

=====
Circles of Displacement
by Darrell Bain
=====

Copyright (c)2002 by Darrell Bain

Hard Shell Word Factory
www.hardshell.com

CATEGORY

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Duplication or distribution of this work by email, floppy disk, network, paper print out, or any other method is a violation of international copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment.

Published by Hard Shell Word Factory.
8946 Loberg Rd.
Amherst Junction, WI 54407
<http://www.hardshell.com>
Electronic book created by Seattle Book Company.
eBook ISBN: 0-7599-0580-0
Cover art (C) 2002 Dirk A. Wolf

All rights reserved.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

To my son, Randy Bain,
This story was written with him in mind.

PROLOGUE

THE GREAT SHIP entered the spiral arm of yet another galaxy. Only the beings in the control room were aware of trouble and they were terrified. It was theoretically possible for the time stress fields of the huge ship to get out of balance, but an actual occurrence was a rarity, something that had not happened for generations. The Engineer Commander's stalks sprang erect as wrongly colored patterns erupted inside its left forebrain, the engineer side, demanding immediate action. There was little time to spare, yet the Engineer Commander was forced to call on ancestral memory from one of its hindbrains in order to assess the problem. By the time a solution became apparent, it was almost too late. It did the only thing possible. It ordered the ship to cease its headlong flight in one violent maneuver, hoping the excess energy would discharge in one compact mass rather than leak backward into the ship and cause its utter destruction.

It worked, just barely. A globe of weirdly tortured space-time formed around the laboring stress fields, a darker black than the space surrounding them. The globe hovered, wobbling in place with the unbalanced fields like a dancer about to lose balance. The ship shuddered all through its mile long length, as if shivering in fear at impending destruction, then at the last possible second, tore loose from the newly formed mass of energized time, instantaneously imparting an equalizing velocity to it in the opposite direction. The ship continued on its way, slower now, but no longer

threatened. It would never pass that way again, nor would its commander ever know or care about what happened to the energy it had lost._

The stark globe of space-time shot away in the opposite direction. It was more coherent than a laser beam, but even as laser light slowly attenuates over distance, so did this different form of energy. It spread, becoming miles wide in extent. The inherent energy, unable to maintain a single point of concentration, threw off smaller globes in a radiating circle, while its center gradually grew smaller. Where the globes of energy passed, hydrogen atoms and rare intrastellar molecules of cyanide compounds and other esoteric deep space molecules were thrown far back in time and replaced by other space and matter from that era in an almost imperceptible cone from it's point of origin, with the displacement in time gradually lessening as the attenuation grew. Given enough distance, it would have lost all coherence, dissipating harmlessly over vast stellar distances. A few molecules displaced here and there would have made no difference whatever in the larger scheme of the universe. In fact, even when it impacted on a planet, the universe would go on in much the same fashion as it had for the last fifteen billion years. Such things had happened before. They would happen again.

The second circle of smaller segments of distorted time spread from the center as the globes of terribly wrong energy approached earth, then a third and fourth budded off, with more following, each growing progressively smaller as it broke from its parent. Now the separate pieces were spread over dozens of miles from the still intact, though much smaller center portion. More than two thousand of the small globes of space-time struck the atmosphere, displacing molecules of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and lesser elements, but they slowed down hardly at all. Only a large mass could accomplish that, and the sleeping East Texas countryside served adequately. In a circle with a radius measuring scores of miles, in a pattern affecting the mass they encountered, pure chance decreed who and what was affected. In places, circles of woods, brush, and pasture hundreds of yards in diameter suddenly disappeared in claps of thunder and ozone and reappeared far back in time, simultaneously sending comparable areas from there into the future. Animals in the affected zones, unable to understand the changed circumstances, blinked and attempted to carry on their lives as before. Some succeeded; some did not. For humans caught in the time storms and thrown back to the Pleistocene era, it was a different matter. They could reason and wonder and become fearful or joyful, as circumstances dictated. In many cases, it depended on where they were when the displacements occurred. In all cases where humans were caught, they believed that they were the only ones affected. At first, that is. Eventually, many of them would make contact with inhabitants of other displaced areas. Sometimes they wished they hadn't.

Chapter One

AS DEREK PULLED his pickup into the circle at the end of the indifferently graveled road leading to the farmhouse, Sheila Holloway noticed immediately that as she expected, her parents were still gone. On Saturday nights they might play forty-two with the Marlin family until well after midnight. That suited her fine. It was still only a little past ten, and she and Derek could sit in his pickup for an hour or so with little chance of interruption. She wanted to know where her relationship with him was going and this would be a good time to talk.

"You want another beer?"

"No," Sheila said, "and you'd better not either. You've already had three. If we're still here when Mom and Dad get home and they smell beer on your breath, we'll both be in trouble."

"One more won't hurt. They won't be back for another hour, at least."

"No." Part of Sheila's protest was simply that she didn't really care for the taste of beer, and when Derek had more than three or four, she didn't like the smell of it on his breath when he kissed her. And she wanted to be kissed. Her sixteen_-year_-old body was still a mystery to her, a thing to

be explored and tested, like a swimmer working up to a dive from the high board, no longer content with mastery of the one still occupied by kids. She leaned into Derek's embrace. He kissed her, his breath smelling faintly of alcohol and tobacco.

Derek would be nice, in a way, she thought, if only he had interests other than hunting and fishing and drinking beer with the other seniors. Nevertheless, she allowed him more liberties than she ever had with other boys. It was a puzzle to her sometimes, but a minor one. At least he showed some consideration, touching her gently, rather than the rough and grasping embraces of some boys she had dated. His hand moved over her breast, and she allowed it, liking the sensation of his strong fingers as he squeezed and molded it in his hand. His tongue entered her mouth and explored pleasantly, like warm sunshine on bare skin. After a while he pulled her closer, letting her feel the male hardness pressing against her thigh, hoping that she would react to the sensation. Sheila did react, liking the feel of his body against her own. She allowed him to unbutton her blouse and slip his hand inside her bra. A wave of liquid warmth spread from her breast down to her belly, causing her to squirm restlessly against him.

Had she drank one more beer, or had Derek not rushed things quite so much, she might have given in. Her young body was demanding release, beginning to overpower the dictates of reason, but Derek moved too fast. He left her breast and moved his hand down between her thighs, rubbing too urgently, too suddenly, too overpoweringly intimate with his attentions, digging his fingers into the denim of the jeans between her legs as if grabbing for a slippery prize that wouldn't come loose.

Sheila broke away from him, breathing heavily. She pulled her blouse together and began buttoning it.

"Sheila -- "

"No." She fended off an encircling arm. "It's getting late anyway. Mom and Dad will be home before long. Let's just sit and talk."

"I'm too bothered to talk. You know what you do to me." Derek reached behind the seat and retrieved another beer. Defiantly, he popped the top and tilted it to his mouth.

"If you're going to drink that, I'm going in."

"Aw, this won't hurt me." Derek pulled out a pack of Cambridge and lit a cigarette, hanging it from the corner of his mouth.

"Do what you want to. I'm going inside." Sheila slid over to the passenger door, frustrated and irritated.

"Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad."

"See you tomorrow?"

Sheila relented. After all, he hadn't really acted much different than he usually did. She leaned forward, kissed him on the mouth, and slid out of the truck. "Why don't you try getting to school a little early in the morning? Maybe we can talk before history class?"

"Okay. See you then."

She closed the door and walked the few steps up onto the front porch, using the inside light filtering out through a window to find the light switch there. She flicked it on, then turned, intending to wave, but Derek was already driving away. She watched until the taillights were obscured by the tree line intervening between the house and the black top a quarter mile away, then turned to open the door.

Just as she closed the screen door behind her, a clap of thunder sounded, and a flash of light surrounded her, illuminating the living room with an eerie suffused glow. It winked out immediately, leaving the farmhouse in total darkness.

"Shit!" She muttered, an expression she seldom used, and never at home, at least not when her parents might hear. She fumbled her way toward a drawer where candles and matches were kept. She lit a taper, and carried it to her bedroom, walking carefully to keep within the bounds of the flickering light.

Had the house not been so dark, she might have noticed that the end of the hallway leading to her parents' room was no longer there; indeed, their bedroom was not there either, nor anything else familiar in that direction. She did notice a coolness in the air, but passed it off to an impending thunderstorm. Unconcerned, she undressed and climbed into bed, wondering if she would still be awake to hear her parents come home. She wasn't, nor would she ever see her mother and father again.

FIRST LIEUTENANT Wanda Smith was still seething. She brushed a hand through her short black hair, irritated at every man in the world, then grabbed the steering wheel of the jeep Cherokee as it began drifting to the left on highway 59, heading south to Houston. Goddamn him. Goddamn him to hell, that son-of-a-bitch eagle_-wearing, smirking army colonel that was destroying her career. Right now, if she never saw a man again in her life, she thought, it would be little loss. _The son of a bitch_! Trust him to catch her with the little WAC corporal. Bad enough that, but the way he handled it! Give him a little fucking or be reported! She would fuck him, all right, with a nine millimeter in the mouth if she could get away with it. It wasn't like she was a roaring butch feminist lesbian; in fact, she usually did prefer men, but every now and then an unaccountable urge drew her to a female, and _damn_, the little WAC had been so cute. They were just getting started when the colonel walked in, drawn back to the office by who knew what. Maybe he had suspected when she failed to react to his advances; more likely he was a long time sniffer_-outer of what he thought to be sexual aberrations, regardless of what the regulations said. That didn't excuse his actions, though, even if she had been consorting with an enlisted person. That, she admitted to herself, was her own fault and she should have known better.

This morning, he had called her into his office. The smirk on his face would have done justice to any cat with feathers hanging from its mouth. Wanda tried unsuccessfully to brush aside images from the scene that followed.

"I know this sort of thing goes on in the service," Colonel Brewster said, twirling a pencil in his fingers like a weathervane, "but you've gone beyond the bounds of propriety. Sex with a subordinate. While on duty. Of the same sex. Can you give me any reason not to report this?"

"No, sir," she said.

"That's too bad. It might be overlooked, given the proper circumstances. You know what I mean?"

Wanda knew all right. She wavered. The hint was plain enough, and possibly, just possibly, she could rationalize it to herself. Then she looked harder at her superior officer. Balding. Going to fat. Piggy little leering eyes leering, jumping from her breasts to her legs and back again as she stood at attention in front of his desk. He reminded her of her stepfather, the second one, undressing her with his eyes at every opportunity, bumping against her whenever she forgot herself and got near him, passing his hands over her in "fatherly" hugs and touches. It was impossible; she couldn't do it.

"Colonel, you can go straight to hell."

He twirled the pencil some more, obviously disappointed. "In that case, Lieutenant Smith, you leave me no choice. Consider yourself relieved of duty, as of now. Let the duty officer know your whereabouts at all times. If you change your mind before I get the paperwork processed, let me know. I might still be able to help. I could get you an honorable discharge, rather than a separation under, um, a cloud, shall we say?" He winked obscenely.

Wanda turned on her heel and left, not bothering to salute. Let the bastard court-martial her if he wanted to; she was through with the military and everything it represented. It's not like I don't have a profession, she thought. I'm a good Medical Technologist; I can get a job anywhere. In fact, the medical center in Houston might be the place to go while her discharge was pending. Abruptly, she decided to leave and call the duty officer each day from there. If the colonel didn't like it, she might just file sexual harassment charges against him and see how he liked being under a cloud himself. She returned to her room in the BOQ, changed from her uniform into

jeans and blouse and began throwing other belongings into assorted luggage. The way she felt now, she might not even return. Let them send the discharge to her, and if anyone gave her any trouble she would call the colonel and read him the riot act. She had nothing to lose, and was just mad enough to drag him down with her, regardless of the consequences of exposing her occasional sexual tendency for females. It wasn't as if it was anything unusual these days, and she doubted that any laboratory in Houston hiring her would give a damn one way or another.

The Cherokee cruised almost silently south on US 59. An occasional vehicle passed in the opposite direction, headlights bright in the moonless night. Wanda had her radio set to a station playing soft tunes from years back, some familiar, some older than she was. An eighteen-wheeler passed her, taking advantage of the reduced number of patrol cars at this late hour, and pulled on ahead. Somewhere in the distance, another vehicle approached, headlights dim at first, then growing brighter. Abruptly, they winked out. At the same time, the radio cut off in the middle of a song, changing to bursts of static. A sound of thunder pierced the enclosed cab of the Cherokee, and at almost the same time a burst of light illuminated the highway. Ghostly pines and telephone lines marched in ranks beside the highway, then faded from sight.

Ahead, the taillights of the eighteen-wheeler brightened, and even from the distance, Wanda could hear the squeal of brakes. She trod hard on her own brakes, then stepped down with all her strength as a tearing crash sounded ahead, awful in the suddenness with which it happened. The Cherokee slewed and skidded, but didn't quite leave the road. Wanda brought it to a stop just short of where the highway abruptly ended in a tangle of huge trees and the mangled wreck of the eighteen-wheeler. Her headlights picked out the carnage in a surreal display of twisted metal tangled into scarred trunks of huge trees, still standing.

Quickly, she pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment, dropped from the cab of the Cherokee to the pavement and raced forward. The incongruity of hundred-year-old oak and pine trees bisecting the highway didn't enter her mind until the pavement abruptly ended and she stumbled and fell into some rough tangles of undergrowth. She got back upright and moved more cautiously forward, playing her light on the ground.

There was nothing to do for the driver. The cab of the truck was almost completely collapsed, crushing the driver inside like a bloody sardine, then flinging the body through the windshield with such force that the remains were a sexless blob. The van of the truck had separated from the cab and was wrapped almost completely around the trunk of a huge oak. The impact had knocked branches down on top of it. They lay dark and still, the white of the broken ends in stark contrast to the moody green of the leaves, barely colored in the beam of her flashlight.

Wanda felt a diffuse fear seep into her body. What were trees doing in the middle of a highway? Why hadn't the truck driver seen them in time? It was a puzzle. One thing for certain, though, there was no going forward. The only thing she could do was go back to the nearest filling station or town and call for help. Or maybe someone else would come along. She walked back past the beams of her headlights and looked in the direction from which she had come. Strangely, she could see no headlights approaching. But it is late at night, she thought, striving for normality. Well, nothing else to do but go back. She climbed into the driver's seat and turned the Cherokee around. Something, some fear she was beginning to feel at a visceral level, made her drive slower. Therefore, she was able to stop in plenty of time when another line of trees burgeoned up across the highway and stopped her progress in that direction as well. Startled almost into a gibbering panic by now, she got out of her vehicle again and stared blankly at the coiling vines and tree trunks blocking her progress. What in hell was going on?

A scream, not human at all, split the darkness, ascending into a wail of terror that was choked off abruptly. Sounds of underbrush moving in the

night like something being dragged away came to her ears, as if a predator was hauling off a kill. The noises scared her back into the Cherokee. She locked the doors and pawed at the glove compartment for her pistol. The old .45 Army automatic felt comforting in her hand. She shivered and decided to wait until daylight before venturing out again.

MICHAEL WRONSEN was caught on a lonely stretch of highway 190 between Livingston and Huntsville. He managed to stop his old Explorer, but just barely, and now he was pacing fearfully back and forth between where the highway stopped and forest began, trying to make sense of his predicament. _Where am I and how in hell did I get here,_ he wondered, as bewildered as a toddler in a funhouse mirror maze. This just can't be highway 190, not with monster oaks and pines blocking both ends of the stretch of pavement. Typically, he put his mind to work and began reviewing the past few hours, trying to pinpoint some moment in time where he might have had a memory loss. He had been driving from Texas A & M for a visit to his parents, and possibly, to go job hunting. He was a professor of physics at the college, but the academic life had begun to pall. Michael was smart enough to realize that he was a very mediocre physicist and would probably never contribute much originality to the field. His former wife hadn't understood that fact. She became dissatisfied at his lack of advancement beyond assistant professor and finally left him for greener pastures. She also left him with a load of debt incompatible with his salary.

A friend with the Compaq computer corporation in Houston had invited him out to tour the plant during his visit and he was seriously considering applying for a job there. He felt as if a change from teaching and desultory research might lead to a brighter outlook on life, especially if the money was good. His free spending ex-wife had never let him accumulate any, and that lack kept him from pursuing some of his other goals. His interests were wide-ranging and he loved to read and dabble in other fields, especially politics, sociology and history. Although he didn't know it yet, that self-acquired knowledge was going to be more beneficial to him in the coming days than physics ever would. Right now, though, that was the last thing on his mind. None of his thoughts explained his present predicament.

The only incongruity he could come up with had been that sudden flash of light and clap of thunder, coming abruptly out of a clear, starry night. The light had momentarily illuminated a bank of huge trees seemingly bisecting the highway. As the light faded, the edge of his high beams picked them up again in time for him to slow and stop, and here he remained. Like Wanda, he had turned around and tried to retrace his path, but trees blocked him there too. It has to have been that thunder and light, he told himself. Either that or I've gone slap dab crazy. Wait. Maybe the radio would have something on it. He climbed back into the Explorer and flipped the key. There was only static. He got back out and paced some more. Thunder and lightning. Well, light, anyway. Could that have ruined the radio? Possibly, but that didn't put him any nearer to solving the problem. Eventually, he felt a tiredness in his legs from the constant walking back and forth. How much time had passed? Hours, it must have been. He noticed a faint brightening in the east. Almost dawn. Wait until daylight, he thought, then hike out of here and find out where I am. The decision somehow brought little comfort.

APPROXIMATELY fifty miles to the west of where Wanda Smith was holding her pistol like a talisman to ward off demons, and from where she was separated by only a few miles from Sheila Holloway, who was going peacefully to sleep, a forbidding red brick building squatted in the very center of the city of Huntsville. Inside that building, known as "The Walls" to city folk and prisoners as well, an execution was being prepared.

Dawson Reeves was already strapped to the gurney, immobile, prepared, but certainly not ready, to receive his lethal injection. Not much further away, several dozen men rested in their cells on death row, contemplating their own ultimate fate. Guards watched them and numerous other hard-core prisoners over black and white monitors; other guards were more or less alert

in outlying portions of Texas' most secure prison facility. Here they kept the men considered too dangerous for other facilities or too recalcitrant to be let out for work details under guard.

The Walls contained other facilities: a dispensary for convicts with real or imagined ills staffed on the early night shift by two female nurses, an armory locked away but ready for access in case of rioting prisoners, a gym, a day room, and many, many cells, inhabited by miscreants, hard core drug dealers, murderers who had dodged a death sentence, recidivist thieves, strong arm men, and a rare innocent, caught in the coils of an overburdened justice system.

Dawson Reeves was certainly not an innocent, but he raged nevertheless, not at the justice of his sentence, but at his own mistake in being caught. If only he hadn't gone back for that girl. Damn the bad luck, how was he to know that the fucking cops had a description and were staking out that apartment? And damn it, he should have moved sooner; there was too much evidence of his previous rapes and kills left laying around in his apartment. That was what had ultimately convicted him, and he cursed the day he had ever let that little teen-aged sweetie slip from his grasp. He should have left then, taking the evidence he jacked off to with him, or destroyed it maybe, burning it up like Jews in an oven. But no, he hadn't tied her tight enough, nor noticed how intently she stared when he removed his mask; and she escaped, the damn ungrateful bitch, and here he was, strapped to a table like his mother had strapped him down when he was bad and wet his pants. It just wasn't fair. If he ever got another chance, he would never, never let one of the bitches get away again.

The lights in the death cell blinked out. At the same time there was a clap of thunder and a diffuse bright light flared and died. Dawson blinked at the after images, wondering what was happening. Suddenly he noticed that the tension of the restraints holding his right arm and leg had relaxed. At the same time, he felt wetness at his right hip, and a pain just beginning there. He flexed his right arm and was startled when it came free. The padded restraint was still attached to his wrist, but somehow it seemed to have come loose from the underpinning beneath the gurney.

In the darkness, Dawson had no idea of what was going on; he only knew that his arm was free. He scrabbled at the buckles on his left arm, got them loose, then sat up and freed his left leg. From out of the darkness, there came a chorus of shouts and screams, heard faintly from the isolation of the death cell, but he paid them little attention, nor did he wonder where the two attendants who had been in the death room with him had gone. By some wild chance, he was free, at least from the gurney, and little else mattered. He stood upright and felt ahead of himself in the darkness, looking for a way out.

The floor dropped out from under him as if he had stepped on a trapdoor, and he fell, screaming into the black night. He crashed to the ground one story below. One of his outstretched arms crumpled, sending a searing pain up through his shoulder as the bones of his lower arm shattered.

A gun shot sounded, closer than he wanted to hear. He scrambled away from the sound, thinking that the guards were coming for him, to strap him back to the gurney and plunge the syringe of lethal drugs into his arm.

A tangle of vegetation and tree trunks, closer to the walls than he remembered, impeded his progress, but it served to hide him as well. He crouched in the darkness, listening as more shouts and gunfire rang out in the night. He need not have worried about the guards. They were up to their ears in alligators.

Eventually, the gunfire died away. He listened closely to exuberant voices and concluded that they belonged to triumphant convicts. It gave him little consolation. In the feudal-like strata of prison society, he had no status at all; his kind were at the bottom rung, right down there with the crazies, child molesters, and deviants.

Finally satisfied that he wasn't being pursued, he crept away into the

dark jungle, cradling his broken arm. He had no sense of direction, wanting only to get away from the prison. Had he gone west, the jungle would have soon thinned, but his progress led him southeast, where, if it had not almost entirely disappeared, he would eventually cross US Highway 59, in the same general area where Sheila Holloway was sleeping peacefully and Wanda Smith had returned to her Cherokee and locked all the doors.

The edge of the time bubble that cut Dawson's bonds and shaved a small chunk of meat from his right hip continued in a perfect circle around the rest of the prison. It was pure chance that where portions of the old brick building disappeared from the new environment, it took most of the guards with it.

The armory was left, and the dispensary, and a goodly portion of the cells. The auxiliary generator disappeared as well, leaving the cell doors unlocked, and what few guards remained were in total disarray.

Over the next hour or two, the guards and convicts fought a number of confused and nightmarish battles in the darkness, but the issue was never really in doubt. Dawn revealed a prison, with a perfect arc cut from it and replaced by forest, where the former convicts were firmly in control.

The arc went on to form a circle hundreds of yards in diameter; enclosed within the circle were shops, service stations, streets and a few private dwellings, all surrounded by forest. The remainder of the Walls_'_ unit sat on the northern perimeter of the circle. As the sun came up, the convicts moved out to secure the rest of the area, gathering in those few civilians who hadn't broke for the new forest when they saw armed convicts moving around.

Let it be said that cons do have their own code of honor, of sorts; a hierarchy of ranking as rigid as a feudal system. Had Dawson Reeves been seen, he would have been eliminated as ruthlessly, and with as little compassion as a gardener kills a snake, but he had already taken refuge in the forest adjoining his former place of confinement, still nursing his broken arm and a slowly building exhilaration at his freedom.

Dawn revealed another aspect of the changed circumstances in the remains of the prison. As it happened, some of the hard-core whites had been closer to the armory, and had seized the opportunity. One of them, a big, hulking brute, a weight lifter by the name of Burley Simpson, a convicted cop killer, had seized the first arms and directed their distribution and the ensuing fight. Burley was on his third incarceration, and so far as the authorities believed, his last. He would not be eligible for parole until he was well into his eighties, and at that he had been lucky; only a technicality had prevented him from receiving a death sentence. He was already prejudiced when he first entered the prison system; by the time of his second sentence, he became rabidly racist. Now, in the Walls, he ran a white brotherhood gang, a body of convicts devoted to white supremacy within the prison system. He had distributed the newly acquired arms accordingly. Daylight brought the revelation of his fondest dreams. The whites were armed; the blacks were not. He seized the day like Napoleon getting a second chance at Waterloo, especially when he was made to understand that the prison had somehow been displaced from the bounds of a society he had never had much use for in the first place.

WHEREVER THE balls of time energy touched down, whatever was within the confines was displaced backwards in time to primeval forest eastward from their center in Huntsville, and to scrub and plains westward. Most of the changes never affected humans directly except here and there, but wherever the time fields touched down, a circular area of the twentieth century landscape was replaced by areas of flora and fauna from the past and displaced backwards, willy-nilly, to cope as it could with an environment not seen since the late Pleistocene.

_ON A RANCH somewhere well north of Houston, cattle were suddenly without the supervision they had been bred for. A few died in the night, others in days or weeks ahead, pulled down by animals such as earth had not

seen for thousands of years._

IN THE LAKE Livingston area, about eighty miles north of Houston, several portions of the huge lake were transported in the blink of an eye. Unconfined walls of water, dozens of feet high and hundreds of feet in diameter, collapsed down across the land, drowning strange creatures and familiar alike, along with a few humans who never had a chance to know what hit them. It flowed and sluiced and washed where the hand of man had never been seen, scouring new paths to old rivers and streams.

A TEXAS FARMER slept the sleep of the just, having put the kids to bed, made love to his wife, then got back up to watch the late news and weather. He believed in weathermen about as much as he believed in politicians' promises, but there was corn to plant the next day, and he wanted to see what the weather radar was showing. He would make his own prediction from that. He fell asleep in his recliner while he was waiting, and never awoke even when the clap of thunder and bright flash of light stole Maude and his three children from him. They were replaced, unfortunately, by a set of huge, dog-like animals. He was torn to pieces before he even became fully awake.

ONE CAPSULE OF altered time struck the center of the small town of Goodpasture on Highway 59, located a few miles south of the city of Livingston, which was built on the shores of the lake. This displacement took only a few teen-agers and their pick-up trucks into the past, along with a deputy sheriff and a few inhabitants of homes near the town's center.

The kids were intent at that hour only with driving past the downtown shops and impressing their peers. One or two crashed gently into the wall of trees suddenly surrounding their environment; the others slowed, stopped and wondered, unable to comprehend immediately what vast changes had come into their lives.

AT A ROADSIDE rest area, a mixed bag of truckers and travelers spending the night there suddenly found themselves confined to a section of highway that began and ended a hundred and fifty yards on either side of them. As dawn brightened into full sunlight, they gathered in disparate groups to try to make sense of their predicament but soon enough, the vending machines emptied, the toilets overflowed, and no one came to rescue them.

Some of the truckers began quarreling. Darla Cranston, a schoolteacher from Tyler on her way to a seminar in Houston, sidled back to her Toyota Camry and furtively tucked her twenty-two-caliber revolver into the pocket of her jacket.

Brent Sampson, a salesman with a slight physique belying his name did the same, only his weapon was slightly higher powered, a .25 automatic. Neither of them trusted the four truckers parked there, and the truckers didn't even trust one another. It was a situation made for trouble.

ALL IN ALL, there might have been several hundred -- or perhaps even several thousand -- people who were displaced backward in time on that early summer night in east Texas. No one will ever know. Many of them never made contact with their fellows, and many more fell prey to an environment they had no preparation for coping with. It was a new world, sparsely populated and the selection had been entirely random, isolating individuals here, cutting families apart there, and nowhere was there a rule of law such as the displaced individuals had been used to and grown up with. The same sun they had been accustomed to all their lives came up just as usual the next morning, but many of them never lived to see it set that night.

Chapter Two

SHEILA HOLLOWAY woke up to the sounds of birds chirping and calling out to each other. It was not an unfamiliar sound, given that the farmhouse was a quarter mile removed from the black top traffic, but it did sound louder than usual this morning, and somehow, not quite the same cheerful sounds as she was used to. Not only that, there seemed to be more of them, as if all the birds in the neighborhood had congregated right outside her window and brought their

neighbors along as well. She shook off the covers on the bed and headed for the bathroom, shucking her nightgown as she went.

The two beers she had drank the night before had left a nasty taste in her mouth, and she turned on the faucet to get a drink of water. It ran for a moment, then sputtered and quit. She blinked her eyes open and remembered that the power had gone out the night before. The early morning sunlight streaming through her bedroom window and into the bathroom had caused her to forget. Oh well, power outages never lasted long, unless there had been a hurricane or something, and it was probably too early in the year for that. She dry brushed her teeth then opened the closet door, flicking the light switch by habit, laughing at herself when nothing happened.

She pulled out fresh jeans and a bright yellow blouse and took them back into the bedroom. There was quite enough light to let her rummage in the dresser for bra and panties. It was Sunday, so she gave no thought to the lack of any other sounds in the house. Mom and Dad must have really stayed out late last night, playing dominoes with the Marlins, she thought.

The light in the bedroom was enough to see how to run a brush through her bright red hair. She wrinkled her nose at the scattering of freckles across her cheeks, tied her hair in twin pigtails and walked out from her room into the hall.

In plain daylight now, the incongruity struck her immediately. No wonder the birds had sounded so loud. Dozens of them were cheerfully singing and chirping from a growth of vine-entwined brush at the end of the hall, growing at the foot of a yards wide tree trunk. The trunk of the huge tree grew up and up until the hall ceiling obscured it. Where it grew should be the entrance to her parent's bedroom.

She could not have been more surprised had a dinosaur suddenly decided to take up residence in the hallway. Her hand shot to her mouth. Had a tree fallen into the house overnight? Was she dreaming? From somewhere outside, she became aware of a snuffling noise, like a rooting pig eating acorns. Cautiously, she stepped forward. Her hand came to rest wonderingly on the bark of the tree. It was rough, as real as an algebra test, and just as threatening.

Shakily, she peeked around the trunk, trying to make sense of what the end of the hall had become. More trees met her vision, and rooting at the base of one was a large furred animal like nothing she had ever seen or heard of. It resembled nothing so much as a huge, slow moving sloth.

Sloth? Sheila bit her thumb and shook her head. She knew nothing like that inhabited the piney woods of east Texas. Had it escaped from a zoo? No. If that were the case, then a six-foot wide tree trunk had also escaped from somewhere and taken up residence in the hallway. This must be a dream, but if it were, it was a singularly vivid one, complete with sounds, and she noticed now, smells as well. A rich odor of composting vegetation wafted into the hall, and the snuffling sounds took on the aspects of a small idling steam engine, chuffing away as the weird animal nosed closer.

Sheila turned and ran back into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Shakily, she opened the other door of the bedroom, the one that led out into the living room. She peeked through the gap. Everything seemed normal there. She stepped out into the room, then quickly turned back and locked the door to the hall, where she still heard the sounds of the feeding animal. At least it sounded no closer, but what on earth was it?

She crossed the room and looked out the large picture window. Normal there, too -- no, wait! Not normal. From where she stood, she should be able to see almost to the county road, but her vision was blocked by forest, angling in a circle around the familiar farmyard at a distance of a couple hundred yards. As she watched, a shaggy creature ambled into view, blinked in the early morning sunlight, then retreated back into the woods. It was about the size of a bear, but resembled nothing she had ever seen before. She stared blankly at it, her mind numb.

Blazer, the elderly dog she had grown up with was nowhere in sight, but

a chorus of meows told her the cats were waiting to be fed. Moving as if in a dream, she went to the kitchen and pulled a bag of Meow Mix from the cupboard; She took it out onto the porch where she filled the bowl while the two cats and several ten-week-old kittens did their best to get stepped on. As she rose up from the bowl, a thought that had been shimmering in her mind burst into full flower. Her parents! Where were they?

Without a thought of possible danger, she dropped the bag of cat food where she stood and ran down the three porch steps into the yard, then around to the back of the house. At least she intended to go back there, thinking wildly that by trying a different direction she might find the rest of the house.

The woods stopped her, and again she heard the snuffling. She backed away and followed the strange new growth with her eyes. It arced around the farm in what appeared to be a perfect circle several hundred feet in diameter; it came back, and ended, she presumed, behind the house, clipping off the master bedroom and bathroom and part of the common hallway. It was too much for her senses to take in all at once. She retreated inside and buried her face in her hands and cried.

WANDA SMITH rubbed a painful kink in her neck where she had slept with her head turned to the side on the reclining front seat of the Cherokee. She came awake slowly, hoping she had been dreaming. It was obviously no dream, she quickly decided. Looking through the back window of the Cherokee, the highway appeared perfectly normal until it ended with the mangled remains of the truck buried in the forest which had sprang up in the night. And that wasn't all: clustered around the cab were several large dogs (wolves?) pulling and tugging at the remains of the driver. She shuddered and turned her eyes away, groping for the pistol by her side.

She got out of the vehicle only once that morning to relieve herself by the open door, and then she quickly she got back in. She drank the remains of a Thermos of coffee, watching and waiting and wondering when the nightmare would end. Eventually, she noticed that the larger trees formed a circle around the isolated stretch of highway, like a distant green wall, completely visible in some directions, half hidden by more familiar growth in others.

During the morning she spotted several animals, which briefly crossed her vision. She strained to identify them. Memories of her freshman zoology class began tugging at her mind, most notably barely remembered pictures of extinct mammals. It was disconcerting to first spot what appeared to be a perfectly normal black bear ambling lazily across the highway, sniffing curiously at the pavement (there were still a few black bears in the piney woods, she thought), then with the abruptness of changing channels on television, she would see a creature straight out of a textbook. And birds were everywhere, in numbers and varieties to stagger the imagination.

Shortly after what she judged to be noon, the dog -- wolves? _Timber wolves in Texas? -- _had finished their meal and departed. No other human, nor any other sign of what she thought of as civilization, appeared. Her belly rumbled, reminding her that she had not eaten since the previous afternoon, and it appeared that if she intended to eat, she would have to feed herself. There was absolutely nothing edible in the jeep. She had intended to stop somewhere before reaching Houston for a snack. The hunger pains made her think. Maybe the truck driver had been carrying something. Looking all around and seeing nothing immediately threatening, she started the Cherokee, turned it around again, and drove to where the highway ended. She chambered a round into the .45 and, holding the pistol in a death grip, approached the mangled cab. Nothing remained of the driver other than spots of blood on the ground and spattered in the cab. In fact, she had trouble climbing into it, but eventually she managed.

The transom and sleeping area were both crushed too badly for access, but it was easy enough to reach inside. She fumbled, felt something vaguely familiar, and pulled out a purse. _Dear God, the driver had been a woman_. She hadn't even noticed the night before.

She opened the purse and found nothing of note other than three tampons. She pocketed them, thinking vaguely and unconsciously of the future. She discarded the purse and reached inside the cab again.

This time she brought out a small satchel. Inside, she found underwear and two sets of jeans and tops. None of the clothing interested her; she had plenty of her own in the jeep. A final reach provided a windbreaker, but nothing else. She appropriated that and squinted around the inside of the cab, wishing she had brought her flashlight.

There! A brown paper bag. It contained two Lancer's cheese crackers with peanut butter and a Hershey bar with almonds. She emptied the clothes from the satchel and dropped the food inside, then she started to pry herself out of the demolished cab. Thinking, she stopped and tugged at the glove compartment. The hinges were bent, but a hefty yank popped it open. Sure enough, inside was a small .25 caliber automatic with two spare clips, a working flashlight and a nail file.

Taking her plunder, she crawled out. Just as she was on the point of leaving to explore the trailer part of the rig, she spotted a toolbox welded to the side of the cab. It was closed with a heavy duty Yale lock, but she was getting the hang of scavenging now. She crawled back inside the cab, retrieved the purse and lifted a jangling key ring from it.

The third key fitted. The top compartment contained an assortment of wrenches, screwdrivers, and other tools of no immediate value, but there was a small, one-piece knife, not much larger than what she used to peel potatoes, and a larger, one bladed folding variety. She tucked the folding knife into her back pocket and the other into the bag.

Hunger vied with an urge to explore further. Peering into the woods as far as possible, and looking back along the highway to make certain that nothing threatening had made an appearance, she walked over to the trailer rig. It was cracked open in several spots. Peering inside, she could make out an assortment of boxes and crates, some of them split apart and dripping liquid. She smelled a familiar, grocery store odor. She reached through an open seam into the bowels of one of the crates and pulled out an apple.

A produce truck. Why couldn't it have been carrying canned goods? Well, apples were better than nothing. She spent several minutes fishing out as many as she thought she could carry, and then returned to the Cherokee. Safely inside once more, she ate one package of the crackers, the Hershey bar, two apples, then watched and waited some more.

As the evening wore on, small animals began to emerge from the woods, attracted by the odor of the produce. She observed them closely until a large, cat-like animal flashed across her view. It disappeared into the woods, one of the little creatures clutched in its jaws.

Wanda had no desire at all to attract the attention of carnivores. Once more, she backed and turned the Cherokee, and retreated to the other end of the highway. She sat and thought and fiddled with the gadgets on the knife she had appropriated, beginning to realize consciously now that an incomprehensible change had come into her life, like nothing she had ever imagined or thought possible.

By day's end, it was obvious that she would have to leave. Twice she saw what appeared for all the world to be an oversized panther take a small animal, and toward evening another bear appeared, sniffing at breaks in the trailer. By this time, she had lost all hope of rescue. The circumstances were too strange to think that the cavalry would suddenly appear over the ridge and bear her off to civilization. She ate another apple to quench her thirst and made plans in her mind to leave this place the next morning. To where, she had no idea.

MICHAEL WRONSEN was having the time of his life. The previous night, he had been scared to death, unable to see what had happened, but in the full daylight of morning, it was plain to see (if he wasn't dreaming, which he suspected from time to time that he might be) that he had been transported intact with his old Explorer into another time, or world, certainly into a

quite different environment than what he was used to seeing on the drive from College Station to Houston.

As a physicist, his mind kept turning to the possible mechanics of the transformation, but his train of thought was constantly interrupted by the sight of creatures, which he knew, without a shadow of doubt, belonged not to the twentieth century, but to an era of the late Pleistocene.

The huge ground sloth, at least, left no doubt. Clutching his pistol for protection (not stopping to think of how useless it would be against a dire wolf, for instance), he wandered in circles from his vehicle, skirting the edges of the two hundred yard circle of virgin forest, poking and prying into the underbrush at every sound, trying to get a glimpse of the animals making the noises. It was fascinating, mind-boggling and as intellectually stimulating as the discovery of a black hole in his backyard would have been.

Wronsen was blessed, or cursed (depending on how it struck him at the time) with the elephant child's curiosity. His habit of reading, even at the table, had been a major cause of dissent in his marriage, and he remembered much of what he read. As a physics teacher, his fellows had thought it strange that he was also interested in history, politics, biology and anthropology. He didn't find it strange at all.

The endless variety of twentieth and twenty-first century culture and learning was for him simply another stage in the history of the species; the omnivorous, omnipotent ape which had conquered the earth. He wondered if the displacement had been near enough in time so that humans were now inhabiting the North American continent (if that was where he was), and if so, whether there were any in the immediate area.

It wasn't until early afternoon that it finally struck him that he was alone, isolated, perhaps the only modern day human on the face of the earth. In that, he was not by himself. Like Sheila Holloway and Wanda Smith, others were wondering the same thing and by this time, all were despairing of help.

TEN-YEAR-OLD Melanie Woods crouched high in a tree where she had taken refuge when her house disappeared while she was out catching lightning bugs for show and tell the next day. She shivered and cried and prayed for her parents to come rescue her. They would never appear.

