderosa, and my feet pointed toward the main camp, twenty yards away. To my right stood a dense wall of Manzanita, and to my left, a small clearing. Hector was busy attended a small fire in our little clearing. An occasional clink of tin led me to think he might be cooking, but I didn't know why he would be cooking here.

I cleared my throat to catch Hector's attention. "*Buenos Dias, jefe,*" he said, gathering several items from around the fire. "How is the arm this morning?"

I was surprised to raise my arm slightly without the searing pain I had experienced since being wounded. I sat up. "Much better than I would have thought possible. What are you up to so early in the morning?"

"*Jefe,* it is near dawn already. I have been up for some time now."

He began to untie and remove the wrappings on my arm. He gently unwrapped my wounded shoulder, bathed it liberally with his brew, and applied a fresh poultice, then wrapped the shoulder again with a clean strip of cloth.

“You’re an interesting man,” I said as he completed dressing my wound and put his small kit away.

“I am just a simple man, *jefe*. I am Chiricahua now and will live the way my mother and the Chiricahua people taught me as a boy.” He paused for a few moments. “I remember many things that I thought I had forgotten. My grandfather was a shaman, a medicine man, and my grandmother was a healer, too.” He patted the leather pouch that he carried on his belt. “You will get well soon, *jefe*, do not worry.”

Sooner than he thought. I was, in fact, already healing rapidly. I felt better than since I could remember. My head was clear, and my usual morning bowel issues were gone. While I knew it would be a couple of weeks before my arm was back to normal, I found I could use it a bit as I pulled my boots on.

I smelled fresh coffee, but as Hector handed me a cup of his brew, I decided his was a far better tonic. Strapping my harness on, I found the pair of Coonan’s weight comfortable, familiar, reassuring. I slung the Village Blacksmith in its heavy leather scabbard across my back and strapped the long-bladed machete at my waist, then hooked the sling of the shotgun over my good shoulder and slung it across my back.

As I reached for the M-14, Hector rolled up a couple of strips of cloth and carefully placed them in his pouch. He noticed my attention to his task. “Fresh bandage for your wound.” Then he saw all of my weapons. “Are we going to battle this morning, *jefe*?”

“Maybe so, my friend. I feel like a new man. We’ll have to see what the dawn brings to us today.”

07:45 hours...

The camp bustled with activity. Guard change at 08:00, and the relief was enjoying breakfast while cleaning their weapons and checking ammo. The conversation was light but directed. Since the

death of Archy Phipps, the resolve of everyone had solidified into a core of determination.

This was Gabe Ford's shift. The young folks looked up to him. "They will never get through us," a teenage boy said amongst a group of his companions.

"I hope they try while I am on duty," a second added.

"Easy, kids," Gabe said. "I'm sure we will have our chance, but until then, you stay focused. Remember your orders?"

"Yes, sir!" one of the boys answered eagerly. "Keep our eyes peeled. Keep our heads down. Signal 2, 2, and 2, if anything tries to cross the water. Don't shoot until they are in range – and make every single shot count."

"Excellent, Rick. The rest of you remember what Mr. Day said, right?" Gabe added.

"Yes, sir!" All ten girls and boys answered.

"Then let's go." They headed for the crossing to relieve the last detail.

As the returning guards filtered into the camp, the Recon Team sat with Hector and me. Bob Occer grabbed a cup of coffee and joined us as well. These men were my core offensive force. I had to make the best use of them as each situation dictated. I could not waste them.

"Gunny," Billy said, taking a stance in front of me, "we went on a recon last night, Black Crow 'n me."

I sat up straight and looked him in the eye. "Did ya now?!" I asked tersely, a bit riled.

"We drew straws, Bill," James interrupted. "Billy and Ramon went to scout the far side there. Jerry and French watched the boat, and I stayed here to run interference in case you got wind of it."

"Not exactly what we had discussed, was it?"

"We needed the intel, Gunny. You know it as well as we do," Bob Occer said.

“You in on this, too, Bob?” I asked.

“Bob had nothing to do with it, Gunny,” Billy said.

“Get off it, Billy,” Bob retorted. “I’m in this as deep as any of you. We needed the intel, Gunny. You can’t protect everyone all the time.”

“You’re right, Bob; I can’t protect everyone all of the time. But, *I am* in command by general agreement, or has *that* changed too?” My voice began to rise.

Hector stood and moved to my side, his hand resting on the hilt of his knife. I realized that I was escalating this needlessly. “Stand down,” I said. “Stand down, all of you.” Turning to Hector, I place a hand on his as he grasped his knife. “It’s alright.”

“*Si jefe.*” He relaxed and looked from one face to the other around us and nodded to each in turn.

“Damn Bill, we didn’t mean...”

I raised my hand, cutting James off in mid-sentence. “It’s alright, fellas, it’s alright. I was outta line. Tell me what you all saw last night.”

The tension faded, and the men’s enthusiasm returned quickly as they began to recount their recon across the ridge toward Idyllwild. They added a significant amount of detail to their map and developed a plan for an assault on Idyllwild.

My shoulder began to bother me again as I sat on the log, listening as they laid out their strategy. Somehow, Hector understood the pain was getting worse, and he silently rolled another of his “medicine smokes.” When he lit the joint and handed it to me, I accepted it without hesitation.

Jerry Ballard motioned toward me. “Gunny,” he said, indicating he would like a sample of Hector’s herb.

Hector raised a hand. “No! *Es medicina para el jefe.* This is for the pain.”

The whole Recon Team gained an entirely new level of respect for Hector.

They reported that the bad guys had left at least a dozen of their dead lying where they'd fallen, scattered through the woods and in the rocks from the water's edge up into the forest on the ridge. If they had discovered any of the dead from the previous incursion, they hadn't done anything with them. The stench of rotting corpses hung heavily in the air.

Our team identified four main trails being used into and out of Idyllwild. There were a few horses, but none were being used regularly. The bad guys were traveling on foot, except for the island raiders we'd encountered at the Land Bridge. The camp at Idyllwild was dispersed over a wide area, encompassing the greater boundaries of the town itself. There were no defined guard posts or regular security. There were still 120 to 130 able-bodied people carrying weapons. Captives were kept in a crudely fenced area with no shelter other than a couple of ragged tents and lean-tos. The renegades appeared to be drunk or under the influence of drugs, for the most part. They quarreled among themselves, and occasional gunfire erupted across the hillside in the general area of the encampment. "Just like Mogadishu," Jerry muttered, shaking his head.

"Now Gunny, we've already spoken with Rachel. She knows several women being held over there, and she is on board," James began. "We're outnumbered 10 to 1, but they can't have any concept of combat like we know it, and we'll have the advantage of surprise."

"What has Rachel got to do with this?" I asked warily.

"A woman is the best kinda bait for these animals. We'll use Rachel to lure them out, bit by bit. We'll set booby-traps here, here, here, and here. These booby-traps will take out some, but more importantly, they will channel the rest this way." James indicated a specific trail on the map. "We'll set up an ambush here, right along the shoulder of Devil's Rock Pile." He tapped a spot on the map that had a good amount of terrain detail on it. "On this

section of the trail, they will be sitting ducks. Even if they thought about it, there's no way to flank the ambush point. We can fall back to here, here, or here if we have to, and if we have the opportunity, we can press the offense. We have two more ambush points already located here and here." He indicated each point in turn.

Billy pointed to the eastern shore of the ridge along the "Bay." "The shoreline here is clear. It's about five clicks along the shore to where the boats will be. We can cover that on the run, if necessary, but I doubt it would come to that."

I sat back, picturing the terrain and possible evolving scenarios, given various situational aspects and personalities involved.

"When?" I asked.

"Tonight?" all replied questioningly.

Taking a long look at the map, I played over the plan in my head again. "Full dark is near about 22:00 hours, correct?"

"Yes, sir, launch at 22:00 hours. Landing at 22:45 or 23:00 hours. Three boats with five men each. Alpha team will head out as soon as we land. The two remaining teams will set up a perimeter and guard the boats," James replied. "24-hour return trip."

"24 Hours?"

"Yes sir, Gunny," French chimed in. "We'll set the mantraps then set up at ambush point Alpha. James and Jerry will take Rachel in close enough to sucker them out just before sun-up. Then, game on!"

"Sounds good," I said, "but I want to speak with Rachel ... now. She needs to convince me she understands the possible consequences of this mission."

"Yes, sir, right away." Jerry headed off to find Rachel.

13:00 hours...

James selected four more sniper teams from among the recent arrivals. Kelvin Belcourt and Nick Elwood were line grunts in the First Gulf War, part of their three-year turn in the Army. Both could shoot and take orders. James took them and two others out for quick practice and training with the '06s. The four spotters also received training from French and Jerry. They would start a two-hour rotation along the shore at 14:00 hours and engage anything that moved across the water until dark. With two teams deployed during each rotation, there wouldn't be too much that could sneak past them.

The Recon Team assembled their patrol and poured over the map, drilling on their strategy and collecting necessities for the mantraps and ambush. Our snipers would remain on our side of the water and keep up a constant vigil for any movement. The Recon Team planned to set out at 22:00 hours, 10 p.m., and head into the "Bay" for a hundred yards, which would put them a mile or better away from any bad guys watching the crossing.

16:00 hours...

It had been a quiet day. Bob toured the shoreline to check the kids in the woods and each firing position at the crossing, ensuring everyone stayed awake and on their toes. Meanwhile, a couple of the replacements were educating the foragers on what to gather, collect, and prepare.

Hector must have been recalling ancestral memories. He cut the legs short on his jeans and fashioned the cut-off pant legs into pouches. Every time he walked into the woods, he returned with some new plant that he worked into his brew or applied to my poultice. I also made sure he carried one of the 30-30 lever-action rifles constantly. He never left my sight for more than fifteen or twenty minutes at a time.

The same two boys that had told me about the lights in the sky stumbled across a hot spring on the near side of Lookout

Mountain, only a half-mile from the camp. We established a rotation so everyone could bathe. Red Willow, an older Indian woman, showed us how to use wild lilac blossoms for soap. What a relief to get the worst of the body odor out of the camp!

The cooks prepared the evening meal, taking advantage of the added ingredients from our Indian friends: Pinon nuts and Acorns, seeds from Buckwheat, Chia and Millet, flowers, buds, berries, wild grape, Manzanita and blackberry, greens from the Amaranth and Redmaid, cactus pads, fruit from the yucca and palm, roots, and bulbs. The added activity was good for morale. Plus, the more we learned about these plants, the better off we would be when our food ran out.

21:30 hours...

As the sun crept down the western sky, the ambush team made a final equipment check. The boat's interiors were lined with saddle blankets. Hopefully, they would help muffle the noise of their aluminum hulls on the water.

All of my Special Forces troops, plus one woman, filled out the Alpha team. Six men and four women made up the Bravo and Charlie teams. We had four personnel per team, plus one for bait. I wish I were going on the raid, but I would have been more of a hindrance than a help in my condition. It pissed me off.

No doubt about it: the raid would be risky. If any of the teams were discovered before they were in position, they could find themselves in a running gunfight. Once on the water, every one of them would be sitting ducks. They were taking all of our assault weapons, and we couldn't afford to lose those.

Not to mention the people.

We needed some diversion. Bob worked up some pyrotechnics by stuffing tin cans with pine cones and black powder. I decided to light them off every fifteen minutes, beginning at 21:45, at a couple of spots on the shore where a point

of rocks jugged into the water, four hundred yards to the west of the crossing. It was far enough away that our adversaries wouldn't be able to make out what we were doing, and it would hold their attention. Hopefully, at the very least, the torches would keep them night blind and utterly ignorant of our folks crossing the water in the dark only a couple of hundred yards to the east.

22:45...

As we lit the fifth torch, I crouched in the deeper shadow of a fallen tree with Hector's binoculars. I counted fifteen faces glowing in the light of the brightly burning pine cones and black powder. At first, it was only two or three, but as more torches were lit, more faces appeared. I hoped like hell that curiosity enticed everyone on the ridge to sit and stare at the bright lights, mesmerized.

I sent four boys into the woods at the edge of the rocky patch where the torches were burning. They would walk their horses around in circles and keep up a loud banter for the next hour or such a matter. Once we ran out of torches, the sound of horseshoes clinking on the stones and the ebb and flow of voices across the distance would help keep their attention diverted a while longer.

At 23:45, the last of the torches were lit. I could hear the boys as I made my way from the shore into deeper cover, heading for camp. Some leftovers were being made ready for the 24:00 guard change, so I grabbed a plate full. Making myself comfortable in front of the Alamo, I peered into the darkness, straining my eyes and ears, wondering where the ambush team was. They should have made landfall at 23:00... 23:15 at the latest. They would make their way north, then veer west and cross over the ridge to set up Ambush points Bravo and Charlie before turning north and east again toward Idyllwild and point Alpha.

I hoped I wouldn't hear any gunfire before dawn.

Finishing my plate of "Yuccatash," succotash made from the root of the Yucca, I took a last tour of our firing positions, found my pallet of pine boughs, and laid down. As the full moon slowly rose above the eastern peaks, I pulled the blanket over my head and tried to chase anticipation of coming events from my mind.

December 29...

Hector woke me at 02:30 hours. The full moon was nearly straight overhead and seemed larger than I had ever seen, almost as bright as day.

I rose from my pallet. "There is a lot of activity at the crossing, *jefe*," Hector said. "It looks like many men are moving around in the forest."

Donning my gear, I grabbed the 14 as Hector led the way across the moonlit expanse on our way to the Alamo. Climbing the backside of the massive boulder, I settled into a comfortable slouch and began to scan the far shore in my rifle scope. Several cigarettes glowed in the shadows cast by the moonlight. There had to be a dozen or more men moving in and out of the trees.

Bob Occer was in front of me, readying the cannon in the shadow behind Delta position. With a whisper, Hector caught his attention. Upon reaching the Alamo, he climbed up beside me. "Looks like they might be gonna try something in the moonlight, Gunny," Bob said. "If you're real quiet right down by the water, you can hear a lot of talking over there. They are definitely getting ready for something."

"Whatever it is, we need to get ready."

"Already on it, Gunny," Bob answered. "I have two people at each firing position, plus the snipers are posted east and west of the crossing at about 40 yards. If they try anything in this light, we'll have them covered." He went on, "Got the cannon loaded

with a canister of nuts and bolts too! Nothing is getting across that rock tonight!"

"Outstanding, Sergeant. Why don't we get some fresh coffee out to everyone. It will be a long night. Our ambush team is over there somewhere. I want to believe that they know about all of this." I nodded to the far shore. "Either way, we need to cause a fuss when they launch the ambush. We can't have them caught between two converging groups!"

Bob disappeared into the shadows as I gingerly climbed down from Alamo. I wanted to lay on top of Delta; its top was somewhat flatter than Alamo. It would be easier to target anything on the stone bridge from there.

Hector stepped from the shadows as I made my way to the little clearing to fetch my gear. "*Jefe*." His voice was hushed but firm. "I am going across the water. I do not like sitting here any longer."

He peeled his shirt off. His broad, muscular torso shone a rich bronze in the moonlight, a stark contrast to the deep walnut brown of his weathered face and arms. "Do not say anything, *jefe*. I am not asking your permission; I only tell you so you know I am not in the camp."

"I don't think you should cross in the moonlight Hector," I said, in a feeble attempt to deter him.

"Look, *jefe*," he said, pointing to the east beyond India position. "The shadow already lays across the water. No one will see me." He took his pouch from his waist and held it toward me. "*Por favor, jefe*. Mind these for me."

He handed me his lever-action 30-30 as well. Checking that his two smaller knives were snug in their sheaths, he drew his massive Bowie knife, turned, and vanished silently into the shadows. Moments later, I heard a faint trilling sound, something like a bird, but unlike any bird I had ever heard.

I retrieved a couple of saddle blankets and found a spot to perch atop the boulder at Delta. I strained my eyes into the night, trying to get any glimpse of Hector in the water but could see nothing. A clink of tin caught my attention as two kids from camp arrived at my position. They carried armfuls of tin cups and cans with bits of wood lashed to them for handles and a large pot of coffee. "It is good and hot," the boy said as he poured coffee into the cup the girl accompanying him was holding.

"Be careful!" she said, handing the steaming cup up to me.

"You kids, keep quiet and stay in the shadows," I said as they began to move along.

"Yes, Sir!" they replied in unison.

"Thanks for the coffee."

Laying across the top of Delta, I saw straight across the length of the stone bridge. As it began to drop lower into the western sky, the moon cast no shadows. I could see several dark shapes at the far end of the bridge, men milling about in the open. *Did they think we were sleeping or what?*

Suddenly, another light storm began to flash across the northern sky. It looked like it was right on top of us, but I saw no bank of steam clouds on the water nor fires flashing through the forest. But in the bright light, I could see twenty or thirty men on the bridge, beginning to cross toward us slowly.

Without a sound, Bob Occer was beside me on the rock. "Did you see that, Gunny?"

"Sure did, Sergeant. Where is your cannon positioned?"

"Moved it forward, sir, right back of Charlie there." He pointed to the next mass of granite.

"What's your range on that thing, you figure?"

"That canister of nuts and bolts ought to carry a good seventy or eighty yards; I'd have to guess."

"Tell everyone to be ready but to wait for me to give the order before anyone fires, then you get ready on that cannon. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir!" Bob scrambled the fifteen feet to the ground and disappeared into the shadows.

Rolling one of the blankets for a rest, I laid the fore-end of the M-14 across it so I could comfortably look straight down the length of the crossing. In the moonlight, I could see the line of dark shapes, crouched low, moving slowly. It was difficult to gauge their true distance before the sky lit up, bright as day again.

Christ! The nearest was already halfway across. As the light storm flashed again, they began to run—

Straight at me.

Looking along the scope with my off-eye, I focused through the eyepiece, holding the cross-hair on the lead body. As if on command, the sky flashed brightly again. I squeezed the trigger, and the rifle roared in my ears as the first man went down.

Instantly, the men running across the bridge began to fire blindly toward us. "Open fire!" I bellowed, flipping the selective fire lever on the M-14 to Full Auto. Focusing through the eyepiece again and finding my target, I began laying short bursts into the mass of men. Gunfire from all positions poured across the bridge.

The cannon roared, and the muzzle blast lit the scene. The men in front stopped, trying to get away from the withering volley of fire as it tore into them. The sky flashed brightly again as the last of them collapsed onto the stone, now dark with blood washing down its shoulder.

The gunfire stopped as the sky darkened again, and a cold silence swept over the scene, the smell of Cordite filling the air. The wind quickened from the west. Without warning, it began to rain softly. The cool, gentle rain was refreshing in the warm darkness of the night.

For 10 minutes we sat, crouched, or lay in our positions, waiting for another assault. Suddenly, the dark quiet was shattered but a horrific, blood-curdling scream, then the sound was choked off. *God almighty, what on earth could that have been?*

After 20 minutes without further action, I asked Bob to check each firing position. No sooner had he moved into the darkness when there was another horrible, gurgling scream from the far shore, then several gunshots, another gut-wrenching scream... then silence.

I glanced at my watch. 03:39. The sun would rise soon. What was the ambush team doing? Several kids, relieved from their firing positions, made their way past me as they moved toward camp. Their voices grew louder as they approached. "Quiet down there!" I cautioned harshly. "Don't make targets of yourselves."

"Yes, sir!" they whispered back loudly.

Moments later, the kids returned with fresh coffee. I peered into the darkness as the rain continued falling gently, steam rising from my cup into the night. Thirty minutes later, my last mouthful of coffee had cooled as I gulped it down. Near India, I heard that soft trilling whistle again. *Must be Hector*. I climbed stiffly down from my perch atop the cold mass of granite.

Jesus, I wish I had some aspirin.

Back at the camp, I directed some of the kids to stoke the fire. If anyone was left on the far shore, I wanted them focused on what we were doing. I didn't want them to try to locate our guards as the sun rose or wander back toward Idyllwild.

The rain hissed in the fire as the flames grew, leaping higher and higher into the dark morning sky. It felt good, the heat of the fire on my aching bones. I stood and enjoyed the heat on my back and the cool mist on my face, thinking of Suzanne. How was she? When would I get home?

As I began to doze on my feet, the breeze on my face changed. I opened my eyes and looked down into Hector's as his hand gently touched my shoulder. "I am back, *jefe*," he said as he raised his arm high in the firelight. He held a tangled mass of ragged, bloody hair in his hand. *Scalps*. "My grandfathers would be proud tonight," he said triumphantly.

Christ! He fucking scalped those sons of bitches! Stepping away, he vanished silently into the pre-dawn darkness.

I'm damn glad he was on my side.

A bullet whizzed through the air, then thudded into the trunk of a large Ponderosa high above us. *Fuckers are taking potshots! Goddamn them to hell.*

Everyone hit the dirt as I glanced up, trying to determine how high the bullet had hit, gauging any real danger. It would be unnerving with bullets whipping overhead, but better than rounds impacting camp directly. I grinned as some of the boys realized they were face down in the damp earth and began to leap to their feet, brushing the dirt from their clothes, trying to look cool.

Suddenly, a second bullet whipped overhead and tore through the Ponderosas as several small branches crashed to the ground. They dove for the ground again. "Fuck this shit!" I said aloud, pitching the dregs in my cup onto the fire.

I tossed the empty cup at a group of the kids. The younger Jackson boy snatched the cup out of the air with a snap. Grabbing the M-14, I turned toward the crossing, "Go get em' Mr. Burroughs!" he shouted. "Go get em' Gunny!"

I headed for the shoreline. "My saddlebags!" I called to another boy. "The one with the clips." I raised my rifle and pointed to the magazine.

"Yes, Sir!" He ran toward the little clearing that Hector and I called home.

As I passed the Alamo, another bullet whizzed through the air high above me, cracking through the branches of the trees. Bob, rising from his position alongside the cannon, waved me toward the west side of the rock. "Son of a bitch is layin' up on that platform," he said, pointing around the rock toward the far shore as the first light of the new day began to chase away the night. "He'll have the guards pinned down once it's full light."

"We'll see about that." I climbed up the backside of the boulder. The blankets I had used earlier were wet and soggy and stank of horse sweat. I tossed them down. "Grab a couple of dry ones, will you, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir, Gunny."

He trotted into the woods. Kneeling, I heard the crack of the rifle as shattered stone, hot lead, and copper splattered my leg and thigh. "Fuck!" I said aloud as I dropped painfully onto the rock, bringing my rifle to bear.

I scanned the forest on the ridge across the water. I spotted the platform and my shooter as a second bullet splattered on the stone two feet from my side. I located his head above the edge of the platform. Bringing the scope to bear, I zeroed in on my shooter. I estimated the platform to be 600 yards out and at about 200 feet rise in elevation—*Turkeyshoot my ass*. I thought as I focused through the eyepiece of the scope. The 14 was zeroed at 400 yards. I shifted my rifle a tad, raising the barrel slightly. I set my shooter's head right on top of the second dot down from the cross-hair and squeezed the trigger. *Rock and Roll, motherfucker!*

The bullet exploded into a log two feet below and three feet to the right on my target. "Wind must be up a touch," I thought, raising the rifle a bit to the left. I set the second dot just touching this punk's head, at 45 degrees, high and to my left. I took a breath and slowly exhaled. I adjusted just a tad more to my left, then squeezed the trigger, quickly pulled back on target, and squeezed the trigger again. The first bullet must have been damn close

because my shooter lunged quickly to the side before the second bullet blew his head apart.

"Some kinda lucky fucking shot there," I said out loud, quickly scanning along the platform's edge, checking for any movement.

The second shooter fired. An instant later, I squeezed the trigger on him. Something hit my foot and damn near tore it off as I heard the crack of the rifle. Wood flew not inches from my second shooter as he fired at me again. I rolled quickly to my left, wincing at the pain as I rolled over my wounded shoulder. Another bullet splattered on the rock where I had been lying a moment before. Bringing my weapon back on target, I acquired a target through the scope, squeezed off three rapid shots, and then rolled again to the left. Bringing the weapon to bear again, I fired three more rounds in rapid succession.

I stopped for a moment to let my head clear as another bullet splattered on the rock, the crack of the rifle shot muffled in the breeze. Quickly, I wiggled myself down the back face of the rock. "Clip ya, did he Gunny?" Bob asked.

I didn't feel like I'd been hit, but when I raised my right foot, the heel was gone from my boot. "Too goddamn close for comfort," I said. "This is the only fucking pair of boots I can find that fit."

Another bullet slapped the top of the rock where I had been perched, screaming wickedly as it ricocheted into the trees. "Let's have a look-see around this way."

I peered carefully from the shadows. As I located the platform again, yet another bullet ricocheted off the top of the rock. "I wonder if this guy's any good," I called to Bob, "or just damn lucky." Still, another bullet splattered on the top of the rock. "Let's try from back here," I mumbled to myself as I headed for the Alamo.

As I climbed into position, the ambush team ripped loose in the distance. The gunfire raged for six or seven minutes before dying down. I settled into a comfortable position on the rock and began scoping the platform again but found no target. Shooter number two had moved or pulled back out of sight. Several randomly spaced shots punctuated the quiet following the initial volley in the distance, then silence.

I glimpsed movement and brought the scope to bear on four or five men moving up a trail in the forest, heading back toward Idyllwild. I settled the crosshairs on the man in the rear and squeezed the trigger. As he went down with a .308 round in his back, the rest of the group scattered into the shadows of the forest.

Before the gunfire stopped, a flock of seagulls descended on the pile of bodies atop the stone bridge. I counted maybe 20 bodies lying under the swirling, squawking mass of birds. As the tide continued to drop, another small pile of bodies appeared to be hung up in the brush.

We'll have even odds before long if this keeps up, I thought.

At 07:40, the tide began to turn. It would take several long hours for the water to wash away the bodies on the bridge. There had been no more movement on the far shore, and the atmosphere in camp was light and triumphant.

"We stopped em' again!" Gabe said as I returned to camp to have breakfast with the people getting ready for the 08:00 guard change.

There had been several near misses during the short battle, and I had lost a boot heel. "We did," I said. "We stopped them good. But we've been damned lucky. Too goddamn lucky for my liking. We're due for a bad turn if it doesn't hold. I don't want anyone getting cocky or complacent. Remember Archy Phipps? Remember the hole in this shoulder?" I asked, indicating my own

wound. "We got careless; I got careless. We can't afford anyone else getting careless!"

I continued admonishing everyone in camp. "You kids going out on guard, keep your heads down! At least one shooter over there can reach you if he tries, and I don't want to attend a funeral for any of you. They are going to be pissed off like nothin' you've ever seen. They just lost 30 odd men right here." I pointed toward the crossing. "I don't know how many more at that ambush."

"You forget those bodies down on the bridge now; they will be gone when the tide comes up again. Keep your heads down, but keep your eyes peeled on the far shore. Does everyone understand me?"

"Yes, sir!" they shouted.

As the clock neared 09:30, I heard more gunfire in the distance, the sound wafting on the breeze. It must've come from some distance farther than the Ambush Point Alpha. *I hope like hell they are continuing the attack and not falling back under fire.*

The two Boy Scouts found me as I caught a quick nap in the shade of Alamo. "We established contact with the Village, sir," one said.

"What?" I asked, a bit confused. I tried to get my wits about me. "You did what, young man?"

"Semaphore, Sir. We learned it in the Scouts. You can talk to the Village right now if you want to! From the top of Lookout Mountain, you can just get a line of sight to Birch Mountain on the ridge above the Village at Lake Henshaw, Sir."

"Semaphore? God Almighty boys, when did you get this idea?"

"We've been working on it for a few days. We had to make up some signal flags," one of the boys answered. "It's a long way, but we have our markers set up so we can find the other guys right off now. Can we show you?"

"You sure can!" I rose to my feet. "Let me go saddle that little gray. I'll ride up the mountain if you boys don't mind."

"No, Sir, we'll show you the trail."

"¿*Cuál está encima de jefe?* What is going on?" Hector asked as I tossed the saddle on the gray. I explained quickly as I pulled the cinch tight and stepped into a stirrup. "Come along with us, my friend." I swung into the saddle.

The boys were already heading out toward Lookout Mountain as I turned the horse around and nudged him with my heels. Hector joined me at an easy trot.

"What is semaphore, *jefe?*" Hector asked as we made our way up the shoulder of the mountain in the warm morning air.

