

## SPECTER OF DEATH

Ben Raines and the company of Rebels walked into the town just as dusk settled over the land. The surrendering Blackshirts sat on the curbs and sidewalks, their hands on top of their heads. None of them would meet Ben's eyes. They were terrified of him. More than a few crossed themselves when he drew near.

Ben turned to Lieutenant Ballard. "Jackie, what's going on here?"

"We haven't been able to figure that out, sir," she replied. "At first, we thought it might be some sort of trick."

Another Rebel walked up. "They believe you have supernatural powers, General. They think you're a shape-changer."

A low murmuring began as the Blackshirts spotted Ben ambling along, carrying the old Thompson.

"El Lobo! El lobo espectro!"

Ben caught the phrase being used and it amused him.

They were calling him Ghost Wolf.

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BATTLE IN THE ASHES

WILLIAM W. JOHNSTONE

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BOOK ONE

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The Rebels had sailed tens of thousands of miles, fighting pitched battles on island nations from Ireland and England, south around the Horn, then northwest up to Hawaii and back to America. They had freed hundreds of thousands from the yoke of slavery and tyranny and thought that when this voyage was over, they could rest for a time.

That was not to be.

The war-weary Rebels were returning to America to begin preparations for what would soon be the largest guerrilla action ever undertaken in modern history.

They had discovered while fighting halfway around the world that a massive army had been training for years in South America. The army's

mission: to conquer what was left of North America and reeducate its citizens ... those that would be left after a savage purge of men, women, and children they considered to be inferior.

Nazism had once more reared up its ugly face and was on the march, goose-stepping its way north. But the new leader making use of Hitler's ravings was more subtle

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in his indoctrination methods. Within the ranks of the New Army of Liberation could be found men and women of all races, all nationalities, all colors. The man behind the movement knew that he must use people of all colors in order to win. After the battle was won, then he would purge his ranks of those he considered inferior. But in order to do that, once the battle was won, he would need the help of a certain type of North American ... a rather ignorant type of person. Unfortunately, that type still existed in large numbers in North America, for as much as some Rebels might want to, they couldn't just shoot anyone who did not subscribe to their way of thinking.

Even though the world would be much better off had they done just that.

Years before the Great War ravaged the world, offshoots of nearly every terrorist group operating around the globe had learned of the new movement and rushed to South America to join the ranks. A terrorist lives for terror, to kill and maim and destroy. Terrorists don't particularly care what cause they're fighting for (many soon forget their original passion and live only for the blood-letting), as long as they are causing pain, spilling blood and blowing this and that to bits ... including old people, babies, animals, and other innocents. But terrorists almost always share one philosophy: they hate America and Americans with a red-hot passion. So when the world's many terrorist groups learned that an army was being secretly formed and trained to take over America, they jumped at the chance.

Then the Great War blew the world apart. The New Army of liberation stayed down and low and continued training in small bases all over the jungles and mountains

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of South America. Soon after the germ and nuclear strikes, one man emerged out of the rubble and panic and confusion and chaos of war.

He was an American, and his name was Ben Raines.

Now the terrorists and the bigots and the hate-mongers and the lawless and the ignorant and the lazy and worthless of the world could really have someone to hate.

Ben Raines.

Ben soon formed a small gathering of like-minded people. They spread out all over the country, seeking others who shared their philosophy of living and their dreams of rebuilding the shattered nation. While the central government (politicians) of the United States were still staggering around and pointing fingers of blame at each other and appointing and forming seemingly endless (and useless) committees to study this and that, Ben Raines and his growing band of followers, soon

to be called Rebels, were cleaning out and setting up their own brand of government in the Northwest. It was called Tri-States, and before the nitwit politicians who made up the new central government of the United States, its capital now in Richmond (Washington, D.C. had been destroyed, and many Americans, whether a part of the Rebels or not, felt that was long overdue) knew what was happening, they discovered that there was a country within a country, and everything was just fine in the Tri-States.

The Tri-States had zero crime, zero unemployment, clean, pure running water, electricity, social services, schools that really taught the young, medical care for all, and all the other amenities that made life good for the law-abiding. And things just hummed right along in

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the Tri-States. And they did it all without help from the central government, and even had the audacity to tell the central government to keep their noses out of the business of Tri-States.

"My God!" cried the politicians, blithering and blathering about in Richmond. "We can't have this. Why, this is positively unamerican!"

Then the central government in Richmond learned that criminals were actually being hanged in Tri-States, for such innocuous things as murder and rape and armed robbery and other such minor offenses that everyone knows is not the fault of the perpetrator, but rather the fault of everyone else. After all, if the homecoming queen won't date a person, or the coach won't let a person play in the big game, or if somebody has a nicer car or newer tennis shoes or flashier jacket, a larger TV set, or a better boom box or Walkman, why it makes perfect sense for that less fortunate person to go out and steal a gun and blow somebody away, for the mental scars left there by these horribly traumatic situations would certainly justify violent acts against an uncaring society.

So after the liberals in Congress ceased months of blubbering and snorting and weeping and stomping on hankies, and after forty-seven committees had concluded 5,593 meetings and fact-finding tours (all at taxpayer expense), the central government reached its decision: The Tri-States would have to cease and desist and disband and stop all this foolishness.

The citizens of Tri-States, through their elected leader, Ben Raines, told the President of the United States and the members of both houses of Congress to go fuck themselves.

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Well! Nobody tells Congress to do that!

The government of the United States declared war on the Tri-States. They thought they had wiped out all those malcontents who had the nerve to think they knew more about running a government than professional politicians.

They were wrong.

Ben Raines gathered a handful of survivors around him and proceeded to rebuild his army. Once that was done, the Rebels proceeded to kick the crap out of the thugs and bully-boys the central government sent after them.

The Rebel philosophy spread and the Rebel army grew in numbers. Just when Ben Raines and the Rebels had seized control of the central government, tragedy struck the world in the form of a rat-borne plague, and when it was over, there was not a stable government left intact anywhere in the world.

Anarchy reigned. Gangs of thugs and warlords ruled the cities and countryside, wreaking havoc and misery on the battle-torn and weary population. Everywhere except inside the borders of the new Tri-States, that is.

Ben Raines had gathered his Rebels around him and started all over, in the Deep South. When they had their sector cleaned out and running smoothly, the Rebels began the job of sweeping out the nation, coast to coast, and border to border. It would take them years.

And down in isolated areas of South America, Field Marshal Jesus Dieguez Mendoza Hoffman continued building and training his army of Nazis, staying low and out of sight. Their time would come. They waited.

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Now it was time for Ben Raines and his Rebels, and Field Marshal Hoffman and his NAL to meet.

The battleground: North America.

The stakes: Freedom.

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Chapter One

"Arms in the hands of citizens may be used at individual discretion ... in private self-defense."

John Adams

Ben Raines stood alone-as alone as the Rebels would ever let him be-looking south from his temporary CP in Texas. Everything was packed up in Hummers and cars and trucks, and his personal company of Rebels were ready for him to give the word. Ben was dressed in denim work shirt, jeans, and lace-up boots. Gone were the famous tiger stripe BDUs of the Rebels. Every Rebel now dressed in civilian clothing. Their uniforms had been laundered and packed away in plastic bags and stored in the Rebels' many underground bunkers, located all over the lower forty-eight.

For the moment, Texas was clean of any members of Hoffman's goose-stepping, black-shirted NAL. But Ben knew that was about to change, and that change was more than likely only moments away.

This upcoming fight came as no surprise to Ben, for he had always predicted-even years before the Great

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War, back when the world was more or less stable-that the final action was going to take place on American soil. Only who they were fighting

came as any surprise to him.

Ben stood and clenched his big hands into fists. "Goddamn you mealy-mouthed politicians," he swore, smoldering anger behind his words. "Goddamn you all. You brought us to this. Everything that happened is your fault. Everything that we now face is your fault. I should have gone along with the plan years back and toppled you bastards in Washington. I regret now that I didn't."

That those hated political leaders were long dead in their graves held little consolation for Ben. He wished they would all rise up from the ground so he could personally shoot them.

"Only a handful of you had the good of the tax-paying, law-abiding majority in mind," he muttered darkly. "I hope you bastards are burning in hell with hot pitchforks jammed up your asses!"

"The general is pissed," Cooper, Ben's driver, said, standing with Ben's personal team a few yards away.

"No kidding, Coop?" Jersey, the diminutive dark-eyed, dark-haired little beauty who was Ben's self-appointed bodyguard replied. "Here we are, about to be attacked by several hundred thousand goose-stepping Nazis-who only have us outnumbered about two hundred to one. The entire Rebel army is spread out over four or five states, and with all of us dressed like people getting ready to go to a rodeo, or a country music honky-tonk. We have the supplies for a long operation but getting to them is going to be a bit of a problem. He knows the Rebels are going to take a lot of losses over

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the months ahead. Intelligence says about fifty to sixty percent of us are going to die, Coop. And that's weighing heavy on his mind. In addition to all of that, General Raines knows that none of this would be happening today if the damn politicians of America had paid attention to the demands of the majority of citizens back umpteen years ago and let the Constitution be the road to travel instead of their own stupid mumblings. And you think the General is pissed, Cooper? Naw. Why would you think that?"

Cooper winked at her and tilted her ball cap down over her eyes. Jersey laughed and took a mock swing at him.

Corrie stood wearing a light backpack radio, earphones covering one ear to catch any messages. Beth, the historian and records-keeper of the team, had Ben's Husky, Smoot, on a leash. The animal had filled out and matured, now nearly a full-grown Siberian husky of about seventy pounds. She would get bigger still. The husky got her name because, as a pup, she made sounds that sounded like she was saying, "Smoot! Smoot! Smoot!"

Suddenly Ben's team, to a person, stiffened when they realized just what they were seeing. Ben was once more carrying his old Thompson SMG, the old Chicago Piano slung over one shoulder. And belted around his waist were two Colt .45 auto-loaders.

"Son of a gun!" Corrie said. "We haven't seen those in a long, long time."

Ben heard and turned around and looked at them. "I carried this old dinosaur when it all began, years back." He sighed. More years than he

liked to think about. So many good friends dead. Hundreds and hundreds of

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men and women who gave their lives for the Rebel cause. "So I'll be carrying this old Thompson when it ends ... one way or the other."

Actually, the Thompson had been reworked so many times by Rebel armorers there was not an original part left in it. It was still a slow-fire weapon when compared to an Uzi or HK, but that monstrous slug it spit out would inflict horrible damage upon a person.

All of Ben's team knew that just the sight of those .45-caliber monsters would be a great morale boost to all Rebels, and that was probably one of the reasons General Raines had done it.

Ben had put aside the old Thompson a long time back, because many people—including a lot of his own Rebels—were beginning to think the legendary old submachine gun had magical powers, and many of them wouldn't touch it. They were just as much in awe of the SMG as they were of Ben. Ben had convinced most of his people that he was not some sort of God. But there were many living in the battered nation who felt he was just that, and no amount of talking would ever make them believe otherwise.

"What's the word on Thermopolis and his bunch, Corrie?" Ben asked.

"All set up and dug in deep and tight in Arkansas, sir."

"Did he take Emil with him?" Ben asked with a smile.

"Very reluctantly, sir."

"At least that will keep the little con artist out of trouble for a while."

Thermopolis and his band of hippies made up part of Ben's HQ's Company. It would be their job to keep track of all units of Rebels. A demanding and nerve-wracking job. Ben had handed that to Therm because

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he was a fine detail man and had never liked the killing involved in fieldwork. Thermopolis had a staff of just over 250 men and women. And the finest communications equipment known to exist in the world.

"Latest position of Herr Field Marshal Hoffman and his New Army of Liberation?" Ben asked, contempt thick in his voice. Then he spat on the ground.

"About five miles south of the border, sir."

General Jesus Dieguez Mendoza Hoffman was the commanding general of the NAL. Spelled Nazi. He was the grandson of a very infamous Nazi SS general who escaped to South America after the Second World War. Hoffman had been schooled from birth to despise America and everything Americans stood for. His sole purpose in life was to destroy the very last vestiges of America and establish a new Nazi order that would ultimately rule the world.

But first he had to kill Ben Raines and the Rebels, and that was

something that; thousands had been attempting to do for years, with no success. Yet.

Field Marshal Hoffman was looking forward to mixing it up with Ben Raines and his Rebels. He paid little attention to his advisors when they warned him not to become overconfident. True, he had suffered some minor losses shortly after the Rebels returned from Hawaii, but those were only very unimportant skirmishes. There was not a doubt in Hoffman's mind that this upcoming campaign would be a short one. There was simply no way the Rebels could stand up to his mighty army. No way. That was so ridiculous a thought it was laughable.

"All of General Payon's people over the border, Corrie?" Ben asked.

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"All that's coming across."

Ben again turned to face the south. The Rebel commanders had looked over, discussed, and rejected dozens of plans on how best to confront the Nazi hordes fast approaching what had once been called the United States.

"Loosely united," Ben muttered, disgust in his voice. "And ruled by federal judges."

Even before the Great War cast its long darkness over the land, Ben had written that the United States was no more than a slightly benevolent dictatorship, and anyone who believed that the American people had any real power over their own lives was living in a dream world.

"General," Corrie called. "Buddy wants to know why in the hell you are still here with Hoffman's scouts less than five miles away?"

Buddy Raines, the powerfully built and brutally handsome son of Ben.

"I'm surprised that Tina hasn't put in her two cent's worth, as well," Ben said.

"She has," Corrie told him. "And so has Dr. Chase. I just didn't tell you. What do I tell Buddy?"

"Tell him to worry about his own ass. I'll take care of mine."

"Rat," Corrie whispered Buddy's code name, "the Eagle says to thank you for your concern and that he will be along presently." Corrie was forever rewriting and rewording Ben's remarks from the field.

"I'm sure that is exactly what he said," Buddy responded.

"Would I lie?" Corrie replied sweetly.

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"Tell that middle-aged Rambo-type to get his butt out of there!" Dr. Chase thundered over the air.

Dr. Lamar Chase, Chief of Medicine, a man well into his seventies, had been with Ben since the Rebel dream of true liberty and justice for all law-abiding citizens began, years back.



"Yes, sir," Corrie acknowledged the transmission.

"That must be Dr. Chase bitching about me being here," Ben said, without turning around.

"Ah ... right, sir."

"Tell him to clear the air and leave it open for emergency transmissions only."

"The Eagle says we are bugging out of this area very soon, sir," Corrie radioed.

"I just bet he did," Chase snorted. "You're a sweet girl, Corrie. But you're a terrible liar! Chase out."

"Feels funny not being in uniform," Jersey said.

Ben heard her. "We are in uniform, Jersey. From this moment on. But I know what you mean. Does feel odd. The Hummer all packed and ready to roll, Coop?"

"Yes, sir."

Ben walked back to his group and knelt down, petting Smoot for a moment, rubbing the husky's head. "You're going to Arkansas, Smoot. You'll be safe there." He stood up. "Take Smoot to the airstrip, Beth. Coop, drive her there. Smoot will be safe with Therm and his bunch."

Ben had cut his personal detachment down to his small team and one platoon of Regulars, all of them hand-picked by Ike McGowen, the Russian, General Striganov, Dr. Chase, the mercenary, Colonel West, the former SAS Officer, Colonel Dan Gray, and Ben's children, Buddy and Tina. That one platoon had the fighting

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capability of approximately a full company of any other soldiers in the world.

Ben squatted down in the shade of a truck and rolled a cigarette. "We're all standing on the darkened and scorched edge of history," Ben muttered. "Waiting for the flames to destroy it all."

"Beg pardon, sir?" Corrie said.

"Nothing, Corrie. Just talking to myself. When is that damn Nazi son of a bitch going to make his move?" he said irritably.

"General Ike says if you don't get your butt in gear and get out of here, he's going to come down here personally and kick it for you," Corrie said, after ten-fouring a transmission.

"Tell Tubby to watch his own ass," Ben replied. "He's got a lot more to look after than I do."

Ike was a bit on the stocky side. The ex-Navy SEAL was another who had been with Ben since the beginning.

"Shark," Corrie radioed, "the Eagle is just about to fly."

Ben smoked his cigarette, thankful that Dr. Chase was miles to the north and not standing here bitching and raising hell about Ben's few cigarettes a day.

"General," Corrie's voice held a different note. "Scouts report Hoffman's Blackshirts are moving north. All columns on the roll."

"Tell the Scouts to bug out and rejoin us here," Ben said quietly, standing up. "Tell them to push it." When Corrie had radioed the orders, Ben said, "Advise all units Hoffman is moving. Tell Ike to blow everything from San Diego to El Paso. We'll make those goose-

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stepping bastards work for every damned inch of American soil they choose to be buried in."

"Is anybody going to say, 'well, this is it?' " Cooper asked.

"You do, and I'll hit you, Coop," Jersey warned. "I swear I will."

Heir General Field Marshall Jesus Dieguez Mendoza Hoffman stood several miles south of the Mexico/U.S. border, felt the ground tremble beneath his polished boots, and watched the huge clouds of dust rise into the air. The dust clouds stretched for as far as the telescope-assisted eye could see. The Blackshirts of the NAL could all accurately guess what had just happened.

Hoffman was not impressed. His cold black eyes were startling to see beneath his very blond hair and pale skin. Many of the NAL were a mixture of Spanish and German blood. Hoffman lowered his binoculars and let them dangle from a leather strap. "Bridges and roads," he said. "So we will be delayed for a few days in crossing. Does the famous General Ben Raines think this action will strike fear into our hearts? Nonsense. What are the very latest intelligence reports from our friends north of the border?" he asked an aide.

"Still very confused, Field Marshal. No one seems to know just what Ben Raines is planning. He has spread his forces all over several states, from small units to large ones."

"I personally think it is some sort of trick," a senior aide spoke up.

"What kind of trick? Be more specific, Karl."

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"I don't know, sir. But his actions make no military sense. They run contrary to every rule of engagement."

Hoffman smiled. What Raines was doing made perfect sense to him. He was going to wage a campaign of terror and harassment against the NAL. A purely guerrilla action just as soon as they crossed the border. No matter. They would amount to no more than a stinging bee.

But what Hoffman didn't know was that the Rebels were pure killer bees, not for the most part docile honey bees. The NAL was about to learn a, hard lesson concerning Ben Raines's Rebels.

"Order patrols across," Hoffman said. "Let's see if the famous Ben Raines has the courage to face us."

But Ben was heading straight up Interstate 35 toward a preset destination some sixty miles from Laredo. Ned Hawkins and a contingent of his New Texas Rangers had laid down a trail a drunken city slicker could follow, heading up Highway 83 toward Carrizo Springs. Buddy and his people had taken off toward Freer, and Tina and a contingent had left quite a trail as they headed toward Hebbronville.

Twenty miles away from each of their positions, other contingents of Rebels lay waiting. Twenty miles further on, yet another ambush was lying wait ... and so on for a hundred miles in all directions.

Hoffman's patrols reported back by radio. "We are across into North America. No resistance. Both cities are deserted."

"Surely everything is booby-trapped?" Hoffman questioned.

"Nothing is booby-trapped," his people radioed. "We have found nothing. But large forces of Rebels have

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scattered in all directions, using all the highways leading out."

Hoffman smiled. "Oh, Ben Raines. You are a devious devil, you are. You want me to head straight up your Interstate system and then you and your Rebels will fall in behind us and attack from all sides. I see your plan. It is a good one, but I am too smart for you."

All his aides and flunkies and gofers smiled and nodded their heads. Field Marshal Hoffman would never fall for something so obvious.

"Four battalions across the river," Hoffman ordered, picking up a map. "Each battalion to be backed up by armor."

"Gunships, Field Marshal?"

"No," Hoffman said drily. He had sent a dozen gun-ships across the Rio Grande a few days before to harass the Rebels. He discovered then that the Rebels had the most sophisticated surface-to-air missiles known to the world. Even better than his own. Everything from Stingers to the SA-14 Gremlin. None of his gunships had returned. "We shall keep them on the ground for the time being."

The Rebels had reached their destinations and were working furiously to get into position, hoping that the Blackshirts would fall for this ruse.

Hoffman had his trailer pulled up, and he sat with his boots off, feet up, sipping tea and relaxing. His people were resting, all certain that in a few hours, the battalions would report back-victorious, of course.

Miles down each road, Rebel Scouts lay concealed, waiting to signal their friends of the approaching Black-shirts.

"Hoffman may be a jerk-off," Ben said to his team, as

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they waited for word of pursuit. "But his troops are seasoned veterans. We don't ever want to make the mistake of selling them short. What happens on this day is going to make the rest of his people very cautious."

Ben had ordered his people to ground several miles outside of the deserted town. This was brush country, at one time the site of many ranches and farms. Now it was all grown up. The Blackshirts would be expecting an ambush in the towns; they would not be expecting Rebels to pop up out of the ground in open fields and meadows and start hurling rockets at them-Ben hoped.

The Rebels had the finest rocket launchers, everything from the German Armbrust to the American TOW. They had AT-4s, Carl Gustafs, and Milans. And they were skilled in their use.

They waited.

"Everyone is in position," Corrie reported. The ambush sites were all approximately the same distance from Laredo, the furthest one being sixty-eight miles, the nearest one fifty-six miles. But the nearest one was located on the worst road, so the Blackshirts should arrive at all sites within a couple of minutes of each other.

At least that's the way Ben planned it.

The Rebels were still outside their hastily dug holes, and Ben looked over at Jersey and smiled. She had turned her ball cap around, bill to the back, and looked about fifteen years old.

These kids, he thought-and they were kids, at least to Ben-have seen precious few moments of joy and peace in their lives. Take those guns and knives and grenades and battle harnesses from them, and they'd look like young people on their way to a square dance. But Ben knew these young men and women were among the most

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brutal, savage and skilled fighters in all the world. And their loyalty toward him border-lined on the fanatic.

Cooper was chewing on a weed. "Coyote probably came along right before we got here and peed on that thing, Coop," Jersey told him.

Cooper spat out the weed and gave her a dirty look.

Beth was writing in her journal, and Ben knew it would be in the neatest handwriting he had ever seen, and very concise. Corrie was dressed in jeans and pullover shirt, an earth-tone bandanna tied around her head. She felt Ben looking at her and smiled at him. He winked at her.

"Jersey," Ben said. "What time is it getting to be?"

She grinned. "Kick-ass time, General!"

"Damn right," Ben said.

The Rebels were dug in 250 meters from the interstate. Their vehicles hidden about a mile away. Ben did not want to risk hiding them in the town, for fear the Blackshirts would first shell the town.

Ben looked across the way and chuckled softly. Those Rebels who were in sight certainly did not appear worried about facing a force of Blackshirts that would outnumber them ten or twenty to one. Several of them were sleeping, their ball caps or cowboy hats over their faces. Others were reading old paperbacks or hardcover books. Several were working crossword puzzles.

"Large force, approximately battalion size, just passing by the Scouts' position," Corrie said.

"Head's up!" Ben called to his people. "Give it all to me, Corrie."

"Open and canvas-covered trucks, deuce and a halves, escorted and trailed by main battle tanks."

Ben looked over at Jersey. "Kick-ass time," she said.

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## Chapter Two

The battalion commander of the Blackshirts rode in an open scout car, behind several main battle tanks, which were not buttoned up. The BC was an experienced soldier, a veteran of many, many battles and a devoted follower of Hoffman and his wacko philosophy. The BC was also a very arrogant man who believed that the Blackshirts were invincible in battle. After all, they had never really lost a battle. True, they had experienced some setbacks against General Payon's forces, but in the end, had been victorious. And they would be victorious against these stupid Rebels as well. He firmly believed that.

His final thought was that no force on earth could defeat the Blackshirts. He took that thought with him into eternity as a slug from a .50-caliber sniper rifle blew away most of his head. The BC's brains splattered all over the driver and in a horrified panic he spun the wheel just as a rocket struck the vehicle and turned it into a burning, smoking, twisted mass of junk.

Some of the tanks were rendered inoperable as rockets blew the treads off; others took hits that exploded the

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fuel tanks and set off the ammunition storage bins, turning the inside of the tanks into a man-made hell.

The troops riding in the trucks had no chance at all as rockets blew them to bloody chunks and heavy machine guns chopped up what was left. Eight hundred men and women of the Blackshirts' infantry and eight tanks and crews were killed, badly wounded, or frightened out of their wits in less than thirty seconds.

"Mop it up," Ben ordered. "And bring me any prisoners."

Ned Hawkins and his New Texas Rangers turned the highway outside of Carrizo Springs into a smoking mass of twisted metal and broken bodies. They began gathering up what weapons and equipment were still useable and stripping the bodies of boots. At Ben's orders, they took what uniforms were not burned or shot or blown to bloody rags. Ned did not

have the foggiest notion why the General wanted the uniforms, but he was not about to question Ben's orders.

"Help me!" pleaded one Blackshirt with both legs blown off.

"There ain't nothin' I can do for you, partner," a Ranger told the man. "I'm not gonna waste pain-killers on you."

"You're devils!" the man gasped.

"No," the Ranger corrected. "We're Americans. And you fucked up bad comin' here."

Outside of Freer, Texas, Buddy and his teams gave the Blackshirts a very deadly surprise and left their broken,

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burned, and bloody bodies on the road and shoulders and ditches. On the east side of Hebbronville, Tina and her Rebels ripped into the Blackshirts' column with the ferocity of a pack of angry wolverines. So complete was the ambush, not one Blackshirt in any of the four columns had the chance to get off a single radio transmission to warn Hoffman what was happening.

The four Rebels teams piled up the bodies, poured gasoline on them, and set them afire, to disguise the fact they had stripped the bodies of uniforms, then slipped back to their vehicles and drove away.

In the once lush lower Rio Grande valley, Rebels had set fire to everything that would burn. They left a smoking, charred, and burning hell behind them, leaving nothing of value for Hoffman and his Blackshirts. So intense were the flames that the advancing forces of the Field Marshal had to back up and cut west in the hope of finding another way across the river.

In his lushly appointed trailer, Hoffman sipped tea and waited for news.

Worried aides haunted the radio operators for reports that never came. All the frantically working operators could pick up were the undecipherable slurping sounds of burst transmissions from Rebel units.

"An entire regiment simply does not vanish from the face of the earth!" a colonel yelled at a frustrated and browbeaten radio operator.

"I know, Colonel. I know. I'm doing all I know to do."

It fell on the shoulders of Hoffman's top aide to carry the silence to Field Marshal Hoffman. The aide was not looking forward to this-at all.

To the north, west, and east of Hoffman's position,

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great black carrion-eating birds were ceasing their endless circling and gliding to earth for a feast.

"You have good news at last, my friend?" Hoffman asked with a smile.

"I ... have no news, sir."

Hoffman stared at the man.

"We cannot make contact with any of the battalions."

"What you are saying is impossible."

"We have lost contact, sir."

Hoffman slowly pulled on his boots and stood up, straightening and buttoning his uniform. "Ridiculous!" he snorted, and opened the door, stalking out of the trailer.

Ben ordered all units to fall back to a line that stretched west to east, following Highways 57 and 87, from Eagle Pass to Victoria, Texas. There was now a long, loose Rebel line stretching from California to the Gulf of Mexico, and Hoffman's Blackshirts were beginning to realize they had one hell of a fight facing them. Reports poured in to Hoffman's CP.

"That's sixteen hundred or so miles!" Hoffman stormed. "It's impossible. Raines doesn't have that many troops. It's a damn trick. And where in the hell are those four battalions I sent out? Have any patrols reported back?"

"Not yet, sir. We're expecting word any minute."

It came. And Hoffman appeared to be in mild shock. He stood for a moment, speechless, his mouth open. "All of them?" he finally spoke.

"All of them, sir," the radio operator said softly. "All four battalions destroyed."

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"Survivors?"

"A handful. They are being transported back here as quickly as possible."

Field Marshal Jesus Hoffman stared at the man, his black eyes burning with fury. "Give me the actual number of personnel lost."

"Over twenty-three hundred, sir."

Hoffman sat down hard in a chair, clearly stunned. A handful of Rebels had wiped out four full battalions of top combat-seasoned troops along with their escorting armor. Impossible. But it had happened. How was the problem Hoffman knew he had to solve. And how to prevent it from ever happening again.

"Hoffman has ordered an immediate halt to all advancing troops," Ben was told. "They moved up to a line about thirty miles inside our borders and stood down."

Ben nodded. "He's busy working out mind-problems. He's trying to figure out what his best move would be and he's not going to commit any more troops until he does. We clearly won the first round, but let's not get cocky about it. Hoffman's people are going to kick the shit out of us before this is over." Ben paused for a moment, and those around him knew he wasn't through. He tapped a folder lying on the battered old table in the dining room of the once fine home about thirty miles outside of San

Antonio, just off Interstate 35. "Bad news, people. This is the final analysis of months of intelligence work by our people. They conclude that thousands and thousands of Americans, all of them living outside of Rebel zones, have gone over to Hoffman's

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side. Copies of this report have been sent to all of our batt comms. From this moment on, we don't know who to trust."

"But we damn sure know the types of people who rolled over," Ned Hawkins said. "At least, I do. I used to be one of them. I can spot them at five hundred yards without binoculars."

Ben smiled. "Yes," he said drily. "So can I, Ned." The Rebels all knew the type. Their numbers were made up of people of all colors who, before the Great War, blamed everyone except themselves for the problems facing themselves and the nation. Whites who hated blacks. Blacks who hated whites. People of all colors who wanted something for nothing. Give me money for doing nothing. I demand this and I got a right to that. All niggers is lazy, they stink, and they're cowards. All honkies is racist and out to get us brothers and sisters. The only good Indian is a dead Indian. We were here first, the land belongs to us and by God we want it and to hell with everybody else. I demand more social services from the government but I want big government to stay out of my life. I got more bills than I can pay, I done it knowin' I was doin' it, I had a fine time doin' it, so now I'll just declare bankruptcy and to hell with my creditors. I got a right to party down and screw anybody I wants to screw, and if I get pregnant, the taxpayers can just damn well pay my medical bills and support my child'en from cradle to grave and give me welfare. I got a right to eat, I got a right to have proper housing, I got a right to have money in my pocket, and you can't make me work if I don't want to. Give me money, money, money. For if you don't, I'll boycott, I'll picket, I'll disrupt services, I'll blow up your house or

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your store, I'll burn a cross on your lawn. I demand government subsidies for this, that, and the other thing. I ain't gonna send my kids to school with no goddamn nigger or spic or Jew. I don't want my kids to associate with a lot of racist honkies. All niggers is bad. All whites is good. All Blacks are good. All whites are bad. You're picking on me. I'll sue you. Just 'cause you caught me breakin' into your home, that don't give you the right to use force against me, and if you do, I'll sue you and there are sure as hell a lot of lawyers around who'll take my case and win it. On and on and on.

Oh, yes. The Rebels knew the type well.

Ben leaned back in the chair and closed his tired eyes for a moment. He wished there was a place he could take his Rebels and to hell with everybody else. A place where they could live and prosper in peace.

But he knew there was no such place.

He knew that wherever they went, they would have to fight for their right to exist. He smiled at that. Our right? he thought. Let's don't be hypocritical, Ben. Don't start sounding like all those protesters of years back, demanding this and that. What you and the Rebels are doing is attempting to rebuild a nation. Moral issues can be hashed out later.



Ben opened his eyes. "If those groups out there, which we all know comprise hundreds of thousands of people, would put aside their hate for one another and band together, they'd have a damn good chance of defeating us."

"They won't do that," Tina told him. "They hate each other more than they hate us. Our best hope is that they wind up killing each other."

Ben stared at the Rebels crowded into the room.

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"We're not going to wait for Hoffman and his goose-steppers to get a firm toehold in America. Corrie, order all units to immediately launch a full-scale guerrilla action against the Blackshirts. Coast to coast. Get geared up, people. We're taking the attack to them!"

General Payon, the commander of all Mexican forces, ordered teams of skilled guerrilla fighters to head back into Mexico, swing around, and attack the Black-shirts from the rear, stinging them and then quickly withdrawing.

From Texas to California, all along the border, Ben's Rebels began quietly getting into place to raise some hell with Hoffman's Blackshirts.

"Lovely night," a Blackshirt commander said, stepping out of the abandoned house along the New Mexico border. "I love this climate here." He smiled and breathed deeply. "I shall ask to be permanently assigned here once we have defeated Raines' Rebels."

Those were the last words he would ever say as three fire-frag grenades bounced on the patio and blew, spreading him and two others all over the rear of the house.

His personnel ran onto the blood-slick patio and began firing wildly in all directions. They hit nothing. The dark shadows melted into the night.

In a once lovely home just south of Tucson, along Interstate 19, two squads of top-notch battle-hardened Blackshirts had just finished their supper. Their last supper. They were looking forward to a group of ladies coming over for a little entertainment. The "ladies" were from a Ben Raines-hating group who called themselves

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CRAPO. The Committee for the Removal of All Political Opposition. The ladies would come over, but the two squads of Blackshirts would be in no condition to entertain them. Not after three rockets from Armbrusts tore into the house and blew it to bloody bits.

Fifteen miles away, a ten-man Blackshirt patrol in two trucks pulled up behind a man working on his old pickup truck along the side of the highway.

"What's the problem, friend?" the team leader asked.

"Worn out," the man replied. "Everything is just worn out." He smiled at the men, his teeth flashing in the night. "Forgive. I forget my manners. I have fresh fruit in the back. Apples and oranges and melons. I would be honored if you would take my small offering."

"We couldn't take your food, senor."

"Please. I would be offended. Nothing is too good for the people who would finally relieve us of the yoke of oppression placed on our necks by that damnable Ben Raines and his filthy followers."

Hiding in the ditches alongside the highway, the battalion commander of Thirteen Battalion, Raul Gomez, stifled a groan. Amelio was a natural born ham and on this night he was really putting on quite a show.

"Ah," the Blackshirt team leader said. "We were told this area had a lot of people who were sympathetic to our cause."

"Oh, my, yes, patron. Many, many of us welcome your coming. Words cannot express my true feelings," Amelio added with just a touch of irony.

The Blackshirts slung their weapons and flipped back the tarp over the bed of the truck. They stood dumbfounded, for the bed was empty. They looked for Amelio. He was gone. The last thing they would experience

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on this earth was the pain as bullets from M-16s ripped into their bodies.

The Rebels took their weapons and what uniforms could be patched up, tossed the weapons in the Black-shirt trucks, and headed out into the desert, leaving the bodies for the buzzards.

It was only the beginning of what was to be a very, very bloody night.

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### Chapter Three

When the news of the night's work reached Jesus Hoffman early the next morning, the man very nearly lost his composure. He forced himself to be civil to the messenger and sat back down at his table, looking at his breakfast. He pushed it from him; his appetite was gone.

They had not yet penetrated forty miles into North America and already the losses were unacceptable. And casualty reports from the bloody night just past were still coming in.

It was impossible, but yet it was happening. Then Herr Hoffman said what people had been saying for years about the commander of the Rebel Army. "I hate that goddamn Ben Raines!"

Hoffman bathed and shaved and splashed on cologne. He dressed in a field uniform, tan pants, and black shirt, and stepped out of his trailer to face his most senior commanders, gathered at his orders. He had prepared a speech in his mind, but looking at his commanders, found the speech not what he really wanted to say. He waved his people to follow him to where a large canvas had been stretched to offer protection from the

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elements; it was open on all sides. Under the canvas, he turned to face his people. Following a decidedly discouraged sigh, he began to speak.

"You all know that Raines' Rebels struck last night. Reports are still coming in. Many of our most forward units have been virtually wiped out or bloodied badly. I have ordered those still functioning to bunker in until further orders. Now then, certainly none of us expected the taking of North America to be easy. But none of us ever dreamt the offensive would start on such a dour note." Jesus Hoffman paused for a moment, then blurted, "Gentlemen, I am open for suggestions."

The hundreds of small teams of Rebels scattered all over the country didn't need any suggestions. They knew what to do: Kill Blackshirts and anyone who supported them, overtly or covertly. And those many hundreds of citizens who were on the side of Hoffman learned this very quickly and vacated Texas posthaste. They knew better than to waste time trying to explain to the roaming Rebel patrols why they chose to support Hoffman and his Blackshirts. The Rebels were not interested. The Rebels had a nasty habit of hanging or shooting collaborators. On the spot. They also knew all the ways of extracting information from recalcitrant suspects. The Rebels did not use physical torture—under physical torture, the suspect will tell his or her questioners anything to stop the pain. Instead, the Rebels used polygraphs, Psychological Stress Evaluators, drugs, and hypnosis. It was unpleasant.

John Masters was the leader of one such group of people who dreamed of the day Ben Raines would die

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and the Blackshirts would rule. He fantasized of a world free of blacks. And free of Ben Raines and his goddamn Rebels. John believed that everything bad that had happened to him and America could be traced right back to blacks. His followers numbered just about ten thousand and they lived in a town in North Texas.

Luis Carrero was of Spanish descent (although he was fourth generation American), and Luis dreamed of a world free of everyone except Spanish speaking peoples. He hated people like Ben Raines. And he hated the Rebels. Everyone around him hated Ben Raines and the Rebels. Luis's followers numbered about ten thousand. And Luis dreamed of the day Jesus Hoffman and his Blackshirts would take power.

Moi Sambura hated everyone who was not black. Moi (real name Charles Washington) held sway over a following of about ten thousand spread over several counties in what used to be Eastern Mississippi and Western Alabama. Moi and his followers had caused no trouble and managed to stay clear of the Rebels over the years, even though they were well aware the Rebels knew of their presence. General Cecil Jefferys, himself a black man and second-in-command of all Rebel forces, detested Moi and everything he and his followers stood for. Cecil had bluntly stated for years that someday the Rebels would have to go in and wipe that bunch from the face of the earth. Ben had held him back.

"They're not causing any trouble, Cec," Ben had cautioned.

"The hell they're not," Cecil would reply. "They've either run off or killed every white person in eight counties. They're in a constant squabble with Wink Payne and that bunch of white trash that follow him."

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"We'll get to them all in time, Cec," Ben would say.

Now was that time.

"General Jefferys on the horn," Corrie told Ben. "He sounds unhappy about something."

"Moi Sambura and Wink Payne," Ben said, walking across the living room of the house in Texas, about seventy-five miles north of Hoffman's command post. "He's found out they both have linked up with Hoffman's Blackshirts. God, what an unholy alliance that must be."

"Go, Cec."

"Ben, we've got to move against Moi and Wink. They've both linked up with Hoffman-for totally different reasons-and having them at your back is unacceptable."

"And what do you propose, Cec?"

"Leading my forces against them. All-out ground and air assault and wipe them clean once and for all."

"Cec," Ben said patiently. "You are still recovering from heart surgery. How many pacemakers do you want installed in your chest? And even if you were a hundred percent, your pulling out would leave Base Camp One unprotected. No. We'll deal with these splinter groups when the time comes."

"You're making a mistake," Cecil warned.

"Cec, we're spread too thin as it is. I've got eyes and ears on Moi and John Masters and Wink and Luis. And that silly-assed CRAPO bunch in Arizona. They're a threat, but not much of one. They all have high numbers of followers, but they're all too lightly armed to pose much of a threat. We've got our hands full dealing with Hoffman."

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"All right, Ben. It's your show. That was good work last night."

"We made him bleed, for sure. How are you feeling?" Cecil had undergone emergency heart surgery just a few months back.

"I'll be one hundred percent in a few weeks, Ben."

Ben knew that was bull and so did everyone else. But they also knew that Cecil would push it to the limit unless Ben kept a tight rein on him.

"You do what the doctors tell you to do, Cec," Ben warned. "I need you right where you are."

"That's ten-four, Eagle. Out."

And Ben knew Cecil would follow orders. He might not like it, but he was a soldier's soldier. And Ben knew too, that Cecil was irritated at not being able to get into the field. But Ben needed Cecil right where he was.

To the south of Ben, Hoffman sat behind his desk looking at General Hans Brodermann. Brodermann stood before him, in full dress uniform, but not the uniform of the regular army. Brodermann was dressed all in black, with the silver death's head insignia of the old Nazi SS on his collar

and cap. If there was a cruder man anywhere in the world, Jesus Hoffman was not aware of it. Hans detested everything about America, for it was the American army, fifty years back, who had hanged his grandfather, who was one of Mengele's assistants at the death camps. And Hans's mother and father had never let him forget that fact. Hans, unlike Field Marshal Hoffman, had no Spanish blood in him. He was Aryan. Pure Aryan, he chose to think. And while he had many nationalities serving under his command, his personal detachment of soldiers were all Germanic ... or at least gave that appearance.

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Hans was one of the select few who knew that once North America was taken, many now serving faithfully in Hoffman's Blackshirts would be disposed of. Especially the Arabic, Oriental, and Negro ... the fate of any others was negotiable.

Hans smiled at Hoffman. It was not a condescending smile, for Hans truly admired and liked the young field marshal, some fifteen or so years Hans's junior. Hans had studied Ben Raines extensively over the years, as had every officer in Hoffman's army, and knew that he and Ben were about the same age, and very nearly the same height and weight. He also admired General Raines. He detested him, but he admired him as well. "So you have decided to pit me against General Raines, mein Field Marshal?"

"Ja, Hans," Jesus momentarily slipped into German. "Your SS division will spearhead the America invasion, Hans. Crush everything in your path. Bring any resistance to their knees, and strike fear in the hearts of anyone who even remotely believes in the Rebels."

Hans clicked the heels of his polished riding boots in reply.

Hoffman stood up and walked to a huge map of the United States, secured to the wall of his trailer office. With his back to Brodermann, he thumped his fist against Texas. "I want this place secured, Hans. I don't care if the ground is so soggy with American blood it slops under my boots. Secure it!"

Again, the click of heels.

Jesus turned, a cold look in his black eyes. "How you do that is of no consequence to me, Hans."

"Carte blanche, Field Marshal?"

"Exactly."

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"When do I leave?"

"Forty-eight hours." He gave the Nazi stiff armed salute. "Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" Hans shouted, then spun around and walked out of the trailer.

Ben sat silently in his chair for a long time, staring out the window, or where the window used to be. He was alone in the room and had given orders he was not to be disturbed for anything short of a nuclear strike. He doodled on scraps of paper, drummed his fingertips on the table, paced the room and cursed and prayed. When he made up his mind,

and it was only after the most agonizing hour of his life, he stood up and called for Come and the rest of his team to come in.

"Come, do we know the frequencies of the known groups aligned with Hoffman and is it possible to jam them for any length of time?"

"Yes, sir. Those people aren't really that smart to begin with. They don't know that we've broken every code they've ever devised within a hour of their transmitting it. They could easily be jammed. For however long you wanted it."

Buddy and Tina were in the general vicinity, and General Georgi Striganov had radioed that he was on the way in.

"I want the rest of the batt comms here ASAP," Ben said. "Transmit that by burst and tell them to get here fastest means possible. I will not make this decision alone."

Four hours later, the fifteen battalion commanders, including Ben, were seated' in the large room. They had

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all looked at and studied the clear plastic covered U.S. map on the wall. Ben had drawn a line east to west, from the Virginia coast clear over to the California coast.

Ben sat on the edge of the heavy old table, staring at his commanders. "I will not make this decision alone, people." He pointed to the map. "The thirty-sixth parallel. If possible we're going to contain Hoffman's people below it. Above it will be all those who, while they might not agree with our philosophy, at least are not aligned against us."

"A mass evacuation, Ben?" Georgi asked.

"Yes."

"That leaves Cecil with his ass hangin' out in the wind, boy," Ike drawled.

"No, it doesn't," Ben spoke very softly. "For only we have the antidote to the gas our scientists perfected."

Pat O'Shea, the Wild Irishman, as he had promptly been dubbed, whistled. "And if the winds were right ..." he trailed off.

"Yes," Ben said. "Hoffman's people would die by the thousands. So the entire state of what used to be known as Louisiana will be a neutral zone. We have antidotes for every type of gas Hoffman has, and he knows it. We have nuclear weapons, and he knows it. Bet that Hoffman and his top people have studied me extensively. They know I'll use both if pushed to it."

"And any who refuse to go north?" Jackie Malone, commander of Twelve Battalion, asked. She and Tina were the only female batt comms. Not that there weren't more females qualified, the Rebels just didn't have the personnel to field any more battalions ... yet.

"We cannot guarantee their safety, and neither can

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we guarantee that we won't shoot them on sight, mistaking them for the enemy or enemy sympathizers."

"I like it," West, the mercenary, said. "It would certainly give us a wide-open field of fire, so to speak."

The others nodded their heads in agreement. Danjou, the French Canadian and commander of Seven Battalion, said, "The evacuation would have to be started immediately. I mean, like this evening."

"Yes. Provided we are all in agreement on this plan. Let me see a show of hands."

Every hand went up.

"All right, that's it. I don't know that we can contain them at the thirty-sixth parallel. I only know that we'd better give it our best shot."

"I hate to be the one to throw cold water on this plan, father," Buddy spoke up. All heads turned to him. "But there is no way we're going to evacuate all innocent people out of hundreds of thousands of square miles. It is, simply put, impossible."

"I agree," Ben said. "But what choice do we have, son, except to try? Hoffman has not yet turned his mad dog loose. But it's only a matter of time before he does. General Payon says that General Hans Brodermann is a monster. Totally ruthless. He will kill anything or anybody who gets in his way. Brodermann commands a full-size division. He has more men in that one division than we do in our entire army. Payon, who by the way could not attend this meeting because he is ... ah, busy this afternoon ..."

Everybody laughed at that. They knew that Payon and his teams were harassing the hell out of pockets of Blackshirts.