WEST OF HUNTSVILLE, in dryer country, one foolish cowboy died trying to protect his horse from a pair of saber tooth tigers. His partner had more sense. He departed his pony with haste that would have done credit to a rodeo wrangler leaving a bucking bronco, and took refuge in a pile of naked boulders. Later that day, he hitched up his jeans and began hiking east, unarmed and wary. He had no idea what had happened to the familiar world, but his sensibilities were close to the earth. He knew he hadn't gone crazy. He also knew he was in one hell of a fix and hadn't the slightest idea how to get out of it. His only thought was to keep walking and see what developed.

IN THE LITTLE town of Goodpasture, south of Livingston, three teenage boys, two white and one black, all with their girl friends, roamed the confines of the downtown area which had been displaced. They were frightened but wouldn't admit it to their girl friends -- or each other. They gazed in awe at the surrounding forest and tried to come up with an explanation of what had happened. Nothing they had learned in their high school courses, nor anything in their limited small town experience, helped in making sense of their situation.

During the course of the day, a deputy sheriff by the name of Dustin Breedlove, who had been asleep in his patrol car behind the court house, made an appearance, along with the elderly proprietor of the donut shop who slept on the premises, two middle aged widows who shared a home just at the edge of the displacement circle and several middle aged couples living within the confines of the displacement area. There were no children. By evening, they were all clustered together in a group, leaderless as yet, but they were certainly not hungry. The Goodpasture grocery store, the feed store and a fishing/hunting center had come along with them.

DAWSON REEVES struggled eastward through unfamiliar brush and woods --

though he had no idea of which direction he was traveling. He was very lucky. He made better than twenty miles through heavy woods that day, chased by the ghost of that awful lethal syringe waiting should he fail to make good his escape. Purely by chance, he failed to strike another area of displacement. With considerable difficulty, considering his broken arm, he took refuge in a tree that night, alternately cursing the environment then thanking whatever powers had been responsible for freeing him from certain death. He intended to make more miles the next day, just as fast as he could travel, even if he didn't have a clue as to where or when he was.

IN THAT PORTION of Huntsville that had made the change, Burley Simpson was in complete control. The downtown portion of Huntsville northeast of the Walls contained a variety of stores and businesses that were in the displacement circle. Burley already had a team of convicts out looting them and rounding up what few civilians had been living or working in the area that night and had failed to flee when the convicts gained control of the prison.

He was amazed and still not quite sure that he was really free. He expected any moment to hear sirens and helicopters or see National Guard troops deploying to recapture them, even though he could look around and see the perfect circle of short scrubby oak and mesquite, which had unaccountably replaced the rest of Huntsville.

Burley's second in command was a man he cared not too much about, an intellectual by the name of Jason Deeson. One of the reasons he didn't care much for Jason was that for all the time he had known him, Deeson had quietly proclaimed his innocence.

Jason had gone down on a charge of sexual abuse of his stepdaughter, which would ordinarily have placed him on the lower rung of prison society, but his calm protestation of innocence (not unique, by any means, but from him, it was convincing), along with his considerable intelligence and size (he topped six four) had made him a place in the upper strata of the prison hierarchy.

Jason was a bitter man. He had long since given up hope of proving his innocence, and he still had almost five years to go on his sentence. His ex-wife, he knew, was the real culprit. She had coached her daughter into convincing lies, and then appropriated most of his estate in the divorce settlement.

When the sudden change of events overtook the prison, Jason participated willingly in the uprising. At least one guard that he knew of had died by his hand, and he wasn't the least bit sorry. The guard had been a cruel and vicious man who constantly abused his authority. His death was well deserved, and then some.

He was reluctant to take part in what Simpson was proposing now, although he didn't let it show. Simpson had too many followers, was too well armed and they were all drunk with power. Jason kept his hand close to the pistol strapped at his side. _The first chance I get, I'm leaving,_ he thought. _But to where? Other than the Walls, and a few shops, there's nothing here but forest. What happened? Well, I won't worry about it now. There are more immediate concerns._

"Those fucking black monkeys need to be weeded out," Simpson said, peering with cruel eyes out into the small, still enclosed exercise yard. Approximately twenty black men milled in confusion there, weaponless and helpless, which was just how Burley wanted them. He looked out over the scrub trees, which had replaced most of Huntsville. Whatever the cause, it left little fear of retribution for what he intended to do.

"Cut me out Stars, Witchman, and Motorcycle Man," he said to a cohort, a blonde punk with an underslung jaw by the name of Goober. "Bring them here."

"What are you going to do with them?" Jason asked, already suspecting.

"I'm going to make a fucking example of them, what do you think? If any of those monkeys are trouble, those three are."

He was right about that, Jason thought. The three men he had named were leaders of the black contingent in the prison system. Straight, all of three

of them, not in for drugs or murder. They were accomplished thieves serving their time quietly, using their influence only to control contraband and to keep their fellow blacks from falling into trouble with the guards. They were just as rabidly racist as Burley, however, and Jason suddenly knew that their fate was sealed. He thought briefly of trying to intervene and then discarded the idea. It would do nothing to help and might very well result in him joining them. Better to wait and see what else Burley had planned.

Jason watched while Burley's blonde punk prodded the three blacks out of the yard with his newly won shotgun, being very careful not to get too close to them. He motioned them into the administrative office that Simpson had made his temporary headquarters. Simpson didn't even give them a chance to talk. He raised his short-barreled twelve-gauge automatic and fired a shot into the belly of each one, splattering himself, Jason and Goober with blood and bits of flesh. Three other of his fellows watched with cold faces from behind him. Burley turned to them. "Dump those apes back in the yard so the rest of 'em can see."

The bodies sprawled limply in the yard moments later. One of them still twitched and moaned; the shotgun blast had been a little off center. Burley, surrounded by his cohorts, stepped onto the edge of the tarmac and addressed the remaining blacks. "Listen up, you monkeys! Your day is ended. Black ain't beautiful no more. You started out as slaves and that's what the fuck you're going to be from now on. When a white man speaks, you say yessir, and you do exactly what he says. That clear?"

There was no answer from the black prisoners other than fearful mumbles. Burley fired the shotgun over their heads, the blast resounding in the yard like a clap of thunder.

"I said 'is that clear', you motherfuckers? Let me hear you!"

"Yessir," a few mumbled.

"That's 'yessir, Captain', you black bastards. Let me hear it again, and louder this time. Any motherfucker I don't hear loud and clear can answer to this!" He shook his shotgun in the air like a cudgel.

"Yessir, Captain." The chorus was louder this time.

"That's better. Now line up, you black bastards, and get your chains on. No, that way, you stupid shits!" Burley gestured with his weapon. Two of his followers were ready. As each black man was passed back into the remaining portion of the building, he was affixed with leg irons and handcuffs. Slavery had returned to the North American continent.

Jason watched the proceedings, feeling a sickness inside himself at the brutality and murders. He thought again of simply sneaking away in the night, leaving Burley to his rampages but a look outside at the surrounding scrub forest stopped him. Wherever they were, this might be all the world he was familiar with and he was reluctant to abandon it just yet, even though he knew that if he stayed, sooner or later he and Burley would clash.

SHEILA'S TEARS were finished. With the resilience of youth, she adjusted. By the following morning, she determinedly put the thought of her parents out of her mind and began considering her predicament.

She avoided the hall until after she was dressed and had something to eat, then she plundered the garage for a hammer and nails. She found some one by fours and two by fours, relics left over from when her dad had converted a spare room into a tool shop and storeroom. Checking carefully to be certain that the sloth-like animal was gone (and that no other denizen was lurking there), she nailed up a barrier in front of the tree trunk.

She didn't think for a moment that her barrier would stop a determined attack from a really large beast, but at the very least, it would let her use the bathroom in relative comfort, even if she had to haul water from the spring to flush the commode. That done she unlocked the gun cabinet, thinking that under the circumstances (whatever they were), she ought to have some sort of protection nearby.

Perhaps it was natural for her to pass over the thirty-thirty and the other, heavier rifle, but she had never fired either. Instead, she chose the

Remington automatic .22 that she was comfortable with. She had shot it many times, mostly at squirrels and rabbits. She really had no conception of what use a rifle would be under the circumstances; she only knew that there were beasts beyond the friendly circle of familiar ground, and that she should arm herself.

There was a natural stream not a hundred feet from the house, and she was getting very thirsty for a drink of water. Cokes and Sprites weren't satisfying her. Not only that, she needed water to flush the commode; it was starting to smell. This was nothing new to her. In the southern part of East Texas, violent thunderstorms and hurricanes were a common occurrence. Sometimes the power would be off for days.

Handling the .22 rifle in one hand and a large bucket in the other, she left the house. If she kept her glance down low, the surroundings were entirely familiar. Sun brightened the front yard and gravel road just as she had seen them for as long as she could remember, and portions of the chain link fence remained intact. But let her glance travel far and the dark, encircling woods brought her back to the reality of the present, like returning to a horror movie after a bathroom break.

The stream was no longer running. She stood looking at the pool of water. Minnows bounced in it the same as always, but it no longer flowed on down to the bottoms. Its origin, where it had bubbled out of the ground all her life, had gone to wherever all other once familiar landmarks were, in some other space or time.

Shaken, she filled her bucket and returned to the house. Carrying it caused her to break out in a sweat. Even in late June, the humidity was high in this part of Texas -- or wherever she was. She used part of the water to take a sponge bath, then she used most of the remainder to flush. Hopefully, she tried her radio, but got nothing but static. She took the little rifle to bed with her that night. The loneliness was awful. She thought she would give anything she ever hoped to own for some human companionship.

WANDA SMITH struck off the next morning, pistol in hand, determined to break the solitude of fearful waiting. She traveled east, for no good reason she could think of, carrying her bag in her left hand, pistol in her right. The bag soon grew heavy, but she lightened it from time to time by eating an apple. Occasionally she spotted an animal large enough to make her want to avoid it, but they seemed content to let her go her own way.

As the day wore on, sunlight began dappling the forest floor in spots, making the walk seem almost like a cheerful stroll in a park, except that the wilderness of vine-tangled trees went on and on with never the slightest sign of civilization. She began to wonder if she would ever see another human being, ever again know the warmth and comfort of companionship. By the time dusk began to fall, she thought she might even welcome the sight of Colonel Brewster should he appear.

Wanda took refuge that night in the hollow of a huge palmate-branched oak, hardly a hundred yards from the chain link fence still partially surrounding the home of Sheila Holloway.

MICHAEL WRONSEN spent that night safe in his elderly Explorer, but the next morning, hunger finally brought him out of his intellectual ferment. His stomach growled painfully, and thirst was beginning to dry his mouth. He held on 'til noon, but finally moved out, armed with only his pistol and a lonely six rounds of ammunition.

Whatever else, he was grateful that the change had occurred in Texas, where the possession of firearms was as common as hamburger in a meat market. He soon found, however, that cowboy boots were not made for long hikes. But he pressed onward, thinking that eventually he might reach the city of Houston, or whatever was there in place of it now.

He had no idea that there might be other areas of displacement until late that evening when he stumbled out into another cleared area. Looking around, he saw that the surrounding forest formed a perfect circle, just as the previous one had.

As tired, hungry, and thirsty as he was, his mind again went into the physics mode. He stopped in the center of the clearing to get his bearings. A noise behind him caused him to whirl, pistol ready. A perfectly normal house cat wrapped itself around his legs, purring happily. Now where could it have come from? There was nothing resembling a house, or any other remnant of the twentieth century in sight. He walked around the clearing, followed by the buzzing cat, which seemed to think he might have breakfast in his pocket.

He alternated his gaze from the encircling forest to the clearing and to the ground, not really knowing what he was searching for until he found it. Footprints. An old sixteen gauge shotgun cartridge, half buried in the dirt. A stray scrap of paper, a bent nail, and finally, just as his path took him near the forest's edge, a little block of mown grass. So, a home had once been nearby, even though he thought it might now be as far away from him as the most distant star. Or perhaps near enough to touch, in another dimension, or another time, he wasn't certain of either. All he could do right now was add the fact to the data he was gathering, and wish to hell a garden, or a grocery store had been in the area. He was getting very hungry.

Hopefully, Michael plucked a pear from a small tree growing in the clearing. He tasted, then spat out the remains. They were still weeks away from being ripe. Squaring his shoulders, he plunged into the forest again. He had been traveling in what he hoped was a straight line, but had no way of telling if that was the route he was taking. The trees he had been traveling beneath were so huge that the sun was seldom visible enough to gauge direction from it. Actually, like most travelers in unfamiliar territory where no distant nor distinct landmarks are visible, his progress had curved to the southeast. By late afternoon, He was nearing the home of Sheila Holloway.

Chapter Three

NOTHING HAD changed, Sheila knew. She had slept with her rifle in bed with her and had had horrible dreams. One of them woke her, just at daylight. She gasped and cried out, then gradually came back to reality as she realized where she was. Even through the closed bedroom door, she could hear the raucous call of early rising birds, but not a sound from the rooster she was used to waking up to.

She got up and dressed in the dim light, then cautiously opened the door into the common hall. Her carpenter work of the day before still stood, blocking the end of the hall like untidy scaffolding. She used the bathroom hurriedly, thinking as she did that perhaps she should have waited and gone outside, saving the inside room for emergencies. The commode didn't seem to be draining very well. She thought about it, and suddenly it made sense. The septic system probably flowed in the direction of the new forest next to the house. Did the strange displacement continue on underground? It was something to think about, but not now.

The refrigerator exuded a sour smell when she opened it. She took the remains of a gallon of milk out, sniffed, then took it out onto the porch to give to the cats. They lapped at it eagerly, but she noticed that one of the kittens was missing, and the mother cat sported a torn ear. She looked out over what had once been a safe and secure yard. The circling forest still threatened, looking ominous, as she tried to peer into it's dark interior.

Thoughtfully, she waited until the cats had finished the milk, then moved the mother cat and remaining kittens into the house. She rummaged in the storeroom and found the cat box and kitty litter where it had been stored away and placed them back in the converted garage. It was make work, of sorts, something to keep her mind occupied while she tried to figure out what she was going to do.

Perhaps the disturbance had only been local. Suppose that only a short distance away everything was still normal? She hoped desperately that it might be, but finding out would mean tackling those dark woods, and she wasn't sure she was prepared to do that yet.

Presently she found a warm coke. She took that and a sandwich of Spam

and cheddar cheese and her little rifle out onto the porch and began to eat, feeding bits of her sandwich to the old short-tailed tom. One more day she thought, then if no one comes, I'll try it.

Something that looked like an oversized buffalo poked its head out into the clearing. She shuddered. Or maybe I won't. God, this is scary.

WANDA SMITH munched another apple from the security of her hideaway, then stood and stretched. She brushed away bits of twigs and dried leaves that clung to her body, and looked around her. The forest was no less threatening in the early morning light than it had been the previous evening. She wondered if she had made a mistake by leaving the area where she had originally been stranded. Well, no use thinking of it now; she doubted that she could find her way back, anyway.

Traveling had been relatively easy; she had simply kept to the vicinity of the huge oaks and pines, where their shade stifled most other vegetation, but every tree looked the same. I'm probably lost, she thought, but at least I know where east is, and south. If I keep in that direction, eventually I'll come to the gulf. If there still is a gulf! _God, what in hell has happened? Am I the only person left in the world?_ Presently, she picked up her bag and continued her trek.

A few moments later, the light suddenly became brighter, as though it were no longer being filtered through the leaves and needles of the huge trees. Something metallic sparkled in front of her. She edged cautiously toward it, and suddenly, like a mirage from out of time, a chain link fence appeared before her. She whooped joyously and gripped the fence links hard, not wanting to take a chance on them suddenly disappearing like her previous world had.

"Ow!" She exclaimed, drawing back her hand, shaking it. She had closed her fingers over a strand of barbed wire running along the top of the fence, a discouragement to cattle trying for the greener grass on the other side. Wanda flicked droplets of blood off the palm of her hand, annoyed that she hadn't seen the wire, but ecstatic at the implications. Somewhere close, there must be other people! Just the thought of seeing another person blinded her momentarily to the fact that the world had changed in a fashion she still didn't understand.

"Hello!"

Wanda looked up at the shout. Her heart thrummed excitedly at the sight of a young girl bounding off a farmhouse porch, almost falling as she skipped down the steps.

Wanda looked for a gate as the girl sprinted toward her, and spotted one a few yards away, but even as she headed toward it, she saw more huge forest trees, exactly like the ones she had been trudging beneath, enclosing the cleared area around the farmhouse like a dark green wall. She opened the gate, alternating her gaze from the nearing girl and the incongruous demarcation of virgin forest and rustic homestead.

The girl bounded into her arms just as she closed the gate behind her. A stunning impact jolted the back of her neck, and she staggered in response.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" Sheila stepped back, one hand covering her mouth, the other still clutching her rifle. She had forgotten she was still carrying it, and as she threw her arms around the delectable sight of the other woman, the barrel had come around and struck her from behind.

Wanda rubbed the back of her neck and grinned at the young, red headed girl in front of her, freckles standing out prettily across the bridge of her nose and spreading across her cheeks. "Never mind. I'm so glad to see another person that you could have hit me with a sledge hammer and I wouldn't have minded."

"Oh, me too! I thought the whole world had gone away and left me. What happened? Are my parents all right? No, you wouldn't know, but we can find out, can't we? Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" Sheila dropped her rifle and hugged Wanda hungrily again, not even noticing the other woman's disheveled appearance, or the pistol she was carrying, or the bag by her side where she

had dropped it.

Peering over Sheila's shoulder, Wanda took in the cleared area surrounding the farmhouse. The area looked to be about the same extent as where she had been stranded. Her hopes fell. As glad as she was to see the young girl, the situation had not changed; it had only become more complicated. She patted Sheila's shoulder, and as gently as she could, said, "It's not that simple, hon. The same thing that happened to you, happened to me."

Sheila backed away, bringing both hands up to her face as if trying to hide from Wanda's revelation. "Oh, no! You mean it's like this everywhere? What -- oh, shit! What's happening? Have I gone crazy?"

"I don't know what's happened, but if you're crazy, so am I. Come on, let's get away from here, and we can compare stories." Wanda looked back over her shoulder apprehensively. During the previous day, she had caught glimpses, and seen tracks, of animals that she had no desire to meet, especially standing in the open like this. She took Sheila Holloway's hand and led her towards the farmhouse, reminding her to pick up her rifle. If what had happened to the two of them was a universal phenomenon, they would certainly be needing it.

I SHOULD HAVE been dead, Dawson Reeves thought to himself, but I'm not. Whatever the fucking hell happened, it saved me from the gurney, and that damned injection. Dawson struggled along, carrying his broken left arm in his right. He had gathered dead limbs and torn strips from his shirt to make a crude splint. He still cried out sometimes with pain when his arm was jostled, but he didn't let it slow him down. He wanted to get as far from Huntsville as possible.

Eventually, I'll find out where I am, he thought, and then it's just a matter of getting close to some unwary person. That shouldn't be hard; he could use his obviously broken arm for an excuse, and the smudges and dirt should camouflage the white prison garb to some extent. It would be easy, he hoped, and then nobody better get in his way. No way I'll ever let myself get strapped in again.

During the day, Dawson passed through two areas of displacement, but never noticed; it was simply a clearing to him, and a threat rather than a promise. He skirted the area and went on, trying to mark a passage south by the sun. Houston should be in that direction. If he noticed the incongruity of centuries old trees and unfamiliar animals he didn't let it distract him. His whole being was totally concentrated on getting just as far from Huntsville as he could.

He traveled southeast rather than south. He was very lucky. He made another twenty miles that day with nothing more to hinder him other than the pain of his broken arm and a raging hunger. He slept that night scarcely ten miles from the farmhouse where Sheila Holloway and Wanda Smith were comparing notes.

AT THE ROADSIDE park on highway 59 between Livingston and Corrigan, about eighty miles north of where Houston had once been located, Darla Cranston had made a friend. She had spent the night in the rear of Brent Sampson's van, sleeping soundly beneath the canopy of western pants and shirts, which Sampson peddled to western stores in a territory encompassing half of Texas.

Brent wasn't the type of man Darla was ordinarily attracted to. He had a slight physique and thinning brown hair, but compared to the three male and two female truckers who had been displaced along with them, he might as well have been six feet tall and as handsome as her father. He had a quiet, confident demeanor that made her feel safer than any amount of shallow braggadocio would have.

Darla was still numb with the sudden change the world had undergone. She had been traveling towards Galveston to meet with her estranged husband when the change caught her at the roadside park where she had stopped for a rest. She was intending to tell him, finally, and in no uncertain terms that

their marriage was over. She was tired of trying to support him on her schoolteacher's salary while he perpetually worked at one odd job or another just long enough to qualify for unemployment benefits.

She wondered why they had ever married in the first place, and then she stopped wondering because she knew. He was a handsome hunk of a man with a bubbling, extroverted personality, just like the high school and college jocks she had always been attracted to. It had taken several years of marriage to discover just how shallow he was beneath the confident shell he presented to the world.

When the truckers had become belligerent during the first day of the displacement, she welcomed Brent's diffident invitation to sleep in his van rather than her own little car.

During that day, Darla watched as the truckers congregated together, after a fashion, but she noticed that they were wary of each other, like strange dogs meeting for the first time. She kept her distance as they drank up whatever liquor they had been carrying and began vandalizing the vending machines. Once, when she had gone inside the comfort station to use the bathroom, she came back out to see the looming figure of the odd male trucker.

"Hey, lady, looks like we're all stranded here together. What say let's get acquainted?"

Darla didn't even like his looks, let alone his attitude. He was a big man running to fat, with a balding head hidden by a dirty blue cap with a Poulon logo on the brim. She stepped aside with a murmured, "Later, maybe." He let her pass, but she could feel his eyes following her as she returned to her car, parked beside the diminutive salesman's van.

Brent greeted her as she returned. She had stifled a giggle when he told her his last name. Sampson. If there was ever a miscognomen, he owned it, but he was very nice. He shared his plunder from earlier excursions to the vending machines with her. He was quietly polite, and stayed close to her when the truckers began getting raucous again.

As the evening wore on, and night approached, she noticed the big trucker who had approached her earlier glancing in her direction. It didn't take much persuasion to induce her to sleep in Brent's van again.

Darla woke early, and peeked out of the rear window. Not seeing any movement yet from the parked rigs, she crawled out of the clothed cave in the rear of the van. Brent was already awake.

"Good morning," he said. "Don't try the bathrooms. They're plugged up, or at least the men's side is."

"Oh. Where -- ?"

"I went into the woods there." He pointed.

Apprehensively, Darla approached the line of trees and brush. Wildflowers graced the periphery, then vanished abruptly at the tree line as if they had been devoured by the forest. She stopped behind the first tree, relieved herself, then ran hurriedly back to the van where the little salesman was waiting.

"What do we do now?" was Darla's first question.

Brent hesitated before he answered. He took in her slim figure and apprehensive expression. "It doesn't look good. We're nearly out of food, and there doesn't seem to be much chance of help arriving. I think we should leave."

"Why do you say that?"

"If anyone were coming, I think they would have been here by now. And look around you. Does anything look familiar?"

"No, but -- "

"There's another reason. I talked to one of the truckers in the john this morning. He seems to be fairly decent, but he warned me about the others. He says they're all bad characters, except for the woman he's gotten hooked up with. And I heard a shot during the night."

"Maybe it was someone else," Darla said hopefully.

"No, it was from right here. I didn't wake you because nothing else

happened, but it made me start thinking about getting out of here."

"But where would we go? This is like a nightmare. I still have trouble believing it."

"It's no nightmare. Just before you woke up, I saw a cougar."

"There aren't any cougars left in this part of Texas."

"I know, but I saw it anyway, and it was bigger than anything that ever roamed these parts. Look at the trees, too. There hasn't been a stand of timber like that since before the white men came. Christ, I don't know how we can be sure we're even in Texas anymore."

"Maybe we should just stay here," Darla said, thinking of the darkness and unknown dangers that might be lurking in the forest. "Not in Texas? If that's true, then where are we? And how did we get here?"

"I don't think we should stay. We don't really know how far whatever the hell happened extends. If it's just local, maybe we'll walk out of it. If not, well, I was thinking about heading south, toward the gulf. Living conditions would probably be a little easier there. If the gulf's still there, that is."

Darla had trouble with the concept of never seeing civilization again. She was not an overly imaginative person, although she was competent enough in the classroom, and very observant. She perceived that he was asking her to accompany him.

While she was considering Brent's proposal, she pulled out cigarettes and lighter.

Brent reached out and covered the lighter with his hand before she could strike it. "Use the car lighter," he told her. "Save that for later. We might need it."

"Oh." The whole enormous improbability of their plight finally sank in. She eyed her cigarette lighter like the rare gem that it had suddenly become, then abruptly made up her mind. "Let me get my things. I'll go with you." Brent Sampson might not be a big husky, but he seemed to know what he was doing, at least more so than anyone else at the park.

BRENT TURNED to do his own packing, wondering if leaving was really the right course of action. What had finally decided him was the truckers and their increasingly vile tempers. He wanted to get away from them as soon as possible before his own courage was called into question. He knew there was no way he would be a match for any one of them physically and he hoped to avoid having to use his little pistol, even as a threat. And there was Darla, the little blond schoolteacher. He could tell from the way she had begun looking at him that she was relying on him for protection.

He laughed to himself, thinking the situation was like something out of a science fiction movie, with him as the wimpy boyfriend trying to protect the heroine. Well, he might be small, but he was no wimp. At least he didn't think so. Modern civilization didn't leave a lot of room for testing the proposition, at least as long as a body minded his own business as he tried to do. And he knew he had one advantage over the other men: he had already analyzed their predicament and was beginning to think of long-term survival rather than immediate problems.

He tied the sleeves of several new shirts together to make packs for them, then began exploring the van for other useful items. There were precious few. His little pistol, with one spare clip, extra trousers, shirts and a few books of motel matches, a flashlight, a jack handle, his shaving bag, spare underwear from his suitcase and a roll of lifesavers he had tossed in the glove compartment and forgotten. Not much equipment to carry them over a hundred miles to the gulf. Good God, what if they were all the people left in the world? Then what? He backed out of the van and was startled to find the trucker he had been talking with earlier standing beside him.

"You folks planning on leaving?"

The question was asked in a pleasant, easy manner. Brent eyed the man. He appeared to be in his early thirties, except for almost completely white hair, at least that portion of it showing below the sides of his cap. The butt

of what appeared to be a heavy revolver hung from one pocket of his light jacket, but his manner was not at all threatening.

"Yes, we are," Brent said.

"Thought you might be. Mind if we tag along?" He hooked his thumb back over his shoulder toward his rig, where a small blonde woman waited, shifting her feet nervously.

Darla appeared by Brent's side, glancing from one to the other of the men, as if comparing the relative merits of friendly gladiators.

Brent caught the implication of her scrutiny and found he was both challenged and amused by it. "He wants to come with us," He explained, and then added. "It's okay with me, if you don't mind. This is the guy I told you about."

"I'm Bob Jezac, ma'am. Her name is Alice." He pointed to the blonde. "I don't know her last name yet, but she seems to be good folks. She was hauling some furniture for Levitz when we got stuck here. Has two kids somewhere. I feel sorry for her."

Brent did, too. He was glad he had no immediate ties to worry about. "Yeah. This is a bad situation all around," he said. "Well, bring whatever you think you can use then, and let's get going. I think we need to be gone before those other jokers wake up." He turned back to his packing.

Brent felt Darla eyeing him in a new light. He had given the bigger man what amounted to an order and just assumed obedience, in the same manner that he had taken the lead with her. If civilization had been replaced with the jungle he could see just a few feet away, women's lib would be of less value than the checkbooks left in his van. And if that was the case, why shouldn't she hook up with someone who seemed to know what he was doing? Muscles didn't mean everything.

JASON STOOD ON the periphery of the coterie surrounding Burley Simpson, listening to him give orders. Burley had moved his headquarters into a small restaurant and was busily trying to drink up all the Coors beer still on tap. Jason sipped one himself, but slowly.

He didn't like what was going on. Burley had gangs of three or four cons looting the other shops within the ring of scrubby forest and bringing it all back to the restaurant. The cons were not doing the actual work; gangs of black men in leg restraints hauled the boxes and crates. They were being piled in disorderly heaps at the back of the dining area.

As Jason watched, one of the blacks tripped and was whacked across the brow with a shotgun barrel. Jason winced. The man was a friend of his. The Negro staggered back to his feet and resumed work, ignoring a trickle of blood coloring his face. Jason sympathized as he glared hate in Burley's direction but the big man laughed and took another swig of beer, obviously enjoying himself immensely.

Jason stepped forward and tapped Burley on the shoulder.

"Yeah, what you want Jason? Man, did that nigger get a lick! Serves him right." He wiped foam from thick black whiskers.

"Are you giving any thought to what comes next?" Jason asked. He was already looking into the future and didn't like Burley's disregard of anything other than his immediate pleasure. There was no telling when, if ever, the supplies of food and drink could be replaced.

"What you mean? We got it made, man. The screws are gone, man; gone. Except for those two." Burley pointed to the only pair of surviving male guards. "Haw! Lookit them. Chained up with niggers. I never thought I'd see the day!"

"You may not see many more days if we don't get better organized than we are now," Jason said politely.

Burley frowned, obviously trying to make his brain consider something further than his next beer. "You think the law's gonna come back?"

"Who knows? Probably not, or they would have been here by now. What I'm thinking is that we'd better start organizing for long term survival. What's going to happen when the food runs out? Or, the ammunition for your shotgun?"

Have you thought of that? Look, you know I used to be an engineer. I want to take a few men and start surveying what's left here, maybe put a few places off limits until we can sort things out."

"Fuck it. If the food runs short, we can let the niggers starve. And you -- " His glare at Jason was cut off by a scream. There was no doubt that it was human. The horrible sound was almost palpable with terror. It cut off abruptly as the whole gang rushed out onto the street. A cacophony of gunfire erupted, booming shotgun blasts, pistol shots, and a scattering of rifle fire. There was no doubt about the location. A group of men still clad in the drab prison white edged into a circle around a huge mound of fur and the remains of something that had once been human.

Jason and Burley broke through the circle. The largest bear he had ever seen, or heard of, larger even than that, still had its jaws clamped into the middle section of the tattered remains of a con Jason had known slightly. He was very dead, as was the bear, or whatever it was. It had been riddled with gunfire.

Jason eyed the beast, thoughts skittering in his head. He recovered more quickly than Burley, who was standing gape-mouthed, his shotgun drooping from one hand, a can of Coors in the other, tilted in his big fist so that a stream of beer and foam gurgled down to the pavement.

"You see what I mean? That thing must have been shot forty times after it was already dead. How many more of them do you think might be out there?" Jason swung an arm out to encompass the surrounding forest. "We need to put some sentries out to warn us, and not waste ammunition in the future. We need to see what tools we have on hand and how long the food will last. Seeds, even. Get it through your head, Burley. The rest of Texas might be gone forever. And the rest of the country, too," he added, as an afterthought.

Burley seem to come to his senses. He brought the remainder of the can to his lips, chugging it down in one huge gulp. He crushed the can in one fist and tossed it away. Jason watched it clang onto the pavement.

"That's another thing. We ought to save everything. Even cans. Who knows what we might be needing in the future?"

Burley squinted his eyes at Jason, started to say something disparaging, then thought better of it. For all his coarseness, Jason knew he wasn't nearly as dumb as he acted.

"Awright, Jase. You take Bunch and Jonesy and get some sentries organized and start finding your fucking tools and nailing up the stores. I'll send you some niggers to help."

"What are you going to be doing?"

Burley grinned lasciviously. "I'm going to go fuck me a nurse again, that is if there's anything left of her. She was an old bag to start with, but her and that other titless wonder are still better than those lezzie guards or the other two old broads we caught. Hey, you want some before we use them up? You ain't had a turn yet."

"Maybe later," Jason temporized. "Send the work gang over to the hardware store. I'm going to start there."

Jason began inventorying the contents of the few stores not already looted, hoping that sometime he would get an opportunity to speak to the chained blacks without being overheard by one of Burley's cohorts.

At mid-morning, while the guards were haranguing one end of the line of chained men, he surreptitiously sidled up to the other end of the cuffle. He knew two of the blacks in leg irons, the others he didn't, but he took the chance anyway. In case any of Burley's henchmen were watching, he struck one of the blacks across his shoulders, hard, but not enough to hurt, or even cause that much pain. "Listen up, motherfucker," he yelled, then bent close as if to reinforce his orders. He whispered quickly to the man he knew best. "Stay loose, Rye. I'll get y'all out of this when I can. Tell Preacher I said so."

Preacher Johnson was a huge, easy going reformed crack addict and the real leader of the blacks, but he was off with another work gang. Jason knew

that Rye would pass on the message, though.

Rye Moseley caught on immediately to Jason's feigned beating. He cringed as if expecting another blow, then whispered back. "Goddamn, Jase, don't take too long to do something. That crazy motherfucker Burley gonna off us all soon as he finished with us. I know he is. He crazy."

"Be ready. I'll do what I can." Jason promised, hoping an opportunity would come. He was sickened by Burley's brutality toward the blacks.

"Thanks, bro'. Don't wait too long." Mosley got back to his feet. Jason saw the despair in his eyes. He hoped he wasn't promising more than he could deliver but he knew he would try. His own suffering for something he wasn't responsible for gave him empathy for the black prisoners

DEPUTY DUSTIN Breedlove was trying his best to assume leadership of the little knot of humanity remaining in the small town of Goodpasture but leadership wasn't really his thing. He had been a deputy sheriff for several years, the best job he had ever held, but making decisions came hard to him. The only thing he really had going for him was the ingrained respect of the teenagers for his badge, but he didn't know how long that would last. Already, one of the boys he recognized as a local football star was starting to question his orders, and he didn't really know what to do about it. How do you give orders to a youth who by virtue of his sports prowess has been complimented, catered to, and indulged by parents, coaches and teachers since before puberty?

Dustin certainly couldn't rely on physical strength. He was all too aware of his own overhanging belly and shortness of breath from too little exercise and too many cigarettes for too many years. Nevertheless, he was going to try, whether he succeeded or not. If nothing else, the deputy's job had given him a sense of responsibility.

Dustin watched as Fred Whitestone curled a callused hand around the waist of Carla Marson, his girl and a cheerleader to boot. He was a big youth with strong arms and sun-bleached blonde hair. There was not an ounce of fat on him, nor on his girl, for that matter. She leaned into his embrace, vacuously pretty, waiting for his lead, but there was a tinge of fear hanging over her, like the apprehension she might have felt the first time she led a cheer in the football stadium.

"I don't know what's happened," Breedlove said. "I just think we should wait here for help. There's plenty to eat, and I've been calling from the squad car. Help is bound to get here soon." He said it like a mantra, trying to believe in it even though nothing had come over the radio except static so far.

"You haven't heard anything from your damn squad car though, have you?" Whitestone smirked. He had armed himself from the sporting goods shop with a small caliber revolver and rifle. He stood spread legged, as if he were an old west gunfighter waiting for his opponent to draw.

"That doesn't mean we won't," Breedlove said.

"Well, Carla and I aren't waiting. Fuck your calls." Fred turned on his heels and left drawing his girl with him, like a scared kitten being tugged around by a friendly but rowdy dog.

"You better stay. And you, too," Breedlove said, indicating the other two couples and the two old widows. The other couples he didn't worry about. They were so scared they had quit even trying to make decisions.

The authority of Breedlove's badge held the other two youths, just barely, but Whiteside paid him no attention. He pulled Carla along with him and strode into the forest. The young girl looked back once, but that was all. They disappeared into the underbrush.

One of the other boys spoke up. "Mr. Breedlove, maybe Fred is right. Maybe we should go. This is too weird." His voice cracked on the last word, like a faulty tape.

Dustin Breedlove had a bright idea for a change. "No, let them go. If there is help somewhere, maybe they will find it. In the meantime, we should stick here." The widows nodded approval. They, at least, still respected the

law.

"Help!" The cry came from the edge of the surrounding trees, startling in its suddenness.

Breedlove whirled, amazingly fast for his heft, hand dropping down to his gun belt as if he were used to hearing such cries every day of his life. Carla broke from the concealment of the forest. Her face was no longer pretty. It was as pale and crushed looking as a white toadstool that had just been stepped on.

"Something got him! Oh, God, something got him! He's dead! He never even screamed, it just bit him and carried him off!" She flung herself into Breedlove's arms, sobbing hysterically.

Dustin held her, looking apprehensively over her shoulder. Presently, when nothing threatening materialized, he became aware of the girl's firm young breasts pressing against his chest. Well, goddamn. lookit this, he thought. She's acting like I'm her protector. And the others will listen to me now, by God, when I tell them to do something. He eased the girl away from him and began giving orders. They were obeyed with alacrity.

Chapter Four

ON A FARM to market road just north of where the little town of Coldwater, the county seat of San Sonata County, had once been located, a faded yellow school bus lay overturned where the driver had applied brakes too strenuously. The driver could not really be blamed; the sudden disappearance of the road ahead would have caused anyone to do the same. Fortunately, where the road ended there was no embankment. Unfortunately, there was a large boulder in the way. It caught the right front wheel of the bus and flipped it like a pancake.

Doris Jenkins, the bus driver, was shaken but not really hurt. The same could not be said for some of her passengers. There were more than two dozen young women on the bus, all the San Sonata Jr. College girl's baseball team, the cheerleaders, the coach, the team manager, and Doris' own daughter, who had come along for the ride and to meet her boyfriend living in Rawling, the little city fifty miles west of Huntsville where the game had been played.

Doris got the girls unloaded from the overturned bus, helping those that needed it. When the bus was finally cleared and she examined her passengers, she breathed a sigh of relief. No one had been killed. Three girls apparently had broken arms, but that was all. The newly installed seat belts had saved them from serious injury. She stood by the side of the bus, emergency flashlight in hand, ready to signal the first passing motorist. The next morning, she was still waiting.

Morning also brought disbelief and near hysteria as Doris wondered how on earth she could possibly have wandered from the normal route, heading east toward Huntsville, onto this short stretch of road. The road was obviously one still under construction since it began and ended within a stretch of not much more than a hundred yards. It was impossible, but there it was.

The country even looked different. There were fewer trees, scattered erratically across the landscape as if planted by a not too bright gardener, and there was grass, growing knee high and waving gently in the morning breeze.

In the distance, she could see a herd of grazing animals that looked almost like bison, although they appeared to be much larger than any bison she had ever seen. She put that down to distance-altered perspective, but it was still strange. So far as she knew, there weren't any buffalo ranches in this part of Texas.

All that day Doris waited in vain for help to come. She watched the girl's coach apprehensively as she walked up and down the short stretch of paved road, then stared out over the rough country which extended as far as the eye could see, saying nothing and ignoring questions from the girls.

Doris tried to console the girls and reassure them, even after she decided that there was no way in the world she could have driven to such a

place, but she failed to find any other explanation. She watched as the coach continued to draw into herself, staring blankly into space, her mind unable to comprehend the unexplainable, leaving Doris as the only adult authority simply by default.

She clung to the remnants of sanity by worrying about the girls and her daughter, Judy. It was the only thing she had to cling to. There was simply no explanation for how they were stranded on a short bleak stretch of rural highway in the middle of nowhere with not a sign of civilization anywhere in sight.

There was no food, and only a few Cokes and Dr. Pepper in the cooler. Late that afternoon, she climbed on top of the overturned bus and searched the horizon. Far in the distance, almost at the limits of vision, she thought she could make out a farmhouse or some other building. She decided that if no one had come by the next morning, she would send one of the girls there for help; it was too late to attempt it now.

