



Prepper's Crucible - Last Volume

The End - Volume Six

Bobby Andrews

PREPPER'S CRUCIBLE – VOLUME SIX

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Synopsis of *Volume Five*

Ben and Cory return to Prescott after having located Ben's sons and Cory's sister, Rachael. Tim, Rachael's boyfriend and former corpsman turned doctor, joins the group as well. They are forced to take a longer route back to the ranch, where they find Eric and Justin, Ben's sons, after passing through Wickenburg on the way home. After making the trip, they arrive back to discover the Mexican Army, determined to take back territory that once belonged to Mexico, is occupying the town and the rest of the state. They also discover that Don was murdered. The story picks up thirty-nine years in the future, when Cory tells his story as the last surviving member of the group.

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The contour of the land is an aid to the army; sizing up opponents to determine victory, assessing dangers and distance. Those who do battle without knowing these will lose.

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

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To my readers: You have been a tolerant bunch of readers, and I appreciate that. I tried my best to put out new installments quickly, so as to not to make you wait too long for the next book. More than six hundred pages of written text, edits, rewrites, and more edits was a challenge, but I did not mind it when I saw your response to my books.

Words fail me when I try to express my gratitude to you. I can't thank you enough for allowing me to make a living at doing what I love to do. You are the BEST! My wife would be the only person in the world to describe me as sentimental, but the truth is, I am. When it comes to my new family – you – I do get emotional at the way you all supported me and helped me pull this off.

I am taking some time off and going back to hunting, fishing, camping, and exploring even more the natural beauty that surrounds me here in Prescott. My shooting skills declined over the last months, so I will also get some more training and attend more competitions for a few months.

I hope the message you take away from these books is that you really do need to be prepared. I don't know that anything bad is going to happen. Who could know that? What I do know is that the potential is always there, so why not do something to get ready and give you and yours the best chance of getting through it intact?

I end this series with a sense of sorrow – I really grew to love these characters. They are as real to me as your family is to you. In any event, I know I will continue writing, but am not sure what comes next. Out of every ending comes a new beginning. I really believe that, and I hope you do too.

—Bobby

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CHAPTER ONE

EMP PLUS THIRTY-NINE YEARS PRESCOTT, ARIZONA, TERRITORIAL CAPITAL

Horace Binkley, the official historian of the Arizona Territory, had finally managed to secure an appointment with Governor Cory Redding. The former park ranger, leader of the great insurgency and then governor of the Territory, had finally agreed to tell his story. The tiny man almost shivered with delight as he entered the downtown plaza on his way to the Pioneer Assisted Living Facility, where the former governor had lived the last four years after disappearing at the end of his first term. Although he could have run for a second term, he chose instead to live the life of a hermit, and was not seen for close to sixteen years, before he turned up at the home. In the four years he spent there, he refused to see anyone; rumor had it he only spoke to a few of the staff at the home. Horace was excited about the prospect of interviewing him not only because he was an historian; he also wrote opinion pieces for the largest newspaper in the state, *The Prescott Courier*. His interview would bring him national fame, as the governor was generally seen as the George Washington of his time. He was one of the very few who managed to organize an effective partisan group that later became the famous Prescott Rangers, the only militia in the Southwest that effectively fought back the Mexican Army. They paved the road for the U.S. Army, and fought side-by-side with the military until the Mexicans were forced to retreat back across the border and lick their wounds for the next twenty years. That the interview was going to take place on the thirty-ninth anniversary of the EMP strike was not lost on him. He wasn't sure what it meant or why the governor chose that particular day, but his happiness about getting the interview outweighed those thoughts.

Horace was a tiny little pellet of a man, with a pompous air about him that made him universally disliked. His face was pinched into a permanent frown, and he walked through the plaza with short aggressive strides, moving quickly. He looked down at his watch and realized he would be fifteen minutes early. Not wanting to appear too eager, he slowed his pace and stopped in front of the three statues that lined the front of the granite

courthouse that looked over the square. The courthouse was riddled with pockmarks from the gunfire during the final push against the Mexican Army more than thirty years earlier. Two tourists were standing in front of the first statue, carefully reading the inscription on the base of the monument. Horace stopped, and seeing a chance to demonstrate his intelligence, approached the young man and woman reading the inscription.

“I’m guessing you’re not from here?” Horace said as he approached the couple.

“We’re visiting relatives who live here,” the woman timidly replied. She was a pretty woman, well-dressed with blonde hair carefully in place. Horace assumed the man was her husband by the fact his arm had been draped around her as he approached. The man was well-dressed and in his early thirties.

“My name is Horace Binkley,” he said, offering his hand. After shaking both their hands he added, “I’m the state historian, and there’s a lot more story behind these statues than you can read on that piece of bronze. You want to hear more about these great men?” The poor little man looked so anxious to talk to them that the man nodded his agreement. Horace moved around them and stood in front of the statue. Turning, he said, “this is Bucky O’Neil. His largest claim to fame is that he was a captain in Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. That’s why he’s mounted on the horse. But he was also a reporter before that, and a lawyer. When he was a reporter, he covered the shootout at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone. He moved here and became sheriff, and later the mayor of the town.”

“Really?” the woman said, clearly enthralled. Horace’s chest got a little bigger.

“He got to know Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday after that gunfight, and they were friends until Bucky got himself killed at San Juan Hill. Damn fool thought taking cover was a cowardly act, and was killed by a sniper as he was walking around the front lines exhorting his men for the attack that was about to take place.”

“Was San Juan Hill during the American-Mexican War?” the man asked.

“No, that was the last war we had here. That was more than thirty years ago. This was the Spanish-American War of 1898.” His voice sounded the least bit superior when he said it. “Let’s move to next one,” he added, after checking his watch.

“Okay,” the man said, and the couple followed Horace to the middle statue. It was of a man holding a rifle over his head with an expression of triumph etched on the bronze face.

“This one is Cory Redding. He is a former governor, and you may have heard of him. Right after the American-Mexican War, he was elected by an overwhelming majority.”

“I’ve heard of him,” the man interrupted. “We read about him in history class.”

“Me too,” the young woman answered. “He was a great man, according to my father.”

“That he was,” Horace replied, a little peeved at having his monologue interrupted. “And,” he whispered conspiratorially, “I’m on my way to interview him in a few minutes. It’s the first interview he’s granted in close to 20 years.”

“He’s still alive?”

“Yes, he is.”

“You’re very lucky to be able to do that,” the woman said.

“I think it has to do with more than luck,” he replied, although the shirt got a bit tighter at her admiration. “But back to the matter at hand. The governor was a park ranger when the EMP hit. He went on to become the leader of the partisans that fought the guerilla war with the Mexicans and kept our hopes alive during the darkest days in the history of the Territory. He was later elected governor and served one term, then disappeared for decades.”

“Where did he go?” the man asked.

“That’s what I intend to find out today.”

“That should be interesting.”

“I’m getting short of time,” Horace replied. “Let’s get to the last statue and then I have to go.”

“Sure.”

The last statue showed a man on a small hill, rifle pointed downward as though firing from above. “This is Don Murphy. He was a retired Army officer who led the fight to defend the town against a gang of bikers who were about to take it over and raze the entire town. He went on to be the first to organize the town to get hunting parties going when the food from delivery trucks and local farms ran out in the winter following the EMP. We know he and Cory were good friends, and that they lived together on Don’s

ranch. We also know he was murdered about two months after the EMP struck, but that's about it. We don't really know much more about him. I interviewed several people who knew him; but the other people that lived at the ranch all died before I could get to them, so I am hoping to find out more today."

"So, this interview is really important to you?" The young lady asked.

"The most important thing I'll ever do if he explains to me what happened between the time the EMP hit and we began to record history again after he assumed the governorship." His own statement struck Horace. It was the most important moment in his life, and the act of stating it gave him pause. He again checked his watch and said, "I really have to go. But if I see you again, I hope to be able to tell you more about that time. It's important to know what happened, and why. The details matter. We have most of the facts, but none of the flavor. It's like eating a steak without salt. It's still a steak, but it's not quite right." He stalked away with his peculiar small-man gait. He crossed the square and began a gradual climb up to the assisted living facility, wondering why the governor had chosen that particular moment to grant the interview.

When he arrived at the home, he stopped and again looked at his watch. He was still five minutes early, so he took a moment to gaze at the building and think about the facility. The home had been funded by the Arizona Legislature and was available to any native-born Arizonan. It charged a percentage of a person's income to live there, and if you made zero, you paid zero. It was unique in that regard. It was founded in the early 1900s when the state realized it would have many founding members who would be destitute in old age. The mining boom and bust made that a certainty and the legislature moved to ensure that all Arizona founding families would have a place to stay in old age, regardless of their wealth. The facility only had 140 rooms, and the waiting list was long; but it still served the Territory. Even during and after the EMP, the home operated with volunteers and kept its doors open to the elderly.

The home sat perched on a high hilltop overlooking the town, and each room had a balcony that faced in one of four directions. Each room was private and all had views of the surrounding landscape. Arizona took care of its favored sons and daughters in a manner unknown in other areas. Horace felt proud of that fact, and finished the climb to the home in another minute. He entered the building and stood in a huge foyer with a long desk

running across one side of the room. Several large, and older, men guarded the narrow hallway that led to the elevators and ground-floor rooms. He walked to the reception desk that was staffed by an elderly woman with grey hair and a large smile. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Horace Binkley to see Governor Redding," he announced in his best authoritative voice.

"He prefers to be called Cory," she answered. "You can follow one of our guards to his room. Eric," she called, motioning to a man who guarded the hallway. "Please take this guy to see Cory. He has an appointment, but make sure you frisk him and keep Cory safe." Eric, a grey-haired man with a wrinkled face and an unkempt ponytail, walked over to where Horace stood. He rested his hand on the butt of an old hog leg pistol and examined the guest carefully. "Hands over head," he said. Horace raised his hands and suffered a brisk pat down before lowering his hands.

