

After the Fall

Darrel Sparkman

Whiskey Creek Press
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Copyright ©2007 by WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

AFTER THE FALL
by
Darrel Sparkman
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Copyright © 2007 by *Darrel Sparkman*

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 (five) years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Names, characters and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author or the publisher.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-59374-815-9

Credits

Cover Artist:

Editor: Joanne Walpole

Printed in the United States of America

Other Books by Author Available at Whiskey Creek Press:

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Osage Dawn

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife and family for their support. A special thanks to my editor Joanne Walpole and the Whiskey Creek staff. To Dusty Richards and the Ozark Creative Writers for dealing out tough love when needed, and accolades when deserved. Thank you all.

Like flowery fields the nations stand,
Pleased with the morning light—
The flowers beneath the mowers hand,
Lay withering in the night.

Isaac Watts, 1719

Prologue

The Fall

The man in black stood on a balcony overlooking the inside of a vast warehouse in the waterfront district of New York City. His reflection in the glass partition separating the balcony from the rest of the warehouse showed how stark his long blond hair looked against his black shirt ... and the black background. Black. His uniform of choice. It was fitting.

"How much longer?" he asked the man named Krueger standing beside him. Krueger was a mercenary, and good at his job. The man in black had used him before.

"Soon. The last group will be here in a few minutes. They are stuck in traffic."

"Who is coming? Tell me again what groups you have recruited."

"We have representatives from sleeper cells of our own people in nearly every state. They will carry out the most important missions. The rest assembling here are a mixed bag. Patriots. Survivalists. Posse and Aryans. All trained and willing." Krueger chuckled, but there was nothing funny about it. "We even have several religious groups."

"How many in all?"

"There are over a hundred people under our control—all sworn to secrecy about their assignments. Each of them leads a group of their own. They won't even talk to each other."

"Do they know the real purpose of our cause?"

"Some will guess," Krueger said. "Most will not. They know only what we tell them, and what they wish to believe."

The man in black turned and glared at his companion. "You told me all was in readiness. I have brought the weapons with me. Disappointment at this juncture in time will not be tolerated."

"Take it easy," Krueger said softly. "Our cause is theirs. They all want simpler lives. All of them mistrust the government. To a man, they believe the collapse of the United States is what it will take to achieve this, and that collapse is inevitable. So, why not make it come sooner, at a time when they are ready for it, and can control it? They think of it as revolution."

"Do these groups actually think they can retain control? Really?" His mocking tone echoed in the empty room.

"I don't believe they understand the scope of what we are doing, or how quickly the end will come." Krueger gestured toward a few of the men below who, even in this gathering, were openly carrying weapons. "And some couldn't care less."

He returned his attention to the man in black. "Your predictions? The two weeks? It seems such a short time."

The man surveyed Krueger, then glanced away, knowing the mercenary was one of those who didn't care.

"Not really, it is actually very simple." The man in black held up his fingers, one at a time. "Electricity.

Fuel. Transport. Food. The fall will come in that order. If we interrupt these things for just a few weeks, the collapse will come. Nothing can stop it."

"But in two weeks?" Krueger scoffed.

"Ultimately, it is the food. Most stores carry, at most, a two-week supply of canned goods. Some have more, some less. Perishable goods will spoil more quickly. So, if there is no electricity to run the refrigerators, everything will spoil. People won't be able to eat the perishables quickly enough and most won't even understand that they should try."

Krueger's interest finally piqued. "Portable generators? Local power plants?"

"Where do you get the fuel to run the generators? And, there are never enough of them, even when there is a small power outage. Gas pumps need power. Hand pumps take a long time, and by then people will be killing for possession of what above ground tanks there are. If the trucks have no fuel and cannot deliver food, then the masses will be hungry. Even though people can go several weeks without eating, they will be hungry in three days. Hungry people do terrible, desperate things."

The man in black smiled mirthlessly at Krueger. "There will be millions of hungry people."

"What of the government agencies?"

"Ah, a true Socialist waiting for a government program to bail you out. Oh, the government will try to cope. FEMA and the Red Cross will send people to assess the situation. Governors will call out the National Guard. By the time they get everything mobilized, and realize they must release their own stockpiles of fuel, and start food drops, it will be too late. The same problems will apply when other countries try to help. They will try, but it will be too late. There simply will not be time."

"In the end, what is it you hope to achieve?"

The man in black turned a cold smile on him. "Chaos. We want it all to come down. Nothing less is acceptable."

Krueger pointed toward the floor. "The last group has arrived."

The man in black stalked toward the door. "Then let it begin."

* * * *

Krueger listened as the planning and lectures began. Two weeks.

Hand-held tactical weapons could not penetrate the nuclear and hydroelectric power stations. Everyone knew that. All the elite university think tanks and government experts proclaimed the premise impossible, so everyone believed it. Facilities were hardened and guarded. The security around all key facilities stayed on high alert.

"The solution is simple," the man in black had remonstrated. "Your groups will detonate small tactical nukes and conventional explosives around the perimeter of your targets, which will take out all the trunk lines delivering electricity from the power stations. It will also leave strategic areas so hot with radiation, repair will be impossible. Most of the electrical grids will go down immediately. The ones that hold on won't be able to isolate themselves quick enough. Like a long row of dominoes, one after the other the grids will drop off line. The nation will go dark.

"The government has huge stock piles of fuel, but will refuse to allocate it to the transportation system, which in turn delivers and disperses most of the food to the country. With the rest of the world in a

constant state of chaos, and fearing an imminent attack from abroad, the United States Government will confiscate all shipments of fuel and earmark it for the military. And without electricity, only fuel stored in above ground tanks will be obtained easily by the people. In less than a week, the largest transportation system in the world will stop moving.

"Millions of people living in the huge metropolitan areas have to buy food everyday from markets or restaurants to survive.

"Millions of people will be hungry. Millions of people will begin to move. There won't be any place to go. People will die. Millions..."

* * * *

Within the first year of the fall, at least eighty percent of the population died. After a time, even the military units stopped trying to cope, and pulled back to the east and west coasts, reasoning that the coastal waters could support at least a rudimentary existence.

The people in the interior of the United States, from the Alleghenies to the Rockies, were on their own. Experts would have predicted survival of the fittest, but in fact, it was mostly survival of the lucky.

Within a few years of what people called 'The Fall', an old breed of man began to re-emerge; survivors with pioneer spirit, relying on no one but themselves. By necessity, the country evolved into a culture of shoot first and ask questions later. Slowly, the people began to start building again. Slowly. In the new America, death is always just around the corner, and a heartbeat away.

Chapter 1

Quail exploded into the air, leaving the clump of sumac with rocket-like force. In the silence following their departure, small brown feathers drifted slowly to the ground in the filtered sunlight washing over the small clearing in the forest.

John Trent left his horse in a long dive, rolling up behind a log next to the trail. After the initial flurry of movement, he became completely still. Trent tried to blink away the sweat trickling into his eyes. A black wood ant, flushed from the crumbling bark of the log, crawled across his knuckles. Trent still did not move. This was the new frontier. The first to move often became the first to die, and he did not intend to die.

He cast a quick glance at his horse standing a few feet away, a horse that seemed very unconcerned with the actions of its master. *A big help you are.* The horse did not even glance his way, entertained instead by cropping grass at the edge of the trail and swatting flies with its tail. Bunched clumps of tall fescue seemed to be the only thing holding the horse's attention. The roan gelding seemed unaware of any danger, and it was usually a good sentry, especially where other people were concerned. Maybe something else had flushed the covey of quail. *Maybe a fox or coyote. Maybe.*

He sighed as his glance went to the leather saddlebags with the circle brand of U.S Army. Experience told him if someone wanted the courier bags, they would have tried for the horse right away. He had been a courier between the few remaining army outposts left on the new frontier for the last three years. Documents in the bag were of little interest to most folks. What was left of the army was impotent at best, rarely conjuring up anything but disdain and contempt.

That left one other alternative. Someone wanted him, and not for a moment did he consider any other option. There were hunters out there, and he was the prey.

Trent took stock of his weapons. The black SKS Paratrooper, with its thirty round magazine, folding stock and bayonet, was in its boot on the saddle and as far away as next weeks rabbit stew. The 9mm single action Ruger, his fighting knife, and a sore shoulder from rolling over the log, were all he had with him. They would have to do.

He suddenly had a humorous thought. In the old books, the hero would whistle for his horse and it would come bounding up, eager to save the day. *This horse would end up sixty miles away if he whistled at it.*

Normal sounds gradually came back to the forest, creeping on silent feet and whispering in the wind. The curious brown thrush and raucous blue jays finally went about their business, throwing disgusted looks back at the bushes where nothing was moving anymore. It was hard for them to be nature's sentinels when there was nothing to see.

In the distance, Trent could hear a mockingbird making its idiot calls. Closer in, a marmot came out of its burrow, nose up to the wind, red fur shimmering in the sun, deciding it was safe to go back to digging roots. A bumblebee came and went in an avalanche of sound, shattering the silence. Its fat body tagged by scientists as being unable to fly, the bee navigated effortlessly through the trees.

Cursing silently, chiding himself for not keeping better watch, Trent began a slow scan around the surrounding forest. The day was hot, too hot for early May, and the small brown lizard perched on the log just inches from Trent's eyes was panting to rid itself of the heat. Looking at the lizard directed his eyes to the log he hid behind. No wonder the ants were out in force. The log was so rotten he could

practically see through it. *Nice protection.*

Minutes later, Trent eased his position a little, moving his leather-handled hunting knife around for a better grip. The wide, heavy blade, honed razor sharp, was used for everything from shaving to cutting wood. Under his heavy buckskin shirt, sweat ran in rivulets down his body, and pooled in the small of his back. Trent's mouth was cotton ball dry and the canteen hanging on his saddle momentarily distracted him. But, wishing wouldn't bring it to him.

The grazing horse snapped its head up, and the raiders leaped out of the undergrowth. Where nothing had been but low bushes and rocks and a few forest ferns, appeared half-naked men burned brown by the sun. Disdaining the use of firearms, true to their newfound mantra, the raiders favored knives and clubs. The first raider came over the bushes in a magnificent leap, brandishing a knobby-ended club, screaming in primeval fury.

The man's blood-curdling cry was abruptly cut short as Trent's knife buried itself just under his breastbone with an audible thump. While the first raider slid loosely to the ground, the second came bounding in. Still on his knees behind the log, and out of position to do anything else, Trent reluctantly palmed his gun and fired. The slug took the running man in the chest and jerked him backwards to the ground. Hearing a grunt behind him, Trent whirled in a flurry of leaves and sweat and partially evaded a swipe at his belly with a knife. He winced as the blade swept away, then blocked an overhand stab from the young raider. Trent's Ruger flew from his sweaty hands.

It was obvious no one had ever taught the young raider how to fight with a knife, and he was not old enough to have learned from experience the vulnerability of an overhand stab. He should have stayed with the sideways slashing that left the burning gash in Trent's side.

Even though he was just a boy, the raider did not have any more time to learn. School was over and this was the final exam. There was a man-sized knife in the raider's hands, and a real sense of urgency driving Trent. If there were more raiders around, the sound of the shot would bring them in droves.

Trent, stepping quickly inside the boy's downward swing, caught his wrist and twisted the attacker's arm around and up behind his back. Heaving upward to dislocate the shoulder, the knife came away in Trent's hand. Hearing another raider coming from behind, he shoved the screaming boy away, slashing his throat left to right in a shower of blood. Pivoting on the follow-through, Trent faced the last raider amid the retching sounds of the boy behind him drowning in his own blood.

Trent crouched with his weight on the balls of his feet, lightly holding the captured knife with the cutting edge up and wishing he could dry his bloodied hands. He willed his breathing to slow, but his heart trip-hammered in his chest.

Except for the one shot, this encounter had been relatively quiet. Trent wanted it to stay that way. Raiders rarely traveled in large groups, so there was a good chance this was all there were of this bunch. He glanced around for his own knife, but it was too far away and he could not easily get to it. Looking quickly around for more raiders and not seeing any, John Trent returned his gaze to the man before him.

The last raider, standing well over six feet and heavily muscled, confident of his prowess, had seen Trent glance toward his own blade.

"Go ahead," said the grinning raider, with an expansive gesture toward the body holding Trent's knife, "I'll wait."

Trent, warily watching the big man, walked over and retrieved his knife, taking his time as he wiped the blood off on his victim's jeans. He stood drying his hands on his pant legs, waiting for the raider to make

his move.

The man walked around flexing his muscles, putting on a show of loosening up, preening and showing off before his next kill. He had crazy looking eyes that never left Trent, or the hand that held the knife. One man had already been lost to Trent's knife throwing skill.

Trent knew he could not match this man on strength alone. He did not intend to try.

"You're pretty good," the raider said. "You took care of them three boys real fast, but don't you get your hopes up. I am better than them. I have killed lots of men better than you, and I'm going to gut you like a pig. You afraid of dying, boy?"

John Trent smiled coldly. "You going to talk me to death?"

The smile faded from the raiders face. He contemplated Trent for a moment. "No, boy. I'll use this." He raised his wide-bladed knife toward Trent.

With a shout, the raider lunged, the point of his knife held forward like a spear, hoping to catch Trent by surprise. Trent faded to one side, seeming to narrowly evade the lunge, but the move kept him close enough for his blade to flick out and nick the man's arm.

Blood welling from the small cut, the raider snarled. "You'll have to do better than that, boy."

Furiously, the raider attacked Trent with broad sweeps and furious lunges, and the small clearing came alive with the sound of clashing steel. Both men were breathing heavily and, as if by common consent, stood apart a moment. Trent remained calm as he watched the man before him, a man whose arms and shoulders were covered with blood—a man who was tiring quickly because of what he thought was insignificant blood loss.

Trent glanced cautiously from side to side. This encounter was taking too long. Every second he stayed in this place increased his danger. He needed to end it.

With a curse, the raider renewed his attack, sweeping wide with his blade and giving Trent the opportunity he needed. Slapping the knife aside with his free hand, Trent came in under the outstretched arm and buried his own weapon in the belly of the big raider. He pulled the blade up and over in a figure seven. Then, placing his left hand on the raider's chest, pushed him away. It was short and brutal, leaving no chance for retaliation.

The man sat on the ground, vainly trying to hold his stomach together, looking at Trent with a shocked expression as his heart pumped his life away through his fingers. The big raider tried to say something, but ran out of time. He fell over sideways into the leaves, his final breath leaving in a long sigh that rustled the grass in front of him.

Panting heavily, Trent quickly looked around him, while retrieving the Ruger and wiping dirt and leaves from the action. A flicker of movement, away in the trees, drew his attention. He froze, watching and listening. *Nothing*. Slipping his Ruger into its holster, he mounted the gelding, pulling the SKS from its boot as he settled in the saddle.

The encounter had left him unhurt, except for the shallow cut on his side. He glanced back at the raiders. Some might think him lucky, but he knew it was more than that. Like the ancient Berserkers, who went wild in battle, bare-chested when others wore armor, this fury was with him, even as a child, fighting with pointed sticks. Those sticks hurt, and more often than not, Trent would lash out in fury unleashed by a stinging wound from an opponent. Sometimes people called his fury bravery, but he could never accept

that. Anyone who was not scared spitless in a fight was a fool.

Trent looked at the men who had attacked him. Young, dirty, and getting no older. Looking at the boy, he felt a wave of sadness wash over him. Even the young ones caught the raiding frenzy. Trent had killed many times in the past. Always, the young ones bothered him the most.

With most of the country returned to a virgin wilderness, no one seemed to want to put out the effort to settle it again. *You would think people could find something better to do with their time than prey on what survivors were left.* But after the Fall and the collapse of civilization, the killing and fighting had become a way of life. *When would it end?*

John Trent looked around the clearing one last time and suddenly felt tired. The one thing he wanted most from life was peace and quiet. With a sudden burst of clarity, he knew he was not likely to get either. He was in the wrong business.

* * * *

The man standing at the window was so large he blotted out the sunlight. His mottled black and green uniform was severely pressed, the creases straight and sharp. The gold clusters of a colonel in the United States Army adorned his shoulders and glittered in the light.

His gaze lingered on the street below, noting nothing in particular, but acutely aware of all that passed below him. It had become a ritual for him. Always hoping for change ... but never finding any.

The street below appeared to be controlled confusion at best. It was busy at this time of day, choked with horses, wagons, and an occasional motored vehicle whose type and looks were limited only by their owner's imagination.

"Look at all this, Fred." The colonel spoke to his adjutant standing behind him. "When we first came here, this street was full of transport trucks, and all-terrain armored vehicles. And tanks. Hell, we even had tanks! Our men controlled the town, the countryside, and all the roads in and out of camp. We were in charge. Now look at it. Horses and wagons, for God's sake. It looks like the 1800s all over again. The civilians are better armed than the soldiers. We are losing men from our units every day, and we don't know if they have been killed, or if they just got tired of it all and walked away."

"How did we lose it, sir?" The lieutenant's voice was close to sounding bored, a dangerous situation because the colonel would not tolerate boredom.

Colonel Bonham did not turn away from the window. There was not any doubt of what his adjutant meant by the question. He and Lieutenant Fred Saints had discussed this subject many times before. It haunted the minds of those men who were in power. Then ... and now.

"It was easy, Fred. You know that. It was so damned easy and predictable. The American people just would not believe it was happening. Europe, sure, they were fighting all the time anyway. China, maybe so, with the billions of people they have, but not to us. Not to the good old U. S. of A. What has it been since the Fall? Twenty years?"

"It started out like a bad Sci-fi movie. The economy was a bust, businesses folding up by the thousands. The value of the dollar was dropping like a rock, and congress did not have a clue, Fred. Not one damned clue. They were so anal retentive, the whole bunch looked like a chocolate donut."

Smiling, Lieutenant Saints interjected, "And the rest of the world?"

"Jesus, what a mess," the colonel responded, never missing a beat. "Every country in the world got mad

at somebody. Europe, Africa, Asia, South America, and we had to send troops to all of them. Trying to police the world. What a waste. The United Nations was an impotent bunch of backsliders afraid of their own shadows and corrupt to the man."

"It was the anger then?" Saints said.

"Oh yeah, that and the floods and plague, and every other damned impossible thing that could go wrong."

"Speaking of which..."

The colonel finally turned from the window. "Jesus, Fred. You have been waving that paper around all morning. I give up. I surrender. What is it? My discharge?"

The adjutant's haunted gaze held the colonel's for a moment and he ignored the old joke that usually resulted in a laugh.

"We got this by courier. There have been fresh outbreaks of plague back East. They say a lot of the water is bad. The whole thing may be starting over again, at least among all the people who drifted back to the big cities."

"Oh, that's just wonderful." The colonel glanced sharply at the adjutant as he stomped toward a map on the wall. "I'm really glad you shared that with me, Fred."

"Sir, the dispatch does say the GDCC is working on a vaccine."

"Right, the Government Disease Control Center." Colonel Bonham's hard sounding voice oozed sarcasm. "With what, for Christ's sake? There have not been any pharmaceuticals made in twenty years, Fred. What are they going to do, throw sticks at it? Bring in some witch doctor and scare it away? Cut open a chicken and look at the entrails? The scientific community never solved it twenty years ago, and they will not now."

"Look at this map, Lieutenant. This Ozark Project has to go through. It may be our last hope. We're sitting right by one of the few safe areas left in the United States."

A pointer appeared in his hand as if by magic, and he began to lecture his adjutant. "Do you see this section of the Mark Twain National Forest? It is a wilderness in there. Mountains and hills covered with forest and grass. The water is clear and cold with the hills full of all the game you want. Some settlements even have their own electricity. Run it from old gristmills on the rivers. It is just sitting there, ready and waiting for us. It is the best chance for our people to survive and start again. Over the last year, we have been gathering some of the best people we can find. The best minds, people with the talent to rebuild. We've got at least fifty families that we can put in there."

"Then what is the problem?" Saints said.

The colonel stood lost in thought. Finally, he said, "Now that they are assembled, I'm afraid to send them in. I am not too sure they would go anyway."

"Raiders."

Nodding, the colonel turned back the map and pointed to northern Arkansas. "We have Big Springs right here in the middle and it is a perfect spot for a settlement. They have their own water supply, electricity, and the works. They raided some hillbilly theme park nearby called Silver something or other, and from the old technology saved from the past, they now have leather working shops, bakeries, a place to cure meat, and enough farm land around close to raise wheat for bread."

He paused for a moment. "The area also has more raiders per square mile than a dog has fleas. The place is getting crowded."

"I'm surprised the raiders haven't taken everything over."

The colonel grinned at his adjutant. "They have the same problem we do. Those red-necked Ozark hillbillies are stubborn as they come, and they do not move easy. Their places are isolated and hard to get to. And generally, they are well defended."

The Colonel pointed with his marker to the top of the map. "Jeremiah Starking has close to five hundred people here on the Upper Jacks Fork, northeast of Big Springs. Men, women, and kids. Maybe a hundred of them fighting men. He is ex-military and knows what he is doing. His people have not turned raider yet, but they are not far from it. If anyone takes over, he would be the one. I do not think it will be long before he decides to move into the area. Trouble is, it will not support all of them, and us too. He has some of his mercenaries in there now, stirring up things, seeing who is in charge and who they need to get rid of. From our last dispatch, we also know Pagan Reeves is there, and no one seems to know which side he is on. The last report we had, Reeves was completely out of control."

"We have enough troops to..."

"That is not an option, Lieutenant."

"What about the other Regional Commanders? Can't they send in troops?" Saints asked, stubbornly.

The colonel glared at his underling. "You still don't understand. We have lost two patrols in the last month. Our soldiers are not woodsmen. The raiders are. We are like the English going against the American Indian. They are eating us alive in there. But what a company of soldiers can't do, might be done with just one man. If he is the right man."

"It would be suicide."

"Maybe, but he might buy us enough time to get our men trained. If our man can keep them busy long enough..."

"I suppose you have someone in mind?" the adjutant said reluctantly, as though he already knew the answer.

"Sure. John Trent. Do you remember the plan that passed through here last month about reinstating the United States Marshal Corp? I think we have our first recruit."

"But, sir, begging your pardon, I know he was your son-in-law for a time, but do you think that's wise? Some people say he is worse than the raiders. Remember Caplinger Mills two months ago? He killed four men, and wounded two more. The people will never stand for it."

"Oh, they'll stand for it. They will have to. No matter what you have heard, Lieutenant, John Trent is an honest man, and fair." The colonel's voice sounded grim. "From the message we got, all that the people at Big Springs want is protection from the raiders. Well, they will get their protection."

The colonel looked at Saints with eyes that appeared hard as steel. "You don't know what kind of man we're dealing with, do you?"

"You mean Trent. Guess not, sir, other than I think he is a cold-blooded killer."

"John Trent is a throwback. Somewhere in his genes are instincts and skills we couldn't begin to

understand."

"You mean, like in the 1800s. Western frontier?" Saints asked.

"Not even close, Lieutenant." The colonel strode to the window again. "All these people you see out there, the traders, the soldiers, even the mercs and raiders to a certain degree, still tie to civilization in some manner. As bad as the Fall was, there is still enough left of modern technology to shape us. We need things to survive, like tools, shelter, and survival equipment. And we all need other people."

He paused a moment. "Trent doesn't need any of those things. You strip him naked and send him out in the wild, he'll come back fat and sassy, and tear your heart out."

"I don't know much about him except he was married to your daughter, sir." Fred Saints laughed. "I've even heard the rumor he does not like to fight."

The colonel turned and looked directly at the lieutenant. "That is correct. He does not. Left alone, John Trent would not harm a fly. He is a man who is very slow to anger. However, given cause, lieutenant, the fire inside him shows no mercy. You have heard the expression 'cold fire'? When angered he can become a killing machine and makes the old SEAL teams, Delta Force, or our Enforcers look like choirboys. He simply does not need us. He is totally self-reliant."

"So, you think Trent will get pushed too far by the raiders and take care of some of our problems."

"I'm counting on it." Colonel Frank Bonham chuckled mirthlessly. "The town of Big Springs wants a company of soldiers. What they will get is one man. They'll get John Trent."

"Well then, if all you say is true, God help them." The adjutant shook his head ruefully.

Colonel Bonham snapped around and stared at his assistant. "No. God help the raiders."

* * * *

The wind through the trees was a whispering rustle as the man on the roan gelding gazed across the hills making up the Ozark Mountains in southern Missouri. The nearer hills appeared sharp in the morning light; a mural etched in different shades of green and brown, broken by gray limestone outcroppings, cliff faces, and an occasional abandoned farmhouse. Dark, successive hills gradually faded away in the mist. The fresh breeze would soon push away the haze, revealing deep valleys and high mountainous hills choked with so much scrub brush and vegetation it was nearly impossible to pass through unless you knew the way. The oak and maple trees spread a canopy over the forest, while pine and cedar tried to soak up what sunlight passed through the leaves above.

John Trent felt at peace as he relaxed in the saddle, sitting well back from the cliff face, close under the shade of an old gnarled oak. He idly reached out and touched the dark, crusty bark, feeling its texture through fingers as hardened as the tree, and wondered how many of nature's denizens made their home in this one old tree. The tree had taken all the punishment time could give it; its bark twisted and hardened by the forces of nature, yet still keeping its uniformity in shape and size. For over a hundred years, judging by its size, the oak had stood, benignly watching the parade of humanity pass through these hills. Of course, there was not much of a parade anymore. Nature had taken care of that too.

It was much the same with the man, for his body too had stood the test of time. It had been hardened and tempered by the fires of survival until he was as much a product of nature as the oak. The difference was ... he could feel and see, and because of those things ... know regret. The oak would never feel regret, or get tired of its life. The man envied the oak for that simplicity.

The tiredness often slumping Trent's shoulders was not physical. Mostly, it was a mental state. On occasion, in somber moments of reflection, he marveled at the senselessness of what the world had become. He could feel the emotions coming up in him, a gusher that, even when capped, still let rivulets escape. It was like trying to stop the leaks in a dam with your fingers. At some point, you ran out of fingers.

He understood how the raiders felt, which was one thing separating him from his peers. The other scouts and couriers in the Combined Armed Forces, USA, just reacted, without caring, to whatever happened to be going on. The raider did not feel despair or remorse of any kind. It was anger! Theirs was an impotent rage at the world for becoming such a place. Anger, because the world had lost so much. Anger, because death seemed to be the easy, if not only, way out. In death, you were not hungry, or cold, or so damned tired you couldn't stand up. In death, you were not afraid to close your eyes at night to rest, fearing some other raider who was just as scared and cold as you, may sneak up and cut your throat for the blanket were wrapped up in. Raider! The very word brought fear to the eyes of army and settlement people alike. Their mantra was simple, in that they had no plans, other than to just live for the day. Anyone not in their group was an enemy. Do not trust anyone, and never ... ever ... show weakness.

John Trent had been on the fringes of this for years. He had joined the Army at the age of seventeen. Like so many people, all he wanted was a guarantee of a place to sleep, and food to eat. He got his wish. But, the price he paid was involvement in more border wars and peacekeeping missions than he cared to think about.

The remarkable event known as the Fall had started years before, like a slow growing cancer, then spread like wildfire through the country. No one knew or cared what started the plague. Trent did not even want to know who to hate. It just did not matter anymore. Back East they were slowly rebuilding. West of the Mississippi River however, the land was lawless and brutal. Death could come at any moment ... and often did.

John Trent had been around, and at thirty-six was already older than the new adjusted life span of the American male. Riding dispatch for the Provisional Government, mainly between Army posts, he could do what he did best. Couriers were about the only means of communication left for the Army. It took a skilled woodsman to navigate the forests infested with raiders just waiting to kill a lone traveler for whatever he was carrying, especially weapons.

To survive, Trent lived by his own rules.

Rule one: Remain unseen and cover a lot of ground.

Rule two: Never forget rule one.

John Trent had a natural ability, born in the gene pool of ancestors he never knew. As a child, he lived close to the woods, and would always retreat to the cool confines of the forest whenever he needed to get away. Once in the Combined Forces, all his assignments had been in the jungles of Central America, South America, and Southeast Asia.

Now, on the new frontier of his own country, Trent rarely ventured into the settlements and left the Army camps he had to visit as quickly as possible. But trouble was always near. No one could avoid it entirely. Lately, he did not try as much to avoid it. It seemed like, at some inner level, he was beginning to welcome it. Some perverse part of him knew just how good he was, and just how much better than most others at the business of survival. He had eye-hand coordination that dazzled ordinary men. And, worst of all, he could feel himself becoming more callous to death and suffering every day

Years ago, before the Fall, one of his instructors had talked to Trent about killing.

"Soldiers expect to have to kill. It is their business. They should not expect anything else. Yet, even the most hardened of soldiers will one day find himself thinking too much about death, and his part in administering it."

The instructor continued with a strong warning.

"It's not the quantity. It's the quality. Some people just need killing. You cannot reason with them and you sure as hell cannot change them. They are rotten to the core, so you go after them for God and country or any other reason that floats your boat. When they are dead, you toss them aside with the rest of the garbage, because that is what they are. Problem is, if you are good it starts getting easy. The killing becomes automatic and you find yourself taking less and less time to decide. Then, one day you will kill someone of whom you are not sure. You start doubting and hesitating. All the black and white in your world will turn to gray. You will start second guessing yourself, and when that happens, it is time to get out. Otherwise, you die. Probably killed by the same people you were trying to protect."

At least that is how it had been, until two weeks ago. Two weeks ago he had been in Pine Bluff. Two weeks ago he had killed another man. As he scanned the forest around him, Trent's mind pushed and pulled at the memory that just would not go away.

That particular day two weeks ago had started innocently enough. Trent had ridden into a little jerkwater town, having about four buildings with three of them falling down, two jumps ahead of a bunch of raiders.

He did not know if they were true raider, or just a bunch of 'good ol' boys' out to hooraw the stranger out of their neck of the woods. Both scenarios were entirely possible. About twenty of them had come bursting out of a draw next to the road where Trent was riding, half of them on foot, the rest on horses, screaming and yelling.

Trent was already hot and tired, and more than just a little cranky, so instead of running he had pulled his old Chinese SKS Paratrooper out and laid ten rounds into the asphalt in front of them. The 7.62mm bullets had shattered on the pavement, and the ricochets took out the knees of some of the horses. The resulting bedlam and confusion had allowed Trent to get ahead of them, and into town.

Coming into the town, it reminded him of a picture postcard he had seen once. The caption was, "How do you know you're in the Ozarks? If someone's front porch falls in ... it kills more than twenty dogs." This town seemed to have more dogs than people. It was always good to know where you were.

Pulling up in front of what he guessed would pass for a saloon, Trent entered and pushed his way up to the bar.

"Got anything cool?" he asked.

Cool seemed to be a matter of interpretation. Cool was the stare he got from the man behind the planks of wood they were using for a counter.

"All right," Trent said, conceding the point, "do you have anything to drink?"

Anything turned out to be a glass of bust-head moonshine, which threatened to rip his hair right off his head. He held the glass gingerly up to the dust-filtered sunlight coming in through the door, then gently set it down on the counter, as if he were afraid it would explode.

"Man," he said, "that corn is a little green!"

The natural reserve of the hill people was broken a little. The barman grinned and said plaintively, "Been aged to perfection. Almost a week."

Trent, his eyes still watering from the drink, heard a chair scrape back on the floor. He turned to see a man standing in the corner of the room, legs spread, his right hand near his weapon. Around the table he had backed away from, three more men were holding cards and looking like they wished they had business somewhere else.

"C'mon, Lenny, leave the man alone," one of the men said. "I got a good hand goin' here."

Lenny's face was in shadow, but Trent could plainly see his sidearm. It was a semi-automatic, maybe a Browning or Colt, slung low in a cloth holster like the old SWAT teams used to wear. Fast draw artist? Gunman? Nut case? You never knew.

All this flashed through Trent's mind in the few seconds it took the wannabe bad man to think of something appropriate to say.

"You." Lenny's voice sounded loud in the small room. "In the buckskins. You one of them Army scouts we been hearing about?"

Trent looked at him for a moment, then said neutrally, "I am a courier for the Army. I'm also tired, thirsty, and not looking for trouble." It was in Trent's mind to turn back to the bar and ignore the trouble hunter, but it wasn't to be.

The man's hand rested on the butt of his gun. When he moved to draw his weapon, Trent shot him in the chest. The mushrooming bullet left a conical pattern of blood on the wall and the half-pulled gun fell to the floor, followed closely by the man.

Shocked silence followed the deafening blast of Trent's revolver. Apparently no one really liked Lenny, but he was one of their own and he was down on the floor. Sure, he was a trouble hunter and fast with a gun. He had even killed several raiders who had come to town hunting trouble.

The gaze of the men in the bar finally moved away from the body on the floor. All eyes were riveted on Trent. One second he was standing there, the next he was holding a smoking revolver. No one saw him draw; it was that fast. Even the bartender missed it.