The night was warm and cloudless, but there was no moon. She and the girls huddled near a campfire lit by deadfall from the nearest tree. She ignored the prohibited cigarette lighter one of the girls produced to start the fire, just thankful for the cheery security of the flames. That situation didn't last long. Soon after dark, a roar split the night, sounding like a big zoo cat at feeding time. Several girls screamed briefly, accenting the invisible threat. Doris jumped to her feet and stared fearfully out into the starlit darkness. The roar had been bone-chillingly close.

"Girls! Get in the bus! Hurry!" Doris sent them scurrying up onto the side of the wounded bus, and then down inside. It was very uncomfortable, but no one complained.

A FEW MILES from where the girls twitched in crowded discomfort, Cecil McMasters checked his lever-action 30-30 again to make sure the hammer was cocked and it was ready to fire. Ordinarily he would never have considered leaving it so dangerously lethal before he was ready to shoot, but the roar of the creature the girls had heard had gotten his wind up. So far as he could remember, he had never heard a noise like that anywhere outside a zoo.

McMasters had been out hunting coyotes when the change came, and hadn't even realized it until he tried to find his way back home after a flash and rumble which he thought was the beginning of a sudden thunderstorm. The next morning, a knoll in the distance prevented him from spotting the same building Doris had seen, and he was scared to wander too far from where he was for fear of never finding his way back. As the day wore on, he began to wonder if he still had a home. Nothing looked familiar; not the vegetation, nor the rolling, tree-dotted plains, nor the animals he saw grazing just far enough away to make identification difficult.

When dusk arrived, McMasters found himself crouching beneath a huge oak with low growing branches, thinking that he must surely have lost his mind. Maybe, he thought, I'm dreaming that I'm back in the Army. That was a familiar scenario, and had been ever since he retired and bought the little ranch just at the edge of that invisible line where pine gave way to Oak and scrub. But I'm not wearing a uniform, like I usually do in my dreams, he thought. And this is too damn real to be a dream.

Presently he noticed a flickering light in the distance. He stood up, squinting into the darkness, wishing that he had brought his glasses along, but damnit, they just got in the way when he was hunting. Bifocals were hard on a hunter. If you focused on the sights, the target was blurry. If you focused on the target, the sights were blurry. He had finally given up in disgust at his aging body and mounted a scope on his favorite rifle. It was hell to get old.

As he watched, the flickering light in the distance grew no brighter; instead it gradually began to dim. It must be a campfire, just dying out. He was just on the verge of setting out across country toward it before it faded completely when a blood curdling roar again rent the stillness, too close for comfort. There were thrashing noises, then a wail of pain, like a heifer under

a branding iron, and after that, only the sounds of rendering flesh and bones being cracked.

Moments later, he was perched in the lower branches of the oak, more scared than he had ever been in combat. The campfire, if that was what it was, could wait until daylight. He marked the direction as best he could and settled down to wait out the night.

SHEILA SHOOK off the despondence she felt. If Wanda wasn't a rescuer, at least she was company, and right now that counted for a great deal. For a time, she was scared to let the older woman out of her sight for fear of being left alone again, but that had passed now. She was no longer afraid, even knowing that she might never see her familiar world again.

Wanda did a lot to soothe Sheila's fears. She watched while Wanda, with quiet army efficiency inventoried the contents of the farmhouse and shared her delight when she found the gun cabinet was stocked with heavier rifles than her own little .22, along with ammunition. Wanda loaded her Dad's 30.06, checked the action and set it aside.

"Can you really shoot that thing?" Sheila asked, admiration in her voice.

"Sure. It's a nice piece. A little heavier than an M-16, but it packs some power. I'm glad it's here."

"It's my Dad's. He uses it for deer hunting."

"Well, I haven't seen any deer yet, but I've seen other things out there. Big things."

"Me, too," Sheila said. "What are they?"

Wanda wondered whether to tell the girl that she was beginning to believe they had been displaced back in time, but decided to let it wait. Right now, she was just glad of the comfort of a familiar shelter and, like Sheila, of human companionship.

"We'll worry about them later. Let's see the rest of the house."

Sheila led her on a tour. When it was completed, Wanda poured herself a drink from the sparsely supplied liquor cabinet. There was Bacardi rum, a pint bottle of peach brandy, and half a fifth of Jack Daniel's black label bourbon. She chose the brandy, poured for herself, then raised an eyebrow at Sheila.

Sheila held out a glass, trying to act sophisticated though she had never taken a drink inside her home in her whole life. The brandy was warm going down, and became even warmer as it settled in her stomach.

"Now," Wanda said, sipping her drink, "There are a few things we need to do. Have you checked the freezer yet?"

"No, there was nothing I wanted to cook from there. Oh gosh! I couldn't cook anyway -- no power. I keep forgetting."

"Well, maybe we could build a fire outside and smoke some of the meat. It's a shame to let it go to waste," Wanda said. She crossed her legs and settled back even further into the big Lazyboy.

"Why -- Oh. You think it might be awhile before anyone comes, don't you?"

Wanda's voice was gentle. "Sheila, hon, it might be a long time before anyone comes. A long time. You should prepare yourself."

"I guess so," Sheila said dolefully. She tugged nervously at one of her twin ponytails.

Actually, Wanda thought, I wouldn't mind a hot meal, even if it is cooked over a fire. Sheila's Spam might be all right for a quick sandwich, but it grew old rather quickly. She visualized all the meat in the freezer, and a sudden idea occurred. "Hey! We don't have to cook outside! I saw a Coleman grill in the storeroom, and we can open the windows to let the fumes out."

"Now why didn't I think of that?" Sheila said.

Wanda smiled. "I think there's a lot of things we haven't thought of yet. Well, are you hungry now?"

"You bet! Let's get started. The cats will eat some of the meat, once it's completely thawed, but right now, I want a big steak. You'll have to show me how to use the Coleman, though. I've never started it by myself."

"Hmm. I've never used one either," Wanda said, "but come on. Between the two of us we should be able to figure it out. I could use a steak myself, and after that, maybe we can start making some plans about where we go from here."

Wanda and Sheila talked far into the night, Wanda gradually leading the teenager to her own belief that somehow, some way, they had been displaced back in time. Sheila had cried some, but finally seemed to accept the idea, even though Wanda knew that she still held out hope that this was only a temporary phenomenon. Wanda had just about discarded that idea. She was thinking now, that if she had found one survivor, perhaps there were others somewhere. She had not the vaguest notion, though, of where they should begin looking.

Dawson Reeves gazed at the farmhouse from the edge of the tree line. Earlier, he had seen two females, a young girl and an older woman, though not that much older, step out onto the porch, look around, then go back inside. He waited as patiently as possible, knowing that sooner or later an opportunity would come to him. He thought once of simply walking up to the house and using his broken arm as an excuse to gain the confidence of the two women, but one of them had been carrying a rifle. He wanted nothing to do with an armed woman. One tied and helpless was more his style, and if he could figure a way, he would soon have that.

During the day, Reeves began to smell cooking meat. The odor was almost unbearably tantalizing. He salivated constantly while he waited, thinking to himself that it was patently unfair for the two women to be inside eating while he was so hungry that he would gladly have chewed the buttons off his jacket if he thought they were digestible. She would pay, the older one, for making him go so hungry, and the younger one too, but not before having his fun. His imagination made the waiting bearable -- but just barely.

MICHAEL WAS NO longer concerned with physics, biology or any other profession. Hunger pains chased away any hint of equations that tried to form, even after he crossed another circle of normal East Texas countryside. All he could do was note its presence; at this time he could only hope that soon he would run into an area containing something to eat. Hell, right now, he would even settle for a McDonald's, much as he hated their cardboard tasting food. Just the thought of a juicy cheeseburger caused his stomach to rumble painfully. Even as dusk approached, he kept on, stopping only when it was too dark to see where he was going. He took refuge that night in another tree, and slept in fits and starts the whole night, not much more than a hundred yards from where Dawson had been waiting all day for night to fall.

MELANIE WOODS had come down from her tree during the day, driven by hunger and thirst. She sampled the unripe tomatoes from a corner of the garden that had come along with her but they were way too tart for her taste and her stomach rejected them. There was no water anywhere in sight and she was afraid to go into the woods. Twice during the long day she spotted animals she didn't recognize emerge from the dark depths of the forest and cross the cleared area, causing her to scurry frantically back up her tree until they were gone. At nightfall, she again climbed up to her perch, but it was harder this time. She was steadily growing weaker, and the awful loneliness was gradually sapping her spirit.

JASON SENT four convicts out as scouts early in the morning, telling them to go no further than the distance that would bring them back to Huntsville, or what was left of it, before dark. Two of the scouts he trusted; the other two were cohorts of Burley Simpson. He doubted that if they found another area of civilization more to their liking that they would return, even if they could, which would suit him fine.

He noticed that Burley's men carried bottles with them, but he made sure that his own men went dry. There was a method behind this decision. If Burley's men got drunk and lost their way in the woods, he would count it as a blessing rather than a loss, but he hoped his own men would find their way back. Somehow, he had to find out what had happened, and what the future held.

In a way, he hoped that the surrounding forest went on and on. If nothing else, it had lifted the burden of bleak years of undeserved confinement from his shoulders, and for that, he was grateful beyond words.

CARLA WAS sticking close to Deputy Breedlove, and he didn't know quite how to handle it. His last girlfriend had dropped him almost two years ago. Since then, he had been singularly lonely, eating too much and drinking too much, and sort of drifting along. Sometimes he slept in his squad car at night, even though his conscience bothered him when he did, but shit, nothing ever happened in Goodpasture anyway, at least until now. If he could have read Carla's thoughts, he would have been amazed.

He wondered if Carla remembered his warning to Fred not to leave. How did she see him now that Fred's decision to go against his warning proved so fatal for him? Was he still the bumbling overweight bubba in her eyes? He had the feeling that he just may have been magically transformed in her eyes to the very epitome of authority and stability. As it was, her presence gave his confidence a much-needed boost, and the other kids went right along. As the day wore on, he began to think more and more like a leader and less like a pawn, good only for issuing speeding tickets and cadging donuts from the grocery store.

The next morning, Breedlove assigned one of the boys to fetch and carry various supplies from the homes of the widows and the other two couples to the feed store where he decided to set up headquarters. There was plenty of room there. He set the other to calling and listening from his squad car radio, even though nothing but static still came over the air. He checked their newly acquired weapons with authority and made sure that the safeties were on.

That afternoon, he explored the periphery where the shops ended and forest began. Carla followed along, never letting herself get more than a few feet away from him. He was completely puzzled at the way the downtown area ended so abruptly in tangles of wild growth, as if part of Goodpasture had been set down in the middle of the Amazon. He stood staring into the wilderness and felt his heart thump inside at the thought, wild as it was. Carla clung to his arm, and the pressure of her breast against it made his heart race faster. Good God, doesn't she know that I'm almost forty years old? Or am I imagining things? What would a kid like her see in me, other than someone to protect her? He turned back toward the town, unable to sort out the girl's intentions or at least not daring to believe them.

By day's end, Breedlove was really scared. No help had arrived. No word had come over the radio. So far as the little area of Goodpasture was concerned, it could have been the only town left in America. He tried not to let his fear show.

As darkness closed in, he ordered everyone into the feed store, moving bedding and blankets and air mattresses over from the sporting center to sleep on. He posted sentries, thinking of how Fred Whitestone had been taken by some wild animal. The deputy took the first shift himself, to set an example, as he thought of it.

There had been a few protests about sleeping in the confines of the feed store, but he quickly stifled it by telling everyone they would be safer there. Besides, there was plenty of space and the storerooms gave adequate privacy. He was grateful for the privacy later, when he returned to the room he had taken and found Carla there waiting for him, lying curled up on the pallet he had made.

"What are you doing here, Carla?"

"I'm scared. I want to stay with you."

Breedlove leaned his rifle against the wall and lit a cigarette. Carla looked trustfully up at him, her face lit with shadows from a flickering candle.

"People will talk."

"I don't care. Please, can I stay?"

Breedlove let himself be persuaded, remembering that there weren't that many people around to talk anyway. He sat down and Carla snuggled up against

him. His stomach rumbled and he was glad that the girl couldn't see the blush that suffused his face. He had very carefully not eaten much at the evening meal. It seemed that he was going to be a leader, and he thought maybe it might be a good idea to make an effort to start looking like one.

He couldn't help but notice how the two widows smirked at him the next morning when he and Carla came out of the storeroom together, but he ignored it and began conferring with the two teenage boys, planning the day's activities. Screw those old broads. They've been living by themselves for so long they wouldn't know what a man was if one came up and bit them on the ass.

DARLA AND Brent, accompanied by Bob Jezak and the short blond woman named Alice, had hardly begun their exodus away from the roadside park when a series of shots sounded from behind them. They all stopped to listen but there was no more gunfire. Only the rustle of leaves in the morning breeze broke the silence.

"I've been expecting that," Jezak finally remarked.

Brent raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Did you hear a shot last night?"

"Yes, but it was just one."

"One's all it takes, if it's aimed right. What you heard last night was one of those dudes warning the other one away from his woman. I suspect there's one less man alive back there now. No great loss, though. Neither one of them was worth a damn." Jezak spat on the ground.

"What about the women? Weren't there two of them?"

"I talked to both of them," Alice said. "One of them I think might be okay, but the other I'm not sure of. I only saw her for a few minutes, but I think she's a groupie. Or maybe a prostitute working the parks."

"That was my impression, too," Jezak said. "Think we should go back, Brent? Maybe take a peek without showing ourselves?"

While Brent was considering Bob's question, another series of shots rang out, like the snapping of reins on a balky horse. That decided Brent.

"No, let's go on, at least for the morning. If we don't find any help by noon, we'll turn back and see what happened, if we can. After that, we can head for the gulf again."

Brent wasn't entirely satisfied with his decision, but it was the best compromise he could think of. He had no desire to get into a shooting match with the unruly truckers and if the change was only local, they could send the law back to deal with the situation. If not, it might be best to return and see if anyone were left alive. Humans might be awfully scarce in this odd new world, and if it were possible, maybe they could salvage whoever was left. Selling western wear certainly didn't do anything to prepare me for this, he thought wryly.

HOME HEALTH care surely never prepared me for anything like this, Peggy Carlino thought as she struggled out of the grasp of another blackberry vine. The first day, she had alternated between sitting in her car and getting out to walk in circles around it, gazing in wonder at the surrounding forest.

Even on the second day of her isolation, she still half hoped that she had become disoriented while on her way to visit one of her patients, an old black man slowly dying from lung cancer. He lived way off the beaten path, several miles down a gravel road from the farm to market, and that was where the change had caught her just as his tarpaper shack came into view. She was running very late and really should have put off the visit until the next day, but she knew the old man needed her, and besides, she always liked to visit with him.

Peggy always stayed a little longer than necessary with the old man, fascinated with his tales of what his youth had been like in the old segregated south. Now, she wished mightily that she had delayed the visit until the next day. The more she gazed into the depths of the climax forest surrounding her, the less room there was to think she had simply gotten lost.

The shack had disappeared from the beam of her headlights at the same time as the flash of light and clap of thunder startled her. She had been

tuned to a news station that gave the weather every half hour, and there had been no mention of thunderstorms. Fortunately, she had slowed as the shack came into view so stopping in time had been no problem.

The rest of the night was still mostly a blurred memory of alternating fear and disgust at getting herself so thoroughly lost, even though she couldn't imagine how it could have happened, and so suddenly at that. Until the next morning when she realized the extent of the disaster, she almost convinced herself that she had only imagined the nearness of the old man's shack and had taken a wrong turn well before arriving there. Daylight brought a horrifying return to reality.

After Peggy finally struck out through the woods, she tried to orient her path in the direction of the nearest town to where the old man's home had been; as the day wore on she began to doubt her ability to find it anyway. She was as thoroughly lost and as scared as she had been the first time she scrubbed for surgery, back during her student days. The first thing she did was drop an instrument and, forgetting her sterile status, bend over to pick it up. The surgeon had chewed her up and down unmercifully and she thought for a day or two that she would simply drop out of nursing, but the feeling passed, just as she hoped and intermittently prayed that this dreamlike experience would come to an end.

One thing Peggy was grateful for was the little automatic pistol she carried in her right hand. The noises she heard as she worked her way through the woods were fearful, and not at all familiar. Don, her husband of twelve years had bought the gun for her soon after she began working for the home health agency out of Livingston, and insisted that she learn how to use it. It was a comfort, now, but not that much of one.

Once, she had seen a bear. She stopped while it inspected her calmly, then it went back to digging roots. She made a wide detour around it, wondering what zoo it had escaped from. There just couldn't be any bears left in this area of Texas. Could there?

Before abandoning her vehicle, she had used a pair of forceps from her medical bag to pull the foil off the top of a liter of distilled water. She stuffed it and the remainder of her lunch, which she had never gotten around to finishing, into her medical bag. During the day, she drank half the bottle of flat tasting water but still hadn't touched the orange and other sandwich. She had no appetite, and didn't want to stop and take time to eat, anyway. She wanted to get out of this forest and back home with Don and Bridgette.

The forest didn't cooperate and by evening, Peggy began to think she had lost her sense of direction, even though she had tried to travel according to the way sunbeams slanted through the overhead growth. The sun was close to setting, she knew; even though she couldn't see it the darkening forest gave ample evidence of how low it must be on the horizon. There seemed to be no end to the huge trees, larger than any she had ever seen, and she was tired and bug bitten. At least I'm wearing pants and sensible shoes, she thought, even if they are wet and muddy. Please, please, let me find someone soon. This just can't be real. I'm scared, and by now Don and everyone he could drum up must be searching for me. Did Bridgette go to school today? Has she asked why I didn't come home last night? Oh, God, let me find someone soon, I can't bear much more of this.

As if in answer to her prayer, from somewhere in front of her, Peggy heard faint sounds of sobbing. Why, that's a child, she thought, like a young girl crying because her horse has broken a leg and has to be shot; no, more like a grade schooler who has missed the bus and been left forgotten in an empty school yard.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?" she called out, trying to peer through the deepening gloom.

The sobbing broke off. Peggy heard the sound of a nose being sniffed, then, "Mama? Is that you? I'm over here!"

Peggy followed the sound, and suddenly broke into a cleared area. Mown grass softened her steps. Thank God, she prayed silently, I've found my way

back.

"Mama?"

Now, the voice came from her right and slightly behind her. She backtracked, looking all around.

"Mama?" The voice came from above. A flash of white moved, descending from the lower branches of a tree, just at the edge of the clearing. She ran forward, and just in time, managed to break the fall as Melanie Woods' strength failed her and she fell the last few feet to the ground.

Peggy held a weak, dirt smeared and very scared little girl in her arms. "You're not my mama," Melanie accused.

"Where is your mama, dear? Let's go find her."

Melanie began crying again. Between sobs, she said, "I don't know. The house disappeared and never came back. I saw some monsters and hid in the tree."

Dear God, it's happened here, too. The poor child. She must have been frightened to death. Peggy uncapped the bottle of distilled water and gave the child a drink. It seemed to revive her, and she began talking incessantly. Peggy listened attentively while she cleaned the girl up as well as she was able to in the gloom. The sandwich she had never had time to eat stilled the little girl's excited jabber, while she wondered what to do next. Her own predicament was almost completely forgotten as she ministered to the girl. She was a nurse again, and her own concerns were forgotten until she noticed that it was almost completely dark.

"Did you say you've been hiding in this tree?"

"Yep," Melanie mumbled around a huge wad of tuna sandwich in her mouth. "It's scratchy, though. The bark hurt my bottom. I didn't sleep much."

"Do you think maybe you can stand one more night in the tree?"

"I guess so. Will we find mama tomorrow?"

"Well, we'll certainly try, as soon as it gets light. Now how 'bout you showing me how to climb your tree? I haven't been in a tree since I was a little girl like you." Peggy smiled when Melanie giggled at the idea of showing a grown-up how to climb a tree. It made the closing dark not quite so threatening.

Chapter Five

THE COWBOY, called "Big Bucks" or Bucks for short by his friends, had seen his partner taken that morning by the saber-tooth, and learned to be very cautious, even though he wondered what in hell one of those critters was doing in Texas, if this still was Texas. By this time he was doubtful, though he still had hopes.

Bucks was not introspective, nor a very learned man, but even he could tell that an unprecedented phenomena had taken place and caught him up in it. The only idea he could come up with was to work his way east and hope Huntsville was still on the map, being very careful in the meantime to never let himself get far from a climbable tree, and never going anywhere near any animal larger than a jackrabbit even if it meant long detours.

He used the sun to mark his direction of travel, and tried to compensate for the times when he was forced into another path. Huntsville lay to the east if it were still there, and that was where he was headed; he didn't know anything else to try.

The second day Bucks crossed a stream and drank thirstily, then wished he had something to eat. He tried to catch perch with his hands but soon gave that up. He wouldn't starve immediately, he knew, even if his thoughts were turning more and more frequently to memories of Jenny's chicken fried steak and cream gravy. If Huntsville is still there it can't be too much farther, he thought, and in fact, it wasn't, or at least what remained of it. On this day, his travels had brought him to less than 15 miles from the displaced area of that city, and only a mile or so from where the girls waited by their wrecked bus, and not much further than that from where Cecil McMasters had begun striking out in the direction of the campfire he had seen the night before.

THIRST HAD driven Doris Jenkins to finally decide that nothing would be gained by sending a lone girl toward the distant building; they would all have to try for it. As soon as it was full daylight, she climbed again to the top of the bus and marked the direction as carefully as she could. She searched the area for signs of the great cat they had seen the day before (which she still half-believed must have been an hallucination), and finally, led off with the girls in tow.

Judy, her daughter, walked by her side, silent and completely obedient. Doris felt a wry amusement. It was one thing for Judy to debate with her over rights and privileges when all it meant was an extra night out or whether she spent too much money on clothes, but it was quite another when her whole world had been turned upside down in a manner so inexplicable that she still couldn't grasp it. And she must be thirsty, so thirsty that even the memory of that last sip of warm coke the day before was like a sweet dream.

"Mother, look!"

Doris stopped and turned. She peered in the direction that Judy was pointing. The figure of a man, stick-like in the distance, waved and began running toward them. The wave threw him off balance and he stumbled, almost fell, and then continued on again.

"Thank God!" Doris said, but already she was wondering what a lone figure was doing out in this wilderness, and even if that could be explained, the wilderness could not.

Bucks drew up in front of the two grown women and their flock of teen-agers, panting heavily. "What -- ?" he puffed. "Where -- ?" He couldn't get his tangled thoughts past his gasps for breaths.

"Our bus overturned. We've been out here for two days. Do you know where we are?" Doris asked

The man, Bucks finally got his breathing under enough control to answer. "Ma'am, I hope we're still in east Texas, but I've got my doubts. Three days, you said? Lord God, that's how long I've been walking, and you're the first persons I've seen so far!"

Doris' throat rasped as she tried to speak. She cleared it and tried again. "We need some water. Do you have any?"

"Sorry, ma'am, I haven't had a drink since yesterday, myself."

Doris saw Bucks examining her and the crowd of girls and knew he was wondering how they came to be together.

"Oh. Look, Mr. -- "

"Jamison, ma'am, but call me Bucks. Most folks do."

The girls began crowding in close to listen to the cowboy, not noticing that he was eyeing them with dashed hopes, seeing their cracked lips and dusty clothes.

"I'm Doris Jenkins. Mr. Bucks, have you been to that house up ahead? Is there anything to drink there?"

"House? What house?"

"House, building. I climbed on top of our bus and saw something."

Doris' voice rasped again. She had to clear her throat before answering. "It's over that way, somewhere." She pointed.

"I haven't been in that direction, but if you saw a house there, let's head for it," Bucks said. "Any kind of shelter would be better than traipsing out in the open, without even no gun. A tiger got my partner and our horses the first day. Have you seen any of them?"

Doris didn't trust herself to speak again just yet for fear of letting the girls know just how low her spirits had sunk. Tigers? In Texas? That must have been what scared her and the girls back into the bus during the night. Dear God, things were even worse than she had imagined. But maybe there would be someone home at the building she had glimpsed. Maybe even a radio or TV to explain the phenomena. "Hurry, girls, let's go." She motioned, and the teenagers followed along, still bunched up. Bucks limped along by her side on blistered feet.

There was indeed a house; a large two-story gray and white brick

building came into view over the next rise. There was no sign of life as they neared. The house sat in a bouquet of azaleas and young oaks. The lawn was fresh and green, as if mowed only a few days ago. Doris thought it was the most welcome sight she had ever seen.

Just as she felt the swishing of knee high grass against her legs change to the welcome carpet of mown grass underfoot, a high shrill scream erupted from behind her. It then stopped as abruptly as if it had been sliced with a knife. She whirled and was struck numb.

A huge cat was clawing at the shoulders of one of the girls, trying to shake her loose from a six-inch fang that had pierced all the way through her neck. Arterial blood sprayed into the cat's face, blinding it. It roared and shook its head. The girl's body flipped through the air like a rag doll, arms and legs flying limply. Her body smacked into the earth with a dusty thud.

Bucks thought he knew what the scream meant even before he turned and saw the saber-tooth shake its victim loose from its fangs. He reacted immediately. "Get to the house!" he yelled. He dropped back behind the cluster of girls, who stood frozen with terror. "Run, dammit!" He slammed a hand into the shoulder of one girl and the backside of another. He had no earthly idea what he would do if the cat charged him.

The huge cat shook its bloody head to clear its vision, then it bounded to cover the body. It crouched over it and growled, a low rumbling bass that seemed to shake the very bones. The girls broke and ran toward the house. Bucks backed slowly away, leaving the cat hovering over its victim. It shook its head once more, then reached down, hooked the body with its fangs and began dragging it away, letting the body trail back between its front legs.

Doris pounded at the door of the house. "It's locked!" She screamed. She looked back over the shoulders of the fear-stricken girls, trying to see if the cat was coming back again. She shrank from a moving form, seen in flashes between the figures surrounding her.

With relief, she watched as Bucks broke through the crowd and shook the doorknob. The door was solid, immovable. He grabbed a solid oak deck chair, backed off, then plunged forward and heaved it through a window, shattering the glass and frame. He brushed shards of glass away with his bare hands, bloodying them in the process. "Inside," he snapped at Doris. "Try the door. If it's dead bolted come back here. We'll all go through the window." He made a cup with his bloody hands for Doris to stand on and she scrambled through the broken window. Seconds later the front door swung open and Doris was almost crushed in the stampede as the girls rushed to get inside. Bucks followed the last one in, then slammed and locked the door.

For the first time in three days Doris felt safe. She almost smiled when Bucks exclaimed, "Christ on a horse, if this ain't the sorriest mess I ever seen I don't know what is!"

DAWSON REEVES waited until just before dawn before he made a move. He figured the women would be in the deepest phase of sleep by then. During the day, he had noted how the surrounding forest cut into one corner of the house, and decided to explore that area first.

Under ordinary circumstances, he would have had his tools and could have come in through the front door with little trouble; he was experienced at such entries. Now, though, he had only the clothes on his back and a long pine knot club he had picked up somewhere along the way. He still had no idea that he had been displaced in time, though the strange animals and seemingly endless forest gave him an eerie sense of disorientation.

Dawson crept around the edge of the forest until he got to where it met the back of the house. There, he found that Sheila's carpenter work was easy to slide through; she had built it for larger denizens than a fugitive convict. He stood up in the dimly lit hallway. The door into the living room was ajar. A faint light came from within. Cautiously, he peeked around the door. In the light of the flickering candle Wanda had left burning he saw something that gladdened his heart. A .45 caliber pistol was lying, lethally innocent, beside the almost burnt out candle.

Dawson picked up the pistol. His thirst and hunger disappeared momentarily at the feel of the cool metal grip in his hand. This was much better than a club, much better. The only question was whether a round was chambered under the firing pin or not. With his broken arm, it was impossible to test. Well, he would know soon enough. At any rate, it would make as good a club as the pine knot he had discarded, and he was counting on surprise in any case. He cocked the pistol, though.

The second door he eased open revealed two dimly seen forms snuggled together on a bed. This had to be the two women. During the whole long day while he watched, he had seen no other humans. Dawson was running on his last reserves. The horror of his fearfully close call with the lethal injection still lay heavily on his diseased mind, and the days of struggling through the forest had brought him close to madness. He gripped the pistol tightly and flicked the light switch. The click was surreally loud in the darkened bedroom, but no light came on. One of the forms sat up in bed. Without a second thought, he pulled the trigger of the gun.

Wanda came abruptly out of her early morning somnolence when Dawson flicked the light switch. Her eyes opened and she sat up in bed. A vague figure was pointing something at her. Before she was really awake, the familiar snap of a firing pin clicking on empty brought her to full awareness. The snap came again, accompanied by a vile curse. She threw herself from the bed as the figure strode forward, brandishing the pistol like a club. She threw up an arm to deflect the blow, but it was too late; she knew even as the butt of the pistol crashed against her forehead, knocking her senseless.

Dawson was favoring his broken arm as he delivered the blow and it threw him off balance. He stumbled and fell, banging his arm on some dimly seen obstacle. The pain was ferocious. He yelled in anguish, trying to curse at the same time.

Sheila threw off the sheets and scrambled from the bed just as Dawson was getting painfully back to his feet. His dirty white prison garb caught the first ray of morning light through the bedroom window. To Sheila, he appeared as a ghost-like wraith. She screamed and retreated from him and stumbled over Wanda's prone body. She went down and her head bounced on the carpeted floor, stunning her momentarily. The ghostly figure began advancing. She screamed again, piercingly, and scrambled toward the other door to the living room. She wrenched it open and scurried through, Dawson right behind her, still cursing in frustration and pain. Sheila's only thought was to escape from the nightmarish apparition that had invaded the bedroom.

Dawson caught up to her just as she managed to unlock the front door. He pounded at her from behind with the pistol butt, but missed her head, hitting her shoulder. He heard a snap -- Sheila's collarbone? -- although she appeared not to feel it. The blow slowed her flight, though. She stumbled out onto the porch and Dawson caught up with her again, hammering at her with the pistol butt. She went down, still screaming in terror. It took several chops with the pistol to quiet her screams, though he never landed a solid blow as he had on Wanda, simply beating down the ineffectual defenses of her upraised arms until her screams subsided into a low moans of pain. One blow had smashed into the side of her jaw, splitting her lip and loosening teeth. Another grazed her forehead, opening a gash that poured blood, blindingly in her eye. Several other blows landed on her arms and breasts, leaving great purple swellings.

Dawson stood up over Sheila's prostrate form, breathing heavily, exultant that he had managed to beat both of the women into submission. He kicked angrily at Sheila's body. "Get up, bitch! Back inside." He pointed the unarmed weapon at the sobbing girl huddled at his feet.

Sheila stumbled upright, shrinking back from the pointed weapon. Dawson assumed she had no idea that he still couldn't fire it. She rubbed at the blood still pouring down one side of her face, trying to clear her vision. Dawson gestured with the pistol, forcing her back inside, through the living room and back into the bedroom where Wanda still lay unconscious.

Beams of the rising sun came through the window, illuminating the room. Dawson glanced around, and then found what he was looking for. "Pick her up and stuff her in there," he said, indicating the open door of a closet.

Sheila's head and shoulder were hurting horribly and she was still stunned from the blows. Her mind didn't want to believe what was happening, but a vicious kick to her hip and a threatening gesture from the gun prodded her into doing what Dawson told her to. Painfully, favoring her bruised collarbone, she dragged Wanda into the closet. She shut the door at the killer's request, then grunting with effort, she pushed the heavy bed up against it. She wiped again at the congealing blood on her face and suddenly became aware that she was nearly naked. Blood and perspiration plastered the thin nightgown to her body. She shrank under Dawson's gaze. His awareness, also, had suddenly taken in her figure. He grinned evilly. "Nice," he said. "Real nice. We're going to have some fun, girlie, but first I want something to eat and drink." He gestured with the pistol, completely in his element now.

THE FIRST SCREAM startled Michael Wronsen awake, almost causing him to lose his balance where he clung in the crouch of a tree. At first he wasn't sure that the sound had been human, but the second and third scream left no doubt. Somewhere near, a woman was in mortal terror.

Michael dropped down from his perch and began running toward where he thought the screams were coming from. He was startled into stopping as he broke through the forest into the clearing surrounding the farmhouse.

Less than a hundred yards from where he stood, on the porch of a rustic home, he saw the figure of a man clad in dirty white garments flailing at the figure of a woman or young girl with what appeared to be a pistol. Even as he watched, transfixed, the last scream broke off into a bubbling moan, and the female went down. He was much too far away to intervene, and even as he watched, the white-clad man kicked and beat the girl back inside the house.

All Michael's instincts urged him to run for the house and help. He suppressed the desire with considerable difficulty; there was no cover between him and the house, where the porch was now dappled with spots of blood, and he was almost certain that the weapon the man had used to club the girl into submission had been a pistol.

Michael stepped back into the cover of the forest and began a quick examination of his surroundings. Soon, just as Dawson had, he noted that the circling forest cut into a corner of the farmhouse, and like him, decided that was the best way to get close enough to do some good.

He began creeping along the forest edge, keeping under cover. Even as he worked his way nearer, and as various scenarios for rescuing the girl swirled through his mind, he couldn't help noting that the cleared area around the farmhouse was approximately the same size as the one which had trapped him, and nearly the same size as the others he had passed through. A pattern began trying to form in his mind, but he pushed it aside; there were more urgent considerations competing for his attention.

Michael took as much time as he dared, determined not to be spotted from some furtive glance out a window, but after awhile, he wished he had hurried. Another scream came from within the house then broke off into an exclamation of pain. Sobbing gasps followed that. His imagination carried an all too clear picture of what must be happening inside, and he hurried his pace, stopping only to make certain he had a round chambered in his pistol.

He eased his way from around the trunk of the tree growing next to the sheared off area of the house. Sheila's barricade provided no more hindrance to him than it had to Dawson. He slithered through, gained his feet and followed the muffled sounds to their source.

It was all he could do to restrain himself from firing. Only the possibility of an errant shot hitting the girl restrained him. Dawson had switched the pistol for a kitchen knife. He was holding it to Sheila's throat, where several shallow slashes trickled blood onto the carpet. He was on top of her, hips thrusting, uttering animal grunts of pleasure while he held the knife. Sheila was sobbing brokenly, glassy eyed and hopelessly.

Michael made two mighty strides toward the prone figures, then with his third step swung a sweeping kick to Dawson's head. It connected with a sound like a pumpkin being dropped from a hayloft. If Dawson's head had been a football, it would have been a sixty-yard field goal. Michael's boot connected with a sickening crunch to the side of Dawson's head, shattering the zygomatic arch and breaking his nose. He twirled after the kick, still holding his pistol in one hand, ready to shoot if he had to, but that first blow to the head had been all that was needed.

Dawson was unconscious, bloody froth bubbling from his nose and mouth. Michael bent and jerked Dawson off the prostate figure of the girl. He was sickened at what he saw. The girl's torn nightgown was pushed up around her neck, the bloody folds circling it like a bizarre red necklace. Her shoulders and breasts were splotched with purple bruises and her lips were puffy. She moaned and shrank from him, as if he were another attacker.

"Easy, take it easy," Michael said. "You're safe now. Don't be afraid." His voice trembled in reaction to the girl's despair.

Sheila rolled shakily to her knees, pushing the gown down to hide her nakedness. "The closet. Wanda's in the closet," she mumbled through split lips. Michael could barely make out what she was saying.

Michael glanced up, suddenly aware of a banging sound coming from a closet door as it thudded against the barricade of the bed. He glanced down at the man to make sure he was still out, then laid his gun down and heaved at the bed.

Wanda scrunched through the partially opened door. A golf ball sized welt over her left eyebrow was rapidly purpling, and tears of frustration were streaming down her cheeks. She spotted Michael's weapon on the bed and grabbed it, swinging it around and pointing it at Reeves with murder in her eyes.

"Don't!" Michael shouted. Something about the prone figure of the unconscious man was ringing a bell, and something else was shouting in his mind that whoever he was, his presence here was important to understanding what had happened to them all. He held his breath as the dark haired woman held the gun steady, supporting it with both hands, pointed unwaveringly at Dawson Reeves' head.

CECIL MCMASTERS knew he shouldn't waste ammunition, but he did anyway. The screams of the girls from the baseball team had drawn him at a galloping run, but he was too late to save the one who had been taken by the saber-toothed tiger. From a distance, he watched unbelievably as the four hundred pound cat slaughtered the young woman while the others ran for the safety of the house that had appeared as he came over a rise. He waited as the tiger dragged the carcass back in his direction until he was sure of his shot. He nailed it just behind the shoulder.

The tiger roared, swirled and charged. McMasters worked the bolt faster than he had ever done before, fired, then fired again as the beast staggered and slowed. It fell, still kicking. McMasters puffed out breath like a sagging blimp. He noticed his hands were shaking, and grinned wryly at himself. Just like in combat. The shakes start when it's all over. He began working his way toward the house, still careful to watch for other dangers. He hadn't lived this long by being careless.

Back at the house, Bucks heard the shots, but he wasn't about to go outside, not without something to defend himself with. With the whole world turned upside down he wanted to be certain that whoever fired the shots was friendly before he committed himself. He peered out through the broken window then circled the spacious living room, pulling the blinds down at each window.

Doris glanced at him curiously from where she was still trying to comfort the hysterical girls. The distant firing had registered only vaguely with her, barely heard over the crying, sobbing teenagers. She kept one arm around Judy, as if even within the protection of the huge house, she needed to shield her.

"Keep the girls here," Bucks said. "Let me look around. Stay away from that broken window. Better yet, put something in front of it. I heard shots

from somewhere."

"Let it be the police," Doris said.

Bucks shook his head but didn't contradict her. He had heard the roar of the big cat as well as the rifle fire, then nothing else. If it had been the law, or army, or whatever, more sounds would have come, but there was nothing but a deadly silence now from outside. He left the girls and Doris still in a huddle and began exploring the house.

It was as if the owners had simply closed up and left to go out to eat, or possibly went on an overnight trip. Everything was clean and as neat as a vacant school on the first day of summer. There were only two incongruities: when he opened the refrigerator, the smell of souring milk and vegetables sifted into the kitchen, and the sink sputtered, but gave no water. The refrigerator did have a water jug, however, and the ice trays held tepid water. He called Doris, and left her and the girls drinking thirstily.

A few minutes later, Bucks was convinced by a quick perusal of the ground floor that, whoever the owners had been, they were not hunters. There were no deer or havolina trophies visible, no gun racks or gun cases anywhere on the first floor. He climbed the stairs with dwindling hope and made a hurried search of the upstairs.

In the closet of one bedroom, he did finally find a weapon, of sorts, an old double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun, with half a box of moldering shells, all number six game shot. He loaded the old weapon even as he wondered whether the shells would still fire, and carried it with him while he made a circuit of the upstairs windows.

There, in what remained of the back yard, he spotted something almost as precious as a weapon, if not more so. Growing from the center of a little covered gazebo was a well, or what looked like a well. He had to hope that it was. What water they could salvage from the house wouldn't last long. Beyond the gazebo, and almost to the line of displacement where mown lawn gave way to tall grass, brush, and occasional trees stood a small outbuilding, almost large enough to be called a barn. Satisfied, he hefted the old shotgun, and descended the stairs. Exploration of that building could wait awhile; he still wanted to find out where the shots had come from. That action was a mistake, but perhaps it wouldn't have made any difference in the long run.