"He's clean," Eric told the receptionist.

"Take him up to Cory's room," she replied. Eric led off, one hand still on the butt of his pistol, and stopped at the elevator. He pushed a button, the elevator arrived, and both men entered it. Eric pushed another button that made the elevator rise to the third floor, and exited the elevator behind Horace.

"Do you know the governor?" Horace asked as they moved down a long institutional hallway.

"Served with him with the Rangers and after," he replied brusquely.

"You must have been pretty young," Horace said nervously. The man's silence and steely gaze were intimidating.

"Nobody was young in those days." He thought for a moment, then added, "we all had to kill people back then, no matter your age." Horace clammed up, a bit put off by the rude treatment, and they walked down the hall until they reached a door at the very end of the hallway.

"Wait here. I'll let you know if you can come in."

"I have an appointment."

"I said, wait here." Eric glanced at him with steel in his light blue eyes, and Horace again remained silent. Eric opened the door and entered the room, then closed the door behind him. He emerged a minute later and said, "he'll see you. Go on in." Horace entered the room and saw that it was empty. He looked to the balcony and saw a man reclined on a chaise lounge and looked at Eric quizzically. "Go on," Eric said, motioning with his head

for Horace to go out on the balcony. He followed Horace out and leaned against the wall.

“Mr. Governor?” Horace asked. Cory was reclined on the lounge, his eyes shut. An IV bag hung off a long pole that sat at the side of his lounge. His face was slack, with folds of flesh hanging under his chin, and his rail-thin body seemed unlikely for the hero that Horace knew him to be.

“Go ahead,” Eric whispered.

“It’s Horace. We have an appointment.”

“Yes, we do.” The voice was faint and Cory still had not opened his eyes.

Horace sat at a small table beside the lounge, pulled a small notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket, looked at his notes, and said, “can I ask you why you granted this interview?”

“You mean after twenty years of silence?”

“Well, yes.”

“You know there’s a vote coming up on whether Arizona should rejoin the Union?”

“Of course.”

“That’s why you’re here. We need that vote to pass.” Cory sat up and stared at the man sitting across the table from him. His eerie light blue eyes glowed with the look of a highly intelligent man, and one who was determined.

“I don’t understand.”

“I sponsored the bill that required Arizona to not rejoin the Union for at least twenty years. Ever since, the ban is renewed every year, and that needs to change now. You got the ear of the people with your opinion column, and we need to get you on board to get the votes out to overturn that bill I sponsored as governor.”

“Well, that’s not really what I wanted to talk about.”

“I’ll give you what you want, if you’ll give me what I need. When I passed that law, the reason I did it was because I wanted us to have the time to be certain the country wasn’t going to do the same thing that created the disaster that followed the EMP. I wanted to buy some time for us to be able to judge if the country was going to head down the same road as the one we had before. We’ve had that phase, and it’s time for us to make the country whole again. We’re the last territory still holding out.”

“Why now?”

“Two reasons. The first one’s important. So, I repeat. We need to be one country again, and if our territory rejoins the Union, the country is whole. The second reason has to do with why we’re doing this interview at all, and is less important. I’m dying, and if I don’t tell the story now, it may never be told. If I don’t help get that law passed, I’ll never see the stars and stripes flying over our capitol again. Also, people have a right to know how we came back from the EMP and won the war. It might help some other generation of Americans who face another disaster like we lived through.”

“So, the deal is if I write the opinion piece supporting rejoining the Union, you’ll give me the story of what happened in the months before and after the EMP?”

“That’s it.”

“That’s a pretty high price.”

“You don’t give up anything valuable without a high price. Make a decision and tell me what you want to do.”

Horace thought it over for a second. He realized that this was his ticket to national fame and said, “deal.” Cory ignored his outstretched hand and rolled on his side to face the journalist.

“Where do you want to start?”

Horace flipped through the pages of his notebook, stopped to consider things and then said, “how about we start with how you came to live with Don Murphy?”

“I was in the right place at the right time. Two of his friends were coming up the Black Canyon Recreational Trail as I was riding down to check the trails. They picked up me and my family when I got out of the trail and we all headed to the ranch.”

“What can you tell me about Don?”

“Well, I can tell you he was a great man with big flaws. He was certain about things, but could change his mind at the drop of a hat.” Cory paused for a moment and then added, “Don was the kind of guy you would want in your foxhole, but not necessarily at a barbeque party. He was intense and focused, and we needed that at the time. I’m not sure he would have been a friend if not for the circumstances we faced.”

“Can you tell me anything else about him?”

Cory thought for a minute and then said, “he taught me tactics and strategy when it came to fighting. He also taught me how to look at a leader, recognize their flaws, and still acknowledge them as a leader. I suspect

many people feel the same way about me. He was incredibly brave and claimed to be cold-blooded, but nothing was further from the truth. It's amazing how we all can be so unaware about ourselves. I guess his greatest gift to me was teaching me how to understand you can be weak and brave at the same time."

"Were you with him when he led the fight against the biker gang?"

"No, he asked me to stay behind and protect the ranch. He saw me as the only other warrior in the group, and didn't want us both to be away from the ranch at the same time. I guess he was right about that. I didn't know it at the time, but I was a warrior by nature. I guess he was one by training, so we sort of complemented each other in some way; but I would never say we were good friends, although we certainly needed each other." Cory's eyes grew dim, his head sagged to one side, and he was immediately asleep.

"What is that?"

"Morphine drip. It takes him out from time to time."

"Is he okay?"

"Does he look okay?"

"No, he doesn't."

"There's your answer."

"How long will he be out?"

"Could be ten minutes or it could be hours."

"Since you were with him, can I talk to you about how the resistance started?" Eric thought it over, shrugged, and nodded his head. "First of all, can you tell me how you got to know the governor?"

"I met him after the invasion when we started to ambush the Mexican Army in the forest. That was after the invasion took place, so we ended up living in a cave in the Prescott National Forest for the first few months."

"Can you think of the event that caused the partisan movement to start?"

"Not really. The first few months were pretty calm. We went back and forth to the ranch to care for the livestock and get supplies, but mostly stayed hidden. We really didn't know much about what had happened."

"When was the first time you fought a battle with the Mexicans?"

"It wasn't really a battle. We started out by 'bushwhacking' the soldiers after they killed or raped. It wasn't organized or anything."

"Can you describe the first time you did a reprisal attack?"

"Well it went like this...." He closed his eyes and remembered those days.

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CHAPTER TWO

EMP PLUS THREE MONTHS PRESCOTT NATIONAL FOREST

Cory watched the column of soldiers through the scope of his .308. They were moving slowly, as though fearful of their surroundings. He noted the soldiers were not maintaining spacing discipline, and there were around twenty men in the column. Cory lay flat on his stomach, covered by a ghillie suit and invisible to the world around him. The twenty-inch barrel of the rifle was supported by a Harris bipod. He slowly pulled his radio from the clip on his tactical vest and whispered, "I'll open up in about a minute. You close the L formation now and do the cleanup."

"Copy."

"Copy."

He again put his eye to the scope, sighted carefully, and waited a minute. The head of the column, an officer, stopped and looked around carefully. He apparently had a premonition, and Cory was not about to disappoint the man. He slowly squeezed the trigger, the rifle barked once, and the officer's head met the 150-grain hollow point and exploded in a red mist. Cory had already moved his rifle to the next man in the column in a smooth motion, and fired again. He was aware of the AR fire that pierced the bright sunny day, but was lost in the world that existed in the scope of his rifle. He downed four more men, then moved up the ridgeline, taking a position twenty yards away from where he fired initially. He saw the muzzle flashes from the ARs that fired from one side of the column and from the rear. The L had been closed, and the last Mexican soldier went down in a blistering hail of fire from both sides of the ambush. The volume of fire gradually died and the men moved forward to where the dead and wounded lay. The men moved quickly, stripping the weapons and ammunition from the corpses.

"What do we do with the wounded?"

"Kill them. They've seen our faces." The men drew their pistols and administered the kill shot to several of the soldiers.

“Let’s go,” Cory said. “Our work here is done.” The group all melted into the forest and traveled separate directions to confuse any attempt to track them. They now had several fully automatic M-16s, thanks to the Mexican taxpayers, and thirty hand grenades. It had been a profitable afternoon. After an hour, they all arrived back at the cave, after each traveled over areas where the rockiness of the ground would throw off a tracker. They parked the ATVs behind a stand of scrub cedar and walked up the hill with weapons, ammo cans, and the grenades.

The killing and raping had started almost immediately after the Mexican Army took control of the town and surrounding areas. The level of brutality was beyond human comprehension. Anybody who hesitated to surrender a weapon was killed. The raping was just a given for any attractive woman. At first, they hesitated to kill children, but even that taboo was violated by the third week of the occupation.

Two weeks earlier, a column of ATVs that were going to town was backed up at a checkpoint. For unknown reasons, the column was strafed by heavy machine guns that didn’t stop firing until everyone in that column, including Cory’s wife and two kids, lay dead. Cory spent a day in numb disbelief when Kate gave him the news, then the rage started. He struggled to calm himself for another day, and then settled into a seething, but controlled anger. He adopted the adage that “revenge is a dish best served cold.” He and Ben collected the bodies of his loved ones, took them to the ranch, and dug their graves next to Don’s. The entire group walked from the cave and the burial ceremony was held. Everyone wept bitterly, except for Cory. He had a smoldering rage to comfort him, and a need to extract revenge – that was his only priority. In short, the humanity in him was ripped away, and what was left was simply a killing machine. And there was lots of raw material for the death factory he was planning to build.

