

KIDNAPPED

"Why kidnap Anna?"

Cecil explained: "To use her as leverage."

"Leverage against me," said Ben. "But... why? I hold no political office. What the hell do they hope to gain by kidnapping a girl not even twenty years old?"

"They plan to try her for treason, among other charges. And hang her."

"Treason?" Ben almost shouted. "Anna is not a citizen of the USA. She's a citizen of the SUSA. How the hell could she be tried for treason?"

Cecil shook his head and took Ben's arm to lead him off the tarmac, but Ben could not be restrained. "We're talking about a criminal act here," Ben said. "An international act of conspiracy. We're talking about spies and the kidnapping of a citizen of an internationally recognized sovereign nation. I want Anna back, safe and unhurt." He paused. "You've got seventy-two hours."

Ben turned away and walked toward a line of military vehicles. He got into a HumVee and drove off.

Cecil watched Ben leave, then turned to an aide. "Get all the members of the emergency council together right now. We've got seventy-two hours before God only knows what hell breaks loose. And if Anna isn't on her way home by then ... a lot of people are going to pay a very heavy price....

"In blood."

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Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, is entirely coincidental.

Prologue

If we accomplished nothing else, Ben thought as he stared out of the window at the clouds below him, at least Bottger is dead ... we've seen the last of that bastard. But we lost a lot of good men and women doing it.

The Rebels had suffered their first major defeat in years at the hands of Bottger's troops... and had lost hundreds of troops. But the Rebel spirit was not that easily crushed, and Ben had quickly rebuilt his army with raw recruits and seasoned veterans pulled in from the SUSAs. He had changed the structure of his army into brigades: ten large brigades, four battalions to a brigade, and one lone battalion-19 Batt-commanded by Thermopolis, the ex-hippie turned warrior. Therm and his people kept track of everything, from troop movements to who needed toilet paper. 19 Batt was comprised of some of the strangest people to be found in any army anywhere. Most of Therm's people wouldn't know military protocol from Adam's off ox, but they all did their vitally important jobs and did them superbly. Ben had no complaints about 19 Batt. For the

most part he left them alone and let them do things their own way ... even though Dan Gray, the commander of 503 Brigade, a former British SAS officer and a stickler for military discipline, cringed and muttered a lot under his breath every time he got near the longhaired, bead-adorned, bandana-wearing members of 19 Batt.

Ben just smiled at the Englishman.

The Rebels had won the battles and the ambushes and the final confrontation with Bottger's troops in Africa, and now they were returning home to America to face the growing threat of another civil war on home soil.

The government outside the SUSAs just would not stop their campaign of hatred against the SUSAs. Just would not or could not understand there were millions of people who did not wish to live under a crybaby, whiny, ultra left-wing, liberal form of government. Those who refused to knuckle down and kiss the ass of big, constantly intrusive government chose to live in the Southern United States of America-the SUSAs: The individualists, the freethinkers, the law-abiding, those who accepted responsibility for their own actions and deeds. Outside the SUSAs were those types who wanted the government to take care of them from cradle to grave, people who blamed someone or some thing for every mistake they made, who would never take personal responsibility for their own actions.

"Oh, it wasn't my fault or his or her fault that convenience store was robbed and the clerk killed," those who lived outside the SUSAs whined. "Oh, no, not at all. You see, here's where the fault lies-the homecoming queen wouldn't date the young man, and he got upset about his rejection and decided to vent his rage against an uncaring society by robbing that store. So it really wasn't his fault, and it's terribly unfair for you to blame him. Don't you see?"

Or: "He didn't have enough orange juice in his diet during his formative years and that created a chemical imbalance in his brain. That's what caused him to rape

and torture and murder that little neighbor girl," the ultra liberals sobbed and moaned.

Or, the left wingers would squall: as they stomped on hankies and flung snot in all directions: "He watched too much violence on TV and in the movies. That's what made him kill all those people," OOOh.

"And the availability of all those terrible nasty evil guns!" the liberals would piss and moan. "Oooohhh," The left wingers would go through another box of tissue, wiping tears away. "We must pass more legislation concerning gun control. We must immediately gather up all the guns in the nation, and that will solve all the problems."

Or: "He was spanked as a child for torturing animals, and that traumatized the poor dear. It wasn't his fault he opened fire on a schoolyard filled with kids. Oh, no, not at all. You see, he read all those nasty, right-wing books by that horrible, evil gun nut from Louisiana. That's what it was. That's why he did it. I think the FBI should launch an immediate investigation of that writer."

Now, Ben and his team were on their way home.

Ben pushed his thoughts away for a moment and looked up as Jersey, his bodyguard, brought him a fresh mug of coffee. He took the coffee and thanked her. She smiled at him and returned to her seat, and he buckled his seat belt. The air was a bit turbulent.

She should be married, raising a family, Ben thought, not knocking around the world with me. The whole team should be married and settled down.

He looked around at his team, seated a few rows away from him:

Corrie, Ben's radio tech, a very pretty and highly intelligent young woman. Beth, the team statistician, quiet and studious, very attractive and shapely and smart. Cooper, Ben's driver, a young man who could take a screwdriver and have a worn-out engine humming like new. Anna, Ben's adopted daughter, in her nineteenth year of life on

this war-torn planet. A beautiful young lady who would soon be going through the most brutal training ever dreamed up by humankind to become a Rebel Scout.

They should all be settled down, Ben thought. But he knew they would never leave him, not voluntarily. And to tell the truth, he didn't want them to.

Ben looked out the airplane window again. A few more hours and they would be home, back in Base Camp One, the capital of the SUSAs. Hell of a name for a town, Ben thought, but it had been called that for years and no one seemed at all anxious to change it.

Ben frowned as he thought of the growing troubles outside the SUSAs. Conditions were worsening hourly. He had spoken with Cecil Jefferys-the President of the SUSAs- just before leaving South Africa. Cecil had told him he wasn't sure just who was running what was left of what used to be called the United States of America. The Congress of the United States

had met in secret session and invoked their slightly altered version of The Emergency Powers Act.

"Where is the President, Cece?" Ben had asked.

"The official word is he's very ill and not receiving visitors."

"That might mean he's dead."

"It might, Ben. But I think it means he's being held prisoner in the new White House."

"Then just who is running the country-the vice-president?"

"No. No one knows where he is. It just came over the news that his helicopter went down somewhere over Michigan. The VP is missing and feared dead."

"Do you believe any of that, Cece?"

"Only that the VP is dead. I believe that. But I don't believe his chopper crashed."

"His crew was working for the other side ... whoever that might be."

"That's what we believe."

"Cece ... you're holding back, ole' buddy. Who is really running the country?"

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Cecil's sigh was audible. "We think it's the senator from California."

"Which senator?" Ben had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Not that it would make much difference. They're both socialist to the core."

"Claire Osterman."

"Oh, shit! Sugar Babe, herself. That bitch."

Sugar, as she was called (presumably because she just loved everyone who agreed with her left-wing politics) hated Ben Raines above everyone else on the face of the earth, or in the pits of Hell. She had once publicly stated during a press conference-when she was the lieutenant-governor of California and before the Great War tore the world apart-that the world would be a much nicer place if Ben Raines wasn't in it. Furthermore, she stated, his writing was awful, the characters much too macho for her delicate sensibilities. (Sugar was, Ben thought, about as delicate as a tractor.) In her opinion his books, along with all the privately owned guns in the nation, should be banned. Later, when away from the press, she had added that Ben was a rabble-rousing, right-wing, gun-loving, politically incorrect son of a bitch.

Ben had called her a ten dollar a night whore selling five dollar pussy.

She had later become one of President Logan's advisors. Ben had thought that typical of Logan's administration- hiring as many flakes and kooks and left wingers as he could. Ben had lost track of Sugar after Logan

was killed with a briefcase filled with explosives-handed to him by a member of one of Ben's Zero Squads. (They were called Zero Squads because that was the odds of their returning alive from an assignment-zero.) Now Sugar was a senator, and still praising the government's confiscation of all privately owned firearms above a .22 caliber or a 20 gauge shotgun. And absolutely none of those nasty, horrible pistols would be left in the hands of law-abiding, taxpaying citizens, Oh, heavens no! Positively not! How unthinkable! Tsk, tsk.

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And the people who lived outside the SUSA, most of them, dutifully handed over their weapons to the federal agents who came calling. Yes, sir, master, I'll bow down and kiss the ass of Big Brother ... you just mark the spot and I'll get down on my knees and give you a great big sloppy smooch.

Ben stirred in his seat, and his frown deepened as his thoughts grew darker. In his opinion-and in the opinion of millions of others-people like those had helped to destroy America. The Great War just nailed the lid on the casket, that's all. All their pie in the sky, half-baked ideas about how best to educate kids had led to teachers being unable to maintain discipline in the classroom. Schools had turned into war zones, with metal detectors, students cussing teachers, sometimes physically attacking them. Many teachers lived in fear for their lives, and not just in the classroom. Many had their car tires slashed, received threatening phone calls at home, and much worse. And what type of punishment did the punks who attacked the teachers and threatened them receive? In many instances, very little. In some instances, no punishment at all. They certainly didn't get their butts whipped. Oh, my goodness, no. That might traumatize the poor little dear, and we certainly don't want that. Were charges brought against the punk, and was he or she hauled off by the cops and sentenced to a term in some juvenile detention facility- what back in Ben's youth had been called reform school? Not very often. "My goodness gracious me," whined the left wingers, "we couldn't have that. Oh, my, no. Certainly not. After all, the teacher wasn't hurt that much." Sometimes the teachers wouldn't even report the incident.

"Shit!" Ben muttered. But he knew the kids were not entirely to blame for their behavior. Many parents couldn't or wouldn't instill or maintain discipline at home, for a variety of reasons, not many of them valid to Ben's way of thinking.

At times like these, Ben's thoughts usually drifted back to his own youth ... a period when life was supposed to

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have been much simpler ... a statement that nearly everyone Ben's age knew was total, absolute bullshit. Times weren't that much simpler. Kids had peer pressure on them then ... just as much as the next generation did. As far as the violence on TV and in the movies causing violence in youth, Ben placed no credence in that unproven theory, whatsoever ... that was just more horseshit from the mouths of whiny liberals.

Ben lectured often at the SUSA's many colleges ... and his lectures were well-attended, the auditoriums always filled to capacity. The students were well aware that all of Ben's theories about government had proved to be correct, and they wanted to meet and hear the man himself ... for

Ben was that rare commodity: a legend in his own time.

"We went to the movies and saw our western heroes kill dozens of bad guys and hundreds of Indians," Ben told the students. "We watched captives being hideously tortured on the screen. We saw and heard Christians being fed to lions and nailed to crosses, whipped to death, drawn and quartered. We watched our western heroes beat people half to death with bullwhips, and watched gangsters and cops shoot it out in the streets. Did that provoke us to pick up guns or knives and shoot or stab our classmates, or attack our neighbors or our teachers or stick up a store? No, it certainly did not. I'm not saying those things didn't occur, but they were so extremely rare they were aberrations.

"We had-at home, in the schools, and in society-a sense of order and discipline. We had, and did our best to maintain, such now old-fashioned and out of date qualities as honor, morals, ethics ... a code of conduct, if you will. Old-fashioned and out of date outside the borders of the SUSA, that is."

Ben believed that young people needed discipline. They want it, whether they admitted it or not. And the young people of the SUSA both loved and respected Ben Raines.

In the SUSA everybody served in the military; the entire nation was an armed camp. There were weapons for everyone

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of age in every household in the SUSA, plus emergency gear, and plenty of ammunition. If war broke out, every resident knew his or her job assignment.

Anna left her seat to come back and sit with Ben. She fixed her pale, blue eyes on him and said, "You've been sitting alone and speaking to no one for hours, Daddy Ben. What's the matter?"

Ben smiled at her. "Nothing really, Baby. Just doing a lot of thinking, that's all."

"We going to have a fight in America?"

"Looks that way ... it sure looks that way. Unless I can somehow talk some sense into the heads of the powers that be outside the SUSA."

Before Anna could ask another question, Corrie walked back. "Pilot just got a flash from home, Boss. National elections have been suspended indefinitely. Martial law has been declared in some sections of the USA. Those sections that are considered sympathetic to us, that is. And it's official-the vice-president is dead. The president has been declared too ill to work. The country is being run by a coalition ... a decidedly left-wing coalition."

"Headed by?"

Corrie shook her head. "That we don't know for sure, but the word is it's going to be Harlan Millard."

Ben sighed. "God help us all if that's true. That is the most liberal left-wing son of a bitch ever elected to congress. Any info on who else is on this coalition?"

"Not yet, Boss."

Ben thanked her, and Corrie returned to her seat. Anna studied her adopted father's face for a moment, then asked, "You know this Millard person?"

"Not personally. But I know all about him. He's been around for years spewing his left-wing garbage. He's big government all the way. He had a radio program long before the Great War and wrote a syndicated column that was carried by a number of newspapers. Then he was elected to congress. He's one hundred percent pure socialist, and real trouble for anyone who believes in capitalism."

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"This coalition... they have the military behind them?"

"They have the newly formed military behind them. We saw this coming months ago. The new military is nothing like the old armed forces. It's much smaller, and made up of thugs and bullies and people who have been brainwashed against everything the SUSA stands for. But it's a well-trained army, and they'll fight. We can't underestimate them for a minute. That would be a very bad mistake."

"Larger than our army?"

"Oh, yes. By several hundred thousand, I'd say."

Anna was silent for a moment. "A lot has happened in the year we've been gone, hasn't it?"

"Yes. And none of it good ... at least, not for us."

"So we fight, right?"

"I guess so, Baby. Looks that way."

Anna kissed Ben on the cheek and returned to sit with the team, leaving Ben alone with his thoughts again, and his thoughts were turning darker and darker.

"Why can't those outside our borders leave us alone?" he muttered.
"We're not bothering them."

It was a question Ben had asked many times. He knew the answer, but it was like calculus to the unfamiliar: he did not understand the why of it. Why does one nation always want to meddle in the affairs of other nations? Why is the SUSA so hated? We don't bother our neighbors living outside our borders. We had trade agreements with them, and were living up to our end of the contractual terms.

Ben sighed. Another civil war. A dirty little war to once more be fought on American soil. How many more bloody conflicts before the issues of sovereignty, states rights, morals, honor, ethics, fair taxation, and the rights of the law-abiding were finally settled? Or would they ever be settled?

Never, Ben thought, not as long as left-wing liberals have anything to do with the running of the country and the making of laws.

Ben felt the airplane change course ever so slightly. They were on the last leg of the long flight home. Home. It

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would be good to get back, regardless of what might be taking place outside their borders, it would be good to sit in his favorite chair with Horowitz playing a Chopin polonaise or nocturne in the background while he read the newspapers.

Ben especially enjoyed reading the newspapers from outside the SUSAs borders. They were filled with the same old tired crap they had contained before the Great War ... only this time few issues were published without some mention of the SUSAs or some highly inflammatory or derogatory piece about Ben Raines.

Ben got a big laugh out of the reporter columns and the letters to the editors. Nobody seemed to be able to grasp the philosophy of the SUSAs. Some thought it was communistic, others thought it was socialistic.

They were both wrong.

The SUSAs was a experiment in living that worked to the satisfaction of the millions of people who lived there. It had a philosophy of government based on the old Constitution of the United States and The Bill of Rights, with a healthy dose of common sense all mixed in.

More importantly, it worked for several million people. And those men and women were willing to fight for their right to live in the SUSAs ... and die.

"And a lot of us are going to do just that," Ben muttered. "There might not be a government of any sort left when the smoke clears-anywhere in North America."

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Chapter One

Cecil had a very worried look on his face when Ben stepped off the plane and the men shook hands. Ben smiled, gripped his longtime friend's shoulder with a big hand, and squeezed. "You look as though you're carrying the weight of the world around, Cece."

"And you look disgustingly healthy and tanned, Ben. God, but it's good to see you."

"And you look the same, Cece," Ben said with a grin. "Of course, you always have a nice tan."

That brought a smile to the black man's lips, then a big booming laugh. He punched Ben lightly on the shoulder. "The liberals would frown on that remark, Ben. You're not being politically correct."

The two walked across the tarmac toward the terminal, Ben's team and Cecil's security people all around them yet far enough away so the men could talk privately in low tones.

Even in the SUSAs, at Base Camp One, the capital of the fledgling

breakaway nation, security around Ben and Cecil was tight.

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"I gather that there have been no hostile moves against us to date?" Ben asked.

Cece shook his head. "Not yet, Ben. Just some small probes at our borders. Nothing major. But intelligence says it's coming. All signs point to it."

Ben nodded his head. "And here we go again."

"Big time, Ben. Both Sugar Babe Osterman and Harlan Millard hate you ... intensely. They have both stated publicly that you're a traitor to the democratic way, and must be captured and tried as such ... taken alive, if possible."

"Fuck 'em," Ben said.

Cecil laughed at his longtime friend. "They have both sworn to bring the SUSA back into the Union," he added.

"They can both kiss my ass," Ben replied. "Don't those two whiny left wingers know we have the weapons and the delivery systems to nail the lid down tight on everything outside our borders?"

"They don't believe you'll do it."

"Then they're both bigger fools than I originally thought. What the hell is the matter with those two?"

"They claim you're bluffing. They say you won't harm civilians."

"I don't want to harm civilians. But I will if those civilians support a regime that is trying to destroy everything we've built."

"They're talking about the kids, Ben."

"I know it, Cece. And I especially don't want to harm any kids. What are they going to do, hide behind the kids? Use them for cannon fodder?"

"In some instances, I think the answer would be yes. We know that rabble-rousers are working among many of the people outside the SUSA, urging them to be ready to march on our borders when they get the word."

"Any idea when that word will come down?"

"Not a clue. But it's my belief that it will be very soon. I think you can safely bet on that." He glanced over at

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Ben as they walked. "Are you still planning to use chemicals to stop them?"

"Yes. It's the most humane way to go. You have the factories running around the clock?"

"For several weeks, now. We've got enough chemicals to stop a major invasion. The no-man's-zone around our borders has been enlarged, and

it's mined. There are patrols on our sides of the zone twenty-four hours a day, plus eyes in the sky."

"We've got to be stretched pretty damn thin, Cece. Our borders run for a couple of thousand miles."

"Sure we are. And even with the addition of the arriving brigades we'll still be thin. When the mass infusion starts they'll be pouring across by the thousands. Perhaps hundreds of thousands of them."

"You have any better idea than mine, Cece? If so, I'm damn sure open for suggestion."

Cecil shook his head. "No, Ben," he said slowly. "I don't. I wish I did."

"So do I. Believe me, I do. But if we're attacked, our borders will be defended. Non-lethally, if they're civilians who try to cross-unless they shoot at us. By armed force, if Millard and Osterman use their army against us. I can't see that we have any choice."

"We don't, unless you want to consider rejoining the Union under their conditions." Cece laughed at the sudden and very startled expression on Ben's face.

"I hope you're joking, ole' buddy."

"I hope you know I am."

"I had to ask ..." Ben paused and smiled. "Just to get your attention."

"You damn sure got it with that remark. Oh hell, Ben, if we're to survive we've got to be ready to fight, and if we're outnumbered, as we damn sure will be, there can't be any rules of engagement. We hit hard, and we fight to win. If Osterman and Millard want to call that dirty fighting, fine with me."

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"Arrange a meeting with Osterman and Millard, Cece. That is, if they'll meet with me."

"Us, Ben. If they'll meet with us."

"I don't trust these people, Cece. They just might agree to a meeting with a killing in the back of their minds. If they feel they can take out both of us, they damn sure will try it."

Cece nodded his head in agreement. Ben had never trusted the left wing ... with good reason. Cece could recall only a very few times when they had kept their end of any agreement with the Rebels.

The men had reached the terminal area, and a door was held open for them. Ben returned the smardy given salute from the uniformed Rebel, and both men stepped inside the building. Cece said, "You want to go home and rest for a time, Ben?"

Ben shook his head. "No, let's hash this out right now. I think time is working against us. Besides, home is just an empty house."

Cece experienced a wave of sadness at that remark. One of the most

powerful men on the face of the earth was in reality a man alone. The one woman Ben had truly loved was buried in a lonely grave in the far northwest. Cece understood that it had been a hopeless romance from the very beginning. Fate often had a dark sense of humor when dealing with the living ... and kismet had dealt Ben a lousy hand.

For all his aloneness, Ben was not an unhappy man. Just a lonely one at times.

The men went into a secure office-one that was electronically 'swept' periodically-and Cecil ordered coffee and sandwiches brought in.

Ben's team and Cecil's security people took up positions outside the office.

Ben pulled the phone over to him and looked at Cece. "White House number still the same?"

"It hadn't been changed a few days ago. But we don't know who is running things."

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"We're about to find out." Ben picked up the phone and a Rebel communications tech immediately answered. "Get me the White House, please."

"Right away, General."

This office phone system was manned-personed, for all the gender sensitive types-by Rebel security, who had been briefed that Ben might be using this office.

It took only a few seconds for the tech to come back. "They want to know who is calling, sir."

"They know damn well where this call originated. Tell them it's Santa Claus. I need some advice. I just caught one of my elves fucking Mrs. Claus."

Cecil choked on a swallow of coffee and the tech began stuttering, not sure how to respond.

"Jesus, Ben!" Cece finally managed to gasp.

Ben grinned at Cece, and told the tech, "Tell whoever that is on the line to stop being so goddamned officious and get whoever's in charge of that liberal lash-up on the horn, and do it damn quick before I lose my temper."

"Yes, sir!"

"Ben Raines on how to win friends and influence people," Cece muttered, wiping coffee spots from his shirt front.

A couple of seconds later a very prissy man's voice came over the line. "We do not like threats or vulgarity, General Raines."

"You have my totally insincere apologies," Ben said, punching the speaker phone button so Cecil could hear what was going on. "Who is this?"

"I am Clarence Adams, senior advisor to Madame President."

"Madame President? What happened, did the president have a sex change operation?"

"That is not amusing, General Raines. President Altman had to resign due to health reasons...."

"I just bet he did," Ben said. "Where is he now?"

"In the hospital. He is gravely ill. What do you want, General Raines?"

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"I want to know what the hell is going on with you people. Do you have a clue?"

"I don't care for your attitude, General. Not one little bit."

"So you don't know nothing about birthin' no babies, huh, Adams?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You must not be a Clark Gable fan, Adams. You never saw Gone With The Wind?"

"What? Oh, yes. Of course. Ha, ha. How amusing. President Osterman is unavailable at this time, General. She's in conference with members of CREW."

Ben and Cecil exchanged glances. Cece shrugged his shoulders. "What the hell is CREW, Adams?"

"The Committee to Rid the Earth of Want."

"Want what, Adams?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind. I'm getting confused. Who elected Sugar Babe to the presidency?"

"There was no time for an election. The nation could not go leaderless. Congress appointed her with the blessings of the new supreme court."

"What happened to the old supreme court?"

"It was dissolved."

"By whom?"

"Congress."

"They have the power to do that?"

"They do now."

Again, Ben and Cece exchanged glances. Cecil arched an eyebrow.

"Are you people operating under the guidelines of the Constitution?"

"We have a new constitution and bill of rights," Adams said very smugly.

Ben was silent for a moment. He sighed and said, "Why doesn't that surprise me? And who drew up these documents?"

"A group of patriots."

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"Oh, I'm sure of that. All of them patriots to the core, right, Adams?"

"One hundred percent, General. Dedicated Americans who want to see this nation emerge from the chaos of war with a new vision for all people."

"I'm overcome with emotion. Excuse me for a moment while I puke."

"How crude!"

"Oh, do forgive me, Adams. I'm sure you're a man of fine sensibilities."

"Quite right, General. Now, is there anything else? I'm really very busy."

"Tell Sugar Babe we need to talk."

"I must insist you refrain from using that ridiculous nickname, General."

"Why? She's had it all her life."

"It is not befitting a lady of her stature."

"Horseshit."

"I beg your pardon, General?"

"I said horseshit, Adams. She has no stature with me."

"She is the President of the United States."

"I'm not a citizen of the USA, Adams. I'm a citizen of the SUSA. We are a separate and sovereign nation, recognized as such by the United Nations."

"Wrong, General. Very wrong. You cannot secede from the Union. What you did was an act of treason, and it will be treated as such."

Ben's chuckle held no humor. "I suppose the new supreme court handed down that decision?"

"Yes. Just a few days ago."

"Goody for them. Now let me tell you something. As far as I'm concerned, your new supreme court is an illegal body, and their decisions are not worth a bucket of buzzard piss. And if you people have plans to use force against us, I can guarantee you a nationwide bloodbath. And you can quote me verbatim to Madame President Claire Sugar Babe Osterman."

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"You are making a serious mistake by threatening us, General Raines."

"I'm not threatening. Just stating a fact, Adams. If you start a war

with us, you're going to get a bellyful of it."

"I shall relay your message to Madame President."

"You do that, Pooopsie."

The connection was broken. The phone hummed in Ben's ear. Ben replaced the phone in the cradle and looked at Cecil.

"What do you know about this Adams person, Cece?"

"I believe he was an aide to Osterman when she was in congress. Ben, you sure let the hammer down on him."

"I got his attention."

"And now?"

"I'll start assigning troops to sectors as soon as they land ... and wait. That's all we can do for now. I won't make the first hostile move. Where are we the most vulnerable along our borders?"

"Hell, Ben, pick a spot, west or north. We don't have enough people to defend our borders."

"We will after we mobilize the Home Guard. But I don't want to screw up anyone's planting or harvesting, or severely cut into their income. Schedules are going to have to be worked out very carefully."

"I'll get people on that right now."

Millions of people lived in the former states that made up the SUSAs, and everybody of age was in the Home Guard. It was an awesome force, for many of them were combat veterans, and all were solid believers in the Tri-States philosophy of government. They would fight to the death defending their right to live under the laws of the SUSAs ... and to co-exist peacefully with the USA. If the USA would only let them.

Cece read Ben's mind. "They're never going to let us live in peace, are they, Ben?"

"Someday, Cece. After we kick their asses so hard their teeth rattle from the impact."

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"And you think we're going to do it this go-around?" "We're going to give it the old college try."

Cece was worried to the bone about the troubles facing the SUSAs, and fearful of the outcome. He knew the Rebels would be outnumbered in any armed conflict, but that was only part of what was troubling him. It was good, decent Americans looking down a gun barrel at other good, decent Americans that troubled him-and Ben.

And while both knew that many of the men and women they would be facing in Osterman's armed forces would be no more than the dregs of society-punks and thugs and men with very checkered pasts-it was the civilians that Osterman's people would whip into frenzy against the SUSAs, urging them to get involved. They would be sure to get hurt and

killed, and that bothered both men.

But they also knew they had but two choices in the matter: surrender or fight. And neither man was about to take surrender under consideration. That was out of the question-unthinkable.

Ben sat quietly, deep in thought, while Cecil made half a dozen quick phone calls. After a few moments, Cecil finished with his last call. He poured a fresh cup of coffee from the carafe and leaned back in his chair.

"Do we unveil our little surprise for the folks, Ben? The men and women we've been training are at a razor's edge and raring to go."

Ben shook his head. "Not yet. I want to keep the wraps on that for a while longer."

"I thought you might say that. But I want to ease back on the training just a bit. We've been pushing them awfully hard."

"All right. Stand them down for a few days. I sure don't want them over-trained until they lose their edge. When the balloon goes up, they're going to get all the combat and pressure they want."

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"You know that Osterman doesn't have much of an air force, Ben."

"I can assure you she won't have any when our people get through," Ben said, accompanying that with a very nasty smile like that of a hungry tiger.

Cecil cautioned his friend-"If she's stupid enough to start trouble with us-"

"She'll start it, Cece. If for no other reason than she hates me more than God hates sin."

"Even if she knows she can't win? Even if she knows all she'll accomplish is to destroy North America?"

"All that, Cece. And more. She's power hungry. Has been all her life. And she professes to hate guns ... but for years before the Great War she had a concealed carry permit. Packed a .38 in her purse. But was instrumental in leading the fight to disarm Americans."

Cecil nodded his head. "I remember all that now. Didn't you and Sugar Babe lock horns on a talk show once?"

Ben laughed as the memory of that came flooding back. "We sure did. I enjoyed that hour program more than I could ever explain. I verbally backed that left-wing bitch into so many corners she thought she was in a maze. She's hated me intensely ever since."

"And then the Great War came," Cecil said softly. "And nothing mattered much for several years."

"That's about the size of it, Cece. Nothing mattered much except for staying alive."

"That and your dream of a better society for those who had a modicum of common sense."

Ben smiled, drained his coffee mug, pushed back his chair, and stood up. "And we turned that dream into hard reality, didn't we, ole' buddy?"

Cece stood up and nodded his head in agreement "We sure did, Ben. But it's taken a lot of sweat and blood and cost a lot of lives to keep it alive."

"It's going to cost a lot more before we're through. Get ready for that."

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"I know," Cece replied in a low voice. "And I think everyone in the SUSA realizes that, too." "Let's get ready for war, Cece."

"Again," Cecil said.

"Yes," Ben said. "Again."

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Chapter Two

A week passed with no word from those in power outside the borders of the SUSA. Then Beth stuck her head into Ben's office one morning and said, "Madame President Osterman on the horn, Boss."

Ben looked up from the mound of paperwork on his desk. "No kidding? Finally. I bet this is going to be a delightful conversation." He punched the record button on a tape recorder and picked up the receiver. "Good morning, Sugar," he said cheerfully. "And how are you this morning in the great state of Indiana?"

"I'm fine, Raines," Claire replied. "Let's dispense with the small talk and get right down to business, shall we?"

"Suits me, Sugar."

"Will you stop calling me Sugar, Raines? I detest that nickname, and have all my life."

"No."

"No? No, what?"

"I won't stop calling you Sugar, Sugar."

"Well then ... fuck you, Raines."

"Thanks, Sugar, but I think I'll pass. Frankly, my dear, you're just not my type."

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She cussed Ben, loud and long. Madame President Claire 'Sugar Babe' Osterman knew all the words and got them all in the right places.

When she paused for breath, Ben asked, "Are you quite finished, Sugar?"

"You're an asshole, Raines!" Then she let him have it again, putting together another long string of profane words.

"I guess you aren't finished," Ben muttered. "Please, do continue."

"I'm going to see your little private kingdom destroyed, and you in prison, Raines. You're a traitor."

"And you're going to do all that if I don't do what, Sugar Babe?"

"Dissolve your government, disband your army, and swear allegiance to the United States. The Southern United States is going to rejoin the rest of the states, and this nation is going to be healed."

"Forget it, Sugar. That isn't going to happen. The SUSAs are here to stay."

"No way, Raines. You're going to be nothing more than a small dark blot on history."

"Sugar, don't start trouble with us. Let's see if we can't work this out, come to some sort of agreement. I see no reason why we can't co-exist peacefully."

"I see lots of reasons, Raines. You've always been nothing but a troublemaking rabble-rouser. You've been stirring up hate and discontent for years. Your damn trashy books started all this. You went on television and radio talk shows and openly supported the militia movement and all those wacky survivalist groups. You're just another loudmouth, right wing gun nut. You advocated the carrying of firearms. You hated the government and you hated the IRS. You certainly fanned the flames of a tax revolt, and your words got a lot of people hurt and killed and put in prison. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you didn't have something to do with starting the Great War. It's certainly something you would do."

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"Are you through, Sugar?"

"No, I'm not, Raines. You're a jerk, and nothing more than a common criminal. You--"

"Oh, shut up, Sugar!"

That shocked the woman into momentary silence. Then she started sputtering.

"You're wrong on a lot of counts, Claire," Ben said. "I never hated the government, and I never hated the IRS. We have to have some sort of method of collecting taxes, and we certainly have to have a government. Without government we'd have anarchy. Without taxes we couldn't have a government. It was all the government intrusion into private lives that got me up on a soapbox. I didn't hate the IRS. Those people were just taking orders from the damned politicians. It was the way taxes were collected that burned my butt ... and you people wouldn't fix it. And I knew that once people were free to carry guns- with a permit and only after firearms training-many of them wouldn't. And I was right. We've proved that here in the SUSAs."

Claire began stuttering and sputtering once more.

"Goddamnit, Osterman, shut up and let me finish!"

"You're finished, Raines!" Madame President shouted. "You and your barbaric nation are finished! Believe that if you believe nothing else."

She slammed the phone down, breaking the connection and leaving Ben holding a buzzing phone.

"Her temper sure hasn't improved any," Ben said just as Anna walked into the office.

"Whose temper?" the young woman asked, sitting down in a chair in front of the desk.

"Madame President Osterman."

"Oh, her. Yes. I went over to the main library yesterday afternoon and did some reading up on that female barracuda. She's a communist, I think."

"Socialist, Baby," Ben corrected.

"So what comes after socialism, Daddy Ben? Communism, that's what. Look it up in the dictionary ... I did."

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Ben smiled at the young woman. "You're right, of course, Anna. But Madame President would be appalled and very, very angry should anyone accuse her of being a socialist or a communist."

"You mean she isn't aware of her political leanings?"

"I don't think so, Honey. I believe that most ultra liberals don't understand that they're flirting with a dangerous form of government."

"Then they're stupid people," Anna said bluntly, in her usual style.

Ben again smiled at his adopted daughter. She was absolutely breathtakingly beautiful, with her blonde hair and pale, pale eyes. "I've known many extremely intelligent people who were ultra liberal, Anna. Not only that, or perhaps despite that, they were very decent, caring, and well-meaning people ... as are most, I believe."

"Then why do they embrace socialism, if they're so damn smart?"

"That's a question I can't answer. I've debated government with many of them countless times. As far as I'm concerned it's like arguing with a stump, and I'm sure they feel the same about me."

"But they don't care one little bit about the rights of those who are politically their opposites, do they?"

"That does appear to be the case."

"Then to hell with them. They can have their own way of life outside the SUSA, and we'll have ours here."

"But they don't want us to have that, Anna."

The young woman fixed her pale, icy eyes on Ben. "Then we kill them," she said very softly.

Ben lost his smile as her words echoed away. Anna's philosophy of life was very simple: I will harm no one who is not attempting to harm me. I will live honorably and decently, without lying, cheating, or stealing. I will leave you alone, if you will leave me alone. But if you try to force your will on me, if you try to steal from me, I will kill you.

Well, Ben thought, Anna's philosophy isn't that far off from those of us who live in the SUSA. She just doesn't mince words

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about how she believes, and what she'll do ... and she doesn't bluff about it-ever.

"Daddy Ben," Anna said, "why didn't the people fight when the government here in America started to turn socialistic?"

"We tried, Baby. But we couldn't get organized under one leader and a set of agreed upon goals."

"Why not?"

"Oh ... a lot of reasons. Squabbling, for one."

"Squabbling?"

"Anna, there were several thousand groups in America under various names-militia, survivalist, constitutionalist. You name it, and we had it. But none of them-most of them, I should say-couldn't or wouldn't cooperate with each other. A group in Idaho, for example, didn't like the leader of the group in Illinois, or the group in Texas didn't like part of the philosophy of the group in Florida, or the group in Arkansas didn't like the name of the group in New York, or the militia in Michigan didn't want to be called survivalist like the group in Kansas. It was a mess."

"How many people were involved in the various groups?"

"Thousands. Men and women of all ages and all backgrounds, education, and vocation. We just couldn't get organized. And the government. Oh, boy ... they were spending millions of taxpayer dollars a year investigating and infiltrating the various groups. Government agents snooped around the various chat rooms on the Internet. Agents kicked in doors in the middle of the night and terrorized entire families, killing family pets, puppies and kittens, for no real reason...."

"Why?" Anna asked, her eyes narrowing to slits from undisguised anger at the thought of that type of government sanctioned terrorism.

"Oh, some asshole member of the community turned in a person's name for having what the press liked to call an 'arsenal' of weapons, or because they were a member of some militia or survivalist group. Many of those kick-in-

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your-door-and-kill-the-family-pet agents were a bunch of sorry ass

pricks. I asked an agent one time if his mother had any children that lived. Sure pissed him off."

Anna laughed. "Were you arrested for saying that?"

"No. But the government had been investigating me for years, anyway. They knew all about me. As one of my friends said, I was 'one looked-at fellow'."

"So you had to be very careful?"

"I should have been, but I wasn't all the time. I aired my opinion of the left-wing, ultra liberal assholes in government whenever and wherever I felt like it."

Anna laughed at Ben's expression. Ben almost always frowned whenever he thought of liberals. "But you had liberal friends. You told me so."

"We didn't discuss politics-ever. The subject was taboo. But in the last few years before the collapse, I had no friends who voted the liberal ticket and espoused ultra liberal views. None."

"You walked away from them?"

Ben shook his head. "No. They walked away from me. I was coming under too much heat from the feds. There was a lot of misinformation being spread about me ... none of it good."

Corrie stuck her head into Ben's office. "Small numbers of federal troops have been moved to what appear to be staging areas along our borders, Boss."

"Small numbers?"

"Scouts and intel are saying company size. Does that make any sense to you?"

"In a way, yes. If they spread out, we've got to spread out, too, in order to keep an eye on them." Ben was thoughtful for a few seconds. "But what if many of those so-called troops being deployed are really civilians dressed in cammies? What would that point to?"

By now Ben's entire team was all in the office. Beth said, "A diversion, perhaps?"

"Yes," Ben said. "To spread us out as thin as they can and then hit us with a hammer blow where we least expect

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it, pouring troops across our borders. And not just troops- as many civilians as they can muster after promising them all sorts of wild pie in the sky nonsense. Corrie, get eyes in the sky up ASAP-every available chopper and spotter plane we can get into the air. I want our borders surveyed."

"Right away."

Ben picked up the phone. "I'll brief Cecil and arrange a meeting. I think we'd better bump the country up to a higher readiness alert, too. All leaves canceled immediately. Everybody back to their unit."

"I wonder why that Sugar Babe person called here last week if she intended to pull something like this all along?" Anna asked.

"My guess would be to offer me the deal she and her buddies had worked out. If I took it-fine. I didn't Madame President Sugar Babe knew all along I wouldn't, so her conscience is clear to start a war with us."

"I guess I'd better get the wagon serviced as soon as it gets here," Cooper said.

"It might not arrive before the shooting starts," Ben cautioned. "I think we'll be up to our rear ends in fighting before that particular ship gets to port."

"Here we go again," Jersey remarked. "It never stops, does it?"

"No," Ben replied. "And this go-around won't end it, either."

"Still predicting worlds of gloom and doom, Raines?" Doctor Chase, the Rebel Chief of Medicine, spoke from the doorway.

Ben looked up at his old friend. "Must be important to get you away from that torture chamber you call a hospital, Lamar. What's on your mind?"

"Casualties, Raines. At a dozen places along our northern border. I just got that word."

Ben leaned back in his chair. "They're probing, Lamar. Trying to find a weak spot. How hard were we hit?"

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"A couple of dozen wounded. No dead ... yet," he added. "Most of our people suffered only minor wounds."

Ben picked up his private line, stilling the ringing. He listened for a moment, then spoke a couple of words and hung up. He looked at Lamar. "Federal troops probing at spots along our western borders, too. Couple of wounded, nothing serious. It's started, folks. Let's get geared up. Corrie, call Colonel Conners. Tell him to get ready to take the wraps off of our air force and get ready for some action." Ben smiled. "Let's see how Sugar Babe likes this little surprise."

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Chapter Three

"Ben Raines and his followers have control of millions of acres of valuable farm land in the SUSA!" The speaker shouted into the microphone.

The crowd nodded their heads in agreement and muttered words of discontent for their own station in life and condemnation toward Ben and the Rebels. Most were out of work, and blamed Ben and his followers for their own inability to earn a living. That didn't make much sense, but the SUSA was an easy target.

"Ben Raines is running a dictatorship down there," the speaker shouted. "He must be stopped, and the land returned to true Americans."

The crowd cheered and applauded.

"But the government can't do it by itself," the speaker told the crowd. "They need your help. After all, it's your country. It doesn't belong to Ben Raines and his Rebels."

The crowd mumbled words of anger. One man called out, "How can we help? We're not armed. The Rebels are, all of them, from what I've heard."

"We're not asking you to fight," the speaker replied. "That is up to the army. And they'll back you all the way."

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That is a promise. We're asking you to settle on the land. Homestead it, stake your claim on what is clearly public lands. The supreme court has ruled on that. It is public land. It belongs to you!" He reached in his pocket and pulled out several sheets of paper, holding them up for all to see. "Here is that ruling ... and it was a unanimous decision by all nine justices. The land is there, just waiting to be settled. The land now occupied by Ben Raines and his Rebels was taken illegally. Those people are traitors! They have no legal claim to the land they now occupy. It belongs to you."

There were dozens of speakers holding forth all over that area of land under the rule of Osterman and her party ... land still referred to as the United States of America. The speakers were working day and night, holding meetings all over the battered and torn nation, organizing thousands and thousands of men and women, readying the eager and very willing civilians to march on the SUSA. What did the civilians have to lose, really, except their lives-and that very real possibility wasn't brought up by the government organizers. The men and women had no jobs, (there were very few jobs to be had outside the SUSA) and their future looked very bleak indeed.

That part of North America still called the USA was recovering very slowly from years of internal political struggle and anarchy. There were some factories operating, but not many. There were some farms producing crops, but not nearly enough. Trains and planes were rolling and flying, but not very efficiently, and almost never on time.

Ben's people who dealt in such matters, working out of 'Think Tanks' in the SUSA, estimated that the USA was operating at about thirty-five to forty percent of its potential. That meant that millions of people were out of work. This wasn't entirely the fault of the people ... not really. Much of the blame for the lack of progress in the nation could be placed on the government. When what was left of the battered USA began once more to stagger to its feet, the government came roaring in with rules and regulations.

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The government sent 'experts' all over the nation to assess the situation and make recommendations ... but only after four committees, eight sub-committees, and sixteen sub-sub-committees studied the proposals and recommendations. When the rebuilding could finally begin-under government supervision, of course-a certain percentage of the workers had to be comprised of various minorities, a certain number had to be women. Work could not begin until and unless those numbers were met. And no ant mound, birds nest, fish pond, squirrel den, or

three-warted, purple-crested, four-toed titty-varmint could be disturbed. Another committee had to be formed to oversee all those rules and regulations. When all that was settled, it was often determined that not enough transvestite cross-dressers were being employed. And if some man dared to mention to one of the women that she looked nice that day, the woman immediately filed a lawsuit for sexual harassment.

Conditions were improving outside the SUSA, but only at a snail's pace.

The citizens of the SUSA began preparations for a prolonged civil war. Factories operated around the clock, seven days a week, producing everything from bullets to canned beans. Underground storage facilities-which were located all over the SUSA-were inspected and restocked. Millions of rounds of ammunition were distributed throughout the SUSA, along with cases of emergency rations and sealed, five gallon cans of water. The citizens of the SUSA were preparing to fight to the death for their homeland.

Personal weapons were checked out very carefully and kept within arm's reach. Vehicles were checked out, and fuel tanks kept full at all times. No one drove anywhere without checking to make sure the trunks of cars and the beds of trucks were stocked with emergency gear.

Harlan Millard and Madame President Claire Osterman

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did not fully understand just how dedicated the men and women of the SUSA were to preserving their way of life. But they damn sure were about to find out.

"Another couple of weeks and we'll be as ready as we can ever be," Ben reported to Cecil and various other heads of government in the SUSA.

Ten days had passed since Rebel patrols along the borders of the SUSA had first been involved in skirmishes with troops of the USA. There had been no more gunshots exchanged across the borders, but the numbers of those malcontents massing at the borders facing the Rebels and the home guard were increasing daily.

"You really think this will turn into a full-blown civil war, Ben?" Secretary of State Blanton asked.

"Yes, I do, Mister Secretary. And then into a bloody, nasty guerrilla type action that will continue for years. It was heading toward the latter in the months just before the Great War came along and hammered us all into a long period of submission and confusion."

"There are good, decent people in Osterman's administration," the former President of the United States said softly. "I know many of them."

"Of course there are," Ben was quick to agree. "But they've fallen in lockstep with the party line. As usual. Nothing ever changes. Not even a war that came very close to wiping out civilization could change it. And I find that disgusting. It was disgusting a decade ago, it's disgusting now ... even more so."

Homer Blanton smiled. "You never did fully understand all the machinations of politics, did you, Ben?"

"I hope I never do, Homer. Because-as Anna would put it-politics sucks."

Blanton laughed and pushed back his chair. Standing up, he said, "There are times when I would certainly agree with her assessment, Ben. Well, I've got to get back to the office for another meeting. See you, Cecil, Ben."

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"Who are you meeting with now?" Cecil asked.

"Some official from what is left of the Mexican government. They want our help in restabilizing their country. They're having trouble with their neighbors to the south."

"Hell, we can't even get along with our own neighbors," Ben said. "Wish them good luck, and maybe sometime in the future we can give them some help."

"I wasn't prepared to give them even that much hope," Homer said.

"That is probably the best way to go," Cecil said. "This civil war we're facing could last for a long time."

The Secretary of State looked at Ben. "You feel that way also, Ben?"