ROSCOE BILLING, one of Burley's men, had just entered the circle of clearing around the two-story house when he heard the screams of the girls as the cat attacked. If it had only been female screams, he might have intervened, but interspersed with them, he heard Bucks' gravelly commands. He sprinted from the opposite direction to the small, barn-like building and used his rifle butt to batter in the back door. From there, he ran to one of the small front windows and took up a stance, peeking cautiously past the aluminum frame. Eventually, he spotted someone peering down from an upstairs window, but he didn't think he was seen.

Through most of the rest of the morning, Roscoe waited patiently for something to happen. He listened and watched, excited at the prospect of reporting to Burley that here in this suddenly changed world were women, a goodly number of them. He wasn't particularly interested himself. He had been incarcerated so long that even the sight of nubile young females spotted occasionally through the windows didn't excite him that much. Burley would be interested, though. And if he could no longer have Burley, well, there were always the niggers, helpless now. That prospect appealed to him.

Later that day, he heard a second male voice, an elderly sounding one, but with a tinge of command in it. Burley and Jason had told him to get back the same day, but he didn't think they would mind if he were late, not if he could bring a captive back, and especially if he brought back news of women in quantity, almost unprotected. He waited.

CECIL MCMASTERS was the best sight Bucks had seen since the last chicken fried steak sitting alongside a pile of French fries and cool crispy coleslaw salad Jenny had fixed for him the day before he took his horse out to check fence lines and got into this godawful fix. McMasters appeared at the

door with a scope-sighted rifle under his arm, and Bucks knew immediately that he had been the one he had heard firing.

Bucks was careful at first, keeping the old double barreled shotgun cradled in his arms, not quite pointing it at him, but ready to use it if necessary. He listened as McMasters told him quickly that he had killed the cat, but the girl was as dead as ever a person could be.

"Sorry I couldn't get here sooner, but I was way off when it happened," McMasters said.

"I'm sorry, too," Bucks agreed. "What the shit is going on? I was late coming in from the range when all of a sudden there was some thunder and lightning and I was out in the middle of nowhere. The same sort of animal that got the girl killed my partner, too."

"I don't know what happened," McMasters said. "I was out hunting coyotes when it happened to me. Where did the girls come from?" He nodded his head at Doris and the teenage girls crowding forward, hopeful that rescue had come.

Doris had just finished explaining to Bucks and he repeated the information. "They were a girl's baseball team, heading back to Huntsville. Their bus overturned. Christ almighty, this is crazy!"

McMasters lowered his rifle. He propped the stock on the carpet and held the barrel in his left hand. He had no more idea than the cowboy of what was going on, but he was beginning to get an idea. He glanced at the covey of girls and decided not to voice his suspicions yet.

"Is every thing OK here, now?"

"For the time being," Bucks said. "We haven't been outside yet, but I think there is a well outback there, and there's a barn or something, too. There's food in the kitchen, but the plumbing is starting to stop up."

"Food, you say? Let's eat and then compare notes. I'm hungry enough to eat a bear. And I've seen one, by the way. A big sucker, too."

"Just what we need," Bucks said. He led the way to the kitchen. Doris and the girls trailed behind.

McMasters turned to face them. "Ladies, Why don't you let me get a little food in my belly, and speak to the gentleman here, then we can decide what we're going to do."

Bucks and McMasters retired to the kitchen. McMasters opened a can of pork and beans, the first thing he found in the pantry, and wolfed them down while he told Bucks of his own adventures. He made the same mistake as Bucks, giving no immediate thought to the outbuilding, but there was no way he could have known. He was still learning to cope with the new world, and the next lesson would come hard.

Doris left the two men talking in the kitchen, while she tried to assure the girls that with two armed men on hand they would be safe; she then wandered toward the back door. The water from the ice trays had only partially slackened her thirst, and like Bucks, she had spotted the gazebo with what she thought was a well in the center of it. It was still daylight, and she checked carefully through the partially opened back door and saw nothing threatening. And McMasters had said he had killed the long fanged tiger. Surely there could be only one of the beasts, and it was dead now. Leaving the door open, she walked quickly to the gazebo and peered down into the raised brick circle in the center. Sure enough, it was a well, and her spirits lifted. She had been so crazed with thirst the last couple of days that the well appeared to her like a gift from heaven. She was still staring down into the opening, where ten feet down, water glistened darkly. It was an ornamental well, of course, and as she was thinking of just how they should rig a bucket and rope to draw the water out, she felt the cold muzzle of a rifle dig into her backbone. "Freeze," she heard a voice whisper. "Don't make a sound."

Chapter Six

DARLA AND Brent peeked cautiously through the undergrowth at the apparently deserted rest stop where their own vehicles still stood among the

big rigs as if simply waiting for road repairs to be completed before resuming their journey. Jezak, followed by Alice, eased up beside them.

"See anything?" Jezak asked, speaking in a low voice.

"No, and I don't hear anything, either," Brent said. He glanced back at the other three members of the band, where evening shadows picked out beads of sweat and dried blood on hands and faces, trophies from briar scratches and insect bites.

Brent was having second thoughts about trying for the gulf. If the rest of the journey was anything like the few miles they had attempted today before turning back, he doubted they would ever make it. The growth was simply too thick. He had unconsciously assumed that despite the wilderness surrounding the rest stop, the rest of the countryside would be much the same as he remembered it; a mix of ranches and farms and little one horse towns, with only stretches of thick woods. He hadn't appreciated that they had begun their journey in the flood plain of the Trinity River and in an era where no drainage or levees existed. He brushed at a haze of mosquitoes and gnats hovering around his head, thinking that if this was what the pioneers had had to put up with, it was a wonder that the country had ever been settled.

"It'll be getting dark pretty soon," Jezak reminded him

"I know. Wait here and I'll go on in." Brent didn't really want to assume the point. He was basically a shy, retiring man, but his was the kind of courage seen in warfare, where often the most improbable of heroic deeds are performed by the most unlikely of candidates. If I just knew why those shots were fired, he thought. Well, only one way to find out. He felt sick and shaky and had to force his feet to move.

"Be careful," Jezak whispered from behind him as he left the concealment of the brush and began creeping forward.

Brent advanced cautiously, trying to keep the tail of the rigs to his front as the best cover available. He passed his own van; display racks of western wear still hung forlornly on the bar across the back compartment, then past Darla's little compact car.

The first rig was empty and silent, but that told him nothing; it might have belonged to Jezak for all he knew. He crept along the side of the second, gripping his pistol with fingers that were slick with sweat. He was just getting ready to risk a peek in the cab, when from behind him came the sound of three shots in rapid succession, a short scream, then the rapid flat slapping of shoes hitting tarmac. He whirled, weapon ready.

Alice and Darla came running as if the devil himself was after them and bounced against the side of the rig before they could halt their terrified flight. Jezak came slower, halting every few steps to glance fearfully over his shoulder.

"Wolves!" Darla gasped. "Oh Goddamn, the biggest wolves in the world." She held her own little pistol in a death grip, pointing back toward the woods. It shook in her grasp like a hand vibrator going at top speed.

Without noticing, Brent put his arm around her, then suddenly became aware of how small and slight she was. It was the first time he had touched her, other than a casual meeting of hands.

"Where are they? Is anyone hurt?"

"We're OK," Jezak said, backing up to join them. "I heard a noise and looked behind us in time. I got one of them and the rest ran when they heard the shot. Biggest damn wolf I ever saw. Or heard of," he added. Brent noticed that Jezak didn't seem to be overly excited, but more curious than anything. He hoped his own countenance appeared the same but doubted that it did.

"We'd better get inside somewhere -- " Brent began. He was interrupted by a faint moan coming from the cab of the rig. He climbed onto the steps until he could see inside.

The woman might have had a pretty face once, but it was hard to tell. Both eyes were blacked, streaks of coagulated blood ran from both nostrils down to puffed and split lips, and there were several gouges like a heavy ring might have made behind a balled fist. The door of the cab was locked from the

inside.

"Bob, there's a woman in here," Brent called down to Jezak. "Looks like she's been beat up. Give me that tire iron from my bag. I'm going to have to break the window."

Jezak handed it up. "I'll check the other rigs. You girls stay close." Brent nodded. He had forgotten his original caution at the sight of the battered woman.

It took several strokes from the tire iron to break the window and poke a hole large enough for him to reach inside and unlock the door. He handed the tool back down to Darla, then quickly checked the woman for broken bones. There didn't seem to be any. He tugged at her lower limbs, surprised at how heavy an inert body could be.

"Alice, I'll need a hand here. Catch her legs when I bring her out. Darla, go see where Bob is. Be careful."

Darla averted her face from the injured woman. A friend of hers had once been beaten by her boyfriend, but nothing like this. She moved away, trying to remember in which direction Jezak had gone. She had taken only two steps when he called out to them.

"It's OK. Bring her over here." Jezak waved from the entrance to the pavilion and then apparently decided he could better serve by helping. He ran forward, but by that time, Brent had already gotten the woman over his shoulder. She moaned again, but didn't resist. Staggering under the weight, Brent followed Jezak into the alcove where the other man helped to ease her to the floor.

"We can relax," Jezak said. "She caught the bastard who beat her up on the other side with his pants down around his shoes and put a bullet in his brain. Good riddance. Anyone who would do that don't deserve to live." He looked again at the woman's battered face and shook his head.

"Did you see any of the others?" Brent asked. He peered out into the dusk. It was steadily growing darker. The towering trees admitted little of what light remained of the day. It was going to be gone soon. Wolves and darkness and blood from one dead body and still oozing blood from the facial cuts of the unconscious woman worried him as much as the missing truckers they had left earlier.

"No. I think they've gone on," Jezak said.

"Good riddance," Brent said. "OK, let's get organized. Darla, you and Alice see what you can do for her. Bob, we need to get that body away from here before your wolves come back. They're probably smelling the blood and that's what brought them."

"You're right about that. But where have the others gone? Any ideas?"

"I don't know, but they must have left the area, otherwise we would have seen them by now. Like I said, good riddance" He returned his attention to the dead body in the restroom, thinking rapidly. Burial would be best, but there just wasn't time before dark. "Let's put him in one of the rigs for tonight. We can bury him tomorrow, deep enough to conceal the smell. Come on, let's hurry."

The next morning, Brent discovered that burial was a rather hard task to perform without shovels. He finally decided on taking the dead man into the woods and letting scavengers have it. That brought a little consolation, but where they intended to leave the body, they found a small, clear stream, only inches wide, but free flowing and sparkling clear. That meant drinking and bathing water in case they decided to stay while the injured woman recovered, and it was almost certain they would have to. Even though it meant lugging the dead man two hundred yards in the opposite direction to get the body away from the spring, Brent insisted on it. The woman was conscious, but weak and dizzy. There was no way she could travel for at least several days, and a source of water was priceless. Even if he had still intended on making for the gulf, it would have to wait.

"HE DOESN'T deserve to live!" Wanda argued savagely. Only the barest lack of pressure from her finger curled around the trigger of the pistol still

kept Dawson Reeves among the living. She stared at Michael with a savage fury, wondering how far she could trust him.

"So he doesn't," Michael agreed, meeting Wanda's piercing scrutiny with his own steady gaze. "However, we need information. I think I know who this bastard is, too, if you're interested." He kicked the prone figure in the ribs, not being gentle. Often, he had seen white-clad trustees on grounds maintenance at the ancillary facility in Huntsville as he drove through, and he had finally recognized both the garb and the man he had recently kicked into unconsciousness.

"You do?" Wanda's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Don't you? This -- " he nudged the body with his boot tip, " -- is Dawson Reeves, the serial killer. They scheduled him to be executed -- I believe that was the night of the change. How did he escape? How did he get here? We need to know."

Wanda relaxed her grip on her weapon the merest fraction, and then tightened it again. "Who cares how he escaped? Or got here, for that matter? All you've done is convince me that, regardless of what he did to Sheila, he's still got it coming."

Michael waved a hand. "I'm not arguing that point, but I am beginning to get an idea of what has happened, at least partially. Some information from this scumbag might help," He said it carefully, locking eyes with the angry woman. On the bed, Sheila suddenly moved, trying to sit up, then fell back again, crying pitifully.

Wanda lowered her weapon. "Take him into the other room, then, out of my sight. I'll see what I can do here."

"Good enough. I'm Michael Wronsen, by the way."

"I'm Wanda Smith, and this is Sheila. I just found her yesterday. We can talk later. Just go away for now, and get that scum out of here." Wanda didn't know just where their savior had come from, nor exactly what he was getting at by wanting to question the killer, but she was willing to go along with him, for the moment anyway. Besides, Sheila needed comfort now more than she needed revenge. She would deal with the man later, and God help him if he wasn't telling the truth.

Michael dragged Reeves into another room. He propped him upright in a chair and tied him securely, then began slapping his face, not being gentle about it nor caring what damage it did. The savagery of his blows surprised him. He had never thought of himself as a violent man, but the memory of what he had read about Dawson's exploits, together with the recent sight of the man in action, left him with no pity at all.

Dawson gradually came to his senses under Michael's blows. He wished he hadn't. His skull pounded as if it had been splintered, and the young girl's struggles had aggravated the pain from his broken arm. It ached with a dull, fierce hurt that throbbed from his fingers to his shoulder, like a toothache that had decided to migrate to wider fields. He wanted to cradle the broken arm, but found that he was roped onto a straight-backed chair, so tightly that he could move only his head, and that hurt so badly that he soon gave up trying to move at all.

The man before him stepped back. His face was as grim looking as any cop, but Dawson didn't think he was the law. He looked more like a professor, or a gentleman farmer maybe. Hope rose suddenly in his breast. If this man wasn't the law, maybe he would be freed, eventually, or maybe manage another miraculous escape. Sooner or later he would have to be untied to eat, or relieve himself. All he had to do was wait, and not give away anything.

"How did you escape, and when?" Michael asked.

"Escape from where?" Dawson said. It hurt to talk.

Michael said nothing for a long moment, simply staring at the killer he had bound to the chair. There were ways of getting information out of the man. He could be as brutal as he wished. Certainly, Wanda Smith or the girl, Sheila, would not restrain him, but he didn't know if he could go that far, the momentary savagery of bringing Dawson to his senses notwithstanding. An

idea popped into his mind, already full blown. He grinned mirthlessly to himself.

"Your name is Dawson Reeves. Three days ago, or maybe four, you were supposed to have been executed at Huntsville. You are a serial killer. I have no sympathy for you whatsoever. Now. I am going to ask you some questions, and you are going to answer them. Can you imagine what will happen if you don't?"

Reeves blinked and tried to twist in the chair. Michael reached and gripped a handful of hair, jerking Dawson's head from side to side. To Dawson, it felt like a hot coal being rattled in his skull.

"Answer me. Do you know what will happen if I'm not satisfied with what you say?"

"No," Dawson muttered. He still couldn't think of anything worse than that awful lethal syringe, and he still was determined to give as little information as possible. At the very least, it would prolong his life, painful as it had suddenly become.

Michael shook his head again, and then released his hold on Dawson's hair. "It's very simple, Mr. Reeves. The first time -- the very first time -- that I catch you in a lie or think you're not being truthful with me, I'm going to leave."

"Leave?" Dawson couldn't believe that. It didn't make sense.

"That's right. Leave. Then, I'll tell those two women in there that you don't feel like talking. I may come back later to see how you're doing, but probably not. You look bad enough now. I don't think I could stand the sight of you after they finish."

Michael was no psychologist, but his instincts were sure and certain. The worst fate Dawson could ever imagine was being tied, helpless, while one of his victims was free to do with him as she pleased. He broke, completely and utterly.

An hour later, Michael left the man alone in the room, completely wrung out. To the man's blubbering request to use the bathroom, he gave a curt reply: "Piss in your pants, you son of a bitch."

Wanda put a finger to her lips as he closed the door behind him. "Sheila is sleeping. I had some Valium in my purse," she whispered. Michael followed her out onto the porch. They sat down on a couple of wrought iron chairs.

"What did you find out?" Wanda asked in a tight monotone. She sat with her hand near her pistol. The last few experiences with men gave her little enough reason to trust the male species. Just the sight of Michael's bearded face caused her to shrink inside, like a porcupine coiling up and displaying its barbs.

Michael noticed her reaction. He rubbed his whiskers as if to brush them away. He spoke pleasantly. "Quite a bit. Is there a map around here?"

"I saw an atlas earlier. Wait here, I'll get it."

Michael turned the pages until he found the map of Texas. He circled the spot on the map where he had been stranded, then added the several areas of displacement he thought he had traveled through. Then, he made a circle on the map representing the city of Huntsville. "Now, do you know for certain where we're located?"

Since Wanda had already gotten that information from Sheila earlier, she showed him, watching as he drew another small circle. "Good. Now let's mark where you were stranded." Wanda told him and he marked it on the map, wishing as he did that he had a service station road map rather than the smaller page from the atlas.

"I think I see. You're suggesting a pattern to the areas of displacement," Wanda said.

"Right. Now, did you pass through any other areas that you think were displaced?"

Wanda thought, and then tentatively pointed out two more points on the map. "That's all I'm certain of. There may have been more." She was impressed. This matter-of-fact man who had rescued her and Sheila was nobody's fool. She

admitted to herself that until now, she had not even thought to look for a pattern to the sudden disappearance of civilization. She was glad that she hadn't shot their prisoner when all her instincts told her she should have. Moreover, maybe Michael Wronsen wasn't so bad, even if he was a man.

"OK, that will do for now," Michael said, "although it's sort of hard to make sense of things on the scale of this map. There's too much clutter on the page. Is there any paper around?"

"I'll find some." Wanda searched through drawers until she found a yellow legal tablet and brought it back out to their table. "Will this do?"

"Good enough." Michael smiled at her, noticing as Wanda allowed the frown she had been wearing to leave her face. Maybe she was willing to work with him now, he thought, especially if he could make some sense of the sudden changes that had occurred.

Michael measured the proportions of the map, and then carefully drew the circles they had agreed upon on a blank tablet page, expanding the scale. When he had finished, he had a picture confirming his suspicions. Wanda stood beside him, looking down at it. "You see?" Michael asked, looking up at her.

"Not completely."

"It's simple, or at least I think it is. See how the top areas of displacement form an arc? Then look -- if you extend the areas beneath, they also form an arc. Then, there is the displacement at Huntsville, where Reeves got loose. If we extrapolate like this -- " He drew more circles. " -- then the displacement areas form concentric arcs, with Huntsville at the center."

Wanda peered closely at the drawing. "It looks like there's some missing areas. There should be a ring of displacements just outside the center at Huntsville, and others circling to the north if you continue the pattern."

"Right. I think there is, but we just don't have any information from those locations. The pattern suggests it, though. All we have to do is look."

Wanda turned her gaze from Michael's drawing to his face. He wasn't smiling at all. What am I missing? Damn, I'm an Army officer so I ought to be able to read a map better than a civilian! "Is there anything else? Other than that you seem to be suggesting that we should go look for other people west and north of here."

Michael hesitated before answering. "There may be other areas outside what I've shown you, but look: even if there are, and if they conform to the pattern we're seeing, they would be progressively further apart." He waved his hand toward the surrounding jungle. "We could search forever and not find them. On the other hand -- "

"The closer to Huntsville, the closer together they would be. And it's too far to try to explore north of there. Yes I see it. Sheila should be able to travel in a couple of days, and we can go look around closer to Huntsville." Wanda appeared to brighten, "We may find other survivors -- other women?" She looked into Michael's face and noticed that he didn't seem to share her enthusiasm. He still seemed to be holding something back.

"What's wrong?"

"Reeves told me that he thought he wasn't the only prisoner who escaped when the change came. There might be many of them, and they are probably armed."

Wanda drew in a breath. "Shit. Nothing's ever simple." They were still contemplating the idea when they were startled by a rifle shot from within the house.

They both jumped up and ran back inside. Two more shots echoed through the house as they ran, but Michael already suspected what had happened, and he was right. Sheila stood beside Dawson Reeve's body, the little .22 rifle already drooping. As they came into the room, it dropped to the floor, and she stood beside the body of her tormentor, body shaking as if it were fevered. Blood dribbled from three neat holes in Reeves' head. His last victim had become his executioner.

Michael watched as Wanda wrapped Sheila in her arms and turned her away from the body. She glared at him over the girl's shoulder. He took the hint

and left them alone, wondering how this situation would play out. From the look in the older woman's eyes, it didn't seem all that promising.

MCMASTERS HAD climbed to the top floor of the two-story home where he and Bucks and the girls had taken refuge. It was pure impulse, or perhaps a relic of his army days; he wanted to get a good view of the countryside. What he saw made him curse out loud.

In the distance, a white clad man was prodding Doris along with the barrel of a rifle, away from the house. Already, they were almost a hundred yards away, and McMasters had left his rifle downstairs. Had he brought it with him he would have had a clear shot, but by the time he got downstairs and out onto the porch, Doris and her captor were out of sight.

"What's wrong," Bucks asked, holding the old shotgun nervously when he saw the grim expression on McMaster's face.

"Someone has grabbed Doris. You stay here with the girls. I'm going after them." He heard a gasp from inside the house, and figured that must have been Judy, Doris' daughter. Well, no time to console her now. He ran down the steps, boot heels clicking.

McMasters tried to hurry at first, but then slowed. It would do no good to get Doris' abductor in sight, then be too winded and shaky to hold his rifle steady. A lifetime of cigarettes and strong drink had slowed him down and he knew it, even if he was still only in his fifties. Guess I'll quit smoking and drinking now; the incongruous thought came as he made himself slow down. Cigarettes and liquor were apt to be in short supply for the rest of his life.

In the distance, Roscoe Billings taunted Doris as he hustled her along. "You got a good time coming, girl, and the rest of ya'll, too, soon as we get back. We got dozens of cons ain't had a woman in years."

Doris stopped. Cons? Convicts? Roscoe lashed her with the rifle barrel. "Get a move on woman. We got a long way to go. Say, I bet even Jason will want a turn with you, or one of those other little Honeys." He laughed cruelly, anticipating the hurrah that would greet him when he got back to Huntsville.

Behind them, McMasters was puffing. He slowed, walked for a few minutes and then increased his pace to a dogtrot. Where in hell were they? He suddenly thought of the saber-tooth that had taken the girl and remembered to look over his shoulder and to the sides occasionally. Finally, he caught a movement in front of him, a blur of white that disappeared as he watched. He tried to increase his pace, but soon slowed again. Never mind, he would catch up, soon now.

It appeared that Roscoe wasn't as perceptive as McMasters. Entranced by the thought of how his status would increase by bringing back news of women to the cons, he failed to check his surroundings often enough. His first warning was a shot from somewhere behind him.

McMasters saw three huge wolves rushing toward the couple just as they came into plain sight. They had been drawn to the area by the scent of blood from the tiger's kill, but had found slim pickings there. Now, though, other prey was in sight. McMasters had no time to even shout a warning. Gasping, he raised his rifle, picked up the lead beast in the scope and fired with the calm urgency he had once displayed in combat. The wolf went down, but the wound was not fatal. It was on its feet again in seconds.

Roscoe whirled, saw the charging beasts and forgot all about Doris. He fired quickly, missed, then missed again. His next shot took the second wolf in the chest in mid leap just before it crashed into him, almost three hundred pounds of black furred muscle. He went down, his rifle jarred from his hands. From somewhere behind him he heard another shot.

Doris screamed and ran back the way they had come.

McMasters worked the bolt of his rifle frantically, zeroing in on the third wolf as it veered toward Doris. He missed, worked the bolt again and dropped it just as it was preparing to leap. While he was busy, Roscoe scrambled from beneath the dead weight of the wolf he had shot and scuttled away. The first wounded wolf was limping in his direction. He turned tail and

ran, forgetting all about his rifle.

McMasters didn't waste any more ammunition. For all he cared, the wounded wolf could have whoever had captured Doris. He ran to meet her, shaking now that the crisis was over. Doris flung herself into his arms. He patted her shoulder, even as his eyes roamed the tree-studded grassy veldt, searching for any further danger.

"Hurry! Let's get out of here!" Doris urged. She was on the verge of hysteria.

"We're safe for now. Wait here," McMasters said. But Doris refused, following almost close enough behind to trip him.

McMasters eyed the two dead wolves warily, amazed at their size, but that wasn't what he had come back for. From the corner of his eye, he had seen a rifle go flying, and that was what he was after. Carnivores here, wherever here was, seemed to have little fear of man and the better armed they were, the better he would like it. He spotted the abandoned rifle and picked it up. He checked that it was still loaded and handed it to Doris. "Here, carry this but, be careful, it's ready to fire." He thought briefly of trailing the man who had abducted Doris, then decided it would serve no useful purpose. He was probably too winded to catch him anyway, and there was always the possibility he carried another weapon, or that there were other of the huge wolves around.

"Come on, let's get back." Doris was only too glad to go with him. A little later, after she had calmed down, she repeated Roscoe's comments. McMasters had no trouble believing her. A gang of convicts loose in a world of saber tooth tigers and giant wolves made as much sense as anything else. He wondered again if he should have trailed the convict and tried to catch him, but finally decided he had done what was best under the circumstances. As the house came back into view and Doris hurried on ahead, a scenario began to run through his mind. It's going to be like combat again, he thought. If that sucker gets back to Huntsville, he and his buddies will be back, and it won't be so easy next time. Not with only two rifles and an old shotgun and not much ammunition. And two-dozen or more women to protect. McMasters began to consider moving his charges, but as yet, he had no idea where they might go.

MELANIE CARRIED Peggy's nursing bag over one shoulder and held onto Peggy's hand as often as she was able to as they trudged beneath huge oak and pine and sweet gum trees. Often, tangles of blackberry vines growing where a forest giant had fallen and provided an area of sunlight hindered their progress. Peggy tried to work her way around those obstacles, but often avoided them only to blunder into mazes of muscadine and mustang grape vines growing from the moist earth before attaching to the trees. Several times an hour, she assured Melanie that yes, they were 'trying to find momma,' but she had about given up hope. Once, they saw an animal that could have made four of them. Although it vanished from sight before Peggy could tell exactly what it was, she was certain that no denizen such as that belonged in Texas. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what it was anyway. She held tight to the grip on her little pistol after that, trying to suspend belief in the animal. Something like that just can't be, she thought, it just can't.

Peggy kept them headed in the direction of where she thought the town she remembered might be located, trying to keep her hopes up, but it was hard to be optimistic. Had it not been for Melanie's cheerful acceptance of the incongruous surroundings now that she had company, she might have despaired but the little girl's presence steadied her. She prayed silently for relief while she thought of her own child and husband. Late that evening it seemed that her prayers had been answered again.

DUSTIN WAS talking to the two teenage boys, Gerald Blackson and Randy Shelton. Randy was tall and brown, Gerald equally tall, but thinner, and much darker. He wore his hair in an abbreviated Afro. The deputy had drawn the boys back into the confines of the feed store, away from the others, where he wanted to make certain they understood his instructions.

"Make sure your girlfriends and everyone else understands, hear? Watch them two old biddies especially. We need to eat up the food that will spoil

first. After that we can work on the cans and dried stuff. If I'm not handy, tell those other folks I said so. Now hold up your right hands. I'm going to swear you in as deputies so you got some authority if you have to crack down on anybody."

The two teenage boys grinned, then became solemn when Breedlove frowned at their merriment. "This ain't no joke, boys. God only knows when we'll ever find out what's happened here. In the meantime, you're young and strong. I'm going to be counting on you to help maintain order until we get some relief."

Breedlove's stern words got their attention. For the first time in their young lives, they were being treated entirely as adults, even to being given authority over the old ladies and the dispirited middle aged couples who were still thinking that the disaster was something natural and that momentarily, government help would arrive. Breedlove had about given up on that idea but he wasn't yet ready to spread it around. The boys listened with growing respect. The death of their friend, and even more, the fact that Carla had taken up with the policeman, impressed them with the fact that they were involved with something more than just an adventure.

"What about the night watch you want to keep?" Randy asked. "Do the girls stand watch, too?"

"They'll have to, soon, but I want to spend tomorrow with them first, to get them checked out with their guns. Until then, they would probably be more dangerous to us than anything else." Neither of the boys asked how long the watches might continue, and Dustin was grateful for their lack of curiosity. He had no idea himself how long it would be before relief came, if it ever did. He was getting very worried, but he wasn't about to let it show, not while everyone was looking to him for leadership. The only bright point he could think of was that the feedstore owner had also been a gun dealer and now he had everyone well armed.

"Deputy! Come quick!"

Ohmigod! Breedlove thought. _Please don't let it be one of the girls._ Damn it, he had told them to stay inside one of the other buildings while he was talking to the young men.

Carla burst into the room of the feed store her chest heaved with excitement. "Dusty, someone's coming! A woman and a little girl!"

Thank the Lord! Breedlove ran out of the feed store with Carla, followed by the boys. Already, the two strangers were drawing close, a woman who looked to be in her thirties, accompanied by a small blonde girl, clinging to the older woman's hand. They appeared to be just about at the limit of their endurance. The woman in particular looked to be so exhausted that he doubted if she could have made it much farther.

"Thank God! Thank God!" Peggy cried, tears streaming down her face. The sight of familiar buildings and other human beings lifted the despair hovering over her like the sudden appearance of blips on a flat line EKG.

"Ma'am, would you mind pointing that little pistol in another direction?" Breedlove asked. The woman was wild eyed, dirty and bug bitten and so scratched from briars that her body looked as if she had tangled with a gang of unruly cats. The sudden hope of rescue drained out of him as if someone had told him his lifeboat was leaking.

Peggy blinked stupidly, and then shoved her pistol into a pocket. "We've been wandering for days. I thought everyone was gone. I thought we had gone back in time or something. Oh, I'm so glad to see you! Please, I need to call my husband."

"The phones aren't working. Ma'am. I'm sorry, but we're stranded, too. There hasn't been anyone but us here for days." Dustin stood helpless while he watched the woman's hopeful expression sag.

"You, too? Oh my God. I thought it was just us. What -- where -- ?" Peggy could not go on. Her shoulders slumped in total defeat. Her husband. Her daughter. Where were they? Where was she, for that matter?"

"Let's get y'all inside ma'am, then we can compare stories," Breedlove said gently. Leading her into the confines of the feed store, he was thinking

that if these two were here, then there might be others. Maybe things weren't quite as bad as he thought. _I'll have to find out,_ he thought. _It don't look good, though, it surely don't._

Peggy followed the uniformed man into the bowels of the feed store. The sign in front was familiar, at least. She had passed it many times while making her rounds, but dear God, where was the rest of the town? The surrounding forest loomed darkly, like death hovering over a terminal cancer patient.

Chapter Seven

JASON WATCHED as Burley Simpson tilted the remainder of a half pint of Old Crow whiskey to his lips, drained the bottle, and tossed it away. It sailed through the open door and crashed into the hallway, where broken glass already made progress painful. Jason said nothing. So far as he was concerned, the sooner the liquor was gone, the better. At the rate Burley and his men were drinking, that couldn't be too far off. Already, Burley was rationing the liquor, even among his own circle of cronies, but he put no limit at all on his own consumption, as if trying to make up in a few days for all the years he had gone without. Jason could see that Burley was getting so unpredictable and arbitrary in his drunkenness that occasionally he thought of simply stealing away in the night and forgetting about the whole system. Only the knowledge of the probable fate Burley had in mind for the chained up black prisoners and his responsibility to his own few followers held him in check. That, plus the fact that he knew of nowhere to go. He waited; soon, he hoped, Burley would provide an opportunity for some sort of positive action. The man was too stupidly crazed with power and rancid hatred for the present situation to last long, but Jason wasn't looking forward to a confrontation. Of the free cons, he could count on support of less than a third of those whose skins were light enough to keep them out of chains. Burley had already executed the most militant blacks, but even if he managed somehow to free the rest, he wondered how many would accept his leadership. He knew it would be hard to stay retribution from the blacks if they were freed; and actually, he wasn't even opposed to the idea, so long as it didn't go too far.

Jason was also, at times, wondering why he should even bother. As it stood, whatever remained of the human race would perish eventually anyway. The two nurses, and the several other women who had been captured, were mostly past the childbearing age, and the way Burley and his gang were abusing them, they wouldn't last long anyway. It hurt him to see the women being used so brutally, just as it hurt to see the blacks in chains, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it right now. Trying would just force a fight between his friends and Burley's cutthroats -- a fight that he couldn't win.

While Jason waited and hoped for a chance to break Burley's grip on the convict society, he occupied himself with exploring that area of Huntsville which hadn't been taken in the change, checking back now and then with the few men he was certain were loyal to him. He even had a few doubts about them. So far as he knew for certain, he was the only innocent man from the prison who had survived the change, and he wasn't even sure of his own motives.

Over the years, he had gradually adjusted himself to the hard life of imprisonment. His sudden freedom, albeit a most curious one, was now giving him trouble adjusting. He finally decided to trust those men he knew well and let the chips fall where they may. After all, there wasn't much other choice, other than simply disappearing into the forest, and he wasn't ready to do that just yet.

Jason returned from one of his surveys and found Burley still working through the remaining liquor, giving no thought to saving any for the future.

Burley wiped his mouth and started to speak. He still held his shotgun in an iron grip. Jason thought he might even sleep with it. Just as he opened his mouth to bellow, a sudden cacophony of shouts and cheers caused him to whirl, weapon ready.

Inside The Walls, Roscoe was known as 'Goober', partly for the size of his organ, but just as well for the smallness of his personality. Now, though, he was returning as exuberant as if he had had a quick enlargement performed during his absence. Jason noticed that his rifle was missing, however, and that he wasn't quite as happy as he should have been at the news he was returning with.

"Women!" Roscoe shouted as soon as he saw Burley. "I found some women! Goddamn, there's two dozen of them, at least!"

Jason watched as Burley shook off the effects of the whiskey he had been drinking. An evil smirk spread over his face, making him look as malevolent as a berserk clown. He motioned Roscoe inside to where he could question him. Jason followed.

"Two dozen, at least," Roscoe reiterated, beaming with pride.

"Where?" Burley asked.

"Not fifteen miles from here. I had one of them for a little while, but she got away. That don't matter, though. There ain't but two men with them, and one of them's an old sucker with white hair. We can off them easy!"

Before Burley could comment, Jason jumped in. "Where's your rifle, Goober? And why didn't you bring the women back here if that old man is such an easy mark?"

Jason was astonished and elated at the news. He had hoped that the convict-controlled area of Huntsville wasn't the only place on earth where the astonishing change had occurred, but until now he hadn't dared act on that desire, not while he still didn't know what to do about Burley's despotic reign.

Roscoe's face fell like a collapsing cliff. His glance shifted from Burley to Jason then fixed on Burley. "Aw shit, there was some wolves, big motherfuckers. While I was killing them, the woman got away. They're back there, though. I can lead anyone to them, believe me."

Burley put his arm around Roscoe's shoulders. "Don't worry, Goober. We got enough firepower to kill any motherfuckin' wolves. Come on, let's get a gang ready. Young, you said? You sure you can find them again?"

"Damn right. They're holed up in a big old house and there ain't nothing between here and there but grass and trees."

Burley began leading Roscoe outside where most of the other cons were gathering. Roscoe had been unable to conceal his discovery as he came in and the convicts were almost going crazy at the thought of women.

Jason followed behind them. He eyed the congregation, looking at the exuberant faces and an awful dichotomy became apparent, turning his thoughts mushy. Women! How long since he had had a woman? Years. An image of his ex-wife formed in his mind, as he had known her just after their marriage.

He hated it and yet was fascinated with the memory. The slow, sensuous way she undressed, teasing and luring. The stark feel of her body pressed against his. The memory of her nails digging into his back as he thrust into her. The sexual image was almost overpowering. Even after all the years in prison, he still retained a picture of other encounters, earlier ones, where he had met women free of the mind games his former wife had played with him.

There was a picture in his mind, an ideal; one where he met and loved and was happy in the loving. He wondered if any of the other cons held such an image. Surely, some of them must, regardless of how they were now gathered around Roscoe, needling him for details. Somehow, he thought, I have to make them see this. And God help me, I have to keep my own feelings in check in the meantime.

Jason gripped Burley's arm, feeling the hard, weight lifting muscles tense at his touch. Burley shook free of his grip.

"What the fuck you want, Jason? A piece of the action?"

"I'm going to have a piece of it, but not like you think. If Goober's not handing us a line of shit, we need to contact those girls, but -- "

"But what, Jase? We can't fuck them, that's what you're saying?"

"I didn't say that." _Lord, how I would love to have a woman again!_

"Then what are you saying? Don't fuck with me, Jase, I ain't in the mood for it."

Jason held his temper. What he wanted to do was lash out at Burley, push his stupid face into his skull, but he knew that wouldn't work, not now, when the rest of the cons were inflamed with the idea of women for the taking.

Jason tried to explain. "Look, Burley. Something weird has happened to the world. None of us knows what, and we never may. These may be the only women we'll ever find, and if Goober is right, they're not much more than kids. Wouldn't it be better to see if maybe they joined us on their own instead of treating them like the ones you have now?"

"Sure, Jase. They'll join up with a bunch of cons. All we have to do is tell them we're pansy-ass nice guys and they'll spread their legs as soon as they can yank their panties off. Don't be stupid." Burley began raising the barrel of his shotgun. Jason stepped in, deflecting the barrel, and dropped his hand to the revolver strapped to his waist. He pushed right into Burley's space, holding the shotgun barrel down.

"Goddamn it, Burley, don't you understand? If Goober found these women, don't you think there might not be others around? Or other men, for that matter? Maybe even the law. Use your fucking head for a change. Don't go off half cocked until we know more about what's happening."

Burley tensed his hand, trying to raise his shotgun. He suddenly became aware of Jason's size and strength, rivaling his own. He shifted his glance around. The other cons were waiting tensely. Some, he knew, would back his play, but Jason was respected as well. Suddenly, he leaned forward, ready for a confrontation. "You sonofabitch. We're going after them."

Jason lifted his hand from Burley's arm and waved away whiskey fumes. "I know that. We have to. All I'm saying is that we're not going to rape them to death when we find them. If we find them. Goober isn't the most reliable lag I know."

Burley backed away, just slightly. "Maybe we'll rape them and maybe we won't." He grinned suddenly. "Maybe I'll fall in love with one of the bitches. What the hell, Goober's teeth bother me anyway. Just remember, though, I ain't responsible for what happens before they get back here."

"I'll attend to that," Jason said, glad the confrontation was ended, for now at least.

He began picking out some of the men he intended to go with the expedition, but he had to be careful. Send too many of his own men and Burley would overpower him while they were gone. Send too few, and he shuddered to think of what would happen to the girls before they returned.

And there remained the question of the blacks that Burley had enslaved. He still didn't know how to resolve that situation. He had found something that might help, though, in his explorations. In the drawer of a small service station, neglected by everyone else, he had come upon a cache of drugs: coke, pot and Quaaludes. He had secreted it immediately in a better hiding place. Now he was trying to decide the best way to use it.