The next day, they planned the first ambush. They knew the Mexican Army was sending patrols into the National Forest to look for the other “bushwhackers” who had taken revenge for the loss of family members, and the number was growing rapidly. Cory knew, from early on, that they would have to organize to present a real threat to the Mexicans; but he had a personal score to settle first. So they scouted the trail into the forest that was used most often, set up the ambush, and killed them all. It was not enough

for Cory. It was only a beginning. He had a hunger that would not be easily satisfied.

They soon split into groups to increase the number and frequency of the ambushes. Tim, the former Marine corpsman who then became a doctor, commanded a group consisting of Rachael, Bud, Ed, and Mary. Cory led the second group of Ben and his two sons and Kate. Ann generally staffed the base radio and let everyone know who was where to eliminate friendly fire incidents. The ambushes were often very fluid events and it was possible for the two teams to meet along the three trails where the battles generally took place. Each team had a sniper with a .308, and three to four in the “cleanup crews” who carried captured M-16s.

The Mexicans wised up and formed special units that trailed columns in Humvees armed with .50 machine guns, and formed a rapid reaction force that would ride to the assistance of their trapped soldiers. After very nearly losing his entire team, Cory decided to play chess with the Mexican commanders, and they began working as one unit, with two teams. The first team sprung the ambush on the column of soldiers and departed the area immediately. The second team hurled grenades from steep ridges above the trail into the Humvees as they passed under them. A two-month-long game of move and countermove ensued. As time passed, each side modified tactics to try to gain the upper hand. It got more dangerous for both sides as time went on; the numbers of casualties grew and the number of battles increased.

Cory and Tim both understood the fundamental problem: they couldn't stand and fight. They both knew that the first time they guessed wrong in the game of cat and mouse they played, they would lose and lose big. Or, if the Mexicans ever followed them to the cave, that would also end them. The Mexicans, on the other hand, could make mistakes and still survive. It was a stacked deck against them and eventually their luck would run out.

The ambushes continued for another three months, and often the group heard gunfire from other bands of partisans in the woods. But their tactics came at a cost. On their third ambush, they lost Bud and Mary, who had run into another Mexican patrol while fleeing the site of an ambush. They were cut down by automatic weapons fire. The group attempted to recover their bodies, only to be ambushed themselves. They were lucky that the Mexicans sprung the trap before they were in effective range, and they managed to escape. Ed, during the following ambush, suffered a shoulder

wound that Tim was able to patch up. However, it took him out of the fight for a month and left the team short-handed. Then, the Mexican Army suddenly stopped sending the soldiers into the forest. It was the first acknowledgement that the groups who chose to fight had an impact on their operations. They talked about whether or not it was just a lull, or if their enemies really had given up on subduing the groups that owned the National Forest for the time being.

“We can’t keep doing things this way,” Kate said one night after another meal of MREs.

“What do you mean?” Cory asked.

“We need to either stop doing the ambushes or get the others organized and mount a real resistance. All we’re going to do is get killed sooner or later. And, we’re just stinging them. I want to bite them so hard they run back to Mexico and leave us in peace.”

“Well, I guess you’re right. How do we do that?”

“We’re going back to the ranch tomorrow to grab some supplies. Don had a whole library of war books.” She stopped speaking and fell into a long silence. Don’s murder was never solved. The night it happened, a rain started that went on for two days. Tracking the killers was impossible.

“Does it still hurt you as bad as it does me?” Cory asked gently.

“Yes, and it’s never going to get any better,” she sighed.

“I know.” He patted her knee gently.

“And the worst part of it is I know I’ll never be that happy again. There will never be anyone who can replace him.”

“I feel the same way.” Ben sat down next to Kate and wrapped an arm around her as she started to gently weep. Ed and Ann joined the group at the picnic table they had moved from the ranch to the cave.

“We’ve lost a lot of good people,” Ben said gently. “But we have to fight on.”

“We’re going to try to get more organized tomorrow,” Cory replied.

“Don had a bunch of books on guerrilla movements and we need to study them and then find other groups who are willing to fight.”

“The Army’s coming!” Eric yelled as he ripped off the headset from the ham radio. “They’ve taken the eastern part of Texas back and are heading our way!” He approached the group with a look of excitement, smiling as he stopped in front of them. “I just heard a ham somewhere in East Texas reporting columns of our tanks rolling through.”

“Where is he?” Cory asked.

“He wouldn’t say. He just said East Texas.” Tim and Rachael, hearing the yelling, joined the group at the table.

“Did he say anything else?” Tim asked.

“He’s spotted some aircraft and helicopters moving west as well. He also said bombers were passing over his position, heading west,” Eric replied breathlessly. “Lord, this is good news!”

“Maybe we can just hunker down and wait for the Army to show up?” Rachael said in a wistful voice.

“That won’t work, Rachael,” Tim replied. “We could all be dead before they get here, if they get here at all. We have to fight on as best we can, and do everything we can to keep them out of the forest, at the very least.”

“That’s not enough,” Cory stated flatly. “We need to find a way to make sure they don’t even want to leave their bases. Until we can move around freely, there’s no chance we can accomplish much.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know, at least not yet. But we’re going to find out tomorrow how to organize, and then hit them often and hard.”

“You mean those books?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Tomorrow we learn how to use guerrilla tactics and get organized with the other groups.”

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CHAPTER THREE

EMP PLUS 39 YEARS PRESCOTT, ARIZONA, TERRITORIAL CAPITAL

Cory was still sleeping as Eric and Horace continued talking about life in the cave and the conduct of the ambushes. Finally, Horace said, “I’m hungry. You want to get some lunch?”

“I guess. He’s probably going to be out the rest of the day. He’s been going downhill pretty fast lately.” The two men tiptoed out of the room and softly shut the door. A large man, who carried a shotgun at quarter arms, guarded the door and stepped aside to let them pass.

“Why the armed guard?” Horace asked.

“A lot of people try to see him, and he doesn’t want to be seen right now.” They left the facility and made their way downtown, passing Whiskey Row and the Superior Courthouse on the way. Downtown had grown busy, with people bustling along carrying bags, and shops filled with people making purchases. When Cory moved the capital back to Prescott, the railroad opened operations again, and the town was a stop on the Los Angeles route. The hotels were usually full, and with a few exceptions, life was much like it had been before the EMP and war.

“It’s amazing how these buildings get destroyed and then rebuilt just the way they were,” Horace said. They entered the Palace Saloon and Restaurant and took seats at a table in the back of the cavernous dining room. The décor was Western themed, and it still had the original swinging doors in front. The massive bar was more than two hundred years old.

“This place was totally destroyed during the final assault on the Mexican Army.”

“I know,” Eric replied. “I was here when it happened. I was one of Cory’s unit leaders.”

“What was a unit?”

“We operated with basic groups of four fighters. Ten groups were a unit when we formed the militia. The unit I had was responsible for assaulting the rear of this building and then the courthouse.”

“That must have been bloody.”

“It was.” The two men fell silent for a moment; Horace shifted nervously in his seat.

“He could have been president, you know,” Horace said. “Why didn’t he run?”

“You don’t understand Cory very well,” Eric replied after a moment. “He never wanted to be governor. Hell, he didn’t want to be anything. He’s a quiet man who enjoys his privacy, doesn’t need or want social things. If it were up to him, he would have gone back to the forest and hunted and fished the rest of his life. Which is what he did when he left office.”

“Then why did he run for governor?”

Eric sighed, thought for a moment, then said, “the only other person who was willing to take the job was a former congressman from Flagstaff. Cory didn’t want us to be led by the very people who allowed the country to get weak in the first place. He felt like he had to run to make sure we never went back to the kind of politics and leadership that got us into that mess. His attitude was that if you break it, you own it. He felt like his generation bore responsibility for the corrosion of the political system that preceded the EMP, so they had to fix it.”

“Why didn’t he run for a second term?”

“He tried to put term limits in when he was governor. He didn’t think anybody should be reelected. It was his way of making a point. And I think he hated becoming something that he despised. He once told me that sometimes you have to become what you hate in order to succeed.”

After they finished lunch, both men ordered coffee and sat sipping from their cups. They both ordered refills and finished those as well. Horace was replaying both the conversation with Cory and the one with Eric. “Can I ask you your last name?” he said.

“Anderson.”

“Are you Ben Anderson’s son?”

“I am.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“You were there from the beginning.” His voice filled with wonder, as though he discovered a rare gem in a pile of rocks.

“No, I arrived after the invasion. The beginning was the EMP.”

“I thought there was only one survivor from the group that started the attacks on the Mexican Army.”

“No, two of us are left. But I am happy to let the world believe that it’s only one.” The men ordered yet another refill and sat silently sipping coffee again.

“Only good thing you can say about that EMP was that those coffee chain stores never came back.”

“I hated that coffee,” Horace replied.

“People paid more for a cup of coffee than they did for a meal. Stupid.”

“Well, I have enough to write the first article, so I’ll bring it by in the morning and hopefully Cory will be awake.”

“He’ll be fine until later in the morning. That’s how it usually goes. We’re doing a road trip to the ranch tomorrow morning, and Cory wants you to go.”

“I’d be honored,” Horace answered. “See you in the morning.”

Horace showed up at the stroke of 08:00 the following morning, carrying a cup holder with three cups of coffee. He was surprised to see Cory dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, sitting in a wheel chair. Eric was wearing the same outfit but carrying a Glock in a holster on his hip, rather than the revolver he wore when they met. After handing out the cups, he sat in a corner on a hospital chair, drank his coffee, and watched the other two do the same.

“We’re going to the ranch today to give you a look at the place and to let me say hello to my wife and kids,” Cory finally said, draining his cup and placing it on an end table. “Eric’s going to take you to the cave to see where we lived during the invasion. It should be a good day for your future writing.”

“I brought a paper with the first article in it, and I think it is pretty good,” Horace replied, holding the paper out in one hand.

“Already read it, and it’s a good start; but you’ll need to do more to get the movement for statehood going around the territory.”

“I know. And I can.”