"Yes, Homer, I do. This conflict we're facing could go on for years ... in one form or another."

"You're not very encouraging, Ben."

"No, not at all. This is a civil war looking us smack in the face. American against American. I hate the very thought of it."

The Secretary of State nodded his head in agreement. "I know, Ben. I know." He checked his watch. "Well, I'm late for my meeting. I'll talk to you both later on today."

One of Cecil's aides entered the office just as Homer was leaving. "There's a reporter here to see you, Mister President. From The Capital Review. His name is Thomas Manning. He doesn't have an appointment."

"How the hell did he get across our borders?" Cecil asked. "They've been closed for days."

"I didn't ask, sir."

Cecil and Ben exchanged glances. Ben said, "I've heard of this Manning person. Read some of his articles. He's pretty much middle of the road in his reporting. He's one member of the press I'd trust... I think," Ben added.

Cecil shrugged his shoulders. "All right, then. Show the gentleman in, Don. I don't have anything else in my appointment book until this afternoon."

Ben stood up and pulled his beret from his pocket. Cecil held up a hand. "No. You stay, Ben. Please? I know you

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don't like reporters. But this might well be our last chance to get our points of view out to those living beyond our borders."

"All right, Cece." Ben continued to stand while Don showed the reporter in.

Manning was a young man, clean-cut in appearance. Ben and Cecil guessed him to be in his late twenties to early thirties. That meant he would have at least some very vivid memories of the hard years after the collapse of the world's governments.

Manning pulled up short for a moment at the sight of Ben Raines. He had studied the life and viewpoints of President Jefferys, and believed him to be a fair man. General Ben Raines was quite another story. Manning had listened to other members of the press discuss Ben Raines many times-cuss him, mostly-and Thomas had never heard anybody say anything good about the general.

To his credit, Manning had done his best to research the life of General Raines, both during his years in college and since becoming a journalist. That had proved almost impossible, since nearly all records had been destroyed in the chaos that followed the collapse of government. He had found copies of some of Ben's old books and read and studied them. He was able to pick out some threads of Ben's philosophy from his writing. Adding that to what he had heard about the man from members of the press who did not openly despise him, Thomas had a pretty good idea that Ben believed in a small government, not the bloated intrusive bureaucracy the US government had been before the collapse. Manning tried his best to be a good and fair reporter, but he was very much aware that writing anything good about President Jefferys, the SUSA, and especially Ben Raines could get him investigated by federal agents. He had been warned to "knock off" writing that Jefferson, of the founding fathers, had believed in a very small, weak government.

Manning introduced himself to Cecil, and the men

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shook hands. "Do you know General Raines, Thomas?" Cecil asked.

"No, sir. We've never met." To tell the truth, the sight of Ben Raines just about scared the crap out of Thomas. The general had the coldest eyes Thomas had ever seen. Ben Raines was middle-aged, he guessed, with a lot of gray in his hair. He appeared to be in excellent physical shape, his face deeply tanned. Big hands and thick wrists. "Sir," Manning said, shaking hands with Ben.

Ben nodded his head and pointed to a chair in front of Cecil's desk. Manning promptly sat. Hell, he was afraid not to.

"Relax, Thomas," Cecil said with a smile. "We don't bite ... I promise you we don't."

"Yes, sir," the young reporter said. "I mean ... I'm sure you don't. Won't." Thomas got flustered, and felt his face grow hot. Cecil laughed and Ben smiled ... sort of.

"How about a cup of coffee, Thomas?" Cecil asked.

?Yes, sir. That would be very nice. Black with one sugar. ''

"Coining right up."

Thomas was aware that Ben was studying him closely through those cold, expressionless eyes. It was disconcerting. He tried to keep his gaze on President Jefferys, but he could not keep his eyes from shifting over to meet Ben's.

Damn! Didn't the man ever blink? It was like staring into the eyes of a big timber wolf.

Thomas almost jumped when Ben suddenly asked, "How did you get across the border, Thomas?"

"I ... well, I just drove across, General."

"Where?"

"From Kentucky into East Tennessee. I crossed over on a county road. It looked as though it hadn't been used in a long time. It was a gravel and dirt road. It would probably be impassable during a heavy rain."

"Before you leave, show us exactly where you crossed," Ben said. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all, sir. I'll be glad to."

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An aide came in with a pot of fresh coffee. Cups were filled and the aide quietly left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Has your traveling through the SUSA surprised you in any way?" Cecil asked.

"Very much so, sir. I was astonished, to tell the truth. Everything is so neat and clean, and the people are so friendly."

"Now that you're here," Ben said, "what can we do for you?"

"Talk to me, General. Tell me what it would take to avoid a civil war."

"That's easy, Manning--"

"Call me, Tom ... please."

"All right, Tom. All Claire Osterman and Harlan Millard have to do is back off and leave us alone. It's that easy."

"They are determined to reunite this country, General."

"It won't happen," Cecil stepped in. "Were a free and sovereign nation, recognized as such by dozens of nations around the world."

"You don't know Osterman and Millard."

"Oh, I do, Tom," Ben said. "They both started out as liberal Democrats--well-meaning but misguided ... to my way of thinking. Then something changed them, and that something was power. It can happen to any member of any political party. They begin to think of themselves as gods, all-knowing and above error and human frailties. They feel this

need to dictate to others, to intrude in the lives of other people. It gets worse ... do you want me to continue?"

Manning smiled. "No, General. I've done my homework on your philosophy of government and your opinion of liberals--just one of the reasons I was more than a bit apprehensive about entering the SUSA."

"No reason to be apprehensive, Tom," Cecil told him. "You're safer in the SUSA than in any other place on earth."

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"Really? What if federal troops launch an attack while I'm here?"

"You'll still be reasonably safe," Cecil assured him. "We could fly you out of here to any place you chose to go."

"Will there be any safe place if Osterman orders an attack on you?"

Ben smiled. "Sure. Outer Mongolia, for one. Diego Garcia, for another. South Africa is reasonably secure now."

"But nowhere in America?"

"That's about the size of it. If Sugar Babe wants a war, and attempts to invade our nation as she has threatened to, the SUSA will damn sure give her a war. And I'll make sure it touches every part of the USA."

The reporter met Ben's steady gaze for a few seconds, then averted his eyes. He could not stare into those cold, deadly eyes for very long. He had noticed that Ben's eyes could hold high humor, but when discussing the fate of the SUSA, those eyes turned cold and mean.

"We don't want a war, Tom," Ben said, softening his tone. But his eyes did not change. "And I mean that. But the old Tri-States philosophy of government will not be destroyed. Not now, not ever. Its time has come, it's here, and it will endure. As long as there is one person alive who believes in our form of government, those attempting to destroy the concept will have a fight on their hands. Believe it, young man, believe it."

Tom did. On his drive through the SUSA, he had talked with dozens of people of all races, creeds, and colors, gently moving the topic to government. The people Tom spoke with were one hundred percent Tri-Staters, and there was not a doubt in Tom's mind that they would fight to preserve their way of life and form of government.

"I believe it, General. But what will happen to both nations should war start?"

"They will probably be devastated. When it's over perhaps your government will have learned a hard lesson, and then we can both rebuild and live in peace."

"Do you think war can be averted?"

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Ben shook his head. "Not with a bunch of damn left wingers running your government. Not a chance. Those bastards and bitches won't be satisfied

until they control the lives of every citizen in the nation."

"Can I quote you on that, General?"

"You sure can, Tom. My comments won't come as any surprise to Osterman and Millard. They know how I feel."

"I've never known any other form of government, General ... except for President Altman's brief term in office."

"Do you have any idea where Altman is?"

"He's seriously ill. In the hospital."

"And you really believe that?"

"Don't you?"

"No."

"Then where is President Altman?"

"He might be dead, Tom. I hope not. But Millard and Osterman just might have had him killed."

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Chapter Four

Tom Manning asked a few more questions and then left after agreeing on a time to meet with Cecil the next day. It was clear to Cecil and Ben that Tom did not believe Claire Osterman and Harlan Millard had anything to do with President Airman's sudden disappearance from the public view.

"He's young, Ben," Cecil said. "He received his higher education in the terrible years just after the collapse. His education was liberal all the way. I'm surprised he turned out as fair thinking as he did." Cecil stared at Ben for a few seconds. "Are you listening to me, Ben?"

"Yes, Cece. I just had an idea." He moved around the desk and picked up the phone, punching out a number.

Cecil noticed the tight smile on Ben's face and sighed. His old friend was up to something.

After a moment, Ben's son, Buddy, commander of the 508 Brigade, came on the line. Ben put the phone on speaker so Cecil could hear both sides of the conversation.

"Yes, Father?"

"Son, get with intelligence and find out where Altman is being held ... if he's still alive. Then pick a team and

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get him out and bring him here. I didn't say you go, boy ... pick some of your best people and send them. Is that understood?"

"Oh, yes, Father. Understood perfectly. Quite clear."

"Fine. Get it done."

"Yes, sir."

Until his promotion to brigade commander, Buddy Raines had been CO of the Scouts-the elite of the elite in the Rebel army: a deadly and highly trained combination of the old Special Forces, SEALs, AF Commandos, Marine Force Recon, and FFL and SAS. They did the difficult immediately. The impossible took just a little more planning and time ... but it was accomplished.

After Ben had hung up Cecil said, "You know, of course, that Buddy will lead the team?"

"Probably. I figure about a week and Altman will be here, providing he's still alive. And that's certainly in doubt."

"And you plan to do what with Altman, if he's still alive and the team can bring him back?"

"Propaganda, Cece. We'll get him well, if possible, then videotape him live, telling the people what actually happened in the USA's capital."

Cecil chuckled at Ben's words. "That will certainly irritate Madame President and her coalition."

"Yes, indeed it will. They'll all have a hanky-stomping snit."

Cecil laughed loudly at that and at the expression on Ben's face. Ben's opinion of liberals was indescribable ... which was probably for the best. "But will it serve to change the minds of any people living outside the SUSAs?"

Ben shook his head "No. Not many. Certainly not the hard core, left-wing, liberal whiners and weepers, those who want something for nothing, and those who want the government to tell them how and when to do everything. But it will damn sure make me feel a lot better."

"And make the war looking us in the face easier to stomach," Cecil added.

"That, too, ole' buddy. Certainly that." Ben stood up

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and stretched. "I'm going to take a run out west, Cece, talk with Colonel Connors and surprise him with a promotion while I look over our air force. Want to come along?"

"Oh, God, I wish I could, Ben. I've got a solid wall of meetings scheduled for the remainder of this week, and for all next week."

"That's right. I forgot. The governors and mayors and Home Guard commanders are coming in. Well, have fun, Cece. I'll think about you."

"I'm sure you will, Ben. Every waking moment. Have fun. Now get out of here. I've got more meetings to referee."

"I'm gone, Cece."

Ben's team-Jersey, Beth, Cooper, Corrie, and Anna- were waiting for him in the parking lot. Ben's personal, special built, armored vehicle had not yet made it back by ship from Africa. Cooper was driving Ben and the team around in a van.

"You people all geared up for our trip?" Ben asked.

"Sittin' on ready, Boss," Jersey answered for the team. "Where is this place?"

"On the border of West Texas and New Mexico, Jersey." Ben paused and looked at his team. "All of you pack survival bags in case of trouble. Including a couple of full canteens."

"You mean in case of a plane crash, Boss?" Cooper asked.

"In case we have to jump, Coop. That's wild country out there."

Jersey grimaced and rolled her eyes at just the thought. Jumping was not on her list of favorite things to do. "Gangs operating out there, Boss? Hell, there's nothing there!"

She was right about there being nothing there. The area south of I-10 and west from Highway 385, all the way over and down to the Mexican border, was deserted.

"Some of the punks we ran out of the cities settled in that area," Ben replied. "They sometimes raid into Mexico, and otherwise live off of the cattle that are running wild in extreme southwest Texas now. So far, they haven't

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given any of our military people very much trouble. They almost always hide when patrols come into the area."

"The towns out there, Daddy Ben?" Anna asked.

"Almost completely deserted. What residents were left moved east a long time ago."

"What's the number of punks out there, Boss?" Beth asked.

"Several thousand, at least. That's just a guess. We'll clean it out one of these days ... if this civil war we're facing doesn't destroy everything we've built over the years."

"And it might?" Anna asked.

"It might, Baby. It just might. There might not be a USA or a SUSANA when it's over."

The plane, a twin-engine prop cargo plane, roared its way west. It was a bumpy ride and getting bumpier. Cooper was moaning about getting ready to die from being airsick, and Jersey was urging him to go ahead and croak; she was tired of listening to him complain.

The pilot kept trying to find an altitude that wouldn't rattle everyone's teeth, and kept flying lower. Ben carefully made his way to the cockpit.

"Sorry about this, General," the pilot said, raising his voice to be heard over the violent hammering the plane was taking. "But we're running into one hell of a storm. And it's getting worse. Heading north is out of the question. I'm going to head southwest for about a hundred miles and then cut north, approach the base that way. I think it'll be a smoother flight."

"You're the boss. Just keep me informed."

"Will do, sir. Sir? Everybody'd better get in their 'chutes ...just in case."

Ben nodded his understanding and returned to his seat, ordering each team member into parachutes on his way. He buckled himself in, too. This was just about the roughest

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flight he could remember. They roared and slammed and hammered their way south.

Jersey had stopped needling Cooper and was looking a little worse for wear herself.

Ben heard the left engine falter and cough, then an explosion.

"What the hell was that?" Cooper shouted, looking around, wide-eyed.

"Left engine, Coop," Jersey told him. She looked out the window and paled. "It's on fire!"

"Shit!" Ben muttered.

The pilot worked frantically for a few seconds to extinguish the flames, but for some reason, which would probably never be known, he could not. He grabbed his mike and shouted, "Everybody out! We're going down!"

"Move!" Ben shouted to his team. "Grab your gear and get out of here!"

Ben literally tossed Jersey out the door and physically shoved the others out. He made his way back to the cockpit and shouted to the crew, "Get your asses out of here, people, before that wing blows!"

"After you, General," the pilot said. "With all due respect, sir, will you please get the fuck out of here?"

"I'm gone," Ben said, and made his way to the door. He stepped out into nothing, remembering the old line from jump school: "That first step is a son of a bitch." He did not have time to see if the crew made it out. The winds were tossing him all over the place. He got his chute opened, and the canopy filled with air. He could not see any of the others.

There was a brilliant flash in the sky ahead and above him, and Ben knew the plane had exploded. He fought his chute; the winds were carrying him fast, first in one direction and then the other. Ben was afraid his shroud cords would get twisted and tangled, but he didn't have much time to worry about that. The ground was coming up fast-what he could see of it. The storm was blowing dirt and sand all over the place, limiting vision.

Ben hit the ground hard and was dragged for some distance, being bruised and bounced over rocks. He finally got to his feet and managed to get his chute collapsed; he was cut and bleeding in a dozen places, but he was alive.

He couldn't see more than fifty feet in any direction because of the blowing sand and dirt and debris. He staggered on until coming to an upthrusting of huge rocks. He slipped into nature's circling of stone and squatted down, hoping he would not meet a rattlesnake. He didn't, and the rocks afforded him some protection from the howling winds. He waited.

Gradually, the storm blew itself out and the winds calmed. Ben cautiously stepped out of the rocks and looked around. Wild country. The sky was dark with ominous looking clouds, and Ben was unsure of the directions. He opened his equipment pack and checked his CAR and then his compass. He was facing west, and what appeared to be mountains loomed some distance away. There were several mountain ranges in this part of Texas, and he was not sure what range he was looking at.

"Well," he said, "I can't just stand here waiting and hoping somebody will come along."

He took a sip of water from his canteen and started walking toward the mountains. The sky was beginning to clear from the west. He walked for about half an hour until he stumbled onto an old dirt road.

"It's got to lead somewhere," he muttered, and began following the old road.

The storm had produced very high winds but not much rain, and Ben's boots kicked up pockets of dust as he walked along. He hoped the clouds would stick around, for it was summer and this was dry country ... nothing like the Sahara Desert, but damn sure desert enough.

Ben walked on, taking his time, for it was hot, and his BDUs were already damp from the sweat. After about an hour of walking, he reached a paved road that ran north

and south. He tried to visualize a highway map of west Texas, but since there were no highway markers he really had no idea where he was or what was to his right or left.

"Hell with it," Ben said, and started walking toward the north. He thought he could see mountains far ahead of him, but again, because of the clouds and gloominess, he couldn't be sure of that.

One thing he could be sure of was that it was damn hot, and he knew he had to conserve his water.

Another hour of walking and he came to a twisted and almost unreadable road sign. He could just make out the lettering: FORT DAVIS 10.

He tried to recall what he knew, if anything, about Fort Davis, and quickly gave that up. He could not remember anything about the place except that it was some sort of historical site and that there was, or had been, some sort of huge observatory close by. He couldn't recall the

name of that, either. Well, he thought, I'll know in a few hours, I suppose.

He walked on.

An hour later he had put some distance behind him and had not seen any signs of human habitation; no smoke, nothing. But Ben knew that if any of the town was left there would more than likely be some gang members living there ... existing there might be a better way of putting it. Knowing how punks operated, he figured they would probably be holding slaves, men and women and kids- more women and young girls than men-they had taken captive in some of their raids.

Then Ben heard the very faint sounds of engines. He looked around him. There was no place to hide. He was out in the open, exposed.

Then he realized the engine sounds did not appear to be getting any closer. He spotted the dust from the vehicles off to the east-more than one vehicle, traveling north to south at a pretty good clip. He rummaged around in his rucksack and found his compact but very powerful binoculars

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and scanned the terrain off to his right until he picked up the vehicles. Dune buggies, at least six of them. Looked like two men per vehicle. Ben stepped off the road and into the shallow ditch. He squatted down, out of the line of sight of the occupants of the dune buggies, and stayed there until the engine sounds had faded away.

He stepped out of the ditch and away from the road. He would have to stay off the road and in the scrub brush from now on until he reached the town ... what was left of it. He wasn't sure what he could do if the town was full of punks. He had a full magazine in the belly of his CAR, and two extra magazines in his emergency pack. He had a full magazine in his sidearm and two extra magazines in a pouch on his web belt. And he had his knife.

He had emergency rations for several days-if he was sparing with them-and two canteens of water, one of them about two-thirds full. He had a small container of water purification pills, a tiny first aid kit, and two extra pairs of socks ... and that was about it.

He knew he had jumped with a small walkie-talkie, but that had been lost somewhere along the way, probably when he was dangling several thousand feet in the air. Maybe it had been jarred out when his chute had opened. Hell, he didn't know. He just knew it was gone, and there sure wasn't any point in worrying about it now.

He walked on.

Ben had been in much worse spots and survived; he wasn't particularly worried about his current situation ... or really about the gang members in the area. He was much more concerned about the fate of his team ... and Anna. He thought he had seen all their chutes open, but he couldn't be sure. Where the winds had taken them was quite another matter. They could have landed several miles apart.

Another hour of walking put Ben in sight of the tiny town of Fort Davis. He squatted down and rested while he studied the town through his binoculars.

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He could see no signs of life, and no signs of smoke from cook fires.

Ben clicked his CAR off safety and rose from his squatting position.

"Let's do it," he muttered, and headed for the tiny town.

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Chapter Five

Ben slowly worked his way close to the seemingly deserted town, utilizing what sparse cover nature provided. That was a great deal more than first met the eye, for in the years since the Great War hardy scrub brush had flourished on both sides of the road.

Ben made his way to the rear wall of a building on the edge of town and squatted down. He took a sip of water and caught his breath; the heat of West Texas could quickly drain a person not accustomed to it.

The windows in the small building he was crouched behind had all been smashed years before, and Ben could tell by the utter silence that no one was inside the structure. Still, to stay on the cautious side he waited for a few moments before standing up and looking inside.

The interior looked as though a bunch of hogs had taken up residence, the floor covered with trash. Ben slipped inside, kicking at the debris to check for rattlers. He looked out a window that faced the town ... or rather, what was left of the town. Ben thought he had come through Fort Davis, some years back. He just couldn't be sure. He had traveled through, passed by, or fought in

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hundreds of towns all over America, and in dozens of countries.

Ben looked around the room, checking to see if there was anything he might be able to use. There was nothing but filth and trash, that he could see, and he was not about to grub around on the floor checking any further.

He stood by the window for several moments, staring out at the town. No movement, no smoke, no sound except for the faint whispering of the wind.

The town was deserted.

Ben slipped out of the trashed interior and made his way up the street, keeping to the rear of the buildings. He inspected each building that had not been gutted by fire, entering through the back. The old hotel was only a burned-out shell. Indeed, most of the buildings in the small town had been destroyed.

Ben prowled around for an hour, looking for anything he might be able to use. He found a one quart military-type canteen in a pile of rubble, and with a cord he found in the same pile he fashioned a sling and moved on. He thought he remembered a creek close by; he'd wash the canteen out there and refill his own, for one was nearly empty. In this heat, a

person needed to drink lots of water.

There were several dozen old cars and trucks in the deserted town, all of them stripped, rusted old hulks. Several of the vehicles had the motors missing ... everything that could be used had been taken from them. Ben ceased his prowling and sat down in the shade of a wall. There was nothing useable left in the town. Ben rested for a few minutes, rolling a cigarette and smoking it while sitting in the shade. Since the Great War and the collapse, Ben had been rolling his own.

Ben began thinking about food. He had enough emergency rations for a couple of days, but he would save those for harder times. There were cattle all over West Texas, descendants of the many herds that had flourished on ranches before the Great War, but the number had lessened as he had approached the town. He figured the

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punks had been living off the cattle, and the cattle had grown wiser over the years and now stayed away from the old town. The cattle were now wild, and very wary of humans. He would kill a cow later on, he decided, and have a steak for supper.

Ben moved on until he located the creek and carefully washed out the canteen he'd found. Then he filled it and the canteen that was almost empty and dropped in a couple of purification tabs. He washed his face in the cold water and felt better.

Ben visualized a map of Texas. Several towns were located to the south, each about thirty miles away. I-10 was to the north, about thirty or so miles. The area from Fort Stockton west to the Mexican border was wild country, inhabited by gangs of punks and Mexican bandits ... and Ben was right in the middle of it-alone.

The crew had radioed their position a couple of minutes before Ben's team had jumped. Ben had jumped about three minutes later. The plane had just begun a slow turn to the north when the engine blew. That would have put them between the Davis Mountains and Old Highway 90, Ben thought, but it was miles west of his present position. He figured his team would head east toward settled country once they got together. Knowing how efficient Beth was, she would be sure to have a map with her.

Ben was in a jam, and knew it, but was not particularly worried about it. There were gangs of hard core criminals operating all over this area, and they had vehicles. Ben would ambush a punk and take his transportation when the opportunity presented itself.

He had seen no signs of any recent visitation by humans in his present location, so where the hell were the gangs living? To the south of his position, probably, in the two towns about thirty miles away. But the dune buggies he had spotted earlier had been coming from the north ... where had they been? There was no indication they had been here, so then where?

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"Prowling around, I guess," Ben muttered. "Maybe looking for the plane that went down."

Ben checked his emergency pack. He had a lighter and a small box of

all-weather matches. No worries there. He rose to his boots. He was getting hungry, and it was past mid-afternoon; time to look for supper and then a place to hole up for the night and cook his steak.

Ben had started out in search of cattle when he heard the faint sounds of voices. He quickly moved away from the creek and into some scrub brush nearby. He waited, his CAR ready to bang. The voices drew closer, the words now distinguishable.

"I know damn well I seen somebody."

"And I know damn well you didn't," a second voice contradicted in an irritable tone. "Who the hell could it be? Don't nobody ever come up here no more. Man, this place has been picked over clean dozens of times. There ain't nothing left to take that's worth a shit for nothin'."

"I don't give a damn 'bout that. I seen somebody, Billy. I know I did."

"We bes' be worryin'bout fixin' our buggy and gettin' the hell out of here. Man, we got a long ways to go."

"That buggy could be a problem fixin'. We might gonna have to walk outta here, man. Unless just bad gas is all it is."

"All the way back to Marfa? You're crazy as a goddamn road lizard. Shit, that's damn near thirty miles. Walk? Fuck you. I ain't walkin' no thirty miles."

"Well if we can't fix the buggy, how'd you think we're gonna get back-flap our arms and fly, you asshole?"

Ben knelt in the brush and listened to the gang members argue back and forth. It was not a serious argument, probably something the two did often.

Ben tried to pinpoint their location, but could not stand up for fear of being spotted. He could not see through the brush ... all he could do was guess at the distance and location, and that was not good enough to chance a shot.

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"Billy, why don't you just rear back and pucker up and kiss my ass?"

"Sonny, you mark the spot, 'cause you look like all ass to me."

Both men started laughing and moved closer to Ben.

"I sure hope that movement I seen was a woman," Sonny said. "I could use me some pussy;"

"I still don't believe you seen anything. You seen a cow, was what you seen."

"Fuck you, Billy."

"If I was to let you, I can guar-un-damn-tee you'd never go back to girls!"

"Horseshit!"

Ben could now see the two men moving toward him as they laughed and

talked about women. Both of them were carrying M-16's. Ben smiled at that.

"Harris said he heard on the short-wave that there was about to be another civil war in America."

"Between who?" Billy asked.

"Ben Raines and his Rebels is about to face off with the federal government, so Harris said."

"I hope so. I hope somebody finally kills that damn Ben Raines and nails his stinkin' body up on a wall and takes pictures of it so's we can all see it. I'd like to use it for target practice. I purely hate that son of a bitch."

"I got my reasons to hate that bastard as much as you do."

Ben stood up, the CAR set on full auto. "Now what did I ever do to you boys?"

"Shit!" Billy hollered. He lifted his M-16 and Ben shot him, the burst of 5.56 rounds taking him in the belly and chest and knocking him back. He landed on his side in the brush and jerked his legs as the pain enveloped him. It took only a few seconds for the agony of his wounds to intensify, and Billy howled in pain. "Oh, goddamn you, it hurts, it hurts!"

Sonny dropped his weapon and lifted his hands into the

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air. "Don't shoot!" he hollered. "I quit. Jesus Christ, man. Please don't shoot me. I ain't done you no harm."

"Help me, help me!" Billy screamed. "I don't want to die. Help me."

"I've always heard that a little pain is good for the soul," Ben said.

"Fuck you!" Billy screamed.

"Oh, I don't think so," Ben said with a frown. "You are definitely not my type."

"Good God!" Sonny squalled. "You're Ben Raines!"

"How very astute of you," Ben said.

"Haw?" Sonny asked.

"You are correct. I am."

"What are you gonna do with me? I ain't done you no harm, Ben Raines."

"I don't know. Turn you loose, probably. That is, if you behave yourself."

"I can't hardly do nothin' else. You got the drop on me, for sure."

Ben smiled. "Yes, I do. Now then, you take off your ammo belt and toss it over to me. Carefully, now."

Sonny removed his makeshift battle harness and tossed it to Ben.

"Very good," Ben told him. "Now take off your friend's ammo belt and toss it over here."

"It's all bloody!"

"Do it, damnit!"

"Yessir, yessir. OK. Don't get all pissed off." Sonny gingerly removed Billy's belt, which contained a half dozen magazine pouches, and tossed it over to Ben. Sonny wiped his bloody hands on his dirty jeans and stood looking at Ben.

Billy had ceased his moaning and thrashing about. He was either dead or unconscious. Dead, Ben hoped. That would certainly simplify matters.

"Where's your vehicle, and what's wrong with it?" Ben asked.

"Parked right down yonder," Sonny said, carefully

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pointing. "Behind that old grocery store. I don't know what's wrong with it. It just quit runnin'. Bad gas, I think. It got to sputterin' and buckin' and stallin', and then just stopped cold. If you ain't gonna kill me, why would you just turn me a-loose?"

"You're not going to be able to do me much damage. You're a long way from your camp."

"Shore am. The headquarters is a good twenty miles south down to Mar ..." Sonny realized that Ben had tricked him, and abruptly closed his mouth. He gave Ben a very dirty look.

"Marfa, huh? Well, it's a nice little town. I remember going through there a couple of times."

"Yeah? Well, it ain't very nice no more. It's all junked up real bad."

"How many men does this Harris person have, Sonny?"

Sonny hesitated.

"You want to live, Sonny?" Ben asked, raising the muzzle of his CAR.

"Whoa! Shore, I want to live. I was just doin' some head figurin', that's all it was. I ain't real good at figurin'. The big war come when I was in grade school, and I ain't got much in the way of schoolin'."

"What happened to your parents?"

"The gas got 'um. I run all the way home and they was dead on the floor."

Ben was about to feel a bit sorry for the man. "You were on your own after that?"

"Naw. My grandparents took me in. Damned old bastard and bitch." Ben's moment of sympathy began to wane. "They made me work in the garden and gather eggs from the henhouse, and all that other funky farm shit."

Sonny paused and Ben asked, "So? It was a hard time after the collapse ... all over the world. Still is. People had to work. You got enough to eat, didn't you?"

"I reckon so."

"Your grandparents died?"

"You could say that. I set the house on fire one night."

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They made me mad's, why I done it. I didn't know they was gonna burn up in it... but they did. Tough break for them. But hell, they was old. And real crotchety, too."

Ben lost all vestiges of sympathy for the dickhead standing in front of him. "I can tell you're all broken up about it."

"Yeah? Well, she was a good cook, but still a bossy ole' bitch. I couldn't do nothin' to please her."

"What a sad story. Poor, poor you. Almost brings a tear to my eye."

Sonny realized then that Ben was being sarcastic. "You go right straight to hell, Raines! I ain't tellin' you nothin' else, you bastard!"

"I really don't need any more from you, Sonny. Now move out. Take me to where your buggy quit."

"What about Billy?"

"He's dead. Move."

Sonny glanced down at his friend. "Huh? He is, is he? Well, he wasn't much, no way."

"Your grief is touching."

"Yeah? Well, what the hell do you want me to say? He's dead, he's gone, he won't be back, not now, not ever no more. That's it. Me and him was pals, sort of. But we sure as shit wasn't butt-fuckin' each other."

"I certainly hope not." Ben's reply was given very, very drily. "Pick up the ammo belts and move."

"I ain't no queer, General. I like women."

"Fine, Sonny. Move."

Ben slung the two M-16's, and they started out. As they walked toward the far end of town, Ben pondered the situation. He couldn't understand how the two gang members had gotten into the town without his noticing them, or hearing the noisy dune buggy. "You boys sure must have your buggy muffled down to a whisper."

"We do, General. It runs as quiet as a grave. When the damn thing does run, that is. Me and Billy didn't like them loud straight pipes. Most of the others do, though." They

walked on for a few hundred more yards. Sonny pointed. "It's right over yonder, see it?"

Ben spotted the buggy parked behind a gutted old store. "Keys in it?"

"Sure. We didn't figure there was no one gonna steal it. Hell, it won't run."

"Good point," Ben muttered, walking over to the buggy, Sonny ahead of him. "Battery up?"

"Sure is. That's a good battery."

"Get it running and I'll give you a canteen of water and some food, and you can hoof it back to your gang."

Sonny stared at him for a moment. "You really mean that, General?"

"I said it, didn't I?"

"You got a deal. But I ain't promisin' nothin'. It's bad gas, I'm sure."

Ben pointed to the three five gallon gas cans secured to the rear of the buggy. "What's wrong with that gas?"

"Nothing, I don't reckon. But we got it all from the same storage tank."

Ben looked at the engine. It was old type, without all the computer panels of the newer model engines. "Take the breather off and pour some gas into the carburetor. See if that will do the trick."

Sonny worked for over an hour, finally removing the fuel line and blowing it out. It was filled with trash. The line was reinstalled, and the engine cranked up and ran smoothly.

Ben pointed toward the cargo space. "Take one of your canteens and a food packet and start walking, Sonny. And Sonny?"

He looked at Ben. "Yes, sir?"

"If I ever see you again and you're running with a gang, I'll kill you. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I sure do. What about Billy?"

"You want to dig a hole for him?"

"I reckon not."

"Then take off and don't look back."

Sonny didn't stick around for any further conversation after that. He took his newfound freedom and a canteen of water and a food packet and started hoofing it quickly away from Ben Raines, heading south, following the old road. Ben stood by the idling buggy and watched him until he was no more than a tiny dot in the distance. Then he began

inspecting the cargo area of the dune buggy.

Several full canteens of water. Ben would empty and wash out the canteens, then refill them with fresh water and purification tabs. Several packets of food, which Ben looked at dubiously. He would eat the contents only if he was very, very hungry ... like starving.

With the addition of Billy and Sonny's weapons and ammo belts, and the scattered boxes of military ammo in the cargo area of the buggy, Ben was well supplied. Enough weapons and ammo to start his own private war ... which was what he had in mind.

What the punks didn't know-no one knew it outside of the Rebels-was that there were hundreds of underground storage facilities all over what was once called the United States ... some very small with only food and water, others huge with fuel tanks. They were always masterfully concealed in the most unlikely places.

There was a well-stocked storage vault near Alpine, with fuel and food and water and clothing and weapons and medical supplies. That just might be where Ben's team had headed. Ben would go there and stock up. He hoped that's where Anna and the others had gone.

Ben didn't trust Sonny boy, not one little bit, so just in case Sonny had concealed himself along the highway, waiting to see what direction Ben took when he left, Ben headed north on Old Highway 17 when he pulled out. He drove for a few miles, then pulled over and waited for about fifteen minutes before heading back south. He found a road, of sorts, that led him to Highway 118, and he headed for Alpine, about thirty miles away.

Ben smiled as he drove along. There was only one little

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hitch about the underground storage facility: Ben couldn't remember exactly where it was.

He knew approximately, but not exactly. Oh, well, he thought, I'll find it. I hope.

He hoped his team had reached the storage site and were waiting for him in the town, provided the town was not filled to overflowing with punks-which it probably was.

Well, he'd deal with that problem when he came to it. He checked his watch. That would be in about fifteen minutes.

Ben laid his 9mm on the seat beside him. He had no idea what he would be facing when he reached the town.

But he would be as ready as he could when trouble came.

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Chapter Six

Ben pulled off the highway about a half mile from town- off the short

bypass-and tucked the buggy behind what was left of a frame home. The front porch had collapsed and most of the roof was missing. Part of one side of the barn was still standing; the rest of the structure had fallen in.

Ben had decided he would wait until dark before checking out the town ... what was left of it.

He sat on the ground in the shade of the ruined home and ate out of a ration pack and sipped water. The hard landing and the bouncing and bruising from being dragged on the ground earlier that day was beginning to tell on him. He ached all over. Ben took a couple of aspirin from his tiny first aid kit, and then wished he had a cup of hot coffee. That luxury would have to wait for a while. He rolled a cigarette and smoked and waited for the sun to set.

Ben heard no sounds of vehicles as he waited. A few birds were singing, and once he caught a glimpse of a lone coyote trotting across the field behind the barn. Other than that, he heard no sounds of life.

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As the physical pounding he'd taken finally caught up with him, Ben dozed for a time. He awakened just as the sun was beginning to set, and just to be on the safe side, he took the keys out of the dune buggy. He stood up and stretched several times, getting the kinks out of his joints and muscles. His cuts were minor, and he had put iodine on them-all he could do for the time being. He stood and sniffed the air. A light, hot breeze was blowing from the direction of the town, but he could detect no odor of wood smoke. Again he wondered if the town were deserted. All indications were that it was.

"Well, time to find out one way or the other," Ben muttered. He picked up his CAR and headed out just as dusk was wrapping a dark, silent, and very warm cloak over the land.

Ben worked his way slowly toward the town. He did not encounter or hear any dogs as he walked, and he thought that very strange. Once he heard the deadly buzz of a rattlesnake off to his left and quickly changed his direction, giving the snake a wide berth.

"It's all yours, Mister Rattler," Ben muttered into the gathering evening. "You'll get no argument from me."

The town was dark when Ben reached the first street. Not a lamplight or candlelight was showing anywhere. And not a sound reached Ben's ears. He looked up at the faint outline of the buildings of Sul Ross University and wondered how much of it was left. How much valuable knowledge had been destroyed by punk assholes?

He walked on, first cautiously standing outside and listening and then carefully inspecting the interior of each home on the first block with the tiny beam from his small flashlight. He found nothing to indicate that anything human had inhabited the buildings in a long time.

"Why did the punks abandon this town?" he questioned softly. Then the answer came to him: Water. More to the point, the lack of it.

Ben recalled doing some research years back, and remembered that this area drew water from very deep

wells. It took powerful pumps to bring it up. When the pumps quit working, the punks hadn't had enough know-how to maintain and fix them. So the town was abandoned.

Ben prowled around for another few minutes, then returned to the house on the edge of the town. He would get a good night's sleep and inspect the town more carefully and locate the cache of emergency supplies in the morning. Then he would make plans about what to do next.

He knew he had to prowl around and find an old road map so he wouldn't be blundering around and getting lost on the back roads. This county, he remembered, was the largest in Texas. It was bigger than the state of Connecticut.

Ben walked right down the center of the highway back to his buggy. He took two more aspirin, a good slug of water, wrapped up in an old smelly blanket from the cargo area (he hoped it wasn't filled with fleas and lice), sat down in the front seat, and promptly went to sleep.

The sounds of engines brought him awake just after dawn. He was stiff from sleeping in the front seat, and sore from the battering his body had taken the day before, but he came wide awake instantly and was alert, reaching for his CAR.

Ben guessed there were two dune buggies, maybe three, no more than that. The buggies did not stop at the old ramshackle home where Ben was parked in the rear. They cruised on slowly by and headed into town.

Ben got stiffly out of the buggy and stretched a couple of times, then did a few deep knee bends and duck-walked around the buggy to warm up and loosen his muscles. When his morning toilet was done, he took up position inside the house-in the front room, facing the highway. He did not want any shooting ... not now. He wanted to gear up from the emergency cache before facing any real trouble.

His breakfast was a packet of crackers, a high-energy bar, and a few sips of water. He waited and watched and listened. The minutes ticked past.

He heard the sounds of the returning buggies and tensed, the CAR ready to bark. His worry was unnecessary. The three dune buggies, two men to a vehicle, rolled on past and picked up speed, finally roaring out of sight.

Ben relaxed and exhaled, then got to his feet and walked out the rear of the house. He squatted down by his buggy and rolled a smoke, enjoying his first smoke of the day but wishing mightily he had a great big cup of hot coffee to go with it.

He knew there was coffee cached with the other emergency gear nearby ... if he could just find the damn bunker.

Ben slowly relaxed and smoked his cigarette. He ate another high-energy bar and chased it down with sips of water. Ben waited a few more minutes, then cranked the dune buggy and headed into town. As he drove he wondered what had happened to all the dogs and cats. Without a supply of water they would leave, of course. He hoped they all made it to fresh

water ... then pushed the alternative out of his mind.

Ben drove the town for a few minutes then headed out to the small airport and the cache of the much needed emergency supplies-if he could find them. He sure as hell planned to give that search his best shot.

The local airport was a mess: junked cars and trucks littered the runway, and the few buildings had been looted and gutted many times by vandals.

Ben knew the emergency cache was located at the airport. That was where the Rebels placed them whenever possible. Ben had briefly glanced at the list of emergency supply bunker locations in West Texas before pulling out, and had noted that the bunker in Alpine was located at the airport, just off the main hangar. The problem was ... the hangar was gone.

Ben started looking around for the concrete slab where

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the hangar used to be. It should be located off to one side, dug out inside a smaller building, and then carefully covered with timbers and plywood and earth, or with plywood and tile over the timbers.

He hunted for several minutes before locating several slabs, all of them about the same size. "Oh, wonderful," he said. "This is just great."

Ben walked around all the slabs stomping at the ground, trying to find some spot that didn't sound just right. He could find nothing out of the ordinary. "Well, shit!" he said, kicking at what he thought was a small piece of wood lying on the ground. He almost broke his toe on the object, and came very close to losing his balance.

Ben hopped around on one foot for a moment, cussing. Then it dawned on him what he just might have hit. Ben looked around for something to dig with. He found a piece of board and went to work. He soon had one end of a timber uncovered. It lay under one corner of a rotting piece of plywood. "All right," Ben said. "I found you."

He worked for an hour, scraping off the dirt and uncovering the cache. Using a piece of rope he'd found in the cargo area of the buggy, Ben rigged a hoist for the supplies and then stepped down into the hole.

He began stripping off the heavy protective covering from the crates. The first several crates contained boxes of field rations. Ben checked the date they'd been manufactured: Years back, but this type had an indefinite shelf life; they were still good. Ben began smiling as he uncovered crate after crate of gear: ammo, grenades, clothing, water, flashlight batteries, first aid kits, tire repair kits ... just about anything anybody could think of to aid survival.

But now Ben faced another problem: how to haul what he needed. The cargo area of the homemade dune buggy wasn't large enough to carry very much. Then Ben had an idea. He stepped out of the hole and carefully checked the tires on the buggy. They were in excellent shape; almost new. Ben didn't know where the punks had gotten the tires ... stole them from somebody, he was sure. He

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shrugged. Their loss, his gain. He checked the rear of the buggy: a trailer hitch.

Ben had seen a piece of a trailer back in the barn of the place he was hiding out. No tires on it, of course, but with any kind of luck Ben just might be able to find some flattened tires that someone had abandoned and repair them with the kits found in the cache of supplies. Maybe. He put several tire repair kits and a hand pump in the buggy, added a few other things he might need, then rested for a moment.

He drove back into town and began carefully prowling. The few stores that once carried tires and other automotive supplies would have long ago been looted. Home garages just might produce something.

He spent the entire morning prowling and came up with four tires and rims that might work. Ben drove back to the home on the edge of town and went to work. Two hours later he had the tires up—they were holding air, and on the trailer. He backed the buggy up and hooked up the small two-wheel trailer. Ready to go.

Before he got halfway to the airport, one of the old tires blew out. Ben replaced the tire, cussing and muttering under his breath, and continued on. He would have to be constantly on the lookout for tires, for age had taken a toll on the rubber and they wouldn't stand up to much hard traveling over the really lousy roads.

Ben loaded up as much as he felt the tires would hold, and headed for a spot in the town he felt none of the punks would be interested in the university.

It was a mess. The buildings had been looted, the books destroyed—naturally, that would be the first thing the punks did. Punks would never understand that knowledge was the first step toward great power. Most of those with a bent toward thuggery were afraid of knowledge.

Ben cleaned out a spot in an old classroom and began prowling the college grounds, inspecting each building. He found a coil of thin cable and clamps and hooks and about fifty feet of rope that was in pretty good shape. There

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was a small but very good tool kit with the supplies in the emergency cache, so Ben wasn't looking for tools.

He found a pocketknife in a pile of debris in one of the dorm rooms, an old portable radio. With new batteries (something he now had plenty of) he might be able to bring in some station and get some news ... good or bad, depending entirely on whether the station was under restrictive US federal control (now almost exclusively broadcasting hard left-wing propaganda) or in free Rebel territory. There were some restrictions on what might be put on the air in the SUSA, but not when it came to news—then it was one hundred percent truth: no statements edited to the point where context or content was twisted, no slant by commentators.

Ben continued his prowling of the town, and in a pile of debris on the floor of a home he found a folder containing state and county maps. The paper was brittle, and he had to be careful handling the maps, but they were readable. He found little else he could use. Just after noon, he stopped his searching and made ready to pull out.

Ben carefully concealed the bunker-still more than three-quarter filled with supplies-and loaded the old trailer. Just as he was about to crank the engine of the buggy, he heard the faint sounds of approaching vehicles.

Ben quickly pulled into what remained of a small hangar and waited. There was nothing else he could do ... he was caught in a one way in, one way out, situation. The vehicles were definitely heading in his direction.

He clicked his CAR off safety and waited.

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Chapter Seven

The six vehicles-three dune buggies, a car, and two pickup trucks-stopped several hundred yards away from Ben's location. The occupants, two to a vehicle-at least that many, Ben couldn't be sure at that distance-stayed in their vehicles.

"Come on, boys," Ben muttered. "Let me see how many I'm up against."

After hiding the buggy Ben had grabbed a rucksack containing full magazines for his CAR and six grenades. He didn't want to start anything with the vehicles so close together: he wanted one of those pickup trucks.

The vehicles started forward. Then several veered off, forming a wide circle. Their intention, Ben felt, was to completely surround the area where the buildings were located.

"They've got a strong suspicion I'm here," Ben whispered. "So come on, boys." Then he smiled, recalling an often used line from western movies and books. "It's a good day to die."

The punks didn't want to get too close to the buildings that remained at the old airport, though. As strong as they

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were in number, they were being very cautious in dealing with Ben. Maybe they want to take me alive for ransom or torture, or both, Ben thought.

The truth was, the punks were scared of Ben. Stories about him were legend ... and most of them were true. In battle, Ben offered no quarter and expected none. And it was known worldwide that Ben Raines hated punks and would not hesitate for a second to shoot one.

Ben waited in what was left of the old hangar with the patience of a born warrior. He had good cover all around him, plenty of ammo, and he was ready for a fight.

"Come out of there, Raines!" The command was shouted from off to Ben's left. "If we have to come in and get you, you gonna get bad hurt or die, man."