IN THE CITY of Livingston, forty miles east of Huntsville, there was a much larger group, conglomerated from the night shift at McDonald's and their few customers, the employees of two service stations, the inhabitants of a number of vehicles which had been stopped at a red light and the customers, clerks and workers busy restocking a huge Wal-Mart super store and the Wal-Mart customers.

Those people caught in the displacement of that portion of Livingston were almost all women, with only a scattering of men here and there, mostly those working at the service stations or shopping with their wives at Wal-Mart. There were a few children, but most of the displaced persons were composed of the night shift at Wal-Mart and their customers, mostly women.

This group stayed where they were after the change. There was plenty to eat and drink, and no imperative reason to go anywhere else, even had they known where to go. There was also plenty of arms and ammunition in the Wal-Mart store, although it took two days and a number of hysterical outbursts

before the restraints of civilization fell away enough to impel the refugees to begin arming themselves. The sight of bison eight feet high at the shoulders crossing the tarmac of the parking lot helped wonderfully in the matter.

"THE CONS WILL come looking," McMasters said. "We'll have to leave." He stood by the fireplace in the spacious living room, where Doris and all the girls were gathered. He caressed the barrel of his rifle cradled over his arm, wondering whether he was suggesting the right course of action.

"Maybe the wolves got that guy," Doris said, trying to convince herself that it was true. "Maybe he never got back to Huntsville."

McMasters thought of how convicts loose from The Walls would behave with two-dozen nubile young women. He shuddered inwardly. "Do you want to take the chance? I don't. Besides, there's very little food left here."

"We could hunt," Bucks suggested. "There's plenty of game."

"And very little ammunition. Besides -- "

"I can't face those monsters out there!" One girl shouted. "They'll kill us all!"

McMasters gestured with his rifle. "Not if we're careful. There's another point, too. Our group represents three separate areas where a displacement occurred. The convicts are another. Doesn't that suggest anything to you?"

"Right," Bucks said. "There may be more people around, not just those f -- those cons. But where do we look?"

A young girl began crying. "I want to go home. I don't like it here." She huddled into herself. A friend hugged her until the sobbing tailed off.

Doris couldn't think. Too much had happened, and there was no pattern to the events she could attach a familiar tag to. Home? God, they might never get home! "Bucks is right, Cecil. Where on earth do we go from here?"

McMasters stepped forward a little. The early morning sun slanting in through a window glinted on his white hair and cast shadows into the creases of his weathered brown face. "Well, we certainly don't want to go east, toward Huntsville. That was a convict that captured you, Doris. There are more of them there. And Bucks has already come from the west; there's nothing in that direction. I suggest we head northeast, circle around Huntsville, and then head toward Livingston. Maybe something survived of that town."

Gradually, over a period of an hour or so, he convinced the rest of the group of what he already knew: staying where they were really wasn't a viable option, not with the threat of the convicts on the loose so close. He and Bucks spent the rest of that day looting the house of everything of value they could carry. He armed the girls with such tools as he found in the little outbuilding and with kitchen knives. He had Doris make up packs from clothing and blankets they found in closets, and filled canning jars with water from the well. The most valuable thing he found as he was rummaging around was a half box of magnum buckshot; apparently they had set on a shelf in a closet for years and had been forgotten. He hoped they still worked.

Carrying all the remaining food presented no problem. More than two-dozen people eating from the stores had already depleted them severely. By early the next morning, McMasters had everyone ready, standing on the porch. The girls glanced nervously out over the grassy, tree studded terrain like new kittens suddenly taken from their mother.

"Let's move out, folks," McMasters said. "Bucks, you lead off. Doris, you and the girls stay bunched up behind him, but not too close; leave him room to fire if he needs to. I'll trail along behind and watch our rear." The group moved out. McMasters, eyeing the makeshift packs, felt somewhat akin to a scoutmaster with a troop bereft of the money for adequate supplies, but as the house passed out of sight behind a knoll, a sense of relief came over him. Whatever lay ahead, he didn't think it could be much worse than what threatened from the rear. Convicts were bad news even when locked up, let alone free and armed.

BURLEY AND JASON agreed on a half dozen men to send after the reported

women, and at Jason's insistence, another group was to be sent to the east to see what lay in that direction. He urged the men to be careful; the scout previously sent that way had never returned. That left Jason with very few men he thought he could depend on. He took the gamble, thinking that information on whatever this new world held was worth the risk. Nevertheless, he felt like a juggler with too many balls in the air. Mishandle one, and the rest were apt to tumble out of control.

MICHAEL WAS worried about Sheila. Since shooting her attacker two days ago, she had hardly spoken. She stayed very close to Wanda, following her around like a newly hatched chick trying to find shelter under its mother's wing. She eyed him suspiciously, and he was careful to speak softly to her, imagining how she must feel about men right now. While she was recovering from the beating Reeves had given her, Michael conversed with Wanda, usually while Sheila was resting. She was an enigma; at times she was abrupt and disdainful, as though he was an unnecessary piece of furniture in a new home; at other times she was quieter and softer spoken, eyeing him queerly, like a rambunctious puppy suddenly grown to dignified adulthood. He couldn't figure out what her problem was and it worried him almost as much as his concern over Sheila. He thought it time to begin their search for other survivors and wanted them all to start off as friends and companions.

"There's no point in staying here any longer," he said to Wanda on their third morning. "We need to start looking for other people."

Sheila focused her gaze on Wanda. In this sudden new world, a man was the last person she wanted to trust, not after her last experience. Wanda understood her viewpoint, but she was beginning to lose her doubts about Michael. He was invariable polite, helpful and knowledgeable, and more important, so far he had shown no proclivities toward thrusting sex into their three way equation. In a way, that was irritating to her. She found herself liking him more and more as time went on. He was unassuming, yet commanding in a quiet way that she liked. Wanda began to think that if she had known a man like him a week or two ago, she might still be in the Army and never have been caught up in the change which had thrown them together in such a strange conjunction. She had not revealed the circumstances to Michael of why she had been heading to Houston on the night of the change, simply telling him that she had been an army officer on leave. She knew Michael noticed the reticence, but he had said nothing. Apparently, he wasn't the type to pry, and anyway, there were more urgent considerations right now than the fact that she occasionally liked women as sexual partners.

"Can you travel all right, do you think?" Wanda asked Sheila, examining her bruised face.

"If you say so. I feel all right and my shoulder isn't hurting any more. Will we ever come back? My parents -- " She closed her eyes, remembering, and trying not to cry again.

"We can always come back here, once we find out what's going on elsewhere," Michael said gently.

"That's true, Sheila. Really, I think we ought to go. Mike is certain we weren't the only places or people displaced. We need to find others; we can't live by ourselves out here."

"All right," Sheila said disconsolately. The picture of Dawson Reeves on top of her, the knife to her throat, intruded into her thoughts. She shuddered, and suddenly was in a hurry to leave. Maybe then she could forget him.

Wanda, using her army experience, made up packs of necessities for them. She and Michael carried rifles appropriated from the house and left Sheila with the .22 automatic, after Michael pointed out that not only would it be a better piece for small game hunting, but that there was most of a case of shells for it, almost nine boxes, and it would be easy to carry.

There was one old sleeping bag in the house, and they gave that to Sheila. Michael and Wanda found a lightweight plastic tarp folded away in a closet. She carried it, while Michael took a couple of blankets. While Sheila

was still packing in her room, Michael took instruction from Wanda on the handling of the thirty-thirty rifle. He was no hunter, and had never been in the service. Wanda was pleased that he listened attentively and took her instructions with no hint of a macho attitude, the last thing she wanted to see in a man now.

"Will this thing stop a bear or a saber tooth, do you think?" he asked.

"A saber tooth? Have you seen one of those?"

"No, but judging by what I have seen, I think we can expect them. Don't you?"

Wanda was a long time answering. "The Pleistocene? That's where you think we are?" She had had the same thoughts; Michael had just brought them into the open.

"If my memory serves, that's what I think. We've seen ground sloths, Bison, what appears to be dire wolves, as well as those giant bears and armadillos. If we haven't been thrown back to the Pleistocene, this is a damn good imitation of it." He grinned wryly at her, and then added, "And if the displacements equalized, then think of what must be happening up in our time when some of those critters suddenly appear. The scientists will be going crazy!"

"I had thought the same thing myself, but I guess I just didn't want to admit it. Christ, do you think there might be Indians around?"

Michael shrugged. "Who knows? It depends on how far back we were thrown. Besides, this might not be our Pleistocene. It might be a completely different universe. All we can do is look and see."

Wanda handed him back his rifle. "I guess so. Well, back to your original question; yes, a thirty-thirty should stop a tiger, but maybe not with a single shot unless you hit it right." She grinned at him. "It sure as hell should annoy one, though."

Michael grinned back. "I saw a skeleton of one at the Smithsonian once. I'd just as soon not annoy one of those critters, if you don't mind."

"Me, neither, for that matter. Well, let me check on Sheila, and I guess we can be on our way."

Michael touched her elbow as she was turning away. "Is she going to be all right?"

Wanda started to give a sharp answer then bit back the words. Why punish Michael verbally for some sick maniac's act? It wasn't his fault, and if it hadn't been for him, both her and Sheila would probably be dead. Time to start remembering that. "She's had a horrible experience, but other women have survived the same thing. Just be gentle with her. Better yet, set a good example. Right now, she's afraid of men."

"I will. Poor kid, I feel sorry for her. I just wish I had gotten here sooner."

"You did fine." Wanda leaned forward and gave him a brief kiss, then turned and walked to the bed room where Sheila was still packing. Now why did I do that? She thought. Michael wondered the same thing, and for the first time consciously thought of how refreshingly pretty she was. With no make-up and dressed in functional hiking clothes, she reminded him of the simple beauty of a Christmas tree with the bangles removed.

Sheila looked up from where she was completing her pack as Wanda entered the room. Already, she knew the trust Sheila had once placed in her parents was being transferred to her, a woman who had appeared suddenly in her life like a life preserver tossed to a swimmer in trouble. Wanda started at a sudden thought that came unbidden into her mind. I could seduce her. It would be no trouble at all. She clamped down on the thought. No, that would be wrong. She is too vulnerable, too hurt and troubled right now. What she needs more than anything isn't a woman, but to regain her trust in men. An image of Michael's pleasant concerned face under it's shock of short brown hair popped into her mind like a new piece of toast. She smiled to herself. Maybe an example would help.

"Are we ready?" Sheila asked.

"Yes. Have you got all your stuff together? Don't forget anything. It might be awhile before we get back here."

Sheila hefted the pack from the bed and began trying to pull the straps over her shoulders.

"Here, let me," Wanda said. She helped her on with the pack and adjusted the front of the straps. She was suddenly uncomfortably aware of Sheila's firm young breasts and coils of loose springy hair hanging to her shoulders.

"Thanks." Sheila grinned brightly at her, her first smile since the attack. "I don't know what I would do if you hadn't come here."

Wanda remembered her admonition. "You should be thanking Mike. He's the one that saved us."

"He did, didn't he? I've been so scared, I haven't even talked to him much, or even thanked him. Is he a nice man?"

"Yes, he's very nice. Don't be afraid of him."

"I won't be if you aren't."

"Good. Let's go now."

The rest of the day was uneventful. They camped that night in the protection of the bole of a huge fallen tree and built a fire in front of them. The flickering flames gave light to an overcast night, unlike the previous ones. In the far distance, lightning played fitfully.

"It looks like we may get some rain by tomorrow," Michael commented.

"It's warm enough. It shouldn't bother us," Wanda said. "The climate doesn't appear to be much different from what we were used to."

"Nor the bugs, either," Michael answered, slapping at a mosquito. He took the last bite of his sandwich. The bread was stale, but that wouldn't be a worry any longer. The sandwiches they had packed represented the last of it, anyway. Within a few days they would have to start hunting. He hoped Wanda had more experience at it than he did. What a strange world they had been thrown into.

Before they left Sheila's home, he took the most accurate measurement he could of the diameter of the displacement around Sheila's home. He had a vague notion that as he had wandered southeast, the displacements had grown smaller than the couple he had passed through on his journey. If the inner circle of displacements to their northwest were indeed larger, he thought that he had picked the right direction. South of them, they might peter out to nothing, and even if they didn't, the chances of finding humans in that direction would become increasingly less.

"Who wants the first watch?"

"I'll take it; I'm not sleepy yet." Wanda said.

Michael's smile was unseen in the bare light of flickering embers.

"Good. I'm an early riser. Wake me if you need to."

There was no need. Sheila relieved Wanda, and then woke Michael in the early morning hours, touching him so tentatively that she had trouble arousing him. Before dawn, he saw that the lightning had come closer, and now there was a very faint rumble of thunder in the distance.

At mid-morning, they broke into another displacement area, just about where Michael had calculated it would be. He nodded to himself in satisfaction, looking around. A small stretch of pavement occupied one corner of the circle, accompanied by two picnic benches and a portion of a third, apparently the remains of a small park along the route of where highway 59 used to run. The rest of the area was nothing more than typical east Texas woods, a second growth of timber springing up to cover what had been logged a few years before.

A large, fat raindrop splattered on Michael's hand and another on his forehead. He looked up into the sky. Dark, rain-laden thunderclouds were rapidly approaching. "We'd better get under cover," Michael said. He led the way toward the benches. "Hurry!"

They made it just in time. "Use your sleeping bag, Sheila," Wanda said over the rumble of thunder. "It's waterproof, I think. Take your pack inside

with you so it doesn't get soaked." She struggled to get the tarp she carried untied.

Sheila buried herself in the bag under one bench while Wanda shook out the tarp and hurried under the shelter of the other. Michael ducked his head and crawled in after her. The space was small enough that they had to huddle together while torrents of water poured over the tabletop. It was low enough that their necks quickly began to hurt under the strain. Wanda moved first. "Stretch out, we'll be more comfortable."

Without waiting for an answer, and without really thinking of what she was doing, she pulled Michael down beside her beneath the tarp. The protecting top of the table was so narrow that they had to lie close together to avoid the runoff.

Michael slipped an arm beneath Wanda's neck to give her a resting place and put his other arm loosely around her waist. Rain drummed overhead like a clutch of tom toms. A bolt of lightning flashed and sparkled and thunder crashed immediately on top of it, seeming to split the heavens with its roar. The rain changed suddenly to hail, splattering onto the tabletop and pavement with crashes like splintering wood. Wanda clasped Michael's body as if it was an anchor in the wind, pulling him hard against her.

"Oh God, I hate this," she whimpered, ashamed of herself but unable to help it. Thunderstorms had always scared her, and she had never imagined being caught out in one with so little protection. She buried her face against Michael's neck.

"Me, too," Michael murmured against her ear. He stroked her back, trying to soothe her. Wanda tried to get closer to him, as if his body were a talisman that, if held tightly enough, would ward off the storm. Somehow, she found her lips pressing against his cheek. Michael moved slightly and that was all it took to bring his mouth into contact with hers. He kissed her, tentatively at first, but another crash of thunder and flash of lightning thrust them even more firmly together.

To Wanda, the storm sounds seemed to fade in proportion to the pressure of Michael's lips on hers, like a bad dream being pushed away by coming awake in a snugly secure bed. Wanda held him tightly, and then gradually eased away as she felt the movement of his hand at her waist, giving him room to slide it up to her breast. The pressure of his touch made her feel safe and not nearly so scared, as though she were being protected by the tender touch of a kind magician. She lost herself in the dreamy experience, holding him close while the storm gradually died.

They were still entwined, touching each other with the slow, pleasant sweetness of newly discovered attraction when a voice interrupted them.

"Hey, you two! The storm's over. You can come out, now." Wanda saw Sheila's grinning face through the slats of the picnic table seats. She flushed and disentangled herself, feeling wet spots on her body where the tarp had not completely protected them.

Michael eased himself out from under the tarp and rolled into the open. He stood up. Sheila grinned some more at him. He flushed, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, but quickly saw that the young girl wasn't upset. He breathed a sigh of relief and reached a hand to help Wanda to her feet. Wanda's cheeks were spotted with bright pink blotches where his beard had scraped and the top buttons of her blouse were still undone. She refastened them, thinking that if Sheila needed an example of how attractive a man could be, she had just been exposed to one, even if it had been unintended.

Later, as Michael ranged ahead, beating a path through the rain soaked forest, Sheila came up close to Wanda and whispered, "You really like him, don't you?"

"I guess I do. He sure made me forget about the storm, anyway."

"Do you think he likes me?"

"Of course he does. Why would you even ask?"

"I was just wondering. How old is Michael, do you know?"

"Oh, in his thirties, I suppose. I haven't asked."

"That's not so old. Was he married?"

"He hasn't said. He's not wearing a ring, though. I doubt if it would matter much, anyway, considering our present situation."

Wanda answered more of Sheila's questions nonchalantly, glad that the young girl was talking more now. It wasn't until later that she began wondering at Sheila's sudden interest in Michael. Then it dawned on her that he was the only man around. No wonder. Still ... am I suddenly becoming possessive? What's going to happen to relationships with no laws to define them? And no birth control. How will that change things when women begin having babies all the time? My God, I haven't even considered those things yet. I wonder if Mike has?

Chapter Eight

BY THE END of the first week after the displacement, the scattering of survivors took on the aspects of an elaborate chess game, where people were the players and random chance the strategists. McMasters with his group of dependents was moving north and east, with one of Burley's gang of convicts trailing them. Another gang explored eastward to the other side of Huntsville, with instructions to seek out and cross the Trinity River, if it was still there. Michael, Wanda and Sheila moved north, while Brent and his group prepared to head south again. Dustin Breedlove, the deputy, held his people in the remains of Goodpasture, while the large group of survivors in Livingston plundered the wealth of the huge Wal-Mart store, leaderless as yet. Other small bands and individuals wandered erratically, while still others stayed where they were, hoping for rescue. The board was laid out. Some pieces were moving, others were standing still, protecting their domain and yet others were gathering for assaults. Eventually, most of them would come together like opposing armies blundering into a battlefield not of their general's choosing.

MCMASTERS CURSED savagely as he fell to the ground, the shot still ringing in his ears. He rolled, feeling pain shoot through his leg like a hot branding iron as he tried to seek cover. The ground plunged out from under him and he fell head first down the steep slope of a brush-covered gully. Only his military training enabled him to keep a grasp on his rifle as he plunged downward. Branches and briars raked his face and arms as he fell. He tumbled a final time and again felt solid earth turn to air as he sailed over the embankment of a creek and landed solidly on the muddy bank. The breath was knocked completely out of him and for a long moment he lay there gasping, trying to get air back into his lungs. He was laying at a slant, looking down at his legs. He saw a thread of blood leaking from his calf, turning the mud where he lay into a soupy pink slush. Shouts came from above. He gasped and crawled upstream, seeking cover. An under cut tree, leaning precariously over the stream, came into view. Hurriedly, he crawled in under it, still clutching his rifle. Concealed there, he brushed dirt from the action and checked to see that the barrel was free of dirt, gritting his teeth against the pain in his leg.

"I got him!" He heard a voice call, just as the boom of a shotgun resounded. He heard a curse, then a rattle of pistol and rifle fire. The gunfire died away, leaving only voices behind. McMasters huddled under the roots of the tree, in water up to his waist and waited for someone to come. He had no doubt that the convicts had trailed and found them. The shouts and yells of coarse voices left no doubt of that. He wondered briefly if Bucks had got away, and then decided that he probably hadn't. Even if he had, he had no doubt that most of the girls had been captured. The sounds he could hear left little doubt of that. Damn, how had they gotten so close without him sensing them? He could only think that they had been intercepted from the side, while he and Bucks were watching behind and in front. My fault! Damn me for an old man, I should have put some of the girls out as flankers. Too late now, though. The damage was done. Any moment McMasters expected a patrol to come down the creek bank and finish him off. He tightened his grip on his rifle and

vowed not to be taken easily.

Surprisingly, no one came to look for him. He supposed that they were too busy with Doris and the girls; either that or they thought him dead. He waited, feeling the water soak into his wound. He debated with himself about trying to crawl back up the gully and attempt a rescue of the women, but his combat experience warned him off. He would just get himself killed if he did that. Better to wait and hope for a more opportune moment.

McMasters remained hidden for a good half hour after the mutter of voices had died away, then dragged himself out of the water and up onto the bank of the little creek. One of the girls had been carrying the first aid supplies found in the house. He tore strips off a spare shirt and used them to bandage his leg. The bleeding had almost stopped, and the water had soaked away most of the pain. Using his rifle as a crutch, he climbed back out of the gully, going slow and testing his leg. He thought he was fortunate that no bone had been broken, although he figured that by the next day, the leg would stiffen up enough to make travel difficult. Yet he had to travel. If there was any hope for the girls, he knew he would have to provide it.

He wandered painfully around the area of the ambush, knowing what he was looking for and hoping that he wouldn't find it. He did, though. Bucks lay almost beside the convict he had killed. His eyes were open and staring up at the sky he had worked beneath, but there was no life left in them. McMasters reached down and gently pulled his lids closed. He eased the pack from beneath him, took it and resumed his hobbling search. A few feet away, he found Bucks' shotgun. Both barrels had been discharged. He wondered if he had hit another of the cons, but found no signs that he had. He mused, thinking that Bucks deserved burial, but he just didn't see any way to arrange it. It was going to be difficult enough as it was to trail the convicts and the girls, and he needed to get started. He picked up the shotgun and began hobbling off when a familiar noise startled him.

The snicker was like a childhood memory come to life. He turned. Not fifty feet away the horse snickered again, just as glad as he was to encounter a partner from times past. McMasters prayed briefly that the animal would come to him.

"Here, boy. Come here," he called softly. The horse shook its head in reply. It was saddled and still trailing reins. He wondered who had been riding at night, and how they had come to lose the horse. Well, it really didn't matter, but as he limped up to the horse and began stroking its neck, he thought that his philosophy was confirmed. Things usually evened out. Now he could travel as well or better than the convicts. He put a foot into the stirrup and swung aboard. Some sons of bitches were going to be sorry!

Just as he was ready to kick the horse into action, a cry stopped him.

"Mr. McMasters! Wait for me!" He turned toward the sound, squinting into the sun. Judy, Doris' daughter, emerged from the underbrush. She ran toward him, hair streaming behind her. The running girl startled the horse and he had to pull on the reins to control it.

"Judy! How did you manage to get away?"

Judy clutched at his leg and looked up at him, as if he might ride away without her. Her pretty young face was tear-streaked. "When mother heard the first shot, she told me to run. She was following, but she tripped. I hid and waited until everyone was gone."

"Did anyone else get away?"

"I don't think so. Mr. McMasters, you won't leave me will you?" She held his leg in a death grip.

McMasters reached down and stroked her shoulder. "Call me Cecil, Judy. No, of course I won't leave you. Can you pull yourself up behind me? Careful of my leg. I've been hit."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Does it hurt?"

"I'll manage. Come on, now. Get up here and let's go. All this blood will be attracting varmints."

Judy climbed up behind him and put both arms around his waist. She

averted her eyes from Bucks' body, but managed to ask, "Aren't we going to bury him?"

"I don't think we can wait," McMasters told her gently. "We need to go after your friends and your mother. Here, can you carry this shotgun?"

"I guess so. Is it loaded?"

McMasters smiled wryly to himself. Advice from a child, which he should have thought of. "No, thanks for reminding me. Look over my shoulder and see how I do it." He inserted a shell into each chamber then handed her the weapon. "See the safety here? All you have to do is move it, and it's ready to fire. If you have to use it, just pull one trigger at a time, and be sure and hold it back against your shoulder when you shoot. It has quite a kick."

"I'll remember. Do you ... do you think we can rescue Mother? And the other girls?" Judy's voice trembled like the fluttering wings of a small sick bird.

"I don't know, but we're certainly going to try. And -- Judy, I'm hurt. If we get any chance at all, you might have to help. Do you think you can shoot a man if you have to?"

"I don't know. I'll try, though, if you say I have to. What do you think those men are going to do with mother and the other girls?"

McMasters hesitated, then decided to be honest. "I imagine there will be rape at the very least. Maybe worse. The convicts at Huntsville were all hard-core criminals. They don't have much respect for women, the law or anything else for that matter. If we can't get them loose, it could be very bad. You understand?"

"I guess so. I wish we were back home."

"I do, too, hon, but wishes won't help. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Judy said. She put one arm around his waist and held the shotgun with the other. The trembling was gone from her voice. McMasters thought she sounded much better now that he had explained, even though he knew she must be sick with fear. She did sound determined, though, and with the horse and newly armed, he thought there might be a bare chance of rescue. He kicked the horse with his good leg, and they moved out, heading southeast now, back in the direction of Huntsville. After a time he became aware of Judy's breasts pressing into his back, nipples erect from rubbing against him as the horse cantered along. He tried to avoid thinking about it, but after a time he relaxed and simply enjoyed the sensation. It had been a long time since he had been so close to a woman and besides, it helped take his mind off his wounded leg.

"THAT MUST BE the Trinity river," Michael said. He looked out over the current, wondering how they could cross. He wasn't really familiar with the river, but it didn't seem to be that much of an obstacle, and it wasn't. Using rope he had brought along, he and Wanda managed to secure two downed trees together to make a makeshift raft. Sitting on the trunks with their legs trailing in the water, He and Wanda used saplings to pole their way to midstream, and then turned them into paddles when the depth dropped off. They drifted a hundred yards or so downstream before the bottom could again be reached, then poled the makeshift raft to the opposite shore. There, it took a half hour struggle through muddy, bottom brushed terrain to regain higher ground. They were startled once, just after reaching shore, by a huge alligator off to the side plopping into the shallows.

Wanda shivered and hugged herself. "I'm glad we didn't see one of those things before we started; otherwise, I don't think you could have gotten me into the river."

"Me, either. I should have thought of it," Michael admitted. "We all need to remember from now on. This is not the East Texas we knew a week ago."

A few miles farther south, and an hour or so before dusk, Michael called a halt. "We'd better start thinking about camping for the night. I was hoping we could make it to where Livingston is -- or used to be -- today, but we can't. It will be dark soon."

Wanda agreed, following his lead. She was surprised at herself for

letting Michael make the decision, but somehow, it seemed right. She remembered a disaster novel she had read once, about a comet hitting the earth, and an observation the author had made: _"Milliseconds after impact, women's lib, as a working philosophy, was as dead as the Roman empire."_ She wasn't quite ready to bury it that deep yet, but she knew with certainty that unless the world returned to normal, women would never again in her lifetime enjoy the freedom that a technological civilization had given them. She thought of the birth control implant she carried. It was due to be replaced and might already be ineffective. So, she thought, it's a matter of either being careful or having a baby. Or sticking to women, but somehow she didn't think of that as a viable alternative right now. She wanted to find out more of what Michael was made of and there was one good way to accomplish that.

Sheila was an observant girl. She had seen how Michael had gradually become the dominant person of their trio, especially after the storm. At first she had been scared of him, fearing retribution for killing Dawson, but he had hardly mentioned it, and then only in reference to other matters, and gradually she began accepting his leadership as easily as Wanda's. She found herself wondering where Derek was now and whether he missed her. Probably not that much, she thought. He was as self centered as most other high school boys. Probably he had already found another girl friend. Surprisingly, she discovered that she felt no sadness at the thought, but rather a sense of release, as if she were giving up her girlhood and fully entering the adult world. While the camp was being prepared, she observed Michael when she thought he wasn't looking. She liked his quiet competence, free of the braggadocio she was used to from young males -- Derek in particular. And he was nice looking, even with his stubbly beard. Would he think she was too young? Or did he think of her in that way at all? Probably not, so long as Wanda was around. Well, maybe they would find other people soon. Even if they did, though, she doubted if there would be another man as attractive and competent as Michael. Oh, golly, I wish I were older. I wish he would look at me the way he does Wanda. The last thought caused her to blush. She was glad it was getting too dark for the others to notice. She wouldn't know how to explain. It never entered her mind that Wanda had been observing her from time to time in much the same way she had been looking at Michael.

They built a roaring bonfire that night. It was smoky because of the wet wood, but that did cut down on the mosquitoes. They ate a meager meal, and then stretched the tarp out with the blankets on top. Sheila volunteered for a watch, and sat two hours, her little rifle clutched fiercely in her hands. She woke Michael sometime after midnight and snuggled in beside Wanda, taking warmth from her presence, but making the other woman distinctly aware of her young body.

THE GANG OF a dozen or so convicts who had headed east from Huntsville also crossed the Trinity, using several rafts to accomplish it. On the other side, they worked their way eastward again. Late in the evening, they surrounded a forlorn family consisting of a man and his wife and two young children and took them prisoners. The family had been caught traveling at night in their car, and had waited forlornly for rescue, never imagining the method it would take when it finally came. The man and the woman were tied together; they shuddered wakefully throughout the night, listening in horror to the rude laughter and quarrels of the convicts. Fortunately, the man held his peace as they were inspected and questioned. Neither he nor his wife were harmed at first, other than being frightened almost out of their wits by off hand references to slaves being held in Huntsville. The family was black.

It was a different story in the morning after the quarrelsome convicts had settled their differences, or at least after one faction became dominant. The woman was untied and separated from her husband, then led a little way off into the woods. The ensuing cries and sounds of his wife being beaten into submission almost drove the man mad, but there was nothing at all he could do. He didn't even notice that some of the men held back from participation in the rape, looking guiltily around at everything except each other and their

captive.

The next day, the outskirts of the displaced area of Livingston suddenly came into view. The convicts drew back into concealment and began arguing. One contingent wanted to attack; they could see groups of people wandering about and moving in and out of the stores, and they were mostly female and unarmed. The four men loyal to Jason wanted to simply return and report -- there were armed men about, though very few of them, but that wasn't the problem. They simply had no real desire for a battle with refugees no better off than they were. Burley's men won the debate, and that afternoon, they began their move.

The battle was quick, fierce and decisive. Four convicts died, but surprise carried the day for them. Most of the visible men of the town died in the first volley of shots; Those remaining were quickly routed. Some few escaped into the woods or went into hiding wherever they could find concealment when it became plain that the attacking force was gunning down every man in sight with no hint of mercy or compassion. A few stood their ground and died trying to protect the women, who were almost all unarmed.

The convicts roped their prisoners together in a string that resembled nothing so much as a coffle of slaves from the previous century. Then they began exploring their conquered domain. The convicts were delighted. In the huge Wal-Mart superstore was wealth for the taking, far beyond the limited goods available in Huntsville. They ate and drank merrily all day, then at night separated out the women from the roped together prisoners and forced them into various alcoves of the massive store. There was little sleeping done before daybreak, unless alcoholic stupor could be counted as slumber.

The convicts moved out the next morning, anxious to bring the good news back to Burley. As far as they were concerned, their mission was accomplished, and had been successful beyond their wildest dreams.

THE PREVIOUS evening, Michael, Wanda and Sheila had come upon the remains of the little town of Goodpasture, where Deputy Breedlove was still holding forth. At first, it was like a re-union of graduates returning to their old hometown. Breedlove was so happy to see new faces that he almost entirely forgot that, after all, it was only three new faces in a world almost bereft of humans. He bubbled over with enthusiasm, asking where Michael and Wanda were from, what they had been doing and what they had seen.

Sheila shyly joined the teen-agers and began talking with them, but she kept Wanda and Michael, especially Michael, in sight while she described her adventures, omitting only that one horrible morning from her tale. She wasn't ready to talk to anyone about that yet, and maybe she never would. It had been a nightmare, not an adventure, but the remembrance of it seemed to subtly separate her from the other youngsters the way surviving a tornado right next to where the neighbors had been wiped out would be.

Michael caught Wanda's eye and nodded. She returned the glance, coming back from where she had been talking to Peggy, the home health nurse. Michael drew her and the deputy aside. Breedlove's enthusiastic grin turned into a frown of concentration as soon as he heard about the possibility of convicts loose in the wilds. "Goddamn, nothing but complications," he said. "Excuse, ma'am, but this situation just gets crazier and crazier."

"There's a pattern to it, though," Wanda prompted.

"There is?"

"I think I have it figured out," Michael said. "We found your group on the basis of my calculations. I think there may be another area of displacement somewhere around Livingston. I want to head for there in the morning. However..." He scanned the remains of the little town and liked what he saw. The remaining buildings were old, but they had been well built, mostly of brick and cement. "This seems to be a good area to keep as a base. There's shelter here, and a good surrounding area that's clear. I don't think we should all go. Sheila..." He looked back and saw her in conversation with the other teenagers. She caught the sound of her name and looked up. "We can leave Sheila here, and one or two men, while the rest of us try for Livingston. Does

that make good sense to you?"

Sheila separated herself from the teenagers as soon as she overheard the remark about leaving her behind. She approached Michael and Wanda like a young doe seeking safety on the first day of hunting season. "Don't make me stay here. Please, I want to go with you." Her eyes pleaded as poignantly as a puppy in a pet store window.

Michael looked to Wanda for guidance, then back to Sheila, noticing for the first time how pretty she was, even with a dirt smudged face and strands of red hair escaping from the band she had secured it with.

Wanda put her arm around the young woman, holding her in a loose embrace. She really didn't want to be separated from her, but neither did she want to expose her to further danger. "Honey, it's not like we're leaving you permanently. We're real close to where Livingston is, or was. We'll be back in a few days. I'll feel a whole lot better knowing you're safe back here. Besides, there's something I want you to do here. See that woman over there?" She pointed to Peggy, who was just now grasping the fact that Goodpasture was only a forlorn remnant of the previous world and that it was unlikely she would ever see her husband and daughter again.

"Yes. Why is she crying?"

"For the same reason you did, sweetheart. She's lost her family, her husband and daughter. She's about to go wild thinking about it and we can't afford that. She's a nurse. We may be needing a nurse before this is over, if it ever is. I want you to stay with her and try to start thinking of the present, not the past. There's that little girl she brought in, too. That's the first child we've seen. Think how she's feeling now."

"There's another thing," Michael put in. "Sheila, I don't like to say it, but it's not likely we'll ever get back to normal. We need to start thinking about holding on to such knowledge as we have, like medicine, for instance. Why don't you start talking to Peggy about nursing and see if you're interested?"

Sheila looked up at Michael, longing still written over her face and suddenly Wanda thought she might know what it was. It wasn't something to worry about right at the present, though, even if she were right.

Wanda put an arm around the girl and pulled her close. "I think Michael is right, Sheila. Will you do that? Talk to Peggy about nursing and help her get her mind off her family?"

"If you say so, but, please, come back to me."

"We will," Wanda said. "Count on it." She kissed her on the cheek then turned her loose.

"All right, then." Sheila stepped forward and hugged Michael before thinking, then blushed and hurried away to where Peggy was still staring blankly around at all that was left of the little town.

Breedlove, who had stepped back a few paces while the conversation was going on, now came forward again. He was impressed with the confident young physicist. If he had figured out where other people might be located, and had proved his theories by finding them, he was ready to follow his lead on anything else he might suggest.

"It sounds like a good plan to me," He said. "By the way, we've most of us been sleeping in the feed store. Something got one of the boys the first day, right inside the tree line, and we haven't tried to go anywhere since. Y'all got here, though, so maybe it isn't as dangerous out there as I thought." He made the last sentence sound like a question.

"Don't count on that," Michael warned. "Keep alert. However, you look like you're armed well enough. If you're careful, it should be OK. At least, we've had no trouble so far."

Breedlove walked away to sound out the others on Michael's proposed expedition, anticipating that they would follow, but Wanda hung back a moment. "You're not planning to leave me behind too, are you?"

"No," Michael said, making an immediate decision. Not only did he trust Wanda as an equal, or perhaps even a superior in exploration, he found that he

didn't want to be separated from her. Even though his predictions had been proven right, he still had no clear idea of what the future might hold. He only knew that somehow the responsibility of getting survivors together was gradually devolving on himself and he wanted her support.

"Good," Wanda smiled. "I wouldn't have stayed anyway."

They all gathered in the feed store that night, talking over plans. Wanda noticed that before long, the others followed the deputy's lead and began deferring to Michael. It was finally agreed that Michael, Wanda, Gerald and his girlfriend would strike out for Livingston the next morning, leaving Breedlove and the other teenager and two older men to protect the rest of the group. The deputy didn't need much convincing. He was content to remain with his fief, although he didn't think of it in those terms. He only knew that Carla and the rest of them had come to depend on him, and he didn't want to let that go. It was nice being a leader.

Wanda noted that Sheila seemed to be happy enough with Peggy's company and that of Melanie, the little girl. Occasionally she even laughed, as if her experience with Dawson was really something she was putting behind her. As dusk closed in, Wanda found a spot within the feed store for a pallet, and even a modicum of privacy in a corner behind a pile of feed sacks of grain. After the evening meal, Michael joined her there.

He eyed the double pallet and sat down. It was concealed from other areas by the stacks of grain, giving an illusion of privacy even if they did have to whisper to keep their conversation from being overheard. He sat down and began laying out his weapons for easy access. "Where's Sheila?"

"I've got her bedded down with Peggy and the little girl. She was exhausted. You know what? I think she's sort of sweet on you."

Michael hardly heard her. He was in deep thought.

Wanda took his silence to mean that he thought Sheila was either too young to have feelings like that for an older man or was simply infatuated with him after he had saved her life. Men! She asked, "What are you thinking?"

He turned to face her. "I did an eyeball measurement of this area. It's bigger than I thought it would be."

"Does that mean something special?"

"It means that the farther north and west we've traveled, the bigger the area of displacement. If Huntsville is the center, that means lots of convicts may be loose. I don't like it."

"If Dawson was an example, I don't either," Wanda agreed.

"He was an aberration. What I'm worried about is what the others may be up to. Sooner or later, we're going to have to find out."

Wanda gave in to his pensive attitude. Suddenly, she was worried, too. Their little group would be no match for gangs of hardened, armed convicts, especially since they had decided to split their forces. Well, that was for tomorrow. Right now she had other thoughts on her mind. She stretched out on the pallet. Michael leaned down beside her in the darkness. Over the feedbags, the flickering of a candle from another alcove cast only a faint light into their shadowed retreat, as if they were laying together in a darkened theater before the curtains were lifted. She reached a hand out to touch him, and Michael responded, moving to draw her close to him. He slid his hand over the fabric of her blouse, feeling for the buttons. He fumbled them open and slipped his hand inside, beneath her bra. Wanda kissed him, then gently removed his hand.

"It's crowded in here."

Michael stroked the curve of her hip. "I know. It's a new world, though. Listen."

Wanda heard faint murmurs coming through the darkness, and movements. "It is, isn't it? Wait." She rose to her knees and began removing her clothing, glad that the water tower had come along with the town so that they had had a chance to bathe.

Michael could barely discern her body as she undressed, keeping just below the level of the concealing bags. When he was sure of what she was

doing, he removed his own clothes, and a moment later she stretched her nudity against him. Her breasts melded softly against his chest, spreading warmth and comfort into his body.

"There's something you better know first," Wanda whispered.

"What's that?" Michael stroked her back and ran his hand over the curve of her hip.

"My implant is about to run out."

"Implant? What implant?"

Men! "For birth control, stupid. Or do you think you can whip up a new one for me by next week?"

"Oh. Maybe we better not, then." Michael began to disengage, reluctantly, but he could see her point.