Trent walked up to the man he had shot. There was not any doubt he would die. Trent knew where he had aimed.

He looked down and was shocked at the age of the man. Man? He was scarcely more than a boy, and he was bubbling his life out of a small hole just under his left nipple. An older man kneeling by the boy looked accusingly at Trent.

In a voice low and ponderous the man said, "You didn't have to kill him."

"He started to draw his gun." Even to Trent his explanation sounded lame and hollow. "He would have killed me if I hadn't stopped him."

"He was just a kid," the man said, "and you are a soldier. You could have wounded him, if you had wanted to."

And there it was. As he stood there, watching the boy vainly rolling his stomach, drowning in his own blood as he tried to fill his lungs with air, Trent's shoulders slumped. Could he have simply wounded the boy? The question kept bouncing around in his head. The answer was ... no. It had never occurred to him.

The men in the saloon turned their backs on Trent and left him standing alone in the middle of the floor.

Finally, he walked out to his horse, mounted up, and started out of town. As he left, he heard a woman screaming.

Two weeks later, and he could still hear her screaming.

Pushing his brown Bushman's hat back on his head, Trent enjoyed the brief coolness as the sweat, trapped by his hatband, gave up its moisture to the breeze. A man of infinite patience, he slowly scanned the country, looking for signs of passage by other men. For in this time and place, the most dangerous animal in the forest was man.

As Trent rested his horse in the shade, his mind worked on two levels. His subconscious mind was busy with the minute-by-minute evaluation of possible danger. Having an acute sixth sense, he was barely aware on a surface level of all this. It was more than simply being raised in the forest, he was a part of the forest, its every sound and breath, and he was *of* the forest as much as any animal that lived there. It was his home.

Movement across the valley caught his attention. His eyes narrowed as he sat motionless in the saddle, his gaze focusing on a small area of the forest. Without taking his attention from the place where he had seen the movement, he reached back and took a small pair of binoculars from his pouch. They were a two-toned green in mottled design, and rubberized to keep the weather out. At least, that is what the instructions said. Trent wanted them because the rubber coating would keep the glasses from making noise.

All his equipment was like that. A clink, or rattle at the wrong time could spell disaster on the trail.

Moving the small wheel between the barrels of the glass, he focused again on the spot of movement. Several buzzards wheeled in formation over something, coming lower with each circle. Something had scared them up and now they were settling down again.

Returning the glasses to their pouch, Trent settled his hat and clucked at the horse to get him moving. The roan gelding had been with Trent for several seasons and seemed to know his every mood and whim. Tough and mean, the horse was a lot of trouble in the mornings, liking to buck and twist, trying to unseat his rider. The horse was a fighter and stayer though, which meant more to Trent than a few minor altercations.

Trent knew he had to see what had attracted the buzzard's attention. There were too many birds for it to be a small animal. It could be something large, like a dead cow or horse; maybe a deer, or it could be like the army patrol he had found a few weeks before, shot to rag dolls and scattered along the trail like so much trash along the road.

Trent could not see the buzzards now, but did not need to. He could feel the oppression coming, like the low clouds of a summer storm. He did not know what he would find, but his gut feeling was that it would be bad. Really bad.

Chapter 2

Trent stopped in the dappled shade of a huge sycamore tree to let his horse rest a moment. The mountainous terrain of southern Missouri did not lend itself to fast paced movement, especially if you wandered off the main roads and trails, and he hardly ever used the main trails.

He had just traversed the valley the hard way, picking his way in a zigzag pattern down the slope of one mountain and up the side of the next until he had finally come to the area where he had seen the buzzards.

The air was hot and sticky, with hardly a breeze fanning the trees. A few horse flies had found them a couple of miles back, following the sweaty horse like a bear to a honey tree. Rippling its skin and swatting its tail, the gelding was skittish and irritable. The horse wanted nothing more than a good roll in the dust, but Trent held him in with a firm hand on the reins, patting his shoulders and making small sounds to comfort him.

Once the gelding was finally under control, Trent returned his steady gaze to the open glade in the forest ahead. He started to urge the horse forward, but stopped abruptly.

If asked, he could not explain it, but somewhere on a subconscious level, alarm bells were ringing like a church belfry gone mad. There was something ahead. It was like a tangible force, an unknown presence. He could feel it, nearly taste it, and because of it, every pore of his body was screaming caution. He was not about to move. Not yet. Not until he knew.

As long as they did not move, he and his horse would be nearly invisible to anyone watching the area. That is, if his horse had not already given them away by prancing around.

A flurry of wings beating the ground, and a raucous squawking from the turkey buzzards, divided his attention away from the surrounding forest. At their sudden flight, his hand swept toward the revolver at his hip and as quickly come to rest on his thigh. The buzzards were skittish too. Restless. And, even though they had to be the ugliest birds in creation, he still trusted their senses over his own.

Still and silent, the man and horse seemed to be made of stone. Trent's eyes relentlessly searched the forest, all his senses keyed to the slightest thing out of the ordinary; a sound or a shadow in the wrong place, anything to justify the feeling he had.

The sense of something being wrong remained with him, covering him like a shroud from a casket. Making a small sound of exasperation, Trent scanned the clearing one more time. *Nothing. Just another bald spot in the forest. Time to move.*

He stood at the edge of a small clearing, brush and small trees nearly obscuring his horse. He quietly dismounted, taking the Black SKS from its scabbard on his way down, not liking even the small noise it made leaving the scabbard. The thirty-round clip was full, but the chamber was empty. He did not want to pull back the charging handle to load it. Not yet. Noise would carry too far in the forest, especially a sharp, metallic sound.

Trent let his breath out slowly. It was quiet, too quiet. The silence of the forest was so loud it made the hair stand up on the back of his neck. No birds sang, no insects buzzed. Even the breeze seemed to hesitate, like it was waiting for permission to move, or waiting to see what would happen. The heat was oppressive, even in the shady confines of the forest.

He had been standing in one place over ten minutes. In a country filled with raiders who preyed on

settlers and army patrols alike, it did not pay to be in a hurry. Army dispatches could wait, and he had not lost anything on the other side of the clearing.

For just a moment, he felt a presence ahead of him, something real and tangible ... then it was gone, leaving him with an unfathomable feeling of relief. Not once did he doubt what he had felt. A mystical concept to most people, it was something you had to feel to understand. The sixth sense of any good woodsman was a phenomenon he could not begin to explain.

Finally, the blanket of silence lifted like fog leaving the ground and the small creatures of the forest took up their daily business. A thrush called inquiringly for its mate, a tree frog began a perfect insect imitation, and a blue jay looked disgustedly down at a beetle it had just dropped to the ground. The forest finally gave up a small breeze, whispering through the pines with a lonely sigh and cooling his sweaty brow.

The clearing was about a hundred feet across, surrounded by tall trees that kept half of the open space always in shadow. Outcroppings of rocks dotted the glade and the native grass was cropped short in places, evidence of the thousands of deer living in the area.

The girl's body lay near the center of the clearing, the afternoon sun sending its creeping shadows slowly around the edges, leaving her in the light. A stray thought came to him. Trent stopped a few feet from her. He was usually indifferent at the face of death, having seen so much of it. Today, his feelings started at nausea, then gave way to dull, throbbing anger. He stood for a moment, swallowing the bile rising with his anger. He filed the anger away for a more useful time. Turning his gaze away from the body, he took in the surrounding area. He had seen hundreds of dead bodies, but never anything like this. No one could be ready for this.

Even through the assault of his senses, Trent could not shake the feeling someone was watching him. With the completion of that thought, he deliberately pulled back the charging handle on the SKS, letting it go with a loud clacking sound as the first bullet was chambered. *Noise be damned.* If someone was watching, let it be a warning.

Trent turned from scrutinizing the forest and forced himself to contemplate the body. He had been a woodsman since childhood, and he could read the message on the forest floor as easily as someone else could read a book. It was just a matter of understanding what you saw.

There was not much to see. No tracks, or anything to give a clue about who had done this. Nearby was a branch, presumably used to rough up the grass, getting rid of tracks and indentations. The leaves on the branch were wilted and wrinkled, but they still had some color. *Today then. Early.*

When he had looked at everything he could see from his position, he reluctantly walked closer to the body. *Hours, no more.* The buzzards circling had not worked on her yet. Small scavengers had not found her to do their damage.

Trent took in the smooth features of the girl's face, the luxurious canopy of hair, blue eyes fixed on something only the dead can see. She had been beautiful, but death had robbed her of that ... especially this kind of death. Now, she was just one more naked piece of garbage left on mankind's doorstep with stark horror stamped on her face.

He tried to force himself to be objective. Anger that he had suppressed earlier was flowing again. *A man who would do this to anyone, but especially a girl ... I want him.*

The girl lay spread-eagled on the grass. Judging from the cuts and rope burns on her wrists and ankles, she had been restrained, her arms and legs tied to short stakes driven in the ground. The holes seemed to be about the size for tent stakes, like you could find in old abandoned hardware stores, or make yourself.

Her clothing had been cut from her after she was staked down, and remained under her, catching the pooling blood that was now black and covered with ants. *She was alive when he staked her down.*

The cutting appeared to be done with a finely honed, thin bladed knife. That was not all the work done with the knife. The sharply defined wounds on her body were distinct, her face covered in blood, brown hair matted with leaves and dirt.

Still feeling the danger of the forest, Trent looked away a moment, hoping to calm his anger a bit. He forced himself to examine her again, trying to use the same skills he would use to trail an animal. The girl's breasts had been sliced open and her nipples were missing. The cut was too sharply defined to have been made by an animal. *Why take her nipples.* Her legs were scratched and bloody, with much of her pubic hair gone. *Scalped? Souvenirs?*

He rose and took a huge breath. Starting with the body as the center of his search, he walked around the clearing in ever widening circles. As he walked, he swore in a low monotone, dripping with anger and loathing. He had seen dead people before, had killed more than he liked to think about in the name of survival. Neither the smell nor the look of death was new to him. He looked back at the girl. *Nothing like this. Never anything like this!*

"Damn!" His soft curse was a one-word epitaph of emotion and feeling. No one deserved to die like that. He could see where the pieces of rope tying her to the stakes had cut into her arms. The girl had possessed spirit. She had fought ... fought hard! Looking at her, Trent was obsessed with the 'why' of the killing. Why this way? Why so brutal? Revenge? Maybe. Rape? It happened. But mutilate the girl afterwards? No. Kill her? No. Even a raider would not do that. He would want to save her for later.

So, this was not raiders out on a killing spree. Although the wounds would have been terribly painful, they did not coincide with the kinds of torture Trent had read about. He searched his memory, thinking of all the men, or women for that matter, that he knew. He searched for anything to help him understand. Finally, he admitted to himself that he did not have a clue.

Raiders killed in anger. They killed to protect hunting rights, often laying claim to a certain section of country. Some of the wilder ones he knew would kill just for the sheer joy of battle, but that same battle would involve another man and be in a stand-up fight, like the men he'd fought with earlier. Who would do this?

This killing was different, and that difference chilled him. It was not a killing over clean water, or a place to sleep, or something to eat. Someone had done this for the sheer joy of killing. From this perspective, an inkling of understanding dawned on him and he looked at the body again. All the wounds were precisely made. If there was anger here, it did not show in the way the girl died. At least, nothing showed on the surface. There was no mad slashing or stabbing wounds. One thing he suspected. Whoever had done this ... had liked it.

Trent stopped by the branch used as a broom to rough up the grass. He squatted on his heels and looked closely at the ground. Whoever had done this had tried to brush out their tracks, sweeping the branch across the grass and dirt until he came close to an outcropping of limestone leading into the forest. Trent assumed that would be the killer's escape route. Slowly, he looked for a sign, and finally, close to the first rock, found the only clue he was to find. A smooth, rounded impression in the dirt that could be a heel print. Moccasins? Trent put his foot beside it. The print was smaller than his. Not much, but it was a start.

Suddenly, a cold chill swept over him. The warning bells he had been ignoring clamored inside his head again. He was not alone.

Chapter 3

Trent straightened and turned slowly to see a woman standing at the edge of the forest. The coldest blue eyes he had ever seen stared, unblinking, down the 20-inch barrel of an AK-90 assault rifle. Her eyes did not waver a fraction, and a quick glance told him the safety on the weapon was down, and off. The black bore of the barrel looked large enough to ride through with his hat on.

She stood on the uphill side of his position. *Higher ground, military?* From that point, she appeared to be tall, nearly as tall as his six feet, with long blond hair, tied in a ponytail. The first few buttons on her thin cotton blouse were undone, because of the heat he guessed, and the action of aiming the rifle had parted the front to reveal the gap between her breasts. The white skin beneath contrasted with the dark tan at her throat, and despite the danger, his gaze lingered.

She filled out her homemade buckskin pants the way a woman should, and how she filled them made him sweat.

Leather boots covered her feet. *Sensible*. A long bladed hunting knife hung from a belt strapped around her waist and the scabbard was tied to her leg with a buckskin thong. *Dangerous*.

When he finally raised his eyes from her body to her face, her eyes mocked him.

"Sure took you a long time to get to my face," she said, in a low, censoring tone.

A slow grin broke the serious lines of his face. "I take my time with beautiful things."

They stood watching each other, both slightly off balance in their positions. The seconds stretched thin as they looked at each other. His gaze held tight to the robin's egg blue of the girl's eyes, sinking deeper and deeper until he ached to blink.

"Drop the rifle."

Her hardened voice jolted him out of his trance. It was gamble time. She did not look like a killer.

"Can't do that," he said.

He saw the muzzle shift a fraction, but the sonic 'whap' of the bullet passing his ear still made him flinch. The muzzle flash did not distract him from watching the ejected casing make a slow, glittering arch in the sunlight, then disappear into the tall grass. Trent's heart tripped into high gear as his ears rang. Maybe he would not need to hear anything until tomorrow.

He still held her gaze over the sights of the rifle. Slowly, her eyebrow arched and he saw resolution come into her eyes.

Trent bent and placed the SKS on the ground. She followed his movement with the barrel of her gun and he almost smiled. When he straightened, she was slow to follow with the rifle. The split second cost her. Her muzzle pointed down, and his Ruger lined up with her belly.

"How in hell—" She was startled, but the rifle was coming up.

"Don't," Trent interjected quickly.

After a moment, she casually tilted her rifle and leaned it on her shoulder, muzzle pointing up and backwards. The position did not fool Trent. She could still bring the rifle to bear very quickly. He

watched her glance shift.

"Your kill?"

Trent shook his head. "Hardly."

"Do you mind if I take a look?"

"Can we call a truce first?"

She did not answer, looking instead at the barrel of the gun still lined on her belly. Realizing he still had a gun on her, and for a fleeting moment wondering how this woman could distract him so, Trent abruptly rocked back the revolver, letting the hammer down in the process, and smoothly flipped the gun into its oiled holster.

He glanced at the forest behind her, a question in his eyes that she obviously understood.

"I saw the birds," she said.

"What happened here?" she asked.

Trent glanced back at the grotesquely displayed body. Now that another woman was present, the victim's nakedness made him uncomfortable.

"A girl was killed. You don't want to go back there. It's not pretty."

"I saw you looking around. Did you find any sign?"

Trent thoughtfully rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. "Not much to see. Whoever it was, they wiped their tracks clean, and didn't leave so much as a bent twig."

"Do you mind if I take a look around?"

Trent realized she did not trust him and he couldn't blame her.

She looked steadily at Trent, and he watched her gaze slowly search his face, then take in the rest of him in a long, slow journey.

It was Trent's turn to feel uncomfortable under her scrutiny.

"You're one of Colonel Bonham's couriers." It was a statement rather than a question.

Trent inclined his head slightly and smiled at her. "Good guess."

The girl walked around Trent, keeping some distance between them. Nearing the body, she got her first real look. She gasped. "Jesus God."

Her hand came up to her mouth and she turned away for a moment. A deep shuddering breath, then a couple more, and Trent could see the strength coming into her. He watched her fight down the horror and revulsion. She straightened, and from a side view Trent saw firmness come into her face.

"You might have warned me," she said.

As he walked over to her, he could see the start of tears in her and how she denied them with a violent shake of her head.

"I wanted to see how you reacted. Women can kill as easily as men. Do you know her?"

She flinched, and apparently realizing how close they were, she stepped away from him. "Yeah, I know her."

"Where is she from?"

"Big Springs, over east of here. We're both from there."

"Who was she?"

"We called her Markie. I don't remember a last name."

"Do you know what she was doing out here? Alone?"

"Same as me."

This is like pulling teeth.

"I was wondering about that," he said. "You being alone, I mean."

"You writin' a book? What difference does it make to you?"

Trent shrugged. "Don't get testy on me. I'm just curious, is all. I don't like finding girls staked out on the ground like this."

As Trent started toward his horse for a shovel, the girl called to him. "You got a name, or will 'hey you' be all right?"

"Trent. John Trent."

The girl took a half step backward, and the barrel of the AK-90 completed a half-circle as the barrel of the gun slapped into her palm. A slick, practiced move, and somehow he knew it would be.

"I have heard of you," she said flatly.

The exploits of John Trent were known around campfires and kitchens and other gathering places where men and women congregated to talk of their new world. Stories of Trent, fired across tables, rolled about the stables; embellished and memorized by the people on this new frontier.

"Yes, I suppose you have. I've heard the stories, too. It never ceases to amaze me ... some of the things I've done."

Her eyes narrowed. "I've heard you're a brutal killer, giving no quarter to anyone, just as likely to shoot someone as look at them. I don't know. Something is wrong about you, Trent. Once I've seen you the stories just don't match—"

Trent interrupted her. "If you have heard of me, you should know I wouldn't do something like this."

"It does explain something."

Trent looked at her expectantly.

Her lips curled in a wry smile. "Tells me where that pistol came from in such a hurry."

He was unrolling a pack from his horse, looking for a small fold-up shovel, when she came up to him. He

had been watching her and was grudgingly impressed by the way she handled herself. He could not hear her walking around. She kind of toed in and glided, taking care where she walked, smooth and easy.

Trent raised his eyebrows, asking a silent question.

"You were right. I didn't need to see that."

He waited her out, hoping she would open up and talk about it. Finally...

"Markie and I were on our way to see the army at Base Camp. Sometimes we go there and pick up supplies we can't find in the deserted towns. Especially ammo. After the army swept the area clean a few years ago, some things got kind of scarce.

"I didn't know her very well and yesterday she just took off on her own. Said she would see me at the army camp."

"You didn't have any men to send?"

Trent knew at once that he had said the wrong thing. The soft blue eyes turned to flint and ice.

"Look, Mr. Army Courier, I was born and raised in these woods. You won't find anyone better, and I surely do not need to be a man to find my way around."

Trent sidetracked her with another question. "When I had the drop on you, you were still going to try and shoot me. Why'd you stop?"

She looked at him seriously a moment. "I am not so young and stupid that I don't know what can happen to women out here. I decided a long time ago that I would rather die. It's that simple."

"But then, you didn't."

She shrugged. "I also trust my own judgment. You are no killer—at least, not that way."

* * * *

It was about an hour later, and Trent had just finished digging the grave. He did not know why, but he dug it extra deep to keep varmints from uncovering her. Maybe he thought the girl deserved at least this small favor.

He did not speak as he rolled her in a spare blanket. Trent thought they were lucky. The body had not started to bloat much. He had buried a lot worse and it was always a thankless job.

Together they picked the blanket up by both ends and carried the body to the grave. After they filled the hole and packed the dirt on top, Trent turned to the girl.

"Do you know any words to say?"

She looked surprised that he had thought of it, and then nodded her assent. They bowed their heads.

"Lord," she said, "we did not know this woman much. I expect you do. She did not deserve any of this. Take care of her." She hesitated a little, anger seeping into her voice. "And take care of the one who did this to her. Amen."

She looked at Trent for approval, got it with a nod, and began gathering up her gear.

Trent was naked to the waist, sweating in the heat coming with the late afternoon sun when he packed

away his shovel. His shirt draped over the pommel of the saddle, muscles rippled across his chest and arms as he tightened the girth and made sure all the straps were tight on his packs.

"You're wounded."

He glanced down at his side, shrugging. "Just a cut. Had a little set-to with some raiders."

The girl glanced apprehensively around the clearing before bringing her gaze back to Trent. "We should be moving. They may have followed you."

"No," he said, his gaze suddenly far away. "They won't. Suppose I could know your name?"

She smiled at him, mocking him with her gaze, then said, "My name is Katie Stephens. If you make it to Base Camp, look me up. I'll be around for a few days. Or, if your dispatches take you through Big Springs..."

"Katie. Short for Katherine?"

"No one calls me Katherine but people very close to me."

"I like Katherine." Before she could reply, Trent deliberately changed the subject. "This girl we just buried, she born and raised in the woods too?"

Katie appeared momentarily flustered. "Yeah. Markie was even better in the woods than me."

"Really? Well, she was not near good enough. You think about that, Katherine Stephens."

Searching his eyes for a moment, she said, "Point taken. See you around."

"It might be better if we travel together." His hand on her arm was gentle, and she easily shrugged out of it.

"I had better go on alone." Her gaze held his, wavered a moment, then the coolness came and she turned away.

"Katherine?"

She turned back to look at him.

"He's still out there."

She shivered like from a cold chill as she replied, "I know. But, you will find I am not anything like Markie." Her voice carried quietly to him. "I won't end up like she did." Katie turned again at the edge of the clearing. "I have it."

"What?"

"It is the eyes, John Trent. Your eyes are too soft for the things you do." She stood looking at him with a satisfied smile.

"Translation?"

Katherine smiled, then said, "It means some girl might have a chance of sweeping you off your feet." It sounded light hearted, but he could tell by the way she looked at him there was a serious question there.

He smiled at her, and said grudgingly, "Maybe so."

Trent stood in the clearing after she left, thinking about what she had said about being different from the dead girl.

"I hope you are right, Katherine Stephens," he muttered to himself. "I sure as hell hope you're right."

She had gone into the dense thicket next to the clearing. He heard her patting her horse, then the creak of a saddle as she mounted. Then she was gone, making no more sound than yesterday's dreams.

He stood, looking up the mountain. Whoever had killed the girl was indeed still out there. He could feel it. Like a vein throbbing in his head, he could still feel the killer's presence. The thought came to him that, just maybe, this killing was not the first for the assailant. The method looked like some kind of ritual—and rituals were something done over and over.

The killing would have to be reported to the Colonel. Maybe they would send a patrol out. *Then again, maybe not. What is one more dead body in the wake of the millions gone before?*

Trent shook himself to free his mind of the problem. Time to quit daydreaming and deliver the dispatches. The trail ahead was dangerous enough without his being preoccupied with something else, but he could not get the picture of the mutilated girl out of his mind. He would like to get his hands on the man who had done it. Just for a little while...

John Trent pointed his horse's head toward the Army camp. He would pick up Katherine's trail, and follow her into camp. Afterwards, he had a job to do. He would be coming back.

No, Katherine, he thought, you won't end up like that.

* * * *

The Watcher stood amid the trees, silent and brooding. Far below, barely visible in the subdued light, his latest offering had lain, supplicating the heavens. Before the cleansing carrion birds could do their work, he saw them suddenly take wing in a flurry of dust and feathers. What had scared them away? His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene below. A movement at the edge of the clearing alerted him.

He watched as the man eased into the clearing, seeming to trust nothing as he gazed around him. Too far away to see facial expression, the Watcher was immediately aware when the man in the clearing accepted what had happened to the girl. He could tell by body language alone. He could feel the rage emanating from the man, and suppressed the urge to run and hide as the man in buckskins suddenly turned and looked up the mountain.

Ah, he is good. He feels. It's proper this man should find this latest offering. After all ... what good is a sacrifice-if no one sees it?

* * * *

Trent was still two days from Base Camp when he cut Katherine's trail. She had lost him the day before, but knowing her ultimate destination, he just continued toward the army camp.

He followed a small tributary that flowed toward the Upper Jacks Fork on the Currant River. The small stream kept ducking under the limestone of the mountain, and then reappearing further along. As with most of this area in Missouri, Mother Nature had reclaimed much of the land it had previously lost to man, and had recovered it with a vengeance in an amazingly short amount of time.

Any travel was slow going. There were not many paths, just an occasional game trail. Trent followed the meandering stream, stomach growling ominously, hoping for a shot at a Whitetail deer. As he rounded a large oak tree, whose trunk was nearly five feet across, he glimpsed a pool of water ahead. The pool

was beautiful, surrounded by high cattails, vines, and forest fern, with water chuckling in from an outcropping of lichen-covered limestone on the high side.

It was a beautiful scene of a natural green grotto in the forest—but not nearly as beautiful as the girl kneeling in the clear water. The pool was in a small limestone basin, and almost completely hidden from all directions. If he had come to it from any other way, he might have missed her.

Trent watched mesmerized as the girl washed herself with a mat of moss, then submerged to rinse off, coming up to catch the few rays of sunlight in her spun gold hair, water running rivulets down her tawny body. High breasted and slim hiped, this vision contrasted sharply with the camp followers he was used to seeing. He suddenly realized the girl in the pool was Katherine.

Trent stood unabashedly watching the girl in the pool. All the old memories, the wants and desires, hearth and home, children playing, the sharing ... all the things he had ever dreamed of came bursting through his veins in a flash of emotion. For a moment, his senses reeled just from the sheer wanting of something so normal again.

Silently easing through the underbrush, Trent found her pile of clothing. With a small smile, he made some adjustments.

While he had been watching her, she had turned her back to him. Now she turned and stood to come out of the pool. Her hands were up in her hair, twisting it into a braid and squeezing the water out. The blond hair, darkened by the water, was long, with a natural healthy sheen few women had anymore. She looked around the perimeter of the pool, testing the breeze like an animal.

The one place she had not looked was toward Trent, which gave him the only clue of what came next.

As she got closer, she lunged in a flat dive for her weapons. Her hands hit the pile of clothes and she came up with the Browning in one hand, and her knife in the other. Facing Trent, who sat nonchalantly on a rock, she bore no resemblance to the silky lilith who had just been bathing in the pool. With eyes hard as agate, she stood in a fighter's stance. Her hair clung wetly to her neck and had fallen across her chest, but did not conceal the dirt and leaves sticking to her breasts and upper part of her body.

He watched her breathing start to settle as she recognized him and apparently decided he did not present any immediate danger. The smile he gave her, and the appreciative gaze over her body, didn't seem to be improving her disposition.

"Enjoying the show?"

Trent chuckled. "Oh, yes."

She thumbed back the hammer on the Browning. "Get out of here."

"Not yet." Trent smiled a little larger.

She pulled the trigger and the hammer fell on an empty chamber. There had not been any change in her expression, the usual widening of the eyes just before action, no warning at all. Just ... click.

The second surprise came when, without any hesitation, she threw the empty pistol at Trent, then followed it in with her knife, cutting edge up. Anyone watching would have laughed as Trent awkwardly lunged backward off the rock. She came right over the rock, and landed in the middle of him while he rolled. They came to a stop with her on top, knife ready to plunge, but the barrel of Trent's pistol nestled under her chin.

Water dripped from her hair onto his face as she panted in anger as much as at the exertion. Her breath smelled of the spearmint leaves she must have chewed earlier in the day, and her eyes were level, shining hard with resolve. For a minute, Trent thought she would try it. She was mad and scared, and it was in her to try to end it right here, and decide her fate with her own hand.

Gradually, a little sanity returned and her eyes turned wary.

"Easy, Katherine," he said. "Let's not make any mistakes."

With her weight settled in on top of him, and her breasts swinging above his face, Trent was having a hard time keeping his mind on the matter at hand. Slowly, keeping the gun at her throat, he rolled her off onto her side, and took her knife. Nearly identical to his, it would have gutted him easily. As he knelt over her, seeing the fear and dread start in her eyes, he realized what she expected next.

Standing up, he reached down and took her arm, pulling her to her feet. He looked straight into her eyes. She did not shrink away from him, or try to cover herself. She stood defiant before him, and he liked her even more for it.

"Look," Trent said. "I am sorry. I was out of line. I played a poor joke. But you should know better than this. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Why should I know better?" she said hotly. "I don't even know you."

"You will," he said gruffly, and gave her a gentle shove back toward the water. "Wash up, and get dressed."

She looked at him, seeming to doubt, speculation furrowing her brow.

"We'll talk," he said, because he desperately wanted to know her.

As she looked at him wonderingly, he walked away. She seemed to realize she was standing naked, and rushed back to the pool and her clothes.

A short distance away, Trent had seen a shallow depression where an old cedar grew up against a bluff. The tight foliage would diffuse the small amount of smoke from the hatful of fire he would build. He went to retrieve his pack and put some water on to boil.

Looking up, he saw the girl standing by the fire. Shifting her weight from foot-to-foot, she looked like she might bolt away at any moment. He noticed she had her weapons.

"You took my bullets." Her tone indicated he would also suck eggs and eat skunks.

Trent reached into his pouch and brought out the .380's he'd taken from her clip. Handing her the shells, he smiled slightly and said, "Sorry."

"Sure you are," she said sarcastically as she started to feed the bullets back into the clip.

"You should have known, you know, by the weight. You need to learn that."

Trent went quietly about making a stew. He had bagged a rabbit earlier, so he put that in the wooden pot, along with some arrow weed bulbs and wild onions.

"You followed me," she said.

"Yes, I did."

She stared at him until he shrugged.

"I wanted to make sure you got to Base Camp all right." He smiled "I didn't expect to find you in the pool. Lost my head, I guess."

Raising one eyebrow, she asked, "Is that all?"

"Of course not." He looked at her steadily. "I admit it. I want to know you. Satisfied? I was afraid I would not see you again."

"You said I should know you wouldn't hurt me. How, Trent? Like I said, I don't know you. All I know is what I have heard, and that's not been too good." She hesitated a moment, then sighed. "All right. I am a big girl. I will not deny I am attracted to you. But, the things I hear ... I'm not sure I *want* to know you."

"You are entirely correct, and I'm sorry."

"And, you shouldn't sneak up on people."

He grinned at her. "Somehow, I think you are going to make me do irrational things."

After studying him a minute, she sat cross-legged across the fire from him, studied the pot, then said, "Why doesn't the wood burn?"

"Won't," he said, "as long as the fire stays below the water line. The water absorbs the heat."

"Why not use a metal pot? There are plenty of old camping supplies around."

"It is too dangerous. Metal shines and rattles in your pack when you bump it, so I don't carry it."

She looked at him in wonderment. "Are you always so careful?"

"Hope to be ... likely die if I'm not."

The girl sat across the fire from him and leaned forward to smell the stew. "Whatever is in there, it smells pretty good." She looked at him. "I can do better."

"No doubt." He looked at her seriously. "Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

Her chin came up defiantly. "I've survived so far."

Trent looked at her levelly. "You've survived through no fault of your own. What if I had been someone else? Anyone could have followed you, and then you would be dead or something worse. And lady, you saw what something worse can look like, back down the trail."

She tried to hold his gaze but failed. "Why didn't you?"

"What?"

Her head snapped up. "Rape me. Kill me. Take your pick."

"Not my style."

She gave him a radiant smile as Trent looked warily at her.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't," she said. "Thank you. You are sure getting your eyes full. You acted the same back at the clearing where we found Markie. Haven't you seen a woman in awhile?"

Trent snapped out of his stare. "No. At least, not one like you."

Katie settled back against a rock. "So, John Trent, what do we do now?"

"We rest. We talk. Then we will see." Trent grinned at her. "Who knows, you might get to like me."

* * * *

Katie cradled a cup of coffee in her hands, made from the one metal utensil in Trent's pack, a coffee pot so blackened by campfires it had ceased to shine. She marveled at how peaceful the forest seemed, and felt surprise at being able to relax with a stranger, alone in the forest. But, thinking on it, he did not seem like a stranger. It had also been a long time since she had any real coffee to drink, other than the brew made from local Chicory root. She decided to enjoy it, at least for the moment.

The quietness of the forest settled in. First light, and evening, was always this way. The mist hung over the ground, swirling slightly in the breeze. Birds called, and the smells of the forest were always the strongest at the beginning, or end of the day.

Katie shook leaves from her hair and on impulse, let it out of the braids she had hurriedly put together. Taking a comb from her pack, she ran it through her hair, looking speculatively at Trent. In a rugged way, he was handsome, although older than she. His age did not matter to her, but it sure would with her father. She caught him looking at her and felt a sudden pull toward those gray eyes and quick hands.

"It's quiet here," she said softly.

"Yes, it is, but the forest is alive with sound. You just have to learn to notice it. In the old days, there was so much noise around, you could not hear anything. They called it noise pollution. Not a problem anymore."

"You sound almost glad things have changed."

"I can like the changes without liking the way it came about."

Katie watched Trent clean his guns. "Why so much attention to them? Why keep them so clean? Twice I have seen you, and both times you worked on your guns."