"It is a system for communicating over long distances, using signal flags in specific positions to convey letters and numbers, kind of like Morse Code. But this can be used in daylight, unlike a signal lamp or firelight."

The gray scrambled through the granite outcroppings. Catching up with the boys, I asked where they were from. "There's six of us, sir, from Clairemont down by Mission Bay. My dad dropped us off at the bottom of Banner Grade before noon that Friday. We were hiking to the Scout Camp at Mataguay. We made it to the spring in Chariot Canyon. We were camped right there when the earthquakes started.

"Saturday morning, we got to Mataguay, but it was deserted. Everything was falling down from the earthquake, so we went to the Ranger Station at Lake Henshaw. We've been there ever since, sir. The rest of the guys are back at the Village."

I dismounted and secured the horse before clambering the last 80 odd yards through a forest of jagged granite boulders. Upon reaching the summit, I saw a clearing with a couple of chairs of Manzanita and oak lashed with quarter-inch cording. On the western side of the clearing was a collection of sticks tied together so oddly that I was unable to ascertain its purpose. Just like Scout

Camp, I thought, recalling my own days as a Boy Scout a half-century prior.

"This is for the binoculars," one of the boys said. He set a pair of high-powered binoculars into the rack. "Sit here and have a look."

The other boy raised a pole with a four-foot square piece of white and black cloth attached to it. Gingerly settling down on the chair they positioned for me, I leaned forward and fixed my gaze through the binoculars.

The odd little rack held the binoculars snugly. I adjusted the focus gently and saw white and black flags snapping in the breeze, maybe twenty miles away. About fifteen feet down the granite face in front of me, cloth snapped in the wind. The first boy took a perch behind the binoculars. Peering over the edge, I saw the second boy waving his signal flags smartly. "He sees you, Pete," the boy called to his friend. "Tell them we have Mr. Burroughs here and to go get the Ranger."

Gene hollered instructions to Pete.

The boy with the flags snapped and whipped his flags up and down for several minutes.

Chapter XI

"Tell 'em to go round up, Mr. Daniels," I said. "I'll just get comfortable and rest here while we wait."

"What's he say, Gene?"

"Gimme a minute!" Gene watched intently, marking each letter on a small tablet. He turned to me. "Sorry, Mr. Burroughs, they say it will take an hour to get to the Village and back."

As the flag overhead fluttered and snapped in the breeze, I dozed off, the warm morning sun on my face.

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*The bright sunlight pierced my eyes. The tall grass of the prairie brushed the bellies of the cattle as they moved from my path; my homestead dug into the side of the hill just ahead. The creek laughed wildly as the big sorrel Appaloosa splashed through it, the crunch and clink of his hoofs in the rocks unusually loud.*

*Standing in the stirrups, the saddle squeaking, I scanned the sun-dappled prairie around me. Behind me, the creek wandered on to join the Tarryall. Far in the distance, sunlight sparkled on the South Platte River as it wound its way across the valley.*

*The sky was brilliant, pastel blue, powder-puff clouds drifting slowly on the wind. A single Peregrine falcon hovered on high, its wings fluttering slightly, holding its position. Something*

*caught its eye, and it dropped slightly, drifting on the wind a moment, folding its wings, diving.*

*The wind rippled across the vast fields of grass in gold and green waves. The scent of the pine and fir on the shoulder of the mountains and the aroma of wildflowers and prairie grasses filled my senses.*

*The horse raised his head and whinnied softly. Ahead on the road, Suzanne walked toward me, waving.*

*Christ, I can hardly believe I am home.*

*Urging the Appaloosa to an easy lope, I saw someone with Suzanne. Straining to see... who... is it... I can't believe it! Walking hand in hand with Suzanne is... little Jimmy!*