"Come back here, you idiot. I didn't say we couldn't." Wanda pulled him back to the warmth of her body and stifled any other protests he might have been thinking of. She knew there would never be any more birth control worthy of the name and she might as well accept the fact. It was going to be a man's world in the future and she decided she might as well cement her relationship with Michael now as later. Or not. Besides, her own body had suddenly become a demanding force, as if it were in perfect tune with the dictates of her mind. Wanda drew Michael on top of her, thighs tingling as she spread them apart and let his weight settle deliciously over her. It was, indeed, a new world.

When Michael sought out Breedlove the next morning, he was directed to the office of the feed store. He knocked on the door. He heard murmured voices from inside, and then Breedlove opened the door. From behind him, he saw the young girl named Carla yawning. Her stretching arms pulled the cover down, revealing bare breasts. She looked up and hastily pulled the blanket back up to her chin. Michael smiled to himself. It is just like Wanda said, he thought. A new world. A few days ago that deputy would have been committing a crime with the young girl. Today he was her protector. Michael wondered what other changes he would see in the years ahead. If he survived.

While Michael talked with Breedlove, Wanda got acquainted with Gerald and Tanya, his girl friend. Tanya was almost as tall as the young man and was even more enthusiastic about the excursion to the north. Wanda checked their weapons while waiting on Michael. She was apprehensive about the trip. What would they do if they found more convicts rather than normal people? How would they cope with them? If Dawson had made it all the way to where she, Sheila and Dawson had met, others could, too. Well, one thing was certain: never again would she allow herself to be captured by one of them; death would be an acceptable alternative.

The group moved out after a sparse breakfast, delayed somewhat by again convincing Sheila to remain behind. Later that day, they ran upon Brent and Darla's group where they had stopped for a rest.

Michael held his rifle tensely at first, then saw the other group relax; there would be no fight here. These people were the same as them; stragglers in a world they still didn't understand. After an hour-long conference, Michael kept Brent and Darla with their group and sent the others on to Goodpasture, assuring them that Deputy Breedlove would see to their comfort. He was encouraged that so far, his theories were bearing fruit. They were finding other refuges, but still, the idea of hardened convicts on the loose dampened his spirits. At least though, these new people increased their own forces in case an encounter with convicts did develop.

Late that afternoon, his fears were confirmed. They broke from the concealing forest into the carnage left behind by the convicts who had ravaged the remains of Livingston. Bodies lay where they had fallen, sprawled amid broken glass and loot discarded by the invaders. Congealed blood lay in pools by the bodies, attracting swarms of flies. Small scavengers darted back into the concealing forest as they approached. Michael noted the four bodies clad in dirty white uniforms and caught Wanda's glance. Now, there was no denying their peril. He posted sentries and led Wanda inside the Wal-Mart.

The shelves were still mostly intact, although the aisles were littered

and there was a heavy odor of rotting meat and produce from the grocery section. Mouse droppings were also evident, but there was still a large supply of edible food left. There were simply too many goods in the huge store, and too few humans had been available to loot them for there to have been much depletion yet. They walked together toward the back of the store, to the sporting goods area. Wanda halted there, causing Michael to turn. She pointed. "Do you see?"

Michael did. Where the firearms department had been, the cases had been robbed of arms and ammunition. Most of the glass display cases had been splintered and broken shards lay on the floor like remnants of a rock throwing fight.

"They took weapons and ammunition, but they left some, too. Careless of them." She pointed to racks of rifles and shotguns.

Tanya came running toward the back of the store. "Mike, Wanda! There's people outside!"

"People?" Michael released the safety on his rifle. Were the convicts coming back?

"Mostly women. They were scared at first. They thought we were more of the convicts come back. They've been hiding in the woods."

Michael and Wanda hurried outside, leaving the store for later perusal. In the back of his mind, he was thinking that the vast resources of the Wal-Mart and the rest of the shopping center included in this displacement area would make a perfect base for the formation of a settlement, but at the end of that thought came the realization that the convicts might be thinking the same thing, depending on how much and what sort of resources in Huntsville had been displaced.

There were eleven women and two men altogether, several of them sporting bloody bandages. Michael posted the others to keep watch while he and Wanda led the scared survivors back inside.

A quick questioning revealed that the attack had occurred only hours earlier, as he had suspected. He was heartened a little by their report that only about a dozen convicts had taken place in the attack, and four of them had been killed. The number of prisoners the remaining convicts had led off was more uncertain, but it appeared to be at least fifteen, possibly twenty or more, almost all women.

Michael made a quick decision, even though his gut tightened at the thought. This couldn't be allowed to stand, not if he could help it. "We're going after them. Wanda, how about you getting these women armed with whatever weapons the convicts left behind and show them how to use them. I'll talk to the others. Hurry." Wanda started to speak then let it go. Michael was acting just the way she was thinking. Her only concern was trying a rescue with their present group.

Back outside, Michael conferred hurriedly with Brent, Darla and the two teenagers. They appeared startled at first, suddenly finding themselves in the middle of what appeared to be an impromptu war after thinking their only mission had been exploration, even after Michael's warning about the possibility of convicts on the loose. Darla, especially, appeared uncertain.

"Do you really think we have a chance against armed convicts? I've never been in a gunfight before."

"Neither have I," Michael admitted, "but we can't let this stand. There's not that many of them left if I've been hearing right, and they won't be expecting anyone to come after them."

"I'm with you," Brent said quietly.

"Good." He turned to the teenagers. "Gerald, I need someone to get back to Goodpasture and warn the deputy and his people. Also, it looks to me as if a few of the group inside are too old to travel fast enough. I want you to take them with you."

"Hey, man, no. I want to fight." Gerald gave Michael a rebellious look.

"Don't worry. Before this is over I think you'll get a bellyful of fighting. The cons sent one expedition here. What makes you think there aren't

others?"

"But -- "

"I don't have time to argue. Just get back to Breedlove. Tell him what's happened, and then I want you to convince him to lead all his people back here, as fast as he can. If we haven't got back by then, follow our trail back south, toward the river. Tell him I said so, and to try to carry any useful supplies he can think of that won't slow him down. Tell him to bring plenty of guns and ammunition, too. We're going to make this area our base; it's too good to pass up. First, though, I'm going to try to catch those damn convicts. Can you do all that? It's a big responsibility, I know, but we need your help."

Put that way, Gerald reluctantly agreed.

As Wanda led the group of scared women back outside, Michael saw that two of the surviving women were too old to travel at the speed he intended. They carried newly acquired weapons uncertainly and he saw that they were mostly shotguns.

"We found more weapons in back," Wanda explained.

"Why shotguns? Oh -- "

Wanda grinned while running her fingers through her short thick locks of hair, thinking how much it needed washing. Well, that could wait, just like another bath would have to. "Yeah. I've got them loaded with magnum buckshot mostly, and a couple with scattershot." She spoke to the group. "Remember girls, don't aim close to the people we're trying to rescue, and hold the butt tight against your shoulder when you fire." She said nothing to the two men, whom Michael was just noticing. One of them was elderly but fit looking, the other middle aged and frightened, but trying to conceal it. The elderly man carried a 30-30 with easy familiarity.

Two of the women carried no weapons. Wanda gestured in their direction. "These two ladies don't want to fight. They say it's not Christian."

Michael held his temper with difficulty. He was more than a little familiar with the Bible belt mentality and had no patience with it, but now was not the time to try convincing them of the absurdity of their contentions. He separated them from the larger group, but kept the two oldsters, then drew Gerald aside to speak privately to him. "Don't let those two Sunday school teachers give you any hassle, understand? You're the boss. If you have to use force to control them, use it, but go as easy as you can. It's something we'll have to deal with eventually, but not now."

"Got it," Gerald said. His brown young face twitched with barely suppressed mirth at the thought of being in command of the old ladies, who in normal times probably would have crossed the street to avoid him. This white man was one he could get to like.

Michael had one more thought. He drew Wanda off to one side. He put an arm over her shoulders and said, "Wanda, I've been giving orders and telling everyone how we're going to rescue those poor women, but I've got to tell you I don't have a clue how to go about it. You said you were in the army. Maybe you ought to be in command."

Wanda felt a surge of affection for Michael well up inside her. Nothing else he could have said could have gone further to confirm her liking of him than deferring to a woman when he was uncertain of his ability in an area outside his domain. "No. The troops will take orders from you more readily right now, and we don't have time to change their orientation. Besides, I was a medical technologist, not a combat officer."

Michael gave her a grateful squeeze and turned back to work. Fifteen minutes later the area was deserted except for the bodies. But not for long. As the humans withdrew, the scavengers crept back, padding uncertainly over the tarmac, but drawn inexorably to the smell of blood and compost. Michael looked back once, then put the matter out of his mind. If there were any chance of catching up with the convicts and their prisoners, then the bodies would just have to wait.

Chapter Nine

CECIL MCMASTERS pitied the horse. It was carrying double, and it was no longer young, but he pushed it hard. There were probably incipient sores beneath the saddle, worn now for a week or more, but there was simply no time to stop and remove it yet. Other matters were more pressing.

He picked up the convicts' trail easily, then veered off to the southeast, intending to circle around and get ahead of them and the girls they held. What he would do then, he still wasn't certain, but putting his presence between them and their base at Huntsville would at least give him some options.

Movement was rapid at first, but then the woods began thickening, demarking the moister climate to the south and east of Huntsville. He thought that the dry line was displaced a little farther east than what he remembered of the old climate. He wondered about it, but not much; he was just annoyed that their progress was slower.

Given a little time, he thought it would be fairly easy to get ahead of his prey and set up some kind of an ambush, but it was becoming harder for the horse to pick its way through the underbrush.

Abruptly, the woods thinned out into nothing and the horse's hoofs clattered onto a paved surface. He and Judy had entered into another displacement area. It was a stretch of highway, incongruous in the wilderness. And only two lanes, narrowed by encroaching brush. The rest of the circle held the same logged over scrub, but where it ended in old growth, a pickup and van were parked close together. Thin wisps of smoke from an old campfire hovered lazily in the still air. McMasters thought immediately of smoke signaling their presence to the convicts but decided they were too far away from their path and the forest too dense for that. McMasters kneeled the old horse and headed their way.

A grizzled man of fifty or so came forward to meet them. He carried a rifle, but there was no threat in it. A huge grin almost split his face from ear to ear. A week's worth of almost total white beard adorned his face. "I told ya!" He called back over his shoulder. "I told ya someone would come. Godamighty, are we glad to see ya!"

Under other circumstances, McMasters would have been glad as well, but now he had to use time to explain. Besides that, his leg was stiffening up badly. Judy had to help him off the horse.

The grizzled man, whose name was given as George, was the head of a family group which had been heading to Galveston for a weekend of fishing. There was George, his wife Emily, and their son and daughter-in-law plus their four children, two boys and two girls, all pre-pubescent. While McMasters begrudged the time spent explaining his and Judy's situation, he did take the opportunity to at last remove the saddle from the horse and begin rubbing it down while they talked. He padded the skinned areas on the animal's back with rags provided by George's wife, then re-saddled it.

George, backed up by his son, was at first reluctant to believe his story, but McMasters simply pointed to his wounded leg and the surrounding circle of old growth trees. None that huge had been seen in east Texas for a hundred years or more. Finally George turned to his extended family. He ran a hand through his grizzled hair. "Shit. 'Scuse me, Momma. Son, I reckon I got to help this man. You stay here with the womenfolk. Sorry, Mister, but we ain't got but this one weapon. Don't know why I was even carrying it, 'cept I just never took it offen the rack after deer season."

"What are we supposed to do?" His son broke in. He was gangly, with thin blonde whiskers. "We can't stay here without a gun. Dad, you've seen those animals. What if another of them comes around. What do we do then?"

"Judy can stay here with you. Her shotgun is loaded with buckshot."

"No! I'm going after my mother!" Judy clutched her weapon protectively.

"Judy -- "

"No. I'm going."

McMasters couldn't find it in himself to say no to the young girl.

Finally, a compromise was reached. She would go, but she would give her weapon to George's son to protect the others, and carry Goober's discarded rifle in exchange. McMasters had little confidence in George, Jr., as he learned his name was, but he felt time pressing like a weight on him, and the less of it spent in argument, the better. If the young man needed to shoot at anything, he was more likely to hit it with a shotgun than his father's rifle.

Painfully, he remounted the horse, but alone this time. There was no way it could carry three. Judy and George would have to walk, regardless of how much it slowed them. Besides that, his leg brooked no argument. He couldn't possibly fight afoot if it came to that. George would have to help, and Judy as well, at least to the extent of helping him get around. He was almost too crippled to walk.

MICHAEL PUT Wanda in the lead, thinking her smaller steps would set a pace the others would have no trouble following. He trailed the group, constantly urging them to hurry. In his mind, he was already picturing the terrain ahead and trying to form a rescue plan. Nothing concrete came to mind until he thought of their river crossing. He hadn't remembered it until now. Maybe that would slow the convicts down. He ran ahead and caught up with Wanda.

He paced in step with her for a few moments then decided to call a halt. The going had been hard anyway, and he thought they could all use a short rest. "Listen," he said, once they were halted and he had gathered the group around him. "I think our best bet is to catch them while they're trying to cross the Trinity. There can't be an intact bridge left, I don't think. They will have to cross the same way we did. That's when we'll hit them. Wanda, you keep the lead, and everyone, you don't need to talk from now on. As soon as you get them in sight, just follow, and keep silent. Wanda, you let me know when they reach the river, then we'll spread out as much as we can."

"Right," Wanda said. "That way, we can fire from the side, and aim at the cons. Good plan." She scratched at a speckle of deer fly bites on her arms. "Damn, I should have worn long sleeves."

"We all should have," One of the women spoke up as she slapped at the ubiquitous flies. Her shotgun barrel traversed an erratic arc.

"Easy," Wanda cautioned. "Don't point that at anyone like that. Not until I tell you to, anyway." She grinned at the woman to take the sting out of her voice. Who would have thought that she would ever put officer's training into effect by leading a group of civilian women into combat?

"Everybody rested? Let's go, then," Michael said, not waiting for an answer. They moved out. He patted each of the women on the back as they passed and touched hands with the old man carrying the rifle. The white haired oldster was panting a little, but his eyes were bright. Michael thought he must be a veteran. Certainly he showed no fear. He wondered if his own apprehension was detectable. Can I kill a man in cold blood? No, not cold blood. The bodies back at Livingston belayed that. He shouldered his weapon and pressed on.

Just as he was getting ready to send word up the line to tell Wanda to take another break, the column halted. He began moving forward and met Wanda coming back toward him. She held a finger to her lips.

"We've spotted them," she whispered. "They're at the river trying to make a raft. They have their prisoners all tied together, with only two men guarding them."

Michael crept past the women, Brent and the old rifleman, cautioning them in whispers to silence. Wanda led until she parted the riverbank underbrush and motioned him up beside her. He peered through the brush.

Two convicts were guarding and heckling the prisoners while the others were busy constructing a makeshift raft. The two were in line of sight of the bedraggled line of women. Each of their hands were bound in front of them, with the ropes leading to the next who was bound in turn. As Michael watched, a convict walked up to one of the women in the line. Holding his rifle in one hand he reached into the line and squeezed a young girl's breast, laughing

when she shrank away from him. A sudden rage made Wanda raise her weapon. Her finger was already tightening on the trigger when Michael hurriedly crawled in front of her, not daring to yell, but willing to do almost anything to keep her from firing before they were ready and spoiling the ambush.

Wanda remembered to breathe. She lowered the barrel of her rifle, not wanting to think how close she had come to firing at the leering convict. She was shaken by the thought that her first gut instinct had been to protect that one single woman rather than the ultimate rescue of the whole group. Maybe men were better at combat, regardless of what she had been taught. At least in these circumstances. She waited now for Michael's direction.

Michael wiped sweat from his forehead, trying to pretend that nothing untoward had happened. "We need to spread out," he whispered.

Wanda nodded and backed away, trembling like a fluttering leaf. Somehow, she thought, I have to stop reacting like that. Just because my stepfather -- _not now, no time._ Michael was motioning urgently at her. She caught the gist of his intent and began moving half of the group along the riverbank while he took the others in the opposite direction. They had already agreed that all would fire upon his first shot. It began before they were completely ready.

Wanda never knew how they were spotted; perhaps some movement, or a glint off a weapon, but it really didn't matter. One of the convicts guarding the prisoners looked in their direction and yelled, raising his weapon at the same time. Wanda fired, missed and fired again. Her second shot brought forth a ragged volley. The shotguns boomed like thunder in springtime, but to little effect. Only one of the convicts at the raft went down; the rest scattered after their weapons. She fired again, and again, cursing as she missed each time. A bullet tore through the brush just past her face and she ducked involuntarily. When she raised her head again, a kaleidoscopic view of the riverbank flickered into her vision. Convicts running; the string of prisoners tangled in a heap from each of them trying to run in different directions, and two convicts crowding around the rafts. She fired at them and finally had some satisfaction in seeing another of them fall.

Michael was taken completely by surprise by the premature ambush. The two women beside him that he was still trying to get in position froze at first then fired ineffectively through the brush. Both of them forgot to hold their weapons tight and were kicked backward by the recoil of the magnum rounds. He scurried forward, head low until the river came into view. He leaned against a handy tree trunk and aimed at the convicts around the makeshift raft, not wanting to let any of them escape and warn the others in Huntsville. He was not used to firing a rifle. He jerked reflexively at the trigger. His first few shots went wild, hitting nothing, but from somewhere a bullet tore into one of the cons and he sank into the water, clutching at his stomach. The satisfaction of seeing him fall was short lived. To his right, a woman rose upright, clutching her throat. Bright red blood spewed through her fingers and splattered green leaves.

Michael fired again toward the raft ineffectively. Four convicts that he could see were still on their feet. They had recovered their weapons and were shooting back. The bullets buzzed through the underbrush, cracking limbs and branches. One of the men rose to his feet and charged, rifle blazing. Michael sighted and fired again. This time, he had the satisfaction of seeing the man fall in a froth of blood, but then a searing pain creased his shoulder. He dropped his weapon, clutching at the wound. Another shotgun boomed, then two more. He spotted his rifle, half covered with leaves and grabbed for it, rising to his knees.

The rafts were abandoned, as were the prisoners. Two convicts were in the river, swimming desperately. Another was running wildly along the near riverbank, firing over his shoulder with a pistol. A shotgun thundered again and he dropped, twitching in the mud.

Wanda stood upright and sighted carefully. She fired. A white clad body stopped its swimming motions and sank, twirling blood behind. She scanned the

river, looking for other targets. Only one convict was in sight, but the current carried him around a bend of the river while she was trying to draw a bead. She fired anyway in frustration, and then rose to her feet. Along the firing line, several women stood shakily, unbelieving for the moment that they had actually participated in the carnage. On the riverbank, the coffle of female prisoners was still trying to untangle themselves.

"Go on," Wanda said irritably to the nearest woman. "Get those people untied." She felt shaky, as if she had drank a gallon of coffee on an empty stomach. She found Michael and Brent standing beside the old rifleman, staring down at his still form. His eyes were glazed with death, but somehow, they still seemed merry, as if he had gone out the way he had wanted to, firing a rifle in combat. At first, she looked at the body of the old man, then she noticed that Michael was bleeding. She dropped her rifle without even thinking about it and went to him. "Mike -- "

"I'm OK, I think. Oh shit, I blew it. Who else is dead?" Michael was responding to his first taste of combat with an incongruous combination of wild exuberance at being alive and a sense of failure at being the proximate cause of other people's death.

Wanda hugged him, wondering how he could possibly think he had failed. From what she had read of combat, this had been a howling success. Whatever the cost, they had accomplished their mission. The prisoners were free. The convicts were running, what few were left. She brushed at the still flowing blood from the superficial wound across the top of his shoulder.

"Mike, you didn't blow it. We won! Come on, now. Let me get you bandaged, and let's see who else is hurt." She felt a fierce protectiveness overcome her, almost maternal in its power and possessiveness. Whatever else happened from now on, she knew that Michael was her man.

Michael hesitated before he allowed her to tend to the crease on his shoulder. While she was taking care of it, he looked down at the white-haired body, and thought to himself: old-timer, you did good. Now let's hope we can make your sacrifice mean something. Wanda led him away, holding him in a protective grip, but even as he threw off the pain of his wound, he knew they hadn't won anything other than a skirmish. The real battle was yet to come.

MCMASTERS KNEW as he spotted the girls and their guardians in the distance that there was no way of getting ahead of them. The forest had thinned somewhat in this particular spot, but beyond he could see where it grew thicker again.

The convicts were apparently just finishing a rest stop and were preparing to get underway again. From where he watched, he could see that two of the girls were clutching torn blouses. While he kept his little group concealed and wondered what to do next, one of the girls held her shirt front together and stooped to pick up a scrap of white clothing from the ground. A con prodded her with his rifle and laughed. The girl glared, but made no protest. Damn, he was already too late for some of them.

Abruptly, he made up his mind. If they could pick off a couple of the convicts from here, maybe it would slow their progress until he could think of a better idea.

"George! Pick a target up front, then fire when I do. Judy, hold the horse, and get ready to help me back on. Don't delay; we won't have but one or two shots, then we'll have to run."

George looked puzzled. McMasters gave him a savage look and punched him on the arm. "Just fire when I do. Try not to hit any of the girls, and get ready to run. All I want to do is try to pick one or two of them off and slow them down until I can think of something else. Understand?" The grizzled man gave a slow nod. Sweat stood out on his face in dirty beads. He looked unstable. His hands were shaking, but McMasters hoped he could at least shoot straight. If he was a deer hunter, maybe he could, but he wouldn't want to bet the farm on it.

A small tree gave him a brace for his scoped rifle. He drew a bead on the convict who had been molesting the girl. The image was fuzzy, only a blur

of dirty white. Damn my eyes, he thought. He held his breath, steadied his aim and gently squeezed the trigger.

The con spun and fell, a red splotch blossoming on his shirtfront. He levered another round into the chamber and ranged with the scope, trying to find another target. Beside him, George got off a round. Immediately, return fire came from the convicts, but it was wild and disordered. McMasters abandoned the idea of trying to hold steady on another target. He fired quickly then shouted, "Run!"

George was already on his way. Judy's face was blanched white, but she held steady as he used her as a brace to mount the horse. He leaned low over the saddle as uncomfortable buzzing noises whistled past. Judy grasped his out flung hand and threw her body over the horse's rump. McMasters kicked with his boot heels and they were away. Just as they gained a heavier cover of brush, he heard a thunk near his leg. _Missed!_ he thought, as the sound of the shot came a second later. He spurred the horse harder, running it until he thought they were safe. He passed George near the end of the race, then stopped a ways beyond.

"Did you get one of them?" McMasters asked as George trotted up to them, panting heavily.

George sank to the ground. He gasped for breath and shook his head. "I don't think so. Damn, I've had buck fever before, but nothing like that. Sorry." Abruptly, he grinned. "I'll try it again, though, if you want me to."

McMasters had to settle for that.

MICHAEL WAS policing up along the river bank, gathering such plunder as the defeated cons had left behind while Wanda comforted the released women. He prodded a body, and then bent to roll it off the rifle it had fallen on. The body groaned as he tugged at it. He let loose quickly and stepped back, weapon ready. Slowly, the white clad convict sat up, holding his head with both hands. He groaned again, then surprisingly, tried to grin. Michael kept his rifle ready while he examined the man. Apparently the wound at the back of his head had been more bloody than deadly. "Get up," he commanded.

Slowly, the con got to his feet, staggering a little at first, then steadying. He still held his head. "Goddamn, what a headache," he exclaimed.

Michael had no sympathy. "Better a headache than dead, which by rights you should be -- and it's still not too late to correct the situation."

"Ease up," the convict said. "I haven't hurt anyone, at least I don't think so. I tried to miss, at any rate."

"Tell that to the bodies I found in Livingston. Are you going to claim you weren't there?"

"No, but I still didn't hurt anyone. Jason told me not to if I could help it, and that's what I did. I'm glad, too."

Jason? Who was Jason? Michael didn't quite know what to make of the captured convict, but if nothing else, he should be able to provide some badly needed information. He motioned with his rifle. "Move. That way, and slow."

"You got it, Mister."

Michael got nothing but glares from Wanda and the other women as he prodded his prisoner into view. When he saw the still bodies he couldn't blame them. Two women and the old man gone, he thought, against how many cons? Five? Six? Not a very good trade. Then he took in the huddle of former prisoners gathered on the outskirts of his band. Well, maybe not too bad at that. He still wasn't used to death, though. His eyes avoided the bodies.

"You're not planning on keeping him alive, are you?" Wanda asked. She stepped forward, weapon raised. Again, her instincts were overriding sound strategy, like a hungry farmer eating his seed corn.

"No!"

The voice came from behind her. She turned. One of the group, a former female prisoner, edged forward.

"Don't kill him. He was never bad to us like some of the others. He even tried to help us some, but the others wouldn't allow it."

"Shit, what is this?" Wanda turned her weapon back toward the prisoner,

but now she seemed a little more hesitant about using it.

"Maybe I can explain some, ma'am," the convict said. "I never tried to hurt anyone, and neither did a couple of the others. Jason told us to go easy if we found other folks and we did."

"Who is this Jason?" Michael asked.

"He's -- can I sit down? I feel dizzy."

Michael motioned with his rifle. The man collapsed to a sitting position. He rubbed his scalp and drew away bloody fingers, then began to talk. "My name's Whitney. Eli Whitney. I'm one of Jason's men. All I was in for was bank fraud, and Jason never did even that much. His was a bum rap all the way. There's others, though -- "

Under prodding questions, the story came out. Whitney answered everything freely, as if undergoing a catharsis. Gradually, Michael and even Wanda began to believe him, incredible as his story was.

"So you see, Jason is trying, but what he can do is limited so long as Burley has the bigger following. There's one more thing, too. We heard about some girls that were stranded west of Huntsville, and Burley sent a group out that way to get them."

"This is incredible," Wanda said. "Black slavery, sex slaves, scouts out all over the place, two different factions of convicts; we have over a dozen women here and only two men, and now you're saying there's more women going to be taken prisoner?"

"Not exactly women, ma'am," Whitney said. "The way we got it, they are more like girls. Teenagers, with one old man and one younger one with them. It may be OK for a while, though. Jason sent some of our men along to try to make it go easier with them. You never know, though. Those shits of Burley's are all either lifers or real mean motherfu ... real bad men. And Burley's the worst of the lot. He's crazy."

"How many convicts altogether?" Michael asked. Already, he was beginning to think of still another rescue mission. The idea of more fighting frightened him enough to cause his hands to quiver where he was holding his rifle in both hands. He tightened his grip, hoping no one would notice. Christ, what am I thinking? I'm no damn general. And why am I taking all this responsibility, anyway?

Eli interrupted his thoughts. "Including the blacks?"

"No, just the ones who will fight," Michael said. Maybe there wouldn't be that many.

Whitney creased his brows. "I'd guess about fifty altogether, maybe more. A dozen or so are Jason's men, but if they thought you'd lock them up again, they would fight on Burley's side. Same as I would for that matter." He gave Michael a defiant look then dropped his gaze.

Too many. "Wanda, we need to think this over. I'd like to get their other captives loose, but that's too many to tangle with. What can we do? We can't just press ahead with what we have now and hope for a break." He looked around at his ragged followers.

"I agree," she said. "As much as I hate to think of leaving the girls and those poor blacks he's talking about alone, without hope, we can't do anything now. We'll have to go back and get reinforcements from Breedlove."

Michael considered, then shook his head. "The people we have can't go against fifty armed convicts, even with Breedlove's group. All I can see is to keep searching the pattern we laid out and hope for more recruits." And then hope they'll join us, he thought.

Whitney spoke up again. "Mister, I sure hate to tell you this, but there's one more thing."

What now? "Bud, you're nothing but bad news all over the place."

"Sorry, but you better know. Everyone was talking about asking Burley and Jason to move everything to a better location if we found one, just as soon as we got back. There weren't too many stores near the prison, and supplies are running low. Did you get everyone, or did some of us get away?"

"Shit on a horse," Wanda said, stamping her foot on the ground in lieu

of anything else to vent her rage on. "Yes, Goddamnit, at least one of them got away. Well, that rules out our search for other people. If we give them time to come back and take over Livingston, we'll never root them out. Crap!"

Michael eyed Whitney with renewed interest. The hint of an idea began to form. At first it seemed ridiculous, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made, given their circumstances. The crux of the matter would be selling the idea to Wanda. And to me, he thought. His hands began shaking again.

DAMN ME FOR an old man, I've fucked up again, McMasters thought. Maybe I was too cautious, but no way now to keep the convicts from getting back to Huntsville. The girls and their captors were only a few miles away from there now, by his calculations, and there was no hope of stopping them, even though they had halted at another clearing, for what purpose he could only guess. He couldn't make out details from the distance.

"It looks like there's going to be a rape," George said. "Goddamn, can't we do something?"

"That's Mother!" Judy whispered. "Cecil, please, do something."

The figures were blurred, but McMasters could see one person being separated from the others and led away. As he watched, blinking his eyes, he thought he saw one man step forward and rip at a blouse.

"Cecil, stop it, please." Judy cried, unable to tear her eyes away from the scene she could see much more clearly than McMasters.

"Help me down," McMasters told her. Painfully, he dropped one-footed to the ground. His wounded leg would no longer bear weight at all. "Get ready to help me back on, then be ready to run." He leaned his rifle on the saddle of the horse. The scope brought the figures into a better perspective, but they were still fuzzy. Under the best of circumstances, it would be a chancy shot, even if his eyes could see as well as they used to. He hesitated. What if he hit the woman instead?

In the scope, he could see Doris having her blouse ripped away. The bra followed. She struck out at her abuser and was cuffed about the head for her trouble. She shrank away, trying to cover her breasts. The convict followed relentlessly, slapping her arms aside. He pushed her to the ground and began ripping at her slacks.

"Please, Cecil, please." Judy's plea came to him like a ghostly apparition inside his head. His hand steadied, and just for a moment the cross hairs of the scope centered on Doris' attacker. Gently, he squeezed the trigger, holding his breath. One second, two, then the white clad convict slowly slumped to the ground, a red stain spreading over his back where the slug had exited.

"Go," McMasters said huskily. A sudden wetness rather than his outdated eyes blurred his vision now. It was the best shot he had ever made in his life, but the small victory rang hollow.

The majority of the convicts quickly disappeared into the forest with their captives and he knew they were going to get back to Huntsville with Doris and the girls. He hated to even think about what would happen when they did.

Once McMasters was sure they were safely away, he called a conference, which really amounted to ordering Judy and George to go along with his next idea, which he admitted to himself was really a long shot.

"George," he said, "I want you to go back and get your family while Judy and I work on east. We can't do any more damage to those cons now, without finding some other people to help."

"Where are you heading?"

"There's some more little towns east of here, or at least there used to be; then there's Livingston a ways farther, I hope. I'm also hoping we'll find some other people along the way to help us out. We'll blaze a trail so you can follow us."

"Ain't the Trinity between us and Livingston?" George asked.

"Yes. We'll have to cross it some way. I doubt we can count on the

bridge still being intact, but we'll manage somehow. Livingston was pretty big and spread out. I'm hoping we'll find a pretty good bunch of survivors there, if nowhere else. At any rate, that's the only idea I can come up with."

"OK, if you say so. Mama ain't gonna like this, but maybe you're right. I can't think of nothing else to do, either. Be sure and mark your trail good."

"We will," McMasters said. "Let's go, Judy." He had to allow her to help him re-mount. She climbed on behind him And again put her arm around his waist. After awhile, her arms tightened and he felt her hair brush the back of his neck.

"Thank you, Cecil," he heard her whisper.

Chapter Ten

WANDA HAD neatly turned the tables on Michael's initial idea that he accompany Whitney back to Huntsville as his "prisoner," then work with Jason to try and get a sixth column going in Burley's rear. The idea was frightening to contemplate, but it was all he had been able to think of to overcome the disparity of forces, and even so he wasn't really enthusiastic about the strategy. He was even less enthusiastic when Wanda insisted on playing the role and was beginning to be sorry now he had even mentioned it. "No! Damn it, Wanda, I won't let you do this. You can't. Just think of what you're proposing!" He thought of Dawson Reeves and other convicts like him who had been imprisoned at The Walls.

"I know what I'm proposing, Mike. I don't like it any better than you do, but unless you can think of something better, that's what I'm going to do. They might kill you out of hand, but they won't harm me. Not physically, anyway." She put a hand on her hip, striking a provocative pose to emphasize her point. She was already steeling her inner mind to endure what she was almost certain would happen if she convinced Mike to go along. Well, Sheila had endured it and under much worse circumstances. If it comes to that, I'll live through it. She marshaled her arguments while Michael was still trying to reject the idea.

Michael was horrified. Logic didn't enter into it, even though that was what Wanda had on her side. Quietly, she went over the facts again, after drawing him aside to keep them from being overheard by the others.

"Mike, I just don't see any other way. Look at the whole picture. First, everyone here already thinks of you as their leader, their commanding officer if you want to think of it in those terms. Next, if we believe Whitney, we only have a few days before all the convicts begin heading for Livingston.

"There are three factions: Burley and his men, Jason's soft cons, and the black slaves. Jason controls a small core of cons who wouldn't ordinarily be dangerous to us. Burley has thirty or forty men under his control who don't give a damn what they do. We can assume that he's captured those teenage girls, and God knows how they're being treated, regardless of what Whitney says Jason is doing.

"Somehow, we have to stop them. We don't have the force to do that, even if that deputy and his gang gets back to Livingston before the cons get there. Someone has to make contact with Jason before we fight, and you already admit that we're going to have to. If he has some assurance that we'll go easy on his gang, there's a good chance he'll turn on Burley when we want him to.

"Not only that, Whitney says if we can free the blacks, they'll fight on our side, just on the chance that they will get a square deal in the future; in the meantime, I'll work on the girls if I find them there. Does that cover everything?"

Michael had to admit that it did, but he wasn't ready to concede yet. He was strongly attracted to her, not just sexually; he was enthralled with the difference between her and his former wife and wanted to get as deep into her mind as he had been in her body. The thought of leaving her to the mercy of ruthless convicts was almost unbearable. He thought of a possible out.

"Everything you say is true, but why do you have to go? Or me either, come to think of it. Couldn't we let Whitney take off by himself?"

"Would you trust him that far?"

"Oh, shit, I don't know. I'm just thinking of you. Didn't you listen to what he said about those two nurses and the other old ladies who were trapped there to begin with?"

"I listened. What I just said still makes sense. Look, it won't be for long. Breedlove should already be heading to Livingston with his people. All you have to do is bring him and everyone else who can fight and catch us on the way back when Burley comes this way. Trust me to make waves in the rear. And one last thing, Mike. I'll remind you again: if you go, Burley might simply execute you after he's gotten whatever information he wants from you. He wouldn't do that to a woman." Never mind what he would do! Wanda remembered her refusal to submit to the colonel when that would have saved her career. What a turnabout. Now she was almost hoping for the same thing to happen in reverse!

Michael found no way to argue with her logic. Except -- "Wait! Suppose that one con we know escaped doesn't make it back to Huntsville. That would mean no expedition back to Livingston!"

"So what? You still plan on trying to rescue the girls and the blacks and what other people Burley's cons have gathered up, don't you? It doesn't change a thing. Someone still needs to cause trouble in his rear before any chance we take will succeed."

Michael looked around him. They were still encamped on the riverbank. What he saw finally convinced him: a gang of women, fewer than two dozen, armed with shotguns they barely knew how to use. They, with Breedlove's meager contingent, if they made it to Livingston in time, would make up his whole fighting force, and there were no others to draw on. His shoulders slumped in defeat. He tried to push the image of Dawson Reeves' assault on Sheila out of his mind, but it kept coming back, only now the scene in his memory was insisting on replacing Sheila with Wanda, helpless beneath a slaver's miscreant.

Wanda gathered his suddenly pale body to her and hugged him fiercely. "Please, Mike, please don't get weak now. I'm scared half out of my wits. I'm going to be depending on you to get me out of this fix I'm going into. And let's face it: everyone will take orders from you; they might not from me."

Michael drew in a deep breath. He stepped back and held Wanda by her upper arms. Their eyes met and locked. "Come on then, you idiot, and let's go see Whitney. You're going to have to get your stories straight before you leave, and God help him if he's lying." Arm in arm, they walked back to the waiting group.

"CAN'T WE DO anything?" Judy asked. She had no more tears left to shed and was beginning to talk again.

McMasters answered as honestly as he could. "We can't attack the whole Walls unit by ourselves. The only thing I know to do now is to search for more help. We've found some people; maybe we can find others."

McMasters was still despondent over his failure to rescue Judy's companions and her mother. He felt totally responsible, even though he had done everything that came to mind. An old mind, though, maybe too old.

And the young girl was beginning to look at him in an odd way, a scrutiny that tugged at past memories like a just discovered photograph from his youth might have done. He recognized the phenomena. It was common for homeless women in a war zone. They sought out the strongest male they could find and attached themselves to him, mentally and physically, letting buried instincts surface and direct their actions. Before too long he would have to start thinking of how to deal with it. Young people were always impatient.

"Where do you think we'll find some other people?" Judy asked. The thought bothered her in a way she didn't understand at all. Right now, she wanted to just stay close to Cecil. She felt safe in his presence.

"All I can tell you is that the further east we've been, the more

people we've seen. Maybe around Livingston. That's on the other side of the Trinity; maybe the cons won't think of crossing it. I'm sorry, hon. I did the best I could. Maybe those bastards will at least think a little before they try rape again. They can't know that I'm not watching."

Judy had to be satisfied with that. At least, the last view she had had of her mother was that of her gathering her clothes. Maybe the convicts would think before they tried anything with their captives again. She could hope, anyway.

IT TOOK ALL the influence Jason could muster to prevent a mass rape of the teenage girls when they were brought within the confines of the Walls. Even then, he might not have been able to prevent it had Whitney and Wanda not coincidentally arrived right afterwards. Surprisingly, they had gotten back to the former prison before the sole survivor of the battle by the river, but just barely. While Whitney was still describing the carnage to Burley and Jason, including his fiction of capturing Wanda, the other con made his appearance and added his story to theirs.

Burley was so furious at the tale of their defeat that he had the convict who had run stripped of his weapon and confined with the black slaves. Jason grinned inwardly, but didn't let it show. All Burley was doing was diluting his strength.

It wasn't all good, though. As soon as Burley heard about the Wal-Mart and other stores at Livingston, he decided to move everyone there. He reasoned that if he moved them all, he would have enough strength to overcome any opposition. Besides, supplies in Huntsville were getting low. Jason couldn't argue.

Organizing and getting the move underway would keep everyone occupied and give him a chance to get Whitney alone. He sensed that Whitney was holding something back, but didn't dare bring it up in front of Burley. And there was something else. The woman he had brought back with him had, when all eyes were on Whitney, winked at him, closing one eye slowly, then raising the lashes of that eye as if she wanted to give him a message. There was a meaning there, if only he could find out what it was.

"Jason, you're the organizer. Why don't you get started with plans for the move?" Burley said in an unusually pleasant tone of voice.

"What are you going to be doing?"

"I think I need to talk to this little lady and see exactly what she's been doing since the change. According to Whit, it was nothing but ladies that ambushed us at the river, but I want to be sure. OK?"

