

A woman who reminded him a bit of Makala on the first night, very sexy gray business jacket and skirt, stockings still on but absolutely shredded, heels knocked off her shoes to try to make them more walkable, was limping along.

She caught his eye, forced a smile, and brushed back her greasy, limp hair.

"Hi, my name's Carol," she said, and moved towards the median barrier, her hand extended. He could see the lost world in her. Sharp professional-looking woman, intelligent face, sexy and using it to advantage, the hand extended for a warm handshake to start the meeting. . . which she was used to having go her way.

"Ma'am, step back and away." It was one of his students, face concealed in the hazmat suit, with rifle leveled. "Keep on the white line of the road as you were told."

Carol stopped, looking back.

"I just wanted to say hi."

The student shouldered her rifle.

"Ma'am, please move back. I will shoot if you try to go over that barrier."

The other refugees in the line looked back. A few froze; others immediately scrambled to the far side of the road.

"The rest of you," the student shouted, "do not attempt to leave the road!"

Carol looked at John appealingly.

"What kind of place is this?" she said, and her voice started to choke.

"We're a town trying to stay alive," John said.

"Ma'am!"

John held up his hand towards the student.

"At ease there, lower your weapon. I'll handle this."

"Colonel, sir, don't let her get any closer to you. I don't want to see you under quarantine."

"Colonel?" Carol asked, still forcing the professional business smile as if just introduced. "You are the officer in charge then. I'm pleased to meet you.

He tried to smile.

"Former colonel, college professor now. And no, I am not in charge here."

"I saw some of your people separating that family off and leading them away. Word on the other side of your fence is that if people have specialized skills you're letting them stay."

John took that in. If this was indeed known on the other side, security would have to be tightened. People would think up any kind of skill or profession and lie their way through the interview.

"Are they being allowed to stay?"

"I don't know," John lied.

"They asked us what we did. Is that it?"

"Really, miss, I don't know."

"Look, I'm a public relations consultant with Reynolds Tobacco."

She looked at the student with the gun still aimed at her.

"Colonel, to be frank, your operation needs some upgrading, a better interface with the public. I can help you set up a plan for that in no time that can help you avoid a lot of problems in the future."

It was a delivery, a sales pitch, cool, professional, and listening to her broke his heart. She actually was used to winning that way and believed it would work now.

"I'm sorry, miss. I don't make that decision here. The doctor and the police do. I'm sorry."

And in that instant her professional business poise, a vestige of the old world, collapsed.

She took a step closer and now it was both hands out in a gesture of appeal.

"Please let me stay!" He couldn't respond. She took

a step closer.

"Do you want to sleep with me?" Carol asked. "I'm serious. Let me stay. You'll like me."

She looked down at herself and her ragged suit.

"Once I get cleaned up, believe me, you'll like me," and she looked at him with head slightly turned now, eyes widening. "You have a tub at home? I'd love a bath and when you see me then

. . . you'll really like me. You can even help me bathe; I know you'd like that."

"Carol, please don't," John said. "Don't do this to yourself. Please don't."

She broke down sobbing.

"Don't do this to myself?" she cried, her voice rising to near hysteria.

"Offer you a piece to stay alive? Three nights ago I was raped. Raped by four men who said they had some food hidden in a shack. I half-expected it but was so damn hungry I no longer cared.

Do

you hear that?" I m sorry.

She sobbed.

"And they gave me a bowl of watery soup in the morning, one of them did, and I felt it was damn near worth the trade. Please, Colonel, I'll spend the night with you if you let me stay and just give me a little something to eat."

And then she just stepped forward, heading towards the median barrier.

"I'll shoot!" the student guard screamed.

John held his hands out appealingly, looking towards his student. "Don't!"

The rifle went off, Carol screaming, ducking down, the other refugees flinging themselves to the pavement.

Either the guard had fired high or in her nervousness had missed. But the girl was already working the bolt, the ejected shell casing ringing loudly as it hit the pavement.

"Next one is to the head!" the student was screaming.

"Carol, don't move!"

He started to move towards the median barrier, the hell with the quarantine.

"Colonel, don't!"

It was Washington Parker, running up, Colt .45 drawn, but something now seemed to tell him to holster his pistol, the sight of it ready to trigger a panic.

He stepped in front of the student.

"Point that gun straight up please," he said calmly, and she obeyed. Next he turned towards the refugees.

"A mistake, people, nothing more. Please keep moving. There's plenty of fresh water at Exit 64, you can rest a bit and wash up there."

He pointed to the family with the children in the shopping cart.

"I bet your little ones need a bath. It's just around the bend in the road. But you must stay in the center of the road."

They started to get to their feet and moved back towards the white stripe dividing the two lanes.

Washington approached Carol, but not too closely.

"Ma'am, please stand up. No one will hurt you if you please stand up and back away from the median barrier."

"Do as he says, Carol," John interjected.

Shaking, she stood up.

John looked at her, and it was as if she was a different person. That the final shreds of pride, of decency, within her had disintegrated. A woman who but six weeks back most likely had a corner

office, a parking slot with her name on it, a liberal expense account, and a damn good stock option had just tried to sell her body for a place to rest for a night and a bowl of soup.

"Carol, are you all right?"

She said nothing, features almost blank, turned, and fell back into the line of refugees.

Something told him with grim certainty she would not live much longer, shattered to the point that a razor blade across the wrists would be a welcomed relief. He was tempted to call her back and he stepped over the median barrier and actually took a step towards her. "Colonel, sir."

He looked back. It was Washington, shaking his head no. Washington turned back on the student who had fired the shot. "Was that a warning shot or were you aiming at her?"

Washington said. "I'm not sure," and her voice was near breaking.

"You were wrong on two counts," Washington snapped, and the girl was now at attention, trembling. "That woman had not yet tried to go over the barrier. Your orders are only to shoot if they go over the barrier or try to turn on you."

"She was getting close to Professor Mather—I mean the colonel, sir."

"I am not sir; I am Sergeant Parker. Remember your orders and abide by them. Now the second count. Was that a warning shot or not? Remember I told all of you I am the only one to give a warning shot. If you shoot, then do it to kill. A warning shot is a wasted bullet, and we've got precious few of them."

"I think I aimed at her."

Washington snatched the gun from the girl.

"Go back up to the barrier; you can help interview the refugees. I'm sending someone who has the guts to aim right to your place."

The girl, crestfallen, turned and walked away, her shoulders beginning to shake.

Parker shouted for one of the boys by the barrier to walk escort with refugees and John came up to his side.

"A bit hard perhaps?" Washington asked. John shook his head.

"I've told my girls repeatedly, if you are going to shoot, shoot to kill. But that pathetic woman did not deserve to be shot at."

"I know," Washington sighed. "What did she do? Offer to sleep with your

"Yes."

"I get it twenty times a day, and it's not because I'm good-looking," Washington said, his attempt at a joke falling flat.

"Sick. I'm hearing more and more stories up here about rape, murder, stealing even of baby formula. It's getting desperate on the road. You were going to offer to let her stay, weren't you?"

"Yeah. You could see it. She's far over the edge. I think she'll be dead in a few more days."

The two looked towards Carol, who was at the back of the column, staggering along.

Washington sighed.

"Yeah, God save her. You're right. You can look at these people and tell who still just might pull through. Poor woman, she's not one of them. No place in this world for her now, and what she has left to sell is fading."

John lowered his head.

"Damn all this," he sighed.

"I'm now seeing hundreds like her every day," Washington said wearily. "Sir, we let one in beyond those that can help us all survive, we break down."