“Good,” Cory replied. “It’s time to go.” As if on cue, two burley orderlies showed up, both dressed in white smocks, hooked his IV bag to the vertical bar on the wheel chair, and rolled him out of the room. Eric and Horace followed them to the elevator and they exited the building through the ER entrance. A waiting ambulance sat in the parking lot and Eric got into the front seat next to the driver as Horace watched Cory get loaded into

the back of the vehicle. He sat in the back seat and twisted around to look at Cory, who sat backward in the ambulance.

“Go north on Williamson Valley Road,” Eric said from the front. “I’ll tell you when to turn.” They wound through several turns on the trip and finally turned left onto the farm road that led to the ranch.

“Take the next right,” Eric ordered. The driver complied, and they soon found themselves in a meadow that was surrounded by trees. The ranch was invisible from the main road, as it always had been. The house and barn were both in a state of bad repair, and the yard was overgrown with weeds.

“Get me out of this thing,” Cory complained from the back of the ambulance. The driver and Eric walked to the back of the vehicle and lowered the wheelchair to the ground with Cory still in it. Eric pushed it toward a small cemetery on the west side of the house that was dotted with crosses. They stopped in front of the nearest grave and Eric placed a hand on the headstone.

“This is where my brother lies. Justin died at the battle of Sedona,” he whispered. “God speed, brother.” Eric pushed Cory’s wheelchair to the next grave.

“This is where Bud and Mary were buried,” Cory said. “They died in one of the first ambushes we did. They were killed trying to get away after the ambush.” Cory’s eyes welled up, but he fought it back with a visible effort, and Eric rolled the chair to the next grave. “The irony of our taking casualties from military weapons made in the United States, and sold to our then friend, Mexico, was not lost on any of us,” Cory continued. “The good news was we were pretty good at getting them back into American hands during the war.”

“This is my father’s grave. He died of natural causes.” The headstone was worn and faded. Eric pushed the wheelchair again down the line of grave markers and stopped at the next one.

“This is Ed and Ann,” Cory said. “They died in the assault on Prescott. Both of them fought until the end, but they both died at what turned out to be the end of the war. Senseless, really.” He again rolled the wheelchair over to the next grave that was Cory’s family plot.

“I have to get up for this one,” Cory said. He struggled to get out of the wheelchair and stood on wobbly legs. He lurched over to the gravesite, supported by Eric, and placed a hand on the tallest gravestone for support. “Julie, I’m coming to be with you soon. Tell the kids I said hello.” Tears

leaked from his eyes and then he added, “I don’t know why God took you all from me and left me to rot on this planet, but I know we’ll be together again and we’ll pick up where we left off – man and wife, joined forever.” Cory stepped to Kate’s grave, caressed the headstone briefly, and sighed. He staggered back to the wheel chair, sat down wearily, and seemed to go into a coma.

“Is he going to be all right?” Horace asked.

“No,” Eric replied, “but take this.” He pulled an envelope from his back pocket and handed it to Horace.

“What is it?”

“It’s a notarized letter of instruction that Cory be buried here, next to his wife. He wrote it himself, in his own hand.”

“Why me? I don’t even know the man that well.”

“Because some fool politician will try to make hay of his death and have him buried at Arlington, or one of the state’s cemeteries, and he doesn’t want that. You have the power of the pen, and now you have a legal document. Do what you have to, but make sure his wishes are carried out.”

“Why don’t you do it?”

“I will try. But if it comes to it, you can stop anyone, including the existing governor, with an article and copy of that document.”

Horace thought for a minute. “I’ll do it. It’s the least I can do.” The two men stood in silence, watching Cory sleep, and then Eric spoke.

“I have to show you Don and Kate’s grave before we leave. That’s what Cory wanted. The two men walked to the end of the grave markers and Eric said, “that’s Don’s grave, and Kate is buried next to him in the closer one.”

“So, the empty space between Cory’s wife and Kate must be for Cory.”

“Seems so.”

“What happened to Tim and Cory’s sister?”

“They moved back to Phoenix after the war and Tim practiced medicine there for years. They both died about eight years ago.”

Horace walked back to Don’s headstone, thought for a minute, and then said, “this man remains a mystery to me. He seemed to be the glue that held the group together at the beginning, yet we know so little about him.”

“I knew him from when I was growing up. Our ranch was over there.” Eric pointed to a set of buildings around a mile away. “He and my dad use to hunt together. But he was just another guy to me. There didn’t seem to be anything special about him.”

“Are we going to the cave now?”

“I suppose we should. We’ve come this far.” Eric walked over to where the driver stood next to the ambulance and said, “keep an eye on Cory. We’ll be back soon.” The driver nodded.

“All right. We can walk to it from here,” Cory said to Horace, and then he turned and began walking briskly toward the mountains that loomed over the ranch. Horace marveled at the man’s pace. He had to be approaching seventy years of age, but moved as though he were a young man. After a fifteen-minute walk, Cory stopped to let Horace catch his breath, and they both turned to examine the valley floor that lay below. It was a crisp day, and the sky was a brilliant shade of blue.

“I can’t help thinking that I’ve seen this view a thousand times and it still fills me with wonder. I was born to live in the forest, but didn’t know it until Cory showed it to me from his perspective.”

“Was that during the war?”

“No, it was after. When he disappeared, we used to hunt and fish here. He usually lived in the cave we’re going to visit, but we also got together at Kate’s place when he came out of the forest for supplies. We’d share a dinner and spend the night once a month or so. I lived at our ranch, so Kate would call me on the radio and I would go over and spend the night in the bunkhouse. Cory moved to the home right after she died four years ago.”

“What did she die from?”

“Old age. Her heart gave out.” Eric thought for a moment, then added, “what you said earlier about Don being the glue isn’t quite right. According to Cory, Don kept everyone alive, but Kate was the glue. She was a mother figure to everyone else and the peacekeeper in the group.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but did Cory and Kate love each other?”

“Absolutely. We all loved each other.”

“I mean as a lover?”

“I knew what you meant the first time; I just wanted to see if you would ask the question. I’d advise against asking Cory that question, but between you and me, it’s definitely a possibility.” Eric turned and again started up the mountain. After another fifteen minutes of walking, they arrived at the base of the hill where the cave was located. They climbed up the steep incline and entered the cavern through the almost-invisible mouth of the cave. Stopping for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dim light, Eric then moved farther into the cave.

“My God, this looks like a garbage dump,” Horace said. He was right. The cave was littered with food wrappers, cigarette butts, discarded camping gear, and empty water bottles.

“It’s still used by the younger members of the militia. Most of them are in their sixties now and are still active. They come here to hunt and overnight in the cave. For the most part, they don’t tell anyone where it is, because they want to use it themselves.”

“So this is where it all started?”

“Yes, this was the original location of our group. We started our ambushes from here. Later, it became the headquarters for the militia. When those numbers got too large, it was converted to a weapons and ammo depot. We stored everything we looted from the Mexican Army here.”

“And this is where Cory spent all those years he was missing?”

“For the most part, but he took weeks-long hikes through the forest, too. This was the place where he stored supplies. He came back here when he ran low on food and water. There’s a spring behind the cave that is so clean you don’t have to filter or boil the water.”

“This place should be a shrine, not a trash dump.”

“People still use it, and Cory doesn’t need or want a shrine.”

The two men moved back to the cave’s entrance, stopped to admire the view for a moment, and then started down the hill. The walk back to the ranch was considerably easier than the climb and Horace found himself enjoying the trip back. When they arrived, Cory was again awake. The driver and Eric loaded him back into the ambulance. Cory motioned for Horace to join him in the back of the vehicle. Horace took a seat on a bench that ran the length of the vehicle and waited for the governor to speak. After a long silence, Cory looked at him.

“You ever hear of the book *Rules for Ranging*?”

“No.”

“It was written in 1757 by Major Robert Rogers. He was an officer in the French and Indian Wars. He created a mobile, well-trained force that was capable of living off the land indefinitely. The *Rules* was intended to serve as a manual for his men. He personally selected 600 soldiers to serve with him during the wars. He blended Native American tactics and his own combat techniques. His tactics were considered revolutionary by the standing military at the time.” Cory paused and then added, “those rules are still used to this day. Each candidate for the U.S. Army Ranger School is

given a copy of that book. It's amended now, and shorter, but it's still in use."

"Why do you bring this up?"

"Because I used that book to wage the war against the Mexicans. I found it in Don's library at the ranch and adopted all his techniques during the war. It was required reading for every unit leader. We only had the one copy, so it took some time, but it was the basis of everything we did."

"The books about the war all describe you as a military genius."

Cory barked a short laugh and replied, "I didn't think of anything new. I just followed Roger's *Rules* and hoped for the best. Tell you the truth, I had no idea what I was doing most of the time, but I couldn't let the men know that."

"That's hard to believe."

"A lot of things are." Cory paused and turned to look out the window. When he turned back and faced Horace, his expression was one of determination and his eyes glowed with intensity. "I want to talk to you about the next article you write."

"Yes."

"You have to tell the people that I support statehood. They need to know that the person who sponsored the law now thinks it needs to be overturned and we should rejoin the Union."

"If the word gets out you're talking to me, the entire world is going to come here to try to interview you."

"Small price to pay." They rode back to the home in silence, with Cory gazing out the window until he again fell asleep.

Horace walked back to the office, crossing the square and then climbing uphill past the Hassayampa Hotel. He entered the newspaper building, walked to his office, and sat down at his desk. His fingers hovered over the keyboard to his computer as he attempted to organize his thoughts. After a moment, his fingers assumed a life of their own and the headline appeared on the screen. It read, "Former War Hero and Governor Breaks Twenty-Year Silence."