*No! This isn't right! This can't be! My heart pounds in my chest...*

~~~~~

A shadow crossed my face. A hand on my shoulder startled me. I grabbed my .357 as I began to rise. I opened my eyes, blinded by the bright sunlight.

Hector grabbed my gun hand and held it firmly. "*Jefe! Jefe!* It is Hector, *jefe*; everything is safe here."

"Goddamn it, I almost had her in my arms!" I groaned aloud. My chest ached as the dream faded from my mind's eye.

"I am sorry, *jefe*. There is something you must see."

It took several seconds to bring myself back to the moment, to a reality I'd just as soon never see again. Pete stood back, watching Hector and I struggle, a look of surprise and fear on his face. "It is alright, *jefe*," Hector repeated calmly.

"I'm okay now, Hector. It's alright." I relaxed as the realization of where I was hit me: December 29th in the year Zero, a long goddamn way from home.

"*Bueno, jefe!* There are some strangers in the valley below." Hector released me and rose to his feet. We grasped each other's wrists as Hector offered his extended hand. I marveled again at his strength as he easily pulled me to my feet.

"Look!" He said, handing me his old binoculars. "Look there." He pointed to a bit of a valley south of the mountain peak. "At the fork of the creek."

My eyes, wet from the harsh glare of the sun, I focused my view through the old binoculars and found the fork in the creek. Three horses were staked out. Two had saddles; it looked like someone was strapping a pack-saddle on the third.

"There is two men there, *jefe*," Hector said. "It is too far; I cannot tell who they might be. It looks like they camped there last night but have stayed very late. It is almost eleven o'clock."

While I watched, the strangers mounted up and headed east, straight into a ravine crossing a ridge that ran north and south, about two miles from where we stood. Fifteen minutes later, they were out of sight of the little clearing on the summit of Lookout Mountain.

The boys on Birch Mountain signaled that Chuck was with them, and they were ready to talk. However, Gene and Pete wisely decided not to answer. The strangers in the valley could have easily seen the flags if they began. "Tell them we have strangers on the island," I said to Gene. I turned to Hector. "We have to go take care of this." I looked back at Gene. "Tell Mr. Daniels to stay by that flag."

Hector and I prepared to head into thick timber and dense Manzanita thickets. I peeled the Village Blacksmith and the machete off and sat them across one of the chairs with the M-14. I had a slug in the chamber of the Remington and three rounds of "00" buckshot in the magazine, backed up by four more slugs, but the bandoleer of shells was draped off my saddle eighty yards the

wrong way. What the hell; with three clips for each of the Coonans, I was heeled well enough.

Hector started off at an easy run toward the thickly forested ridge below.

"Stay here and keep your heads down," I said to the boys as I followed Hector. "Keep your eyes peeled down there." I pointed to the ridgeline Hector was jogging toward.

I did not know this piece of terrain but having viewed it from the mountain's peak, I had a fair understanding of it. We should be able to intercept the strangers and follow them, but the brush looked thick enough to keep the hogs out. Hobbling along with one heel gone was killing my back. I had to stop and pry the heel from the other boot.

Hector vanished into the thicket, fifty yards ahead. When I reached it, I crouched down and stuffed myself into the same rabbit hole Hector had disappeared in. Or so I thought. There was a footprint in the damp earth, but it didn't matter. There was only one way to go, anyway. I was too damn big to fit in a much tighter space.

When I figured I was done, I stumbled out of the brush into a clearing. Hector was there, crouched down, one hand raised to keep me quiet. "They are not here yet, *jefe*, but soon. Wait here *por favor, un momento*."

He pointed toward the shadow of the thicket, then disappeared into the forest. Several minutes passed, a squall blew in from the west. As the wind quickened, it rained softly. Hector returned, his hair matted from the rain, the massive Bowie knife in his hand. He motioned with the knife. "This way, *jefe, quietly!*"

I guess I was making more noise than I thought!

We followed an unseen trail as Hector quickly moved through the dense thicket, across a small irregular clearing, and into the forest. He stopped. As I struggled to quiet my breathing, I could hear horses pass in the distance.

Moments later, Hector and I were following them from just within earshot. The strange riders headed toward Santa Rosa Mountain or Toro Peak on the island's eastern shore, only five or six miles farther. Still, that was a lot of country to cover. We followed them for nearly an hour, skirting the steep southern shoulder of Santa Rosa Mountain and beginning the climb toward Toro Peak. I heard broken bits of conversation, something about a dog, "Max won't like that," and "Mason."

Mason again. I could not make out what they were talking about, but I was certain I had heard "Mason." The hair on the back of my neck began to rise.

The rain lashed us fiercely. The wind began to scream in the treetops as we crossed one last rise and began to drop toward the far shore and the relative shelter of the lee side of the mountain. I could hear the horses talking, growing restless in the storm. Then I smelled smoke. I heard metal horseshoes clattering over bare rock, climbing up the steep slope to our right.

Huddled in a clump of close-growing Ponderosa saplings, I heard voices; then I spotted the fire. Thirty yards upslope, a large bonfire crackled. While edging to a clearing at the base of a massive granite cliff face, I spotted several horses in a makeshift corral. A dozen men milled around the fire while several others hunkered down under the questionable shelter of a lean-to a couple of yards from the leaping flames. They had been using this site for several days, if not weeks, judging from the scattered garbage.

My heart pounded at the realization that 18 or 20 of the enemy trailed us all this time. What were they up to? I motioned for Hector to make his way farther up the hill to observe. I slowly worked my way in closer.

"A *dog*? You brought back a goddamn dog to eat?" One of the men shouted.

"It's better than the fucking seagulls we've been eating for the last week, Randall, and you know it!"

"A fucking dog? Goddamn you, George Trevey, a fucking dog!"

"We tried to get a cow," another man said in an odd, childish voice, "but Mr. Mason came after us."

"Mason?" another asked. "Lemont, are you certain it was Mason Holt?"

"Yes, Mr. Sam, I'm sure! He's my friend."

"Like hell, he is, Lemont. Once he finds out what Leo did to his Mama and little sister, he'll be hunting all of us," Sam replied.

"Willie," he shouted, "I thought you said you killed that goddamn Mason, you lyin' son of a bitch!"

"I said we got a couple of em' goddamn it! We didn't check the fucking bodies to see who it was."

"So Mason knows we're out here now? That son of a bitch! He ain't crazy like Leo, but he is just as goddamn tough – and he will take you the fuck out."

"I seen him take Leo down with his bare hands," remarked another man.

"It was Mason for certain," said George Trevey. "He was riding that big black gelding with the two white socks; nobody else in these parts sits a horse like he does."

"Mr. Mason is my friend," Lemont said again. "I wish I could visit with Mr. Mason again."

"Lemont, you goddamn retard, shut the fuck up!" Sam said. "Why the hell is this goddamn idiot out here with us, anyway?"

"Leave him alone, Sam!" another man said in a loud, gruff voice. The entire group fell silent.

"Come on, Max! What the fuck?" Sam muttered meekly.

"You back off, or I'll gut you like a fucking pig right now!" Max said in a booming, angry tone. He turned to Lemont. "Are you sure it was Mason?"

"I know it was Mr. Mason. He's my friend."

"We've been stuck here for a week because of you chicken shit bunch of pussies," Max said, his anger ringing through the air. "There's one old man and a bunch of fucking kids and old women over there, and you all are too goddamn scared to make a move. Well, I'll tell ya right now, once this weather clears, we are gonna take that crossing back. I want some decent food, a goddamn bottle... and a woman."

The group quieted down after Max's outburst and focused on the dog now scorching on the fire. Each of them played out the next move in their minds.

As I worked my way back into the brush, one of the men wandered away from the others. Drifting over to the corral, he spotted my movement and came toward me. He was about 5-foot-2 and heavy-set. I pulled my Buck knife to silence him... then I saw his face. The man had Down Syndrome, along with a nasty black eye and split lip. Someone had been using him for a punching bag.

He approached, a smile on his face. "Hi! I'm Lemont Daggett," he said cheerily, holding out his hand, his big, bright blue eyes shining with delight.

We were in the forest, shielded from view of the camp, but any serious scuffle would surely be heard. There was no way I could deliberately hurt this innocent soul. There had to be some alternative. "I'm Mr. Mason's friend too, Lemont," I said softly. "Would you like to go see him?"

The man's eyes lit up like a child at the carnival. "You know Mr. Mason, too?"

"Yes, I do, and he said he'd like to see you, too," I lied. "But we have to go right now."

"Max won't like that," he said shyly, cautiously.

"We won't let Max know for now, Okay?"

I began to back into the forest. Lemont followed without another word.

Hector stepped from the forest behind Lemont, his Bowie knife at the ready two hundred yards from the camp. "Lemont?" Hector called softly into the rain and wind rustling through the trees.

"Hello, Hector!" Lemont called in return.

"We must be quiet, Lemont," Hector replied, holding a finger to his lips. "*¿Dónde está su hermano?*" he asked. "Where is your brother?"

"Max is back at the camp." Lemont pointed toward the camp at the cliff. "We didn't tell him we're going to see Mr. Mason."

"*Bueno mi Amigo.* But we must go quickly now." He took off at a fast pace.

"Hector don't like me to call him "Mister," Lemont said. "He's my good friend too."

I had no idea how long it would take before someone missed Lemont. Apparently, Max was Lemont's brother, so I suspected he would be missed sooner rather than later. In the continuing downpour, though, they would find it very difficult to track the three of us through the pine forest and Manzanita thickets.

Lemont found it hard to match Hector's pace. We dropped farther and farther behind as Hector vanished into the forest. After perhaps an hour, Hector appeared in front of us with my horse and weapons. "I have been to the mountain top, *jefe*," he said. "The boys have signaled to the Ranger what we have found, and he will strengthen the defenses at the Village. We must go to the crossing now, quickly."

Poor Lemont was not fit for the trek we had just made, let alone another three or four miles on the run. We mounted him on the gray and jogged toward the crossing.

"Max will be looking for his little brother soon, I think." Hector nodded toward Lemont as he flopped back and forth in the

saddle. "He treats him very badly but will not let anyone else do so. Max Daggett *es muy malo, jefe*. He is a very bad man. They lived near Ranchita, but he spent much of his time hiding from the law on the Reservations. He is a very bad man."

We reached the camp at the crossing at 16:28 and immediately sent the sniper teams to set up a rear guard. Bob hauled the cannon into a defensive position at the southern edge of the camp to supplement the snipers. If this Max fella held to his word, we should not expect to see them as long as the rain continued, but I didn't know what to expect with Lemont missing.

The newly relieved guards grabbed some jerked venison and a hot cup of coffee, then filled in the holes in the south and east sections of the perimeter. A couple of well-worn trails led to the crossing from the direction of the camp at the cliff. Those trails merged into one at the far side of a narrow pass. The terrain dictated that they would have to come through that pass.

Max Daggett appeared to be a bit smarter than the rabble he led. I was not sure what to expect from him. *What was this old man with a bunch of women and kids capable of?*

Standing in the mud, under the shelter of a hastily raised tarp near the cook fire, I began to wonder where our ambush team was.

Gabe Ford returned to the camp after checking the guard posts. "Anything across the water?" I asked.

"We heard gunfire on three separate occasions, very far off. But nothing since this storm hit. There hasn't been any movement at all on the far side of the crossing."

As we discussed the day's events, Gabe began to tell me more about himself. "I'm from La Mesa. I didn't know any of these people before I got here. I lost Becky and Dillon, my wife and 7-year-old son, in the first big earthquake." He paused, the pain visible in his eyes, thick and persistent as the high water that would not recede. "Sometimes I wish I hadn't survived at all; I miss them

so much. I barely made it to high ground ahead of that first big wave."

He grew silent, choking back tears. "Who is this Max Daggett?" he asked, changing the subject. "And Lemont, what about him? Why is he here?"

I explained how Hector spotted the strangers in the valley and tracked them to the camp at the cliff. I told him of overhearing the conversation around the fire and how Lemont had discovered me in the woods. I shook my head. "I had no choice. I couldn't bring myself to hurt him, Gabe. There was no other choice. It was lucky that he came along without any trouble. I think he'll be better off away from that bunch anyway."

"What about his brother?"

"What about him? We're going to have to deal with him anyway and better now that we know about him. He mistreated Lemont, from what I am told. You saw his face! The man will be better off with us."

"I agree 100 percent. Just trying to wrap my head around what is going on is all Bill. If it weren't for working these guard details, I'd be lost."

"We'll get through all of this, Gabe." I placed my hand on his shoulder for assurance. "We'll get through it." But even as I spoke, I wondered just how many of us actually would.

The rain continued into the night. Hector built a pallet for Lemont in our little clearing. Some of the recovered plastic was secured between several trees as a shelter to keep out the rain.

Lemont followed Hector like a puppy; it seemed Hector took him under his wing. Our private camp had become rather cozy. Under the dense canopy, the rain did not penetrate very deeply. With the addition of the new roof, as it were, our little fire easily chased away the chill in the air.

The camp had broken into groups of rotating shifts on guard duty and other assigned communal responsibilities. Small

enclaves, like Hector had created, had been set up in several places. Our overall contingent consisted of 52 souls. They appeared to remain focused on their tasks, though the horrors and losses of the past three weeks lingered in the shadows of everyone's mind. Nearly everyone had been running on three or four hours of sleep a day, but we rested as best we could when opportunities presented themselves. With the continuing rain, everyone not actively on assignment huddled under one form of makeshift shelter or another. The smoke from several small fires around the camp laid thick in the air, clinging to the forest as if hiding from the wind blowing the storm in from the sea.

Eventually, the cooks abandoned the fire. It would be a cold camp tonight, I thought, dozing off as I reclined on my bed of pine boughs and damp blankets.



I stood atop the cliffs of Torrey Pines, Suzanne, and young Casey by my side. The sunlight flashed brightly in my eyes. The warm salt air of the ocean two hundred feet below blew Casey's air wildly as he laughed, marveling at the seagulls, not ten feet from his fingertips as they drifted on the wind rushing up the cliff face.

The screeching of the gulls rang loudly in my ears as I saw a wave rising in the distance, building higher and higher, blotting out the light of the setting sun....



I wrenched myself from my dream world again, my heart pounding in my chest.

My God, please let these dreams stop.

Opening my eyes, I saw the slow drip, drip, drip of the rain splash on the plastic roof of our shelter. The smoke from the small,

smoldering fire blanketed the ground as it slowly wandered into the open, was caught by the wind and swept away. I could tell it was late from the length of the shadows. The storm had passed.

Instantly, Daggett's words rang loudly in my head: "Goddamn it, once this weather clears, we are gonna take that crossing back!"

As I crept to my feet, my wounded shoulder was stiff and numb. The ache in my bones returned with the dampness and the chill. Gritting my teeth, I stretched my arms wide, twisting from side to side, stomping my feet, trying to get the blood moving again. "Goddamn, I am too fucking old for this shit," I said out loud, again.

I glanced at the watch: just past 19:00 hours. Another three hours till sunset. I heard voices in camp as the cook fires were fanned back to life and the relieved guards gathered in the growing warmth. Collecting my weapons, I checked my ammunition and headed for the main camp, trying to shake the dream of that rising wave.

People changed into dry clothes and spread pine needles over the mud that now surrounded our camp. Clothes hung on ropes strung from the trees snapped loudly, flapping in the wind. I was amazed at the resilience these people showed in the face of what we had endured, what we were up against, and the unknown.

Hector, Lemont, and several others were clustered near the cook fire. As I approached, I could hear Hector speaking. "These herbs of the mountain with the Manzanita and juniper boiled very slowly will...*Buenos noches, Jefe*. Have you rested well?"

I nodded and smiled faintly. "Well enough, for now, my friend."

"I am showing our *amigos y amigas* about the herbs that heal you, *jefe*."

Without warning, Lemont wrapped his short stubby arms around me. "Thank you for bringing me here, Mr. Bill!" he exclaimed. "Thank you for all my new friends."

"You're welcome, Lemont." I returned his hug as best I could, my wounded arm still numb.

"We'll take care of Lemont," a young man in the group said. "He will be *our* brother now."

Lemont released his hold on me and wrapped his arms around the young man. "These are my new brothers and sisters, Mr. Bill," he said cheerily. "I never had such a nice family before."

I turned away quickly as tears unexpectedly welled in my eyes. "Keep him safe, kids," was all I could muster.

Motioning to Hector to follow, I walked toward the long shadow of the Alamo. He stepped beside me. "Si *Jefe*, what is wrong?"

"Nothing at the moment, my friend, but we need to be prepared for Lemont's brother and his crew. Right now, I need some of your brew. Then we'll check our defenses."

"*Si jefe!* Right away." Hector spun around to the group of kids. "*Mis niños*, show me what I have taught you! *El jefe necesita la medicina rápidamente!*" He clapped repeatedly as he hustled them back to the fire.

With the Remington slung across my back and the M-14 over my shoulder, I began a tour of the firing positions at the crossing. At every post, I was greeted warmly. The lowering sun began to suck the chill from my body. While I chatted with the people, their enthusiasm became infectious. By the time I had made the rounds and returned to the fire, I was in high spirits. Greeted by Hector's "children" with a plate of food and a large tin cup full of fresh, hot *medicina*, I relaxed and refreshed myself. The food and medicine fortified me as I envisioned the terrain to the south and formulated a plan for the camp's defense and decisive offensive action.

We were ten miles, as the crow flies, from the cliffside camp where I had overheard Max Daggett cursing his men. The two known trails from that direction merged into one as the sharp rise on the mountains choked the larger valley into a narrow defile for some 150 yards before widening out again three miles from camp. The rough, bare granite mountainsides of the pass prevented traverse. The only other route was perhaps fifteen miles around, through thick forest and rough granite outcroppings. They would come through that little pass.

With James, Billy, and the ambush squad across the water, all that remained were the old men, women, and kids that Daggett had bragged of. High tide had come and gone, but the stone bridge of the crossing would not be exposed again until near midnight. My plan solidified in my mind: Leave a handful of sentries at the crossing to watch for boats and deploy everyone else to the south, then lay an ambush just outside the mouth of the pass.

The westerly wind still blew strong under clear skies when I gathered everyone not currently manning a post at the crossing or in the woods. "You all know we have sixteen people across the water," I began. "Seven behind me at the crossing and eight more scattered in the woods along the shore. We have eighteen, maybe twenty of the enemy that will be coming at us from the south."

I scratched out a map of the terrain in the wet ground. "Two of you will watch the east. If they try to circle around, it will be from that direction. Three will watch the crossing from Alamo, and the rest of us will deploy on the shoulder of the pass and in the woods just this side." I paused to survey my audience, looking intently into the eyes of each, gauging their reaction.

Then I pointed to the south. "Bob already has that cannon out there. We have a dozen canisters of grapeshot. But once that cannon fires, I figure they'll scatter. The snipers will be posted on the slope above the pass here. The rest of us will be in a "V" formation in two lines, so we have a good crossfire, but you

shouldn't be in the direct line of fire from the opposite side. Does everyone understand?"

I paused to assess their faces, to see how well they comprehended. Everyone was following closely. "They have horses, but we won't know until the last moment if they will be mounted or on foot. Make every shot count. If they are mounted and charge, don't waste time – shoot the damn horse. Then you can shoot the man. The snipers will be responsible for any stragglers, any of them that break for cover, and if they come at us in groups, they can keep them pinned down in the pass. Questions?"

"Yes, sir," Gabe Ford said. "When can we expect them?"

"At any time. The moon is on the rise, and it will be near full tonight. I don't know if they will try to come at us in the dark or wait until dawn. Whichever, we have to be ready. Mr. Occer has rigged a couple of those torches we used last night. But, we can throw these. If they come after dark, we will lob those into them. Just remember, do *not* look into the light. They will; when they do, they will be night blind for a moment. You have to be resolute. They will not show any of you any mercy. We have to stop them; we *must* stop them all! Any more questions?"

"When do we move out, sir?" the younger of the Jackson boys asked.

"Right now. Go round up the folks at the crossing, every one of them." I directed my attention to the whole group. "Now, who has a steady eye?"

Several hands shot up. I selected a young woman. "You will be our eyes on Alamo. Remember the alert if something is on the water?"

"Two shots, pause, two shots, and pause again – then two more shots," the girl replied.

"Good girl. Gabe, give her one of the 30-30's and a box of shells." I turned back to the girl. "Honey, remember: our raiding party will be coming back sometime shortly after sundown. Keep

your eyes peeled; we don't want to be shooting at them. Remember, three boats to the east of the crossing!"

"Yes, sir."

"If you see anything else on the water, let loose with the signal and then start in on them with that Winchester. Help will get here as quickly as possible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, sir," the girl replied again, a bit more cautiously.

I looked at everyone in the gathering. "Let's ruck up and move out!"

As the group scrambled for their weapons and gear, I checked the time: 21:23 hours. 9:23 p.m. Another 30 minutes before full darkness. The moon was already on the rise, struggling to light the sky from behind the storm's dark curtain. At the last moment, I decided to leave a half-dozen of the youngest kids to tend the camp and watch over Lemont.

Twenty-five untrained and questionably armed people against eighteen to twenty hard, merciless men; This was going to be interesting.

When I arrived at the mouth of the pass, I called everyone together. "We'll set up along these lines." I selected hiding places. "We will have a "V" formation with the open end toward the pass."

Some old words came to mind, words that had served me well. "Anyone heard of Sun Tzu?" I asked.

No one replied.

"An ancient Chinese warrior. Author of *Art of War*. Sun Tzu talked about 'Death Ground.' His theory was that if you put your warriors in a situation whereby they have no retreat, they will fight like the devil." I paused and looked around the cluster of faces in the dying light. "Does that mean anything to anyone?"

No response.

"What he meant was that if your warriors have no option to run away, they will fight for their lives, and they will win!"

I paused again to see if there was any sign of understanding. From the back of the crowd, that same scared little girl that had killed five men with her shotgun slowly raised a hand.

"Yes?"

"We need to leave the back door open?"

"Exactly!" I roared in reply. "We have to leave the back door open! If they can run away, and if we are lucky, they will."

"How do we do that?" I asked the group of puzzled faces.

"Let them run back to the pass," the scared little girl said with growing confidence.

"Exactly! If they can turn and run, they will turn and run and *not* charge our lines. If they turn and run, keep at them. You snipers, let them get back into the pass, then open up on them again. Do we all understand now?"

"Yes, Sir!" several voices replied as a fuller comprehension began to dawn on them.

"Good. Everyone into position. I will launch the ambush by tossing one of these torches into them. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

God Almighty, I hope so.

They scattered to their assigned positions. I left the M-14 and my long knives on my saddle and tied the gray seventy or eighty yards away from the ambush site. Hopefully, he would remain hidden and protected from stray gunfire.

Things were quiet as a cemetery at midnight, nothing from the pass yet as I walked our line. I gently nudged the kids awake as they lay in their hiding spots. *God forbid Daggett rushes us hard. We'll all end up dead.*

At about 01:20, one of the kids found me. He was breathless and upset. "Mr. Burroughs, the patrol is back. You better come quick." He paused to catch his breath. "There's wounded, sir."

In my head, a vision of Jimmy standing over the dead body of his father...

Quickly turning command over to Bob Occer, I ran for my horse. "Show me."

The poor kid must have run the entire distance from camp to reach me. He could hardly keep up now. As I swung into the saddle, I reached down and pulled him up behind me and lit out at full gallop.

The thundering of the horses' hooves alerted the camp. As I tossed the boy to the ground, James ran to meet me. Raising a hand as I dismounted, he called to me, "Bill, Jerry's dead."

I stopped cold in my tracks. Jerry Ballard, one of our Rangers, one of our trusted friends, one of our Native brothers...dead. "Goddamn," I said as I shook myself into action. "Fill me in."

"The rest of us are okay," James said as we headed toward the campfire. "He took a round through both lungs, Bill. We couldn't stop the bleeding."

As the adrenaline rush faded and the realization that the rest of my boys were okay, I began to get a little weak in the knees. James caught me under my arm before I realized I was going down. "Jesus Bill, you okay?"

"I'm fine," I replied, shaking loose of his grasp. "I hadn't realized how much all of you had come to mean to me, I guess."

I reached the camp. Jerry's body lay just at the edge of the firelight, wrapped in a tarp. Billy, French, and Ramon were still with him, softly chanting unintelligibly over his body. I stayed back, out of respect for their loss, as they finished their good-byes.

Rachel calmly directed the nervous kids at the cook fire. The rest of the patrol patiently waited as everyone received a hot meal. I couldn't miss the pain in Rachel's eyes as she stole glances at Jerry's body every few moments. "Rachel and Jerry had a thing

going," James said quietly. "At least she was with him when he died."

He moved to the cook fire for his first hot meal in more than twenty-four hours.

Billy, Ramon, and French joined James and me, sipping hot coffee by the fire. I quickly brought them up to speed on the current situation at the pass and the events leading up to it. In spite of the rigors of the last twenty-four hours, they were all anxious to get to the pass and take the fight to Daggett and his men. Everyone except James and I knew the man; they were eager to stop him. The loss of their friend burned like a fire inside them, and their vengeance would not be stayed for long.

I insisted they eat before heading to the pass. As they ate, they gave me the short version of their incursion. They killed five enemy in man traps. Three successful ambushes left an estimated forty-three additional dead. Then they encountered a small force on the trail, and a running battle ensued in which Jerry was wounded as they chased them back toward Idyllwild, killing another nine enemy.

Fifty-seven enemy dead... and Jerry Ballard too. Possibly a quarter of their entire force gone. I wondered if losing Jerry was worth it. James and the boys seemed to think so. "We will grieve for Jerry later," Billy said. "Right now, we need to take down Max Daggett."

After their meal, Billy, French, Ramon, and James did a quick weapons check, restocking their ammo. As they did so, I gave them instructions. "Boys, we'll move through our lines at the pass. I'll leave the ambush team there to keep an eye out once we enter the pass. Use that whistling signal of yours as the all-clear to come back through.

"I'll give you ten minutes, then Hector and I will bring up the rear and cover your retreat if you need it. Am I clear?"

"Clear, Gunny!" Billy answered for the four of them.

French knelt down and tied his pant legs tight around his ankles with twine. The others quickly followed suit. Without another word, they grabbed up their weapons and ran quickly toward the pass. I sent the rest of the patrol to the east to fortify the pickets, then mounted the gray and raced to catch the boys. They had covered nearly a mile before I caught up with them. Slowing the gelding to their pace, I gave them the layout of our ambush. I kicked the horse into a full gallop; within moments, I was at the ambush site. I quickly let the group know to stand down.

Within a few minutes, the four men silently passed through our lines at the double-quick. As they vanished into the night, Hector appeared beside me. "We should go now, *jefe*."

"Ten minutes, Hector. I'll have to stay horseback for a piece."

"I know the trail, *jefe*. Follow me." Hector turned toward the pass without waiting.

With only the soft drumming of the horse's hooves on the wet ground, the occasional clink of iron on stone, and the squeak of stirrup leather to be heard, I followed Hector. The moonlight glistened on his dark bronze back as he silently ran the trail ahead of me. We reached the pass quickly as the passing storm unveiled the waning moon's bright light. The closeness of the defile opened into a wide glade of meadow and scattered trees.

Hector paused at the fork of the trail, studying the tracks in the wet ground. Without a backward glance, he rose and leapt away on the path to the left as gunfire erupted in the dark distance.

I could not recall the terrain, even though I had covered it on foot less than twelve hours before. Suddenly, Hector stopped dead in his tracks on the trail ahead. I brought the horse to a sliding stop to avoid running him down. Hector grabbed the reins to steady the animal. "Dismount here, *jefe*," he said, speaking softly into the deep shadows. "The fight is just over the rise."

He pointed into the darkness down the trail. Leaving the M-14 and my long knives on the saddle, I ground-tied the horse and followed Hector. I grabbed the shotgun from its sling across my back and slid the safety to the FIRE position with a faint "Click."

The path meandered from a clearing with scattered trees into a gradually denser forest. As passing clouds cast shadows in the woods, the firefight erupted anew not fifty yards ahead. Hector was perhaps thirty feet in front of me, just rounding a bend in the trail when the moonlight revealed the form of a man stepping from behind a massive Ponderosa pine, a weapon in his hands. As he brought it to bear on Hector's back, I brought the Remington up.

"Hector, drop!"

I fired from the hip. The shotgun's roar drowned out my words. Bark erupted from the trunk of the Ponderosa two feet from the man in the shadows. He was huge. He must have been six-foot-six or seven, dwarfing my own six-foot-two frame.

We were less than fifteen feet apart as the man aimed in my direction. As I jacked a fresh round into the Remington, he fired. His first round slammed into the shotgun, causing the freshly chambered round to fire. The shotgun was torn from my grasp.

"Fuck you!" the man roared as he fired again.

I knew the voice. Max Daggett.

He began to walk toward me as I staggered to catch my balance, pulling one of the .357s from its holster. *Focus on the front sight*, I thought. *Focus on the front sight*. Years of training kicked in as I held the Coonan steady with both hands and fired. Front sight...front sight.

Daggett jerked to the side as my first shot hit meat.

I could hear his gun roar, but I couldn't hear mine. I knew I was firing as spent cases flew from the ejection port. The slide kept moving, and the .357 kept slamming into my hand as the muzzle flash leapt from the gun, lighting the darkness for an instant with each shot.

I felt the sting of burning powder and felt the concussion blast my face with each blinding flash from his gun. Something punched me in the chest and knocked the wind out of me. I felt a sharp pain as I took a glancing shot to my left side.

Front sight, squeeze... front sight, squeeze.

The searing pain of a bullet ripped across my left cheek. Daggett jerked backward as another of my 158-grain JHP slugs slammed into his chest.

My left arm went numb as I was hit in the left shoulder and spun halfway around. *Front sight, squeeze*, I kept saying to myself. *Front sight, squeeze*. I struggled to keep the Coonan on my target, the gun's grip slippery from my own blood.

Daggett staggered toward me, then back again as another slug slammed into his chest. As he began to crumble in front of my eyes, he fired the semi-auto again. My right leg was ripped from under me.

I fired again as I fell. In the light of the muzzle flash, I saw Daggett's head snap backward as my last round opened a crater in the middle of his face.

When I hit the ground, everything went black.

Chapter XII

The pain was unbearable. The wind on my face was hot and dry, my lips parched. Someone pushed me onto a horse's back, my hands to the saddle horn.

My head pounded. I could hear voices but did not know whose voices or what they were saying. I choked as I struggled to breathe. I coughed and tasted blood.

Focus, I kept telling myself. Focus.

It was pitch black, of that I was certain. The horse was nervously sidestepping whoever was tying my hands when something bumped my right leg, and the pain roared through my body.

Strong hands grabbed me, steadying me in the saddle. As the ringing in my ears subsided, I heard Hector's voice. "Do not fight, *jefe*; you are badly hurt. Please, *jefe*, do not struggle."

As the shadow of a cloud skittered away, I saw dark splotches of blood splattered on my hands. I coughed. More blood splashed on my hands.

Oh, God. This ain't the fucking way I want to go.

I heard James to my right. "His leg is secure. Let's go."

As the horse began to move under me, everything went black again.

Darkness consumed my world. The constant motion made me nauseous. I tasted vomit. I choked and coughed and tasted blood again. I was on board a ship, tossed wildly on a stormy sea. Constantly moving, never resting. My God, I wished it would stop.

I could not tell if my eyes were open or not. Was this another horrible dream? Where *am* I?

And then, utter darkness.

My mind seemed to clear for a moment. I was no longer moving.

Daylight. The darkness had lessened. But I couldn't see anything.

I heard voices again. My face felt as if it was on fire. My chest ached. The pain seemed endless. Every muscle and bone throbbed in agony. I was unable to move. Unable to see.

The light grew brighter for a moment and then fell dark again. The voices seemed to be trying to comfort me, but the agonizing pain caused my mind to spin in the darkness.

"He's gone," an unfamiliar voice said. A woman was crying.

"He's still breathing, doc!" James said. I'd know that familiar, husky voice anywhere.

More darkness. An unfamiliar voice, "The leg..."

As the voice trailed off, something cool was put on my face. I felt I was floating in a dark void, formless, painless, no longer anchored to earth by the mortal coil. I drifted in that darkness, gently blown on long, sweeping arcs by an unseen, unfelt wind, the long and graceful path of a pendulum. I watched myself from a distance, drifting away into the darkness, then slowly swinging back and past me, on into the darkness again as if suspended from an unseen anchor far above.

Adrift in the velvet darkness, I saw a cloud of white in the forest, full of hateful scowling faces. Then horrible screams in the distance. Someone cried, the sobbing of a throng.

Then silence.

I was being moved, pressure here and there, hands on my body. Panic began to rise in my chest as consciousness started to return.

Focus!

Then in a blinding flash of pain and agony, my mind went blank.

I heard a bird chirping. "Suzanne?" a familiar voice called out. "Suzanne?"