"... told me that Brodermann is the crudest man he

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has ever seen. He loves torture; enjoys seeing men and women and children humiliated and degraded. This man would make Sam Hartline look like an angel."

Ben had killed the torturer, Hartline, in hand-to-hand combat several years back.

Ben said, "We'll be lucky if we can get forty percent of the population above the thirty-sixth parallel. Fifty percent will be nothing short of a miracle. But we have to try. Let's go, people. We have a lot of work to do."

After the others had exited the room, Ike walked to Ben's side and said, "It's a grand and noble plan, but it ain't gonna work, Ben."

"I know it," Ben spoke quietly. "But we have to give it our best effort." He smiled at Ike's attire. The man was dressed in bell-bottomed jeans and wore a sailor's cap on his head. He resembled a fat Popeye. "You know what you look like, Ike?"

"Don't say it, you string-bean," Ike told him. "Ben," Ike's tone turned

serious. "You take care, now, you hear?"

Ben held out his hand and Ike shook it. "Luck to you, old friend."

"Same to you, Ben."

Ike turned and walked out into the fading light.

"We're sure going to need all the luck we can grab," Ben muttered. He picked up his Thompson just as the gas lantern sputtered and died. "I hope that's not an indication of things to come," he said.

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#### Chapter Four

The Rebels broke up into small teams and began scouring the countryside, going house to house and alerting the people there. It was a futile gesture, and they all knew it, but all felt it was something that must be done. They asked each person they contacted to alert at least two more families. Most survivors agreed to move north; some refused to leave.

"Your funeral," the Rebels told them, and moved on. They had neither the time nor the inclination to argue.

Hoffman's intelligence people knew something big was going on north of their position, but didn't, as yet, know what. On the morning that Brodermann and his SS troops were preparing to pull out for the first big push, Ben broke the news to Field Marshal Hoffman.

Hoffman read the communiqué several times, then handed it to Brodermann, who read it and passed the paper around to the other commanders.

"He's bluffing!" a tank commander said. "Raines would never use poison gas or nuclear weapons."

"Ben Raines doesn't bluff," Hoffman said, meeting the eyes of Brodermann and seeing the slight nod of

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agreement from the man. "If he says he'll do something, he'll do it. Don't ever sell this man short. He's ruthless. But in a strange sort of way, a fair man." He turned to the map. "Raines says we can use this area of Louisiana to set up hospitals and long-term patient care and no one there will be bothered as long as it is used as that as nothing more. Everything else is a free-fire zone. Advise our medical personnel that this designated area is to be a non-combat zone. We will also respect all of the Rebels' medical facilities. After all," he said, "we are not barbarians."

Ben read the communiqué and nodded. "Brodermann is on the march. He's moving on three fronts. Heading up Eighty-three, Eighty-one, and Fifty-nine. Armor and heavy artillery. Approximately seven thousand men per column. And the columns are staggered." Ben sighed. "All right, people. Start blowing every bridge south of Highway Ninety. Burn every town, every village, every house. We'll not leave one scrap of useable material. We can't stop the bastards, but we can damn sure make life miserable for them."



"Hoffman is attacking along the borders of California, Arizona, and New Mexico," Corrie said. "Pouring across in large numbers. Intell says we vastly underestimated the size of his army."

"We, hell!" Ben said. "Intelligence did, not us. What's the latest estimate?"

"Probably two hundred thousand."

"'Goddamn!" Ben said. "We're outnumbered two hundred and fifty to one. And that's being optimistic."

Ben looked over at General Payon, who had just

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pulled in that morning. The Mexican commander was dead tired and his clothing grimy from the road, but he managed to smile sadly. "It is a grim time we live in, my friend."

Ben was silent for a moment. "We have three Rebel battalions to the west of us, and six battalions here in Texas. I'm going to hold the rest in reserve to the north of us. But close enough so they can come busting in if we need them. Order your people to fall back and join those battalions north of us, General. They need the rest."

"They are weary, General," Payon admitted.

"General, I hate formality. What do your friends call you?"

Payon smiled. "You'll hear it sooner or later. My nickname comes from my early days in broadcasting. Mic the Mouth. like in microphone. I used to get quite excited at soccer games."

Ben laughed. "Mike it is."

General Hans Brodermann halted his column just south of the now fiercely burning town of Cotulla and ordered his break-off columns to stop and hold their positions. They were just south of the ambush sites at Freer and Carrizo Springs. Both of those towns were also blazing. Gas fumes in long unused buried tanks were exploding, sending debris flying into the smoky sky.

Brodermann stood up in his armored scout car and looked at the scene through binoculars. "Ruthless man," he murmured. "Ben Raines is going to be a formidable enemy. I like that. He'll give me a good fight." He sat

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down and spoke to an aide. "Be certain we don't outdistance our supply trucks. Have the scouts found a way around this inferno?"

"Yes, sir. But the roads are very bad and we won't make good time."

"We shall take all the time we need, Peter. This is going to be a very long campaign."

The column moved on, its speed reduced to a crawl. Which is what Ned Hawkins and his small team of New Texas Rangers had counted on. There were half a dozen armored scout cars in the column, so they had no way

of knowing which one Brodermann and the senior officers were riding in. Besides, General Raines had told them to concentrate on the supply and support vehicles. A column can't move if it doesn't have fuel.

Ned's team put four rockets into huge, lumbering tankers and the old rutted highway was enveloped in a massive ball of fire. Vehicles near the tankers exploded, both incinerating and blowing body parts in all direction.

Ned and his team jumped into stripped down fast attack vehicles and took off across the country, weaving and zigzagging and presenting no targets at all for the guns of Brodermann's SS troops. The fast attack vehicles were well out of range in under a minute, almost silently speeding across the brush country, the wide fat tires digging into the earth. The exhaust systems of the vehicles were muffled down to near silence.

"No pursuit!" Brodermann was quick to tell his radio-operator. "That's what they want. They'd chop any pursuers to bits. Secure the immediate area and let's check damage." When his men assured him the area was clean-and it was-Brodermann got out of his armored

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scout car and stretched his joints and muscles, looking all about him.

"Get my camp chair and place it over there," he told his driver, pointing to a shady spot. "And establish radio contact with Field Marshal Hoffman."

"On scramble, sir?"

"It doesn't make any difference," Brodermann said. "I suspect that Raines's Rebels have the capability to decode anything we might transmit." He told his senior people to come with him. Out of the fierce Texas sun, Brodermann spoke. "We have to start thinking like Ben Raines," he told the assembled group. "We will not be fighting a conventional war. We shall be fighting a very unconventional war. It will be like no war we ever waged. Oh, we all have experience in guerrilla tactics, but on a much smaller scale. I suspect Raines has probably twelve to fifteen thousand Rebels. He's broken them up into tiny units and sent them all over the nation. Day after day, week after week, he's going to peck at us. And if we let him, he will inflict horrible damage. He's not going to fight us on our terms, so we have no choice but to fight him on his terms."

Brodermann chuckled without humor. "Years ago, we thought we would walk into this nation and seize the cities, thus controlling the countryside. Raines burned the damn cities to rubble. Then we changed our method of operation and decided to concentrate on the Rebel outposts. We managed to destroy a few, but now Raines has disbanded all of them south of the thirty-sixth parallel and sent them scattering in all directions. We know that the Rebels have huge underground supply caches, but only the most senior officials of the Rebels know the locations. It would be amusing to torture a

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Rebel, to see how he or she withstands pain, but nothing constructive could come of it. Those supply caches can keep the Rebels supplied for years. Raines's Base Camp One is off-limits to us. His factories there

are working day and night in the manufacture of munitions and supplies. If we attempt to interfere with any of that, he will unleash his poisons upon us, and we have no antidote for them." Aides brought them all coffee, and they sugared and creamed and stirred and sipped for a moment.

Brodermann said, "Most of those Americans who refused for years to come under the rules of the Rebels now have no choice in the matter. They have to follow Raines. This is one smart bastard, people. He's not only a ruthless warrior, but he is a damned intelligent one."

"Then we must destroy Ben Raines," a colonel said.

"Oh, very good, Wiesenhofer," Brodermann said, sarcasm thick in his words. "That's excellent thinking. You have a plan, I suppose?"

"Ah ... no, sir."

"I thought not. Colonel Wellmann?"

"No, sir."

"Colonel Marke?"

"No, sir."

"You have all read the dossiers compiled on General Raines. He has no family that we are aware of. At least not outside the restricted area. There is no leverage to use against him and the bastard wouldn't yield to any if we had it. Captain Blickle, what was that message you spoke of about an hour ago? Something about motorcycle thugs attacking a patrol of ours?"

"Yes, sir. Yesterday a gang of biker hoodlums, male and female, attacked and wiped out a patrol of ours

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working over in Florida. Two of our people pretended death and heard them talking. The group is heavily armed and commanded by two people: Leadfoot and Wanda."

"Leadfoot?" Brodermann asked, arching one eyebrow.

"Yes, sir. Obviously a code name of some sort. They are all operating under code names. But I don't know why that is. The survivors said others were called Beerbelly, Hoss, Sweetmeat, Sugar, Hognose, and Pisser."

"My word!" Colonel Wellmann said.

"Have our people in intelligence analyze those names," Brodermann ordered. "They have some significance, surely. Pisser?" he muttered, shaking his head. "Well, I have to confer with Field Marshal Hoffman. It would be futile to continue pushing forward with great armies. We'd be all bunched up fighting shadows."

"Then what do we do?" Colonel Wellmann asked.

"Come up with a better plan," Brodermann said simply.

"You bastard!" a man told Ben. Everything the man and woman and the

three children owned was piled into the beds of two old pickup trucks, parked in front of a freshly painted and well-kept house.

"Oh?" Ben said, smiling at the man and not taking offense, for he knew what the man was referring to, and it wasn't Ben's ancestry.

"I hate you and your damn harsh right-wing rule, Raines. But even you're better than those Blackshirts. I think."

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Ben laughed. "Right-wing, huh? It's been awhile since I've heard that phrase. You're way too young to be a part of the old peace and love generation. You weren't even born then, I don't imagine. So what's your problem?"

"You've forced me to pick up a gun and fight, that's what's wrong!"

"Are you telling me that you have lived here since the Great War and never had to take a human life?"

"No. I can't say that. I've defended home and family when it was necessary. But I didn't take some perverted delight in killing."

"And you think I do?"

"Yes."

"Well, to a degree, you're right," Ben admitted. "I enjoyed killing Sam Hartline. I think I did the world a favor by destroying Sister Voleta and Khamsin and Lan Villar and Kenny Parr and Ashley and Matt Callahan and all the rest of those terrorists. I enjoyed wiping out most of the Night People. But what you may not know is this: we have about three thousand or so former criminals in our ranks. I offered them amnesty and they took it. They've turned into top-notch fighting men and women. And at least they are fighting for this country. What are you doing, except running your mouth."

"There are about two hundred or so of us here, General. We've done pretty well so far and we haven't asked you people for a damn thing."

"Yet," Ben said. "And don't think you've done your kids any favors, for they haven't been vaccinated for any of the childhood diseases. I know. For you people don't have the capability to make the vaccine-any of it. We do. Disease is rampant in this nation, mister. But with

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your mentality, if your kids get sick and die-God forbid-you'll probably blame me for it."

The man stared at Ben. There was no hate in his eyes, only disgust. "And you think you would be blameless?"

Ben smiled and leaned up against a fender. Brodermann and his forces were a hundred miles south, and Ben was in the mood for a good argument. Since Thermopolis had moved part of Intell and HQ to a secure position in Arkansas, Ben had not had a good head-butting difference of opinion.

"You mean," Ben said, "you want it like before: free rides for everyone?"

The man, who had told Ben his name was Charles, shook his head and grimaced. "You right-wingers always have an easy explanation, don't you?"

Ben carefully rolled a cigarette before replying. "If you mean that I don't believe in something for nothing, yes."

"I ..." Charles shook his head. "No. No, I'm not going to argue with you, General. You've got us right where you want us, so what is the point?"

"You disappoint me, Charles. I was so looking forward to a spirited debate." Ben sighed. "Well, go on, take your family, and get them across the thirty-sixth parallel. Draw weapons and learn how to point them in the right direction. There'll be medics there to vaccinate your kids and see to any of your needs. Big Brother's back now, Charles. But you don't seem very happy about it."

Charles stared at Ben. "You ... goddamnit, Raines. None of us wanted Big Brother in our lives!"

"Really? Why, Charles, your kind wanted cradle to

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grave protection from all things. You wanted the best law enforcement but you paid many of our cops shit wages and saddled them with so many rules and regulations they couldn't function. Your kind talked out of both sides of your mouths. On one hand, you bawled and squalled and stomped on hankies every time a punk got killed. You bellowed and roared because you couldn't be safe in your homes or on the streets, but then you filed lawsuits about overcrowded prisons and jails until they were being run not by the corrections people but by federal judges. You wanted adequate health care but you slapped doctors with so many lawsuits many of them either had to quit or raise their rates so high it was unaffordable to a great many people. Then you started hollering about a universal health plan and the goddamn ambulance-chasing lawyers and lobbyists and attorneys for the doctor's organizations stalled it in committee for years. You want me to go on, Charles?"

"You're twisting things all out of context, General."

"Am I really, Charles? Am I?"

The man refused to reply. He spun on his heel and stalked away, getting into the lead pickup and driving off, heading for the north. And safety. In the dreaded hands of the Rebels, whom he professed to despise.

"Didn't bite, did he, General??" Jersey asked, standing close to Ben.

Ben cut his eyes and smiled at her. "Wasn't because I didn't try, Jersey."

"Why do they hate our way so much, General?"

"You can't make a fair comparison. None of you. Because you've never known any other way, Jersey. You, Beth, Corrie, and Cooper never knew-or have blocked out-the way it was before the Great War."

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"I remember just a little bit of it, General," Corrie said. "I have this

picture of my parents sitting around the table-I think it was the kitchen table-once a month and wondering how they were going to pay all their bills. Isn't that funny? I can't even remember what they looked like. But I remember that."

"Yes," Beth said. "One of the few things I remember clearly was my mother and father saying often that taxes were killing them. And that something was dreadfully wrong with our government. I don't even know what they did for a living. I don't really know how old I am."

"My granddad used to say this country was going to hell in a hand basket," Cooper said. "Of course, I didn't know what he meant. But I've listened to the older Rebels talk for years. I sure as hell don't want to go back to the way it was before the Great War."

Thoreau's line about leading "lives of quiet desperation" came to Ben's mind. But how to explain that to these young people who had never had the chance to experience that quiet desperation?

And when I am gone, and war is over, what kind of world will these young people build? Or will they still be young when peace reigns? Will they live to see peace?

Ben shook his head and opened his map case. They were a few miles north and west of the ruins of San Antonio, in the hill country not far from the deserted town of Bandera. The group had stopped and set up camp at one of the many old dude ranches in the area. Bandera, Ben had read in an old brochure, had once been called the dude ranch capital of Texas.

Bands of wild horses now roamed the area, descendants of the tame horses that city folks once came to ride and play cowboy with for a week or so. Half-wild

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cattle could be found everywhere, and the Rebels never lacked for fresh meat.

And neither will Brodermann's people, Ben mentally added.

But Ben couldn't see any way to prevent that.

"Scouts report that more and more people are leaving the area and heading north," Corrie broke into his thoughts. "But a lot of them are joining up with John Masters and his people up in the Panhandle. He's got quite a following, General."

"Estimates?"

"Ten thousand."

"That's men, women, and children. How many fighting personnel can he field?"

"About thirty-five hundred."

"That's still too many to have at our backs. Tell Buddy to regroup his Eight Battalion and get ready to strike from the north. I'll pull together my One Battalion and hit them from the south. We've got time. Brodermann is still trying to devise a battle plan. Saddle up. Let's go deal with Mr. Masters and his hate group."

## Chapter Five

John Masters looked the part. And he played it well. He was one of those quasi ignorant, heavy-jowled, pus-gutted, piggy-eyed loudmouths who had an unshakable opinion on everything and was given to thundering Godlike pronouncements through a bullhorn, which his followers hung on breathlessly. To say his followers were just slightly less knowledgeable than John would be like saying fire is hot.

Since the Great War, dozens of groups, large and small, made up of people who blamed everything bad that had befallen them on those who were not the same color, religion, race, or whatever, had sprung up all over the nation. If they did not get in the way of the Rebels, or draw too much attention to themselves, Ben had pretty much left them alone.

Then groups such as Masters's began embracing the puke from the brain and mouth of Jesus Hoffman, who preached the somewhat diluted teachings of Hider.

That was more than Ben Raines could take.

"Raines ain't a gonna do nothin' to us," Masters boasted, when he learned that two groups of Rebels

were approaching his location, one from the north, the other from the south. "They's too many of us. 'Sides, Raines has got his hands full tryin' to deal with the Blackshirts, and they gonna walk all over Ben Raines and then we'll be shut of that nigger-lovin' bastard forever."

It never seemed to occur to people like Masters that armies numbering hundreds of thousands had been trying to 'walk all over Ben Raines' for a decade. Ben was still very much alive and very much in command.

And as far as Ben being a "nigger-lover," Ben didn't place a whole lot of emphasis on the color of a person's skin. It was what was in the individual's heart and brain that mattered to Ben. Ben and his Rebels had fought Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, Asians, and just about any other ethic group one could think of... if they were stupid enough to declare war on the Rebels.

The Rebel Army was made up of men and women of all nationalities, all religions, all races. Ben's critics, and they were many, had accused Ben of taking the cream of the crop and ignoring the rest. That was true in part.

For the most part, the men and women who made up the Rebel Army were a tolerant bunch who used a great deal of common sense in day-to-day dealings with their peers. Anyone could do it; most simply would not. And that included people on both sides of whatever color line was involved. Whatever the color or faith.

So in that respect, Ben did have the cream of the crop.

But even among Rebel ranks, many had to continually work at being tolerant of others. Sometimes tempers flared and violence followed. It

was not often, but it did happen. As Ben had pointed out many times, the men

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and women who made up the Rebels were not perfect ... they just tried very hard to be.

John Masters looked at the communiqué handed him by a runner from his communications center. He wadded it up and tossed the crumpled note to the ground. "Brodermann says for us not to engage the Rebels. He wants us to cut and run. Hell with him!"

"Why, goddamn, General," a follower of Masters said. Masters insisted on being called General, even though he had no prior military training and could not even make it through the first few weeks of Boy Scout training, back when such organizations existed. He was kicked out when he said he wasn't sharin' his tent with no goddamn Jew-boy. "We'll just whup Raines proper and have done with it."

"Damn right!" Masters replied. "Git ever'one to arms and in position around the town."

"How many's comin' at us, General?" Sonny asked.

"Brodermann says two Rebel battalions. That's about fifteen-sixteen hundred Rebels. I figure each battalion's got at least three-four hundred women and niggers and Jews and spies and the like. They can't fight and ever'one knows it. So that means we're prob'ly lookin' at no more'un a thousand people. It won't take us long to deal with this. I just can't figure how come ever'body is so scared of the Rebels."

For years, Masters and his hate group had been isolated in one corner of the panhandle of Texas. They had grown their crops, maintained the oil rigs and refineries in the area, and kept their heads down. They had communications equipment, but had never been able to

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break even one of the Rebel codes. Masters and his people had no knowledge of burst transmissions and no concept of military tactics. Their slogan was Stay White And Pure. SWAP. It was a mystery to Ben how Masters and his SWAP people were going to get along with Hoffman and his mixed bag of fighters. But since few radical racists had the ability to see past the ends of their hoses, that small obstacle had probably never occurred to Masters.

Masters and his fearless fighters grabbed their guns and got behind barricades, ready to defend their wimmin an' child'en against the dark hordes of racial equality, common sense, and justice.

Ben and his son Buddy pulled their battalions up to within a mile of the town and circled it, out of range of anything Masters had in the way of armament.

Behind the barricades, General Masters stood, a green beret on his head-he had taken it away from a little boy years back-and his trusty .30-.30 at hand. "Our moment of glory is here, men!" he shouted. "We'll go down in history as the first to defend our right to live white and free and pure."



Actually about a half a million had gone down under the guns of the Rebels. Six feet down in most cases. Mass graves.

"Stand ready to repel the charge!" Sonny shouted. He remembered that line from his high school lit class.

"Aw, shit, Sonny," Bubba said. "I was gonna say that."

But no charge came.

Ben leaned against the fender of his Hummer and viewed the town through long lenses. Paul Blair, a Cherokee Indian and a graduate of the University of Tennessee

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stood beside Ben. Paul was a company commander in Ben's One Battalion. He had found a chicken feather and stuck it in his cowboy hat.

"Take plenty scalps this day," Paul grunted, a twinkle in his eyes. "Paint face and dance. Then count coup."

Ben looked at him. "What are you going to use for a coup stick, O Great and Noble Red Man, your economics degree or your minor in education?"

Paul grinned and showed Ben a child's rubber tomahawk he had found amid the rubble of an old five and dime. "Will this do?" It was surprisingly realistic.

Ben laughed at the man. "That thing is going to get you in trouble someday, Paul."

"The dossier on John Masters says he hates Indians."

"Masters hates everybody. What else is new?"

"I want to get close to the man, wave this tomahawk, and yell some Cherokee words at him."

"I wasn't aware you knew any Cherokee."

"I know how to say 'good morning' and 'it looks like it might rain.' " He pulled out several tubes of lipstick and knelt down, looking at his reflection in the outside mirror of the Hummer. He began carefully streaking his face with purple and red and orange.

Jersey looked at him and slowly shook her head. "How come One Battalion always gets the people who are full of shit?" she questioned.

Paul cut his eyes. "Look, Little Bit, you're about a quarter-breed Apache, yourself."

"You're right," Jersey said. "Let me use that lipstick when you're through."

"Jesus," Ben muttered. "You people better start taking this seriously. John Masters is a certifiable nut, but his guns are very real."

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"Buddy on the horn, sir," Corrie said.

"Go, Rat," Ben said.

"What's the poop, Pop?"

Ben chuckled. His kids took every opportunity to take as many liberties as possible, knowing that Ben didn't mind and the other Rebels got a kick out of it. "We wait. Intell says there are lots of children in there and I want to keep collateral damage to a minimum."

"That's a big ten-four, Big Daddy. Rat out."

"A whole battalion of jokers," Ben muttered. "Corrie, order snipers up with their .50s. Start picking off SWAP people on sight."

"Yes, sir."

When Ben turned around, he was momentarily startled. Paul Blair had taken off his shirt and had painted his chest with the lipstick.

"Are you going to take off your shirt, too, Jersey?" Cooper asked, standing well away from her.

Jersey told him to go commit an impossible act upon his person.

"Request permission to take some of my people in after dark, sir," Paul said.

"Your people being those of Indian heritage, I'm sure," Ben replied.

"Well ... that's a possibility."

"Permission granted. Now get out of here." He looked at Jersey. "And, no. You're not going."

"The thought never entered my mind, General."

"What the hell are they waitin' on?" a SWAP member asked, wiping his sweaty hands on his britches.

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"They're just standin' out there lookin' at us. All they've done is call for our surrender."

"And General Masters told them what they could do with that, didn't he?" his buddy replied.

"Damn shore did."

That was the last thing he would ever say. A sniper's bullet took him in the center of the face and blew out the entire back of his head. The force of the .50-caliber slug slammed him backward and knocked his body into a staring, horrified, and blood and brain-splattered SWAP member. He dropped his rifle to the street and it went off, the bullet striking a man in the knee and sending him howling to the ground in pain. His rifle clattered to the street but did not discharge.

"Goddamn!" a team leader yelled. "Fire at them Rebs. Far, goddamnit, far!"

"Far, hell!" a SWAP member hollered. "Far at what? I can't see nobody to far at?"

With good reason. The sniper teams, laying a mile to a mile-and-a-quarter out of the city limits, were using ten-power scopes and firing the .50-caliber Haskins M500. A monstrous powder charge blows the 1.5-ounce slug out of the muzzle with five to six times the energy of a 7.62 mm NATO round. Using various types of rounds, the Haskins can deliver slugs that will either pierce four-inch armor or explode on contact, turning the steel body into flesh-shredding shrapnel. The bullet arrives at its target long before the sound of the rifle can be heard, and at that distance, sometimes it is not heard at all.

"Order the sniper teams to use armor-piercing rounds," Ben ordered. "Let's liven up the day for the SWAP members."

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The streets of the town had been barricaded with old junked cars and trucks, rusted out and useless. The .50-caliber armor-piercing rounds blew right through them and tore great gaping holes in the flesh of the defenders crouched behind the rusted hulks, sending the SWAP members hollering and racing for better cover.

"Sir," Beth said to Ben. "Sergeant Hanks requests permission to speak to the General."

"Beth," Ben said. "What is with all this sudden formality? We've never stood much on ... Jesus Christ!" Ben yelled, as he turned and eyeballed something that looked straight out of an African jungle movie.

"Easy, General," Sergeant Hanks said, jerking off his grotesque wooden mask. "It's me, Hanks."

Ben stepped back and looked at the man. He was speechless. The black sergeant from upstate New York was naked except for a loincloth and a whole bunch of chicken feathers he had glued to his body. He held the sun-bleached skull of a cow in one hand and a horribly ugly ceremonial mask in the other. He was smiling at Ben.

Ben found his voice. "Robert ... what in the name of God is going on around here?"

The words had just left his mouth when the sounds of tom-toms reached him. He listened for a moment, looking all around him as the sounds drifted through the early summer air.

Corrie spoke into her headset and said, "Buddy wants to know if you're having a dance over here and why he wasn't invited?"

"Oh, that's Captain Blair, sir," Hanks said. "He's got about a dozen of his Indian buddies with him and they're doing a war dance. I thought I'd dress up like a

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witch doctor-I found this mask in a house down the road-and do some psychological warfare on the folks in the town. They've got nothing in that town that will reach this far."

Ben knew that for a fact. His Scouts had already gone in, scratching themselves and hawking snot on the ground, cussing blacks and Mexicans and Jews and everybody else they could think of. They had looked around, had a meal, and sized up the situation. Small arms only, and that was not unusual.

Years back, Ben and his people had swept the nation clean, seizing and storing weapons of all descriptions. They had left very little for others.

Wild yelling and chanting came over the sounds of the tom-toms.

"Where in the hell did Captain Blair get tom-toms?" Ben asked.

"Oh, those are fifty-five gallon drums, General," Hanks said. "We fooled around with various levels of water in them to get just the right sound. Pretty good, huh?"

"Right," Ben said. "And I suppose you have several more of your buddies of ... color to assist you in this, ah, witch-doctor dancing?"

Hanks grinned.

"Oh, go on," Ben said, doing his best to hide a smile. "While you're at it, see if you can conjure up a plate of fettuccine for me."

"General Masters!" an aide yelled, busting into Masters's house. "They's a whole bunch of damn nigger

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witch doctors a-whoopin' and a-hollerin' on the road. Shakin' skulls at us!"

Masters spilled his coffee all down the front of his shirt. He heaved his fat ass and his pus gut out of the chair and lumbered after the man. Using binoculars, he viewed the scene.

"By God!" he breathed. "Them's real Africans out yonder. They's callin' down some curses on us."

"Do they work?"

"How the hell do I know. Folks say they do. That voodoo's some powerful stuff, boy."

Sergeant Bob Hanks and a few of his buddies had a really nice dance step all worked out. Sergeant Hanks had to threaten to shoot two of his friends before they'd agree to do it. And they was a good thing they all wore old Halloween masks, for they hid their embarrassed grins.

The four men, all nearly naked except for loincloths and chicken feathers, would take three steps forward, hold up cattle skulls in the direction of the town, shout "Ugh!" and back up.

"This is terribly repetitive," one of the men said. "Not to mention embarrassing."

"Just shut up and go 'Ugh!' " Bob told him.

"Boy, that's playin' dirty," John Masters said. "I mean, that's dirty even for Ben Raines."

"I don't feel good," a SWAP member said. "My stomach hurts. I think they done caused me to come down with some terrible disease."

A doctor among the group looked at the men in disgust. "Don't be stupid!" he admonished them. "Just ignore all that ranting and raving. It can't hurt you."

Then the sound of tom-toms reached the defenders of SWAP. Wild Indian yells followed that.

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"What the hell is that?" Masters demanded.

"Injuns!" he was told. "Look through these here field glasses and you can see 'em. All painted up and doin' a war dance."

Cooler and more intelligent heads among the SWAP forces tried to prevail. But it was no use. Ignorant and misinformed to begin with, bitter and hate-filled long before the Great War, now isolated for years, with little emphasis placed on learning, many of the SWAP people began to unravel. Children began crying and that only added to the confusion.

"Shut them goddamn kids up!" Masters hollered. "I cain't hear myself think with all that catterwallin' goin' on. I got to think, y'all. Damn!"

A sniper's bullet slammed through a concrete block and sent stone splinters into Masters' face and neck. He bellowed in fright and pain, hit the ground and flattened out. As much as his pus-gut would allow.

Hanks and his dancers were really getting into the rhythm of it, and getting very innovative. The tom-toms were banging and Blair's Indians were yelling.

Ben was sitting in a camp chair by his Hummer, drinking coffee and thinking this was a hell of a way to fight a war.

Both Buddy and Ben had sent some of their Scouts in close and they were now flitting among the buildings on the edges of the town. In a hour's time, the Scouts had grabbed about sixty young kids and passed them back to their lines, turning them over to the medics.

"The kids are in pretty good shape, physically," a Rebel doctor reported to Ben. "But they're filled with hatred toward anybody not of their color. It'll take a long time to bring them around."

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"I'm not going to try," Ben said, surprising those gathered around him. "Base Camp One is very nearly overwhelmed now. And we've only had limited success in working with the kids of outlaw and hate groups. When this is over, we'll reunite them with their mothers and let them go. It's the best we can do under the circumstances."

He stood up and again looked at the town through binoculars. He scanned the town for a few seconds, then lowered the field glasses and turned to face his team, a hard look in his eyes. "Beth, tell Blair and Hanks to knock it off. They've had their fun, now it's time to get serious. Come,

tell Masters to send out the women and kids. We don't want to hurt them. Get the mortars set up."

The tom-toms ceased their drumming and Hanks and his now nearly exhausted "witch doctors" vanished from the long lenses of the SWAP members.

"What the hell's Ben Raines up to now?" Masters questioned. The cuts on his face from the stone splinters had been dabbed with iodine and he looked like he was suffering from some horrible pox. "Where'd all them niggers and Injuns go to? What the hell's goin' on out yonder? What's all them wimmin back yonder squallin' about?"

" 'Bout sixty-seventy kids is gone," he was informed. "The Rebels done been in the town and snatched 'em. They cut a bunch of throats and they used silenced guns to kill more of our'n, too. Nobody saw nothin'. Bastards move like ghosts, they do."

"Raines is tellin' us to send out the women and kids," a radio operator said. "Says he don't want to see them hurt."

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Masters felt something cold and slimy roll around in his guts. He'd spent years boasting about how he and his people would kick the crap out of the Rebels should they ever show up. Now they were here and Masters had lost about fifty people to sniper bullets, the Rebels had arrogantly slipped into his town and kidnapped dozens of kids, cut throats, and killed his people without being seen, and his SWAP forces had not been able to fire an effective round against the Rebels.

"Send out the women and kids, John," a doctor urged him. "We can then make our stand, if that's what you want to do."

"What do you mean, if?"

"You want to die for nothing?" the doctor questioned.

"What do you mean, nothin'? Our cause ain't nothin'. We got a free white society. We got what we always wanted. This is what we worked for, even before the Great War."

"And when we die, we will have a cold lonely grave," the doctor said. "I don't take much comfort in that. General Raines let some of his troops have a little fun at our expense. That's how confident he is. I'm taking my wife and family and leaving under a white flag. The rest of you can stay here and die. For your cause." He walked away.

Masters leaned against the wall of a building. He hated Ben Raines almost as much as he did niggers. But the idea of dead kids and women didn't appeal to him. "Send out the women and kids," he ordered. "And everybody else that's turned chicken-shit. Me ... I'm stayin'."

"They're showing a white flag," Ben said, looking

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through long lenses. "Corrie, ask Buddy if he's receiving the same signal."

"That's ten-four, General. Women and children and a few men in the bunch."

There were six highways leading into the town. The Rebels had blocked them all. 60 mm mortars had been set up and the crews were standing by, ready to drop the rockets down the tubes.

"Tell those surrendering to get their vehicles and drive out of here," Ben said. "Jesus, we can't handle all those people. Tell them to head down to Interstate 40 and then cut west. I don't ever want to see any of them again. There must be four or five thousand of them. My God, they could overwhelm us by sheer numbers."

"Hell of a way to fight a war," Jersey muttered.

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## Chapter Six

The old cars and trucks smoked and rattled and rolled on, the occupants staring silently through hate-filled eyes at the Rebels as they drove past.

"We'll probably have to fight those kids someday," Buddy radioed to his father.

"I'm certain of that," Ben replied, watching as a boy of about ten gave him the middle finger from the back seat of a car. Ben resisted an impulse to return the bird.

"The children sure have lovely manners, don't they?" Jersey remarked.

"Yes. Remarkably well-behaved," Ben replied drily. "They have certainly been steeped in the social graces."

"What will happen to them, I wonder?" Beth asked.

"Oh, they'll drive until they find some deserted and isolated little town," Ben replied. "Then they'll set up there and once more start teaching and preaching hate against people not of their color or faith or personal opinion or whatever. Years back, those of us with any sense knew that laws and legislation alone could never erase hatred and prejudice and bigotry ... anymore than governments could effectively legislate morality. It

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was going to take education and a hundred percent effort on all sides of the color line."

"But none of us had to go to school to be able to get along with others," Corrie said.

"True," Ben said. "So maybe there is hope for the human race after all. But not for that bunch holed up in the town. Corrie, tell them to surrender. They'll have one chance and one chance only."

Corrie did and listened for the reply. She smiled sadly. "They said for you to go to hell, sir."

"Start dropping in mortars," Ben ordered.

"Here we go," Jersey said.

Mortar teams had ringed the town from about 2,500 yards out, and their crews started dropping in M734 preset rounds of HE. Some exploded on contact with earth. Others detonated near the surface, and still others were used as proximity rounds, killing anything within a predetermined range.

Still other mortar crews dropped in willie peter, and the white phosphorus rounds soon had flames leaping into the dry air and thick smoke billowing up from the burning town.

Those inside the town had the Rebels outnumbered, but anytime a fighting force bunkers themselves in tight with no escape routes, the outcome of the battle is nearly always predictable.

John Masters was only minutes away from learning a hard lesson about the fighting savagery of Ben Raines and the Rebels.

There were those who tried to run from the flames. Snipers cut them down. Confusion was the order of the day as the mortar rounds never stopped coming in. Each mortar crew was throwing six to twelve rounds a minute

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at the town, and it was a constant roar of deadly booming thunder. Old burning buildings were collapsing all around the SWAP defenders and flying rubble was causing as many casualties as anything else. Men were being buried alive under tons of brick and mortar. The Rebels had come with plenty of supply trucks following them, and planes were ready to fly in more rounds if needed.

"We gotta surrender, John!" a weeping man screamed at Masters. "We're all gonna die in here if we don't."

"Hell, no!" Masters shouted. His face and head were dripping blood from minor wounds caused by flying debris, he had lost his beret and his rifle, and was armed only with a .357 revolver, which was about as effective as a club since the Rebels were still a good mile and a quarter away, most of them lounging on the ground, smoking or reading or gossiping or catnapping.

"John, goddamnit, look around you!" his friend shouted. "The damn town is bein' destroyed around us whilst we talk. Can't you see what them Rebs is doin'? They're walkin' mortar rounds in, John, startin' at the outskirts and workin' in. They're pushin' us back to the center of the town. Once they have us all within a two or three block area, they'll just pour it on and kill us down to the last man."

Masters looked at the pistol in his hand and threw it to the rubble-strewn street. "Git on the horn and tell Ben Raines we give up. Go on, do it." When his friend had raced away, Masters turned and looked toward the south. "Goddamn you, Ben Raines. I hate you!"

"You ain't never gonna make me take orders from no nigger, Ben Raines!" Masters declared, standing in front

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of Ben, who was sitting in a camp chair, drinking a cup of coffee. "I ain't never took no orders from a coon and I ain't about to start now.



Not you, not God, not nobody can make me do that."

A Rebel psychiatrist was seated a few feet away, observing and listening to Masters. As for Ben, he hadn't as yet made up his mind exactly what to do with the prisoners, about fifteen hundred of them, but he was working that out in his mind.

"You might as well go on and shoot me now, Raines," Masters stood his ground. " 'Cause there ain't nothin' gonna convince me that niggers is good for anything other than bein' a white man's slave. And what are you doin' with all them goddamn witch doctors, anyways?"

All the Rebels standing around laughed at that.

"Y'all quit laughin' at me!" Masters hollered. "Stop it, now, you hear?"

That just got the Rebels laughing all that much harder and louder.

"What are we going to do with all these people, father?" Buddy asked.

"Put them on trucks, send them to California, put them on a couple of those ships we have out there, and dock them at San Carlos, Baja, Mexico."

"Are you serious?"

"You have a better idea?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"You ain't sendin' me down to live with no damn bunch of lazy-assed, greasy beaners!" Masters hollered.

"On second thought," Buddy said, "I approve of your plan. Wholeheartedly."

"Thank you. I think those warm, friendly, and very

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pleasant people down in the Baja will know exactly what to do with Mister Masters and his ilk."

"I think General Payon is going to get a big laugh out of this," Jersey said.

"I hate Mexican food," a SWAP member said. "Makes me fart."

"We have lost a stronghold in North Texas," Jesus Hoffman was informed. "Raines and his Rebels wiped out John Masters and his group. It is unconfirmed, but reports are he killed them to the last man."

The Rebels had sent out that report.

Field Marshal Hoffman sighed and shook his head. This campaign was not going well at all. "What is General Brodermann's location?"

'Just south of San Antonio. But the Rebels have put the city to the torch. They have destroyed it. General Brodermann reports that there is little left."

"Order him to halt there." Hoffman was thoughtful for a few moments,

staring out the window of his trailer. He wanted North America, but he wanted it whole, not the charred useless remains of it. The U.S. had factories he could reopen; but not if Ben Raines kept putting them to the torch.

Hoffman thought he knew Ben Raines' long-range plans, and they distressed him. Ben Raines was looking far to the future; planning for decades after his own death. The man was not looking for immediate personal creature comforts and glory, he was thinking of his grandchildren and his grandchildren's grandchildren. Ben Raines' plan was to tear it all down and re-

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build from scratch, politically, judicially, and economically.

He must be stopped.

"What Masters said back there, General," Beth asked. "Before we shipped them out. Was any of that true?"

Ben and Buddy's columns were heading south, to take up positions just north of San Antonio. Ben had received word that Hoffman's columns had stopped and were bivouacked just south of San Antonio, about forty miles apart.

"To a degree, yes," Ben replied. "But people like Masters always take things out of context. The government did put in place a number of programs aimed at helping minorities, and some of them were blatantly unfair. Anytime the government forces private industry to hire someone or promote someone based on color instead of ability, that's wrong ... on the one hand. On the other hand, many companies would not have hired or promoted minorities had the government not put those laws in place. It was a Catch 22 situation.

"But Masters was right when he said that too many times minorities cried racism when none existed, or was intended. And he was right when he said that the welfare system was abused. It was. By too many people, of all colors. And he was right, again, to a degree, in saying that the government-when we had a government- pandered to minorities and crapped on the white middle class. Just before the Great War knocked everything down, race relations were at their lowest point in three decades. The much-put-upon middle class had grown weary to the point of armed rebellion by seeing certain

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types of minorities burn and loot and riot every time some decision or event went against their beliefs. And he was right in saying that you didn't see white Americans taking to the streets and looting and burning and acting like crazy people when a black person shot a white person. People like Masters are uncomfortably correct on a lot of points, as far as they choose to take the issue.

"But, Beth, up until the 1960s, many blacks, and other minorities, in certain parts of the country, weren't even allowed to vote. They had to pay taxes, serve in the armed forces, and obey the laws, but they couldn't vote, go to a school of their choice, sit in the front of public transportation, eat in a public restaurant, stay in a white hotel or motel, or walk in certain parts of town. They were beaten, lynched,

tarred and feathered, castrated, raped, falsely imprisoned, kept from holding public office, and forced to suffer all sorts of other indignities. Most received substandard education, using hand-me-down textbooks and were taught in dilapidated, poorly maintained buildings."

Ben looked out the window at the seemingly deserted countryside. "Takes a long time for people to forget. It doesn't excuse lawless behavior or preferential treatment, but I don't blame them for not forgetting."

"But on the other hand ..." Corrie said with a smile, wanting Ben to warm further to the subject.

Ben laughed. "What do you want me to say, Corrie? That we all have a streak of bigotry or racism in us? Well, we all do. Anyone who says they don't is a damn liar. What we have to do-black, white, yellow, red, tan-is work to overcome that. The white people can't be expected to work at one hundred percent in overcoming

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it, and allow the blacks to work at fifty percent. It must be a joint effort, pulling in double harness all the time. But it wasn't, it isn't now, and it never will be. Cultures will always clash. But what we can do-the Rebels-is attempt to teach people to clash gently, not violently. To talk it out instead of duking it out. Or shooting it out. To convince people to stop pointing fingers and saying 'you owe me something for what your ancestors did to mine.' That's (bullshit. What's past is past. Let's bury it, stand side by side, and look toward the future." Ben smiled. "Just please turn down that goddamn boom-box!"

The Rebels headed south, with a lot of laughter coming from Ben's command vehicle.

The battalion commanders met at Ben's CP north of San Antonio. Payon, the Russian, Striganov, Rebet, Danjou, Ned Hawkins of the New Texas Rangers, and O'Shea, of the Free Irish.

They commanded some 6,000 men and women. Against some 21,000 elite SS troops under the command of General Brodermann.

After greeting everyone, coffee was poured and the commanders sat down, while Ben moved to a large wall map of Texas. "Here is the latest from Intell, and it's easy to see what Brodermann has in mind. Green denotes where his main forces are located, ready to thrust north. Highways 83, 35, and 37. Orange denotes his smaller units-trained and experienced guerrilla forces. They are poised on Highways 181, 123, 80, and 183. Well, Brodermann just made his first fatal mistake. He split his forces to meet us at our own game. He fails to

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realize that we've been playing this game for years. He's a comparative newcomer at it. But it won't take him long to learn. He's an experienced commander. Now then, his men are still in bivouac. So we're going to get in place and hit him hard at first light day after tomorrow. Buddy is in place over here, on Highway 90, in hiding and ready to strike from the east the instant we hit from the north. Georgi, I want you and Payon to launch full battalions in what will appear to be a major assault at the westernmost column along Highway 83 at 0535. At the same time, the rest of us will hit the smaller units over here, from the north, while

Buddy's people come at them from the east.

"The instant the attack begins, preset charges will be blown, knocking out the bridges across the Nueces, the Leona, and the Frio, west of Brodermann's CP, which is here, on 35. Bridges will be blown on the San Antonio and the Atasosa. Brodermann's two centrally located columns will be cut off, unable to head straight east or west. They'll have to detour far south and then cut across. By that time, our work will be done and we'll be gone." Ben sighed and then smiled faintly. "Hopefully. If we do this right, we will have eliminated a very elite part of Hoffman's army and demoralized the hell out of the rest of it. There is no point in taking prisoners." That was said very flatly and it left no doubt in any commander's mind. "There will be no circling around or prolonging this affair. We hit them hard, gather up as much equipment as we can in a very short time, and get the hell out of there. If the enemy wants to pursue us, that's going to be their funeral. I don't think they will. But if we're successful, Brodermann just might be so angry

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he'll throw caution to the wind and come chasing us." He smiled. "I hope he does."

Beth and Cooper passed out briefing kits to the commanders and they sat for a time, studying them. Jersey sat in a chair in a far corner of the room, her M-16 across her knees. She was expressionless. Jersey made even hardened commanders nervous.

Striganov finally turned his head and stared at Jersey. "You don't trust us, girl?" he rumbled.

"When it comes to the General's life, I don't trust anybody," Jersey said.

Payon laughed at the expression on the Russian's face. "With a battalion like her, we could win the war in a week, hey, Georgi?"

"Less than that," Georgi replied.

Payon had noticed that Ben's team always positioned themselves at separate locations around any room he was in, offering him the maximum of protection. Outside any building Ben was in, there was always at least one full squad of heavily armed Rebels, and a hundred yards away, ringing them, another squad or two.

"You ready, my friend?" Georgi asked the Mexican.

"Yes. It is going to be payback time for my people."

"You want to lead the assault?"

"I would be honored."

"So it shall be."

The Russian and the Mexican left the room.

Soon the others filed out, until Ben was sitting alone at the scarred old once-lovely dinner table in the huge dining room of the big ranch house. Cooper walked over and refilled Ben's coffee cup. Ben thanked him and rubbed a palm over the wood. "A lot of good times were had around

this table," he said aloud, speaking to

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no one in particular. "Families gathered for anniversaries, birthdays, family reunions, Christmas, Thanksgiving. From the old pictures we found scattered about, several generations have sat around this table. Years of meals were enjoyed here. Families were planned, futures all mapped out, engagement parties held here, wedding gifts were shown here and baby shower presents piled high. Today, I sat here and planned the deaths of hundreds, perhaps thousands of men. And tomorrow, the home will be burned to the ground. Is it the end of one era and the beginning of another, or just the end, period?"

"You always get this way before a campaign, General," Beth said. "Go have a drink or two."

Ben's eyes widened, for Beth was the quiet one. Then he started laughing, for what she had said was true. He quickly sobered when Corrie said, "Dr. Chase is here, General."