Ben smiled grimly and his eyes changed, hardening and narrowing. He made no reply as he thought: Stop yapping about it and just do it, punk.

Let's get this action started. I have miles to go and things to do.

One of the punks fired, the bullet slamming into a pile of debris a dozen yards behind Ben. Another of the gang fired, this time from behind Ben. Ben could not tell where that slug came from, or went. He did not move.

"Maybe he ain't really here, Slick," another voice shouted. "We don't know for sure."

"He's here, Willie," Slick called. "He couldn't have gone in the direction Sonny said he did. Sonny forgot about that road bein' blocked. Raines just tried to pull a fast one, that's all. But it didn't work, and we got him in a box."

"You wanna open the lid on this box, Slick?" another voice called.

Slick didn't reply, and Ben smiled again.

"That's what I thought," the voice called. "Ain't none of us real anxious to lift the lid on this box."

"It's just one man, Benny," Slick finally called. "We can take him if we're careful."

"And that's exactly what I plan on bein,' " Benny said. "Real careful."

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"Come on out of there, Raines!" Slick shouted. "We got food and water, and you ain't got nothin'. Don't play the fool here and get yourself dead. If we have to we'll blast you out. Think about that."

"Blast away, boys," Ben muttered. "But do something besides run your mouth."

The punks all opened up and Ben hit the dusty concrete floor of the hangar and stayed there until the shooting stopped. They must have burned a hundred or so rounds of ammo and accomplished nothing.

Ben rose to a kneeling position and looked out through the jumble of rubble he was crouched behind. One of the punks was running toward the hangar. Ben took him down, the burst of 5.56 rounds from his CAR turning the punk around twice. He dropped his weapon and fell to the ground, screaming in pain, both hands holding his perforated belly.

"You bastard!" yet another voice yelled. "You rotten bastard. We'll get you for that."

"Yeah, yeah," Ben whispered. "Same old crap. Stop yapping and come on and do it."

"Get him!" Slick yelled. "Open up and keep the bastard pinned down. Move in. Now!"

The lead started howling and bouncing around and off the piles of rubble in what was left of the hangar. Ben again went belly down on the floor and shifted position, crawling over behind the rusted hulk of an old car. Some of the lead came uncomfortably close and Ben stretched out on the floor, peering out from the rear of the junked vehicle.

"Go!" Slick shouted.

Two of the punks jumped out from behind rusted hulks of vehicles and began running toward the hangar. Ben blew a full magazine in their direction. The twenty round burst cut the legs out from under one and stopped the other cold and dead as the lead ripped into his belly and chest.

The area around the old hangar was silent for a couple

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of minutes except for the punk with his legs crippled, thrashing around on the ground and screaming in pain.

Ben waited, a fresh mag in the CAR.

The screaming stopped, and the day was quiet.

Slick called, "We got grenades, Raines. We can blast you out, man."

"Then do it," Ben muttered. "I don't think you've got them. But I sure do."

No grenades were lobbed in his direction. One of the punks cussed Ben.

Ben grinned.

The punk with the ruined legs had ceased his wild howling and now lay on the ground, moaning in agony. "V all got to help me, Slick," he called, his voice filled with pain. "I'm hurt really bad."

"Sorry, Dave," Slick called. "Can't do it. Raines would cut us down and then we'd all be in trouble and Raines would get away. Try crawlin.' "

"Man, shit! What are you talkin' about? Hell, I can't crawl! Both my legs is busted. I hurt really bad. The bones is all busted. I can feel them grindin' around when I try to move. Y'all got to come help me."

No one answered Dave, and he began cussing his friends.

When Dave paused for breath, Slick called, "There ain't no need to feel that way, Dave. We're all stuck here. Can't nobody move."

Dave had become too weak and out of breath to say anything. He moaned his reply.

Another punk worked up his courage to make a try for it. With a yell, he jumped from cover, running for the protection of a building to Ben's left. "I'm comin' to help you, Dave!" he shouted. "Hang on, buddy."

"I bet you won't make it," Ben said, lifting his CAR and squeezing the trigger. He gave the punk half a magazine, waist high, and the running man dropped his weapon and tumbled to the ground, face first. He rolled over once, screamed, jerked several times, and then was still.

"This ain't worth shit, Slick," one of his gang called. "I

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mean, what the hell, man! Raines is cuttin' us down fast. Let's get out of here."

"Fuck you," Slick replied. "Get on the CB and call for the boys to come help us."

"The CB ain't worth shit here, Slick. We're out of range. We're on our own."

"Some of our people will be along. You can count on that, Rollie."

"The hell we can!" Rollie called. "They think we're headed in the other direction, remember? That's what you told them when we left, 'fore we run into Sonny."

"I want Ben Raines," Slick said. "Think about it, boys. You too, Marcie ..."

Marcie? Ben mused.

"His people will pay a lot of money to get him back," Slick called. "And if we kill him, the Rebel movement will fall apart. Either way we win. You all know I'm speakin' the truth."

None of the remaining gang members spoke for a moment. When one did speak, it was a female. Marcie, Ben supposed.

"I guess you're right, Slick," she called from Ben's left. She sounded young. She was behind cover very close to the old hangar, probably hiding behind that pile of junk about twenty or so yards away. "You people helped me when I needed help. I'll stick with you."

"OK, Marcie," Slick shouted. "Thanks for stickin'. How 'bout the rest of you?"

The others, one at a time, finally agreed to stay and finish the fight... one way or the other. But some of them did so very reluctantly, especially the female.

Dave had stopped his moaning, and was still. Passed out from the pain, probably, Ben figured. And that was too bad, for the hollering of wounded was always very demoralizing and usually caused enemies to do foolish things.

"Come on, you assholes!" Ben finally yelled. "Pack of yellow-bellied scum. What's the matter ... Eight or ten to

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one is not good enough odds for you? What a pack of chicken-shits!"

"Hey, fuck you, Raines!" one of the punks called. "You ain't so tough."

Ben laughed, loud enough for all of them to hear. "Is that the best you can do? Not only are you yellow, you're all a bunch of dumb asses!" Ben immediately dropped belly down to the floor after saying that, anticipating a hard burst of fire, and he was right: they all opened up, spraying the lead around.

Ben lay on the floor, listening to the lead bounce around and cringing whenever a round came close. Finally, the firing stopped. Ben slipped to his knees and waited in silence, hoping one of the gang members would get impatient and screw up. He did not have a long wait.

"Give me some cover fire!" one of the punks yelled. "Right now!"

Ben slipped to another spot and peeked out through the rubble in time to see a man running toward the hangar. Ben put him down with one short burst. The punk fell to his knees and stayed in that position for a few seconds, the front of his shirt bloody. Then he toppled over on his face, and was still.

"You boys keep it up," Ben called in a taunting voice. "I figure in another hour you'll all be dead or dying. I have the time. I can wait."

"Goddamn you, Raines!" Ben recognized the voice of Slick. "We're gonna get you. You can count on that."

Typical punk response, Ben thought. "You're sure doing a lousy job of it so far, Slick."

"Huh? How come you know my name?"

"I possess all sorts of magical powers, Slick. I learned them while visiting the priests who live in dark caves in the mountains of Tibet. It was there I learned all about the true mysteries of life."

After a moment, Slick shouted, "What the hell are you talkin' 'bout, Raines? You talkin' goofy, man. You ain't makin' no sense a'tall."

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"He's needling you, Slick," Marcie called. "Trying to make you mad enough to do something stupid."

The girl's got some sense, Ben thought. Maybe she isn't a totally lost cause. Then he cautioned himself: Forget it, Raines. Don't start getting soft now. This sure as hell isn't the time or the place for charity.

Acting on sudden impulse, Ben moved to the rear of the hangar, just in time to spot a shadow of movement behind the rusted hulk of an old pickup truck. He lifted his CAR and waited. A head popped up for a few seconds, and that was all the time that Ben needed. A short burst of 5.56 rounds took the top of the man's head off, from the eyes up.

"Bobby?" another voice called. "Answer me, Bobby?"

"Bobby's dead," someone said. "Jesus Christ, man. Raines blowed off the entar top of his head. They's brains and stuff all over the damn place."

"Shit!" Slick hollered.

"You seem to be losing gang members, Slick," Ben called. "Unless my addition is wrong, that's six down so far. Pretty soon it'll be just you and me-or maybe not, since you don't seem to have the balls to do anything on your own."

"You son of a bitch!" Slick screamed. "You'll pay hard for that remark, Raines. I'll hurt you bad for that, you bastard."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!" Ben taunted him. "All mouth and no balls, that's you, Slickie Boy. Not a hair in your crack, is there? I had you pegged right, Candy Ass."

Slick cussed Ben for a full minute without stopping, calling him some

very interesting combinations of names. The other members-those not too hurt to talk-trying to calm him down, but Slick wasn't having any part of it. "I'll cut a hole in your belly, Raines, and pull your stinkin' guts out an inch at a time, you rotten piece of shit. I'll pull your fingernails and toenails out just to hear you scream. I'll gouge out your eyes and cut out your tongue. I'll--"

"Oh, shut up, you silly asshole!" Ben shouted. "You're

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not going to do anything. You don't have the balls to do anything, you yellow piece of shit."

That did it. Slick lost what little control he had left. "Get him!" the gang leader screamed. "Kill that son of a bitch!"

The remaining gang members left cover and charged the hangar.

Ben stopped one with a short burst, spinning him around and putting him on the ground on his butt, both the punks' hands holding his punctured belly.

Ben missed the second punk clean. The gang member zigged when Ben was sure he was going to zag. But he did succeed in forcing the punk to hit the ground and scramble on his hands and knees like a big bug for cover.

The third craphead made the front of the hangar and came screaming and firing at where he supposed Ben to be. He was wrong. Ben stepped out from behind cover and gave him a short rip of 5.56 slugs, catching the punk in the side, shoulder, and arm and slamming him into a pile of rubble.

Ben caught a piece of a ricochet on the side of his head that caused his world to darken and spin momentarily. He staggered back against the old junk car he'd been using for cover, and felt the blood pour from the cut. He shook his head, and the blood flew. His vision cleared just in time for him to see a wild-eyed punk jump into the small cleared space and lift his Uzi, a wide grin on his face.

Ben leveled his CAR and gave the grinning punk some lead to the belly and chest that completely wiped the smile from his lips and sent him sprawling to the floor, wide-eyed in death.

Ben ejected the nearly empty magazine from his CAR. Before he could slip a full magazine home a gang member scrambled over the mound of debris and jumped onto Ben's back. Ben flipped him off and gave him a jump boot to the side of the head, directly on the temple. The punk lay still, blood leaking out of his nose. His body convulsed for a few seconds, then was still.

Ben jammed home a full magazine and spun around as

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the sounds of a vehicle pulling away reached him, tires spinning and howling on the tarmac.

Ben wiped the blood from his head with his shirt sleeve and caught his breath. It looked as though there were two people in the dune buggy.

"Come back here, you bastard!" Marcie screamed at the rapidly disappearing buggy.

Ben stepped out of the hangar, using what was once the side door, now minus the door. Marcie turned and blew some lead in Ben's direction. Her burst missed Ben and knocked holes in the side of the hangar. Ben returned the fire and the woman jumped for cover.

Ben pulled a grenade from a side pocket of his pants and jerked the pin free. He lobbed the grenade toward the pile of rubble. The mini-bomb landed in the rubble and blew, sending crap flying and caving in one side of the pile, collapsing the junk onto the woman.

Ben squatted down for a moment, until his breath leveled out. He wiped more blood from the side of his head and stood up, quickly stepping to the protection of the side of the hangar.

The airport area was quiet except for the moaning of several wounded punks. Ben ignored them for the moment. There was no sound at all coming from the pile of rubble where Marcie had taken refuge.

Ben stepped back inside the hangar and gathered all the full magazines from the dead. He picked up the weapons and laid them on the ground outside, then gathered all the spare magazines and ammo he could find from the dead and wounded and piled them with the others in front of the hangar.

For the moment, he ignored the moaning and pleading and begging for help from the wounded. The Rebel philosophy was: You tried to kill me, partner. I don't owe you a damn thing. I'll get around to you when I get the time ... if I get the time. So for now, just shut up.

Ben had fixed a compress for his head wound. The bleeding had just about stopped. He took two aspirin and

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walked over to the pile of rubble to see if the woman was still alive. She did not appear to be hurt much. Pinned under a mess of rubble, she was doing some serious cussing, all of it directed at Ben.

"You have a really filthy mouth, girl," Ben said. He could not see her from the waist up, but he could sure hear her, loud and clear.

"Go fuck yourself!" Marcie said.

"Would you like to try working yourself out of the mess that is covering you?"

"Ah ... no, I guess not."

"Then watch your mouth."

"Yes, sir."

"That's better. When I get this crap off you, Marcie, if you have a gun in your hand, I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

"I understand you. Real clear. I don't have a gun, Ben Raines. I lost my rifle when the grenade exploded, and I can't get to my pistol."

"That's good. Just don't try to move around, this crap might shift. I'll get you out of there."

?I don't believe I have any pressing engagements today.

Ben smiled. "You have a better vocabulary than most gang members I've encountered."

"My life is a long sad story."

"I'm sure." Ben's reply was drily given. He worked steadily for a few minutes, clearing away some sort of twisted metal framework and cutting his hand while doing so. He said a few cuss words and sucked at the small cut for a few seconds.

"What's the matter, Ben Raines?" Marcie asked.

"I cut my hand. Nothing serious."

"That's good. Man, you sure played hell with the gang."

"A couple got away, including Slick."

"That figures. I've noticed he talks tough as hell when he's got a gang behind him. Alone, there isn't much to him."

Ben pulled the last bit of debris from the woman and

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noted that she had been telling the truth: she was unarmed, except for a sidearm in a flap holster, the flap secured.

"OK. You're free."

Marcie rolled over on her back and stared up at him.

Ben was somewhat startled. Marcie was a beautiful young woman.

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Chapter Eight

Ben stepped back several yards and watched as Marcie got to her feet and climbed out of the jumble of twisted metal. She made no hostile moves, and the expression on her face was not one of hate or anger.

She faced him, Ben maintaining several yards distance between them. "Now what, Ben Raines?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "That's up to you, Marcie. I'm not going to take you prisoner, if that's what you're thinking. I'm pulling out as soon as I can get loaded."

"You mean I could just get into one of those buggies or trucks and leave?"

"Why not? I'm not going to shoot you."

"Where would I go?"

"Hell, Marcie, I don't know. Back to your gang, I suppose. Wherever you want to go."

She ran fingers through her short hair-light brown, Ben noted, and really in need of washing. Her heart-shaped face was smudged with dirt marks, and could use a good scrubbing. She met Ben's eyes and grimaced. "I'm a mess, right?"

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"Nothing that a bar of soap and about an hour in a tub full of hot water wouldn't fix."

She laughed at that, and Ben noticed that her teeth were very white and in very good shape ... most punks teeth were yellow and rotted. "It isn't my gang. And if you'll show me a tub of hot water and a bar of soap I'll sure use them both."

"Slick's gang, then. Go back to them, if that's what you want to do."

"I don't want to. I've only been with them a few weeks, and never planned to stay very long. And no, I'm not Slick's old lady, if that's what you were thinking. I'm not anybody's old lady."

Ben stared at her for a moment, then made up his mind. "All right. Help me load up one of those pickup trucks and we'll get the hell out of here before Slick returns with his gang ... if that's what you want to do."

"Suits me. I'll go with you, and be glad to get away from Slick and his idiots." She pointed to a vehicle. "That truck is almost new."

"Let's do it, then."

"How about the wounded?"

"You concerned about them?"

Marcie hesitated. "Well, not really. But I'd feel sort of funny about leaving them here to die if we could help them."

"But you were all ready to kill me a few minutes ago."

"I've never shot anybody in my life. I swear it. When I shot at you it was instinct. I thought you were going to kill me."

Ben nodded his head. "All right, Marcie. You look at the wounded and see what you can do for them, if anything, and I'll start loading up. Then we'll get gone from here."

Thirty minutes later, they were on the road.

"Both of Dave's legs are broken," Marcie said, munching on a high-energy bar. "He's gonna be crippled the rest of his life, I bet."

"Probably. Unless he gets to a doctor."

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"Doctor? Out here? Forget it. Nearest doctor is hundreds of miles away. I haven't seen a doctor since I left Wisconsin. No, don't turn here. Those roads are all blocked. Everything north and east is gang controlled. We've got to go west ... I think I know a way west that will get us clear. I think."

"How many gangs are operating out here?"

"Dozens of them. Some have four or five members, others have a hundred or so. The main gang leader is a guy who calls himself Duane. He's got a mob with him."

"And his territory is ... where?"

"We've got to go through it to get clear. He operates out of the town that used to be called Van Horn."

"There was a time, a few years ago, when Texas was entirely clear of gangs of punks."

"Not anymore, and you can believe that. Not in this part of the state, anyway. Gangs are making a fast comeback all over America."

"Not in the SUSAs," Ben said with a smile.

"So I hear," Marcie replied. "The life expectancy of a punk in the SUSAs is kinda short, isn't it?"

"Real short. You said you came from Wisconsin. Why did you leave?"

"I also said it was a long story."

"We've got time. We'll be lucky to average thirty miles per hour over these old roads."

"OK. If you really want to hear this sad tale. Here goes. My parents survived the gas and the gangs, and the really terrible times after that. They schooled me at home until things started running halfway back to normal. Then I went to public schools, such as they were ... are, I guess would be a better word. They're still lousy as crap ..."

"Not in the SUSAs." Ben had to say it.

"Yeah? Well, I heard about that, too. Anyway, I graduated high school and went to college for a year. I was a few years older than many of the kids-I'm twenty-four now-and my parents taught me to read when I was three. I've been reading everything I could get my hands on ever

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since." She cut her eyes toward him. "You mind if I smoke, Ben Raines?"

"Not at all. I smoke cigarettes. But it's a habit you should quit. It's bad for your health."

"Then why don't you quit?"

"I don't want to."

She dug in a pocket of her military style, cargo-pocket britches and held out a pack of cigarettes. "You want one of these?"

"I thought those were outlawed outside the SUSA. Big Brother so decreed?"

"They are. But small cigarette factories are a big, thriving business. People are growing tobacco in basements and flower gardens, and in the woods, and God only knows where else. Big black market in cigarettes. People are gonna smoke if they want to smoke."

Ben took a cigarette and lit up. It wasn't bad, but it sure as hell wasn't smooth, either. Then he had a thought: The best tobacco land was in the SUSA. Why not start bootlegging cigarettes across the border into Left-wing Liberal La-La Land? That would piss off the left wingers in power. He laughed, and Marcie looked at him strangely.

"The cigarette that bad?" she asked.

"Oh, no. Not at all. I just had an amusing thought, that's all. Go on with your story."

"Well, I learned to read from books that were published long before the Great War ... many of them published before the political correctness crap came to be. I read about cowboys and Indians, not Western Horsepeople and Native Americans. You know what I mean."

"Oh, yes, I sure do, Marcie. Firsthand."

"When I got to public school, high school, I began to notice the textbooks were, well, different. History was not depicted the same way as in the old textbooks I had read as a child. Putting it bluntly, it was all screwed up."

Ben chuckled softly as they drove along. The liberals finally got their way: they had officially changed history. He had known about this, of course. He had reviewed the

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textbooks. But Marcie was the first younger person he'd talked with who would actually admit to noticing the change.

"According to the history books I was forced to study in high school and during the year and few months I attended college, America was the aggressor toward Japan during the Second World War. America was the aggressor in every war we were ever involved in. Especially against the Native Americans."

"There was right and wrong on both sides during the westward expansion period in America. That's the only fair way to view it. The Indians didn't 'own' the land in the European concept of ownership-no tide or deed or other proof of ownership. They were just there. Some settlers did try to make friends with the Indians, and did. Some wanted to kill every Indian they saw, and did. The same philosophy held with the Indians: some wanted peace, some wanted war. I know all about the left wingers screwing up history. They screw up practically everything they touch. Go on with your story."

"Well, about mid-year in my second year of college I'd had enough of it, and I stood up in class and challenged one of my history professors on a

point. He got so angry I thought he would have a heart attack. I was called into the office of some college official and bluntly told that I was out of line, blah, blah, blah. Big long boring lecture. I told them to go to hell and walked out."

"And your parents did ... what?"

"Oh, they got upset with me, not with the college. They're lifelong Democrats-very liberal-and believe everything the party hands out, i.e., if the textbooks were changed there must have been a good reason for it. Men and women who are much more learned than me discovered flaws in the old textbooks and corrected them. I didn't buy it then, and I don't buy it now. Wrong is wrong. Call me stubborn or hardheaded, or whatever."

Ben cut his eyes to the young woman. He felt she was telling him the truth. Just a hunch on his part. "Marcie,

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you're an intelligent person. How in the hell did you ever link up with Slick and his gang of dickheads?"

"I drifted around after leaving home, spent about a year just wandering and seeing the country. But I was afraid to try to get into the SUSAs."

"Afraid? Why?"

"Because of all the press you people have received over the years. According to the press, you have a really violent type of society. You shoot people for the slightest infraction. Is that really true?"

Ben had a good laugh and then shook his head. "No it isn't true, because of the type of people who live in the SUSAs. Our code of day-to-day living involves honor, ethics, decency, integrity. We're a society that respects the rights of others."

"And if the people in the SUSAs don't live up to those qualities?"

"They're in trouble."

"From the government?"

"Oh, no. Very rarely will the government take action unless they break the law. The people they cheat, however-that's quite another story."

"They shoot the person who cheated them?"

"No ... I don't recall any shooting. But there have been several real good ass whippings."

"And the police do?"

"Very little, if anything at all. They investigate, of course, but almost always find that the man who got his ass whipped had many citizen complaints already filed against him."

"What happens to the man who cheated the people?"

"Oh, he usually leaves the SUSAs without being asked. For health reasons," Ben added drily. "Marcie, you haven't told me how or why you

hooked up with Slick and his bunch."

"I wandered down this way and found myself lost and very much alone one day. I was out of food and water. Some of the women in the gang found me and felt sorry for me, I guess. Slick wanted to make me his old lady, but

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he already had a woman. Mean bitch called Big Sadie. And she's big, too. Not fat, just tall and tough. She could probably whip Slick."

"What's Slick's real name?"

"I don't know. Slick's all I've ever heard him called."

"I figure we're about ten or twelve miles from Marfa. Look on that map on the dash and see if there's a way around the town."

"I know a way around it. I think I remember it. It's dirt but hard packed, and we've had no rain to speak of. We should be able to make it all right. That storm the other night was wind, mostly."

"Tell me where to turn."

"It's not far ... if I remember correctly. It'll be off to the right. Watch for it, 'cause it's hard to spot."

"Anything on the road? Off of it, I mean. Old houses, maybe?"

"I think I remember a few old places. Awfully rundown, though."

"That's all right. We just need a place to hole up for the night. You keep ducking the question. Why did you leave home to wander?"

"Oh, that's easy to answer. I got into it with my folks. That's all. I see things differently. And it was their way or the highway. I chose the highway."

They rode in silence for a few minutes, with their own thoughts. Ben believed the young woman's story. Her manner, personal appearance, and vocabulary helped back it up. If one young person was rebelling against the left-wing form of government outside the SUSA... might there not be others? Ben felt there surely would be. It was something to think about, and perhaps use in some sort of peaceful campaign.

Then Ben shook his head. Peaceful? Not likely, not with Harlan Millard and Claire Osterman in charge. While Ben disliked both of them, he knew they hated him with a very deep burning intensity, and had for many years, since long before the collapse of government and the Great War.

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Marcie broke the silence. "You're deep in thought, Ben Raines."

"Yeah, I guess I was. Thinking about the government outside the SUSA. That always depresses me."

"I know that those in charge are determined to reunite America. They hate the SUSA."

"They hate everybody who dares to stand up for their guaranteed constitutional rights."

"Does that include my parents and my brothers and sisters?"

"You never mentioned them, Marcie, but yes, I guess it does, if they're embracing the strict party line of Osterman and Millard."

"Embracing it? Hell, they're in bed with it one hundred percent-all the time, all the way."

"What do your brothers and sisters do for a living?"

"One of my brothers helps Dad run the farm. My other brother is an officer in the army. My sisters are married and living in a nearby town, raising kids and preaching the party line to anyone who will listen. I'm the youngest of five."

"What unit is your brother in?"

"Some sort of specially trained outfit. I really don't know for sure. They're bully boys, I know that. My brother's been a bully all his life. We're not close, never got along. He's an asshole."

Ben smiled. "You're the rebel of the family, then?"

"You'd better believe it. Always have been. I think my parents were glad to see me leave, in a way. That's a terrible thing to say, isn't it?"

"Not if it's the truth."

"It's the truth. Slowdown. Here's the turnoff. Now we're going to see some wild, desolate country."

Ben slowed and turned off onto the old road. The landscape was stark and lonely looking.

"How far down this road until we come to one of those old houses you mentioned?"

"Several miles. It's set off the road about half a mile."

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Off to the right. I never got real close to it. Don't know what it's like inside."

"Probably a mess. But we're going to find out in a few minutes. I'm hungry and want a cup of coffee."

"I'd like to have a long, hot, soapy bath. Think you can arrange that?"

"I doubt it. How about a short wash in cold water?"

Marcie sighed. "That'll have to do, but I can dream, can't I?"

"All you want. We'll get out of this mess. Then you can have your hot bath."

She stared at the road for a moment, then said, "Can I live in the SUSAs?"

"Of course. I think you'd fit right in. You seem to be a person who thinks for herself and doesn't need the damn government telling her what to do and looking over her shoulder and holding her hand twenty-four hours a day."

"I definitely fit in that category. Look over there, Ben Raines. There's the old house."

Ben slowed and turned down the dirt road. "I really hope there isn't a gang of punks waiting for us there."

"Me, too. Anyone who tries to leave Slick's gang is killed. That's the rule, and it's enforced. I've seen it. If they find me, I'm dead."

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Chapter Nine

Ben pulled in behind the old home, tucking the pickup in close to the back porch. The dirt road they had come in on was so hard packed they'd left no tracks to give them away.

"I don't think anyone is home, Ben Raines," Marcie said.

"I think you're right. Let's check it out." He reached down to the floorboards and retrieved her web belt and pistol and handed it to her. "You'll need this."

She met his gaze, locked her green eyes with his for a few seconds. "Aren't you taking quite a chance handing that to me?"

"I don't think so, but I'll know for sure in a few minutes, won't I?"

"I'll tell you now, General. I won't turn on you. You have my word on that."

"All right. Let's check out the house." Ben opened the door and stepped out of the truck, deliberately putting his back to the young woman. When he turned around, she was walking toward the back porch.

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She paused and looked at him, question in her eyes. "You coming?"

Ben smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out a full magazine for the 9mm. He held it out to her. "You'd better replace that empty mag in your sidearm with this full one, Marcie. You might need it."

She looked startled for a couple of seconds. Then a slow smile moved her lips. She laughed softly and stepped toward him, taking the full clip. "Interesting way you have of testing people."

"Ben."

"All right." She ejected the empty from the butt of the nine and slipped home the full mag. "Ben it is."

He stepped up onto the old steps leading to the once-screened in porch. The screen was nearly gone, now, ragged hanging in shreds. "Wait for my

all clear."

"I'll do it."

Ben was a cautious man. He had removed the keys from the truck's ignition. He pushed open the back door and stepped into what had once been the kitchen. The floor and the old table were covered with dust and litter and rat droppings. Ben walked through the house. There had been no one there for a long, long time. Ben wasn't sure he wanted to stay in the house, but decided it wouldn't take long to clean out one room and then they could spend one night. He called for Marcie. He heard her footsteps as she walked through the kitchen and up the short hallway.

The young woman stuck her head into the room. "I think we're alone here."

"I believe so. Let's get this room cleaned up and have something to eat."

Ben awakened once during the night. Something had jarred him awake. He lay in his sleeping bag and listened. A few feet away, Marcie was sleeping soundly. Ben looked at his watch. One o'clock. Whatever sound had awakened him was not repeated, and he drifted back to sleep.

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He awakened at four thirty and slipped from the bag. After his toilet, Ben prowled around the outside of the house, CAR in hand. Nothing was amiss.

He used a couple of heat tabs to fix coffee and took a cup into Marcie. They ate a cold breakfast of field rations and then smoked and talked softly in the dark silence of pre-dawn.

"So when we get out of this mess," Ben said, "you're not going back to your parents' home?"

"No. Like I said, I think I'll move into the SUSA. I ought to be able to find some sort of work."

"No doubt about that. Jobs are going begging there."

"Why?"

"Our economy's booming. We have the strongest currency of any nation in the world. But we need a few million more people to fill all the jobs that are available."

"There should be lots of people who would be more than willing to come into the SUSA if a good job is waiting for them."

"Oh, there are lots of people who think they want to live there, Marcie. We get hundreds of inquiries every day. But only about two out of every ten could make it in the SUSA. A person has to possess an uncommon amount of common sense to make it in our society."

"And those who don't have a lot of common sense? Or don't use what they have?"

"Some of them get hurt. A few have gotten killed. A very few, thank God. Most either straighten up their act or pull up stakes and leave before they're asked."

"You say thank God. Are you a religious man, Ben?"

"I certainly have a very strong belief in God. And so do a large percentage of people who live in the SUSA. We have a lot of different faiths there."

"Is church mandatory? That's the word that's being passed around outside your borders. A person is required to attend some church."

Ben had a good laugh at that. "No, Marcie. Church attendance is by no means required of any resident of the

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SUSA. I heard that silly rumor. It's just part of the massive misinformation campaign started by the USA's liberal press and kept alive by Osterman and Millard."

Marcie glanced out the window-minus the pane. Silver was beginning to streak the eastern sky. "Be light soon."

Ben glanced out the window. "Yes, you're right. We'll pull out when it's full light ... and that won't be long. When we're on the road and reach some high elevation, I want to try the CB and scanner in the truck. And the dash radio."

"They all work. Sometimes something will come over the radio. The AM stations. Not the FM."

"Music?"

"Sometimes. Mostly it's talk from the USA stations. A lot of it's propaganda."

"I've heard some of it. Much of it's directed against us." He laughed softly. "Osterman and Millard and their left-wing cohorts are really afraid of us, Marcie. And that tells me we're doing something right."

"But they think they're right."

"Yes. But they want power, total control over peoples' lives. That's something we don't have and don't want in the SUSA. It would be rather difficult to have total control when the entire population is armed. The gun control crowd-the left wingers-have always been afraid of an armed population."

"They sure hated the militias and the survivalist groups. I've read a lot of old books written about that."

"The liberals hated them because they were afraid of them. The liberals were taking us to the left, and toward the end, just before the collapse, the militias and survivalist groups were ready for armed intervention. And I would have joined them in the fight," Ben added, getting to his feet. "Let's pack it up and get rolling. I want to check out those radios."

Marcie had helped Ben transfer the gear from the trailer to the bed of the pickup, and she was still amazed at the

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amount of material that had been stored right under their noses.

Rolling up the sleeping bags, she asked, "These caches are all over the country?"

"Hundreds of them." Ben smiled at her. "The Rebels try not to leave anything to doubt when it comes to survival. We plan pretty well."

She returned the smile. "I would sure say so."

When they were on the road, heading out on the old county road, Ben turned on the dash radio and tried to find a station. He could find two, both what used to be called National Public Radio, now no more than hard-line propaganda outlets for the left-wing government. The news was all about what the government was doing to help the people, and how the people must work harder to help their government help them.

"Lenin would be so proud," Ben said, turning down the volume.

"Disgusting," he added.

"We've had a decade of that, Ben. Off and on. An entire generation has grown from little children to teenagers listening to that crap."

"I'm glad you recognize it as crap."

"Oh, I always have. But many-a large percentage-of kids don't. The left wingers have destroyed millions of books and hundreds of films-movies, documentaries, TV programs-that glorified anything that was to the right of their own screwed up philosophy of government. I was arrested once for reading one of your books."

"Arrested?" Ben had known it was bad outside the SUSA, but he had not realized it was that bad.

"Yes, I was detained until my parents could come to the police station and get me. I was about eighteen or nineteen years old, I guess."

"Jesus Christ," he muttered.

"Your books are banned. I mean, everything you've ever written."

Ben nodded his head. "Yeah, I knew that. That started

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several years ago. What I didn't know was that people were being arrested just for having a copy of my work."

"Oh, The Watchers aren't that obvious about it."

"The Watchers?"

"That's what we call them. The people, civilians who are snitches for the government. Every town has them. I know you've heard about them."

"Yes, of course we've heard of the block wardens. But I didn't know there were that many of them."

"Oh, no one really knows who they are. Not officially. But after a time, you can spot them. You can't prove it's them, but you know. They eat better than other people, have a nicer home, a better car, dress nicer."

"Things really have gone to shit outside the SUSA," Ben muttered.

"More than you know. And it was all done very quietly and very slowly. We didn't even know it was going on until everyone was in place and reporting to their superior. There must be hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands, of these people, spread out all over America ... the USA, I mean. Each little town has ten or twelve at least, snooping and spying and taking notes on everybody else."

"It's worse than our intelligence people thought ..." Ben paused and frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Unless our intelligence network outside the SUSA has been compromised."

"It's probably been compromised inside the SUSA as well," Marcie said.

"I doubt it. Outside, yes. But our people inside the SUSA, as well as those returning from any operations work are polygraphed, PSE'd, or both. It's those living and working outside the SUSA and reporting in who've been compromised. How deeply is something I wouldn't even try to guess."

"Don't underestimate those in power, Ben. Now don't get mad at me for saying it, but I think underestimating them is what you've done."

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Ben kept his cool and slowly nodded his head. "I think you're right. That's exactly what I have done. Damn it!"

Ben chastised himself as they drove along. He had indeed considered Osterman and Millard to be nothing more than lightweights with big mouths and extremely left-wing ideas ... and he had held that opinion for years. Now he had to admit to having been very wrong. Now his mistakes were coming home to haunt him.

Ben drove for another few miles, then stopped in the middle of the dirt and gravel road and tried the CB and the scanner, both mounted under the dash. He could receive nothing. Either he was out of range or nobody was talking.

A few miles later they reached what was left of an old bridge. They could go no further-the bridge had been destroyed.

"The bridge was intact a few weeks ago," Marcie said. "I crossed it with some of the women. We were just riding around talking."

"It's been blown," Ben said, standing beside the young woman on the south side of the ruined bridge. "Dynamited, probably. Or C-4. Whatever. It's back to the highway for us. You know another way around Marfa?"

She shook her head. "No. But surely there is one."

"We'll check those county maps I found."

"Why would someone blow up this old bridge? It's in the middle of nowhere. Slick doesn't have any explosives. I know that for a fact. Besides, he's too dumb to know how to use them. Duane and his people don't know anything about us, and they sure as hell wouldn't know we were heading this way."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, Marcie. But standing here staring at the wreckage won't rebuild it. Let's start backtracking."

Marcie checked the old maps while they drove back to Highway 90. "There are several roads that will take us around the town, but I sure wouldn't want to make a guess as to their condition."

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"We've got to try them. If Duane and his mob have taken over Marfa, and they're as large as you say, we don't have any choice in the matter."

"Biggest gang in West Texas. Slick was scared to death of them. He'll be scared even more now, with his gang cut down considerably."

"Maybe he'll try to join the gangs."

Marcie shook her head. "No way. Slick told me he's tried to do that several times. Duane wouldn't even consider it. Duane doesn't have much use for Slick. Slick's bunch is made up of the losers from other gangs in the area."

"But still you stayed with them."

"I didn't have much choice. If a woman joins up with Duane, there is some sort of initiation she has to go through ... taking on the entire bunch of guys, if you know what I mean."

"Typical punk shit," Ben said.

"You got it. And I didn't want any part of that. I was sort of between a rock and hard place as to choices."

"I would say so."

They reached the highway, and before pulling out Ben again checked the CB and scanner. Nothing. He pulled onto the concrete slab and headed west. They had approximately three miles to go before reaching the county road that wound around for miles and miles before eventually leading to and ending on the highway at the west side of Marfa.

"If there is a road there must be houses on the damn thing," Marcie remarked. "Ranches, I guess. Otherwise why would the county build it?"

"I suppose so. I don't know much about this part of the state. But I'll sure make a bet there is one thing we won't find."

"And that is?"

"Water."

"But there must be creeks and springs around here."

"A few, probably. But I don't know where they are."

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Marcie stared out the window for a moment. "Desolate," she finally said. "Lonely."

"There used to be people living out here. We see old houses every so often. But those who stayed after the collapse and our rebuilding were relocated after the punks moved back in and it become too dangerous to live out here. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of cattle are roaming around all over the place. Look over there to your right at that small bunch-herd.

"Yeah, I see them. Some of the bulls will attack, too. I heard some of the gang talking about people having been gored by attacking bulls."

"You want a steak for lunch?"

"I really just want to get out of this area and be safe for awhile."

"We'll make it, Marcie. I've been in a lot worse situations and made it out."

"I haven't," she stated softly. "By now Slick's got every member of his gang out looking for me ... including the women ..." She paused for a few seconds. "Especially the women. And I know what's going to happen to me if they catch me. Let's just say it won't be pleasant."

"I think I can imagine."

"Not a pretty picture."

"No, it isn't."

Ben found the gravel and dirt road leading off to the south, and took it. Several miles later it seemed as if they had suddenly been transported into a strange, desolate, and silent land. Beside him, Marcie looked out the window for a time and shuddered.

"It's as if we're the only two people left on the face of the planet," she said.

"That'd be one way of getting out of this mess we're in." Ben grinned at her.

She frowned for a second or two and then burst out laughing. "Yeah, it sure would. Then we could start the human race all over, couldn't we?"

He smiled. "Well, it's a thought. But somehow Ben and

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Marcie doesn't have quite the same ring as Adam and Eve."

"People would have thousands of years to get used to it."

This time it was his turn to burst out in laughter. "Yeah, I suppose they would, at that. But I don't think it would work."

"Why?"

"You may have noticed that I'm a few years older than you."

"No more than about thirty, Ben."

"You're a good guesser. That's just about right on the money."

"That bother you? The age spread, I mean?"

"A few years ago it wouldn't have, but yes, I'm afraid now it does ... would."

"Most men would have said, 'Oh no, not at all.' And then pulled off the road to show me how much it didn't. But not Ben Raines. Are you always this honest?"

"I try to be. That's another of the qualities that people who live in the SUSA possess. I think it's a good one."

"Well, I'll tell you something. Right at the moment it sure as hell doesn't do much for my ego."

Ben smiled and cut his eyes to her. "Well, how about this-You're a beautiful young woman. And beneath two or three layers of West Texas dust and dirt, you're sexy as hell. Does that make it better?"

"Yeah, I guess. But you sure are full of bullshit, you know that?"

"So I've been told, Kiddo. More times than one, I assure you of that.'"

There had been a line of sexual tension drawing around them. It was now erased and they both became more relaxed. Several miles rolled by before Marcie broke the silence. She suddenly straightened up in the seat and twisted around to stare out the rear glass.

"Is that dust back there, Ben?"

"Yes, I picked up on it a couple of minutes ago."

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"I doubt it's Slick's people. This is right on the edge of their turf. Unless they've made a very quick alliance with the gang out of this area."

"I doubt that. They're probably still licking their wounds and dreaming of revenge. Duane's bunch, maybe?"

"More than likely it's the bunch out of Marfa. I heard some gang from up north of the old Interstate blew into the town and ran the old bunch out."

"Well, we're going to find out in a damn few minutes. They're closing. Is that an old house up ahead, off to the right?"

"Yes. I see it."

"Hang on, Kiddo. It's gonna get wild from here on in!"

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Chapter Ten

Ben pulled in behind the house, tucking the pickup as close as he could to the rear of the house. He and Marcie quickly unassed the pickup. Ben jerked an M-16 and two rucksacks from the bed of the truck, tossing the rifle and one of the rucksacks to Marcie.

"Take the right side of the house," he told her. He hesitated for a heartbeat. "Unless you want to be taken prisoner, don't freeze up on me."

"I won't," she told him, her face pale. "If it comes to that. But how do we know those people are unfriendly?"

Automatic gunfire suddenly knocked chunks of wood from the side of the old home.

"It's damn sure come to that. Does that answer your question?"

"It does. I'll do my part, Ben."

"Head's up, Kiddo!"

Ben turned his attention to the men who had jumped from the car and the pickup truck that had been following the car, and were now running toward the old house. All of them were armed with what appeared to be AK-47's and M-16's, or look-alikes of those weapons.

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Ben gave one a short burst from his CAR, knocking the legs out from under a man. He screamed in pain as his shattered legs collapsed under his weight and he went tumbling to the ground. He lay squalling in pain, hollering for someone to come help him. No one did.

"Hey, you behind the house!" a punk yelled. "We want that truck of yours. Give it up and you can both walk out free. We won't hurt you."

Ben smiled. "Sure we can go free, dickhead," he muttered. "And I have oceanfront property in Montana."

"Oh God, Van!" the wounded man yelled. "I hurt something awful. Y'all got to help me."

"Hang on, Marvin," a punk yelled. "Stay calm. We'll get you in a minute."

Ben had worked his way under the house, which was set up on concrete blocks, giving him ample crawl space. He hoped he would not come nose to nose with a rattler during his journey toward the front of the old home. He reached the area under the front porch and lay there behind a set of concrete blocks. So far he had not been seen.

Ben spotted a man using the pickup for cover, and blew half a mag of 5.56 rounds into his legs and ankles. The man dropped his weapon and flopped on the ground, screaming in pain.

"Where in the fuck did that fire come from?" someone yelled.

"I don't know," the man Ben now assumed was Van hollered in reply. "I couldn't tell."

At the rear right side corner of the house, Marcie opened up with her M-16, the lead slamming into and bouncing off the rusted hulk of an old car that two of the punks were using for cover. Some of the lead went under the old car, and one of the punks did a little dance as the bullets tore up the ground around his feet.

"Holy shit!" he hollered after Marcie had ceased firing. "This ain't worth a damn, Van."

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"Just hold on, Mark," Van yelled. "We'll get 'em in time. We got 'em trapped, man."

"You think," Ben said. He worked a grenade out of the rucksack and pulled the pin, holding the spoon down. He drew back and side-armed the fire-frag as hard as he could. It bounced on the ground once, then rolled under the rusted old hulk of a car.

"Goddamn!" Mark squalled in terror as the grenade rolled between his booted feet.

One second later it blew, scattering bits and pieces of Mark all over the place.

"Jesus Christ!" another punk shouted. "Let's get the hell outta here, Van."

Van didn't respond immediately. A few seconds ticked by. "They can't go nowhere, Johnny. They's still plenty of us, and just two of them. We'll wait them out."

Ben had taken that time to crawl back to the rear of the house. He stood up and brushed the dirt and cobwebs from him. He pointed to a stack of bricks about three feet high. "Get behind that, Marcie. That's the best protection around. I'll be inside the house, at the front."

"OK," she called just loud enough for Ben to hear. "Ben?"

"Yes?"

"I never heard of any gang leader around here called Van. That must be the new gang I told you about."

"Whoever or whatever they are, I'm going to lose patience with this situation very soon. Keep your eyes open, your head down, and stay loose."

"Be careful."

"You bet. Careful ... that's me."

Just as Ben was settling into a spot by a front window frame-no glass, of course-Van hollered, "You assholes killed a friend of mine, you know that? Mark was my buddy. We've been buddies for a long time."

Ben said nothing, and Marcie was silent behind the pile of bricks in the rear of the house.

"I run this area around here. And you people is trespassing."

Anyone who passes through my territory has got to pay tribute."

Typical punk shit, Ben thought. Punks never change. Worldwide they're the same. He remained silent, waiting for one of the dickheads to make the slightest mistake.

Of course, there were many people who could have told Van from very painful firsthand experience that the first mistake he'd made was tangling with Ben Raines.

Others would have been very happy to tell him, if they could speak from the coldness of the grave, that the odds were very, very good it just might be his last mistake.

Ben waited.

"Where are they, Van?" a gang member called. "Why don't they do something?"

Before Van could reply another voice was added. "Somethin' real funny 'bout this, Van. And I don't like it none."

"What are you talkin' 'bout, Stacy?" Van called.

"These people are too damn cool. Too damn calm 'bout bein' in this situation, that's what I mean."

"I agree," someone called from a ditch.

Another voice was added. "Maybe they're just stupid."

One more than I thought was alive, Ben silently mused. Now how many does that make?

Before he could do some simple math, Van opened up with his weapon on full auto, but he was spraying lead on the other side of the house, away from Ben and Marcie. A full mag was burned, then another. Van hit nothing except air, the side of the house, and occasionally, the ground.

"Idiot," Ben muttered.

Marcie did not give away her position behind the bricks by returning the fire.

"I think I probably got one of them with all that lead," Van yelled.

"Then come on," Ben muttered. "If you think you did, show yourself, punk. Check it out."

But Van had enough sense not to expose himself. "Get up there and see, Red!" he called.

"Piss on you, Van," Red yelled. "I don't think you hit no thin'."