"This new world we've got, sometimes these guns are the only thing between me and being dead. I don't want to be dead." He looked at her pensively. "Especially now."

Silence followed for a moment and she watched him with satisfaction. Katie smiled, knowing she had the power to make this man, this warrior, uncomfortable. Perversely, she wondered if he had a woman already, and if she made him uncomfortable too.

"I'm going to find a place to sleep for the night," Trent said. "You're welcome to come along if you want. Your choice."

She looked at him speculatively, conflicting emotions jumbling her thoughts. Surprising herself, she said, "I'll tag along—for awhile."

* * * *

They moved out late with Trent in the lead. Disdaining the game trails, she watched him weave a path through the thick undergrowth, constantly keeping an eye out for a place to spend the night. He'd told her they would have a cold camp, with no fire to attract attention. She guessed discomfort was another price of survival, and felt amazed at the amount of information he'd given her in a short amount of time. Cooking was done during the day, then camp was moved somewhere else to lessen the chance of

discovery. You never wanted anyone to see you before you saw them. Ever.

They found a spot under a white oak. The canopy of leaves would keep the dampness off and the wide expanse of dried leaves on the ground would give warning if anything approached.

She knew it was not only the people they had to worry about. This was a land of black bear, wild pigs, and more than once she had seen the tawny mountain lion, any of which would be hard to handle, especially at night.

Katie watched him stake out the horses, then wrap himself in a blanket. After a quick look around, he appeared to go to sleep immediately.

She sat for a while staring at the man. Reviewing the events of the day, she shook her head slowly in the darkness and smiled. *A woman needs a man just as much as he needs her.* Unless she missed her guess, this was quite a man. Maybe, just maybe...

* * * *

Dust rose in lazy clouds as four men pulled up in front of the rundown shack centered in the clearing. Slouched in their saddles, the men surveyed the area, looking for signs of life in the adjoining buildings. The forest was slowly winning the battle to take back the clearing. The barn had fallen in and the attached stock pens were overgrown with weeds. Smoke rose slowly from the chimney of the house.

"You better be right about this one, Pagan." Red Seaver's voice took on a plaintive note. "The woman at the last place we hit was downright ugly, and fatter 'n a cow."

The other men snickered, until Pagan Reeves silenced them with a glance. "I didn't know you were so particular, Red."

"He ain't," one of the other men said, grinning and spitting a wad of tobacco into the weeds.

"Hello, the house." Pagan Reeves voice echoed in the small clearing. When no response came, he said conversationally, "I know you're in there, McCracken. You don't come out, we'll just burn this shack down around your ears."

The front door creaked open and a gaunt man dressed in bib-overalls stepped onto the porch. A floppy hat came down to his ears, and his bare feet were stark white against the weathered boards of the porch. He held a shotgun in one hand, pointed at the floor.

"I told you last time, Pagan. We want no part of you." The man's voice dripped with Arkansas drawl.

Pagan grinned at him. "Don't matter a bit, McCracken. You had your chance. Now you do not. So, why don't you call out your women? Me and the boys would like to get acquainted."

"What do you—"

The man stopped short at the sight of Pagan's gun on him. Casually, grinning widely, the other men drew their weapons.

"Drop the shotgun," Pagan said.

Nervously, the settler started sidling toward the door, until a shot from Pagan's gun splintered the boards in front of him. The shotgun fell to the floor, next to McCracken's bloodied feet.

Immediately, Red Seaver and the others jumped from their mounts and swarmed onto the porch. One of

the men knocked McCracken senseless with the butt of a pistol as they brushed past him into the house. Moments later, they emerged, towing two women behind them.

"Now this is more like it."

Seaver held the younger of the two girls. His hands pulled up her blouse, squeezing and fondling. Both girls were crying, looking at their father lying next to the house.

Pagan Reeves dismounted and walked up to the girls. Stopping at the older girl, he gently cupped one of her breasts. He spoke without turning his head. "Big, you and Smith keep watch for a while. Red and me have the first call on these ladies."

Big Waters started to grumble, but a glance from Pagan shut him up. "You'll get your turn, Big, as many times as you want."

As the youngest girl started to scream, Seaver silenced her with a slap.

"Hey," Waters shouted, "don't mess them up too much."

* * * *

The sun was sliding past noon, leaving scant shadows around Pagan Reeves as he sat on a stump out in the yard. The McCracken girls were cleaning up after the meal they were forced to prepare for the men. Both were naked, and the younger girl had blood running down one leg.

Standing, Pagan said, "We had better be going. We're burning daylight, boys." He looked at Seaver. "You know what to do with them, don't you, Red?"

Red Seaver grinned as he pulled his knife. "Oh, I surely do."

"No. Don't hurt them any more, Pagan." The muffled and anguished cry came from the girls' father.

"You should have joined us when you had the chance, McCracken."

"You people are vermin. Not fit to live on this earth. Some day you will get yours. I just wish I'd be there to see it." McCracken's voice choked with emotion and his own blood. "Girls? I am sorry, girls. I should've done better for you."

Hours later, the four men reined in their lathered horses at a junction in the trail.

"We'll split up here. Seaver, you take the men and head for Big Springs. Look around for some more people. You know the kind we want." Pagan's tone was terse, his mind on other things.

"Where you goin'?"

"I think it's time to pay another visit to the Sanchez ranch."

The men exchanged grins. "I know what you're after. That Sanchez woman is mighty fine looking."

"Forget it," Pagan said. "That's one I won't share. Besides, we get her cattle and we'll have all the women we want."

Reeves stopped at the edge of the forest, calling back to Seaver. "Red, you see Hobbs, you send him to Base Camp after that bartender—what's his name, Walsh? He's been giving colonel what's-his-name too much information. Time we put a stop to it."

Seaver raised his hand in answer and jogged his horse down the trail with Big Waters and Jumbo Smith.

Chapter 4

Trent rode into the east side of Base Camp Bravo, leaving the protection of the forest and the things he understood—sliding his horse down the rocky embankment and scattering leaves onto Farm Road AP. He let his horse blow a moment as he reacquainted himself with the layout of the Army base Colonel Bonham had put together a few years ago.

Shunning the main roads, the colonel built his camp right in the middle of the part of Mark Twain National Forest skirting the White Fork River. Equidistant between Vanzant, to the west, and Burnham to the east, the camp was just a wide place in the road. It was comprised of a few buildings and storage bunkers and was surrounded by the rolling hills and forest of the Ozark Mountains. The colonel chose this location for its remoteness and easy accessibility to the forest he hoped to control.

As a primary mission, Base Camp Bravo was to make seasoned soldiers out of raw recruits sent from the plague-ravished land back east, and somehow by their very presence, bring law and order to the new surrounding countryside. If you had fuel, and most did not, you could reach the camp by vehicle. The Army had dwindling supplies, hoarded and confiscated from civilians, but those supplies were for very special occasions.

He watched, slightly amazed, while a green truck, the back covered with a green tarpaulin, disgorged a squad of men dressed in green clothes, faces streaked with camouflage paint, and carrying packs full of standard and useless army issue equipment. Lessons learned in jungle war across the globe, bought with blood, were still ignored.

Trent rode toward the main building where he hoped to give his dispatches to Colonel Bonham, passing by the soldiers on the way. He carefully looked them over as he rode by. All had packs piled high on their backs. With the packs catching on every tree limb they passed, coupled with wearing a steel pot on their heads, those men would be deaf and blind in the forest while their enemies would be able to hear them coming hundreds of yards away. Trent saw one man looking at his SATCOM navigation gear, while another calibrated motion and heat sensors. Assuming they recharged the batteries from a vehicle, how would they do it out there? Amazing. Useless.

The soldiers watched him as he rode by. The variety of expressions was typical. Some looked at him with scorn, some with suspicion, most with open hostility. Trent knew the drill. He had been part of it once. He did not dress like them; therefore, he was not with them. Anyone not with them was against them. Their confidence in themselves revealed a subtle arrogance, the result of superior weapons and training ... they thought. What they did not know was how inadequate their training was. Fire teams and massive firepower would not save them in the forest. They would need to think, to adapt. And fight. Fight as they had never dreamed. Hopefully, they would learn. If they lived.

Guiding his horse from shade to shade, tree to tree, he finally ended his round-about route under the spreading arms of a box elder tree. He tied the reins to a branch, and threw the saddlebags across his shoulders. Finding his way into the building, he walked down a short corridor, where the floor shined enough he could see his face in it. *Some things never change*. He chased his reflection to the end of the hall and the young soldier standing guard.

"Colonel in?"

The man looked at him, wrinkling his nose a little at the smell. You didn't ride a sweaty horse all day without picking up a little fragrance along the way.

"Not here." The answer was a nonchalant version of 'get out of here and leave me alone'.

Trent stared, until the young man started to show color in his cheeks.

"Son, suppose you got a place for these dispatches? The colonel will want to see them."

The private took the bags, a slow warming of respect in his eyes. Even new recruits knew about couriers. "Sorry. You could have told me you were a courier. I thought you were one of the locals, in to beg food or ammo from the colonel."

"Not likely." He turned away. "I'll be at the Bucket if he wants me."

Trent led his horse to the white-boarded corral and turned it loose. Carrying his saddle and extra pack into the barn, he was accosted by a shriveled imp of a man wearing faded overalls and sporting a long tobacco-stained white beard. Trent idly wondered how long it would be before the old and battered gimme cap, with the picture of a green tractor on it, would move.

"Thought you was dead, Trent. Them raiders must be gettin' soft, lettin' you traipse around the country all the time." He moved his green baseball cap to set jauntily on the back of his head. *About ten seconds.*

Trent gave him a wry grin. "Got close a couple of times. How have you been, Pop?"

"Cain't complain." The old man cackled, showing stained teeth, and pulled the cap level again.

"All right to leave my stuff here, maybe overnight?"

"Just a night? You go over to the Bucket, you may not come back for a week. I hear they's a new batch of girls over there." He smiled wickedly, shifting his cap around. "Wouldn't know myself, of course. Too old, you know?"

Trent grinned, shaking his head in mock amazement. Tossing his pack in a corner, he pulled the clip from his SKS and locked back the bolt, ejecting the round from the barrel. Catching the spinning cartridge in the air, he replaced it in the clip and dropped the SKS Paratrooper on top of the pile.

"You still got that old gun? Why ain't you got one of the new fancy Colt guns the Army's givin' away, or one of them AK-90s you can find layin' about?"

Trent looked at his rifle with affection. The type 56 SKS Paratrooper, with its folding stock and snap under bayonet, had seen a lot of use. Even so, it was still accurate to a thousand yards, and a formidable weapon. Of more importance, it used the most common ammunition found in the United States, or the world: the 7.62mm NATO round.

"This one hasn't worn out yet."

"Know what you mean, I guess. Though, I never could figure it. You take a gun that's supposed to be accurate to half-way roun' the world, shoots from now to next week, then you duck into the woods with it where you can't see more 'n fifteen feet. Don't make sense."

The old man's eyes clouded over as his mind went down memory lane. He shifted his cap to a more serious angle.

"I remember back in '90, street price on that gun was sixty bucks with a box of five hundred rounds of ammo for another twenty. There must have been thousands of them. Had a sign over in the hardware

store 'war surplus AK's and SKS rifles ... only dropped once'."

Chuckling at his own humor, the old man moved his cap to the back of his head and waddled back into the barn, his skinny legs bowed like parentheses.

As Trent was leaving, he turned. "Seen a young girl come in? Tall, blond, well set up and riding a mouse-colored gelding?"

The old man shook his head. "Nope. Wished I had. Sounds like she's worth looking at."

"She is," Trent said, as he passed out the door.

The day before Katie had decided to go on ahead of him to Base Camp. She said she needed to think.

"Won't do no good," the old man joked. "If she sees me first, she'll never look at you again. Hey," the old man shouted at Trent's back. "You ain't getting soft on some woodsy girl are you?"

Trent heard the old man cackling for a block.

* * * *

The Bucket-O-Blood emerged overnight, even faster than the base camp. Running pack trains into the old deserted cities, Charley Walsh brought fresh supplies of liquor and hard goods into the camp almost weekly. His place was always crowded, the noise level maintained a dull roar, and today proved no exception. He had two things making the frontier bearable for soldiers who did not really want to be there: women and liquor.

Trent paused at the doorway, wiping sweat from his forehead as his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting in the room. Settling his webbed duty belt, he stopped long enough to tie the leather thong, at the bottom of his holster, around his thigh. He kept the thong untied while riding, mostly out of convenience. Now, it might make all the difference if he needed his gun in a hurry. He had Velcro fasteners once. They were easy to use, but once dirt got in them ... modern was not always best.

Most of the tables were full, but the bar had room. Trent planted his elbows on the counter top, hooked his heel on the foot rail, and yelled at the bald-headed man at the end of the bar.

"Can a man get a drink around here?" Trent said.

Charley Walsh turned around with a smile. "Trent." He said the word like it was a puzzle and he had all the answers. "You made it back."

"Some reason you thought I wouldn't?"

The two men shook hands, the slow grasp of friends who had not seen each other for a while.

"Did you bring good news or bad?"

"Little of both," Trent said with aplomb. "The good news is the forest is still there, green and beautiful as ever, cool and quiet. You should see the deer. They are multiplying like rabbits. The game is coming back, Charley. A man couldn't starve out there if he tried."

"What's the bad news?" Charley asked, guardedly.

"The bad news is the raiders still own it."

"I hear you," Charley said.

Trent knew Charley had always dreamed of living in a cabin, high on a mountain so he could just sit and watch the world go to hell.

"So, what's going on in Base Camp, Charley?"

"You didn't notice," Charley said, disgustedly, "with all the Mr. *Green Jeans* traipsing around like they owned the place?"

"Any news from back East?" Trent asked.

"Same as usual. Industry is picking up a little, and most of the plague is gone. The bacterial rot has never come back, thank you Lord. Things are so peaceful back in the real world, the army has run out of things to do. So they are going to launch a campaign out here to save us all from ourselves. Now you know why so many extra troops are around. They just cannot understand how we can live without them."

"Who's going to save the Army?" Trent's voice was sardonic as the two men laughed together. They had discussed this subject before.

Walsh jutted his chin at the recruits surrounding one of the tables. "Not this bunch."

Trent chuckled. "I saw Pops over at the livery. How old is he, Charley?"

"Dunno. Looks an even hundred, but he is probably not a day over ninety-nine. They say he's been through it all."

"Looks to me like someone soaked him until he shrunk. I have never seen so many wrinkles on one human in my life."

Charley's expression clouded over. "Trent, you ever wonder how it would have been if the lights hadn't gone out? If the damned plague and starvation didn't hit the world so hard? I found an old newspaper the other day. Reading about it was downright depressing. Seems like everything quit working at once, and people just couldn't believe what was happening. Runaway virus that medicine could not stop. Super strains of bacteria dissolving flesh, for Chris' sake. Sometimes I..."

"Charley," Trent said softly.

Charley looked at Trent, startled out of his reverie.

"Just let it go, partner," Trent said. "You can't change it. We have to take the world the way it is. Just let it go."

"Yeah." Charley slowly perked up. "Hell, yes. I almost lost it for a minute. It just doesn't do any good to think about it."

Trent had been looking over the people in the room while conversing with Walsh. Thinking of the murdered girl, he looked at the people around him with new eyes, eyes that were at the same time jaded, and curious. Who could do such a thing? What would they be like? How would they act in public? Trent's thoughts bounced around in his head as he scanned the small crowd.

For the most part, the clientele were not any different from those found in other various settlements around the interior. Nearly everyone in the large room wore a uniform of some sort, and carrying weapons was second nature to them. The exceptions were the working girls. They were not wearing much of anything, and he could not see how they could possibly be hiding any weapons.

Thinking of which ... "Charley, you see a tall blond girl come into town in the last day or so? Good looking, maybe six feet tall, looking to buy supplies?"

"That's a big girl." Charley thought a moment, his face screwed up in the palm of his hand.

"Nope," he said. "Course, the only women coming in here are usually looking for a job. Are we talking about that kind of girl?"

"Not likely. At least, I don't think so."

Trent's mind was already back in the crowd, and his answer preoccupied. His attention was drawn to a table occupied by a group of yelling, screaming recruits out to set a new record for good times. At a table next to them were four hard-eyed men conspicuous by what they were not doing. Trent pointed with his chin at the somber group.

"What's the story on them?"

Charley cast a worried glance their way, then leaned closer to Trent. "Best leave them alone. They ain't locals, and they sure as hell ain't army. All I know is they came in here about an hour ago, parked at a table, and didn't even order a drink."

Looking at the men, Trent thought they were more likely wolves in sheep's clothing, or raiders doing a little scouting of their own. He wondered suddenly just how many soldiers were in camp. It would be embarrassing to have the soldiers out looking for raiders, while the raiders took over the camp. Trent decided that would be a good question for the colonel.

Suddenly, the door to the saloon opened, and a man stepped through. Looking around the gloomy interior of the room, he went directly to the table surrounded by mercs, and sat down.

Ben Hobbs! New interest held Trent now, and he quietly slid his drink away. While acting as if he was rubbing a sore leg, he casually slipped the thong off the hammer of his pistol. The leather thong kept the gun from falling out of the holster accidentally, but if Trent needed the gun in a hurry, there would not be time to take it off. John Trent was a careful man. He had helped bury men who were not.

Hobbs was a mercenary for hire. Sometimes he worked for settlers, occasionally he ran with raiders, but usually he worked for himself. He was bad all the time, and could not be trusted. Although Trent had not heard much about him lately, any place Ben Hobbs would be, there was going to be trouble.

Trent knew Walsh had seen him move his drink away; knew he'd felt the subtle change that came to the room by his casual movement toward his shotgun, kept under the counter.

A couple of hill men got up, nodded to Walsh, and walked unhurriedly through the back door; others squared around so they could watch the front. The party of recruits seemed blissfully unaware of the looming problem.

Amid a peal of laughter, one of the soldiers suddenly scooted back his chair and jostled one of the mercs at the other table. Slowly the merc stood up, his spilled drink making a dark splotch on his pants and shirt. He had an automatic handgun strapped to his waist, and held a folded up Mac-10 machine pistol in his hands.

"You sojer boys are cutting it kind of wide, ain't you?"

"What?" The young soldier looked stupidly at him, his mouth working like a fish out of water as he tried to think of something to say. He was too drunk to hear the danger signals going off in his head.

"I said you are a piece of shit." The merc waited, as if he had already choreographed the scene.

The young soldier let out a growl and slammed up from his chair. The rest of the men at his table stood up, watching the byplay. None of them was armed.

As the soldier stood, the merc slashed him across the face with the MAC-10, showering the table with blood.

"Hold it." Charley Walsh held his shotgun across his chest, the barrel pointed at the ceiling. "You just hold it." Charley's voice sounded loud in the suddenly quiet room. "There will be no fighting in here. Understood?"

Trent, watching carefully, suddenly realized Charley was out of position. If he needed to, he would not be able to get his shotgun into action fast enough.

The merc brought the machine pistol up.

If he cuts loose in these close quarters ... Trent moved into action.

He knew nothing in the world was louder than the sound of a gun cocking from an unexpected direction. The sound of the hammer rocking back on Trent's Ruger froze the merc. He was caught in his own trap, and afraid to move. Turning his head slightly, the merc saw Trent out of the corner of his eyes, could see the light glinting off the pistol, and saw the dark bore of the barrel pointing straight at him.

"Ben Hobbs." Trent hesitated a moment as the name echoed in the room, then said conversationally. "Call him off."

Trent looked directly at the mercs. All the men were waiting for something to happen, holding weapons on their laps instead of in their holsters. It looked like a set up to Trent, and he suddenly realized the target was Charley, although he was not sure why. It really did not matter. Charley was game enough, but he was not a gunfighter. And, Charley Walsh was his friend.

Finally, Hobbs said, "Forget it."

The merc slowly straightened, the barrel of the MAC-10 jerking toward the ceiling. He was at last able to turn, and his gaze found Trent in the gloomy room.

"Some other time?"

"No," Trent said.

"How about now, outside?"

"Mister, I do not know you. Why be in such a hurry to die?"

The merc's gaze was wild, and Trent had a sudden thought about drugs, which was one of two things you did not see much of anymore. The second thing was fat people.

"Well, I cain't dance." The merc grinned. "And, the stock market's busted. Mr. Green Jeans done stole all the gas for my four-wheeler, and I ain't killed a man in a week. I guess I just need the entertainment."

"Forget it." Trent returned to the bar, never losing sight of the merc in the mirror.

The man stood uncertainly for a moment before sitting down, banging his MAC-10 on the table. As the gun bounced and clattered, the men around the table flinched. Hobbs quickly reached out and set the

safety on.

Hobbs and his men conversed in a low murmur, then got up together and strode from the room. Collective sighs of relief went around from the rest of the patrons.

Trent walked over to the table of recruits. All of them were now stone cold sober.

"You wannabe soldiers listen to me." Trent's voice was level and cold. "Don't you *ever*..." He paused to let his words sink in. "*Ever* go anywhere without your weapon. Your weapon is the first thing you pick up in the morning, and the last thing you lay down at night. You sleep with it like it's the best lover you ever had." Trent's voice suddenly changed to a roar. "Do you understand?"

The recruits flinched back in their chairs, and Trent turned back toward the bar amid a chorus of 'yessirs' from the table.

"I thought we was going to have to shoot that boy." Walsh's voice sounded matter-of-fact.

"So did I. Charley, have you made anyone mad lately? This was a setup if ever I saw one. They wanted you."

"Don't know." Charley scratched his head quizzically. "Been helping the colonel some. Lettin' him know who was on the up-and-up around here, that sort of thing. Nothin' serious."

"Someone must be taking it seriously."

Again, the door banged open, but this time it was the young private from the colonel's office. He came purposefully toward Trent. *Definitely a man on a mission.*

"Colonels compliments, Mr. Trent," the young soldier said. "He'd like to see you in his office."

"Ain't he purty, John?" Charley said. "Don't you just feel safe all over with him running about?"

Trent tossed his drink off, gave Charley a grin and strode out the door, with the private right on his heels. He walked right into trouble.

The merc from the bar stood in the middle of the street, legs spread, hands brushing the butt of his auto. Maybe he had seen one of those old western vids, and loved the look of it. Trent sighed softly. It was not over.

The hard voice of the merc rang between the buildings. "I heard you was something with a gun, woods runner. I'd like to see just how good."

Trent looked at him calmly. After the first rush of adrenaline, his nerves always steadied out. His heart was beating a slow sixty. He had been down this road before.

"You don't want to do this, son."

"Really?" The merc was shouting. "I can take you any day."

"Then, do it."

The merc had probably found a mirror somewhere. He had cut quite a picture, with his low-slung gun in a tactical holster and his fast draw. He dreamed of being famous, of gaining fear and respect from people on the frontier. He never dreamed of the years of hard work, or the kind of fire it takes to mold and temper a man like John Trent; and he never dreamed of dying. He just could not picture himself dead in

that mirror.

As the merc's hand dipped to the auto holstered at his side, Trent seemed to be waiting. Time ticked by with a measured cadence for the people who watched along the street. It must have seemed to the onlookers that Trent wasted precious time checking bystanders who might be in the line of fire. He then stepped to the right to clear himself from the young soldier who had unwittingly bumped into him from behind. Most of the people watching thought Trent had waited too long.

A single shot echoed up and down the street. One of the bar girls gasped, hand to her mouth as she looked at Trent, sure he was dead. But no blood appeared on Trent, and he was holding his Ruger steady on the merc.

The merc slowly bent at the middle, a macabre bow at the end of a poor performance. He had not even got a shot off. The merc raised his eyes to look at Trent and then crumpled face down in the street. Tail up, and nose in the dirt, he was dead.

Trent shifted his gun to cover the group across the street. Ben Hobbs and John Trent locked gazes across the narrow street. Hobbs' right hand was on his half-drawn gun, and his men were waiting, their eagerness to kill apparent in their faces.

"Any reason I shouldn't kill you too, Hobbs? You put that boy up to this," Trent said in a hard voice.

When Hobbs spoke, his voice was a painful rasp. "I'd just as soon not die today, Trent."

"Then take your hand away from the gun."

Hobbs' hand moved as if jerked with a rope. His auto fell back into its nylon holster.

Trent kept his single-action lined on Hobbs' belly. He chuckled. "Reckon you owe me one, Hobbs."

Hobbs stared angrily at him a moment, then turned and walked away. His men followed more slowly, casting murderous looks between their fallen comrade and Trent.

Trent was surprised. They had lost face twice in the last hour. Any self-respecting group of mercs could not afford that. People might get the wrong idea and think they were soft.

Holstering his gun, Trent walked toward the colonel's office. The private did not follow him so closely this time. As they passed the livery doorway, Trent said, "Pops, put that rifle away. I like to shot you when that barrel poked out the window."

Pop's shrill cackle echoed from deep within the barn. Trent wondered if the cap was back, or forward. Probably forward. Maybe.

Chapter 5

The old building shuddered from the storm erupting within its walls. The office seemed to expand, forcing dust from the nooks and crannies of ill-fitting lumber by the sheer force of noise. Army personnel standing guard at different points in the building avoided looking at each other and turtled their heads down a little tighter to their shoulders. Lieutenant Saints, who had just sat down outside the door, got up and walked up the hall away from the noise.

Lined up along the hall were wooden chairs, available for people waiting to see the colonel. The girl sitting in one of the chairs shook her head at the adjutant's invitation to go with him. She smiled, hands folded across her stomach, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, listening to the tirade going on inside.

The colonel, sitting behind the desk in the exploding office was getting older by the minute, his face swollen in rage, blood pressure at record levels for a man still alive.

"Christ on a pogo stick, Trent! Have you gone insane? You going raider on me? Losing your grip? What in God's name are you trying to do? Kill all the raiders by yourself? Are you that crazy? I was watching that little scene out the window, Trent. What was that? Code duello? Shootout at the OK Corral? Jesus!"

Trent could not keep the smile off his face as he contemplated the irreverent picture conjured up by the colonel. Leave it to an ex-drill instructor to come up with something like that.

"Conversation kind of dried up, Frank," Trent said softly, in contrast to the verbal fusillade coming from his superior, echoing through the building like a thunderstorm over the horizon. Too many had made the mistake of thinking John Trent was like his voice. Too many had died trying to figure out the difference.

Frank Bonham, a field colonel retired to a desk job by a host of 7.62mm pieces of lead fired from an AK-47, glared at the man lounging in the chair before him, and Trent knew what he was thinking; had heard it all before. *An enigma. A throwback. Born two centuries too late.*

Trent unwound his lanky frame from the wooden chair, finally standing in front of the desk, making a visible effort at straightening sore muscles and stiff joints.

"Trent, you can't just up and shoot people like that," the colonel said. The colonel's voice returned to normal and his blood pressure finally appeared to be within reasonable limits.

Trent answered calmly. "What would you like me to do, Frank? He was a hard case, a merc for hire, and Ben Hobbs was out there with him. I don't know what his problem was, maybe he just didn't like the way I put on my hat. It does not matter because I did not have any choice. You, more than anyone else, should realize that.

"The raiders won't come in peaceably. They are not afraid of us, Frank. To them, the Army is trying to tear down their way of life, and they do not like it. That is how you got your legs, Frank, or don't you remember?"

The colonel was not through. "Wait a minute, Trent." He waved a packet of papers at him. It had been twenty years since the Fall and the army was still trying to run on paper.

"I have a proposition for you." The colonel talked fast, trying to hold Trent's attention. "All the particulars are in these sheets. There are letters of authority, signed by me. Who to contact, stuff like that."

Trent wheeled to look at the Colonel. "Letters of authority for what?"

"There's a situation east of here, about sixty miles. Big lake area in the Ozarks. It's a place called Big Springs. They have a good thing going out there. The place is starting to grow and has its own economy. Do you realize how important that is? They raise their own food, make their own clothes, and run two grist mills so they can grind grain and saw lumber. They are not dependant on anyone. The bad news? Raiders are also terrorizing them. The name Pagan Reeves keeps popping up. He may be the head snake, or just working for Jeremiah Starking, we do not know. I need you to go in there and find out."

"You mean scout the situation, and report back." Trent was skeptical, and showed it. Taking the sheets of paper, scanning the information, he said, "Why doesn't the army take care of this? That is right up your alley. The exercise would do your men good."

Bonham stood up, looking seriously at Trent. "John, civilization is gaining a foothold. That newsflash just may have passed you by. You, on the other hand, are making people nervous around here. My superiors think you're getting a little wild for the present locale." Bonham smiled grimly. "Besides, most of my men are busy guarding the pack trains coming out of the cities. They can't be spared."

"So what's the deal?" Trent asked.

"I have a commission for you."

"I don't want to be an officer in your damned army," Trent said levelly.

"Not that kind of commission," the colonel said huffily.

Trent smiled a little as he saw the colonel was about to the end of his patience.

"We're reinstating the office of the United States Marshal. I want you to be the first charter member." Bonham reached into a drawer, pulled out an object and tossed it on the desk in front of Trent.

It was a five-pointed star, surrounded by a smooth silver circle. In the center the inscription, *U.S. Marshal*.

"What's this, Frank, a bulls-eye?"

"Take it, John. It's about the only job I'm going to have for you." There was just a hint of pleading in the colonel's voice.

Trent sighed, and held the colonel's gaze. "Nope."

"What?"

"I'm done, Frank. I am tired, and I don't want to do it. Did you know there are parts of the country where I can go and not see anyone for months? Months, Frank. That sounds good to me. Real good."

At that moment, a girl strode into the office. Offering her hand to an astonished Colonel Bonham, she said, "I'm Katherine Stephens ... call me Katie." She turned to Trent. Her voice became soft and throaty. "Hello, again."

She had changed out of her buckskins into homespun's and shirt, and he was right about her hair. It fell to her waist.

She reached out and softly caressed his side. "How's the wound?"

Trent felt heat start at his collar and work its way upward, as Colonel Bonham looked suspiciously between the two of them.

Just to show he still had some control, he said, "I have decided to call you Katherine."

Katie looked at him, appearing momentarily nonplussed. Regaining her composure, she turned back to the man behind the desk. "Colonel, I need to talk to you."

"Please, have a seat." The two men looked quizzically at each other, mentally shrugging.

"I couldn't help overhearing you mention Big Springs. That is where I live."

It looked like she was getting ready to launch into a long story. Trent found another chair, turned it around so he could lean his forearms on the back, thumbed his hat off his forehead, and settled in. Even if he did not like the story, he could always just watch the girl.

"I have some pack animals with supplies that I have to get back to Big Springs. I had hoped to hire some men to help, but so far, I haven't found anyone. Colonel, I need an escort."

"You realize, Ms. Stephens, that we are not in the business of escorting settlers around the country," Colonel Bonham said patiently.

"I know that, Colonel. I also know you are sending out training patrols for your *Green Jeans*."

The colonel grimaced at the analogy.

Katie turned her persuasive gaze on the colonel. "It would be a simple matter for you to send a squad along as a training mission."

Trent sat with his chair tilted back on two legs, grinning at Bonham, enjoying the man's discomfort.

"How did you know that?" the colonel asked.

"There are not many secrets around here, Colonel."

Katie turned and faced Trent. "And now for you, Mister Trent. You told the colonel you wouldn't take the job of Marshal."

At Trent's cautious nod she continued. Her voice was soft and insistent, harboring a sudden, deeply suppressed anger.

"Have you forgotten the body of the girl you found? Remember Markie? Is your memory so short? Who is going to right that wrong? Who would be able to find the person who could do such a thing and then disappear into thin air? Who else but you, John Trent?"

She paused for breath, scooting her chair around to face Trent. Placing her hands on his knees, her gaze intent on his face, she said, "I've been asking around, talking to folks. People will talk to you, John, people from both sides. They know you and respect you. They'll listen to you. No one else but you could walk into a raider camp and come out alive. The settlers that are left in this area need you."

"It'll be dangerous," Bonham said, seeing an opportunity, and teaming up with the girl. "There will be no courts out there, and no military backup. Just you and that damned six-gun you like to wear. You could take your time, John. Weed it out, get the right of it, and then do not waste my time with reports. Any actions taken will be by you, on your own authority. Do you understand that, John? Do what needs to be done."

"I always have, Frank." Trent turned to Katie. "What makes you think people are ready for the law?"

"Because that's what makes a community work. Rules. So people don't step all over each other."

Trent stared at both of them momentarily. "All right. I will do it. However, understand this; I'll do it my way." He looked at Katie. "I was going back anyway, Katherine. That's one wrong I do intend to right."

The two men shook hands, gazes lingering on each other. Each knew the risks and the dangers. The handshake was a long embrace between two friends.

Colonel Frank Bonham sat back in his chair, studying the situation. "All right, here's the deal, young lady. You get a squad. They will take you as near as possible to Big Springs, and then return here. You are lucky one of our more seasoned sergeants is in camp." He paused for effect. "You'll also get our number one U.S. Marshal as scout for the trip."