My body was nearly numb. My limbs throbbed painlessly with every heartbeat. I could not move a muscle as I struggled to see through the fog in my mind.

"Suzanne?" The voice again.

Was that *my* voice? Was I calling for Suzanne?

I opened my eyes and saw the face of an angel above me in the bright light.

"Suzanne?" I felt something cool on my face. "Suzanne?" I croaked hoarsely.

Blinking repeatedly, my vision began to clear. The face of Rowena peered back at me. She wiped my face with a damp cloth again, my head resting in her lap. "No, Bill. It is just me," she said softly.

Slowly, she trickled water between my lips. "Welcome back. For a long time, we thought you might not make it."

"Where am I?"

I blacked out again.

I heard excited voices in the distance, a dog barking maddeningly and a squeaky little voice moving closer. *Jimmy!* I thought as my mind began to clear again. *Jimmy is here!*

Like a wave washing over me, the events at the crossing poured through my mind. I opened my eyes to the sweet sound of that damn mule braying outside, and I looked up into the bluest eyes I have ever seen, wreathed by a wild shock of unruly, flaming red hair.

Little Jimmy Day looked as big as a mountain as he knelt next to me. His small hand was cool against my skin as he gently

stroked my forehead over and over. "Grampa, you're awake!" he said quietly.

"Hello, Jimmy boy." I croaked through dry, cracked lips. Jimmy leapt to his feet. He banged through the metal doors and ran outside, shouting, "He's alive! He's alive! Grampa's alive!"

A cool breeze found its way through the open door, caressing my naked skin. *My God, that felt good.*

James rushed in, with Rowena and French right behind him, followed closely by an old fellow I had never seen before. As my eyes continued to clear, blinking into the daylight behind my visitors, Hector stepped into the opening. His chest was heaving as if he had been running. "*Jefe! Dios Mio! You are awake!*" He pushed past everyone and came to my side.

Hector dropped to his knees and gently raised my head as he arraigned a wad of cloth as a pillow for me.

My god, *I am alive!*

"Hector, my friend," I said hoarsely, "how are you?"

"*Bueno! Mi amigo.*" Tears welled in his eyes. "I am very good now."

"How do you feel, Mr. Burroughs?" the old man asked. "I'm Doc Parker. How do you feel this morning?"

"Just call me Bill, Doc," I croaked in reply. "I feel like hell."

"You are one tough old son of a bitch; I'll give ya that!" Doc Parker said dryly. "I thought sure we had lost you a couple of times! I gave you up for dead more than once."

The space filled quickly with people, some of which I knew... and some I might have seen before, but I wasn't so sure. Mason Holt came through the door with Ramon. Mason looked like the mule had kicked him square in the face. Ramon had bandages wrapped around his chest and upper arm.

"What happened?" I asked as James came into view again. "What day is this? How long have I been down?"

"It's Friday, the first of February," Doc Parker said. "You've been out for thirty-four days this mornin'."

Goddamn, thirty-four days and a wake-up. Thirty-four days! "Gimme some water, please," I said.

"A lot has happened, Bill," James said. "We've got a lot to fill you in on."

"Okay, folks, side show's over," French said abruptly. "Let's give Gunny some air! Come on, everybody out!"

"James," I called as the crowd moved out of the room. "You stay. French, Ramon, Hector. Mason, you too." I looked at Hector. "Help me up. I need to sit up."

"Maybe that is not a good idea yet, *jefe*."

"Bill, you should wait," Rowena said.

"Wait, my ass! Somebody give me a hand here." I struggled to raise myself. Overwhelmed by the pain, I collapsed with a gasp. "Give me a hand here, goddamn it!" I shouted feebly.

Quickly everyone moved to my aid. Blankets were bunched up and stuffed behind me as Hector grabbed underneath my arms and sat me up like a child. My head whirred as the blood drained from my face. I choked back nausea, fighting to keep the hot, bitter bile from rising in my throat. The bedding that covered me fell away, exposing my chest and torso, swathed in bandages. As I grimaced against the pain, my cheek stung as if I had just been lashed across the face with a buggy whip.

"Jesus H. Christ," I groaned. "What the fuck happened?"

"You took five FMJ rounds from a .45 Caliber semi-auto, Bill. Point blank." James began matter of factly.

"You saved my life, *jefe*," Hector said. "I thought Daggett had killed you...." his voice began to crack.

French held up what was left of my Remington. "We saved this for you, thought sure you'd want to see it. It may well have saved *your* life."

"I think I remember taking a hit to the chest and the shotgun going off," I said.

"It's a wonder you remember anything," Mason said. "You busted your skull wide open when you fell. The doc didn't think you'd wake up at all."

The action of the Remington was smashed from the impact of the .45 caliber slug. "That bullet might well have killed you if it hadn't hit the shotgun," French added. "We thought we had all of Daggett's goons pinned down when we heard all hell break loose behind us on the trail. Daggett managed to circle around us in the woods when you stumbled on him. Christ almighty, Gunny, he'd a sure enough offed some of us if you hadn't stopped him."

James nodded. "We heard the gunfight," he said. "It couldn't have lasted more than ten, fifteen seconds maybe, then dead silence. A minute later, Hector came rippin' down the trail with his knife in his hand and finished the last of Daggett's trash before they knew he was amongst them. They never fired another shot."

"I am sorry, *jefe*, I thought you were dead. I thought Daggett had killed you, or I would have never left you on the trail," Hector said. The man's remorse made my heart ache for his pain and swell with pride at the same time. "When you shouted, I dropped to the ground, and your guns lit up the darkness like fireworks! You stood face to face firing your guns into each other!" Tears welled in his eyes.

"It's alright now, my friend," I said wearily. "I am alive and here with you again."

"It took us ten minutes maybe, to get to you," James said. "You were in bad shape, Bill, real bad shape and losing a lot of blood. We plugged you up the best we could, got you on your horse, and came straight to the village here. Billy went back to the bridge."

"Billy! Where's Billy?" I asked, a bit panicked, "and Bob, where's Bob?"

"They're fine, Gunny. They're at the crossing. We'll get to them shortly," French said.

"Like I said, Bill, you were hit five times," James resumed. "Your left shoulder again, you got clipped on the left side; that busted a couple of ribs. One through your right lung, that one across your cheek, and the one that got your leg. That bullet shattered your knee."

As his words fell onto my ears, I realized that something was not right. I remembered hearing the strange voice in the darkness, "The leg.... He's gone," and a woman crying...

I heard "shattered" and "knee," and my leg began to ache. I tried to pull the bedding off of my legs but did not have the strength. "Pull 'em away, James. Pull the blankets away."

"Bill, *No!*" Rowena said, "James, wait. Please, let's get the Doctor back in here first."

"Move the goddamn blankets, James," I commanded. "*Now!*"

James didn't hesitate again. He gathered the bedding gingerly. Hector knelt across from James, and together they lifted the blankets from my legs.

I was nothing but skin and bones, naked as the day I was born, except for a blood-stained bandage wrapped around the stump of my right leg.

The stump... My leg was gone from the knee down.

"*Mother fucker!*" was all I could manage to say as I sat up farther to see. My head swam at the effort. The realization of what I was seeing made me nauseous again. "My fucking leg is gone," I muttered. "My fucking leg is *gone!*" I fell back against the bundle of bedding behind me.

"My fucking leg is gone!" I whispered harshly to myself.

"Easy, Bill," James said as Rowena ran from the room to find Doc Parker.

Mercifully, everything went black.



Sitting astride the Appaloosa, I squinted into the bright, piercing sunlight. Windblown waves of prairie grass stretched for miles, the Tarryall Reservoir glittered in the sunlight, sparkling at the foot of the distant mountains.

I turned in the saddle to see Suzanne running easily toward me, waving, smiling, calling to me, but the wind carried her voice away from my ears. I could hear only the rustle of the grass.

Suddenly, I was lying in the lush grass, the rich aroma of wild mint swirling around me and the refreshing sound of the rushing water soothing me as the river wound its way down the valley.

Home!

"The Tarryall to the east and the river running south, my old homestead is just there!" I said to myself.

The wind roared in my head, and I collapsed onto dry, parched earth. Dirt and dust choked me, filling my nose and mouth. As I struggled to get to my feet, the sunlight faded with crushing swiftness.



Hands on my body. Someone was pulling me, pushing me, rolling me over as I fought to open my eyes. I was shaded from the sunlight, a cool breeze blowing across my uncovered body, then comforting warmth as a blanket was draped over me.

"Grampa? Grampa?" It was Jimmy.

Jimmy was kneeling next to me when I opened my eyes. We were outside, next to the Council Fire. *Who carried me outside?* A tarp of some sort stretched overhead, providing shade as I lay on a palette. "Grampa, are you okay?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm not sure, Jimmy," I managed to reply, tasting dirt in my mouth.

"Here, Bill," Rowena said as she circled from behind me. "Rest easy. You threw yourself off of the bed again. Take a drink; then I'll get you cleaned up." She raised my head gently, holding a cup to my lips.

The familiar taste of Hector's brew was refreshing. Swallowing the warm liquid, I raised my hand and tipped the cup higher, gulping a mouthful, then another and another until I emptied the cup. Rowena washed the dirt from my face. She pulled the blanket down to my waist and began to wash the dirt from my bare skin.

"Doc Parker will raise cane when he sees those dirty bandages," she scolded me mildly. "What on earth did you think you were doing? You've started yourself to bleeding again."

"I was home," I said, "laying in the grass by the river. Suzanne was there."

"Well, the doctor seems to think you're going to live after all, but we have to get some meat on those bones and get your strength up before you can think about goin' home again. How's that sound to you?"

"I'm as weak as a kitten, Rowena. I don't know if I'll ever be in shape to get back home."

"Well," she replied, "Jimmy and I will make sure you get strong again. Won't we, Jimmy?"

"Yes, ma'am, we sure will!" Jimmy beamed. "We'll take good care of you, Grampa."

Rowena finished cleaning me up then carried on with other business. Jimmy sat at the foot of the pallet and began to chatter

away about the events in camp while I "was away." "The people from the 'aserbatory' came to the village and were yellin' at Mr. Daniels. He made 'em all leave! Well, except for the lady, she stayed," he said. "She's really nice."

"All the ladies from the other island came here," he continued. "They all live here now, too, but nobody likes the ones in white dresses. They made a big garden down there." He pointed down the mountain toward the lake.

The ladies from the island? White dresses? The questions drifted through my mind as Jimmy continued. "The Boy Scouts showed everyone how to do the Morse Code and 'semiphone.' Now we can talk all the way across the valley, clear over there." He pointed east toward Lookout Mountain.

The boy was so animated I could hardly keep my eyes on him as he jumped and moved around my bed. His joy and energy were catching, and I began to feel some strength creep back into my body.

After thirty minutes or so, Rowena returned with Doc Parker. "Well, you got two more *good* days of rest in you," the doctor said. "How are you feeling?"

"Limp as a damn rag, Doc, but I'm not in much pain."

He nodded to Rowena, then turned to me. "You're healing real good, Bill."

Rowena gingerly helped me into a sitting position as the doctor began to unwrap the yards of bandages from my shoulder, chest, and torso. He grabbed the blanket and tossed it to my foot.

"Damn, Doc!" I exclaimed weakly. "There's a woman present!" Doc Parker didn't even notice.

Rowena moved her head close to mine. "You don't have any secrets from me anymore, Dad," she said, trying to keep the laughter from her voice.

Jimmy reached down and pulled the blanket up to cover my privates, blushing brightly, "*Mom!* He's still a *man*."

"Yes, son," she said. "He is *still* a man." She gave Jimmy a rather dramatic wink. "I apologize, *Mr. Burroughs*."

The little exchange told me how things had been going with my new family while I "was away." The relationship between Jimmy and Rowena had grown strong. Jimmy now had the mother he had never known. And, it seemed, I now had a daughter.

Doc Parker spent several minutes unwrapping me. As more of my withered frame was laid bare, I could see that I must have lost fifty or sixty pounds. Maybe more. I was literally nothing but skin stretched over a bony frame. The old Bull Dog tattoo on my left shoulder was shriveled and nearly unrecognizable with fresh scar tissue from the two bullet wounds. A piece of plastic tubing stuck out of the right side of my chest just below the ribcage, and a long wicked looking wound extended down my left side, just below my armpit.

The doc began to unwrap the stump that remained of my right leg. "How's the pain Bill?" he asked.

"Very little at the moment. Looks like hell, but the pain is negligible."

"You were pretty lucky, you know. That crack on the skull should have killed you!" Doc Parker went on.

Only then did I realize that my head was still swathed in bandages.

Doc Parker took me on a tour of my injuries. He pressed his finger against the fresh scar under my left armpit. "This one on your side here broke two ribs but didn't penetrate your chest at all. This one here," he indicated a bullet hole an inch below my right nipple, "broke the rib, then punctured your lung. Don't understand why it didn't do more damage. I was told you were shot with a .45 caliber, but none lodged in your body."

He paused for a moment as he fiddled with the tube protruding from my chest. "This keeps fluid from building up in the wound," he said. "By the time I got here, Donnie Banks already

had it inserted, inflating the lung. I'll pull it in a few days once it quits weeping. We'll keep it covered till then." He placed a clean swatch of cloth over the end of the tube and wrapped another clean strip around my chest to secure the bandage.

"Tell me about the leg, doc," I asked as he finished wrapping the chest wound.

"The leg was as good as gone before I ever laid eyes on it. Your men had secured it well enough, but the bullet struck just below the patella. The kneecap was gone. The upper extremity of the tibia was shattered, totally obliterated; there was nothing left for the fibula to anchor to."

He paused again, looking at the stump. "I actually think I did a pretty fair job," he said, admiring his handiwork for a moment. "The femur was completely untouched, so once the lower limb was removed, it was a simple matter of debriding the affected area, cleaning up the wound, and promoting tissue growth."

The doctor continued to push and poke at the new pink flesh. "We have no antibiotics, no anesthetics. All I had was what little I could salvage from my office and my satchel." He pointed to the zipper-like scar across the front on the stump. "I used a flap of skin from behind the knee and sewed it in place to create a cover over the exposed tissue."

More details of the procedure came pouring from Doc Parker. "Ya know, that Hector fellow of yours probably did the most to save your life. Once the leg was off and was all sewn up, I was pretty much a bystander. I would never have given any of his herbs a second thought, but he set up camp outside your hut and didn't leave for ten days straight. Hell, it was him and Rowena that dressed your wounds every day. They treated you with that juice of his, bathed your wounds. Several times, he practically sat on your chest to keep you from tossing yourself out of bed.

"The other men, the soldiers, they checked in on you every couple of days. I guess they had other business to tend to. And

Jimmy here," he said, tousling the boy's wild red hair, "slept in there with you every night. Rowena told him it would be good for you to hear his voice, and I swear to God that boy never shut up!"

While he spoke, my eyes wandered to Jimmy, still kneeling beside me, watching, listening to the doctor. His small hand grasped a couple of long bony fingers while he stroked the back of my hand with the other, cradling it in his lap.

Rowena held me in a sitting position for the doctor's examination. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders to shield my naked body when the cool breeze caused me to shiver. "We'll take care of you, dad," she said softly in my ear. "You just keep getting better, and we'll put some meat back on these bones."

As Doc Parker finished his examination and wrapped my stump, I relaxed into Rowena's arms and let the warmth of her body soak into mine. Even though the Doctor droned on, I closed my eyes and dozed off.

I woke to the crackling of the fire as it consumed the partially dried pine logs with relish. Pockets of pine sap popped and snapped as the fire roared to life, reminding me of the sounds of a distant gun battle.

I was perched on a pallet constructed of pine poles lashed together with crossbars near either end, with short legs that kept me elevated about a foot off the ground. A sheet of rough OD green canvas had been wrapped around the frame in several turns, and I was wrapped in a blanket that smelled fresh, like a breeze off a grass-covered field in the spring. Easing the blanket over a bit, I saw a piece of cloth wrapped around me like a loincloth. Or a diaper.

Breathing the warm air, I could taste the faint scent of the ocean nearby. I could hear the rhythmic pulse of the surf crashing on the shore in the distance.

My God, I'm alive. I really am alive!

Turning slightly to survey my surroundings, I saw the row of storage containers used to form the hub of the village on the ridge behind me. A parapet I did not recognize lined the far edge of the clearing overlooking the lake and the wide valley below. I could just see firelight reflecting off the sheet metal roofs of the first row of shelters beyond the parapet. The last rays of light flickered on the clouds above as the red-orange orb of the sun dropped below the far horizon and vanished into the sea.

I smelled meat cooking, though I could see no one near the council fire. There must be a kitchen below. The sound of voices filtered up the slope on a gentle breeze. Cheerful, happy. Voices I didn't recognize. The voices of many women.

Red, the healer pup, came bounding around the western end of the parapet, his tongue lolling. I made a sorry attempt at snapping my fingers. While the near-silent sound of my dry, withered fingertips scraping against each other had no effect, the movement did. Red looked at my hand, then peered into my eyes and leapt toward me. I nearly panicked for a moment as he charged toward me, but at the last instant, he hit the brakes and came to a scrambling stop in a cloud of dust with his head positioned precisely under my outstretched hand.

The dog had suffered some pretty nasty burns on his head. One of his ears had been burned nearly halfway off but was now fully healed. All of the hair that had been singed from his face and head had grown back.

The pup was running circles around my hand, his little stub of a tail wagging all the way up to his shoulders. He could hardly keep on his feet as he cavorted about, trying to get every inch of his body in contact with my hand all at once.

I sensed movement at the same time the dog did. As Red ran into the growing shadows to the east, I heard Jimmy talking to his mule. "You stay here now, Katy," he said firmly. "Be a good girl; I want to go see if Grampa is awake."

The mule blew softly as if in reply and pawed the ground, impatient at being made to wait. Jimmy's attention shifted to Red as they greeted each other warmly. The love that the boy showed the mule and the dog warmed my heart as I struggled to sit up to greet him.

"Grampa!" the boy shouted when he saw me awake. "How are you?" He dropped something from his grasp as he rushed to my bedside and gave me a firm but gentle hug around my neck. "How are you?" the boy asked again cheerfully. "You were sleepin' all day!"

He turned to retrieve what he had dropped. He snatched up a thick length of Manzanita. "Hector and me are going to make you a new leg!"

He handed the piece of wood to me. It was a rich red color common to the Manzanita of these mountains. It had a large burl at one end and was nearly as long as the boy was tall, a good three inches in diameter at the butt end, tapering the length with a slight curve to about an inch and a half around.

I pulled the boy close to me again. Tears filled my eyes. "I think this will make a fine leg, Jimmy!"

The boy's enthusiasm and joy were boundless as he described how they were planning to fit my stump with a boot that "Mr. Mason" had fashioned from horsehide. Then he explained how they were going to shave the burl down so the end of my leg could rest in the broad socket, padded with a wad of sheep's wool. I was amazed at the boy's understanding of the requirements to construct a prosthetic leg for me. He continued in great detail about positioning the curve of the wood, the position of the leg in the socket. How the "boot" should hug my thigh "but not too tight," and how I could strap the boot to the shoulder harness that carried my Coonan's.

As the boy continued eagerly, I became aware of the sound of the wind sighing in the trees and the screech of the seagulls. I

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heard the music of mountain songbirds close at hand and the steady pulse of the sea battering the virgin shore in the distance.

I relaxed on my pallet, enjoying the boy's company. Life was good today.

Chapter XIII

I lost track of time. Days became blurry mixtures of sleeping, eating, and laying on my pallet in the shade, interspersed with short trips hobbling to the outhouse on a pair of mismatched crutches Jimmy had provided. I breathed deeply of the fresh air, tainted slightly with the flavor of the ocean. I thought of home. I thought of Suzanne and how she might be faring. I knew she would be safe with our old friend, Harold, and his boys, but what if... *My God, the what-ifs could drive a man insane*—I thought repeatedly as the days drew on.

One evening, people began to converge on the council fire from every direction. Tables and chairs were set up. Dishes piled high upon them. Pots and platters heaping with food began to appear; within minutes, the recently deserted area was filled with people bustling about. The cacophony calmed into the familiar sounds of friendly conversation and people sharing their adventures of the day as they continued to set up a communal meal.

Then "the soldiers" joined the gathering. James and Billy, French, Ramon, and a dozen others stacked their weapons against the front of my hooch. Bob Occer, Gabe Ford, and several young faces I remembered filed into the light and formed a line at one of the tables. To one side, a large gathering of women, thirty or so, were clustered around an old woman. All wore long white dresses. Four or five of them remained close to the old woman while most others busied themselves stacking food on the tables they had

commandeered. They finished up their preparations and sat quietly for the most part. Several others appeared to be part of their group, but outside the whole, almost as if the rest were shunning them. These eight or nine stood back from the tables where the others were sitting.

It was all quite orderly. Everyone appeared eager to eat, but they all held back.

Eventually, James stood in front of the fire and began to speak to the gathered crowd. As he spoke, Billy, French, and Bob came to my bedside and helped me stand while Ramon pulled a shirt over my bony shoulders. Rowena provided a strip of cloth to wrap around my hips like a skirt. She tossed the remaining length between my legs and over one shoulder, cinching it with a belt around my waist.

"Lookin' a little like Gandhi!" I said aloud to myself as I caught a momentary glimpse of myself in the reflection in a water glass. Later, I would learn how much worse I really did look.

Hector appeared with my crutches. I was all set. He assisted me as I hobbled to the head of one of the tables and gingerly eased my shriveled backside into a sitting position for the first time since, well, since I could recall. James was still rambling at the fire when everyone stood up and began to clap and cheer.

I looked up. Every single soul was looking at *me*.

Most faces were smiling, cheerful, excited. However, the women in white sat stoically; almost none showed any emotion at all. The women and girls standing showed some emotion, but their faces were haggard and worn, many with eyes red, all of them fatigued. Their dresses were not quite as white as the others.

"What's going on?" I asked as James stopped beside me. "I didn't hear a goddamn thing!"

"Well, Bill, I was sayin' you pretty much saved our collective asses out here. You held us together; you gave us direction. When we began to think we were lost, you gave us hope

and strength," he said. "We found the strength we needed with your leadership. We found hope in your compassion and courage. Without your leadership, this whole group may have never survived." He swept his arm in front of us, indicating the crowd gathered at the tables.

I tried to raise my voice to the crowd but did not yet have the strength. "Thank you, James. Tell them thank you for me," I said. "Tell them they are all welcome."

My effort to sit up quickly sapped what strength I had. Chuck Daniels, the ranger from Lake Henshaw, stepped up beside James. With a bit of the dramatic, he made a fuss of producing several glasses. He carried a bottle of tonic water and, to my unbelieving eyes, the familiar dark green bottle of my favorite gin.

Chuck set up a half dozen or more glasses and poured them full of gin and tonic as everyone chattered cheerfully. My boys reached in to secure a glass. I noticed Mason's eggplant eyes again and Ramon's bandaged chest and arm. I realized several of the "soldiers" were also sporting bandages.

"We need to talk!" I managed to say to James as he placed a glass in my hand, gently curling my bony fingers around it with his.

He nodded curtly and turned to the assembly. "To health and happiness!" He raised his glass to me, then to the crowd.

"To our loved ones, here and lost!" He turned back to me. "And to Gunnery Sergeant Bill Burroughs. The toughest son of a bitch I've ever known," he finished with a yell.

The crowd agreed wildly as I struggled to raise my glass to them, then emptied it in two choking gulps. The familiar bite and pungent flavor of the gin washed through me like a hot wave and made my head spin for a moment. "Let's eat!" I called as loudly as I could manage, slamming the glass on the table. I sat back to catch my breath.

I couldn't bring myself to ask for a second round of gin. "Pretty goddamn pitiful," I said to myself, shaking my head. "Weak as a friggin' kitten."

I surveyed the gathering from the head of the table. James, Rowena, and Jimmy sat to my left, followed by French and Ramon, then several women I did not recognize. To my right was Hector, sitting quietly, eating slowly, always watching, never missing anything around us. Next to Hector was Billy and Rachel, then Chuck Daniels, and several more women I did not remember seeing before.

At the next table sat the rest of my soldiers. I recognized fifteen or eighteen but another dozen faces I had no recollection of seeing before. A cold fist clenched my heart as I realized many faces were missing. Where were they? My imagination ran rampant with reasons why they would not be here.

There was a distinct difference in the food that was served up for me. *Salt!* I had grown accustomed to having no salt at all. Now, it tasted a bit alien on my tongue. *Canned food.* Where did all the canned food come from? When a large serving of canned peaches came my way, though, it certainly didn't hurt my feelings.

A month of nothing but unconscious sips of Hector's brew had caused my stomach to shrink severely. I couldn't eat much before I was stuffed. After fifteen minutes or such a matter, I no longer had the strength to sit up to the table. Without a word, Hector moved from his place, retrieved my pallet, and set it near the fire. Little Jimmy scrambled to my side. I couldn't manage to stand on my good leg, despite Jimmy's struggle to help, but before anyone else could assist, Hector was by our side. With only a glance between them, Jimmy understood Hector's intention. He stepped away as Hector scooped me up from the chair like a child. Jimmy ran to the pallet and grabbed the bedding. As Hector gently sat me down again, Jimmy draped a blanket over my bare leg and stuffed the now-familiar bundle behind me to keep me propped up.

Once again settled on my throne, I relaxed into the blankets and enjoyed the hum of voices around me. I glimpsed a face in the crowd, a young woman who, for a moment, reminded me of Suzanne as she looked forty years ago. She was smiling and talking with friends near her, but I could see some deeper pain lurking behind her eyes when she stopped. *What had this woman endured?*

Jimmy and Hector retrieved their plates. While Jimmy sat at the foot of my pallet, Hector squatted beside me. My guardians, one for my body and mind, the other for my heart and soul, silently finished their meals.

As the gin and hot food warmed my innards and the fire warmed my withered hide, I started to doze again, but the wind freshened as a light rain began to fall from the darkened sky. The cool mist woke me as the people rushed to gather their meals and find their separate shelters. A couple of the boys snatched up my pallet and hurried me back into the storage container that was my hooch, my room, my sanctuary. The familiar scent of leather and horse sweat, kerosene, and gun oil filled the close air. As a lantern was lit, the room began to fill with people.

Hector and Jimmy were at the head of my bed as if standing guard. The little red heeler scampered through the gathering crowd and bumped his way under the raised pallet. James and Billy, Ramon, French, Bob Occer and Gabe Ford, Chuck Daniels, and Mason Holt gathered around me, along with that sad face woman I had noticed at supper.

The scared little girl that had killed the five men trying to assault us from their aluminum boat pushed into the lantern light, one arm in a sling. I saw several faces I recalled from the few days at the crossing and several more that I did not know at all. And, like at supper, there were several that I didn't see but would have expected too, given this particular gathering.

"There's a few faces missing," I thought out loud.

"Leo's renegades made a try for the crossing not long after you were wounded," Bob said. "They must have been pretty pissed off after the ambushes and such that the boys threw at 'em." He fell silent as he looked around the circle of faces in the lantern light, waiting to see if there were others eager to speak. "They crossed the water west of the stone bridge. We found their boat about two miles out. They crept up through the woods till Randi here—" he indicated that scared girl "—Randi heard em' coming. She killed three of them with that shotgun of hers before she was wounded. Lucky for her, they just left her for dead."

As he continued to speak, my eyes scanned the faces and found her stern gaze. She didn't look at all like the scared little girl I'd scolded before the shooting at the seashore, what now seemed a hundred years ago. She elbowed her way through the press of bodies and came to my side as I raised a hand toward her. Taking hold of my outstretched hand, she squeezed hard, bent over, and kissed my forehead. Without a word, she stepped back, releasing my hand. Tears welled in her eyes as she pushed her way back into the crowd, out of the glow of the lantern.

"When the gunfire broke out, they charged the crossing again," Bob continued. "Eight of our people were killed right off. Three others didn't survive their wounds."

Billy jumped in. "Both of the Jackson boys are dead. The preacher is dead, and little Sherri Lindt, Becky Sawyer, and Lynn Meyers. Jelly, Randall, Wayne, and Kyle Gardner... all dead."

"Lemont was hurt bad, too, but he survived," Mason said. "Your Boy Scouts are OK; they should be around here somewhere."

"Several of Holt's men managed to get across the bridge," Billy said. "They rushed into camp and just unloaded on anything moving. They shot the girls dead when they tried to shield Lemont; then they shot him down like a dog." Anger rose in his voice. "Pete and Gene and the Jackson brothers stopped them there in the camp,

but they were all wounded. The Jackson boys were in bad shape, they lingered for several days, but they died within hours of each other."

That cold fist clenched my heart again as I remembered the faces of each of them, how the older of the Jackson boys awkwardly presented me with the shotgun he had worked so hard on. "Always good to have a Farrier in the camp," I had told him.

I wished now I had said much more.

Reliving the deaths of our new family members, the silence that filled the room hung heavy in the air. Billy resumed, choking on his words. "They flanked us from the west. When Randi opened up on them, most everyone on that side turned to repel the assault; then, they charged the bridge again. Bob had just gotten his cannon into place and fired on them, but eight or ten of them made it across while Bob was reloading, and they rushed the camp.

"We killed 22 of them on our side of the crossing. There were another ten or twelve bodies in the water when the sun came up. Thirty-five of them dead, maybe."

Bob picked up the narrative, determined as Billy that I know the details. "We didn't see or hear anything from them for several days; then they started massing across the water again. I let rip with the cannon, sent two cannon balls into them, and they disappeared into the woods. Then it got quiet again."

"On the ninth of January, a couple days after their latest try at the crossing, Hector came to me," James said. "He said he was going across the water again. He had been sitting with you for ten days straight when he decided it was time to take care of business."

"The doctor told me you would not live, *jefe*; it was time to end the madness," Hector said.

"We weren't going to sit and wait while Hector infiltrated Holt's territory alone." James looked over his shoulder. "No offense, Mason!"

"None taken, James!" Mason seemed amused.

"When they crossed the water, they came in from the west, so we went to the east," James explained. "We slipped in without being noticed. Four boats loaded, six per boat, twenty-four of us fully packed and loaded for bear. We headed straight for Idyllwild without stopping, circled around, and came in from the north, same as before.

"When we got to the compound where the women were being held, we took the guards out without any problem, then sent the women into the woods. Three snipers laid up above the town, and we set up a long ambush line. Ten of us worked our way around to the south end of town and waited for the fireworks to start. Billy and French moved into the edge of town from the north and sniped several bad guys. That suckered 'em into chasing them right into the ambush. That ambush was seventy or eighty yards long. By the time they lit 'em up, nearly all of the renegades were trapped. Ramon and I pushed up through town with our team and caught the ones trying to retreat from the ambush. The firefight lasted about forty minutes altogether."

He paused, soaking in the climactic moment again. "When the dust settled, there were four or five of the renegade women still alive. We turned them over to the women they had been holding captive."

"And?" I asked.

"And nothing," James replied wryly. "Ask the women in white. We never saw any of them again."

"So, I missed the big action," I said. That explained the women in white, little Randi's arm in a sling, Ramon's wounds too. "What then?"

"We split into two groups. Ramon was wounded, and a couple of others. They headed for the boats. The rest of us, fifteen in all I think, took the main trail toward the crossing. Billy and French took point and scouted ahead. They spotted Holt, and another ten men headed our way, so we set up and waited for them.

"That damn Mason... 'Leave Leo to me,' he says. After we lit the column up, Holt was the only one left standing. I mean, he was just standing there. He couldn't believe he was the only one left alive!"

James turned to Mason. "You're up."

"Well, Chief, you know Leo was my cousin. Most of the Holt's were no account, and Leo was the worst of the whole lot. My dad didn't hold much with the rest of the Holt's, so growin' up, we didn't have much to do with any of them. My mom, God rest her soul, was a Winston. My baby sister and me pretty much grew up around the Winston side of the family. Dad liked it a whole lot better that way."

"Anyway, when we rescued the women and girls over to Idyllwild, my little sister was with them. Oh!"

He paused and urged the sad woman that reminded me of Suzanne into the glow of the lantern. "This is my baby sister, Sarah Winston Holt," he said. "Sarah, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Bill Burroughs."

Up close, the woman's eyes were stunning, deep green in color with pale highlights that flashed in the lantern light. She was wearing her hair up when I saw her at supper, but now it was down. Long straw blonde tresses framed her face, cascading over her breasts. She took my breath away. She looked exactly as I remembered Suzanne when we had first met so many years ago.

I realized I was staring, slack-jawed. The woman pulled back against her brother. "I apologize," I said. "You remind me so much of someone very dear to me." After a momentary pause, my mind came back on point. "What happened with your cousin?"

"Once Leo saw he was alone, he tossed his shotgun to the ground and started beggin' 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!' But when I stepped clear of the boys, he got real mean-faced like he always did and started cussin' me. 'Mason, you worthless pussy, what do you think you're gonna do?' he said, mocking me."