"I give you an order, Red!"

"You know where you can shove that order, don't you, Van?" Red challenged.

"Come on, guys," a punk called. "Let's don't start no arguing' 'mongst ourselves. That won't solve nothin'."

"Either I run this outfit, or I don't," Van wouldn't let go of it. "I give the orders, and by God I want them obeyed. You hear me, Red?"

"Whole goddamn county can hear you, Van. You hollerin' like a calf in a hailstorm."

Van did not respond. Probably pouting, Ben thought with a small smile.

"I got an idea, Van," Red called.

"What is it?" Van asked sullenly.

"Burn 'em out of there. That old house ought to go up like dry kinlin' wood."

"That's a good idea," Stacy yelled. "How 'bout it, Van?"

Van spoke up after a few seconds. "Yeah, I guess we could do that. If that's what you want, it's OK with me. But how you gonna get close enough to do that?"

Before Red could reply, both punks whose legs and feet had been shot out from under them started hollering in pain and begging for someone to help them.

Ben waited, ready to fire, but none of their friends made a move to help.

"I'm gonna work my way over to that field," Red called. "Come in from that side. They's some cover over there and I can make it close to the house. I'll get me some of them rags from the truck and tie 'em to a stick. Light it and give it a throw. That ought to do it."

"Might work," Van said. "OK, Red. You can give it a try, and good luck to you."

"Make 'em keep their heads down whilst I get over to that field, boys. Lay down some lead for me."

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"Goddamnit, will somebody hep me!" Marvin shrieked.

"Hush up, Marv," Van hollered. "We'll get to you soon as we take care of these bastards in the house. Just be quiet. Can't none of us think with you squealin' all the time."

"Oh, God, I'm dyin'," the other punk squalled. "I'm bleedin' to death. Help me."

"Now!" Red called, jumping from behind cover. "Fire, boys, fire!"

Before he could run five yards Marcie opened up and nailed him. She burned half a magazine, but she got him. Red turned around several times, his chest and belly perforated with bullet holes. Then he slowly sank to his knees, and after a few seconds fell over on his face and was still.

"Shit!" Stacy shouted. "Come on, Van, let's get gone from this damn place. This ain't worth a crap, man. We stay here and they're gonna get us all."

"All right, Stacy," Van called after a few seconds pause. "You be right, man. They's always another day. Let's get to the wheels and get out of here."

"What about me?" Marvin screamed. "Y' all just gonna go off and leave me to die?"

"We'll come back for you, man," Van called, with about as much sincerity as a rattlesnake's smile.

"You a lyin' son of a bitch," Marvin yelled. "You ain't gonna do no such of a damn thing. Neither of you. Goddamnit, don't go off and leave me!"

The punks were already running from cover, trying to make the vehicles. Ben shot one, the 5.56 rounds stitching his legs, buttocks, and back, and throwing him forward on his face. He died on the ground without saying a word.

Marcie cut the legs out from under the man called Johnny, and he tumbled to the ground. Her burst caught him running as hard as he could, and he fell heavily, rolling and screaming. Marcie fired again, and Johnny was silent in death.

"That's about it, Van," Ben broke his silence. "Just you and me now, asshole."

"Hey, man, let's make a deal, OK?"

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Ben laughed at him.

"You think that's funny, you prick?"

"I think it's hysterical, punk. What do you have to deal with?"

"I'm out here and you're in there. That's somethin', ain't it?"

"Not much when you think about it, Vanny boy. You're dead, punk. You just don't know it yet. Best thing you can do is just lie down on the ground and die."

"That's crazy. Fuck you! I ain't gonna do no such of a goddamn stupid thing."

"Then I suppose I'll just have you kill you, Vanny boy."

"Oh, shit, will somebody please hep me?" the punk behind the rusted out hulk of a car yelled. "I'm hurtin' and dyin', and all y'all's doin' is arguin.' Damn!"

"Oh, shut up!" Van called.

"Get your buddy and any others that might be alive and clear out, Van," Ben called. "This is the only invitation you're going to get from me. Do

it, boy. And be damn quick about it."

"Who the hell do you think you is, givin' orders to me?" Van shouted.
"By God, I don't take orders from nobody."

Ben tuned him out and slipped to the other side of the house. By a side window, he had a clear view of Van's cover. Ben pulled the pin on a grenade and lobbed it. It fell just short of the cover and blew. Van yelled and jumped from the wreckage. Ben shot him, the rounds twisting him around and around, much like a human top. Van slowly slumped to the ground and lay still.

"That's it!" Marvin yelled. "I'm done and through. Is there anyone else left alive?"

Silence greeted his words.

"Oh, God!" Marv hollered. "I'm hurt and all alone."

"Can you drive, boy?" Ben called from the house.

"I could if you'd give me a chance. You can damn sure bet on that."

"With broken legs?" Ben called as he walked through the house and out the back door.

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"One of 'em is busted. I got some lead in the other, is all. In the back of my upper thigh. It ain't too bad. It's just about quit bleedin'."

"Then crawl over to that car and get gone ... and don't come back. It that understood?"

"You bet it is, sir. I don't have to crawl. I can limp that far with the hep of this here stick. I'm gone."

Ben watched the man limp and stagger to the car and pull out. As soon as he was on the road and driving away, Ben called, "Get all the weapons and ammo from the dead on your side of the yard. I'll do the same over here. We'll put them all in the bed of the truck. You'll drive the second truck. That truck has two gas tanks on it. I can see the fuel flaps. Let's hustle, and get on the road as quickly as possible."

"I'm with you, Ben. You can bet that punk will be back. Or at least some of his buddies will, as soon as he can make contact with them."

"He's got a long and painful drive ahead of him before that happens. There's a CB antenna on the second truck, but none was on the car. I made sure of that."

Both of them turned at the sound of an explosion from about a mile or so down the road.

"What the hell was that?" Marcie asked, her eyes on the cloud of black, greasy smoke that had begun pouring into the sky. "You don't think..."

"Yeah. Marv didn't make it. He must have passed out or lost control and left the road. Either way, we don't have to get in any hurry about packing up and pulling out, or being followed. That's one problem ole'

Marv solved for us."

"I guess he did."

"Let's get to work and see what we've got in the way of additional supplies. That looks like a pretty good truck over there."

Marcie looked down the road, in the direction they had been heading. "I wonder where this road eventually leads."

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"Away from here," Ben told her as he walked toward the pickup truck. He ignored the dead who lay sprawled in the yard. "Let's get to work and get gone."

"Are we going to bury the dead?"

"No."

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Chapter Eleven

The truck was in good shape, except for the cab being filthy. It was littered with crap, some of which neither Ben nor Marcie cared to identify. Marcie scooped out the litter in the cab while Ben checked the bed of the truck. Several full cans of gas were among the junk. Ben found a dozen boxes of military ammo-manufactured in the USA-and wondered how the punks got hold of it. Was it stolen, or was it given to the punks?

"Interesting," Ben muttered. "Something I'll have Cecil look into, and that's a fact."

"What'd you say, Ben?" Marcie called.

"Nothing, Kiddo. Just talking to myself. That comes with age."

"Yeah, right. You'll be ready for a wheelchair any day now. We'll have to be on the lookout for one."

Ben smiled and continued his prowling through the mess in the bed of the truck, throwing away most of it.

A half an hour after Marv's car ran off the road and exploded and burned, they pulled out. The CB in the pickup worked just fine. If they did get separated and

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weren't more than a few miles apart, they could stay in touch.

"Keep any transmission very short," Ben told her just before they pulled out. "As few words as possible."

"You got it."

The landscape grew more barren as they traveled farther on the lonely county roads. They saw no other signs of human habitation. They stopped just after noon and ate lunch-field rations-then were on the road again. They got lost a couple of times on the confusing and unmarked maze of old county roads and the going was very slow, but by the middle of the afternoon they pulled out and across Old Highway 90 West and stopped to talk.

"I want to avoid Van Horn. If the largest gang in West Texas has taken control there, we won't stand a chance against them. The way I figure it, we're only a few miles south of this old highway that will lead us to Highway 166 and back into the Davis Mountains. That will take us to this highway," he said, pointing to the map, "that will end at the Interstate. Once we get there we'll have to decide where we're going next."

"I'm following you. Wherever you go, I'll be right behind you."

"OK, Kiddo. As the fat man on TV used to say, 'Away we go'."

"Who said that?"

"I'll explain it someday. The liberal feminazis have probably banned reruns of his old show, proclaiming him to be a male chauvinistic pig."

"Feminazis?"

Ben laughed. "Another slightly overweight man used to use that term. Come on. Let's get rolling."

They reached Highway 166 by mid-afternoon and turned north. A few miles later they were brought to an abrupt halt: a bridge over what appeared to be a dry wash had been knocked out.

"This is getting discouraging," Marcie said, eyeballing

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the torn up remains of the bridge, a disgusted look on her face. "Was this bridge blown up?"

"I can't tell. I think it's been out for a long time. All we can do is backtrack. We'll try to make Fort Davis before night, and in the morning we'll take Seventeen up to the Interstate. It's all we can do."

"Ben, has the thought occurred to you that we just might be trapped in this area?"

He met her serious gaze and nodded. "I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought of it."

"And if that's the case?"

"We fight our way out."

"Against a hundred or more to one odds?"

"Do we have a choice?"

"Good point."

"Hang in there, Kid. We'll get clear."

They backtracked and made it to the ruins of Fort Davis with about an hour of daylight to spare. Both of them were tired and more than ready for something to eat and a rest.

"We'll reopen the cache of supplies out at the old airport in the morning and load up your truck," Ben told her. "Let's hope we won't be back to this area."

"Sure suits me."

Ben smiled and winked at her. "Keep the faith. I told you-we'll make it out of here."

They ate supper and were in their sleeping bags just as the sun was sinking behind the Davis Mountains. Both were sound asleep in minutes. Ben awakened about four the next morning and silently slipped from his sleeping bag, being careful not to wake Marcie. The town and the hills and mountains surrounding it were silent. Ben made coffee and heated something that looked and smelled disgustingly inedible from a breakfast pouch of field rations. He sipped his coffee and waited for Marcie to wake up.

"What's that god-awful smell that's overpowering the wonderful aroma of coffee?" Marcie called in a sleepy voice.

"Breakfast," Ben said with a grin.

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"Yuck! Did you just kill it, or is it still alive?"

"It's dead, I promise you, but it's good for you. The Rebel doctors have assured me of that many times."

"Do they eat it?"

"Somehow I doubt it."

Both managed to eat the breakfast mess and, amazingly, were able to keep it down. Then they relaxed over cigarettes and coffee.

"The coffee is delicious, Ben."

"Thank you."

"I just can't find words to describe the breakfast, though."

"Some things are best left unsaid."

"I agree."

At first light they drove to the airport. The bodies of two of Slick's gang lay where they had died, rotting, and the flies that swarmed the bodies were having a delightful time.

"I think it'll be best if you don't look at them," Ben cautioned her.

"You really didn't have to tell me that. Phew!" she waved her small hand

in front of her nose.

"Let's see about getting the cover off that hole in the ground, load up the trucks, and get the hell gone from here."

"Wonderful idea."

By mid-morning they had reached the ruins of a tiny town a few miles south of the Interstate. There was very little left there, the buildings burned.

"What hit this place?" Marcie questioned, standing by Ben in the center of the main street.

"The Rebels, fighting gangs of punks years ago," Ben told her. "The people who tried to resettle this area never got around to cleaning up this little town." He smiled at her. "But I'm sure the lake is still there, and probably still good to swim in ... or to take a bath."

"Lake?" She brightened. "What lake?"

"Oh, about five miles northeast of here."

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"I could use a bath, Ben. Or haven't you noticed?"

"We both could."

"So what are we waiting for?"

"I meant to tell you. I found some small size BDUs back at the cache. They look like they'll fit you. Come on. Let's get cleaned up."

The five hundred acre lake was spring fed, and the waters clear and surprisingly unpolluted, considering all that had occurred over the years.

Ben checked the area carefully, but could find no recent sign of human visitation. "You take your bath, Marcie. I'll stand guard. Then you can keep watch while I bathe."

Needing no second invitation, she grabbed a bar of soap and hit the water. Ben backed off a respectable distance and stood guard while Marcie giggled and splashed and soaped and had a good time ridding herself of days of dust and dirt.

Then it was Ben's turn, and he carefully bathed and washed his short hair. He threw away his old BDUs, ripped and torn from his hard landing a few days past (his body still carried a few deep bruises and cuts) and dressed with new ones from the cache at the old airport. Marcie discarded her old clothing and Ben buried their old outfits in a stand of trees.

After their baths, now dressed in fresh clothing, they were beginning to look and feel human once more.

"Being clean is such a wonderful feeling," Marcie said, brushing her hair with a broken-handled brush from her rucksack. "One of the simple things in life. Are we going to spend the night here?"

"No. Lots of animal tracks around the lake where they come to water. No point in tempting any to attack. We'll find another spot to bed down."

"And tomorrow?"

"Try to find a way out of this punk-infested place."

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"That's going to be difficult, Ben. They're all over this area ... hundreds of them."

"But mostly south of the old Interstate, right?"

"That's true. But this whole area is sort of like a no-man's-land-no law, and no decent people. South of Marfa and Alpine it really gets bad, gangs from Mexico crossing the border to fight gangs over here, and vice-versa. While you and your army were in Africa it seems the whole world went crazy ... again. From the news I get, Europe is all torn up again, the Nazis back in power in some places. Some factions in China have made an alliance with the Nazis, and that country is in the middle of a civil war. Mexico, Central America, and South America are nothing but one great big battleground. The United Nations doesn't seem to be able to do anything."

"Hell, they never could do anything ... except ask for American troops to be sent all over the fucking world ... and get a lot of American troops killed."

"You didn't have much use for the United Nations, did you, Ben?"

"I didn't have any use for it. As far as I was concerned, America should have gotten out of the U. N. years before the Great War and told them all to go right straight to hell. I wasn't an isolationist, but this nation was far too open for far too long to suit me."

"I never got that side of history. Not from the new textbooks being used in schools."

Ben nodded and looked around. It would be dark in a couple of hours, and they needed to find a place to hole up for the night.

"Let's pack it up and get out of here, Marcie."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Nothing like that." He turned around, facing her, his back to the woods. "We're just too open here, and that makes me edgy."

"We are kind of exposed, aren't we?"

Just as Ben turned to one side a rifle cracked, the slug missing his back and howling off the metal of the cab of

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the truck and ricocheting away with an ugly whine. Ben and Marcie hit the ground, belly down, Ben swinging his CAR around, his eyes searching the timber around the lake.

"You all right?" Ben called.

"Yes, but if you hadn't turned when you did--"

"Yeah. You'd have been the proud owner of one dead body and two pickup trucks."

"Asshole!" she told him.

Ben chuckled as his eyes picked up movement in the timber. He cut loose with half a thirty round magazine and that produced a couple of yelps from the darkness of the woods.

"Jesus Christ, Whopper!" someone hollered. "Them things come too close for any comfort."

"I'll say." Ben assumed that was Whopper speaking. "One of them slugs just missed my ass."

"Whopper?" Marcie muttered, crawling closer to Ben. "Is that what I heard?"

"Yeah. I can't wait to hear what the other is called."

Despite the precarious situation, she giggled. "Maybe there's more than two."

"It wouldn't surprise me to discover we're facing a dozen or more. Hand me that rucksack to your right, Marcie."

Ben fished out a grenade, jerked the pin, and heaved it with everything he had. It landed just at the edge of the timber and blew.

When the dirt and rocks stopped falling and the sound of the explosion had died away, someone shouted, "Holy shit, Dinky! That there feller's got hisself some dynamite."

"You be rat about that, Dobber. Purty good arm on him, too."

"Dinky and Dobber?" Marcie whispered. "I don't believe it."

"Son of a bitch blowed a tree down on me," another voice called. "I'm all covered up with limbs and leaves and bird's nest and shit."

"Can you get free, Whacker?"

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"I reckon so, if I work on it a while."

"Whacker?" Marcie breathed. "What the hell have we gotten into here?"

"I keep waiting for James Dickey to show up," Ben said.

"Who?"

"Deliverance."

"What's that?"

"A novel. I'll tell you about it later."

"Did you see the bush on that bitch?" one of the cretins yelled. "Man, I gots to have me some of that. Some fine lookin' titties, too."

"You have some admirers, Marcie."

"Thanks, but I don't believe they're my type."

"You be rat, Snake." Ben recognized the voice as belonging to the one called Whacker. "Nice lookin' pussy on her. I want to see her when you run that root of yourn up her snatch. I bet she'll holler."

Beside him, Ben heard Marcie sigh.

"Nice people, eh?" Ben asked.

"Just lovely. Their conversational abilities are truly astounding."

Ben smiled and burned the rest of the magazine into the woods.

Another voice added to the litany of ignorance. "Gawd-damn! That one damn near took my haid off."

"You hit, Toot?"

"Naw. I be's allrat."

"Now we have Toot," Ben said. "Marcie, ease your way down to the rear of the truck and blow a full mag into the woods. Try to keep it about eighteen inches off the ground. Let's really get their attention."

Thirty seconds later, Marcie cut loose and filled the timber with 5.56 rounds.

"You rotten bitch!" one of those in the woods yelled. "I know that was you doin' that shootin.' You'll pay for that. You sorry cunt."

"Rooster's hit!" Whacker shouted. "That whore got him in the leg."

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"You hurt real bad, Rooster?" Ben couldn't put a name to the voice.

"Naw," Rooster said. "It's just a graze. I'm allrat."

"Now we have Rooster," Marcie said, slipping a full mag into her weapon.

"I'm gonna wear your pussy out for that, bitch!" Rooster yelled.

"What is we gonna do with the guy, Whooper?"

"Kill him, I reckon. He's too old to cornhole."

"What a wonderful choice I have," Ben muttered. He reached up and cracked open the door of his truck. Reaching inside, he managed to pull out a regulation M-16 with a bloop tube. He groped around until he found a rucksack and pulled it out, laying his short-barreled CAR on the seat.

Marcie watched him for a few seconds, then asked, "What is that thing attached to the barrel?"

"Just watch and learn, Kiddo. I'm about to liven up this little picnic."

Ben reached into the rucksack and dragged out half a dozen rifle grenades, slipping one into the tube. He smiled at Marcie. "Now we'll really give them something to 'holler' about."

Ben gave them a 40mm grenade.

That got them all to yelling and cussing. He gave them two more grenades as fast as he could load and fire.

"Oh, shit, Whopper!" Dinky squalled. "My ass is on far. I got lead in my ass! Gawddamn, it burns!"

"Wonderful," Ben muttered, fitting another grenade into the tube.

He quickly sent two more grenades into the timber, and those two scored a direct hit on the person of one of the gang called Snake. One grenade landed in the middle of Snake's back and exploded.

When the sounds of the explosion faded away, Whacker started hollering, panic in his voice. "Oh, shit, I got pieces of Snake all over me. Oh, Lordy, he's all tore up. Oh,

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Gawd, his legs is over yonder, and his haid's over there!" Whacker started puking violently.

"Jesus Christ. This ain'tworth a shit," Toot yelled. "They got us outgunned real bad. I'm fixin' to haul my ass outta here, Whopper."

"You stay put, Toot!" Whopper shouted. "This ain't over by no long shot. We gonna kill that son of a bitch and then have us something to fuck in jist a little while."

"How we gonna do that, Whopper?" Rooster hollered.

"We gonna rush 'em from all sides, that's how. That'll confuse 'em."

"That'll get us kilt, is what it'll do," Dobber said. "They got what little high ground there is and good cover. We got a stretch of open ground 'twixt us and them, in case you hasn't noticed."

"I can see that, you asshole! I ain't blind. Hit's a chance we gotta take."

"Then you take it, Whopper. Hit's all yourn. Leave me out of it."

"You sorry bastard," Whopper yelled. "You done lost your guts, you yeller-belly."

"You can go fuck yourself, too," Dobber yelled back. "I ain't gonna git myself kilt just on your say-so. Ain't no pussy worth dyin' over."

"I don't know 'bout that," Whacker stuck his mouth into the debate. "That there is some prime gash if I ever seen any. She'd last us a good long time, and when we wore it out and it got all sloppy we could trade her off."

"I got to go 'long with Whacker," Rooster said after a few seconds of silence. "That there's 'bout the bes' lookin' piece of ass I've seen in a long time. We could trade her off down in Mexico for a goody 'mount of stuff we need bad. Y'all better give that some thought."

"I say we got to avenge Snake too" Whopper argued. "We cain't let these two go. That'd be a-smearin' Snake's memory."

"Fuck Snake, too," Dobber said. "Man was a fool. He kept what little brains he had in his dick."

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"He shore musta been a genius then," Toot spoke up.

"Enough of this. We gonna stay and fight," Whopper said. "I run this outfit, and I give the orders. I done give 'em, and that's that. Rooster, you start workin' your way around the north side. Git on now."

"We gonna pay hard for this, Whopper," Dobber said. "You mark what I say, all of you. But you be rat. You the boss. We agreed on that."

"You boys listen to me," Ben called. "Why not give it up and get on out of here? There's been enough shooting for this day. How about it?"

"You go right straight to hell!" Whopper yelled. "You in our territory, you do what we say you do."

"Yeah," Toot hollered. "Tell you what, you give us the woman and your trucks and supplies and sich, and we'll let you walk outta here. How about that, mister?"

"No deal, boys," Ben called. "I'm telling you, give this up and back off. That's my best offer. Think about it for a couple of minutes. OK?"

"I vote we talk about it," Dobber called. "How 'bout the rest of y'all? What do you say?"

"Talkin's done!" Whopper shouted. "It's shootin' time." Whopper fired a couple of rounds at the trucks. One round punched a neat hole through the windshield of Marcie's pickup, and the other flattened a tire on Ben's truck.

"Now that pisses me off," Ben said, sliding another 40mm grenade into the tube. "OK, boys," he muttered. "I gave you your chance. Now it gets real nasty!"

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Chapter Twelve

The rifle grenade landed within a few yards of Rooster and blew. Only the thick brush and the small tree he was behind saved him. He still took some shrapnel.

"Shit-far!" Rooster hollered. "I been hit. Oh, Lordy. I thank I'm dyin'!"

"Where it is you hit?" Whopper shouted.

"All over more 'un anywheres else," Rooster yelled. "Lemmie look some." A few seconds passed in silence. "Wai... maybe I ain't dyin' lak I thought. I reckon I ain't. Mister!" he squalled, "I'm a-gonna git you for pepperin' me lak this. I'm gonna cut your nuts out and set your dick on far. And that there's a promise, you bastard!"

"Nice bunch of guys," Marcie said.

"Lovely. You ready to rock and roll?"

"You want to dance now?"

Ben smiled. "No, Marcie. It means ... well, are you ready to open fire?"

"I've been ready."

"Let's do it."

They both opened up. Ben first with another 40mm grenade and then a full mag of 5.56 rounds. Marcie burned

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thirty rounds into the timber just as Toot took Rooster's place and was working his way around to the north side of the small overgrown landing and camp grounds. Her rounds knocked both legs out from under him and he went down hard, cussing and yelling in pain.

"I'm hit hard, y'all," Toot hollered. "I thank one of my legs is broke, for shore."

"I'm a-comin'!" Dobber yelled. "Hang on, Toot!"

Dobber forgot where he was and jumped up in his excitement, and Ben shot him twice in the belly, the second round about four inches above the first.

"Oh, shit!" Dobber said weakly, dropping his rifle. "Oh, shit! Oh, Lordy me!" Then he toppled over and had no more to say on this earth.

Ben smiled, a grim death's head curving of the lips, and dropped another 40mm grenade into the small stand of woods. His smile widened as he heard a hard cry of pain.

"I'm hit, Whopper!" Whacker yelled. "My face is all tore up real bad. I'm bleedin' lak a stuck hog!"

"We got to git gone from here," Whopper said. "We got to talk about this. Pull back and block these people in whilst we jabber some. Hang on, boys. I'm a-comin'."

Ben had Whopper's location pegged in his mind ... at least to within a few meters. Bushes trembled as Whopper moved toward Whacker, and Ben carefully dropped a grenade a few feet in front of the thick brush.

Whopper didn't make a sound during or after the explosion. Ben and Marcie waited.

"It's over, y'all," Toot called. "Whopper jist got blowed all to hell and gone. He ain't even got no haid no more. That bomb landed about a

foot from him and splattered him. I tell y'all, it's over. We're done. OK, guys?"

"Shore suits me," Dinky hollered.

"I'm finished," Rooster said.

"Walk or crawl out here into the clearing," Ben called. "Do it with empty hands. If I see a weapon I'll kill you all. Understood?"

"We understand."

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The three men appeared in the clearing, Dinky and Rooster helping Toot to limp along, dragging his broken leg.

"Get on over to your vehicle," Ben told them. "Wherever you left it. And get the hell out of here. Get far away from this area. Don't ever let me see any of you again. If I do, I'll kill you without hesitation. Move!"

After the trio had staggered off, Ben carefully checked the timber, gathering up weapons and ammunition. That had been Rebel SOP for years. Whopper, Snake, and Whacker were dead. Ben left them for the ants and animals.

"I heard the sounds of a vehicle of some sort pulling away," Marcie told him. "I walked up to the turn-off and looked. They're gone."

"That makes them smarter than I thought."

Ben dumped the various types of weapons in the back of his truck and stood for a moment, looking sourly at the flat tire on the rear of the truck.

"It won't fix itself, Ben," Marcie said with a smile. "Come on, I'll help you. I sure know how to change a tire."

With both of them working changing the tire didn't take long, and they were soon back on the road. They saw nothing of the three survivors of the shoot-out. Just to be on the safe side, Ben headed for the interstate, then turned east for a few miles before reaching the cut-off for a tiny town on the north side of the once super slab.

There was very little left of the town. A few houses, a couple of other buildings, and a small church. Ben pulled over and parked on the side of the road, Marcie right behind him. They got out and talked it over.

"The church doesn't look as though it's been touched," Marcie pointed out, staring at the empty House of God.

"Occasionally, even punks won't desecrate a church."

"Maybe they're afraid of the wrath of God."

"Could be. It'll be getting dark in a very few minutes. Pick a spot for us to bed down."

"What's left of that old store and gas station over there," she replied, pointing.

"Not the church?"

"No. I wouldn't feel right about that." She looked at him, her eyes and expression serious. "Would you?"

Ben shrugged. "I can't say it would bother me one way or the other."

"It would me."

They pulled the trucks around to the rear of the building and checked it out. Everything that could be used had been taken, of course; the store had been looted many times.

"You clean out a spot for us, Marcie, and I'll get the gear out of the trucks."

They fixed a place behind a counter to spread out their sleeping bags and Ben opened two packets of "field rats." He looked at the rations, distaste evident in his eyes.

"I hate to kill a cow, because so much of the meat would be wasted," he said, "but I am becoming very weary, very quickly, of these damn things."

She laughed at his expression. "They're keeping us alive, Ben."

"Doesn't mean I have to like them."

"Where do we head next? In the morning, I mean?"

"North toward Interstate 20. Just south of it, we'll find a county or state road leading east and take that route."

"How long before we're in Rebel territory?"

"Probably another hundred miles or so, straight east. I think there's a settlement at what used to be Fort Stockton, but I can't be sure of that. Those people may have been forced to pull back. We'll stay off the main highways and stick with older, less traveled roads."

"The gangs should be fewer the closer we get to secure areas, right?"

"I would think so. People who live in the SUSAs won't put up with crap from punks. Stealing is a very uncommon occurrence in the SUSAs."

"How do you keep kids from pulling pranks?"

"You don't. No society ever has, or ever will. Pranks are one thing, stealing someone's vehicle is quite another."

Home invasions will get the offenders killed very quickly in the SUSAs. Our law enforcement units don't kick in doors at night and hotdog around as used to be the case in America before the collapse. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time it wasn't necessary, and was done only as an intimidation tactic by an increasingly desperate government."

"Desperate?"

"Attempting to impose their steadily growing socialistic actions on those who were opposed that form of government."

"Did any agents ever kick in your door?"

Ben shook his head. "No. They knew I was one man who would greet them with gunfire if they ever pulled that type of shit on me. I told them so when they visited me one time ... during the day."

"What did they say when you told them that?"

"The older agent didn't say anything. The younger one told me it wasn't smart to make threats against federal agents."

"And you said?"

"I told him I wasn't making threats. Just stating a hard fact."

They got a good night's sleep, and were on the road just after dawn. The gas tanks were filled to capacity, and the trucks were running well. Now if they could just get out of punk country and make solidly controlled Rebel territory—a big if, considering they had over a hundred miles logo.

They saw no signs of human life on the run over to Highway 18. There they turned north, and a few miles later passed through what was left of a small town. The town had been destroyed, with only a few burned out hulks of buildings remaining.

They drove on to the town of Crane—through the burned-out business district and into what had once been

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part of the residential area. It was in ruins, now nothing but block after block of devastation. Ben drove out to the airport and stopped.

"The batteries for the radio I got with the other supplies back at Fort Davis are long out of date, and weak," he explained. "I wanted to get closer before attempting to make contact with my people. This is as good a spot as any to give it a try. Keep your fingers crossed."

Ben tried three times to raise friendlies on the radio. Nothing. He knew the batteries were just about gone. One more try should do it. Then? Well, they would drive. What choice did they have? He shut the radio off.

"We'll let it rest for a few minutes. These old batteries really don't have much juice left in them. I'll make some coffee while we're waiting."

"Any danger of the gangs around here hearing those transmissions?'"

Ben shook his head. "Not unless they have some very sophisticated equipment."

They smoked and drank coffee and talked for a few minutes. He finally reached for the radio. "One more time should do it."

"One way or the other?" Marcie asked.

"That's about it, Kiddo. One way or the other."

"Try it. If you can't raise anyone ... let's get back on the road."

Ben winked at her and hit the send button. "This is General Raines. Anybody listening?"

The voice that came back was weak but clear. "General Raines. This is rescue five niner. What is your location, sir?"

"Airport at the town of Crane. You anywhere close?"

"Minutes away, sir. Are you hurt?"

"Negative on hurt. I can't smoke this location, Rescue. Can you find it?"

"Affirmative, General. Hang tight."

"Ten four. Is my team all right?"

"All your team members OK and back at Base Camp

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One. Three gunships now joining me. ETA your location approximately twenty minutes."

"That's a ten-four. There will be two to pick up."

"Two of you?"

"That's affirmative. Raines out." He laid the nearly dead radio aside and looked at Marcie. "It won't be long now."

She sighed. "A long, hot bath. I'll believe it when I hear the water running."

"A long, hot shower and then a whiskey and water and the evening paper," Ben said. "I feel as though I've been out of touch for a month instead of only a few days."

"It's been a busy few days."

"It has, indeed." Ben got to his feet. "Let's get the trucks away from the hangar, and visible. I wouldn't want them to miss us."

They pulled the trucks out close to the old runway and stood waiting. "What will those gunships do?" Marcie asked.

"Destroy anything and anybody who gets too close to this location during the pickup."

Within minutes the hammering sounds of the big blades slicing the air reached them. The choppers were soon visible. The gunships began a wide circle of the area, making sure no bogies interfered with the pick up. The big rescue chopper circled once, then settled down.

Ben helped Marcie inside, then put all the weapons taken from the dead and wounded in the chopper. He climbed in, shook hands with the crew chief, and sat down, buckling himself in and putting on his headset.

"Let's go home," he said into the mike.

"Affirmative, general," the pilot said. "On our way."

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Chapter Thirteen

The chopper carrying Ben and Marcie had just refueled at a Rebel outpost and with the extra tanks had enough fuel to make it to a base close to the Louisiana line. After refueling, the chopper hammered on into Base Camp One.

Cecil met Ben at the landing pad and the two old friends shook hands, Cecil saying with a grin he could not conceal, "Ben, you old warhorse. It's so damn good to see you!" Then his smile faded.

Ben stared at him for a moment. "What is it, Cece? Come on, your jaw just dropped down and hit your shoe. Give!"

"It's Anna, Ben."

"I asked if she was all right. I was assured she was. What happened, Cece?"

"We picked up your team and the plane's crew just hours after you all jumped. We didn't know where in the hell you were--"

Ben waved him silent. "Forget about me, Cece. I'm here. What about Anna?"

"Agents from Osterman's side had been planted here

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about a couple of years ago. We captured one, and he broke and confessed--"

"What about Anna!"

"They kidnapped her, Ben."

"But... why Anna? That doesn't make any sense."

"Because Tina is with West most of the time, and no one in their right mind would try to take Buddy. You and I have both seen him kill three men in seconds with his bare hands. No, they know you and Anna are close. She was the logical choice."

"Logical choice to do what, Cece?"

"To grab and use as leverage."

Ben was silent for a moment, staring at his longtime friend. "All right, Cece, OK. Leverage against me for them to gain ... what? I'm not the president here, you are. I hold no political office. What the hell do they hope to gain by kidnapping a girl not even twenty years old?"

"They plan to try her for treason, Ben, among other charges. And hang her."

"Are you fucking serious? Treason? Anna is not a citizen of the USA. She's a citizen of the SUSA. How the hell could she be tried for treason?"

The other Rebels were giving Ben and Cecil a wide berth, standing well away from the two men who gestured and talked at the edge of the tarmac.

Ben's team was not at the airport. They were with a group of other Rebels, Scouts mostly, who were getting gear together, certain that Ben would call on them for a rescue raid to get Anna. Marcie had been whisked away to a hospital for a good checking over by Rebel doctors. Most Rebels and no civilian even knew of the kidnapping. Cecil had clamped the security lid down tight, and not one word of it had leaked to the public.

"I don't understand any of this, Cece," Ben said, maintaining a firm grip on his temper. He took his friend's arm and led him off the tarmac and toward a line of vehicles. "But I'm going to get Anna back home, safe and unhurt,

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you can bet on that. And I don't give a good goddamn who I have to kill to accomplish that."

Cecil held up a hand. "I know, Ben. I know. We're all working toward that goal."

"Working ... how?"

"Through diplomatic channels."

"Fuck diplomatic channels," Ben said bluntly. "We're talking about a criminal act here. An international act of high conspiracy. We're talking about spies and the kidnapping of a citizen of an internationally recognized sovereign nation. Diplomatic channels can go suck eggs. I want Anna back. I want her back right fucking now. And by God, that is the bottom line."

"This is not the fault of those citizens living outside our borders, Ben." Cecil spoke calmly. Inwardly he was not at all calm. He was furious. "Let us handle this our way."

"All right, Cece. Seventy-two hours," Ben said, his voice tinged with cold anger. "I'll give you that much. I want Anna back in seventy-two hours. Unhurt. And there'd better not be a bruise or a scratch on her. That's final."

Ben abruptly turned away and walked toward a line of military vehicles. He reached a group of soldiers and pointed toward a Hummer. "Who's driving that vehicle?"

"Ah ... no one, sir."

"Fine," Ben said. He got in the HumVee and drove off.

Standing on the tarmac, Cecil watched Ben leave and quickly turned to an aide. "Get all the members of the emergency council together right now. We've got seventy-two hours before only God knows what breaks loose."

Ben drove to his house and cleaned up, showering and carefully shaving.

He had not shaved in several days, and he did not shave his upper lip now. He was well on his way to growing a moustache. He dressed in civilian clothing and drove to a large shopping center miles from his home. At a drugstore he bought several boxes of a popular men's hair coloring. He returned to his house and carefully read

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the instructions for the use of the product. He stored the hair coloring in his medicine cabinet and went into the den, sat down in his recliner, and picked up the phone, punching out the number of Scout HQ.

"This is General Raines. Let me speak to one of my team members, please. That's fine, I'll wait. Certainly, Sergeant. Yes, Jersey would be perfect."

Ben waited until Jersey was located and brought to the phone. "Little Bit, Ben here. I'm fine. OK. Now listen to me carefully...."

After giving Jersey instructions to pass on to the other team members, Ben went outside to his 'borrowed' Hummer.

At one of the many Rebel motor pools Ben spoke to the senior sergeant in charge, a longtime friend who had been seriously wounded some years back and pulled out of the field.

"Jesse, I want a late model sedan with a mill under the hood that nothing can catch. I want a hidden compartment-somewhere-to store various types of weapons, grenades, and ammo. The best tires on it. You've got seventy-two hours to do it. Can you do it?"

"Hell, yes, I can do it! I've already got several cars. I keep them for our security people. The compartment won't be any problem at all. It'll be waiting for you."

"Oh, I'm not through, Jesse. I want a valid USA plate on it. How about that?"

"What state?" he asked without hesitation.

"Let's do Illinois. I was born there, and plan to drive through there to familiarize myself with it."

"Let's don't. Let's use California. That state is still so fucked up they can't run a check on anything. I'm serious, General."

"Suits me, Jesse."

"You growing a moustache, General?"

"Thought I might."

"Looks good on you."

"Thanks. Ah ...Jesse ... this car business-"

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"I know about Anna, General. I've still got an eyes only clearance with Rebel security. From this point on, I never saw you, and don't know a thing about any car."

Ben smiled at his friend. "Thanks, Jess."

"Now hit the trail and let me get to work. Oh ... General?"

Ben turned around.

"I'll have a valid California driver's license waiting for you. I've got a buddy who'll take your picture and fix you right up. Whenever you're ready."

"How about tomorrow morning?"

"Sounds good. Meet you here at o nine hundred?"

Ben nodded, smiled, and left the motor pool.

Ben drove over to an armory and had a long chat with another old friend, making arrangements to pick up some items in a couple of days.

He was just about ready. A few more items to pick up. A couple more arrangements to take care of.

Ben drove back to his house and sat down in his recliner. Seventy-two hours to wait. If Anna was not released and on her way home by then ... a lot of people were going to pay a very heavy price.

In blood.

Ben left his house only a few times during the next three days. He talked with Cecil on the phone several times every day, with Cecil assuring him that everything humanly possible was being done ... through diplomatic channels, of course.

Ben's patience with diplomacy-or the lack of it-was growing very thin.

With only a few hours left to go before the deadline ran out, Ben picked up the telephone in his den on the second ring.

"Ben?" Cecil said. "Madame President Osterman has requested a few more days. I've agreed to extend the deadline for seventy-two more hours."

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"Is that right?" Ben's reply was devoid of the steadily growing rage within him. "Tell me, Cece. Just who on Sugar Babe's staff is dragging their feet on this matter?"

"The usual crew, Ben. All her left-wing cronies. They're making some demands that I am just not prepared to take seriously."

"I see." Ben did not give a damn about hearing the specifics of the demands. As far as he was concerned, every demand made by Osterman and her left-wing dickheads was illegal and totally without merit. He wanted Anna back, and that was that. And he would get her back ... one way or another.

"All right. Keep me informed, Cece."

"I sure will, Ben. Daily."

Ben returned to his small study and to his computer, where he had spent much of his waking hours the past few days. He now knew the names of all of Osterman's inner circle; he knew where they lived and how they spent their free time pursuing hobbies: golf and jogging, mostly.

The FBI, the Secret Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms ... those agencies no longer existed. They had been replaced practically overnight with the FPPS: The Federal Prevention and Protective Service. Ben knew once the fancy title was stripped away it still amounted to only one thing: the Secret Police. And he knew that the men and women who made up the FPPS were no more than thugs and bully boys-many of them reasonably well-educated but still no better than Hitler's Gestapo of decades past. The dedicated and decent members of what used to be known as the FBI, the ATF, and the Secret Service had either retired voluntarily or had been kicked out.

The left wingers had finally seen their long sought after dream turn into hard reality. The United States of America was under a hard system of socialism. Everybody was equal. No one was better off than anyone else.

"Yeah, sure," Ben muttered. Then he laughed bitterly.

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"It took a while, Mister Orwell, but your prediction finally came to pass, full-blown."

Ben leaned back in his office chair and studied the information on the screen for several moments. He shook his head in disgust at what he read, then began the procedure for shutting the system down.

While that was occurring he glanced at the pages he had printed out that day, committing to memory the important information.

He picked up the phone and punched out the number of the motor pool. When the phone was answered, he said, "I'm set to go, Jesse. Put the keys in the ash tray. And park the car by the side of the main garage."

"You got it, General. The other, ah, material from the armory came today. I stored it for you. You remember how to get into the compartment?"

"I remember."

"Good hunting."

"Thanks, Jesse. I'll see you when I get back."

"You bet, General."

Ben was already packed and ready to go. His hair was colored a dark brown, with the temples gray. His moustache was nearly as full as he would allow it. It had come in mostly brown, with only a few flecks of gray. His new ID card was in his wallet, and all the information about his new identity had been committed to memory. He was now Ben Grayson. He had a briefcase of papers from California concerning his line of business. He had asked to be left alone for several days while he had people all over the USA tracking down the location of Anna, and the names of those who were responsible for kidnapping her. His wishes to be left alone were obeyed. No one came to see him, and no one knew about

his change of appearance.

Ben tossed his luggage into the Hummer and went back into the house and fixed something to eat. He lingered over his meal, had a cup of coffee, then drove over to the motor pool. He parked the Hummer by the side of the main building. He did not make any contact with Jesse.

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The car Jesse had fixed up for him was a Ford sedan, four door. It was not a new car, but Ben knew without asking it was in top shape. Jesse would not give him anything less.

Ben transferred his two suitcases and briefcase to the back seat of the sedan and got in and cranked the engine. It started with a powerful thrust. Ben smiled, thinking: God only knows what kind of mill Jesse has under this hood and the suspension under the body.

Ben slipped the car into gear and headed out. Reaching the intersection, he turned north. He would drive straight up through Arkansas and then angle off to the east and head into Illinois and then into Indiana.

Anna was being held in a safe house in Central Indiana. Ben's people in the USA were almost certain of that. He had been warned that information might be out-dated, that she might have been moved several times by now, and was most certainly constantly under very heavy guard. The FPPS was taking no chances with their valuable hostage.

Ben spent the night at a motel in a small town in Arkansas. He slept well, then had a wonderful breakfast of country ham, eggs, grits, biscuits, and real redeye gravy and got back on the road.

He drove on through part of Eastern Missouri, then cut east and crossed over into what the residents of the SUSA referred to as 'Occupied Territory' ... formally known as the United States of America. He went through the first of what would be many federal checkpoints.

Ben smiled after he was passed through the first checkpoint without a hitch. The border guard looked at Ben's driver's license, asked Ben's reason for visiting the state of Illinois. Ben told him business, and that was that. He was waved on through with bored indifference.

Ben spent the night in Southern Illinois, just across the line from Indiana. He read the evening newspaper and snorted in disgust every few minutes. It was filled with nothing but pure socialistic crap: how the New Federal Government was introducing programs to help everybody.

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And that everybody must work just a little harder and a little longer in order to insure that everybody else could enjoy the same comforts.

The left-wing, hanky-waving, snit-throwing columnist blathered on: No one should fear the new wave of federalism: it was in place for your own good. Oh my, yes, indeedy.

Ben had to lay the paper aside and go outside for a few minutes to get some fresh air. The editorials in the newspaper were making him nauseated. The left wing had done it, all right. They had finally done it, and it had backfired in their faces: they had wanted more federal

controls, but none of them had seemed to realize that with more and more big government came more and more control in the lives of citizens. Back before the collapse and the Great War, Ben had tried to explain what that philosophy would eventually lead to, tried to explain it to the few liberal friends he had. The conversations had produced the same results as someone attempting to converse with a stump. Nothing. The liberals just stood there with blank looks on their faces until Ben finally gave up and walked away.

"Well, you asked for it," Ben muttered. "You wanted government in your lives, and now you've all damn sure got it."

"Beg pardon, sir?" The voice came from behind Ben.

Ben turned. A middle-aged man and woman were standing there, the man holding a piece of luggage, the woman with a motel key in her hand.

Ben smiled. "Sorry. It was nothing. Just talking to myself. Bad habit I've got."

"Do it all the time myself," the man said. He stared at Ben for a moment. "You work for the government?"

Ben laughed. "No. I don't. Why do you ask?"

"Can't be too careful these days. Goddamn government informers all over the place."

"David," the woman cautioned. "Be quiet."

"It's all right, Ma'am," Ben said. "I don't work for the government. I'm a businessman from California."

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"You say you are," she came right back. "But we don't know that for sure. You might even be what you say, but still working for the government."

Ben shook his head. "And both of you might be with the government, trying to trick me into saying something. That's the way this New Federalism works."

"That's very true," she replied. "These days, a person just can't be too careful. If you get put on a list, you're in real trouble."

"Have you folks eaten supper?" Ben asked. "I was just heading for the restaurant."

"No, we haven't," David said. "Tell you what. You seem like a man with a mind of his own. That's rare these days. Wait a second while we put our luggage up and we'll join you."

"I'll be right here. You folks stow your luggage and refresh yourselves. By the way, my name's Ben Grayson."

"David Renniger. This is my wife, Nancy."

"Pleased to meet you." Ben shook hands with the man and nodded at the woman. "I'll just catch the evening air for a few minutes. Have myself a smoke while I wait."

"A smoke?" David said. "Are you crazy, Ben? That's against the law. You can be arrested for smoking in public."