The chair legs hit the floor with a sharp bang. "Frank!"

"What better way for you to get into the area?"

Katie rose from her chair, a pleased look on her face. "We leave in the morning." She looked pointedly at Trent. "First light."

"How old are you, Ms. Stephens?" Colonel Bonham asked. "Aren't you kind of young to be running around the forest alone?"

"How old do you have to be?" She paused, looking at each one for a moment, then quietly closed the door on her way out.

"Wow." Frank Bonham's voice was full of admiration.

"I think we've been had, and it only took her about thirty seconds."

"No shit," came the colonel's garrulous reply. He raised his hand as Trent started to leave. "Son."

Frank Bonham's voice had changed. Trent looked at him with dread. The only time the colonel had called him son was after his daughter's death.

Colonel Bonham cleared his throat. "We need to talk..."

The sun turned the sky to a golden hue, behind silver rimmed clouds looming in the west. A breeze found the grassy hill that stood sentinel duty above the mass graveyard in the field below. John Trent had not wanted to bury his young wife in the common graves, so he had picked a quiet place that was surrounded with boulders and trees, and had a thick carpet of grass and prairie flowers. He had laid her to rest over a year ago. Now, finally, he knew the truth about how she died.

He was just starting to leave when he heard footsteps behind him.

"Katherine."

"You got good ears."

Trent shook his head. "You walk soft enough."

Katie moved around to the other side of the grave, sat on a chair-sized rock and looked intently at him. Finally, she asked, "Did you love her?"

"I don't know. Maybe," Trent said. "We were young. We needed each other. That was enough for us. She didn't deserve what she got."

"You blame yourself."

"If I had been there, it wouldn't have happened."

"You can't know that. Look at me, John."

When she had his full attention, she said, "Women aren't helpless. We're not all fancy playthings in lace and bows who have to be protected all the time. Some of us actually do things by ourselves, with no help from anyone else. Sometimes we have to stay by ourselves. It has been that way since the first farmer took his wife west to the Promised Land. It will be that way until the end of the earth. So, it is nonsense to think that you are to blame. The only one to blame is the one who did it."

"Did I tell you she was the colonel's daughter?" Trent asked.

"No, you skipped that part. Does it make a difference?"

"He was the one who found her."

"Okay ... and?"

"He just told me she died like the girl we found in the clearing."

Katie was silent for a moment. "God, I am so sorry."

It was nearly dark, and Katie moved over by Trent. Her hand was like a burning brand on his arm, and he felt uncomfortable sitting by his wife's grave with another woman.

"Do you think she would like me?" Katie asked.

Trent laughed and surprised himself. Laughing was something he had not done in quite awhile.

"No way," he said. "She would be jealous as hell."

"Maybe. I will tell you something, though. If she were still alive, I'd take you away from her."

He looked at her quizzically.

"You were cheating yourselves, John. Needed each other? That is not enough. You need love. Passion. You need that fire in your belly that you cannot get rid of. Your senses fill with each other. Nothing else matters. If you love someone like that, you won't even see anyone else."

"That doesn't come along very often," he said.

"Oh, really. What did you feel when we were in the clearing, John? And, what about the second time? When you found me bathing in the pool, I damn near fainted. I can't believe you did not feel the same thing."

"We'd better go, Katherine."

As they stood, she was suddenly in his arms, holding his head with her hands and burning him with a kiss that stopped time in its tracks. When she released him, they were both panting and Trent could not take his eyes from her lips.

"Why don't you see," she said softly, "if you can get that out of your belly, John Trent." She moved her hand downward and chuckled. "Well, at least you want me."

After she was gone, Trent stood in the darkness. He couldn't think of a thing to say.

Chapter 6

Dawn found Trent at the holding area, just outside of base camp. He had been up before daylight, packing his gear, and cleaning his weapons. There was little to get ready, just some dried jerky for times he could not hunt, a bedroll and ammunition. It would be enough.

Settling himself under a tree, he leaned back against the trunk. He did not worry about the pack train getting by him. They had to leave camp in this direction, so the unit would probably form up around here somewhere. He automatically scanned the area, saw nothing of interest, then pulled his hat down over his eyes and went to sleep.

A few minutes later, he awoke as the first of the trainees started arriving. The soldiers were in full battle gear, carrying at least sixty pounds per man, their packs piled high on their backs. They had pots on their heads, and clunky boots on their feet. There was the usual complaining and grumbling found with any group of soldiers. Some stomped around asking foolish questions of other men who did not know any more than they did.

He could see the soldiers stealing glances at him. Dressed in jeans, with buckskin leggings and shirt, and brown bush hat that had seen better days, Trent knew he was not an impressive sight to them. He heard some comment to each other about his single-action revolver in a land of semi-automatics, and his lack of equipment. None came close enough to bother him.

"All right, fall in," a new voice shouted. The voice of authority. Trent sat up. He knew that voice.

"Gunny?"

The grizzled sergeant turned with a surprised look on his face and strode toward Trent. The men shook hands, each staring at the other.

"Been awhile, Gunny."

"It has been that. Heard you went down, last year. Something up at Caplinger Mills?" The eyes of Gunnery Sergeant Melbourne Thomas were brooding and penetrating, his face, after the initial surprise, lacking expression.

"It was a near thing."

Trent was puzzled. Where he expected a more animated reunion, all he received was a perfunctory and lukewarm greeting. The reunion was short-lived.

"Sergeant!"

Another voice of authority. Trent decided at once there were too many voices of authority around here.

Gunny turned, waving indolently at Trent, and said. "Here, Lieutenant."

"Better get them together, Sergeant Thomas. We're ready to move out." He looked with obvious distaste at Trent. "Is this our scout?" His voice left the impression that he hoped it was not. "Why can't we get army scouts?"

Trent stepped forward. "John Trent, Lieutenant. I will be going with you, and I know the country. So does she." He had heard the packhorses coming toward them, so he just pointed his thumb back over his

shoulder.

"Very well, Trent. I am Lieutenant Spencer. You'll take orders from me, and I have already been briefed on the woman." He turned briskly to Gunny. "Sergeant, we'll move out in thirty minutes. I'd like to meet with Miss Stephens, you, and the scout in fifteen. We will have a troop meeting in twenty. Understood?" Not waiting for a reply, he walked off in the direction of Katie's pack train.

"Nice guy, huh?" Trent said.

Gunny did not reply, just turned and walked off while Trent looked after him with a troubled gaze.

"This is going to be a fun trip," Trent said to himself. "I can tell."

Fifteen minutes later, they stood under the same tree. The pack train was waiting, and the trainees were standing at ease, at least as much as they could with a sixty-pound pack strapped to their backs, sweltering in the heat.

"There are a few things I want to get straight, before we leave." The lieutenant's gaze riveted both men. "Chain of command. I am in charge of this training mission. You both take orders from me. Is that understood?"

The sergeant's 'Yes Sir' dwindled into nothing as Trent walked away.

"Who gave you permission to leave, Mr. Trent?" Lieutenant Spencer's voice thundered.

Trent stopped and walked back toward the lieutenant. He saw Katie's shocked expression, and Gunny rolling his eyes, before turning his full attention on Spencer. He stopped with his nose about an inch from Lieutenant Spencer's face, and knowing how important it was to keep the trainees from losing faith in their commanding officer, kept his voice purposely soft.

"Spencer, I'm going to say this just once. First, you have no authority over me. I am a United States Marshal. New, to be sure, but it is your superiors who gave me that authority. Now, I have been around the park a few times, Lieutenant, and you will not run over me. If push comes to shove, according to the articles in my pack, and signed by Colonel Bonham, you are to assist me."

Gunny quietly tried to insert himself between the two men.

"Second," Trent continued, "I am leaving this group and going my own way, Lieutenant, because you are a walking dead man. The only chance you have for survival in these hills is to do everything your sergeant says, when he says, and how he says. Then, if your stupid arrogance doesn't get everyone killed first, you just might have a chance of coming back. Third, you did not have brains enough to get horses and pack animals for your men. Sure, they can walk it, they're tough kids. That's not the point. You need to make time, and your men need to be fresh in case you come up against raiders. And, lieutenant, you *will* come up against raiders. The fourth thing is this." Trent's voice became deadly quiet. "If you ever yell at me in that tone of voice again, I will piss on your campfire and ruin your whole day. Now, is *that* clear?"

The lieutenant tried to respond. "I'm a lieutenant in the—"

"Shove it, Lieutenant," Trent said flatly. "No one cares."

He brushed by Katie as he left. She reached out and caught his arm. "John, please don't go. I need you."

Trent stopped reluctantly. "Why? You've got Lieutenant Green Jeans."

"Do you remember those men you had trouble with outside Charley's place? They came this morning and offered to herd my pack animals. When I turned them down, they didn't like it much. John, I can smell raider a mile away. So can you. You know they will hit us on the trail, somewhere. It is just a matter of when."

Trent weighed the possibilities. He did not like any of them and realized she was right. He could imagine what Ben Hobbs' men would have done, if Katie had hired them. They would go with the pack train and, when the time was right, take it over. Since that did not work out for them, they would probably be lying up in the hills somewhere in ambush, just waiting for their chance. A show of force might just keep them away.

"What's in your packs?" he asked.

She looked at him steadily. "Guns, ammo, medicine." She smiled. "Toilet paper, which I had to promise half a forest in wood planks for payment. Just everything any self-respecting raider would kill for."

With an exasperated sigh, Trent relented. Turning back to the small group who waited for his decision, he said. "Gunny, there's a good place to camp about twenty miles east of here. On your map it's the junction of U highway and Eleven Point Creek, in grid fourteen. I will see you there tomorrow if you push hard, otherwise I will see you whenever you make it. I'm going to make a side trip first."

At Katie's questioning look, Trent said innocently, "I'm going to the library."

Chapter 7

It was the second day that John Trent had been waiting for the pack train, the third day out of base camp. He had scouted ahead of them, snooping through some of the obvious places an ambush might be staged. He did not really think the raiders would strike this early, but it was impossible to be sure. They were not stupid, and were completely unpredictable. But, a few days from now, the soldiers would be tired and irritable. Fatigue would cause them to cut corners to save time, and the soldiers would have trouble staying awake at night while they guarded the camp. That is when the raiders would strike.

Sitting with his back to a boulder the size of a house, Trent was cooking a noonday squirrel over a hat-full of fire when the pack train ambled toward the clearing. He had been hearing them for the last ten minutes, and marveled that they marched up a rocky wash, advertising their existence to all who wanted to hear. They could just as easily be walking on the soft earth next to it. He reminded himself to ask Gunny about it. The sergeant should know better.

Trent could see the lieutenant leading his men up the wash, with Katie and her pack animals bringing up the rear. As he watched, she raised her hand in greeting.

Slowly the party of pack animals and soldiers moved into the clearing. The lieutenant came straight toward Trent's small fire. Looking past him, Trent could see the men were dead on their feet. Leave it to the Ozark terrain to take the starch out of a man.

Katie, with the help of a couple of soldiers, hazed her animals toward a grassy clearing nearby. Gunny was missing.

Lieutenant Spencer looked at Trent a moment. Unconcerned, Trent turned the squirrel over the fire, browning it. The juices dripped into the flames, making a sizzling sound that brought rumbles of hunger from the watching soldier.

"We're late." Lieutenant Spencer did not sound as authoritative as he had three days ago.

"Yes, you are," Trent said simply.

Standing up, Trent glanced at the squad of soldiers. None had taken off their packs. They were waiting for orders, a plus for discipline but not much for common sense.

"Lieutenant, if you'll take some advice, I think you should camp here until tomorrow. Your men look done in. You could use the opportunity to check them out on camp procedures, defensive positions, that kind of thing."

Lieutenant Spencer sighed, "I think you're right, Trent." He turned and made a hand sign to the men. With relieved groans and grumbles, the squad dropped their packs, and went about their tasks with efficient movements and purpose.

Catching Katie's attention, as she finished hobbling her horses, Trent motioned her over to his fire. The lieutenant sat on a rock nearby.

"Where's Gunny, Lieutenant?"

"We saw some smoke yesterday evening. I sent the sergeant to investigate. He told me he would pull a cold camp then catch up with us this morning." Gazing back down the trail, he said, "He's overdue."

Lieutenant Spencer looked at Trent. "Why?"

"I just wondered. You know, Spencer, you should not travel in creek beds. I know it is easier sometimes, but sound travels a long way in these canyons. I could hear you coming for nearly a mile."

As Katie came up to the fire, Trent pulled a wooden plate from his pack, and put half the squirrel on it. Digging into the ashes at the side of the fire, he produced two brown trout wrapped in leaves that had been baking in the coals. Putting one on the plate, he passed the food wordlessly over to her.

"If you're trying to get on my good side, you've made a good start." Katie's strong white teeth were already tearing the meat apart.

The lieutenant looked at her portion, then at Trent's. Taking the hint, he got up to leave.

Trent moved about his part of the camp, putting out the fire, cleaning utensils, and stowing away his gear. Katie was unashamedly licking her fingers as she used them to clean the last of the grease from the wooden plate. Her steady gaze had not left Trent since she came to the camp, a fact that made Trent more apprehensive by the minute.

"Why?" he finally asked.

"What?"

"Why are you watching me all the time?"

"I like to watch you. You remind me of a big cat. You don't waste any movement, are sure handed, and quiet. I like that." She grinned at him as she held the wooden plate out to him. "You're also going to make some lucky woman one hell of a good cook."

Trent smiled as he bent to take the plate. "I'm just used to doing for myself." He looked at her pointedly. "That's something you should consider. I have been doing for myself a long time. I'm set in my ways. Likely, some younger man might be better for you. After all, I am probably twice your age."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

His smile was slow in coming. "Now, that would be plain crazy on my part. I just want to lay it out so there are no misunderstandings."

"You are worried, aren't you?" Katie laughed. "Afraid I'm going to get..." She searched for the right word. "Amorous?"

"You do that here, you'll get spanked." Trent tried to be serious, but it was a losing battle.

"See." She chuckled. "That's what I like about you older men. You have more imagination."

Trent laughed and changed the subject. "Did you have any trouble coming up the trail?"

"No, none to speak of," Katie said soberly, "but I have some brewing here."

As Trent raised his eyebrows, she hooked a thumb over her shoulder, pointing at the soldiers. "One of the Green Jeans has been staring at me a lot. He tried to talk to me a couple of times. I think he's working up to something, and I'm going to be the main attraction."

"Need me to speak to him?" Trent asked.

"Nope. I am a big girl. I will handle it." Katie smiled at him. "Of course, you might stay close..."

Trent chuckled as he walked off to see the lieutenant, leaving Katie to stew in her own juices.

Chapter 8

The man who called himself the Watcher pressed his hands to the sides of his head, eyes closed in pain. This one had screamed. She was strong and fought hard. He did not plan to do this again ... not this soon. He didn't want to, but there she was and she was young and pretty, her shiny black hair pinned into a bun in the back, and she looked scrubbed and clean, and the virginal innocence was an aura around her ... and he could not stop himself.

She was fast—he had to run her down, and her long black skirt kept tripping her, making her easy prey. Even then, she almost got away. The girl struggled and fought, and lost the funny little white cap she wore on her hair, the lace soiled with dirt and grass stains. He stuffed it in her mouth to shut her up. Finally, he tied her to the stakes he had hammered into the ground. He pulled flint and tinder from his pouch and started a little fire. With reverence and gentleness, he placed the end of the small branding iron in the fire, the one with the cross on it that would become cherry red in a few moments.

Later, as he pulled up his pants, he looked at her scornfully. She had stopped crying and her gaze followed him everywhere he went. Just like the others. They always settled down, right at the end. Always thought that what they had given would be enough. She might even try to smile soon.

Contemptuously, he pulled out his hunting knife. Eyes wide in terror, she started screaming again, her mouth a red rictus of pain.

* * * *

The gelding moved restlessly under Trent as he sat in a clearing, considering his options. Lieutenant Spencer had casually mentioned that Gunny was overdue. Trent had left immediately to back-trail the squad of soldiers, hoping to run into the sergeant. Following the trail had been easy, at least until now.

The soft earth in the clearing showed tracks of more than one band of horses, making any particular sign impossible to find. It looked like a regular parade of people had gone through this clearing since morning. He could picture the native hill people stopping to look at the tracks, gazing after the patrol, probably shifting their cud of chewing tobacco from one cheek to the other, then spitting a long brown stream at the tracks. Their contempt shown, they would disappear back into the forest. *One thing was certain. The patrol was not fooling anyone.* By nightfall, the news would be all over the hills. They might as well have brought a brass band with them.

Seen from the last ridge he had crossed, a small cluster of buildings nestled at the bottom of the next hill. He turned his horse that way. Gunny was probably swilling moonshine, telling lies, and sampling the local women.

Topping a small rise in the dirt road, Trent reined in the gelding. The small hamlet spread out before him, a few rundown buildings on both sides of the path they called a road; or more likely, in this part of the country, they called it a trace. No one was visible along the street, not surprising considering the heat.

Sweat trickled down his sides as he took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Drying his hands on his shirt, he slipped the loop off his revolver and pulled the SKS from its boot on the saddle. Clucking to the horse, he rode down to the buildings.

The slow-walking gelding was tense as a spring as he neared the largest of the buildings. Muscles bunching and nostrils flaring, the horse came to a stop in front of the only building sporting a sign, Ziler's Mercantile. Holding his SKS in one hand, Trent was starting to dismount when a voice startled him from behind.

"Better not."

The level of suppressed anger he heard spoke reams about what would happen if Trent did not obey. The tone surpassed any language barriers.

Several doors along the walk began to disgorge a ragged band of people, mostly women and kids. Glancing behind him, Trent found the men. They were all armed and looked ready for target practice with Trent the bulls-eye. His SKS was in his right hand. Swing and fire? Fatally slow. To draw and fire his pistol, he would have to shift the SKS, or drop it. They had him. Stone cold.

Let's see you talk yourself out of this, Trent chided himself as he turned in the saddle to confront the men. Most were holding weapons, not pointed in any particular direction. The sallow faced young man standing in front of the group pointed his double-barreled twelve gauge right at Trent's middle. Persuasive.

"What's the problem?"

"Like you don't know?" The barrel of the shotgun came up a bit.

"I don't, or I would not ask," he replied reasonably.

Trent felt more relaxed now that he had gotten a better look at the man's weapon. He knew he could draw and shoot before the man pulled the trigger on the shotgun. It was an old piece with individual hammers for each barrel, and the man had not cocked either one. The man could fire by pulling the triggers, but that was a hard pull. The fraction of a second it took would cost the man his life, if it came to that.

"What are you doing around these parts?"

Trent tried to look around without being too obvious about it. "I'm looking for a man, thought he might have stopped here."

The shotgun came up to the man's shoulder as he aimed at Trent's head. "I think you're lying."

Watching the man's finger on the trigger, knowing he'd make his try if that finger so much as twitched, Trent tried to think of a reply that would not result in a shooting. Another voice broke in, an old voice, but one still strong with vitality.

"Let him go, Lon."

Lon jerked around, lowering the shotgun. "He is a stranger, Gran. I bet he is one of them *raiders* we keep hearing about."

"Don't matter, Lon. Use your head. If he done it, he would not ride back into town. Don't be stupid," the woman said.

Lon appeared to be trying to figure out if she had called him stupid, when a gray-headed woman stepped around from behind Trent's horse. Tall and erect, dressed severely in black and gray, it was obvious this was the matriarch of the clan. Her eyes were sharp and bright. Anything less than the truth told to this woman would reap nothing but grief and pain.

"Let's start over, mister. You can see we're a bit touchy. What's your name?"

"John Trent, ma'am."

"Don't try to butter me, boy. What are you doing here? This place ain't exactly on the main trail."

With no hesitation, Trent laid it out for her. He told her who he was traveling with and why, and who he was looking for. Several of the men nodded when he mentioned the army patrol.

"I used to be a courier for the army. Right now, I am a brand spankin' new U.S. Marshal headed for Big Springs."

At the mention of being a Marshal, the older people smiled, and most of the crowd nurtured looks of derision on their faces. Even the kids thought it was funny, having no doubt been raised with stories of moon-shiners and the law. He'd heard the stories too.

"These hills ain't been too kind to lawmen—as a general rule. However, times are different now. Everything's different." Gran looked away, lost in thought for a moment.

Decision time.

"Might be we could use some law, now and again. We have some trouble, and don't quite know what to do about it. Why don't you climb off that horse and come with me."

Walking into the mercantile, she turned at the door and addressed the crowd. "Ya'll go on 'bout your business. Lon, set some of the men to keep watch. And don't ask me what for because I don't know. We'll be out later."

Trent followed the woman inside. *Trouble* lay on a wooden bench at the back of the room. The form looked like a woman, and Trent had no doubt that it was. The blanket was too short to cover all of the body, so they had covered her head, letting the feet show. Her left foot still had on a black lace-up shoe. *Homemade*. The other foot was bare and bloody. Trent shook his head and sighed. *Another killing*.

The old woman seemed frailer now that she was not in front of the townspeople and didn't have to carry the mantle of authority. She did not make any effort to approach the body. Her voice was old gravel, washed in mud and loathing.

"Someone killed one of our girls. Did things to her." Her voice broke and her gaze pinned Trent. "We tried to trail whoever did it. The trail just petered out and went away. Left just enough for us to think it's maybe one person, a man."

Anger colored her voice. "There ain't many people we can't trail in the woods, mister-brand-spankin'-new Marshal. The one that killed her ... just went away." Her hard gaze pinned him. "You know anything about this?"

"More than I want to," Trent admitted. "There have been other killings."

The old woman kept silent for a few moments as she digested the news, searching his face with eyes that had seen more pain than they should ever have had to see. With a catch in her voice she said, "She was the prettiest girl here. We were hoping to marry her off soon."

"Gran," Trent said softly, "I don't mean any disrespect, but I need to look at her. All of her. I have to know if she is the same as the others. You know ... how she was killed." He inclined his head toward the door. "I wouldn't like to get shot while I am doing it."

"She's naked," Gran said.

Trent nodded, waiting for her decision.

Finally. "Will it make a difference?"

"I don't know," Trent said. "I am kind of new at this."

She gazed at him with a little humor peeking around her grief. "By the Lord Jehovah, an honest man. You'll never last." She paused a moment, then said, "Go ahead, Marshal. Please don't touch her."

Understanding the stubborn pride and moral code these hill people possessed, he said simply, "Of course."

Leaving the building a few minutes later, he paused outside the door and took in a deep breath. The girl had looked much the same. Maybe a little more hurried in the handiwork, and he needed to think about that some. Her belly sliced open, her pubic hair scalped, and the nipples gone from her breasts. And the brand. What significance a cross, burned into her forehead, had to do with anything, he didn't know. There was a lot he did not know. *Too damn many questions. Not enough answers.*

The old woman waited, watering his horse from a bucket, flanked by several men and women. *Black hats and full beards on the men, bonnets on the women.* Not an old rusted out vehicle anywhere. They probably never had one, maybe didn't even know the world had passed them by—but it was a world going backwards not forward.

"Well?"

They all looked at him as Gran asked the question.

He addressed them all. "Counting this girl, there have been three women killed in this particular way, at least that I know of. There may be others. I don't have a clue about who did it, except he or she is very good in the forest. There hasn't been a sign left anywhere to look at. That's all I know."

One of the men spoke up around his cud of tobacco. "That ain't much. How d'you figure to keep this from happenin' again, Lawman?"

Trent answered truthfully. "I can't. You know that, as well as I do. Before the Fall there were hundreds of thousands of lawmen, maybe a million. Even back then, the law could not protect you from something like this. You have to take care of yourselves, just like you've always done."

"Well now, that's a right big help."

Trent smiled ruefully. "I know it isn't much, but it's all I can tell you. For my part, I will do my best, that's the only promise I can give. Meanwhile, you protect your womenfolk. Do not let them go anywhere alone. I do not think this killer likes a crowd. I also think it is a man, from the one heel-print I have seen. He is strong, and a woodsman. There is one other thing. If there is any doubt, shoot to kill."

"We 'bout shot you, mister." The laconic reply came from one of the older men.

Trent looked pointedly at the man. "That's why I rode down the middle of the street. So there would be no misunderstandings." Addressing all of them, Trent said, "I know it's a couple of days travel, but if you need me for anything, or find anything I need to know, I'll be at Big Springs."

As Trent mounted and started to leave, the old woman had a final comment. "You got a badge, lawman?"

"Yeah, somewhere," Trent answered, searching his pockets.

"Better pin it on ... might save you from any ... misunderstandin's."

Trent reached into his saddlebag and found the badge, and pinned it on his shirt. "You might have a point there, Gran."

Heading back up the trail toward the standing rocks of Eleven Point Creek, Trent remembered his original mission. *Where in hell was Gunny?*

* * * *

Twilight shaded the clearing as Trent rode up to the campsite. The sound of the water bubbling over the rocks had muffled his approach and he rode unannounced right into trouble.

Katie leaned against a rock, the campfire between her and one of the soldiers. Wide and muscular, the man was moving around the fire toward her when Trent's voice rang out. "Soldier, I'd like to save your life."

The big man whirled at the sound of Trent's voice. "What'd you say?"

"You heard me. Now get back to your own part of the camp."

"Or you'll do what?" The soldier was half Trent's age and held a short machine pistol, barrel pointing down.

"I'll kill you," Trent said simply.

Contempt in his voice, the soldier said, "I got an automatic in my hand, and your toy pistol is in its holster. Now, I am no hotshot courier like you, but I just have to believe I have got the edge here. I think you are dead meat. As a matter of fact, I think I'll kill you first and then enjoy your woman the rest of the night."

Trent said quietly, "To do that, you'll have to be able to pull the trigger."

The man stood facing Trent. "Awww, I heard of you. You are supposed to be some 'quick draw' artist, like Wyatt Earp or sumpin'. I never believed those old stories, and I don't believe you."

"Then kill me."

Trent calmly stood in front of the soldier and could see the indecision in his expression. A minute ago the soldier was sure he could kill Trent, but now the seeds of doubt were obviously starting to sprout in his mind. To make it worse, the other soldiers were watching. There wasn't any way he could back down without losing respect. Trent could see he was going to try it. Slowly, the barrel of the machine pistol started coming up.

"Benson, get out of there!" Gunny's voice was bullhorn loud, blasting over the sounds of the river like a pounding fist.

Walking up to the soldier, Gunny said, "Move, soldier, or I'll be taking a personal interest in makin' you suffer."

Benson's gaze shuttled between Trent and Gunny. Grumbling, he lowered his weapon and sidled away toward his side of the camp.

"That was close," Trent said.

"Ah, hell," Gunny said. "You probably shoulda just shot him. Save yourself the trouble later."

The lieutenant coming over to them, his boots scrunching in the gravel, interrupted their conversation. "What's the trouble, Sergeant?"

Trent answered for him. "Your man Benson was out of line, Lieutenant. I also couldn't help but notice you sitting over there doing nothing about it."

"Sergeant? I was talking to you."

"I'll take care of it, sir."

The lieutenant looked across the fire at Katie. "Very well, then. I don't think the..." he looked her up and down, "Lady was in any danger."

Trent's fist cracked against the lieutenant's jaw, lifting him off his feet, and the man's shoulders made a scrunching sound as he hit the gravel. Trent reached down and jerked the lieutenant to his feet. Holding the wobbly-legged man upright, Trent breathed a soft warning to him. "Don't you ever speak to her in that tone, Lieutenant. Not now. Not ever. Is that clear?"

Gunny took over. "Benson, get back over here and take the lieutenant to his bedroll. He must have tripped on something. The rest of you men go back to whatever useless things you were doing. Stanton and Ashe, take first guard. Move!"

Coming back, Gunny said, "Must be the humidity. Tempers are kinda short around here, and me not even having chow yet." He looked pointedly at Trent. "You would do well to get that girl out of here. She's trouble, even if it's not her fault."

While Gunny stirred around the leftover squirrel and fish, Trent went to Katie. "Are you all right?"

"Sure. I can take care of myself, you know. That really wasn't necessary."

Trent ignored her show of bravado. He reached out and brushed her hair from her face. "From now on, don't get so far from your weapon. Do not ever go unarmed. Even when you think you are among friends, or if it is just a call of nature. It might make the difference."

"Yes, Father."

"And don't be a smartass."

"And don't you be so jealous of it, Trent. You don't have to win it. I've decided it is already yours."

Trent pondered that while trying to recover his sagging jaw. *Well, now.* Still nonplussed, he sat down to talk with Gunny.

"You out looking for me?"

"We thought you might be lost," Trent said with a smile.

Gunny looked seriously at Trent. "No point in looking for me, boy. There will never be a day you could find me out there. You should know that."

Trent watched as Gunny abruptly got up and walked away. *Now what was that all about?*

* * * *

Katie and Trent lay in their bedrolls on opposite sides of the fire. With their heads close together, their conversation soft and quiet. He had just told her about the other killing. She lay mute, thinking about it.

Finally ... “I don't understand the kind of person it takes to do such a thing.” Katie's voice was mildly plaintive in the night.

"I know," Trent said. "I did some reading. Even if we did know the type of person that does this, it probably would not put us any closer to catching him."

"Wait. Whoa. You were reading?"

Trent grinned. "You don't think I can read? Do you remember the side trip I mentioned? I went to the library in one of the abandoned towns we passed. I didn't find much, the place was a shambles, but there were a few things left." Trent thought a moment. "Mainly they broke the killings down into four categories: visionary killers—people who hear voices and have visions; mission-oriented—getting rid of a certain group of people; hedonistic killers—they kill for sexual gratification and usually mutilate the victim, and the power-oriented killer—they like to control and dominate."

"This guy may fit all four," Katie mused.

"I know," Trent said around a yawn, "but we will find him. One way or another."

He glanced at Katie. *Great, he had put her to sleep.* Through a hole in the canopy of trees above them, Trent stared at the stars a long time.

Chapter 9

The predawn light slowly appeared as a white envelope of humidity and fog. Cooler air had moved in during the night and the dense growth and damp ground gave up its moisture in surreal fingers, slowly lifting toward the canopy of leaves above. Water dripped from the leaves, shaken loose by a few twittering sparrows grumping sleepily at the new day.

The hilltops saw the tip of the sun as it came up, but the valleys between the hills remained shrouded in the gloom of shadow and night.

John Trent came awake with instant awareness, listening to the sounds of the forest as he opened his eyes. Something was wrong.

With awareness came action, and Trent silently snaked out of his blanket into the darker shadow of the huge boulder next to him. Breathing shallowly, with his mouth open to give his ears a better chance at hearing, he strained his senses into the dawn.

Turning slightly, he looked at Katie lying a few feet away, and saw her staring at him. He made a slight hand motion, and after a startled glance around, she slowly moved toward him. Once she gained the shadows, she quickly came to him.

Without taking his attention from the forest, Trent pointed toward one of the sentries. Slumped over a rock, his posture could easily have been mistaken for slumber.

Katie's breath felt soft and warm in his ear. "What's wrong?"

"His gun is missing." Trent looked across the clearing. He could barely make out the sleeping patrol. Gunny had spread his blankets away from his men, around a bend in the clearing. Trent hoped he was awake. He reached out and pulled Katie to him, his hand unconsciously caressing her hair as his senses filled with her. His mouth touching her ear, he breathed, "Raiders. They're inside the perimeter."

With hand signals, he had her cover the clearing to the left, while he took the right.

Trent thought of tossing a rock into the sleeping men, hoping to wake them, but he was too late. Someone tossed something else.

A serrated round object bounced once with a metallic click on the ground.

"Is that a..." Katie's astonishment echoed loudly between the rocks. Her indiscretion did not matter.

"Down!" Trent hurtled his body into hers, dumping her to the ground behind a boulder.

The roar of the explosion barely muffled the sound of automatic weapons. Ears ringing, Trent rose up from behind a waist high rock and coolly fired. Rushing bodies and gunfire filled the camp. The sleeping squad of soldiers leaped from their bedrolls after the grenade went off and lost three men to gunfire before they went back to earth.

During a sudden lull in the firing, Trent heard someone screaming. He vaguely remembered seeing a wounded man dragged out of the camp and into the brush. The screaming abruptly stopped.

Again, the firing picked up. Trent reached for his pack of extra clips for the SKS. He saw Katie grimly shuck out a spent magazine and slap in a spare, never taking her attention from the clearing.

"Let's show them we're still here."

Trent's voice stayed level and cool. As Katie came to join him, Trent raked the perimeter of the forest, his SKS firing as fast as he could pull the trigger. Katie's AK-90 roared in short bursts on full auto.