"Sarah had told me what Leo had done, and I was madder than hell already. That son of a bitch, my own cousin, had raped my baby sister. He let his trash rape her, and when my momma tried to stop them, Leo beat her unconscious. My momma never woke up again..." Mason stopped, his composure slipping, his voice cracked and wavering.

"I killed him," Sarah broke in. "I blew his fucking head off!"

She began to sob horribly. Mason wrapped his arms around her. "His head was gone!" she sobbed. "God forgive me, I blew his head off!"

"It's alright, sis," Mason said. "He had it coming."

Mason looked back at me. "When Leo challenged me, I lit into him with both fists. We brawled for a bit, but when I started to get the better of him, he pulled a knife and lunged at me. That's when Sarah scooped up his shotgun and fired both barrels. She wasn't more than fifteen feet away.

"That shotgun blast blew him clean off his feet. The whole front half of his head disappeared in a cloud of blood and brains and bone! I never seen anything like it."

Sarah continued to cry softly, sheltered by her brother's strong arms. "No need to fret about it anymore, sis. He had it comin'. Mom wouldn't be takin' it as hard if you ask me."

I replayed the scene in my head. Now I understood the darkness I had seen in the woman's eyes.

An awkward, painful silence followed. Billy finally broke it. "We've been patrolling all over San Jacinto, hunting stragglers ever since. They had a pretty large horde of food, and there was some liquor left, but they were burning through all of it pretty fast, judging from the garbage everywhere. The whole town was trashed.

"We hauled over a couple of loads of weapons and ammo. Everyone that survived moved over here, so anyone still there is a

bad guy. Makes the huntin' a lot easier." He said with a bit of a twisted grin.

"Good," I said. "Sounds good, boys. I'd like to see an inventory of our supplies tomorrow morning, if at all possible."

"We'll have it for you by breakfast, Bill," someone in the crowd said.

"What's the story with these women in white?"

"She's evil," Sarah said before anyone could answer. "She's an evil old bitch."

The loathing in her voice took me by surprise. "Come sit beside me, girl," I said. "Tell me about it."

The men stepped clear as Sarah sat at the foot of my pallet. Without further prompting, she told her tale. "My mother and I lived in Hemet. My Aunt Lilly had a little summer place up in Idyllwild. When the ocean rose the first time, momma said we should head on up to Aunt Lilly's, just in case. It was a good thing we did, at first. That was until Ellen Rector convinced everyone that she should be in charge."

"Rector?" I asked the group. "The same Rector?"

"Older sister," Billy Greentree said.

"Runs in the goddamn blood, it would seem," I replied. I turned to Sarah. "Go ahead, honey. I apologize for interrupting."

"That Rector woman controlled everything and everybody. If you didn't do like *she* said, she'd sic those bitches of hers on you. Then that damn Leo showed up. He had 50 or 60 guys with him by then, all trash and worse. I never did like Leo; he was always mean from my very first memory."

"That bitch Rector gave him girls to keep them away from her 'faithful,' to keep him away from her own girls. They started wearing the white dresses so Leo's trash knew which girls were off-limits. After a while, though, that didn't matter so much. You saw those women and girls standing while the others ate this evening? Well, ask *them* about Ellen Rector. She'd have them

whipped like animals if they disobeyed her or didn't work hard enough. She is evil and already a threat to your authority, Mr. Burroughs. You mark my words."

Her face became pinched, her forehead furrowed as her voice became hollow with anguish. "It was bad at the camp they put us in; we didn't have any shelter. Well, except Rector and the women in white. Leo gave them a couple of tents, and you had to swear to obey Rector to get into the shelters. When Leo found out about my mother and me, he sent for us. I don't remember what I might have expected anymore, but when momma saw him, she cussed him for the trash he was, and he beat her right there, Mr. Burroughs, he beat her to the ground and put his boots to her."

As she spoke, the color drained from her face; dark shadows grew around her eyes. Her voice grew hoarse and angry. "When I tried to stop him, he beat me too, until I lost consciousness. When I woke up, momma was dead. He beat her to death right there in front of everyone. As soon as he knew I was awake, he had his animals rip my clothes off, and then he raped me in front of the whole camp, in front of everyone... my own cousin!"

She swiped tears from her eyes angrily, her voice wavering as she tried to maintain her composure. "Then he threw me to his trash. They beat and raped me over and over again for four days. I think I would have died, too, but I swore I would make Leo pay for what he did to my mother. May God damn his soul to hell. I made him pay."

She leaned over and hugged me around the shoulders. The wet warmth of her tears caused an odd sensation as they trickled across the fresh scar on my cheek. She stood and headed toward the door. Mason laid his hand on his sister's shoulder as she passed him, but she pulled away and went out into the darkness.

The silence that followed hung so thick it seemed to suck the very air from my lungs, the depth of this tragedy slowly

burning its way into my mind. Of the many horrors I had witnessed and survived, this atrocity crushed my heart.

"Alright, gentlemen," I said, slapping my hand against the leather boot with the length of Manzanita sticking through it, "we will have to wrap this up for the evening. I am wore out. We can finish tomorrow once I get this new leg fitted."

As the men found their way out, Randi held back. She approached me, holding a mirror on a handle. Taking the mirror from her warm hand, I held it against my chest for a moment and drew a long breath. I raised the mirror and looked at myself for the first time since the earth first rumbled on December 1st.

The bandages had been removed from my head only the day before, and I knew my head had been shaved after my injuries. Still, I wasn't fully prepared for what I saw.

My beard was quite shaggy after a month without a shave. It was the familiar salt and pepper black, gray and white, but the hair on my head was pure white! The bullet that had creased my left cheek had just missed the corner of my mouth and plowed across my face, leaving a vicious scar nearly three-quarters of an inch wide that ended just above and behind my ear. My face was sunken and drawn from the weight loss, and I could just see the edge of the large scarred area behind my right ear where I had struck my head when I had fallen. I ran my fingers through the short crop of snow-white hair, my fingertips gingerly playing across the scar on the back of my head. My gaze locked onto the crisp blue eyes staring back at me from the mirror.

Jesus Christ, I looked eighty years old. "My God, Suzanne would not recognize me at all," I thought out loud.

"I've been workin' that gray gelding of yours, Mr. Burroughs," a girl's soft voice said.

I looked up to see little Jaime Koch, that she-devil on horseback that had been my courier. "He's ready to go any time you are, sir. Maybe tomorrow?" she asked hopefully. "You need to

get back on that horse again soon, Mr. Burroughs. You know what I mean."

The girl was right, whether or not she fully understood it. I had to get on my feet again, soon. "Let me get this leg strapped on after breakfast, and then the two of you can give me a hand," I said, speaking to both girls.

Randi and Jaime both perked up before leaving. As my eyes followed them out, I could see a dozen people crowded around the council fire. More fuss?

Jimmy sat on the pallet next to me. "You really gonna get on your horse tomorrow, Grampa?" he asked.

"Looks like I don't have much choice, Jimmy. I have to get back in the saddle sooner or later. Looks like tomorrow morning will be a good time for it."

"Can me and Katy come with you?"

I smiled. "I expect I'll need some kind of escort in case I fall right off. I think you'd make an excellent one."

The boy hugged me fiercely. "I love you, Grampa." He jumped from my side into his little bedroll on the floor, not ten feet away.

James, Billy, Ramon, and French were still in the hooch with me but had hung back and remained silent as the others finished and left. "We need to talk about security, Gunny," Billy said as little Jimmy busied himself, fighting his bedding. Rowena turned to help him.

Billy lowered his voice. "Sarah was right about these women in white. They are trouble. That Rector woman is plotting to take over the village."

"Runs in the blood sure enough," I said.

"That it does. She's been agitating since they arrived. Most folks want her gone, but the Laguna people won't allow her on the island. Can't say as I blame them, either.

"Most of the women are afraid of her and that clutch of demons that do her dirty work. They are a vicious bunch. I've stopped 'em more than once from horse whippin' their own for not workin' hard enough or wanting to leave the clan. But I don't know what to do with them."

"Let me ponder on it for a bit, fellas," I said. "We'll get it ironed out, I'm sure. I think ol' Machiavelli could shed some light on a course of action when a usurper threatens the security of the community."

"Sure, Gunny," Ramon said, confusion crossing his face. "Whatever you say sounds good for me."

"Enough for tonight. I am beyond tired, and now it appears I have riding lessons in the morning. Gentlemen..." I looked from one to the other and stopped as my gaze fell on Hector's eyes. "Thank you for saving my life. Thank you for keeping the people safe."

As I settled back into the warmth of my bedding, Rowena turned the lantern down a bit. I heard several muffled "Goodnights" as my soldiers and closest friends filed out into the darkness, then a final "*jefe, Buenas noches. Véale por la mañana.*"

"*Buenas noches*, my friend," I said as Hector passed through the doorway.

Rowena finished getting Jimmy settled. She turned out the lantern and sat beside me in the darkness. "They all love you," she said. "You know that, don't you? They love you like their own father. Some of them even more, I think." She kissed me on the forehead, rose silently, and went out into the firelight, pushing the big metal door closed behind her.

Relishing this incredible show of love and affection towards me, my mind whirled. There was a lot to think about. *The women in white?* I'd have to come down hard on that Rector woman, but timing would mean everything. I'd have to crush her control over the others, but not until I had the right opportunity.

Those girls won't allow me to shy away from gettin' on that horse tomorrow. God, I hope I can pull it off! Gotta get that peg leg to work, too, I said to myself. The murmur of the people outside my door ebbed as I waited for sleep to take me.

I lay in my bunk for some time, staring at the reflection of the firelight as it danced across the metal ceiling of the container I shared with Jimmy and Hector. Jimmy's rhythmic breathing slowly lulled me to sleep.

Chapter XIV

I was awakened by gunfire in the distance, a couple of shots in quick succession followed by two that were more evenly spaced. It sounded like an execution.

I dragged myself from my pallet and grabbed the walking stick Jimmy had given me. The boy stirred in his blankets and jumped from his pallet when he saw me hobbling about. "Here, Grampa, let me help you." He grabbed the peg leg from the floor. "Let me help you," he repeated adamantly.

I lifted my thigh as he gently slid the boot into position. As I settled my weight down into it, the brushed leather was comfortable on my naked skin. The burl end of the Manzanita had been whittled out to form a pocket for the stump of my leg, and a thick pad of brushed sheep's wool cushioned the socket. Jimmy handed me a shirt. As I slipped it over my shoulders, he tightened up the loincloth I still wore in the tropical heat.

Jimmy ran to collect my guns and holsters. As he returned with the harness in hand, Rowena opened the door of the hooch slightly. Seeing Jimmy and me up, she opened the door wide to let in the daylight and then helped Jimmy lift the harness to my shoulders and across my back. *Good to feel the tackle across my body again.* The weight of the guns gave me comfort.

Jimmy helped design the straps that would attach the boot to my gun harness. He was anxious to put it all together for the first time. To my amazement, everything lined up just about right, and every contact point rested nicely on my body. The boy was

beside himself, checking this strap and that buckle, unconsciously pushing my hands aside as he examined every detail of his design. Then stepping back, he placed a small hand below mine on the walking stick as if to help stabilize me. "Okay, Grampa, take a step!"

"Hold on there, Jimmy," I said cautiously. "Let's get things settled first."

"You need to put your weight on it so I can see how the boot fits."

I pulled the boy to my side. Using him and the stick for balance, I set my full weight into the new prosthetic. My thigh settled a bit more deeply into the boot, which held it snugly. It bound a bit in the crotch and pinched my buttocks uncomfortably; tender new flesh stung on contact with the wool.

"Hold on, Grampa."

Jimmy guided my hand from his shoulder to the stick, then ran outside. Returning with a piece of charred wood, he scraped the burnt end of the stick against the floor to sharpen it. He marked the leather for modification and managed to mark the backside against my butt without issue. However, when he came to my crotch, he paused. Embarrassment flushed his face. "Hold your stuff outta the way, Grampa."

"My *stuff*?" I asked humorously.

"You know, Grampa. Your *stuff*!" He stood back and looked up at me, his face red as a radish.

"Yes, sir." I promptly grabbed a handful of my "stuff" and held it out of his way. He immediately set to work again, delicately marking where the boot needed to be trimmed.

Rowena, who had been tidying up the beds, could no longer keep her snickering quiet. She burst out laughing uncontrollably.

"*Mom, please,*" Jimmy said. "*We're working here!*"

At this point, I could no longer stop myself from laughing. When I laughed, I threw myself off balance. I teetered precariously

for a moment, crowing loudly. Jimmy stood back, angry at first, then wrapped his arms around my waist as the laughter became infectious, hugging me tightly while attempting to help me maintain my footing. I took a couple of feeble hops on my good leg and crashed unceremoniously onto my bunk as Rowena scrambled to get out of the way. I caught Jimmy's weight and pulled him up onto my chest, and continued to laugh until my sides ached.

As we recovered from our fit of laughter, Hector stood in the doorway and smiled. "*Venga comer jefe*," he said. "*Jimmy mi amigo, venga el comer hombre!* It is time for breakfast!"

The sun was high in the sky, though it was not yet past six o'clock in the morning. Jimmy carried my new leg, and I hobbled along with my walking stick as a crutch. Rowena stayed close to assist if needed. Making our way to the end of the parapet wall, I paused for a moment in anticipation. I would have to negotiate a 15-degree decline for more than 60 feet to get to the "Mess Hall."

"Do you want your new leg, Grampa?" Jimmy asked.

"No, son, just workin' up my courage before negotiating this hill here." I nodded at the short slope between us and breakfast.

"I am here, *jefe*," Hector said as he stepped up by my side and wrapped a strong arm around me. "Put your arm across my shoulder, and I will help you down the hill."

Without further interruption, we easily made our way to fetch my first meal in the new facility.

I was surprised to see what the people had built. They built a sizable structure resembling post and beam architecture after salvaging material from across the island and along the shoreline. The building was maybe 50 feet long by 30 wide, with window openings and hinged covers that opened or closed as needed.

Hector helped me through the door. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness of the interior, I could see that they had used an

eclectic collection of oddities to decorate the building. Curiosities of all sorts were everywhere. At one end were the large double doors through which we had entered; at the other, two 55-gallon barrels converted into a massive stove, with an overly large hood suspended from the ceiling by lengths of steel cable. Behind the stove, work had begun on a cold cellar dug into the mountain, already fifteen or eighteen feet deep. Its sides were shored with timbers and lined with large, tightly stacked granite stones.

Two rows of tables ran the length of the room, each nearly ten feet long by four feet wide. A wide path split the center, and there was ample room near the walls for foot traffic to pass between the wall and the tables. Long benches lined both sides of each table. In the corner adjacent to the big stove, a raised platform covered with planks, eight or ten inches high and about ten by fifteen feet in size. On the platform was a large chair with a high back flanked on either side by a low bench, possibly five or six feet long.

People milled about the hall, some finding their favored spot, others carrying food to the tables, still, others engaging in conversation. Some of the women in white suddenly dashed the platform and appeared to take control of it.

Ellen Rector walked in, flanked by four women. She bore enough likeness to her brother for me to recognize her instantly. All were clad in the long white dresses that everyone had become accustomed to seeing in the village. Pushing past anyone in their way, they headed straight for the platform. Upon Ellen's arrival, it became apparent that the platform was the dais of the women in white, and Ellen Rector was the high priestess.

Hector guided me to a table at the head of the hall, right in front of the platform. Platters of food were set on the table as we took our places. Rowena immediately began dishing food onto plates, placing one in front of Jimmy and then one in front of

myself and Hector. Without hesitation, Jimmy dug into his meal with relish.

Suddenly, there was a loud commotion on the platform. Several women ran to find a seat on the benches, and Ellen Rector began banging the floor with her cane. She was seated in the large chair, flanked by women sitting on the benches—several other women clustered behind them.

"No one will eat until I have given the blessing!" she shouted.

I coughed, choking on her words.

"You there, boy!" she shouted, pointing her cane at Jimmy. "Spit that food out of your mouth!"

Well, she didn't waste any time throwing down the gauntlet.

Everyone in the room held their breath, waiting to see what I would do. So much for timing.

Without hesitation, I pulled myself up on my good leg. Taking my walking stick in my hand like a club, I raised it overhead and crashed it down on the table. Tin plates clattered. Some cups and glasses crashed to the floor. The thunderous noise silenced all conversation in the room.

"How dare you!" the old woman began.

Before she could speak another word, I raised my staff and again smashed it down upon the tabletop. This time, several of her ladies in waiting jumped and covered behind the others.

"No, old woman," I began in as stern a voice as I could muster, "How dare *you!* You are *not* in charge here! *You* will tell *no one* what to do, where to go, or how to behave in this village. I am in command here by consent of this majority," I said loudly, "and no one here refutes my authority. Do you understand?"

"You are a dying old man," the old woman said, spite burning from her eyes.

I slammed my staff onto the tabletop again. This time, the old woman visibly jumped in her chair. "I am not dead *yet*, and you will *not* interrupt me again," I shouted louder as some of my old strength began to creep into my body.

The crone sat in silence, her ladies in waiting wide-eyed, no longer in control.

"You there! You women in white. Any of you have anything to say?" I asked. No one replied.

"Do you know who I am, old woman?" I asked. "Do you have any idea at all who I am?"

"Yes. You are Bill Burroughs from Valley Center."

"I am Gunnery Sergeant William Davis Burroughs, and I am the head honcho, here and now. That is what should be important to you. You will no longer shame or threaten or cause harm to anyone here. Do you understand?"

Again, no reply. "Do you know what happened to your brother in Valley Center?" I asked her.

"Yes," she answered petulantly. "Some hoodlums killed him while he was trying to help *his* people."

"Your brother was caught stealing food, and he was killed when he tried to shoot me in the *back*!" I said. "I am not going to give you the chance to pick up where he failed. Do you understand me?"

Not allowing time for a response, I continued. "You ladies," I said to the group hovering around the old hag, "which of you are afraid of this woman? Step aside here, get clear of the rest." I pointed to a table away from the platform.

A half a dozen women hesitantly moved from the platform. Moments later, a couple more decided to join them.

"Any more of you ever been mistreated by this woman or her hags?" I asked. Several of the remaining women raised their hands. "Move over there," I commanded, pointing to the table now beginning to fill with women.

"Any of more you women ever been insulted or humiliated by this woman?"

Nearly all of those who remained on the platform raised a hand. "Over there!" I pointed to the table with my walking stick.

Eight women remained on the platform with Ellen Rector, their eyes filled with a mixture of hate and fear.

I turned my attention to the group that had left the platform. "You ladies all have a choice. You can join us as part of this community. You can participate freely and share in our labors, share in what bounty we have, and share in the security you will have here. Or, you can stay with her."

I looked into the eyes of each of them slowly, one by one. Leaving them to ponder my statement, I turned my attention to the small group huddled around the old woman. "Do the rest of you understand what is about to happen here?"

There were no replies.

"Do all of you there intend to suffer the same consequence as this woman?" I pointed my stick at Ellen. "Consider your answer well. Be very careful of what you say next."

Two more women stepped away and silently joined the others but were not allowed a seat at the table. "So be it."

I slammed my walking stick on the tabletop again. "You," I pointed to the women who had chosen to leave the platform, "Go gather these women's belongings and bring them here."

Twenty-eight women silently filed out the door. As they reached the sunlight, they began to run, chattering amongst themselves.

I turned to the two women shunned by the others. "What should I do with you two?" I asked them.

"I would like to stay here..." one of them began, but the other slapped her across the face. "Damn you, Shelia! Damn you to Burroughs! You can go to hell!"

She stomped back to the platform.

"Fair enough," I said. "We'll let the others decide if you can stay, Sheila. Sit down there and wait."

As I finished speaking, the first of the women I'd sent for the belongings returned with bundles in their arms, then the others followed with many more bundles. "What's all this?" I asked a bit incredulously.

"They have lots of clothes and jewelry they took from all the dead girls," one of the younger women said.

"They took the belongings of the *dead girls*?"

"Yes, sir," the woman answered. "She would tell Holt which ones he could have; then they would take all of their stuff and divide it up between them."

Rage built in my chest like a roaring furnace. "It's lucky for you, old woman," I said, struggling to control myself, "that I only have one leg, or I would personally choke the life from you. You disgusting, hypocritical old hag!"

I looked at the others on the platform. "You made a deal with the devil, ladies, you sold your souls," I said, "and hell has just come to breakfast."

"There are piles of clothes, bolts of cloth, and jewelry, and a sewing machine, too," another woman volunteered when I paused to catch my breath.

I didn't know how many people in the village knew of the incredible actions these women had shared with me, but they all remained silent. Gabe Ford was close by, and I motioned to him. As he made his way over, I turned back to the women on the platform. "Gabe, have these women searched. Take everything they have except the clothes they are wearing. Do you understand? Everything! They walk with only the clothes on their backs."

Then I pinned my eyes on their leader. "Ellen Rector, you and your she-devils will surrender everything you have on your person. If you resist, you will be strip-searched right here, right now. The lot of you will be escorted to the stone bridge this

afternoon. You will each be given seven days' worth of rice. I will allow a single knife between you. You will be exiled to San Jacinto, and whatever God you profess to pray to can have you.

"You will be considered outcasts by us. If any of our scouting parties ever find you, you will be killed on sight. You do not deserve to live, but I think your suffering in the wilderness on San Jacinto will be far better punishment than having your blood on the hands of these good people."

I turned to the crowd that filled the hall. "Does anyone object?" I asked. "Does anyone have anything to add?"

There were no replies, no comments. No objections. "Gabe, escort these criminals to the boat house and put a guard on them. After we have all enjoyed a good breakfast, your team will escort them to the crossing."

Gabe took charge of the seven women and marched them out of the building.

Piles of clothing and bolts of fabric, bags full of jewelry, and an old treadle sewing machine were brought to the hall. The clothes and fabric would be stored and used as needed, and the jewelry sorted for precious metals and gems of value.

It was voted that the valuables, the hard currency as it were, would be stored in my hooch. I guess no one would dare take it while it was under my protection. Maybe it showed how much I was trusted. Perhaps it showed how much I was feared. I didn't give it much thought.

During breakfast, there was a celebratory atmosphere in the air, due wholly to the elimination of the threat posed by the women in white. From that point forward, we didn't see any white dresses.

After breakfast, at Jimmy's insistence, Hector carefully trimmed the edges of my boot, and I tried the leg on again. It fit beautifully. The pinching and crowding were gone, but my leg was still tender. At first, walking on it was excruciatingly difficult.

My difficulties were alleviated somewhat once I got back into the saddle. A hitching rail had been set at the edge of the clearing by the council fire. Randi and Jaime were there, patiently waiting with the gray and their own favorite horses as I hobbled up the gentle slope from the hall with Hector's assistance. I could only make a few tentative steps before I had to pull the boot off. The severed leg was still much too tender. It had been less than six weeks since Doc Parker had performed the amputation. Continuing with Hector's help, Jimmy beside me, I made my way resolutely to meet my fate.

The gray blew and stomped, skittering sideways as I approached him. After hearing my voice and feeling the familiar touch of my hand on his ears, he calmed down. The slice of apple I had spirited out of the mess hall didn't hurt either. Hector boosted me into the saddle. It felt a bit alien with one foot in the stirrup while my short leg dangled freely. I would definitely have to contrive some kind of stirrup. Hector secured my thigh to the stirrup leather with a piece of cloth.

I was a bit wobbly as the girls led me around in circles like a kid on a carnival pony, but the longer I sat in the saddle, the better I felt. Jimmy followed behind me, riding Katy, going round and round. "This feels pretty good for the moment," I said. "Let's take a slow ride around the village."

Jimmy headed out on his red mule. The girls were riding along on either side of me, and Hector patiently followed behind on foot, watching for any signs of distress.

It was a nice ride, round about. It felt great to be out in the sunshine, to feel the unfettered wind blowing off the ocean and across the land. It also became very apparent that while this loincloth was great for lounging in the heat, it was not at all suitable for sitting horseback. Not the way it bunched up between me and the saddle. I needed to track down a decent pair of jeans.

Life is good today, I said to myself, then remembered the women in white.

God help them. Nobody else is going to.

The horse followed the boy on his mule as we meandered along, my mind wandering, running again to Suzanne. How was she faring? Was she still safe at the edge of our valley in the mountains? Did our valley still exist at all? How long before I could attempt to make my way home? Would I ever even be able to try to find a way home?

For the next several days, we repeated our little parade. Every morning after breakfast, Jimmy would lead the procession around the village and up the last hundred yards to the top of the forested ridge and back. This succession of long, slow circles gave me confidence in the saddle again.

One morning, Jimmy came to me, more excited than usual. He had placed several feathers in Katy's bridle. One stuck out from behind his own ear, and there was a bit of an air about the village.

"What's the fuss?" I flicked his feather with my fingertip.

"It is February 22nd, Grampa," he replied, a bit miffed. "It's my birthday today."

"Your birthday?"

"Yes, sir! I'm nine years old today." With a click of his tongue and the touch of his heels, the boy nudged Katy into an easy jog up the ridge.

The gray followed with a quick start. I found that I naturally clung to the horse's back without much effort. All these days of riding in circles paid off, I thought, as the horse sped up the hill to catch the boy and his mule. Jimmy continued to the top of the ridge and stopped for a moment, gazing out over the ocean, waiting for me to catch up. Our regular escort was noticeably absent. As I broke the ridgeline, the wind swept up and over the cliff, ruffled my mustache, and rippled through my short hair, tickling my scalp.

After turning his mule, Jimmy continued along the ridge toward the Observatory past Palomar Mountain. I had not traveled this far since waking from the coma, certainly not without Hector by my side. For a moment, I felt panic. My sure-footed horse walked along through the windblown grass and low-growing brush with quiet confidence. My anxiety subsided, and I began to enjoy the ride thoroughly.

Off to the south, I heard gunfire – three quick shots, followed by a single final shot. I couldn't figure out who would be shooting with that kind of pattern. Maybe someone in the village would know. I made a mental note to ask.

The gray followed the boy's mule as they wandered into the trees on the shoulder of the mountain. As the forest closed in around us, the wind hushed, and the calls of the birds filled the air. It was near 85 degrees in the sun, I'd guess, but under the canopy of the forest, the air cooled dramatically, and I was refreshed.

I had lost all track of time since the shoot-out. Thanks to Jimmy, I had the date fixed again. February 22nd. His ninth birthday. Nearly three months since the nightmare began. Now, in the midst of this earth-scattering upheaval, we had a little Eden of our own making.

Chapter XV

February 28...

The urge to go home grew stronger every day. Now, it was more than an urge; it was a *need*. Physically, I was gaining ground rapidly. My wounds were healing, though my ribs were still tender. The leg remained a problem, but that too was constantly improving.

We'd seen or heard nothing from Ellen Rector and her she-devils in the three weeks since we exiled them to San Jacinto. Meanwhile, Mitchell Armstrong, one of our Indian brothers, rose through the ranks of the villagers. Many, if not all, respected and trusted him. In his mid-forties, Mitchell was nobody's fool. His strong but gentle personality worked for everyone, and he was both smart and fair-minded. I hoped he would take over the leadership of the village when I left.

Security patrols headed by Bob, Ramon, and French continued on Santa Rosa, as we called our island and San Jacinto. They had determined that Laguna Island was safe and clear of any hostiles. Santa Rosa appeared to be safe as well, but it was a big island. San Jacinto was somewhat smaller but extremely rugged. There were reports of a small sailboat circling the islands, but so far, there had been no contact with anyone other than those already known to us on the three "settled" islands.

James and Billy made a detailed survey of the north shore of San Jacinto and observed smoke rising from a number of locations on the slopes of San Bernardino. The ocean channel

stretched more than two miles wide at high tide, but an exposed mud flat stretched several miles between the mountains in both directions at low tide. The tide rose from east and west to a high strip of land where the city of Banning used to be.

Nothing remained of Banning, Cabazon, or Beaumont, for that matter, nor any of the smaller towns that lined Interstate 10 before the poles shifted. Instead, they lay beneath a massive mud flat that stretched from the ocean, over the city of San Bernardino, to the sea in the east that covered Palm Springs.

We did not know if the mudflat could be crossed on foot or on horseback, but it appeared pretty apparent that the rising tide could trap anyone or anything caught too far from shore. So at some point, we would have to test a crossing there – or remain isolated.

Some of the small towns might have remained intact in the San Bernardino Mountains. With the Riverside and San Bernardino valleys underwater, there still could be survivors at Big Bear Lake or Lake Arrowhead, maybe even at Crestline. Smoke at several locations certainly meant survivors lived on the island.

I could hobble around on my new leg quite well, though only for a few minutes at a time. The new flesh was still very tender but beginning to toughen up. Hopefully, a callous would form sooner rather than later. So I gingerly trimmed the proud flesh that formed on the wound every day to reduce the discomfort.

Jimmy suggested we take a ride down by the lake. The girls rode alongside me, and Hector patiently followed behind, still watching for any signs of distress, constantly ready in case of a mishap. It was a nice ride down the ridge, near about a mile from the village to the lake's shore and about a thousand-foot drop in elevation. It felt great to be out in the sunshine, to feel the warmth on my back, and the brisk wind in my face again. We passed the gardens the villagers had planted after removing the fences the women in white had erected. I could only shake my head. *What*

could they have been thinking when they began that sort of nonsense?

Upon reaching the lake, we headed west along the shore toward the sea. A short dock was floating on the lake, constructed of sections of planking lashed to 55-gallon drums. A single boat tied to the dock gently bumped against one of the drums with a rhythmic, metallic thump.

Reaching the seashore a mile further on, a large swath had been cleared of debris was beginning to gather a bit of sand, though, at low tide, the *beach*, such as it was, only extended for 50 or 60 feet before plunging sharply to the water's surface below. The sea, which had become muddy brown following the upheaval of the quakes, appeared to be returning to a healthy blue-green color. Almost back to normal.

The new normal. I wondered how much marine life survived the hellacious upheaval, the cataclysmic pollution. I noticed large piles of trash and debris randomly spaced all along the shore. Someone was busting their asses to clean it up.

Angel Island sat about a half-mile offshore. The once lush, deep green of the pine and fir forest was scorched brown and black, burnt from the solar storm that swept over and torched the whole island in a second. The island was now a forest of blacked skeletons left standing as stark sentinels against any who might dare to venture there.

By contrast, the valley to the east was fast recovering from the fire that swept from horizon to horizon. Starkly apparent were two large mounds of charred wood. One was the pyre for the dead villagers, the other for the livestock. Across the channel to the south lay Laguna Island, still lush and green. I could just make out a few orderly rows of trees defining the location of an orchard in the distance. The water in the channel flowed quickly but calmly. I noticed two rowboats and a small catamaran tied to moorings. The

most of the sailboat had been broken and repaired, though I saw no sail for it.

Several more shots rang out across the channel as we turned back to the east and began a slow loop around the lake. I pulled the horse up short. "Hector!" I called, "What was that?"

"The hogs, *jefe*. It is only the hogs," he replied. "They raid the orchards. I am afraid they will destroy the whole island before long."

"Hell, we don't have enough ammo to kill all the blasted hogs, do we? Has anything else been tried to protect the orchards?"

"They tried to build fences, but they cannot hold the hogs back from the fruit."

A hog fence! I swung the gray around and stopped, looking for a moment at the mountain of the scorched timber on Angel Island. "That would work," I muttered to myself.

"*Lo que es, jefe?* I did not hear you," Hector said.

"The trees Hector, the trees!" I pointed to the forests of blackened pillars, blanketing Angel Island's flanks. "A fence that would hold those damned hogs!"

"*No entiendo, jefe,*" Hector said. "I do not understand."

"We'll talk about it at supper, my friend. But I think it could work."

By the time we circled the lake and reached the village again, my backside was chaffed something fierce. It was the longest I had spent in the saddle. I couldn't remember feeling so saddle sore in all my life.