Jason nodded slowly. He didn't have much of a basis for argument. "All right, but remember what I said. We'll all be better off in the long run if we try to act half way human. Ammunition and supplies won't last forever. Sometime soon, we're going to have to plan on forming a society of some sort and make long range plans." He eyed the cons jostling and bantering for a closer look at the teenage girls who had just arrived. He turned away from Burley and closed his eyes in momentary sorrow. He knew there was no way he could prevent some rape occurring before the day was over, particularly among the young black women. Too many of the cons, encouraged by Burley's cohorts, had already begun thinking of blacks as if they were a subspecies, much in the way southerners had well over a century ago.

"Yeah, I heard you say that already. We'll see. Right now I got some business to take care of." Burley nudged Wanda toward the office he had appropriated with the barrel of his shotgun. He shoved her inside and then turned to Jason. "Just remember: we ain't having no blacks in your so-called society, and if the women don't come around soon, the boys will get too impatient to wait. Get me?" Without waiting for an answer, he entered the office and closed the door.

Wanda thought Burley had the coldest eyes she had ever seen. Like a snake, she thought, perpetually coiled and ready to strike at the slightest provocation.

"Now, little lady, tell me more about your girls and their shotguns."

Burley's grin was as devoid of humor as a hyena's bared fangs.

Wanda stared into his cold eyes. "I told you already. I organized the survivors at Livingston when I found them there, and came after the ones who killed all those poor men. Why did you have them do that, anyway?"

"How do you know I was the one that ordered it?"

Whoops. Keep your story simple, Wanda. This man isn't as stupid as he looks. "Whitney told me on the way here. It wasn't necessary, you know."

"What do you know, bitch! You ever been locked away? How would you feel if you'd been without a man for ten years?"

"If you were an example, it wouldn't bother me a bit," Wanda said deliberately.

Burley's callused hand lashed out like a striking rattler. Wanda stumbled backward. The whole side of her face went numb with the force of the blow. Burley took a step forward and seized her by her blouse. He twisted the fabric in his huge fist and yanked. His face was flaming red.

"One more remark like that and you're dead meat, girl." He shook his shotgun. "I'll cram this up your ass and blow your guts out through your mouth."

Inside, Wanda was withering like an insect being sucked dry of its vitals by a spider. It was all she could do to keep her voice steady. "You bastard, you ever hit me again, you'd better kill me. You have to sleep sometime."

Burley threw her across the room. She bounced off the desk, bruising her hip. He glared at her then motioned with his shotgun. "Get up."

Wanda got slowly to her feet, eyes wary. She had intended to antagonize him; a vile temper could lead to mistakes, but this was enough. Anything more, and he might really kill her. She had never gazed into eyes like this man possessed. There was madness there, and a complete lack of any hint of pity.

"Move."

Prodded by the shotgun, Wanda was forced into the cellblock where the other females were being held. A single convict standing guard unlocked the chain wrapped around the bars, and then relocked it as Burley watched. He stared coldly at her for a moment, then turned on his heel and left.

Wanda breathed a sigh of relief. She had expected a beating, or worse, but apparently she was safe for the time being. Now she had to decide how much and what she could whisper to the other prisoners. It would be prickly. She wanted to give them hope, but all it would take was one Sabine conversion and their scheme would go up in smoke.

JASON BEGAN preparations for the move to Livingston. During the process of checking supplies and giving orders he spoke to a number of cons before casually getting Whitney off to himself. "What's the line, Whit? Maybe Burley believed your bullshit, but I know better. What's that woman up to?"

Quickly, Whitney told the whole story and then concluded, "They intend to lay the ambush right after we cross the river, if they can manage it. Wronsen is their leader's name. He intends to have a couple of decoys waiting. They'll pretend those monsters out there got the rest and will ask to join us. That's when they'll hit us. We're supposed to help take out Burley and the worst of his gang. They promise amnesty for us, and even some of Burley's men, if they behave."

"Do you believe him?"

"Yeah, Jase, I think so. At any rate, I think we have to take the chance. If we don't, sooner or later Burley will take us out; you, especially."

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I guess we'll never get a better chance, will we? What role is that Wanda woman supposed to play?"

"She'll warn the women at the last moment. We're supposed to try to slip them some shanks if we can, or maybe even a few little pistols."

"We'd better be careful about that. A few of the women already have reason to use them. I'll take care of that part, or get Slats and Killa to. They're both reliable. You did good Whit." Jason looked around to be sure he

wasn't being overheard. "One more thing. You be sure to volunteer to guard the blacks the last day, then while you're with them on the raft, unlock the cuffs and tell them I said to do what damage they can when the fight comes. I know you're straight, and I don't trust anyone else for that job. I don't know how deep the prejudice goes in some of the other men."

Whitney agreed. He had one more question. "What happens if Wronsen doesn't make a fight of it at the river?"

"His woman is here. If he doesn't fight at the river, he'll fight somewhere else. Wouldn't you?"

Whitney suddenly got a dreamy look in his eyes. "For a chance of getting next to a babe like that, I'd fight a Goddamn saber tooth tiger."

Jason grinned wryly. "You might have to. We saw one while you were gone. It didn't look to weigh more than four or five hundred pounds."

MICHAEL SENT Brent Sampson and Darla back toward Livingston with instructions to lead Breedlove and his group back to the river as soon as they arrived. He kept all the food and most of the supplies with his group. Whatever happened, he was determined to lay an ambush at the site of the former one. After Brent had left, they began burying bodies to conceal the smell from scavengers. It was enough that they were planning to fight heavily armed convicts without having to worry about dire wolves or such.

Michael sent out scouts up and down their side of the river in case the crossing site was different this time, even though Whitney had told him the convicts had marked their trail. After that, he could only wait. And worry. And let doubts creep into his mind about the success of their plans. Where is Wanda now? What is happening to her?

BREEDLOVE WAS antsy as hell. In all the time he had been involved with police work, he had never drawn his gun, and now Gerald, the young black teenager, had come back to tell him that a war with escaped convicts was brewing, and that he had to hurry. Not only was he supposed to prepare for a war, but he was also to arm all the women and prepare them to fight beside the men. Every hand would be needed.

He did the best he could, delegating some to round up all the food, ammunition and firearms they could comfortably carry while he began giving such lessons as he could in firearm safety and marksmanship. He felt woefully inadequate, but considered himself duty-bound to do his best. To his surprise, the two widows accepted shotguns after he told them about the teenage girls taken captive. The two women who had refused to fight for Michael gave him more trouble, but he solved that by thrusting .22 rifles into their hands and telling them bluntly to either accept them or be left behind. Again, to his surprise, the ploy worked. He wondered why Michael hadn't tried it, and was proud that he had had the gumption. Perhaps Carla's approval of his other actions had something to do with it, he thought. Migod, just having her as his woman almost made a war seem worthwhile!

By the time his force was ready to leave, he was proud of himself. I can do it, he thought. Whatever in hell it takes in this goddamn crazy new world, I can do it.

The sky had been inordinately clear since the thunderstorms a few days ago, but as they prepared to leave, Breedlove noticed high scudding clouds beginning to slowly build far to the south. At the last minute, he added such raingear as he could find to their packs.

GEORGE FOUND his son almost completely undone. He had seen a pack of dire wolves cross the displacement area while they were gone. Unprovoked, he had fired his weapon into their midst and very nearly been devoured before he and his family and George's wife gained refuge in their vehicles. It took George Sr. hours of shamed pleading to persuade him to leave the area in search of McMasters and his theory of other survivors. Only the fact that they were almost completely out of food, and, not incidentally, George's account of what a crack marksman McMasters was finally persuaded him.

McMasters watched George and his little group as they arrived. McMasters' feelings that the older George would settle down, much as he had

seen young soldiers do after their first combat, had been right, but so was his doubt about the youngster. Some men were simply cowards, and nothing anyone could do could change that mindset. It could be worse, though, he thought, reading each person as they approached. Even if George, Jr. did appear to be almost scared out of his wits, the two women seemed to calm down almost immediately when George caught up to him and Judy on the banks of the Trinity, as if he represented an authority of some sort that they didn't realize consciously that they were even missing.

McMasters was still riding the abused old pony. He thought it might be the last horse he would ever see, but for now, it was a Godsend. While his leg was no longer quite so painful, he still had to have help to walk every time he dismounted. He hoped the horse would last long enough for him to get back on his feet. He swore to himself that if it did, he would retire it to pasture for the rest of its life.

Late the next day, after using a clumsily constructed raft to cross the river some miles from where Michael's makeshift force had defeated the convicts returning from Livingston, they entered another displaced area, and again he found a stranded family, a young couple caught on the gravel road leading to their farm. The farm was gone to wherever all else familiar had disappeared to, and they had simply waited there, weaponless, with no idea of what had happened.

The appearance of other humans was as welcome to them as a fresh shower after a hard day in the fields. They had each been considering the possibility that they had gone insane. McMasters was very glad to see them. After explaining their mission, he took George, Jr.'s weapon from him and gave it to the man. George, Sr. didn't protest. Perhaps he knew his son as well as McMasters did.

The next morning, McMasters decided to follow the river for a while, regardless of the harder going. Farms and small towns, as he remembered, had been strung out along the Trinity's winding course like beads on a necklace. Perhaps they would find some of them. He figured the river probably ran more or less in the same bed as in modern times; at least he hoped so.

Finding more survivors was the only chance there was to rescue Judy's mother and the other girls. He still didn't know exactly how that might be accomplished, but he was determined to try. The feel of Judy's young body pressing against his back gave him an incentive, if nothing else did, though he was still uncomfortable with the way she kept so close to him, helping him to walk and touching him when there was no real reason to do so, as if he had already replaced her boyfriend in her thoughts, white hair and weak eyes objects of little concern. She cuddled up next to him that night like a child holding an oversized teddy bear.

Sometime during the night their positions shifted. He woke up and found Judy nestled back up against him, spoon fashion, with his arm around her waist. Sleepily, in a normal nocturnal movement, he slid his hand up her body and cupped her breast, molding it into his curled palm. Judy stirred and then was quiet again. He did not have the strength to move his hand.

"WHAT DID Wanda have to say?" Jason asked Burley. In preparing for the move, he had directed that supplies and makeshift packs be supplied to the female captives, the better to conceal any weapons he might be able to smuggle to them. Checking, he had seen the bruise on Wanda's face, and was barely able to conceal his anger. However, if she had escaped with only a bruise, he thought she had been extraordinarily lucky, considering Burley's predilections.

"Not a Goddamned lot. Maybe you can get something out of her. Be nice to her. Mother fucking bitch."

"I'll talk to her," Jason said immediately, before Burley had time to reconsider, "but not now. I'll get her aside after we leave." He hoped that his casual retort would be enough to distract any suspicion Burley might have, and apparently it was.

"Yeah, you do that. Just don't you try fucking her before I do. I've

got my name on that ball buster. She'll be begging to suck my dick before I'm finished with her."

"Let's get to Livingston, Burley, then get that kind of thing sorted out. The women aren't going anywhere, not with what's out there waiting on them if they run." He pointed a finger at the encroaching forest.

"I'll Goddamned guarantee they aren't going to run. You aren't planning anything like that are you Jase? I'll kill your ass if you try."

"Run to where?"

"Yeah. There's no place else to go, is there? You know, Jase," he said, suddenly as friendly as he was ever likely to get, "I never thought I'd see the day when us lags would be running the world."

"Such as it is," Jason said.

"Yeah. Well, better this than thirty more years before I was even eligible for parole. You about ready to move?"

"Just about. All that's left is to talk to the blacks and tell them what's happening. And get them loaded up." Jason threw the remark off as casually as he was able.

"Them fucking niggers don't need to know nothing except their place. Loaded, up. Haw! They ain't much smarter than mules no way!" Burley guffawed at the analogy.

"It might keep them from causing trouble on the way."

Burley had made a point of keeping the blacks isolated from any possible allies. He hesitated now, then decided that Jason was probably right. "Go ahead, then. Just don't get too friendly with them, Jase. Know what I mean?" He patted his shotgun.

Jason nodded and left. He climbed the stairs to where the blacks were confined, taking one of his men with him. There he ostensibly helped guard them as one by one they were let out and shackled together.

"I'll take them now," Jason told the guard.

"Burley said -- "

Jason leaned into the man's space. "I said I'll take them now. I need to get their loads ready. Or would you rather take a turn carrying one of the packs?" The guard gazed up at Jason's tall solid body and left with no further argument. If Jason was holding his own with Burley, he sure wasn't going to dispute his orders.

Jason led the chained string of men slowly down the stairs, letting his cohort precede him to give warning of any listeners. He pulled Rye aside as far as the chains allowed.

Rye spoke up immediately, fear coloring his voice. "Jase, you got to do something, man. We can't live like this much longer. Ol' Burley ain't lettin' us eat much and he workin' the hell out of us." Rye's eyes shifted wildly, as if he were watching for lions in an arena.

"It won't be much longer," Jason said. "Something will be coming down in a day or two. Be ready when I get the word to you. You know my men. Leave them alone and I promise you a fair shake. OK?"

The chained men muttered among themselves after Jason left them with another guard and the bundles they were to carry.

"I don't trust no motherfucking honky," one of them spoke up.

"Hush up," Preacher Johnson told him. "Jason is a fair man. If he say we'll get a fair shake, we will. You just do like he say when the time comes." His deep bass voice made his whisper sound like drums muttering in the distance. There was no more argument. Preacher Johnson had been doing life without parole for a brutal murder committed in a drug induced frenzy. In prison, he had gotten religion, but that wasn't the primary reason for the lack of argument. At six foot six and weighing almost three hundred pounds, very few convicts were brave enough to contest his orders. Not more than once, anyway. His size and conviction saw to that. A number of cons had been converted after he first beat them senseless then leaned on them to mend their ways. If he gave the word, most of the blacks would follow his lead and hope for the best.

As they left Huntsville behind, Jason felt as if he were juggling eggs, and had too many in the air at once. He didn't think they would have but one good chance to break Burley's reign of terror, and that was contingent on so many factors that he didn't see much of a chance of them all working out as planned. Well, he had done what he could. In his pack, and in those of a few of his men, several small pistols were concealed, as well as a number of knives. After some debate with himself, he had also brought along all the Quaaludes he had found, and left the rest of the drug cache behind. Quaalude would make a person sleepy, and slow the reflexes. At the right time he would share with Burley and his followers, after very carefully warning his own men not to partake. That is, if he knew when the optimum moment was at hand.

The next day, he dropped back from his lead position and fell into step with the string of females. His heart went out to them, especially the young girls, and most especially the young black women. What must they be thinking? He could see from the drawn faces and dried tear streaks on dirty cheeks that many of them were on the verge of utter despair.

"I need to talk with that one," he told one of the guards, pointing to Wanda.

"Burley said not to let any of them loose. Not til we're ready to, you know, take care of them." The guard leered knowingly at the string of young women and licked his lips.

Jason had been prepared for that. He shook a pair of handcuffs loose from his belt. "I won't let her go anywhere." He snapped one of the cuffs to his own wrist. The guard unlocked Wanda from the string and Jason attached the other cuff to Wanda. He let them fall to the rear of the file, where he knew two of his own men were trailing.

"Here," he said. "Hide these quick, and for God's sake, don't dare use them or let anyone else see them yet." He passed her two small .25 caliber automatics. Wanda quickly shoved one down inside her bra and tucked the other into her pack.

Wanda tried not to let the other women notice her exuberance. "Thanks. Whitney spoke well of you. He was right."

"I try," Jason said. "Quickly, now, are there any other of the women you can trust to keep quiet for now?"

"Not Doris." Wanda pointed her out. "She's about to crack. I haven't had time to be sure of anyone else. How long do I have?"

"So long as it's before we get to the river. Make up your mind before then, and let either me or Whitney know, if you can. And for God's sake, try to stay out of Burley's way -- he's going to get down on you just as soon as he thinks he can."

Wanda rubbed the bruise on her cheek. "I know. Try to keep him off me until we get to the river, if you can." Now that she was armed, she didn't trust herself not to shoot him if he abused her again.

"I'll try. Do you think your other people will make it in time to join up with Wronsen?"

Wanda spread her free hand expressively. "I hope so. I've been trying to slow everyone down as much as I can. What happens if they don't?"

For that, Jason had no ready answer.

"Find out anything?" Burley asked as Jason passed him on the way back to the front of the column.

"No. You're right. She's a bitch."

Burley roared with mirth. "Told ya! You're too motherfucking easy, Jase. This is what runs the world now." He stroked the barrel of his shotgun as if it were an erect organ.

"Maybe. You ready for a break?"

"Yeah, why not? Kind of looks like rain, don't it?"

Jason searched the sky. Clouds were building to the south, like encroaching amoeba. He remembered that earlier they had been moving rapidly across the sky in bands, like the fringes of an approaching hurricane. They were still moving, but now they were a solid mass. He wondered whether rain

would help or hinder. Maybe both.

Chapter Eleven

BREEDLOVE LED his tired contingent into the Livingston displacement area where Brent Sampson met them and quietly urged them to hurry on to meet Michael at the planned ambush site.

"We're going to have to rest first," Breedlove said. "Some of the old folk are exhausted." He scanned the sky. "It's looking like rain, too, and it's getting late besides."

Brent looked over the tired, dirty group, and then decided the deputy was right. They would have to rest for a while, and by that time, it would be getting toward evening.

While a meal was being prepared, he led Breedlove into the Wal-Mart and on back to the storage area. There were weapons aplenty and enough ammunition to last a long while. Breedlove toured some other aisles in the store with Brent. He made a rough calculation. This one store would supply what few people he knew to have been displaced for a long, long while. Even the food would last for a time, but not as long as many of the other items. He walked through the garden section, glad to see that it had come along with the rest of the store. In time, he thought, we'll have to start farming, and there's plenty of seeds and fertilizer here. Memories of his childhood spent in the fields of his father's small truck farm came to mind. But there's a war to fight first. Goddamn, always problems. Carla slipped an arm around his waist, coming up to him from behind. She had noticed him eyeing the seeds. "I grew up on a farm," she said. "We'll have to do that before long, won't we?"

Breedlove slid an affectionate arm around the young smooth curve of her waist, wondering what he had ever done to deserve her. "We will," he told her. "I grew up on a farm, too."

"Good. We'll have to settle down soon. I wasn't carrying my pills when the change happened."

Breedlove drew her to him as Brent quietly withdrew, leaving them their privacy. Brent knew the feeling. Darla had not been carrying the next month's supply of her own pills when the displacement occurred either, though he noted that the Wal-Mart pharmacy was still largely intact. If it were not already too late, Darla could replenish her supply there, but he was already thinking of the future. The Wal-Mart supplies would only last so long, even if they managed to secure the area. Before long, such society as existed would inexorably begin changing to reflect that fact. He wondered what it would be like to have a son. Or daughter. Perhaps this new world wouldn't be so bad after all. If they won the war, that is. Outside, where the evening meal was being eaten, he eyed the odd congregation of would-be soldiers, and had his doubts. The people here sure didn't look like an army.

MICHAEL SPENT the day ranging up and down the river, trying to pick out areas of concealment which also gave a good field of fire, then helping build them into possible firing pits. His knowledge of how to do that was vague, but he did the best he could. He wished Wanda were present to help him. Even though her army field was in medicine, she had taken the standard training required of all officers, including females. The last brushfire war had shown that women could function in combat just as well as men, although it shouldn't have needed demonstration. The Israeli army had proved that concept a long time ago, during their war for independence.

Politics, he thought. That's all it was. And if I come out of this alive, I guess that's what I'll be doing. There certainly won't be much need for physics teachers for a while! He reflected on this, and then reconsidered. If whoever survived didn't want to see their children go back to wearing skins and carrying clubs, there would always be a need for teachers. Otherwise, the risk was pointless.

That night, his small group huddled together behind a makeshift barrier they had constructed to guard against the animals and ate a cold meal. He wouldn't allow a fire, just in case the convicts had scouts out.

He thought of a conversation he and Wanda had had as they were traveling. Just how far back in the Pleistocene had they been displaced? Wanda's college courses in Zoology had prepared her for answers to that question much more than him. According to her, the period just before the last glaciations had been when most of the large mammals had become extinct, so they had been displaced at least that far back in time. Again, by her account, they couldn't have been thrown too far back. As best she could remember from her studies the large animals they had seen so far looked more or less like the last versions which lived before the great extinction. If that were truly the case, then they could expect to see mammoths, mastodons, camels, horses (perhaps), sloths and most of their predators.

Horses, now, that was a thought. Could they tame horses? And something more important: had their ancestors crossed the Bering Strait yet? Some scholars thought that man rather than climate had caused the extinctions. Others were certain that the north American continent had been inhabited much longer than the twelve to fourteen thousand years ago generally given as the first excursions from the old world. Someday they would have to find out.

Michael shook his head, tossing those thoughts aside. First priority was defeating the convicts and freeing their prisoners. If that was successful, then they would have to work out a means of living in this new environment, and melding the disparate remnants of humanity into a working society. After that, the deeper questions could be considered.

__Fifty armed convicts, at least,__ he thought. And even if Breedlove gets here in time, all I have are three dozen, at the most, and most of them women. That brought another unwanted thought. __The reputed teenage girls.__ If he managed to free them, that would throw the male-female ratio even more out of kilter. What would that entail? Physics theory sure didn't provide any answers, nor any other discipline he was familiar with.

Dusk was gathering. Michael would like to have posted guards right along the river, but already the forest was beginning to give off unfamiliar noises. Predators would be about, and the last thing he wanted was to lose anyone to some ungodly monstrosity out of the past, or to have their positions revealed by panicky shots in the dark. Better to tuck it in for the night.

"You're being awfully quiet," one of the women said. Her bright red hair was tied in a ponytail with a scrap of rag. He remembered her name. Jill Tucker. She had been married, with a small child. Sadness hovered over her face like a doctor telling his best friend he had an incurable disease. It reminded Michael that there was still one issue to settle.

"I hate to bring it up, but we still haven't decided on who's to be the decoys, and I'm scared to wait for Breedlove's group. There may not be time to get them in place then."

Jill scanned the small group and smiled mirthlessly. "Not much choice here, is there? Hell, I guess I'll do it. If I'm not ever going to see my baby and husband again, I don't care much anyway."

Another woman spoke up. Michael couldn't remember her name. She was short, black and overweight. "I'll go. I lost my daughter. She got caught between two drug gangs fighting over turf. She wasn't doing nothing, just walking home from school, and she got shot in the neck. She died on the way to the hospital. They caught three of them, and they went to prison. Maybe I'll see one of them motherfuckers." She caressed her shotgun.

Michael questioned the two women for a little while, and then accepted their offer. He wished he could take the burden himself, but it wasn't in the plan. Women would make better bait.

He was a long time getting to sleep. Even if Breedlove didn't arrive with help before the convicts got to the river, he was still determined to fight, even with as little force as he had. If nothing else, they should be able to pick off some of the convicts, then make a withdrawal toward Livingston and hope for reinforcements and a more decisive fight later. In the meantime, he could only hope that Jason, Eli Whitney and Wanda were well prepared to back his play.

Even if Breedlove arrived in time with his few troops, it was going to be a dicey situation, and he worried half the night about all the things which might go wrong, and he agonized over what Wanda might be going through while he tried to rest. His thoughts were not conducive to sleep, but eventually he managed to relax by forcing himself to believe that whatever happened, he had managed as well possible. It was a small comfort.

Michael had barely fallen into an uneasy slumber when Jill woke him for his turn at guard. Just before daylight, the wind picked up and it began to sprinkle rain.

THE OLD HORSE staggered, stopped, then collapsed in slow motion, like a film being run at a reduced speed. McMasters rode the horse down and stepped away, gasping as his weight came down on his bad leg. He wavered and then held himself up with the butt of his rifle planted in the ground. He gritted his teeth until the pain passed, waiting until the others caught up. Judy hurried forward from where she had been walking to save the old horse's strength and helped ease him to the ground.

"What happened?"

McMasters shook his head. He limped over to the horse. Its neck was stretched forward on the turf. It tried once to raise its head, then was still. Once it was quiet, he could see congealed blood seeping from beneath the saddle. The thunky noise he had heard as the convicts fired the last shot at him must have hit it somewhere not immediately apparent, and it had gone unnoticed, the blood coagulating beneath the saddle. He petted its head while it drew a long final breath. "Sorry, old fella. I wish I could have done better by you," he murmured.

"Is it dead?" Judy asked.

"Sorry, hon, but yes it is. And I don't know what to do now. I just can't walk like I am."

"I could maybe make you a crutch," George, Sr. said. "I had to use one once. It's not so bad once you get the hang of it."

Well, a crutch would beat just sitting and waiting. "If you can, George, it would be a blessing. I don't want to just sit here like a wounded duck waiting on a dog."

George took out a huge folding knife and began searching for a suitable sapling. Within a couple of hours, he contrived an adequate crutch, padded with such scraps of clothing as they could spare. McMasters tested it gingerly, and decided it would work, but it was already getting late. He complimented George.

"This will do fine, but I think I need to wait until tomorrow before I try to walk much. Let's camp, and we'll move on then." The women began preparing a meal with what food they had while McMasters arranged a rotating guard. He put George, Jr. last on the roster, thinking that predators or inimitable humans would be a more likely danger earlier in the night rather than later. Judy slept very close to him after she came in from her turn at guard duty. When he woke the next morning, she was curled against his back, an arm around his waist. He rolled over slowly. Judy's eyes blinked open. She kissed him then looked away, face flushing. McMasters didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say. Other parts of his body weren't nearly as old as his eyes, though. He couldn't fail to notice that.

BREEDLOVE SENT Gerald ranging out ahead of his little command. The young man wasn't woods wise, but the path toward the river was pretty well marked. The convicts and their prisoners had dropped scraps of cloth, left footprints, and even gouged trees here and there to mark their path, and Michael had seen that the blazes were added to. If it hadn't been for the rain which began shortly after they started, the path would have been even easier to follow.

The deputy glanced uneasily at the sky. The scudding clouds of the day before, confined to the south, had moved northward, and turned to a high overcast with a blowing rain. The humidity was like an oppressive cloud, drawing breath from the body like a steam bath after a hard workout. He had to

call for frequent halts to let the older ones rest. The only consolation was that the rain had dispersed the ubiquitous mosquitoes and deer flies to the point that they were a mere annoyance rather than a constant cloud.

That morning, Breedlove had hoped that they would be able to reach the Trinity River by evening, but as the oppressive day wore on, broken by frequent stops, he knew it was not to be. Even with a path already somewhat broken, the heat and humidity, combined with constant entanglement in vines and brush, and the slow pace dictated by the older members of his force kept progress to a crawl. Just before dark, he finally called a halt.

It took all the authority he could muster to get a guard set and weapons checked before the rain-laden night closed in, like a theatre being darkened before the first act. As he took his own turn on guard duty, he noticed that the wind was beginning to blow harder. By morning it was driving the rain sideways, coming steadily from the southeast. He hoped it wouldn't interfere with Michael's planned ambush, or the progress of his own group which was supposed to play a part in it. That is, if they made it there in time. The way things were going, he was beginning to worry that they wouldn't.

THE RAIN WAS making Burly meaner and even surlier than usual. He shouted and cursed at anyone who came near him, as if vile words might make the rain go away. Jason tried to calm him with the mention of refuge at Livingston within enclosed stores where plenty of food was waiting, but it had little effect. He finally left him to rave, giving his attention to encouraging the other convicts, hoping to keep them going rather than turning back.

He had managed to get Wanda aside for another short talk during the day, and this time, when he returned her to the coffle, he left the key to her cuffs with her. The guards were so miserable that they had not objected to him simply transferring the cuff from his arm and locking it to the nylon rope binding the rest of the women.

Whitney and another of his followers had surreptitiously slipped another two pistols and several knives into the group after Wanda had gestured to the ones she thought they could trust. When the fight came, most of the women would still be bound, but at least the rope that held them together could be severed. It was the best he could do.

The blacks were still in chains, but there he was optimistic. During the course of preparations for the trek to Livingston, he had managed to slip into Burley's erstwhile office and secure a master key to the locks. While the blacks were being loaded with their burdens he slipped it to Preacher Johnson, telling him in a hurried whisper not to use it until a fight ensued. Like Michael, Jason was hoping for a decisive ambush where the blacks and women captives would suddenly throw their weight into the rear at the right moment. It was going to be all or nothing and he just hoped that the big black preacher would wait for the moment when he could make a difference. The rain began coming down harder.

By noon, the rain became a driving force, slashing in from the southeast along with rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning. Jason was apprehensive. He wondered if he could convince Burley to cross the river under these conditions, but he need not have worried. Burley was anxious to get out of the weather, curses notwithstanding.

"Jason, you sonofabitch, soon as we get to that goddamn one horse town we're heading for, I'm making some changes. Fuck your society. I'm having some more ass then, and if this fucking rain don't stop, I may just kill me some niggers while I'm at it. Fuck this shit!" He waved his shotgun and brushed ineffectively at water streaming down his face.

"Let's get across the river," Jason told him, raising his voice to be heard above the wind driven spatter of raindrops. "We can camp there for the night and make the rest of the way tomorrow."

"Fucking right," Burley said. "Did Whitney or that bitch say anything about a liquor store there?"

"No, but I've got something," Jason said.

"Yeah? Like what, Jase?"

"Quaaludes. I found a stash while we were getting ready to leave."

"What the fuck. Give me one. Those stupid bastards carrying the dope from Livingston all got wasted."

"Let's get to the river. I'll pass them out there. OK?"

Burley brushed more water from his face. "Yeah. Let's hurry. Goddamn. Quaaludes? Maybe I'll slip one to that bitch. No, fuck it. I'll take hers." He laughed uproariously then plodded on. A few minutes later, the exhausted, wet column halted at the river. The blacks, foodless that day, slumped wearily down by their heavy packs. Jason passed out the Quaaludes, hoping he had picked the right time and that Preacher Johnson wouldn't jump too soon in freeing the blacks. They looked to be just about at the end of their rope.

Shortly thereafter, the convicts began constructing rafts for the crossing. They were anxious to get across the river before it rose any higher, an idea Jason had planted with Burley as soon as it occurred to him. The rain increased in intensity, and the thunder became an almost constant roar.

"WE CAN'T TRAVEL in this mess!" George, Jr. shouted over the driving rain. His thin blonde hair was plastered to his head and his clothes were as soaked as if he had just fallen off a boat.

McMasters brushed water from his eyes. Everyone was wet, but there was no shelter other than the trees, and he didn't want to stay under them if he could help it. Lightning was beginning to flash in the near distance. "We won't be any worse off than we would be staying here," he said.

"Well fuck you, I'm not going!"

Lightning flickered off to the southeast. McMasters had been watching it all morning as it came closer. He had been slack once about not moving faster and didn't intend to make that mistake again, even in these circumstances.

Besides, there was no good place to stop. He wanted to find some decent shelter where he could rest his leg and have Judy bandage it again. He suspected that it had broken open and was bleeding once more, though it was impossible to tell in this weather. And, he was thoroughly disgusted with young George.

"Have you ever been outside in a real thunderstorm?" He deliberately raised his voice past the level needed to be heard over the storm. "Or under a tree when lightning struck? If I can walk with a crutch, you can make it. Maybe we'll find a building somewhere that's been displaced. If we do, it will be grounded. Otherwise, you just take your chances."

McMasters hit the right nerve. George's son was scared of just about everything, lightning included. The boy turned away, hating this strange new world, but not inclined to argue any more.

McMasters moved them out, wondering how much longer he could hold everyone's loyalty. A rescue mission on a bright, sunshiny day would go over a hell of a lot better than this sorry quest where they were all soaked and miserable. He was beginning to wonder how much longer he could last. Judy's presence helped him keep going. She stayed close to him, ready to help if he stumbled. He grinned at her and got a smile in return.

Presently, they came to a small river, which he figured to be a branch of the Trinity. Fortunately, they came out at a place designed by nature for an easy crossing. McMasters had little trouble persuading the others to make the passage at that time rather than later, reminding them that with all the rain, it would only get harder. Once across, he limped on and the rest followed. The thunder and lightning moved closer and the wind increased in intensity, still blowing the rain in sheets and still coming steadily from the southeast. Finally it dawned on him. Oh, Goddamn, this isn't just a storm; it's a fucking hurricane!

MICHAEL DIDN'T know what to do. The driving rain obscured the opposite riverbank, and it was growing steadily darker, even in the early afternoon, when the day should have been brightest. He crouched under the dubious shelter of a heavy growth of youpen, just as miserable as he had ever been in his

life. He came to the same conclusion McMasters had and wondered how close the eye would pass, and how close the gulf coast was in this era. Each factor would affect the intensity of the storm they would be subjected to.

Michael was contemplating pulling in the two women decoys from where they crouched under even less shelter than he enjoyed, but he held off, hoping he was wrong and that the weather would improve.

Just as he finally decided that the convicts would not possibly be moving in this deluge, a flash of lightning illuminated the opposite bank of the river. In that brief flash, through a flood of driving rain, he glimpsed a cluster of figures struggling with several uprooted trees. His heart skipped a beat then thumped wildly in his chest.

Oh Christ, here they are, and Breedlove still hasn't arrived, and I can't see a damn thing in this rain. What do I do? Call off the ambush? No, I told Wanda we'd be here. She'll be depending on me. There's nothing to do but try and hope it doesn't turn into a total disaster.

He moved from under the tree and rushed forward to where Jill and the revenge minded black woman were concealed. Neither heard him coming over the increasing roar of thunder and wind-whipped branches. He tapped Jill's shoulder. She let out a gasp of surprise before recognizing him.

"In case you didn't see, tell your partner the convicts are on the way," he shouted. He couldn't even see the other woman, even though he knew she was close. Shit. Well, maybe the convicts were having their problems, too.

JASON RODE the lead raft with Burley and several other cons. The only time he could see the opposite bank was when intermittent flashes of lightning lighted it. Rain slashed at them in gusts so fierce that it was hard to keep his footing and watch the approaching bank at the same time.

No way Wronsen will try an ambush under these conditions. Damn, why didn't this weather hold off one more day?

Jason had convinced himself that all the carefully laid plans were going up in smoke, or water in this case, when he spotted the two women waiting on the opposite bank of the river in the brief flare of a lightning flash. They waved and shouted, although he couldn't hear what they were saying. He touched Burley's shoulder and pointed. "Company," he said.

Burley looked up sleepily and raised his shotgun. His movements were slow, as if he had to think consciously before committing himself to action. Good. The 'ludes were working, but how in hell could Wronsen's people even see to aim in this crap? Jason tried to think of some way to improve the odds, then the wind-driven rain swept over them in renewed fury, blinding him to all except the nearing riverbank.

"Don't shoot, they're friendly!" Jason shouted at Burley as the two women came into view again, then repeated himself as a crash of thunder drowned out his words. The hastily constructed raft caught in an eddy and nosed into a muddy embankment.

Burley still didn't seem to know what was happening, but he raised his shotgun at Jason's call. Jason grasped at the barrel of his shotgun and forced it down. "Don't shoot, I said! Can't you see? They're waving at us!"

"Oh, yeah," Burley said foggily. "Booger! You and Whambang get ready. Go grab them cunts as soon as we hit the shore and find out what the fuck they think they're doing." He grinned madly at Jason and shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind.

The raft beached crazily and Booger and Whambang jumped ashore and ran forward, corralling the two women. As friendly as the women appeared, the cons gave no thought to shaking them down for weapons. As Jason, Burley and the other men waded to the bank, the two women were pushed forward. Water streamed from their bodies as if they were under a shower. Burley clutched his shotgun and strode forward. Before he could speak, Jill shouted over the roar of almost constant thunder. "We give up! Everyone else is dead! Monsters got them. Please, can we stay with you?"

"Damn straight you can stay with me," Burley shouted back, even though as he came forward he was already close enough to touch the women. He grabbed

Jill and pulled her forward into a rude embrace. Then he spotted the other woman. "Not that nigger, though. She goes to the chain gang. He reached out and grabbed at the black woman's clothing, then flung her backward. "Booger! Get this bitch tied up so we can sweat some of the fat off her." He reached down and pinched cruelly at an ample breast.

"I'll get the rest of the rafts unloaded soon as they make it across," Jason said. He looked back over his shoulder as he turned to the river and winked at the redheaded woman Burley was fondling. He couldn't tell whether she saw it or not, but the ploy was working. Burley didn't appear the least bit suspicious, and he had apparently forgotten that the river was where the previous ambush had occurred.

As the other rafts gained the shore, Jason sent as many of Burley's men forward as he could and delayed the strings of black and female prisoners, as well as his own followers. It was easy to do. The wind was howling now, driving huge raindrops almost parallel to the ground. Visibility was cut to yards, and sometime even less than that. Thunder crashed almost constantly, and lightning cracked through the trees like an artillery barrage. This is a hurricane, Jason thought. God help us all, how can anyone fight in the middle of this?

THIS ISN'T A thunderstorm, it's a hurricane, by God! And it's getting worse! Michael told himself, just about the same time Jason did, but he had already seen Jill and the other woman join the convicts. There was nothing to do but go on with his plan. He washed water from his eyes with a hand across his face and tried to spot one of the others. As his vision cleared, he spotted one of the men -- he couldn't remember his name right off hand -- and cautiously approached. "Move out!" Michael shouted in his ear. "Tell the girls to open fire whenever the cons start up the bank. Or whenever they can see them," he amended.

"What then?"

"Just tell them to do what they can! Soon as you pass the last firing pit, work back to the river and try to flank them. I'll do the same in the opposite direction." Michael had no idea if this was good military strategy or not. He suspected he was ordering his thin line of female troops into a total fiasco, but if the convicts couldn't see any farther in front of their faces than he could, maybe it wouldn't turn out that bad. Damn it, where is Breedlove?

BREEDLOVE HAD sent Gerald on ahead to scout while he tried to keep his drenched file of reluctant warriors together. If it hadn't been for the urgency of the relayed message, he might have called a halt. He might have anyway, except that Carla trudged uncomplaining by his side. Her only concession to the beat of wind and rain was to occasionally run her hand down the length of her water logged hair and squeeze the moisture from it. So long as she kept going without complaining, so would he.

Suddenly, Gerald broke through the obscuring rain, running hard. He skidded to a stop in front of Breedlove. "Dustin, we're there! I think I heard some shooting, but I couldn't tell with all this noise!"

"You found the river? Did you see anyone?"

"Nothing but the river, but I swear I heard shots off to my left. I came right back." Gerald was excited, as if he were just getting ready for a first airplane ride.

Damn, Breedlove cursed to himself. I must have let us wander off course in the rain and gloom, and now maybe Wronsen is having to fight without us. He shouted as loud as he could to make sure everyone could hear. "OK, let's pick it up! Soon as we get to the river, we'll spread out a little and head for the fighting!" He lowered his voice to speak directly to Gerald. "You lead the way and I'll try to keep the others together."

"Right, Boss." Gerald grinned, white teeth shining. "What then?"

"Fire at anything wearing white clothes. Do good, Gerald, and hurry. I don't think we have much time."

"Gotcha." Gerald wrung out his Afro and it was immediately saturated

again. A huge flash of light and a deafening crash of thunder hurried him on his way, visions of urban warfare dancing through his mind. No gangs here, though! These were the real bad dudes, with not an ounce of mercy in their bodies. He hoped he would live, suddenly realizing that this wasn't a game, but a real live shootout to the finish.

Breedlove turned and began giving instructions to the rest of his force. They moved forward, struggling against the gale.