Suddenly, the clearing was full of rushing figures as the raiders charged their position. Katie's rifle clicked empty and she fumbled with another clip as three men darted toward them. The action of Trent's SKS clacked open, and not having the time to reload, he palmed his Ruger, dropping two raiders as they stormed around the boulder. Katie pulled her small Browning .380 Auto from her ankle holster and shot the third raider just as he lined his sights on Trent. She then turned and expended the rest of the sixteen round clip at the backs of the fleeing raiders.

Wordlessly, Trent handed her a clip for the AK-90 and covered her while she reloaded. Snapping in the clip, she jacked back the charging handle and was ready, eyes made wide by a rush of adrenaline and trying to look everywhere at once.

As suddenly as it started, the attack was over. The silence following the brief battle was deafening. Immediately reloading his SKS, Trent positioned Katie between two rocks and slipped into the forest. Single shots punctuated the morning each time he found a wounded raider.

Gunny and Trent walked into the camp from opposite sides, stopping suddenly as they caught sight of each other. Katie straightened with an audible sigh of relief. The surviving soldiers began drifting out of whatever cover they had found during the brief fight.

Gunny's anger was scathing. "Look at them, Trent. These soldiers are really something." Taking a big private by the arm, the same one who had given Katie trouble, he asked, "Where's your weapon, Benson?" The wild-eyed man looked vainly for his MAC-10.

"That's enough, Sergeant." The lieutenant walked up, brushing leaves and dirt from his uniform.

Gunny whirled around. "Enough? Christ! It is not near enough! Not one round fired, Lieutenant. Not a single damned one. These recruits scattered like a bunch of kids. If it had not been for Trent and this girl, we would all be dead."

"We didn't do so bad." The lieutenant's voice had a plaintive edge to it. "It could have been worse."

Walking toward Katie, Trent spoke to Gunny as he went by. "You lost three men, plus your two sentries, Gunny. That is five. Our horses are all gone, plus the pack train. They got what they wanted. The only reason they attacked was to keep us busy. They got it all. All the supplies and ammo you have left is whatever is on your backs." Coming to Katie, he spoke softly so only she could hear. "Pack our gear. We are leaving."

She did not waste time arguing, just turned and began throwing their things together, obviously knowing he wanted to keep watch on the forest. She was done in moments.

Trent turned to Gunny. "You're on your own, Gunny. We are pulling out."

"You can't leave us, Trent," the lieutenant blurted out. "The colonel said you were to guide us."

Ignoring him, Trent spoke to Gunny. "We are drawing too much attention. This crowd is too big. You would do better to break into small groups and scatter. The raiders know you are here. They will dog you the rest of the way home. Katie can take me on in to Big Springs."

Gunny's voice conveyed his regret as he looked at the remaining men of the patrol. "I will have to stay

with them."

"Watch your ass, Gunny."

Glancing around the clearing, littered with bodies and the smell of death, Gunny replied, "Yeah, I hear that."

"Ready, John." Katie's voice was subdued, but her chin was up and her gaze steady. The smell of cordite reeked in the moisture-laden air, and the morning sun was already promising the oppression of another hot day.

As they left the clearing, Gunny's voice stopped them. "Trent? If I don't get fragged bottle feeding these damned killers; I'll come by to see you."

"You are welcome anytime, Gunny."

* * * *

Midmorning found them on a bluff overlooking the river. They were still following Eleven Point Creek and Trent knew they would have to turn away from the river soon to head northeast toward the Currant River and Big Springs.

They were walking in a pine forest. The needles on the ground muffled all sound of their passing and the whispering breeze hissing through the trees at the top of the bluff was soothing and cool on their faces. Trent dropped his pack and stretched, looking out over the hills and valleys. Glancing back, he noticed Katie sitting on her pack, arms around her knees, just staring at the ground. She had not said much since the attack earlier that morning, and now as she sat there, she trembled and shook. The aftermath was starting to set in.

Kneeling, Trent wrapped her in his arms, holding her head to his shoulder. "It's all right, Katherine. Your body is just reacting to losing all that adrenalin. The shakes are normal."

He handed her his canteen, and she gratefully put it to her lips.

"I never knew my mouth could be so dry. Do you get the shakes too?"

Trent's expression softened. "Sure, but I usually do it late at night when no one can see. I have to protect my image." He stroked her hair. "Your first time?"

"Yeah." The one word was full of emotion.

"You did good."

"Did I, really? I killed some of those men. I've never killed a man before." Her voice was a mixture of loathing and wonder.

Trent roughly pulled away, hands still on her shoulders. His gaze held steadily to her blue eyes until he was sure she was through feeling sorry for herself. He watched it all march past, by the expression in her eyes. He could count the emotions. Loathing. Despair.

No one should ever have to kill. It was not fair.

Slowly, reality set in, with her new knowledge of the real world. Then resolve. But, not pride. He knew she was not proud of it, but also knew deep down the killing was unavoidable. It was simply the price of survival.

The hands that had roughly held her away from him started caressing her arms and shoulders. Trent's voice was gentle. "How did you do today? Let me evaluate you as I would a soldier, Katherine. Most important of all, you were quiet and did not ask stupid questions. You did what I asked you to do without hesitation, and yes ... you had the guts to kill when you had to. There was no choice. Those people who attacked our camp were not going to stop and let us take a vote about whether we wanted to die, and they sure as hell were not going to debate the morality of the situation. They were going to kill you. Or worse. Or both. Remember that.

"Look at how the recruits did. They ran like rabbits. If more of them were like you ... they might not have lost so many men. Besides," he chuckled, trying to get her mind off the attack, "you even saved my tail. That last raider would have put lead into me if you hadn't nailed him."

Katie smiled at him, her gaze burning with something he had seen in her before when they met at the clearing. "Then you owe me. Right? There's bound to be a code of the forest, or something like that?"

"You bet."

"Then pay up."

His lips started to form a question, but it just made things easier for Katie. Her lips found his, softly clinging, then grinding with hunger. Her arms went around him as she entwined her fingers in his hair and held him against her.

"Are you sure about this?"

Her answer was another kiss. This one softer and full of promise.

All his resistance to her, which was not much, fell away as his hands cupped her buttocks and pulled her tight against him, crushing her breasts against his chest.

Breathing heavily, she broke away, chuckling as his mouth found her throat and his hands worked on the laces of her shirt. "Why, Marshal," she said breathily. "The things you do ... and right here in broad daylight?"

Chapter 10

The following day found them high on a tree-covered mountain, overlooking a natural basin about two miles across. Although he could not see it from their vantage point, Trent could hear the rumble of water erupting from the spring below.

"How did all this come about, Katherine? I had it pictured in my mind as being a lot bigger."

With a sigh, Katie dropped her pack to the ground and came to stand by Trent, appearing happy to take on the role of tour guide. Trent had not stopped all morning, and by her moans and groans, he could tell her tail was dragging.

"You hear that noise from below?" she asked. "That's the spring. I found some old tourist brochures that told all about it. Millions of gallons of cold, clear water comes bustin' out from under this mountain every day. It forms a river for about two miles, then ducks into a cave in the limestone, and disappears. It finally feeds into the Currant River several miles from here."

Trent stood with his hands on his hips. He took a deep breath, taking in the cool, moist air coming up from below. Katie came to stand in front of him, fitting into him like a spoon.

"That's what started the settlement? The water?"

"Yep. There were some small towns nearby, but when the plague started no one knew what caused it. People were scared. Some of the locals thought contaminated water caused the sickness, so they holed up here in the basin. This water was the cleanest around, I guess. At least, it was clean enough that people did not die. Of course, there weren't many people here until the last few years."

"How did they keep everyone out? I would think once the word got around everyone would want to come."

"You'd remember this more than I, anything us young folk know is just hearsay." She arched an eyebrow at him. "But with people dying so fast it was pure panic. Not many thought of Big Springs, and a lot that did died before they got here. Then, of course, there was the road."

"Road?" He glanced at her quizzically.

"There was only one road into this place, so they blasted it out. All this limestone is soft. A few sticks of dynamite in the right spot made it disappear under tons of rock. Now, the only way in or out is game trails, on foot or horseback. Those can be watched, if need be."

Katie stared into the basin, absentmindedly rubbing the back of his hands, which were locked around her.

"Katherine, about yesterday."

She leaned back into him, pushing against him with her buttocks. "What about yesterday? You feel you were cheated or something? Got took advantage of? What?"

"Be serious."

"I am dead serious, John."

"I just want you to be sure, that's all. I'm no bargain."

"That is a matter of opinion, old man," she said with a chuckle. She picked up her pack. "Come on. We go around this bend and you can see the town."

A few minutes later, Katie stared in awe at the settlement. "Where did all..." Her voice faded with the question.

Trent pulled a pair of binoculars from his pack. Focusing the instrument pulled a vision of the town right up to his nose. The settlement had one street, with buildings lining each side. A few houses randomly dotted the basin floor and off to one side stood a small country church, complete with steeple and bell tower.

The street, lined with men, and horses and wagons tied to rails and posts, was a well of inactivity. No one seemed to be doing anything. Then, a group of men erupted from one of the buildings. Trent saw the puff of smoke long before he heard the insignificant sound of the shot. The group turned and trooped back into the building. The body left on the ground did not move.

Trent turned to Katie with a grim expression. "Looks like you have a lot of new residents."

"Raiders?"

"Raiders, mercenaries, survivors, who knows? It doesn't make much difference what you call them."

Holding her own set of glasses, she said, "I don't see any of the locals, and I can't figure how they got those wagons in."

Abruptly, she started down the pine-needed trail skirting the basin.

Following, Trent asked, "Where are you going?"

"There is a ranch a couple miles from here run by Connie Sanchez. She is a friend of mine and has a bunch of riders right out of old Mexico. They're all descendants of the Maya, whatever that is. All I know is, nobody messes with them. Connie keeps her ear to the ground. She'll know what's going on."

* * * *

The Sanchez ranch lay in a high, narrow valley next to the Big Springs basin. The land was not quite as rough, with the forest broken by small glades full of grass. In the distance, Trent could see cattle grazing on a plateau, and on another were horses. All the animals had guards. Someone had been very smart. Cattle represented food. Anyone controlling a herd of cattle could have about anything they wanted. Provided they could hold it.

Coming out on a wider trail that led to the main house, Trent saw a low bungalow with a red-tiled roof and wraparound porch. They hitched up their packs and started toward it.

"Hold it."

The voice had come from the side, next to a gigantic outcropping of limestone, and Trent silently cursed himself for not being more careful. Katie's confidence had lulled him into thinking they were safe.

The man who rode around the rock was lean and dark. Both hands handled his rifle as he guided his horse with his knees. His wide brimmed hat sat on the back of his head, revealing shiny black hair. The smoke from the small cigarillo made his eyes squint at them, but Trent doubted he missed anything. This man looked to be all whang-leather and sharp spurs. There was no doubt about the M-16 pointed at them.

"You have business here?" His voice was soft and musical, with no trace of an accent.

Katie spoke up, sounding flustered. "You must be new here. I'm a friend of Consuelo's."

Motioning them forward with the point of the gun, he said politely, "That we shall see. Today is not a good day for visitors."

"Have you had trouble?" Trent asked.

"Each day has its own." The brusque reply was both philosophical and grim.

As they neared the long porch, a woman burst through the door. Long black hair framed her eyes, and her low cut dress revealed a voluptuous body. Her dress was trimmed with so much jewelry, she looked more like an Indian princess than a Mexican land owner.

"Katie," she exclaimed as she hugged the tall blond girl.

"How's it going, Connie?"

Consuelo's expression sobered a moment. "It goes. How do you like my new foreman?"

"He seems very capable."

"Capable?" Connie laughed. "You have no idea."

Trent was watching the retreating man on the horse when Connie turned to him. "And who is this very handsome man?"

Katie pulled him by the arm as they moved toward chairs on the porch. "Connie, this is John Trent."

"Welcome." The black haired beauty let her gaze roam over him from head to foot. Her Mexican accent suddenly became thick as syrup. "I am the Contessa Maria Consuelo Gonzales Pelenque y Sanchez."

Trent did not know whether to doff his hat, bow from the waist, or fire a twenty-one gun salute. Lacking the proper artillery, he compromised. "Damn!" He grinned.

"That's what I said the first time." A voice came from within the house. "Of course, I've been here a lot, so I'm used to it."

The door behind them opened and a big man eased himself onto the porch. The truculent voice and mocking eyes set warning bells off in Trent's head.

Trent looked at Katie for direction, but her gaze locked on Consuelo. Somehow, she had led them into a nest of snakes, and Trent decided to walk soft, not wanting to step on the wrong one. He had been in the woods way too long.

Consuelo was obviously flirting with him, Katie was gearing up for an old-fashioned clawing match, and another man was staking out the Mexican girl as his own territory, leaving Trent in the middle. Trent couldn't stop the grin growing on his face.

The man had stopped and was staring at Trent. "I know you."

"A lot of people know me," Trent replied evenly. "And you are?"

"Pagan Reeves." He said it as if it should mean something.

And it did. Colonel Bonham had talked about this man. Brutal and ruthless, Reeves was supposed to have no side but his own.

"I know the name."

Apparently, Katie could not keep Trent's identity to herself. Pulling Consuelo to a table, she said, "John is a United States Marshal."

"A marshal." At first, the Mexican girl was unimpressed. "A marshal?"

"The army assigned him to Big Springs," Katie continued.

"Alone? Are you crazy?" Consuelo said in incredulous tones as she shuttled her gaze between Katie and Trent. "Have you seen the town since you returned?" All trace of an accent was gone. "There are at least fifty mercenaries in town alone. They have just about run all the honest people off. We hear there is a *big cheese* raider camped out in the hills, just waiting for everyone to clear out so he can move his families in. We need an army here, not one man."

"Guess I will have to do." Trent was moving off the porch, getting ready to leave.

"You won't last a day," Reeves said with contempt, standing with his hand close to his holstered pistol. "I remember you now, Trent. You are the Army courier. Scout. Fast-gun artist."

Reeve's mocking tone was pushing, and Trent did not want anything to happen here because of the women. Too many got hurt in shootouts, and not necessarily the people doing the shooting.

Reeves continued. "Maybe I should just save the boys in town the trouble and run you off right now."

Coldly angry, Trent turned, and his earlier caution gone, faced Reeves. Walking toward the man, he replied. "Why don't you do that, Reeves? You run me off. Do it right now. You have a gun. Use it."

Trent kept getting closer. Finally, they were facing each other with less than a foot of space between them.

"How about it, Reeves? Are you going to pull that shooter?"

Trent could see Pagan Reeves was sweating. Any gunplay now would get them both killed. Neither could miss.

"Enough of this."

The man who had escorted them to the house stood a few feet away. He held a large bore Smith and Wesson as if it was part of his body. He pointed it at Pagan.

"Sure, anything you say, Chico," Pagan said.

Pagan backed off slowly, making a show of being reluctant to move. Looking maliciously at Trent, he mounted his horse.

"Trent. You come to town and you will die. Big Springs is mine. I have the town and the men to hold it. But you come on, Marshal. You just come on."

Reeves whirled his horse and rode away in a cloud of insignificant threats and dusty bravado. He was gone in seconds flat.

Trent turned to face the Mexican, the pieces of his memory finally clicking together. "Chico Cruz."

"The same."

"I have heard many things of Chico Cruz."

"And I have heard of the courier John Trent."

Katie broke in. "If this mutual admiration society could break up, it's time we left. It's getting dark, John."

"All right, Katherine."

"John?" Consuelo said. "John, is it? And Katherine? He gets to call you Katherine?" She looked at Katie, holding her hand to her mouth. "Now I see. I am so sorry, Katie. Now I know why you were getting so mad."

Connie giggled softly into her hand. "Please, both of you, stay with me tonight."

Katie shrugged. "All right, we'll stay. Let's go inside, Connie. We have some catching up to do."

"Why was Reeves here?" Trent threw the question out for anyone to answer.

Consuelo turned and regarded him a moment.

"He wants me," she said. "He wants my land ... he wants my cattle. Mostly, he just wants. Up to now, it has been easier to humor him than to fight him." She looked over at Cruz with a troubled gaze. "We may have to fight him, now."

After the women went inside, Cruz turned to Trent.

"He is a dangerous man, this Reeves."

"He's got some yellow in him," Trent said.

"Yes, but he is all the more dangerous for it. With him, you have to watch your back."

Trent finally breached the question that had been burning inside him. "Last I heard, you were Jeremiah Starking's second-in-command. Your name is on every army bulletin board in the territory."

"So? Do you now challenge me, Marshal Trent? We have always been on opposite sides, my friend, but we know of each other and are very much alike, I think. There would be no gain for either of us, if we fight."

"Sometimes, there is no gain," Trent said. "I've been given a job, Chico. Now, I wear a badge. That doesn't impress anyone yet, but I have been thinking about it, and I like the idea. I have decided I am going to do the job that goes with the badge. If I do it well, then the badge will gain respect. If I can do this well, then the next man to wear the badge will have respect. I may not have a choice where you are concerned."

"There are always choices." Cruz scraped a line in the dust with his boot. "See? Between us is a line. You are on one side. I am on the other. What separates us, Trent? You have killed. I have killed. Now, suddenly, you have a badge. Do you now think your killings are somehow official? If you decide someone should die, you will perform your duty. There are no questions asked. If I decide someone has to die, and kill them, I am a criminal, and a murderer. I am wrong simply because I do not have a badge. My question for you is this: does the badge make you right, Trent? Or, is this badge simply the horse you

ride to get what you want?"

Chico Cruz stood straight in the evening sunlight, a tall man burned brown by the sun. "Do not show your badge to me and expect me to honor it. I will not. I will honor the man, and judge you by your actions."

Both men had turned and were leaning against the fence railing of the corral. Trent watched as the horses nipped and played in the evening coolness, thinking of what Cruz had said.

The problem was, Trent liked this man, and of course, what he said was right. He respected him as one fighting man does another. All he had ever heard about Chico Cruz was that he was a tough man in any kind of fight, and never a word about senseless killings or brutality. But he had been Starking's right hand man. And Starking was a raider. Was Trent's opinion of Starking wrong too?

Here, standing in the approaching gloom of evening, in a ranch yard he had never seen before, John Trent felt he had found a kindred soul. Both men understood each other as can only happen when the same ground has been covered, the same battles fought. Each had tasted the blood and dirt of victory and defeat.

Trent took his time. He wanted Cruz to understand. "Chico, ever since I joined the army, I was about seventeen I guess, I have always tried to do the right thing. I have always had a deep feeling for what is right. I guess we can call it the law. Not laws written by legislators and congressmen that are written on a whim and can't be enforced. There is an older law. The one most people are born with.

"From the first time man sprung from the well of life, he has had a sense of right and wrong. Someone has to stand up against those who take advantage of weaker people. I guess that's where I've always tried to be."

Cruz flipped the stub of the cigarillo into the corral. "But now, you have a disadvantage. Now that you have the badge, and if you honor it, you must be right and just. Above all, you must be sure. Sure of your position, and what you do. You must be all these things before you pull your gun, my friend."

"So, you think I should throw the badge away?" Trent looked quizzically at Cruz.

Cruz shrugged eloquently. "The man on the other side of this line we talk of, like Pagan Reeves ... has no decisions to make about right or wrong. He knows exactly where he is. He knows where you are, and will not hesitate, or be bothered with doubts. That gives him the advantage because you will always have to wait that extra second until you know, until you are sure. The other man does not care if he is right or not." Cruz reached over and tapped the butt of Trent's pistol. "When that time comes, you will have to be very fast, my friend, and very, very good."

"Which side of this line are you on, Chico?"

Chico thought a moment. "For each man, and each circumstance, I must draw the line." As Trent raised his eyebrows, Cruz continued. "You wonder about this? We can't be brave at all times. We can't even be right all the time. To survive, we must deal with each situation by itself. My job is to protect the Senora Sanchez and help preserve her rancho. This I will do."

"Then if I yell for help ... none will be coming."

"I heard about the fight at Caplinger Mills. There were six men? I don't think you will need much help."

"Maybe." Trent smiled ruefully. "And maybe I have bit off more than I can chew."

* * * *

The Watcher sat in the shade of an old incense cedar that was twisted and gnarled with age. The shady blanket of needles kept the setting sun from reflecting on the glass of the binoculars he was using.

The women below him, brought into sharp relief by the ten-power lens, were beautiful, full breasted, full of life and vigor. But no, he would have to look somewhere else. These women were worthy, but too well guarded. The pistolero would guard the Mexican girl, and guard her well. The blonde haired woman was with Trent and the Watcher did not want to antagonize Trent. At least, not yet. He returned his gaze to the blond woman. Watching her walk across to the corral below, he felt the heat stirring within him. She was beautiful. He knew she would be soft in places she needed to be. Would her nipples be large and soft, or small and hard? Her skin would be tight, and part like ... he forced his eyes from her. Maybe later. It would be fun ... later.

Chapter 11

Big Springs was built on either side of the old Conservation Department's access road which entered the small basin between the hills. Mills populated the part of the road that paralleled the springs, using the rushing water to power huge paddlewheels, which turned the gears and grinders that processed corn and wheat, or turned the blades for sawing lumber. Across the old and broken tarmac were buildings that housed a trading store and meeting hall. A few houses and a church were at the south end, and a lone building used as a saloon was on the north.

As Trent made his mid-morning ride into town, his thoughts were on how best to handle this new situation. He had dressed with care, wearing jeans and knee-length moccasins, a blue cotton shirt with his new star pinned on the front in plain view. His SKS was in its boot, and his right hand was on his hip near his gun. Sitting tall in the saddle, he rode down the middle of the street toward the saloon.

His reason for coming in alone, he had discussed with Cruz last night...

"At least let me go in with you in the morning," Cruz had said. "My riders can watch your back for you."

"Thought you didn't want to help," Trent had replied chidingly. "I'll go alone, Chico. If we go in with a show of force, there will be a fight for sure. If I go alone, maybe they will not be so jumpy. I could use the loan of a horse though."

In the end, Cruz agreed and the horse he gave Trent was magnificent. Too large to be a good cattle horse, the sorrel gelding reminded Trent of stories of the Conquistador horses ridden into battle. *A battle horse. Fitting.*

When faced with a problem, Trent only knew one way to solve it. *Straight on ... don't pull your punches and the devil takes the hindmost.*

Chairs lined the porch of the saloon, most of them filled with mercs and hangers-on, the likes found in most any settlement. The local spit-whittle-and-chew club.

Trent looked the men over as he stepped down from his horse. He thought they could be bad as a group, but did not see anyone who might be trouble by himself.

"Mornin'," Trent said as he took the steps two at a time. He held a rolled up piece of cardboard that he had taken from the back of his saddle. "Who runs this place?"

One of the mercs turned his head and spat a brown stream into the street. "Who wants to know?"

Without breaking stride, Trent reached out with a toe and kicked the front of the chair out from under the man. The merc flipped over backwards with a crash, his head cracking against the building on the way down. A look of dumb surprise washed over his face.

"I do." Trent waited, as if he did not give a damn what the merc did, and in truth, he did not.

Finally, when the merc saw no one was going to rush to his rescue, he said, "Murdock runs it."

"Thanks." Turning to one side, Trent palmed his Ruger, reversed it, and used the butt for a hammer to tack his poster to the wall. He stepped back and surveyed the men on the porch. "Read it. If you can't, find someone to read it for you."

Moving into the gloom of the saloon, he stopped to let his eyes adjust to the dim light. This saloon was different from others he'd seen in that it was neater than most; the bar across one end was polished, the floor swept and clean. He looked around at the men and women sitting at tables and leaning against the bar. Some he knew from other places, some he had never seen. Still, there were not any he would call raider.

"I'm looking for Murdock." The noise level had fallen to a whisper when he came in and his voice carried easily.

A large woman in her late twenties got up from one of the tables and crossed around behind the bar. Leaning forward on her elbows, she looked him over; the way a schoolteacher does the class prankster.

"I am Murdock."

Trent could see now why the place was neater than usual; it had a woman's touch.

When he thought 'big' to himself, he did not mean fat. This woman was over six feet tall and proportioned to size. When she leaned forward, her breasts nearly exploded from the low-cut dress. In the subdued light, her face was expressionless, her eyes unreadable as obsidian. Trent vowed to be very careful, and not low-rate this woman.

"You run this place?"

"Every inch of it, mister. What'll you have?"

"How about a speech and a beer, in that order."

She grinned and the hardness left her face. "You give the speech and I'll get the beer."

Trent turned and hooked his elbows on the bar. While looking nonchalant, the position actually put his hands closer to his gun. He knew at least one in the room that did not miss that fact. "My name is John Trent. Some of you know me. If you do not, you will get to.

"What passes for government these days claim I'm a United States Marshal, but you and I know that has not meant much in these hills for the last hundred years. That does not matter. You can call me marshal, or law dog, or anything else you want. That does not matter either.

"What does matter is this; I am serving notice right now, anyone not showing some sign of work, or serving some purpose around Big Springs, will leave. It can go easy or hard, and you can have it any way you want it. The trouble in this settlement is over.

"There is a list of people outside on the wall. If your name is on the list, you have until sundown to get out. After that, I will kill you on sight. That's the speech."

Trent turned and took the beer Murdock handed him. It was cold and beaded with condensation. He swallowed half the contents before he put the bottle down.

"How do you keep it cold?"

"There is a well in the back that feeds in from the Springs. The water is cold enough to make your teeth hurt. Is my name on the list?"

He looked sideways at her. "I didn't know your name. Besides, looks to me like you have a job."

"I thought maybe you would try to run off all the newcomers and just leave the original settlers."

"Nope. That is not my intention. Just run an honest place. When people get too drunk to navigate, send them out the door. If they won't go, send for me."

"If they won't go, I'll show them this." She reached under the bar and came up with an old sawed-off Ithaca pump shotgun. On the front was an attachment called a Duck-bill, a deadly item spawned in the jungles of Vietnam that would spread the shot in a horizontal pattern.

"I inherited this from my grandfather. He was a Nam Vet," she said.

"Have you ever used it?"

She grinned at him. "Just once. It was one hell of a sight. I don't get too many arguments any more."

"I can imagine."

"One more question, Marshal. What about my girls? Do they stay?"

Trent was not aware she ran prostitutes. He idly wondered what they took for pay as he said, "You still don't understand, Murdock. I do not have a problem if you are doing normal stuff, and not causing trouble. I am not going to run the oldest profession out of town, unless they are spreading disease or rolling drunks. Just keep it clean."

"Well, I'm not sure the local parson would consider our normal stuff very normal, but I appreciate your attitude just the same."

He noticed her glance at the door. Looking around, he saw a cluster of men at the poster he had tacked up. One of the men ripped it from the wall and threw it down on the deck.

Trent sighed and started for the door. "Well, time to go to work."

Murdock called to him. "The big man is the one they have brought for you, Trent. He likes to stomp and he is a nutcracker."

As he passed through the door, the human bear jumped forward and wrapped him up, picking Trent's feet off the porch and trying to break his back. Trent knew if he did not end this fight now, he was a dead man. He struggled to free his left arm; his right hand pushing the man's chin back and up. Finally, his arm came free and he opened his palms and slapped the man on both ears, a move that ruptured his eardrums. The first time the man just whined. The second time his grip loosened. When Trent slipped down in the giant's grasp, he kicked the man on the instep and slid free. The man howled in pain.

Trent suddenly found himself propelled into the street and surrounded by a ring of spectators. Most were shouting encouragement to the giant.

It was hot and humid, and Trent was fast losing his temper. "Mister, I don't know you, so you will get one warning. No more of this," Trent said, panting.

The big man smiled, showing gapped teeth. Blood trickled from both of his ears. "The name is Big Waters, lawman, and I am going to kill you with my hands. I'm gonna break you like a stick."

The man was clumsy, but a monster of strength. Trent sighed. He just could not chance a long fight, not in this heat.

"All right then, Waters. Come and get it."

The big man rushed him again. When he was an arm's length away, Trent jabbed his fingertips into the

man's throat. When the giant stumbled to a stop, gagging for air, Trent slipped sideways and kicked in the man's right knee. The leg broke with a liquid sounding pop, and the giant went down like a felled tree, screaming and holding his leg.

Trent looked at the rest of the men and women. "Anyone else?"

The crowd was stunned. Not at the violence, he was sure they were used to that. They had seen men crushed in Big Waters' hands. The man they were afraid of was defeated with no more effort than taking out the garbage. Trent meant it to be that way.

One man dressed in a partial camo uniform said, "Tell it to Pagan Reeves. He will skin you alive."

Trent singled him out. "No. You tell him. Right now." He stared at the man until he turned and left.

"All right, move out of the way," a woman's voice broke in.

Murdock pushed her way through the crowd, carrying a black bag. "Jesus, Trent. You should have killed him."

"Why?"

"After I set his leg, we'll have to cut a tree for him to use as a crutch. None of us are big enough to carry him around."

"Use a horse."

* * * *

Later that afternoon, after one of the townsmen found him a building to use as an office and place to live, Trent stood in the empty room wondering what to do with it. A knock on the door saved him.

"Mister." A young boy stood at the door.

"What can I do for you, son?"

"Preacher Stephens wants you should come down to his place for dinner."

"C'mon in," Trent said. "You got a name?"

"Tommy."

Trent held out his hand. "My name is John, Tommy. Nice to meet you."

Tommy wandered inside looking around, ignoring the outstretched hand. "Not much of a place."

"I just got here," Trent said defensively.

"No kiddin'. Know what my dad says?"

Trent raised his eyebrows in question.

"He says you got a bulls-eye painted on your butt, and people are goin' to be linin' up soon for target practice."

"Your father is a wise man."

"My dad says—"

Trent raised his hand to stop the continuing avalanche of 'dad says'. "Tommy, you are depressing the hell out of me. Why don't you show me where this Preacher Stephens lives, huh?"

"That's easy, Marshal. Next to the church." The boy left, shaking his head, undoubtedly wondering why someone would not know the preacher lived next to his church.

Chapter 12

Trent tied his horse to the fence bordering a small white house, loosening the girth on the saddle. He unlatched the gate, let it swing shut behind him and walked up to the porch. The house matched the white church beside it. The whole place looked bleached. A tall, lank man opened the door. Although pushing sixty, he held himself erect, and proud.

"Reverend Stephens?"

"You must be Marshal Trent."

The preacher opened the door and Trent passed through into a spare-looking room with a few chairs parked against the walls. An ancient sofa seemed to be the main gathering place in the room.

As they stood, sizing each other up, the reverend said, "My daughter seems quite taken with you, Marshal. She talks about you all the time. I am surprised a man of your age would encourage that."

No beating around the bush here. "Your daughter seems to have a mind of her own, Reverend. She will make up her own mind concerning who she is with."

"No doubt. She is headstrong. How old did you say you were?"

"I didn't say, Reverend, but since you are asking, I am thirty-six."

"That would put you about twice my daughter's age, wouldn't it?"

"Reverend, you are grinding this axe a little thin. If you have got something to say, spit it out." Trent was beginning to dislike this man. A lot.

Reverend Stephens didn't reply as Katie entered from the kitchen.

"I see you two have met," she said. "I hope you are playing nice."

"Hello, Katherine." Suddenly Trent was tongue-tied as a schoolboy on his first date.

Wearing a full-skirted dress with ruffles at the shoulders and a dip in the front that went way below her open-throated tan line, Katherine Stephens had gone from beautiful to breathtaking. Trent was suddenly aware of his clothes, still dirty from the trail, and the fact he had not had a bath in days.

Katie took him by the arm. "Close your mouth, boy, the flies are gettin' in. You will excuse us, Father?" She led Trent out the back door. "I thought you might want to wash up."

There was a bench by a well pump, with two pans of water. Trent took the hint and stripped off his shirt. Katie leaned against the side of the house, watching as he washed vigorously in the cold water, then stood looking around for a towel. Katie reached inside the door, snagged one off a hook, and tossed it to him.

Trent flattened his wet hair with a comb, which made him wish he had a haircut. This, in turn made him think of his chin and wish he had a razor, which made him wish he were somewhere else entirely.

He smelled her before he felt the towel rubbing his back. Lilac and sweetness, mixed with cooking smells of bread and chicken. When he turned, she stepped inside his arms, her breasts nudged up against him, her expression serious, yet humorous at the same time, searching his eyes.

"Don't let my father run over you. It just makes matters worse. We will have dinner, and he will likely preach at you awhile. Then he will go over to the church to study." She smiled at him. "Well be alone then."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ah, you are such a gentleman." She gave him a peck on the nose and left him to get into his shirt by himself, her fingers leaving feathery tracks across his stomach.

* * * *

Supper was over and the two men sat on the front porch. The church and parsonage were built on higher ground, so the valley lay open before them like a mural. Trent tried to remember where he had seen a painting like this. In the distance, he could hear a piano playing in the saloon and occasional laughter drifted by, carried by the summer breeze on its way out of the valley.

The Reverend, perhaps trying to circumvent the melancholy atmosphere the evening brought, did not waste any time on preamble. "They are a godless people, with little thought for life or propriety."