I smelled the evening meal as we climbed the hill to the village. My stomach growled. I hollered for Jimmy to ride ahead and see if he could find his father and Billy Greentree. A plan brewed in my head, and I wanted to discuss it with my Segundo and his 1st Sergeant.

The evening meal was nothing special, boiled pork and wild greens with millet. Unfortunately, the gardens were not yet producing any crops.

Half of the village population was out on patrols, mainly on San Jacinto. The tide was at its highest near midnight, so the patrols waited for it to turn.

Jimmy had been able to track down James and Billy. As we enjoyed the meal together, the conversation turned. "I've been thinking about the hogs on Laguna," I began. "The timber on Angel Island could solve the problem. It would be a piece of work, but a barrier could be made to keep the hogs from the orchards."

Everyone looked at me quizzically. "I've done the math," I said. "It would take 130 logs, 80 feet long, give or take, to cover a mile two rows high. Angel Island is covered with burnt timber. It could be cut and trimmed and floated across the channel."

Now their expressions were downright disbelieving.

"The channel is a half a mile wide, for Christ's sake. So it'd be maybe a five-mile float along the shore to Laguna. We have the horsepower, and we can rig the harness. Just drag them into place and stack them. There can't be any hog over there big enough to move a barrier of that size."

Hector understood immediately. "*Si jefe*, it would work!"

"Sounds a bit difficult, I'd say," Billy remarked.

"Christ a mighty, son! How the hell do you think this country was built in the first place?" I retorted. "Hard work, ingenuity, and determination. We need to protect those orchards. Am I correct?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply all around.

"Well, let's get some folks on that tomorrow. What do you say?"

"First thing in the morning, Gunny," Billy replied.

"Good enough," I said. "Now, what about making a crossing to San Bernardino?"

"You sure are fired up this evening, aren't you, Bill?" James asked.

I smiled and nodded. "It's past time for me to get this sorry ass moving. I need to get back in shape and back in charge."

"You've always been in charge as far as anyone is concerned, but you need to take it easy while you recover," James said.

"You know how I feel. We have these islands secure. The people all like Mitchell. If he'll have it, he can take over here. I need to find a way north and east. I need to make my way home."

They looked from one to the other, digesting my comments. Some looked eager, while others seemed worried, hesitant, maybe a bit scared.

"All of you know I want to go home, right?" I asked again.

"We thought you might want to give it a bit yet, Bill," Rowena said.

"Well, I sure as hell can't leave tomorrow, but I'm not going to wait to get ready. Would you?"

"We just thought..." She fell silent.

Jimmy sat wide-eyed, looking from his father to Rowena then back at me. "Grampa," he started, "I'll help. Dad, I can help, can't I? You said..."

James held up a hand, and the boy abruptly fell silent. "Yes, son," James said slowly, "You can help your Grampa like we said."

Peculiar bit of conversation. I thought, but I wanted to stay on subject. "I'd like to get an eye on the north shore of San Jacinto, for starters. I'm curious to gauge the tidal flow myself. Have we tried signaling across the channel to see if there is anyone on San Bernardino able to talk back?"

"We haven't tried that yet, Bill, but we can do that right away," Billy answered, his enthusiasm unwavering.

"If you think you are strong enough, *jefe*, I will pack supplies for the journey, and we can travel to San Jacinto tomorrow as you wish," Hector added.

Suddenly, I began to doubt that I could weather the journey, but I was determined. "It's safe enough, isn't it, boys?" I asked, looking from James to Billy, then Hector. "Why don't we make a family affair of it? Why don't we all go along? Rowena, Jimmy, all of us?"

Little Jimmy exploded in his seat, "Can we, Dad? Can we please? I can help around camp, I can help mom and everything! Please, Dad?"

Rowena smiled silently in the fading light. "Sure, son, you can go," James replied. "We'll all go like one big family."

Jimmy leapt from the bench and raced out the door.

"You got a tiger by the tail now, Dad!" Rowena said.

"I'll be glad to have him on the trail with us," I replied.

Little did I know that this was the beginning of something far more important than I imagined.

February 29...

I awoke before sunup and grabbed a pair of jeans Rowena had tracked down for me. Then, with my crutches, I made my way to a gravel-covered area with blankets around three sides and proceeded to bathe myself for the first time without assistance. I won't say it was easy. In fact, it was a major bitch of a chore, but I knew I needed to get self-sufficient again, quickly.

Finishing my shower, such as it was, I dressed myself with no small degree of difficulty and limped back to the hooch just as Jimmy burst through the doorway in search of me. "Grampa, you fooled me!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were gone without me."

I ran my fingers through the boy's wild hair. "We're not goin' anywhere without you, young man." Red stood in the

doorway and stretched, yawning noisily. "Let's see if we can rustle up an early bite to eat. What do ya say?"

"Yes, *Sir!*" he replied eagerly as he dove back inside our shelter, emerging momentarily with my peg leg.

I managed to stay on my feet all the way to the Mess Hall, but once there, I couldn't stand any longer. The end of my severed leg was chafed raw, and every step felt as if a spike was being driven into it, clear to my teeth. Of course, I didn't dare let the boy see that every step was agonizing, and I sure as hell wasn't going to let any of the others know, either.

I sat down at the first bench we came to and sent the boy for the crutches. "I need to take this gradually," I told myself as I eased the boot from my aching stump of a leg. As I waited for the boy's return, I heard something stirring in the cellar and gave a shout.

"Hello, there in the cellar!" I called.

Red Fern, an ancient Indian woman, poked her head from the cellar door. Recognizing me in the dim light cast from a kerosene lantern on the wall, she raised her hand and disappeared back inside. She returned shortly and raised her hands in front of her, first one then the other. "Jerked beef and cold tea. I am sorry, Mr. Bill, I have no fire in the stove yet."

"Not a problem, Miss Red Fern. Could I trouble you for the same for the boy when he returns?"

"*No es nada*, Mr. Bill." She smiled and disappeared again.

"*Muchas gracias.*"

By the time Jimmy returned with the crutches, I had decided that I would need Hector to boil up a batch of his brew to bathe my leg. I needed to heal quickly so I could manage without the damn crutches.

When we had gnawed on some jerky and finished our tea, we made our way back up the hill. It was a bit awkward, but it was

a great deal easier hobbling back to the Council Fire with the crutches.

As had been our customary morning ritual, the girls were up early, readying the horses for a ride. Not wanting to dash their spirit, I immediately invited them along on our journey. Thankfully, they both graciously declined, stating other pressing duties. I'm sure they didn't want to be saddled with me night and day for four or five days on the trail. When I informed Hector of the need for his medicine, the corners of his mouth curled up slightly as he patted one of his medicine bags. "We are prepared, *jefe*."

By 07:00, we were on the trail. Billy estimated we would still have safe passage across the stone bridge as low tide should be sometime near noon. Thanks to the stiff pace that James set, we arrived at the crossing just as the sun hit its zenith. We continued straight across the bridge. I hung on for dear life as the gray scrambled up the well-worn trail. Though heavily used, the path shot up nearly vertical for ten feet or better before easing up to a stiff 45 degrees for another 80 feet or more.

By the time we pulled up to await the rest of the crew, I was huffing and puffing as bad as the horse. Jimmy laughed and hooted all the way up, clinging to Katy's back. She seemed to glide up the precipice as if she were a mountain goat.

I must have been pretty wide-eyed myself as Billy brought up the rear. "You okay there, old man?" he asked, laughing.

I coughed and spit, clenching the saddle horn till my knuckles were white. "I'll outride you, by damn," I said in good fun. I heeled the gray around and gave him his head as we raced ahead up the trail.

It was a two-day ride from the village to the north shore of San Jacinto. This was my first time on the north side of the crossing. As the trail wound up the mountain, we passed the platform where the cannon had fired on us. The wounds in the

wood from my assault with the M-14 were still apparent, and the faint stench of rotten flesh still hung in the air. James rode point with me right behind, and he called attention to each ambush sight and set of traps as we passed them. I could envision each battle in my mind as we crossed the ground. More than two months later, signs of those battles were still visible.

I wanted to survey the situation in what remained of Idyllwild, but it was decided to circle east to Idyllwild on the way back from the shore. So, for now, our trail led north and west along what remained of Highway 74. As the old road disappeared into the sea, we followed a narrow path along the precipitous mountainside. At times, the mountain shot straight up on one side for hundreds of feet while plunging 1,000 feet straight down to the ocean on the other.

It was slow going, but we covered 20 miles or better before we stopped. It was nearly 8 p.m. when we came to a broad area that sloped gently westward to the ocean. Billy told us that we were due west of Indian Mountain, and we would camp here for the night. An old forest road climbed over the saddle ahead, just south of Ranger Peak, but we would wait until the morning to explore it.

We dismounted for the first time in nearly eight hours. If it hadn't been for Hector there to catch me, I would have collapsed when my wooden leg hit the ground. The men set up camp in a snap, and Hector popped a batch of his brew on the fire before I could catch my breath.

Rowena and Billy cooked dinner while James scouted the outlying area. When it was ready, Jimmy gently bathed the raw stump of my leg with Hector's brew. As the sting began to ease, I enjoyed the cool ocean breeze.

After my fill of millet cakes and jerky, Hector provided one of his medicine smokes. I didn't even finish the damn thing before

falling asleep where I sat. Sometime later, Hector moved me to my bedroll, but I had no idea until I awoke the following day.

March 1...

The acrid sting of wood smoke awakened me. Choking on the smoke, I became aware of the sunlight just beginning to lift the darkness of the night. The wind shifted slightly and carried the smoke out to sea, leaving me alone again. For breakfast, we dined on dried apricots and fresh apples with some of Hector's brew. After the morning aches dissipated, I felt renewed and energized again, ready for the next leg of our journey. Today I was determined to mount the gray without assistance.

As camp was packed and all made ready to saddle up, I gingerly donned my peg-leg. The stump wasn't as raw as before. Another day in the saddle should see it well healed, I thought hopefully. However, as I planted the peg firmly on the ground and raised my foot high for the stirrup, the pain shot clean to the top of my head. Clenching my teeth against the lightning bolt that flashed against the back of my eyeballs, I grabbed the saddle horn and, with a heave, hoisted myself up and swung my leg over the horse's rump as if there were no problems at all.

I breathed a deep but silent sigh of relief when my backside made contact with the saddle. I sure didn't want anyone to think I couldn't handle this simple task, but I wasn't foolin' everyone – and Hector let me know it. "*Jefe*," he began in a tone of voice you'd use speaking to a child with a scraped knee, "go easy for a while, *por favor*. The others do not need to know, but I will help you."

"I appreciate it, but I need to be able to do this on my own."

"*Si, jefe*, as you wish." He said flatly as he turned and headed toward the forest road, following Billy's lead.

The terrain was extremely rugged. Even on the forest road, the ride was long and arduous. Finally, crossing the saddle below Ranger Peak, we dropped into and through a small valley. There were dozens of burnt-out homes, so we passed quietly and cautiously. It was like crossing sacred ground. I could not begin to guess the horrors that had transpired when Leo Holt's men raided the tiny enclave.

We climbed out of the little valley and picked up Highway 243 about noon, then followed its winding track as it zigzagged back and forth across the face of the mountain. As we began to make our way down the mountainside, the tide had turned. We watched in disbelief as the ocean raced in, rapidly covering the mudflats.

We reached the shoreline above what had been Banning by 16:30 hours. The old road ran straight into the water, disappearing under the rising tide. There was nowhere properly situated to set up camp, so we opted to bivouac right on the road itself. We had a quick meal of millet cakes and jerky again, washed down with Hector's brew. It was, all things considered, a fairly lovely meal.

The tide continued to rise. We calculated that rising at eight or ten feet an hour. The water covered about two and a half miles of ground per hour, maybe a bit more. On good, dry land, a man or an animal might be able to outrun the water, but on that mud flat, it could be treacherous.

After our meal, I settled in and scanned the far shore with Hector's binoculars. Our scouts had seen smoke rising from several locations, and I was anxious to spot some myself. The San Bernardino Mountains rose high above the mudflat as it vanished beneath the rising tide. San Bernardino was a massive island compared to Santa Rosa, with at least three known natural bodies of water scattered on the mountain, though if they remained was another question.

From the reports of smoke on the mountain, I was certain of survivors. I wondered, though, were they friends? Or enemies? Had they experienced the same horrors as us? Had they battled each other as we had?

As the sun slowly set beyond the western horizon, I did not spot a single finger of smoke reaching for the sky. Maybe it was being scattered by the wind. I watched the mountain until darkness closed in, looking over the slopes again and again for any speck of light. I kept watch late into the night but saw nothing.

March 2...

Jimmy woke me just past dawn with a cup of Hector's tea hot in his hands. "My dad and Mr. Billy left a little while ago," he said. "They went to get some freshwater."

Hector appeared from the direction of the shoreline. "I have met the boy in the boat, *jefe*," he said quietly. "He would like to meet you."

"What boy? What boat?"

"Por favor, Jefe! Follow me. I will show you."

With great difficulty, I managed to cross the 200 yards across the rugged, brush-choked slope to a point where a finger of water reached into a flooded gully in the hillside. The boat was camouflaged so well that I was standing right in front of it before realizing it was there. If it had not been for the tall, thin young man standing aboard the gently tossing craft, I would have continued past it.

We studied each other for a moment before the boy nimbly jumped from the boat's deck to the shore. I looked up into his calm, dark green eyes. He had to be 6-foot-3 or taller. An unruly shock of sun-bleached, sandy brown hair and a deep, dark tan made it clear he had been on the water a while.

"Joe O' Hollearn," the boy said as he approached, his hand extended.

"Bill Burroughs." I admired the boy's strong, firm handshake. "You the fella we've seen circling these islands?" I asked.

"I haven't seen any other boats, so, yes, I guess so. These and several other islands to the north."

My heart began to pound. Several *islands* to the north? There is nothing but islands? "Is there anything left of the mainland?"

"Sure, if you want to call it that."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean. Why don't you come up to the camp? We can have a bite to eat and talk about what you've seen."

"I don't like the idea of leaving the boat, Mr. Burroughs. I've been attacked on several of the other islands."

"You're safe here, son," I assured him. "But have it your way. Why don't you sail around to the east there." I pointed along the shore. "We're camped where the old road enters the sea. We can relax and eat, and you can keep your boat in sight the whole time if you'd like. We're all friendly here."

Without waiting for an answer, I turned to begin the short trek back to camp. Hector spoke briefly with the boy in Spanish, but I did not understand the words.

"Mr. Burroughs?" the boy called as he stepped back on board the catamaran. "Would you care to ride along with me?"

I glanced at Hector. As he nodded in approval, he grasped my arm firmly and assisted me onto the boat, foregoing the need for an answer.

The sailboat was draped with military-style camouflage netting from the top of the mast to the ends of each hull. The netting caused the boat to handle very sluggishly as it dragged in the water. As Joe poled the boat into the wind, I surveyed the

modest craft's condition. The sleek twin hulls, near twenty-five feet long, were bright yellow beneath the camo, with a dark blue tarp and netting stretched across the span of twelve or fifteen feet between the hulls. Every kind of odd box and crate was lashed here and there for stowing gear, and a 30-gallon drum was tied to 4x4's that spanned the hulls. I observed how well his lashings were tied, how the lockers were placed to balance the boat, and realized that the barrel must be for freshwater. This boy must be made of strong fiber, I thought. How long had he been alone?

As we made our way out of the protected gully, the breeze caught us. We were carried the 200 yards around the point quickly and beached within a few yards of our camp. Hector was waiting silently. As the boat's twin hulls grated against the earth, he grabbed the rope Joe tossed to him. Jimmy had been pacing excitedly up and down along the water's edge. As we made land, he rushed to help me clamber from the boat.

The young man held back, lingering for a moment as he cautiously scrutinized the camp and the surrounding terrain. Finally satisfied, he turned and ducked under the camouflaged netting. He tucked a long cylindrical bundle under his arm; without further hesitation, he leapt from the boat. With long, confident strides, he accompanied Hector to the camp. Jimmy held back and took my hand, and we followed slowly.

Hector and Joe chattered in Spanish as they climbed the gentle slope, continuing unabated as Jimmy and I arrived. I unceremoniously plopped onto a pile of saddle blankets in the shade of the canvas lean-to. "*No habla*," I stated, my voice raised slightly so as to interrupt the conversation.

"*Excúseme, jefe!*" Hector said. "Jose has much to tell!"

I turned my full attention to the young man. "Let's hear it."

"Well, Hector and I have a lot in common. I have been studying the herb lore of the Native Americans for the university these last two years. He tells me he may be the last of the

Chiricahua. He may be right, I think! There could be some White Mountain Apache that survived in the mountains of Arizona, but Chiricahua, I don't know of any of their lands that might still be above sea level.

"I'm from Portland, Oregon. I was at a winter camp in the Sierra Nevadas when the quakes hit. I tried to make my way home at first, but when the Cascades began to erupt, it was impossible...." He paused for a moment, reflecting. "I have no idea if my folks made it out before the eruptions began or not."

"How far north were you able to go?"

"I managed to get down to Chico on foot and head north; some of the I-5 corridor was still manageable. But by the time I reached Redding, the wind had carried the ash cloud far enough south that everyone was heading back, trying to escape it. Redding was already under eight or nine feet of ash and getting worse by the hour, so I turned around, headed back to the south again too.

"The quakes continued, just like here, I'd imagine, and the sea level rose. I was stranded on a little rise near Corning when the wind blew this boat my way." He turned and nodded toward the catamaran at the water's edge. "It wasn't three or four hours before the little hilltop I was on was completely submerged."

"Damn! So you just did get outta there?" I asked.

"Karma." he said softly, "Karma. I have been on that boat since December 5th, Mr. Burroughs."

He unfurled the bundle he had retrieved from the boat. "These are some charts I've made." He laid several sheets of cloth on the ground between us. "You can see all of this to the north is desolate. Volcanic ash has completely obliterated the region. I know; I have gone as far to the north as anyone could. To the west of what was the Central Valley are a few peaks poking above the water, but there are no survivors there... none that I could find, anyway. The solar storms scorched that whole area. The Sierras were hit hard, too. I did find some small groups of survivors along

the shore, but as I said, I was attacked several times. I can't carry very much in the way of supplies. Whenever I put in to restock, everyone wants this boat.

"I used a highway map as a guide," the boy continued. "These aren't exact, but close enough."

The maps charted the waterline from near Crescent City on California's northern Pacific shore, down along a series of islands then eastward across what had been California's Central Valley to the remnants of the Sierra Nevada range. The Sierras had been shattered into a string of rugged islands. To the east of the islands lay a vast wasteland clear to the foothills of central Utah. It was indeed the Great Basin now, a vast wasteland. The southern third of Nevada is completely submerged, while the northern two-thirds were partially submerged during high tides, a vast morass of mud and debris at low tide. Arizona and New Mexico were most likely also drowned under the ocean. Any passage farther north is impossible due to the continued volcanic fallout. Only a string of tiny mud-washed islands dotted across the map from near Mono Lake at the base of Mammoth Mountain to just south of Salt Lake City.

"Hector told me you are looking for a way to get to Colorado," Joe said. "These islands are your only hope. You might be able to dash from one to the other during low tides, but then again, the mud might swallow you right up. I've been stranded on that mud flat during low tides, off and on for days, sailing to Salt Lake City and back. There's nothing left there, either."

"What about getting to Mono?" I asked. "Could someone reach Mono Lake on horseback?"

"If you can cross this tidal flat between here and that island," he said, indicating San Bernardino. "You'd have to swim the channel to the San Gabriel Mountains."

"What do you know of the terrain on San Bernardino, and how wide is the channel to San Gabriel?"

"I can't speak to the interior," he replied, "but the south shoreline is very steep and rugged. You couldn't navigate that very well on horseback. During low tide, you might be able to cover a few miles a day along the flats, though... maybe. But the channel to San Gabriel is a good mile wide. Do you think a horse can swim that far?"

"A horse will cover that distance without too much trouble, but it could be risky," I said. "What of the people you've encountered? You said you had been attacked?"

It's not pretty out there, Mr. Burroughs."

"*Momento, Amigo,*" Hector interrupted. "*El niño,*" he said, nodding toward Jimmy, who listened intently at my side.

"*Entiendo,*" the young man replied.

The exchange puzzled me for a moment. Then, finally, Hector stood and extended a hand toward the boy. "Jimmy, *mi amigo,*" he said, "let us go see if your mama would like some help."

The boy sat still as a stone as he looked to me for direction. He knew something was afoot. I nodded to indicate he should go with Hector. "Go ahead, son, see if your mama needs anything."

I could tell the boy didn't like being told to get, but he jumped to his feet nonetheless. "Yes, sir, Grampa," he said sullenly. He stalked off beside Hector, across the camp to where Rowena was striking a cook fire.

I turned my attention back to the young man. "What is it, Joe?" I asked. "What is so bad the boy needs to be taken away?"

"Well, Mr. Burroughs, I have been circling this group of islands..." He waved his hand from San Gabriel to San Bernardino, then to the south. "I put in at several places on both islands looking for food and to replenishing my water supply." He paused to gather his thoughts, then began to pace back and forth. He looked directly into my eyes. "I saw bodies, Mr. Burroughs.

Dismembered corpses. They weren't torn apart by animals; they were cut up. Somebody cut them up for meat, I swear!"

I settled back onto my pad of blankets. "Jesus. You're sure of this?"

"The bodies were hung from trees and cut up, Mr. Burroughs. They were cut up for meat."

"God almighty. Cannibals. I can't believe there are fucking cannibals over there!"

"I can't think of any other explanation, Mr. Burroughs. When I tried to approach anyone near the shore, all of them ran into hiding. I was discovered onshore twice and had to run for my life. I just did get the boat into deep water the last time."

Cannibals? That put a whole new twist on things. We would need to post sentinels to watch for anyone attempting to cross from San Bernardino. "Well, Joe, there are no cannibals on *these* islands. So you can consider yourself among friends here and rest easy. No one here will try to take your boat or anything else that belongs to you."

I shook his hand again firmly. "Welcome to the Santa Rosa Islands."

Chapter XVI

March 3...

Unaware that I had drifted off to sleep before sundown, I woke in the pre-dawn darkness. It was difficult getting my bearings in the thick, pervasive blackness as I shook the cobwebs from my mind. I'd have to be careful with those medicine smokes. I could come to like them a bit too much.

The camp was quiet in the darkness. The embers that remained of the fire glowed faintly, then flared brightly as the breeze blew in off the ocean. While I gazed at the red glare of the coals, an unburned twig burst into flame. I noticed a faint flicker of light across the broad channel, near the top of the steep slopes of San Bernardino.

In an instant, I was wide awake, my heart pounding like a mad man beating the devil on a drum. Scrambling for a moment, groping in the darkness, I felt the cold, familiar shape of the synthetic rifle stock and the metal barrel of the M-14. Working myself into a comfortable position, I propped the rifle across my saddle, focusing the scope on the pinprick of light. The fire was big enough to be seen at better than two miles. *Someone stoked that fire recently. Let's see what's going on at the Cleaver's!*

Slowing my breathing, I settled in to watch, wait and see what the sunrise might reveal. The sky began to lighten in the east as the receding tide exposed a long stretch of the muddy flat between the islands. The first of the sun's rays sparkled on the water. Before I could detect any movement, the speck of flame on

San Bernardino disappeared in the growing daylight. As I strained my eyes to see into the shadows of the forest on the far island, I dozed off again...



The sun was bright as I sat astride the big Appaloosa. Standing knee-deep in the creek, the air rising cool from the snowmelt that caused the creek to test its banks, the horse pawed playfully in the cold, fast-moving water. We made our way upstream again, heading home at last. The screech of a red tail hawk, riding the wind high above, rang in my ears.

I nudged the horse with my heels. He jumped the short bank and headed off across the wide valley. In the far distance, nestled at the foot of a snow-capped mountain, was home—our home. The place Suzanne and I had settled in twenty years ago, where we planned to live out our lives together.

"Suzanne!" I called for her, "Suzanne!" I raised my voice, but there was no reply.

Against the wind, I heard a soft voice. First patiently, then more instant ... but I could not make out the words. Fog crept in, casting a shadow across the valley. Something clawed at my back as the voice in the distance continued. "Ganesh," the voice said. "It's called Ganesh, Grampa."



My dream world faded rapidly into the bright glare of the morning sun. I became acutely aware that my neck and back cramped badly from the position into which I had slumped.

"He's an elephant man, Grampa," Jimmy was saying. "His name is Ganesh."

As I rolled onto my side to relieve the cramp, the bright morning sun fell full across my face. My instinctive effort to shade my eyes brought another shock of pain to my neck and back. Then a shadow fell across my face, blocking the bright, piercing light.

"Grampa?" Jimmy spoke from the shadow above me. "Grampa, are you okay?"

Opening my eyes to a slit, I looked straight into the boy's eyes as he knelt above me, his pale, freckled face surrounded by a halo of wild red hair.

"Are you okay, Grampa? You were talking in your sleep again, ya know. Are you okay?"

His bright blue eyes looked into mine. His brow pinched with concern. It took me several moments to grasp where I was before I could answer.

"You're here, Jimmy boy?" I was unsure if I was awake or still dreaming.

"I'm here, Grampa."

"Then everything is okay." I reached around his thin shoulders and pulled him down to my chest, giving him a long, gentle hug.

"You sure you're okay, Grampa?" the boy asked suspiciously.

His tone humored me. "Well enough, son," I said, mustering a little strength. "How are you this fine morning?"

The boy's concern faded instantly, "Look!" he said, brandishing a small, crudely carved object in his hands, "Look! It's called Ganesh!"

"What's a Ganesh?" I asked playfully, knowing full well the answer.

"It's an Elephant man! A Hindu God, Joe said. He called him the Remover of Obstacles! It sure would be good to have him around, dontcha think?"

"Well, a great many people around the world think so, Jimmy. I sure don't see how having Ganesh on our side would hurt!"

"Joe said I could look at it for a while. He keeps it on his boat for good luck."

"Something has kept that young man alive all this time," I said. "Maybe there is something to ol' Ganesh after all!"

As the tidal cycle progressed, high tide was near 00:45 hours, low tide a little more than twelve hours later. James, Billy, Hector, and Joe had been busy marking the exact point of land that was the first to be exposed as the tide ebbed. Finally, they made their way back into camp near 08:30 hours.

The aroma of fresh, sizzling duck filled the air, and the sound of rapidly boiling water greeted us as we joined the rest of the party at the fireside.

"You rest well, Chief?" Billy asked, a bit of humor in his voice. "You were mumblin' and hollerin' in your sleep again."

"We thought it best to let you be while you were snuggled up to that rifle," James added, his voice half-concerned, half-chiding me.

"I was dreaming of home again. I was dreaming about Suzanne."

They tried to hide their silent, exchanged glances, but I saw them nonetheless. *I wonder how long this is going to go on?*

We ate together in silence, in the shade of a tarp stretched between several stunted pines, each of us pondering God knew what personal fancy. The duck was an excellent change to our decent but monotonous fare. Billy had snared the bird at a fresh water hole up the mountain the night before. While Rowena readied it for the spit, Joe broke out some rather unusual seasonings he had concocted from wild herbs he'd gathered and stored on his boat.

James broke the extended silence. "We've marked the highest strip of land between the islands. We'll get our Recon Team up here; take a look across the way."

"I was watching a fire over there before dawn," I said. "Didn't see any activity, but your right, fellas; there are people over there. From what Joe has told me, we need to be extremely careful."

"Joe told us of what he saw on San Gabriel and San Bernardino," James said. "We'll get sentries posted along the shore when we get to Idyllwild tomorrow."

"Good, good," I mumbled, my mind wandering a bit. "Think we can check out the crossing to San Gabriel while we're at it?"

"They will search out the path to San Gabriel, *jefe*," Hector interrupted. "You need to heal before you can undertake such a journey. Let Hector help, and Joe too. He has the understanding of many herbs, *jefe*. We can help you heal quickly if you will let us."

"I'll be as patient as I can," I replied, "but work your magic quick."

March 8...

The rain continued unabated through the day. The storm swept out of the east without warning and caught us an hour after leaving Idyllwild. It hadn't let up since. At least the freshwater catchments would be brimming with clear drinking water again.

Upon our arrival in Idyllwild, we found very little left standing. The old post office had been spared significant structural damage and had been used as Holt's headquarters. Most everyone on San Jacinto was still concentrating on scouring the island for renegades and survivors, although none of either had been found. Before heading back to Henshaw, a coast watch was sent to the north shore to monitor the channel for any activity. We would see

if anyone else was moving on the southern slope of San Bernardino after the blasted weather cleared.

I gave young Joe a writ of safe passage, and he made the trip from the north channel to Henshaw without incident but caused quite an uproar when he swung his catamaran onto the beach at the gap. He had pulled down all of the camo netting for the trip, and the bright yellow, blue and brilliant white sail caught everyone's attention. Upon producing my note to Chuck Daniels, he was greeted warmly. The poor boy was kept busy until we returned, repeatedly relating his journey, describing the geography of scattered islands and volcanic wasteland to the north and the endless ocean to the east. At my insistence, he mentioned the butchered corpses only to Chuck and Gabe Ford.

After returning to the village, I invited Joe to bunk in the hooch with Jimmy, Hector, and me. I combed his memory and poured over his charts to no end. There were 14 islands to the north and four channels between them that I would have to swim. Exposed mudflats connected the rest at low tide, which I might be able to cross on horseback. But, with this peg leg, I couldn't walk across without difficulty, if at all.

James, Billy, Ramon, and French were preparing for some kind of action. When I asked, they simply said, "Just being prepared." I guessed they were planning a full-scale recon of San Bernardino. Maybe it was just wishful thinking.

My own plans for heading north were quickly taking shape, thanks in no small part to Joe's information and his charts. I could pack supplies for a month, maybe more if I rationed myself strictly. Water was my biggest concern. I could pack two five-gallon containers on a horse without a problem. Twenty gallons of clean water, with luck, would sustain me for 40 days. I could take two horses to pack the water, one for food and one for ammo, camp gear, and other necessities. I'd start on the gray and take a

second saddle horse as well. Six horses total, five of them on a lead line. It was going to be a handful.

I planned to hunt some fresh meat once the weather cleared. I figured to barter the fresh kill for jerked meat, dried fruit, and millet. I could not leave thinking I had caused a food shortage or any kind of hardship for these people. In a very short time, they had become my family. James and Jimmy, and Rowena. Billy Greentree, French Dick, and Ramon Black crow. And Hector. Most of all, Hector, the man had become my friend, my brother, my son, my protector.

Leaving these people would be one of the most difficult things I could imagine. But I had to go. I could not live without making an effort to find Suzanne and assure she was safe in this new and dangerous world... if she still survived. I could not sit idle growing fat and lazy, waiting to die.

March 9....

Something was different. The wind had changed. There was a new scent in the air. I felt stronger... *stronger!*

The lingering storm had passed in the night. I could feel the warmth of the coming day before the sun's first light began to wash the eastern sky. I lay on my palate for a while, listening to the rhythmic intake and exhale of breath as Hector, young Joe, and little Jimmy slept in the close confines of our shared abode. The smell of horse sweat and kerosene filled the space, while saddle leather, gun oil, and faint traces of days-old Cordite lingered about me in the dark closeness.

Outside, I heard the shrill, distant cries of gulls. Songbirds began their varied choruses as dawn broke across the island. Soon, I would be leaving this behind. I peered into the darkness around me. What hardship, what horrors, yet unknown might I face? I wished I were 20 years younger. *This trek may finally be the end of me, but I'm going anyway.*

The sun's warm light crept into the dark interior of the hooch, falling upon the faces of my boys as they slept. What would become of them in the end? What would become of any of us?

I heard a faint clink of tin, someone getting busy in the mess hall. As quietly as possible, I pulled myself to my feet. Tightening my belt about me, I found my leg and gently slid the soft leather boot onto my stump. The leather felt good against my skin. I stood on the peg leg, seating the boot firmly; the sharp, piercing pain was but a memory now. I lifted the gun harness from its peg on the wall, shouldering it in a single, smooth motion. Its weight was comforting as I cinched the straps that secured the prosthetic to the harness. I decided to swim the gray to Laguna Island and hunt pig.

As I eased the squeaking metal door of our room open, I caught a whiff of Manzanita tea in the air. So red Fern was in the mess hall, I smiled. *That old woman treats me like a king!*

I cautiously strolled across the upper compound. The leg felt good. I started down the short decline to the mess hall. With each step, my confidence grew. The pain to which I had become accustomed was gone! Instead, I felt a new vigor that I could not explain. With each stride, I felt the strength returning to my limbs.