Ben smiled. "Are you going to turn me in?"

David returned the smile. "Not damn likely! Wait a second and I'll join you. But we'd best get behind the building before we light up. It's safer that way."

"All right. I'll wait for you."

The husband and wife disappeared into their room, a few doors down from Ben's. Ben waited for about five minutes. David and Nancy reappeared. Both cast suspicious looks all around as they walked toward him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"We're smokers, Mister Grayson," Nancy said. "Where have you been? You can be arrested for smoking."

"Oh, I know that," Ben quickly replied. "But I'm just hardheaded enough to believe that if I want to smoke in

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private that's my business, and none of the damn government's business."

The man and woman smiled. "Maybe you are all right," she said. "We'll take a chance. Come on, Mister Grayson. Let's grab us a smoke before dinner."

"Country sure has gone to crap," he muttered.

"Living out west like you do," David replied, "I guess you don't have it as bad as we do here in the middle of the nation. It's really bad around here."

"I'm beginning to understand that."

"And it'll get worse," Nancy said. "You just wait and see. Mark my words, Mister Grayson, there's going to be a civil war. People are not going to stand for much more of this nonsense."

"I seem to remember that same kind of prediction back before the Great War. Not too many people had the courage to do much about it."

"Yeah, so do I. I wish to hell I'd had enough sense to join some anti-government group back then. But I followed the party line, just like my parents."

Ben did not choose to respond. Already, he was beginning to experience the tension and suspicion of the couple who had joined him.

As they walked around to the rear of the motel complex, Ben said, "I hope they have something good on the menu this evening. I haven't eaten since early morning."

"You really are from the far west, aren't you, Mister Grayson?" Nancy asked. "We heard the new rules haven't as yet reached all parts of the

nation. You've got a lot to learn about the New Federalism."

"I beg your pardon?"

Nancy smiled. "We'll bring you up to date over a smoke. You're in for a real surprise."

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Chapter Fourteen

"This food isn't very good," Ben whispered to the couple seated across the table from him. "And there's no salt on the table." He looked around the dining room. "There's no salt on any of the tables."

"You can ask for a salt substitute," Nancy returned the whisper. "Pure salt is illegal."

Ben blinked a couple of times. "When the hell did all that take place?"

"Officially, last week," David replied. "It came under the new Health Food Act. There hasn't been any press on it. Not yet, anyway."

"What the hell is that?" Ben asked. "I've always known Osterman and Millard were weird. But no salt?"

Nancy smiled, saying, "It's not just salt, Ben. Nothing cooked in lard or grease can be served to the public or used at home. French fries are a thing of the past. Anything deep fried is illegal."

Ben forgot his food and just stared across the table in disbelief at the couple. "You're putting me on!"

David and Nancy laughed, David saying, "Nope. 'Fraid

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not, Ben. No real bacon can be served in restaurants, either. It's not good for you. Can't buy it in stores. Only on the black market. Turkey bacon is all that is allowed. But some of it's really not bad ... once you get used to it."

"No foods of high fat content are allowed," Nancy said. "That's new Federal law. It went into effect last week. The people must be protected."

"From themselves," David added.

"Good God!" Ben blurted. "Has the damn government gone crazy?"

Both David and Nancy quickly and quietly shushed him. David looked around furtively and said, "Be careful, Ben. You never know who might be listening, and who will report you. It's not wise to criticize the government. You have to be careful not to get on the government's subversive list. Once you're on it, it's almost impossible to get off."

"What the hell happened to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights?" Ben whispered.

"They're being reinterpreted and rewritten," Nancy said. "That isn't official yet. But it's happening as we speak."

"Cigarettes are illegal," Ben said. "Now you tell me that any type of fatty food is illegal. What's next?"

"Sport utility vehicles and full size pickup trucks are about to be banned," David replied. "All cars and trucks are to be approximately the same size. One driver won't have an advantage over another in any type of accident."

"How about eighteen wheelers?" Ben asked, pushing the plate of bland food away from him. It was awful: tasteless and devoid of any spices.

"They're next," Nancy said. "As soon as the government figures out how to move materials in a safer manner. It's whispered that congress is talking about building highways for large trucks only."

"That would sure put a lot of people back to work," David remarked, sarcasm thick in his voice.

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"It certainly would," Ben agreed. "For about the next century or so."

"The new order is moving very quickly now," Nancy said. "The press seems to be solidly behind them, and the government appears to be unstoppable."

"That figures," Ben said. "About the press, I mean. And you folks are going to do what about it?"

The husband and wife shrugged their shoulders. "What can we do?"

There were a number of things Ben thought of suggesting, but he held his tongue. He didn't really know these people, and there was a real possibility they might not be who they claimed to be. The paranoia and suspicion that seemed to prevail all around Ben was beginning to lightly grip him.

Nancy seemed to read his thoughts. She touched Ben on the hand. "Infectious, isn't it? The mood, I mean?"

"Yes," Ben said. "It sure is."

"Wondering about us, aren't you?" David asked.

"That thought passed through my mind, yes. I have to admit that."

"We don't blame you, Ben. We're both wondering about you, too. You just don't know much about what's been going on in America."

Ben decided to take a chance. "The USA, you mean."

Both husband and wife visibly paled. Ben immediately lost much of his suspicion of the pair. No way they could fake that. They both were plenty scared. "Ben," Nancy said softly, "don't even mention the SUSAs, not ever! To anybody else."

"It's too dangerous," David whispered. "People who have said good things about that part of the country have gotten into a lot of trouble."

"Arrested?"

"Detained for a period of time and questioned," Nancy said. "And sometimes the questioning can be harsh, if you know what I mean."

"Yes," Ben replied. "I can imagine."

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The three were silent for a few minutes. None of them ate much of their supper. Finally Ben said, "Where do you two call home?"

"New Muncie," Nancy replied, spreading some of the worst tasting oleo Ben had ever had the misfortune to put in his mouth on a slice of bread. She smiled. "A lot of towns and cities around the country have New in front of the original name, although the maps usually leave that off."

"I've noticed that," Ben said. Then he lowered his voice. "I guess General Raines and his Rebels pretty well destroyed most of the cities and larger towns."

"They did what they believed they had to do," David said cautiously.

"Oh, I'm not faulting them," Ben quickly replied. He shook his head. "Have you ever seen the ruins of Los Angeles? No? It's a sight to behold. It will be a long time before everything is cleared. Years before rebuilding is complete."

"You live near Los Angeles?"

"Oh, no. I'm located in Northern California. But I've been down to Los Angeles several times on business. It's certainly something to see. When did the state to state border passes stop in this part of America?"

"Only a few weeks ago," David said. "All the guards were shifted down south, if you know what I mean."

Ben nodded his head. He knew. They had all been shifted down to the border with the SUSA ... all two thousand or so miles of it. "The way it looks and sounds to me, there might be a war shaping up between the two nations."

David sighed. "That wouldn't surprise me at all. But General Raines has said he'll use chemical warfare against the USA. I just don't believe he means it." David cut his eyes to see if anyone were listening. No one was. "Ben, we're all Americans. Borders can't change that. What can those of us outside the ... well, that other nation ... do to change things? To live peacefully side by side?"

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Ben knew, of course, but he was hesitant to say the words aloud.

"I know, I know," David said. "At least I think I know what you're going to say. But we're unarmed, Ben. And I mean totally unarmed. We can't fight... what do we fight with? Getting caught with a gun in your possession means hard jail time. God, all this ... mess we're in just quietly slipped up on us."

Ben had to smile at that. "Did it, David? Did it really just slip up on us?"

David stared at Ben for a moment. Then he exhaled in frustration. "OK, Ben," he whispered. "So it didn't. All right, we let it. But that doesn't answer my question. What can we do about it now?"

"I can't answer that, David. That's something you'll have to decide for yourself."

"I guess I knew that all along." His eyes twinkled for a few seconds and he added, "Of course, even if you did know the answer, you'd be hesitant to discuss it with someone you've only known for an hour, right?"

"Wouldn't you be, David?"

"Sure. Sure, I would. Well, where are you off to in the morning?"

"North, David. I have business up north."

They lingered awhile longer over really lousy coffee and talked of small things. Nothing more was said about the government. After a few minutes, Ben said goodnight and excused himself, heading to the rear of the motel complex for a smoke. He was not surprised to find half a dozen other people there, puffing away. They fell silent at Ben's approach. It was a very uncomfortable silence.

After Ben had lit up and taken a couple of drags, one of the women in the group of sneaky smokers said, "Oh, to hell with it. If he's a government informer then he'll just have to go ahead and report me. If I want a cigarette, I'm by God going to smoke one. Fuck the government!"

Ben chuckled and said, "If you folks are worried about

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me, you can relax. I'm not a government agent. I'm just passing through on my way up north."

"It's not agents we're worried about, mister," one of the men said. "It's local informers you have to watch out for."

"Yeah," another man said. "Lousy left-wing bastards and bitches. They get special privileges for informing on people who break the rules."

"When the hell did the voters pass all these crummy assed rules and regulations?" a woman asked.

"We didn't," another in the group said. "Osterman and Millard and those people decide what is good for the people. But the people don't have anything to say about it."

"It's communism," another said.

"It's very close to it. But it started out as socialism," Ben said. "Many years before the Great War and the collapse. But socialism is the first step toward communism. The people just couldn't, or wouldn't, believe it. Many tried to warn people what was happening, but they weren't taken seriously. They were called anti-government and government haters."

"Yeah, I remember that," a man said. "I wish to hell I'd joined one of those groups back then."

"I know what I'm going to do," a woman said. "I'm moving to the SUSA."

"Lady," a man said. "You're taking a hell of a chance just speaking those words aloud."

"You sure are," Ben said. "The damn government can arrest you for treason, or some other ridiculous charge."

"Not only can they arrest you," a man said out of the darkness, "they do."

"Buddy of mine was hauled in for questioning," another said. "The federal goons didn't hurt him, but the questioning was long and very intense. Scared the crap out of my buddy."

"We've sure reached a sorry state of affairs in this country," a woman said, toeing out her cigarette.

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"With no end in sight," the man standing next to her added.

"Well, there is a civil war shaping up," someone said. "Maybe it will get all straightened out after that's over."

"I like some of what the SUSA offers," a woman said. "But the way I hear it they've got some pretty restrictive laws on the books down there."

"You're getting your information from the government owned radio and TV," a man countered. "Who the hell would believe what any of those people have to say?"

"Who the hell would believe anything the press says?" another offered. "I remember during the last few years before the collapse, there were only a few reporters I'd pay any attention to. They're all gone now."

"Most of them are working for the newspapers and TV stations down in the SUSA. I've seen and heard and read them when I was visiting down close to the border. There is a hell of a lot of difference between the news down there and what we get up here."

"Yes," Ben said. "I've visited friends who live along the border with the SUSA. It's straight, hard facts down there. And if it's in print or on the air they'd better get it right the first time, and every time after that."

"I heard that if a politician distorts the truth or twists the words of his opponent, or just blatantly lies, the press is all over that person with both feet," a woman said, lighting up another smoke.

"You bet they are," Ben replied. "I've personally heard them do it."

"Smokes out!" a man said in a stage whisper. "The cops are here."

Ben dropped his cigarette and toed it out, then stepped back against the side of the building just as two uniformed men came around the building, flashlights in their hands.

The woman who had first vocalized her contempt for the government stood calmly, puffing on her cigarette. There was no back up in her.

"You there!" one of the men in black uniforms said.

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"What's the matter with you? Put out that cigarette. You're in violation of the National Health Act."

"Screw you!" the woman said, and took another puff.

"We got us a real mouthy one this time," the other cop said. "Where did you get those cigarettes, lady? Give us a name, and we won't write you up."

"Go to hell," the woman said. "I'm not bothering a soul by smoking out here. Go catch a crook or something."

The other cop grabbed her and twisted her arm behind her, snapping on one cuff. Then he twisted the other arm and clamped the cuff on that wrist.

"Get out of here!" the second cop told Ben and the others. "And keep your mouths shut about what you just saw. Move, goddamnit!"

"Whatever you say, officer," a man said.

The crowd of smokers faded into the darkness and Ben walked slowly back to his room. It was hard for him to believe what he had just witnessed had actually happened.

"Unbelievable," he muttered.

Then he realized that perhaps it wasn't so difficult to believe, after all. The ultimate goal of the enviro-freaks, the ultra liberals, the feminazis, the hard left wingers, the anti-gun crowd, the give-me-something-for-nothing crowd, the government-knows-everything-Big-Brother crowd and their timid little don't-hit-me-I'll-sue-you groupies, had always been to control the lives of everybody who didn't agree with them.

Ben stood in front of his room and watched the patrol car leave with the hollering, cussing, kicking woman in the backseat. He turned his head as another woman from the smoking group walked up.

"What'll happen to that woman?" Ben asked.

"Oh, she'll be fined and given a lecture by the judge. If her attitude hasn't improved any, and she lips off to the judge, she might be sent to a reindoctrination camp."

"Are you putting me on, lady?"

The woman laughed. "No. Not at all. Those camps just

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opened in this area last week. They've been a very successful government secret for several months now." She stepped closer to Ben. "We need to talk, General Raines," she whispered. "Right now. In your room."

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Chapter Fifteen

The woman appeared to be unarmed, and she made no threatening gestures. Ben stood in the darkness for a moment and stared at her, his memory banks working overtime. There was something about her that was familiar.

"It's important," she whispered. "I'm not a federal agent. I'm here to help you, not turn you in."

"Years ago," Ben whispered. "In Louisiana. You were with the FBI. You and a male agent came to see me about a book I'd written."

"That's right, Ben. But I quit the Bureau months ago. Just before the name change." Ben could see her shrug her shoulders. "It was either that or get fired. The new administration did some housecleaning."

Ben reached into his pocket for the room key. "Yes. I would certainly say they did. Swept a reasonably clean floor and then let in the rats to shit all over the place."

"That's...an interesting way of phrasing current events, General. But in a manner of speaking, you're right."

Ben opened his room door and waved the woman inside. He did not turn on the lights. He walked through the

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darkness and turned on the light in the bathroom. That left the larger room in dim shadows.

"My name is Sandi," the woman said, sitting down in a chair before Ben could ask her to do so. "With an i, not ay."

"I remember now. Sandi. Yes. You were all upset about a novel I'd written that was critical of the government."

"I was very young then, Ben. Full of very idealistic notions. Times change. People mature."

"Well, the times certainly have changed, for a fact." Ben opened his suitcase and took out a bottle of whiskey. "Drink, Sandi?"

"Sure. With water. Don't drown it. Obviously you haven't heard about the new regs concerning the use of alcohol."

"Don't tell me the government is banning booze."

"To a degree, yes. But that isn't why I'm here."

"Let's hope not."

Ben turned to fix the drinks and Sandi said, "Have you lost your mind, Ben? If I can recognize you, don't you think others can do the same?"

"I'm sure. Are you telling me this was just a chance meeting?"

"Yes. As difficult as that may be for you to believe, it's the truth. I was having coffee in the dining room when you checked in."

"Just passing through this town, huh?"

"No," Sandi said. "I live here. I was born here. My father owned Parsons Hardware until the Great War. Ask anyone from around here. Would you like to see my brand new government ID?"

"No. It could easily be as fake as mine. I'll take your word."

"What state's ID are you using?"

"California."

"Good call. That state is so screwed up nothing can be checked out of there."

"So I was told. I've been out of the country for some months."

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Sandi took the offered drink and thanked Ben. "How was Africa?"

"Bloody. What do you want, Sandi?"

"Nothing much. Just a chance to work with you, that's all."

Ben sat down and gave her a long, hard look. "And I'm supposed to trust you? You show up out of the blue, so to speak, a woman who has spent her entire adult life working for a government I fought against, and I'm supposed to take you at face value, is that it?"

"Do you have any choice?"

"I could kill you right now and solve the problem. So, yes, I do."

She frowned. "I don't think I like that choice, Ben." She held out her purse. "I have a pistol in there. I could have killed you from the shadows, and probably been rewarded with getting my job back. I didn't."

Ben nodded and took a sip of his whiskey and water. "That's very true. Put your purse down. I don't want to look in it. All right. You have family left in this town?"

She shook her head. "No. My parents were killed by punks a few years ago. I don't know where my brother and sister are. I don't even know if they're alive."

"You know, of course, why I'm here?"

She shook her head. "I haven't a clue. I was certainly surprised to see you. I thought surely I was mistaken. Why are you here?"

"My adopted daughter, Anna." Ben didn't know whether to believe the woman or not, but he would reserve judgement for a while longer.

"I heard you adopted a kid from eastern Europe. What about her?"

"Osterman had her kidnapped. I'm told they're going to try her for treason and execute her."

Sandi shook her head. "I doubt it. There would really be a public outcry about that. Probably just a move to pull you into doing something stupid."

"Perhaps," Ben admitted. "But if I'm supposed to be

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so well known, why are you the only one who's recognized me?"

"The hair and the moustache threw me off for a few minutes, but the voice gave you away." She slugged back some of her drink and set the glass on a coffee table. "OK what's the plan?"

"I don't have one, other than to find Anna and get her free. Which I will do, one way or the other, bet on that."

"I might be able to help you with that... maybe," she quickly added. "No promises."

Ben didn't hesitate to reply. He knew he needed all the help he could get. "All right, Sandi, it's a deal." If she were setting him up for a hard fall... well, she would die before he did. Ben would make damn sure of that.

"I can't check in here for the night. That would look strange to the front office-they know I live not far from here. Besides, they're probably informers."

"I'm already getting very weary of this informer crap. I think perhaps a war is just around the corner."

"Will you people start it?"

"No. Not unless something happens to Anna. Then I'll start my own private war. No ... a war will start between our two nations only if the USA violates our freedom, our sovereignty."

"Well, I can assure you, Ben, that is going to happen. I know for a fact that Claire Osterman and Harlan Millard have vowed to reunite the states."

"Then there will be a war," Ben said, in a flat, deadly tone. "It's firm, then-those two run the USA?"

"With an iron grip, General. One hundred percent."

"Better break that habit of calling me General. That could get us both killed."

"You're right. Sorry." She smiled. "But for years in the Bureau, you were referred to as General Raines." She laughed, and it was a genuine laugh, not a bit forced. "Among other names, of course."

"I'm sure of that. OK, where and how do we meet in the morning?"

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"I'll put a change of clothing in a large purse and meet you up on the

corner by the gas station. You can buy me whatever else I need on the road."

"Oh? I can buy you?"

"Sure. I'm unemployed, remember?"

Ben grinned at her and lifted his drink glass in a mock salute. "Deal."

Sandi finished her drink and stood up. "I'll see you in the morning, then. What time?"

"Early. About five-thirty. On the corner."

"And I'd better be alone, right?"

"If you're not, you're dead. And that's a promise."

"I believe you, Ben. See you at dawn."

Ben finished his drink and went to bed, a pistol within easy reach on the night stand. Sandi was lying. He was sure of that. But he would play along for a while. See where it led.

"Do you know a place where we can get a decent breakfast?" Ben asked. They had been on the road for about an hour.

"Not really," Sandi said. "The government has outlawed eggs cooked sunny-side up, for health reasons. Of course, you know about bacon being banned."

"How about pork chops?"

"Baked or broiled or grilled is OK Not fried."

"Now, how in the hell is the government going to keep people from frying pork chops in their own kitchens?"

"Obviously, they can't, but they're launching a massive ad campaign against fried foods. They're teaching kids in grade school never to fry foods."

Ben cut his eyes to her and grimaced. "Wonderful," he said sarcastically. "You mentioned something about liquor last night. The government is banning booze?"

"In a way. There again, it's being taught in grade school. And in a very subtle way, kids are being taught to inform on their parents."

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"The left wingers really must be happy. The good ole' U S of A is finally a one hundred percent socialistic society."

"Millions of Americans aren't too thrilled about it."

"Then why in the hell don't they do something about it? Why did they allow it to reach this point?"

Sandi offered no immediate response to that. She glanced at Ben for a heartbeat, then sat quietly for a time and looked out the window as the

landscape rolled by. Finally she said, "But millions of Americans are happy with it, Ben."

"Yeah, and that's the big problem with a so-called democracy. Take a hundred people, and fifty-one can tell the remaining forty nine what to do. That split isn't worth a damn!"

"The percentage is different in the SUSA, isn't it?"

"You bet it is. But that isn't a problem in the SUSA. We all think pretty much the same on the major issues. We don't want to run another nation's business. But voting on major issues has been a problem in the USA for decades ... a growing one. Look up there ahead of us. A damn roadblock."

"That's a big county school over to the right. Something's happened at the school. See the lights from the police cars?"

Ben pulled in behind a mini-van and stopped. The line of cars and trucks ahead of the mini-van was already long. Ben glanced in his rearview mirror: the traffic behind him was backed up. He was pinned in. That was not a feeling Ben liked. He stirred restlessly behind the wheel.

"Relax," Sandi said. "I see an ambulance over at the school. It's got nothing to do with us."

A woman came walking back to the mini-van from the direction of the roadblock and walked up to the car, passenger side.

"A kid brought a pistol on the bus with him this morning. Can you imagine that. A pistol! He was going to shoot one of his teachers."

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"Did he say he was going to shoot a teacher?" Sandi asked.

"Well, no," the red-faced, highly agitated woman replied. "But why else would he bring a pistol to school? I mean, pistols are outlawed here ... finally. Not even adults are allowed to own pistols. You know that!"

"Yes, I'm well aware of that," Sandi said, cutting her eyes to Ben, who was smiling. She felt she knew what he was thinking: Sandi was one of the federal agents who used to kick in the door of any American citizen who dared defy the federal ban on pistols ... back before the Great War.

"Don't say a word, Ben," she whispered as the woman standing on the side of the road rattled on about guns. "I know exactly what you're thinking."

"My lips are sealed, ex-fed," Ben replied.

"It wasn't a real gun!" a man yelled from several cars up the line. "It was a toy pistol."

"They killed him!" a woman shouted from the car just ahead of the mini-van. "They shot the boy dead."

"Well, it was the boy's fault," said the woman standing by the side of the road. "Toy guns have been banned for several months now. He shouldn't have brought one to school. It's all his fault. And his parents' fault."

"If only one boy was shot, ask why there are several ambulances at the school," Ben whispered.

Sandi didn't have to ask. Before she could open her mouth, the woman at the car ahead of the mini shouted, "The police shot three boys who ran to help the first boy. My God!"

"Were they carrying toy pistols, too?" Ben asked.

The two women standing by the road were shouting at each other angrily and moving closer to each other. For a minute Ben thought the women might tie up in a fight.

"Oh, to hell with you, fatso!" the second woman yelled. "The damn pistol was orange! It was a water pistol!"

"It still looked like a real gun!" the woman standing by

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Ben's car shouted. "And don't call me fatso, you skinny bitch!"

"An orange pistol, you lardass?" the other woman yelled. "Bullshit!"

"I wonder if those two ladies know each other." Ben whispered. "I'll bet they do."

"Lardass?" the slightly overweight lady hollered. "Well, fuck you, Sally!"

"Yep," Ben said. "They know each other."

"Real close friends, too," Sandi said.

"Oh, I'm sure."

A heavysset man in a black uniform walked up. "All right! You women be quiet. Stop shouting and cussing each other and get back in your cars."

"The state police," Sandi said, "but part of their salary is paid by the government. They're really a branch of the FPPS."

"The Federal Protection and Prevention Service," Ben muttered.

"You're almost right," Sandi said. "It's Prevention and Protection."

"Whatever."

"You can go to hell, too, Ralph," Sally yelled. "You damn communist!"

"Well, now," Ben said, sitting up straighter behind the wheel. "There might be hope for the USA yet. Where there is one with the courage to call it like it is, there will probably be more."

"If she doesn't shut up she's gonna get arrested."

"Ralph is not a communist," the woman standing by Ben's car bellowed. "He's a brave man doing a fine and thankless job."

"They're both about half right," Sandi remarked. "There are still some

cops who don't like their new designation and job description. I don't know if Ralph is one of those or not."

"Shit!" Sally shouted sarcastically. "He's a damn bully boy, that's what he is!"

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"You'd better shut that mouth of yours, Sally," the state cop yelled.

"What are you gonna do, Ralph?" Sally challenged. "Arrest me for having an opinion?" Before Ralph could reply, she added, "Oh, well, now! Here comes the head honcho of the state bully boys. Get ready to kiss his ass, Ralph, you gutless punk!"

Another voice was added. "Take that woman's name." A tall slender man in a black uniform walked up.

"I know her name, Gene," Ralph said. "She's got a big mouth, that's all."

"Now, by God, you'll see who runs things around here, you whore!" the woman by Ben's car yelled.

"Be quiet, Bertha!" Ralph hollered.

"Whore?" Sally yelled. "You screw every secret police agent who will stick a dick in you, and you call me a whore? You goddamn informer!"

"Arrest that woman!" the tall man in the black uniform shouted. "I want to question her."

Sandi cut her eyes to Ben. "Now you see firsthand how things have deteriorated."

"How dare you speak to me in such a manner!" Bertha yelled. "You damn ... Republican!"

"Now that is really an insult," Sandi said. "Any member of what used to be known as the Republican Party is suspect by the New Left and the FPPS."

"The Republican Party no longer exists?"

"Sort of, but not really. Not always by that name. It's called the New Right now... among other names. But very few dare to openly join it. It's a subversive organization."

"Oh, really," Ben replied, his voice filled with scorn. "The USA has certainly gone to shit in more ways than one, hasn't it?" He glanced at her. "The Republican Party is still around?"

"A few brave souls still register as Republicans, but damn few. As I said, you get listed as a subversive when you do."

Ben shook his head in disbelief, but knew Sandi was telling the truth. The ambulances were pulling out of the

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parking lot, Sally was being led off by the state police for questioning, presumably for calling someone an informer, or for pointing

one out in public. Ben wasn't sure. He dropped the shift lever into drive and pulled out behind the mini-van.

"You blame me-I mean hold me responsible in some way-for what has happened in this country, Ben?"

"Why not? You were sure as hell part of the 'investigate anyone who dares to say anything critical about the government' crowd. How many doors did you help kick in, Sandi? How many taxpaying citizens did you help roust in the middle of the night? How many firearms did you take from law-abiding people? Hell, yes, you were a part of it. And after the Great War and the collapse, when the nation was rebuilding, you went right back with the feds and started doing the same damn thing, all over again."

"I can't deny it. You're right, I did."

"Now you've had a change of heart, right?"

"Oh, not entirely. I still don't agree a hundred percent with the philosophy of the SUSA, and never will."

"Hell, very few people living in the SUSA do agree a hundred percent. But they live with the laws they don't entirely agree with because they have created a better society ... for us. We're easing back on some of our laws and rules. And we'll probably ease back on a few more as time goes by. But the so-called harsh punishment we have for criminals, our gun laws-such as they are-our educational system, which is completely different from anything found up here in this fucked up place, to name just a few things about the SUSA, those will never be compromised. Never, not as long as I live."

"Unless the SUSA reaches some sort of agreement with the USA, there's going to be a terrible war between the two nations. Is that what you want?"

"That's the last thing I want. President Jefferys has made that very clear, time and again. But every time some sort of agreement is reached the left wing takes over up here, and reasonable leaders are driven out of office and

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replaced by people like Osterman and Millard. What are we to do, Sandi?"

They rode in silence for several miles before Sandi replied. "Nothing can be worked out, Ben?"

"Nothing. And we have tried."

"Up here, the official word is that you want war. That you turn down every offer of peace this administration suggests."

"We do turn it down, but we don't want war. The offers they make are ridiculous, amounting to nothing more than surrender for us. That isn't going to happen."

"Then there is going to be a war." Her statement was flat, devoid of feeling.

"I'm afraid so. I don't see any way to avoid it."

"Then I'd better make up my mind and pick a side and stay with it, right?"

"I thought you'd already done that, Sandi. Did you change your mind?"

She smiled, rather sadly Ben thought, but he didn't have to wonder much about that ... he was sure she was still working for the government. "Oh, I'm not going to turn you in," she said. "Rest easy and put that thought out of your mind. I wanted to hear some words from you, not the official party line out of the capital in Indiana or the official line from the SUSA. Do I support the SUSA? Not entirely. But I'm certainly leaning more toward the SUSA than the USA ... at least as long as Osterman and her crowd remain in control."

Damn liar. "From the looks of things, so far as I've seen, that is going to be a long, long time."

"Unfortunately, you're probably right about that. So I don't have much choice in picking a side, do I?"

"Not if you enjoy freedom."

She nodded her head. "OK." She pointed. "Hang a right at this intersection up ahead. That'll take us into Indiana, and there are no checkpoints to worry with."

"Sandi, you've never told me where you believe Anna is being held."

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"I know for a fact the FPPS is still using our old safe houses around the capital. It's going to be a process of elimination, that's all."

"And when we find her, there's going to be some killing. Are you ready for that?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not if you stay with me."

"There again, Ben, I don't seem to have much of a choice. The USA's not offering its citizens a democracy, but then, neither is the SUSA. However, while the SUSA believes in a small central government and maximum freedom for its citizens, with everyone taking total responsibility for his or her own actions, the USA believes in a large and intrusive government and offers, the barest minimum of freedom for its citizens. The USA is going right back to a very complicated tax code, just like the one used before the collapse and the Great War. The SUSA's tax code is simple and, I believe, the fairer of the two. So my side is your side, and let the chips fall where they may. But I have to warn you that when this is all over and the smoke clears-by that I mean Osterman and Millard out of power-I will support the USA. This country can't survive separation."

"All right, Sandi. We each know where the other stands. I can work under those rules. Now let's go get my kid."

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Chapter Sixteen

Ben and Sandi checked into a motel-adjointing rooms- on the outskirts of Indianapolis in the middle of the afternoon. After stowing their luggage and seeing to their personal needs, Sandi joined Ben in his room, sitting down in the desk chair.

"So how far are we from the first of these safe houses?" Ben asked.

"We're about half a mile from one. It's a warehouse. One of the few buildings you people left standing," she added with a faint smile. "But the city has made an astounding recovery, as has much of the USA. Nothing like you people in the SUSA, of course. Or so I've heard."

"It's because we all were single-minded about rebuilding, Sandi. Twelve and fourteen hour days-during the spring and summer-were common.

"And no unions to get in your way."

"That's not entirely true. But do you think unions up here are going to last very long, or have any real power under a socialistic form of government if they do?"

She shook her head.

"Well, labor got what they wanted. After a total collapse

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and several years of anarchy, damned if they didn't go right back voting for the left wing."

"Not all of them."

Ben held up a hand. "Let's talk about this safe house. We can discuss politics later."

She nodded and unfolded a recent map of the city. She pointed to a road. "It's right here. On the left side, about midway."

"All right. Let's go check it out."

She touched his arm. "Are you armed, Ben? Other than that pistol?"

He stared at her for a moment. The woman just wouldn't quit. To his way of thinking, she had given herself away a dozen times already. All right, he'd play her game awhile longer. "What are we going up against?"

"Automatic weapons, both wheel and semi-automatic pistols."

"No rocket launchers or .50 caliber machine guns?" Ben asked, only slightly sarcastic.

"You really don't trust me, do you?"

Sandi's blue eyes were a bit chilly as they locked onto his gaze, Ben thought. But ... why not? She was playing a dangerous and deadly game. "Not entirely," he leveled with her. "I've yet to see just what you'll do when the chips are down and the play is dirty."

"I guess that's fair. I'd probably feel the same way."

"Let's go to work."

"You didn't answer my question about being armed."

He smiled. "No. I didn't, did I?"

They drove slowly past the big warehouse. There was a truck parked by a side-loading dock. No other vehicles in sight.

"Not a very busy place," Ben remarked.

"Not now. But it is a working warehouse for government material. Living quarters are in the rear. Behind the storeroom. It's heated and air-conditioned. Fully equipped kitchen, bathroom with shower, two bedrooms."

"All the comforts of home. Soundproofed?"

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"Sure."

"So no one can hear the screaming of those being questioned?"

"We never tortured anyone, Ben. The interrogation might have gotten very intense, but there was never any physical torture."

"If you say so. Are there cameras monitoring the outside?"

"Not when we used it. I can't say about now."

"Well, just in case there are, we'd better not drive around it again. You think Anna is being held here?"

"There's a chance she is, yes. It's just going to be a process of elimination for us. Checking out all the places I know of."

"And she might not be in any of them."

"That's a possibility. And if she isn't, then what?"

"I find an FPPS agent and get the information from him."

"That might not be as easy as you think. I'll be the first to admit these FPPS guys are bully boys for the most part, but you'd better remember that most of them are as tough as a boot. Keep that in mind."

"Oh, I'm sure you're right, Sandi. But I've found that people can take one finger being hacked off, but once the second finger is sawed or cut off, most folks suddenly tend to be rather cooperative."

Sandi stared at him and then shuddered. "I hope you're kidding, Ben."

"I'm not. This is my kid we're talking about. And there had damn well better not be a mark on her."

Sandi said, "Before you brought that up, I was going to suggest we have an early supper."

"That's a good idea. Tell the truth I am a bit hungry. You know a place?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Turn up here at this next light. To the right."

"Is the food edible?"

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"It's not bad. A little on the bland side, but it's good for you. Healthy." She smiled at Ben's sudden grimace.

"So are the field rations our scientists have concocted. But they still taste like sheep shit smells."

"You have such a subtle way of putting things."

"I know. That's me. Tactful."

"Answer a question for me?"

"If I can."

"The SUSAs has a universal health plan, right?"

"Of sorts, yes. No citizen is denied medical treatment, if that's what you mean." He cut his eyes briefly to her. "That's a strange thing to ask at this time."

"I was curious about how you pay for it."

Ben turned on the street she had pointed out before replying. "The government of the United States handed out hundreds of millions of dollars a year, every year, to countries who didn't have the foggiest notion of how to spend it wisely, or just flat out didn't deserve it. Your government funded the most asinine of programs in history ... with taxpayer money. Many of those programs were miserable failures. Worse yet, they didn't have a chance of working from the outset. Your government spent billions on pork barrel projects-roads that went nowhere, bridges that weren't needed. That list is practically endless. Most members of congress-in my opinion-were a bunch of assholes who took great delight in spending taxpayer money and raising taxes in the most under-the-table, devious manner they could dream up, and they were plenty inventive when it came to fucking the American public out of their money. We don't do any of those things in the SUSAs. So we can take that money and spend it on things that really matter. Our criminal justice system is nothing like the old one. That had a stranglehold on both the innocent and the victim while giving the criminal all sorts of rights and legal loopholes. And in addition it cost the taxpayers billions and billions of dollars every year. It costs us billions and billions of dollars less. That's just part of how we do it, Sandi."

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"I ... guess I see. I don't think anyone outside of the SUSAs really understands how your government works."

"Oh, most people do. They just won't accept it."

"I guess. It just seems so ... extreme to me."

"It really isn't extreme. It's just back to the basics, that's all. One of the oldest rights humankind has is the right to protect loved ones, self, and property. That goes back thousands of years, back to when our ancestors lived in caves. And I have never believed any legislative body or court of law should have the power to take that away from people. In the SUSA, we don't even try. What is mine is mine, and if someone tries to take it without due process, I'm going to stop him. And if that involves the use of deadly force ... so be it."

"And you don't consider that extreme?"

"I consider it the right of every law-abiding citizen of the SUSA ... if they wish to exercise that right."

"And the crime rate in the SUSA?"

"Practically non-existent."

"Then I guess that says it all, doesn't it?"

"I guess it does."

Ben parked the car at the rear of the warehouse lot, tucking it between two trucks.

"We'll sit here for a few minutes and wait," he said. "If they have outside sensors, someone will be along shortly to check us out."

While Sandi was in her room at the motel, Ben had opened the hidden compartment in the car and had taken out a short-barreled 9mm machine pistol with sound suppressor, thirty round magazine. The weapons were designed and manufactured in the SUSA, and most special operations people carried them when the job required stealth and silence.

Ben had placed the machine pistol on the floorboards of the backseat along with a full six magazine pouch. He

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reached behind him, retrieving the equipment, cradling the weapon.

Sandi watched him in the darkness as he checked the sub-machine gun. "Interesting weapon."

"We like them."

"If the FPPS found you with that weapon during a road check, you'd be in a lot of trouble."

"Probably. But there would be a lot of dead FPPS people before I went down."

"Then you don't mind breaking the law outside of your own nation?"

"Not when it involves rescuing my kid, who was illegally taken from my nation."

"Have you considered that maybe the FPPS people guarding her don't know who she is?"

Ben looked at her. "Don't talk nonsense."

Sandi nodded in the darkness of the interior of the car. "I guess you're right, Ben." After a moment of silence, she said, "May I ask a question?"

"Go right ahead."

"How come the commanding general of one of the most feared armies on the face of the earth is off on a lone wolf operation all by himself?"

"Because it's my show. Anna is my kid. The democrat/socialist government in power up here did it to sucker me out. All right. That's what they wanted, so here I am. And don't think for an instant they don't have their best people surrounding Anna. They knew I would come after her." He looked at his watch. A couple more minutes and then they would make their move.

"Time to go?" Sandi asked.

"Almost."

"Won't the dome light come on when we open the doors?"

"No. They're fixed not to come on. Neither will the trunk light."

"Do you think of everything?"

"I try. Sandi?"

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"Yes?"

"Don't hesitate to shoot. You said the building was soundproofed."

"It is. Ben, I might know some of those people in there. If they're in there. What then?"

"If that's the case, I would say your friendship with them is about to come to an abrupt end. And they're in there, Sandi, or you wouldn't have been so insistent on coming here first. Unless you're setting me up. And if that's the case, you'll go down first."

"I'm not setting you up, and I don't know for sure she's being held here. I just have a hunch, that's all. Call it a very strong hunch."

"All right. It's show time. So let's do it."

Sandi opened her purse and took out a pistol: a snub nosed .38. Ben noted that she did not check the loads. Amateurs did that... and people in the movies. A gun is either loaded or it isn't, and if the person carrying the pistol doesn't know, they probably shouldn't be carrying one around.

The two of them walked across the rear parking lot, their shoes making crunching sounds in the gravel. There was no other sound except for the traffic noise on the street in front of the warehouse.

"Not much traffic for the nation's capital," Ben remarked in a whisper.

"Never is," Sandi replied. "There is nothing here to see. Not like

Washington used to be."

They heard the sounds of a back door opening, and hit the ground fast, only a few yards from the rear of the building.

Ben figured they were only a few seconds from a wild shoot-out, but the man who opened the back door did not see them. He stood for a moment, framed in the dim light, until a woman's voice called out.

"Shut the damn door, Marsh," she said in a commanding voice. "Are you crazy?"

"Hell, Barbara, there's no one out here," Marsh replied.

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"There isn't one chance in a million any damn Rebel will show up after that bitch."

"Don't be so damn sure of that, Marsh. Now get your ass back in here, pronto."

"All right, all right," Marsh said irritably. "Keep your pants on."

"Oh, don't worry about that, I will," Barbara said with a laugh.

Marsh turned and started back inside.

Beside him, Sandi waited just a couple of seconds before she started to lunge to her feet. Ben stuck the muzzle of the 9mm spitter in her ribs. "Don't do it," he whispered. "You waited just a heartbeat too long."

She hesitated, and then Ben heard her open her mouth and suck in air to yell just as the door closed behind Marsh with a solid sound.

"Relax," Ben told her. "It's a little late for yelling, don't you think? You said it yourself-the building is soundproofed."

"You son of a bitch!" she hissed at him. "You won't get out of here alive."

"Maybe not, but neither will you."

He felt her relax. "How did you-" She bit off the remaining words.

"I've suspected all along. It was a really clumsy approach back at the motel. Very amateurish of you."

"Now what? You going to kill me in cold blood?"

"Why not? That's exactly what you were going to do to me, isn't it?"

"Only if you resisted."

Ben chuckled softly. "And you think I wouldn't have? How much reward has Madame President put on my head?"

"How-"Again she bit back the words. Then she hissed, "You bastard."

"A guess. Just a very educated guess. Get up and walk back to the car."

"And if I don't?"

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"I'll kill you right where you lie."

"I don't think you will, Ben. I don't think you can kill in cold blood."

"Then you don't know me very well, Sandi. I would advise you not to push your luck."

She looked at him in the very dim light from the street lamps that reached the rear of the warehouse. "You're bluffing, Ben. That's all."

"I seldom bluff."

"Maybe this is one of those times."

"It isn't, Sandi."

"Help!" she suddenly yelled, jumping to her feet. "It's Ben Raines. In the parking lot. In the rear-"

Ben shot her.

The only sound was the rapid working of the bolt on the lethal little spitter. Sandi fell face forward on the gravel. She trembled once, then was still.

"Stupid," Ben muttered. "Just plain stupid."

Ben got to his feet and looked around him. Her yelling had not attracted any attention that he could detect. This was mostly a warehouse district, with only a couple of small convenience stores, farther on up the block. There were some cars and pickup trucks parked in front of the stores, but he could see no one in the parking area of either store.

"Lucked out again, Raines," he muttered.

Ben walked leisurely toward the rear of the warehouse. He knew that a running figure attracted more attention than a person just strolling along.

A couple of trucks, big rigs, rumbled past on the street in front of the warehouse. A car drove along slowly. Ben could hear the radio playing loudly. A talk show commentator was running his mouth and flapping his gums about something, arguing hotly with somebody. Ben picked up a few sentences before the car drove out of hearing range.

"It's communist, that's what it is!" a woman said. "America has turned communistic. I saw this coming years ago. And you're a damn communist!"

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"Madame, I am a registered Democrat!" the talk show host angrily replied.

Ben couldn't hear the woman's reply to that, but he could just about guess what it was, and that made him smile.

He reached the raised platform at the back door and stepped up on it. He took several deep breaths and tried the doorknob. It was locked.

Saying a short prayer to the Almighty that Anna was in the building and all right, Ben kicked the door open and stepped inside.

"Knock, knock," he said to the group of men and women sitting at a long, folding type table.

They all reached for guns.

Ben opened fire.

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Chapter Seventeen

The first burst from Ben's spitter knocked the man called Marsh backward, the front of his shirt bloody and pockmarked. Ben jumped to one side just as another man leveled an auto-loader in his direction and pulled the trigger. As Ben was hitting the floor he gave the group half a magazine of 9mm rounds. The man throwing lead at him with the big semi-auto went down, several of Ben's rounds taking him in the throat and face.

"Kill the son of a bitch!" Barbara screamed, ducking behind a filing cabinet.

"It's a million bucks if we take him alive!" Ben heard a man shout.

"Hell, it's a million bucks if we kill him!" another shouted.

Ben rolled to one side and leveled his spitter. He figured he had about twelve to fifteen rounds left in the magazine. He let the weapon rock and roll, silently praying it would not jam up on him.

Two men went down, cussing him as they died. Ben quickly ejected the empty and slipped in a full mag as the room fell silent.

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Barbara's pistol jammed on her, and she screamed in rage and hurled the weapon at him. Ben ducked and closed the distance between them, sticking the muzzle of the spitter in the woman's face. She abruptly closed her mouth, her eyes widening in momentary fright.

"Anna," Ben said. "Where is she?"

"She isn't here. See for yourself."

"Where is she?"

"You'll never get that information from me, Raines!" she sneered at him.

"Oh, I'll bet I do, lady." Ben hit her with a big fist that turned her lights out. She dropped to the floor in a slackened heap.

Ben quickly checked the living quarters. Nothing, and no sign that Anna had ever been there.

Two of the FPPS agents were dead, two more were dying. Ben grabbed up a set of handcuffs from the table and quickly secured Barbara. He ignored

the wounded men and picked up Barbara, slinging her over one shoulder and headed out the back door to his car.

Using duct tape from an emergency roadside kit, he taped her mouth, dumped her in the trunk (she damn sure was no lightweight) and quickly headed out. He kept his speed down to the legal limit as several unmarked FPPS cars, dash-mounted red lights flashing, roared past him in the other lane, heading for the warehouse. Somebody had reported the sound of shooting.

Ben did not return to the motel. He had already memorized a way out of the city, using Sandi's map. Fifteen minutes later, he drove past the city limits sign on the east side of the capital and cut down a blacktop road, staying on it for several miles. Then he cut north on another road. He drove it until he found the ruins of a ramshackle old farmhouse. He cut down the gravel driveway and tucked the car in close to the rear of the old house.

Ben opened the trunk and jerked the woman out, dumping her on the ground on her butt. She grunted through the tape as her ass impacted with the hard ground.

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Ben dragged her up the steps, through the back porch, and into what had once been the kitchen. He righted an old chair and then ripped the clothing from the woman, leaving her naked. Using the roll of duct tape, he secured her to the chair and then ripped the tape from her mouth and stepped back.

"Now you listen to me, lady," Ben said. "I don't have chemicals to make this easy on you." He pulled a very sharp, lock-back folding knife from his back pocket and showed it to her in the faint light. "I can guarantee you more pain than you have ever experienced in your life. I don't want to have to do this, but I will. I want my kid, and I want her right now. It's all up to you."

"Fuck you, Raines. I don't think you'll do it."

"Then that makes you a fool."

