

# HOOFPRIENTS IN THE ASHES



## PROLOGUE

### *The Long Ride*

**T**he world used to run on things like gasoline and the internet. Those days are gone now, and what's left is just broken highways, silent phones, and dust—lots of it. People talk about how it happened, how everything fell apart. Some say it started with the cartels and the terrorists that they helped smuggle into the country, others blame the government, but it doesn't really matter anymore. The only thing that matters is survival.

Out here in the Sonoran Desert, we used to think we were far from the mess—just ranchers, doing what we've done for

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generations. Raising cattle, tending the land. But that was before the collapse. Before they came for our food, our land, and our freedom.

It was a year ago when the first signs of trouble really hit. Terrorists slipped across the border, smuggled in by cartel networks that had been running drugs and guns for decades. The U.S. government, so tangled up in its own internal fights, missed the warnings until it was too late. People said it was just another group of immigrants at first, another day on the southern border. But they weren't just looking for a better life. They were moving terrorists in waves, hidden among the trafficked people.

The first attacks hit the cities—Phoenix, Dallas, Los Angeles. But they weren't just targeting people. They went after the country's veins—its energy. Solar farms and battery storage systems were prime targets, the very things keeping the nation's infrastructure limping along after years of neglect. Explosions ripped through solar arrays, sending shards of panels flying, but it was the battery fires that made the real impact.

Those fires burned hotter than anyone had ever seen, so hot they couldn't be put out. Lithium-ion batteries, the backbone of the green energy movement, ignited like kindling, fueling blazes that roared for days. Firefighters, powerless against the intensity, could only watch as the infernos devoured entire energy storage fields. With each fire, the power grid buckled until whole sections of the country went dark. It wasn't just about the lights going out—it was hospitals, water systems, communication lines. Everything fell apart at once.

What happened was just the beginning. The attacks came in waves, rolling across the country like wildfire. Cities burned,

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and when the grids went down, so did the last threads of order. People scrambled for resources. It wasn't long before violence and desperation spilled into the streets.

I remember when it started to get bad, just whispers at first. Then came the violence—cartel fighters in the south, rogue government forces from within. It didn't take long for the system to break under the pressure. Cities burned, and the people out here in the ranchlands were left to fend for themselves. At the Dalton Ranch, we thought we were ready for anything. Turns out, we were undercalculating how bad things could get.

By the time news of the grid collapses reached us out here, the ranchers, the fighters, and the outlaws were all that was left. Roads became battlefields, and every town was a warzone.

It was chaos everywhere. Entire systems shut down, fuel lines were cut, and people started hoarding anything they could find. The government tried to respond, but it was already fracturing, politicians pointing fingers while terrorists and rogue factions fanned the flames. And those smugglers? They didn't stop with bombs. They were still moving terrorists in waves, hidden among the trafficked people, using the same routes they'd been perfecting for years.

Now, we have returned to travel by horseback. Not because it's some romantic throwback to a simpler time, but because there's no other way. The roads are useless, the fuel's run dry, and the trucks sit idle, rusting away under the relentless sun. The only fuel and vehicles available for travel has been hoarded by a rogue military operation calling themselves the Homeland Security. The horses, though—they've become our lifeline. And like the world itself, we've gone back to something raw and primal.

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The world is not recognizable and the fight for survival is a daily grind. I've got scars to prove it. We all do. Our fight to stop Sombra Roja's activity on the Dalton Ranch felt like a victory at the time—taking down their smuggling operation, reclaiming the ranch, and driving their armed men off our land. But in the grand scheme of things, it was a mere drop in the ocean of chaos flooding the southern border. For every cartel route we cut off, ten more sprung up across the desert, weaving through hidden canyons and forgotten towns.

The smugglers were relentless, adapting faster than we could track them, moving drugs, weapons, and terrorists, under the cover of night. The victory on the ranch was personal, but the larger war raged on. We'd shut down one route, only to find out they had countless others feeding into the heart of the nation, with Sombra Roja at the center of it all, thriving in the disorder.

Our victory against Sombra Roja on the Dalton Ranch was a drop in a well of blood and dust.

Now, we fight for more than just the ranch. The old world's gone, and with it, any sense of normal. What's left? Dust, ashes, and hoofprints in the dirt. A fight for what's left of our country and our freedom.

This is our livelihood, and we keep putting up a hell of a fight.