05:20...

Having finished a sparse meal of dried fish and pan bread baked from some sort of wild grains, I made my way to round up the gray. He was happy to see me and appeared eager to get under saddle. Making our way up the hill, Hector greeted us at the hitching rail near the hooch with a saddle in hand. "Early for a ride, jefe?"

"Going for some fresh pig this morning, my friend." I dragged a brush over the gray's back a time or two.

Hector settled the saddle in place and began to cinch it tight. "*Momento por favor*," he said. "I will go with you."

"Not today, Hector. I need to do this myself."

"My friend, you need..." He started.

"Please, Hector. I need to do this my way today. Please understand."

He stepped back and cast his eyes to the ground. "*Si, jefe.* As you wish."

Returning to our shelter, I secured the M-14 and a satchel of loaded magazines. I tied the rifle in its sling and, with a grunt, mounted the gray.

"I will be fine," I assured him, settling into the saddle. "I am crossing to Laguna, is all. I'll be back before noon."

Swinging the horse away, I pointed his nose at the peak on Laguna and headed out, wondering if I was being a bit rash. "If I can swim this horse across the channel to Laguna, I'll have it in the bag," I said to myself, dropping over the ledge toward the lake. I never looked back.

The tide was still dropping when I reached the channel. There was a clear path to the water's edge, and I could see several take-out points across 50 or 60 yards of water on the far shore. The current wasn't running too fast, but I guessed we could be carried a good 75 or 80 yards downstream before making that far bank. *Maybe that's why I see so many places to climb out,* I thought as I un-slung the 14.

The horse stepped into the water without more than a moment's hesitation. Then, after 12 or 15 feet, the bottom dropped out from under us. The horse leapt into the current and surged straight across the channel. I let the saddle drop from beneath me and gave the horse his head. Grasping the saddle horn in one hand, I held the rifle and bag of magazines high as the cool water washed around me. We proceeded quickly until the stronger current of the deeper channel caught hold of us. The horse instinctively turned into the current as he quickened his effort. Within a few minutes, we were out of the current and back into calm water.

Moments later, the horse's feet found purchase on solid ground. As he approached the bank, I pulled myself back into the saddle. The gray scrambled the 30 or 40 feet up the bank to a relatively level shoulder of the slope and then stopped to shake. I laughed as I was nearly tossed from the saddle while the horse shook furiously like a giant dog after his swim.

The horse stood calmly as I blew the water from the action of the Coonan's. "Gonna need something to waterproof some gear before heading north," I said to the horse. He snorted softly in reply as we set out for the orchard I had spied from high on the mountain across the channel. "Orchard equals pig," I said out loud as we broke the top of the rise.

The gray leveled out into an easy lope toward an orderly row of trees in the distance. On my right stood a barrier of large logs stacked two high. I could see hog sign in many places along the base of the barrier. They had been rooting deeply. Large stones filled holes where the hogs had tried digging beneath the massive fence in a couple of places. "Looks like they took our advice," I said to the gray as I reined him in, slowing to a walk. As the temperature climbed steadily, I figured we'd walk the wall to see if we could happen upon any hogs napping.

Wild animals will spook at the sound and feel of something on two legs, but a four-legged creature can get a lot closer without causing alarm. I reined the gray away from the log wall and pulled up under the shade of a giant sycamore tree. I needed to adjust my trousers and check the condition of my gear before I got too serious about burning any powder.

I was surprised to find my rifle and satchel completely dry. Pulling the scope from its pouch on my harness, I seated it sharply into its bracket on the M-14 with a snap. I removed the magazine from the rifle and tapped it against the saddle horn, ensuring that each round was stacked and seated snugly, then inserted the magazine back in its port with a satisfying "click."

The gray seemed to understand what we were about, standing like a rock as I settled a moccasined foot in the stirrup and mounted him again. He turned ever so slightly toward the log barrier, then stopped, waiting for my direction. "Easy boy." I ran my hand up the length of his neck, rubbing his ears just the way he liked it. "We'll see some pig sooner than later, I think."

With a soft click of my tongue, the horse stepped from the shade of the sycamore as the sun warmed my bare skin. After several days of rain, the temperature had been hovering at a comfortable 75 degrees. Now, though, I guessed it was nearly 85 degrees already and not yet 07:00 hours. "Going to be a scorcher," I told the horse. Giving him his head, he wandered in and out of the oak and sycamore, on a path parallel to and 40 yards off the hog fence. The horse walked calmly through the tall grass. Hog sign was apparent here and there. Patches of earth were turned deeply, a sure sign of pigs digging for roots and such.

When the breeze shifted slightly, I caught the faint sound of men's voices. As we proceeded further, the voices became stronger. Upon breaking from a patch of close-growing brush, I saw a group of men and women laboring on the Hog barrier.

I was spotted and then recognized. Everyone paused for a moment to exchange greetings as I approached. The people were warm and friendly. There could be worse places to live out my days, I thought. The gravity of that notion hit like a brick. "No! I am going home, I am going to find Suzanne, and I will not let anything get in my way!" I admonished myself.

The sound of the wind in the apple trees filled the air with the rustling of leaves as we left the construction behind. The noise calmed at the whim of the breath of the gods off the ocean. The scent of ripe apples filled the air, and the gray nipped at a choice morsel or two as we made our way deeper into the orchards. The horse stopped and tossed his head, his ears perked up, straining into the breeze. Then, standing like a statue of stone, he peered into

the trees, shifting his weight from one side to the other. He blew once as he tossed his head again and began to walk forward of his own volition.

I heard them before they came into view. Hogs! The closer we got, the more obvious their numbers became. There must have been several dozen, at least. I could hear the insistent, peevish squealing of many piglets. The commotion of the herd was punctuated by the occasional deep grunt of many older, larger hogs.

The gray stopped as we came to the edge of a clearing. Not 60 yards across, it was carpeted with thick, dark green grass nearly knee-high. To one side were the remains of an old packing shed. In the shade of the grove of trees, just beyond was a large herd of feral pigs.

Since we'd approached from downwind, the pigs did not catch our scent. This herd had several breeding sows that I could see. There must have been 50 or 60 piglets scampering in the grass, never venturing far from the pack of older pigs rustling and rooting around a couple of old, fallen apple trees.

The heat was becoming oppressive. Laying up in the deepest shade, I could see several very large sows, 200 pounds or more, I'd say. In their midst was a massive boar.

I tugged gently backward on the reins with my fingertips. Then, as the gray silently moved back into the shadows of the orchard, I reached for my rifle. The movement caught the big boar's attention. As I brought the gun up, he lurched heavily to his feet, putting the whole herd on alert.

I didn't think that big old boar would make good eating, but he was obviously the prime breeder for this bunch. Thirty feet to his left, several pigs began to mill about in a tight bunch. I eased the rifle to my shoulder, brought a fat gilt into the sight, and squeezed the trigger. The roar of the gun shattered the calm and

quiet of the little clearing, and the herd scattered. Birds flushed from the grass, and trees exploded into the air.

Pulling the rifle down to acquire another target, the horse tensed under me and shifted slightly. Looking along the scope with my off eye, my heart jumped into my throat. That damn boar was charging straight at us! He was massive, 450 pounds or more if I was a day old. "Ganesh ol' buddy, where are you now?" I pulled the rifle tight against my shoulder again.

"Easy boy, easy there!" I spoke softly to the gray, "Just hold on a minute." I tried to get the hog's rapidly approaching chest lined up in the scope. Unfortunately, the boar crossed half the clearing before I could recover and get another shot off. As the rifle roared again, the hog stumbled and somersaulted but was back on his feet, charging again without losing a beat.

The massive beast filled the scope as I squeezed off a third shot. His front legs collapsed under him as his chin plowed through the grass. I was nearly unhorsed as the gray pranced sideways in the commotion. I swung him around and gave him a heel. He leapt two or three times to the side. I spun back around for another shot, but the hog was dead, lying motionless in the tall grass that rustled softly in the silence as the breeze blew gently through the clearing.

The rush of adrenalin ebbed, and the silence of a mausoleum filled the clearing. The blood pounding in my ears began to fade. The pigs had scattered in every direction at the first shot. Then, a pall of silence fell over the glade.

Not thirty seconds had passed from start to finish. I had two pigs to hoist, bleed and gut. In this heat, I would have to work fast. The task was a test of my strength and skill. Neither the rope nor the tree could stand the weight of the giant boar, but I was able to clean and dress the 100-pound gilt without too much difficulty, though my knife dulled quickly.

Tying the dressed pig behind my saddle, I headed back to the work party laboring on the hog fence. As I passed, I let them

know of the giant boar's carcass near the old packing shed and headed back to Henshaw. Again, crossing against the current with the added bulk of the pig was difficult ... another lesson learned.

I arrived back at the village near 14:30 hours, much later than I had told Hector. I immediately went to find him, but he was nowhere to be found. I felt a bit concerned by his absence. I had become so used to his presence, my constant shadow.

I sat for a few minutes to gather my strength as Hector strolled into the village, leading two loaded pack horses. Each horse carried half of that massive hog! He'd followed me and witnessed my encounter with the herd, my hunt, and failed effort to hoist and butcher the giant hog. He didn't comment as he quickly rigged a tripod of pine poles. He hung both sides of the hog with little effort and began to cut them into manageable portions. He unrolled the hide he had peeled from the hog's carcass and began to scrape excess flesh from it. Old Red Fern and several others took over the chore and began to smoke the portions of the hog Hector had carved from the carcass as it hung under the tripod.

Exhausted, I sat mesmerized as a dozen people came together. As if performing a finely choreographed and practice ballet, they prepared the hide and the meat for our use and consumption. Several of the older children pulled the pig from behind the gray's saddle. While the processing continued, they unsaddled and brushed him down as though directed.

After Hector had given his task over to the elders, he came to my side with a jar of cool water, offering it to me. "It has been a long day for you today, *jefe*, has it not?"

"Yes, my friend, a longer day I have not had in some time."

"You did well, my friend, but next time I will come with you." His eyes settled on mine. The concern they showed spoke volumes.

"Yes, my friend." I raised a weary arm and set my hand upon his shoulder. "I will gladly hunt with you, without question."

March 12...

While the earthquakes had continued steadily since the beginning, primarily small temblors with a few bone-rattlers thrown in, we had all become used to them.

Until this one.

At 10:25, the earth began to groan deeply beneath our feet. It was a sound of such tonal quality I felt it in my bones before the ground began to move. The nearly imperceptible sound rapidly grew into a roar. The blue-green water of the ocean erupted violently along a line running roughly south to north and just a bit to the west.

As the earth convulsed, the island we called Elsinore began to rise dramatically higher above the water. Geysers of steam and rock rose several hundred yards or more into the sky. The earth rocked beneath my feet, and I was thrown violently. I clawed at the dirt and grass in an effort to keep from being tossed down the hillside toward the lake.

Little Jimmy was caught in a fit of terrified laughter that had me beside myself, clawing at the ground, my sides aching as I tried to maintain my composure but overtaken by a wave of laughter myself.

Above the roar of the earth tearing itself apart, people and animals screamed in terror. I clung to the ground for life as violent rolling tremors rocked the land beneath me, over and over and over.

Then it stopped.

With dust still thick in the air, I glanced at my watch: 10:32. Christ! Seven minutes of non-stop rock and roll. It seemed that the Earth Mother wasn't done punishing us just yet.

Out to sea, I could not see Elsinore on the horizon. I can only imagine what the end must have been like for any poor soul

that still clung to life on that patch of dry ground that no longer existed.

The clamor of voices pulled my attention from the still roiling sea. Several of the buildings had sustained damage, and numerous people had been injured, none critically, thank God. As everyone calmed down, they migrated to the open area around the council fire, a regular practice when the stronger quakes hit. Open space was safe space. As the people made their way up the hill, I caught myself looking at every face, glancing at first one, then the other, looking, frantically looking.

Where was Suzanne?

At that moment, I made up my mind: *I'm leaving*. I wasn't going to wait any longer, not for my body to heal, nor until we identified and pacified any threat from San Bernardino. I wasn't going to wait for more news of a clear route. I was going to gather my gear, make ready and head out, pronto! I had grown to love some of these people as my own family, but I could not rest here any longer. I was going home at last, to Suzanne – or die trying.

March 16...

Mason and his boys picked six good horses from the herd, vouching for their fitness himself. Four were shod while the others appeared sound and well prepared for the journey.

It wasn't much of a problem wrangling the gear I needed, such as water casks, pack-saddles, and oiled canvas packsacks. I added a couple of hundred feet of good rope and as much .308, .357, and 12 gauge ammo as I could carry.

Day by day, Jimmy became more somber and withdrawn as my departure grew closer. James and the recon team seemed preoccupied. They had not been in the village for more than a few hours at a time since returning from our survey of the northern shoreline. Hector remained by my side nearly 24 hours a day. It had become a bit eerie, in fact.

The earthquakes continued at fairly regular intervals for several days. I didn't know whether they were aftershocks or actual quakes. I wished it would settle down, though.

Another storm moved in overnight as the wind shifted, blowing hard off the southern ocean. The blast of cold air signaled the arrival of a cold front settling right on top of us. It marked the first time since January that the temperature had dropped below 70 degrees. With everyone running around half-naked in the 80 and 90-degree heat, none of us were ready for the chill wind that plagued us all day and into the night as I continued to sort my gear.

March 17...

The weather continued to blow cold and rainy from the south, but Hector and I headed to Laguna after a belly full of hot broth and jerked pork. Forging Banner Channel, the water felt warm against the cold air, and the sea was rough, but the gray had grown used to the water crossings and handled it without much effort.

We had my string of horses in tow for the trek. I wanted to get them used to traveling together and settle their nerves for the long journey ahead. Without Hector's steady hand, I would have been hard-pressed to manage them on that first crossing, but they all scrambled ashore on Laguna without incident.

The wet weather didn't appear to bother our prey much, so we hunted hogs in the cold drizzle for the better part of the day. Hector was an excellent tracker, but even I was able to locate the herd several times. We took a couple of pigs on each occasion. The weather seemed to dull their senses a bit.

March 19...

The beauty of the sunrise enthralled me. The weather had cleared, and the temperature was rapidly on the rise. Hector and I

spent the night on Laguna, tracking a herd of hogs. Before we were finished, we loaded all seven of our horses with butchered pigs.

Hector scouted downslope, gathering raspberries at a patch the pigs hadn't discovered. I sat in place, sipping tea and marveling at the sunrise. We considered camping another night on the island, depending on how the day went.

After a long morning hunt, I hung another hog in the trees. Finally, we'd put a dent in the pig population, but the People would have to continue to hammer away at the two known herds to keep them under control.

Without warning or prompting, Hector told me he would be joining me when I headed north. "I will not let you go alone, my friend," he said adamantly. "There is nothing you can say that will keep me from it. I *will* ride with you to your Colorado mountains!"

I was a bit relieved. I had not asked anyone to undertake the journey with me. I had no right to ask anyone to put themselves in the path of God only knows what danger might be found. Nevertheless, I accepted Hector's insistence with gratitude. "It will be a long and difficult road, my friend," I said.

"We will face any trouble together. We will get to the mountains of your home and *su esposa. Usted es mi familia, mi hermano, mi jefe.*" He spoke softly but firmly, then grasped my forearm as I grasped his. "*You* are my family, my brother, my Chief," he said, looking intently into my eyes. "We will travel this path together to whatever end we will find."

His eyes moistened as he spoke. He stood, turned away, and repeated what he'd said before: "*Usted es mi familia, mi hermano, mi jefe.*"

There it was: Hector would ride beside me on the trek to Colorado. I had been hiding my concern and trepidation of making the journey alone. Now, I was relieved beyond my own imagining.

Chapter XVII

March 20, 19:30 hours...

It had been several hours since Hector left on some undisclosed errand. I was content to rest and jot down my thoughts while the last of the sun's rays flashed bright red and orange against a thin blanket of clouds. The shimmering reflection of its golden orb danced on the ocean as it slid below the far horizon. A torn and dog-eared *Farmer's Almanac* said today was the Spring Equinox. I wonder if I can call it that any longer? How did the polar shift affect the Earth's orbit around the Sun—or the Moon's orbit around the Earth, for that matter? I didn't know.

My compass pointed to magnetic north, now somewhere in the northwest Pacific. Who knew how long the changes would continue as the earth's crust adjusted to the massive gravitational shift? Ancient mountain ranges crumbled and became submerged in a roiling sea. New mountains thrust up from the depths as tectonic plates collided, while volcanic islands roared into existence as the plates were pulled apart at the seams. What the surface of the planet looked like was anybody's guess.

I had no star charts, guide posts, maps, or anything else to show me where the heavenly bodies should be as they traveled the Universe in their long, elliptic paths. Only this almanac. Sunrise and sunset no longer abided by the predictions old Ben Franklin began laying down for us 250 years before.

In late March, facing northeast after evening twilight, the constellation Orion should be on my left and the Big Dipper on the

right. Orion's Belt should be low in the west and the Big Dipper almost overhead. Yet, I could not find Betelgeuse with its distinctive orange glow, nor Rigel, the brightest of Orion's stars. We should have long, cold nights and short cool days, not the opposite. It should be dry with a foot or more snow blanketing this mountaintop. Instead, the mercury often topped 90 degrees before the sun reached its zenith, and brief rain showers provided momentary respite from the sweltering heat nearly every afternoon. The weather pattern more closely resembled a summer day in Florida than winter in the southern California mountains. Raging tropical storms rose out of the ocean almost without warning. The earth continued to move continuously beneath our feet, and the occasional solar storms destroyed everything in their path.

In a day, we would leave Santa Rosa Island and the little village. We planned to island-hop north, jumping from one shattered bit of granite to the next, along the fractured spine of what was once the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Once we reached the volcanic wasteland indicated on Joe's charts, a hundred miles south of the Oregon state line. At that point, we planned to turn east and pray we could make our way from one "muddy little island" to the next.

Thin wisps of angel wing clouds and gentle westerly winds foretell mild, warm weather for our departure. We'd make our crossing at San Bernardino, hopefully without being spotted by hostiles huddled in the brush or shrouded by the forest's shadow.

With luck, we'd make a dry crossing to the foot of San Gorgonio, then search out a path for a wet crossing to San Gabriel. From there, we'd be on our own with only Joe's charts to guide us.

I knew I could still hold my own, crippled though I was. I'd tracked men in the wild for many years, and with Hector's skills in woodcraft from his many journeys home to Old Mexico, we would

ferret out a new route to the Rocky Mountains, to my home, to my Suzanne.

March 21...

I woke to the sweet scent of Hector's brew long before the sun broached the eastern sky. The pre-dawn darkness blotted out the starlight as we loaded the pack saddles with fresh pork for the short ride to Henshaw.

We finished our meager breakfast of fresh pig sizzling from the fire and roasted pine nuts washed down with warm herb tea. Then, breaking camp as the sun's rays burst from the sea, we headed for the work camp along the hog fence to say our goodbyes as we passed.

The swim across Banner Channel was a refreshing plunge in the morning heat. As with every crossing, my confidence continued to grow. Hector was silent as usual until we scrambled up the channel's bank and stopped to check the livestock and gear. "*Jefe*, we are prepared for our journey.

We have supplies to last for many weeks, ammunition for our guns, and many good horses. *Pero tengo una pregunta. ¿Están preparado para esto en la cabeza?* Are you prepared in your head?" He tapped a finger to his temple. "*Mi amigo*, are you ready for the journey *here?*"

I paused for a moment, pondering the question, puzzling an answer. *Am I?* I asked myself. *Am I truly ready for a thousand-mile journey through God knows what?*

I turned to Hector. "I'll never be more ready than I am today, my friend. What about you? Are you still willing to make this journey with a crippled old man?" I asked wryly, hiding my fear of his answer with a smile, afraid he might have decided against the trek north.

"I have given my word, *mi hermano*," he replied, his eyes fixed firmly on mine. "We will go to your Colorado mountains

together. If they are still there, *o encontraremos a nuestro Dios juntos*, or we will meet God together."

"*Gracias*, my friend." I pulled myself up into the saddle again. "Let's get after it then!"

With a nod to the north, I nudged the gray with a heel. We were spotted at the gardens, and runners raced ahead to the tiny hamlet on the hill ahead of us.

My excitement grew as we crested the last rise to the village, where we were greeted warmly. Stepping down from the gray's back, twelve or fifteen people began to unload our haul of meat and cart it away.

A fire was struck in the Council pit, though it was only 11:00 hours. They skewered one of the hogs, stuffed with cattail root, pine nuts, and crushed juniper berries, and stitched it up as it hung over the growing blaze. A couple of boys turned the pig on the spit while others busied themselves, hauling tables and benches from the Mess Hall to the Council Fire. Together, Miss Red Fern and Liz Banks, who had taken over the duties of chief cook and nutritionist for the village, managed the orderly preparation of a feast unlike any we had seen to date.

Mason joined us to make a final inventory of our gear. Giving the livestock one last going over, he was oddly quiet.

By 13:00 hours, everyone crowded around the Council Fire. The celebration became more festive when Chuck Daniels appeared with two bottles bound in leather. "Been hoarding the gin," he said a bit sheepishly, "This is half of what's left."

He extended the bottles toward me. "Thank you, Chuck," I said as he quickly turned away. "Hold up there! Sit and have a round with me."

He turned and sat beside me. We shared a tip of the bottle without another word spoken. Then, after passing the bottle between us a couple of times, he stood and walked away.

As Chuck stepped away, one Villager after another made their way to my side and offered their thanks for some favor or courtesy they thought I might have done. Some were grateful for my leadership, while others wished me well. Still, others simply shook my hand while looking deeply into my eyes for a moment. The warmth and honor of the people overwhelmed me.

After everyone spoke, I sat away from the commotion and gathered my thoughts, pondering the road ahead. Soon, I found myself confronted by Mitchell and Donnie, Gabe, Bob, and a dozen other villagers. "We all know you are leaving today," Gabe said. "We will all be sorry to see you go, but we understand. We know you think Mitch should take over as village leader, and we agree." He motioned to the group that had gathered around us. "Mitch has agreed to step up to the task. I've been appointed Security Head." He turned slightly to Bob, who nodded in agreement.

"We all agree to continue what you've started here. We cannot thank you enough for everything you've done for us, for your leadership, for the confidence you have given us, and for your friendship. You have kept us alive and allowed us to build our community, to make new families," Gabe added.

"None of us thought we could ever get this far, Bill," Donnie said. "Liz and I will always be in your debt."

I was dumbstruck by their outpouring. Before I could respond, though, Mitchell stepped to my side. Grasping my arm, he helped me to my feet. He took my hand in his and held it firmly. "We will be here if you ever return." He wrapped an arm across my shoulders in a firm hug. "Now, let's join the party!" he said, stepping back.

He continued to hold my hand firmly and led me into the gathering. He guided me to the large chair at the head of the Council Fire, but I insisted he take his place as the new leader of

the village and the three islands. No amount of argument would avail; submitting to the uproar, I took the seat.

As villagers began to take places around me, bringing food and drink, still others content to stand and converse, I realized that Jimmy was missing. In the excitement, I had not noticed at first. Now, I realized I could not find him in the crowd. James and Rowena were not present, either. I did not see Billy, French, or Ramon among the many faces mingling around the fire, and Joe Halloran's tall thin frame and wild shock of blond hair was nowhere to be found.

Hector appeared beside me. "They will all see you at the North Shore of San Jacinto, *jefe*," he said.

I was puzzled and a bit disappointed at their absence. "I had hoped to make the trip to the north shore with them and say our good-byes."

Then it struck me: Why would they go ahead of us?

The celebration wore on for several hours, but time was against me as the moment of my departure grew closer by the minute. Finally, the crowd parted and began to fall silent as Hector led the gray and a string of eight fully packed horses into the circle. "It is time now, *jefe*," he said. "We have everything prepared; it is time we took the trail."

"You sure we have..." I began, but Hector cut me off.

"We have everything, *mi hermano, confía en mí por favor...* trust me."

Bob and Gabe helped me to my feet. As Hector held the gray, I settled my foot in the stirrup, swung my peg leg over his rump, and sat down in the saddle. I took one last long look around the village we had built on a bare, windy mountainside. I raised my hand in farewell and turned the horse toward the trail to the stone bridge.

Hector took point on foot, leading the packhorses. I nudged the gray softly, and we moved out to the calls of farewell and good

wishes behind us. I never looked back as we rode north and east across the wide valley for the last time.

As my excitement at the journey's beginning cooled, melancholy crept over me. The memory of the people that I left farther and farther behind with every step began to weigh on me as we rode in silence.

Ahead, two riders leading a single horse broke from the cover of the forest and angled across the valley toward us at an easy lope. My eyes weren't as good as they were before getting my head cracked, but shortly I recognized Randi and Jaime, the girls that had ridden with me nearly every morning while I convalesced.

Riding toward us, they waved and called, as cheerful as ever. Then, circling wide, they handed Hector the lead line of the horse in tow. He leapt onto the horse's back.

"Your favorite pony," Randi called to him. "Just like you asked."

"*Gracias mis hermanas pequeñas,*" he said with a smile. "Thank you, little sisters."

Our pace quickened as the girls fell in behind the packhorses. Their ceaseless chatter was comforting to hear as a soft, warm wind followed us up the valley.

Soon afterward, as I rode point, Hector called to me. He pointed out a low dust cloud behind us, moving up the valley from the south. Must be a patrol heading for the crossing. Nodding to Hector, I turned my attention to the trail.

We were a mile or so from the forest at the head of the valley when several riders burst from the trees and came barreling towards us at full gallop. I did not recognize any of them. Hector and the girls appeared calm for the moment, and we continued ahead without pause.

Suddenly, the riders ahead began firing their weapons into the air. I unslung the M-14. Snapping the scope into its bracket on the top of the rifle's receiver, I turned the gray to the right, a touch

standing in my stirrup. Through the scope, I looked from one face to the next.

I couldn't recognize any of them. The leader was riding a big pie-bald bay and wearing a plaid shirt. He raised his pistol and fired into the air again. I chambered a round in the 14 and drew a bead on his chest, center mass. Sliding my finger from the trigger guard, it rested lightly against the side of the trigger. Then, pulling the rifle butt tight into my shoulder, I curled my fingertip across its broad, knurled face and started to take up the slack.

"*¡No tire el jefe!*" Hector shouted as the girls raced past me. "Do not shoot! They are our friends from the Forest Patrol coming to greet us!"

A few moments later, the eight riders swirled around us in a cloud of dust and the thundering of hooves. I now recognized the rider of the pie-bald bay – young Remie Guerrero. I knew him from the crossing. "Mr. Burroughs! Mr. Burroughs!" he shouted repeatedly. "It's only us! Come to say goodbye!"

Jesus Christ, I nearly pulled the trigger on that kid.

Slinging the rifle back over my shoulder, I waved in recognition. The blood pounded in my head as I realized what I had very nearly done. I would need to follow Hector's lead more closely while friendlies are close to hand. After a few words of greeting, the kids rode ahead, probably to keep anyone else from lining up in my sights ...

As we crossed the last hundred yards at the head of the valley, the cloud of dust caught up to our column. It was Gabe Ford and twenty-five riders and packhorses, all in a lather. "I thought we'd catch you sooner," Gabe said as he reined in beside me, out of breath from the hard ride. "Got a patrol headed to Idyllwild. The rest of us are going to escort you to San Bernardino."

Turning, he gave quick orders to his lieutenant. Twelve riders leapt away at a gallop toward the Stone Bridge. With the

new arrivals, we had better than fifteen riders in our group. Their jovial spirit was contagious. The chatter was loud enough to hear for miles.

As we rode, the trail narrowed to a rocky switchback that crossed the saddle between the peaks before dropping down into the wide forested valley that lay between the Stone Bridge and us.

As we made our way through the narrow, rocky defile and into the woods beyond, the forest seemed to soak up every sound. The conversation died to a murmur in the coolness of its shadow.

I rode in silence, my mind swirling with the adventures we experienced together. It began with the race against the earth and sea from Oceanside to Valley Center and meeting James and little Jimmy.

I remembered our days in the little valley in the hills, trying to keep our heads above the rising sea, and the torturous trek to Lake Henshaw. I thought of the many times I had ridden this trail, the days of discovery, the brutality of Holt's men, battles fought, and lives lost.

The lives lost... all of the lives lost.

In my mind's eye, I saw all the young faces that would not see another winter.

I thought of finding Lemont, who now had a new and loving family in the village. I remembered a walk in the darkness to a fight not far from where we were headed. A fight that nearly killed me. The fight that secured Santa Rosa and signaled the beginning of the end for Holt's Renegades.

What lay ahead?

We arrived at the Stone Bridge camp at 20:00 hours. There was no fanfare, no cheering crowd, no hoorays. The camp was quiet, to my liking, with only a small fire smoldering in the pit.

March 22...

I was sleeping the sleep of the dead when the moving earth woke me again. The ground shook like a wet dog shivering in a cold wind. The quake was short but intense, and the entire camp was awake in the blink of an eye.

It was 03:00 hours.

After a morning fare of tea and hardtack, we were back on the trail and filing across the Stone Bridge by 04:15. The eastern sky was just beginning to show the first signs of the coming day.

A new path had been cut through the woods, over the ridge toward Idyllwild. We made our way up the mountain's side, following the new track in single file. The stink of the dead renegades still lingered in the forest, carried on a soft breeze through the trees. Hector nodded his head toward Gabe in answer to my questioning glance. "Gabe's idea," he said. "He figured that if we need to reinforce the San Bernardino crossing, they would need to travel quickly."

"It's a strategic highway," Gabe added, overhearing Hector's comment. "The Security Troop doubles as the construction crew."

The new path led on through the forest. It dropped slightly after cresting the ridge, following the terrain along the mountain's gradual slope. Traveling this new path was easy on man and horse and would definitely speed travel between the stone bridge and Idyllwild.

We came to a fork in the trail. As the main path veered slightly east toward Idyllwild, the west fork headed off toward the San Bernardino crossing. A dozen men, boys, and young women worked on the path. They stopped and saluted as we took the east fork toward what remained of the little town a few miles ahead.

Before noon, we reached Idyllwild, a testament to the value of the new road. As we rode down the main street, I marveled at the work that had been done to clean up the town. Gabe set about his duties as Security Chief while we joined the gathering for a

noon meal. Squirrel was abundant in the dense red cedar forest that blanketed the mountainsides, so it was roast squirrel and cattail root with watercress from the creek for lunch. It was a welcome and interesting change from our regular fare.

After relaxing for an hour of food and conversation, Gabe ordered his security escort to mount up. Four riders were sent ahead to scout the trail to the crossing as Hector and I made a final check of our gear and livestock and mounted our horses. I looked down at the people's faces as they crowded around us, young and old, girls and boys, men and women. All of them sought an answer, a word of hope, a word of strength.

I decided to oblige them. "Remember," I began, "just as each one of you relies on the person next to you, *that* person relies on you." I pointed to each of them. "You people here, *especially* you people, must remain strong and resolute. You must obey your commanders and trust in their judgment. Everyone back at the village looks to you for safety and protection from hostiles, and they pay for that by providing food and clothing for you.

"Remember that you are all equals. You people here just have a different job to do. Do that job well, without the expectation of privilege or power, and if you are lucky, you may all yet survive."

I turned the gray and raised a hand in farewell as I rode away. I never looked back. Following our escort into the lowering sun, the "Good-byes" and calls of "Safe Journey" faded behind us.

Would they survive? I wondered. Would any of us survive?

The ride north was fast and easy on the new trail. "We've been working on this trail from the day we cleaned the Renegades out of Idyllwild," Gabe explained as we rode. "We've just started using them regularly in the last week or two."

"I wondered where the lot of you were," I said. "Looks like you've done a good job, Gabe. These people need to feel safe to rebuild their lives. Remember that the soldier serves at the will of