"Chase! Hell, he's supposed to be in the neutral zone in Louisiana, setting up hospitals for the wounded."

"He's pulling up right now. He flew into that strip on the Llano and had a driver bring him here."

"Goddamned old goat. Doesn't he realize this whole area is only hours away from being a free fire zone?"

"Oh, shut up, Raines," Dr. Chase said, stomping into the room. "You don't have enough medical people here to handle the job and you know it. You're going to have badly wounded and you know that too. So stop bitching about it and pour me a cup of coffee."

Cooper was terrified of the old doctor. Jersey just sat and stared at him. If she was afraid of anything, no one knew what it was.

"You, girl," Chase said, looking at her. "Stop giving

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me the evil eye. I've known this middle-aged Don Quixote a lot longer than you."

"So what does that make you?" Jersey popped back. "Sancho Panza?"

Lamar Chase blinked and Ben laughed at the expression on his face. "So let's hear your comeback to that, Lamar."

"Impudent child," Chase grumbled, and sat down. He glanced over at Jersey, smiling at him. "You really read Cervantes?"

"Sure."

"I would have thought your tastes would be more in line with Cosmopolitan."

Jersey blinked. "What the hell is that?"

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## Chapter Seven

After chatting for a few minutes, with Lamar bringing Ben up to date on conditions in the neutral zone, he asked, "Where do you want my MASH units, Ben?"

"I've got dust-offs and fully set-up medivac planes spotted around the area north of both battle sites. Put your field hospitals here at Junction and at Caldwell. Landing strips at both places. I've made agreements with Hoffman to honor his field hospitals and he has agreed to honor ours."

"Do you think he will?"

"For awhile. Until the battles start turning sour on him. And they will."

"You are a supremely confident man, Ben. Considering all that we're up against."

"It's been written that the right cause always wins, Lamar."

"Oh, yes. God on our side and all that," the doctor said. "I just hope somebody remembered to tell Him about it."

"Didn't Joan Baez sing a song about God On Our Side, or something like that?"

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"Raines, how the hell would I know? You listened to Joan Baez?"

"Sure. And Bob Dylan and Procol Harum ..."

"Do you have something stuck in your throat?"

"No! That's the name of a group. They did "A Whiter Shade Of Pale." Good tune."

"You listened to Bob Dylan?"

"Sure. I can borrow Cooper's guitar and sing you some of his songs?"

"Oh, God, no! The last time you tried to sing your dog ran away from home, women miscarried, and it rained for a week straight. Spare me your dubious vocalizing."

"Now you've hurt my feelings, Lamar."

"Nobody can hurt your feelings. You're an insensitive oaf." He looked at Ben and shook his head. "Don't pout, Raines. It doesn't become you."

"Can I giggle and simper instead?"

"You're making me nauseous. Do you have anything to drink around here?"

"Water."

"Now you can add lying to your other faults," Chase said. "There hasn't been a time in all the years I've known you that you didn't have a

bottle stashed somewhere."

"Sorry, Lamar. You're out of luck."

"Isn't it about time for your annual visit to the proctologist?" Chase asked sweetly.

"The booze is over there in my knapsack," Ben said quickly, pointing.

"I knew you would never even consider refusing an old man a drink of whiskey," Chase said, chuckling as he walked to the knapsack.

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"You're an evil old man, Lamar," Ben told him. "I'll never deny it. But it sure has been fun on the journey to that point."

Stretching out east to west for almost two hundred and fifty miles, the Rebels quietly got into position. They moved out in tiny units of two and three vehicles, too small for detection. Hoffman had learned not to put helicopters in the air, for the Rebels had the most sophisticated SAMs in the world, and not one chopper Hoffman sent out had ever returned to the pad.

There were still a lot of people in Texas, and in every other state, whose loyalties did not lie with the Rebels, but they had learned that the Rebels, in this fight for survival, dealt very harshly with collaborators. If a turncoat was not shot or hanged on the spot, they were shipped to California, put on board ship, and off they went to some godforsaken island thousands of miles away, and dumped. And Ben Raines had lots of ships and lots of crew for them.

Those who supported neither Raines nor Hoffman were advised in the strongest of terms to keep their mouths shut. Just behave like those three monkeys: hear nothing, see nothing, and do not speak. And after seeing the cold killing grimness in the eyes of the Rebels, those who wished to remain neutral, and not make the retreat north to the thirty-sixth parallel, quickly agreed that it would be best if they saw nothing, heard nothing, and spoke not a word.

On the night preceding the attack, aides came to the trailer of General Hans Brodermann. Brodermann had

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a headache and was in no mood to listen to the gloom and doom reports.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he snapped at his people. "The Rebels are not going to attack us. We're too strong and they are too weak. Raines made a mistake in breaking up his battalions into small guerrilla units. He rendered himself nearly impotent. He'll realize that mistake in time, but by then it will be too late. We will hold our positions until long range artillery can join us. Then we shall begin the forward march, clearing out great swatches of territory as we advance. Now return to your commands and get a good night's sleep. We have forward observation posts on alert, and they are manned by the best people we have. Raines and his little mosquito bands will not trouble us here."

Brodermann was correct to a degree. He did have forward observation posts, and they were manned by some very good people. But not as good as

the Apache, Pina, Navaho, and Zuni Indians who made up Ben's Special Operations Teams. While Ben and his Rebels had been overseas, those units had been training Stateside in preparation for this. Brodermann's SS units were about to discover what the U.S. Army had learned more than a century past: never underestimate the fighting skills and the stealth of the warriors who made up the Southwest Indian tribes. The SP teams had learned that the SS forward observations teams, with predictable Germanic precision, reported in at 00 hours and again at 0030 hours. On the dot. To the timed second. Which was why Ben had timed the assault to begin at 0535. For at 0531, the forward observation people would be dead in their bunkers. Brodermann would learn to

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never underestimate the savage and unorthodox fighting techniques of Ben Raines.

The fast attack vehicles of the Rebels had driven to within a couple of miles of the forward observation posts and then cut their muffled down engines and waited. Strict noise discipline was being observed. No one moved, no one talked, no one lit up smokes. At 0525 radio operators turned up the volume and began listening more intently to their earphones for the clicks that would tell them the outposts were cleared of all hostile living things. Except for perhaps a stray scorpion or a rattlesnake.

The sky was just beginning to tint a faint silver in the east when Come said, "There it is, General. Two clicks. Repeated. We're clear."

Ben looked at luminous dial of his watch. 0533. "Two minutes to go. Start engines."

Brodermann was beginning to stir under his blankets. He opened his eyes and stretched, reluctant to leave the warmth, for the night had turned unusually cool.

In about sixty seconds it would, quite unexpectedly, warm considerably.

"One minute," Ben said.

Cooper slipped the Hummer into gear. The bolts of mounted .50-caliber machine guns were pulled back. Big Thumpers were armed. Mounted 7.62 M-60s were readied. Grenades were taken from battle harnesses. People swallowed to relieve the mouth-dryness of tension.

"Go!" Ben said.

Corrie relayed the orders as the FAVs lunged forward, big fat tires digging at the ground. Cooper floor-boarded the HumVee as Beth stood up and worked her way into

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the harness behind the roof-mounted M-60. She was bullet-proofed from her head down to her hips. The material wouldn't stop a .50-caliber slug, but it would stop anything up to that.

The FAVs sped past the silent forward observation posts and silently screamed toward the still-sleeping camp of the elite SS troops south of Interstate 10 and east of Interstate 30. Ben and his battalion were



taking the heaviest unit of SS troops, on Highway 181, next to the San Antonio River and the closest unit to Brodermann's location. Rebet was tackling the SS troops located on 123, east of Cibolo Creek. Danjou and Ned were attacking the SS forces bivouacked on Highway 80, and Buddy was roaring in from the east, hitting those along the Guadalupe River and Highway 111-183.

All units struck within seconds of each other. Striganov and Payon had slipped in and set up old 81-mm mortars and gave Brodermann's camp a full 90 seconds barrage of HE and willie peter as they were storming in.

Hans Brodermann heard the fluttering of mortar rounds and was out of bed and jumping into his trousers and boots just as the first round hit.

"Mein Gott!" he muttered. "It can't be. Raines wouldn't dare!"

But then he had no more time to think as a round exploded very near his quarters and tipped the trailer over. Brodermann went rolling and sliding ass over elbows on the tiled floor and banged his head on the base of the commode, knocking himself goofy for a few minutes.

Outside, the scene was chaos, highlighted by tanker

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trucks being ignited, vehicles burning, and the area filled with racing Fast Attack Vehicles and pickup trucks and Hummers, the vehicles scooting around, the machine gunners pouring out heavy fire at anything that moved. Big Thumpers were knocking out grenades and spreading death and confusion all over the place.

The central command of Hans Brodermann was in total chaos. Commanders were trying to rally their troops amid the clattering of machine guns and the roaring of 40 mm grenades. No one could believe it was happening. Something like this was simply not done to the elite troops of the SS.

But it was being done. And being done devastatingly well. Along and south of a two hundred and fifty mile stretch of highway, the Rebels were kicking the shit out of the troops of Field Marshal Jesus Hoffman and enjoying the hell out of it.

The Rebel vehicles made one long pass through the camps and when they pulled out, they left behind them a scene of burning, ruined confusion, the camps littered with dead, dying, and badly wounded.

Ben and his teams hit the SS camp and caught the elite troops of Brodermann with their pants down ... many literally so, with their bare butts hanging over the edge of the latrines.

It was a dangerous but highly successful move on the part of the Rebels, but also one that in all probability they could never pull again. After this attack, Brodermann would reassess his security and tighten it down.

But that wouldn't help him a bit on this bloody gray Texas morning.

Buddy and his battalion slammed into the SS camp

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from the east and caught Hoffman's finest completely by surprise. It was a rout. Many of the SS troops weaponless, caught walking to or from the latrines, to or from the mess tents, or just getting out of bed. Some were naked except for a towel around their waist, ready to walk to the portable showers.

At every location, the Rebels roared up and down between the lines of neatly pitched tents and chopped those SS troops still in their sleeping bags or blankets to bloody rags with automatic weapons' fire. Many of the drivers of the heavier Hummers just took dead aim at the arrow-straight rows of tents and drove right over them, crushing and maiming those unlucky ones still inside.

Hans Brodermann struggled to his feet and fought to claw his way out of the overturned trailer, which he knew could turn into a death trap at any second. He crawled out of the front door, now facing toward the sky, and tumbled to the cool earth, landing heavily on his belly and momentarily knocking the wind out of himself. Cursing, he fought his way to his feet and stood for a moment, shocked and stunned by the sight in front of him.

The early morning grayness was torn by sounds of the deadly surprise attack. Fires were burning out of control and the dead and wounded were sprawled anywhere and everywhere he looked. It was chaos on a scale that he had never before witnessed. His people simply could not get a handle on it; they could not get organized enough to mount even a small counterattack.

Brodermann hit the ground as a FAV came roaring past. The machine gun on the open roof, mounted on the roll-bar, opened up in his direction and the lead

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howled over his head, tearing great holes in the floor of his trailer. He could do little else but curse Ben Raines. And that he did, with great feeling.

Danjou and Ned ripped through the SS camp at high speed, Rangers in the back of the fortified pickup trucks throwing grenades, manning heavy machine guns, and using Big Thumpers to hurl out their deadly charges.

As Striganov and Payon were completing their final swing of Brodermann's main camp, they gave the orders for the 81 mm mortars to resume their shelling of the camp, using HE and willie peter. Brodermann and his SS troops could do nothing except keep their heads down and try to survive this bloody, terrible, and totally demoralizing Texas morning.

In every Rebel battalion, Ben had issued orders to certain teams to do nothing except concentrate on crippling or destroying Brodermann's vehicles. When the assaults finally ended-the attacks lasting no more than three or four minutes maximum-the Rebels left behind them a scene that was enough to make even the most seasoned combat veteran weep.

Flames were leaping upward, the smell of burning rubber offensively harsh in the cool air. The smoke from the many fires was thick, hanging close to the cool earth, and nearly blinding. The screaming of the wounded was awful. Many of those caught in their tents had crushed limbs from the Rebel vehicles running over them. Stores of ammunition were cracking and popping and for any of the SS troops to move was a danger

from the exploding rounds of their own stockpiles.

The Rebels had killed or wounded nearly fifty percent of Brodermann's SS troops. They took no prisoners. They showed no mercy. The Rebels were ruthless and

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savage and to the survivors of the early morning attack, it told them what they had to look forward to in fighting Ben Raines and his people. Most did not relish the thought.

An aide came running up to Brodermann as he was slowly getting to his feet. Brodermann was badly shaken. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. It was ... unthinkable. Gnats like the Rebels were supposed to be merely irritating, certainly not deadly and dangerous.

"Do we mount a counterattack, General?" he yelled to be heard over the roaring of the fires and the cracking and popping of small arms ammunition.

Hans Brodermann stared at the wild-eyed man with blood from a slight head-wound trickling down one side of his face. "No," Brodermann, finally found his voice. He coughed to clear his throat of the nearly choking smoke that swirled all around the camp. "Raines would love that. You may be sure he has planted ambush teams all along the roadways, hoping for us to pursue. Are we in contact with the other battalions?"

"All units seem to have been attacked. The Rebels struck at every location. We have reports that bridges were blown all around us."

"Send out small patrols to assess the damage. Check the forward posts. I have a hunch you will find only dead men."

"Yes, sir. I will send men over to right your trailer and start repairs."

Brodermann turned and looked at his bullet-pocked quarters, lying on its side like some dead prehistoric beast. "Leave the son of a bitch where it is," he said bitterly. "You can bet Ben Raines does not have such luxury with him. We can no longer count on fighting a

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conventional war, Willie. When all damages have been tallied, report to me. Then I must report to Field Marshal Hoffman. It is a bitter day, Willie. A bitter day." Hundreds of yards away from Hans Brodermann, two senior SS sergeants looked at one another. One said, "I think we made a mistake in coming to North America. A very fatal mistake."

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## Chapter Eight

The Rebels lost five people, with a dozen wounded, two of them seriously. Miles north of the burning camps of Brodermann's troops, they quietly buried their dead in secluded places and conducted simple ceremonies.

Then they mounted up and pulled out, heading for a central rendezvous point.

"Spread out," Ben told his people. "From the Devils River in the west to

the San Jacinto in the east. Hit whatever you think you can successfully tackle. I want these goose-stepping bastards held below the twenty-eighth parallel for as long as possible. The longer we can contain them down here, the stronger our people get above the thirty-sixth." The Rebel commanders shook hands all the way around and took off.

Ben and his teams moved to just outside Kerrville, secured their vehicles in several of the many buildings in the old religious encampment, and settled in, monitoring the still-frantic radio transmissions from the Black-shirts.

Even Ben was stunned to learn that the attacks had killed or wounded nearly half of Brodermann's forces.

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His eyes touched the eyes of his team and several other Rebels attached to him. The eyes were smiling, hard warrior smiles.

It was then that Ben realized the Rebel movement would never die, never be defeated. As long as there was one Rebel left alive, the movement would live. The Rebels did not consider their way to be perfect. They were not striving for perfection. The past system of justice and law and order and all that went with the forming of a society had deteriorated to a confusing and non-workable mess when the Great War came and wiped the slate clean. Then the Rebels spent years cleaning out the scum and the dregs of society, the human predators. They knew their system of government worked; they had seen it work for nearly a decade. Not for everybody, for a system of laws and rules cannot be devised that will please everyone. But enough people agreed with the Rebel way to try to live under it, with more coming in everyday.

It would not die. The Rebels would not, could not, let it die.

And Ben knew they wouldn't let that happen.

"Company coming," a guard called out. "Forward people are bringing them in."

Ben stepped out to meet the people, and pegged them at once. Religious fanatics. He'd never met a religious fanatic yet who didn't share, to some degree, the same look of arrogant smugness, of a closed mind to all opinions save what they personally embraced, and they all irritated the hell out of Ben.

"General Raines," the Rebel said, "these people are from something called the Church of the Only Holy Way."

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"Wonderful," Ben muttered. "I guess that means if you don't belong to their faith you will be denied entrance to Heaven."

"Exactly, sir," one of the younger men in the group said.

"Horseshit," Ben told him.

The young man blinked. "I beg to remind you there are ladies present, sir."

"If you say so." Ben looked at the dozen or so men and women, most of

them in their late twenties or early thirties. They all looked healthy and well-fed. And Ben didn't like or trust any of them. "What do you people want?"

"Protection from the advancing hordes of mongrels."

"Where are your weapons?"

"We don't believe in violence, sir."

"Then turn right around and carry your butts on out of here," Ben replied. "I'm not your nanny."

"General," a rather pretty woman said.

"I'm not going to argue the point with you, lady. If you don't place enough value on your life to fight for it, then I have no use for you. Now is there anything else you want?"

"I was told you were a cruel man, General Raines," a beady-eyed young man said, waving a Bible at Ben. "But until now, I did not realize just how cruel."

Ben stared at the young man. It has been noted by everyone who ever got personally close to Ben that when he stared at you, his eyes could take on the predatory stare of an eagle just before it sank its talons into prey. The young man suddenly got a case of the twitchy-itches.

"I may be cruel, sonny-boy. That's not for me to decide."

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But what I really am is a realist. And you are beginning to get on my nerves. Now it would be a very wise thing for you and your little group of religious bigots to get in your jalopies or on your bicycles and drive or pedal the hell north. Up to the thirty-sixth parallel. That is roughly a line stretching east to west, right across the center of the nation. It goes through some fascinating places. Roanoke, Louisville, St. Louis, Colorado Springs. Of course, few of those cities are standing now, but I'm sure you could find some converts among the rubble. I'm equally certain they would rape your women, butt-fuck you men, and then turn you into slaves, swap you off for a good horse, or have you for dinner. And if you're so stupid you won't pick up a weapon to save your own lives, then I want nothing to do with you. Now get the hell out of here."

"May God strike you dead, Ben Raines!" a woman shouted.

Ben laughed at her. "Now that is interesting, lady. First you tell me you don't believe in violence, now you're imploring God to strike me dead. You're not very consistent, are you?"

She stood and glared at him.

Ben said, "Get them out of here and on their way north. Somebody up there will look after them."

"Suppose they won't go?" the Rebel asked.

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Then that makes it their problem, doesn't it?"

"You'll burn in the hell-fires for this, Ben Raines," the beady-eyed young man shouted, waving his Bible "God is on our side."

"I do believe I've heard that one before," Jersey muttered.

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Ben smiled and waved at the group and stepped back inside the building. Some of the religious fanatics tried to follow him. Jersey stopped that movement by applying the butt of her M-16 to the belly of the beady-eyed follower of the Church of the Only Holy Way. He folded up like a piece of paper and hit the ground, coughing and gagging.

"You'll suffer mightily for that, sister!" a woman shouted. "For you have struck a messenger from God."

Jersey narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to give the woman a personal message. A very personal message. Cooper could attest to the fact that when Jersey decided to verbally unload on a person, it was like firecrackers exploding around one's head.

"Let it alone, Jersey," Ben said from the open doorway. "It just isn't worth it. Believe me, I know from experience."

When Jersey gave the beady-eyed messenger the butt of her rifle, the area around the front of the house suddenly filled with armed Rebels. The group who had confronted Ben very quickly got the message: their lives were on the line, and they were toeing that line awfully close.

"Peace, brothers and sisters," one of the group said. "Allow us to leave and we shall depart quietly."

"Haul your butts, then," Cooper said.

The group got their messenger up on his feet and led him away. He was a little pale and a tad shaky.

Ben was studying a map when his team joined him in the large office of the old complex. A seasoned Rebel medic, but a newcomer to Ben's personal detachment, said, "You don't like those kinds of people very much, do you, General."

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Ben looked up and smiled at the Rebel. A medic that Doctor Chase had transferred to Ben's command. "Book-burners," he said. "Self-appointed censors hiding behind their own narrow interpretation of the Bible. In their own way, they are no better than the worst racist group we have ever encountered. We demand a lot from our own people, but there is no one religion among our ranks. I don't care if you worship a kumquat. Just don't try to force me to do it. I've disliked those kinds of people ever since I was old enough to reason. They're bullies and cowards waving a Bible. I don't give a damn what happens to them." He put his reading glasses back on and resumed his studying of the map. The subject was closed.

Field Marshal Jesus Hoffman sat in his quarters and looked at the wall. The report transmitted from General Hans Brodermann and typed up by his staff lay on his desk. The most elite and combat-experienced of all his

troops had been overrun and their numbers cut in half by a Rebel sneak attack during the predawn hours. Tons of equipment lost. Vehicles destroyed. Hundreds of weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition gone, much of it taken by the marauding Rebels. His people were badly demoralized. The advance had been brought to an abrupt halt.

What manner of men and women were these Rebels?

He called out at the knock on his door, and the office filled with his most experienced commanders, from Captain to General. They sat at his gesture and waited in silence.

Hoffman stood up and looked at the group. Finally he

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said, "We have marched thousands of miles. We have faced and overcome savage Indian tribes and armies whose numbers were ten times greater than those of the Rebels. Now we have scarcely advanced one hundred and fifty miles into North America and our losses number into the thousands. And they have been inflicted upon us by a band of men and women whose numbers don't even equal one of our divisions.

"To the west of us, a mere three battalions of Rebels have effectively halted our advance into California, Arizona, and New Mexico. A very magnificent advance of ten to fifteen miles, I might add. The entire way drenched with blood. Our blood-not theirs. Disgraceful. To date, a rag tag band of North American malcontents, led by a middle-aged man, have managed to bring down the government of the United States, wipe out most of the bands of outlaws and mercenaries, kill off the world's best known and respected terrorists, defeat and destroy the armies of Khamsin, Lan Villar, and others, then sail halfway around the world and defeat Jack Hunt and his armies in Ireland, move to England and destroy the gangs there, free Hawaii, and now they have stopped us dead in our tracks. How?"

His commanders remained silent. They no more had the answer to that than did Field Marshal Hoffman.

Hoffman did not let up. "And to further worsen the situation, Ben Raines has not defeated us with mighty salvos of artillery and huge tank battles. His people are attacking in small numbers in pickup trucks and light vehicles. And on at least two occasions my armies have been stopped and humiliated by a bunch of goddamn Texas cowboys on horseback! We are the finest equipped army on the face of the earth"-Wrong! He just thought

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that. Ben's Rebels had equipment that Hoffman and his people did not even know existed-"and our people are being defeated by mounted Texas Rangers. On horseback, for God's sake! Charging us with six-shooters blazing!"

"Ah, actually, Field Marshal," a general dared contradict, "most of those Rangers were using 9-mm semiautomatic pistols and H&Ks or Uzis."

"They were still riding goddamn horses, weren't they?" Hoffman flared, sitting down behind his desk.

"Ah ... yes, sir. Twice, that we know of."

"What do you mean: 'that we know of?' "

"They don't take prisoners, sir. And they seldom leave survivors."

"Well, don't just sit there with your long faces hanging out. You are among the finest minds I have. Give me some suggestions and solutions."

A young major stood up. "Sir. What Ben Raines wants us to do is break up our forces and fight him guerrilla style. I feel that would be a grave mistake."

"State your objections to that," Hoffman ordered.

"General Raines and all his commanders know the country. They know it from coast to coast, border to border. They have supplies hidden in hundreds, perhaps thousands of secret caches. They have millions and millions of gallons of fuel hidden. Probably billions of rounds of ammunition and explosives. Several years ago our intelligence people reported that Raines' doctors and scientists have antibiotics-in powder form, sealed in air-tight containers-which will last for years. All they have to do is set up a portable lab, add water, or a few chemicals, and go from there. General Raines planned for this invasion, all the while hoping it would never come, but he was certainly going to be ready for it if it did occur. Our

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supplies are right now days behind us, struggling to reach us. And that's if we don't move from this location. I realize I am the youngest and least experienced man here, Field Marshal. But you asked for suggestions. I am afraid I do not have any solutions."

"Thank you for speaking your mind, Major." Hoffman knew the young major was brilliant, and felt that he had not spoken everything on his mind. He smiled at the major. "What would you do if you were sitting in this chair instead of me?"

"I honestly do not know, sir. And I admit that I have thought of what I might do. I could reach no conclusion."

Hoffman stared at the young major for a moment, then nodded his head. "Thank you, Major Weber. I appreciate your candor."

Weber sat down. He knew he had not won any points with the older commanders present, but he had won some points with the Field Marshal, and that was all that mattered.

Hoffman drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment. "General Brodermann learned a hard lesson about the Rebels. But what happened was not entirely his fault. We had to learn how the enemy would fight, and now we know. With savage ruthlessness. Giving no quarter, asking none. And that's the way we must fight them. We will hold here until our supplies reach us. A week; no more than that. Brodermann has asked that he be allowed to maintain his point position. I have said yes. General Schiller, start our terrorist groups marching at once. Spread them all over the nation. They know what they must do, and being terrorists, they do it extremely well."

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"Yes, Field Marshal. At once."

"General Jahn, are your fallschirmtruppen ready?"

"Ya, Field Marshal. My paratroops are ready to go at your signal."

"Colonel Barlach, are you ready to receive prisoners for interrogation?"

"Yes, sir."

Hoffman smiled. "General Daimler?"

"Sir?"

"Do be so kind as to bring Colonel Barlach some prisoners. You know how testy he can be when he is not inflicting pain on someone."

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## Chapter Nine

"General Payon's eyes and ears in Mexico say that Hoffman's supply trucks will reach him in less than a week. Planes are already landing at the strip near his CP," Corrie said.

"I wish I knew what he was up to," Ben mused. "Beth, did our people get anything of value from those prisoners we picked up and shipped over to Cecil?"

"Nothing, sir. They just don't know anything of value. Obviously, Hoffman and his top people play it pretty close to the vest."

"And reports of random acts of terrorism are still coming in?"

"Yes, sir," Corrie said. "Savage, brutal, and totally senseless acts."

"He's cut his radical fringe loose," Ben said.

"All those messages we received for years were true," Beth said. "The hate for America never died."

"So it seems," Ben said softly. "Those fruitcake groups still hate America and Americans as much, or more, as before. I didn't understand it then, and I still don't." He smiled at his team. "Don't look so startled,

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people. There are a lot of things that I didn't and don't understand. Probably never will. Where was the latest attack, Corrie?"

"About a hundred miles northeast of here. A Rebel patrol found what was left of the elderly couples. Four couples. Patrols had tried to evac them but they said they'd lived in that area all their lives and weren't about to move now. They were all tortured to death."

"Let's take a ride," Ben said.

The four couples, all in their late seventies or early eighties, had lived in a large rambling one story home. They had worked a large

garden, had chickens and hogs, and kept the place neat and had obviously been living a quiet and contented life. Ben stood in the large living room and looked at the words written in blood on the walls.

"Mideast fanaticism shit," he said, disgust in his voice. "Praise Allah and all that crap. Die in battle and go straight to paradise. Real brave bunch, this group is. Killing a small band of nearly helpless elderly men and women really strikes a blow for their cause. Providing they even know what that cause is, which I doubt."

His team remained silent, for they knew that the harming of helpless children and elderly or innocent animals could push Ben's danger meter over into the red. Cooper, watching Ben's face, had him a hunch that when they caught up with this bunch-and they would, he had no doubts about that-the outcome for this terrorist group would be about as pleasant as a crucifixion.

"Buddy's here," Jersey said, looking out a blood-splattered window. "He's got a prisoner."

Ben stepped outside to face the dark eyed, olive-

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skinned man with his hands tied behind his back. Father looked at son. "Where'd you find this piece of shit?"

The prisoner hissed and spat at Ben, the spittle staining Ben's shirt.

"About fifteen miles from here. We think he got separated from the main group. The only thing he will say is how much he hates America and Americans."

"Jew-lover!" the man spat out the words, his hard bright eyes staring at Ben.

"And that," Buddy added. "He has a terrible complex when it comes to Judaism."

"Torture me!" the man shouted. "I will tell you nothing. I will soar on the wings of pain to Paradise."

"Oh, you're going to soar, all right," Ben told the man. "But not on the wings of pain." Ben looked at the man and woman from the Reads' intelligence section. "He's all yours."

The two-person team picked up their briefcases of chemicals and walked toward a small shed. "Come on, Ali," the woman said without looking back. "You're going to sail as high as an eagle can fly."

"I will tell you nothing!" the man shouted.

"Wanna bet?" Ben asked, his smile as hard as flint.

"I think we might have overdone it," the woman said. "We turned him into a babbling idiot."

"I'm very nearly overcome with grief," Ben said, pouring a cup of coffee from the pot on the grate over the small fire in the yard. "I might start flailing myself with ropes and chains at any moment. What'd you

learn?"

"His team is working close," the man said, as the

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woman poured herself a cup of coffee. "Hoffman sent out several hundred teams to terrorize and demoralize the citizens, all over the United States. Every damn lunatic group that ever existed has linked up with Hoffman. And since you used to work for the CIA, you're a main target, General."

"What else is new?" Ben muttered. "Back when the world was more or less functioning I used to get a half dozen death threats a year ... at least."

"Didn't the Agency protect you?" the woman asked, looking up from the fire.

"You have to be joking!" Ben said with a smile. "Someone filed some lousy reports on me. They shoved me out in the cold and left me dangling. Said I'd been a bad boy. I told them if I hadn't of been a bad boy, I wouldn't have spent years in Operations. They failed to see the humor in that." He laughed. "It could have been worse. They could have kept me on and assigned me to the Mideast desk."

"What do you want us to do with the sheik of Araby in there?"

"Drag him outside, pump him with enough joy-juice to float him to paradise and leave him for the buzzards."

"And then?" Buddy asked.

"We go terrorize some terrorists. They won't be hard to find. We'll just follow the trail of blood and bodies they leave behind. That's all the hell they've ever known how to do. And they do it well."

Ben split his teams and told them to work every road. Visit every house in every hamlet. Get any people left started north across the parallel-if they chose to go- and kill terrorists. Continue burning anything that

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would torch. Leave nothing behind for Hoffman's Blackshirts.

Ben's team drew first blood. A forward FAV, ranging miles ahead, radioed back that they had spotted what appeared to be very furtive movement in a tiny hamlet that had been reported totally void of life only a few days back.

"Hold it there," Ben said. "Don't give away your position. We're on the way."

It was dry rolling hills country. Ben and team parked, hiding their vehicles carefully and walked to the Scouts' position on a rise that overlooked the dusty little hamlet.

"We've counted eighteen so far," the Scout leader said. "We think there's maybe double that. It appears to be a meeting of some sort. Two groups have joined the ones already here. They work in six person teams."

"All right," Ben said. "We'll wait and see if more join them. We'll send as many as possible of these cowardly bastards to hell. Spread out. Work low and slow."

"General," Corrie said. "Buddy is in a firefight with some sort of hostile group about thirty miles west of here. He says they'll be able to contain the situation, but won't be able to lend us a hand for several hours, at least."

"I don't recall asking for his help. My God, but he's getting to be as worrisome as Ike. Tell him to mind his own business."

Come turned her head and bumped Buddy. But she softened Ben's reply, as Ben knew she would.

The Rebels crept into position and waited. The terrorists below them were fruitcakes and screwballs, but they were also professionals who, judging by their movements, had received extensive amounts of training in

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their deadly art. The Rebels soon pinpointed the location of the guards and as the day wore on, knew to the minute when they would be changed. Four more six-person teams drifted in, all coming in from the north and the east. That made at least forty two terrorists in the small village and possibly as many as sixty, or more.

Ben smiled at the number. He had twenty-four people with him, having eluded the others that Ike had saddled him with. It should be a real interesting fight.

"We have to assume there are no civilians down there," Ben said. "And if there are, they're there willingly. We have heard no screams of pain or shouts of protest." He looked at his watch. Two hours had passed since the last team had checked in. "Those people made one big mistake, gang. There is but one road leading in and out of that village. And we have it covered. Tell the mortar crews to start shelling, Come."

The town must have been where the terrorists were storing supplies. Perhaps they had returned there to re-supply. The Rebels would never know. The third mortar round landed in the center of an old service station garage and when it blew it took nearly all of that side of the block with it. Bodies and body parts were flung in all directions and the blast was so heavy the concussion from it flattened two frame structures located directly across from the garage, on the other side of the street.

Wounded and dazed and confused terrorists staggered out of the remaining buildings and the Rebels shot them down where they stood. The memory of those tortured and butchered elderly people was vividly fresh in their minds.

Ben and his people left their positions and walked down to the tiny town, now devastated, the streets slick

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with blood spots. Ben stood over a woman with more than a tad of Oriental blood in her ... and all around her. Ben guessed her age at about thirty five. It was hard to tell. Her eyes shone hate up at him.

She spat at him, the bloody spittle landing near Ben's lace-up work boots.

"What nitwit group did you belong to?" Ben asked her.

She cursed him in very fluent English.

Ben picked up her Uzi, handed it to a Rebel, and walked away, leaving her to die with a curse on her lips and hate for America in her heart. "Be sure and strip the ammo belt from her," Ben called over his shoulder.

"Sure is a mixed bag," Jersey remarked, walking beside Ben. "Oriental, Black, Hispanic, and Arabic." She looked around at the dead and dying and the ripped and shattered bodies. "They must have had a ton of explosives in that garage."

Ben squatted down and rolled a cigarette. He watched as his two medics went from terrorist to terrorist, checking them. He offered them no pain killers, no medicines, no patch jobs. They had dedicated their lives to inflicting pain on innocents; they could die the same way.

There was an occasional shot as some of the less seriously wounded terrorists tried to make a fight of it. It was not much of a fight.

"Buddy just a mile out of town," Come said.

Ben ground the butt of his cigarette out under his heel. He didn't feel like putting up with another antismoking lecture from his son.

"Father, where is the rest of your detachment?" Buddy asked, walking up. He sniffed the air

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suspiciously and looked accusingly at his dad. But he sensed Ben was in no mood for a lecture and left it at that.

"I sent them to another suspected terrorist site. It's rather difficult to move about unobtrusively with a goddamn platoon following me."

Buddy looked around him at the devastation. "What did you drop on this town, a mini atomic bomb?"

"Three mortar rounds, kid. The third round landed in a storage area filled with some sort of explosives and drums of gasoline. It was a rather large boom."

"So I see. That group we came in contact with mistakenly thought we were part of Hoffman's army. They did not like our surrender terms."

"And?"

"Well, after negotiations failed, we eventually stacked die bodies in several buildings and set them on fire. It was a dreadful smell."

"Before or during the burning?"

"Both."

The Rebels talked casually of the deaths of their enemies. Most would work feverishly to save the life of a hurt dog or cat. They would weep

over the body of a fallen buddy. They would risk their lives a hundred and one times a day to save any innocent person. But their unofficial motto was an eye for an eye plus the head of an enemy. A Rebel would crawl through his own blood, holding his guts inside his shattered stomach with one hand, just to kill an enemy. Ben had told them once that was the unofficial motto of the old Israeli Mossad, and it fit the Rebels rather well. Which was why they had never been defeated and never would be defeated. They would lose battles, but not the war.

One final shot was heard at the far end of the mangled

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street. A Rebel walked over to investigate. "Another terrorist, General," he called. "She shot herself in the head rather than surrender to us."

"Gather up everything we can use and load it in the trucks Buddy has tagging along with him."

"Thank you very much, father," Buddy said sourly.

"You're quite welcome, son. What are you doing with those deuce and a halves, looting the countryside?"

Buddy walked off, muttering to himself.

Ben was not nearly as charitable as his son. He ordered the bodies left where they were. "Let the buzzards have them," he told his people. "Mount up. We've got to hunt a hole and stay down for a time."

"Twenty eight teams have failed to check in," Field Marshal Hoffman was informed the next morning. "Including most of the Syrian teams."

"How overdue are they?" Hoffman asked, as his stomach abruptly turned sour. He belched and patted his lips; with a napkin. He looked down at his breakfast and suddenly lost his appetite.

"A full twenty-four hours."

Hoffman sighed and pushed back from the table. "They're lost, then. Goddamn that Ben Raines. Goddamn him, you hear?"

The Blackshirt heard, as did anyone else within a hundred yards of the lavishly appointed trailer, for Jesus Hoffman was shouting.

The word quickly spread and the commanders of the thousands of troops gathered in the huge miles-long encampment rushed to the trailer, to stand outside and listen to the Field Marshal rant and rave.

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"No more!" Hoffman shouted. "No goddamn more! I will not tolerate it."

The news of the Field Marshal's tantrum quickly spread and the entire encampment soon grew eerily silent. Mechanics put down their wrenches, cooks turned the fires low, infantry personnel stopped the cleaning of weapons.

"We did not march thousands of miles to be held at bay by a ragged bunch

of malcontents led by an idealistic dreamer!" Hoffman thundered.

"No, sir," the messenger said. He wished he was facing a band of Rebels at this moment. He wished he could be anywhere except where he was.

Hoffman lost what was left of his composure. He picked up his freshly poured cup of coffee and hurled it against the wall of the trailer.

Hoffman whirled to face the young messenger. "Without Ben Raines, the Rebel movement would crumble. Chop the head from a snake and the snake dies." Hoffman looked at the messenger as if seeing him for the first time. "What do you want? Send someone in here immediately to clean up this mess. Get out of here!"

The messenger hit the air.

Jesus Dieguez Mendoza Hoffman clenched his fists, forced himself to take several deep breaths, and calmed his raging emotions. He stood for a moment, staring out of the window of the trailer. For the first time since his outburst he was aware of the hundreds of troops all gathered outside, quietly waiting. He looked at his commanders, standing close to his quarters. Hoffman walked to the door and slowly opened it. He waved to his senior commanders, motioning them to his quarters.

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His composure fully restored, Hoffman sat down at his desk and waited until his people had taken seats. "Gentlemen, we have been held at bay by a pack of barking dogs long enough. We have allowed ourselves to be frightened and cowed by this tiny band headed by Ben Raines. Effective this moment, that will cease. The greatest army on the face of the earth has been forced into a defensive position. Think of the absurdity of that. The ridiculousness of it. Impress that upon your troops. Show them how they have been humiliated by a tiny band of men and women in blue jeans and cowboy boots, racing about in little puny vehicles ... and on horseback," he spat the last. "Brandishing six-shooters and waving the flag of Texas."

Hoffman stared at his commanders, crowded into the room. He smiled at the group. Three days from now, at dawn, we move out. In force. We launch a full-scale attack against the Rebels. In one week, I plan to have the entire state of Texas under our control."

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## Chapter Ten

"Not damn likely," Ben said, after reading the communiqué just decoded by his people. He laughed softly. "So Herr Hoffman plans to strike fear into our hearts by flexing his muscles, eh? All right. We'll let him flex his muscles. Corrie, has this communiqué been sent out to all our people?"

"Waiting for your orders to do so," she replied.

"Do it. Then tell them to stand by for further instructions."

Ben walked to a map thumb-tacked to a wall of the old church rectory and studied it. He smiled and looked at Beth, standing by with pad and pen at the ready. "As soon as Hoffman makes his move, have all our people

fall back. Have our people immediately begin gathering up all the broken weapons we've picked up, all the worn-out clothing and boots. All the patched and useless tarps and ground-sheets and shelter-halves. Gather up all the ripped and torn underwear and socks. Pile up busted canteens and rusty eating utensils and the like and get ready to scatter them along the way. I want this to look like a complete rout on our part. We are fleeing

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for our lives, people. We are turning tail and running away from the awesome forces of Hoffman. We are frightened to death of the Blackshirts. Their advance has demoralized us all. Their might has turned us into rabbits. Order everyone to fall back to the thirtieth parallel. Start all the battalions I've held in reserve working their way south. Right now. Tell them to stay at least a hundred miles east or west of Hoffman's northern push." Ben chuckled, but it held an ominous note. "So come on, Hoffman. Show me what a brilliant strategist you are. Strike fear into my heart, you evil bastard!"

"Ike reporting, sir," Corrie said. "He says that the Blackshirts are pulling away from their lines and heading east, on the south side of the border. Hold on, sir. Colonels Gray and West calling in. They say the same thing."

"Get hold of our eyes below the border, Corrie. Ask them what Hoffman has left down there for reserve. He's got to have stretched himself pretty damn thin."

"I did, sir. He's left behind small garrisons of troops in selected towns. But mostly he's depending on the local bully-boys to keep the people in line."

"We know he has several more divisions down in South America," Ben mused. "But we also know he's short on wheeled transportation. Like us, he has plenty of prop-planes, but damn few jets and fewer pilots to fly them." Ben paced as he spoke. "We'd be wasting explosives blowing airports. You can land most of those old transports of ours, and his, on practically any runway a crop-duster could use."

Ben walked to the ever-present coffee pot and poured a mug. He sugared and stirred and sipped. Then he smiled. "Hoffman anticipated my move. He felt I would

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swing troops around to nip at his sides, so he's pulled his western troops in to protect his flanks. And he's hoping I wouldn't pull my battalions out of the west and give him a hole that I'm wagering he had no intention of using. Well, the Nazi son of a bitch guessed wrong!"

"Order our three battalions in, sir?" Corrie asked.

"You bet." He smiled once more. "Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee."

"Sir?" Beth asked.

"A champion prizefighter used to say that ... or something to that effect. It fits us rather well, I think. Because that's exactly what



we're going to do."

Jersey and Cooper exchanged glances, Cooper whispering, "Now it's gettin' down to the way the General likes to fight."

"Yeah," Jersey returned the whisper. "Kick-ass time!"

There were those in Hoffman's command who questioned his decision to launch a full-scale attack deep into the heart of Texas, but only the most brave questioned it aloud, and then only among the closest of friends.

Brodermann was not one of those who questioned his Field Marshal's order. He looked forward to this massive thrust of men and machines of war. Hans had a very personal score to settle with Ben Raines, and the sooner the better was his philosophy on the subject.

He had asked to spearhead, and was given the green light. His people were ready, and he now waited for the word.

"What is the status of those Rebels in California, Arizona, and New Mexico?" Hoffman asked, on the night before the pullout.

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"They are still there. Your plan worked, sir. They remained in position, afraid to leave the route unguarded."

Hoffman smiled. It was going to work.

Actually, the three battalion commanders did leave some people behind. Seventy-five from each battalion. They kept cook fires burning, kicked up dust running around in cars and trucks, played catch with baseballs and footballs and so forth, and in general maintained a very high profile.

Since the black-shirted troops left behind to watch the Rebels were fewer in number than those they spied upon, neither side was in very much danger from the other. It was just a variation on the game of hide and seek, so to speak.

Albeit a deadly one if those south of the border ever caught on to what was actually happening north of them.

Brodermann radioed back to Hoffman, excitement in his voice. "It's a rout, Field Marshal. A complete rout. They're leaving equipment behind in their haste to retreat. Our people are stocking up on field rations-cases of them. We've tested them and they have not been tampered with. They're really quite delicious."

The Rebels had been only too happy to throw away the goop that Dr. Chase's lab boys and girls had dreamed up for them to eat. It was highly nutritious and packed with vitamins and minerals and tasted like shit.

"They abandoned clothing and weapons and canteens. Many were so frightened they left their boots."

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They left behind cases and cases of field rations. More than enough to sustain my people for a week or more."

The only hitch the Rebels' lab people hadn't worked out was that the rations tended to make one constipated. As Brodermann's people were about to discover.

"Maintain your position," Hoffman ordered his spear-header. "I want to see this personally."

"They took the bait," Corrie reported, after all the info was in from communications. "They sound elated."

"I hope they eat all that goopy shit," Ben said, aware of Dr. Chase standing close, scowling at him. Ben turned to meet the frowning chief of medicine. "And I'm telling you for the last time, Lamar: have your people come up with something less nutritious and more on the tasty side."

"I've already ordered that, Raines," the crusty old doctor popped right back at him. "The first shipments should be arriving by planes within hours."

"Good. Green eggs and ham was wonderful in book form. It isn't worth a damn at four o'clock in the morning."

"You are belaboring the point, Raines. Shut up about it. And where did you get that sombrero you've plopped on your head? You look like Hoot Gibson."

"Who the hell is Hoot Gibson?" Jersey whispered to Cooper.

"He's taking a hell of a chance," Thermopolis spoke to a few of his staff members at one of their communications and HQ bunkers deep in the Arkansas mountains. "This could backfire on him. But I can see why he's doing it."

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Emil Hite, the little ex-conman turned loyal Rebel, was not his usual joking self. He was serious as he studied the big board, denoting the positions of all the Rebels, all around the shattered land that was once called the United States. Someone was constantly changing the board.

"But if Hoffman continues to fall for it," Emil said, "he'll be in one hell of a bind, I once the General starts attacking from all sides."

"Big 'ifs,' Emil," Therm said softly. "Real big 'ifs.'"

Ike, Dan Gray, and West were moving east, staying on secondary roads and keeping Scouts ranging far out front at all times.

Leadfoot and Wanda had cleared their sector of Hoffman's Blackshirts and all the collaborators they could find and were now barreling west. They had taken the southernmost route across Louisiana, staying in the bayou country, and had crossed into Texas on what remained of old I-90. The ex-outlaw bikers had picked up dozens of other bikers who wanted to be a part of Raines' Rebels, and it was an awesome sight as the several hundred strong bikers, all heavily armed, came roaring westward on their choppers and custom motorcycles. In the old Sam Houston National Forest, they pulled in and made contact with Ben's HQ.

"Leadfoot on the horn, sir," Corrie said.

Ben took the mic. "Go, Leadfoot."

"Got nearly four hundred bikers now, Eagle," Leadfoot radioed. "We're in the southernmost trees named after one of the commanders at the Alamo. You ten-four that?"

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"Sam Houston National Park," Beth said, lowering a map.