It was messy, but it didn't take all that long. She had told Ben where Anna was being held, and the pain had been intense enough to guarantee she wasn't lying. The woman wasn't that hurt or disfigured but she was in a lot of pain, and most of the bluff and bluster had been taken out of her. She slumped naked in the old rickety chair, weeping as the sweat glistened on her body-sweat mixed with blood. She had also pissed on herself.

"Damn you to hell!" Barbara gasped the words at him. "You're a monster!"

"Just a man who wants his kid back."

"I hope you're captured and hanged, Raines. I hope they leave your body dangling from the gallows until it rots!"

"I wish you well, too, Barbara."

"Fuck you, Raines, you ... you goddamn Republican!"

Ben had to lean against the old kitchen counter and laugh at her words. The more he chuckled the angrier the woman became, some of her bluster returning.

"Your kingdom won't last much longer. In a few months the SUSA will be history. Destroyed!"

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"Oh, I rather doubt that. That's just another wild-eyed, democrat socialist pipe dream."

She hissed and spat at him, some of the spittle dribbling down her chin.

"How ladylike of you, Barbara."

She cursed him until she was out of breath.

"Are you quite through, now?"

"I hope your kid's been gangbanged, Raines. Shagged front and back. I hope she's been forced to suck the cock of every agent that's guarding her."

Ben sighed and shook his head in the darkness, wondering how much hate one person could have-and why. Why did these dedicated followers of Millard and Osterman hate the SUSA so intensely?

"Why do you people hate the SUSA so much? That baffles me."

She cursed and spat at him until she was bug-eyed and panting for breath.

"What's the matter, can't you tell me? Can't you give me a valid reason?"

"You've destroyed the Constitution and The Bill of Rights, Raines. That's why."

Ben stared at her, unbelieving, in the dim light. "We've destroyed The Constitution and The Bill of Rights? I can't believe I'm hearing those words from you, from a damned socialist."

"We do what is best for the people. The people don't always know what is good for them. They have to be shown. That's government's job."

"Well, there is a lot more to it than that. But the sad thing is, you really believe that crap."

She began babbling the party line, right out of the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Ben listened for a few seconds before waving the woman silent.

"Enough, lady. Good God, be quiet. You're giving me a headache. Besides, I don't have time for all that socialistic shit. You should be able to get yourself free in a few hours, if you work real hard at it. Seeing you wandering around

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naked ought to give some man a real thrill; I'm sure some dedicated and true blue democrat socialist will stop and help you. However, if that doesn't please you, there is another option-I can always just shoot you

right here and now. That certainly would uncomplicate matters for me. The choice is yours."

Barbara closed her mouth and kept it closed. She had discovered-quite painfully-that Ben Raines would do exactly what he said he would do. She sat silently and glared wild hate at Ben.

"No comment?"

"I would like to live, General," she said.

"Wise choice. I commend you. All right. Don't go anywhere." He chuckled at the sudden expression on the face of the trussed-up woman. "I'll be right back. You can entertain yourself while I'm gone by reciting the words of Karl Marx or Sugar Babe Osterman."

Ben returned a few minutes later with a small first aid kit and placed it on the table he had shoved out of the way before he went to work on the woman. "There're iodine, bandages, tape, and aspirin in there, along with some other items. When you get free you can doctor yourself. What's left of your clothing is on the back porch. OK?"

She stared at him, not believing what she was hearing. "First you cut me, now you provide me with first aid materials. What the hell kind of man are you, Raines?"

"Well, lady, I guess you could say I'm what used to be known as a Tri-Stater. Back before your wonderful government crushed the movement... for a little while, that is."

"I've heard that term before. I don't know exactly what it means."

"I don't have time to explain it now. You just work at getting yourself free. Let's hope we'll never see each other again."

"That would suit me just fine, Raines."

"I just bet it would. But... a few stitches and a couple of day's rest and you'll be fine. Then you'll start hunting me,

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revenge on your mind. I hope you won't find me, for if you do, I'll kill you. Keep that in mind."

Ben turned and walked out of the old house. He got in his car and drove away. He knew where Anna was being held-at least up to the time he'd grabbed Barbara. He felt sure they would have moved her by now.

But he'd find her. Sooner or later. And if she had been harmed or was dead-he had to consider that possibility- he would see that the government of Osterman and Millard was destroyed ... forever.

"Any word from Ben?" Cecil asked.

"Not directly," the officer in charge of that section of communications replied. "But we intercepted a message from the capital concerning a wild shoot-out at one of their safe houses and the kidnapping of a senior member of the FPPS."

"That's Ben. He's OK, and on the warpath. How many FPPS agents were killed?"

"Five."

Cecil smiled. "You watch the toll start to climb now. Ben is just beginning to get wound up. Any mention of Anna?"

"No, sir. Not a word."

"If one hair on that girl's head is out of place, Ben will start killing every member of Osterman's cabinet and inner circle he can get into gunsights."

"Yes, sir. You can count on that."

Cecil left the communications room attached to the SUSAs capital building in Base Camp One and stopped to chat with Ben's team, who were standing out in the hall. Colonel Buddy Raines, Ben's son, was standing with them.

"There isn't much I can tell you, gang," he said. "Ben's alive and kicking some socialist ass. That's about it."

"Mister President," Buddy said. "I have a question, if I may be permitted." He always addressed Cecil formally when around others. Alone, it was "Uncle Cece," which caused some raised eyebrows when those unfamiliar with

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the relationship were nearby. Buddy was white and Cecil was black. Ben always found that amusing. "I have studied socialism thoroughly, and what is being practiced outside our borders is not pure socialism. Exactly, what is it?"

Cecil laughed, not at Buddy but at his seriousness. Buddy was a very serious young man, and highly intelligent. Cecil also knew he would not take the laughter the wrong way. "Bud, you're right. It isn't pure socialism. But it's so close to socialism that's how we refer to it. It's, well, Big Brother-ism, I guess you could call it."

"It's a very unappealing form of government," Buddy replied.

"It sucks," Jersey said.

Buddy looked at her and blinked a couple of times. "Well, yes. I suppose that might be one of the cruder ways of describing it. But I cannot envision President Jefferys lecturing a high school civics class and describing the USA's form of government as one that 'sucks.' "

Cecil smiled. "Perhaps not, Bud. But that pretty well sums it up. Look, gang, if I hear anything about Ben you people will be the first to know, OK?"

Cecil nodded his head to a chorus of "Yes, sirs," and walked off up the hallway, his security people ahead and behind him. He did not appear to be overly worried about his longtime friend, but Buddy and Ben's team knew that was an act. Cecil was plenty worried, and Ben was just a part of why. Federal troops were being moved into staging areas about a hundred miles north of the borders of the SUSAs, and war was imminent. Of

the five stages of alert, one through five, the SUSA was at four. Factories were working around the clock producing weapons, ammo, uniforms, canned foods, medical supplies, and all the hundreds of other things-large and small-needed for war.

Cecil had abruptly canceled the planned rescue of President Altman. Buddy and his special ops people were needed here in the SUSA.

Watching Cecil walk away, Cooper, Ben's driver, said,

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"Colonel, we'd appreciate a bump if you hear anything about your father."

"You know I will, Cooper," Buddy replied. "But all we can do now is pray."

"You'd better pray for the souls of the FPPS people holding Anna," Beth, the team's statistician remarked. "'Cause if they get in the Boss's way, they're dead."

Ben knew there was little point in heading for the safe house Barbara had told him about. The FPPS would have moved Anna the instant they learned Barbara had been taken.

Barbara had told him about other safe houses, as had Sandi. He felt sure the places Sandi had told him about would be nothing more than set ups, with dozens of FPPS agents waiting for him to show.

Ben drove for more than an hour, staying on the back roads, until coming to an abandoned grain elevator with a small open-front storage shed in the rear. He backed the car into the shed and parked. He would grab some sleep and resume the hunt in a few hours. Barbara would get free of the heavy tape that bound her, but it would take hours for her to do so, and another several hours for her to hike out of that area.

Half naked, Ben thought with a smile.

Ben knew he could not continue driving his sedan. Sandi would have called vehicle description and license number in first thing. So he had to ditch this car and get another. But the car had served its initial purpose: it had gotten him and his gear across the border and into enemy territory.

Ben yawned as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He would worry about the small stuff when he woke up. Now, he needed sleep.

He awakened just a few minutes before the first touches of silver tinted the eastern sky. He closed his hand around the butt of his pistol and then sat in the car for a moment before moving anything but his eyes. He could neither

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hear nor see anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Ben got out of the car and stretched until his joints popped and his muscles lost their crampy feeling. He walked around for a bit and began to feel better.

He had not heard any vehicles pass on the old road in front of the long-deserted elevator.

Ben made his way through the piles of trash and rubble, keeping behind the old elevator. He sat for several moments behind good cover, glancing up and down the old road. Nothing. He longed for a cup of coffee. He settled for a smoke.

"Time to get going," he muttered, making his way back to his car.

Ben pulled out and headed back to the capital. He figured that would be the last place they would look for him. It was also where Anna was being held. He was sure of that. Where in the city or outlying area was something he would have to find out, and quickly. Time was running out.

He parked his car at a supermarket and walked around the lot looking for a car with the keys in it. No luck.

He walked around for a few more minutes, then returned to his own car and drove off. "I'll just take my chances," he said. "I don't think they'll be looking for me right in the middle of the lion's den."

He encountered no trouble of any kind as he drove around the city. Much to his surprise, none of the police he drove past gave him so much as a second glance. It was difficult for him to believe that Sandi had not called in the vehicle description, but she apparently had not. And Barbara had never gotten a good look at the vehicle, or any other kind of look, for that matter-except for the very dark interior of the trunk.

He had memorized the streets and numbers of the safe houses Barbara had told him about, and had driven by each one before noon. The house where Anna had been held looked deserted, but Ben decided he would pay it a visit that night anyway. Anna might have left some kind of

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message scrawled somewhere ... if it had been at all possible for her to do so.

It was certainly worth a look.

Ben drove to a part of the city that had not been rebuilt. He knew that from studying intelligence reports, and from computer printouts he had gathered during the seventy-two hours Cecil had promised Osterman.

He pulled inside the garage of what remained of an old car dealership and parked. He got out and walked around, stretching his legs. He would start his prowling at dark.

"Hang on, Baby," he whispered in the silence of the old garage. "I'll find you." He paused and added, "With God's help."

Then Ben Raines, commanding general of the most powerful and feared army in the world, knelt down and prayed.

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Chapter Eighteen

Ben lucked out at the first safe house he entered. He had parked several blocks away and walked down an alley to reach the house. A couple of dogs barked at him during his walk, and that was all. He encountered no human foot traffic. Using a small flashlight, Ben prowled the rooms of

the safe house and found the room where he was sure Anna had been held. Anna favored black, crew neck T-shirts, and Ben found one in her size under the bed. He inspected the room and the bathroom, but could find nothing else. He was just about to give up when he lifted the lid on the commode tank and looked inside. Nothing. Then he noticed printing on the inside of the lid. Anna's printing. It was the name of a town about fifty miles north of the capital. Ben replaced the lid and exited the house, walking back to his car, smiling.

"OK, Baby," he muttered. "I'm on my way." He pointed the nose of his car north and drove the speed limit whenever he could on the beat up old highway. Usually he was at least twenty mph below the posted limit. The roads outside the SUSA were in terrible shape. The democrat/socialist government of the USA had not gotten

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around to fixing the highways; they were too busy making certain everyone consumed the right amount of orange juice, listened to the right TV programs, read the right books and magazines (one hundred percent absolutely positively politically correct, of course), telling people Don't smoke cigarettes or we'll put you in jail, don't even think about owning a gun (you might shoot some poor criminal who turned to crime because the coach wouldn't let him play or the prettiest girl in school wouldn't date him, or his Corn Flakes were too soggy), and for heaven's sake, don't have too much fat in your diets ... among many other very important things. Roads could wait: the people didn't need to go anywhere, anyway. There was too much work to do at home. "We must all work very hard to make sure that everyone has the same material blessings as everyone else. Fifty percent of your income is not too much to pay in taxes. Unfair? Silly you! For goodness sake, what's the matter with you? Don't you understand that under the New Democracy of the USA no one shall be rich and no one shall be poor. We're all equal. There now, isn't that simply wonderful? Of course, it is. The government says it is, so it must be, because your government is always right. Do not question your government- ever.

It wasn't exactly socialism. It was almost socialism. It damn sure wasn't anything even close to the government in the SUSA, thank God.

Ben reached the small town north of the new capital of the USA and pulled over alongside a closed service station. He had no idea where Anna was being held. She was here, but where? How to find her?

That problem was solved when a highway patrol car suddenly pulled in beside Ben, its headlights out, two uniformed men in the unit. They made it very clear immediately that they were not there to inquire about Ben's health.

"You in the car," the man on the passenger side said. "What the hell are you doing?"

Ben was growing very weary of the arrogance of the

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new breed of police officer in the USA, all trained and, according to Sandi and Barbara, all connected directly to the FPPS ... especially the state police. He would play their game, at least for a little while, see where it took him.

"Sorry, officer. I was on my way to Wabash and took the wrong turn and ended up here. Decided to get some rest."

"Yeah? Get out of the damn car!"

That did it. "Oh, I sure will, officer," Ben said through gritted teeth. Authorities in the SUSA were nothing like this arrogant trash. Ben picked up the 9mm spitter with his right hand and stepped out of the car. He stuck the machine pistol in the face of the state cop on the passenger side.

"Say please," Ben told him. "And your asshole buddy better keep his hands on the steering wheel, or you won't have a face."

The cop paled; Ben could see that much in the dim light. "Take it easy, buddy. Ah, please."

"That's better. What happened to the good cops who used to patrol the highways?" When there was no immediate response, Ben said, "Answer the damn question!"

"They all resigned," the man behind the wheel said. "Or got fired when they wouldn't pledge loyalty to the FPPS and the new democracy. For God's sake, take it easy with that weapon, mister. Please?"

"You know who I am?"

"No, sir," the man on the passenger side said. "But I can tell you that you are in one hell of a lot of trouble."

"Oh? I'm in a lot of trouble? You real sure of that, Bubba?"

"Shut your fuckin' mouth, Frank," the driver pleaded nervously. "For once in your life, please shut that goddamn trap of yours."

"You'd better listen to your partner, Frank," Ben told him. "He's trying to save your ass."

"I guess," Frank said.

"I want some information, boys," Ben said. "And you're going to give it to me. Aren't you?"

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"Whatever you want, mister," Frank replied. "You got it." He sighed audibly. "Isn't that right, Roger?"

"You betcha!" his partner quickly agreed. "What is it you want?"

"I'm looking for the safe house occupied by the FPPS, and you're going to take me to it."

"You can go right straight to hell," Roger told him. "I ain't telling you jack-shit."

"Oh, I think at least one of you will," Ben said. "As a matter of fact, I'd bet on it" He lowered the muzzle of the spitter and gave Roger a burst to his knees. The working of the bolt on the silenced spitter

could not be heard twenty feet away. Roger screamed once and then passed out, slumping over to his right and falling on his partner.

"Oh my God, mister!" Frank yelled, panic in his voice. "Oh, Jesus Christ!"

"Now, then, Frank, ole' buddy," Ben said. "Are you going to tell me where that safe house is? Or better yet, why don't you show me?" Ben jammed the muzzle of the spitter into Frank's crotch and grinned at him. "Don't you think that's a good idea, Frank? I sure do." He pulled Frank's pistol from leather and stuck it behind his own belt.

Frank rolled his eyes and groaned. "Oh, my God!" He nodded his head vigorously. "I think it's a wonderful idea. You bet I do. Please don't pull that trigger. I'm begging you, mister. Don't pull that trigger."

"Get out of your unit and keep your hands away from your side. Take the keys out of the ignition first and hand them to me. That's a good boy. You're doing just fine. Now walk over to my car and get in behind the wheel."

Standing outside the car, Frank asked, "What about Roger? He'll bleed to death."

"That's Roger's problem, Frank. It isn't wise to get lippy with a man who is holding a gun on you."

"No, sir."

When both of them were in the car, Frank asked, "Now what?"

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"Now you drive me to the safe house. And don't tell me you don't know where it is. This is too small a town, and you new breed of state boys are asshole buddies with the FPPS."

"I'm in trouble if I take you there, mister."

"You're dead if you don't."

"That doesn't leave me much choice, does it?"

"The way I look at it, it doesn't leave you any... unless you're a fool."

"One thing I'm not. Well ..." He cranked the engine. "I don't much like the new state police, anyway. Some folks love us, some hate us. Others just put up with us 'cause they like the New Democracy."

"And you?"

Frank put the car in gear and pulled out. "Money and power, mister. It's just as simple as that. Nobody gives us any lip." He glanced at Ben and smiled. "Well, almost nobody."

"Drive, Frank."

"Who are you?"

"My name isn't important." He reached over and removed the handcuffs from Frank's belt holder. "You just take me to that safe house and

you'll be out of this game. And alive," Ben added.

"And out of a job."

Frank drove in silence for a couple of blocks. "I don't know why I'm telling you this, but there are a lot of FPPS agents in that house. They'll kill you."

"Or I'll kill them. But thanks for telling me. It shows that you're not a one hundred percent supporter of the USA's New Democracy."

"Are you kidding, mister? It's damn near communism. Or what I think communism is. I hate it."

"But you work for the FPPS."

"It's a job, that's all. Good jobs just aren't that easy to find. Especially ones that don't take half of what you make in taxes."

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"FPPS people and those who are connected to them get tax breaks?"

"Oh, you bet we do. And so do people in the army. But we're not supposed to say anything about it. It isn't right, though. Fair, I mean. But what the hell is fair now?"

"I live in Northern California, Frank. It's very isolated up there. We don't know much about what's taking place on the outside."

"War is what's going to happen, mister. Between us and the SUSAs. And it's going to be a bad one. It's going to tear this country apart."

"I've heard a lot about the SUSAs and Ben Raines. None of it good."

"Everything I've heard is good! If they'd have me I'd move to the SUSAs tonight." He chuckled, but it held a sour note. "And after tonight, I'd better find me a hole. 'Cause I'm gonna be in deep shit, and out of a job."

"Well, head on down to the SUSAs, Frank. Level with them about who you are, and what you did up here."

"Oh, sure," he said sarcastically. "Let me tell you something. You don't understand about that nation. That's a tough bunch of people down there. They've fought all over the world and they don't lose fights. They learn I worked for the FPPS, hell, they'd shoot me on the spot."

"You don't know that for sure. I've read about people who moved down there and started over clean."

"Oh, yeah? I bet you can't name a one."

"Outlaw bikers, street gang members, thugs. It's a fact, Frank."

"Really? I wish I could. We just don't get much information up here about the SUSAs. Just a bunch of propaganda, is all."

"How much of that do you believe?"

"Damn little. I know most of it is a lie." He paused for a few seconds.

"But I don't ever say that out loud. Watchers and informers, you know?"

"So I've heard."

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"You ever heard any of the government's broadcasts, or read any of their literature about the SUSAs?"

"I don't listen to much radio. And I've read only a little about the SUSAs ... from our government, that is. What makes you think most of it is a lie?"

"Because no one would live there if it was true. I've talked to people who visited the SUSAs ... before the USA put the ban on traveling there. I was going to go until that happened. My friends told me that everybody's working, there's practically no crime to speak of, factories all over the place running around the clock. Roads are in good shape. Trains and planes and buses run on schedule. Their economy is the best in the world. All that couldn't be happening if very much of what our government says about the SUSAs is true."

Ben smiled as an idea came to him. "You really would like to move down into the SUSAs, Frank?"

"Oh, you bet I would." He laughed. "Why? You going to tell me you have connections down there?"

"Well, I might. I sure as hell won't be able to stay in the USA after I raid this safe house, will I?"

"You sure as hell won't." He glanced at Ben. "Why are you going to raid the FPPS's safe house? You never did say."

"Because they have my daughter in there."

"Oh, shit! What did your kid do? Was she involved in some sort of student protest against the New Democracy? There's a lot of that going on. But the government has put a lid on any publicity about it."

"There are a lot of student protests?"

"Oh, you bet. One every day somewhere. Sometimes they get real violent. Some students have been killed. But mostly it's just busted heads, some jail time, and then off to a reindoctrination camp somewhere."

"And they come out of these reindoctrination camps a better person, right?"

"Well, I wouldn't say better, but if they want to come

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out at all their political views will be changed some. And you can bet on that."

"And who runs these camps?"

"Why ... hell, the democrat socialist government does. Who else?"

"I figured that, Frank. No, I mean, does the FPPS operate them?"

"Oh, sure. Not us. Not state or local cops. Hard-line FPPS people. Look, the FPPS is brand new. Nothing like the old FBI. I mean, nothing like them."

"Kind of like the Nazi gestapo of long ago?"

"Well... not quite that bad. But they might be someday, if they keep on the way they're going. Up at the end of that block is the safe house. Are you ever going to tell me your name?"

Ben looked at the man. "Ben Raines."

Frank swallowed hard a couple of times. "Holyjumpin' Shit!" He finally managed to say. "Yeah, now it all fits. I read the bulletin on you. Do you know how much reward money is being offered for you?"

"A million dollars, so I've heard. That's a lot of money. You interested in collecting it?"

"I sure would be a liar if I said it didn't just enter my mind."

"Well? What's it going to be? You have three choices, the way I see it. You can try to take me alive or kill me and collect that big reward and live like a king the rest of your life. You can get out of the car right now and tell the FPPS I turned you loose. Or you can help me get my kid and head down to the SUSAs. What's it going to be?"

"Live like a king, huh? It doesn't work that way here in the what used to be called the Good Ole' U S of A. Taxes would take about sixty percent right off the bat. That's federal taxes. State would be another ten percent. Even if I kept my job, those taxes apply on winnings and things like that."

"So what's it going to be?"

"Aw, hell, General! Let's go get your kid. I can knock

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on the door and they'll let me in. They know me. I won't be armed, so the rest is up to you. As soon as they open the door, I'll push the person out of the way and hit the floor-OK?"

"OK, Frank. Let's do it!"

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Chapter Nineteen

The civil war that had long been predicted between the USA and the SUSAs began hours after a team of FPPS agents raided a house in Ohio. The house belonged to and was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Harry McComb, lifelong residents of Ohio. Their son, Harry, Jr., who lived on the same side of the street two houses away, was a strong supporter of the old Tri-States philosophy of government, and had organized a small chapter of like-minded men and women. The Attorney General of the United States, acting on the orders of President Claire Osterman, authorized a nighttime raid against Harry McComb, Jr. and the others in his

Tri-States chapter. According to a local government informer, they were supposed to be holding a secret midnight meeting-presumably discussing the pros and cons of several makes and models of those big ole', nasty, terrible, awful, and long-banned handguns.

The FPPS agents raided the wrong house.

The elder McCombs, both in their late seventies, were roused out of bed in their nightclothes, shoved around, yelled at, humiliated, cursed, and belittled. Their home, which had survived years of near anarchy after the collapse

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of government, was ransacked. The McCombs' pet, a small, eleven pound dog named Chester, was stomped by one of the FPPS agents, its back broken. Mrs. McComb, upon seeing her pet trying to drag its way to her, pulling itself along by its front paws, tried to get to her pet. Restrained by one of the brave government agents, Mrs. McComb suffered a heart attack and died in her living room. Mr. McComb, attempting to get to his wife, tried to push his way through the crowd of heavily armed agents and was struck on the head by an agent wielding a collapsible steel baton. Mr. McComb died two days later in a local hospital. The agents continued their ransacking of the house. Another FPPS agent, tired of hearing the injured dog whimper in pain, silenced the little creature by clubbing it to death. The midnight entry and the ensuing events had taken about five minutes.

Harry McComb, Jr. was on a fishing trip with several of his friends and did not learn of his parents' deaths for several days. Immediately after his parents' burial Harry dug up his .308, cleaned and oiled the weapon, and with two of his friends drove into New Dayton and attacked the local FPPS office, killing three agents and a secretary and wounding three other agents before being killed by other agents.

Madame President Claire Osterman and Attorney General Wilhelmina Morrow both called the attack on the New Dayton FPPS office the work of anti-government terrorists, probably the work of members of some militia group by banned government. It was a dreadful, horrible, cowardly thing. Yes indeedy, it sure was. Tsk, tsk.

No mention was made of the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. McComb, or Chester.

Upon hearing of the attack on the FPPS office, another long-banned, anti-government group in Michigan launched an attack on the FPPS office in New Detroit, killing two agents and wounding three more before being killed by local police.

The USA national press promptly reported that the

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attacks were, in all probability, ordered by the SUSAs. That rumor, of course, came from 'usually highly reliable sources.' In reality, they came straight out of the New White House in Indianapolis. The war was on.

Ben knew nothing of the events occurring hundreds of miles south of him as he waited, pressed up against the wall beside Frank on the porch of the FPPS safe house.

"Who is it?"

"State Police. It's Frank."

"He's OK," another voice said. "I know him. Let him in."

The door opened just a crack, wide enough for the man to see it was a man in a state police uniform. "What do you--"

The man's words were jammed in his throat as Frank put a shoulder into the door just as hard as he could. The FPPS agent was knocked off his feet and to the floor. Frank lunged through the now wide open door, jumped to his left, and hit the floor.

Ben came in right behind Frank, his spitter leveled.

The surprise attack was totally unexpected. One agent grabbed for a shotgun and Ben stitched him across the belly and chest, the line of bloody bullet holes moving up and right with the climb of the machine pistol.

Another FPPS agent lifted an auto-loader, and Ben punched holes in him, knocking him backward against a wall. A third agent, a woman, fumbled at a pistol laying on an end table, and Ben said, "Don't do it, lady. Don't do it."

"Screw you!" the woman said, standing up as her hand closed around the butt of the pistol.

Ben finished the magazine, stitching the woman across the chest. She sat back down on the couch, a very startled expression on her face. Then she died, her eyes wide open and staring directly at Ben, accusingly.

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"Jesus," Frank whispered, getting to his feet. "You don't mess around, do you, General?"

"No," Ben answered shortly as he ejected the empty mag and slipped a full one in place. "Anna!" he called. "Where are you, Baby?"

A thumping sound came from behind a closed door. Ben kicked open the door and breathed a sigh of relief. Anna was on the bed, gagged, her hands tied to the headboard. She was alive.

Federal troops tried a frontal assault against Rebel positions, attempting to cross the West Virginia line over into Virginia. They didn't make it, and it turned into a slaughter for the Federals. The Virginians hammered them with intensive long range artillery and drove them back. It was very nearly a rout.

The Federals tried the same tactic along the Southern Missouri/Northern Arkansas border. The Arkansas Home Guard, backed up by several battalions of regular Rebel troops and attack helicopters, put the Federals into a full retreat.

The Federals tried another attack across the Oklahoma line into Texas. It was a bloody failure as the Texas Home Guard, highly outnumbered, held rock-solid firm and beat the Federals back.

The commanding general of the Federals ordered a pullback of all troops. He realized only then that the SUSA was going to be a very tough nut to crack ... if they could crack it at all. Madame President Osterman had been very wrong when she proclaimed that her troops would be victorious over the SUSA in only a few days.

"This war is going to be a bloody son of a bitch," General Duran told several of his ranking officers. "If we contain the Rebels inside their own territory and keep them out of the USA, it will be nothing short of a miracle."

"We've lost a lot of people, General," General Vandermeer said. "And didn't gain an inch of ground."

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Studying maps on the table in front of him, Duran nodded his reply. He finally thumped the map and straightened up, facing his senior officers. "Problem is, the Rebels don't have a weak point. We're facing twenty-five or thirty million people, all heavily armed and well trained. The Rebels have stockpiles of supplies all over the damn place. Our intel says they have supplies enough to last for years. And intel says they will fight right down to the last person. Surrender is not a word in their vocabulary ... unless it's applied to the opposing force."

"This fight will not be limited to the SUSA, gentlemen," a man dressed in civilian clothes said.

General Duran slowly nodded his head in agreement. "I know, James. But have you been successful in convincing Madame President of that?"

"No. Unfortunately she has always considered Ben Raines a lightweight."

"Bad mistake," General Vandermeer said.

"A tragic mistake," James said. "But until or unless she sees the error in her thinking, we're looking at one hell of a very large problem. The president wants results, and she wants them quickly."

"Well, she's not going to get them," General Duran said. "And you'd better convince her that we're all in this thing for the long haul. I'm talking about years."

"Our economy won't hold up for such a long struggle."

"The Rebels' will," General Masters pointed out. All eyes turned to him. "Look, gentlemen, let's face some hard facts. We've all read the stats, but we all seem to have ignored or disallowed them. President Osterman certainly has. One-the SUSA has the largest navy in the world, as far as we know. Two-they have the best-equipped army in the world. That's a fact. They have the best-equipped air force in the world, and that is a fact. Their home guard alone is made up of several million men and women, all highly trained and well-equipped and motivated. They have the supplies to fight a protracted war, and they have supply lines and the means to almost instantly resupply

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their people in the field. Their economy is the best, their currency the strongest in the world. I'm only hitting the high points here,

gentlemen. Now here is the highest point-the Rebels have nuclear and germ capability, and General Raines has warned us that he will use them. And I believe him. Now, as military commanders we had damn well better face these facts and come up with an alternate plan to fight the Rebels. Because facing them head-to-head is going to accomplish only one thing we are going to get our asses kicked all over the goddamn place. And that, gentlemen, is a fact."

"Madame President had better not ever hear you say those words, General Masters," Jerry said.

"Madame President doesn't know jack-shit about warfare," Masters replied. "She's a goddamn politician and always has been, when she wasn't fucking her way to where she is."

"That's enough, General!" Jerry commanded. "You're stepping over the line."

Masters fixed the White House liaison man with a cold stare. "I don't take orders from you, Jerry. I'm in this fight because I don't believe in a divided nation, not because I'm a socialist. Claire Osterman has sucked dicks from here to California to help her get where she is. And you can take those words back to Sugar Babe if you like ... and you probably will."

Jerry did. One hour after Madame President was told of General Masters' comments, Masters was relieved of command and placed under arrest.

Ben cut the ropes that bound Anna's wrists to the bedpost, and she sat up and jerked the tape from her mouth, then threw her arms around Ben's neck.

"Are you all right, Baby?" Ben asked.

"I am now."

"Did they hurt you? Abuse you in any way?"

She pulled back and refused to meet his eyes. That told

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him all he needed to know. Ben silently cursed. Rape of a female prisoner by a Rebel could mean long prison terms and on occasion, a firing squad.

"Guess what, General?" Frank said from the doorway. "I had a change of heart. Don't move."

Ben sighed and cut his eyes. Frank was holding a shotgun, the muzzle pointed at him. "That million bucks got to you, huh, Frank?"

"Something like that, General. The boys here all took turns humping your kid, hey? Well, I could have told you they would. She looks like she'd be a prime piece."

Anna was slowly lifting Frank's 9mm from behind Ben's waistband. When it was free, she jacked the hammer back with her thumb.

"Too bad you'll never get any of it, you socialistic son of a bitch," Anna told Frank.

Frank flushed and took a couple of steps into the room, which was exactly what Anna wanted him to do. The small bedroom would help muffle a gunshot.

"Don't be too sure of that, Blondie," Frank said, taking a couple more steps closer to the bed. "I bet it's pretty good stuff. So, after I take care of the general here, I just might take me a taste."

"When pigs fly, you creep! I'll die first, goddamn you!" Anna then proceeded to cuss Frank. She did a good job of tracing his ancestry back through the centuries, Ben thought.

Frank frowned for a moment, then grinned. "Hey, Baby, did Margie do her thing with you too?" he said with a laugh. "I hear she likes young blondes."

"She didn't like this one worth a damn," Anna said, then shot him twice. Once in the belly, once in the chest. Frank stumbled back and tried to raise the shotgun, but could not. He fell back against the wall and cursed, his voice weak. Blood began leaking out of his mouth. "You bitch!" he managed to say before he began coughing, blood spraying out of his mouth. "You miserable little Rebel bitch!"

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"Rebel all the way and forever, you son of a bitch!" Anna told him.

Frank closed his eyes and died.

"Let's get the hell going, Anna," Ben told her.

"Let me get my shoes on, Daddy. Take half a minute. As soon as I can find the damn things."

"I'll be gathering up the weapons. And ..." An idea hit him. Maybe it would work. What the hell did they have to lose? He'd give it a try.

"What?" Anna asked, looking up from her searching under the bed.

"Get your shoes on, Kid. Move it"

Ben gathered up the weapons and took the ID from the dead woman and from the men. He flipped open the leather holder. No picture on any of the ID's might work. It was sure worth a try.

Ben looked out the front door. There were few houses occupied in the long block on the edge of town, and Ben guessed the two shots Anna had pumped out had not been heard.

He pulled the car up closer to the house and stowed the weapons in the backseat just as Anna came walking out, wiping a bloody knife on a piece of cloth. Her knife, Ben realized.

"You have trouble in there, Baby?"

"One of the men was still alive," she said. "He had my knife. He is no longer alive. He was going to do some awfully disgusting things to me. The woman wanted to watch."

Ben opened his mouth and Anna waved him silent. "There's nothing to say."

It's over. Let's go."

Ben headed west out of town. He felt that south would be crawling with police and FPPS agents. He would cut south when he got into middle Missouri ... if they made it that far. Missouri was split, just as it had been during the first civil war. Those in Southern Missouri sympathized with the SUSA, and they would give Federal troops about as much help as they would a rattlesnake.

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Anna would tell him more about what happened with the FPPS agents when she was ready to speak of it... or she might never tell him. Probably the latter.

As they traveled through the night, Ben told Anna all that had happened with him since he'd left the SUSA. Then she began to talk about her capture, and a bit about the questions the federal agents had asked her.

"They want you bad, Daddy Ben. They believe that with you dead the SUSA will collapse."

"They're fools. The Tri-States philosophy will live as long as there is one person who believes in it."

"That's what I tried to tell them. They laughed at me. Among other things," she added. She turned her head and looked out the window for a moment.

"Did they talk at all about what type of security Osterman and Millard have around them?"

"No. Not a word. But all the agents who were guarding me are-were-dedicated believers in this New Democracy thing. Whatever the hell that is."

"It's what the United States fought against worldwide for years, baby. From about nineteen forty-five until the collapse of communism about forty years later. Then, while nearly every country in the world that had fully embraced or at least flirted with some form of that type of government was running away from it, the liberals in this country were rushing to embrace it."

"That doesn't make any sense, Daddy."

"Most of us who believe in the Tri-States form of government don't think that liberals make any sense. Or very little. That's why I've believed for years that the best thing for America was the splitting up of the country into four or five smaller nations within a nation, all answerable to some small degree to the larger nation, all using the same currency, but with guaranteed states' rights that the others couldn't challenge."

"We tried to do that, didn't we?"

"Yes. We did. And under President Altman it was working. But the left wing is never satisfied. They've got to have

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it all their way, or no way. Now we're in a war that will probably tear this nation apart."

"Irreparable?"

"It might be that bad. But the Tri-States people, those who are left, will rebuild ... again, and again, until we're finally left alone."

"That will be accomplished in our lifetime?"

"Maybe in your lifetime, Baby. Not in mine."

"But it was your dream."

"Yes," Ben said softly. "It was mine."

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Chapter Twenty

Ben drove through the night and managed to cover all of two hundred miles. But at least it got him out of Indiana and into Illinois. He turned the wheel over to Anna and caught a few hours sleep. He awakened with a stiff neck.

"Where the hell are we, Kid?"

"I cut south a few miles back. Where you told me to. We should be able to find some SUSA people in about an hour. Maybe get something to eat and some sleep."

"We're not stopping. Any known SUSA sympathizers will be under hard surveillance. Our stopping would be dangerous all the way around. How's the gas situation?"

"We're going to need some before long."

"Pull in the next station. We'll fill up and get a cold drink and a sandwich ... if they have them."

"I could eat almost anything."

"I have some emergency rations in the trunk," Ben said with a smile.

"I said almost anything."

"These are the very latest creation from our lab boys and girls. I packed them before I came to find you."

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"Then they can eat them. We'll save them for emergencies. Like when we're about to die."

Anna's sense of humor was rapidly returning, and Ben was glad to hear it. He smiled at her and she cut her eyes and winked at him.

"There's a service station just up ahead," Anna said. "Looks as if it's open. You want to check it out first?"

"No. Let's get some gas and food and keep on going. We're only a couple of hours from the border. That's when it's going to get really interesting."

"How are we going to get across into SUSA territory?"

"I don't have the foggiest idea."

Anna pulled off the highway into the service station and up to the pumps. Ben began filling the tank while Anna went to the ladies room. He noticed a car pull in from the north and park off to one side of the main building. A few seconds later another car rolled in from the south and parked on the opposite side of the building. Ben noted there were four or five in each car. He was just topping off the tank when Anna strolled out, carrying a paper bag filled with food and soft drinks. She walked up to him.

"What's the matter, Daddy Ben? You've got a funny expression on your face."

"I think we've been made. Don't look around. Two cars. One at each end of the building. Four or five people in each car. Get ready to hand me my spitter from the front seat."

Anna stowed the groceries and stood with both passenger side doors open. All the weapons in the backseat had been carefully checked and loaded. Ben had two pistols tucked behind his waistband, his jacket covering them. Anna had a 9mm in her waistband.

"Two of the men walking this way," Anna whispered. "They're wearing suits."

"FPPS people. Get ready."

"Oh, I'm ready for some payback. You can bet on that."

"You there!" one of the men called, in a tone of voice

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that irritated Ben. "Get up against the car and keep your hands in sight. You're under arrest."

"Screw you!" Ben told him.

"It's him!" the second man shouted, grabbing for a holstered pistol. "And his kid. Take them, dead or alive! Who gives a damn as long as we get them?"

Anna shot him in the belly just as Ben jerked out his 9mm and began banging.

The other agent went down, several holes in his chest. He did not move.

Another suit and sunglasses burst out of the service station, a shotgun in his hands. Anna and Ben both fired at the same time, and their bullets stopped the FPPS agent cold and knocked him backward. The shotgun dropped from his hands and discharged as it hit the concrete curb in front of the building, blowing out the front glass. The FPPS agent sat down on the ground hard, and then toppled over.

Ben and Anna separated, Ben going to his left, Anna to the right as soon as she had tossed him his 9mm spitter and a canvas magazine holder, full up with five mags. Anna had grabbed a CAR from the backseat, one taken

from the safe house, and she opened up, the weapon on full auto. She blew out the back window of the FPPS car parked on the south side of the building just as the vehicle was emptying of agents and sent them yelping and hollering for cover. Anna ran behind a tow truck and crouched there.

Ben gave the second FPPS car a burst that flattened both back tires, some of the lead howling off the concrete drive and parking lot.

"Get that damn cunt!" a man yelled. "She's the one who used a knife on Jackson-bet on it."

Anna stood up for a couple of heartbeats. "You got that right, asshole!" she yelled, then gave the shouter a burst of 5.56 rounds. His legs flew out from under him and he hit the concrete hard.

Ben made it to good cover behind a car and crouched there, his spitter with a full mag and ready to snarl.

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"Call the state patrol!" an FPPS agent yelled to the gas station attendant. "Get them out here pronto! You hear me?"

Ben put a burst through the front plate glass window, broken glass showered the inside of the small front office. The attendant hit the office floor and stayed put.

"You call 'em if you want 'em!" the young man shouted. "I ain't movin'."

"By God, I'll put your yellow ass in jail!" the FPPS agent hollered.

"Better than bein' dead," the attendant called.

"Son of a bitch!" the FPPS agent yelled.

"Yore mama!" the attendant shouted.

Ben ended the conversation by laying a burst of 5.56 rounds on the concrete just in front of the car the agent was crouched behind. The rounds ricocheted and flattened and several of them hit the agent in his legs and knees. He was knocked to the concrete and began screaming in pain.

"Get him, Becky!" he bellowed. "My knees are all busted up. I can't move."

"Yeah, Becky," Anna whispered. "Come on, you bitch. Just give me a target."

The FPPS agent called Becky popped up and triggered off four fast rounds in Ben's direction. The shots missed and Anna gave her a burst from her CAR. Anna missed, but the slugs put the FPPS agent belly down on the ground.

"You damn little whore!" she squalled at Anna. "I'll get you for that."

"Go sit on it, bitch!" Anna yelled. She followed that comment with another burst from her CAR. Anna didn't hit anything, but the howling lead caused Becky to let out with another squall and a string of cuss words.

Anna cussed the woman while she changed mags, Ben hearing the clink of the empty as it bounced on the concrete.

"Did anybody call for help?" an agent hollered.

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"The goddamn gas boy won't call!" another woman yelled.

"I ain't no gas boy!" the attendant yelled. "And this ain't my fight."

"Get up off the floor and use the phone!" the second woman shouted.

"That's your ass, too, lady!" the attendant hollered. "I ain't movin'."

"Bastard!" the woman shouted.

"Bitch!" the attendant yelled.

"You get up off that floor right now!" a male FPPS agent yelled. "By God, that's a direct order from the FPPS. Call the state highway patrol."

"Fuck you!" the attendant yelled.

"Shit, Jerry," an agent called. "We're on our own out here in the boonies. That hillbilly turd isn't going to help us."

"Use the goddamn radio, Don!" Jerry shouted.

"Mine's busted," Becky said. "It took a burst from that little Rebel whore."

"Mine's busted, too," Don called.

"Whore!" Anna yelled. "You're a fine one to talk, you damn federal cunt!" she exploded.

"Somebody shut that Rebel bitch's mouth!" Jerry yelled.

"Try shutting mine!" Ben shouted.

Jerry jumped up and started to trigger off a burst from an M-16 he'd retrieved from the trunk of his car. Both Ben and Anna nailed him before he could pull the trigger. Ben's rounds took him in the stomach and chest. Anna's rounds caught the agent in the throat and face. His head exploded, showering the FPPS agent crouched next to him with brains, blood, and bits of bone and fluid.

"Oh, shit!" the agent yelled. "Jerry's head just blew up all over me!"

"Wipe it off," Becky called. "You all right, Linda?"

"I'm OK How about you, Bob?"

"I'm hit in one leg and the other knee, but I'll live. Hurts like hell. Is Jerry dead?"

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"Dead?" the agent with flesh and blood all over him called. "Hell, yes, he's dead. Half his head is missing. Shit, it's all over me."

While the agents were yakking Ben made his way back to the car and took a grenade from a canvas rucksack. Anna watched him and smiled.

Ben pulled the pin and tossed the pineapple. It rolled under the car where the agent with Jerry's brains all over him was hiding then blew.

The gas tank on the vehicle didn't explode, but the grenade sure made a mess out of the car and the agent hiding behind it. It blew just in front of the agent's legs and mangled him.

When bit and pieces of the car and the agent stopped falling, Bob called, "That's it, people! OK, Raines? We're through. We've had it."

"Slide your weapons out where I can see them and stand up, your hands in the air," Ben said.

"You sure about this, Bob?" Becky called.

"I'm sure," the agent replied. "Hell, what choice do we have? Raines? I can't stand up. One knee is busted, and the other leg's got a bullet in it."

"Then the other agents can help you," Ben told him. "Do it, ladies."

"You won't shoot us?" Linda yelled.

"Not if you behave and do what I tell you. Make up your minds."

"OK, OK," Becky called. "The weapons are coming out."

Pistols and shotguns came sliding out on the concrete. The women stood up, hands in the air and very sullen expressions on their faces.

"Now, now, girls," Ben said, knowing that the term 'girls' would irritate the oh-so-politically correct, feminazi type women. "Don't look so dejected. It isn't that bad, girls. You're alive. You'll live to marry some nice man and have lots of healthy babies."

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Anna laughed at the sudden and very disgusted expression on their faces.

"Bitch!" Becky said to Anna.

Anna gave her the middle finger.

"Be nice, now," Ben told them, as Anna gathered up all the weapons and Becky and Linda helped the wounded Bob to a wooden bench by the side of the service station. Bob was in a lot of pain, and made no effort to hide it. He groaned in agony as he sat down on the bench.

"Check his wounds," Ben told the women. He looked up and down the old highway. There had been no traffic from either direction during the wild shoot-out.

Ben wondered if local supporters of the SUSA had something to do with that. Probably, he concluded. More than likely he would never know for sure.

"The bullets didn't hit any big veins or arteries," Linda said after quickly checking Bob's legs.

The service station attendant had wandered out and was watching.

"You have a storeroom that can be locked?" Ben asked him.

"Sure do. Around back."

"Help your friend to his feet and move," Ben told the women. "Around to the back."

Ben put the three agents in the storeroom and broke the key off in the heavy padlock.

"It'll take a better man than me to get that padlock off there after that, mister," the attendant remarked.

"That's the general idea, friend," Ben told him. "Wait a few minutes and then call for help, OK?"

"If the phones work," the attendant said with a definite twinkle in his eyes. "They can get a little ornery out here, if you know what I mean."

Ben smiled. "I sure do." He looked at Anna. "Let's roll, kid. We're only a couple of hours from home."