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CHAPTER FOUR

EMP PLUS FIVE MONTHS PRESCOTT NATIONAL FOREST

Cory stood in the clearing waiting for other groups of fighters to join him. His group had spent the previous two weeks stapling notices to trees along the trails. The notices asked anyone living in the forest to meet at the meadow where he stood, at this date and time, to organize a resistance movement. He stood with his AR slung from his shoulder, muzzle down. It had been a desperate gamble to post those notices, but he had little choice. Since the Mexican Army no longer patrolled the forest, the risk was acceptable. After a few minutes of waiting, four men entered the meadow, with three of them carrying rifles aimed directly at him. The fourth man did a slow circle around the clearing and then stood in front of Cory.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked. Cory examined the man carefully. He was of average height, but whippet slender, and his beard was a wild creation that seemed to grow in every direction.

“Just what the notice said. We want to hurt the Mexicans so bad they go home. We’re all nipping at their heels, but I want to bite their head off. So do the rest of my group.”

“How in the hell are we going to do that?”

“We’re going to get organized and take the fight to them. We take over some smaller towns around Prescott and hold them as long as we can. We make them fight street-to-street, and bleed them for every inch of territory they take back from us. Before that, we head down to the area around the town and ambush convoys until we all have fully automatic weapons, .50 machine guns, and grenades. We take what we need from them to fight against them.”

“That’s a pretty ambitious plan.”

“I have seven fighters in my group and we already have M-16s and hand grenades. We can do it, but we gotta get organized so they can’t pick us apart one at a time.”

“What’s your name?”

“Cory,” he replied, extending a hand.

“Mine’s Caleb.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

The two men shook hands. Caleb examined Cory for a moment, then said, “you don’t look crazy, so I’ll hear you out.”

Another group of six entered the clearing and approached Cory, then a group of four, followed by four more. Soon, eighty men and women stood in the clearing, all armed. They began milling around, shaking hands and introducing themselves. Finally, Cory cleared his throat and said, “I’m with the group that posted the notices, and I want to say a few words if you don’t mind.” Everyone fell silent as Cory continued. “I’ve lost a wife and two kids to the Mexicans.” He stopped for a moment, cleared his throat, and continued. “I’m guessing everyone here has lost someone. But it’s time we stand up and take the fight to them. I’m tired of hiding in the forest and waiting for them to show up. It’s pretty clear to me that we need to get organized and go after them.”

“How the hell are we supposed to do that?”

“As I was telling Caleb,” Cory said, pointing to his new friend, “we ambush convoys and take the weapons we need to stand and fight. Then we take over some small towns and force the Mexicans into street fights, bleed them dry, and disappear into the forest when we can’t hold on any longer.”

“That’s crazy,” a tall woman said as she approached him. Her dark hair was pulled into a bun and her brown eyes stared at him with a startling intensity.

“The men that founded this country were all considered crazy,” Cory replied calmly.

“What? You think you’re George Washington?”

“No, but I bet there is a Washington out there somewhere, and I can run things while we wait for him to show up.” The woman stared at him, noting his calm expression and relaxed demeanor.

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“I want to call a meeting for tomorrow at the same time and place. We need to have one leader from each group attend. We won’t get anything done with this many people and we are creating a target-rich environment for the Mexicans. Will each group appoint someone to attend the meeting tomorrow?” Several heads nodded. Cory added, “if you can do it now, we can at least meet each other. The rest of you should get out of the meadow and find concealment for the next few minutes.”

The groups all huddled, talked, and then seven men and the tall woman walked to where Cory stood. They all introduced themselves and Cory closed the meeting by saying, "I'm going to bring eight M-16s here tomorrow so each unit has one fully automatic weapon." The leaders looked at him in amazement and then silently disappeared into the forest.

"It's a start," Cory said to himself, and followed the others into the forest and made his way back to the cave.

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CHAPTER FIVE

EMP PLUS FIVE MONTHS PRESCOTT NATIONAL FOREST

By the time Cory was able to begin to organize the various groups in the forest, they were becoming a formidable force, although they still operated as individual, small units. They continued their ambushes as separate groups but operated closer to town and out of the mountains, and reaped enormous gains in terms of the weaponry they possessed from looting the victims of their ambushes. They had four Humvees with .50 Ma Deuces mounted in the rear of the vehicles. The cave was filled with cases of grenades and ammo for the M-16s they liberated from the opposing force, and they managed to get four Barret .50 sniper rifles with 200 armor-piercing rounds.

The ranch continued to feed the group from its vast store of dried and canned food, as well as the occasional steer or chicken they slaughtered on their trips back to keep provisions moving to the partisans that were now their allies. Cory calculated that they could feed everyone for another year, so long as they spent one day a week hunting and fishing. He made a priority of moving as much long-term food to the cave as would fit, and together with the other fighters in the forest, never came back from one of their raids without stopping at the ranch to load supplies to bring back to the woods. Cory had mixed feelings about sharing the location of the cave with men and women who might be captured and made to reveal their hiding place; but, like everything else, it was a calculated risk.

Ben moved back to the ranch and lived in the barn to care for the livestock during the cold weather. It worried Cory and the others to no end that he was there by himself, and they all knew that, eventually, the Mexican Army would somehow find the ranch and they would lose whatever supplies and livestock remained there; but they could do little to change the situation.

As their activity level increased, so did the reprisals against the populace of Prescott. General Santamaria, who they learned from a soldier they captured was the commanding general of the Mexican forces, was killing ten Americans for every Mexican soldier Cory's group killed. They took

men, women, and children alike to fill the quota. Daily execution squads roamed the streets, picking people at random to face firing squads. As the death toll in town increased, so did the number of volunteers who entered the forest to find the partisans and a means to take revenge for their executed loved ones. They were hard people, many of whom felt they had nothing to lose, and fearless warriors.

Infiltrators were a constant worry by then, as Tim pointed out to the leaders at one of their meetings; so they tried to establish a system of not accepting anyone who did not know existing members of one of the groups. And they continued to operate as individual groups, so nobody outside that particular group knew operational plans and movements. However, that was about to change, at least for a few larger missions that required coordination.

When Cory finally felt like they had enough weapons and ammo, he called another meeting of the leaders of the various groups that lived in the forest. They came to the cave for the meeting, and Cory held it after they had a meal of barbecued chicken, freshly slaughtered at the ranch and brought to the cave for the occasion. When everyone finished their meals, Cory stood and began speaking. "I think it's time we establish some goals for ourselves. We have five areas of operations I want to focus on, and I need all your best thinking on each one. First, we need to disrupt their communications so they can't coordinate attacks or responses to us. Second, we still need to pick a small town to seize and hold for some period of time to show the populace we are a viable alternative to just letting the Mexicans have their way. That has to wait for now, but we'll get to it before too long. Third, we have to pick up the pace in terms of ambushing convoys. At the rate we're growing, we won't have enough food and weapons for our fighters. That leads to point four, which is we need to start planning raids on their stockpiles. Not only does that pressure them by cutting their supplies short, it allows us to sustain the militia we need to become to win this fight. Last, we need to own the night and force them to stay on their bases so we can operate freely. Questions?" The room was silent, so Cory turned to Justin and said, "Justin, give us an update on the U.S. Army, based on your ham reports."

"Well," Justin said, standing and moving to the center of the cavern. "We just took El Paso and we still have air superiority over Texas. The Army took heavy casualties in the fight, but seems to be moving our way. I can't

tell you how long it will take them to get here, but the rate of advance seems to be slowing quite a bit.” He sat down and glanced at Cory, who nodded at him and again spoke.

“We need to send in some spies to help us identify several targets in town and then we need to hit them all at the same time. That will deliver a devastating blow to the enemy and put them back on their heels for a while.”

“We’re sort of obvious,” Caleb said. “Look at us. None of us has had a bath in months and we all carry weapons.”

“You stop at the ranch on the way into town, bathe, shave, and get clothes. We still have power and water there and there’s clothing in the house that will fit everyone. We leave our weapons in the barn with Ben and go into town.” Some of the leaders looked doubtful, so Cory added, “I’ll be leading the mission and you guys can come or not. Either way, we have to do this.”

“I’m in,” Krista said. She was the tall woman with the intense eyes that Cory met in the meadow.

“Me too,” Caleb added.

“Okay,” Cory said, nodding his approval. “We need to find several sites to attack. We have to find their communications center and knock it out of commission for the rest of the attacks to work. That’s the first priority. Can you do that Caleb?”

“We own it.”

“We also need to find their supply depot and get as much food and ammunition as we can. Krista?” She nodded back.

“You’re going to be at the battle site longer than the rest of us if you have to load supplies. You sure you want to take this on?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, but if it looks dicey, just burn the place down and get the hell out of there.”

“I will.”

“When we attack those two sites, we have to make sure they pay dearly when they try to come out of their bases,” Cory continued.

“We can scout that,” Manfred said. “I got a son that still lives in town and he’ll know where the bases are.”

“Finally,” Cory said, “the forces coming out of those bases will be heading toward the communications center and the supply depot. When

they get by the first ambush outside the bases, we need to have another one between them and where they're headed."

"I got that," Lloyd replied.

"It would appear we have a plan. All team leaders meet here tomorrow. We finalize things and move out tomorrow night to the ranch. The next day we head into town. Say goodbye to your loved ones and make peace with your God tonight. If we live through tomorrow and the initial attacks, we got a shot at beginning to take this place back."

Cory barely slept that night. He knew a lot of people were going to die in the attacks, if not during the reconnaissance mission. He went to Kate's bedroll and nestled in behind her. She rolled over and moaned once. Cory said, "don't take this the wrong way. I'm scared and I don't know what I'm doing."

"Don said that all the time."

"I thought he knew what he was doing."

"He didn't think so, and neither do you. It's the sign of someone who is willing to doubt themselves. Go to sleep. I'm tired and you're being irrational."

"Guess so. Goodnight and thanks for letting me sleep here."

"It's only for tonight so get over it. But I do like the arm around me when I go to sleep."

"Good night," he said before falling into a troubled sleep.