"I copy that, Leadfoot. Straight west of you is a MASH unit. You know their frequency. Head there and await orders."

"That's a big ten-four, Eagle. Give 'em hell. Wolf Pack out."

"Hoffman and Brodermann just think they've seen unconventional warfare," Ben said with a smile. "Wait until they tangle with that bunch of outlaws."

"You have done well, Hans," Hoffman said, beaming with satisfaction at the seemingly endless trail of discarded equipment left behind by the "fleeing Rebels." "I am now certain we shall be in full control of Texas in a week's time. After that, it's just a matter of tracking down the retreating Rebels and disposing of them. Do try to take General Raines alive. Colonel Barlach is so looking forward to interrogating the good General Raines."

"I shall do my best, sir."

"I know you will."

Dr. Chase had moved his MASH units about a hundred miles north, to Ballinger on old Highway 83, and to Hillsboro on 35. Ben and his Rebels carried on with their systematic destroying of towns and cities and the blowing of major bridges.

If at all possible, Ben intended to hold Hoffman south of I-20. But with the massive firepower of the man, he didn't know if that was possible.

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Like the mule, all he could do was try.

"It's time to pull the plug on Hoffman's advance," he told his team. "We've got to knock out some of his tanks. Once that's done, we can uncork our own tanks and meet his on an equal basis. Our tanks are far superior. They're better armored, have heavier firepower, and are faster. What are the latest reports?"

"Hoffman has committed eight divisions north of the border," Beth said. "He has four divisions in reserve."

Ben shook his head. He had been stunned when he had heard the rumor of the revised figures of Hoffman's strength. He had been shocked when he found out they were true. "Twelve full divisions," Ben said softly. "Approximately two hundred thousand men. Minus about fifteen thousand that our little ragtag bunch of boys and girls have managed to send to that great Nazi heaven in the skies."

Ben walked to a map. "The arrogant bastard has spread himself over three hundred miles of territory, committing a full division up eight routes.

Look at what's he's done. We've stopped him dead bang cold on 163 just north of Barnhart by blowing those bridges. We've stopped him at the ruins of San Angelo. We've trapped him and stopped him between the Llano and the San Saba. We've blown every bridge on 87 and stopped him dead. Same on Highways 16, 281, 81, and 77. He's most vulnerable on Highway 77. His people are exposed and in danger and the silly bastard can't see that. Order Buddy, O'Shea, and the Wolfpack to start hammering at that part of the division that someone foolishly placed over here on 36. They're cut off. We've blown all the bridges between 77 and 36. Get them moving, Corrie."

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There was nothing Hoffman could do except pace up and down as his engineers, now stretched pitifully thin along three hundred miles, worked feverishly to lay temporary bridges across rivers and creeks. None of his commanders dared approach him to point out that several battalions of his troops were cut off and dangerously exposed. Hoffman was in no mood for a critique of his strategy.

Hoffman ordered spotter planes up; the Rebels brought them down with SAMs. Rebel long-distance shooters, armed with .50-caliber sniper rifles lay hidden along the north shores of the rivers and creeks and terrorized the Nazi engineers.

Hoffman dared not send teams across to hunt down the snipers, not after the first few attempts. Ben had anticipated that and had Scouts and Recon teams in place to ambush the Blackshirts as they tried to circle around the snipers, who were firing from as far away as a mile and a half.

Hoffman ordered his artillery to lay down covering fire in an attempt to kill the snipers. As long as the bombardments lasted, the snipers were quiet and his engineers could work. Once the bombardments ceased, the snipers popped up and started shooting. Hoffman's engineers finally had to build thick shields and work behind them, which slowed them down to less than a snail's pace.

Hoffman's massive army had been stopped cold.

On the easternmost flank of the Blackshirts, Buddy, O'Shea, and the Wolfpack quietly got into place along a seventeen mile stretch and waited for the fall of darkness.

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The Blackshirt commander knew he was exposed, knew that he was light when it came to tanks, and suspected the Rebels would try to hit him sometimes during the night. But where was his main concern. And how would they do it? He spread his men thin, all along the seventeen mile stretch of old highway.

Knowing how the Rebels loved risk-taking and doing what was least suspected of them, the commander made a fatal decision and faced the bulk of his troops to the west, thinking that the Rebels would probably slip up between the two cut-off armies.

"We're dealin' with a bloody fool," O'Shea said to Buddy. "Did the man think we'd walk into a box like that?"

"He just had to make a choice," Buddy said. "And he made the wrong one."

"He'll ne'er get another chance to choose," the Irishman said grimly.

"Count on that," Buddy finished it.

The sun slipped over the horizon and deceptive shadows began creeping and lengthening. Field Marshal Hoffman ordered all work stopped and all men to take up arms. There was a sick, tight feeling in his belly. His early supper lay like a slimy blob in his stomach.

"What's wrong?" General Schiller radioed, irritation evident in his voice. "My engineers are nearly finished. Another hour and we can cross."

"No," Hoffman radioed his reply. "Every man behind a gun. I feel the Rebels will make a charge this night."

"From the front?" Schiller questioned. "That would be suicide, Field Marshall. Ben Raines would never do anything like that."

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"Don't question my orders!" Hoffman snapped. "Every man on the line."

"Yes, sir," his generals acknowledged. And to themselves: But if Raines does come, it won't be from the front. We are not dealing with a fool.

"Make them use up ammunition," Ben told Corrie. "We've got them ahead of their supply trucks. Let's wear them down. Get them shooting at shadows."

At full dark, the Rebels began lobbing mortar rounds in the general direction of Hoffman's lines and the Blackshirts panicked, immediately opening fire, pouring rounds into the darkness, hitting nothing but rocks and trees and empty air. All along the three hundred miles of front lines, the Blackshirts wasted thousands of rounds of precious ammunition. The early night sparked and sang deadly songs, the ragged tune coming from the Blackshirts side of the rivers and creeks. The Rebels kept their heads down and let the lead whistle and howl.

Buddy, O'Shea, and the Wolfpack had worked their way so close to the lines of the Blackshirts they could hear them talking. They could practically smell the fear emanating from the cut-off Blackshirts.

"Now!" Buddy shouted.

The Rebels slammed into the eastern side of Highway 36 with the savagery of hungry piranhas.

The commander of the Blackshirts on the eastern edge of Hoffman's northern push got off one short radio message. Hoffman's face drained of blood and his stomach churned as he read the message, god help us all.

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## Chapter Eleven

The Rebels were all over the Blackshirts before they could reposition from west to east. This was bloody and brutal hand to hand fighting, something the Rebels had perfected over the long years of war. This was pistol and knife and hatchet and club warfare. Back to the raw basics.

The Blackshirts had never, ever, encountered such savagery. The Rebels did not come screaming over the top-they came like deadly silent wraiths and it was that very silence that panicked and broke the enemy line.

The disciplined soldiers of Hoffman's army looked at outlaw bikers, bearded and leathered and tattooed, swinging deadly barbed lengths of chain; their female counterparts armed with silenced machine-pistols, spitting out quiet death.

The soldiers of Hoffman broke and fled for their lives, running toward the west. Those that chose to stay and fight died. The Rebels took no prisoners.

The Rebels smashed through the thin lines and split up, working north and south along the rutted old highway. They captured hundreds of assault rifles, fine

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weapons, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. They captured machine guns and light vehicles and mortars and cases and cases of mortar rounds. They captured hundreds of boxes of field rations, which to the Rebels, after years of eating their own highly nutritious but crappy-tasting goop, were like gourmet meals.

The Blackshirts even abandoned half a dozen of their big battle tanks-the crews running off into the night. The Rebels promptly cranked them up and drove off, along with the trucks and other light vehicles, after loading them with guns, ammo, food, mortars, boots, and anything else the Rebels felt they could use.

The Rebels did not come out of the battle unscathed. They had their dead to carry off and bury and their wounded to transport to Chase's MASH units. But the Blackshirts suffered terrible losses. All who did not run off were killed and many of those who tried to flee were gunned down.

It was wasn't a matter of being callous. It was merely a question of chopping down the enemy to a more manageable size. Every Blackshirt killed now was one less the Rebels would have to someday fight.

By the time troops from Hoffman's Eighth Division got over to the battle site, there was nothing left but the silence of the dead.

General Ramos Schleyer, CG of the Eighth Division, stood in the center of the carnage and was stunned speechless. The dead were sprawled everywhere. The Rebels left behind no wounded.

"Barbarians!" Ramos hissed, finally finding his voice. "Filthy savages." Strange words from a man who took great delight in raping young girls, violating young boys, and killing anyone who did not agree with his political

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views. He pointed his riding crop at an aide. "The Rebels will pay dearly for this, Hugo. Dearly, I say. Mark my words."

"Field Marshal Hoffman, sir," a radioman handed the general the field phone.

"No, sir," Ramos said, in reply to Hoffman's very direct question. "They

were wiped out to the last man. The filthy barbarous bastards left no wounded behind." He listened for a moment. "No, sir. The Rebels took all the equipment. Guns, vehicles, boots, food, mortars, tanks, gasoline ... everything." Again, he listened. "Yes, sir. I will see that our people are properly buried. I have chaplains coming in now to insure proper burials."

After Hoffman had broken the connection, Ramos said, "Get me General Krosen at the Second Division. We have to make plans to rid ourselves of Ben Raines. That and nothing else, must be top priority. We have to convince Field Marshal Hoffman of that. We must."

"We are now dirty filthy barbarians," Corrie told Ben, who was sitting behind his desk, his stocking feet propped up.

He smiled and lifted his mug of coffee at her. "I'm glad to hear it. Obviously, Buddy's report was factual. What officer called us that?"

"The CG of the Eighth Division. General Ramos Schleyer. He is furious and saying that he will have your head on a pole for this atrocity."

"That would be unpleasant," Ben said. "What else?"

"We've decoded some rather odd transmissions and cryptography is trying to make sense out of them now."

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"And they all concern me, right?" Ben asked, a strange smile on his lips.

"Yes," Corrie said. "How did you know?"

"like so many others we've faced, Corrie, the leaders of the Blackshirts believe that if I'm killed, the Rebel movement would collapse. They just can't see that I'm merely a part of it. I'm not the whole. But we're going to have to be careful from now on. For if the generals convince Hoffman of their theory, assassins will be coming out of the woodwork after me." His eyes swept the room, lingering for a moment, touching all the members of his team. "And that includes all of you. And don't ever forget that."

"Well, if that's the case, Ike oughta be storming in here at any moment," Jersey predicted. "That ol' mother hen will be wanting to relocate you up way up in North Canada."

Ben smiled. Jersey had pegged the ex-SEAL correctly. Ike was very protective of Ben. As soon as the decoding experts did their work and reported the news to all Rebel commanders, Ike would be rolling in and raising hell about Ben's safety.

"The Blackshirt generals are requesting a meeting with Hoffman," Corrie called out. "They want to meet first thing in the morning at Hoffman's First Division HQ,"

"It's started," Ben said. "Fine. That will give us another day to shift troops around and make plans. I ..."

"General Ike on the horn, sir," Corrie said. "He says it's very important."

Ben laughed and walked to the radio. "I bet it is," he said, taking the

mic as Corrie flipped over to speaker.

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Ike was already yelling. "Goddamnit, Ben. Pack it up and get gone from there."

If they were not transmitting from a "fixed" base, to improve the range of communications, and to prevent the enemy from getting any accurate fix on locations, in the field the Rebels used a very upgraded version of the suitcase repeater.

"Where would you have me go, Ike?"

"Away from where you are," Ike said simply, calming down.

"That's not a bad idea," Ben said, but not to Ike. "But we'll do it on the Q.T." To Ike: "No, Ike, I think we'll just stay put for a time. But I will take your very fine suggestion under advisement."

Ben never said things like "taking your very fine suggestion under advisement," and Ben knew Ike would grab the hidden message immediately.

"No way I can convince you, huh?" Ike said, a very subtle change in his voice.

"Not a chance, Ike." Ben knew other Rebel communications people would be monitoring the transmissions and they would put it all together.

To insure that everybody knew what was going on, Ben and Ike began conversing in double-talk, using terms that would lead the Blackshirts-if they could unscramble the transmissions-to believe that Ben was staying in his present location.

When they had spoken enough gobbledygook to tip off even the sleepest of Rebel communications operators, Ben hooked the mic and said, "Pack it up, people. We're pulling out."

Within minutes, the team had packed their gear and

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were heading out. They rolled into Dr. Chase's HQ a few hours later.

"Get your MASH units down and moving," Ben told the chief of medicine. "To just north of I-20. And don't argue. I think Hoffman will be mounting a major offensive very soon."

"Me, argue?" Chase said innocently.

Ben rolled his eyes. "Move!"

"Most of them can move," Chase said, becoming very serious. "I've got two who can't be moved for seventy-two hours. And that's final."

"All right, Lamar. It's your show."

"You staying here, Ben?"

"Until dawn." Over coffee, he explained what he felt the Blackshirts



were going to try next.

Chase nodded his head. "That's the way it always is, Ben. Back to playing cat and mouse." He refilled their cups and looked hard at Ben. "The game is just about to turn deadly serious, isn't it?"

"Yeah. We're going to start taking casualties now. Hoffman will make fewer and fewer mistakes counting on the day when he feels we have to stand and slug it out."

"And will that day come, Ben?"

"Oh, yes. It'll come, Lamar. We can't hit and run forever. But that time must not arrive until we've killed off a lot of his troops. This has got to stay a guerrilla-type action. We just don't have the people to stand nose to nose."

Lamar toyed with his coffee mug for a moment. It was very late, past midnight, and the MASH tents set up around the small house Chase was using as his quarters and office were silent. The doctor lifted his eyes,

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looking at Ben. "Old friend, are we going to win this one?"

"I don't know," Ben said softly. "The movement itself will never die. I know that. But whether you and I and those close to us will live through this fight ... that's up for grabs."

Lamar sighed. "Well, I'm an old man." He smiled. "With a reasonably young gal and a baby to look after. It won't matter much if I don't make it. You, now, you've got a few more good years ahead of you." And ... He paused and frowned. "If you'd quit smoking cigarettes, that is."

"I haven't lit one in your presence so far, have I?" Ben said with a smile.

"No. But you'd like to. Oh, go on and roll one, Raines. You're beginning to fidget like a virgin in a locker room."

"And what, Lamar?"

"What do you mean, Raines?"

"You started to say something then paused and started your usual harangue about my smoking."

"I do not harangue anyone, Raines." He took a sip of coffee. "Ike's right, you know."

"Oh, Lamar, not you, too!"

"Listen to me, Ben. You've got to listen to me. You talk of the movement. Ben, you are the movement. I know all the times we've discussed this. I know all your arguments: Buddy and Tina will take over, blah, blah, blah. And I know that someday they will have to assume the lion's share of what you now do. But not yet. The time is not now. You said it yourself, Ben: we are facing the most crucial time since the Great War. Now, more than ever before, we need you."

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It was said with such sincerity, such quiet emotion, Ben sat and stared at the older man for a moment. "What do you want me to do, Lamar?"

"I can't ask you stay out of the field, Ben. That's in your blood. But do so with caution. Don't spearhead. Don't lead wild charges. And don't get careless and let yourself get boxed in somewhere."

Ben slowly nodded his head. "All right, Lamar. I'll rein in my horns. I won't go looking for a fight, but damned if I'll run from one."

"That's good enough for me, Ben. Go get some sleep. We'll talk more at breakfast." He smiled. "Fresh eggs and ham."

"That's an invite I'll accept."

Far to the south, Hoffman sat in the darkness of his trailer. He felt he knew perfectly well what his generals wanted to discuss in a few hours. The taking of Ben Raines. But Hoffman, even though he was younger than Raines, and did not have near the experience, was nonetheless a very intelligent man. He knew that should he, Hoffman, die, his army would fight on. And so would the Rebels. Perhaps not with the cunning that Raines possessed, but fight on they would. And he felt that Ben Raines knew that, too.

Any of Raines' colonels or generals could step in. He knew. He had studied the dossiers on them all. Dan Gray was a brilliant leader of men, as was Ike McGowen. General Payon was tough and smart. General Georgi Striganov, the Russian Bear, was a tough old soldier with years of experience behind him. The mercenary, West, was as mean as a cornered panther.

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Ben's son, Buddy, was fearless in a fight and showed great potential as a leader.

No, Hoffman concluded, his generals were wrong. Very wrong. But they were right about one thing: they could not continue to allow the Rebels to chip away at them. How to stop the bastards and bitches from doing that had caused Hoffman endless hours of sleeplessness. But there had to be a way. There just had to be a way.

Hoffman ordered every division to hold their positions and not to attempt any advance. Every commander in Hoffman's army doubled and sometimes tripled security on the edges of their perimeters.

Ben ordered his own people to back off and take a wait and see attitude until after the generals met with Hoffman. It would be interesting to see what came out of the high-level meeting.

"Gentlemen," Hoffman kicked off the meeting. "Let's face facts. And the overriding fact is that our eight divisions and Brodermann's short spear-header division are surrounded by a thin line of Rebels. Now I do not perceive that as much of a threat; we could punch through at any time. However, when we do punch through, and we will, Raines will simply order his northern-based troops to fall back, and realign his forces to the east, west, and south. We will conquer nothing, because Raines is destroying everything in his path. We will kill no Rebels, because Raines will not allow any face-to-face fighting, except on his own

terms. And we all know that is savage surprise ambushing."

He paused and looked at his commanders for a moment. "And we have learned some hard lessons

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about ourselves and the Rebels during this short campaign. I myself have learned that up until we crossed the border, I was an arrogant fool. I believed that we would just roll over the Rebels and march on to glory. I said that Texas would be ours in a week. Well, comrades, Texas will be ours, but it certainly will not be ours in a week, and probably not in several months. Unless we are very, very careful, Texas could very easily be our Russian front, our Waterloo, our Dunkirk. If we don't succeed here, we're finished. Think about that for a moment."

Hoffman waited until the sudden babble of voices had fallen back into silence. "Gentleman, Raines is not going to fight us on our own terms. He simply will not do it. And if we continue fighting him, using the tactics we have thus far practiced, he'll eventually defeat us. Look at the facts. For every Rebel we've killed, they've killed five hundred of our people. At least. We thought, I thought, we could occupy the towns and cities and turn the people against the Rebels. I did not count on Raines evacuating everybody and relocating them north. And north of the thirty-sixth parallel he has Rebels training many of those evacuees, whipping them into an army five or six times our size. That son of a bitch Raines is the most unpredictable goddamn bastard I have ever encountered in my life!"

Hoffman stomped to a window and stared out, struggling to regain his composure. He turned slowly, looking at his men. "Who among us ever dreamt General Raines could very nearly successfully evacuate an entire state? That's impossible! But he did it."

Hoffman paced the room like a caged animal, around and around the neatly aligned chairs.

"Field Marshal," General Timmermann spoke. "Does

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not that prove what we here maintain? Kill Ben Raines and the movement dies?"

Hoffman shook his head. "No. It does not. Raines is the driving force. But the Rebel movement-no, their philosophy-is ingrained. The death of Ben Raines will not cause the Rebel movement to dissolve. They would falter for a step or two, and then, I believe, grow even stronger. For then, Ben Raines would not be a leader, he would be a martyr. I sure as hell don't want that. Many of the people of the United States who presently dislike the man would pick up a gun to fight us."

The more Hoffman spoke, the more frustrated he became. He felt like going away where no one could see him and jumping up and down and screaming in a temper tantrum. He could not remember ever feeling so helpless.

Taking a deep breath, he said, "Ben Raines has approximately fourteen battalions. About eight hundred to a battalion. Eleven thousand men and women, and those badly outnumbered forces are kicking the shit out of

us!" he screamed the last. "They are doing what tacticians would claim is impossible."

"We could kidnap his son and daughter," General Schmidt suggested.

"Raines does not negotiate with criminals," General Maihofer said. "And he would call that a criminal act. Besides, we don't even know their location."

"Hell," General Kroesen said. "We don't know the location of any of Raines' people. We send out patrols, they never return. We send up planes and helicopters, they're shot down. Hunting the Rebels is like searching for a single ship on the ocean. You know it's there, you just can't find it."

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"We had dozens of collaborators in this state," General Schleyer said. "Feeding us very good information. Raines hanged some of them, shot a few more, and the others got the message. They now claim to have no knowledge of anything. The three monkeys personified."

"Take some of them to Colonel Barlach," General Mohnhaupt suggested. "He'll get whatever is in their heads."

"It would be of no use by the time they were transported to him and he did his work," Hoffman nixed that. "Raines and his Rebels do not stay long in any one spot. What we have to worry about is whether our former spies are now spying on us!"

General Jahn had remained silent thus far. Hoffman met his eyes and said, "Something on your mind, General Jahn?"

"Break my paratroops up into small, highly mobile guerrilla teams and drop them far behind enemy lines."

"The planes will be shot down!" General von Hanstein flared.

"Shut up," the tough paratrooper told him, steel in his voice. "I have that problem all worked out."

General Jose Schmidt then uttered what every person who had ever fought Ben Raines and the Rebels had said at one time or the other. "I hate that goddamn Ben Raines."

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## Chapter Twelve

"Our Scouts on the western and eastern fringes of Hoffman's position report hearing planes go over last night," Corrie told Ben. "They did not return."

"What do our people at the thirty-sixth parallel report?"

"Nothing. Their radar picked up no air traffic at all."

Ben thought about that for a moment. "How many planes, Corrie?"

"A large number."

"Well, Hoffman is either dropping supplies to the few of his people we know still remain north of us, but I think that's unlikely. I think he probably dropped paratroopers north of us, then the planes took a wide half circle back home and none of our people heard them."

"Somebody down there finally got some brains working," Jersey remarked. "I was beginning to think this was going to be a piece of cake."

"I knew it was too good to last," Ben said. "All right, Corrie, have communications alert all our people for impending guerrilla action. These boys and girls are going to be tough. From what our intell people have managed

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to find out, General Jahn is smart, tough, mean, and a damn good soldier. And you can bet this, too: Jahn jumped in with them. The German authorities arrested him and kicked him out of the German army just before the Great War because of his Nazi views. He was an up and coming career man, too. Only the Great War prevented the Germans from putting him in prison. But he's a top-notch soldier."

After Corrie had done her work, she turned in her chair and said, "Speaking of Germany, Thermopolis up at communications is getting some strange signals in German. He just bumped me about an hour ago. He says that Germany is now stabilized-kind of like we thought we were in the States-and the messages are saying something about you to hang on, two units of GSG 9 are on the way to help us. Therm says he has no idea what GSG 9 means."

Ben's boots hit the floor and he jumped to his feet. "GSG 9? Hell, that's Colonel Wegener's old outfit. I think Uwe Dee was commanding officer when the Great War came. GSG 9 is, or was, a top antiterrorist unit. You get Therm on the horn and have him find out who's commanding these units and then have our people in England verify it. Man, oh, man. I hope these boys are on our side."

"Are they that good, General?" Beth asked.

"They're tops, Beth. Or were. I imagine they still are. Come on, boys," Ben urged. "We need all the help we can get."

It did not take Corrie long to determine that the GSG 9 people were for real and they were on their way to assist Ben and the Rebels. They were still a few hundred

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miles off the South Carolina coast, and Ben ordered trucks from Base Camp One to be there to meet them.

"Who's in command?" he asked.

"A Colonel Lenz is in overall command," Corrie told him. "The battalion commanders are Major Streicher and Major Dietl."

"So this gives us about two thousand more people, right, General?" Cooper asked.

Ben smiled. "Well, not ... quite, Coop. I figure about four hundred."

"Four hundred!" Jersey blurted. "But you said two battalions."

"No, I didn't. I said two units. Their combat units consist of two hundred men per unit ... or at least they used to. But don't worry, gang. Those four hundred will more than carry their weight."

Ben was silent for a time, standing by a boarded up window, staring out through the cracks in the warped old boards hastily nailed up years ago. The old home showed signs of having been involved in several battles over the long, bloody years. He turned from the window.

"Corrie, bump Thermopolis on burst and ask him to start contacting other countries that we know are free of the plague and have stabilized their governments. We know of several."

"Yes, sir. What are we asking those governments for?"

"Help," Ben said simply.

Hoffman's forces began inching forward, sometimes no more than a mile or two a day. Ben's people harassed them every inch of the way. But harassment was

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not enough to stop them. The Rebels fought hard, but constantly lost ground, as they were now fighting Hoffman's massive divisional thrusts, and also guerrilla actions on all sides. General Jahn's tough paratroopers were popping up and striking all over the place.

The GSG 9 people had landed and were on the way. Poland had responded to Ben's plea for help and was sending a battalion. The governments of Denmark, Finland, and Norway were hurriedly putting together a force of men and equipment. Australia had answered the call and they were sending a small force of volunteers. Iceland was sending 250 men. Korea was sending men and equipment. England was sending over a short battalion. Holland was putting together a small volunteer force of their Royal Netherlands Marines Corps.

For the moment, at least, no one else could send anything except prayers. France had been virtually wiped out by the plague, as had Spain and several other European countries. But Ben knew that many other countries around the world were functioning and could send help. For whatever reasons, they remained silent, not responding at all to the pleas for help.

"They better get their act together," Ben said grimly. "For if we don't stop Hoffman here, right here, that Nazi son of a bitch will conquer the world."

"General," Corrie said, turning from her radio. "Israel has come on board. They're up to their eyeballs fighting the Arabs, but they're going to send a small force of paratroopers."

Ben nodded his head. "God knows of all countries they can least afford to send help. But I felt they would. Anyone else?"

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"Not yet."

"Tell Thermopolis to keep sending out the call for help."

"Yes, sir."

The next day, Spain came through. They were sending a special force of their GEO, the Spanish antiterrorist unit.

Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela asked if they could not be of more help by combining their forces, to try to block Hoffman's supply line from the south.

"Tell them it would be much appreciated," Ben said.

Beth added it all up. 'Just under five thousand personnel, General.'

"There may be more coming," Ben said, rubbing his face. "But don't count on it."

None of the older Rebels said anything, but Ben knew they were, to a person, thinking about all the countries America had helped over the years, countries who now were remaining silent. Some of those countries were, Ben knew, just simply unable to send any help.. But more than a few just chose to ignore America's plight.

"You will be remembered," Ben said, a very ugly note to his voice. "Tattoo that on your arms, assholes."

"Ike on the horn, General."

Ben took the mic.

"You'd better split, Eagle," Ike warned him. "Hoffman's first division is exactly twenty miles from your location."

Ben sighed in frustration and anger. The Rebels were not accustomed to retreating. "All right, Shark. We're bugging out now. We'll set up north of I-20."

Ben turned to Corrie, His team could easily read the

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anger and despair on his face. "Corrie, order all units to retreat north of I-20 and regroup there. The rest of you, start packing up."

"Yes, sir," she said softly.

Hoffman was euphoric when the news of the Rebel retreat reached him. He actually felt like singing and dancing around his office. He had not conquered all of Texas in a week, as he had boasted he would, but his people now controlled a large chunk of it. His bubble of euphoria burst when he was given the rest of the news.

He was stunned silent for a moment. "German troops are coming over to aid Ben Raines?" Hoffman gulped for air and screamed at the aide. "German troops will fight against me? I do not believe that. That is impossible. We are fighting for the Fatherland. They must know that."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure they do," the aide said diplomatically. "But units of GSG 9 are rapidly approaching what we think is General Raines' current position."

"There must be some mistake. Surely they are coming to aid us?"

"No, sir. We intercepted messages from the German chancellor. He said we must be stopped at all costs. Nazism must not be allowed to flourish again."

Hoffman fell back into his chair, his mouth hanging open. He stared at the young aide for a moment. "That cannot be! It's a lie someone made up!"

"No, Field Marshal. It's true."

"How many German troops?"

"Approximately five hundred, sir."

Hoffman started laughing. "Five hundred? That's ridiculous. Five hundred troops. That's funny, my friend."

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Five hundred troops. Oh, thank you. I needed a good rousing laugh."

The aide waited until he had stopped his laughing and was wiping his eyes with a clean handkerchief. "Also troops are on the way from Poland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Australia, Iceland, Korea, England, Holland, Israel, and Spain."

Hoffman's butt left the chair in a hurry and the aide backed up quickly, thinking the field marshal was going to jump clear over the desk. "What the hell did you say?" Hoffman yelled.

"I said troops are on the way from Poland, Den ..."

Hoffman waved him silent. "I heard all that! I'm not deaf. How goddamn many troops?"

"Our intelligence says that to send less than five divisions would be useless."

"Five divisions!" Hoffman yelled, his face paling. "Five fucking divisions?"

, "Yes, sir."

Hoffman cleared his throat, composed himself and sat down, smoothing his hair with his hands. "We are talking of full combat divisions."

"Yes, sir. That is what intelligence thinks."

"That would be approximately one hundred thousand men. Why then, is Germany sending such a token force?"

"Intelligence thinks they are only an advance team, sir."

"Yes. Yes. That makes sense. Now I want you to leave me. I must think."

The aide left. Happy to do so.



Hoffman leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. So, he thought. We are once

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more fighting the world, as Hitler-God rest his glorious soul-did so many years ago. They are fools to fight us. Fools! This plan that I am now carrying out was fully planned years before I was born. Victory was assured me by the very blood that runs through my veins. I cannot fail. That is not only unthinkable, it is impossible.

He thought for a long time, wrote out a message, then rose and walked to his communications building. "Order all commanders to halt their advance immediately. We must prepare for a major assault against us." He handed the message to the radioman. "This will explain everything. Send this in code to all commanders. Immediately."

"Yes, sir."

Corrie sat for a moment, trying to make some sense out of the communiqué just radioed to her from communications central. It just didn't make any sense. Finally, she handed her headset to another Rebel and walked into Ben's office, a room just off what had once been a den in the old home.

"Makes no sense, General," she said.

Ben rubbed eyes weary from hours of staring at maps. "What doesn't, Corrie?"

"We just decoded this. Hoffman has ordered an immediate halt to all advances. He has instructed his troops to prepare for a major counteroffensive by the Rebels."

Ben looked at her for a few seconds, then shook his head in confusion and disbelief. "Would you repeat that, Corrie."

" 'Rebels being re-enforced by five divisions of troops

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unfriendly to our goals. Preparing to launch major counteroffensive against us on all fronts. Stand or die. Heil Hitler.' It's from the headquarters of Field Marshal Jesus Hoffman."

"Do they know something we don't, Corrie?"

She shrugged her shoulders as the rest of Ben's team gathered around. "Do you suppose Ike or some of the other commanders sent out false information?"

"Not without first clearing it with me. I do not understand this at all."

"All our batt comms are requesting orders," Corrie said. "What do I tell them?"

Ben leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Tell them to mount up. We attack!"

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## Chapter Thirteen

The Rebels punched at Hoffman's lines from all directions, using mortars, rockets, and light arms. Every Rebel who could carry a rifle took part. It was hit hard and run like hell. They didn't really inflict a lot of physical damage, since the majority of Rebels had moved north of I-20, but the psychological effects on the Black-shirts was significant.

"We have repulsed the first wave!" Generals Schleyer, Maihofer, and Schmidt proudly radioed to Hoffman. "Our casualties are very light."

But General von Hanstein wasn't buying any of it. He didn't believe Ben had five divisions coming to his aid. He didn't believe there were five solid divisions of troops anywhere in the world except for the troops they were already fighting.

He sent a patrol north of his position to check it out. They reported seeing only very small bands of Rebels. They guessed they were Rebels-they couldn't be sure since those they spotted were in no regular uniform. None of those they saw showed any inclination to stand and fight. They requested permission to pursue and engage.

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"Negative," General von Hanstein quickly nixed that. "Return to base." He got Field Marshall Hoffman's HQ. "This is a ruse, sir," he informed Hoffman. "I don't know what Raines is doing, but he does not have five divisions of additional troops. It's some sort of trick."

"Nonsense!" Hoffman snapped. "I shouldn't have to remind you that our intelligence is the finest in the world. They have been on top of this situation since the first transmission. You are wrong, General von Hanstein."

Von Hanstein held his temper and his tongue. He had always been of the opinion that Field Marshal Hoffman's intelligence people would have difficulty finding their own asses with both hands and a seeing eye dog. But he knew better than to argue with Hoffman.

"Yes, sir," von Hanstein said. "As you say, sir." Von Hanstein walked outside and stood for a moment. "Ben Raines is up to something," he muttered. "I know you're up to something, Ben Raines. But what?"

Ben didn't know himself until he stood facing a map. Then he started smiling.

"We're in trouble," Cooper whispered to Jersey. "The general's grinning."

Ben turned around. He smiled at his team. "I have a plan," he said, then started laughing.

"GSG 9 people are in camp," Corrie said. "And Ike's on the horn and he's hot."

"Go, Shark," Ben keyed the mic.

"Goddamnit, Eagle!" Ike roared. "You're supposed to be north of I-20 by now."

"GSG 9 people rolling up, sir," Jersey called, looking out the window.

"They look pretty damn tough to me."

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"They are," Ben said. "Shark, we're been delayed some. We'll be packed and on the road within the hour. That's a promise." Ben was careful not to tell him in what direction they'd be heading, however.

"That's good, Eagle," Ike said. "General von Hanstein is not fifteen miles from your location."

Ben grinned. "That is a fact, Ike. Yes, indeed. That is a fact. Eagle out." He stepped outside and shook hands with a smiling Colonel Lenz of the German GSG 9.

The two men spoke for a moment and Colonel Lenz laughed. "Everyone said you had more than your share of courage, General Raines," he said. "This proves them correct. It's a fine plan. Let's do it."

"You've got some memorizing to do, Colonel," Ben said. "We'd best get to it."

A half hour later, Ben gathered his team around him and laid it all out. There was just about one minute of silence after Ben had told them what they were going to do. Jersey finally found her voice and summed up the feelings of everyone present. "Holy shit!"

Von Hanstein finally but reluctantly followed orders and prepared for an offensive from the Rebels, spreading his people out along a line east to west. The easternmost units were side by side with men of the Fifth Division, the westernmost units talking with personnel from Hoffman's First Division. Ben and his Rebels, and Colonel Lenz and his GSG 9 men, all of them now dressed in seized Blackshirt uniforms, with Lenz spearheading, headed south and just drove right up to the first checkpoint on Highway 67 and stopped.

"You there!" Colonel Lenz barked at a guard. "We're

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from General Schleyer's Eighth. We're trying to get to Field Marshal Hoffman's HQ, with a personal message from General Schleyer and this idiot driver of mine took the wrong road. Can you help us?"

"Certainly, sir," the guard said. "Just stay on this road for about twenty more miles. You'll come to Highway 87. Turn west and you'll run right into the field marshal's HQ. Have you seen any Rebels, sir?"

"We've seen nothing. I think it's a ruse and so does General Schleyer. But ..." He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "We are only soldiers, hey. What can we do?"

"Yes, sir," the sentry said with a grin. "I imagine General von Hanstein would be glad to talk to you. He shares your views about this so-called assault. His CP is only a mile past the intersection. He's pretty thin down there. All our troops have been deployed along this line."

"Certainly, we shall speak with him," Lenz said. "Do call the General and advise him we are on the way."

The sentry waved them on through. "Heil Hitler!" he stiff-armed.

Lenz forced a smile, returned the stiff-armed salute, and mouthed the hated words. Then he spat out the window. "Up yours, asshole," he muttered, when they were past the checkpoint. He grinned at his driver. "He'd probably shit on himself if he knew he'd been standing this close to a Jew, Zuckerman."

Zuckerman then proceeded to heap some highly uncomplimentary remarks on the heads of the Blackshirts and Lenz laughed aloud. Down the road, the convoy pulled over and he ran back to Ben's vehicle, an armored car seized from one of many Rebel ambushes

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of Blackshirts. "That's the hard part," he told Ben. "Von Hanstein will have fresh coffee and cake waiting for us."

"I can't believe that sentry didn't smell a rat," Ben said. "We're not exactly a small force."

"I must admit, I was a bit apprehensive. You ready?"

"Let's do it."

Lenz chuckled. "If we pull this off, it'll send this Hoffman bastard spinning right through the ceiling."

Von Hanstein stood for a moment after receiving the message from the checkpoint. Something bothered him about this. Why did this officer take the northern route instead of the much safer southern route? "Oh, well," he finally muttered. "Make fresh coffee, Carlos," he told a Blackshirt. "Company is on the way from Schleyer's Eighth."

The sergeant paused and narrowed his eyes. "From a hundred and twenty five miles east of us, sir?" he questioned. "At this time of high alert?"

"Odd, isn't it, Carlos?" von Hanstein said softly. "Ah! I have it. The party must have set out long before the alert. That's it."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure that's it." But the sergeant was far from convinced as he set about making fresh coffee and laying out cookies and small pastries. Something about this just didn't feel right to him. His duties done, he checked his sidearm and made certain his rifle was close at hand.

Carlos looked outside. Not enough men, he thought. The camp is nearly deserted. General Raines is crazy enough to do something this daring ... Bah! He shook his head and pushed those thoughts from him. The guards at the checkpoint would not have allowed the convoy through if anything had seemed out of the ordinary.

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You're letting your imagination run away with you, he silently admonished himself.

"Sergeant Rogillo!" the voice broke into his thoughts.

Carlos looked up. "Sir?" he said to a lieutenant.

"Daydreaming, Sergeant?" the lieutenant asked, a smile on his lips.

"I ... ah, guess so, Lieutenant," Carlos admitted, red-faced.

"That's not like you. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing at all."

"Be alert then. We don't want a bad report going back to General Schleyer, now, do we?"

"No, sir." On this last day of his life, Carlos busied himself setting out cups and saucers.

General von Hanstein sat in his office, behind his field desk and drummed his fingertips on the wood. He again read the message. Odd that the officer did not give his name. Perhaps he should give General Schleyer a call? He opened his mouth to call for an aide, then sighed and shut his mouth. What was he thinking of? Schleyer would think him a fool!

He rose and walked into his communications room. "Have there been any further attacks from the Rebels? Anywhere along the front?"

"Just a few skirmishes, sir. Nothing of any significance."

Something is wrong, von Hanstein thought, returning to his office. Something is very, very wrong.

Sergeant Carlos Rogillo had gone to communications and spoken with the guard at the checkpoint. The guard had been very indignant. Of course, he was certain the men were from the Eighth. He'd recognized Sergeants Zimmerman and Rozas. And the colonel was SS.

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SS, Carlos mulled that around. SS? No way. Why would an SS colonel be acting as a messenger boy? Those turds thought themselves to be above such mundane tasks. Especially a colonel. Carlos felt eyes on him and turned, looking at Major Schlosser, looking at him.

"What's the matter with you, Sergeant?" the major asked. "Your behavior is quite odd."

"I ..." The sounds of approaching vehicles cut off his reply.

Major Schlosser waved him silent.

General von Hanstein stepped out of his office, straightening his tunic.

"SS troops, sir," Lieutenant Bachman said. "A lot of SS troops."

"SS?" von Hanstein said. "That explains a few things. Those arrogant bastards think they're invincible. That's why they took the northern route. Showboating. Do you recognize any of them, Hans?"

Hans Bachman peered out the freshly cleaned window of the old farmhouse. He shook his head. "I ... I'm not sure. I think I know this colonel, sir. I mean, I've seen him around."

"Show them in," von Hanstein said, then walked back into his office. "Bring them to me." He'd be damned if he'd grovel to a colonel, even if he was one of those goddamned SS people.

Boots sounded on the porch.

Sergeant Carlos Rogillo opened the front door for Major Schlosser to greet the visiting troops. The major stepped out, smiling. Carlos stepped to one side and looked around the Major. There were women in this group. That's odd, he thought. The SS did have women in its ranks, but they were usually office personnel. The

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colonel and his senior officers were probably making a lark of this trip, carrying their personal cunts along with them. That's usually what those perverted SS females were used for. All of them were twisted in some deviant manner. Carlos looked for a familiar face. He knew Sergeant Zimmerman. He couldn't find him in the milling crowd. Odd, the SS troops seemed to be taking up a loose defensive position. Paranoid bunch of bastards.

Carlos turned around and walked to his desk, automatically straightening his uniform. Like most regular troops, he was slightly afraid of the SS. They just were not normal people.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," Major Schlosser said. "Please come in. You must be tired. After you've freshened up, we have coffee and cake."

"Danke, Colonel," Lenz said with a smile.

Schlosser stepped to one side. The man behind the colonel seemed somehow familiar to him. Tall, with a lot of gray in his hair. Hard mean eyes, too. Old for a major. Probably fifty. The man stared directly at him and Schlosser was suddenly very uncomfortable under the hard gaze.

He was only seconds away from becoming a whole lot more uncomfortable. For a very brief period of time.

Colonel Lenz and Ben Raines stepped past Schlosser and entered the command post.

General von Hanstein looked up from his desk, stared at the tall major, and felt the blood drain from his face. "That's Ben Raines!" he screamed.

Jersey gave Major Schlosser a burst in the belly from her H&K and the slugs knocked the major backward. Sergeant Carlos Rogillo grabbed for his pistol and Major Dietl shot him through the heart. Carlos fell across

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the pastry table and died with his face on a cookie platter.

General von Hanstein felt the muzzle of a .45 not too gently touch the side of his face. He cut his eyes and stared into the face of Ben Raines.

"Welcome to Texas," Ben said. "You asshole!"

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## Chapter Fourteen

The battle for the headquarters of General von Hanstein was very short and very brutal. The Rebels and the GSG 9 men took only a few prisoners, General von Hanstein among them. The (Rebels and the GSG 9 personnel gathered up all the weapons, ammo, and food, loaded up the beds of trucks, and took off, heading south. The radio operator had been killed in the first burst of gunfire, so it was doubtful he managed to get off any messages ... but Ben wasn't going to take any chances.

"We'd never make it by heading north," he told Colonel Lenz. "So we head south and cut east once past Austin, then cut north once we're clear of Schleyer's Eighth Division lines. I've marked maps in case we get separated."

"And if we meet enemy long the way?" Colonel Lenz inquired, a hard glint in his eyes. The commander of the German troops liked the way Ben Raines fought a war.

Ben smiled. "Why ... I guess we'll just have to engage them, won't we?"

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The two men laughed, shook hands, and ran to their vehicles.

General von Hanstein, trussed up like a pig, lay in the bed of a deuce and a half. He glowered at everyone who came near him, and refused to speak a word.

"They've discovered the camp," Corrie told Ben, monitoring on a Blackshirt radio. "Hoffman's ordered a full-scale search underway immediately. He's ordered planes up."

"Head straight for the ruins of San Antonio," Ben said. "They'll never expect us to do that. We can't make it tonight, but we can make this state park a few miles down the road and camouflage the vehicles. The roads are in too bad a shape to try running at night without lights. Step on it, Coop."

The convoy made the old overgrown state park, hurriedly camouflaged their trucks and armored cars, and settled in for a very tense night.

"Do we bump Therm and tell him where we are?" Corrie asked.

"Negative. No transmissions of any kind. No fires, no smoking. Cold camp. We just sit tight and silent."

"Ike is going to be screaming and climbing the walls," Corrie reminded Ben.

"Good," Ben said, opening a field ration packet and smelling it before tasting it. "Maybe he'll lose some weight." '

Ike McGowan wasn't the only one screaming and climbing the walls. Field Marshal Hoffman was having a temper tantrum. Hitler would have been proud. Between violent fits of temper, which included breaking

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glasses, cups, and one very old bottle of brandy, Hoffman ordered a replacement commanding general in to take over von Hanstein's division,

a massive air and land search underway, the sentry who let the Rebels and the GSG 9 men through put up against a wall and shot, and then a bottle of aspirin and two tranquilizers. When he finally managed to calm down, he called a meeting of his staff officers. None of whom were looking forward to the meeting.

"The few wounded the Rebels missed during their coup de grace said many of the attackers spoke German," Hoffman told his people in a surprisingly calm voice. "That means the GSG 9 people have linked up with Raines. The goddamn filthy traitors. The wounded also heard General von Hanstein scream out Ben Raines's name from his office. They also confirm that General von Hanstein was taken prisoner. Thrown into the back of a truck. The nerve of that bastard Raines. Taking a small force deep into our territory and carrying out a successful raid."

Before he could continue, an aide rushed into the room and handed him a slip of paper, then quickly departed before Hoffman could read the radio message and once more fly into a fit of rage.

Hoffman read the message and barely managed to contain his anger. He took several deep breaths and composed himself. He said, "At least a full division of Ecuadorian, Peruvian, and Venezuelan troops have closed our highway supply routes. Those supplies that we were expecting will not arrive. The convoy was ambushed and all supplies seized. There were no survivors. All supplies will have to be flown in from this point on." He was silent for a time. "The world seems to be

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massing against us," he said finally, his words softly spoken. "But we expected that. All right. I anticipated something of this nature. I will shift Eighth Division down to guard the airport and roads around what is left of San Antonio. Supplies will be flown into there and trucked out into the field. Eighth Division will also have the responsibility of providing guards for the supply convoys. From this moment on, we are in no rush. We advance daily, but we do so slowly and carefully."

"Then we are standing down from our defensive positions?" a staff officer asked cautiously, knowing the question had to be posed.

"Yes," Hoffman said, no anger in his reply. "I overreacted and will admit it."

"What about the message we received from the commander of Base Camp One?" Hoffman was asked.

Cecil had sent word that Hoffman could, under the terms agreed to earlier, freely and safely staff hospitals within the boundaries of what used to be Louisiana- and was now a neutral zone-but under no circumstances would he allow any SS troops to be treated in that area. He had issued orders that any and all SS troops were to be shot on sight, no matter what their physical condition might be.