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Chapter Twenty-one

Ben took the wheel and headed south, staying on the back roads. He would remain on county roads until he crossed over into SUSA territory... if he could successfully dodge Federal patrols and find a place.

They had been listening to the radio off and on since Indiana, and knew the war between the USA and the SUSA had begun. So far the Federal troops had taken quite a beating, but Ben knew that could change in the blink of an eye.

One thing the democrat/socialist government now ruling the USA had not done was pour a great deal of money into a military buildup. The military had lots of manpower-to the feminazis: people-power-but was short on modern equipment. And they had air force to speak of. Big Brother government was spending billions of taxpayer dollars making sure the residents of the USA behaved in a politically correct manner, and toed that strange mixture of democrat/socialistic liberal line in all other matters.

But they couldn't fund their military.

Which was certainly all right with Ben; it made the

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Rebels' job a lot easier. But the Rebels still had a hell of a task ahead of them.

"Are we going to try to drive across our borders?" Anna broke into Ben's thoughts.

"No. I would guess that every road will have a Federal patrol somewhere on it. If they didn't before your escape, they sure do now. We'll ditch

the car a few miles north of the border and walk in."

She looked at him. "You have a radio, Daddy?"

Ben smiled. "Now, what do you think?"

She laughed. "I would say you do."

"You'd be right. But there's no point in using it until we get close. I don't think the Federals have the capacity to unscramble our transmissions yet, but I don't want to take that chance."

"We'll booby trap the car, right?"

"You have a very sneaky mind, Baby."

"Of course, I do." She grinned at him. "I learned it all from you and the team."

Ben smiled at that. When Anna was just barely in her teens she had headed a band of young guerrilla fighters in her home country in Europe ... several years before Ben and the Rebels arrived and Ben took the dirty-faced little waif in as his own. Ben had legally adopted the girl, according to SUSA law, and her name was now Raines.

Ben pulled off the highway and onto a gravel road. He took out a map of Southern Missouri and studied it, finally settling on an approximate spot where they would leave the car and hoof it the rest of the way.

"Find it?" Anna asked.

"Close enough for government work. The USA's government, that is. In the SUSA we get it right the first time."

Anna was still laughing as they pulled out onto the blacktop.

Two miles later they almost ran into a roadblock. Ben saw the car about a quarter of a mile ahead of him brake suddenly, and he pulled off the road and down an old

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road to his right. The road had not been used in so long it was nearly all grown over with grass and weeds.

"I think we might have more walking ahead of us than we planned on, Kid," Ben said.

"So we walk for a few miles in the country and then find a car and steal it," Anna replied. "Suits me."

Ben feigned great surprise. "Heavens! Steal a car? Have you no shame?"

"Not when it comes to saving my butt." She opened her door. "Let's get gone from here.!"

"Just hold on for a few minutes. Let's check this situation out before we do anything that might prove later to be real stupid."

"OK. What's our move, Pops?"

"Pops?"

She grinned at him, and at that instant she looked more like a fourteen-year-old tousle-headed kid than a combat-hardened veteran of several major Rebel campaigns. "Where's your sense of humor, General?"

Ben reached out with a big hand and ruffled her hair. "Pops is fine. Let's go reconnoiter this situation."

It didn't look good, and Ben whispered as much to Anna as they knelt in the timber and brush and looked at the roadblock about a hundred yards away. Traffic was now backed up all the way to the road Ben had turned down. Cars were being searched very thoroughly, the occupants forced to stand away from the vehicles, guns pointed at them.

"Place is crawling with troops and those damned FPPS turds in, black jumpsuits," Anna whispered. "I hate those miserable, goddamned people."

"They've sure changed from the old FBI I grew up reading and watching movies about years back, for a fact. And it was all done practically overnight. All while we were in Africa."

"Looks like you were right about the walking."

"Looks like."

"How far is it to the border?"

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"Too damn far to walk, that's for certain. We'll clear this hurdle and worry about the next one when we come to it. Let's get back to the car and gear up."

The compartment concealed under the trunk and backseat held lots of equipment but did not contain backpacks, and that's what Ben and Anna needed right now. They stowed what gear they could carry comfortably in several small rucksacks, hooked web belts around their waists, rolled a couple of blankets tightly, and took off through the timber. They carried more ammunition and grenades than anything else.

They spent the first night in an old deserted barn behind the blackened ruins of what was once a house. Their supper was cold field rations that tasted terrible, even after being saturated with hot sauce. A small bottle of the fiery stuff was included in every accessory pack ... to help kill the awful taste.

"This crap is even worse than the old stuff," Anna bitched. "It's awful!"

"No it's not. I had some recently. And this is good for you. The doctors and the lab people all say so."

"Do they ever eat it?"

"I doubt it."

"That's what I think, too."

"They test it on troops in the field."

"The more the troops bitch about it, the better for you the lab people think it is, huh?"

"Go to sleep, Anna."

"Can I throw up first?"

Ben went to sleep with a smile on his lips. It was good to have Anna back.

The next morning the outskirts of a small town came into view, and Ben and Anna knelt at the edge of a small stand of timber and observed the goings-on for a few moments. "Pops," Ann said, "I really would hate to steal a car that belonged to a SUSA supporter." She paused and smiled.

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"But it wouldn't bother me at all to swipe a car belonging to a New Democracy supporter."

Ben lowered the compact binoculars and nodded his head. "I don't think we're going to get a chance to steal anything out of that town." He handed her the long lenses. "Take a look. The place is crawling with Federal troops."

Anna looked for a few seconds and then lowered the binoculars. "It looks like a staging area."

"I think the Federals have pulled back this far to regroup. They got a good ass kicking from our people. We'll head west for a few miles before cutting south. That area is scarcely populated."

Ben and Anna were footsore. They were both wearing low quarter shoes, not-suited to long hikes through rough country.

By noon of that day they were ready for a long rest by a tiny creek. They soaked their aching feet and washed and dried their socks. Then they forced themselves to eat some field rations, and it was a real effort as usual for both of them getting the mess down and keeping it down.

"This stuff is the pits," Ben said. "When we get back I am ordering the lab people to destroy this crap and come up with something edible."

"Good, Pops. That is wonderful. I assure you, you'll be revered forever for that single act of compassion." Anna began digging a hole in the ground with a stick. "I just can't eat anymore of this hog slop. I'm gonna get sick if I do." She dropped the containers in the hole and shoved the dirt over them. "Rest in peace," she said.

"I'd rather we returned to C-rats," Ben said. "Some of them were pretty damn good."

They walked on, staying in the timber whenever possible, which was most of the time, for this part of Missouri had never been over-populated, even before the Great War and the collapse. Most of the land was rocky and difficult to farm. They met a few dogs. They all were friendly and didn't bark much, and after a pat they ran off, playing and having a good time.

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"I would give them some of these field rations," Anna said. "But I like dogs, and feeding them this crap would be cruelty to animals."

By approaching nightfall they had covered only a few more miles over some very rough country and decided to call it a day. Their shoes were just about shot, and they had been forced to take cover several times when helicopters flew over.

"They seem to be working a search pattern," Ben observed. "I think our abandoned car has been found."

"They're going to pay a hell of a price if they find us," Anna said. "I'm not going to be taken prisoner again. And I mean that, Pops."

Ben said nothing. But he had no intention of being taken alive, either.

"How many miles until we reach our lines?" Anna asked.

"Still too many for us to walk, Kid, and make it. If we stay on foot, we're going to get caught... trapped somewhere. And that will be the end for us. It's just a matter of time. We're going to have to find some transportation."

"But I bet there are many roadblocks between here and the border."

"I'm sure, but I'm working on that little problem. Right now, let's get some sleep."

"I need some boots."

"So do I. Got any suggestions?"

"I could go alone into the next town and buy some. You have any money?"

"I have plenty, but forget it. The wrong clerk would put it together, and you'd be caught. Then I'd have to come in and try to get you, and I'd be caught. Then we'd both get seriously dead. Got any more suggestions?"

"You have such a way with words, Pops. No, I guess I don't have any more suggestions."

"Thank you. Now would you please shut up and try to get some sleep?"

"One more thing."

"What is it?"

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"Thank you for coming to get me, and I love you."

That caught Ben off guard. After a moment, he cleared his throat a couple of times and said, "Well ... think nothing of it. And I love you, too."

"Now go to sleep."

"Yeah, right. Sleep. "What a good idea."

They had found what was left of another old barn and had settled in for the night. It was summer, but the nights were still surprisingly cool.

In the timber, something popped, followed by the faint murmur of voices.

Ben and Anna were instantly alert, weapons in hand. Behind them, more voices could be faintly heard, but the distance was still too great for the words to be clear. The darting beams of flashlights flashed in the early evening.

"I think we have company, Baby."

"No kidding?"

"Smartass," Ben muttered.

"If we play this right," Anna said. "We'll both have new boots in a few minutes."

Ben cut his eyes to her. "You're really a delightful kid, you know that, Anna?"

"You're all right yourself, except when you get all crotchety."

Before Ben could whisper a response a voice called, "Here's two sets of footprints."

Behind them, more voices could be heard. They were trapped ... at least momentarily.

Ben pulled a rucksack to him and spilled out some grenades, giving half of them to Anna.

"You stay here," Ben said. "I'll take the rear."

"I'll wait for your signal. Good luck, Pops." She kissed him on the cheek and slithered off into a better position.

Ben got into place.

They waited.

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Chapter Twenty-two

The command was given, clearly heard by Ben and Anna. "Easy now, they might be in that old piece of a barn. Lewis, put your light over there."

Ben and Anna waited, weapons at the ready. The beams from several flashlights flashed over the barn, front and back.

"Can't see anything, Captain." The voice came from Ben's side of the barn. "No tracks, nothing."

"Same here in the front," Lewis called. "I can't see nothing."

Another voice was added. "They're in there. The tracks lead straight up

to the barn and stop. I been trackin' for years, boys. We got 'em."

Ben and Anna slipped their fingers from the trigger guards to the triggers.

"Does that million dollar reward apply to us?" The question was tossed out.

"No. Just the satisfaction of killing that traitorous bastard Raines."

"That's good enough for me." Another voice.

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"Let's do it, people," the commanding voice called. "Barnwell, toss a grenade into that barn."

Barnwell never got the chance. In the shadowy dimness Anna watched him jerk the pin and draw back his arm. She shot him. A few seconds later the grenade exploded, flashing in the early evening.

The night blew apart with gunfire, and the old barn vibrated from the impact of slugs.

Ben and Anna were behind good cover inside the barn. They kept their heads down and waited out the first barrage.

"Cease fire!" the order was shouted. When the firing stopped, the captain shouted, "How's Barnwell?"

"Dead, Captain. The grenade blew him apart. He's all over the damn place."

"Barney was my buddy!" someone shouted. "Goddamn those people. I'll get them!" The man stood up to charge the barn, a shadowy figure in the night, and Ben shot him.

"Green troops," Ben muttered. "Or just awfully stupid. Probably a combination of both."

"Don't anybody else do anything that stupid!" the captain yelled. "Somebody get on the radio and call for support. Tell them we've got Raines and the bitch trapped. Give them our position."

"No can do, Captain Jennings," a voice called. "Ted was standing next to Barnwell. He's dead, and the radio's blown all to hell and gone."

"Goddamnit!" Jennings cursed.

"We can take them." Ben recognized the tracker's voice. "Hell, there's only two of them. We've got them outnumbered."

Ben crawled over to Anna. "We've got to get out of here before it dawns on those idiots they've got bloop tubes and start dropping grenades in here. The fire so far has come from front and back. Both sides are clear, I think."

"There's a ditch on the west side," Anna said. " 'Bout twenty feet from the barn. But there isn't much cover from here to there."

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"We've got to risk it. Stay on your belly and go as soon as the firing

starts. I'm going to give them a long burst from the other side of the building. I probably won't hit anything, but that should get it going."

"I'll wait for you in the ditch."

"You keep going, Baby. One of us has to make it. You hear me?"

"I said I'll wait for you. And that's what I'll do. You hear me?"

"You're a hardheaded brat."

"I'll never deny it."

"All right. Get ready to go when I fire."

Ben crawled back to the rear of the barn and cut loose, first with a grenade, then with a full magazine of 5.56 rounds in short spurts, to make the fire last longer.

Changing mags, he cut his eyes over to where Anna had been. She was gone. She had made it. Ben crawled to the front of the barn and heaved another grenade and burned another full mag. Then he was gone, quickly crawling out the busted side of the barn and sliding into the ditch.

"Thank you so very much for green troops," Ben muttered. Then he turned and bumped into Anna, waiting for him.

"Leads straight into the woods," she whispered, pressing her mouth against his ear, her voice just audible above the panicked shouting and the roar and rattle of gunfire from the green Federal troops.

"Lead the way."

In a couple of minutes they were deep in the timber and heading south. The Federals were still firing without letup into the old barn.

"Is that you, Dick?" The voice had suddenly sprung out of the darkness just a few feet off to Ben's right. "Jesus, what's happening back there? Sounds like a real firefight going on."

"Yeah," Ben said, and he stepped close enough to pop the lone sentry on the side of the jaw with the butt of his

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CAR. Ben had left his smaller and less accurate machine pistol with the abandoned car.

The sentry went down without making a sound.

Ben quickly took the unconscious man's weapon and ammo, then his walkie-talkie, web belt with canteen and pistol attached, and field pack and heavy rucksack. He did not bother to check the contents of the rucksack. He checked the man's boots: too small for him, and too large for Anna.

"Can't have everything," Ben said. "Let's go."

Another mile of walking and they came to a highway that ran north and south.

"This is the old scenic route highway," Ben said. "I remember now. This will lead us into what used to be a national forest... still is, I suppose. I can't remember the name of it. If we can make it to the south edge of the forest, I can call in and we can be evacuated out."

"Good," Anna said. "This damn rucksack you handed me is heavy. What the hell is in this bag?"

"I don't know. Open it and see."

She reached inside and smiled. "It's full of grenades, Pops. A dozen or so of them."

"Good. I imagine we'll be needing them before we're out of this mess. I got half a dozen full mags from that stupid sentry. We'll be needing them too, I imagine."

"How far to the edge of this forest?"

"Thirty miles, at least. With what's left of these low quarters, we'll both be practically barefoot when the choppers come."

"I can sure believe that."

"Well, let's go. We'll stay on the shoulder of the road for easier walking. Keep your ears open for traffic."

Ben looked far down the old highway, faintly shining in the night. For the very first time, he felt confident they would make it back to the SUSA.

And then ...

Civil war.

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Chapter Twenty-three

Ben and Anna walked the lonely highway until just after midnight before calling a halt to the night's march. They saw only a few vehicles, and had plenty of time to get off the road and into the timber before they passed. Only one of the vehicles was military, and it sped by without slowing.

Ben and Anna slept for a few hours and resumed their walking south about an hour before dawn. They were footsore, weary, and in need of a bath.

But they were a few miles closer to home territory.

They came to what was left of a tiny village in the middle of the old National Park and rested.

"About halfway there, Kid," Ben said after taking a drink of water. "How're the feet?"

"Sore. My shoes are about shot."

"So are mine. But they'll make it a few more miles. You want something to eat?"

"Yes. I sure do. A sixteen ounce T-bone steak, rare, with baked potato, salad, and a big glass of cold milk. Think you can arrange that?"

"Maybe in a day or two. Right now, would you settle for some field rations?"

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Before she could reply they heard the faint sounds of an approaching vehicle. Ben and Anna quickly headed for the timber and brush. Over the years since the collapse and the Great War it had grown right up to the rear of one of the three remaining buildings in the village.

They bellied down in a shallow, brush-covered ditch, weapons at the ready, and waited.

The expensive-looking SUV slowed, then pulled over in front of the building where Ben and Anna had been resting in the shade. Three men and one woman unassed the vehicle. They were all wearing black jumpsuits.

"FPPS dickheads," Anna whispered. "Let's whack them and take their ... whatever that thing is."

Ben returned the whisper. "Only if they start it, Kid. From now on until this war really gets going, the Federals are going to have to start every skirmish. I don't want history to state that we started it."

"You didn't hesitate to shoot when you came after me," she reminded him.

"That was different. The Federals had kidnapped you. They had invaded our territory and committed an illegal act. Now be quiet."

"Yessir, Boss," Anna said with a grin.

"Mack," one of the FPPS men said, "as you can clearly see, Raines and his bitch kid are not hiding here."

"I know that, Darin."

"Then why did you insist on stopping in this godforsaken place?"

"Because I have to take a piss, that's why."

"Well, go over there behind that building before you haul it out," the woman said.

"Yes, Alice," Mack said. "Whatever you say, ma'am."

"Hey!" the fourth agent said. "Listen. Another vehicle coming our way."

"Brilliant of you, Beck," Darin said. "The damn road runs right by here, so anyone driving the road would have to be coming our way."

"Fuck you, Darin," Beck said.

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"You'd never go back to girls, Sweetie," Darin minced about, one hand on a hip.

"Knock it off!" Alice said.

"It's George and his team," Mack said, as the SUV came into view "I wonder what's up."

"Nothing," Alice said. "We'd have heard it on the radio. They're probably just goofing off."

"Yeah," Beck said. "Like us, they lost the trail and don't know what to do next."

The big SUV pulled in and parked next to the first team's vehicle.

"You want to try to make a run for it?" Anna asked in a whisper.

"No. The brush is too dry. We'd make too much noise. But we may have to shoot our way out of here. Jesus, how many people are in that big SUV?"

"Six, it looks like."

"Ten to two. Great odds."

"Well, maybe Mack will pee and they'll leave."

"They're getting a big ice chest out of the SUV. I think they're going to have lunch."

"I'd kill for a ham sandwich," Anna said wistfully.

"I hate to say it, but so would I. If Mack turns the wrong way while he's back here taking a whiz you're not only going to get a cheap thrill, but we're going to have a fight on our hands."

Anna made a gagging sound at that and stuck out her tongue at Ben. "If he waves his pecker in my direction, I'll shoot the damn thing off."

"Be quiet. Here he comes."

Mack kept his back to Ben and Anna as he relieved himself. He started to zip up and got the zipper stuck. He cursed and hopped around and jerked at the zipper. Nothing worked. The zipper remained jammed.

"Shit!" Anna whispered in disgust.

"What the hell are you doing back there, Mack?" Darin yelled. "Come on, we're gonna have lunch."

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"My damn zipper's stuck!" Mack yelled. "I mean, it's jammed up tight."

As the others laughed at him, Mack turned and looked straight at where Ben and Anna were hiding in the ditch. He stopped working at the zipper and stared for a moment. Something didn't look right to him.

"What the hell ..." he muttered. "What is that?" He shrugged and half turned, then stopped and looked back.

After thinking it over for a few seconds, he took a couple of steps closer to the shallow, brush-covered ditch, his hand moving to rest on the butt of his pistol. He cocked his head to one side, a very puzzled

look on his face. He took a couple more steps, then stopped as what he was really seeing finally dawned on him.

Then he looked right into the eyes of Ben. His mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Jesus H. Christ! Goddamn, it's Raines!" the FPPS agent shouted, and jerked out his pistol.

Ben had no choice. He shot the man.

Anna had shifted positions the instant Ben fired, and was able to cover one side of the building where the other agents were, facing the road.

One FPPS agent came boiling around the side of the building, a submachine gun at the ready, and Anna shot him, knocking the legs from under him and sending him yelling in pain and sprawling to the hard ground.

"Get on the damn radio!" Alice yelled. "Advise the CP we have Raines and the girl pinned down, and get some help out here right now."

"I don't think so," Anna muttered. From her position, she was able to cover both Federal vehicles. She waited for an agent to make a move.

One did. The FPPS agent called George tried a fast run for his SUV, and Anna brought him down, the impacting 5.56 rounds knocking him face first onto the cracked concrete of the old parking lot. George rolled over a couple of times, and came up on one knee, leveling his CAR.

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Anna gave him another burst and turned out George's lights forever.

Ben lobbed a grenade into the rear of the old building, and when it blew the concussion just about finished what was left of the frame structure. The front half of the building gave it up and collapsed outward, the debris burying two of the FPPS agents.

"Get this shit off me!" Nickie hollered. "I can't get out from under it."

"Help!" Pat yelled. "I'm pinned in here. I can't move."

Ben tossed another grenade and the rest of the termite-infested old building fell apart, settling to the ground in a cloud of dust.

Both Ben and Anna moved during that shattered minute of dusty confusion-Ben a half dozen yards to his left, Anna a half dozen yards to her right.

They could now cover the road and the vehicles.

Anna held up a grenade and Ben nodded, pulling the pin on a grenade. Father and daughter hurled the lethal mini-bombs, which landed just behind the front of the debris and blew, sending shards of wood and chunks of concrete block flying in all directions.

One small chunk of concrete hit Alice smack in the center of her forehead and knocked her as goofy as a road lizard. She lost her weapon amid the dust and falling debris. She crawled around on the ground, dazed and confused and bleeding from a cut on her forehead until she

finally collapsed, out of it for a few moments.

Agent Beck emerged from the jumble of fallen crap and got off half a magazine before Ben and Anna riddled him with bullets.

Darin tried a run for his vehicle and Anna put him down, stitching him across the waist. Darin tried to crawl, but his legs would not function. He died face down in the dust.

"Shit on this!" Pat yelled as he finally managed to work his way clear of the rubble that had buried him and Nickie. He burned a few rounds in Ben's direction. Bad move on his part. He forgot to take Ben's shift in position into

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account, and his shots hit air. Ben didn't miss. Ben shot him in the chest, and Pat went down on his back. His legs trembled once, then he was still.

"Hey, folks!" Hal yelled. "Listen to me for a minute. Stop shooting. How about a truce? Huh? I'm not all that keen on dying."

"Sounds good to me," Ben said. "All of you toss out your guns and stand up, and you'll live. But it had better be unanimous, and no tricks."

"I'm out of it," Roy said. "I need a doctor. I'm hit in both legs."

"Sounds OK to me," Agent Paul called. "Here's my guns, coming out." A pistol and M-16 came clattering out onto the concrete.

"Get the rest of this crap off me, and I'll be more than happy to give it up," Nickie yelled. "But I can't move. My legs are pinned."

"Alice is unconscious," Hal called. "So I'll vote for her. We're done, General Raines. Like through, man."

"Toss all the guns out and stand up. Behave, and I promise you that none of you will be hurt. One of you go help the woman get clear of that debris that fell on her. And a couple of you help your wounded partner."

Anna gathered up all the weapons and looked at Ben. "The big SUV," he told her. "Let's ride in style."

She grinned and winked at him. Anna's spirit was indefatigable.

After putting the weapons in the back of the big wagon, Anna stood guard over the agents while Ben checked the wounded man. His wounds were certainly painful, but not at all life-threatening. He put a field dressing on the wounds, gave the man some antibiotics in tablet form, and then gave him a pain pill.

"That'll help with the pain, and you'll live," Ben told the man. "But I can tell you not for long if you keep fucking around with Rebels."

The wounded agent tried a smile. "I can damn sure believe that, General. You guys play rough."

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"You people are clicking around with a way of life that works well for us. Leave us the hell alone, and everything will be all right."

"I'm just taking orders, that's all, General."

"Yeah, I know. The best advice I can give you is to stop it."

"Then how do I make a living and feed my kids?"

"Find another job, partner."

The agent looked at him.

"Unless you enjoy kicking in the doors of decent people in the middle of the night and rousting them out of bed."

"There are laws against possessing certain types of guns in America, General."

"Yeah, right. The forerunner of the FPPS used to remind me of that every now and then."

"That hasn't been that many years ago, General. If you people hadn't formed up into survival groups and militias and raised so much anti-government talk, the collapse of the government might not have happened."

Ben chuckled at that. "Is that what the present administration is teaching now?"

"President Osterman is a wonderful person," the agent said stiffly. "And you people are very wrong when you say she is a socialist."

"It's a unique brand of socialism, boy. I refer to much of it as cultural Marxism."

"Sir? That's a new one on me."

"Political correctness, son. It's nothing more than cultural Marxism."

"I'll have to remember that."

"Yeah. When your masters debrief you after this operation be sure and tell them what I said."

"Rest assured, I will."

"I'm sure of that, son." Ben gave the wounded agent a pain pill. "Put that in your pocket for later. It's probably going to be several hours before anyone comes looking for you. And take my word for it, it's a long hike out of here."

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"You'll never make it to the border, General."

"Oh, I think we will. And I really hope we can do it without further bloodshed."

"Roy, stop talking to that traitorous bastard!" Alice shouted across the

way. "And by God, that's an order. You two are getting real chummy over there."

The woman was sitting up, her butt on a concrete block, and had regained her senses, as much as she ever had them-which probably wasn't that much, considering the type of government she was working for. One of the other agents had put a field dressing on her forehead and given her a couple of aspirin.

Alice concluded her opinion of Ben Raines. "The son of a bitch is venomous as a cobra! And slick as an eel." She looked at Anna. "So is this Rebel whore."

"Screw you, too, lady," Anna said. "That is, if anybody would want to."

Alice cussed Anna and Anna gave the woman a very dirty look, followed by the finger.

"Filthy bitch!" Alice said. "What do you do in your spare time, whore-fuck the troops?"

"Easy, Anna," Ben cautioned. "She's just trying to get you to do something stupid."

Anna smiled at Alice. "Fucking the troops is certainly something you'd never do, is it, Butch?"

Ben thought Alice was going to lose it and do something really dumb, but the woman managed to hold her temper in check. She looked down at the ground and said no more.

"All right," Ben said. "Anna, you take the two women over behind that broken-down shed and make them strip down to the skin." He smiled. "Including their boots. Bring their clothing over here to me. You men, as soon as the ladies are out of sight peel down and toss your clothing over to me. Do it!"

"I'll do no such thing!" Alice flared.

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"Yes, you will," Anna said, lifting the muzzle of her CAR. "Or I'll knock a leg out from under you and rip the clothes off you."

"You better do what she tells you to do, Alice," Ben said. "Right now."

Nickie tugged at Alice's arm. "Come on, Alice. It's no big deal. Let's do it."

With dirty looks at Ben and Anna, Alice and Nickie walked off behind the shed.

"Peel," Ben told the men.

Ben gathered all the clothing and went through the pockets, looking for lighters and matches. They could start a fire, and a large amount of smoke would bring investigators. He found several boxes of matches and several lighters ... and a couple packs of cigarettes. He put the cigarettes in his pocket and stowed the matches and lighters in a rucksack.

Anna tossed him the women's clothing and he went through it, finding a small packet of waterproof matches in a pocket in each multi-pocketed jumpsuit. He tossed the clothing back to Anna, minus the boots, then returned the clothing to the men, also minus the boots.

Ben tossed the boots in the second seat of the big SUV. He then loaded the still unopened ice chest in the rear cargo compartment.

"OK, boys and girls," Ben said. "Get into that piece of shed over there and stay put. And I mean stay put."

"What about our boots?" Nickie asked.

"They stay with us. You won't be walking very far barefoot."

"That's no way to treat prisoners of war, General," Roy said.

"You're not prisoners of war. War has not yet been officially declared between our two countries, and personally I hope it never is."

"Oh, it will be, General," Alice popped off. "And we'll

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destroy your goddamn gunsmoke society. And I hope I get you in gunsights someday."

"Oh Jesus, Alice," Nickie said. "Will you please shut that damn mouth of yours?"

"Don't you dare speak to me in that tone of voice!" Alice yelled at her. "I'm the senior agent here."

"Whoopee and congratulations," Anna said. "Now haul your senior ass into that shed, lady. Move it!"

Ben noticed that several of the men smiled at the exchange between the two female FPPS agents. Ben suspected that all was not real hunky-dory when it came to promotions within the government agency.

When the agents had been herded into the shed, Anna said, "They won't be in there one minute after we pull out."

"I know it. But I don't think they'll go very far barefooted. You drive the other SUV, Baby. Follow me down the road for a few miles, then we'll tuck it away in the woods and rip out some wiring just in case they do hike down a ways and find it... which is very doubtful."

"OK. Did you look in the ice chest? What's in there? I'm hungry as a hog."

"No, I haven't. Not yet. We'll eat when we get a few miles down the road."

"I can last that long, I guess, before I fall over from hunger. Anything holding us here?"

"Just gravity."

"Smartass," she muttered. "So let's go, before Alice decides to do something real funky."

"Funky? I haven't heard that word in a long time."

"How about 'shitty,' then?"

Ben shook his head. "Forget it kid. Let's get gone from here."

"Yeah, let's go. I'm hungry."

Ben muttered under his breath about young people in general and Anna in particular, and walked to the lead SUV.

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Thirty seconds after they had pulled out, Alice stepped gingerly out of the old shed, walking carefully on bare feet. She looked down the road and lifted her right hand, saluting Ben and Anna with a middle finger.

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Chapter Twenty-four

Ben found an old road of sorts about ten miles from the site of the shootout and turned off the highway. He and Anna tried on the boots taken from the FPPS agents and each found a pair that fit perfectly. Then they opened the well-stocked ice chest and had lunch.

"I don't think these agents were paying much attention to a healthy diet," Ben remarked, fixing a huge sandwich.

At the moment, Anna could only nod her head in agreement. She was too busy chowing down on a sandwich approximately the same size as a catcher's mitt.

After chewing and swallowing and take a long drink of cola, Anna said, "Not much farther, according to the map."

"Probably forty miles to the border. But they'll be dicey ones. Bet on that."

Finished with lunch, with no lingering hunger pangs for the first time in several days, Ben ripped several handfuls of wiring from under the hood and dash of the second, smaller SUV and Anna got into the big SUV with him.

Heading down the road, Anna clicked on the dash radio and she and Ben listened to the news. Federal troops had

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again tried to punch through along the border of Virginia and had been beaten back. Several teams of guerrillas had tried to land along the South Carolina coast. They had been killed, and the ship that brought them had been sunk, many of the crew taken captive by the Rebels.

Anna switched stations, over to a SUSA based Free Radio Network station. President Osterman had called for a world boycott against the SUSA. It had been ignored by all the leaders of the free world. While many of the leaders of other nations did not approve of the Tri-States philosophy of

government, the SUSA was by far the most productive nation in the world, with most of its factories running at least sixteen hours a day and others working around the clock. The goods produced by the workers in the SUSA were of the highest quality. Leaders in many countries remembered it was Ben Raines and the Rebels who risked their own lives to save their asses, even though many of those same countries were now on the verge of civil war themselves. Besides all that, no one wanted to get on the bad side of the President of the SUSA, Cecil Jefferys, and they sure as hell didn't want to get Ben Raines pissed at them.

The Federal troops had once again pulled back to regroup and make plans.

"Those troops we saw back up the road," Anna said.

"Yes. I hate to see this, but war's definitely coming. And when the Federals come at us in full force, it will eventually tear this country apart."

They rode for a few miles in silence, not seeing another vehicle on the road.

"I know a way to stop this war before it can get started." Anna broke the silence. She looked hard at Ben. "And so do you."

"Yes. I do. But we'd have to whack a lot of people. My Zero Squads did just that about a decade ago. And they all died doing it. A lot of very good people." Ben sighed and shook his head. "That is strictly a last resort, and I hope it never reaches that point."

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"But you think it might?"

"Yes, I do, Anna. It's sad, but I do. And when it does, it will be the end of this once great country--both the SUSA and the USA. Nothing will ever be the same again after that. It will be the darkest moment in our history."

"But we can rebuild, Pops."

"You young people can try, and I hope you succeed. But for me, I plan to go down with a gun in my hands, fighting for what I believe in."

"And Uncle Ike?"

"He'll be with me, and so will Cecil and a lot of others who have helped make a dream become a reality for millions of Tri-Staters."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"Yes. But in the meantime, I'll do whatever's necessary to preserve the SUSA."

They rode on for a few more miles without speaking. They met no traffic, and saw no signs of human life.

"Town just up ahead," Anna said, looking at a map. "Two or three more miles."

"And then how much farther to the border?"

"Well ... this road ends. You're going to have to go either left or right on this highway. If we turn east, it's a good twenty-five miles to the next road south."

"And west?"

"Just a few miles to a county road heading south. It's unpaved. But that road will take us to within five miles or so of our border."

"West it is, then." Ben patted the steering wheel of the big nine passenger SUV. "This is a really nice vehicle. I don't think I want to give it up."

Anna cut her eyes to him. "Oh, hell. Now just exactly what does that mean?"

"Means I just might decide to keep it."

"That's what I thought." She rubbed the fabric of the seat. "Well, it is nice. Cooper would like it."

Ben braked as they came to the major highway. It appeared to be in fair shape. He looked both ways. No

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traffic. "Strange," he said. "Troops massing all along our borders ... everywhere but here, that is. And no checkpoint at a junction on a major highway. I find that very odd." He took his foot off the brake. "But, what the hell. Let's give it a try." He grinned at Anna. "What do we have to lose?"

She grimaced. "Oh, sure. Of course try it. What do we have to lose? Not very much. Just our lives."

"Oh, ye of little faith. Check the map, Kiddo. How far to this county road?"

Anna studied the map for a few seconds. "The map doesn't show the mileage, but I'd guess no more than ten at the most. Then another ten on the unpaved road down to the junction of a paved highway. Then we turn west for maybe three or four miles before coming to another unpaved road that leads right to our border."

"It all sounds just too damn easy."

"It sure looks easy."

"We'll find out." Ben checked the road ahead and his rearview mirror. "Where the hell is all the traffic? This is just too damn weird."

"Doesn't anybody live around here?" Anna questioned. Then snapped her fingers. "Pops, maybe the government ordered all the people out."

Ben held up a hand, then snapped his fingers. "Sure! That's it. They've all been ordered out due to the war. So that means ... a big push is being planned. A really big push, to paraphrase Ed Sullivan."

Anna looked at him. "Who's Ed Sullivan?"

About halfway down the gravel and dirt county road, Ben pulled over and

dug out his radio while Anna made a visit to the bushes. The transmission would be scrambled, as were nearly all Rebel transmissions.

He was answered on the first send.

"General Raines! Are you all right, sir?"

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"I'm fine. Anna's with me, and she's OK. Are you aware of any big push being planned by the Federals?"

"Negative, sir. Nothing in the works. We've beaten back everything they've tried. And they've taken some heavy losses."

"Parts of extreme Southern Missouri have been evacked of civilians. We haven't seen a living soul, other than FPPS agents, in several hours. Pass that word onto General McGowan, please."

"Yes, sir! Do you want us to come in and get you, General?"

"Negative on dust-offs. I like the SUV I'm driving."

"Ah ... say again, sir?"

"Forget it. If I get in a jam I'll let you know. Eagle out."

Anna returned and leaned up against the big wagon. "Did you give them our location?"

Ben smiled at her. "Of course not."

"I figured as much." She stared at him for a few heartbeats. "You'll never change, will you? You really get a kick out of lone-wolfing it, don't you?"

"I don't object to it. And no, I won't change. Not until age forces me out of the field. And that's going to be a few more years, at least."

"Uh huh. You know, people do worry about you."

"So I've been told. They should worry about something else. I can take care of myself."

"So what happens now?"

"We hide the wagon and stick around here. See what happens and call it in."

"On this gravel road?"

"What better route to take to move large numbers of troops, especially at night?"

She nodded her head. "You're right I hadn't thought of that. The road's dry and pretty hard-packed, too. Won't be much dust kicked up."

"So let's find a place to tuck and camouflage the vehicle, and see what happens."

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"Suits me. We've still got lots of food, and it'll stay cold for hours longer."

"Hungry again?" Ben asked with a smile.

"I will be in a little while."

"Let's get this vehicle hidden and find us a good vantage point." He looked around. "Like that hill right over there with the timber on it."

She smiled and lifted a pair of very expensive and high-powered binoculars. "So nice of those FPPS agents to lend us these. There are two pairs."

"Remind me to send them a 'thank you' card. Come on, let's get into position and see what happens."

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Chapter Twenty-five

Ben radioed in their position after he and Anna counted twenty-five deuce and a halves packed with troops, all heading south on the unpaved county road. This time, though, both Ike and Cecil were standing by to receive Ben's transmissions.

"Our informants in that area alerted us there might be a big push in the works, Ben," Ike told him. "Now that you've confirmed it, I think it's time for you and Anna to get the hell out of that area."

"I don't know if we can, Ike," Ben told him. "Traffic has picked up again. This convoy now approaching looks like it's going to be a long one. Ike, there are tanks moving south with this column. Quite a bit of armor. This is shaping up to be one hell of a push. It would be very risky for us to attempt a move at this time."

"Ben, we're going to start hitting that area hard. But we can't if you and Anna are in there. You've got to move out. Right now."

"No place for us to go, Ike. But you've got to hit now. We can't afford to allow this buildup to continue. Send in

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the steel and lead, and do it now. Do I have to make that a direct order?"

"No, Ben, you don't."

"That's good, Ike."

"The attack will begin in approximately fifteen minutes with artillery, followed by gunships."

"Anna and I will head east and hunt a hole. Put a stopper in this, Ike. Right now." Before Ike could respond, Ben said, "Eagle out."

Ben looked at Anna, lying beside him on the ridge, staring at him.

"We've got to hunt us a deep hole, Baby. This area is about to get creamed."

"There are shovels in the wagon."

"Let's get them and then get the hell away from this immediate area ... pronto. We'll take what we absolutely have to have and haul ass. Let's do it."

Ben and Anna hurried back to the SUV, geared up as much as possible, and then headed east. They had walked for perhaps half a mile when the Rebel artillery barrage began. Ike was really laying it on heavy, and the Rebel gunners were right on target.

Rebel 155's and 203mm, located just across the border, were laying down a wall of steel.

Ben and Anna didn't have time to dig a hole, but they did find a deep ravine and hurriedly got in it, huddling close to one side while the artillery shells came crashing around them. Bits of hot steel filled the air, whistling a deadly song. The Rebel gunners were using various types of rounds, including high explosive-fragmentation/projectile and white phosphorus. The HE projectile contained sixty anti-personnel grenades. That round was among the most feared and dreaded of any artillery round.

Just a half mile to the west of where Ben and Anna huddled in the ravine explosions were ravaging the night, and the sky was lit up with fires as fuel tanks were ignited. From a half mile away, whenever the heavy artillery barrage let up for a few seconds, Ben and Anna could hear the

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faint cries of the horribly wounded men and women in the convoy.

A full squad of troops came running through the brush and timber, not in panic, but just getting away from the deadly barrage that was raining down on the convoy.

They ran right into the decidedly unfriendly fire of Ben and Anna.

The pair cut the squad by fifty percent during the first few seconds of fire.

"What the hell!" a man called. "It's the Rebels. They've come across the border. They've sent ground troops onto US soil. Get on the horn and alert the-"

He never got to finish. Ben stitched him with 5.56 rounds and Anna started screwing the lid of the coffin down tight by tossing two grenades into the still knotted-up band of Federals.

Ben finished it with a full magazine.

He didn't know if someone got off a transmission in the seconds before the squad was finished. He could not take the chance. He had to assume they did.

"Get some full magazines off the bodies," Ben told Anna. "Quickly, Baby. Then we've got to get the hell out of here. I'll stand watch."

Anna hurriedly began filling a couple of rucksacks with full mags and grenades. They both ignored the moaning and the cries for help from the wounded.

"You picked the wrong side, boys and girls," he muttered. "You pays your money, you takes your chances."

Ben found a walkie-talkie that worked, and then they started moving swiftly toward the east southeast. The going was very slow and chancy. The night was cloudy, threatening rain, and as black as pitch, visibility limited to only a few yards in front of them.

Gradually they began putting the sounds of battle behind them, but they would have to put more miles behind them before they no longer heard the deadly sounds of the rolling thunder of the barrage.

During a rest stop Ben said, "We're only a few miles

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north of our border, and maybe only a mile or so from a small river. When we reach the river we'll stay on the west side and cut due south. We'll be home by dawn."

She sighed. "A deep tub filled with hot water and bubble bath. I can hardly wait."

"You're gonna have a long wait, bitch!" The voice came out of the darkness. "But I think we can come up with something to help us pass the time."

Ben lifted his CAR and pulled the trigger, burning about half a mag in the direction of the voice. The instant Ben fired, Anna threw herself to one side and came up on one knee shooting. When Ben had burned half a mag he went to ground and rolled to his right, offering no target to the Federals.

The sudden resistance from Ben and Anna was totally unexpected by the Federal patrol. The voice would never speak again: Ben's fire had taken him in the chest and neck. Anna's CAR spat and hammered and knocked two Federals down. The other members of the enemy patrol fired at where Ben and Anna had been, their rounds chewing up the earth and nothing more.

Ben and Anna fired together at the muzzle flashes and put down several more members of the patrol.

"How many of them are there?" a Federal called.

"Just two," he was answered. "General Raines and his bitch kid. Has to be them."

"Mel?"

There was no reply.

"Dick?"

Nothing.

"Sarge?"

Sarge had been the first to go down from Ben's firing. He would never speak again.

"Allen?"

No response.

"Bobby?"

That was answered by a groan.

"Jesus, Don, there's only two of us left."

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"What the hell do you want me to do about it? I can't raise the dead."

"Let's get the hell out of here."

?No way, Merle. Taking those two will mean a promotion for both of us. Think about it, man. Couldn't you use the extra money?"

"I guess so."

"No more talk," Don said. "Let's just take them."

"How?"

"Watch me and learn."

But it was all over for Don. Ben had pulled the pin on a fire-frag grenade and tossed it. The mini-bomb landed a couple of feet from Don and blew, scattering various body parts of the Federal over what had been a large portion of his immediate area.

"Help me, please," Bobby moaned.

Bobby was ignored. "Don?" Merle called. "Don, talk to me, man."

The bits and pieces of Don remained silent. And would forever.

"I'm hurt bad," Bobby called.

"Shut up, Bobby. For God's sake, please shut up! I can't think with you talking."

"I hurt, Merle. Man, I really hurt. You got to help me, Merle. Please!"

"Be quiet, Bobby."

Ben and Anna said nothing, not wanting to give away their position. They waited. In the distance, the pounding of Rebel artillery could still be heard. Ike had ordered his people to pour it on and keep it up.

"Mel's still alive, Merle," Bobby called. "He's right beside me and he's got a pulse. Please help us."

"What the hell do you want me to do, Bobby? Just tell me that, will you?"

"Give it up, that's what. Jesus Christ, man! What choice do we have? Rebels will be compassionate to prisoners. That's what I keep hearing from people who've fought

them. But they won't give no quarter to people who keep righting them. They'll kill us, Merle."

"Well ... you two are hurt. Mel's still alive? You sure about that?"

"Hell yes, I'm sure. I can hear him breathing. He's right beside me."

"All right, Bobby. OK. We'll do it your way. Hey, General Raines, or whoever you are. We surrender. We give up, man! You hear me?"

"I hear you. Leave your weapons on the ground and stand up," Ben told the men. "Hands in the air. If I see what even looks like a weapon, I'll kill you. Do it!"

"Mel can't stand up, General. He's unconscious."

"Then you and your buddy stand up ... right now!"

Two shadowy forms rose slowly to their feet, hands in the air.

"Walk toward me a few steps," Ben told them. "Right there. Stop and sit down. Both your hands on the top of your helmet, fingers laced. Do it."

"Watch them, Anna. I'll see about the wounded one."

Using a small flashlight, Ben checked out the one called Mel. He was indeed alive, his pulse strong. One round had knocked his helmet off, and another round had creased his skull. He would have one hell of a tremendous headache when he came out of it, very much alive.

Now what to do with the prisoners?

As if reading his mind, Anna said, "We could just shoot them. It would save us a lot of trouble."

Ben didn't know if she was joking or not. With Anna you never knew.

"Let's keep them alive, Anna," Ben said, shutting up the very sudden and urgent babbling from the two prisoners.

"Whatever," Anna said.

Ben checked out Bobby's wounds. They were very minor, but painful.

"You let us go, General," Merle said. "And we're gone from here. We won't cause you any problems, and that's a solid promise, right, Bobby?"

"Oh, you bet! A promise."

"Be quiet," Ben told them.

"Yes, sir! Whatever you say, sir."

Ben quickly made up his mind. "Take off your boots, both of you."

"Our boots?" Bobby asked.

"Those things you have on your feet. Take them off. The socks, too. Toss them over here. Easy now."

"Yes, sir."

A moment later, the two Federals were barefooted.

"Strip!" Anna said.

Ben looked at her in the darkness and smiled.

"Strip? Is that what you said?" Merle asked.

"Strip, damnit!" Anna said.

"Yes, ma'am!" Bobby said, and started peeling down to the buff.

In a few moments, both men were standing buck-assed naked. Ben rolled up their clothing and he and Anna gathered up all their gear and the weapons of the Federals.

"Your friend on the ground has a bad head wound," Ben lied. "If you move him, he'll die. If he wakes up, he'll probably live. You'd better stay with him. If you try to follow us, we'll kill you."

"We're staying right here, General," Merle said. "Bet on that."

Ben and Anna turned and disappeared into the darkness.

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Chapter Twenty-six

Ben and Anna reached the river about a half hour later and cut south. They walked steadily, but not hurriedly. Ben figured they at least had a good two hour's head start, maybe a bit longer, on any pursuit from the Federals, if they were lucky-But luck had a nasty habit of running out. The two men would stay with their wounded buddy for a time-until they figured out Ben had lied to them about the seriousness of his wound. Then they would take off, trooping naked and barefoot back to their lines.