The group left the following morning after the other fighters arrived. The all had bathed, shaved, and found new clothing before going to bed.

The following day, their recon went well and they returned unscathed. They went unarmed, so the repeated searches of the two ATVs they drove produced nothing. The bonus was that they were able to recruit two friends of Cory's to help them locate their targets, and things went much more quickly than they thought possible. Most important, Cory's friends also knew where General Santamaria lived. It was the old house close to the Mexican operations center in what had been the home of the last territorial governor. The front of the house was in the line of sight from a hill about 500 yards away. The group returned to the cave and decided to delay a day to allow them to sight in one of the Barrett .50 sniper rifles. They were going to try to kill the general as he left the house to go to the operations

center to respond to their attacks. Tim chose a model 82A1 from the four they had captured, and left the cave to sight it in. He picked the 82A1 because it had a new ATN Ares 6-2 6-x scope with night vision. It was the best scope they had and perfect for the kind of shot he would take.

As the size of the mission grew, so did the complexity of pulling it off with minimum casualties.

They ghosted into town on ATVs at the idle. Each group took a separate route into town and moved cross-country until they could find alleys and secondary streets to move down to avoid hitting any roadblocks. They parked the ATVs behind houses and crept through the alleys to get to their ambush points. When they were all in position, Cory pressed his mic key once and waited. Time passed, and the only thing he could hear was the faint sound of Mariachi music, apparently being played on radios by the Mexicans who occupied the checkpoints and other facilities that surrounded them.

An hour later, Cory fidgeted nervously. He was at the second ambush point with four fighters on each side of the road that led from the base closest to the supply depot. It was close to two o'clock in the morning and they were almost an hour behind schedule. The attack was due to start long ago, and he had yet to hear the final squelch on his radio that told him Krista was in place. Each of the six teams was given a number of squelches to emit when they were ready. Her signal was six squelches. His earbud was fixed in his left ear so the wire didn't interfere with moving his rifle. "Damnit," he whispered. A few seconds later, he heard the six squelches. Two minutes later, he heard the gunfire commence. It started with two single gunshots. "Sentries at the supply depot," he thought. Then two more, and he knew the fight at the communications center had started. The volume of fire grew quickly until it seemed like a wall of gunfire. Cory patted the man next to him and motioned for him to advise the next man down to get ready. They were on a ridge overlooking Highway 69. All the men began removing grenades from a bag that sat on the ground behind Cory and dispersed to their positions, leaving thirty feet between them across the top of the ridge.

The gunfire from the communications center slowed and then two massive booms split the air. "Hand grenades," Cory thought, and smiled with satisfaction. Then, he heard the gunfire diminish from the supply

depot. It stopped and he heard the roar of ATVs at full throttle. That sound stopped and Cory again smiled. Total silence ensued for around five minutes, and then he again heard the ATVs at full throttle again. The raid on the supply depot had just ended.

He then heard the roar of the Barrett. One shot, and then a second, and he thought to himself, “the general is down.” He smiled in satisfaction and then frowned when he thought of the reprisals that would undoubtedly occur.

“Get ready and pass it down,” he hissed at the man closest to him. He heard engines straining in the distance, and as the sound grew closer, he pulled the pin on his first grenade and held the safety lever down. As the column of trucks started to pass his position, he yelled, “throw!” Four hand grenades rained down on the column of vehicles below them, and Cory stood when the blast noise stopped and fired into the men below. The rest of his group did the same, and Cory saw more grenades coming out from the end of the line that they formed on the ridge. He fell to the ground, waited for the explosions to echo off in the distance, got to his knees, and continued to fire on full automatic. He stood again and emptied his second magazine at the men who staggered out of the trucks, many holding their hands over their ears, and downed three men before his mag ran dry. The other shooters also ran dry and the gunfire subsided to nothing. A few shots rang out from the Mexicans who still stood, and Cory decided to break contact.

“We’re out,” he shouted, and the men fell back and took up blocking positions, leap frogging in groups until they got back to where they parked the ATVs. They loaded up and headed out of town, splitting into two groups when they reached the outskirts of town. Cory could hear the roar of other ATVs behind him and hoped everyone made it out from the various locations they had attacked.

The groups headed back up the trails and into the mountains separately, and one by one, pulled up to the cave and got out the vehicles. The sun peeked over the horizon as Cory stood at the base of the hill that led to the cave and did a mental count of the returning fighters. Everybody pulled up and got out of their ATVs, and Cory noticed Caleb and his group were missing.

Krista limped to where he stood, blood leaking from her leg, and said, “Caleb and his crew didn’t make it. We saw them get taken out at one of the

checkpoints. They were lit up by a shoulder-fired missile and the ATV just disintegrated. I don't think there were any survivors."

"Any wounded?" Cory asked.

"Just me and my son," she replied.

"Tim!" Cory yelled. "Can you and Rachael police up the wounded and get them to the cave for treatment?"

"We're on it. And we got the general and one of his aides," Tim said before he moved from vehicle to vehicle and lifted the wounded out of the ATVs, placing them in a neat line in front of the trail to the cave. The rest of the group took turns helping them into the cave.

"Eric, we got a total losses number yet?" Cory asked.

"Seven dead and four wounded," he replied. "Two of the wounded are severe and probably won't make it."

"Get everyone to disperse to their camps after they empty Krista's ATVs and store the supplies in the cave. They can come back for their wounded later. I don't like being this bunched together. We may get a reaction today and I don't want all our eggs in one basket. And debrief everyone before they leave and let me know how much damage we did when I wake up." Cory walked off, entered the cave, and sat with Kate at the picnic table. He stared at her and she at him.

"Don't beat yourself up," she said. "It's war, and people die." They slept together that night on her bedroll and she stroked his hair until he fell asleep, then she wept.

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CHAPTER SIX

EMP PLUS 39 YEARS, TWO DAYS PRESCOTT, ARIZONA, TERRITORIAL CAPITOL

Horace again strode through the downtown plaza and made the climb up the hill to the assisted living facility where Cory was spending his final days. He was exhilarated at the quality of the piece he wrote, and knew that his glimpse into the private life of the former governor, and his contribution to the history of the partisan movement that was so important the restoration of the Southwest, would propel him to a fame he never before experienced. He was in tears as he finished his article the night before, and he felt as though he finally did something that really mattered. He had taken the action of brave men in a horrible circumstance and made them real to his readers. He stopped at the base of the hill that lead to the home, looked up, and saw Cory sitting on the balcony of his room. He waved at the former governor, who waved back. Horace felt some steel in his spine and resolved to get the governor what he wanted: a truly united United States. He continued up the hill and walked into the reception area, where the same crusty old woman staffed the front desk.

“Seeing Cory again,” he said, noting that every light on her phone was going off, but the ringer wasn’t making any noise.

“We turned the ringer off three hours ago. You created a storm of crap we would rather not deal with.” She waved him toward the elevator with a dismissive gesture and returned to watching the local TV station that was running a story on high school football teams.

Eric entered the reception area from the elevator and walked over to where Horace waited.

“He’s ready to see you.” Horace noted Eric again wore the old .45 hog leg and wondered why he wore different pistols.

“Can I ask why you wear a .45 here and wore the Glock yesterday?”

“I accessorize.”

“Huh?”

“Google it.” He turned and walked back to the elevator. Horace followed and the two men again rose to the third floor and exited the elevator, moved through the room, and out to the balcony where Cory lay on the chaise lounge.

“Don’t bother to hand me the paper,” Cory wheezed. “I already read it, and judging by the phone calls, I would say it was a damn fine piece. Almost cried reading it, but that’s just not me.”

“I did my best,” Horace answered, surprised at how desperately he wanted to please a man who was about to die, and could do nothing more for him. “Can we continue the interview?”

“I’d rather not; but a deal is a deal, so fire away.”

Horace consulted his notes and then said, “I am pretty sure you guys occupied the town of Mayer for a while and that wasn’t too long after your first organized raid. Can you tell me about that?”

“That was about a month after the first raid. We rode to Mayer and took over a small supply base there. It was close to the freeway that their convoys used to bring supplies from the railhead in Phoenix to the Prescott area, so they unloaded the semis there and moved the supplies into Prescott with old M-35s. We decided that we could get supplies and force a fight in an area where we could make them bleed.”

“They used trains to get the supplies into the States?”

“We didn’t know that until later. The Mexican rail system uses narrower gauges on the tracks, so they welded sleeves on the rollers on their locomotives, used our rolling stock, and that’s how we were taken over so fast. They really were pretty clever.”

“What happened in Mayer?”

“We took the base and forced the radio operator to call in a distress call. When they showed up, we made them fight street-to-street and bled them dry. They lost close to 200 men in that fight. We lost 13.”

“How did you pull that off?”

“We drew them into town and then hit them from all four sides. Mayer is in a valley, and we had the high ground, so we didn’t have to worry about friendly fire incidents. We just opened up on them and kept firing until they were all dead. Then they sent in the tanks and we had to leave or get wiped out.”

“When did you become a militia and not a partisan group?”

“When the Air Force decided to drop a guy into our AO, after we got ahold of them on the ham. Crazy bastards dropped this guy into the middle of what they had to think of as nowhere, but he brought along encrypted radios and C-4. That proved to be pretty useful. And the guy was very resourceful. He was a genius with explosives, and he eventually got us air cover and all kinds of perks. Technically, they sent him in to be a forward air traffic controller, which is a euphemism for someone who tells planes where to drop their bombs. But this guy was a miracle for us. His name was Bill Johnson, or at least that’s what he told us; but that was really when the militia began and we started coordinating attacks with the U.S. military.”

“Were you personally still raiding and ambushing convoys then?”