Hoffman merely shrugged at that. "We will provide care for our elite troops. We do not need the protection of a neutral zone for them. The Rebels in the field will not attack a hospital. General Cecil Jefferys's orders came as no surprise. Considering what he is. All combat troops will stay out of the neutral zone."

Hoffman met the eyes of his staff officers. "Let's return to the matter



of Ben Raines. That son of a bitch!"

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Ben and his command, deep in enemy territory, hit the small patrol of Blackshirts very swiftly and very hard. The five vehicle patrol had made the mistake of entering the old state park. It was their last mistake. Five rockets from Armbrust launchers turned the trucks into blazing death traps. Within seconds the Rebels and the GSG 9 personnel had put out the flames so the smoke would not be seen and had dragged away the searingly hot rubble, the bodies entombed forever in the twisted and melted metal.

"For years I have heard of Ben Raines and the Rebels," Major Streicher said to Ben, as they sat in the darkness of the cold camp. "At first we thought it was just a rumor. Then rumor became fact as more and more countries-splintered and torn as they may be- began adopting the Rebel philosophy. Those countries who are sending troops here are now virtually free of crime and are rapidly rebuilding their societies. Those who have not adopted the Rebel way are nothing but raging battle zones. They will have to be dealt with at some future point. By us."

"I'm afraid you're right," Ben agreed, grimacing as the night breeze picked up and brought with it the odor of freshly charred human flesh. "That is, providing we manage to knock the blocks from under Hoffman and his Nazis."

The major smiled in the night. "Oh, we will, General. All of us sensed that the moment we met you and your people. Your movement is unstoppable. We might die, but the movement will live on."

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"Ike's raising hell, General," Corrie said, walking up. "He's getting everybody else all worked up, too."

"Let him holler," Ben said, wishing he had a hot cup of coffee and a smoke to go with it. "We'll bump him as soon as we're clear of this box we're in. I don't even want to risk a burst. The damn Blackshirts are all around us. They could get lucky."

"This General Ike McGowan," Colonel Lenz said. "Will he send out rescue patrols?"

"No," Ben said quickly. "He'll bluster and beller but that's just for my benefit. He's letting me know how he feels about my taking chances."

"He's right, you know?" Colonel Lenz said softly.

Ben chuckled good-naturedly. "My God! You and Ike are going to hit it off famously."

At first light, Hoffman's troops began their slow northern advance along seven fronts. There was little the Rebels could do to stop them. Ben had ordered his heavy artillery moved north and hidden. For every big gun and battle tank the Rebels had, Hoffman had thirty. The Rebels just could not stand toe to toe with the Blackshirts and slug it out. Not yet. They had to wear them down, little by little.

Ben and his command pulled out, heading east and staying on little used

county roads, getting lost more than once, for many of the roads were not on any map. Dusk found them camped along the banks of a large creek or a small river--none of them were sure about that.

"I think it's the Blanco," Cooper said, looking at a

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map. "This road is not marked. If it is, we've got to cross Interstate 35 tomorrow."

"And we know from radio intercepts that Hoffman is shifting his Eighth Division over to San Antonio," Jersey added. "We might run into them."

"I think we'd better stay right where we are," Ben ended that discussion. "We've got good cover and water. In a couple of days we'll be in the clear. Stand down, gang." i

Forward people both saw and heard Hoffman's Eighth Division on their way southwest to San Antonio. And it was a massive movement. At noon of the third day's hiding, the recon teams reported no more movement of troops and equipment. The highways were silent and empty.

"Let's go, people," Ben ordered. "We'll be in the clear in two hours."

Luck was with them and two hours later, they were rolling up 77, big and bold as brass, heading for Waco ... or what was left of it.

"According to these reports," Major Dietl said. "Hoffman's Seventh Division is only a few miles to our west."

"Sure," Colonel Lenz said with a smile. "That's why General Raines is taking this route. Who would think to look for us here?"

Dietl grinned and shook his head. "Working with the general is going to be interesting."

"To say the least."

The words had just left his mouth when the words of forward Scouts screamed into Corrie's ears. "Gunships heading south. Following the highway."

"Over there," Ben said, pointing to the ruins of a

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small town. "Duck in between those buildings. Order Stingers readied."

As she always did, Beth had slipped on another headset and was monitoring the frequencies used by Hoffman. "They're calling in our position now, General," she said.

Cooper pulled into an old service station. The gloom was comforting.

"The choppers are beginning a slow circle, General," Corrie said, after speaking with forward recon. "Staying out of range of SAMs."

"I wondered when Hoffman's boys and girls would smarten up," Ben said, getting out of the armored car and stretching. "Well, we can expect some

sort of company pretty damn quick. What kind of gunships are they, Corrie?"

"Scouts don't know. Say they've never seen anything like them. But they resemble our Apaches. They say the firepower looks awesome. But the choppers are not making any hostile moves. They are staying well away from the Scouts position, maintaining a slow circle."

"Dig in for a fight," Ben ordered. "We can't move from here. Those gunships would cut us to pieces."

Corrie was calmly setting up her radio, Jersey was standing in the open door of the service part of the old filling station, Cooper was checking out his M-60 machine gun, and Beth had taken up a position at the rear of the building. Other Rebels had spread out up and down the ruins of the small street. Stingers were readied in case the circling gunships of Hoffman did come into range.

Men of the GSG 9 had quickly appraised the layout of the town and taken positions without having to be

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told. In less than three minutes, the town appeared to be deserted.

"Blackshirt units are on the way," Corrie said. "From the north, west, and south."

Ben nodded his head and checked his Thompson, then checked his side-arms. "How many of them?"

"Too damn many," Corrie replied. "And coming as fast as road conditions allow."

Ben smiled at her initial reply.

Cooper unwrapped a candy bar from a ration packet and took a bite. Jersey popped a fresh stick of gum into her mouth. She glanced at Ben. He winked at her and Jersey laughed and signaled thumbs-up. Beth was laying out thirty round clips of .223 ammo for easy reach.

"Colonel Lenz reports his men are in position," Corrie said. "Recon staying in place and asking if there is a way to get a Stinger to them?"

"Negative," Ben told her. Ben walked around the shop area a couple of times. He stopped and said, "Corrie? Now you can bump our people and tell them where we are and that we just might be in a little bit of trouble."

Jersey rolled her eyes at that, then grinned and said, "And tell them if they want to get in on the action they'd better hurry. We're about to kick Nazi ass all over the place."

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## Chapter Fifteen

Hoffman was ecstatic as he studied the huge wall map of Texas. He could not hide his wide smile. He actually felt like dancing. He controlled that unseemly urge and rubbed his hands together and chuckled. "We have that arrogant rogue bastard now," he gloated, for he had correctly

anticipated what route Ben might take back north. "He cannot slip out of this box. Shift units of the Seventh Division north and south of Raines's location to prevent Rebels from coming to his aid. I want gunships up immediately to cover the area east of his position. Nail the lid down tight. Now, General Ben Raines. Now, I have you." He turned to face an aide. "Just as soon as all troops and gunships are in position, kill that son of a bitch. Blow that damn town to bloody splinters and dust."

The staff officers surrounding Hoffman all applauded at the brilliance of their field Marshal. He accepted the loud accolade with modesty.

"Corrie, relay the message to our people. Maintain radio silence. Cooper, pass the word: Take two day's rations,

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as much ammo as each person can comfortably carry, and leave everything else. We were using Black-shirt vehicles so let's leave some presents behind with them."

Cooper grinned and nodded his head in understanding. The vehicles would be booby-trapped.

"Split up into four or five person teams and head for the river bed and work east toward the Brazos. But don't try to follow the river north. They'll be expecting that. Keep working east until we reach our units along I-45. Do it right now. Move, Coop. And get back here quickly. Let's get our shit together, gang. We've got to bug out. I have a feeling Hoffman is going to use heavy artillery on this old town."

Teams began exiting the town within a minute. Ben's team waited, knowing they would be the last to leave.

"I must insist that you leave now, General," Colonel Lenz told Ben.

"Take off, Colonel," Ben said with a smile. "Godspeed."

Lenz gripped Ben's shoulder for a moment, then saluted. "We'll take General von Hanstein with us."

Ben nodded. "If he gets to be too much trouble, shoot the son of a bitch."

Lenz laughed. "It will be my pleasure to do so, General." The German GSG 9 commander was gone at a silent run.

"And so once more, it is with regret that we leave a lovely scenic spot," Beth said straight-faced. "What a delightful time we've had here."

Even though Beth was not prone to wisecracking, ever since she had seen an old travelogue tape she had

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mimicked the announcer whenever they got into a tight spot.

"Make a note in your diary to return here someday," Ben said with a smile.

"Hell, there won't be anything left in an hour," Beth replied.

"Or less," Ben added.

"That's it," Corrie announced, taking off her headphones and slipping into the straps of the back-pack radio. "We're alone. All teams have gone."

"Bug-out time," Ben said, looking at Cooper. He was just finishing his booby-trapping of the armored car. "Did you leave a nice surprise for them, Coop?"

"They'll get a bang out of it."

Jersey groaned at the old joke.

"Let's go, gang," Ben said.

They slipped out and headed for the river. Ben's piece of a map did not give a name for the stream. It was the San something; that part of the map was creased over and not legible. Ben's team had not gone half a mile before the artillery barrage started. They paused and looked back as the old town exploded.

"Another fifteen minutes and we'd have been chopped meat," Jersey said.

"Speaking of meat," Cooper said.

"You're always hungry, Coop," Ben said. "Come on. It's hours before we can stop for that."

"I'll die of starvation!"

"You'll get shot in the ass by me if you don't move," Jersey warned him.

Cooper took one look at Jersey and moved right out. Smartly, as the British say.

The four Scouts had left their forward positions and

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moved out first, under orders from Colonel Lenz. He told them to head for the river fast, like bunny rabbits, and stay there until they linked up with their General and stay with him. He didn't have to tell them he was doing that without Ben's notice. They guessed that.

A mile from town, Beth spotted the Scouts waiting for them. "Don't fuss at them, General," she said. "I bet you Colonel Lenz ordered them to link up with us."

"You're probably right." Ben waved at the Scouts to take the lead and they set a route step that was not uncomfortably fast, but covered a lot of ground. The small group held to cover as much as possible, avoiding open fields.

Ben was the first to hear the unmistakable whapping of rotor blades. "Down!" he called. "Choppers."

Corrie was listening intently to her earphones. "Teams have been spotted," she said, lying beside Ben. "Hoffman knows we bugged out."

"We're in for it now," Ben replied. "He'll be throwing everything he's got at us."

"We're spotted!" Beth shouted, listening to the Black-shirt's frequency.

"He'll be coming in for a strafing run," Ben called, watching the chopper begin a slow turn. "Good God, look at the armament on that damn thing."

Then the helicopter disintegrated in the air as a Rebel Stinger, fired from a hidden Rebel team about a half a mile away impacted against it. Metal parts and body parts were flung in all directions and the ball of fire fell out of the sky and crashed to earth.

"Let's go!" Ben shouted, jumping to his feet. "Head for that stand of timber."

Reaching the timber and pausing to catch their

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breath, the small band of Rebels listened for the sounds of more choppers. None came.

"Probably a lone wolf," Ben said, after taking a small sip of tepid water from his canteen. "You picking up any enemy chatter, Beth?"

"Negative."

Corrie didn't mention that Ike and other Rebel commanders were raising hell about Ben's disappearance and continuing silence. Ben already knew that.

"Let's cover some ground while we can."

By nightfall, they had put the destroyed town far behind them. They ate cold rations and Ben told them to get some rest. He had some thinking to do.

Should they move on? That just might be a dandy way to get seriously dead by the guns of their own people. Before they had bugged out of the little town, passwords had been chosen: Alamo and Bowie. But with very nervous trigger fingers, there might not be time for words.

Ben slept for a few hours and then roused the others. "We'll chance it. Let's move out. Everybody remember the challenge? OK. Heads up."

They had not gone a thousand yards before the point man dropped down, the others following.

The point Scout silently wriggled back to the main body. "Blackshirts," he whispered. "Looks like a big bunch of them."

"Go around them," Ben said. "To the east. Coop, pass the word. Anybody makes a noise, we're all dead."

It took them nearly half an hour of slow and silent moving, being very careful where they put a boot down. By the time the Rebels had worked their way clear of

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the Blackshirt encampment, the smell of nervous sweat was becoming sharp

in the surprisingly cool night.

A mile away, behind them, hard gunfire splintered and fractured the night. A few hundred yards in front of them, sudden movement and the sounds of boots hitting the ground flattened the Rebels out, still and silent, hearts thudding heavily. Sharp commands came to them and then a Blackshirt patrol came running past, heading for the gunfire. They were running so close all the Rebels could feel the impact of boots upon the earth.

"Move out," Ben whispered. "Straight east. These sons of bitches are all around us." He didn't have to add "be careful."

A hour later, the Rebels came to a tiny creek, the water no more than a few inches deep, and took time out to splash cold water on their faces.

"Where in the shit are we?" Cooper whispered.

"Alive," Jersey told him.

They walked on. They were bone tired and nerve-taut, but each careful step put them that much further away from enemy territory.

Just before dawn, during a much needed rest period, Beth suddenly perked up, sniffed, and asked, "What's that smell, General?"

"The river. I smelled it a few minutes ago. That's why I called this break. I want to wait until light to look it over. I think we're clear. I think I know where we are. If it hasn't been blown, there should be a bridge about two miles to the east of here."

"I sure could use some hot food, clean socks, and a bath," Cooper said.

"The bath, I certainly agree with," Jersey stuck it to

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him. "But stay close, you smell so bad you're keeping the mosquitoes away."

"You're just too kind to me, Jersey," Cooper popped back, putting a hand on her knee. "I always knew that deep down you really cared."

Jersey looked down at the hand on her leg. "I'll break it, Cooper."

He removed his hand. Quickly.

"Sleep," Ben put an end to the harmless bantering that had been going on between the two for years. "All of you. I'll stand first watch."

The team slept until the warm rays of light filtering through the trees woke them. They looked around. Ben was gone.

The first team to have bugged out of the town had reached a Rebel patrol and reported. Ike had flown in to where Ben was supposed to have been, a few miles north of I-20, and was studying a wall map.

"If they made it through all those patrols and gun-ships," he said, "I figure they should be at the river by now. We know there are Blackshirts east of the river, but only in very small patrols. We have more patrols working there than they do."

"Settle down, Ike," Dr. Chase told him. "If anything had happened to Ben, one of his team would have radioed in. You know that."

"Unless the whole team was whacked," Ike said grimly. "And we've got to consider that." He started pacing the floor and cussing.

"I swear to God, Ike," Chase said. "If you don't settle

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down, I'm going to tranquilize you. And with a butt like yours, I couldn't miss with the needle."

Ike tried to look hurt. He couldn't pull it off. "I'll have you know I've lost a few pounds, Doc."

"Well, you found them again. Sit down, Ike!"

Ike stopped his pacing and sat down. Chase poured him half a glass of bourbon. "This was found buried a couple of days ago. Several cases of it. I can't think of a better time to get loose. Drink up, Ike. Ben will make it. He always has."

"Luck has a bad habit of running out on a man, Lamar. And Ben's been doing this for a long time. Too long, I'm thinking."

"I stopped trying to get him out of the field entirely a long time ago. He'll die in the field, Ike. You know it, and I know it."

"Yeah," Ike said softly and cut his eyes to the silent field telephone on the desk.

Hoffman had been in a blue funk since his troops had found no bodies in the rubble of the old town. That elusive son of a bitch Raines had slipped out like a silent snake. Hoffman had poured twenty thousand troops into that area and still Raines had slipped away. It was quite impossible, of course. But Raines had certainly done it.

Incredible. The man and his Rebels moved like ghosts and fought like possessed demons. And obviously they took General von Hanstein with them. They would probably torture him. Poor von Hanstein. He would have the divisional chaplain hold a service for him. Yes. That would be the Christian thing to do. And Jesus

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Hoffman certainly considered himself to be a Christian man. He went to mass every Sunday. And didn't he have the good of everyone in mind? Certainly he did. It was just that some people were born to lead and others were born to serve. Or be exterminated. Hoffman didn't consider that unchristian at all.

An aide knocked and entered. Hoffman looked up. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"That fellow up in Mississippi and Alabama, Moi Sambura? He wishes to speak with you on the radio, sir."

A grimace passed over the fine Christian features of Field Marshal Hoffman. "I thought the Rebels were jamming all their frequencies?"



"They have stopped. Momentarily, I'm sure."

Hoffman rose to his boots. "Oh, very well. I wonder what that damn nigger wants now?"

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BOOK TWO

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Chapter One

The Constitution preserves the advantage of being armed which Americans possess over the people of almost every other nation ... where the governments are afraid to trust the people with arms.

-James Madison

"What are you listening to, Corrie?" Ben asked.

"Some interesting exchanges between Hoffman and that nut that General Jefferys hates so, Moi Samburu. You want to listen?"

"No," Ben said. "You can tell me the gist of it after those two clowns stop their babbling." Ben paused in the rolling of a cigarette. "I thought Moi was being jammed?"

"I got a burst from Base Camp One about five minutes ago. General Jefferys ordered the jamming stopped for a time so he could find out what Moi is up to."

"Good idea." Ben lit up and watched Corrie take notes of the conversation between the Nazi and the nut.

Ben and team were about fifteen hundred yards from a bridge that spanned the Brazos, the Rebels hidden

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amid the thick vegetation. So far, Scouts had reported no signs of life on the other side, but Ben was not convinced. If they were caught under fire while crossing that bridge, it would be over for them. Rainfall had been heavy and the river was up.

Corrie rolled her eyes and grimaced. Ben smiled. Moi must really be on a verbal rampage. Back before the war he was an extreme militant who advocated and preached loudly that blacks should declare war and kill all whites. Just as Wink Payne hated all blacks and wanted them all dead. Now they were both aligned with Hoffman against the Rebels. Neither man had enough sense to understand that if the Rebels were defeated, Hoffman would turn on them and kill them both. It was, as Ben had said before, a very unholy alliance. Not to mention very unstable. Both Moi and Wink possessed unpredictable and volatile personalities. Ben had hoped for several years now that they would meet and kill each other. No such luck.

Corrie sighed and removed her headset. "Moi and Wink have had a major falling-out. Moi wants to attack Wink's position and Wink wants to declare war on all blacks. Hoffman told both of them to maintain peace or he'd send troops in to be sure it was done."

Ben was reflective for a moment, then he smiled. "Now that is interesting. When we get out of this hole we're in, we'll just have to see if we can agitate them both a little bit."

"Rebels coming in!" a lookout passed the word. "About forty of them."

A half a dozen teams of Rebels and GSG 9 troops, all looking weary and bedraggled entered the camp. Ben stood up and shook hands with Major Dietl.

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"It certainly is good to see you alive and well, General," the major said with a smile. "It's been a rather dicey couple of days."

"It has for a fact," Ben agreed. "Sit down and rest. Eat. We'll cross over just as soon as I'm sure we're not walking into an ambush."

Major Dietl sank to the ground with a sigh of relief.

A Scout walked into the encampment. "Barry's back, General. He said it was an easy swim. He says it's clean on the other side."

"Easy swim for him," Ben said with a smile. "He's Ike-trained. He's got web-feet and gills. All right, Paul. Take your Scouts across and cover the other side for us. We'll be along presently."

"Right, sir."

The Scouts secured the east end of the bridge while Ben and the others packed up their meager supplies and began the crossing. They marched for another ten miles and saw no signs of human life. They passed only a few deserted farms; most had been destroyed by the retreated Rebels. Ben had left precious little for Hoffman's army.

Ben called a halt and told Corrie to start sending out very short coded messages. "Let's see what we get in reply."

They got nearly every team that had bugged out of the old town. The teams were all within a five mile range of each other.

"Tell them to start heading north," Ben said, pointing to a spot on the map. "We'll link up there."

Cecil had Rebel personnel on the Texas-Louisiana border and intercepted the coded messages. He sent word to Ike and planes were waiting on the small strip

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when Ben and his group arrived. Two hours later they were back in Ben's CP just north of I-20.

"Where you worried about me, Ike?" Ben asked with a smile, removing his filthy shirt and tossing it aside.

"Not a damn bit," Ike said stiffly. "I'm tired of worryin' about you."

Ben laughed at him and Ike exploded. He outlined, for the umpteenth time, all the reasons why Ben should stay out of the field and start acting more like a commanding general. Lamar Chase came in and sat down, after pouring himself a cup of coffee. He listened and chuckled occasionally at Ike's antics. He knew that Ike's words were bouncing off Ben like water off a duck.

Finally, Ben, showered and shaved and dressed in clean clothing, looked at Ike. With a bland expression on his face, Ben said, "I'm sorry. Were you speaking to me, Ike?"

Ike stood sputtering and stammering and flapping his arms like a fat bear. He finally stalked out of the room, muttering about associating with crazy people. He slammed the door behind him.

"You going to lecture me, too, Lamar?"

"Nope," the doctor said. "It wouldn't do any good, would it?"

"Not a bit."

"So our little talk of a few weeks ago is right out the window, huh, Ben?"

"Not entirely, Lamar. But if I see that my taking a chance will accomplish something, I think it's worth the risk. You want to argue that?"

"No." The doctor was strangely quiet.

"Are you sick?"

Lamar smiled and shook his head. "No. Just glad

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you're back, Ben." He lifted his coffee mug in a salute in Ben's direction, then left the room.

"What the hell's wrong with him?" Jersey blurted.

"He's getting mellow in his old age, I suppose. Have our spooks gotten any information out of von Hanstein?"

"Nothing that we didn't already know," Beth said, her hair still damp from the shower. "I talked to one of those weirdos from intelligence, and it's like we thought all along: Hoffman doesn't really have much of a plan. The spook thought von Hanstein was telling the truth."

"Beth, you make damn sure the general is not physically harmed. Some of our people are certain to be taken prisoner, and I want to be able to have something to swap ... unharmed."

"Field Marshal Jesus Hoffman on the horn, General," Corrie said.

"No kidding?"

"No kidding, sir."

"I'll be damned," Ben said, taking the seat Corrie just vacated for him.

He keyed the mic. "This is Ben Raines."

"General Raines," Hoffman's voice sprang into Ben's ears. "This is Field Marshal Hoffman. I believe you have one of my generals."

"That I do."

"He is an old and dear friend of mine, General."

"General von Hanstein has not been harmed nor will he be, Field Marshal. I expect the same treatment to be accorded should any of my personnel be taken prisoner."

"I assure you that will be the case."

"Thank you."

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"Now, then, General Raines. Shall we discuss the release of General von Hanstein?"

"Oh, I think not, Field Marshal. Von Hanstein is really quite comfortable here and we have many, many things to discuss."

"He will tell you absolutely nothing, General." Hoffman's tone turned a bit cooler, losing some of its geniality. Ben felt all that buddy-buddy crap was forced anyway. "Not even under torture."

"Field Marshal, I have no intention whatsoever of torturing von Hanstein. He is in comfortable, if not lavish quarters. He is eating the same food we are, and except for some sore feet from all that walking we did bugging out of that little town before you starting shelling it, your general is in fine shape." Ben chuckled and that seemed to infuriate Hoffman. Ben heard his sharp intake of breath.

Hoffman's tone turned to ice. "You cannot win, General. Your position is quite unenviable. I assure you of that."

"Oh? That's news to me, Field Marshal." Ben smiled and winked at his team. In order for them all to hear, he had turned on the speaker and cut the volume low to prevent feedback. "Seems to me like my people have been kicking your goose-stepping ass all over the place."

Hoffman almost lost it at that. Ben could practically feel the hate coming over the airwaves. Hoffman took several deep breaths and said, "You will live to regret that remark, General Raines."

"I doubt it, Hoffman." Ben dropped all pretense of formality, since neither of them meant any of it. "But I will tell you something I really believe: this just might be the end for both of us."

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Hoffman was silent for a time. Then he sighed. "All right. I will admit that has crossed my mind. But it does not have to be, General."

"I don't much care for any of the options you're about to present me, Field Marshal."

"Surely you recognize I represent the master race?"

Ben laughed. "The master race. You've got to be kidding. You're just like the rest of us, Hoffman. All mixed up. You've got German, Spanish, Indian, and no telling what else coursing through your veins. Where do you come off with this master race crap?"

"I think, General, that you are trying to bait me," Hoffman replied, avoiding the question. "You know exactly what I mean."

"This conversation is beginning to bore me, Field Marshal. It's just about time for dinner, and I'm hungry. Is there anything else on your mind?"

"Your arrogance will defeat you, General Raines." Hoffman could scarcely keep his anger in check. He was so angry his voice trembled, for he had radioed on an open frequency and knew that thousands of people—including many of his own—were listening to the exchange. And he was not making a very good showing. "I will bury you all!"

"A Russian leader said pretty much the same thing, decades ago," Ben reminded the Nazi leader. "He was wrong, and so are you. You might kill me, Hoffman, but the Rebel movement will go on, and eventually, be victorious. You don't have much sense, but I think you have enough to know that."

Hoffman lost it. He exploded in anger and started cursing Ben, in German, Spanish, and English, the profanity all jumbled up in languages.

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Ben laughed at the man and signed off. He turned to his team and said, "That will blow the lid off, gang. He's got to recoup his verbal losses. He'll hit us hard and hit us soon. Put everybody on full alert."

"I can't understand why he radioed on an open frequency." Beth said.

"He's so arrogant he felt his troops would get a morale lift by listening to the conversation," Ben said, moving to a wall map. "It never occurred to him that he would come off second best." He studied the map for a moment. "I'm guessing now, but I'll bet that he'll probably move up artillery and start pounding us. All along this line. He'll try to punch through. Corrie, send a runner and tell Chase to pack up and move out. Have him shift all his MASH units back twenty miles. Right now!"

Ned Hawkins of the New Texas Rangers had entered the room and was standing quietly, listening. "Have we lost Texas, General?" he asked.

Ben shook his head. "No." He studied the map for a moment longer. Then he smiled grimly. "But we're going to let Hoffman have some territory. We'll let him punch through," he jabbed a finger at the map, "along this line, and commit his troops. While he's doing that, we'll be doing an end-around and harass the hell out of him on three fronts. From the south, east, and west. But we won't be able to do much in bumble-bee size teams. We'll reform in company strength and make him fight us along a line that conceivably could stretch for a thousand miles. He'll have to match us unit for unit or we'll be all over and around him by infiltration."

Ike had walked in with Doctor Chase. "Just as soon as we do the

end-around and counterattack, Hoffman

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will order General Jahn's paratroopers to surface and hit our northern people hard," Ike said.

"Yes. So, Ike, you and Rebet take your battalions and all the latest reinforcements and move north, up to the thirty-sixth parallel. That'll put nearly seven thousand people under your command. You've got to keep Jahn's paratroopers contained and off our backs. As soon as Hoffman makes his push, Jahn might regroup into a major force and strike ..." His eyes searched the big wall map north of the thirty-sixth parallel, "... somewhere. And he might decide to stay in small units and wage a guerrilla war. I don't know."

"Whichever way he goes, we'll hold them, Ben," Ike said. "But where does this put you, Ben? As if I can't guess."

Ben smiled. "In the field, Ike. I'm reforming my company and heading south. We can't afford to let even one able-bodied person stay back in this fight." He winked at Ike. "And I do a pretty fair job out there in the field."

Ike nodded his head. "I won't try to talk you out of it, Ben. I'm through with that." He stepped closer and stuck out his hand. "Good luck, Ben."

Ben shook the hand. "Same to you, Ike." He dropped the hand and smiled. "Maybe someday we can all sit around and reminisce about this."

Ike returned the smile, but like Ben's smile, it was forced. Both men knew this was root-hog-or-die time. That they would never see each other again after this moment was a real possibility.

Chase knew it, and walked to the table and poured three drinks, about two fingers each. "Drink up, boys. This is no time to be maudlin."

186 The men clinked glasses. Ben said, "To victory." He looked over at Jersey. "Right, Jersey?" She smiled. "Kick-ass time, General!"

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## Chapter Two

At dawn, Hoffman's big guns had been moved into position and opened up. From the ruins of Forth Worth-Dallas west over to Midland, Hoffman's gunners lobbed in rounds. But they fell on no Rebel positions. Ben had guessed accurately and shifted his troops. The incoming rounds created a lot of sound and fury but the Rebels sustained no casualties. And as Ben had predicted, when the big guns fell silent, Hoffman's troops massed for a northern push across I-20. They surged across, and found nothing.

Hoffman stood just north of the smoking ruins of Abilene, a look of confusion on his face. That was quickly replaced by fury when a runner handed him a message.

"Rebels are attacking our flanks and hitting hard to the south of us,"

Hoffman said. "Have we had any word from General Jahn?"

"General Jahn has been forced to regroup in order to combat the multinational force operating to the north of us," Hoffman was informed.

"Five Division is ranging far ahead of the other columns, sir," a young captain said, excitement in

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his voice. "The swastika is flying proudly over the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth. We are victorious!"

Hoffman stared at the young man. "How many Rebels has Five Division killed?"

"Why ... ah ... none, sir. But they have taken prisoner a group of people believed to be agents of the Rebel government. They deny it, of course. They claim to be from something called the Church of the Only Holy Way and they are demanding protection."

Hoffman continued to stare at the young captain. "Protection from what?"

"Us, sir."

"Send them to Colonel Barlach," Hoffman ordered. "He'll get the truth from them."

That would be the last time anyone would ever hear from the members of the Church of the Only Holy Way, whose members believed in nonviolence and who would not pick up a gun and fight for their dubious beliefs.

Hoffman clenched his fists in anger. "Have there been any Rebels reported killed?"

Hoffman's aides stood in silence. Their muteness gave the Field Marshal the answer to his question. His thousands of men had not killed a single Rebel.

"We have conquered nothing and we are victorious over destroyed cities and miles of desolation," Hoffman said. "We have not spilled one drop of Rebel blood." And I have led my troops into a box, he admitted silently.

Hoffman walked away from the group, to stand silently in the shade provided by what remained of one wall of a burned out building. "Ghosts," he muttered under his breath. "I'm in a battle with shadows and invisible

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whirlwinds. I can't win this way. It's impossible. How can we be victorious over an enemy who will not stand and fight?"

An aide approached him. "Sir? Your quarters are ready and the battle maps are up and accurate to the hour."

"By all means," Hoffman said, sarcasm thick in his voice. "Let me view this ravaged land and all its conquered and beaten people."

Hoffman stood in his quarters and looked at the huge map. He shook his head. "We're in a box," he finally spoke. "I led us right into a box."

"But one that we could break out of anytime we wished," a staff officer said.

"And go where?" Hoffman asked, touches of desperation in his voice. He sat down at his desk and rubbed his face with his hands. "Call in my generals," he said. "We have to have a meeting. We cannot continue like this. We are accomplishing nothing."

"We could advance, sir," a colonel spoke. "We could move right up to the thirty-sixth parallel."

Hoffman looked at the older man. They just don't understand, he thought. But I do. In all our years of war, we have relied on massive troop strength to conquer the people.

We should have stayed in South America.

He pushed that thought from him. But it wouldn't go far. It stayed in the back of his mind, nagging at him like an invisible but very vocal old hag.

We should have stayed in South America.

Shit! Hoffman silently raged.

Our supply lines have been cut, Hoffman thought, swiveling in his chair to face the map that he hated to

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look at. We have outdistanced what few trucks are getting through from the south. My elite shock troops are fighting for their lives against General McGowan and the multinational forces a hundred miles to the north and if I try to send troops in to beef up my paratroopers, the Rebels will ambush them. Most of my terrorist teams have been found and wiped out. Those two idiots to the east, Moi Sambura and Wink Payne are no help at all. Luis Carrero and his followers have proved to be less than worthless. All talk and no action. That's what I get for putting much faith in a former Los Angeles street gang leader, a black radical, and a white redneck.

We should have stayed in South America.

"Get my generals in here," Hoffman said wearily. "Order all troops to halt advances." He slammed a hand on his desk. "Goddamnit!"

Ben and his company had worked their way up close to the southernmost contingent of General Schmidt's third division. The rolling prairie country along the North Concho was very deceptive, and the Rebels had used that to their advantage, leaving their vehicles several miles away and advancing on foot and crawling on their bellies. Dusk was settling over the land, and the Rebels smelled fresh blood.

"Scouts report no more than two companies occupying the town," Corrie said. "Nearest reinforcements are forty-five miles to the northwest, thirty-five miles to the east, and forty-five miles to the north. The south is empty."

"Field Marshal Hoffman has called for a meeting of



his generals," Beth reported. She was monitoring the Blackshirts' frequencies. "Hoffman is slightly pissed."

Jersey, lying beside Ben, said, "Hoffman stepped on his dick this time."

Ben softly chuckled. "How close in are the Scouts?"

"Inside the town at five locations," Corrie said. "They'll create a diversion at your orders. Blackshirts are digging out their field rations now and getting ready to settle in for the night."

"Five minutes," Ben said. "We'll let them enjoy a few bites of their last supper. Any word from Ike?"

"Kicking the hell out of Jahn's forces. Ike says the multinational force is some of the best he's ever seen. The countries really sent the top people. Fifty of the Israeli IDF captured two hundred and fifty Blackshirt paratroopers."

"What'd they do with them?" Ben asked.

Corrie just looked at him.

"That's what I figured," Ben muttered. He took a sip of water and checked his Thompson, pausing as Corrie held up a hand and listened intently to her earphones. "What is it?"

"The troops in town just surrendered to the Scouts."

"They did what!"

"Packed it in. Gave up. Scouts say come on in. The town is secure."

The company of astonished Rebels stood up and walked into the tiny town just as dusk was settling over the land. The Blackshirts sat on the curbs and sidewalks, their hands on top of their heads.

A low murmuring began as the Blackshirts spotted Ben, ambling along, carrying the old Thompson. Ben caught the phrase being used and it amused him.

"El Lobo! El lobo espectro!"

They were calling him the Ghost Wolf.

Ben stopped in front of one young officer, a lieutenant, and stared down at him. The young man refused to meet Ben's eyes.

Ben turned to Lieutenant Ballard. "Jackie, what's going on here?"

"We haven't been able to figure that out yet, sir," she replied. "At first, we thought it might be some sort of trick. But now I believe these men are really scared to death of you."

A Spanish-speaking Rebel walked up. "They believe you possess

supernatural powers, General. They think you're a shape-changer. And apparently so do a lot of other Blackshirts. But we can't get a fix on where it started."

An idea sprang into Ben's mind. "Make sure someone is monitoring the Blackshirts' radio at all times. Start interrogating these people. Find out if these men joined Hoffman willingly, or were conscripted. I've got a hunch it's the latter. I also have a hunch they don't have much in the way of education. We just might have found the fatal flaw in Hoffman's armor. He's spent years building a mighty army, but he forgot to educate his people. Get cracking."

Ben walked the line of Blackshirts. None of them would meet his eyes. They were terrified of him. More than a few of them crossed themselves when Ben drew near.

Ben heard mutters of "Silent Death," and "Ghost Walker," when he came close to the surrendered soldiers. He paced up and down the line, saying nothing,

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just staring at the men, who still refused to meet his gaze.

Jackie Ballard walked up and motioned Ben to one side. "You called it, General," she said. "These are conscripts. About half of Hoffman's army are draftees. They have no stomach for this fight. Most of them despise Hoffman and his methods. But the army was the only way to receive food and shelter and medical care for themselves and their families. It seems that Hoffman has taken over several South American countries and one either serves Hoffman, in one way or the other, or gets himself or herself enslaved or dead. The troops serving in the southern sector are nearly all conscripts. Only the hard-core are at the front."

"I'm getting the impression Hoffman's army is built on shifting sand," Ben replied. "How about education?"

She shook her head. "Very poorly educated. Many can neither read nor write much beyond a third grade level. They're very superstitious."

Ben nodded his head in understanding. The average age of Hoffman's troops was about twenty-one or so. That meant that when the Great War struck the earth, these men were children, and mentally, had not grown much beyond that.

All right, Hoffman, Ben thought. You still have us outnumbered, but I've found the chink in your armor.

"What are we going to do with these people, sir?"

"I don't know. Yet. But I'm working on it. Let's get something to eat and bed down. First thing in the morning, I want to speak with the officers and senior sergeants."

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Ben and his team pulled out of the town at dawn, and headed for another location, taking the two companies of Blackshirts with them. The captured troops had proved themselves to be friendly and cooperative and seemed very much relieved to be prisoners of the Rebels.

The Rebels headed south, stopping about twenty-five miles later at the ruins of a tiny town. They were deep in enemy territory, but the bulk of the enemy was far to the north of them, and Ben felt they were in little danger. He was not surprised to find nearly a platoon of Blackshirts in the ruins of the town. Upon sighting the Rebels, they threw up their hands and grinned. Captain Garcia, commander of the surrendered Blackshirts, had told Ben to expect it.

"They do not wish to fight North Americans, General," Garcia said. "What they wish to do is to join your Rebel army."

"They would fight their friends?" Ben asked.

"No," Garcia said quickly. "But they would fight against the regular troops of Hoffman. Their friends will all surrender if you give them a chance to do so. Field Marshal Hoffman made a very bad mistake in forcing these men to join his army. Perhaps if he had not threatened their families if they did not join, things would have been different. Many of these men are from the many Indian tribes of South American countries. They can be very fierce fighters, for that is their heritage, but only if they choose to fight. You see, General, Hoffman deliberately kept these people uneducated. But just because one has little formal education does not mean that person is estupido. These people have seen that in your army, there are people of all colors, all faiths, all

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working together. Hoffman is a smart man, but he is also a very arrogant one. And he is surrounded by arrogant men."

The lieutenant in charge of the platoon of Blackshirts who had just surrendered approached Garcia and Ben, a package in his hand. Jersey leveled her M-16 at him.

"Wait!" Garcia said. "He means your general no harm. He has very little English, so he is going to show you his intentions." Garcia spoke in rapid-fire Spanish, too fast for Ben to follow, and the lieutenant nodded his head and opened the package and smiled.

The package contained civilian clothes.

The lieutenant pulled at a pocket of his black shirt. "Muy malo," he said. He pointed to the civilian clothes and then to Ben's denim shirt. "Ver' good!"

Ben understood the simple message. He looked at Garcia. "All your people have civilian clothing?"

Garcia smiled. "Si. We have been waiting for you. Many more would like to join you, but they are afraid that El Lobo will shoot them before they can make their intentions known."

Ben looked at Garcia for a very long moment. If he made the wrong choice, the situation could well turn into a massacre for the Rebels. For once the surrendered black-shirts were armed, they would outnumber the Rebels in Ben's immediate command.

He looked at Lt. Ballard. "Jackie?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I believe them, General. I think we've just found ourselves some much-needed allies."

Ben nodded his head slowly. He looked at Jersey. "How about you, Apache?"

"I say we go for it, General," Jersey told him. "If we

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could come up with two or three additional battalions, and stay to the south of Hoffman's lines, we could really start kicking the shit out of him."

Ben opened his map case and spread the map out on a fender. "Captain, show me where you know there are troops waiting to join us."

Garcia pointed to a half dozen locations, running toward the east. "All along here, General. Two, maybe three thousand men and women. One to two companies at each location."

"The ranking officer?"

Garcia shrugged as only a Latin can do. "I guess that would be me, General. I was to be promoted to Major next month. My papers had already been approved. I am jump-qualified and jungle-trained. The equivalent to your old American Army Ranger."

"All right, Jorge," Ben said. "You're now a Colonel in the Rebel army." Jorge Garcia's mouth dropped open in shock. "Get out of those damn Blackshirts and into civilian clothes. We've got a war to win."

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### Chapter Three

With the surrender of half a dozen of Hoffman's battalions-and the Blackshirt battalions were full strength battalions-Ben now not only had sufficient troops to be a real problem to those loyal to Hoffman, he also had captured large numbers of weapons and vehicles, and one of those battalions coming over to the Rebel side was a towed artillery battalion, with dozens of 155-mm howitzers and the heavy 6x6 trucks needed to pull them, and the eleven man crews needed to make them fully operational. The 155s had an enormous range and Ben was smiling as he inspected the guns and crews, who had burned their hated black shirts and were now dressed in a variety of colors.

"El Lobo!" one senior sergeant shouted, and soon the call was thundering all around the encampment. "General El Lobo!"

Ben let them shout until they got it out of their systems. He figured he'd sure been called a hell of a lot worse. Ben waited until they quieted down and stood silently, all eyes on him. Ben was not much on speeches, so through an interpreter, he kept it short.

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"Welcome to the Rebel Army, and welcome to America and to Texas. When this war is over, and it will be and we will win ..." He waited until a new round of cheering had faded, with many of his own people caught up in the spirit of the moment and joining in. "... You can return to your

own homes, or bring your families up here and stay with us. The USA is a big empty country, and we need new people."

He paused for a moment. "We won't all make it through. We will have casualties. We will all lose friends and loved ones. I've helped bury more than I care to think about over the long and bloody years. Friends and loved ones," he said, his voice suddenly husky with emotion. For a moment, he thought of Jerre, buried on a lonely lovely ridge a thousand miles to the northwest. "It's the price we pay for freedom. Freedom is never cheaply won. The right to be free, to live and love and raise your families and attend the church of your choice and defend what is yours and work the earth or whatever your vocation might be, is always paid for with the blood of brave men and women. Men and women just like you.

"All of you have decided to reject the hateful and brutal philosophy of Nazism and join us against that terrible rebirth. Even though your commanders have made it clear to you that if you are captured, you will be shot, on the spot, by Hoffman's forces. Field Marshal Jesus Hoffman issued those orders yesterday morning and they were immediately passed along to you. I'm proud to say that not one of you elected to leave the ranks." He paused for a few seconds. "I'm not much on speeches, so I'll end with this: I welcome you all."

Ben stood alone-Jersey three steps back and to his

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right, the butt of her M-16 on one hip-in front of several thousand troops and all the equipment of war, and listened to the wild cheering. They were certainly an enthusiastic bunch, but in the back of his mind, Ben was wondering if they could fight.

Well, he thought, that was going to be determined very quickly, for in his pocket he had the message Corrie had handed him just moments before he addressed the new troops. Hoffman was sending battalions of his elite SS troops against them. They were about twenty five miles away, to the north, and pressing hard.

"Colonel Garcia," Ben called.

"Si, General?"

"Position your troops and get your artillery in place. We are going to stand and slug it out."

"Si, General!"

Ben walked back to Lieutenant Ballard. "Position your people to the rear, Jackie. This is the fight of our new people. Let's see how they work."

"Yes, sir."

Ben walked the lines, and was impressed at how quickly and proficiently the new battalions worked. He concluded that they had been thoroughly trained by experts. Up to now, the only thing lacking had been motivation. Now they had it.

Colonel Garcia approached him. "General ..."

"It's your show, Colonel," Ben cut him off. "You call the shots. I'm

just an observer."

The young colonel knew that he and his command were being tested by the experienced older warrior. And he knew this was one test that none of them could afford to fail. He had looked into the eyes of all the Rebels, young and not so young. Jorge Garcia had seen years of

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combat experience in those eyes. These Rebels were experts at war. Even now, with hordes of SS troops advancing toward their position, many of the Rebels were resting on the ground, some reading worn books, some eating, some even asleep. They were, amazingly, utterly, totally calm. Jorge had never seen anything like it.

"Si, General Lobo," Jorge said. "We will not fail you."

Ben smiled, not taking offense at being called a wolf. "I'm counting on that, Colonel. The last thing I want is a Nazi bayonet up my butt."

"That will not happen," Jorge said.

Ben nodded and watched as the colonel trotted off, yelling orders in rapid-fire Spanish. All of the new people had some English, but Ben had okayed the use of Spanish until all of Jorge's people could master a new language.

"Ten miles out, sir," Corrie called. "Coming hard. They have towed artillery."

Colonel Garcia had his own spotters out with Ben's Scouts, and he was receiving the word at the same time as Ben. Ben sat down in a camp chair and rolled a cigarette.

"Preparado," Garcia spoke into his mic, his voice calm. Ben was a thousand or so meters behind the lines, monitoring Garcia's orders by radio.

The crews manning the 155s locked in HE, WP, and M449 antipersonnel rounds. The M-449 rounds each contained dozens of grenades and they were highly effective rounds.

"Good choice of rounds," Ben said, after thanking Cooper for a fresh cup of coffee.

The SS troops were well in range of the 155s, and still

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Colonel Garcia held his fire. Ben smiled at that. Jorge knew his business. At eighteen miles this type of 155 could be accurate within approximately one hundred yards of its target. But the closer the target, the more accurate the big guns became.

The Rebels had stopped their reading and sleeping now, and were watching the crews preparing their howitzers for battle. The infantry battalions were dug in deep, the positions staggered in the shape of a huge and very wide U. This country was perfect for concealment and surprise, and Colonel Garcia was using it to its utmost.

"Six miles out," Corrie said. "And closing." She paused, a thoughtful

expression on her face. "Whoever is commanding those SS troops is an arrogant fool, General," she added.

"You're right," Ben said. "They should be stopping and getting their artillery in place to soften us up. Instead, they just keep barreling on. Right about now they're entering the first perimeters of the U. Jorge knows what he's doing. He's impressing the hell out of me. Jorge is going to give those SS troops a real nasty surprise."

Lieutenant Jackie Ballard leisurely strolled by. Cooper noticed with a very appreciative eye that she filled out her jeans remarkably well.

"Down, boy," Jersey told him, noticing the direction his eyes were traveling.

"It ain't no crime to look," Cooper replied. "Is it, General?"

"Damn sure isn't," Ben said. Ben always had an eye for the ladies.