BOOGER FELL backward, chest torn by buckshot, never knowing what hit him. The two Quaaludes he had taken slowed Burley's response, but even so, he had seen the ground-level flash of the shot. He fired back in that direction then the thick wall of rain obscured everything else. He ran back toward the river, calling for help.

Jason was struggling with the two files of prisoners and didn't even hear the shot, nor did anyone else in his area. He couldn't see much of anything through the sheets of rain and could only hope that the black prisoners knew they were supposed to break free now when the fighting started. Tree branches were being torn loose above him by the wind, and the beating rain obscured all but what was happening in the immediate vicinity.

Wanda was doing her best to ignore the drenching. She doubted that Michael had been able to arrange any order in this miserable weather until she saw a fat black woman passed back into the cuffle and secured to the rest of the file of prisoners. That decided her. She passed the one spare pistol to the woman behind her, then a knife. "Cut the ropes, then hold them in your hand. When the fighting starts, help me take out the guards."

There was no chance of being either overheard or seen. The hurricane mounted to a crescendo of fury, isolating all but the nearest figures from sight. If nothing else, she thought wonderingly, we can split up and get away and hope some of us reach Livingston. I've told them to head for there, anyway. Maybe they won't drown on the way. She gripped her pistol, barrel down. Two yards away, the nearest guard saw nothing amiss. He walked head down, secure in his misery.

JUDY WAS helping McMasters stumble along on his crutch, face averted to avoid the slanting wall of water beating against his body when he tumbled, crying out in pain as his abused leg took the weight of his body when he fell. At first she thought he had simply tripped, then she realized that he was struggling with a rain drenched, white clad figure. His right hand gripped a rifle barrel, trying to force it away from his body. Neither he nor the convict, who had wandered away from his group in the rain, had heard the first shots of the ambush, and now they were locked together in a thrashing mass on the muddy ground.

While Judy stared in stupefaction, the convict exerted his strength and slowly began forcing the barrel of his rifle toward McMasters head. McMasters felt the strength began to drain from his arms. The pain in his leg shot waves of agony upwards. He gritted his teeth and blocked the movement of the rifle barrel for a moment, then slowly, inexorably, it began moving again.

The young convict felt his strength begin to overcome the older man and he surged forward. Judy leaped, forgetting completely that she had a weapon. The weight of her body broke the unequal struggle. McMasters took advantage of the sudden shift. He gripped the rifle in both hands and forced it against the convict's throat, pressing down with all his strength, pushing the man's head deep into the muddy earth.

Even as George ran forward to help, he kept up the pressure until the man was completely still then struggled to his knees, gasping for breath. George helped McMasters to his feet, assisted by Judy. For just a moment, the rumble of thunder ceased. In the distance came the sound of shouts and gunshots, barely heard above the thunder.

"That was a damn convict!" McMasters chest heaved. "Come on, let's see if we can help whoever they're fighting!" If there was one convict here, there must be others ahead, and by the sounds, maybe they were in trouble. He didn't even pause to think of what they might be getting into.

Chapter Twelve

FOR JUST AN instant, Wanda could hear the sounds of yells and gunfire in front of her. Michael had made it! She raised her hand in the air to signal the women nearest the other guard, then pointed the little pistol at the guard next to her and shot him in the head. She didn't even have to aim much; he was less than three yards away, trudging along with his head bowed to avoid the relentless rain. He fell without a sound.

Peering through sheets of blowing water, she thought she saw the other guard go down. "Here, take this!" She shouted to the woman next to her, thrusting the other pistol into her hand. She slashed through the ropes binding her and appropriated the dead guard's shotgun. Then she ran along the line slashing at the rope that bound the other women together. Some of the women only then realized what was happening. The noise of the storm had obscured the shots.

"Spread out and move forward!" she commanded, hoping the girls would fight. If revenge was a motive, surely they would. "Those with weapons up front, the rest of you follow. Hurry!" She led the way through a tangle of sodden brush, hanging on to vines and tree trunks to avoid being blown off her feet by the wind, and trying to separate sounds of the fight from storm noise. It was almost impossible.

The file of chained blacks had been following the females. The first inkling Jason had that battle had been joined was the sight of several women moving separately, free of their bonds. He stopped and listened, then made out individual shots over the roar of thunder.

Now! He thought. He blasted the one guard belonging to Burley's faction in the back, and then yelled at the blacks. "Get yourself free. Hurry!"

Preacher Johnson unlocked his chains and then ran down the line freeing others. "Follow Jason," he told each one as the chains dropped away. "Go after those sorry rednecks and kill the motherfuckers! God can forgive us later!"

He accepted the weapon Jason appropriated from the dead guard and followed him forward. "Don't run off into the woods," Preacher warned the others as they moved. "There's monsters out there worse than Burley. You gotta fight." He knew they would, unarmed or not. Anything was better than slavery.

The blinding rain would make it easier than he had ever hoped to get his men in close to Burley and his crew. May God damn that sorry bastard! Ahead of him, he saw Jason raise his weapon and fire and he followed like an avenging black angel, looking for targets.

Burley was no strategist, but even over the intermittent crash of thunder, he could tell by the ragged volume of fire after Goober was cut down that there wasn't much opposition in front of them. He retreated just far enough to meet the bulk of his force and quickly organized them into a staggered skirmish line. He sent one man back to warn the guards accompanying the blacks and females, then urged his men forward. He hung back near the rear, watching for Jason. When he found him, he intended to kill him on the spot for leading them into this ambush.

Burley was elated that the opposition crumbled quickly, especially as the few men he could keep track of in the storm flushed their foe from concealing brush and saw they were almost all women. Fuck Jason and his society. When this was over, he would have a harem.

Burley could see only individual clashes for the most part. The gale driven rain and heavy undergrowth made it almost impossible to see more than a few yards in any direction. The only way Burley sensed victory was a quick lessening of gunshots. He passed the body of a woman who had been almost decapitated by a shotgun blast to the neck, then another leaning against a tree trunk clutching a torn arm. He kicked her weapon away.

He began yelling for his men to gather around him in a little area partially cleared by the recent fall of a huge oak. In ones and twos, they began gathering as they heard his calls over the raging storm. He began

sending some of them back out to round up the rest of his men, not knowing yet that they would meet an opposing force in their rear. He noticed that none of Jason's followers were joining up and began raging anew at his treachery.

MICHAEL KILLED the first convict he saw with an easy shot to the chest; He saw the next spin and fall, losing his weapon as he went down, but it was all downhill from there. More convicts broke through the brush to either side of him. He fired at one of them, missed, and then his whole right arm went numb as the convict whirled and fired back. The shot panged off the action of his rifle and ricocheted, plowing through his bicep like a hot drill bit. He ducked as another bullet cut past his head. He plunged away, trying for concealment. The shot which had wounded him left him defenseless except for his sidearm. He made a few yards, then stumbled and fell over a rotted log. At the last minute he managed to draw his pistol and fire up into the chest of the pursuing convict. The convict tripped over the same log as he fell on top of Michael, bubbling blood from his mouth.

Michael pushed the still breathing man from atop him and began crawling away. His sense of direction was awry and he suddenly realized he didn't know where he was, nor have any idea of what was happening elsewhere. Oh Christ, I've blown it again! He got to his feet and began creeping through the underbrush. There was no need for quiet. The storm had reached its full fury.

Breedlove's hurry almost led to disaster. He was plunging through the forest so fast that he almost ran right into the midst of Burley's gathering men. At the last minute he managed to halt his progress before he was spotted. He backtracked quickly, dodging low to avoid bullets spanging through the forest. Two of his men came stumbling through the blinding rain and he halted them. He slapped them on the shoulders and sent them off into the woods. "Help me find the others. Quick! Bring them back here." This was too good of an opportunity to miss. He was so excited that he forgot to be scared.

He had perhaps half his force gathered and was preparing them for a devastating volley when someone not contacted shot into the group of convicts, spoiling that plan. "Fire!" He yelled, seeing those few opposing men he could make out turn their weapons in his direction.

Some shot, but others waited until most of Burley's men had scattered behind trees and brush. Within moments, Breedlove's small force became mixed up in a terrible close-quarter encounter where the enemy could hardly be seen at all.

Victory usually went to the side who fired first. Casualties were heavy on both sides, and in a few spots the line intermingled and hand to hand combat surged through the brush, with men and women grappling rain slick bodies and gaining and losing advantage as hands slipped off water soaked skin. Gradually, Burley's men began gaining the advantage, buoyed by their greater numbers.

A sudden rush by several convicts bent Breedlove's line, and he began to despair. The roar of the storm made it impossible even to call a retreat. There was nothing to do but try to hold out and hope that he hadn't misjudged and that Michael's force would turn the tide. Then Breedlove remembered that he hadn't even stopped to see if it was Michael's men fighting in the downpour. He brushed water from his eyes and tried to think what to do next.

A few yards away, Carla fired into the brush. Breedlove made a sudden dash and fell to the squishy ground beside her. He yelled into her ear. "If I buy the farm, you get away from this mess, hear me? Don't let these bastards catch you. Carla looked up and nodded, then rolled onto her side and began to reload her weapon. She wasn't about to leave her deputy, not for anything.

MCMASTERS COULD make out the individual sound of shotguns and rifles sounding along with the thunder and rain pelting into the forest like a gang of drummers out of synch. His ears were attuned to combat, even after all these years.

He left George, Jr. with the women and children while he, Judy, George, Sr. and the other man crept forward. He struggled to keep upright with the crutch and hurry at the same time. Somehow, he knew that the sound of battle

he could hear over the drumming rain and almost continuous thunder came from the gang of convicts he had seen before. Maybe now he could make up for the hesitancy he had berated himself for in the past.

Inevitably, as he tried to hurry the pace, he put pressure on his partially healed leg, sending sheaths of agony from the wound all the way into his hip. A bullet zinged near his head and he ducked instinctively. As he did, the crutch twisted and snapped in two. He collapsed, twisting as he fell to land on his good side. Damn. Now I am in a mess! Judy bent to help him. He tried to wave her away.

"No, I can't go any further. George, you and Judy will have to go on. Do what you can, but don't risk your lives more than you can help."

"I'm not leaving you," Judy said. If it were not for the water streaming from her face, he might have been able to see that she was crying. McMasters was as frustrated as he had ever been in his life, but there was simply no sense in trying to walk; he knew he couldn't. He lay on his back and looked up. Rain drummed on his face, cascading down through the wildly twisting branches of the great oak overhead. Maybe --

"George, wait! Help me up." He got to his feet with George's support. The branches of the tree grew from a point low to the ground and ascended upwards almost as conveniently as a ladder. He slung his rifle and pointed. "Help me up to that first branch, then I'm going to climb as far up as I can. I think I'll be able to see from there. Then you and Judy go on." If there was anything he could do to help, it would have to be from there.

It took some convincing on Judy's part, but he was adamant. Unable to travel, this was his last best option. Once on the lower branch, he waved them forward and began to climb, using his good leg and both arms.

BURLEY SENSED his advantage. He was winning, and Goddam, a whole bunch of freemen were going to be sorry when this was over. He crawled to the closest man on either side of him and told them to pass the word to get ready for a final rush.

Just as he turned to his right to give the word, a sudden gust of wind cleared the rain away momentarily, and fifty yards to his rear he saw one of his men jump to his feet and twirl. A ragged apparition overwhelmed the man before he could fire, coming out of the sheets of rain like a wrathful black ghost. The black man rode the other convict to the ground, swinging a club. He picked up the fallen shotgun and blew the man's head to pieces from point blank range. The blacks were loose!

"Belay that rush!" Burley yelled as loudly as he could. "Niggers in our rear! Get them, they don't have guns yet!"

The convicts on either side of him turned and ran back to the rear. The black he had seen dropped one of them before he was overwhelmed in the rush. Others sprang forward, meeting the backward rush of Burley's men with bare hands and clubs. Half of them went down before they could grapple, but the rest clawed forward and wrestled grimly for weapons.

Burley ran to help, leaving others to hold the forward line. He blasted one dark skinned man then was astounded to see him replaced by a woman with her hand extended, firing a pistol. Beside her, another woman watched helplessly, armed only with a knife. Burley ignored her and shot the armed woman, then looked around frantically. A flash of lightning showed the fringes of the clearing dotted with struggling groups of convicts, blacks, and women, interspersed among brush and trees like confused animals in an earthquake. He plunged into the brush, seeking safety and a way out of the sudden impasse.

Wanda's women had become intermingled with the blacks as they moved forward and, almost blinded by blowing rain, they plunged into the midst of the convicts before they knew they were upon them. There was no way to lead any sort of organized resistance after that. Fights developed, flared up, and were brutally concluded amidst the concealing deluge and flying brush. Blood diluted with water streamed into Wanda's eyes from a scalp wound, making it even harder to see. Yells and screams surrounded her, intermingled with crashing thunder and flashes of light, a nightmare crescendo that went on

without rhyme or direction. Men and women struggled and died by themselves, separated and isolated by the storm. She had no idea if they were winning or not. Her only coherent thought was that whatever happened, the women were free. If they felt as she did, they would brave the forest, or even death rather than be recaptured.

Wanda's pistol clicked on empty. She flung it in the direction of a convict who popped up suddenly in front of her, causing him to fire blindly as he dodged. A terrific gust of wind and water swept over them both. Wanda was knocked from her feet. She huddled under a bush where she fell, hand gripped around the haft of a kitchen knife. It was her only weapon now.

MICHAEL WAS perhaps the first to notice that the thunder was dying away and the lightning losing its intensity. The wind began to abate and the rain slackened. The sounds of gunfire became clearer. He slithered through the brush in the direction of the noise, concealing himself from view as best he could. He thought the battle was probably lost by now, and was surprised that firing was still going on.

Abruptly, he stumbled over the body of a convict. A young black man lay nearby, breathing heavily through a punctured chest. He patted him as he passed, hoping he was one of many who had been freed. He got no response from the wounded man and went on, knowing nothing of how the fighting was going. For all he knew it might be almost over but there was no way he was going to leave the scene yet, not while there was still a chance, and not while Wanda was still out there somewhere.

The sound of shots being fired grew louder and Michael began to move even more carefully. He carried his pistol in his left hand; his right arm was still useless. He peered around a tree trunk just as the sun broke through the clouds. Bodies lay sprawled together as they had fallen, but all around the fringes of his viewpoint, fighting was still raging. He could make no sense of it. Bullets and buckshot twanged through the air like angry wasps and impacted into branches, brush, tree trunks and flesh.

Nearby, he saw a white clad convict rise to his knees and aim a rifle. Without thinking, he braced his left arm against the trunk of the tree and triggered his pistol. The convict threw up his arms and fell into the brush. Bullets ripped the trunk of the tree just above his head and he ducked away. Somehow, the battle was still going on. He moved away on his belly. It wasn't over yet, and he still had a few bullets left.

The sudden appearance of the sun saw both sides of the opposing forces still locked in combat, but the battle was inconclusive. Knots of men and women fired, took cover, grappled with figures suddenly rising from the underbrush, and lived and died as chance dictated. The combat spread out along the riverbank like a slowly growing forest fire, with flames licking here and there as they found fuel to consume. It could still have gone either way, but it was McMasters who finally made the difference.

The eye of the storm began passing over the battlefield just as he settled into his tree top aerie. As the day lightened, he gained a superb view from above. Looking down, he could spot the convicts easily by their white garb. He settled into a comfortable crouch on a whorl of limbs and began picking targets. He fired slowly, fixing the crosshairs of the scope exactly on his targets and making sure that every shot counted.

The convicts began noticing that their men were falling, but they couldn't tell from where the shots were coming. One would suddenly drop, head or chest erupting blood and bits of brain or lung. They looked around frantically and began shooting wildly in all directions. Calmly, McMasters chambered round after round, sighted through the scope and gently squeezed the trigger. With each shot, a convict fell.

Finally, it was too much. McMasters watched from above as the convicts broke and began running. He gloated over the consequences of their panic. As they rose into view, some came directly into sight of the remainder of Breedlove's force. Upright, and limned in the sudden daylight, many of them were cut down. Others ran the other way and were pulled down from concealment

by the few blacks still on their feet. Several were tripped and done in by women who plunged knives into their prone bodies.

Within a few moments after McMasters began his sniping the battle was over, those few convicts who managed to break through the opposition were in headlong retreat.

Burley saw what was happening and scurried away, ducking low at first, then breaking into a full run. He crashed directly into Michael before either of them could avoid the collision. Michael was knocked to the ground. His pistol spun away into the brush. Burley staggered but kept his balance.

Michael stared upward in horror as Burley pointed his shotgun at his chest and pulled the trigger. The firing pin clicked. He worked the pump and pulled the trigger again, but there were no shells left in the chamber.

Michael tried to scurry away from the huge convict. Weaponless and wounded, he knew he stood no chance in a hand-to-hand fight. Burley followed and kicked him in the head. He raised the butt of the shotgun and crashed it down, just as Michael rolled groggily away. The butt of the gun glanced off the side of his head, throwing him onto his back. He raised his good arm ineffectually as Burley lifted his gun for another stroke, knowing already that it was useless. He was going to die.

From nearby, Wanda had seen Michael appear in her vision like an icon flashed suddenly on a computer screen. Weaponless except for a knife, she could do nothing but scream as she saw Burley try first to kill him by a blast from his shotgun then by the butt end. The scream was all it took. Burley pulled his next blow, whirling in reaction.

"Help!" Wanda screamed, hoping someone on their side was near. She advanced with her knife ready but fearful of the huge convict.

"Bitch!" Burley screamed. He wanted badly to go after the ball busting bitch but he was scared that help might be near. He took a last ineffectual swipe at Michael's head and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Wanda rushed forward and helped lift Michael to his feet. She began leading him away from the direction Burley had gone, fearing that he might decide to return.

Michael was dizzy, not sure whether he was dead or alive. Wanda's sudden appearance was like something out of a dream, not quite real. He shook his head and his senses cleared, turning the dream to reality. The sun went behind encroaching clouds as the other side of the hurricane eye approached. Rain began once more to fall and the wind rose toward another gale, this time from the northwest, but not nearly as severe as before, as if it was in concert with the ebbing of battle.

Still using Wanda to half-support him, Michael found Breedlove near the clearing where the fiercest fighting had occurred, and after a short conference, set him to ranging about to gather survivors and flush out any remaining opposition. Gradually, a motley group of men and women began to congregate around them.

Jason had survived. In fact, he had seen little of the fighting. In the first rush of action as he led the blacks into battle, he had been knocked senseless by a clubbed rifle and had only regained consciousness after most of the fighting was done with. Looking around at the numerous bodies being spattered by rain, he was mildly ashamed that he had had so little to do with their demise.

Wanda introduced him to Michael, and they grinned together over their twin forehead bruises. "Bring all your men here," Michael told him. "We've got to get sorted out."

Jason slicked water from his bloodied forehead. "I'll get them. Christ, I can't believe we really pulled this off. What happened to Burley, by the way? Has anyone found him?"

"The last I saw, he was running hell for leather away from here," Wanda said. "I'm sure some others got away, too. Do you think they'll be a problem?"

"Who knows?" Jason said. "Let's worry about them later. I'll look for my men." He walked off, wondering how many of his own followers might have

been exterminated by mistake during the fighting.

Michael sighed. He squeezed water from his hair and looked around. In the distance, an occasional shot was still being fired as Breedlove went about his business. A cluster of teenage girls and an assortment of other women were in front of him; he knew only a few of them. On the fringes, a few black faces stared into the crowd apprehensively. One huge black man towered over the others, seeming to hold them in check. There was a gaggle of convicts, Burley's remnants, who had managed to surrender rather than run, sitting bound together, heads hung, water dripping from their hair and running down their faces.

Wanda stood by his side, armed once again. He heard noises from the edge of the clearing. Out into the open came a white haired man, supported on one side by a young girl and on the other by a grizzled, middle-aged man. He clutched a scoped rifle protectively, as if it were a favorite child. They walked around bodies in the gathering dusk, avoiding water beginning to pool around the still forms.

Michael sighed again. He was tired, his arm and head hurt, but the day was not yet over. "Jason, we owe you," he said after the convict returned, bringing what few of his men he had been able to find. "Everything is just going to have to wait for now, though. You and your convicts just hold on until we get back to Livingston, then we'll see about how we're going to organize things. I suspect it won't be easy, but we sure can't do it here, not in this weather. Can you manage that?"

"On one condition," Jason said. He smiled gently at Michael, then turned and gestured towards the freed blacks and his men. "Don't call them convicts. Not after all this." He pointed to the bodies laying in pools of water.

"I see what you mean," Michael said.

McMasters arrived and introduced himself to Michael. He then asked him to send someone back for George, Jr. and the women he had left waiting. He saw no reason why they wouldn't still be safe, but he was worried anyway. Characteristically, he didn't mention the devastating effect his sniper fire had had on the tide of battle.

Michael sent two men to follow the senior George back to where the others had been left then turned his attention to getting the disparate group he now commanded moved away from the area. He knew that undiscovered bodies must still be everywhere in the brush, and scavengers would begin appearing as darkness fell. As evening came on, the rain tapered off to a slow drip, then finally ceased completely, along with the wind. By nightfall, he had everyone moved a mile or two away, transporting the wounded on makeshift litters. The next morning, he intended to send Breedlove on one more sweep of the battlefield then head for Livingston, and hopefully, a reconciliation of erstwhile enemies. He still wasn't sure how he would work that out, but he was confident that it could be accomplished.

His other thoughts were orientated in different directions. He had gone over them again and again during his travels, changing and amending them as more survivors came together and finally setting them firmly in his mind as he sat with Wanda beside a smoky fire built from wet wood. He knew what would have to be done so long as he remained in command, but some of the group surely would not like his ideas.

GEORGE, JR. dropped to his knees in the mud and threw up both hands just as soon as Burley burst upon the scene. Burley was scared and tired, and not in the mood for surrender in any form. He clubbed the terrified young man to the ground with the butt of his empty shotgun, then ordered the two women to provide him with food. He kept the empty gun trained on them as he ate, and began contemplating. He would take the young woman with him just as soon as he satisfied his hunger, then look around for more displacement areas. Maybe he could find others who thought as he did, or perhaps a few of his cohorts had survived.

Just as he was finishing his meal, he noticed one of the women abruptly

look up and stare into the forest. A shot sounded. The bullet skimmed past his head, causing him to duck. As he did, the young woman he had picked out to take with him stuck out a leg and tripped him. He went down, losing the empty gun he had used to threaten the group. He rolled and scurried off into the underbrush. Bullets searched near him, but miraculously he wasn't hit.

Lacking a target, the shots soon ceased, and Burley congratulated himself on once again escaping harm. He could come back; eventually someone would get careless. But night was approaching. He needed shelter.

Stumbling through the deepening twilight, Burley suddenly came upon a monstrous fallen tree. At the bole of the uprooted trunk, a natural cave had formed. Perfect, he thought. He crawled inside.

The great cat had been disturbed and agitated by the hurricane, though it's carnivorous mind was unable to grasp the concept of such abrupt changes in the weather. It only knew that it had taken it's unease into shelter and began licking itself dry while it waited out the storm. It was very hungry.

Burley was bounced to the floor of the cave by one swipe of a huge paw. He looked up in horror as needle sharp teeth closed on his up flung arm, and screamed as fangs bit through bone and muscle as if they were wet paper. He let out a horrible curse then screamed as the cat raked knife-like claws into his belly. The cat batted his head with a forepaw, silencing his screams. Burley bubbled and cried softly as he gradually lost consciousness. The cat purred and fed contentedly, ignoring the dying moans of its prey.

AS MICHAEL GOT up and began making rounds to speak with survivors of the various groups, a thought that had been trying to form finally jelled. He broke off from talking with Preacher Johnson and hurried to find Sheila. How could he have forgotten? If anything had happened to her --

He found Wanda with the teenage girls, assuring them that the fighting was over and the remaining convicts were either rendered helpless or were become allies.

"Wanda, have you seen Sheila?" A picture of the young woman with her bright red hair in pigtails formed in his mind. Surely not. Please, don't let her be dead, not after what she's gone through. The depth of his concern startled him. So many dead, yet Sheila was suddenly foremost in his thoughts. Why hadn't Wanda been concerned too?

The concern in Michael's voice touched Wanda's heart. "Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry! I forgot to tell you."

"Oh, God, don't tell me she's dead." He clenched his fists as a sickness gathered in his belly.

Wanda smiled and took his hand. "No, she's fine. Come with me." She led him off toward a group of prone bodies, the wounded, while the hammering in his chest slowed back to normal. Two of the figures raised up and moved over to another person who was moaning feebly. The hammering came back. There was no mistaking that red hair, even in the feeble light.

"Sheila!" He called.

Sheila looked up from where she was helping Peggy place a makeshift bandage on a wounded woman. "Mike!" She ran to him and threw her arms around him.

"Ouch!" Sheila's grasp included his wounded arm.

"Oh! You're hurt. I'm sorry." Something more than concern about his wound tinged her voice.

"It's not bad. I'm glad to see you. Did -- " Michael started to ask how much of the fighting she had been involved with then decided he didn't want to know.

"Sit down here," Sheila said. "I'll fix your arm. Peggy has been showing me how."

"It can wait. I just wanted to -- "

"No it can't! You sit down," Sheila said possessively.

Wanda touched his shoulder. "Go on, Mike. Let her take care of you. I'll handle the camp for a little while."

Michael allowed himself to be convinced. His arm really was hurting and

he was glad of a chance for a break. He didn't notice Wanda's parting wink at Sheila, nor the puzzled look on Sheila's face.

Chapter Thirteen

WANDA AND Michael stood on the tarmac outside the entrance to the Livingston Wal-Mart. Preacher Johnson, Jason, Breedlove and Cecil McMasters flanked them. Behind Preacher stood the half dozen surviving blacks; Jason's remaining men stood in a half circle around him, and the rest of the congregation were grouped behind the leaders. Off to one side, a dozen or so of Burley's followers were being guarded by a mixed contingent of representatives.

Michael made a quick count and noted that females outnumbered males by more than two to one, confirming what he had already suspected. Doris' teenagers added to the disparity. What to do about the disproportionate ratio of men to women was one of the most contentious points of the discussions which had gone on almost constantly during the two days since their arrival at Livingston as he and the other leaders tried to decide on a form of government.

Michael was dead tired, and he carried his wounded arm in a sling. It had been a long, wet weary trek back to Livingston, a slow march with the burden of caring for the numerous wounded. The trip had been compounded by bickering and suspicion between Jason's men, the females, his own command and the few remaining blacks. He had gotten them all to Livingston only by a constant reiteration that once there, he would take care of their problems. Now he had to deliver, and he just hoped that he could bring it off.

The other leaders had finally gone along with him on every matter except what to do with those of Burley's convicts being held prisoners. That problem was still in abeyance.

"This isn't all of us, you know," Michael began, and his audience immediately perked up. That was the last thing they had expected to hear.

"We've really hardly touched all the possible areas of displacement. Out there, there must be many other people. They may be waiting where they are, or wandering around as we did looking for help or company.

"Most of you have probably heard by now that I have figured out the pattern of where the changes in our world took place. I think we are obliged to search the whole area of possible displacements and bring those others we may find into our group. At the same time, we can look for other resources besides what we already have to use to help build a viable society."

He looked over at Jason, then turned his glance to Wanda and on to Preacher Johnson, Breedlove, and Cecil McMasters, standing with a new crutch under one arm and the other supported on Judy's shoulders. He glanced out over the crowd and saw that most of them were nodding their heads, agreeing to the proposal for a search for more survivors. His next idea might be harder to put across, though.

He continued. "We've had a war. Some of us lost; some of us won. Before the war, some of you were being held as prisoners. Some of you were convicts, and some of you held these people in bondage. That has all been ended. What I want you to think about now is how to go on from here. Some of you may not like what I propose, but I think it's the only way to go."

There was a muttering within the various factions. What he had to say next might cause the fighting to start all over again, but he knew it had to be said.

"I propose an amnesty, except for those few." He pointed to the few seated captives, ones Jason had identified as the most culpable of Burley's gang. "I don't think there are enough people left in the world for us to afford any more fights. As of now, I want everyone to be free to start from scratch. Whatever your past, and this includes former convicts and everyone else who survived the displacement, let's start anew. Our past lives are over. We need to come together now. This is a brand new world, and we're going to need every able bodied soul we have to make it work for us."

The convicts under guard looked up at these words, a sudden hope glinting in their eyes. Would they be turned loose? No, the man speaking had excluded them. The freed blacks and women who had been held captive muttered rebelliously while Michael was talking, but held their peace while he paused to gauge the crowd's reaction.

"It won't be easy," He continued. "There are bound to be animosities. However, we are going to have laws, just as soon as we can formulate them. Everyone starts from scratch, as I said, but that doesn't mean anyone now has a free reign to do as they please. Anyone who misbehaves can expect retribution, and let me warn you: I have here Preacher Johnson, Jason Deeson, Wanda Smith, Cecil McMasters, and Deputy Breedlove to enforce what I'm telling you. If you screw up, expect us to hold you responsible, and don't look for a lawyer to get you off easy."

The last comment brought forth some chuckles and a noticeable easing of tensions, especially from the convicts. Michael had already consulted with the leaders he named. They were backing him, although Wanda and Deputy Breedlove had taken some convincing.

He had finally convinced Wanda, and through her, Breedlove, by the simple mention of the concept of gene pools. Simply put, a minimum number of humans of reproducible age were required to prevent gene drift, where the ultimate result is deterioration of the stock, unwanted recombinations of lethal or deleterious alleles, and ultimate extinction of the species.

Michael paused. So far he had carried his audience, but now came the hard part. "There's one more major consideration. I can look around me and see that we have another problem. I'll be blunt: as it stands now, we have more than twice as many females as males, not even including the underage girls. What do we do about it?" He got everyone's attention with that statement. The teenagers looked apprehensive; the older men and women showed a mixture of interest and puzzlement, wondering where he was going with this subject.

Michael went on, "There are no marriage laws now. There are no means of birth control either, after our pharmacy stocks run out. We have no ordained ministers nor anyone else to tell us what is right or wrong between the sexes under these circumstances. What we have here is a unique situation.

"I have conferred with my advisors." He waved an arm to indicate the representatives he had picked to support him. "I have also talked with as many of you as there has been time for. I will tell you now that we will not allow anyone to be coerced into situations they are not comfortable with. On the other hand, I do not propose to allow anyone to prevent any other persons from living as they please, so long as no one else is harmed by it."

Michael could see that many of his audience still didn't quite understand what he was getting at. He would have to be blunter still. He wondered if he weren't taking too much on himself. Given the situation, though, he knew it needed to be brought out into the open, even if it ultimately caused his own deposition.

"So here it is. We are going to have to accept the fact that we will have multiple marriages, or lacking anyone to perform marriages, multiple groupings. Bigamy, if you choose to call it that, and in most cases, it will be two or more women taking up with one man. I know this will be a hard concept for some of you to grasp, but we just don't see any other solution, given the disparity in the numbers of male and females who have come together here. Let me emphasize, though, _that no one is going to be forced into such arrangements against their will._ Everyone will be free to live, marry, or cohabit exactly as they please, and so long as I'm in charge we're going to formulate laws to back up that freedom. They will be stated plainly in the constitution we'll vote on soon." He paused to give his words time to sink in, and then threw out a bomb.

"Sometime in the future this disparity in the sexes will no longer be a concern, but for now, it is, and will be for the next generation or two. You should be able to understand that point just by looking around and seeing how few children we have among us." Little ten-year-old Melanie's face split in a

grin at the mention of children.

Michael made his final point. "We are stranded here, in a world almost bereft of people, and there are too few of us to try living under rules which evolved from a vanished society. From this point on, we have to make up our own."

"There's still the rules of God and God's plan for us," a woman spoke out from somewhere in the crowd. A few others nodded agreement.

Michael had little patience with anyone claiming intimate knowledge of God's secrets. "Ma'am, if it pleases you to think God doesn't approve of what I've just said, then get Him to tell me so. Or go somewhere else. Otherwise, that's how we're going to operate unless a majority of you decides not to elect me or fail to ratify our new constitution. Let me emphasize again, though, that no one is going to be forced into acting against their beliefs. Just don't try forcing what you believe on anyone else."

The woman who had spoken out sniffed and looked around at the plethora of females. "I suppose next you'll tell us that since there are so many women, some of us will have to become lesbians."

"No one will have to, ma'am, but if that's what you prefer, you certainly have my permission." The roar of laughter which greeted his remark disarmed the woman as effectively as if she had been disrobed. Michael had spoken impromptu, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth, it occurred to him that the woman had voiced a concern he hadn't thought of yet. Or was it a concern? He decided to ask Wanda about it later.

"One more thing, then we'll take questions," He said. "We're going to have to learn to be farmers and hunters. The food stocks we have now won't last long. Before they go, we need to prepare to replace them. That is going to entail hard work on everyone's part. We'll set up a committee to get this going, then designate work assignments." He smiled wryly. "For those of you who were say, involuntary farmers in your previous life, we'll be needing lots of advice."

All the convicts, including those still in captivity, laughed at this remark. The Texas Department of Corrections was notorious among the states for forcing their prisoners to grow most of what they ate.

"That's all I have to say. We'll take questions, now."

The debate was long and interminable, dragging on into the evening. The freemen, as the convicts called anyone not in captivity, led the questioning at first, but gradually, Jason's men and then the women began entering into the debate. Michael brought those he thought had the most to say to the podium. As the evening wore on, Wanda and some of the others wandered away. Preacher Johnson brought up the last subject.

Just before dark, he came to stand beside Michael and proposed that Burley's remaining men be freed. His suggestion was greeted by a mostly negative response until he made the salient point: "It don't matter what they done before, and it don't matter what they may do in the future. We say we're going to have law, don't we? If they go bad again, we got the strength to punish them, praise God. Let them go free and earn their keep."

A woman rose from the crowd. Her hair was in tatters and her clothes still were dirty, but she stood proud. She pointed. "I can see a man from here who I know did bad. Never mind. There wasn't any law then. Let him go now. If he does it again, I'll be the first one in line to put his chains back on. Let's start over!"

Her motion carried, though not without glares from a number of women and blacks. Michael nodded and Jason began freeing the prisoners. He helped each to his feet as he unlocked their cuffs and spoke private words to each of them. Preacher Johnson followed behind, adding his advice, which amounted to a threat to break every bone in their bodies the first time they got out of line. A new society, born of battle, was being formed.

ONCE WANDA was sure that Michael was going to carry the day, she left. Also, once assured that Michael had come through the battle alive, her next priority had been Sheila.

There had been little time for them to talk since the epic battle at the river. She had been tied up in debate about the direction their newly formed society was to take and Sheila had been working almost to the point of exhaustion helping Peggy care for their wounded. In the brief intervals when she had seen Sheila over the last day or so, she noticed that something appeared to be bothering her. As soon as she left the meeting, Wanda searched her out.

She found Sheila sitting by herself, on one of the far benches by the food section of the Wal-Mart. She appeared to be deep in thought. Wanda sat down beside her.

"I wondered where you were," Wanda said.

Sheila shrugged. "I needed to get away for a little while. All that talk this evening got me to thinking."

"What's wrong?" Wanda asked, concerned. She thought that by now Sheila had recovered from Dawson's assault. On the other hand, a lot had happened since then. Perhaps that was no longer a main concern, but she could see a hint of sadness in Sheila's expression, like a recently spanked puppy trying to figure out how to get back in it's master's good graces.

Sheila crossed her arms over her breasts, "Did you hear what Mike said about so many women?"

"Yes, I heard. But that's no problem for you, Sheila. You're young and pretty. You can have just about any man you want."

"Really? I don't think so."

Something was definitely troubling the girl. Wanda put an arm around her shoulder and tugged her close. Sheila leaned into the embrace. Wanda touched her chin and tilted it up. "What's wrong? Tell me."

Sheila's chin quivered. She cast her eyes down. "The only man I want is Mike, and you already have him." Tears began to leak down her face.

"Oh, gosh," Wanda said, relieved. "Is that all?"

Sheila rubbed at her eyes. "Isn't that enough? What do you expect me to do? Take up with a woman?"

Wanda felt her heart beat a little faster. "That might be an option if it were the right woman, but I'm sure we can work out something even better. Weren't you listening? There's so many more women than men that some of us are going to have to share." Still holding Sheila's chin with one hand, Wanda leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips.

Sheila backed off in surprise, then relaxed and let Wanda brush her lips again. She stared at the older woman.

"Do you mean you and Mike -- "

"Or you and Mike." _Or you and I, for that matter,_ Wanda thought wistfully.

"I thought -- I mean -- Mike -- you -- " Sheila found that she couldn't absorb the full import of Wanda's words all at once.

Wanda curled her arms around Sheila, holding her close. "Don't worry about it sweetheart. I think the three of us can work out an arrangement, don't you?"

Sheila hesitated then nodded shyly.

Michael was going to be awfully surprised.

EPILOGUE

_THE MAN WAS clad in deerskins. He held a spear upright by his side, taller than he was. It was tipped with a beautifully constructed flint point, an anthropological mark of pre-glacial North American aborigines. He kept the spear by his side, not for protection, but because it was the mark of his tribe, hunters of the holy bison and great mammoths. He hoped it would serve him now, as he prepared to confront the strangers. They wore odd, flimsy skins and hunted with lightning and thunder. They tamed horses and rode on their backs. They were too powerful to ignore, and he had been selected to confront them. Quaking, he stepped into the clearing, hand raised and open. One of the pale men set aside his lightning stick and came to meet him, hands as open as

his. His prayers to the great coyote had been answered. The strangers were peaceful. Now his tribe could learn, and perhaps in time, hunt with the lightning and thunder as these new inhabitants of the world did._

IN THIS incarnation of the infinite lines of history, the new world would discover the old and all would be different, as it had been so many times before.

Darrell Bain

DARRELL BAIN has been writing most of his life, though he didn't get really serious about it until the purchase of his first computer, which made correcting his typing so much easier. In the last ten years he has had a total of twelve books either published or currently under contract to be published. Two of his works were finalists for the EPIC 2000 Awards and another nominated for the Frankfurt eBook awards. His writing ranges the gamut of genres from Science Fiction to Romance, from Non-fiction to Suspense and from Children's books to Humorous Adventure and humorous non-fiction.

Darrell Served a number of years in the military, including two years in Vietnam. His first published novel, Medics Wild was based in part on his time in Vietnam. After leaving the military Darrell obtained a B.S. in Medical Technology and managed medical laboratories in Louisiana, Texas and Saudi Arabia. Eventually he and his wife Betty settled in East Texas where they own a Christmas tree farm located -- where else? -- on a real road named Santa Claus Lane. Two of his non-fiction works deal with crazy adventures on a Christmas tree farm. Other members of the family include Biscuit the dachshund and Black Spot and Black Dot, the tomcats.

Other Titles by Darrell Bain

The Disappearing Girls

Ultimate Suggestions

Available from Hard Shell Word Factory (<http://www.hardshell.com>) or through your local bookseller.

Titles from other publishers:

Life On Santa Claus Lane The Sex Gates Hotline To Heaven The Pet Plague Tales From A Texas Christmas Tree Farm Toppers Medics Wild

For more information, visit author's web site at:

<http://www.santa-claus-lane.com/>

Visit www.hardshell.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.