"Which ones?"

"All of them, Mr. Trent. Each and every one of them."

Trent thought about it a moment. "I guess I am glad I'm not down there."

Reverend Stephens snorted at his sarcasm. "You think you are better, Mr. Trent? I am not blind or deaf. I have heard of you, and know of your kind. Frankly, I can't tell much difference between you and the people you're supposed to protect us from."

"So your answer to the problem is..."

"Leave, Mr. Trent. The will of God can be done without your assistance."

"With you interpreting God's will, I suppose."

The Reverend ignored the barb. "The killing has to stop. With you here, posing as a U.S. Marshal..."

"Posing?"

"The situation will only get worse. No one will have respect for your kind of law. The badge you are wearing is a vain trinket that you should put away. That..." he pointed to the worn handle of Trent's pistol, "won't solve anything here."

Vain trinket? Trent thought a moment, rubbing the star on his chest, realizing he and the reverend were at an important juncture. He needed to pick his way carefully. "Has it occurred to you that I may be as much God's instrument as you? When you think about it, we have the same goals. We want an end to the killing, and we want peace." Trent stood and leaned against a worn post. "Do you think for one moment that your preaching of peace will make any difference to those people down there? They only understand one thing. Survival. The quick and strong live. The slow and weak die. They do not want to die, Reverend."

"Violence is never the answer."

The reverend seemed to be warming up to the subject and Trent could feel a sermon coming on.

Abruptly, Trent said, "What happens when they come for your daughter? What happens when they

decide they want to live in your house? What happens when the raiders become tired of the girls in the saloon and take after the women in your congregation? How will you stop that, Reverend?"

Stephens stood and looked over the valley.

"I'll tell you, Reverend. Unless the raiders know you will hurt them more than they can hurt you, unless you make the price so high they will not chance it, you don't have a chance in hell, Reverend. Not one."

"And your way, Mr. Trent?"

"You say you have heard of me. So have they. Most of the raiders down there are followers. Oh, they'd kill you soon enough if they thought they could get away with it, but most of them don't want to die trying. For those, my presence will make a difference. That leaves the rest, like Pagan Reeves and a few others. Those I'll have to fight, Reverend, because there just isn't any other way. I will not have time to debate the issue, or bring them to you for conversion and counseling. The bad ones have tasted blood, and it will take blood to stop them."

"And you, Marshal Trent. You have tasted blood. Can you not stop until you have tasted theirs?"

Trent thought a moment. "You may be right ... at least for one person."

The preacher was obviously thinking of the raiders, but Trent was thinking of the mysterious killer.

"I'm curious, Mr. Trent. What possessed you to take such a job?"

Trent snapped back to the present and grinned ruefully at the reverend. "Now I've thought about that. I have to tell you, if God has made me do this, then I wish He had left me alone. My way has always been to let others do as they want, as long as they did not bother me. Somehow, that is not good enough anymore. I guess, when it comes right down to it, there just was not anyone else around to do the job."

"The Commandment says 'thou shalt not kill', Mr. Trent."

"See, there you go again, thinking you are the only one who has ever read a book. The original translation in the Greek says 'thou shalt not commit murder'. There is a world of difference in that. It wasn't until modern times that the clergy changed the wording to kill."

"And you think that distinction absolves you from the responsibility of your killing? The premeditation?"

"No," Trent said. "When you strap on a gun, you strap on the responsibility that goes with it. A gun is a tool, used to save lives, as well as take them, Reverend. Your problem is, everything has to be black or white. Unfortunately, we live in a world of gray."

"There is only right and wrong, Mr. Trent."

"Then I envy you your clarity, Reverend Stephens, however short-sighted it is."

Both men turned as Katie came out of the house, looking fresh and vibrant. Every time Trent saw her, she looked more beautiful.

"I think you two have about beaten that subject to death, don't you?"

Reverend Stephens turned to Trent. "I must go to the church, Mr. Trent, but I want you to know something. I love my daughter very much. I do not want to see her hurt, and I cannot see how you could do anything else but hurt her." The reverend smiled. "It's been an experience talking to you."

As her father went down the steps, Trent spoke. "When you think about it, Reverend, you may realize we are on the same side."

"I can't imagine that, Mr. Trent." He continued toward the church, a tall man in a black coat, his back unbending to age or differing opinion.

As they stood on the porch, Katie studied Trent's face, her eyes dark and serious. "Now this is a side of you I didn't expect. I thought your arguments were eloquent."

"You were eavesdropping?"

Her laughter was a welcome diversion after talking to her father. "Of course."

"Your father is not a bad man, Katherine. He just has tunnel vision. Our only difference is a matter of viewpoint."

It was then he heard the yelling. Young Tommy came tearing around the house, cutting under the reins of the horse. The animal reared and nearly broke free from the rail. Trent moved quickly to calm it.

"Marshal, you got to come quick. Somebody went by the Clark's house and them people are all dead. The whole bunch of them are dead. Folks are saying it's the plague."

Not waiting for a reply, the boy was off and running again, looking for the next place to tell his news.

"I'd better go, Katherine. Most people wouldn't know plague if it bit them on the ass."

"Not without me, you don't. I'll be just a minute."

* * * *

The cabin sat well back in the woods and a small crowd of people were gathered in front as Trent and Katie rode up. Silently the crowd parted to let them through.

Someone said, "I think it is plague."

Trent stopped and looked around at them. "Would any of you know plague if you saw it?" When no one answered, he said, "I want everyone to stay back. You're tromping up the ground where there may be tracks that I need to look at." As Trent went up the steps, he told Katie, "Stay outside unless I call you."

At her nod of assent, he went through the open door. Quietly, he moved through all the rooms of the small house, his passage known only by an occasional squeaking board in the tongue and grooved floor.

Trent wandered through a rumpled bedroom full of homemade toys and piles of clothes. The other rooms were equally in disarray, not surprising with small children running about. Long lines of meat adorned the back porch, cut into thin strips and dried for jerky. He paused to smell it, thinking it might be a source of trouble. Finally, he stepped from the dirty back porch into the room he had been avoiding.

The family was around the kitchen table. He had purposefully saved this room for last. There didn't seem to be any reason to hurry, it was obvious they were dead. Trent was old enough to know something about plague; at least enough to know this was not it. Plague takes awhile, following the usual course of one person being infected, then spreading it to others. Even the new viral strains that cropped up during the Fall weren't this quick. Whatever had killed this family had gone full course in a matter of minutes.

Finally, he did what he had put off for so long. He looked at the Clark family, individually ... personally. The man and woman were both young and healthy looking. The woman had fallen forward onto the table

and the man had fallen out of his chair onto his left side. The baby, about nine months old and sitting in a homemade highchair, looked like it was asleep. Trent stood there, absently brushing back a lock of wispy hair on the baby's head. At a small noise, he glanced up and saw Katie watching him from the door, tears in her eyes. Looking at the table full of food, he knew it had to be something they ate, or the water they drank. The house was much too drafty to harbor any poisonous fumes or gas, and there were no wounds. Seeing a pot of stew on the wood stove formed a question in his mind.

He found the answer in the trash under the sink. Several empty cans of prepared beef stew. The cans were green with corrosion, and had to be pre-Fall. How stupid could they have been? The food in those cans was spoiled. He knew from experience the toxin from bacteria growing in food was virulent and quick. They had probably just warmed the stew enough to eat, had not cooked it long enough to kill the bacteria. He had seen the same thing in the jungles of Central America. And the same thing here. Trent had seen enough.

"What'd you find?" The voice boomed loudly in the room.

Trent's head cracked against the bottom of the sink. Cursing and rubbing, he looked up. "Who let you in, Murdock?"

The big woman held up her black bag. "I go anywhere, Trent."

"Next time, hum a tune or something. You should not sneak up on a man like that. I have never seen someone so big be so quiet."

"So, what do you think?" she asked, ignoring his complaint.

Trent held up a can, careful not to get any of the contents on him. "Botulism."

"Bot ... what?"

"You're some medic, Murdock. Old cans. The food was spoiled."

Murdock's mouth made a round 'oh' as Trent went past her and onto the porch.

"You folks gather around." His quiet voice carried easily in the silence surrounding the house.

The people waiting outside shuffled closer. Trent saw a few mercs in the outer fringes of the crowd. Judging from the number, it looked like most of the honest townspeople were here.

He put it to them straight. "The Clark family is dead. All of them. The cause is not the plague or anything like it. This is what killed them." Trent held up one of the old, rusty cans. "I should not have to be telling you this, especially so long after the Fall. We all use material things made years ago. Material things. It is the way we live. But, you can't do that with food, no matter how good it looks, or how clean you think it is. If you do not grow it, raise it, or kill it yourself, do not eat it. That is survival rule number one, people. Anything you find in cans or jars may be spoiled. When something lies around for years, there is no end to the kinds of sickness it may breed."

Trent looked over the crowd. "Whatever was in those cans killed the Clark family in a matter of minutes. You think about that. It just is not worth the chance. If any of you have food like that stashed away, get rid of it. If you know where this family got these cans of stew—go get the rest and bury them." Trent paused a moment. "Now, these people need to be buried. Any volunteers?"

When several men stepped forward, Trent turned to Murdock. "You want to take care of this?"

"Sure."

He looked at her quizzically. "You got a first name, Murdock?"

"None you'll ever hear."

Grinning, Trent left things in her hands, then walked back to the horses with Katie.

Katie looked back at the house. "Sometimes people can be so stupid." Her voice broke. "The baby..."

"Katherine."

"What?" Her gaze moved to what had hardened his voice.

Pagan Reeves was waiting for him, and it did not look like a social call. Red Seaver was beside him, grinning widely. The third man was a raider who called himself Tommyknocker. He had two guns strapped to his waist, and a mind totally void of conscience. Trent had heard a lot about the Tommyknocker. Mostly that he was insane and mean. Trust Reeves to bring a crowd.

Trent sighed as he slid the thong off his Ruger. "You better stay out of the way, Katherine. I'll be talking to these men."

Chapter 13

Trent rode to see Pagan Reeves, sidestepping his horse down the hill. His right hand was on his hip, inches from the butt of his pistol, his left hand shoulder high, holding the horse with a tight rein.

"You lookin' for me, Marshal?" Pagan's truculent voice rang out.

"Not until morning." Trent's gaze never left the three of them. Of the three, he worried about Pagan Reeves the least. He knew Red Seaver, who was deadly with any kind of weapon, but it was Tommyknocker he would watch the closest. The man was wild-eyed and high strung.

"Which means?" Pagan asked.

"Your name is on the list."

"What if we don't wanna leave?" Tommyknocker spoke in a high-pitched voice as he moved his horse away from the other two.

"Then I'll kill you." Trent said it matter-of-fact, with no bravado or embellishment. It was just a simple statement of truth.

Tommyknocker laughed. "You'll never see the day."

"Do you remember the last time I saw you?" Trent asked. "It was at Caplinger Mills. You were wounded and running like hell."

With an oath, Tommyknocker dropped his hands to his guns.

Trent shot him out of the saddle.

As the man flipped backward off his horse, Trent moved the barrel of the pistol to cover the other two. Reeves sat in stunned silence while Red Seaver cursed under his breath.

"What'd you do that for?" Reeves yelled at Trent.

"Never could see talking when it's a shooting matter. You would do well to remember that, Reeves. Now, you have a choice. A choice you did not have a minute ago. Either you can pull that fancy pearl-handled pistol, or you can gather your people and leave town. The choice is yours, Reeves, and I don't have all day."

Red Seaver said, "Someday it will be you and me, Trent."

"Forget it, Red. I've seen you draw."

"You haven't seen me draw, Trent." Reeves' tone was taunting. "Have you thought of that? I've seen what you can do and I'm not worried one bit. What do you think of that, lawman?"

"I've seen you start to draw," Trent said. "You just never finish. That's the way people like you are, Reeves. You start, but never finish. You try to get other people to do your killing for you."

Pagan Reeves' face turned a mottled red, then faded to gray. When he finally spoke, it was in a choked whisper. "Red, go get the rest of the men. Meet me at Sliding Rock, then we'll go see Starking." He smiled maliciously at Trent. "I think open season is about to start on our Mr. Trent."

"Would you care to start now, Reeves?"

Reeves shook his head. "No. I can wait. When the time is right ... we'll meet."

Trent relaxed slightly. "It may never come, Reeves."

"Why?"

"I can't imagine ever turning my back on you."

As Trent rode back toward town, he raised his hand in salute to the Reverend and Katherine. Neither looked very happy.

* * * *

Marshal John Trent lounged in a tipped-back chair that graced the front of his makeshift quarters at Big Springs. Katie had called after him, following the confrontation with Reeves, with a promise to return later and talk. It did not take much to figure what the subject would be. He had even surprised himself with the suddenness of the killing of Tommyknocker. But there simply was not time to do anything else.

As he sat watching the townspeople go about their evening chores, Trent tried to collect his thoughts on his first day in town. One crisis with the food poisoning, and the raider element certainly knew where they stood. Trent's fight with Big Waters had seen to that. Coupled with meeting Katie's father, it had been quite a day. Hopefully, within a few days, the townspeople would start to see him as a help instead of a hindrance. In the meantime, Trent needed to figure out just how to go about this marshaling job he'd fallen into.

He was about to get up and make a circuit through town when he noticed a large man in a floppy hat walk out of Murdock's saloon. His wild hair was barely contained, and from his appearance, Trent was glad he was upwind from the man. It was not his rough appearance that brought Trent's attention to him, it was his manner. The man had walked toward Trent, but stopped at a small cabin set slightly back from the street. After furtively looking around, he quickly snatched open the door and ducked inside. In the cool night air, Trent heard the sound of a slap and a woman's scream. *What the hell?*

Trent ejected from his chair and ran to the house. The screaming and cursing continued as he mounted the porch. Trent quietly turned the knob and let himself in.

The man had a woman backed into a corner, holding her with one hand, the other raised to slap her again. As Trent moved toward him, he caught sight of children's faces peering from another room. The man stopped with his hand paused in mid-air when the woman's eyes shifted.

With a curse, the man lunged toward a back door, but Trent's foot intercepted his legs, piling him up on the floor. The woman's assailant came up spitting mad from the floor, but his anger was no match for Trent's cold fury. As the man stepped in, Trent met him with a straight left jab that crushed his nose in a shower of blood. Not giving the man any chance to set himself, Trent bent him over with a short jab to the ribs, then straightened him up with a solid uppercut to the jaw. Then, Trent grabbed him by the neck and threw him bodily outside into the street.

As the two men came together again, Trent noticed a small crowd had gathered. The would-be rapist took a wild swing at Trent that he easily evaded, then Trent slapped him, first one hand, then the other, until the man was whining in frustration. With his pounding fists, Trent drove the man back down the street.

Finally, Trent pinned the man against the awning post next to his office. Turning to the crowd who had

followed, he said, "Someone get me a rope."

"You going to hang him, Marshal? We've all had trouble with that man." The question came from one of the women in the crowd.

"It's a thought," Trent replied.

A few minutes later Trent had the man tied to a post with the rope thrown up over a crosspiece, pulling his hands over his head, and taking most of his weight off his feet. Trent stood looking at him a long time while the man groggily looked back. Finally, he turned to the crowd. "Has anyone checked on the woman?"

Murdock pushed her way through the crowd. "She's all right, Marshal. Just scared."

"Good." He turned back to his prisoner. "So, what do we do with vermin like this?"

The comments from the crowd were varied and sudden, ranging from death to emasculation. Trent noticed a puddle forming under the man that was not sweat.

Turning to the crowd, Trent said, "We'll let him hang here all night. Murdock, in the morning you can turn him loose. If he's still alive, he can leave town." Trent turned back to the man. "Mister, I don't want to know your name, where you've come from, or where you are going. If I see you again, I'll beat you to death."

Trent turned to the crowd again. He had noticed a few men in the outskirts of the group that were not local; they just were not dressed right. He directed his comments to them. "The people of this town will not be bothered. Anyone causing a problem will answer to me. I won't be giving any more warnings."

Trent was in his office soaking his hands when Katie came in. She leaned on the door as she closed it. There were no lights inside, so he could barely see her in the dusk.

"I can't leave you alone for a minute."

"Just doing my job ... I think," Trent replied.

"What are you doing to your hands?"

"Found some Epsom salts on the shelf. It will help keep the swelling down."

"I heard this 'porch ornament' tried to rape that poor woman. Do you think he's the one you're looking for?"

"Not likely. He's too clumsy, and not smart enough. No, he is not the one." She was still standing by the door. "What's wrong, Katherine?"

"I don't know. You killed a man earlier today, while he was just sitting there talking to you. Then, I see what happened out here and it bothers me. Sometimes, I do not know you and that scares me. You were so brutal. I have never seen you like that."

"You don't know me, Katherine. I tried to tell you that. I am not hiding anything from you. This is who I am." He dried his hands and held one out to her. "Come and sit with me. We can talk."

Katie shook her head, "No. I ... I better not. I need to think."

"Then go do your thinking." Trent's voice sounded harsh in the gloomy room. "While you're at it, stop by

and make sure that piece of filth hanging on the porch is being treated right. Maybe you could take him home with you."

Trent did not get up to close the door after she left. He wasn't too sure it would close after the way Katie slammed it. As he sat in the darkness, his throat felt raw and his mind was full of emptiness. He knew his world had just walked out that door. What he did not know was how to get her back.

Chapter 14

Dawn had been gone a couple of hours and the midmorning heat pressed a heavy hand on John Trent. The trail written in the bent grass and churned earth, turned up by the passage of horses, was easily followed. Pagan Reeves and his men did not try to cover signs of their passage.

Trent thought back to the night before. His simple ruse had worked. Sure Reeves was a back shooter, he had taunted him until the man went running to the raider chief, Jeremiah Starking. Trent could have wasted days scouting around the hills looking for Starking, but now the trail was like a paved highway.

Topping a rise, Trent saw a huge encampment spread out below him. Groups of people milled around a cleared area between at least fifty cook fires. Children ran and whooped through the camp, and farther away a small herd of horses grazed under the watchful eye of a guard.

There was only one tent in the clearing. Trent pulled out his binoculars to study the area. Standing next to the dwelling, a boy in cut off bib overalls held horses that looked hard ridden. Pagan must be in conference with Starking. It was time to move.

Walking his horse into the clearing, the SKS across his thighs, Trent rode straight and relaxed in the saddle. He pulled his hat brim down to his eyes. His badge glittered in the sunlight. He noted that this raider camp was different from others he had seen. The people at the campfires were bedraggled, and most looked like they had missed a few meals, but they appeared clean. The area around the fires was not littered and Trent noticed for the first time, a garbage pit dug to one side, and farther out, the latrine. Someone kept a tight rein on these people. A germ of an idea crept into Trent's mind.

A wave of people preceded his way through the camp, then broke and split at Starking's tent when Trent reined in the gelding. The curtain brushed aside, and a tall white-haired man stepped out. Several others, including Pagan Reeves, Ben Hobbs and Red Seaver, instantly flanked him.

Trent and Starking took stock of each other, matching what they had heard against what they saw.

"Speak your peace, Marshal Trent."

So much for cordial introductions. Trent looked around the circle of faces, feeling like a bone in a wolf den. If he did not make this good, he would have about as much chance.

"Mr. Starking, it sounds like you have heard of me. If that is so, you should know I would not ride in here without good reason. We need to talk. I think we can avoid a lot of needless bloodshed and come to terms that would help us both. That is, if you're willing to listen."

"And why should I?"

Trent lifted his rifle, causing a hasty stir behind Starking, then shoved it into the boot on the saddle. Pushing his hat onto the back of his head, he hooked one knee around the saddle horn and gestured to the people around him.

"The word is, you want to take Big Springs and make homes for these people. I can sympathize with that. Your people trust you, and I can see you care for their welfare. The problem is, Big Springs is already settled."

Starking nodded. "A few hill people are there, I understand."

"Have you seen it, Mr. Starking?"

"Reeves told me about it."

Trent pinned the man standing behind Starking with a penetrating gaze. "Then you've been lied to."

The crowd stirred, muttering and shifting their feet in the grass.

Reeves started to speak, but Starking raised his hand to silence him. "Your story is different?"

Trent turned in the saddle a little so he could see more people, especially the men and women with small children. "Big Springs has as many people as you do, maybe more. There are families there, just like here. They have a church and a preacher. They have a store that deals in trading, and two gristmills for grinding grain and sawing lumber. There is a ranch nearby that is busy rounding up cattle, and there are enough of those to keep a good many people fat for years. Most important of all, the water at the Springs is clear and clean."

Starking turned from staring at Reeves and asked, "What's your part in this?"

"The Army sent me here to keep the peace, any way I can. I am supposed to keep the lid on until they can come to the area in force. You know what will happen then. The Army's rule is that raiders are shot on sight. I have a better idea."

Starking and his lieutenants bristled at the last statement, some of his men laying hands on their guns.

Reeves pulled his weapon and said, "If you—"

"Let's hear him out," a voice from the crowd interrupted.

Again, Starking called for quiet. "Go ahead, Trent."

"If you try to take Big Springs by force, the people there will fight. You will lose good men trying to take the place, and so will they. It is a natural fortress, and there are not many ways to get at it. Thing is, you do not need to fight for it. I don't see you folks as raiders. You just need a place to live. There is plenty of room at the Springs and the surrounding area. If you come peaceful, that is. I will talk to people and let them know about you. The most important thing is to keep the peace. People start showing up dead and the deal will be off."

"We get along all right by ourselves," Starking said.

"Really?" Trent looked around the circle of faces. "Where are your hunters, Mr. Starking? The forest is full of deer and boar, and the flatlands have cattle running free. I do not see much but rabbit and squirrel in your cooking pots. I see running sores on your children, and they wear rags for clothes. Personally, I do not think you are doing so well. Know why? Someone has all your best men trying to push honest people off their land, when they should be putting meat in the pot."

The last comment he directed at Reeves, who did not speak, just raked his hot gaze over Trent. Starking nodded, realizing the truth.

Reeves, obviously sensing that Starking was starting to agree with Trent, stomped to his horse. "I'm taking my men with me, Starking, and we'll take care of Big Springs. I can see you don't need us anymore."

"Your men?" Starking said. "Maybe we'd be better off without 'your men'. Hear this. Whoever quits me

and goes with you had not better cross paths with me again, Pagan. I will not tolerate that kind of loyalty."

Most of the men stayed, while Reeves and a few of his followers left.

Starking turned back to Trent. "Light and set, Marshal. It seems we have a lot to discuss. By the way, we have one of your Green Jeans in here. He's in a bad way."

As they walked into the tent, the smell of rotting flesh assailed Trent's nose.

"Not much we could do for him," Starking said. "He's gut shot."

Thinking of Gunny, Trent pulled the blanket away from the man's face. It was Lieutenant Spencer.

"We found him yesterday; I don't know what's keeping him alive."

Lieutenant Spencer's eyes fluttered open. Seeing Trent, he tried to speak.

"What happened?" Trent leaned close to the man's face. "Ambush?"

The man nodded, finally giving up trying to speak. His breathing came ragged and shallow, his fevered gaze holding on Trent.

Trent thought for a moment, then asked, "Raiders?"

At this, Spencer became agitated and feebly shook his head. The effort was too much and it left him staring with sightless eyes at the side of the tent.

"Guess we'll never know," Starking said.

"I'd be real disappointed to find out you had anything to do with this, Starking," Trent looked levelly at the raider chief.

A voice cut into the semi-darkness of the tent. "Don't get your feathers ruffled, Marshal."

Trent turned, recognizing the drawling voice belonging to the old matriarch from the village he had gone through.

"Do you know this woman?" Starking asked Trent.

"I know her," Trent smiled. "She kept me from getting shot awhile back."

Starking spoke to the woman. "Well, I'm not sure you did the right thing, but let's hear your story."

Gran ignored the man, instead giving her attention to Trent. "We been scoutin' the hills, like you said to do. Keepin' watch. We run onto that army patrol you was with, 'cept they was headed the other direction this time. They'd been ambushed, all right, but from the inside." She paused to let it sink in. "Someone right in amongst them cut loose and shot them all. We buried all of them, except for this one."

Trent tried to absorb his information. He was missing something. *What about Gunny?*

Gran continued. "When we found the girl you looked at, Lon saw just a piece of a track. It came from a shoe with an odd stitch. Whoever did the shootin' of the patrol had that same track. We thought you'd want to know."

"Did you bury a man with stripes on his sleeves, a sergeant?"

"Don't know what a sergeant's stripes look like, Marshal."

"Three stripes pointed down with two over the top." He drew the figure in the air.

"Nope. They all had just one of those stripes."

Relieved, Trent said, "Then one got away. Thanks, Gran."

She was not through talking. "Marshal?"

Trent raised his eyebrows.

"You watch your back, son," Gran said. "There's something not right about this, but we just can't seem to pin it down."

"Yeah, I hear you, Gran."

"Then hear this, Marshal. Lon may do the job for you. He was supposed to marry that gal you saw. He is lookin' for the killer awful hard. It is makin' him crazy. Just don't you shoot him by mistake."

"Gran, if you see him ... you tell him good luck."

"I probably won't see him. He spends all his time over in this neck of the woods. Do I see him, though, I'll tell him."

* * * *

Trent left Starking's camp with more questions than answers. He had a cold feeling in his stomach that the answers were staring him in the face, but he just could not see it. There were not many clues, and hardly anything to investigate. So far, all he had was bodies.

Ignoring his wife's death, and thinking only of the more recent killings, he knew there was a thread that was tickling his mind. The only connection between the murders he could see was ... himself.

And he was worried about Gunny. Where was Gunny? He had mentioned joining Trent. But maybe he wouldn't. More likely, he was trailing the one who ambushed the patrol.

Trent's mind kept at the problem. So, what did he have? Two partial footprints of a moccasin that had been torn and repaired, which pointed to a woodsman. And the fact that the man, and it had to be a man, left little or no trail. This fact pointed to someone trained to hide. Army? Special Forces? Gran thought the killer had been with the patrol. Had they taken a prisoner? Was one of the patrol members an imposter? And, how would he find him in a few million square miles of forest?

His horse pulled up and stopped and Trent, totally absorbed in working out the problem, had to look around to get his bearings. The trail, once a fire access road around the mountain, narrowed here with a steep fall on his left side and a high bluff on the right. The path was grown up with grass as high as his horse's knees. Sitting in the partial sunlight that filtered through the trees, he was just nudging his horse forward when he saw a wink of sunlight reflect off something high on the bluff above him.

He started to wheel his horse but a bullet caught him high on the shoulder, turning him in the saddle. A second round scraped along the top of his head, just under the skin, snapping him off his horse and into the brush along the trail. Head ringing and barely conscious, Trent rolled down the steep embankment, trying to get some distance between him and the shooter. Finally, coming up against a lichen-covered deadfall, he lay gasping. The forest fern and grasses were waist high here, and he could not see the trail above from where he was lying. Waves of nausea rippled through him as the initial shock wore off and

the pain hit. He shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

Move. He had to move.

Suddenly, the air around him buzzed like mad hornets as he heard several guns open up from the trail above. Leaves puffed up around him, and clipped twigs and splinters flew into the air, falling on him as he struggled to move. With a huge effort, he rolled over the log as he felt smashing blows in his side and back.

After the onslaught of noise, the forest fell quiet. Trent lay gasping for breath. He felt light-headed. The last sound he heard was of a man laughing.

* * * *

The steady spattering of blood on leaves was the first thing Trent heard when he came to. Through blurred vision he could barely see the blood dripping from his nose. He turned and squinted at the sun, surprised to see it had moved hardly at all. He must have been out only a few minutes.

Using the log as a crutch, he got his feet under him. Looking up the hill, he realized everything he needed was still up there somewhere with his horse. At least he had his Ruger, and the hunting knife. They would have to do.

Trent started to walk ... and fell on his face. *All right, I'll crawl. Just like swimming. Reach out, grab a handful of dirt and pull it toward you...*

* * * *

Three men rode out on the trail, having gingerly traversed the bluff. They stopped to survey the damage.

"What do you think, Red?" Pagan Reeves scanned the brush below for any sign of Trent. All he could see was the red-stained log.

"I think we got us one dead marshal." Seaver laughed.

Shoving his rifle down in the boot, Pagan turned in the saddle. "I didn't hear you shooting, Hobbs."

"Not much of a back shooter, Pagan," Hobbs said.

"Hell, what's the difference? You are just as dead one way as the other." Pagan eyed Hobbs suspiciously. "You are not gettin' religion on me, are you? I never heard of a born-again raider." Both he and Seaver laughed.

Hobbs pulled his horse back from the trail. "You boys go on to the Springs. I think we'll part company here." His rifle pointed at the two men, who stared angrily at him.

"When you're out, you're out, Hobbs." Pagan's voice was low and threatening.

"Don't try to scare me, Pagan. I don't feel like laughing right now."

After the two men had pounded down the trail, Ben Hobbs sat looking at the place he knew Trent must be. Hell of a way to go, he thought, but he could at least bury him. He owed him that much anyway.

Hobbs approached the blood stained log quickly, anxious to be on his way. Pagan might decide to come back and use him for target practice. Hurriedly, he looked over the top of the log. Trent was gone.

With a soft curse, Hobbs glanced around for a trail. It was easy to find. Trent had not gone far and Hobbs found him almost immediately.

The Marshal's scalp wound still bled slightly and the rest of his body seemed painted in red. Hobbs felt for a pulse and was shocked to find it not strong, but steady. He sat back on his heels a moment, thinking it out. He would retrieve Trent's horse, then take him to the Sanchez ranch. If Trent lived that long, so be it. It was too dangerous to take him back to Big Springs. Murdock was not that good of a medic anyway. Besides, Pagan would be there and he didn't want to deal with that. Nodding, Hobbs started moving.

* * * *

Hours later, Hobbs stopped, and answered a questioning voice from a sentinel.

"It's Ben Hobbs. I got a wounded man here and thought you might want him."

"You are alone, Hobbs?" Cruz had come up silently behind him, holding his short M-16 level with Hobbs' belly.

"I am."

"And who is this man?"

"Trent."

With a curse, Cruz grabbed the reins of Trent's horse, leading him toward the house, shouting rapidly in Spanish as he went. The front door slammed open like a shot and Consuelo rushed out. Together, she and Cruz pulled Trent from the saddle.

Hobbs watched as Chico Cruz put his hand gently on Trent's head, and said, "Ah, compadre. It is a poor end. Someone will die for this."

Consuelo looked strangely at Cruz, apparently never before having seen this kind of gentleness in him. Suddenly, Katie shoved her aside.

"John?" Her voice quavered, as her hands covered him, helplessly, touching and probing as tears welled in her eyes. "God, I've never seen so much blood. How can he still be alive?"

Suddenly, Katie gasped, talking to herself. "Oh, thank you, Lord."

"Get Murdock. He is going to make it. Look at this." She laughed and sobbed at the same time. Her strong hands ripped the front of Trent's shirt open to reveal his back and side. "One of the bullets just cut through the meat on his side. It went straight through. The second must have hit a rib as he was turning. The bullet followed the rib around his body and came out the front. I can tell by the trail it left. If we can keep out the infection, he'll make it."

Cruz was at once skeptical. "He has lost a lot of blood."

"I know, but he's strong. He will make it. He has to." Katie turned back to Trent. "You crazy, wonderful man," she sobbed. "You weren't shot with bullets, you were shot with luck!" She was still crying and laughing when she turned to the others. "Come on, let's go. He will be all right. Go. Go!"

Cruz sent one of his riders for Murdock, with a stern order to hurry, then helped carry Trent inside.

Hobbs watched as the rider ignored the regular trail and went bursting through the brush heading for the backside of the Springs. He'll kill that horse, he thought.

He watched a moment more, marveling as the confusion turned into order, then clucked at his horse. It

was time to go.

Cruz walked out on the porch. "A moment."

Hobbs reined in.

"Who did this?"

"Reeves and Seaver." Hobbs was not about to hold anything back from this man. He did not think it would be healthy.

Cruz held his gaze. "You were with them."

"I didn't shoot. Chico, I'm not much good, but this I just couldn't do." He paused thoughtfully. "But then, I didn't stop it either."

"Then, why did you bring him back?"

"We had kind of a face off at the Army Base Camp awhile back. One of my men pulled a gun on him. A dumb kid. Trent killed him. I had my own gun half out of the holster when Trent turned on me. He could have killed me right then. No one would have said a word. He let me go. I never knew why."

Chico slowly nodded. "It is because he is not the killer most people think." He glanced up. "Are you leaving?"

"Damn right I am. I do not want to be around when he gets up. That man is gonna' be mad."

"I will thank you for him, since he cannot do it himself. I am sure he will not forget your actions. But, Hobbs..." Chico's voice turned cold and brittle. "Ride far from this place."

Hobbs walked his horse as far as the edge of the clearing surrounding the ranch house, then cantered down the trail.