"Fuego!" Colonel Garcia shouted, and the ground

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beneath their boots began to tremble as the 155s roared into action.

Whatever the SS troops expected, it certainly was not this rain of death that began hailing down on them from the skies. Jorge Garcia had aligned his guns with graduated elevation. The first mile of the SS convoy was suddenly turned into an exploding inferno. Bodies were ripped and torn apart and bloody bits and pieces hurled high into the hot smoky air. As those toward the rear began leaping from trucks in an attempt to escape the barrage, Jorge ordered his gunners to fire their antipersonnel rounds. It got real interesting for the SS troops when those started landing. The ground around the panicked SS troops, no matter which way they ran, turned deadly as the grenades began exploding.

Spanish armies have for centuries been big on bugles, and this one was no different. As the last rounds struck, Colonel Garcia shouted, "Ataque!" and about twenty-five bugles blew.

Ben nearly left his seat, for he had not noticed the trumpeters gathering a few yards behind him.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Jersey hollered, jumping up and looking wildly all around her.

Cooper had just lifted a coffee mug to his lips and when the bugles blew he spilled the whole cup down the front of his shirt. Beth was writing in her journal, and when the attack bugles blew, her pen went one way and the journal went another. Come had just taken off her earphones when the bugles blew, and she fell off the tailgate of a pickup truck, landing on her butt.

Ben looked at his team and started laughing, the laughter just audible over the bugles. Cooper was jumping around hollering, trying to get out of his steaming

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shirt, Jersey was wild-eyed, Beth looked numb, and Corrie just looked

disgusted.

And the bugles continued to blow while Ben was cracking up with laughter.

Ben rode with Colonel Garcia up to the smoky field of death. The colonel's troops were just finishing off the last of the SS troops, and they were not being gentle in dealing with them. Garcia had ordered no prisoners taken, and his soldiers were following his orders to the letter.

A few of the SS troops were begging for mercy, for Heaven's sake. "Compassion, dios!" they cried. What they got was a bullet, for the South American allies of the Rebels were well aware of Hoffman's orders should they be taken prisoner, and they knew the SS troops would be happy to execute them on the spot, and take great joy in doing so.

"Gather up all the weapons and other usable equipment, Colonel," Ben instructed. "And equipment that even looks like it might be repairable. That's the Rebel way. We fix it up and store it."

"It is a very good way," Jorge agreed. "And one that we shall adopt, beginning now."

"Your troops were excellent in battle, Colonel," Ben complimented him. "Superb."

Colonel Garcia drew himself up to his full height, which was a good half a foot shorter than Ben. "We are Rebels now, General," he said proudly. "Anything less than perfection would not please me."

Ben smiled and patted the man on the shoulder. "Lighten up, Jorge. In battle, striving for absolute

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perfection is a good way to get killed. We just do the best we can and then get the hell gone. The Rebels do stand and slug it out from time to time, but we're at our best doing what Jim Bowie advocated. Cut, slash, and run."

"I know who that is!" Cooper said. "He was killed at the Alamo, right, General?"

"That's right, Cooper. He tried to convince Travis to abandon the old mission and launch a guerrilla type of war against Santa Ana. But in the end, Travis, Bowie, Crocket, and a hundred and eighty other men-give or take a few-died defending the mission."

"Was it worth it?" Beth asked.

"That's always been debatable," Ben replied. "I guess that as long as there is someone around with some knowledge of history, it always will be. But if you're asking for my opinion, yes, I think it was necessary; I think the time demanded that sacrifice. It galvanized the feelings of others and that helped win the war for Texas independence." He looked around him. "This is no time for a history debate. Let's get cracking, people, and then put some miles behind us."

Buzzards were circling high above them when the Rebels pulled out, heading east. Even if they were spotted by Hoffman's scouts, no light force would dare attack them, for they were now several thousand strong,



and Ben knew that his new Rebels could fight, and fight well.

Far to the north, Hoffman sat behind his desk and silently fumed. The man was absolutely livid with rage, but he had vented his vocal rage and now sat silent. He had sent hundreds of elite troops to crush a few battalions of dissident and ignorant troops, and they had been wiped out to the last man.

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"Raines!" he suddenly shouted, leaping to his feet and startling the room full of staff officers. "Raines joined them. Has to be. He's south of us. We've got him and I didn't realize it."

"Got him?" a junior officer questioned before he thought.

Hoffman took no umbrage at the blurted insolence. "Of course. Shift two divisions to the south and engage the bastard and his ignorant new followers."

A senior officer, far too old for the field, was the first to speak. "Jesus, no," he said quietly.

"Uncle Frederich," Hoffman said, looking at the man. "You are questioning me?"

"Yes, Jesus. I am. The rabbit does not pursue the wolf. And Ben Raines is an old gray lobo. And those with him are not lobeznoes."

Hoffman waved that aside. "I know they are not cubs. They are nothing more than ignorant savages. Many of them can scarcely read and write."

"But they showed today that they could fight," the old man didn't back up. "I, along with others, have warned you about conscripts. I have taken the liberty of purging our ranks of conscripts. It is rare that they make good soldiers ... for us. Today certainly proved that."

"Uncle Frederich ..."

"Hear me out, Jesus! I am owed that much."

"Si, mio tío," Hoffman said, and sat down. He could not be disrespectful to a man who had helped raise him.

"I think I know what General Raines is doing. He is making you split your forces, making you fight on many fronts. And that is nearly always the kiss of death. Don't fall for this trick, Jesus."

The other staff officers sat quietly, none of them

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wanting any part of this exchange. The old soldier could get away with arguing with the field marshal ... and he was about the only one who could. The exploding rage of Jesus Hoffman toward anyone who questioned his orders was well known.

"Uncle Frederich," Hoffman said, "even with the addition of these turncoat troops, we still have Raines vastly outnumbered. I feel now is a golden opportunity for us."

The old soldier shook his head slowly, a grim expression on his face. "You heard the desperate radio calls from those dying troops. General Raines now has a new name: 'El Lobo.' And you know how superstitious many of our most loyal troops are. There are murmurings even among them. 'Shape-changer,' is what many are calling General Raines. They roll their eyes and shake their heads just at the mention of his name. My suggestion is this: dispatch enough troops to block the highways and keep General Raines and troops occupied. But no more than that. Shift a division up north to assist General Jahn's paratroopers now fighting those Rebels commanded by General McGowan. Crush those Rebels closest to us. Using massive force, crush them, defeat them battalion by battalion. But don't, don't, spread your forces too thin. Don't fall for this plan of General Raines'."

The meeting was interrupted by a messenger. "General Raines on the radio, Field Marshal. He is asking to speak with you."

"Ah!" Hoffman said with a smile, sitting down and turning up the volume on his speaker. In a moment, the patch was completed. Hoffman's mouth dropped open and a collective gasp went up from everybody in the

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room except Frederich when the voice of Ben Raines boomed throughout the room.

"Hello, Hoffman," Ben said. "You goose-stepping shit-head!"

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#### Chapter Four

Hoffman's face drained of color. Nobody-nobody- spoke to him in such a manner. Hoffman sat, momentarily speechless. A small smile curved the lips of the old soldier. He knew only too well what Ben Raines was doing. And he knew without any doubt that his nephew was going to take the bait. Frederich Rasbach started making plans that moment. Even before Hoffman found his voice in retort, the old soldier had made up his mind to take a few troops and leave. North America was about to become very unhealthy. Frederich rose and moved toward the door. There, he paused, to confirm his suspicions.

"I'll crush you!" Hoffman screamed into the mic. "Raines, you bastard! I'll grind you under the heel of my boot."

"Fuck you, Hoffman," came the calm voice of Ben Raines.

Frederich put out his hand toward the door knob and shook his head slowly and sadly.

"How dare you speak to me in such a manner!" Hoffman hollered, his face flushed. "You ... you trash!"

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Frederich heard fast-approaching boots and stepped aside to let a runner in. The young man rushed to Hoffman's side. "We have his location pinpointed, Field Marshal."

Hoffman nodded his head in understanding and with an impatient wave of his hand, silenced the runner.

"How about you and I settling this, Hoffman?" Ben questioned. "Just the two of us. Man to man. We'll meet and duke it out. Winner take all."

"Duke?" Hoffman questioned the room.

"He means fists, sir," a staff officer said.

"Fist-fighting?" Hoffman said. "How barbaric. But what else should I expect from a low-life with no breeding? Why, the man must be at least fifty years old. He wouldn't offer such a challenge unless he planned some sort of trick."

"General Raines is totally untrustworthy, Field Marshal," another staff officer spoke. "He is not a gentleman."

Frederich smiled. Gentleman, or not, Ben Raines meant every word he had just spoken, and the old soldier hoped his nephew would not take up the offer. Ben Raines would kick the snot out of the younger man.

And enjoy doing it, the old soldier mentally added.

"Two and Three divisions to the south," Hoffman ordered, his face still beet red and his hands trembling with fury. "Immediately. Full armor and artillery."

A staff officer rushed from the room.

You young fool! the old soldier thought. Sending troops right into the wolf's den. And sending them to their deaths.

"How about it, fart-breath?" Ben spoke. "Are you still there or have you gone to the latrine to shit your fear?"

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The old soldier by the door had to suppress a chuckle. He despised Ben Raines, but he admired greatly the man's courage and grasp of tactics. And also how well he played on human egos.

Hoffman was so outraged he could not speak. He sat holding the microphone and sputtered.

Say something, you idiot! Frederich thought. Go ahead, step deeper into the trap General Raines is laying out for you. We had such high hopes for you, Jesus. But we failed to see your frailties. You were too coddled, kept too close to the breast. What you are is not your fault, but ours.

"You are a dead man, Raines," Hoffman finally found his voice and composure.

Someday, for sure, as all of us must face that long sleep, the old soldier thought. But not by your hands, Jesus. Resist those orders, Generals, Frederich silently urged.

The officer who had left the room returned, his face flushed with excitement. "Generals Kroesen and Schmidt will be heading south within the hour, Field Marshal," the officer said, waiting until after Hoffman

had released the talk key.

"Very good," Hoffman said, then frowned as Ben's voice once more filled his head.

"Hey, Hoffman!" Ben called rudely. "Stop playing with your dick and talk to me."

Hoffman clicked off the radio and turned to face his staff officers. "I will not dignify any remark from that barbarian with a reply."

Several hundred miles south, Ben grinned and handed the mic to Corrie. "Did I talk long enough for them to pinpoint our location?"

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"They're probably halfway here by now," Corrie said drily.

Ben laughed and patted her shoulder. "Well, you said you were getting bored, remember? All right," Ben said, rubbing his hands together and pacing as he talked. "Hoffman is going to throw quite a number at us. He's not going to take any chances on us slipping away this time. He'll throw at least one division and probably two at us. What divisions are closest to us, Colonel Garcia?"

"Hoffman's First division is the nearest. But I'd guess Two and Three divisions will be the ones chosen for this. Commanded by Generals Kroesen and Schmidt. They're professionals."

"Not SS?"

"No. That is Brodermann. And we wiped out nearly half his troops." He smiled. "And he was running a very short division, as you may recall."

Ben recalled. "Then for all intents and purposes, the SS troops are but a memory."

"I would guess that he has perhaps four to six battalions left."

"Can he rebuild?"

"Possibly. But not too quickly. He chose his people very well, over a period of years. And Brodermann was not among the dead. At least not that we could identify."

"No. We wouldn't be that lucky, Jorge. All right. We'll say he has five thousand troops left him. That's still a lot of SS crap to have looking over our shoulders."

"I hate those people," a young captain from Garcia's command said. "I loathe them." He shuddered. "They're cruel and twisted men and women."

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"So were the ones who surfaced seventy-odd years ago," Ben replied. "Nothing changes."

"So what do we do now?" Colonel Garcia asked.

"Why, we wait for the Blackshirts to get here," Ben said calmly. Then he

smiled and confused the colonel when he said, "Sort of."

Ben had forced Hoffman to spread his people all over a front that extended hundreds of miles, and Hoffman had no choice but to move his people around in an oftentimes futile attempt to plug holes. He had been forced to send additional troops north of I-20 to assist General Jahn in fighting Ike McGowan and his people. Hoffman's supply lines had been stopped cold in South America and whatever supplies he received had to be flown into the airport at San Antonio and trucked out into the field. Hoffman's grandiose plans to conquer all of North America by fall had been tossed on the scrap heap. Ben Raines and his Rebels had stopped him cold in Texas with little hope of getting out anytime soon.

Hoffman had marched into Texas with just under 200,000 troops, and Ben Raines and his rag-tag bands of malcontents had stopped him dead bang.

Now, to make matters worse, many of his troops were walling their eyes like frightened cattle at the mere mention of Ben Raines's name. There had been talk of some old man who called himself the Prophet popping up all over the place and calling down the wrath of God upon the heads of the invaders.

Nonsense, of course, but many of his troops were getting spooked. And Hoffman did not know how to combat the wild rumors.

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And his closer advisor and friend, Hoffman's Uncle Frederick Rosbach, had flown back to South America. Frederick had urged his nephew to abandon his dreams of conquering all of North and South America and return with him. Hoffman, naturally, refused.

One thing Hoffman did know for certain was that when his Second and Third Divisions reached Ben Raines's position in the south of Texas, he would be rid of that bastard forever.

Hoffman might have felt certain about that, but somebody forgot to tell Ben.

Dawn.

"The enemy columns are proceeding very cautiously," Corrie said to Ben.

"Placement of vehicles?" Ben asked.

"Strung out wide and using all accessible roads. ETA of advance troops 1300 hours this day."

"Everybody mounted up and ready to roll?"

"Sitting on ready."

"From this moment on, maintain tight radio silence. If something has to be transmitted, use burst only."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's pack it up and get the hell out of here."

Ben had split his forces, half heading west, the other half east. Colonel Garcia had stepped aside without a word, knowing this was

General Raines's show.

When the Second and Third Divisions of Blackshirts had moved out, heading south, Ben ordered four battalions of his Rebels to move east and at his orders, mix it up with the small garrisons left behind. Hoffman had not yet realized it, but he had committed one very large

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fuck-up. He had left his western flank wide open. Ben could not understand how the man could have made such a terrible error in judgement, but he had, and Ben was going to take full advantage of it.

It was going to be a race for time and distance, one that if Ben lost could spell disaster for his command. But if he could pull it off, he just might be able to knock the boots out from under Hoffman and really give his own people one hell of a morale booster.

"Brilliant," Colonel Garcia said, when Ben outlined his plan.  
"Absolutely brilliant."

Ben didn't know how brilliant his plan was; he just hoped it would work.

Ben had left behind a small force, armed with howitzers taken from the demolished SS troops. When the two divisions came into range, the small force of Rebels and South American troops would open fire, engaging the Second and Third Divisions in an artillery duel for as long as possible. Ben and his battalions and Colonel Garcia and his battalions would be driving straight north just as fast as road conditions allowed. When they reached the southern edge of Hoffman's First Division, the four battalions of Rebels would attack the small garrisons from the Second and Third left behind from the west. Ben and Colonel Garcia would then strike at Hoffman's First Division, catching them, they hoped, by surprise.

Scouts were already in place, waiting for Ben's orders to neutralize Hoffman's southernmost forward observation posts.

By the time the troops of the Second and Third Divisions overran the positions of the Rebel gunners left behind, who would, hopefully, have bugged out before

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that happened, the Blackshirt generals would realize they had been suckered. But they would be a good 175 miles south of the surprise attack on Hoffman's First Division, and unable to do anything except cuss Ben Raines. Which Ben felt sure they would do, with a great deal of passion.

Ben was under no illusions concerning the attack. He knew he probably would not get anywhere near Hoffman's HQ. But just being able to strike within a few miles of the man would shake the Nazi bastard down to his toenails.

But General Brodermann worried Ben. His intell people had not been able to pinpoint the man's location. And the thought of that SS son of a bitch launching his own sneak attack against Ben, while Ben was hitting Hoffman with his own surprise attack, was not pleasant.

Then Corrie dropped the news on Ben.

"Brodermann is with the First Division," she said. "Meeting with Field Marshal Hoffman at his HQ. Apache scouts grabbed a Blackshirt recon team and got the information out of them. His battalions have been assigned to Hoffman's division."

"Well, at least we know approximately where he is," Ben said. "Do we have an exact location of Hoffman's HQ?"

"No, sir. Only that he moves it daily. It seems the man is awfully paranoid."

"You have any idea what happened to the Blackshirt recon team?" Ben asked.

"I would imagine they probably tried to escape," Corrie said blandly.

"Uh-huh," Ben said.

"Our gunners are now engaged in an artillery duel

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with batteries of the Second and Third Divisions," Corrie said, after listening to her headset for a moment.

The convoy rolled past one of Hoffman's southernmost forward observation posts. Rebel Scouts were sitting by the side of the road, having a late lunch. They gave Ben's command car the thumbs-up sign as it rolled past.

Ben returned the thumbs-up as the convoy rolled on.

"No one's given any alarm yet," Corrie said. "The luck is still with us."

"May the Force be with you," Ben muttered.

"Beg pardon, sir?" Cooper asked.

Ben smiled. "It's from an old movie, Coop."

"Two minutes to artillery drop off, sir," Beth said, working the other radio.

They would drop off the artillery, wait until the guns were ready to fire, and then drive under the overhead arching shells for just under twelve miles. By the time they struck at First Division, the Blackshirts would be softened up ... considerably.

Ben's forces would then liven things up a bit for the hopefully still-stunned Blackshirts.

"Everybody out and stretch for five," Ben said, as Cooper brought the Hummer to a halt. It would take the eleven man artillery crews just about five minutes to position the 155s and have them ready for firing.

Ben rolled a cigarette and stretched his legs while the artillery crews separated, formed up, and set up. He took a drink of water and checked his Thompson, then checked the bag filled with full drums on the floorboards of the Hummer.

"Colonel Garcia in place," Corrie said. "We will link

up just outside the southernmost edge of First Division's encampment."

"Or what's left of it," Ben said, toeing out the butt of his cigarette. "Everybody knows what they're to do, so there is nothing left to say. Mount up."

The now more than regiment size band of Rebels would roar through the devastation, firing everything they had, including Big Thumpers, until they reached the approximate center of the sprawling encampment. There, they would dismount and take the battle hand to hand.

Those Blackshirts left behind by the Second and Third Divisions had pulled back to the east and joined for greater strength. Four battalions of Rebels were now striking at that small garrison and the plan was for them to punch through and link up with Ben and Colonel Garcia.

Buddy and his battalion, along with the Outlaw bikers, were driving hard for San Antonio. They would stay there and harass the Eighth Division guarding the airport and the ruins of town. Such a small force had no hope of defeating a division, but they could keep them hemmed in and worry the hell out of them.

While Ben was striking from the north, Striganov, West, and Danjou would be hammering hard from the north end of the First Division's lines. If all this worked, Ben's hopes were that Hoffman would be forced to withdraw to the east. Five battalions of Rebels, Dan, Tina, Pat O'Shea, Greenwalt, and Jackie Malone's battalion, were stretching out north to south along Highway 281 and setting up many of the batteries of artillery that Ben had been holding in reserve.

Payon, Paul Gomez, Jim Peters, and Ned Hawkins's bunch were pushing hard to get in position to the south.

If this worked, they would have Hoffman and his men in a box.

If it worked.

## Chapter Five

When the first artillery rounds hit, Hoffman was just sitting down for coffee with General Brodermann. His HQ was several miles from the explosions, but he still heard the booming.

"What the hell?" he said, turning in his chair.

Then rounds started coming in fast and hard.

"We're under attack from the south!" Brodermann said, jumping to his feet.

Hoffman ran for the office and reached it just as an aide opened it from the other side. The door impacted with Hoffman's nose and knocked him sprawling to the floor, his beak bloody. The aide stood frozen, horrified at what he'd done.



"Idiot!" Brodermann yelled at the young man. "Fool! You've injured the Field Marshal. What the hell do you want?"

"We ... we're being attacked from the west, sir!"

"From the west? What the hell are you blathering about? Are you deaf as well as stupid? We're being attacked from the south. Goddamn it, can't you hear?"

"From the west, too, sir," the aide blurted. Field Marshal

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Hoffman was just getting unceremoniously to his feet, grabbing at a chair for support, his nose clearly broken and spurting blood. "The garrison just radioed. They cannot hold and are falling back to our position."

"My no' is 'oken," Jesus Hoffman said. "Shit!"

A fat colonel came running into the outer office and tried to stop. The floor of the old home was slick tile, and his leather-soled boots could find no traction. He slammed into the aide, the aide slammed into Brodermann, and Brodermann slammed into Field Marshal Hoffman. All of them went slipping and sliding and tumbling to the floor. For a few seconds, it looked like the Three Stooges meets Danny Kaye.

"We're under massive attack from the north!" the colonel hollered.

"Get off me, you elephant!" Brodermann yelled.

"Et off of 'e!" Hoffman shouted, spraying everybody with blood.

An SS officer came running in. He stood for a moment in the doorway, his mouth hanging open and his face registering his shock.

"What the hell do you want?" Brodermann screamed.

"Ah ... why, ah, General Schleyer says he is under attack at the San Antonio airport. Why are you all on the floor? What has happened to the Field Marshal?"

Captain Blickle came running in. He blinked at the scene on the office floor. He shook his head and decided it wasn't any of his business. For the moment, at least. "Scouts from General Mohnhaupt's Seventh Division say Rebels are lined up north to south in massive numbers along Highway 281. They have begun shelling his command." He paused. "What are all you people doing on the floor?"

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Before anyone could reply-not that anyone was about to-several artillery rounds landed a few hundred yards from Hoffman's HQ. The explosions blew out all the windows on that side of the house and tore off part of the old roof. Captain Blickle joined the others on the floor.

"Oddamnit!" Hoffman yelled. "Et off me!"

The rattle of automatic weapons could now be clearly heard.

"Rebels!" someone outside screamed. "Thousands of them. El Lobo is leading the charge."

Brodermann lurched to his feet. "If I hear El Lobo one more time," he shouted. "I'll shoot the son of a bitch who said it."

Together, they all managed to get Jesus Hoffman to his unsteady feet and out the door. "Get the Field Marshal to safety," Brodermann ordered.

"Where?" Captain Blickle demanded, looking around him at the panicked troops, confusion and the exploding artillery rounds.

"How the hell should I know?" Brodermann shouted. "Just get him out of here. Move, goddamnit!"

Blickle and the still nose-bleeding Hoffman rushed to a waiting car and jumped in the back seat. The driver sped off. Brodermann looked around for some of his SS troops, then realized they were miles to the north and probably helping contain the charge of Rebels up there.

"Damnit!" he swore. "Who would have guessed Raines would do something like this?"

Brodermann finally and forever, in the span of only a few seconds, realized that one simply could not second-guess Ben Raines. If you made ready for the norm, he would throw something at you completely off the wall.

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Expect something totally unorthodox, and Raines would hand you something right out of a military textbook.

Then Brodermann looked on in amazement as the Rebels began slowing and stopping their vehicles, troops dismounting and engaging the Blackshirts in hand-to-hand combat. "No!" he shouted. "This simply cannot be!"

But it was happening, and Brodermann suddenly got that message and looked around for any officer. He saw one. He jerked his pistol out of the holster and tried to rally the panicked troops. One tried to run past him, all wild-eyed and scared, and Brodermann shot the man. That got the attention of several people. "Throw up a line!" he shouted. "Goddamn you, listen to me. Throw up a line and hold it."

He got the attention of several sergeants, and they quickly began to shout and kick some order back into the troops. A line was thrown up and slowly some semblance of soldiering began to take place. The fighting was now going to be house to house and very close up.

Ben jumped over the sandbags around a machine gun emplacement, jerked the dead body away from an unfamiliar but heavy machine gun, and stitched a deuce and a half from radiator to midway of the bed. Every third or fourth round loaded into the belt must have been incendiary, for the truck exploded and sent body parts flying all over the place.

Jersey and Corrie jumped into the pit with him and Cooper began helping with the belt while Corrie was trying to raise other battalions for a battle assessment.

Ben grinned at her. "When you get Ike, tell him we're having fun down

here and wish he could join us!"

Corrie ignored him. She'd been with Ben for years

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and nothing he ever did surprised her. She finally yelled, "It was a total surprise, General. All battalions on all fronts reporting we really caught them with their pants down."

"Casualties?" Ben yelled, after cutting down three running Blackshirts. He rested his hands from the heavy jarring of the machine gun.

"Very light."

"Give me a status report on conditions right here, Come," Ben requested.

After a moment, she said, "We're stretched out along a line approximately three miles wide. Artillery wants to know should they shell the town?"

"Negative," Ben quickly told her. "Hell, we're on the outskirts of the damn town. Tell the batteries to advance to within a few miles of us and set up and wait for orders."

That done, Ben said, "Come, give the orders to go over the top, people. Let's go, let's go, let's go!" And he jumped out of the sandbagged pit and took off running.

"Jesus!" Cooper said, and took off after him, Jersey and Beth and Corrie right on his heels.

Brodermann took one look at the advancing Rebels and cursed as he shook his head. He knew with a soldier's sixth sense that to stand and face that would be pointless. "Fall back!" he shouted. "Fall back to those woods north of town. Move. Quickly, now."

"Secure the town and then advance no further," Ben panted the orders, squatting down behind a brick house.

When he had caught his breath, and Corrie had issued the orders, Ben said, "Set me up a CP and rig for long range transmission, Corrie. Tell supply to get our

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uniforms ready for us. From tiger stripe to desert cammie. We're back in business!"

When the major five-front offensive was launched by the Rebels in Texas, those Rebel contingents in California, Arizona, and New Mexico rushed the Blackshirts on the other side of the border, while General Payon's guerilleros struck them from the south and the worshipers of Nazism were caught by surprise. No prisoners were taken.

General Cecil Jefferys sat in his command post at Base Camp One with a smile on his face. He had felt all along that when everything fell into place enough to satisfy Ben's mind, he would quit playing cat and mouse all over the state of Texas and really step in close and slap the crap out of Hoffman. And he had done just that.

Cecil made a mental note to go see Ben's ,dogs that afternoon and play with them for a time. He knew they missed Ben terribly and he needed the exercise anyway.

"Give 'em hell, Ben," Cecil said.

Hoffman and the remnants of his First Division managed to slip through the thin northern lines, running west to east, and hurriedly thrown up by Striganov, West, and Danjou. Hoffman's Second and Third divisions were being held right where they were by Payon, Gomez, Jim Peters, and Ned Hawkins's Texas Rangers. Hoffman's Sixth and Seventh Divisions were taking a real pounding from the battalions of Dan Gray, Tina Raines, Pat O'Shea, Greenwalt, and Malone. Hoffman's Fourth and Fifth Divisions massed and overran

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Danjou's position on the eastern edge of the front and pushed into the clear into northern Texas.

Ben ordered those contingents coming from the west to angle south and link up with Raul Gomez who was holding east and west of either side of Highway 277. He also ordered everyone back into uniform and pulled out all the tanks and artillery he'd been holding in reserve.

To the north, Ike ordered teams out to blow all bridges along the Canadian River from the New Mexico line over into Oklahoma, and Cecil sent teams from Base Camp One to blow the bridges along the Canadian from Oklahoma City to the Arkansas line.

Ben leaned back in a rat-chewed old recliner Cooper had found for him and smiled. "Now, Hoffman, you goose-stepping dickhead. Now, let's see you wriggle your way out of this one."

"The Field Marshal does not wish to be disturbed," an aide told the tough paratroop General.

General Jahn looked at the young man and smiled. "Get out of my way, you strutting little REM, before I physically remove you."

The aide blustered, but stepped out of the way. "Sir," he said. "What is a REM?"

Jahn smiled. "It's an American expression. It means Rear Echelon Mother-fucker." He stepped into the office and closed the door behind him.

Hoffman's nose had been set and a piece of tape placed across it. He looked at Jahn for a moment. "Well, General Jahn, what is it?"

"Consider surrender terms, Field Marshal," the general said without hesitation.

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Hoffman blinked. "Have you lost your damn mind, General?"

"No," Jahn replied shortly. He walked to a sideboard, poured a snifter of brandy, and drank it down.

Far too much brandy, Hoffman noticed. And without taking the time to savor the delicate bouquet. The man was utterly without breeding.

"But it's time to consider our position," Jahn said, his back to the Field Marshal. He poured another brandy, and this time swirled the liquid about and gave it time to breathe a bit.

Then, Hoffman noticed, he knocked it back like a damn drunken roustabout.

"It's better than it was a few days ago," Hoffman said.

"Hell would have been better for us than then," Jahn said. He spoke his mind and damn the consequences. He was a professional soldier, not a diplomat. He turned, facing Hoffman. "Field Marshal, consider this: Eighth Division is pinned down in the ruins of San Antonio. Raines' Rebels there have now been beefed up by about a thousand Mexican guerrillas. Schleyer cannot get out. The Rebels have blown every bridge, every overpass, in a circle around the city. The Eighth is trapped and we cannot get supplies in to them. They are doomed. They will fight until their ammunition is gone, and then they will be forced to surrender."

"We will be victorious up here and then send relief columns to break them out!" Hoffman shouted.

"You're living in a dream world, Field Marshal."

Hoffman jumped to his feet. "You do not speak to me in such a manner!"

"I offer you the truth while your staff officers shield

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you and tell you only things they know you want to hear. And you know that is the truth."

Hoffman sat back down and pouted for a moment. He lifted his eyes and looked at General Jahn. "Surrender is repugnant. Absolutely unacceptable."

"Raines is a warrior, a first class fighting man and brilliant tactician, but he is also an honorable man." Jahn sat down in a chair in front of Hoffman's desk. "Field Marshal, you know I only pay lip service to the teachings of Hitler. I am not a Nazi and never have been. No matter what you tell other people or personally think about me, and I know you think you have converted me, I shall never be a Nazi. What am I, what I have been all my life is a fighting man. I am a soldier. You are a student of history, Field Marshal, so think back. Not to the lies and half-truths you were taught as a boy, but to the real truth that you later discovered. The entire world rallied together, seventy years ago, against the man you worship. And now this shattered world is doing the same thing against us. There will be more countries coming in, Field Marshal. Trust me. My intelligence people have monitored other nations' transmissions, and even though they have internal problems of their own, they are putting forces together to assist the Rebels. Even as we speak. I personally don't think they will arrive here in time; I think we will be but a memory before long. But the Gods of war are fickle- they might choose to smile on us for a change. Who knows?"

Hoffman stared at the general for a long moment. His first thought was to immediately relieve the man of command. But he quickly put that out of his mind. Jahn was a fine commander and a brilliant tactician. His men

would follow him through the gates of Hell without question. True, the forces of the NAL had suffered a setback, but not one that was insurmountable. He must convince Jahn of that. He needed the paratroop general. Needed him very badly.

"I will not consider surrender, General Jahn," Hoffman reiterated.

Jahn shrugged his shoulders. "In that case, Field Marshal, I am certain that most of my men will fight to the death. But I will not order them to do that."

"You do not believe in our cause, General?" Jahn smiled. "You mean the torture and oppression and slavery of people, Field Marshal?"

"I am doing no more than Ben Raines is doing," Hoffman replied.

Jahn met Hoffman's eyes. The man is crazy, the paratrooper thought. Why couldn't I see that months ago? He knew the answer to that even before the thought cleared his mind. He saw it. He just ignored it.

"Anything else, General Jahn?"

The paratrooper was silent for a few heartbeats. He shook his head and rose to his boots. "No, Field Marshal. There is nothing else."

"Dismissed."

"Yes, sir."

Hoffman threw out his left arm. "Heil Hitler!" Jahn looked at him. "Shit!" he said, and left the room.

## Chapter Six

Corrie looked up, surprise on her face. "General!" she called to Ben, seated across the room, his eyes poring over maps.

Ben removed his reading glasses and looked over at her. "Yes, Corrie?"

"General Jahn on the horn, sir."

Ben quickly walked the distance and took the mic. "Ben Raines here."

"This is General Jahn. I wish to discuss surrender terms, General Raines."

"On the air?"

"On the air, face to face, or sitting on two burros," Jahn's strong voice came through the speaker. "It makes no difference to me. My only concern is the treatment of my men."

"A trick, Ben?" Lamar Chase asked, standing close.

"I don't think so." He keyed the mic. "If your men lay down their weapons and agree to leave the United States, they will not be harmed,

General. I give you my word. But I can't guarantee their safety once out of this country."

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"We don't want to leave the country, General. We want to become residents," Jahn replied. "We are not Nazis, General. We are soldiers. But do not ask us to fight against men and women who we, in many cases, have known since childhood. I cannot ask my men to do that."

"I understand, General. I would like to meet with you, General."

"It would be an honor, sir."

"Hold what you have and stay on this frequency," Ben told him. "I'll be back in touch with you in fifteen minutes."

"I shall be waiting. General Jahn clear."

"Get me Ike, Corrie."

"Shark here. Go, Eagle."

"What do you see up there, Shark?"

"White flags, Eagle. Lots of them. My recon teams tell me that Jahn's people all over the place are laying down their weapons and standing in the roads, in the streets, in the fields, hands on their heads."

"I'll be at your location ASAP, Shark. Make a fresh pot of coffee."

"That's a big ten-four, Ben."

Ben put on his beret and picked up his Thompson. "Let's go, people."

Hoffman was clearly suffering from a mild case of shock. That General Jahn, one of the toughest and most capable soldiers he had ever known would surrender to Ben Raines had never entered Hoffman's thoughts.

Hoffman lifted dull eyes to his staff people gathered

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around his desk. "What happened?" was all the man could say.

Ben and General Jahn shook hands, and then both men stepped back and studied each other for a moment. Jahn slowly removed his pistol from his holster, all the while keeping one eye on Jersey, who, Jahn quickly and accurately surmised, would be more than happy to shoot him dead on the spot, and handed the weapon, butt first, to Ben.

Ben took it, looked at it, and returned it to Jahn. "Tell your men to keep their side-arms, General. We still have hundreds, perhaps thousands, of outlaws and assorted scum roaming the country. I won't leave you defenseless."

Jahn holstered the pistol. "That is kind of you, General Raines. Some of my men were worried about that very matter. Where would you like us to relocate?"

"Anywhere you like, General. I must advise you that General Brodermann has orders from Field Marshal Hoffman to hunt you down and kill you."

Jahn smiled. "I certainly hope that murderous SS bastard tries it. It will be the last thing he ever does."

Ben laughed. "I believe you, General. Do you know what Hoffman has in mind?"

"No, sir, I do not. And I would tell you if I did. The field marshal and I did not exactly, ah, part on the friendliest of terms the other evening."

Ben chuckled. "You didn't hit him, did you?"

Jahn again smiled. "No. But I would be lying if I said that thought did not occur to me."

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Ben sobered and looked at the man. "I have to ask, General. Why did you surrender your men?"

"Frankly, because you are going to win, General Raines. And I felt that any further sacrifice of my men would be criminal on my part."

"Any Nazis in your division, General?"

"Plenty of them. And they did not surrender and will still conduct a guerrilla type action against the Rebels."

"Thank you for your candor, General Jahn. One more thing: If you are serious about joining the Rebels and settling in this country, you will be expected to fight for it."

Jahn smiled. "That is something we do very well, General. Count on us."

The men shook hands and Ben left him with Ike. Just as Ben and Georgi Striganov had once been bitter enemies, and were now friends, Ben felt that given the time, he and Jahn would also become fast friends and allies. Also, though Jahn didn't know all about the meeting, while Ben had been driving up to meet with him, he and his senior officers had been interviewed separately and every word analyzed by some of the most sophisticated lie detector equipment anywhere in the world. Had Ike felt any of them to be lying, he would have shot them on the spot.

Battalions had been reformed and most of the Rebels were back in uniform. For those fighting in the arid parts of the state, they wore desert cammo to better blend in. A few wore tiger-stripe and the rest wore woodland cammo. All were back in black berets when out of combat zone or on stealth patrol, everyone on the

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line was in helmets and body armor, Kevlared to the max.

Artillery was all in place, gunships were being readied-on both sides, Ben was sure-and the two forces were about to start slugging it out.

And still Hoffman had made no major move to bust his Sixth and Seventh Divisions out of the loose box they were in. Ben had spent several long days pouring over intelligence reports and dozens of maps.



"I just can't believe it," Ben finally muttered. "Hoffman is going to do it." This was said after Ben had studied several bundles of intercepted dispatches between Hoffman and his commanders and then carefully studying a map. "He's really going to stand and slug it out with my eastern battalions. The man is a fool." He straightened up from the table and said, "Corrie, order Dan to launch a full scale artillery attack immediately. Tell General Payon I'm shifting Jim Peters Fourteenth Battalion and Ned Hawkins and his Rangers to the south, with all the artillery they can muster, to prevent the Second and Third from making an attempt to break the Eighth division out of San Antonio. Tell Garcia to shift two of his battalions down to help on the eastern front. The Blackshirts can't run west. There isn't a bridge or overpass intact for hundreds of miles once past this area." He tapped the map. "No point in delaying this any longer." He shook his head. "Damn, but we are spread thin."

Ben turned to Beth. "General Jahn and his bunch cause any trouble up north?"

She shook her head. "Not one incident. While they are being processed by our people north of the thirty-sixth parallel, Jahn ordered his men to turn in their side-

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arms. Not a one objected. One full colonel was overheard to say if he never heard another shot fired in anger he would be happy."

"But the multinational force have their hands full containing that regiment of Nazis who refused to surrender with General Jahn and company," Jersey said. "Maybe we ought to go up there and lend them a hand."

Ben smiled at her. "Sorry, Jersey. I sort of gave my word I'd run the rest of this show from the safety of a secure position. Relax and enjoy the tranquility."

"But you miss the action, don't you, General?" Cooper asked.

"No comment," Ben replied.

"Dan says he will commence firing at 1000 hours, General," Corrie called.

Ben looked at his watch and smiled. "Fifteen minutes. Dan isn't going to waste any time. How are our stockpiles, Beth?"

"Overflowing, General. But Hoffman can't say the same. He simply won't be able to match us shell for shell and round for round. He's got to conserve his supplies. We have completely stopped any incoming supplies from reaching him."

"Remember, sir," Jersey added. "Our people at Base Camp One worked around the clock for months getting us ready for this. We've got supplies cached everywhere. And the multinationals brought tons of supplies with them."

Ben nodded and began a restless pacing of the office. The office was actually the den of a home located on the Trinity River in East Texas, far from any battlegrounds and out of danger. His team watched him,

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knowing he was missing the action. Tell the truth, so did they.

Once Ben stopped his pacing and stood for a moment, hands balled into fists resting on his hips. He slowly looked around him at the room, a disgusted expression on his face. Then he walked to the open window and looked at the green landscape. One of the contingent assigned to guard Ben smiled and waved at him. Ben returned the wave and turned around to face his team. "Ike and Chase damn sure couldn't have stuck me in a more isolated place," he bitched.

"Ike didn't do it," Beth said, looking up from her journal. "Your kids picked this place out."

"Wonderful. Never have kids," Ben muttered. "They'll turn on you."

"Hang on!" Corrie said, adjusting her headset. "I've got a transmission coming in. Say again, Recon. Say again. You're breaking up."

She listened for a moment and turned to face Ben. "About a regiment of Blackshirts from the Sixth and Seventh busted through the lines, sir."

Ben's face brightened. "No kidding? Which way are they heading, Corrie?"

"Straight toward us, sir."

"Is that a fact?" Ben picked up his Thompson.

"Dan is urging us to head for the neutral zone and wait it out," Corrie said.

"Way too far," Jersey said, checking her M-16. "We'd never make it."

A Rebel lieutenant had been standing outside, listening. He stuck his head through the window. "What are you talking about, Jersey? It's a good two hundred and

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fifty miles to the bust out point. We'd be over into the neutral zone long before they even reached here."

"I'm with Jersey," Ben said.

"Sir," the lieutenant protested. "We have a very light battalion here. That's a damn regiment-sized force coming at us."

A sergeant standing beside the lieutenant said, "I can have choppers in here in one hour, General. We've got to get you to safety."

"I don't like helicopters," Jersey said. "They have this tendency to fall out of the sky."

"I agree," Ben said. He gave Corrie a few orders and then, with a smile on his face, said, "Let's see now, what shall we do. Ah! I know. We'll ..."

"Ike on the horn, General," Corrie interrupted.

Ben walked to the communications set-up and took the mic. "Go, Ike?"

"Ben, you get your long tall skinny ass out of there!" Ike yelled from hundreds of miles away in North Texas. "You hear me, Ben? You head north for the Oklahoma line."

"I thought I'd head for Louisiana, Ike."

The speaker was silent for a moment. "What are you pulling, Eagle?" Ike asked. "I don't trust you."

His team was staring at him, disbelief in their eyes. Ben Raines was going to run from a fight? They didn't believe that for a moment.

"That regiment can't go anywhere, Ike," Ben radioed. "Cecil will have ten thousand home guard people waiting for them at the line. That is, providing they even reach the state line before his artillery blows them off the face of the earth. You're in command here, Ike."

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"I'm heading back to Base Camp One for a little R&R. You have any objections to that?"

"I don't trust him," Colonel Lenz of the GSG 9 said, standing close to Ike. It hadn't taken the GSG 9 commander long to learn that Ben Raines would go to any lengths to get into a scrap. "He's up to something."

"Tell me!" Ike said. "I been puttin' up with his trickery for years."

"Corrie, have the battalion pack up and mount up," Ben ordered. He winked at Jersey and she smiled, knowing Ben had something wicked up his sleeve.

In Base Camp One, due to repeaters placed all up and down the line, Cecil sat in his office and was able to listen to the conversation, a smile on his face. Ben was sure as hell up to something. But he couldn't imagine what it could be. If Ben told his commanders he was going to Base Camp One, he was going to Base Camp One. How long he was going to stay and what he was going to do when he left was what worried Cecil. For he knew only too well that Ben was an ol' war hoss and he was not going to stay out of action for any length of time. But what in the hell did he have planned?

"He's gonna pull somethin'," Ike fumed. "He's actin' just too damn innocent. I know him, I tell you. He's got somethin' sneaky up his sleeve."

"However," Colonel Lenz pointed out. "He is the commanding general."

"Yeah," Ike replied. He keyed the mic. "All right, Eagle. Sounds good to me. With you out of the way, we can stop worryin' about you and concentrate on kickin' Hoffman's butt."

"I thought it was very considerate of me," Ben said drily.

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His team was still looking at him thoughtfully, all wondering what Ben really had in mind.

Hundreds of miles away, Ike looked at Colonel Lenz. "He's pullin' somethin'," Ike said. "But for the life of me, I can't figure what it is."

With a smile, Ben handed the mic to Corrie. "Let's pack it up and get gone, gang." Then he picked up his Thompson and left the room, laughing.

Cooper looked at Jersey. "Whatever he's got in mind, you can bet it's gonna be interesting." He paused. "And sneaky," he added.

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## Chapter Seven

Ben and his light battalion, actually about three companies strong, pulled out within the hour and headed east. Ben had said nothing about what he had in mind. But everyone in the headquarters battalion knew they were not going to Base Camp One for R&R. Quiet bets were made among the men and women as to their final destination.

When they arrived at Base Camp One late the following morning, Ben told Corrie, "Pass the word that we'll be here for about thirty-six hours. So make the best of it." To Cooper, "Have all our vehicles gone over front to back and top to bottom." To Beth, "Draw supplies for an extended campaign." To Jersey, "Let's go, Little Bit. We've got things to do and not much time in which to do them."

"You think that Ike is gonna figure out what you're up to, huh, and start raising hell about it?"

Ben smiled. "Something like that."

At Cecil's office, Jersey started yakking with old buddies and Ben closed the door to General Jefferys' office. The two old friends shook hands and stared at one another for a moment.

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Cecil finally waved Ben to a chair and said, while pouring them coffee, "You must be fairly confident about the outcome of the western campaign, Ben."

"Very. When General Jahn surrendered, that signaled the beginning of the end."

"You took some chances over there." He smiled and held up a hand. "Not that I wouldn't have done the same thing. You had to do something very bold to gain the upper hand."

"I just thank God it didn't backfire on us. And it certainly could have."

Cecil smiled. "But it didn't. You're confident enough to grab at any opportunity to leave and go off head-hunting on your own, so level with me. You're up to something, in your usual sneaky way. So let's have it."

Ben managed to look hurt. Cecil laughed at him. Ben grinned. "You're not going with me, Cec. My first stop was at the hospital to talk to your doctors."

Cecil shrugged. "I have resigned myself to this desk, Ben."

"I'm going to settle the hash of Moi Sambura and Wink Payne once and for all and get them finally and forever off our backs," Ben said.

Cecil drummed fingertips on the desk top. "With how many battalions?"

"Just mine."

"You can't be serious, Ben! Jesus God, man. Moi alone has about ten thousand back-to-Africa followers. Wink has just about the same number of white trash. They're spread all over the top half of Alabama. One faction jumps around and beats on tom-toms and the

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other burns crosses and has the market cornered on bed-sheets. They're all a bunch of goddamn nuts! But very dangerous ones."

Ben laughed at the expression on his friend's face. Moi Sambura despised Cecil Jefferys and the feeling was certainly mutual. "Oh, I'm going to take along a few tanks and so forth. Maybe some gunships. Don't worry about me. I'm not going in unprepared."

Cecil shook his head and sighed. But he knew that once Ben had made up his mind, nothing was going to change it. "Does Ike know about this?"

"Oh, hell no. He'd be screaming if he did. I'll let you tell him once we're on the way."

"Thanks a lot."

Ben smiled. "That's what friends are for."

Jesus Hoffman sat in his headquarters and brooded. He was not angry. He had vented that and now he was just depressed. Things were not going well. As a matter of fact, things were just plain shitty for the NAL. He swiveled in his chair and looked out the window.