“No, I was more worried about trying to keep us fed and getting ammo. By that time, I was the general and the troops were fighting the fight. I just did my best to find food and ammo for them. After the occupation of Mayer, people started showing up from all over the state and I became the guy who had to coordinate everything. If I would have been captured and tortured, it would have all gone down. We grew to 2,000 fighters by then. We trained them and sent a lot back to where they lived before the EMP hit, so we ended up with cells of fighters in Tucson, Phoenix, and Flagstaff. The southern cities worked on blowing up the tracks before the supply trains arrived, and Flagstaff worked on getting the Mexicans off the old Army bases there and out into a fair fight.”

Cory laid back and again fell asleep.

“Can you tell me the story from there?” Horace asked Eric.

“I can tell you some of it, but he never talked about operational stuff back then.”

“I’ll take whatever you can give me.”

“Okay, but let’s leave him to sleep. We can talk downstairs in the cafeteria.”

“Fine by me.”

The two men walked down the stairwell and entered the cafeteria where the home’s occupants who could walk took their meals. Eric led Horace to an empty table and they both sat.

Eric paused for a moment and then continued the story. “My brother and I began leading the raids. Tim, Rachael’s husband, took control of overseeing operations in our AO. Cory spent a lot of time traveling to meet with the other cells in Phoenix and Tucson. He traveled mostly by ATV

overland and on secondary roads. The Mexicans still had checkpoints on the main roads into all the towns, so the meetings usually took place outside the city limits on somebody's farm or ranch. Cory never spoke much about who was doing what because we operated on a need-to-know basis, and keeping the different cells compartmentalized was important to our security. We learned that the hard way."

"What happened?"

"Three of our raids were ambushed, and we realized we had a traitor in our ranks. Finding him wasn't easy. Eventually we did, but we lost a lot of men and had to suspend our raiding for close to a month. We finally found a radio in his tent, and he confessed. The Mexicans had taken his wife and kids hostage and threatened to kill them if he didn't provide information on our movements."

"What happened to him?"

"Cory executed him with a pistol shot to the head."

Horace thought for a moment and then asked, "what was the U.S. Army doing around that time?"

"They were on the Arizona border. They had retaken Texas, but met stiff resistance after that. The Mexicans had to protect Nogales, as all their supplies were coming by railroad through there. So they fought like tigers to keep that line of supply open." Eric paused and added, "the general the Mexicans sent to replace Santamaria after we killed him was named Sanchez. Things changed dramatically. Apparently, they decided to take a new approach. The reprisals stopped and they began a propaganda war. They dropped leaflets that said any resistance fighter who surrendered their weapons would be pardoned, and started offering medical assistance to civilians. None of that worked, though. By that time we were having enough success to keep the loyalty of most of the citizens, and everybody knew the Army was on the way. It was only a question of time before we would take everything back."

"Is this when you think you went from being a partisan group to being a militia?"

"Yeah. Cory and I agree on that point. Once we started taking direction from the military, the prime objective was to disrupt their supplies by train. So Cory moved to Tucson for three months and directed operations there. Tim took command of our operations in Northern Arizona and he traveled to Flagstaff to coordinate with the militia there. There was a small Army

Reserve base there that the Mexicans took over and used, but there were also around 60 reservists there, and they formed the core of that cell. They were even more active than we were, and pretty quickly gained control of their AO at night. By that time we owned the night as well, but couldn't operate openly during the day. The Mexicans pretty much stayed in town on their bases. They patrolled during the day, but went into a defensive posture at night, so we became more active raiding static targets."

Horace was furiously scribbling notes, trying to keep up with Eric's monologue and held up one hand to indicate he needed time to catch up with the narrative. Eric paused, looked at him curiously, and Horace said, "you have no idea how valuable this information is. You're covering a period of our history that we know almost nothing about, except for some dry facts."

"You know," Eric said, after taking a deep breath, "I saw a documentary on TV about us and the war, and I pretty much laughed through the whole thing. Everybody makes such a big deal out of what we did. What nobody seems to realize is that if the Mexicans had sent Sanchez in first, there probably wouldn't have been a resistance. But Santamaria gave us no choice. From the moment they arrived, they started killing and raping, and confiscating weapons people needed to survive." Eric paused, clearly thinking about what he was going to say next.

"I'm not sure that would be the case," Horace answered. "There were different Mexican commanders all over the Southwest, and resistance movements everywhere."

"Horace, there were no heroes or military geniuses in the group. We fought to stay alive and get vengeance for loved ones. We were all, at first, terrified at what we were doing. But it was better than being plucked off the street, at random, and being executed like cattle."

"If that's the case, Cory wouldn't have agreed to lead the militia," Horace responded. "That just made him more of a target than lying low, or just running his one cell."

"He didn't have a choice. The Air Force would not accept more than one leader for the state. They objected to the chain of command not being simple and clear. They pretty much conditioned their assistance on Cory taking the job. Come to think of it, that man has spent his entire life doing things he hates to do."

"That's what made him great man."

“He still is,” Eric pointed out.

“I know.”

“You know, he would never agree with that characterization of him. He never thought what he did somehow singled him out for attention.”

“That’s part of what makes him great.”

“Let’s go see if he’s awake,” Eric said. The two men stood and left the room, walked up the stairs, and entered Cory’s room. A nurse was just leaving with a half-eaten tray of food, and Cory was propped up in his bed, watching TV.

“Are you strong enough to continue?” Horace asked.

“Of course. What do you want to know?” Horace flipped back through his notes and read for a moment, then looked up. “What can you tell me about Bill Johnson? You said earlier he was a godsend.”

“He was. Bill was a sergeant in the Air Force. He was an African American, and really made the difference in terms of us getting the war to end. He did our first aerial bombing mission just south of Tucson later that year, and proceeded to blow the hell out of any Mexican train or truck convoy that was foolish enough to try to move through our territory. That was the beginning of the end for the invasion, and I think we all knew it.”

“What more can you tell me about that time?”

Cory closed his eyes, clearly transported to another time and lost in thought.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

EMP PLUS TEN MONTHS VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Bill and Cory waited for the airdrop four miles from the cave. It was around 2:00 AM, and they took turns piling wood on the signal fire that marked the drop zone. They sat next to the fire and watched the shadowy movements of the others in their group as they milled around in the tree line. A line of ATVs sat in one corner of the meadow, waiting to be loaded with much-needed supplies they would distribute to the militia.

“You think they’ll make it tonight?” Cory asked.

“Don’t see why not.” Bill studied his fingernails carefully, resumed clipping them, and then cleaned under the nails with the fold-out blade on the clippers. He looked bored. It was the third night they waited for the drop and Cory was starting to wonder if the Air Force was going to make good on its promise to drop more radios, food, ammo, and medical supplies to his group of fighters. He found that they were more than eager to get his messages, through Bill’s radio transmissions, with the intel about troop movements and where the Mexican Army operated, but less than responsive to his requests for supplies.

“This is starting to piss me off,” Cory said. “We’ve been out here for three nights, and nothing. Get somebody on the radio for me. I need to tell them to start delivering or stop asking for our help.”

“Not a good idea,” Bill responded, moving to the next nail.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re going to give them the information they need anyway, and they know it. So just relax and understand that this is how the military works. They’ll give us what we want, but they’ll do it when it’s convenient for them.”

“I’m starting to wonder if we’re on the same side,” Cory complained.

“They’re on their own side, and will get around to us when it’s easier to get to us. You need to relax.”

“Bill, I like you and appreciate all you have done for us; but I want you to call them and tell them we’re down to one month’s worth of rations, three

skirmishes from being out of ammo, and we have no more ability to help them until they help us. It's that bad. If you need to, tell them we will have to cease operations and stay in the forest. I won't go to Tucson anymore and help with the attacks on the rail traffic, and you might as well pack up and head back to wherever their headquarters are now. We are at the end of the line. I'm not bluffing or joking. There is only so much I can ask of the men and women who are fighting with us, and they only have so much to give." Cory stood up, walked to the nearest ATV, and left the drop zone. He pulled into the area below the cave minutes later, fuming at this latest setback, and walked up the path to the entrance. He saw Kate monitoring the ham with her earphones plugged in, and the rest of his group was sleeping in every corner of the cave. The cavern was much less crowded now, with most of the supplies they brought from the ranch either eaten or used up in their battles. He ran his fingers through his hair, sighing once, and then moved to where Kate sat listening to the radio. He motioned for her to take the headset off when he got to her line of sight.

"Any good news?" he asked.

"Not really," she replied, after taking off one side of her earphones.

"They're still bogged down on the Texas border."

"In more good news, there was no air drop tonight either."

"What the hell is going on with the Air Force?" Kate responded.

"You've been out there three nights now."

"I don't know, but Bill is calling them tonight and telling them we're done if they don't send us what we need. I told him that before I left."

"He'll sugar coat it."

"He will, but maybe it will get through to someone."

"I doubt it."

"Me too," Cory sighed and looked around the cave. He saw Tim and Racheal sleeping in a corner, huddled together like two bears in a den. He saw the rest of his warriors sleeping quietly in the corners of the cavern.

"We'll have to send the hunting parties out again tomorrow, but they've been coming back with less every time we send them out. Let's get whatever is left at the ranch tomorrow, including the livestock, and move what's left here. We really can't afford to lose anything from the ranch anymore."

"I'll take care of it, and we might as well bring Ben back. He's been staying there for months. and so far we've been lucky he hasn't had a visit

from the Mexicans yet.”

“He’ll miss sleeping in a bed and having heat and power, but yeah, we need to bring him back.” Cory paused for a minute, then added, “I’ll see you in the morning. I’m tired.”

“I’ll be asleep in the morning. Justin is taking the radio shift at first light.”

“Well, if you want to sleep on my bedroll with me, you can.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay, see you later.”

The following night, the Air Force finally delivered on its promise to resupply the partisans, and the drop was spectacular to the militia that waited for the supplies. Cory wasn’t there. He had left for Tucson to continue the raids on the railroad cars that delivered the supplies to the Mexican Army. Bill went along, carrying four bricks of C-4 that they intended to use to blow up a bridge on the railway.