* * * *

It was late. The moon had come and gone, and the night breeze stirring through the open windows was soft and fragrant. Occasionally, a whippoorwill would call into the night, an echoing answer coming later from another valley.

Murdock had patched Trent up as best she could, then gone back to town. Consuelo had retired to bed. Chico Cruz was somewhere around, but Katie did not know where. He was always around.

She sat next to Trent, her hands idly playing with his hair, careful not to touch the crease on his scalp. He was naked under the blanket; his head wrapped in white cloth, along with his shoulder and hip. On his side, and in the middle of his back, were bruises that were getting blacker by the moment. He had been wounded four times, but with luck he would make it. *Thank God*, she thought as she bent to kiss him on the lips.

* * * *

It was dark and warm. There was a fragrance, bringing memories of sweat and passion, something soft and yielding...

Trent woke with a start, a jagged edge of pain slicing behind his eyes.

"This can't be heaven. It hurts too much." His voice was hoarse and halting.

Katie leaned over and kissed him, not surprised he was awake. She had been noticing signs of him waking up for an hour. "Welcome back."

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears and she leaned back to keep from dripping on his face. As Trent tried to move, she said, "Shush. Be still. You'll start the bleeding again."

"Where am I?"

"Connie's ranch. Cruz is keeping watch."

"How'd I get here?"

"Hobbs brought you."

"Ben Hobbs?" Trent gazed at the ceiling, trying to digest that little piece of information.

"How bad am I?" he asked after a while.

Katie's hand rested lightly on his shoulder. "You took a beating, but you'll live. Lost some meat on your shoulder, and you will have one hell of a headache. You were grazed on the hip too, but that's not too bad."

"My chest feels like a horse stepped on it."

"You were hit in the side and back. I was afraid I would lose you. I don't think I could stand that."

"I have too much to live for to check out now. I'll be around."

A few minutes later, after Katie decided he had been kissed and pampered enough, Trent said, "I can't figure why they didn't come down and finish the job."

"Reeves and Seaver?" Katie's nose wrinkled in disgust. "Yellow streak, maybe?"

"It'll cost them," he murmured.

"Not for a while, it won't," she said in a stern voice. "You have to rest. You lost a lot of blood, and your shoulder may get infected if you're not careful. It's not too bad right now, but you don't want to break that wound open again."

"What do you hear from Big Springs?" he asked.

"I asked Murdock about the town when she came to look at you," Katie said. "She said Pagan rode into the Springs right after he ambushed you. He was really bragging it up."

At the look in Trent's eyes, Katie continued quickly. "Whatever he is doing now can't be helped. The people will deal with it the best they can. It will not do any good for you to go after these men when you are not ready. Now, you would just make it easy for them to finish the job."

Trent contemplated that for a moment. Through the pain in his head, it seemed like he had to formulate each thought separately and move it to the next one.

"So, what do we do, nurse?" he finally asked.

"I know a place not far from here, an old cabin hidden back in the hills. We'll go there and let you mend."

"And then I'll deal with Reeves."

"No. Then we will deal with Reeves."

* * * *

The horse screamed as it hit the rope stretched across the trail, stumbling forward and pitching its rider headlong into the dust. When Hobbs came to, he was standing. How ... he tried to move and found himself lashed to a tree. Looking around, he saw a tall man in buckskins coming toward him.

"Who are you?" Hobbs stammered as he tried to control his fear.

"Doesn't matter, boy," the man said.

"What ... what are you doing with that knife?"

"You shot up a good man, boy. You shouldn't have done that."

"I didn't, mister. I never shot him. It was Reeves and Seaver. They did it."

Hobbs struggled to get loose as the man came closer. "Please, it wasn't me!"

"You were there, boy. You were there."

* * * *

The screams lasted almost an hour. Hobbs was a strong man. A lot stronger than he should have been, or probably wanted to be. But that was the trouble. Sometimes you just couldn't die when you wanted to. The screams were shrill, panting things at the last, feeble and bubbling past bloody lips, but there was no one to hear them. Except for one, and he did not care.

The Watcher cleaned his knife on Hobbs' shirt. It was hard to find a spot that was not bloody. He caught up Hobbs' horse, took the saddle and bridle off, then slapped it on the rump.

As he watched the riderless horse limp down the trail, he thought of the girl. He could wait now. The killing of Hobbs had sated his thirst for the moment, but he wouldn't wait too long.

* * * *

Chico Cruz and one of his sentries stared and listened into the night.

"I thought I heard screams, Chico. They were faint, brought with the wind. Terrible screams."

An owl hooted in the distance as the wind rustled the leaves of the towering oaks surrounding the ranch yard. Both men stood silent for a few moments until Cruz broke the silence.

"I hear nothing, Gorge."

"But, I..."

"I don't doubt you," Cruz said. "Whatever it was, it is gone."

As they walked back toward the house, Cruz said, "Keep a sharp eye. There is a demon feel to this night."

Gorge shuddered as he looked back toward the forest.

Chapter 15

Pagan Reeves was furious. It was the day after they ambushed Trent, and no one was around. Most of the townspeople had disappeared. Even his men had left.

Flanked by Red Seaver, he stalked up and down the small street of the settlement, looking for someone to vent his wrath on. He found his catharsis in Reverend Stephens.

Standing in front of his church, the preacher saw them coming and waited.

"Well, if it isn't the Holy Man," Pagan said.

The reverend did not seem impressed. "Leave this place, you are not welcome here."

Seaver edged around to the side of the reverend. When the preacher looked at Pagan, Seaver drew his pistol and whipped the barrel across the back of the reverend's head, turning the blond hair crimson. As the preacher fell, Seaver and Reeves kicked him repeatedly in the face and ribs. When they finished, he was barely alive, breathing shallowly through smashed and bleeding lips, arms wrapped around his belly, spitting up blood in a wheezing cough.

Pagan Reeves stood over the preacher. "That ought to keep you quiet for a while." He looked at Seaver. "Kickin' preachers is thirsty work. Let's go get some of Murdock's beer."

When they entered, the saloon had few patrons. Pagan noticed Murdock at the end of the bar, and he yelled, "How 'bout bringing a man a drink, Murdock?"

The big woman raised her eyes and focused on Pagan. "When I see a man, I'll do that."

"You'll do it now ... or I'll burn this place down around your ears." Pagan's voice was brittle with menace.

Handing bottles to each of them, she said, "You know he'll come for you. You gotta know that. This may be the last beer you boys will have."

"Trent?" Red Seaver guffawed loudly. "He never saw it coming. We hit him twice. He's dead."

"You shot him from ambush? I never figured you for a back shooter, Red."

Seaver's voice sounded proud, echoing from the bottle. "It don't matter how we get it done, Murdock. What matters is getting it done. And I never miss."

"You did this time."

"What?"

"I saw him last night. He will live a long time. That's more than I can say for you two."

Seaver could not believe it. "We hit him solid. There was blood everywhere!"

"Oh, you hit him all right, but you didn't hit him good enough. If I'm any judge, he'll come to see you boys, and right soon."

"Where?" Pagan's voice was coldly furious. "Where is he, Murdock? We'll just go and finish the job."

"Sure. You go ahead, boys," Murdock stated. "He's out at the Sanchez ranch. You do know Cruz, don't you? And the rest of his riders? You try anything out there and they'll hunt you down like coyotes."

The two men looked at each other and finished their drinks.

* * * *

They had just walked out, and Murdock was washing out their bottles, when the door opened again. Turning with a scowl on her face, she thought Reeves and Seaver had just come back in. She was surprised to see a total stranger standing in the room.

"I'm a thirsty man."

The newcomer looked her up and down, his eyes wide with amazement. "My name is Charley Walsh, and I think I'm in love."

Murdock straightened up a little, smoothing her hair. "It's been that kind of day."

Pouring a straight shot of skullbuster, she handed it to him.

Walsh knocked back the drink without a shudder, under Murdock's admiring gaze.

"Have you seen a long, tall galoot around?" Walsh said. "He's kinda' short on brains, but a likable sort, and he'll be wearing a tin star for a target on his chest."

"Why do you want him?" Murdock asked guardedly.

"I'm the best friend he has in the world, that's why."

"Well, now..." Murdock walked over to the front door, locking it. "Maybe we should have us a talk."

* * * *

Two weeks later John Trent stood on the front porch of the earth home that had been carved into the mountainside years before. Katie's 'hideout' had turned into quite a place. The original owner had outfitted the home with the finest survival equipment money could buy. Unfortunately, it looked like it was never used. *That is the bad part about survival. It is mostly luck, and luck is a fickle mistress.*

A walk-in closet had revealed a treasure of weapons. The rifle rack had produced an SKS just like his, along with M-16s and a Colt Sportster that looked like an M-16, but chambered for the NATO round.

There were several handguns racked on the wall, mostly semi-automatics, but way in the back was a Smith & Wesson .357, similar in weight to his Ruger. The load was about like his 9mm, but the ammo was hard to find. Judging from the stash in the closet, ammo would not be a problem in the near future. He hefted the pistol and eared back the hammer. No. The frame was too large, and the gun too heavy. He put it back on the shelf. Maybe Chico could use it.

Trent straightened as he cast a worried look around the clearing. Katie had gone hunting that morning, and should have been back before now. He would give her a few more minutes.

Under her watchful care, his wounds were healing fast. Two days ago, when Katie was hunting, he had saddled his horse and tried to get into the saddle. The first step had brought sweat to his forehead from the pain, but he had made it. The thought of Pagan Reeves brought anger to Trent's face. *Soon ... soon.*

Glancing at the trail, he saw Katie striding up the path carrying a small whitetail deer across her shoulders.

"Another day, another feast," Katie said when she was close enough to be heard. There was a fine sheen of sweat on her brow, and her breath was a little ragged from carrying the heavy deer. She apparently chose to ignore it ... he did not.

"What would you do if you shot a big one?" Trent asked chidingly.

"I don't shoot big ones."

Changing the subject, Trent asked, "Any sign?"

At once, she was serious. "None to speak of."

"I went up the bluff today." He gestured at the peak behind the house.

She looked at him critically, apparently pacified when she saw no blood. "And?"

"With those high-powered binoculars we found, you can see this whole country. It looks like Starking is still in camp. I was worried he would go ahead and take over the town."

"Pagan still has it."

"How..."

"Bird told me," Katie said mysteriously.

"Two legged?"

"Yeah." She relented. "I scouted up pretty close to town. Found little Tommy fishing the creek. He let me know. Most of the townspeople are hiding in the hills. Pagan and his bunch are just lying around. They seem to be waiting for something." She looked at him worriedly. "If you go, they'll be all over you."

"I know."

Trent changed the subject. "Found out something about this place today when I was up on the hill."

Her raised eyebrows asked the question.

"Solar power."

She looked blankly at him. He had forgotten how young she was.

"Electricity," Trent said. "You know how they generate it at the mill, by turning a generator? Years ago, they perfected a way of collecting the sun's energy and turning it into electricity. All I had to do was clean off the collectors and hook up the batteries." He smiled at her. "Although the batteries are in bad shape, I think there's enough power for a small surprise tonight."

She gave him a puzzled look, and then said flatly, "Batteries."

"Yes. They're little..."

She dumped the deer at his feet. "Surprise me with this. If you can climb that bluff, you can skin a deer. I'll go clean up." She paused to smile back at him; "I wouldn't want to miss anything tonight."

* * * *

Later, they were sitting contentedly on the floor of the living room, their backs against the couch, with venison steak nestled in their bellies. The pale glow of an illuminated dial washed over their features.

Although they might still work, Trent had elected not to try the main lights in the house. The old car batteries were still weak and he wanted all their power for his surprise.

"What's this called again?"

"A CD player. Compact Disk." He wrapped his arms around her, clasping his hands across her middle.

"And it's just music ... no words?"

Earlier he had tried to explain the concept. "This isn't some folk singer banging on a banjo and singing through his nose."

"Uh huh. Well, let 'er rip, old-timer."

Slowly the music filled the room. After a quick and delighted look toward the speakers, Katie settled back to listen. Minutes later, the power stored in the batteries ran out, and Katie was wiping tears from her cheek. She turned to Trent, looking deep into his eyes.

"It was so sad," she said softly.

"And also very beautiful."

"Why?" she asked. "Why did you do that to me?"

He thought a minute. "I don't really know. Just so you could hear something of what we've lost, I guess. Maybe I needed to share the sadness with someone. Or, since you're so young..." He gave her a squeeze. "I thought you needed to be educated."

She thought about it. "It's okay then, as long as we share."

They were silent for a long time, each lost in their own thoughts.

Finally ... "What is the name of the music?" Katie asked.

"Adagio for Strings by Samuel Barber."

She mouthed the words. "I'll remember that."

Turning her around to face him, he kissed her tenderly. The kiss lasted a long time.

"I want to make love to you."

She chuckled as she bit him lightly on the lips. "Like on the trail?"

"No, not like on the trail. That was more like spontaneous combustion. We needed each other. This will be different, and it will take a long time ... maybe the whole night."

Their lips parted again and she breathed softly into him. "Sure you're up to this?"

Her startled laughter as he lifted her to the couch turned into a long, soft, sigh.

Chapter 16

The Watcher felt proud of himself. It was time, and he had found someone worthy. She came alone from one of the smaller houses surrounding the ranch of Consuelo Sanchez. A basket in hand, she picked blackberries and stopped to pull collard greens from the bog.

When she was out of sight from the buildings, he came up behind her and hit her at the base of the neck with the edge of his hand. She dropped like a stone, her basket spilling on the path. As he picked her up, her long black hair spilled over the Watcher's shoulder. Close up, she was even better than he had hoped. Barely into her teens, she was nubile and firm, and radiated a freshness he could smell and taste. The Watcher would take his time with this one.

* * * *

"John."

"I hear them." Trent reached for the SKS as he went out onto the front porch.

Horses, single file and coming up the trail. He stood outside the door, leaving it open in case he wanted to duck inside in a hurry. Katie was around the corner of the house and behind the breastworks of a woodpile, making an effective crossfire if they needed one.

They did not. The first rider into the clearing was Chico Cruz. Behind him were ten of his men, all mounted on magnificent horses. Erect and haughty in the saddle, and sporting more guns than an arms dealer, they looked tough and competent as they gazed curiously around the clearing.

"Light and set," Trent said.

Chico nodded to Trent, then shot rapid fire Spanish to his men. They headed toward some shade at the edge of the clearing, two of them breaking off to dismount and walk into the forest. *Sentries. The news must be bad.*

Katie, her AK-90 on a sling, joined them as the two men shook hands. Trent could see Chico was troubled, yet the man tried to keep up the social amenities.

"This is a good place..." he began.

Trent interrupted. "What has happened, Chico?"

Chico sighed and took off his hat. He looked twice his age for a moment, glancing first at Katie, then back at Trent. "On our way here, we found Hobbs. He had been dead about a couple of weeks, maybe. Someone cut him up very bad. One of our men heard screams the night he brought you in. It must have been Hobbs. Someone laid for him. We found a skinned tree. Whoever it was probably stretched a rope across the trail to trip the horse. No other sign, either, not so much as a bent twig. A bad thing, my friend."

"Can't figure it." Looking at Cruz, Trent knew there was more. Finding Hobbs would not upset him this much.

"Alvarez," Cruz pointed in the general direction of his men, "his daughter is missing. She was picking berries yesterday." He shrugged expressively. "We found the basket. That is all."

"And no sign?"

"Nothing," Cruz said as Trent and Katie exchanged glances. "This means something to you?"

"Maybe ... if she doesn't turn up."

Cruz looked toward his men. "She is only thirteen. Sweet, like the honey. Everyone loves her; she is like a daughter to us all. If you know something..." He looked expectantly at them, his expression a mixture of hope and dread. "Anything?"

Katie picked up the conversation. "We know of three young women who have been murdered." She gestured toward Trent. "Going back to his wife a couple of years ago."

Chico looked sadly at them. "Then all I can hope is that she is not found. If we never find her, there will always be hope."

The voice of Chico Cruz hardened. "The one who does this?"

Trent said honestly, "I don't have a clue, Chico, not one. We just have to wait for the killer to make a mistake."

"Raiders? Reeves?" Cruz was searching.

"I don't think so. Starking holds the raiders under tight control. Besides, I do not think that is the kind of thing he would go for. Pagan Reeves? My impression is no. I mean, he could be the one, but I do not see him wasting good womenfolk that way. He would rather keep them around."

"And if you catch this man?" Cruz asked, watching Trent closely.

"Then I'll be crossing that line we talked about."

An unspoken message passed between the two men, thoughts of a conversation in another time and place. Katie watched, a puzzled expression on her face.

Reassured, Chico stood and gathered the reins of his horse. "You will go to the Springs soon?"

"Very soon." Trent's gaze was steady on Chico.

Chico's face lit up in a dazzling smile. "This I would like to see."

The group had remounted and was riding somberly away, when another rider burst into the clearing. After a short conversation, Cruz turned and rode back to Trent.

"We have found her." His eyes were hard and the muscles of his jaw kept clenching. "Please. Will you come?"

"Of course," Trent and Katie replied together.

* * * *

The clearing was small, less than twenty feet across, with vegetation choking the perimeter. The mass of cuts and mutilations in the center of the clearing barely resembled a human form. The group stopped at the edge of the forest.

"How did he find her?" Trent asked.

"He was coming to join us," Cruz replied, "and came across this trail. He followed. The trail comes in here and leaves on the other side of the clearing."

"Have the men wait. Let's look around."

An hour later, they stood in the shade of a pin oak, watching the men wrap the girl in a blanket and secure her over a saddle.

"Shouldn't we be following the trail?" Katie asked.

Trent answered her. "The body looks to be a day old."

She quickly caught on. "And the trail?"

"Today," Cruz confirmed. "There is a boot track at the edge of the clearing. The edges are still well defined. There was a light rain last night that would have softened the imprint."

"Thanks for the lesson," Katie said dryly.

One of the riders led the horse back down the trail to the ranch, with two men riding guard. The rest looked expectantly at Trent.

"So, let's go see," Trent said.

Trent was on point, with Cruz and Katie close behind. The dense growth was too hard to ride through and the men walked, leading their horses. The trail was not hard to follow, a rock turned over here, scuffmarks somewhere else. Stopping a moment, Trent listened. The only sounds he heard were from the men and animals behind him. As always when trailing, he wished he were alone.

"He's pushing too hard," he said.

"I think we have the same thoughts, amigo," Cruz had come to stand by Trent. Both gazed down at the barely discernible trail.

"You think someone came up to the body, then heard or saw someone, and went after them."

By way of agreeing, Cruz said, "The trail ahead is made for ambush. We must be very careful."

The trail in front of them blended into a path that wound around the side of a mountain, closed in by dense brush and trees on both sides. The path was barely visible and used only by the animals of the forest. The trees overhead let in filtered sunlight, just enough to make shadows dark enough to hide in. As they rounded a pile of rock, brought up against some trees during a landslide long ago, Trent saw the body.

"Damn," Trent said fervently.

Holding his hand up, Trent instructed the party to stay back as he went on alone.

Trent knelt beside the man, amazed he was still alive, then propped him up against a tree trunk. When he moved him, he found the courier pouch the man had hidden beneath himself. Trent slung it around his own shoulder out of habit.

The knife wound in the victim's belly was amazingly bloodless, but already the smell was overwhelming. Grabbing feebly at Trent's arm, the courier tried to form words his lips could not master. Finally, his voice breaking up and faint, he said, "Trent, I never ... never saw him. Had on an army shirt..."

Lieutenant Saints gathered his strength with a visible effort. Looking at Trent with feverish eyes, he said, "It's not supposed to be this way. A man is supposed to die with tall sons by his side, and daughters to

take care of him."

"You are a good man, Saints. That counts for something." Trent's voice was soft.

"I have been trying to die, Trent, but it just won't happen. Can't stand the pain. I'll be crying like a baby in a few hours. We're soldiers, Trent. We've both been in combat. I'm asking for release."

The last word wheezed past his lips as the soldier grimaced in pain and coughed up blood.

Chico and Katie had come up behind Trent. "You know this one," Chico asked.

Katie answered for Trent. "Isn't he the colonel's aide, from back at base camp?"

"Fred Saints. He is Colonel Bonham's adjutant."

Cruz was looking at the lieutenant. "He's still alive."

"I know," Trent said softly.

"With that wound it could take days for him to die. But he will surely die, my friend. He would suffer a great deal." Cruz was looking at Trent intently.

"I'll take care of it."

"John," Katie interjected in a startled voice. "There has got to be another way. We can get him back to town. With care..."

"With care ... he would last an extra week." Trent's voice was unemotional. As a soldier, Saints had made a final request. Whether Trent liked it or not, he was a comrade in arms.

Cruz put his hand on Trent's arm. "Would you allow me to do this?"

"No," Trent said. "Thanks, Chico ... but no."

* * * *

Later, as they stood at the edge of the clearing, Katie asked Trent, "Why would Saints be here?"

"I don't know, Katherine." Trent's voice was tired. "I do know he and the colonel were cooking up some plan for moving out here. Maybe he was coming to see me."

Trent stood with hands on hips as the men with Cruz scouted around the area. They came back with the report he expected. Nothing. After burying Saints, Katie and the men rested beneath the trees. The sun was starting to dip toward the west, and darkness comes early to the forest; it would soon be time to go. But there was a curious reluctance among them to leave the place.

"I don't know. Maybe there is a clue here and we just can't see it." Trent's voice was skeptical. "I know one thing. Our man is getting a lot messier in his work."

"Which means?" Katie was obviously still queasy from seeing the young girl and then Fred Saints.

"Maybe he's losing control. It is possible this has come on him just this past couple of years. If so, he is killing more frequently. It is as if he is feeding on it. But it's starting to take more to satisfy him. He is starting to hurry. And, if he is losing control, maybe he'll make a mistake. I just hope I am close when he does."

"The words Saints said to you," Katie said, "they didn't make sense."

"I know. The word: army. But it made sense to him," Trent said. "I think he was amazed. You know, Saints and I did some training together. He was a good man in the forest, although maybe not one of the best. Whoever killed him laid an ambush and got him cold. Saints never saw who hit him."

A sudden idea came to Trent. "Maybe that's it. If he wore camouflage, then you might not see him. Maybe that's what he meant by army."

Everyone was looking at Trent expectantly. "Before the Fall, there was a lot of really neat high tech stuff in the ranks. I noticed a few of them in the packs of the patrol we came in with."

"Like?" Katie interjected.

"Like a gadget that will tell your position within five feet at any spot in the world. Night vision goggles that turn night into day. Clothing that changes color like a chameleon. Heat sensors that let you find a man in the dark. You put all that stuff with a man that is an expert in the forest anyway..."

"But there's no army around here," Katie said. "Gunny is missing and the Green Jeans patrol was wiped out."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Cruz sounded unconvinced. "Besides, they don't have to be army. Anyone could have these things now."

Lost in his own thoughts, Trent replied, "I need to spend some time in the forest. Alone. If I cannot see him, maybe I can feel him, smell him, or even hear him. This has gone on too long. I have to try something."

"What about Reeves? You do not want to have trouble on two fronts. You can't trail this killer if you're worrying about your back trail." Chico's voice hardened. "How about we take care of Pagan Reeves for you?"

"I've something better for you to do, Chico. If your men are willing, pull as many off the ranch as you can spare and put them on the trails. Two-man teams. I want to know who's moving and where they are going. If we see Starking, we'll ask him for help, too."

"You think Starking would help?" Chico's voice sounded skeptical.

"Won't know until we ask, Chico."

"And Pagan?"

"No," Trent said. "Pagan is my responsibility. I will take care of him. And you're right. It has to be done first." Trent stood and adjusted his gun belt. "We'll go to town tonight."

* * * *

It was not until later that he remembered the dispatch. He opened the courier pouch and retrieved a short, cryptic message.

Trent. Moving your way with settlers in one month. If Springs not suitable, suggest alternate site to Lt. Saints. Charley Walsh closed saloon. Probably coming your way. Resp. Col. Bonham.

So, that was it. More settlers. Trent sighed tiredly, then in frustration balled up the paper and sent it winging into the bushes. This wilderness haven was going to be knee deep in people before long,

many of them young women no doubt. And the killer was still loose.

Chapter 17

John Trent paused at the edge of the valley, testing the air like a prowling wolf. The night was warm and muggy, his shirt felt damp in the cloying heat. An occasional flash of lightning would briefly illuminate the sky to the west, and a low growl of thunder would follow.

Trent and Katie walked silently through the glade, moving toward the back of Murdock's saloon. Trent had tried to persuade Katie to stay away, but she had stubbornly insisted she come. They found the back door locked, but as they turned to go around the building, it opened a crack, creaking slightly in the stillness.

"Get in here. We have been expecting you," Murdock said.

When the door had closed behind them, Murdock turned up an oil lamp and looked them over. "Must have been one hell of a week."

Trent looked toward the front of the saloon. "I'm looking for Pagan."

Murdock ignored his enquiry. "Trent, you look like you've been caught in a stampede of Arkansas Razorbacks, and Katie looks like the cat that ate the canary. I'd say the negotiating is over between you two."

Trent ignored her baiting. "Is Pagan here?"

"Nope, just some of his boys. Red Seaver is in there and Jumbo Smith. Jumbo is about the same size as Big Waters, only meaner. You will notice by the names they use, they ain't the sharpest knives in the drawer."

Trent looked a question at her.

"Big Waters is the one that walks on crutches now, being as someone got mad and broke his leg." Murdock's voice was quiet and sarcastic at the same time.

Katie broke in. "Have you seen my father?"

"I don't know how to make this easy, girl." Murdock reached out and brought Katie to her. "Hon, your father always was a stubborn man. He met up with Pagan and Red a few days ago. After they beat him around a bit, they came to the saloon. Red went back out and shot him. I am sorry, Katie. He's dead."

Katie went pale in the subdued light. Her eyes widened, then closed to hide her pain. "I should have stayed." Her breath caught in a stifled sob. "I should have been here."

"Wouldn't have helped none. The preacher's whole flock was around. They did not help none either. We buried him behind the church, thought that'd be best." Murdock continued to hold Katie as tears coursed down both their cheeks.

Finally. "Hey," Murdock grabbed Trent's arm, "by the way, some no-good bum is out there. He claims to know you. Name's Walsh. Pesky little fella. I kinda took a shine to him, so don't shoot him."

Trent turned his stony gaze toward the door. "You two stay here." Trent opened the door a crack, then turned and asked Murdock, "Where do you keep the Ithaca?"

"Under the bar, about middle way. You be careful, Trent. That gun will take saints and sinners alike."

Slipping through the door into the smoke filled room, Trent walked casually down to the middle of the bar, reached under and brought out the shotgun. He thumbed off the safety.

Charley Walsh was sitting at the far end of the bar. When Trent walked in, his eyes lit up. "Well, if it isn't..." His comment died as he saw Trent take the shotgun. "Oh, shit." Walsh scooted around the end of the bar and pulled his pistol.

The room got quiet in waves, starting close to Trent, then expanding on into the room as more people looked up and realized who was there.

Red Seaver was sitting at a table with two other men. When he looked up and saw Trent, he went two shades whiter.

Trent pounded on the counter top with the butt of the shotgun. He had their attention. One of the men at the table stood up, hands out wide. Trent recognized him instantly. Dake Priest was an ex-courier. He'd dropped out of sight the last couple of years and Trent had lost track of him.

"I'm not in this, Trent."

"Too bad, Dake. I like to get all my chickens together."

"Now, you got no call to act like that. What happened two years ago wasn't my fault."

"Oh, I know. Someone had to supply the raiders with automatic weapons, right? Tell you what, Dake. You go stand in that corner, and maybe I won't shoot you."

"You want my gun?"

"Keep it. You can use it if you feel lucky." Trent moved his attention to the rest of the crowd. "Folks, there's going to be some shooting. If you are not friends of Red here, you had better get on outside. If you are friends of his, then stay and join the show. It doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

"Now, Marshal ... you hold on a minute." Seaver was sweating. "This ain't going to be fair. I got this girl in one hand and a drink in the other. You got to at least give me a chance."

The area between Trent and the table cleared out and most of the patrons filed out the door. The table in front had three men, and standing in the corner was a fourth.

"You men were warned. Not only did you stay, you killed a man. And for what, Seaver? What do you get out of killing that preacher? Was that one fair?"

Seaver stammered an answer. "We were drunk, Trent. Besides, Pagan started that. Not me."

Jumbo Smith had stood it too long. With a truculent voice, he said, "We got you three to one, Mr. Marshal. Maybe if you drop your guns, we'll let you live for awhile."

The bargirl started struggling to get away. It was all the distraction the raiders needed. Trent could see it in Red's eyes. It was going to be now.

Trent made eye contact with the girl and said, "Drop."

The girl fell down, as if she had practiced the move for years, as Red's gun was coming up. Trent dropped the barrel of the duckbilled Ithaca and pulled the trigger, aiming high to avoid the girl. The two men at the table exploded in a red froth as the number four shot blew through them. Trent whirled to face the man in the corner. A bullet nicked the top of his ear and he jacked another shell into the pump

shotgun. The Ithaca jammed! Trent sidestepped up the bar, as a second shot went through the side of his shirt, palmed his Ruger and fired. Rocked back against the wall by the expanding slug, the man tried to bring his gun in line. Trent fired again and the man dropped, his gun falling from lifeless fingers.

"Left, Trent!"

Charley's hoarse scream galvanized Trent back into action. Jumbo Smith, covered in blood, was coming up from behind the overturned table. Trent dropped onto one knee as Smith's first shot went over his head. Carefully, as if on a target range, Trent fired one shot. Smith stood stiffly for a moment, then collapsed lifelessly behind the table.

The door opened behind Trent as Walsh got up from the floor. Katie came in, and with one look at the carnage around the table, slowly slid down to the floor. She sat that way, with her arms folded across her knees, forehead on her arms.

Murdock stood protectively over her, but with a sheepish look on her face as she spoke to Trent. "I forgot to tell you. That Ithaca jams a bit. Needs some work."

Trent just looked at her.

"I said I was sorry." Her customary belligerence was coming back as she went around the bar to help the bargirl to her feet.

Trent helped Katie. "Let's find a place to hole up for the night," he said gently as he folded her into his arms. "And Murdock ... take care of my friend, here. He looks a little piqued."

Chapter 18

Morning was still a promise in the eastern sky as they stood by the preacher's grave. The roar of the water, rushing from beneath the mountain, seemed muted by the fog. The errant breeze, pushing the mist around the small graveyard, was cool and damp.

"We never got along." Katie's voice was subdued, barely audible above the background noise of the Springs. "I'm sorry for that."

Trent's gaze roved around the meadow and toward the town. "He died doing what he believed in. Even in the face of death. I heard from some folks he did not give in. He was telling them to get out of town when they took him. I would say that is a fair judgment of any man. He died facing his troubles. That's all anyone can ask of a man."

Katie looked up, noticing where his glance had gone. "Do you have to go?"

"You know I do."

"Isn't there some other way? Hasn't there been enough killing."

"If there was another way, I would do it, Katie. There has been too much killing, that's a fact. But, there will have to be some more before this is over."

"I'm afraid."

"I know, Katherine. I'm sorry."

"I should have fallen in love with some hillbilly, and raised pigs and chickens." Katie sighed and leaned her head against his chest. "I don't want to lose you, John."

He held her away and looked steadily into her eyes. "It could happen, you have to know that."

"Why can't we ride out of here? Why not just grab our stuff and go?"

"What about little Tommy? Or Murdock? Do you think she can last? Or any of the settlers?" Trent looked at her, a humorous glint in his eyes. "Don't I remember you telling me I should take this job? It was my duty?"

"I didn't love you then." She paused and sighed. "Ah, damn you, Trent. I don't know why I stay with you."

"Sure you do. You said us old guys are more interesting."

"Not if you're dead."

"Point taken. This will not be a contest, Katherine. Not if Pagan is alone."

"You can't know that," she said.

"I know him. I know me."

* * * *

As the sun started to climb, running the shadows from the street below, people began showing up in small

groups. They positioned themselves along the street and between buildings for what small protection they would afford. Trust the mountain grapevine to get word around.

Leaving Katie sitting on the church steps, Trent was starting down the hill when he heard his name called. He turned to confront a small group of men, coming in from the trail above the springs.

"Mr. Starking."

"Marshal Trent."

"I'm asking you to stay out of this, Mr. Starking. It would be a favor."

Jeremiah Starking smiled crookedly. "We never had much in common with Pagan Reeves, Marshal. Actually, we're here to meet with some of the townsmen. It is peace we are looking for, not war. We will not interfere."

"Do me a favor then?" Trent asked.

"If I can."

"Pagan still has several men. If I go down, make sure they do not take over the town. There is a future here. If you and your people merge with the settlers, you'll be strong enough that you won't have to worry about the Pagan Reeves of this world."