Ben Raines had uncorked all his artillery, and the Blackshirts were getting plastered on every front. Raines had rocket-assisted 155s, both towed and self-propelled, with a range of over 26,000 yards, and Raines had placed them well out of range of Hoffman's largest guns. Every division Hoffman had was tied up, pinned down, or in a box. And they were taking terrible losses. Both in blood and morale.

I should have stayed in South America, he thought for the hundredth time that day. I should have been content with what I had. He shook his head. No, eventually

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Raines would have come after me, even down there. So if the dream must end, what difference does it make where it ends?

Hoffman stood up and walked around the room several times, to get the blood flowing and the kinks out of his joints and muscles. Then he stepped out of his office and told an aide to gather his staff officers. He told another to make fresh coffee and see if the mess had some cakes or cookies. While waiting for his staff to assemble, he drank a cup of coffee and felt better, refreshed. He sat on the edge of a table he used for a desk and his thoughts were bitter.

"I was going to conquer Texas in a matter of weeks," he muttered. "The

whole of the United States in a year." Several of his staff people had gathered silently by the open door and were listening to him mutter. "Now my troops are scattered and demoralized. I would go home, but the way is blocked. I would call for planes, but the Rebels have missiles and would shoot them down. That is, providing they even reached the southern borders of this goddamn country."

One of his staff officers cleared his throat and if Hoffman heard, he ignored it.

"Why?" Hoffman said in a whisper. "More importantly, how did it happen?"

"It happened," the voice of a senior staff member broke into his mutterings, "because we were all too confident, too arrogant, and we grossly miscalculated the strength and underestimated the resolve of the Rebels."

Hoffman lifted his eyes and turned his head while the other staff officers braced themselves for a display of temper. But Hoffman merely nodded his head in agreement and softly said, "Yes. Yes, you are absolutely correct."

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I have to admit it. But do you have any suggestions that would help us turn the battles around to our favor?"

"No, Field Marshal. Sadly, I do not."

"Nor do I," Hoffman admitted. "Come in and sit down, gentlemen. There will be coffee and small treats available in a moment. We have to plan. And do it quickly."

Just before Cecil shut his office down for the day, Ben walked in and checked on what was happening in Texas. His Rebels were steadily gaining ground. Buddy and the bikers and Mexican guerrillas had trucked in some mortars, and had moved in close and were keeping Hoffman's Eighth under a ruthless and steady barrage. Buddy predicted the Eighth was near total collapse and would surrender within the week.

Units from above the Thirty-sixth parallel had moved south and now had a large contingent of Hoffman's troops trapped between Ike's units and their own.

"Down to days now, Ben," Cecil said. "That's Ike's assessment. We sure as hell overestimated the staying power of the Blackshirts."

"General Jahn's surrender knocked the blocks out from under them," Ben replied. "Never in their wildest dreams did they ever envision Jahn surrendering more than half of his division."

"If the Eighth does surrender, what in the world are we going to do with them?"

"I'm readying ships for that now. We'll send them right back to South America."

"The people down there that the Blackshirts enslaved

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and tortured will surely kill a lot of them once they land," Cecil pointed out.

"I'm counting on that," Ben replied.

Cecil shrugged. "When are you pulling out?"

"First thing in the morning. I'm taking main battle tanks and Dusters and some towed artillery. We'll clear the first decent airport we find close enough in first thing. I want to make peace with Moi and Wink. And I'm going to try. But I'm not going to jack around with either faction for very long, Cecil."

"Good," his friend replied.

An aide came in and said, "This just in, sir." He held up a sheet of paper.

"Read it, Frank," Cecil asked.

"Field Marshal Jesus Hoffman has ordered all troops to fight to the death. Anyone who surrenders will be branded a traitor and shot on sight."

"Thanks, Frank. What do you think about it, Ben?"

Ben shook his head. "It won't work. Hoffman has nothing except Brodermann and a few other battalions of die-hard SS troops to back up that threat. They'll be out of supplies in a week or so. And hungry soldiers don't fight well."

"You're really that confident, Ben?"

"Two weeks ago if someone had said what I just said, I would have thought them crazy. But now, yes, I'm that confident. We've split Hoffman's forces hundreds of miles apart. We've cut his supply lines. We've demoralized his troops. Frankly, I would consider halting all major actions against them and just sit back and starve them out."

"Are you leaving that up to Ike and me?"

"Yes." Ben eyeballed his friend. "But you keep your

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ass out of the field, Cec. Do I have to make that an order?"

Cecil shook his head. "No. The only way I'll get back into action is if Base Camp One is attacked. And I don't think that's going to happen."

"The regiment of Blackshirts who busted through?"

"My home guards have stopped them cold with artillery and gunships. They broke up into small units and scattered. Some of them have surrendered to Rebel patrols and some have thrown away their weapons. We have evidence that many of them have changed out of uniforms and into civilian clothing and are trying to head south toward home. Latest reports say the Mexican guerrillas are not treating those who cross the border with a lot of kindness."

"Certainly can't blame them." Ben sighed. "Well, it's all over west of

us except for the mop-up. The gods of war did not smile upon Hoffman. Luckily for us. It could have turned out very bad." Ben stood up and stuck out his hand. "I'll be pulling out before dawn, Cec. I'll see you all in a few weeks. I'll have mess with the troops this evening. See you."

Cecil sat and watched his friend leave. He could not recall ever meeting or reading about any man who was more of a soldier's soldier than Ben Raines. He slept in the mud and the rain and the cold and the heat with them. He ate the same lousy food and shared every hardship. Which was just a few of the reasons why there wasn't a Rebel in or out of uniform who wouldn't willingly and immediately lay down his or her life for Ben.

Cecil had to chuckle when he recalled first meeting Ben. The man was adamantly resisting becoming any sort of leader. All Ben wanted to do back then was

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travel the country and write about the Great War and the aftermath of it. He was pushed and cajoled into taking the job. But when he finally made up his mind to do it, he threw himself into it a hundred and ten percent.

The good ol' days, Cecil thought, leaning back in his chair and listening to the silence of the office building. The hum of computers and copying machines was gone. The chatter of men and women at work gone for the day.

"You be careful out there, Ben," he murmured.

As he had done countless times in the past, Ben walked the long lines of trucks and tanks and Jeeps and Hummers, stopping in the darkness of predawn to chat every now and then, Jersey moving like a silent shadow with him. This was One Battalion. Ben's personal battalion. Known throughout the entire Rebel army as the toughest and meanest bunch of men and women in the land. Very few rookies in this battalion. These were bloodied and hardened and seasoned combat veterans. And their name was legend.

"Here we go again, General!" a man called out.

"Damn right," Ben said. "Did you pack extra socks, Sonny?"

"Six pair."

"Did you remember to bring your reading glasses, Jeff?" Ben shouted.

"In an unbreakable case this time!" Jeff said with a laugh. "How about your glasses, General?"

Ben patted a breast pocket. "Right here."

"And I packed an extra pair just in case," Jersey said.

Ben approached the line of big main battle tanks.

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"You boys and girls ready to go?" he called up to the helmeted head sticking out of the turret.



"Ready to kick ass and take names, General."

"That's my line," Jersey laughed.

A runner panted up to Ben. "Great news, sir. General Ike just radioed in. Hoffman's Eighth division has just packed it in. Buddy Raines is accepting General Schleyer's surrender as we speak."

"Good, good!"

"There's more, sir. General von Hanstein hanged himself last night. Guards found him just about thirty minutes ago. He left a note saying he preferred death over dishonor."

"How very noble of him," Ben said drily. "Are you saving the bad news for last?"

"Yes, sir. Scouts report that numbers of terrorists are still roaming around, sir," the runner stated. "And many of them have joined with Moi Sambura. Wink Payne has vowed to fight to the death."

"How many times have we heard that?" Ben muttered. "All right. Thank you for the news."

Corrie, Beth, and Cooper appeared at his side just as the sky was beginning to lighten. Beth said, "Scouts ranging out, sir."

"Very good. Any breakdowns or other glitches this morning?"

"Negative, sir."

"Bring the Hummer up, Coop."

"Right, sir!"

"We following I-20 this run?"

"Yes, sir," Corrie said. "And recon reports that Moi and Wink are dug in for a fight."

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"Then they'll damn sure get one. Right, Jersey?"

"Fuckin'-A."

"Let's do it."

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## Chapter Eight

Corrie received messages all that morning about the surrendering of Hoffman's Blackshirts, from squad size to company size, they were laying down their arms and walking out with their hands up. But no one from Hoffman's First Division had surrendered, and not one SS trooper had shown the white flag. So that made Field Marshal Hoffman still a very dangerous enemy. Ben did some head work and concluded that Hoffman could still field about twenty thousand men, perhaps more than that, and all

of them hard-core Nazis and dedicated to Hoffman and his dream of a new Nazi empire rising up all over America.

"Bastard," Ben muttered.

No one in the Hummer had to ask who Ben was referring to. They all could pretty well guess.

Once the convoy left the area tightly controlled by the Rebels, the highways were in bad shape and the convoy was slowed down considerably. Ben ordered the convoy over just west of Meridian, Mississippi with about three hours of light left, at a small deserted town. Scouts had checked out the town and found certain

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areas of it functioning-in a manner of speaking. The town had been one of the outposts, but those there had not been able to effectively combat the roaming gangs of thugs and could not bring themselves to adopt the harsh law of the Rebels. So they had left-no one knew where-and the town, at least parts of it, had turned into a squatter's camp.

"They're heavily armed," Ben was told. "And not at all friendly."

"Before you tell me," Ben said, "I can guess. They have hordes of half-naked kids running around, most of them with runny noses and rashes, and dirty diapers, or no diapers at all. They have no schools, no proper sanitation facilities, no doctors. The men all consider themselves to be 'rough, tough, rugged individualists,' who hunt and fish while their wives work the gardens, keep house, and bear children. All of whom are illiterate."

The Scout laughed. "It never changes, does it, General?"

"Unfortunately, no. It does not. Damnit!" Ben kicked at a rock and succeeded only in scuffing the toe of his boot. "We had this place all set up and fully functioning. We spent a lot of time and effort in this place. Why in the hell did the good people turn tail and run?"

No one answered him because they knew he didn't expect any reply.

"Maybe," Ben said softly, "it was because they were good people. Maybe we've been the bad guys all these years."

"Sure we are, to an extent," a company commander said. "You said yourself that a nice guy could never be President of the United States, or Prime Minister of England,

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or the leader of any large country. It takes someone who is part son of a bitch."

Ben smiled. "Did I say that? Yeah. I guess I did, at that. Well, I was right. What does Meridian up the road look like, as if I didn't know."

"Burned out, looted, picked over five thousand times," the Scout replied. "Some pretty sorry outlaw-looking types in there, General."

"Any sorrier than the ones now occupying what used to be our outpost?"

"No, sir. Just about the same."

"Company coming," Corrie said. "Be here in about five minutes. Fifty or so men, all heavily armed. And all in need of a bath. Badly in need, according to the patrol."

"That figures," Ben said. "The easiest thing in the world to make is soap. But will these bastards do it? No. Come on. Let's get this over with."

The men, all bearded and blue-jeaned and booted, carried a wide variety of weapons, but carried them like men who understood guns. And Ben had no doubt but what they did.

Ben halted them about twenty-five feet from where he stood in the room. "That's far enough, boys! I can smell you from here."

"I always knowed we'd meet up someday, Mr. Big Shot General Raines. Yeah, I knows who you is. I seen your pitcher. You just as ugly as your pitcher made you out to be. I reckon you come here to tell what to do, right?"

"Judging from your appearance and body odor, I doubt that even your mother could tell you what to do ... or if she tried you didn't listen."

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The man flushed under the grime on his face and cocked his head to one side. He narrowed his eyes. "You got a rale smart mouth on you, Raines."

"Why thank you. I take that as a compliment."

"I din mean it thataways."

"I'm sure. What do you men want?"

"To tell you to git, that's what. W'un's run this area around here."

"Oh, my!" Ben feigned great consternation. "He's ordering us to leave. Should we pack up, people?"

"He's just scaring me to death, General," the usually quiet Beth said, but she hated this type of men they were facing. If Beth could have her way, she'd line them all up and shoot them on the spot.

"Yeah, me, too," Jersey said, then quite unladylike spat on the broken asphalt. "Just about that much."

Corrie was leaning against the fender of a six-by, her CAR-15 pointed straight at the knot of men. There was a strange smile on her lips.

"You cunts got rale smart mouths, ain't you?" the spokesman said.

"If you don't back off and apologize for that remark," Ben told the man. "You're going to be in serious trouble."

"Oh, yeah? How's that?"

"Because I might be forced to turn these ladies loose. And believe me, boys, you don't want that."

"Shit!" one of the men said.

A slim but very shapely oriental Rebel stepped forward. Kim filled out her BDU's very nicely. She was one of the highly motivated and trained-to-the-edge Scouts, and she was lethal. At her side, in a pouch, she carried throwing stars, and was extremely accurate with

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them. She could also kill with her bare hands, and did, often, working behind enemy lines.

"What's that goddamn gook want?" the spokesman asked.

A whole gaggle of women and malnourished kids had appeared behind the knot of rednecks. The women were not much better to look upon than their men. Ben felt sorry for the kids, for he knew they did not have a chance in life. They would, in all probability, grow up to be just like their parents. Worthless. There would be the exception among them, of course. The occasional kid who would defy their parents' self-imposed ignorance and cruelty and learn to enjoy reading and expanding his or her mind, who would break away and better themselves. But those break-aways would be rare.

"Get your kids out of here," Ben told the group of men. "I don't want them to see this."

"You don't tell me to do nothin' wif my younguns, Raines," the man responded.

"Back off, Kim," Ben told the young woman, quickly sizing up the situation. "These kids have had a tough enough time of it without seeing more violence."

"I knowed all the time that you was yellin', Raines!" the man said with a grin. His teeth were rotted and blackened.

Ben's eyes turned cold. "You ignorant son of a bitch!" Ben lashed out at the man. "I see it daily but I still have a hard time believing just how goddamn stupid some people can be. Look at us, you fool. You're looking at over a thousand troops. The finest weapons known to exist in the world today. One of those main battle tanks parked over there could wipe out your whole little gathering of stupidity. Look at these troops around me. Look

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at their weapons. In five seconds you could all be lying on the road, dead or dying. And you dare to get all up in my face with threats? Turn around and return to your stinking hovels. Go on, continue your lives of ignorance and bigotry. Raise a new generation of fools. We'll just come back here at a later date and wipe them out, just like we should do with you, right this minute!" Ben pointed a finger at the man. "Don't open your mouth again to me. Don't say another word. Because if you do, I will kill you on the spot!"

The man raised a hand to his face. The hand trembled slightly.

"We got a right to live decent lak and you cain't come in here and tell

us what to do," a woman uttered one of the whining statements that most Rebels had learned to despise over the long warring years.

"Shut up!" Ben roared at her. "I'll tell you your rights. You have the right to work and to better yourself. You have the right to respect the land you squat on. You have the right to expect the same treatment you offer others. And under the present conditions, that is just about it. What do you want from us, lady? Tell me. Go on, tell me. Because you are looking at the only government that now exists in this battered nation."

The woman said nothing. But her eyes glared hate at Ben and the healthy and well-fed Rebels gathered all around him. Ben knew the look only too well. And the unspoken words that lie behind those eyes: Give me. You owe me. I demand. I got a right. I can fuck whenever I wants to and you gots to feed my bastard children. You gots to give me money for doing nothing. You cain't make me work ifn I don't wants to. You gots

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something and I ain't got nothin' so you gots to give me half of what you got. Whenever I wants to.

Words that helped to bring down what was once the most powerful nation in all the world.

"Hit's been a rale hard winter, General," another woman said. "And we din have no good crop last season."

"And that is my fault, I suppose," Ben said sarcastically. He knew he should just turn around and walk away. Knew he would never get through to these people. No one had been able to get through to them for decades. The government-when there had been a government-had wasted trillions of taxpayer dollars on people such as these. And gained nothing. The Rebels had learned that the only way to combat ignorance and bigotry was to go into the home and catch the young during their formative years, and if necessary, take the young from their parents and put them in caring foster homes. But those homes were now filled to overflowing. The Rebels were now taking few young as they traveled. There simply was no more room.

"Well," the woman said, "y'all seem to have a-plenty and we ain't got nothin'. You could share wif us."

Ben shook his head in disgust. Same old story. "And when what we give you runs out...?"

She shrugged, as Ben had expected she would. Nothing ever changes.

"I bet you share with niggers all the time, don't you, Raines?" another man said with a sneer.

This stupid bunch was really beginning to annoy Ben.

"You damn shore got enough of 'em with you," the ignoramus added, looking at the growing ranks of Rebels.

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Less than eight percent of his battalion was black.

"What is your name?" Ben asked.

"Carl Ray. Folks call me Jigger. Been called that near'bouts all my life." He narrowed his eyes. "Why for you want to know 'at?"

"I'm sure I'm not in the least interested in finding out why folks call you that."

"Is you gonna hep us, or not?" Jigger asked. "We help those whom we know will try to help themselves," Ben told the man, trying to hold on to his temper. It was beginning to be a losing proposition. "That does not include your group. Now why don't you just leave us alone and we'll be more than happy to do the same for your, ah, group."

"We ain't a-gonna beg y'all for hep, Raines," Jigger said.

"Good. Now why don't you go away?"

"And we ain't takin' no orders from you, neither."

Ben turned around and looked at his troops. They were sitting on fenders, squatting on the ground, standing around him, all grinning at him, and all thoroughly enjoying this exchange.

"You think this is funny?" he asked.

They all nodded their heads.

"Except for their kids," Cooper put a damper on it, standing off to one side. "But what can we do?"

"Nothing," Beth said. "And it'll break your heart if you let it. Maybe we could take the very youngest...?" She trailed that off, knowing they could not. The Rebel adoption and foster home placement people were overloaded and terribly overcrowded. They simply could not do any more.

Cooper snapped his fingers. "Corrie. I got an idea."

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"Wonderful," Jersey said. "All this time I thought you were brain-dead."

"What is it, Coop?" Ben said, overhearing much of the exchange.

"General Jahn and his people."

"What about them? Oh! Hey," Ben said. "That's right, Coop. Von Hanstein said that Jahn and his troops were always getting into trouble with the field marshal for taking in kids and being careful not to harm any ... if at all possible. Corrie, find out where Jahn and company are located and give them a shout. Jahn said many of his men were married and they were going to try to get their wives up here, one way or the other. I ..."

"Hey!" Jigger shouted, interrupting Ben. "Whut's all that damn whisperin' 'bout over thar?"

Ben glanced at him. "Shut up, Jigger ..."

'Jigger!" Carl Ray hollered.

"Whatever. Just be quiet. Every time you exhale you pollute the air."

Jigger looked at a friend. "Did that son of a bitch insult me, Flapper?"

"I do believe he did, Jigger. But I ain't rat shore, since I can't catch the jist of all them words he spouts. Whut do you say, Billy Joe?"

Billy Joe ruminated on the question "Ah personal thank he's been in-sultin' us ever' since we got up here."

Jigger thought about that for a moment. Then he grunted. "Ah thank I'll just, by gawd, walk up yonder and whup his uppity ass," Jigger said. He pulled at the waist of his jeans in a futile attempt to get them over his enormous gut.

"Ah'll be yore second, Jigger," Flapper said. " 'At's the way them folks in the olden times done 'er."

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"My second what?" Jigger asked.

"Never mind, I know what to do. Come on."

The three men walked up to Ben, who had his back to them, talking with his personal team.

"Three locals coming up," Cooper said.

"Ignore them," Ben replied.

"Hey, you!" Flapper said to Ben's back.

Ben continued talking to Beth while Corrie set up a communications patch to Ike.

"I'm a-talkin' to you, boy!" Flapper raised his voice.

Dozens of Rebels watched the three men carefully as Ben continued to speak to Beth, ignoring the trashy trio.

That Jersey had taken a few steps away from Ben and had her M-16 leveled at the three men did not escape the notice of Jigger and Billy Joe. Both of them got a little nervous. Jersey's dark eyes held a menace that they both picked up on. Billy Joe and Jigger looked very carefully all around them. There were something like a hundred guns pointed at them. A little nervous turned into a whole lot nervous.

"Ah, Flapper?" Jigger said, suddenly breaking out in a very cold sweat.

"Hush up, boy. I'm a-talkin' to the general here."

"You bes' look around you, Flapper," Billy Joe said. " 'Fore you git any more hoss-tile."

The ignorant lout who had started this conversation, and who had not opened his mouth since being ordered by Ben to close it, suddenly had a nearly overwhelming urge to pee. But he was afraid to move for fear of getting shot.

The kids had been quickly taken away by their mothers. The women were showing a great deal more sense than the men.

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"Goddamnit, boy!" Flapper hollered. "Is you deaf?" Then Flapper made a terrible mistake. He shoved Ben. Hard.

"Oh, shit!" Billy Joe whispered.

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## Chapter Nine

Ben recovered his balance and threw a short hard right fist that landed dead center on Flapper's big red nose. Flapper's big red nose suddenly got bigger and redder as he stumbled backward and fell hard to the asphalt, landing on his butt.

Billy Joe and Jigger raised their hands high into the air as a hundred rifles took steady aim at them.

"We's out of this!" Jigger squealed. "Lord God, folks. Don't shoot us!"

"I'm with him!" Billy Joe hollered. "What he just said, I mean."

Flapper crawled to his feet, his nose streaming blood and his eyes killing mean. "You gawddamn uppity son of a bitch!" he said. "I'm a-gonna stomp your guts out."

"Come on, then," Ben told him.

Flapper rushed Ben, swinging both fists, and Ben tripped him, once more sending the man hollering and flapping his arms for balance, and finally sprawling on the blacktop. This time Flapper landed on his face, skinned it up something fierce, and the man

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commenced bellowing like a mad bull as he fought to once more climb to his feet.

"I really wish you'd stop all this nonsense," Ben told him, pulling on a pair of leather gloves that Cooper tossed him. "Before I lose my temper and hurt you."

"Son of a bitch!" Flapper yelled, blood from half a dozen cuts and scrapes running down his face. "Stand still and fight lak a man, damn you!"

"How is a man supposed to fight?" Ben questioned.

"Wif his fists!" Flapper hollered. He shook his head and the blood flew.

"Oh!" Ben said, stepping closer. "I guess I can perhaps manage to do that. Do you mean something like this?" He suddenly hit the surprised Flapper with a haymaker right that crossed Flapper's eyes and buckled his knees. "Or like this?" Ben asked, driving in a left that pulped Flapper's lips and knocked him up against the front of a truck. "Perhaps this?" Ben questioned, and hit Flapper in the belly so hard his fist was momentarily lost in the flab.



Flapper's face turned chalk white and he seemed to sigh as he slowly sank to his knees. He remained that way for a moment, and then toppled over, once more landing on his face in the center of the cracked old highway.

Ben looked down at the semiconscious Flapper. "Not bad for a middle-aged man," he muttered. He turned to Billy Joe and Jigger. "Either of you two have anything else you'd care to discuss with me?"

"No, sir!" they hollered, their hands still in the air.

"Are you both certain of that?"

"Yes, sir!"

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"Will you please carry your friend away from here and leave us alone for the remainder of our stay?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Ike says Jahn's with him and they've started sending planes down to get their wives. General Jahn says to bring the-kids on," Corrie called.

"Good, Corrie, thank you. I thought that would be Jahn's reaction. But before we do that, let's inspect the town and see if there is any hope for these people."

"Any hope?" Jigger hollered. "What do that mean? What is y'all gonna do-shoot us?"

"That's not a bad idea," Ben told him.

Jigger peed his pants.

"Oh, Lard!" Billy Joe yelled.

Ben sent teams in to inspect the living quarters of the tiny town's inhabitants. He had seen more than his share over the long years of how trash chose to live. Why they did so was something that had eluded him all his life.

Ben soaked his right hand in salted water while the teams were in town. He concluded that he was getting just too damned old for fist-fighting.

He had just dried off his slightly swollen hand when the teams reported back in.

"Report," Ben told them, already reading the news in their eyes.

"Kids are filthy, suffering from malnourishment, and of course have never been vaccinated for anything," a doctor said. "Pisses me off," he added.

"Take those young enough to be rehabed," Ben ordered. "Corrie, have Cecil start sending planes in at noon tomorrow to transport them back. We'll have that old air strip cleaned up by then."

No one had to ask what to do if the parents objected. In truth, damn few of them would object. Most would be happy to get rid of the brats. The Rebels had seen that very thing happen, time and time again, coast to coast, border to border. And it never failed to astonish and disgust them.

No groups of people came out to the Rebel encampment from the shacks and hovels to protest the taking of their kids, although some did stand well back from the grass landing strip when the planes came in the next morning and watch the kids being loaded into the cargo planes for the flight back to Base Camp One. There, the children would be given medical attention, vaccinations, and first of all, treated for head lice. They would be housed-properly, for the first time in their lives-with Rebel families until Jahn and his people were settled and ready to take them. Ben sat and stared at the rabble, open contempt in his eyes.

A courier handed Ben a pouch and Ben sat on the ground, beneath the shady branches of a huge old tree, and read the dispatches.

Intelligence felt that most of what was left of Hoffman's army-with the exception of the SS troops-was nearing total collapse. Their supply lines severed, they were running out of ammo and food, and those who surrendered told tales of eating rats to survive.

Hoffman had vanished. Intelligence believed he had slipped through the lines and headed north. They also believed Brodermann was with him, as were many of Hoffman's staff officers. Their defenders were hard-core SS troops. What was happening in most places west of the Mississippi River now was tedious and dangerous digging out and mopping up.

Ben and battalion watched the last plane leave and then mounted up and headed out, following I-20 northeast. In their command posts in North Alabama, Moi Sambura and Wink Payne braced for what they knew was going to be the fight of their lives.

Wink Payne felt Ben Raines to be a nigger-loving, no good son of a bitch. Moi Sambura felt Ben Raines to be a black-hating, racist son of a bitch.

"But he's got African Americans in his army," a few of the more moderate members of Moi's movement pointed out.

"Uncle Toms," Moi would always reply. "Chocolate covered vanilla ice creams. Black on the surface, white in the middle. They're just as bad, or worse, than Raines."

What neither side could see was that all Rebels were, first, last, and always, Americans. People from every state in what used to be called the Union were represented in the Rebel army. Every creed, every color, every nationality and religion.

"Fight to the death!" Wink told his people.

"Fight to the death!" Moi told his people.

"I wish to hell I could figure out some way to get those two to turn on each other," Ben mused aloud over the evening meal. "That sure would

save us a lot of time and bother."

Under the light from a gas lantern, Ben studied maps of the state. "From Birmingham north to the state line, everything east of I-65 to the Georgia line is claimed by Wink. Everything west of I-65 over to Mississippi Highway 45 is claimed by Moi." Ben put aside the maps and smiled, and with that, his team knew he'd come up with some plan; probably a very perverse one.

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"We attack tomorrow?" Corrie asked.

"No," Ben replied. "We'll stay on I-20 over into Georgia. When we reach Georgia Highway 27, we'll split up into company sized units, with each company having armor and artillery. Then we'll start shoving Wink and his nuts and fruitcakes west." He laughed. "Right into Moi's territory. The results should be quite interesting. Wink's people might decide to run north or south, and if they do, that's all right. We'll be ready for that, too. Corrie, bump Base Camp One and have gun-ships standing by ready to fly. I want gunships flying search and destroy along the northern, southern and eastern perimeters of our TO. Get the PUFFs ready to go as well. Might as well do this right."

"It's a hundred and sixty six miles to Georgia Highway 27," Beth told him.

"We'll figure two days total to reach it and spread out south to north," Ben said.

"Soften it up with artillery first?" one of the company commanders in attendance asked.

Ben shook his head. "Not until we give the noncombatants time to get out of the area. I don't like the idea of a lot of collateral damage if it can be avoided."

"And if they refuse to come out?" he was asked.

"A lot of people are going to get hurt," was Ben's reply.

It was a confusing and sometimes chaotic time in Texas. The Rebels and the multinational forces were very nearly overwhelmed by surrendering and very hungry Blackshirts. General Payon helped the situation immensely by clearing a way south through Mexico for the

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prisoners. The Blackshirts were disarmed and using their own captured vehicles, with the prisoners driving, were sent south, back to their own countries and to a very uncertain fate once they arrived. If they arrived. For the citizens of the Blackshirts' home countries, once the bulk of Hoffman's people had left for the north, had risen up and overwhelmed the dictatorial government in place.

Cecil appointed Ned Hawkins and his force of New Texas Rangers to be the law in Texas and to clean it up. Hoffman, Brodermann, their staff officers, and at least several thousand of their SS followers, had disappeared without a trace.

"We've won some battles but not the war," Ben said, upon hearing that

news. "They'll stay down and quietly rebuild. For there are still thousands of people across this country who subscribe to Hoffman's ideas. We haven't heard the last of Hoffman. Not by a long shot. You've got to cut the head off before the poisonous snake is dead. And be damn careful when you handle the dead part, it can still kill you. Corrie, have Ike assign as many people as he thinks necessary to start scouring the land, looking for Hoffman. How about the plans of the multinationals?"

"They agreed unanimously that they'll stay until things are secure."

"Good enough. What about those that we learned were coming over?"

"Cecil told them many thanks and to head on back home. And that anytime they might need help, to give us a shout. They said they would and wished us good luck."

"Any word from Moi or Wink?"

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"Yes." She hesitated. "Moi says for you to take your offer and stick it up your honky racist ass. Wink says to take your offer and stick it up your nigger-lovin' ass."

"Being misunderstood," Ben said with a smile. "That's the story of my life."

His team all groaned at that.

"And no respect either," Ben added. That got him another series of groans.

"Gunships up?" Ben asked, when the groaning had died down.

"Up," Corrie said. "No signs of anyone trying to bug out."

"Fools," Ben muttered. "The arrogant fools. Well, you can bet one thing, when the shells start dropping in on them, there will be some quick rethinking on our offer."

"But it'll be too late then, won't it, General," the GO of Dog Company asked.

"Yes," Ben said slowly. "It will."

Jesus Hoffman had split up his remaining forces, disseminating them among the population and countryside. Hoffman could wait. He would choose his new people very carefully and proceed ever so slowly. And he now knew just the type of person who would jump at the chance to join his forces. The rabble of Paris had helped defeat Burgundy-so he had been taught in school-so too could the rabble of America help bring down Ben Raines. They all despised him with a burning passion that bordered on fanaticism. Hoffman knew that. So why not use them? The more he thought about it, the

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better he liked it. He had broached the plan to Brodermann, who had agreed to the genius of it.

"Yes," Hoffman said, leaning back in his chair and smiling. "It will work."

They had all carefully packed away and hidden their uniforms, and were now dressed in civilian clothing. They spoke only English. Any other language was forbidden. The men had all grown moustaches and many had grown full beards. They hunted and fished and scratched out gardens. All had plans to take American women as wives; those with children preferable.

"One year, Ben Raines," Hoffman spoke to the silent room. "Give me one year, and I will smash you into the ground. I learned from you, Raines. I learned much from you. I learned that you are not a gentleman. I learned that you are no more than a cut above a very cunning savage. Yes, I learned much. And for that, I will thank you just before I kill you."

Moi Sambura could not understand what was happening. He had sent scouts out north and south of his seized territory, but they could find no sign of the Rebels. But lots and lots of attack helicopters. And some strange-looking old slow prop planes, that fairly bristled with guns. Moi was the furthest thing from a fool. He knew from the description what his scouts had seen. PUFFs. One PUFF could effectively clear an area about the size of two or three football fields ... of all living things. And do it very quickly.

What the hell was that damnable Ben Raines up to?

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"We got to get the wimmen and the chil'ren out of here, Wink!" one of Payne's men said, panic in his voice. "They's thousands and thousands of Rebels gathered over yonder to the west."

"Sit down, Ed," Wink told him. "Calm yourself. There are not thousands and thousands of Rebels. There is one, maybe two battalions of Rebels. That's it. That's a total of no more than two thousand Rebels. And some of them is women. And we all know the only thing women is good for. So they're probably along to screw the troops, is all. The crap we been hearin' about women Rebels bein' tigers in battle is just that, Ed. Crap. We got machines guns, mortars, and the bes' automatic assault rifles anywhere in the world. Hell, Ed, we been coon-killin' Moi's people for years, ain't we? Don't that tell you nothin' 'bout How tough we is, boy?"

"I reckon you be right, Wink," Ed said, sitting down. "But you better talk to the men. Some of them is gettin' spooked about the rumors of thousands of Rebels."

"I'll settle 'em down, Ed. You just leave that to me."

After the calmed down Ed had left, Wink sat in the study of his home and pondered what faced him. Unlike many, if not most, of his followers, Wink Payne was not an ignorant man. It was his radical views that drew the ignorant to him like steel shavings to a magnet. He would have been highly insulted had anyone suggested that he and Moi Sambura were so much alike in their thinking they could pass for mental twins. But it was true. The main difference between them was their color. Wink hated black people, Moi hated white people.

Both were highly intelligent men, well-read and well-versed, but both were so blind in their individual hatred they could not see that even if they could somehow

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miraculously combine their forces, they would still be unable to defeat the Rebels.

They didn't know this, but Ben Raines did.

The sadness of it all, Ben thought, as he leaned against the fender of his Hummer and stared at what used to be the Alabama-Georgia state line, is that both Wink and Moi are correct to a small degree in their thinking. Back when we had a central government in Washington, D.C. the nation's leaders overreacted in an attempt to try to make up for two hundred years of injustice toward the blacks. Some white toes got stepped on; in many cases, trod on hard.

Ben didn't believe that standards should have been lowered to help the blacks, and neither did any intelligent black that he had ever met ... once confidence was gained and both sides could speak freely.

Cecil Jefferys had once said, "Toss them all into society with the same standards for everybody, no matter what color. It will be brutal, but the best and the brightest and the mentally toughest will make it."

But that didn't happen until men like Ben Raines and Cecil Jefferys came into power. And Cecil's words were proving to be correct.

Ben had often written to and said to government leaders, back when the government was whole: "This nation cannot be all things to all people, all the time. To attempt to do that is not only physically impossible, but economically unreasonable and grossly unfair to the hard working taxpayers who are being forced, in most cases against their will, to foot the bill."

But the elected officials would not listen to men like

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Ben Raines and Cecil Jefferys. The best of friends. A black man and a white man of like mind. Hard men.

"Wink," Ben muttered, as he stared toward the west. "And Moi, too. You'd better get your acts together. And you damn well better do it quickly. 'Cause in about five minutes, I'm coming after you."

Ben walked back to where Corrie sat with her radio equipment. "Any word from either of them, Corrie?"

"Not a peep directed at us, sir. But Beth has been listening to Wink's people talk back and forth."

Ben cut his eyes. "What are they saying, Beth?"

"That they're going to kick our asses."

Jersey slapped a full clip of .223 ammo into the belly of her M-16. "I wonder if anyone over there would like to bet on that?" She stood up and looked at Ben. "Kick-ass time, General?"

Ben nodded. "Kick-ass time, Jersey."

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## Chapter Ten

In slightly less than fifteen minutes, eight towns that once bordered the Georgia line were reduced to blazing rubble and thick, swirling, choking smoke from the artillery barrage. Wink had finally used some common sense and moved women and children back to the center of his controlled territory, momentarily out of harm's way. But when the barrage ended, not quite half of those men he had assigned to the eastern front lines made it out of the savage barrage of HE, WP, and antipersonnel rounds that rained down on their heads from miles away.

Wink's men had been told the Rebels would be easy to stop. And his ignorant followers had believed that. They had believed that right up until the shelling. They fired their mortars toward the east. But the rounds fell miles short of the Rebel artillery.

Wink ordered his followers to fall back. "Blow the bridges on the Tennessee," he ordered. He thought that might buy him some time. It wouldn't. He thought that would show the Rebels how determined Wink Payne and his followers really were. It didn't. He

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thought he would be able to rally his men and stop the Rebel advance. He was wrong.

Ben, at the top of the state near the Tennessee line, simply drove straight down a secondary road, on the east side of the river and Gunter'sville Lake, blocked off the southern escape route, helped Baker Company put any of Wink's stragglers into a box, and systematically set about mopping up.

"We have one of Payne's senior officers," a scout reported, just as Ben was finishing the evening meal.

It was pleasant in this part of the state, with thick forests, the foliage lush, and flowers at high bloom. The air was softly scented with dozens of fragrances, and the evening was cool for this time of the year.

"Bring him in," Ben said.

The man was scared, and tried not to show it. But Ben and his team could smell it. They'd smelled it many times before. The man looked to be in his mid- to late forties, and was clean-shaven. Ben, knowing the man had been thoroughly searched, waved him to a chair.

"Coffee?" he asked. "Mr. ... ?"

The prisoner looked startled. "Jeb Brown. Yeah, might as well," he said. "I haven't had real coffee in years." He smiled thinly. "You give me a cup of coffee and then you shoot me, is that it, General?"

Ben smiled and tasted his own just-poured cup. "No one is going to shoot you, Mr. Brown. You're a prisoner. As soon as Wink is put out of business, you can go back to farming, or whatever it is you do. As for the coffee, our friends from South America just sent us tons of fresh beans. And we, ah, liberated more tonnage from General Jesus Hoffman and his Blackshirt army."

The man took the cup of fresh coffee, sniffed it several

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times and smiled. "That does smell good. Thank you, General."

"Por nada," Ben said, his eyes hooded.

"I don't speak no greaser language."

"They are not 'greasers,' Mr. Brown. They are Mexicans, South Americans, Latinos. They might be Peruvian, Chilean, or whatever. But they are not greasers."

"They ain't as good as no white man." Brown took a gulp of coffee, holding the mug as if fearful it might be snatched away from him at any moment.

"You are right about that, Mr. Brown. They are much better than you and your cohorts."

"Well, it figures you'd say that. You bein' a nigger-lover an' all."

"Wrong again, Mr. Brown. I don't judge people by the color of their skin, but by their actions and deeds and how they treat other people. There are a great many black people I cannot abide. Just as there are people of all colors I personally have no use for. Including whites."

"Like Wink Payne."

"He's one."

"Moi Sambura?"

"He's another."

"Can I have another cup of coffee?"

"Sure."

Jeb gulped at the fresh cup of brew and said, "I'll make a deal with you."

"What kind of deal?"

"Well, I'll tell you everything I know and you turn me a-loose."

"We already know everything you know."

"Huh! The hell you say! How would you know that?"

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"We infiltrated Wink and Moi's groups years ago, Mr. Brown. We didn't consider either of you important enough to waste much time on back then. You could wait. We had other, more pressing battles to fight. We know what you have in the way of weapons, and the battle plans of both groups. So you see, Mr. Brown, you have nothing to barter."

"I'll be damned. You ain't got no smokin' tobacco on you, has you?"



Ben tossed him the makin's.

Brown rolled and licked and lit. He tossed the bag and paper onto the desk.

"Keep them, Mr. Brown," Ben told him. "I doubt you'll have the bag smoked by the time this little exercise in futility is concluded."

"Huh?"

"It's going to be a very short war."

"Can I speak frank with you, General?"

"Go right ahead."

"Where do you come off roarin' in here and stickin' your nose into our business?"

Ben smiled. "Brown, I could talk for the rest of the night, but I don't know if you would ever understand. We don't care if you don't subscribe to our way of life. We really don't care. But when you start killing innocent people, children in many cases, simply because they wouldn't get off the sidewalk and let you walk by. When you horsewhip and lynch black men and boys for daring to speak to a white woman, and all the other atrocities you people have committed ... well, Mr. Brown, that offends me. I feel obliged to come to you and read to you from the scriptures, so to speak. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

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"You don't think Moi Sambura done the same thing to white folks? Hell's far, man, that nigger come in over yonder and run off or kilt hun'reds of good decent white people!"

"We are going to deal with Moi, Mr. Brown. Rest assured of that."

"You gonna kill him?"

"In all likelihood."

"Good."

"And Wink Payne too."

"But Wink's a lay preacher. He's a good Baptist. He's a religious man. He can show you right in the Bible where it says plain as day that niggers ain't as good as white folks."

Ben reached into his rucksack and tossed a Bible on the desk. "Show me, Brown."

"Well, now, I can't personal show you. But Wink can."

"And you believe that?"

"Shore." Brown looked at Ben for a few seconds. "You really read the Bible, General?"

Ben thought of the remark attributed to General George Patton when a reporter asked him that same question. "I sure do, Brown. Every goddamn

day."

Jeb Brown blinked at that.

"Get him out of here and feed him," Ben said. "Then lock him up."

Wink Payne was a good speaker. He could motivate a crowd to do just about anything. But as a soldier, he had a lot to learn. The Rebels were kicking the butts of his people at every report. Wink kept backing up until

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he found, much to his surprise, he could back no further. I-65 was the separation line between Wink's little nation and Moi's claimed territory.

"That dirty, no-good, rotten, honky son of a bitch!" Moi cursed Ben.

His aides stood quietly. Moi and his people all wore flowing robes and cute little Muslim caps. They would soon discover the outfits, while quite African, were very impractical as combat uniforms.

"Be sure and get me one of those hats," Ben said, after interrogating one of Moi's scouts. "I want to give it to Cecil."

"And do you have any idea what General Jefferys will tell you to do with that hat?" Jersey asked.

"Oh, yes. With complete verbal instructions on where to shove it. What is Wink's position now?"

"Backed up to the north-south Interstate," Beth said. "With Moi's people taking shots at his men."

Ben chuckled. "Worked out just like I thought it would."

"You goddamn stupid African bastard!" Wink yelled into a microphone. "What the hell are your apes shootin' at my people for? We're all in this together now. Ben Raines is after both our asses, you idiot!"

"Give me that microphone!" Moi said, grabbing frantically at the mic. "And will somebody please get that goddamn goat out of my office!"

"Do you hear me, you burr-head?" Wink shouted.

Ben and his team were gathered in the shade of a lovely old tree, having lunch, drinking coffee, and monitoring

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the conversation. And immensely enjoying every word of it.

Moi got his volatile temper under control and keyed the mic. "Are you suggesting that I actually link up with you and that pack of morons you command?"

"I damn sure ain't whistlin' Dixie!" He turned to an aide. "That is one dumb nigger over there."

"Praise Allah for small favors," Moi muttered. "And then what, Wink?"

"Well, hell, you dumb gorilla-we fight Ben Raines and whip the bastard. Then when it's over you stay on your side of the line and we'll stay on ours."

Moi then knew he was attempting to converse with a lunatic. Raines' Rebels had just proven themselves over an army of about one hundred and fifty thousand, seasoned combat veterans. And now Wink Payne, self-proclaimed preacher and all around flake, actually thought he could defeat Ben Raines' personal battalion of Rebels. Moi knew from months of monitoring open Rebel frequencies, that the First Battalion of the Rebel Army was comprised of the toughest, hardest, and meanest men and women who ever wore the black beret of the Rebels.

"Well, are you gonna answer me, or not, you ape?" Wink yelled.

Moi keyed the mic. "Are you listening, Ben Raines?"

Corrie handed Ben the mic. "Oh, yes, Charles," Ben said. "I'm listening."

Wink Payne was sudden rendered speechless, something quite novel for the man.

"My name is Moi Sambura!" Charles/Moi yelled.

"Your name is Charles Washington," Ben replied. "Your father was a well known and highly respected scientist

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and your mother an educator at a very prestigious university in New York State. You hold a PhD. You founded the Back to Africa movement just before the great war. The way you, and your people, choose to live, peacefully, is of no concern to me, Charles. But peacefully is the key word. I won't tolerate closed borders in this country. Not for me, not for you, not for any group. How you dress, how you worship, is strictly your business. None of mine. You open your borders and stop hassling whites, and we're out of here. That's a stone cold promise."

Moi looked at the speaker for a moment. "Brothers and Sisters in the Rebel Army. Arise and kill the white devils around you!" Moi screamed the words.

A black Rebel squad leader, who was resting on the ground, opened his eyes. "That is sure one loudmouthed mother-fucker."

"Is that your answer?" Ben asked.

Silence greeted his words.

"Moi," Ben said. "Listen to me. Neither you nor Payne has a chance. But it doesn't have to be this way. The killing can stop right now. Keep your weapons, you know how I feel about Americans having the right to be armed. Keep your nation intact. Call it what you wish. Let's just stop the hostilities."

"I hate that son of a bitch!" Moi said, after Ben's words sank in.

An older man on Moi's staff asked, "Why, Moi? What has Ben Raines ever done to you? He's certainly never done anything to me."

Moi stood silently, trembling with rage. He didn't just hate Ben Raines. He hated all white people just as deeply as Wink Payne hated all black people. Neither

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Moi nor Wink had ever learned that there are good and bad among all people, and that color has nothing to do with what is in a person's heart.

"How 'bout me and my people, Raines?" Wink screamed into his mic. "You goin' to give us the same offer you just give to that nigger?"

Ben sat in his camp chair for a long, silent moment. Then he sighed and lifted the mic. "Yes, Wink. I am. Can you and your followers live in peace with people of color?"

"That depends on the people of color, Raines."

"Interesting answer," Ben said to his team. "I wonder if he realizes just how profound it was?"

"You expect me to live side by side with that ignorant Cracker, Raines?" Moi shouted the words.

Ben recalled Cecil Jefferys' words: "Only the best and the brightest and the mentally toughest will survive, Ben. Sooner or later we'll have to deal with the stragglers and the outcasts and the ones who hate for no good reason."