The artillery barrage had ceased its deadly rumbling in the distance. There would be practically nothing left of the long Federal convoy, and damn little left of the road on which it had been traveling.

After several hours of following the river and making their way through the thick brush, Ben and Anna reached a clearing.

"The no-man's-land," Ben said. "It runs all around our borders. It was originally only a few hundred yards wide, but in many places now it's several miles wide." He took the radio from his rucksack and keyed the switch. "This is the Eagle with his chick. Anybody listening in the nest?"

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The response was almost immediate. "We read you five by five, Eagle.

What is your twenty?"

"North side of the no-man's-zone. On the west side of the river. Between the river and the road the Federal convoy was using on their way south. You copy that?"

"Affirmative, Eagle. Choppers on the way. You have anything to mark your location?"

"As soon as I hear the choppers, I'll light a fire on the north side of the zone. Just at the edge of the clearing. That's going to have to do it."

"I copy, Eagle. Give the dust-off about forty-five minutes."

"Ten-four. We'll be ready."

Ben turned to Anna. "Let's gather up a pile of dry brush. A big pile." He pointed. "Stack it right over there. Then we wait."

"Let's pull up lots of this real dry grass. That'll light easily."

"Good thought, Kiddo."

"Bubble bath, here I come," Anna said. "And you can get reacquainted with a razor. I can't tell you how much I hate that damn moustache you grew."

"Oh? I thought it gave me a Clark Gable look."

"Who the hell is Clark Gable?"

Just moments after Ben and Anna had gathered up a mound of dry brush and stacked it at the edge of the clearing, on top of armloads of dry grass, they heard the sounds of running boots coming from the north.

"Federals," Ben said. "We're between a rock and a hard place now."

Ben didn't have to explain. Anna knew the no-man's-zone was heavily mined, and it was a death trap for anyone who blundered out in it.

"Over there," Ben said pointing. "That will at least give us the high ground." He glanced at his watch. "Thirty

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minutes at least before the choppers arrive. We've got to hold out. We're too close to home to pack it in now."

The beams from what appeared to be dozens of flashlights were getting closer when Ben and Anna finished their run for the high ground and settled into position. They were about ten to twelve yards apart on the ridge.

The both laid their grenades and full magazines out to one side, for easier grabbing.

"I was getting tired of lugging these things around, anyway," Anna said. She scooted over a few yards closer to him.

"Yeah, we'll see if we can't lighten the load some. They were getting a

little heavy."

"The civil war between the USA and the SUSA is going to really begin right here, isn't it?"

"The combined events of this night will probably start it," Ben agreed.

"It was inevitable, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Ben said slowly. "It really was, Baby. But all of us who began the Tri-States movement knew that from the beginning, when it was just a dream."

"That bastard and his bitch kid are around here somewhere," the voice came from the woods.

"If I'm not a whore, I'm a bitch," Anna whispered. "I'm beginning not to like these people."

"Out there, Al," another voice said. "They're in the no-man's-zone."

"That's crazy, Ed! They wouldn't have gone out there. They'd be blown to pieces. There are hundreds, thousands of mines all over the damn place."

"Maybe they know the way through?" someone else said. "If General Raines doesn't know, who would?"

"That's a thought, Jake."

"At night?" Al scoffed. "No way, guys. Nobody goes walking through a minefield at night."

"Not to mention black wire, razor wire, punji pits, and all kinds of other evil shit."

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"You're sure right about that, Pat. Those goddamn Rebels really fixed this strip up nasty."

"So what do we do?" a new voice was added.

"I don't know, Dave, I'm not going out into that strip, you can bet on that."

"What hell is that over there?" a Federal asked.

"Where, Donnie?"

Donnie put the beam from his flashlight on the mound of brush Ben and Anna had piled near the edge of the strip.

"It's just a pile of brush. Shoved there when they were clearing this area."

"I don't think so, Ricky," Al said. "Not the way that stuff is piled. It looks like ... well, I'm not sure. Hell!" he suddenly blurted. "That's for a signal fire! That's what that is. I'm sure of it."

"Then they're ... real close," another Federal said softly, his words just audible to Ben and Anna.

"Probably looking at us," Al said, glancing all around him. "But where?"

In the cloudy night, Ben and Anna watched as the Federals began slowly backing up, edging their back toward the protection of the timber on the north side of the no-man's-zone.

"There!" one Federal yelled, lifting his weapon. "They've got to be on that rise right there!" He pulled his weapon to his shoulder.

Ben shot him.

Anna squeezed the trigger on her CAR and two Federals went down.

The night was torn apart with the rattle of gunfire and sparkled with muzzle flashes.

Ben lifted his mike. "This is the Eagle. You copy?"

"Copy, sir."

"We're in a firefight with twelve to fifteen Federals. They're in the timber on the north side. We're on a small ridge just inside the zone. We'll be unable to light the signal fire, but you should be able to spot the muzzle

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flashes. When you come into visual, we'll toss a couple of grenades. You should be able to pick that up."

"That's ten-four, sir. We'll spot you with night vision. The gunships will handle the Federals. When they come in, keep down. You copy?"

"Ten-four. What's your ETA?"

"Approximately fifteen minutes, sir."

"Ten-four. We'll be here."

Ben and Anna suddenly came under heavy rifle fire from the Federals in the timber. They could do nothing except keep their heads down. The Federals poured on the lead, but succeeded only in tearing up the earth in front of Ben and Anna.

The Federals paused in their fire for a few seconds and the pair on the ridge opened up, returning the fire. No one was hit, but the Federals learned the Rebels could bite.

"Let's rush 'em!" a Federal shouted. "Up and at 'em. Go!"

"Now it gets hairy," Ben called. "We've got to hold out for twelve more minutes,"

"Will do, Pops," Anna replied calmly.

Then there was no more time for talk as shadowy figures began running out of the timber toward the high ground.

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Chapter Twenty-seven

Ben and Anna waited until the Federals had begun the scramble up the slight incline before opening fire. Their first burst knocked several of the government troops back and sent them rolling to the ground. The savage fire put the rest of them scrambling away from the base of the incline and running for whatever cover they could find.

One of the Federals made the mistake of running around to the rear of the small rise of earth, trying to get a shot at Ben and Anna from behind. He stepped on a mine. There was a tremendous roar in the night, then stunned silence except for the dull splatting sounds of blown off limbs hitting the earth.

"Oh, God, Al!" one of the Federals hollered. "Larry stepped on one of those fucking mines. Oh, Jesus God in Heaven. He's splattered all over the place."

"Settle down, Wally," Al called from the darkness. "You can't help him now."

"Goddamnit, Al," another soldier called. "This ain't worth a shit. They got the high ground and the area behind them is mined. We'll never take them."

Wally was crying and making no effort to hide it.

"Shut up, Wally!" Al yelled. "Goddamnit, just shut your fucking mouth and act like a man's supposed to act."

"Me and Larry was recruited together," Wally said, his voice a sob in the night, "we went through basic together." He broke down again and began weeping.

"Candy ass kid," Al said, contempt in his voice. "Ignore him, guys."

"I agree with John," a Federal called. "We can't dig them out, Al. We can't breach that rise."

Ben and Anna waited in silence.

"Then get on the damn radio and call for help," Al yelled. "Edgar? You hear me?"

"Edgar's dead," Al was told. "He was the first to get hit. I ain't about to try for the radio."

"Shit!" Al said. "What the hell are we supposed to do? We've got to take those people. It's our job, damnit!"

"We're on our own, Al. Best thing we can do is wait them out," another soldier called.

"All night long?"

"If we have to, yeah. Maybe then we'll have some help."

"Help? Are you kidding? The whole damn convoy is gone. The road's impassable. The bridges are gone. The brigade's nearly wiped out. Help? From where?"

Green troops again, Ben thought. Very few of them have ever been tested in battle. Many of the noncoms seem to have no combat experience.

Ben wondered what percentage of the Federal Army was green. Probably a very large portion, he concluded. And not very well trained, either. If Madame President Osterman insists on a war with us, it's going to be a slaughter for the Federals- at least until they get some combat time behind them.

"These people are bullshit," Anna called softly. "They don't know the first thing about tactics."

"Of course not," Ben replied in a stage whisper. "The USA has turned into a unisex society. No difference in boys and girls. No parent who supports the New Left would dream of allowing their children to play with toy guns. No

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such games as cowboys and Indians. They aren't allowed. That wouldn't be politically correct."

"What the hell do the boys play with?"

"Dolls and tea sets."

"You're joking!'"

"Nope. 'Fraid not."

"Good God!"

Ben smiled as he looked at the luminous hands of his watch. Seven more minutes until the choppers arrived.

"Keep a grenade handy," he told Anna. "It won't be long now."

"They won't be able to land. Mines."

"They'll hover until we can get on board. Don't worry, Baby. We're nearly home free."

"My bubble bath. At last,"

"Hell with this!" one of the Federals yelled. He jumped up and ran out of the timber, a couple of his buddies with him, vague zig-zagging shadows in the night, heading straight for the high ground.

The zig-zagging stopped abruptly as Ben and Anna opened fire, each of them burning a full magazine into the hostile night. One of the Federals went down, and was silent. The other two went down on the ground, badly wounded. They jerked and moaned in pain, calling out for help.

No help came out of the timber, only the faint sounds of cursing.

Ben and Anna quickly slipped home fresh mags and waited on the crest of the small hill.

"You copy, Eagle?" Ben's radio crackled.

"I copy, Rescue. We're waiting."

"Two minutes, Eagle. Four gunships will neutralize the area north of your position."

"Ten-four, Rescue. We'll keep our heads down. We'll mark the hostile area with grenades."

"We know where you are, Eagle. Just keep your heads down and let us do our thing."

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Ben smiled as he keyed the mike. "That's affirmative, Rescue. Will do."

Seconds later the throbbing sounds of helicopters could be heard in the darkness behind the pair on the rise of ground. Half a minute later the timber north of the rise exploded as the gunships unleashed all their deadly fury. The gunships cut loose with dozens of 2.75-inch folding fin rockets and 30mm chain guns. Each of the attack choppers carried over seventy of the deadly anti-personnel rockets, and the front edge of the timber quickly turned into a killing ground. Nothing was going to survive that pounding. Indeed, none of the Federal troops even got off a shot as the attacking helicopters turned the edge of the timber into a smoking strip of destruction.

A helicopter slowly began settling down over the crest of the high ground until its runners were only a few feet off the ground. Ben and Anna left their gear and quickly climbed on board. One of the crew assisting the pair gave them a big grin and the thumbs-up sign.

Ben smiled and returned the gesture as he and Anna buckled themselves in. The chopper turned and roared off into the night, heading south.

Toward home.

Ben slept for six hours and awakened refreshed. His feet were still a bit sore from all the walking in shoes not made for hiking, but other than that he felt fine.

The rescue chopper had set down at a base in Northern Arkansas, and Ben and Anna had immediately boarded a small jet and were flown the rest of the way to Base Camp One. Anna had gone home, to her small apartment only a few blocks from where Ben lived.

Ben was scheduled to meet with Ike and Cecil later on that day. Ike was to bring him up to date on all military actions that had taken place since he had been gone, Cecil to bring him up to date on the political front.

Ben learned one thing that had both saddened and

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angered him: President Altman was dead. The official word from Madame

President Osterman's government was that he died after a massive heart attack. Ben believed that about as much as he believed he could fly a jet fighter plane ... and Ben was no pilot. There was not a doubt in Ben's mind that Osterman had ordered Altman's death. The two had never really seen eye to eye back before the Great War and the collapse.

After another long, hot, soapy shower (he had taken one upon arriving home) and a careful shave which included removal of his moustache, Ben took his coffee and went outside to sit on the front porch and relax and read that day's paper.

The news was not good.

The paper was filled with war talk and stories about how the Rebels had thrown back repeated attempts by government troops to cross the SUSA's borders.

Ben finally folded the paper and laid it aside. He knew war was looming; he did not need to be reminded of it. He was not looking forward to it, at all.

Ben finished his coffee and went inside to dress: BDUs and boots. Then he got into his HumVee and drove over to the capital building for his meeting with Cecil and Ike.

"It's official, Ben," Cecil said as soon as Ben was seated and had a mug of coffee. He held up a sheet of paper. "This was brought to me by courier, about an hour ago ... direct from the United States Department of State. A state of war now exists between the USA and the SUSA."

Ben took a sip of coffee. Just right. "Have you informed our allies?"

"Not yet. But it won't come as any surprise to any of them. They have already assured me of their neutrality."

"In writing?"

"Yes. And President Osterman has also been informed."

Ben smiled. "I can just see that socialistic bitch bouncing off the walls of the new oval office."

Cecil was in no mood for humor, having been on the phone with heads of state from around the world for the

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past few hours, but he had to smile at the mental image of Claire Osterman having one of her famous snits.

Ike belched at the thought, and Ben and Cecil laughed at their old friend. Ike lifted a hand and waggled a finger. "It ain't funny, boys," he said. "That damn woman hates us all. She hates us so much she'll do anything to destroy us."

Cecil sobered abruptly. "Ike's right, Ben. And after these recent humiliating defeats of her Federals at every move, and you and Anna slipping through her net to safely, she'll be blind with fury."

Ben nodded. "Oh, I'm well aware of that, Cecil. Remember, I know the

woman. But what, really, can she do that we can't confront and defeat? The answer is nothing at all." Ben paused and sighed. "Even though ..."

Cecil picked it up. "Even though it will destroy both nations in the end, right, Ben?"

"That's about the size of it, Cece. Unless you have some viable alternative. Do you?"

Cece shook his head. "No. Not really. Nothing that would be acceptable to any of us, or to ninety-nine point nine percent of the residents of the SUSA."

Ben spread his hands. "So there you have it. What choice does it leave us?"

Ike and Cecil looked at him and said nothing for a moment. Ike finally broke the silence. "Well, here we go again, boys."

"Sure looks that way, Ike," Ben replied.

"I don't know what else I can do, diplomatically," Cecil said. "I believe I have exhausted all peaceful options except for total unconditional surrender."

"And that's what Sugar Babe is demanding?" Ben asked.

"Total unconditional surrender and the dissolution of the SUSA-yes, that is what she is calling for."

"Fuck that," Ike said bluntly.

"Yes," Ben said. "That is not an option."

Ben rose from his chair and walked to a window that looked out on a street. He stood and stared out for a

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moment. In the SUSA, around the capital building, there were no closed streets or huge concrete barriers. The capital was as open as could possibly be. There were guards, of course, both in uniform and plainclothes. And there were restrictions about civilians carrying weapons in and around government buildings.

In the SUSA, terrorists and those who would harm an elected official in the capital had a very short life span. Assassination attempts had been made on a few occasions, but had never been successful. The assassins had been tried, convicted, and hanged in a manner of days, not years.

Ben turned from the window. "Put us on the highest alert, Cecil. Travel outside our borders into the USA is forbidden. Advise the citizens that we are now officially in a state of war with the United States of America."

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Chapter Twenty-eight

Ben and Ike split up the SUSA. Ike would command troops in Louisiana,

Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama. Ben would take the eastern states of Tennessee, Florida, Virginia, Georgia, North and South Carolina.

The states of Oklahoma, Missouri, Kentucky, and West Virginia were split as to loyalties. Parts of Southern Illinois went with the SUSA, in spirit at least.

"Where do you want my CP, Ben?" Ike asked.

"We'll float, Ike. For a time, anyway. Until we see how the wind blows."

Ben would personally direct the 501, 503, 504, and 505 Brigades and all the reserves, Home Guard, and civilian militia in the states in his sector. Ike would command his 502, the other brigades, and the reserves, Home Guard, and militias in his sector.

The Rebels began making final preparations for a sustained, all-out war with the USA.

Factories began working around the clock, seven days a week now. Ben had personally visited the lab and nutrition people and told them in no uncertain terms that they had better start producing a field ration that tasted good,

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because if they didn't his next visit was going to be goddamned unpleasant.

Furthermore, he added, "This highly nutritious and vitamin-packed crap you people have been turning out tastes like boiled camel shit smells! Whatever you have left of it, destroy it and the recipe for it!"

The lab people got the message, loud and clear.

Ben gathered his team at his house one evening for hamburgers, beer, some conversation, and one last peaceful gathering before they hit the road.

"Cooper," Ben said as he turned hamburger patties on the outside grill, "our transportation ready to roll?"

"Serviced and sittin' on ready, Boss. When do we pull out?"

"Day after tomorrow, oh five hundred."

Cooper looked at Jersey and smiled. "That's five bucks you owe me."

"What's this about?" Ben asked him.

"Scuttlebutt had it we'd pull out day after tomorrow at dawn. Jersey bet me it was wrong."

Ben cut his eyes to Jersey. "You're losing your touch, Little Bit."

She shrugged. "I have to let him win every now and then. If I don't, he pouts."

There wasn't a lot of kidding or horseplay among the team members that evening, and that didn't come as any surprise to Ben. He was sure he knew exactly how each member felt, for he felt the same way: none of them were happy about the upcoming war against other Americans, with the

possible exception of Anna. There was a lot of hate in her for the FPPS, and Ben certainly could not blame her for the way she felt. Anna had been raped several times during her time with those rogue agents.

Ben did not like to think about what might happen to any FPPS agent that Anna took captive. Unless he was there to intervene it would be unpleasant. He was sure of that.

Just before the gathering broke up early that evening,

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Ben told his team, "Gear up, people. I'll see you all in about thirty-six hours."

The team helped Ben clean up, and then left. Ben fixed a cup of coffee and sat on his porch, watching the neighborhood kids finish their playing for that day in the waning moments of summer daylight; soon their parents would be calling them in for baths before bedtime.

In the SUSA parents were not afraid to allow their children to play outside. In all of the SUSA, child molestation was almost unheard of. Molesting a child in the SUSA was one sure way for a pervert to guarantee himself a very short life. Punishment for molesting a child was certain to be very quick and very final. There were no mutterings of psychiatrists about how the pervert's psyche had been bruised as a child because his mother had been frightened by a catfish ... or some other such blathering bullshit as was so often allowed in courts outside the SUSA.

A couple of neighborhood kids rode their bicycles past Ben's house and waved and called a greeting. Ben smiled and waved at the kids. It was a tranquil scene. Something right out of Norman Rockwell, Ben thought as he drank his coffee and listened to the sounds of kids at play.

And why not? he silently questioned. Isn't this the way it's supposed to be: A neighborhood where kids can play safely and parents can allow them to play without worry? A neighborhood made up of individuals, each person with his own likes and dislikes about TV programs and reading material and music, people who agree-for the most part-on law and order, and right and wrong, and morals and values and honor?

"It's damn sure worth fighting to preserve," Ben muttered. He drank his coffee and went into his house to watch some television, but there was nothing on that he cared to see. He looked over his selection of video tapes and couldn't find anything that piqued his interest, either.

"Well, to hell with it," Ben muttered. He was just about to call it a day and go to bed when his phone rang.

"Ben," Cece said, "the Federals have broken through

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our lines and crossed the border in three places. You'd better get down to the ready room, right now."

"On my way."

Ben beeped Corrie. "Get the team together and out to the airport. Stand by to travel. Have Coop get the wagon ready. I'll be in the ready room

with Cecil and Ike."

Ike was staring at a huge wall map of North America when Ben walked in. Ike turned to face him.

"Ben," drawled the Mississippi born Ike. "The Federals busted through in my sector right up here in this little bitty corner where New Mexico and Oklahoma meet. They spread out all over this grassland area here, and are pushing the Home Guard back. Regular troops are still not in there. It'll be several more days before they can plug the hole."

"And in my sector?" Ben asked, walking over to the map, his face grim and set in anger.

Ike thumped the map. "Central Tennessee, and up here in Western Virginia. They poured across in Tennessee. Intel says they must have been coming in small groups for days, as civilians. Ben, we're so goddamned spread out we can't rely on intel anymore. It either comes in too late, or doesn't come in at all."

"I know, Ike, I know. We've got a couple of thousand miles of border to protect."

Ben traced the long border with a finger. "But they've got the same thing to protect with a lot of green troops. And there is this: many of the residents of the USA are just not going to fight. They don't have anything to fight with. The government up there has outlawed militias and taken away the citizens' firearms, and a very large percentage of those chicken-shit liberals who chose to live up there are just too damned yellow to fight. They want somebody else to do their fighting for them."

"We'll get these holes plugged when all the Home Guard gets mobilized and in place."

"We don't have time for that, Ike," Ben told him. "Get

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all our fighters and bombers and gunships in the air, and tell them to get ready to go to work."

Ben turned to Cecil. "Cece, I've got an idea. Have you a line to Madame President Osterman?"

"Oh, yes. One has been established."

"I would appreciate it if you would give that bitch a bump and warn her that the consequences will be dire if she continues to push this war."

"I'll do that, Ben." Cecil smiled. "Buying a little time, are we, Ben?"

Ben returned the smile. "You better believe it, ole' buddy. I sure am. The longer we can stall that socialistic feminazi the better off we'll be."

"I'll get right on it."

"I've got troops moving as fast as is humanly possible, Ben," Ike said.

"If we can stall Madame President for three days we'll be in place. Just

three days."

Ike grinned at Cecil. "Cece, you could always offer to fuck her."

Cecil suddenly looked as though he was about to barf. Ben was still laughing as he walked out of the office.

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Chapter Twenty-nine

The scene beneath them was peaceful as the big cargo planes roared north to a Rebel base in Southern Tennessee. The fields thousands of feet below looked fresh and green in the early summer.

Ben had been unusually silent during the flight from Base Camp One, and his team had not made any attempt to break into his thoughts. For all his worldwide reputation as a warrior Ben had thought of and rejected a dozen or more ways to possibly avoid a war that was sure to tear the nation apart.

The terms that Madame President Osterman wanted above all else were ones that Ben would not even consider: surrender and the dissolution of the SUSAs.

Ben could see no way that a civil war between the SUSAs and the USA could be avoided.

"ETA thirty minutes, General." The words crackled through Ben's headset.

Ben unbuckled and walked back to where his team was sitting. The huge cargo plane was carrying Ben's personal vehicle, tons of supplies, and a platoon from Ben's 501 Brigade.

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"Coop, as soon as we touch down we're heading straight for the front lines," Ben said.

"OK, Boss," Ben's driver acknowledged.

"Corrie, has there been any word from any of the other hot spots?"

"Nothing, Boss."

"Word from Cecil?"

She shook her head.

Ben nodded and returned to his seat. Just moments before Ben's plane took off from Base Camp One, Cecil had informed him that Osterman had agreed to a seventy-two hour cease-fire during which representatives from both governments would meet to discuss the main sticking points between the two sides.

Osterman had inquired if General Raines would be present at the talks.

She was informed that he would not.

"Good," she had replied. "Just the sight of that man makes me nauseated."

When Ben had been informed of her comment, the lone reporter Ben would allow anywhere near him decided immediately that it would be best Ben's reply not be printed.

Cooper pointed the nose of the big, nine-passenger wagon north, and within a couple of hours after landing he was facing the Federals' front lines, about a thousand meters away, studying the situation through binoculars.

Ben lowered the long lenses, turning to the colonel commanding the battalion of the Home Guard assigned to this sector. "Looks good. Looks real good. You hold for seventy-two more hours, Colonel, while the cease-fire is in effect, just three more days, and by the time it's over you and your people can fall back for a much deserved rest and perhaps see your families for a time."

"That would be wonderful. I'll tell the troops. Oh, we'll hold, General. You can count on us." He smiled. "Although some of my people are getting a bit long in the tooth for this sort of thing."

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Ben chuckled softly. He could empathize with the colonel's remarks ... at least to some small degree. His own close-cropped hair was almost all iron-gray now, with only a few specks of brown, not at all unattractive on him. "I understand that, Colonel. I'm sure as hell no young strutting rooster anymore, myself. But your people are doing one hell of a job. If I could, I'd shake every hand here and personally congratulate them."

"I'll pass that word along, General. It'll sure tickle my people to know you said it."

"Let's see the lines, Colonel."

The battalion commander was momentarily startled. "Ah ... all of them, General?"

"All of them, Colonel. Every inch of the lines from west to east."

"They stretch for miles, General," the colonel said doubtfully.

"We have time," Ben replied with a smile.

"Would you like to rest for a while first, General?"

"No."

"Something to eat, perhaps?"

"No."

"All right, General. We'll check out the lines." He smiled. "All fifty or so miles of them."

By the end of the first day at the front, Ben had not been able to see all of the miles long front, but he had seen enough to know the Home Guard, the militias, and the few reserves that he'd managed to get into place were in good shape, both in equipment and in spirit.

They were ready for anything the Federals might decide to throw at them.

"Osterman certainly has nuclear capabilities," the colonel said.

"She won't use them," Ben replied. "For one thing, the Rebels are so spread out the nukes would mostly kill civilians. As much as Osterman hates me, she won't be

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responsible for the killing of innocent civilians ... at least, I don't think she will."

"Personally, I think the woman's crazy."

"Oh, no, Colonel," Ben corrected. "She's not crazy. Not in the least. But she is a democrat/socialist, and to their way of thinking that means they're one hundred percent right about all things and there is no room for compromise. You're close enough to my age to remember all the squabbling the old Democrat and Republican parties used to have. They usually managed to hammer things out ... eventually. Then, only a few years before the collapse and the Great War, it seemed to all go to shit. The Democrats changed, their philosophy becoming more hard-line socialism and new world order. Open borders and go easy on criminals. It's not pure socialism. It's a unique form of socialism that belongs solely to the democrat/socialist party." Ben waved a hand and grimaced. "Ah, what the hell? It's all moot now. The old Republican party has all but been outlawed, the democrat/socialists are firmly in power, and the nation is split. So here we are."

"Facing the fight of our lives."

"I think you're right in saying that, Colonel. Win, lose, or draw, the nation will never be the same after the last shot is fired. Not this time."

"But we will win, won't we, General? You don't have any doubts about that, do you?"

"Oh, we'll win, Colonel. No, I really have no doubts about that. What I'm wondering is what we'll win after the last shot is fired."

"I don't follow you, General."

"What will be left, Colonel?"

"Why ... the SUSAs, General."

"And a completely, totally, utterly devastated neighbor to the north. Factories and highways and newly rebuilt bridges and office buildings destroyed. Lives turned upside down and fresh careers gone. And to make matters worse, the residents filled with hate toward the SUSAs."

"General Raines, the USA has at least five times the

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population of the SUSAs... probably more than that. They could easily field five times our number."

"But they won't, Colonel. Liberals abhor war. They hate guns. Violence sickens them. They don't want to fight. They want somebody else to do their fighting. Look what's been done recently—they've scrapped the Star Spangled Banner as the national anthem because they didn't like 'bombs bursting in the air' and other lines that they say glorify war. They're now squabbling among themselves trying to pick a song that's 'soft and pretty.' Patriotism is "old hat" in the USA. Frowned upon. There is no God. No Divine Being. No Higher Power. Liberals are far too intelligent to believe in such nonsense as that. They've lost their direction. And they'll lose this war. And in a manner of speaking, so will we. The USA will lose many material things, but they can't lose their faith, Colonel, because the majority of them don't have any. At least, we will never lose our faith."

"I understand what you're saying, General." Ben smiled. "Good, Colonel. Now let's head back and get some chow. I'm hungry."

The Rebel buildup of troops and supplies continued around the clock for the next three days. Bridges along the border were wired to be blown electronically. Thousands of deadly mines were laid. Since the Rebels were always prepared for a fight, depots around the SUSA were already filled to capacity with millions of rounds of ammunition, weapons, rockets, mines, grenades, spare parts, clothing and boots, medical supplies, and everything else the Rebels would need for a sustained fight.

With just a few hours to go before the seventy-two hour cease-fire ran out, Ike radioed Ben and told him that everything was ready in his sector: his people were in place, and geared up for whatever the Federals might throw at them. There was little else he could do.

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"Prayer certainly wouldn't hurt," Ben told his longtime friend.

"I been doin' that, Ole' Buddy," Ike responded.

"Keep it up."

"Don't worry, I will!"

Then, with only two hours to go on the deadline, a spokesperson for Madame President Osterman asked if the cease-fire could be continued for another three days.

Ben laughed when he read the communiqué. "Sure," he told Cecil. "Give them all the time they need. They're finally getting smart and building up just like we are ... as best they can with what they have to draw from. Our eyes in the sky picked that up three days ago. Some extra time will benefit us much more than it will them."

"You're sounding very chipper today, Ben."

"I've been doing a lot of soul-searching since we last spoke, Cece. We didn't start this conflict with the USA. We offered to establish trade agreements with them, offered them protection ... the whole damn ball of wax. But nothing will appease them except for us to turn belly up and kiss their socialistic asses, and when we won't they want a damn war. Well, to hell with them. They can kiss my Rebel dick!"

Cecil laughed. "You are feeling your oats today, aren't you, Ben? Well,

I've done some soul-searching myself, and I agree with you one hundred percent. You'll be interested in knowing that some surveys were done here in the SUSA. Something just over ninety-six percent of those surveyed agree with our stand. So, give 'em hell, Ben."

"I felt the people of the SUSA would be solidly behind us. Anything less would have surprised me."

"Me, too," Cecil said. "Ben, are we going to be ready when the Federal push comes?"

"Oh, yes. We're just about as ready now as we can get. A few more days will enable our people all along the line to get in place. Our fighters are under wraps at an old base south of us, and the pilots are hot to go. I'm sure the Federals know we have quite an air force, but not as

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substantial as what they're going to see when the action starts."

"You anticipate any problems in pushing them back across the border where you are?"

"None at all, Cece. The only reason the Federals managed to penetrate this far into our territory is because this is one of the strips that was never completely cleared and mined. Sugar Babe really screwed up by asking for a few more days."

"It might be a trick on her part, Ben. Have you considered that?"

"That's the very first thing that popped into my head, ole' buddy. We'll see."

"All right. You take care, Ben."

"You too, Cece."

Ben talked with a few more people that day and he and his team took off in the big, nine-passenger wagon to make a run over to the easternmost outpost of Rebels, on the west side of the Cumberland River, just a few miles south of the Kentucky line. Ben's personal security platoon was with him, of course, both leading the way and following in half a dozen vehicles.

"What?" Ben heard Corrie say. "You're breaking up. Say again."

Ben twisted in his captain's chair to look at her and to listen to the one-sided conversation.

"Are you sure about that? Nothing here," Corrie said. "It's quiet."

"What in the hell's going on?" Ben asked. "Talk to me, Corrie."

"Apparently, Federals have broken the cease-fire, Boss. They've begun a hard push against our people at several places. Our people are holding ... so far."

"That damn bitch!" Ben said. "Well, it's what I half suspected would happen."

"They violated the truce first," Anna spoke. "So from now on it's anything goes. No rules, right, Pop?"

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Ben hesitated, then said, "If that's the way they want to play it. It's a brand new ballgame now."

"Federal troops coming straight at us, Boss!" Corrie yelled. "Less than a thousand meters away to our north. A full company of them."

"Who the hell is reporting that?"

"A spotter plane, Boss." She held up a hand as Cooper looked to Ben for orders. "Federals pushing hard against our easternmost troops. They're attempting to flank them."

"Tell our people we're making a stand right here, Corrie. Pull over, Coop. Head for that ridge over there to our right. The war just started for real," Ben said through clenched teeth.

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Chapter Thirty

With Cooper leading the way, bouncing across the clearing toward the series of low brush and timber-covered hills, the platoon followed. The several pickup trucks that were always with Ben and his security platoon, filled with all manner of weapons and gear, were the last vehicles to cross the clearing and duck behind the hills.

Ben did not have to order his people to spread out and get into position: his security platoon operated like a fine Swiss watch. Each person knew his job and got to it without being told.

"Five hundred meters from the road," Ben's spotter called. He was using very high power long lenses with range finder. "Advancing slowly."

"Mortars ready to go," Ben was informed.

"Heavy machine gun ready," a Rebel called.

"Big thumpers ready," another called.

Ben's security team carried two 60mm mortars, one .50 caliber machine gun, two M-60 machine guns, two SAW's (not counting the Squad Automatic Weapon Cooper used), and two 40mm automatic grenade launchers, called Big Thumpers. All members carried regulation M-16's with

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bloop tubes. Ben used either his CAR or his old faithful M-14, affectionately known as a Thunder Lizard.

"Four hundred meters from the road," the spotter said.

"They're sure to spot the tire tracks where we cut off and came over here," Jersey said.

"Good," Ben said. "That suits me just fine. I'm ready for a fight."

The platoon waited on the crest of the low hills, hidden from view by brush and timber.

"Approaching the road and stopping," the spotter called. "Point man checking it out."

"Has he spotted our tire tracks?" Ben asked.

"Doesn't seem to have noticed them, General. They're crossing the road."

"This is too easy," Ben muttered. "I almost feel sorry for them."

"I don't," Anna spoke up. "It's like you said, Pops- They started it."

Ben cut his eyes to her. She unwrapped a piece of gum, stuck it in her mouth, and began chomping nonchalantly. Anna certainly has the right attitude for this business, Ben thought. He looked at Jersey, lying beside Anna. The diminutive bodyguard yawned. Ben smiled and looked at Corrie. She was busy talking to someone back at their CP, probably giving our location and calling in for gunships. Beth looked as though she was thinking about taking a short nap. Cooper was lying behind his SAW, munching on a candy bar.

"Approaching max range for M-16's," the spotter said.

"Hold your fire," Ben said to Corrie, and she passed the word down the line. "Set mortar elevation for three hundred meters."

All eyes close to him turned to him. "Three hundred meters, Boss?" Corrie asked.

"Three hundred," Ben repeated. "We'll finish this within seconds after starting it."

"We sure will," Beth muttered. "We'll be checking to see how close they shaved this morning."

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Ben smiled at that, and the Rebels on the ridge waited, silent and motionless.

"They finally noticed the tire tracks," the spotter said. "They're looking at them."

"Green troops with green commanders," Ben heard a Rebel sergeant mutter in disgust.

"Knock it off," Ben said.

There was no more talk from the line of Rebels.

"Approaching range," the spotter said. After a few seconds, he added, "In range."

"Fire," Ben said.

Several dozen weapons of various calibers and millimeters opened up from the ridge. The Rebels turned the clearing below them into a solid

killing field. The flower-sprinkled meadow became slashed with crimson and noisy with the screaming of the panic-stricken and frightened, with the moaning of the wounded. The suddenly dead seemed loud in their final and permanent silence.

Probably sixty percent of the Federal force were killed or severely wounded during the first minute of the Rebels' opening up from the hills. Many of the rest of the green troops panicked and tried to run back toward the road. The Rebels cut them down with 40mm grenades, high explosive mortar rounds, and machine gun fire.

After only a few minutes Ben called for a cease-fire up and down the line. "Can you transmit on their frequency?" he asked Corrie.

"Affirmative, Boss."

"Tell them to gather up their wounded and get the hell back to their own lines. Do it right now. We'll take care of any wounded they can't carry or their aid people don't think can be moved. This is the only chance to leave I'll give them. If they try to make a fight of it, I'll kill them all."

Corrie spoke for a few seconds. She cut her eyes to Ben. "They'll leave as soon as they can gather up all their wounded."

"Tell them to leave all their weapons and ammo and

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grenades. That will lighten their load considerably," he added drily.

"Will do."

The Rebels on the ridge waited and watched as the Federals gathered up their wounded and prepared to move out back to their lines.

"The officer down there wishes to speak to the ranking officer up here," Corrie told Ben.

"Tell him to meet me at the base of this hill. Alone."

"Affirmative."

Ben made his way down the hill and sat down on a log. He rolled a cigarette and waited. A few minutes passed before a young lieutenant walked up to Ben. The young officer paled when he recognized who he was about to address.

"Sir ..." he stammered.

"Be quiet," Ben told him. "And listen to me. First of all, you're very lucky to be alive. Secondly, your self-appointed president is a nut..."

The young officer's eyes narrowed at that, but he remained silent

"If you have any sense at all, you'll quietly take some sort of emergency leave and disappear. Move to the mountains and keep your head down until this civil war is over. And we'll win it, boy, don't have any illusions about that."

"You can't win it, General. We have the might of the United States government behind us. A nation divided cannot stand."

"How original," Ben said.

Ben stared at the young man for a moment, realizing the officer had been so thoroughly indoctrinated, probably beginning at a very early age-brainwashed might be a better term-nothing he said to him was going to get through.

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "All right, son. Have it your way. Leave your weapons, take your wounded, and get back to your lines. We'll radio our gunships not to attack you,

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and we'll see to those too badly wounded to move. Get out of here."

The young officer saluted and Ben returned the salute ... sort of. The lieutenant wheeled about and marched off. Ben retreated a few yards back into the brush for cover, just in case.

He heard a slight rustling behind him and turned to look. Anna and Jersey were standing there, weapons at the ready.

"Never hurts to be cautious," Jersey said.

"Besides," Anna said after spitting out her well-chewed gum, "I don't trust those damn Federals."

Corrie checked up and down the Rebel lines and discovered that all areas had held against the attempted Federal push. The Federals had suffered a great many casualties for nothing. The Rebels loaded up the severely wounded Federals and headed back.

"We'll send a burial crew to see to the dead," Ben said. "I won't leave these boys and girls to rot in the sun or be eaten by animals."

Back at his temporary CP, Corrie gave Cecil a bump and Ben brought the President of the SUSA up to date about the Federals breaking the truce. "Of course they were ordered to," Ben said. "No field commander issued those orders. It was Madame President Osterman."

"That lying bitch!" Cecil fumed over the miles. "She gave me her word."

"Well, we know how much her word is worth," Ben told him. "She's a pit viper, Cece. And that's really giving the snake a bad name. She cannot be trusted. I never thought she could, but I decided to give her one try. So much for that."

"And now, Ben?"

"Do we have a choice? I think not. Osterman and her cohorts want a war. All right, we'll give them one. It's what they want. God knows I don't want a civil war. After the fight, or because of the fight, maybe, just maybe, there will be a slim chance we can settle this. Personally, I don't

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think so, but it's worth keeping in mind and giving some thought to.

What do you think, Cece?"

"I think, Ben, you may be right. But I also have to remind you of your own words-'The nation will never again be the same no matter who wins.' "

"Oh, I haven't forgotten it won't be the same, Cece. Certainly not in our lifetime, anyway, that's for damn sure."

"Are you set with everything you need, Ben?"

"We have supplies to last us for a sustained campaign, Cece. The last of my brigades is in place and ready to rock and roll. Armor is here. Artillery is here. Just wish us luck and a very short war."

"I don't know about the short, Ben."

"I don't either, ole' buddy. This thing may drag on for years. In some form or another."

"From one side or the other."

"That's very true, Cece. I think we'll win, but the gods of war are fickle, as you well know." Ben laughed. "Stop trying to shove all the outcome on me, you old fart. You spent years in the field."

"I'm trying to forget all that, Ben. I'll have you know I have put my sordid past behind me and never think about those dreadful days filled with bad food and cold showers ... when we had time to take one, that is. I now enjoy my hand tailored, double-breasted suits and made to order cufflink shirts. A cold martini before dinner is always nice, and then some intelligent conversation with very world-wise diplomats. I'll have you know I am a highly respected politician now."

Ben burst out laughing. When he could talk again, he managed to say, "A respected politician? Hell, Cece, I didn't know there was such a thing!"

Cecil gave Ben a very loud and wet-sounding raspberry and hung up, laughing.

"What's so funny, Pops?" Anna asked.

"Cecil. He's a riot."

"Very handsome man, I think. I also think it's time for

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you to start thinking about upgrading your wardrobe. I'd like to see you buy some nice, pin-stripe suits."

"Oh? You'll have me looking like Gregory Peck, I suppose."

Anna blinked. "Who the hell is Gregory Peck?"

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Chapter Thirty-one

After their last, rather humiliating defeat at the hands of the Rebels

the Federals withdrew, backing up to their own territory. For a few days all was quiet on all fronts. Rebels and Federals faced each other in spotty locations across a wide expanse of land, running for several thousand miles from the Atlantic coast in Virginia to El Paso, Texas.

The politicians in the USA and the SUSA talked on the phone for hours.

The field commanders on both sides of the line waited and studied maps and planned.

The line troops just waited and sweated it out.

"Nothing, General," a Scout just back from a venture into Federal territory reported to Ben. "The line troops are doing the same thing we're doing-waiting."

"The politicians are still yakking back and forth," Ben said. "Wasting time, settling nothing."

"From what I've read," the Scout replied, "that's about the way it's always been, sir."

Ben smiled. "That does just about sum up both houses of the United States Congress, for a fact."

"Nothing like ours."

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"Thank God," Ben said.

After the Scout had left Ben sat in the office of his HQ and stared at a wall map. The SUSA looked small, almost helpless, against the rest of North America.

Ben shook his head, removing those thoughts from his mind. The SUSA was anything but helpless, and the USA was about to discover that, the hard way.

Ben's team came wandering in through the open door to his office and took seats-with the exception of Anna, who sprawled on the carpeted floor.

"By all means, make yourself as comfortable as possible, Anna," Ben said.

"Thanks, Pops. I will." She unwrapped several sticks of bubble gum, stuck the whole wad in her mouth, and began chomping.

Ben sighed and looked at his team. "What's up, Gang?"

Before anyone could reply Buddy Raines, commander of the Special Ops unit and the 508 Brigade, strolled in.

"What the hell are you doing here, Boy?" Ben asked.

"Ike decided to make my command a floater. Rapid response, he called it. I like it."

"I'm sure you do. And you just decided to, ah, float up here?"

Buddy, a very proper young man, was looking disapprovingly at Anna, sprawled on the floor. He sighed at the pose of his adopted sister,

shook his head, and lifted his eyes to his father. "Oh, of course, Father."

"Right," Ben said drily. "Of course you did. And Ike and Cecil had absolutely nothing to do with it?"

"Quite right, absolutely. Nothing at all, Father," Buddy said innocently.

Ben lifted a hand. "All right, all right. Skip it, Boy. You're here and we can use you. But isn't this going to cut Ike short?"

"Oh, no, sir. Those Texans surprised us all. They took the wraps off a well-equipped and trained Home Guard two brigades strong. If the Federals cross over into Texas, they're going to pay a very heavy price ... in blood."

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"I knew they had a hell of a Home Guard."

"That's putting it mildly, Father. Anyway, Intel thinks the main push will be centered here, or near here. Our operatives in the north are almost certain of that."

"Are you planning to bring your entire brigade?"

"Half of them. But all of my Spec Op people."

"All right. I'll put you to work right now. Tell your boys and girls to get across into enemy territory and bring me back some prisoners ... officers, preferably. And notice I didn't say you go, Boy. You understand that?"

"Perfectly, Father."

"I'm glad to hear it." Ben turned his head to one side and muttered, "Not that you'll pay the slightest bit of attention to my orders."

"Beg pardon, Father?" Buddy questioned.

"Nothing, Boy. Nothing. Nice to see you. Get settled in and get your people going."

Buddy grinned. "Roger that, Father. See you." He tossed a jaunty salute and left the room.

"I have one kid who's about half smart-ass, and the other one is a bubble gum factory," Ben said, sitting down in the chair behind his desk.

Just then Anna blew a large bubble and it exploded all over her face. "Well ... shit!" she said.

The entire team burst out laughing, and Ben couldn't help joining in as Anna began the process of peeling the gum from her face.

"It isn't funny!" she managed to mumble through the thick layer of goo.

"The hell it isn't, Kid!" Ben said, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief.

"It's in my hair!" Anna griped.

"Come on, I'll help you get it out," Beth said, standing up and holding out a hand to Anna.

Anna rose to her feet and the two of them left the room, Beth still smiling at the younger woman's antics.

Ben stilled the ringing of the phone and listened for a moment. "All right," he said, "we knew it was coming."

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"Thanks." Ben hung up the phone and sighed. "It's back to work time, Gang. Federals appear to be massing for a big push in half a dozen locations." He looked at Cooper. "Get the wagon ready to go and make sure everybody is geared up."

"Right, Boss."

He looked at Corrie and smiled-rather sadly, Corrie thought. "Show time."

She nodded her head and stood up. "Looks that way, Boss." She turned to leave the room, then paused and looked back at Ben. "I guess it's never going to stop, is it?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't think so, Corrie. I think we'll be fighting for the rest of our lives to keep the SUSAs a separate nation."

Jersey rose from her chair and stretched her diminutive frame. "Well, hell, it was getting boring around here, anyway. I'll go kick Cooper in the butt and make sure he packs his toothbrush."

"Alert my security platoon, Little Bit," Ben said.

"Will do, Boss."

Alone in the office, Ben picked up the phone and spent the next fifteen minutes being brought up to date on the situation. He then called Cecil on a security line and chatted for a few minutes.

"There will be no more delays, Cece. No more ceasefires. This time we go for the gusto."

"All right, Ben. It's time to settle the matter of the SUSAs' sovereignty once and for all. There isn't much left to say, is there?"

"Just one thing, Cece."

"Oh?"

"May God have mercy on our souls."