Starking did not answer, just clucked to his horse and led his people toward town.

Trent stood in the center of the street with the sun warm on his shoulders. The morning breeze gently ruffled his shirt. Every sense was incredibly alive, each breath pure and sweet, as if his body were trying to savor the last feelings he would ever have.

Pagan Reeves stepped smiling out of the saloon where he'd probably been filling up on liquid courage. Two men flanked him, and Trent felt his blood run cold. One of the men was a small time merc for hire, always wearing an idiot smile. Trent had seen him around but could not remember his name. The other man was Dake Priest! Priest, the ex-courier gone bad, now a gun for hire. Trent's mouth tasted dry with tension and adrenalin as he willed the knot in his belly to go away. *No one said it would be easy.*

"You're running in rough company, Priest. I should have taken you down last night." Trent's voice echoed between the buildings as he purposefully ignored Pagan.

"I like it rough, Trent."

Of them all, Priest was the most dangerous. He would have already figured his odds and planned his moves. Standing slightly behind the other two, Priest would know he was in the best position to get a shot off.

"Way I've got it figured, Priest, my first two shots will be for you. At this range, I can't miss. The next shot will be for smiley there. I'll save Pagan for last."

As he stared at Priest and steadily advanced toward them, the gunman began to sweat, eyes darting side to side. Trent could guess what he was thinking. This was not going the way it should. They should stop. Square off. They should taunt each other. This way, and at this range, all of them could die.

Pagan could not stand it anymore. "What about me, Trent? Ain't you worried about me? Don't you want me?"

"How about now, Pagan?"

Trent's gun was up and firing. Priest took one in the shoulder as he dove for cover. The other merc, his hand just bringing up his gun, was looking down at the small hole in his chest. Bright red blood pumped from his shirt. He started to say something, but ran out of time. He folded up on wilted legs and fell in the dust.

Trent brought his gun to bear on Pagan. Pagan's hand was on his weapon, but he had not drawn it. Now, it was too late.

"Don't shoot, Trent." Pagan looked from side to side, desperately seeking help.

Trent just stared at him while keeping track of Priest at the same time. A sudden shot rang out and Priest flopped from behind a boardwalk.

The musical voice of Chico Cruz said, "We'll watch your back, compadre. You have a trial to do, yes?"

A trial.

"How many people have you killed in these hills, Pagan? How much grief and pain have you caused?"

"I'll leave. Please. You'll never see me again." Sweat dripped from Pagan's face, his gaze locked on Trent in a vain hope of reprieve.

"No, Pagan, you'll not be leaving. It's too late. You have Rev. Stephens to answer for, and the McCracken family. God knows how many others."

"You're the law, Trent. You have rules. You can't just..."

Pagan Reeves probably thought he had a chance. Trent glanced to the side, and Reeves' hand streaked toward the gun in his holster.

* * * *

The Watcher stood looking at the girl in the print dress. Beautiful and willowy, blond hair and large breasts, skin soft and unblemished. Not now! It was too soon. There were too many people. But she was worthy. He could taste her; feel her flesh under his hands. The Watcher drew in a shaky breath. And what of the man? The man he had come to see fight with Pagan Reeves. He'd known it would be no contest, but three men? And the man was close. He would come for her, come hard! The hero would come for the killer. The Watcher laughed to himself. The hero would not return. So be it. Maybe it was time for that too.

Silently, the Watcher moved up behind the girl. She had come in with Starking, but had separated and was walking toward the church. The girl flinched as shots rang out in the street below, and the Watcher glanced disdainfully in that direction. It would be no contest. The man would win. Would he always win?

The Watcher mentally shrugged as he advanced on the girl. It did not matter. It was the girl that mattered. The one who was worthy.

* * * *

Chico and Trent walked up the hill toward the church, Chico leading his horse by the reins.

"I used to think I was very fast with my guns, Senor." He shook his head ruefully. "Now, I think I'll throw them away. I saw Reeves kill a man on that very street and I thought he was fast. It is not so. And then, when you looked away from him ... on purpose?"

"I had to bait him, Chico. Otherwise, he would have crawled away. I just could not shoot him in cold blood. Not even him." Trent palmed his gun and held it up. "You know, this isn't something I asked for, or ever wanted, Chico. I was born with quick hands. It seems to me, there should be something better to use them for."

"You did a good thing today, my friend. If you had shown him mercy, he would not have stopped killing. He would not have changed."

"In my heart, I know," Trent said. "In my mind, sometimes I do not know."

A scream snapped their heads up in unison. A girl was struggling with someone in front of the church. As they watched they saw the man swing and her head snap back. Katie came rushing around the building, but was knocked sprawling by a sweep of the man's arm. Almost in the same motion, the man swung the girl to his shoulders and disappeared into the forest behind the church.

Cruz was trying to line up a rifle shot when Trent pushed down the barrel. "Too risky."

They both mounted Cruz's horse and arrived at the church in moments, scattering divots of grass and dirt around the porch. A faint trail led away in the wet grass toward the forest beyond.

"Katherine, are you all right?" Trent asked hurriedly.

"Yeah, I guess so," she answered groggily.

Trent ran to his horse tied to the porch. He pulled out his knee-length moccasins, dropped to the ground, shucked his boots, and tugged them on. Pulling his Bowie, he threaded his belt through the loop in the scabbard. Donning a long-tailed hunting shirt, he stuffed trail mix in the pouches. Slipping a strip of leather over his revolver, to keep it from falling out as he ran, he reached up and took out his SKS. He folded the stock to make it shorter, then checked the clip. Thirty rounds. It would have to do.

"Let me come with you." Cruz was already turning away to remount.

"No time. I am going to run him down, Cruz. He will have a horse back in the brush. If I push hard enough, he will not have time to stop and hurt the girl. On rough ground I can make better time on foot than he can on a horse. I might even be able to outrun his horse. But above all, I've got to keep him running."

"You mean like a wolf pack runs a deer," Cruz said.

"You got it."

"What can I do?"

Trent held his friend's gaze for a moment. "This may be a long run. If the worst happens and he kills the girl ... I will stay after him. I have to push him hard enough that he knows that. You and Katherine round up some men and supplies to follow, but not too close. Just stay close enough that I can find you. If I do not get him right away, I will need supplies. If you get a chance, cut in front of him. We do not want to lose him. Not now."

"Hurry, friend Trent. This man is a devil. You must run like the wind."

Trent did not answer. He was already ducking into the gloom of the forest.

Chapter 19

Trent hit the edge of the forest at a dead run. For the first few minutes, he would throw aside caution. The girl's life was at stake. He picked up the trail immediately. Broken grass and bent limbs, then the churned grass where the man had mounted his horse. The trail went straight away down a dim path in the forest that would skirt around the mountain. This was second growth forest, which meant there were not many trees, and the grass and bushes were almost waist high.

He was trying to match the pace of the man ahead. The kidnapper's first burst of speed would be from the panic of discovery and trying to get away. Soon, reason would set in and he would slow down or stop. If Trent could keep from overrunning him, that would be his first and best chance.

The initial burst of speed from the man he chased, was a lot longer than Trent expected. It was a full half hour later when the stride of the horse he was trailing began to shorten. Keeping his attention as far up the trail as possible, Trent almost missed the torn grass and dirt clods where the man had reined in his horse and gone off the trail about fifty feet ahead.

The first shot passed with a sonic crack, and whacked into a tree behind him. The second creased his hip, leaving a burning red hole in his hunting shirt. Panic shooting? Or a warning? The first came too high, the second too low. Trent did not stop, just swerved to the side and into the brush. The growth under the tall trees was not thick here, mostly sumac and scattered fern, so he began a weaving approach toward a copse of trees ahead.

Moments later, Trent rolled into the clearing, bringing his SKS to bear around the perimeter. Nothing. The sun glittered off the bright shell casings ejected into the grass. The man had dismounted to shoot. The imprints in the soft earth were small, maybe a size nine or ten. After the missed shot, he had mounted and continued down the path, leaving a trail a child could follow. Knowing something of the man he followed, that fact worried Trent more than anything else did. This man had never left a trail before. *A challenge? And maybe his first mistake.*

Trent cursed as he stood in the clearing, trying to catch his breath. He had not been fast enough. The man was gone ... and so was the girl.

Quickly cutting three sticks, Trent made a crude arrow in the trail to show which direction he was going. As he began to run, he felt a cold fear knot up in his belly. From now on, the man would be more cautious ... and Trent would have to give him the first shot. He would not miss forever.

An hour later, Trent stood on top of a bald knob overlooking the trail ahead. He was scratched and bleeding from the nearly impenetrable shortcut he had taken. His knee-length moccasins were torn near the top from the fangs of a startled timber rattler that sunned itself on a limestone ledge. Trent had merely ripped it out of the leather and tossed it away. His mind was focused on the quarry ahead. If the man followed the trail around the mountain, he would have to appear in one of the clearings below. Trent picked the clearing that had a stream in it. If they stopped for water...

He set the sights of the SKS to battle setting, for longer range, and settled down to wait. Watching the clearing below, he tried to control his breathing. This was a real gamble. If he guessed wrong and they did not show up, he'd lose an hour picking up the trail again and the girl would be dead. If they did show up, and he missed his shot, he would be behind again. It would take valuable minutes to get off the promontory he was sitting on and continue pursuit.

* * * *

The young girl regained consciousness with a rush of pain and nausea. She remembered someone grabbing her from behind as she walked toward the church. She remembered a struggle, but did not recall much after that.

Now, she was sitting on the ground where the man had unceremoniously dumped her. She rubbed her stomach, sore from the way she'd been draped over the saddle.

"Mister, don't do this."

"Now you be quiet, missy. I don't want to hurt you."

"Like hell you don't," she said. "You are the one who has been killing all the girls."

He pointed his handgun at her. "Hold out your wrists so I can tie them."

When she did not, he casually reached out and hit her on the side of the head with his pistol. "Now," he said reasonably.

She held her hands out as the first feeling of panic began to set in. *Stall. Do what he wants. Anything. Trent will be coming.* She had heard her father talk of him and knew he was like a god to the woods runners. Everyone either admired him or was afraid of him. *Stall. Trent will come.*

As if reading her thoughts, the man laughed. "That boy won't catch up to us."

She replied angrily. "He'll come, and if not him, my father will. You don't know what you have done, do you? My father is Jeremiah Starking. He can bring a hundred men after you if he wants."

As the man was apparently unimpressed by her father's name, she watched the man turn to face back toward the direction they had come. The trail he watched spiraled around the mountain. At different points, she knew he could see the back trail. As she watched, he suddenly raised his gun and fired.

The Watcher turned to the girl, chuckling. His body and mouth looked like he was laughing, but his eyes appeared stone cold and lifeless.

"Believe you may be right," he said. "That boy is running, not using a horse. Smart. Knows he can go where we cannot. Yeah, I'd say this is going to be interesting."

"See? Like I said, mister, you'd better let me go."

Without replying, the man picked her up and put her on the front of the saddle. Mounting behind her, his hands lingered on her thighs and breasts. "We got to move, missy."

* * * *

Later in the morning, both the horse and riders were hot and tired, and the man stopped to water his horse. Carrying double in this heat was hard on the animal. Walking upstream, he braced himself on his hands and leaned forward to drink from the cool stream.

His reflection in the stream exploded in a froth of mud and water as a 7.62mm bullet plowed into it at 2400 feet per second. The man jerked backwards as a second round hit the soft earth where he had been, splattering him with mud. A third notched the heel of his moccasin, taking a bloody piece out of his heel. Whining with apparent fury, he dodged his way back to the horse, bullets kicking rocks all around him. The girl stayed motionless, hoping to go unnoticed, knowing if she moved it would hamper the shooter. The Watcher gave her one wild look, stopped, then threw her on his horse and went pounding down the trail.

* * * *

Trent cursed his luck and poor marksmanship, a sick feeling in his stomach. He had done the one thing he could not do. He had missed!

From behind him came a stampede of sound. Trent whirled to see Chico and Katie riding into the clearing at the top of the bald knob.

"You made time, Chico."

"I heard shots."

"I missed him, Chico. I had him and I missed him."

"Shit." Chico's fervent oath said it all. Then, he brightened. "The girl is alive?"

"So far."

"Starking is coming behind us and he is going to kill someone. If not the man we are after, maybe us. I'm thinking he won't be too particular. He is mad, my friend."

"Don't blame him." Trent had already been moving toward the trail down the mountain and Katie continued to push him in that direction.

"Go. Go," she cried.

Trent grabbed Chico by the arm. Pointing, he asked, "Where does that trail come out?"

Chico looked down at the trail, then looked around more closely at the mountain. He grinned. "The trail he is on has cliffs on both sides. He has to stay on it until the other side of the mountain. There is a small park that the trail empties into."

Mistake number two. "How long?" Trent relieved Cruz of his favorite leather riata as he talked.

"Couple of hours," Cruz replied.

"How long to go over the top?" Trent asked.

"For a bird? Not long. But you cannot do it, my friend, even with my fine rope."

"If I can make it over, I can be waiting for him at the clearing on the other side." Trent turned to Chico. "Get behind him, Chico. Push him. Not too hard, but stay close enough that he knows you are there. Watch he doesn't double back on you."

Trent disappeared into the trees before Chico could answer.

* * * *

After he left, Katie's voice was apprehensive. "Chico, what if the man we're chasing is Gunny? It is the only thing about this that makes sense. Gunny is the only one who is unaccounted for."

Chico Cruz sat looking at Katie, his expression fearful for the first time. It might make a difference. Could Trent kill his friend? Or would it slow his hand enough to be the instrument of his death.

Shaking his head, and slapping his horse, Chico Cruz went helling down the mountain, making more noise than he had made in years. Katie was right behind him, pulling the packhorse. *They would push him, all right. Maybe even catch him.*

Chapter 20

Trent stood at the edge of a clearing, bent at the waist, holding his side and taking ragged, deep breaths. His hands were torn and bloody. A long gash bled down his left side and soaked his shirt, where he had slipped on a jagged edge of limestone. His hat had fluttered down a sheer precipice, somewhere behind him.

As he looked around, he could see no sign anyone had passed this way. He breathed a silent prayer that he was in time, and that the abductor had not stopped along the way. With luck, Chico had pushed the man hard enough to make him careless.

He didn't have long to wait. His answer came with a slight rustle of leaves, and a scrape of a branch along buckskin as a man rode out of the forest and into the clearing.

"Hold it." Trent's voice was level and cold.

The man flinched, then slowly relaxed. "Sure," he said, as he turned in the saddle. "How you doin', boy?"

"Gunny?" Trent looked back down the trail. "Did you see..."

Trent suddenly became aware of the abducted girl struggling to get up from where Gunny had dumped her in the weeds along the edge of the trail. Gunny sat facing him, hands folded across the pommel of his saddle.

"You," Trent said.

"I reckon."

He was speechless for a moment. "My God. Why, Gunny?"

"I don't owe you anything, boy, least of all explanations."

Trent almost missed seeing the rifle coming up in Gunny's hands. Throwing himself to the side, he palmed his revolver. The roar of Gunny's rifle deafened him at close range. The shot went high over Trent's shoulder and ricocheted off an outcropping of limestone. Flakes from the rock hit him like bee stings.

Trent's first shot hit the action of Gunny's rifle, splintering the stock. The second took him high in the shoulder, punching him out of the saddle.

Gunny sat up groggily in the grass and stuck his finger in the hole in his shoulder. "You like to shot the lights out of me, boy."

Trent just stood there, his mind still trying to comprehend what his eyes and ears were telling him.

"It's him, John." Katie's soft voice came to him from behind. Chico and Katie had come up during the shooting.

"I know."

"Take me to the shade, boy," Gunny said. "I could die in this heat."

Trent walked to Gunny and kicked the shotgun away. Reaching down, he relieved Gunny of his handgun and knife. Pulling him to his feet, Trent helped Gunny walk to a pine tree, leaning him against the trunk.

Katie and Chico led the girl away. She was sobbing and cursing in the same breath.

Gunny looked at Trent with a hard gaze, still trying to bluff it out. "Why'd you shoot me, boy?"

"You had the girl. You were..." Trent's voice faded as metal and wood clanked at his feet.

Katie calmly walked away again. Looking down, Trent saw a pile of tent pegs and rope. Half hidden in the tangle of rope was a branding iron. A small blackened cross adorned the end of it. Trent's gaze slowly came up to meet Gunny's.

"All those women."

Gunny slid down the trunk of the tree, seemingly oblivious to the blood seeping from his shoulder wound. "What difference does it make, boy? I just do it. Sometimes I remember, sometimes I don't. None of them women was any good. At first, they act as if they don't want it. But they do at the end, they all do. They do anything I want."

"Even my wife?" Trent asked softly.

"Now, I didn't know that at the time. I'm sorry about that one."

"You're sorry." Trent's voice became lifeless. "What about Saints and Hobbs?"

Gunny shrugged, grimacing with pain.

The shot startled them. Bark exploded from the tree next to Gunny's head and Trent threw himself to the side, a woman's angry scream ringing in his ears. Coming up off the ground, he saw Cruz taking a rifle away from Starking's daughter. Whipping back around, his hand streaking for his gun, all he saw was empty space. Gunny was gone!

Chapter 21

Standing in the sunlit clearing, Trent looked past the girls at Cruz. The man shrugged.

"I was watching you, not the girl. I didn't think."

Starking's daughter tried to explain. "I'm sorry. I was mad. I..."

Katie grabbed the girl's shirtfront. "Don't you realize what you have done? He's loose again."

"Katherine." Trent's voice was calm as his eyes searched the trees. "It's nobody's fault. We all messed up on this one." He turned to the girl. "Are you all right, Miss Starking?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Trent." Cruz had been moving around the clearing. "He picked up his rifle and knife."

"I noticed. He must not have been hurt as much as I thought."

"How could he do so much in so little time?" Cruz said.

"We are not talking about an ordinary man, Chico."

Katie had led the Starking girl over to the horses to rest. Walking back, she said, "Something interesting. The girl said, just before they got to this clearing Gunny mentioned they were close to his place. That might be where he went."

Trent looked up the mountain. "Well now..."

"We go after him now?" Cruz said.

"Nope." Trent cast a glance at the sky and the long shadows under the trees. "I am not going into the woods after Gunny in the dark. He would be laying for us for sure." Walking back to his horse, Trent said, "Better make a fire and get some food in our bellies. After the meal, put the fire out. We will sleep in a cold camp tonight."

"I've got two extra men here. I'd better send Miss Starking back with them." Chico chuckled. "Maybe she can keep Starking from lynching us."

Later, when they were away from Katie, Cruz asked, "Where do you think he will go? I bet he's long gone."

"I don't think he'll go anywhere, Chico. I think he will stay right here and wait to see what we do. He can't chance an open fight, and he won't want to lead us to his camp." Trent's gaze turned to the forest. "I'll go out tonight."

"But, you said..."

"I didn't want to worry Katherine."

* * * *

The moon had come and gone, leaving the campsite a jumble of dark shadows and phantom shapes. The night air assailed the senses, as Trent tried to penetrate the blackness. Every pore of his body tried to

gather information his sight could not provide. There was very little breeze to feel, and the leaves of the trees hung limp in the fragrant night air. John Trent stood in the darkness, silently adjusting his knife and handgun. He would leave the SKS. This would be close work.

He glanced toward Katie's bedroll, wishing he could run his hand through her hair, or kiss her one more time before he left. But he knew he could not. Silence was the key now. It was time to go and Gunny knew he would be coming. With a slight rustle in the grass, Trent faded into the forest.

* * * *

Dawn was an hour away and Trent had been completely around the campsite twice. He was beginning to have his first doubts. Maybe he'd guessed wrong and Gunny was long gone as Cruz thought.

Kneeling by a giant boulder that afforded his back some protection, Trent stared into the darkness. His senses probed everything, analyzing every sound and smell in the night air. He had about given up when he felt it.

There was a change in the darkness, subtle and soundless, a faint odor of sweat and leather. He moved his head, testing the faint breeze, trying to get some kind of direction from a sixth sense only the animals of the forest would understand. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and Trent's breathing became shallow and silent. *Gunny.*

The night felt ominous. Trent carefully shifted his feet, and then froze as he inadvertently made a small scrunching sound. A blade swished through the darkness, hanging up on his buckskins before slicing into his leg.

Trent immediately retaliated, lashing out with his other leg and feeling the satisfying thump as he connected. The two men came together, grunting and straining, both trying for a knee to the groin at the same time as they groped for the other's knife hand. Over-balanced by the action, they hit the ground rolling, with Trent slashing his knife across Gunny's chest. Suddenly Gunny was up and gone, leaving Trent crouched in the weeds, breathing heavily, nearly deaf to the night sounds from the pounding in his ears. Trent took a deep, silent breath, forcing his breathing to slow down.

He had not heard Gunny coming and did not hear him leave. Trent shifted his position, pulling a long piece of cloth from his pouch. Knotting it tightly around the cut on his leg, his hand slipped on the bloody cloth and hit a bush next to him.

A stab of flame exploded in the darkness and a three-round burst plowed through the bushes. Gunny had fired at the first sound he heard. Trent rolled from his position and down into a run-off ditch, lined with tree roots and rocks. There was a burning across his left forearm from one of the bullets. As soon as his feet hit the rocks, another burst went over his head into the trees. Trent palmed his gun, but held his fire, temporarily blind from the muzzle flashes in the darkness.

"Trent?" Gunny's voice carried softly in the night. "You better leave, boy. You can't beat me out here."

Trent did not reply. Taking a ball of string from his pouch, he tied one end to a small rock. Leaning another rock against this one, he started moving softly around to his right, trailing the string behind him. *Maybe. Just maybe.*

"Not talking, Trent?"

Trent pulled the string hard. The tumbling rocks made a sharp click in the night and Gunny instantly fired. Trent palmed his gun and fired into the muzzle flash of Gunny's rifle. The muzzle of the gun flew up in the air, spitting flame into the night sky. Seconds later, Trent was there, but Gunny was gone. Picking up

Gunny's rifle, Trent melted back into the forest to wait for dawn.

* * * *

Katie was stalking around the small fire Cruz had started. He had warned her to stay back from the fire, just in case, but she paid little heed.

"We should go out and help, Chico. We have to do something."

"Where would we go?" Chico asked.

In the distance, they heard the clattering sound of an AK-47, with three spaced shots following close behind.

Chico Cruz stood with his head cocked to the side, listening intently. "We'll go out when it's light, Katie. Right now, Trent only has to worry about himself. If we went out now, it would be a disadvantage for him."

"Daybreak then," Katie relented. "Is that coffee ever going to be ready?" She looked up, startled as someone limped into camp. "Cruz! Look out!"

* * * *

Gunny stood on high ground, his stocky body easily taking the weight of the tall, blond-headed woman. It had been so easy. After all, they were not really woodsmen. They had thought he was Trent coming back to the camp. Now he had the girl. Now the man would have to come. The Watcher's interest was peaked when far below he saw the man come into the camp. It brought back another memory of seeing Trent come into another clearing long ago. Difference was ... now he had Trent's woman.

* * * *

Trent stood at the edge of the small clearing, fighting the impulse to run headlong into the camp. A small amount of smoke was rising from under the steaming coffeepot. His SKS was still leaning against his pack and other gear. Lying next to the fire was Chico, appearing at first glance to be asleep—except for the red stain on the earth under his head. Trent still did not move. Silently he stood in the shadows, eyes probing every possible hiding place around the perimeter of the glade. Finally, he stepped into the clearing, reading the story in the scuffled dirt around the fire. Katie was gone.

"Gunnyyyyyyy!" Trent's voice rocked the mountainside. Anger and frustration tore from his vocal chords in primeval sound, lashing its way up the mountainside toward his foe. "I'm coming for you!"

A small sound brought him back from his rage. Chico was struggling to sit up. Trent turned and knelt beside him.

"Dammit, Chico. What happened?"

Chico Cruz looked groggily around. Suddenly, his eyes cleared and he tried to lunge to his feet. "He was here. We thought it was you coming back. He just walked right into camp. Katie yelled a warning at me. That's the last I remember." He looked around the camp. "My God ... Katie!"

Trent tied a bandage around the cut on his leg. "He has her. She's gone."

"Then you must hurry. Catch him before he—"

"Not this time."

Chico looked at him as if he was crazy.

"He wants to draw me up the mountain. It is between him and me. Katherine is the bait. He will not kill the bait. At least, not now."

Chico started down a trail of self-loathing. "Once again, I have failed you..."

Trent interrupted him. "Stop it, Chico. We have no time. Do you have men close? Riders you can get to in a hurry?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so." Chico's voice was hopeful.

"Go get them. Seal off this mountain. If the worst happens, Gunny must not escape. No matter what it costs, Chico. Even if Katherine and I both go down, you have to make sure Gunny doesn't leave this mountain. Is this understood?"

"I will not fail, this time."

Trent looked up the mountain. *Now, Gunny. Now, you will pay.* He faded into the trees at the edge of the clearing, leaving not so much as a ruffled leaf to mark his passing.

* * * *

Gunny watched her come awake slowly. He could see memory come rushing back, and watched as the pain in her head was replaced by fear ... a gut-wrenching fear that bolted her upright on the bed—only to be snapped back by the ropes holding her down. She swiveled her head and found Gunny gazing at her from beside a window.

"You."

"Might as well lay back and be comfortable, missy. It's going to be a long day." Gunny went back to gazing out the window. "I'm going to kill him."

"You will never do it," Katie told him quietly. "Not on your best day."

Gunny left the window and came slowly toward her. He saw Katie glance down at herself as she suddenly realized she was completely naked. He could see tears in her eyes as she fought the restraints holding her to the bed.

"Please don't do this, Gunny."

Gunny stood by the bed and calmly cupped one of her breasts. He could feel the heat rising within him. She was so beautiful. Her breasts were large and full and she was so worthy ... *not now ... not yet!*

Katie stifled a scream as he pinched her nipple between his fingers. He withdrew his hand, only to come back with a glittering blade. Resting the cutting-edge between her breasts, he lightly pulled the knife down toward her navel, the weight of the knife the only pressure on her skin. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, a thin line of blood started coming up in little beads.

"Oh, he'll come, missy. He will come, and maybe he will kill me. Maybe we will both die. But, he won't be here for a long while. And, missy ... by then you won't care what he does. Not one bit."

* * * *

Trent stood in the gloom of the forest with sweat running in rivers from his body. A thin wire stretched across his leggings. Another inch, it would pull free, and the metal fragments from the satchel charge would tear him to pieces. He had worked his way up the mountain by the roughest route possible. Now, with the cabin in sight, he faced only one way to get to the top of the mountain. It was booby-trapped

every step of the way.

Slowly, Trent backed his leg away from the wire. His heart was hammering in his chest. He hadn't considered booby-traps, and he had almost paid for the omission with his life ... and Katie's. *Think, damn it, think!*

He had just disarmed the explosive charge when the answer came in the form of Chico Cruz. Trent looked on, astounded as Cruz and two other men hazed a small herd of cattle ahead of them—and coming up the trail. Suddenly an explosion rocked the mountainside and one of the steers came apart in a shower of blood and hide. The rest bolted, panic stricken, into the brush. Two more men came up the trail, pushing more cattle ahead of them. Bovine minesweeping was cruel but effective, and something used in past war and conflicts. Two more explosions and the men came up even with Trent.

Cruz grinned at Trent. "It's all I could think of."

"Chico, how many more cattle down below?"

"Many more, my friend, and my riders have found a way up the other side of the mountain."

"We have to hurry. Gunny will figure out what we are doing. If he thinks he has to run, he will kill her." Trent slid down the boulder he had been perched on. "I need an old-fashioned stampede, Chico. Everything you've got all in one push, right up to the cabin."

* * * *

Gunny stood by the window, listening intently. He had heard three explosions, then silence.

"That boy's smart." He turned and walked toward Katie. "He is trying to find all my satchel charges so he can explode them. Smart, but it will take him too long." He stood by her side, rubbing the side of the blade against her abdomen. "Right now, it's time for us to..." His voice trailed off.

The sounds of bawling cattle, shots fired and men yelling, signaled the start of the stampede. Chico's men drove the panicked cattle straight up the mountain trail, causing one explosion after another. Gunny leaped to the window in time to see what was left of the herd of cattle already pouring into the clearing around his cabin. Turning, he looked out the back window of the house to see riders coming in through the trees. Cursing, Gunny grabbed his rifle and threw open the front door. As he brought his rifle up to fire, a charging horse knocked him sprawling. He came up firing, emptying saddles all around him. His AK-47 clacked open and he threw it from him. Pulling his knife, he waited for the one he knew would come.

* * * *

"It's time, Gunny." Trent was softly treading toward Gunny. "It is time for us."

"Come get it, boy." Gunny's face twisted in a snarl. "I'll give you a belly full."

They came together in a clash of metal as razor-sharp knives made deadly designs in the air. A silent crowd on their horses encircled the fighting men, each mesmerized by the fight before them.

Gunny lunged at Trent, his knife slashing across Trent's arm.

Gunny stepped back. "Got you, boy."

His laugh died in his throat as he back-peddled away from Trent's attack. When they pulled apart again, Gunny was bleeding from several places on his chest and arms.

Trent waited quietly for Gunny's next move. When it came, it was so fast Trent barely avoided it. With his blade pushing Gunny's knife aside, Trent buried his fist in Gunny's belly. Then, when Gunny folded up, he met his lowering head with a rising knee. Gunny snapped backward and hit the ground, shoulders first, then rolled frantically away; fearing Trent would be on him.

Trent stood quietly waiting. No emotion stirred his face as he stared at Gunny.

The soldier stood slightly bent over, his left hand against his side. "That was good, real good. But not good enough. Now it's time for you to go, boy."

He came at Trent with all his strength and speed until, panting for breath, they stood eye-to-eye in the middle of the clearing, their knives locked together as they strained against each other. As they stood, Gunny suddenly came up with a knife in his other hand. Trent wrenched away as the blade slid along his side against his ribs, then completed the turn, knocking Gunny sprawling in the dirt. Gunny came up spitting dirt and rushed him. Trent brushed aside Gunny's thrust and felt his blade bury itself in Gunny's stomach.

Gunny looked down at the knife in his belly, then up at Trent. His breath was coming in gasps as he looked into Trent's eyes. "Guess I'll go ... instead."

Trent pulled the knife up and over in a figure seven, then pushed Gunny's body away. He stood looking at Gunny for a long time, no sound coming from the men gathered in the circle. Finally, the horses parted and Trent saw a blanket-wrapped Katie coming toward him. Cruz had cut her loose and she was running to him, laughing and crying at the same time. As his arms were full of Katie, Trent looked over her shoulder at a grinning Cruz.

"A long day, my friend." Trent's voice sounded tired.

Cruz sobered and looked seriously at him. "It will get longer."

Trent, alarmed, pushed Katie away from him. "What is it, Chico?"

Chico gazed down the trail. "We have all this hamburger..."

Chapter 22

The crisp, cool air of an early fall day gently rustled the golden leaves in the towering oaks. The day was resplendent in color as the different kinds of trees tried to outdo each other, trying to be the brightest and biggest.

Colonel Frank Bonham walked past the mass graveyard that chronicled the Fall of the United States far better than the printed word would ever do. He climbed a grassy knoll, walking toward the lone grave at the top. Brushing away leaves stranded against the stone, he placed a small bunch of wild flowers on the grave of his daughter.

Standing again, curious, he reached down and picked up an object lying on top of the stone. Looking around the clearing, wondering who had left it, he finally let his gaze fall on the object. It was a small branding iron with a cross on the end.

He nodded his head once, then reverently he placed it back on the stone. As he walked back down the hill, his steps slowly regained a youthful spring, his eyes clear and vindicated. His smile—a small thing—growing slowly.

Author's Note

Big Springs, the principal landmark in this story, is located south of Van Buren, MO on US 60, then 4 miles east on SR 103. It is one of the nation's largest springs. Flowing from a collapsed cave, it emits an average of 286 million gallons of water a day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darrel writes for his own enjoyment, and started with poetry and essays. With constant support from his family and friends, he has expanded into novels.

Early in his career, Darrel served in the Navy, training to hunt submarines, then went to Viet Nam for combat search and rescue. After that he came home to work in the family business, also spending 17 years as a volunteer medic with the local ambulance company, 10 years as a professional photographer, and worked as a computer technician. Somehow, he also found time to help his wife raise 3 children.

Currently, Darrel lives in southwest Missouri with his wife of over 40 years. His three children and 11 grandchildren live close by. He is employed by a leading horticulture supply company and works in irrigation and tech support.

Nearly as strong as his belief in God, is the adage that the only thing constant in life is change, and that luck is a fickle mistress indeed. It has been an interesting trip.

You can find out more about Darrel at **jontop.tripod.com**

For your reading pleasure, we invite you to visit our web bookstore

* * * *

* * * *

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Visit www.whiskeycreekpress.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.