Ben slowly lifted the mic and spoke calmly and carefully. "Yeah, Moi, I do. And the same goes for you, Wink. I'm going to call a cease-fire for the rest of the day. It'll stay in effect until 0600 tomorrow. You two get together and talk this over. See if you can find some common ground. Canvas your people; see what they have to say about it. If the two of you can't work something out, at one minute past six in the morning, I'll blow you all right straight to hell."

"How about our women and kids?" Wink asked.

"They can leave anytime they choose. They will not be harmed."

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Moi tossed the mic to the table and stalked out of the room.

Wink handed the mic to his operator and sat down, his face mirroring the man's inner fury.

"Too much hate between those two," Jersey said. "It isn't going to work, General."

"I don't think it will either," Ben replied. "But at least we can say we tried."

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## Chapter Eleven

By the middle of the afternoon, women and kids began leaving the contested areas, a few elderly people with them.

"Corrie, tell our medical people to treat the very young and the very old," Ben said. "The rest of them can go to hell."

"One of Moi's people to see you," Cooper said.

"Show him in."

"Moi will never agree to your terms, General," the white-haired black man told Ben.

"Then he's got a problem."

"Black and white will never get along, is that it, General?" the elderly man asked.

"No, that isn't it. That is probably true with Moi and Wink, but the rest of us can, if we work at it."

"Suppose we just want to live alone?"

"Fine," Ben told him. "Just do so in peace with open borders. But if you want any help from us, you'll have to abide by Rebel law. And don't tell me that I owe you anything. I don't owe you a damn thing."

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The old man chuckled. "I can remember when my people weren't allowed to vote."

"I guess we've come full circle then. Because none of us are voting now. And probably won't for a long time."

The man held out a part of his robe. "You should try one of these. They're really quite comfortable."

"It is your right to wear it, and my right to think they look silly as hell. But I don't have the right to taunt you for wearing it. Do we understand each other?"

"Quite," the elderly man said. "I am free to go?"

"Mister, you are probably the most free you have ever been in your life." Ben paused. "Most free?" he muttered. He shrugged. "It'll do."

The old black man stared hard at him for a moment. "You must realize that Moi and his hardcore followers will fight to the death."

"It won't be a very long fight," Ben assured him.

"And his death won't bother you?"

"Not in the least."

"You have to be the hardest man I have ever met, General Raines."

"You might be surprised just how much compassion I have in me, Mr. Whatever Your Name Is. But since I'm the one who can give it or withhold it, it's up to me to decide who gets it. And Wink Payne and Moi Sambura, I assure you, are not on the list." Ben pointed to a chair. "Sit down."

You want some coffee?"

"Real coffee?"

"Yes. What is your name?"

"Franklin Sharp. And yes, I would like some coffee. It's been years."

Ben hollered for a fresh pot of coffee and it was there in half a minute.

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The elderly man sighed contentedly after the first sip. "That is so good. I had forgotten how good." He smiled at Ben. "Are you surprised I did not take a Muslim name?"

"Damn little surprises me anymore, Mr. Sharp."

"Mr. Sharp? How odd to hear a white man say that."

"You're my elder and you're polite to me. Why shouldn't I be polite to you?"

Franklin smiled and sipped. "Moi had us believing you were a Negro-hating devil."

"Moi is as much a racist as is Wink. Negro?" Ben asked. "Not black or African-American."

"After years of being called boy and nigger, when it got to Negro, that was quite good enough for me. Not all of us are black, I'm certainly not, so I don't care to be called black, although it doesn't offend me in the least. As for African-American, that's rather a mouthful when faced with a long day of conversation."

Ben laughed. "Next thing you're going to tell me is that you're a Baptist."

"Actually, I'm Episcopalian, and have been for many, many years."

"You look tired, Mr. Sharp. Have you eaten today?"

"Ah ... not since breakfast."

"Well, drink your coffee and I'll have some food sent in. Then we'll let the doctors check you over."

"That's kind of you. But might I trouble you for one more little item?"

"Sure."

Franklin Sharp smiled and said, "You wouldn't happen to have a couple of pairs of Levis that would fit me, would you?"

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"That old man is really something," Cooper said. It was late and the camp was quiet.

"Which old man, Coop?" Ben asked, turning down the lantern on his desk and closing a journal.

"Mr. Sharp. He was a college professor when the war came. He's just full of stories. He asked if the Rebels would accept a Negro as a teacher?"

"Well, of course, we do. You told him that, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. He was sure surprised. You know, General, we have a really bad reputation. There are a lot of damn lies being spread about us."

"For sure, Coop. Mr. Sharp wants to come live with us at Base Camp One, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"He's sure welcome."

"I like him," Jersey said. And Jersey didn't have many kind words for a lot of people. "I think he's a nice old man who ought to be able to live and work in peace. And he probably knows a lot, too."

"He might not be so friendly to us after we start killing Moi's followers," Ben put a damper on their spirits. "You all had better think about that."

"He's kind of sad about that," Cooper said. "But he told me Moi was wrong in doing what he did and should have taken your offer of peace."

Ben looked at his watch. "He's got eight hours to reach a decision. After that I'll make up his mind for him."

286 Ben gave Moi and Wink the benefit of the doubt and waited until 0605. Then he turned to Corrie, standing to his left. "Drop them in, Corrie."

From miles away, the big guns of the Rebels boomed. When the first of the almost one-hundred-pound shells struck, Wink and Moi knew that enormous blast signaled the beginning of the end of their twin racist dreams.

Ammunition was no problem for the Rebels. With thousands of rounds already stockpiled all over the nation, they had, in addition, thousands of rounds seized from the Blackshirt army. And Ben really walloped the positions of Moi and Wink. He kept up the barrage for six hours, with no let-up, turning the land in front of him into a smoking, hellish, no-man's-land of pockmarked earth and burning buildings.

The gun crews would stagger fire for half an hour, then the crews would stand down, hook up, and move forward a mile or so, and repeat their performance. At noon they had advanced to within sight of the eastern side of I-65. Ben called a halt to the artillery barrage.

When the 105s and 155s ceased their booming, and the area had turned eerily silent, Ben ordered helicopter gunships and PUFFs to go in and strafe and rocket any-, thing that moved.

Ben was determined to keep his own casualties down to a bare bones minimum. The lives of ten thousand Moi Samburas and Wink Paynes were not worth one Rebel loss.

At two o'clock that afternoon, Ben ordered the choppers and the PUFFs back to their temporary bases and told his people to mount up and advance.

Not one shot was fired at them as they crossed the interstate into Moi's claimed land. That land was now a

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smoking ruin, with a mangled body, or part of a body, littering the ground every few hundred yards. Wink and his people had scrambled across the interstate, fleeing from the crashing artillery rounds, and had run straight into the guns of Moi's front line defenders. While the explosions boomed all around them, raining down fire and death, the two groups fought each other in hand to hand combat, with pistols and rifles and shotguns and knives and hatchets.

"Idiots," Ben said, standing in the midst of the body-strewn carnage.

"They sure hated each other, didn't they?" Coop remarked, looking down at a dead black hand still gripping a white neck, and a white hand still closed around a black throat. Both hands were stiff in death.

"Maybe this was the only way it could end," Beth said.

"But if Moi and Wink made it out," Jersey added, "it isn't over."

"All right," Ben said, adjusting the chin strap to his helmet. "Let's end it."

The Rebels broke into squad-sized units and stretched out from the deserted towns of Lester in the north to Flat Creek in the south and slowly began working their way west, in the tedious and dangerous job of house to house searching and mopping up.

Ben and his team found two black males and two white males huddled together in the basement of a country home. They were tired, dirty, hungry, scared, and weaponless.

"For folks who claim they don't like each other," Jersey said, prodding them to their feet with the muzzle of her M-16, "you're sure sitting mighty close. Move!"

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Outside, the quartet squinted and blinked in the light of the sun. "I think they're suffering from battle fatigue," she told Ben.

"How could they be suffering from that?" Beth asked. "They didn't fight!"

"That one's covered with dried blood," Ben said, pointing to one of Moi's men. "Have the medics check him out."

"It isn't my blood," the man stated. "The building I was in took a hit from one of your artillery rounds. I'm the only survivor. I was literally splattered with the blood of my brothers." He stared defiantly at Ben. "Now their blood is on your hands."

"I can live with it," Ben told him. He looked at Wink's men. "What's your story?"

"You had no right," one said.



"I'm trying to put this nation back together, pal," Ben replied. "And if I have to kill every sorry son of a bitch like you four to do that, I will. And I'll have no regrets about it. Get them out of here."

It took over a thousand people two weeks of hard searching to cover the area. There was no sign of Moi or Wink. Of course, that didn't mean anything. Many of the dead had been ripped apart by the hundreds and hundreds of artillery rounds, burned to unrecognizable char in blazing buildings, or buried forever under tons of crushing rubble.

"I'd bet they made it out," Ben said. "Their kind is hard to kill. They'll pop up somewhere, spewing their venomous hate. We'll see them again."

The survivors of the attack, black and white, mostly women and kids, had elected spokespeople. They came to see Ben, asking about their future.

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"That's up to you," he told them. "If you want to stay here and work together, rebuilding, we'll help you all we can. If you want to go on hating each other, well, I can't stop you from doing that, either. But if you choose that route, I can tell you what you'll get from us. Nothing. Zero. You will get not one aspirin or antibiotic from my medical people. You will be totally alone. You will not receive food, protection, or any other type of assistance from us. And we'll take the younger kids with us right now. Before any of you have the time to poison their minds with bigotry. Think about that. Give it a lot of thought before you reach any decision."

About half of them, nearly an equal number of black and white, agreed to stay and rebuild. Franklin Sharp and several dozen other men, black and white, ranging in age from twenty to eighty, had already agreed to stay. The other men and women, both black and white, sullen and with hate-filled eyes, told those remaining to go to hell. They left, the blacks in one group, the whites in another, each looking for their own peculiar version of Utopia on earth.

"What do you suppose will happen to them, Ben Raines?" Franklin Sharp asked.

"Oh, they'll seek some isolated spot and squat, and there they'll fester in their own hatred. Others like them will find them and they'll grow. In numbers, not in mentality. Someday in the future the Rebels, or the organized law of that time will have to go in and fight them. Some people change, others don't. Those that don't take their hate to the grave."

"You should teach, Ben Raines," the old man said.

"I'm too much of an arch-conservative to teach, Franklin."

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"Oh, I don't think so, Ben Raines. You are somewhat of an enigma, to be sure. But I have doubts that you even know exactly what you are. Except for being the man who rose out of the ashes of destruction and is attempting to pull a nation back together. You are most definitely that."

"But am I right or wrong, Franklin?" Ben asked.

"Only the writers of history can be the judge of that, Ben Raines. We

will be no more than dust in a lonely and forgotten grave when that question shall be answered." He held out his hand. "Good luck to you, Ben Raines."

White hand shook black hand. "And good luck to you, Franklin Sharp."

The Rebels mounted up and pulled out as engineers and doctors and road-builders and others from Base Camp One pulled in.

Ike had radioed in. All resistance in Texas had been crushed by the Rebels and their multinational allies. Hoffman and Brodermann had slipped out, that had been confirmed.

"We'll have to fight them again," Ben said, as the convoy rolled westward toward Arkansas and Thermopolis's command, dug in deep in a mountain.

None of Ben's team had to ask where Hoffman would recruit his army. They knew. From the hundreds of thousands of malcontents scattered all over the nation. People of all races who hated Ben Raines and his Rebels and the authority they represented.

"When we get set up tonight, Corrie," Ben said. "Have Ike send out teams all over the nation. We've got to start rebuilding outposts, and this time we'll make them stronger and with more people per post."

"Yes, sir."

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"We'll use Jahn's people to start new outposts all over the nation, Beth," Ben added. "And that will keep them widely separated until we can weed out any Nazi's who have infiltrated his bunch," Ben added, knowing, as Jahn had confided in him, that there were hard-core SS people in his group, put there deliberately by Hoffman and Brodermann. Jahn just didn't know who they were. But he had suspicions.

"Jahn might not like that," Jersey said.

"It was his idea," Ben said with a smile. "Jahn wants to live in a free society, where he can enjoy the books he wants to read, newspapers that don't carry the party line, and where he can engage in open, spirited debate. And the man wants to farm his own piece of ground. Some of his staff officers told me Jahn had one of the most beautiful flower gardens they'd ever seen. You just never know about a person."

"Yeah," Cooper said. "Hitler played the harmonica."

"Cooper!" Jersey said.

"It's true! I read it in a book."

"General!" Corrie said, and the urgency in her voice stopped the bantering. "Thermopolis is under heavy attack. He's holding, but says he can only hold out for another twenty-four hours at most."

Ben lifted a map. "We roll all night, change drivers every two hours. Corrie, tell the trucks pulling the artillery to catch up when they can. Who is attacking Therm?"

"Therm says he doesn't have the faintest idea. But they're throwing everything but the mop bucket at him."

"Tell him to hang on. We're on the way."

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## Chapter Twelve

The convoy bulled their way through the night until about midnight, when the skies opened up and began a torrential rain on them; a hard rain that slowed the convoy down to a careful creep. The roads were in horrible shape anyway. After years of neglect, they were full of ruts and holes and places where entire sections had been washed out by flooding. Scouts had gone racing ahead, bouncing over, around and through the holes and sometimes leaving the road altogether, driving in the ditches and in fields, doing their best to stay ahead of the convoy.

Just about the time the rain slacked, the drivers pulled over for a shift change and Ben took the wheel.

"Oh, shit!" Jersey muttered. "Here we go. Hang on, people."

"I heard that," Ben said, and roared ahead.

"I've lost contact with Therm," Come said.

"We don't have far to go now," Ben spoke over the roar of the engine.

The Hummer Ben was driving soon overtook the Scouts, and Ben pushed the advance party hard, staying

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right on the bumper of the last Scout vehicle. Finally, Ben spun the wheel, raced around the Scouts, and took the lead. Behind him, the convoy picked up speed, staying with Ben.

After an hour of sliding around hilly curves on the rain-slick old highway, with Ben's team holding on to anything they could grab, they sped past the old county line sign and were within a few miles of Therm's HQ. Ben slowed, then pulled over to the side of the road. Ben and team got out.

"Try it now, Corrie," Ben said.

"I have them, General."

"Give me the mic. Therm! This is Eagle. What's your status?"

"Grim." The sound of gunfire was sharp. "Where are you?"

"Within spitting distance. What are we looking at?"

"Several thousand. We now believe they're a combination of Hoffman's Blackshirt troops, right-wing survivalist groups who've kept their heads down until now, and what's left of Hoffman's terrorist groups. They have exhausted their mortar rounds and are attacking with small arms only. We are completely surrounded, Eagle. You ten-four that?"

"I copy, Therm."

Therm was telling Ben that it didn't make any difference which direction he chose to attack from. Just come on.

The COs had run up to Ben's position. "My company will attack from the north," he told them. "Baker will take the south. Charlie take the east. Dog Company swing around and take the west side. When Dog is in position, we attack. Corrie, any word from the Scouts?"

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"Coming in now, sir." She listened through her earphones for a moment. "Everything is clear around the attack zone. No surprises for us."

"Let's go 4-F, people," Ben ordered.

Find 'em, fix 'em, fight 'em, and finish 'em.

The Rebels, running without lights, quickly swung into position. The sounds of battle were sharp in the damp night. The rain had ceased and a few stars were beginning to poke through the cloud cover. The storm was moving rapidly off to the east.

"All units in position, sir," Corrie reported.

"Let's do it," Ben replied, and the Rebels moved out on foot.

The terrain was hilly, thick with brush and timber, and the going was gradual uphill, and slow and hard.

"Dog attacking from the west," Corrie said. "Enemy is swinging units around to meet them. They believe our main force is Dog."

"Did Dog encounter any mines, trip-wires, or any other impediments on the way?"

"Negative."

"Tell our people the password word is Jerry, response is Lee." When that was done, Ben said, "Put it in gear, people." Then took off at a trot through the timber.

The Rebels crashed into the Blackshirts, right-wingers, and terrorists from the north, south, and east at just about the same time, catching them completely off guard. For a full ten minutes, it was hand to hand combat in the damp and treacherous footing in the darkness of the timber.

Ben slammed the butt of his Thompson into the pale face of a man and then shot him in the chest. Jersey jumped onto the back of a dark shape coming up fast

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behind Ben and rode the man to his knees. He threw her off and Cooper shot him in the face. Corrie's CAR-15 spat fire and lead and two dark shapes went down screaming in pain. Beth had slung her M-16 and had both hands filled with 9 mm pistols for the close-in work.

Ben saw dark shapes come running through the timber and leveled his old

Thompson. The Chicago Piano roared and bucked in his hands. The heavy .45-caliber slugs tore into flesh and splintered bone and knocked the running shapes spinning to the ground.

A man leaped out of the darkness and onto Ben's back. Ben twisted and slung the man off, then kicked him on the side of the jaw with a boot. The man screamed as his jaw splintered and he rolled away, coming up fast to his knees, a pistol in one hand. Ben pulled the trigger on the Thompson and the slugs turned the man's face into a bloody, unrecognizable mess. If the man ever had any real thought processes, they were now spattered on the trunk of a tree.

Ben and team quickly and effectively finished what remained of the counterattack and knelt down on the damp earth to catch their breath.

"Therm says the situation has eased on his position," Corrie panted the words. She caught her breath and then smiled in the night, white teeth flashing against the tan of her face. "Smoot is all right. She crawled behind a foot locker and is still there."

"Dog's smarter than we are," Ben said, snapping a fresh drum into place. "Let's go."

It took the Rebels only a few minutes to break through on all sides and Therm's command poured out of the underground bunkers to join them. The attacking

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forces faded into the night, leaving behind their dead and wounded.

Ben did not have to order his medical-people to see to the Rebel wounded first. They did that automatically, ignoring the pleas from the enemy wounded.

It took Ben a few moments to find Thermopolis. All of Therm's command had returned to their usual manner of dress. Jeans, sweatshirts or T-shirts, headbands, and tennis shoes.

"Are we going to have a love-in?" Cooper asked, casting hopeful eyes toward Jersey.

"Forget it," she told him.

"You're breaking my heart, Jersey."

"You'll get over it."

"Ben!" the voice of Thermopolis reached him.

The two men found each other, shook hands and smiled at one another.

"Good to see you, Thermopolis," Ben said.

"Bastards seemed to come out of nowhere," Therm said. "Those right-wing survivalist types must have been very familiar with this part of the country and linked up with Hoffman's Blackshirts. Then they slipped in small groups at a time."

"Probably part of those we chased out of southern Missouri a while

back," Ben replied. "We knew we didn't get them all. Let's get a body count."

If Therm's estimate that he had been under attack by several thousand men was correct, and Ben had no reason to doubt it, the Rebels had broken the backs of that particular bunch. By dawn they had counted more than fifteen hundred dead and wounded. Most of the wounded critically hurt.

One slight confrontation stuck in Ben's mind. Shortly

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after the sounds of battle had faded, Therm and Ben had been standing and chatting.

"How about the enemy wounded, Ben?" Therm suddenly asked, after a civilian had walked up, carrying a medical bag and with unspoken questions in his eyes.

"Who is this?" Ben asked.

"Dr. Sessions," Therm said. "He and his wife, who is also a doctor, joined up shortly after we got here. We have the makings of quite a community here."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ben said.

"The wounded, General?" the doctor pressed him. "They are suffering."

"That's their goddamn problem," Ben told the man. "You make sure that my people are taken care of, any civilians who might have been in the area, and then, and only then, do you jack around with the enemy. And if they're going to die, you give them a shot to kill the pain and leave them alone. Now, did you hear all that loud and clear, doctor?"

Therm was inspecting the stars. They were quite lovely this night, since the storm had blown clear.

"Help me, Doc!" a man called out. "I took one in the legs."

Cooper walked over to the cammie-clad man. "How'd you like to take one in the head?"

"You got to be kidding!" the fallen man blurted.

"Trust me when I say he isn't," Beth told him. "Shut your damn mouth. You get treated after everyone else."

The doctor's wife had joined the group. Sessions looked first at Ben, then at Thermopolis. "I thought surely you were kidding when you told me about Ben Raines. My wife and I had a good laugh about it."

"You're not laughing now," Therm replied.

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Sessions looked at Ben. "I don't think I like you very much, General."

"I don't give a damn whether you like me or not. You just treat my people and do it right the first time. Get to it, Doctor."

Doctor and wife left in a huff. Ben looked at Therm. "He'd better learn how we operate, Therm. If he stays here, and if he ever leaves a Rebel unattended to work on an enemy, and that Rebel dies, I'll kill that bastard. Personally."

"I tried to tell him, Ben. I thought I got through. But I shall pass along your latest words."

"Good," Ben said with a smile. "Now let's go get some coffee."

Therm had lost ten of the people who had been with him for years, and eight more had been badly wounded. Fourteen regular Rebels had been killed, and more than twenty wounded.

"I take the blame for this, Ben," Therm said, after they both had slept for a few hours and were now sitting, having a late breakfast.

"Don't," Ben told him. "That would be nonsense. It wasn't your fault. I've read your logs. You had patrols out, Scouts out. You did exactly what any other commander would have done. These things happen. I know you feel bad. So do I. I have a thousand times over the years. And you never get used to it. You just have to learn to live with it." Ben looked around. "Say! Where is Emil?"

Therm laughed. "Leading a recon patrol up in Iowa. You lucked out."

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"Regular Rebels are taking orders from Emil?" Ben asked, astonishment in his words. Emil, the little ex-con artist, was liked by everyone. But a leader of men?

"Well ..." Therm again laughed. "They pretend they take orders from him. Sergeant Mack is with him."

Ben relaxed. Mack would see to it that Emil didn't get in much trouble. "You've got it looking good around here."

"Yeah, I'll have to agree with you. A few of the folks from Mountain Home and surrounding towns came here to settle with us. We're going to have a good place to live here ... someday," he added.

"Keep the faith, brother," Ben said. "Power to the people and all that."

That really set Therm off in a burst of laughter. He wiped his eyes and said, "Way to go, Ben. Dylan and Baez would love you for that."

"Yeah. I'm sure the three of us would get along famously. Did you know I used to sing a lot of Dylan's songs?"

Therm suddenly stopped smiling. He frowned. "That's not funny."

"I didn't mean it to be funny. I used to be able to cord a guitar pretty damn well."

"You never told me that!"

"Yes, I did."

"You did not! You sang protest songs?"

"I didn't consider them protest songs. I just liked them."

"That's incredible!"

"No, it isn't. Where is your guitar?"

"You wait right there. Don't move. I'll get it. This I have to hear personally."

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"Fine. I'll be right here." He hurried off.

"I'm leaving," Cooper said.

Jersey lifted her M-16. "If I gotta hear this, so do you. Sit down, Coop."

Coop sat.

"You two are hurting my feelings," Ben told them.

"Has anybody got any ear-plugs?" Jersey said.

Therm returned with a Martin guitar and handed it to Ben. Ben flexed the fingers of his left hand a few times. "You have to realize that I haven't played in years. The tips of my fingers are going to get very sore, very quickly."

"Just a few chords and a few lines will convince me that you're not bullshitting me," Therm replied.

"Oh, ye of little faith," Ben said.

"I'll believe it when I hear it," Therm said.

Ben selected a big triangle pick from the case, hit a few practice chords, cleared his throat a couple of times, and then launched into Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues."

Ben's voice was deep and husky, but he could carry a true tune and his singing wasn't all that bad. He did a few lines and then went into "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," and did a respectable job of it.

The look on Therm's face was priceless.

Ben sang a few lines of a dozen songs from the protest days, hitting all the right chords. Then the tips of his fingers started hurting. Ben smiled and handed the guitar back to Therm. "Nice axe, Therm."

Thermopolis said, "Well, I'll be goddamned! You really can pick."

Ben smiled. "Yeah. Thanks. That was fun. Took me back years."

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Therm's eyes narrowed and he was thoughtful. "Yeah. Probably back to when you worked for the damned CIA and infiltrated student dissident groups. I'll make a bet that's why you know all those songs."



"You never heard me say that, Therm."

"Oh, well," Therm said with a shrug of his shoulders. "At least you're continuing your habit of constantly amazing me."

"Ike and Dr. Chase are on the way here," Corrie informed them.

"Why?" Ben asked.

"They didn't say."

"ETA?"

"One hour."

Ben looked at Therm. "Did the good Dr. Sessions get over his huff at me?"

"Not really," Therm leveled with him. "But I told him if he wanted to practice medicine, and have drugs available to him, that's the way it had to be."

"And he didn't like that very much, did he?"

"Not at all."

"His wife of like mind?"

"Absolutely."

"You're going to have trouble with them, Therm. I sense it and I'm pretty good at picking out troublemakers. But that's your worry. I'm sure they're both good people. But they've got to be made to understand about the time and place and the hundreds of thousands of people out there who would like to destroy this movement. If you can't get through to them, then whether they stay or go is a judgement call you're going to have to make. And you'll make the right one."

Therm shook his head. "Just think. A few years ago I

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was a contented hippie, living as one with the land, in my own little commune, and enjoying life."

"And singing protest songs about me," Ben said with a smile.

Therm's eyes twinkled. "You do get right to the truth, don't you, Ben?"

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### Chapter Thirteen

Dr. Chase took an immediate dislike to both Dr. Sessions and his wife. He said to Ben: "You would think, after more than a decade of this world being turned upside down, the idealistic views of those two would have been knocked out of them."

"Perhaps that is precisely why they still cling to those views, Lamar," Ben replied. "Forget about them. They'll make it or they won't." He

looked at Ike. "Why this trip, Ike?"

"We think Hoffman and Brodermann are holed up somewhere in the northwest. Intell has narrowed it down to that location. They believe that the troops have spread out over a couple or three states, taken wives, probably with children, and settled in while their leaders recruit new members. There has been quite an exodus of sorry-assed people from all over the nation. All heading west."

"What states?" Beth asked, sitting at the table with her notepad.

"Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Montana," Ike said, looking over at her.

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She nodded. "That's almost half a million square miles."

"Did you just add all that up or do you keep those facts in that head of yours?" Ike asked.

Beth smiled sweetly at him.

"And you have a plan on how we might ferret them out?" Ben asked.

"No," the ex-Navy SEAL admitted. "Intell thinks they speak nothing but English, have become solid citizen types, helping all others around them, thereby making themselves a valuable part of a hundred or more communities. And there is not a way in hell we could prove they aren't what they claim to be. And here is something else: Some senior general, a Frederick Rasbach, an uncle or great uncle to Hoffman, apparently slipped out of Texas weeks ago and returned to South America. There, he and his people destroyed all records of the NAL. Right down to the last scrap of paper. Our allies down there report there is nothing left to link anybody with the NAL."

"This General Rasbach?"

"Vanished. He'll probably live out the remainder of his years in some remote part of South America."

"Well, you can bet your boots on one thing: If Wink Payne and Moi Sambura made it clear of Alabama, they're heading that way to join the new movement. Shit!" Ben added.

"One conflict after another," Therm said softly. "It just never ends. I swear to God, I don't see how you people have kept your sanity all these years."

Ben looked at him. "By not just believing that we're in the right, Therm. But knowing we're right."

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"I could argue that, Ben, but I don't feel like it right now. So what are you going to do?"

"Try to stop the flood of crud and crap from joining up with Hoffman."

"And how do you propose to do that, Raines?" Lamar Chase asked.

Ben smiled broadly and winked at Jersey, sitting across the room. She knew immediately something big was in the works, and muttered under her breath, "Oh, shit!"

"Why, Lamar," Ben said. "By doing what I do best. Going out and getting into an argument."

Knowing that Ben would not be dissuaded, Ike offered only a token verbal resistance, and quickly gave that up. Chase just cussed for a few minutes, then set about adding to the medical personnel going with Ben.

Then he said he was going with Ben.

"What?" Ben shouted.

"You heard me. And don't shout. There is nothing wrong with my hearing."

"Why, you old fart! You'd get in the way."

Lamar smiled sweetly. Very sweetly. Ben braced himself. "I don't go," the chief of medicine said. "You don't go. It's just that simple."

"That's blackmail, Lamar!"

"You damn right it is. Pure and simple. Now what is your answer?"

"Oh, all right. But I don't want to hear a lot of bitching from you about the field."

"Me? Complain?" Chase attempted to put a very innocent look on his face. He managed to look like a satyr

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trying to slip into the back of a church with screwing the organist on his mind. "I never complain, Raines."

"Everybody make sure your boots are laced up tight," Ben called. "The shit is getting deep around here."

"I resent that," Chase said.

"Get your duffle packed, Lamar," Ben told him. "We pull out in the morning. Early."

Lamar started to say that he'd be up before Ben. But he checked that. Nobody got up before Ben Raines.

"Therm," Ben called. "You're sure Emil is still up in Iowa?"

"Right. The extreme eastern part. I spoke with him last night."

"Good. Keep him up there and out of trouble. We'll head for the Kansas-Colorado line and start stretching out. Corrie, have our people in Texas and Oklahoma stop any westward movement. They know the types to stop and turn around. Have Buddy, Dan, and Jackie start moving their battalions north. We'll all intersect... here," he pointed to the map. "And I want full battalion strength. Make sure they double the artillery that normally travels with each battalion. We don't have any way of knowing how many of the crud and crap have migrated west to join

Hoffman-probably thousands, the way those bastards network-but we can damn sure put a stopper in the bottle. We're out of here in the morning. 0500 hours."

"How does he know which types will join with this Hoffman," Dr. Sessions asked Therm. "Does he think he possesses some magical powers?"

Therm ignored the sarcasm. "He knows. Believe me, he does."

"That's impossible!" the doctor snorted.

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"I thought so too. Until I spent some time with him. He's a very unusual man."

"I'm sorry, Thermopolis. But I have to disagree. He's a right-wing savage. My wife can't stand to be around him and quite frankly, neither can I. As gentle a man as you are, I find it incredible that you are a willing part of the Rebel movement."

Therm smiled. "Ben Raines is a walking contradiction, Doctor. That's what he is. And hard-headed as a goat. But if this nation is ever to be whole, he's the man who'll do it. Five years ago, you would have had a most difficult time convincing me of that. But I believe it now."

"If he doesn't kill half the population first."

Therm looked at him and then shocked the doctor and astonished himself when he said, "Did you ever consider that perhaps half the population might need killing?"

Therm walked out to the long lines of vehicles grumbling and snorting and farting in the predawn darkness. He knew he'd find Ben at the head of the column.

The two men stood shoulder to shoulder for a silent moment. "Dr. Sessions and wife are considering leaving us," Therm broke the silence.

"His option." Ben didn't give a good goddamn what the doctor and wife did.

Thermopolis smiled in the darkness. He knew how Ben felt and he pretty much felt the same way. At first, he and Dr. Sessions and wife had gotten along well. But Thermopolis had been too long with the Rebels. He had learned that the Rebels did not crave war; they were not

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bloodthirsty savages, but rather just flesh and blood and caring and feeling men and women who had a very ugly job to do, knew that there was no one else around to do it, and so were doing it. Every army throughout history has drawn its share of homicidal maniacs, and the Rebels were no exception. But they were always quickly discovered and booted out. Many of the Rebels were family men and women, whose spouses were the home guard back at Base Camp One. To a person they longed for the war-days to be over. But until that day, they would fight.

As for the new doctors, to put it bluntly, they were getting on Thermopolis' nerves.

Standing by Ben, he said as much.

"Run them off," Ben told him. "It's your command."

"We need them."

"Then put up with them, Therm."

"Goddamn it, Ben! Everything is black and white to you. Life isn't that way."

"It is if that's the way one chooses to see it," Ben replied, hiding his smile.

"Shit!" Therm said, and stalked off. He stopped and turned around and yelled, "You are a very exasperating man, Ben."

"Right," Ben called.

"You be careful out there."

"Will do."

Ben made his slow walking tour of the column. Heavy weapons had been beefed up, with the battalion carrying nearly twice the artillery they normally carried. Each squad carried an additional heavy machine gun and mortar. More M249s had been assigned to each squad, giving each squad awesome firepower. Any band

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of outlaws or malcontents who attacked this unit would be in for a very unpleasant surprise.

"Let's roll," Ben said, climbing into his Hummer. "Head west, Coop."

Ben and battalion left Therm's HQ and headed west, toward the Oklahoma state line. Long before they reached the Arkansas' western border, they cut north, up toward Missouri. For the first several hours, their journey was uneventful. They saw many people; more than most felt they would. But the people showed no more than a passing interest in the long Rebel column. Ragged kids watched with more interest than the adults, looking at the towed artillery and the tanks that rumbled along the old roads. The kids grinned and waved at the Rebels. Most of the adults did not. Soon, the Rebels contented themselves matching the civilians' unfriendly looks stare for stare.

"What the hell's wrong with these people?" Jersey asked. "They act like ... well, I don't know what the hell they're acting like. Stuck up, I guess."

"They don't need us," Ben replied. "So they think. They've lived isolated for years and like it that way. Intell said there were a large number of religious fanatics beginning to surface all over the country. Many of them accepting what has happened as God's will. Let them think what they want. I don't give a damn about the adults. It's the kids that bother me. They're being denied medical care because of the beliefs of their parents and that's wrong."

Ben stopped it there. He just didn't know what to do about the kids.

General Jahn and his people would take as many as they could. When they could handle no more ... ? Well, Ben didn't like to think about that. Ben

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knew there would be thousands more kids, just like these, in the years to come. The Rebels would try to help the little ones. But the Rebel homes were already very nearly overwhelmed.

The Rebel column hit a stretch of country where they saw no humans. No signs of life except for plumes of smoke, coming from homes or camps set well back off the road.

"They don't want any part of us," Cooper said, gesturing toward the smoke. "It's gonna be like I read in books written before the Great War. The haves and the have nots. Many of those people will begin to see what we have, and then look at what they don't have, and they'll revolt."

"Yeah," Jersey said. "And what makes me mad is they'll blame us for what they don't have. I read those books too, Coop. They don't want to work for anything. They want someone-meaning us-to hand everything to them. Piss on them."

Ben smiled secretly, letting them talk. There were no free rides in the Rebel society. Everybody who could work, did so. Refuse, and you were kicked out and nobody gave a damn what happened to you. Those people who lived in the camps and houses where the smoke was originating could step forward and join the Rebel movement, and they would be welcomed. But if they expected a free handout, they were sorely wrong. And if any group tried to take by force what the Rebels had, they would die. There were no pseudo-sociological excuses here. The Rebels did not give a damn for color or how a person was raised. One was either a part of the Rebel movement, or one was out in the cold. As Therm had pointed out: the Rebel philosophy was black and

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white, with no gray in the center. And until conditions returned to some sort of normalcy, that was the way it had to be.

"Order everybody to button up and make certain all body armor is on," Ben told Corrie. "This is sniper country. And we are not the best-loved group of people in the world."

"Putting it mildly," Beth said drily.

"Scouts report a large number of people, men, women, and children, moving west on Highway 160," Corrie said. "Estimated six or seven hundred of them, four or five to a vehicle. Too many for the Scouts to stop."

Ben lifted a map. "We're almost at an intercept point. Tell the Scouts to keep them in sight and us informed. As soon as we're in position, have the Scouts fall back and join us. Step on it, Coop. Corrie, tell the tankers and supply vehicles to catch up with us."

The column reached the intercept point and set up roadblocks. The Scouts joined the main body and reported verbally. After the report, Ben stood in the center of the highway, cradling his Thompson. He waited for the first forward units of the civilian column. He felt he knew what he

would initially see, and he was not disappointed.

Main battle tanks, Dusters, and APCs were behind him and on both sides of him, forming a U-shape, vehicles staggered, with all guns pointing toward the east. Rebel units had taken up defensive positions all around Ben and his personal team. It was quite an impressive sight. And the sight was not lost on the rattletrap cars and trucks that soon came chugging and rattling up the road, many of them belching smoke. Ben could see that

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only about one out of every three vehicles was in fairly good shape.

From hidden vantage points, Scouts reported in. "Kids are all at the rear of the column. Only armed men and women at the front half of the column."

"Millions and millions of spare parts all over the nation," Jersey said, disgust in her voice. "New cars and trucks everywhere, and these clowns show up driving this crap."

"Dr. Sessions and his kind say we should pity these people, Jersey," Ben said with a smile.

"Sessions and his kind haven't been out here fighting these sorry types for years," she retorted. "He'll get a bullet up his butt one of these days and that might change his mind."

"You really believe that?" Cooper called from the other side of the road.

"Hell, no," she said. "It hasn't proved true very often in the past."

The convoy of movers stopped several hundred yards from the roadblock.

"Give me that bullhorn," Ben said.

A man wearing two pistols got out and stood on the cracked old highway. "What's the trouble here? We're not lookin' for no fight, mister."

"You won't have a fight if you just turn those jalopies around and head on back where you came from."

"You just ain't got the right to tell us where we can or can't go."

"I've got over twelve hundred heavily armed Rebels that says I can," Ben's voice boomed over the yards between them. "You people just turn around and head on back where you came from and there won't be any trouble."

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But I can assure you of this: you are not going to go west to join Hoffman and his Nazis."

The man waited just a couple of heartbeats too long before he replied. "What's that you say? Hell, I ain't never heard of nobody called Hoffman."

"His face is flushing," Beth said, looking at him through binoculars.

"Mister," Ben said flatly. "You're a liar."

The man opened his mouth to return an angry protest. He bit off the protest as his eyes swept the hundreds of rifles pointing at him. "We got a right to choose the type of government we want to live under, Ben Raines. And yeah, General, I know who you are."

"The Nazi movement will not flourish in this country, mister," Ben told him. "Not now, not ever."

"We got a right to live decent!" the man shouted, his anger boiling over.

"Who is stopping you from doing that?"

"You are, you son of a bitch!"

"How?"

"By forcin' us to live under rules that we don't want to live under. That's how."

"And you think Hoffman will be an improvement, right?"

"It'll damn sure be better than the rules you people enforce, that's for sure."

"Boy, has somebody fed him a line of crap," Jersey said.

"Teams are attempting to flank us," Corrie said. "Left and right."

"This guy's going to open the dance any second now," Ben replied. "Get ready to roll for the ditches."

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He lifted the bullhorn. "Nobody is forcing any of you to live under Rebel law, mister."

"That's shit!" The man started to lift a hand.

"Don't do this, Roy!" a man's voice called out from among the movers' vehicles. "Hear him out."

"Shut up, Tom!" the spokesman said, turning his head. "How come you and your people want to argue with me every step of the way?"

"Because you're wrong!"

"Mister," Ben spoke through the bullhorn. "Call back your teams trying to flank us. They haven't got a chance."

The man's hand shot up into the air. "Now!" he screamed. "Kill the bastards. All of them."

Ben and his teams dropped to the old road and rolled to the shoulders, then behind APCs. The Rebels opened fire. They just got out of the line of fire as the main battle tanks and Dusters opened fire with cannon and heavy machine guns. For several hundred yards eastward, the lines of cars and trucks erupted in a seemingly endless wall of flame as the gas tanks exploded. Parts of vehicles and pieces of humans were sky-rocketed into the air by the thunderous explosions.



Ben came to his knees, lifting his Thompson to fire, but lowered it when he saw there was nothing to fire at. The Rebels had kept their fire away from the last half of the column, in order to spare the women and kids. Those women had now grabbed up their kids and were running for the safety of the fields, left and right of the road and the inferno. Bodies and pieces of bodies were sprawled in death on both sides of the old highway. Only a few were moving and moaning in pain.

"Cease fire," Ben called. "Shut it down. It's over."

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The movers had been able to fire only a few rounds before the Rebel wall of death collapsed on them. Ben lifted the bullhorn to his lips. "Stand up with your hands empty. Do it, people."

Slowly those movers still alive-most of them to the rear of the column-began getting to their feet. All were careful to keep their hands in plain sight, without weapons. Many held their hands over their heads.

Cooper lowered binoculars. "They're complying, General. All up and down the line."

Ben lifted his own binoculars. He could see plainly the shock on some faces and the open anger on others.

"How's it feel to be the most hated man in all America, Ben Raines?" a woman screamed out of the thick smoke.

"Hate me all you like, lady," Ben muttered. "You're at the end of a long line."

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#### Chapter Fourteen

The badly shaken survivors of the attack were gathered up and placed under guard. A man was brought to see Ben. Ben sat on a camp stool on the front lawn of an old home, under the shade of a huge tree. The home had been a nice one, made of native stone. Ben looked at the man with a bloody bandage around his head.

"What in the hell is the matter with you people?" Ben asked. "Why would anybody in their right mind want to join the Nazi party?"

"I really didn't. Believe that, or not. It's the truth. Roy and his bunch convinced us to come along. That was me you heard holler for Roy to hear you out."

"But you went along with him."

"Yes, I did. We did. I wanted to see this Hoffman. See if he was as bad as you people made him out to be."

"He is," Ben said. "Believe me. Ask some of the Spanish people I have in my battalion. Ask them what he did to their people. That is, if you have no objection to speaking with people of different backgrounds."

"I'm not a racist, General. Never have been. But I'm

old enough to remember quotas and giveaway programs for minorities, and I'm dead set against them."

"So am I. So why are you opposed to joining us?" "I don't like what you teach in your Rebel schools and your laws are too damn harsh. You have too many rules and regulations for a man to have to follow." Ben studied the man. "What is your name?" "Torn Riley. I was born in Kentucky, thirty years ago. I have never been in trouble with the law in my life. I was raised to respect the law."

"The law is what we represent, Tom. Yet you refuse to join us. Tell me, why are you so afraid of your children being educated?"

Tom Riley looked around him. He saw Rebel doctors and medics taking care of the wounded. Other medical personnel were seeing to the needs of the wounded children. "Nice of y'all," he said, a wistful note in his voice. "We had us a doctor once. Outlaws came and took him to care for some wounded they had. Then they killed him. I found the body. He'd been tortured. You folks are well-organized," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"You're welcome to join the movement, Tom." Tom Riley sighed heavily. "Maybe it's time. I guess it is. We've been on our own for years. Me, and those seventy odd families who sort of follow my direction. Even though we don't agree with a lot of what you do, General Raines, you folks put others in a hard bind." He tried a smile. "Sure, you'll leave us alone to live the way we choose. But when you say alone, you really mean alone. No help of any kind. Our kids subject to being taken from us. That's blackmail, General."

"It sure is," Ben agreed cheerfully. "Tom, let me try

to explain something to you: this old planet has taken quite a beating over the last few centuries. Now, what is left of the population has a chance to give something back. You can either be a part of that, or you can sit back and do nothing except complain. The Rebels have set aside hundreds of thousands of acres for the animals to live free and wild, as God intended them to do. We will never cut timber or build homes in those areas. We will allow no hunting in those areas.

"We still don't have a clear idea how much of the population we've lost. We're constantly having to revise figures. But we believe there is room for all of God's creatures. There was before the Great War, but Americans were just too shallow and greedy to give much thought to God's lesser creatures-and there is still a lot of spirited debate among the Rebels as to just who is the lesser of the creatures-us or the animals.

"You say you don't like what we teach in our schools. Do you even know what we teach? Probably not. So I'll tell you. We teach reading, writing, math, and keeping one's body in good shape. Every child who is capable of engaging in physical training gets eight to ten hours of that per week. But we really don't give a damn who can throw a baseball or football the farthest, or dribble a basketball better than others. What is put into a child's mind is what we're concerned about. It's senseless and useless to have a highly motivated teacher put something in a

child's head during the day only to have it removed by stupid parents when the child gets home. Our children are taught respect for the land, the animals on it, and the people who are trying to rise out of the ashes of war. For those who choose not to take part in the re-

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building, they can, quite frankly, go straight to hell. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Riley?"

Tom Riley looked back at the twisted carnage on the highway, still burning and smoking. He looked at the rows of dead laid out in the fields, ready for mass burial. He looked at the Rebels, tough and capable and well-fed and in the peak of physical conditioning. He nodded his head. "Oh, yes, General. You're quite clear on that matter."

"Fine, Tom. You and your people can join us and be a part of that rebuilding, or you can fight us, and most of you will die. It's all up to you."

"Can I take your offer up with those who sort of look to me as their leader?"

"Certainly. I want you to do that."

Tom Riley and his people agreed to return to Kentucky, and after being resupplied by the Rebels, they pulled out. Teams of Rebels would meet them back east, to assist in the setting up of an outpost. Most of the outposts of the Rebels had been destroyed by Hoffman's terrorist teams, with all of the Rebels having lost good friends to Hoffman's vicious and twisted philosophy, so it was all back to square one for Ben and the Rebels. Nearly everything they had physically accomplished over the long bloody years, Hoffman and his people had destroyed.

But starting over was nothing new for the Rebels. They'd been doing that for years. The Rebels just resigned themselves to do it and did it.

The Rebels pulled out the following morning and linked up with the battalions of Buddy, Dan Gray, and Jackie Malone. The Rebels began stretching out, south to north, and setting up roadblocks on every highway

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leading west. They were fully aware that they could not possibly stop all western movement, but they could block a large percentage of it. Ben ordered helicopter gunships to join them and had light fixed-wing aircraft up as eyes in the skies.

Recon was reporting a massive movement from the east, many of the groups well-armed and spoiling for a fight with anybody who stood in their way of joining the new Nazi movement.

"I guess we now know what all the people we couldn't account for were doing all these years," Dr. Chase said to Ben at a staff meeting. "Practicing Nazism."

"And now their great savior is calling on them to rise up and fight," Dan Gray added. "Hoffman," he spat out the last.

"Yes," Ben agreed, and then smiled. "But they've got one hell of a

mountain to climb before they can join Field Marshal Hoffman. And that mountain is us."