the people, not the other way around. You have control of all of the strength and power. Don't misuse it. It would be the end of what has been started here."

"We'll do you proud, Bill," he replied. "We will do you real proud."

The first time I had ridden north of the Stone Bridge, we had navigated a narrow, circuitous route along a thousand-foot cliff, over mountain peaks and passes.

Now, we followed a new trail carved by hand from the shoulders of the hillsides and across narrow valleys. The horses' hooves thudded loudly across a bridge of hand-hewn logs that spanned thirty feet across a deep, steep-sided gulley.

That first ride north had taken nearly two days. This time, we rode three hours before cresting a rise in the trail to see San Gorgonio Mountain rising high above the swirling sea that bordered the mudflat between the islands. A single thin tendril of smoke rose from a cluster of large granite boulders at the water's edge, still two or three miles down the mountainside.

The tide had turned and began its long run from east and west, racing as it did every day to see which side would reach the high ridge of land in the middle first. Poles were set into the ground, stretching in a line from shore to shore, each pole fifty or sixty feet apart with a piece of bright cloth flying from the top. The flags snapped crisply in the gusting wind.

Interesting. At high tide, the flags must have hung clear of the water. It couldn't be more than seven or eight-foot deep, by the look of it. "That's our crossing there, Bill." Gabe pointed to the line of flags waving in the wind. "Those pine poles mark the highest point of land between the two islands. They're fifty paces apart, and each is set deep with an even twenty feet sticking out of the mud. We measured the highest watermarks at thirteen feet, give or take."

"You boys have been mighty busy up here." Why hadn't I heard of any of this?

Gabe's smile filled with a working man's pride. "That's not the half of it. You'll see soon enough, but we have a right smart garrison built to guard the crossing. In fact, we have had patrols over there on San Bernardino for the past two weeks. But... well, you'll hear all about it when we get across."

Hector had been riding at the head of the column and had not once turned to look back. As we began our ride down the last slope, he stopped his horse and turned sharply into the wind, looking intently into the long shadows cast by the afternoon sun.

Moments later, an arm extended above the brush, straight up into the air, a fist clenching a rifle held horizontally, the barrel pointing toward the shore. The rifle bobbed up and down two or three times as the light from the afternoon sun glinted from its barrel. Hector raised his lever-action rifle over his head, then, pumping his arm up and down three or four times, wheeled his horse around and lit out toward the garrison at a hard gallop. Gabe immediately called the troop to the gallop. I had command of the packhorses and brought up the rear as the troop thundered past me at full tilt.

Ahead, the trail wound around the knob of the hill, covered in dense, high brush. I heard raised voices and the uneven clatter of gunfire, then silence as the wind shifted and carried the sound away.

I unslung my shotgun. Jacking a round into the chamber, I backed the slide down a touch. I spied the double zeros on the shell casing. "Out fucking standing," I said, snapping the chamber shut with a satisfying "crack." "Two more double-aught in the tube and five slugs behind that," I said to one of the riders towing a string of pack horses behind us. "God help the son of a bitch that lines up in my sights."

I tried to nudge the gray along faster, but the packhorses lagged. I felt a little left out, not being in the forefront of whatever action lay ahead of us. I couldn't even remember how I ended up with the damn lead line anyhow.

As we rounded the bend, I saw a low log structure with a dirt roof on a flat shoulder of the hill. The garrison sat fifty or sixty feet above and maybe 100 yards back from the shore. A thin finger of smoke rising from a chimney pipe piercing the thick layer of dirt covering the roof. In front of the building, forty mounted, armed men and women were deployed in two precise ranks, every rider sitting at attention. In front, little Jimmy was sitting smartly astride his mule, along with James, Rowena, Rachel, Billy Greentree, Ramon Black Crow, and French Dick. Hector grinned from ear to ear as he wheeled his horse into line, the dust settling slowly around the animals' feet.

I slipped the safety on the shotgun to the "safe" position and returned it to its place across my back. The wind stopped for a moment as the dust cloud from more than a dozen horses closed in around us. Then just as suddenly, the breeze perked back up and blew the choking cloud away.

"We got hats, Grampa!" Jimmy yelled as he bid Katy to move with a wiggle of his heels and started toward me. "We all got hats. We have one for you too!"

As he pulled the mule around, I slowed the gray to a walk, and the boy rode beside me. "We want you to wear this one." He pulled a hat with a heavy, wide brim from a saddlebag behind him.

Pulling the mule to a stop, he slapped the broad brim across his thin arm a time or two, then presented the hat to me with both hands. The hat was off-white in color and spankin' new. It was a Plainsman, a broad, heavy brim to shade the eyes and neck or cover from the rain. It had a short flat crown and a gray leather hatband.

I accepted Jimmy's offering with as much pomp as I could muster, given the circumstance. I was, after all, more than a little pumped up, thinking I was riding into a firefight.

The admiration in the small boy's eyes brought me back to earth with a rush that made my head spin. As I took the hat from his hands, he held it tight for a moment. "You are the head Ranger now, Grampa! My dad and them," he said, pointing to his father and Billy, Ramon, French, and Hector, "are your Rangers."

He let loose of the hat and turned his attention to the horsemen in front of us. Then, as if presenting some potentate or other, he made a broad flourish with his little arms, and everyone raised a cheer as I settled the hat on my head. The hoots and hollers died away as the group rode toward me. I realized that James and the boys were each leading a couple of heavily loaded packhorses.

The math didn't quite add up. Hector and I had more than enough supplies on our pack animals. Any more horses could cause us problems on the trail.

As Jimmy sat his mule beside me, the men that had helped with the horses handed off the leads for the pack-train to James and the boys as they rode toward us. "We are going with you, Bill," James said matter of factly as he pulled his big bay to a halt in front of me.

"Us too," Rowena called as she joined the circle forming around me. Rachel followed with three more fully loaded horses.

My head swam for a moment as I realized that, rather than just Hector and I, we would be a whole troop on the trail, Jimmy's "Rangers" and a family in nearly every sense of the word.

I was speechless.

"The hat was Jimmy's idea," James said. "This—," he swept his arm in the direction of the ranks of horsemen, "was Gabe's. We've been planning to ride with you since they nursed you back from the dead."

"But why didn't..." was all I could get out of my mouth before Hector interrupted. He set a hand on my arm. "*Jefe*, my very best friend, *mi hermano*. I did not want you to worry for these people while you were healing. I told you *I* would ride with you to your Colorado *y su esposa*. Now, we will *all* ride together with you. *Somos tu familia*."

I sat there on the gray, tears welling in my eyes, surrounded by the people that had come to be my closest family. Words could not express how I felt. My tears washed streaks in the dust caked on my face from the long ride behind me, but I didn't care.

My heart ached with pride and love for these young people. One big family, as Hector had so accurately said.

As the moment waned, Gabe began shouting commands to his troop. "By twos, Column left, at the walk... move out!" He yelled. Two by two, as ordered, the mounted troop rolled out of their formation and headed down the trail toward the shoreline. "Tides comin' in," he yelled. "Let's go!"

Forty mounted men and women smartly guiding their horses as commanded, parading by me, each saluting smartly as they passed. "They know how important security is to you," Billy said as they made their way toward the shore. "They all take it very seriously."

As the column passed, the last six riders held back. We fell in line behind the column headed toward the crossing to San Bernardino. My heart raced as I pulled the lead-line taut behind me.

We're going. Finally, I'm going home!

I was lost in thoughts of Suzanne for a moment, but the flag atop the first crossing marker snapping in the wind brought my mind back to the present.

We made quite a spectacle, more than forty horsemen and women in a smart military column. As for the "Rangers," we were six men with a wealth of military and field experience between us,

two strong-willed women and an amazing young boy. We were armed to the teeth and loaded to take on the devil.

Crossing the two-mile stretch between San Jacinto and San Bernardino was uneventful, though the going became a bit dicey in a couple of places where the sea found its way up an old wash-out or a gully here and there. I was surprised when the gray's steel shoes clattered across the crumbling remains of three roads that had once made their way over this high strip of land. The tide rose fast while we crossed, and I was quite relieved when we scrambled up the rocky path to higher ground on San Bernardino just as the ocean closed behind us, completely covering the broad mudflats again.

I could see from the well-worn track that there had been many incursions to the island. The brush had been hacked back to create a clear, level area maybe eighty feet across, where we were able to regroup. By the time I reined my horse to a halt, Gabe had already dispersed the majority of his force into a wide perimeter. Ten riders were sent west on a trail that wound upwards along the steep shoulder of San Gorgonio.

"You boys have been making this crossing fairly frequently from the look of it," I said to Gabe as he swung his horse in beside me.

"We've been sending patrols every day, working on the trail, looking for survivors and hostiles alike." He paused for a moment, watching the progress of his lead riders. "We found both." He nodded his head toward the western trail and nudged his horse's flank with a heel. "There's a small group of friendlies here. If they're still there, we'll pass one of their camps in a bit. The hostiles are scattered bands mostly, no cohesion, no leadership that we can determine, but they are ruthless Bill, just *ruthless*."

"Goddamn *liver eaters*!" Ramon said as he reined in beside us. "They're fucking animals!"

We rode in silence for several minutes before Gabe began to talk, almost to himself. "They're eating people, Bill. They butcher them and leave what's left hanging in trees to rot. You ever hear of such a thing?" Then, he turned his full attention to me again. "Have you *ever* heard of such a thing?"

Not waiting for an answer, he pulled his AK-47 from its scabbard and checked the chamber. Satisfied when he saw that his weapon was loaded, he cradled the fore-end across his arm. Thinking it best to follow suit, I pulled up the M-14, chambered a round, and rested the rifle lightly across my arm. I began scanning every bit of cover around us uneasily.

"Just a precaution," Gabe said, noticing my change of attitude. He pointed up the slope. "We've pretty much got 'em pacified. If they're going to hit us again, it won't be until we reach the tree line. That lead patrol will flush 'em out if they're there. There's five more of ours moving along the ridge above. They'll have the flank if anything heats up."

Several minutes passed as we continued to climb the trail along the shoulder of the mountain. I nearly held my breath in anticipation. The hair on the back of my neck began to lay down again after the lead patrol vanished into the woods with no ensuing gunfire. Twenty minutes later, we reached the edge of the forest and plunged into the cool shadow of the trees without any incident.

After several hours, we broke out of the tall pines as the trail began to drop down the mountain again. Rounding a large patch of brush, I could see the sunlight flashing on the surface of the brilliant blue sea more than a thousand feet below, and I thought I saw a sail.

Gabe pointed out a deserted camp as we passed, "They've moved again." He turned to the others. "Keep your eyes open! Watch for hostiles!"

"They'd only have moved if they were forced to," he said as he stood in his stirrups, scanning the brush around us. "They were

waiting here for our escort. We're taking 'em over to Santa Rosa when we return."

After a few minutes, I caught a glimpse of a sail again. "That's Joe," James called from behind, "He's going to ferry our supplies across to San Gabriel."

At 18:20 hours, we reached the western end of San Bernardino Island. By the time I arrived at the shore, Gabe's troops had set up a tight camp and deployed a wide defensive perimeter. Joe Halloran was standing near the small cookfire with Gabe. "It's too late to cross tonight," he said as we approached. "Let's rest up. We'll have to cross tomorrow."

I swung the gray toward a row of tethered horses as his words died on the wind. I wouldn't have admitted it, but I was more than ready to get out of the saddle, stretch my legs, get a meal and some shut-eye.

I tied my horse alongside the others. Un-cinching the saddle, I tossed it across my shoulder. Hobbling toward a pile of gear, Hector took the saddle from my shoulder, "Rest here, *jefe*," he said, setting the saddle down at one end of an unfurled bed-roll. "*Tomaré a cuidado los caballos*. I will see to the horses."

"*Gracias, Amigo*," I replied, slowly settling down onto the blanket with a muffled groan. "*Muchas gracias*."

I laid back, resting my head against the saddle, a wave of weariness washing over me. Whether it was the repeated rush of adrenalin, the long hours in the saddle, or just my age gaining on me, I was flat worn out.

Laying on the bedroll, cooled by the gentle breeze from the channel, enjoying the late afternoon sun, the earth began to rumble again.

The Remuda was picketed along the edge of a dense Manzanita thicket not thirty yards from me. They were no longer bothered by the sometimes continuous movement of the ground, and they continued calmly grazing. I felt a kinship with them that

had grown stronger as the yearning for the conveniences of modern technology faded farther behind us. I knew animals could tell us more about a change in the weather or imminent threat than any broadcast news report. I closed my eyes and listened as they grazed, grasped the grass with their nimble lips, cropping it one mouthful at a time with a short turn of their head and grinding it slowly between their teeth unhurriedly. It was very soothing, comforting actually, knowing they would alert me to any threat near at hand.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was far behind what was left of Telegraph Peak on San Gabriel Island. We would make a landing on that shore when we crossed the channel the following morning. I marveled at the size of the mountain as it towered more than six thousand feet above the ocean. The lush green of its forested flanks appeared both inviting and ominous as the shadows that preceded the coming night began to race down its sides.

As if on cue, the horses raised their heads in unison, looking to the north, ears cast forward. A moment later, the rattle of gunfire shattered the wind. I heard the clatter of hooves from the far side of the thicket as picket riders raced their mounts to the top of the rise a half-mile away. A second shot, then a short rattling burst followed. After that, only the sound of the wind as everyone near camp fell silent, waiting for more.

The smell of coffee grabbed my attention as I struggled to my feet. The aroma had not caressed my nose for an age, it seemed, and I made a beeline for the cook fire to avail myself of the treat.

"Look here!" James said, smiling, his teeth gleaming white against his dark skin as I approached the camp. He and the boys were already taking their pleasure of the coffee simmering on the fire. The girls prepared the evening meal, with Jimmy assisting as needed. Sizzling meat on the spit and the aroma of fresh pork greeted me as I approached the cook fire.

"Look what has decided to grace us all with his presence." Billy handed me a steaming cup of thick black coffee.

"What's up?" I nodded in the direction of the sound of gunfire, just as another short burst clattered in the distance.

"Scouts been out lookin' for the friendlies. They smelt wood smoke about an hour ago," Billy replied. "Gabe took a detail to check it out. Don't need hostiles harassin' us when we cross the channel tomorrow."

"An hour ago?" I asked incredulously.

"Christ, Bill," James began with a laugh. "You've been sawing logs over there for nearly three hours already."

"Jesus. Three friggin' hours?"

He laughed. "We gonna be taking an afternoon siesta every day now?"

"We will rest whenever *el jefe* needs to," Hector said firmly as he stepped to my side.

"Easy, Hector," James said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We're just funnin' with the boss is all. Just foolin' around a bit."

Hector looked at me out of the corner of his eye and winked.

I choked on a mouthful of hot coffee, bursting into laughter as I realized I was the butt of the joke. They nearly knocked me into the fire as several hands pounded on my back, the roar of laughter startling the horses. "What a bunch we make," I said, catching my breath and stepping back to survey the group of men: Hector, clad in a loin-cloth, his skin dark against the off-white muslin that wound around his thick waist, the tail hanging just below the tops of his knee-high moccasins; James, black as coal; Billy, French, and Ramon, like Hector, their skin darkened by exposure to the sun, all striking figures.

The last vestige of the day's light reflected off rippling muscle as they lingered shirtless near the fire. We were indeed a sight to behold.

Another burst of gunfire, much farther away this time, interrupted our banter. "Security is runnin' somebody down, I'll bet," Ramon said. "Don't hear anything but 30 caliber. Listen!" More gunfire wafted on the wind. "Seven-six-two by three-nine for sure. Security is all carrying an AK or SKS." He shook his head. "They're on to some of those goddamn liver-eating sons a bitches, I'd guess."

His words were sobering as we listened into the wind.

Joe O' Hollearn joined us. "Bad current in the channel, Mr. Burroughs. We'll have to cross at high tide," he said.

"Tell me what you know."

"Current always runs north to south or, well maybe east to west, lookin' at a compass these days. Always fast, very, very fast. At low tide, there are eddies all along the far shore. Wild, dangerous eddies, like a vortex almost. The water looks calm enough, then without any warning, the bottom drops out, the water swirls and churns as it flows past, then calms down again. Sometimes debris will surge to the surface in the middle of it all. The bottom must be very rough to cause such tremendous turbulence."

"What's it look like at high tide?"

"Looks calm, but the current is very fast," he replied. "We'll have to start the horses as far upstream as we can get. It's gonna be pretty rough."

"We can start the horses across about two miles upstream. With luck, we'll get across before we hit these narrows," James said, nodding toward the channel. "Joe will ferry the supplies and weapons across."

I was incredulous. "Narrows?" I looked at the half-mile-wide channel in the quickly fading light.

"Low tide will be near 3:30 A.M.," Joe said. "The shoreline drops off fast all through here. In the morning, you'll be able to see what I mean. The channel narrows to about a quarter of a mile, and

the current literally roars past. Hell, you can hear it from here. At high tide, this is about a half-mile wide right here.” He pointed along the channel’s course. “Upstream, it widens out to nearly two miles, and the current is much slower. We have to cross at high tide, or the horses will never make it.”

"When is high tide expected?" I asked.

"Four o'clock tomorrow afternoon... maybe."

"Well, then we have plenty of time to repack the gear and get the livestock into position. As long as Gabe and his team can keep trouble off our back, we should be set to launch at the turn of the tide tomorrow. Any other issues?"

Eyes flashed in the firelight as each man turned to look at the other in silence.

"Outstanding. Now, what do we have for supper?"

Jimmy appeared beside me, bearing a plate heaping with boiled greens and a sizable slab of meat still smoking from the fire.

March 23...

The dawn broke cooler than usual. The mist from the northern sea rolled so thickly across the islands that the sun could barely reach the ground. The hulk of Telegraph Peak was scarcely discernible through the dreary twilight of the dense fog.

I remembered Joe's warning of a treacherous crossing on the ebb tide, and it filled me with foreboding. We must be ready to launch before slack water at the high tide. Struggling to my feet, I pulled a shirt over my shoulders and marveled at how rapidly my wounds were healing.

The sharp pain of shattered ribs was now only a dull reminder as I slung my gun harness across my back, cinching it snugly across my chest and drawing the buckle tight on the straps that secured my prosthetic. I stomped my stump of a leg deep into its boot and stood straight, straining into the gear that bound me.

Everything settled into place, my leg was secure, and the weight of my twin .357s was gratifying.

"Good," I said softly into the fog, enjoying the feel of the harness. "Today, the San Gabriel crossing."

Surveying the camp in the thin light, I realized I was the first to greet the day. I felt a faint flicker of warmth in the bed of ashes in the fire pit and managed to fan the glowing embers into a growing flame. I took full advantage of the tin of coffee and the clatter of graniteware on stone to rouse several more souls from their sleep. "Up and at 'em!" I bellowed loudly, rattling several cups together. "Everybody up and at 'em!" Soon, everyone was stumbling or crawling from their bedrolls and getting after their business in camp.

Several horses whinnied in reply, anxious to start the day. The gray stood silent, head high, ears cast toward me, watching as if he knew today was going to be no ordinary day.

Breakfast was a helter-skelter affair of warmed-over pork, pan bread, and hot coffee. During the night, the Security team located the missing friendlies, taking out a handful of "liver-eaters" in the process. A small detail had immediately escorted them to the crossing to San Jacinto.

We decided to load the packhorses and haul everything east along the shore to the point of embarkation, two miles upstream. Before the conversation ended, the camp bustled with activity. As two or three of the horses were loaded, a rider immediately started them along the shore.

By 06:30, everyone was on the trail again. I stepped into the stirrup and mounted the gray. I surveyed the now deserted camp, checking for any remaining gear, Joe's warning flashing through my mind: "We have to cross at high tide, or you'll never make it!"

The wind picked up slightly from the west, and the fog began an eerie dance as it swirled about, rustling the tall grass and

whispering ominously in the brush. "Let's go," I said softly to the gray as he nervously shifted from side to side. I slackened the reins and gave him his head.

He did not hesitate and leaped away at a gallop, eager to catch the last of the troop just disappearing over the ridge a half-mile to the east.

We spent the morning organizing the supplies by weight. Joe O'Hollearn's little catamaran would have to be loaded carefully for each of the dozen trips it would take to haul the food, weapons, and other gear across the wide channel. Finally, James, French, Ramon, Billy, Hector, and several hands from the Security Troop would swim the horses across the channel just before slack tide. It was going to be a long swim.

At 15:00 hours, Gabe and a half dozen of his troop launched in the first crossing. Watching as the white triangle of the nylon sail faded into the mist, I could only wonder what that shoreline looked like. Joe had told us that the eastern shore was wide and flat, long stretches of grass and sand with little or no cover for hostiles. Further west, the shore was steep and rugged, strewn with massive granite boulders, and dense brush choked any path between them. The current was swift and treacherous, the racing water capable of carrying us into the channel as the tide ebbed.

For nearly thirty minutes, I sat on the gray, barely breathing, listening into the fog, straining to hear any sound above the rushing water. I hoped to hear some sign of the men on the small craft.

Without warning, a white patch appeared in the fog, tacking across the gentle wind, struggling for headway against the current. Joe beached the boat directly in front of me. Leaping ashore with bowline in hand, he yelled, "Let's get this boat loaded! The current is already picking up. We gotta move!"

All hands loaded the boat while trying to keep it balanced; while two hundred yards along the shoreline, the wranglers started the horses into the water.

There would be no turning back now.

Hector appeared beside me. "The gray, *jefe*. We must get the gray into the water!"

Like an idiot, I had sat watching the goings-on and neglected to get my own mount ready for the crossing. However, Hector had the animal stripped and heading for the herd at the water's edge as soon as my feet hit the ground.

With one man aboard, Joe launched the heavily loaded sailboat. Several others joined me to wade into the sea and push them out from the shore. Slowly, painfully slowly, the sail flapped and fell slack, then caught the wind again as Joe struggled to control the boat in the current. Then, with a crack, the sail filled out, Joe snapped the tiller, turning the boat hard into the wind, and they were off, fading into the swirling fog again.

"Blow wind, blow!" I howled into the fog. "Goddamn, you BLOW!"

The sail snapped and popped as Joe tacked again. Before my eyes, the fog began to clear, and the wind quickened against my face, cooling my skin as the sweat dried in the freshening breeze.

My peg leg stuck in the mud, and Mickey Belcourt caught me just as I began to fall. "Hold on there, Mr. Bill," he said calmly, catching my arm as I floundered about in the muck. "Get your arm across my shoulder. I'll get ya pulled loose."

We both tumbled into the knee-deep water as my leg was wrenched free from the sucking mire.

The wind gathered strength. The lumbering boat gained speed with the wind at Joe's back as we struggled to our feet. When the sail went slack, Joe tacked into the wind. The sail filled as the boat heeled against the strain. He jumped to the windward

side and leaned far over the water, tacking hard. He was pushing it hard. *We may just make it.*

Before twenty minutes had passed, Joe was back for another load. "Rowena! You're up this trip. Come on, get aboard!"

Rowena glanced at Jimmy, then looked me in the eye. "Go," I commanded as I laid a hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "He'll cross with me."

As the wind continued to gather strength, the tide turned and the current quickened visibly. Now we were really up against it. Joe fought the current valiantly in the overloaded boat. The blustering wind pulled the small craft quickly out of sight, returning each time successfully.

"Rachel!" He called loudly against the increasing howl of the wind, "Let's go!" After a mad scramble, Joe launched, racing down the wind, then tacking hard full into its face again.

"Last load is us, Jimmy," I said to the boy, trying to keep the anxiety from my voice. Neither of us had moved an inch, watching load after tightly lashed load leave with the small boat.

Even without the small boy and me on board, the last load would be heavy, but there was no other choice. With the wind holding at near 15 knots, the current in the channel was beginning to roar as the tide dropped precipitously into the narrowing channel to the west. Another trip could well prove disastrous for man and vessel.

The last of the gear was hauled aboard and secured in place; I rigged Jimmy with a makeshift life jacket of canvas lined with a plastic bag. Hopefully, it would keep the boy afloat if things took a turn for the worse. We scrambled aboard and lay flat on the canvas deck at Joe's direction and held on for dear life as the crew pushed the boat back into the quickening current one last time.

The wind howled in the rigging as the sail filled. The boat heeled sharply leeward, the mast groaned against the load. I glanced at Jimmy. As I was lifted high in the air, his eyes were

wide as saucers, his knuckles white as his small hands clutched the netting he laid upon. I smiled and gave him an exaggerated wink as Joe played out the sheet and eased the boom. The hull crashed hard into the water, and the spray drenched us all. Jimmy squealed in delight as adrenalin and the cool ocean spray washed the fear from his eyes.

"Lay low," Joe yelled against the wind. "Hold tight. There's a bad eddy ahead."

He leaned hard on the tiller, and the boat groaned as the current caught us. The stern swung wildly to starboard, then struck something solid as a huge tree trunk suddenly surfaced beneath us. The massive log surged up from the depths, raising the port hull high out of the water, threatening to capsize the boat. Then, the tree trunk turned at the last possible moment, and the hull slid down along its length.

The entire length of the hull slammed into the water again. The maelstrom spun the boat 360 degrees once, then twice. As the centrifugal force increased on a third revolution, Jimmy screamed as he was ripped loose from his perch and tossed headlong into the raging torrent.

As the boat swept over him, the boy disappeared beneath the swirling foam. Without thinking, I loosed my hold of the rigging and rolled into the turbulent sea. Something struck me hard on the back, knocking the wind from me. Lunging for the surface, I managed to just gulp a lung full of precious air before ducking under the bright yellow hull of the catamaran as it continued to spin, still trapped in the swirling current. The pull of the water dragged me down as that same massive timber that nearly capsized us brushed my side. I jammed my good leg against it and pushed with all my strength.

To my amazement, I saw Jimmy's pale white face just feet away from me, sinking fast in the turgid, darkening water. My lungs felt as if they would burst as I pulled against the water with

all the strength I could muster. My arms ached as I fought the roiling current, first one stroke, then another.

Finally, I grasped the boy's thin ankle. I grabbed a handful of his fiery red hair and lunged for the surface. The small boy felt as though he weighed a ton as I fought for the light above me. Reaching, down I grabbed beneath his arms and pushed him toward the surface with all my strength.

We surged free of the grip of the ocean. Air never tasted so sweet.

While I struggled to keep the boy's face free of the water, a stinging lash whipped across my face. I instinctively struck out at this new threat, only to recognize the comforting coil of a length of rope. I grasped the rope in one hand, clutching the boy tightly in the other, and kicked for the surface.

The rope went taut as I was pulled against the current, then my head broke the surface, and I saw Joe pulling for all he was worth. I sucked in mouthfuls of air, alternately choking and vomiting water, then gulping still more air into my lungs.

The boy had stopped breathing. I had to get him free of the water, get him onto that boat, and clear his lungs. Though my mind was trying to drive my body onward, my strength was failing quickly. I focused on maintaining my grip on the boy and rope.

I saw Suzanne's face in my mind's eye as I choked on another lungful of water. I did not have the strength to fight any longer. As Suzanne's face faded into darkness, I felt myself pulled halfway out of the water. My ribs smashed against the hull of Joe's catamaran, spewing a fountain of water from my lungs. I choked and coughed uncontrollably as Joe rolled me onto the boat, tearing the boy from my grip.

As I gasped for air, trying to claw the breath back into my lungs, I was aware that Joe was feverishly working to save little Jimmy's life. After several moments of frantically trying to get the boy's lungs clear, he began to respond. Then, after an involuntary

twitch, his body convulsed violently as volumes of water ejected from his nose and mouth. His slight frame was wracked by convulsions as he coughed and gagged and vomited still more fluid. Joe pulled Jimmy to his knees and held him as he coughed and spit until finally he hung limp and gasped for air.

"Bill!" Joe yelled through the haze in my head. "Bill! For God's sake, get a hold of yourself."

A sharp blow between my shoulder blades brought the fire back into my head. Joe rose from the canvas deck and thrust the boy into my arms.

"Take him!" he shouted in my face. "We're adrift, goddamn it! We're heading into the channel!"

Instantly, the fog in my head cleared as his words rang in my ears. "Grab onto something and hold tight!"

The boat rapidly gained speed. I pulled Jimmy onto my chest and wrapped my arms and legs into the lashing, holding on for dear life.

Joe grabbed the sheet hauling on the boom as he wrenched the tiller. The boat swung into the wind and shuddered hard as the sail billowed. The headstay groaned, singing with tension as the mast pulled against the rigging. Joe fought to tack across the wind, struggling to get the boat to the south side of the channel. The water level dropped by a measure of feet every minute.

Suddenly, we broke free, and the boat lurched forward into calmer water. "We're coming about!" Joe yelled as he leaned against the tiller. The sail went slack. The boom swung from port to starboard, lines singing, tackle clattering, the small boat shuddering as the sail caught wind again. The wind howled, salt spray stinging my face as the boat lurched into the gale.

"Coming about!" Joe yelled again.

He tacked hard into the wind as he hugged the shoreline of San Bernardino Island. Minutes later, the channel widened, the raging current slowed, and Joe eased the battered craft across the

wind toward San Gabriel again. With the wind whipping the rigging, we raced across the channel in record time. Joe loosed the sail and drove the catamaran's twin hulls hard onto the muddy shore at the foot of Telegraph Peak.

I laid in a tangle of line and cargo atop the canvas deck, breathing deeply, holding Jimmy close, feeling the warmth of my body spread into his tiny frame. The wind shredded the fog, and the sun shone brightly in my eyes. "We're alive!" I thought out loud.

Jimmy stirred at the sound of my voice. "We made it, Jimmy," I said softly as he lay draped across my chest. "We've made it to San Gabriel Island."

We lay there for ages, so it seemed. Joe was hunched over the tiller, knuckles white from his tight grip on the wooden shaft. The young man's body heaved as he fought to catch his breath, spent from the battle with the sea. I closed my eyes against the glare of the late day sun. Slowly, Jimmy's heartbeat dropped to normal, and his breathing matched my own.

At that moment, I realized something: as long as I drew breath, this boy would be an inextricable part of my life.

Someone lifted the boy from my chest. A hubbub of voices grew around me. When I opened my eyes, Hector was loosening the lines that entangled me. "*Gracias a Dios que estás bien a mi hermano. Pensé que te había perdido!*" I thought I had lost you!"

"I thought I was gone myself, for a minute," I replied heavily, exhausted from the ordeal. "Thought for sure I was a goner."

I crawled to the edge of the deck and planted my foot on solid ground again. My head spun as I staggered upright, still dripping wet. I looked at the faces gathered about me and was reassured to see everyone present. Looking inland some distance, I saw a flag snapping in the gusting wind. I easily recognized the

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red and white banner bearing a grizzly bear upon it. The flag of the once-great State of California was flying upside down.

Epilogue

On an ordinary day, perhaps a day just like today, extraordinary events began to unfold. Great machinations of the universe began to reshape the face of planet Earth. An ordinary man, like you or me, found himself faced with unfathomable circumstances.

As Bill Burroughs raced into the dark night, merely steps ahead of and at times in the very teeth of a global cataclysm, he observed the masses of humanity stop and stare in disbelief. In their inability to comprehend the changes enveloping them, failure to formulate any action, they doomed themselves to the abyss.

By the millions of millions, the human race was nearly destroyed. In a geological blink of an eye, humanity was on the verge of extinction.

Through chance alone, a confederation of survivors found themselves safe, for the moment, from the ravaging earth beneath their feet and an ocean bent on swallowing everything about them.

With James and his young son Jimmy, the old man forged an alliance against nature and against the evil that remained among them. Through trial of fire and flood, with small successes and many failures, they managed to build a safe haven for the peaceful while destroying the threat from within... and without.

With only the desire to find a way home, the old man remained, and through the strength of will, honesty, and integrity,

people of like mind were drawn to him; accepting the mantle of leadership, he guided the people to safety.

With James and Jimmy, Billy Greentree, French Dick, and Ramon Black Crow, ex-military Native Americans, Rowena, the younger sister of Billy, Rachel, an ex-military nurse, and Hector, a Chiricahua mestizo, Bill Burroughs created a new family to weather the storm ahead.

Having ensured the tranquility of the Village at Henshaw, old man Burroughs and his Rangers set off, at last, to strike a new trail across a shattered land to find their home in the far-off Colorado Rocky Mountains.