An ordinance and weapons training man fell out of the sky that night. He landed with an awkward stance, stutter stepping and almost falling over before he regained his balance, and then limped off the drop zone before he introduced himself. His name was Jim and he was clearly not happy to be there; but he got his act together, helped retrieve the SAWs and other automatic weapons from the drop, as well as more of the encrypted radios and food rations, before he climbed into an ATV and rode off to the cave.

Cory and Bill sat on a small rise that overlooked the railway between Nogales and Tucson. They both hated the terrain. “How the hell are you supposed to fight a guerilla war in a place that’s so damn flat you can watch your dog run away for a week?” Bill complained.

“You must have a poodle,” Cory replied dryly, and again glassed the bridge they were about to place the charges on. “But I get what you’re saying. It makes me jittery to be somewhere where there is no concealment, much less cover. I’m a lot happier in the mountains, but this is where the targets are, so let’s just get this done and get the hell back to Prescott as soon as we can.” After a moment he added, “I haven’t seen anything move down there for an hour. When it gets to be twilight, I think we should head down and place the charges.”

“You want to use the contact detonators?”

“Yeah, we need to take the locomotives out. They can replace the rolling stock all day long, but the locomotives are a finite resource; so we just place the charges at the northern side of the bridge and make sure they blast before the engines get to the other side. We can save the remote detonators for later. How many of those do we have left?”

“Around twenty.”

“How do those things work?”

“Radio waves. A small servo closes the contact on the detonator when you activate them from the control.”

“So we could place bombs in buildings and detonate them from another location?”

“Up to three miles away.”

“We can use that later. We got people working at their bases all over the state, and if we can find a way to get the explosives into their headquarters, we could detonate them at the same time we storm the buildings and take over their headquarters.”

“We don’t have orders to do that.”

“I don’t have to take orders.”

“It would be better if you did.”

“I decide what our people do, and they will do whatever is necessary to end this war and get our territory back.”

“They won’t like that.”

“Life’s a bitch and then you die,” Cory replied, shrugging. He again glassed the area below him, looked over his shoulder, and said, “it’s going to be dark soon. Send the sappers in.”

“You going to stick around?” Bill asked.

“No, I have to go back to the Babson’s place and check in with Flagstaff to see if Tim needs any support from Prescott for the attack they’re doing on the supply trucks. That’s due to start in a few hours and I want to make sure he’s good to go.”

“You know, we’re going to have to move south of here to interdict the supply trains to the battle site on the Texas border.”

“We’re moving south next week. Right now, we’re still accumulating supplies in Prescott, and that was all the C-4 we had. Once we get resupplied, we can move farther south and start going after the supply trains to the Texas front.”

“Okay, I got it from here,” Bill said. He stood, waved to a group of four men to head down to the railroad tracks, and watched them as they moved off the rise toward the desert floor.

Cory heard the blast of the explosives as he talked to Tim on the encrypted radio, and then switched the band to talk to the Army unit that still sat on the Arizona border, locked in a toe-to-toe battle with the Mexican Army. He spoke to Kate briefly before signing off. Before he fell into a troubled sleep, he heard the sound of gunfire in the distance. The ambush on the Mexican Rapid Response Team that reacted to the attack on the train was happening, but he was too tired to listen to the battle. He fell asleep that night with details of operations to come rattling around in his head, had a dream about his wife and kids, and arose early the following morning to meet with the head of the resistance in the Tucson area.

Phil Babson was the prototypical Arizona rancher, wiry and weather-beaten. He was also the leader of the resistance in the Tucson area, and a ferocious fighter who led his men from the front and was a constant worry to Cory. His capture would lead to a disaster for the Tucson group, as Phil knew all the men in his group and where they lived. The two men sat on the porch of the Babson house, where Cory spent the previous night in the bunkhouse.

“Something big is coming,” Cory said and then fell silent, apparently lost in thought.

“That’s good to know,” Phil replied. “You gonna tell me what it is or just let me sit here until it happens?”

“Sometime in the next few weeks we are going to start aerial bombing with the Air Force. They now have air superiority over the state and are sending in more forward air controllers with laser designators.”

“What’s our job going to be?”

“Keeping them safe and moving them to target locations. We need to identify the targets and then move on them, one by one. The priority will be locomotives, tanks, and trucks – anything that moves gets hit first. After that is ammo dumps and barracks.”

“That is big. It means our Army is going to make a final push, or they wouldn’t ask us to do it.”

“It’s bigger than that,” Cory replied. “After we hit the targets they want us to attack headquarters buildings in all four AOs at the same time and take

our towns back.”

“I’m not sure we have enough men to do that here. They outnumber us 10 to 1.”

“The Army has intel that says most of the Mexican Army is going to be moved out of the population centers soon. They have to reinforce their troops at the border to hold off our Army. When that happens, we have to move and take our towns back. We’re never going to get a better shot at taking over unless we want to wait for the Army to come and save us and I don’t want to do that. This is our land and I want to be the one to take it back.”

“I’m with you. Even if the Mexican find a way to come back, they’ll still have to come against us when and where we choose. We can fortify positions and make it so tough on them they’ll give up.”

“Bill is staying here with you. I have to head back to Prescott. I’m going to stop in Phoenix and talk to the leader there, then send one of my men to Flagstaff again to organize that effort.” Cory was always careful to not use the names of the leaders in the different AOs. He was the only one, aside from Bill, who knew them all.

“Have you told Bill yet?”

“He knows everything. We’ve known about this push for a while, but I didn’t want to talk about it on the radio. I know it’s encrypted, but this is too big to take any risk at all.”

“I understand. I’d do the same.”

“As soon as we get the laser designators and the forward air controllers, that’s the signal to go. I’ll make sure each leader has both, and then we attack the following night, take out as much as we can, then we move on their headquarters and send them back across the border. The attacks all start at midnight, and we need to move on the headquarters before light. I’m also going to send down some NVGs so each of your team leaders can see the enemy.”

“Why don’t they just drop the supplies in each AO and save us the trouble of having to distribute all that stuff?”

“Because we’re the only group that has control of a defined piece of geography. The other three take and hold areas for a while, but always end up dispersed all over the place. A drop into your areas would risk supplying the other side, or losing the supplies in the event of an attack that would make them disperse.”

“When are you heading out?”

“Right now.”

“You shouldn’t be going back by yourself. Let me send some men with you as far as Phoenix and you can pick up a new escort there. We can’t afford to lose you now.” Cory nodded his agreement, not liking the idea of baby sitters, but recognizing the need to stay out of the hands of the Mexican Army.

“I’ll get them organized. Three should be enough.”

“That’s fine.” Cory shrugged.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

EMP PLUS 39 YEARS, SIX DAYS PRESCOTT ARIZONA, TERRITORIAL CAPITAL

Horace reviewed his notes before looking at Cory, who was perched up on pillows in his hospital bed. He went back a few pages, frowned, and then said, “Eric told me that you had some sort of lull in the action after you got back from Tucson. What was that all about?”

“Well, it was the damn Army and Air Force not delivering on what they promised. I had got used to that by then. It’s hard to believe they actually won the war.” Cory paused to take a sip of water through a straw in the water glass on his bedside table, and added, “it almost drove us crazy.”

“What happened?”

“We didn’t get the laser designators we needed to launch the attacks on the armor and bases for over a month, and I didn’t really know what to do. If we stopped our normal raids on the railroads and convoys, we would have tipped off the fact that something big was in the making. If we continued them, we were going to get people killed for no reason – we could have just waited it out and let the Army take things over. It was excruciating. I lost 39 men and women when I made that decision.”

“So you decided to continue raiding.”

“No other choice. There was too much at stake. We were on the verge of getting the country back, and I couldn’t stop pressuring the Mexican Army without putting more pressure on our Army on the Texas border. They would have sent troops down to the border before our Army was ready, and I couldn’t let that happen. It was an impossible situation.”

“But the Army was in charge by that time. Why didn’t they just tell you to stand down and let them take over?”

“They did.”

“And you disobeyed?”

“Yes, I was convinced that we had to take our state back and I was also certain the time was right to do it. I wasn’t about to let up the pressure on the Mexicans and risk not taking back, at the very least, our town, and making it an example for the rest of the state.”

Horace again flipped through his notepad and said, "Eric told me they put out a bounty for you around this time. Is that correct?"

"Yeah they did, but it didn't bother me much. We had the forest to ourselves and the photograph was something they managed to get from the Department of Motor Vehicles database. It was five years old and showed the clean-shaven version of me. By that time, my hair was long and my beard was full. I used to see the wanted posters on my travels to Tucson and Flagstaff and didn't even bother to take them down. We traveled on secondary highways, most of which had no checkpoints, so it really wasn't a problem."

Horace seemed to think for a long time and then said, softly, "what did Kate do during this time?"

"She ran the communications center."

"Was she a commander in the movement?"

"No, she was the glue."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We were all running around all over the state. I was going north and south, trying to get a handle on the operations, Tim was handling Flagstaff, Eric was dealing with Tucson, and we had a guy in Phoenix, Roger, who took care of their area of operations. Kate kept us all on the same page by running the operations center and telling us what was going on everywhere we were not. It was a very hectic and trying time. We got through it, but it was incredibly frustrating being on the verge of victory, but having to wait for the Air Force to deliver us what we needed to end it."

"So, when did the breakthrough come? What made you move to the next phase?"

"When we finally got the laser designators and the forward air controllers. That was a month later, and we were getting pretty tired of all the promises we got from the Air Force by then. They didn't really provide us with what we needed until they had air superiority, and that was a month of us losing men and women before we finally could go on the attack. We started dropping Paveway smart bombs on anything that moved during the day. Took out tanks, locomotives, trucks. The laser designators had a three-mile range, so we didn't even have to get close to the targets. Our guys pulled security for the airmen and they took care of dropping the bombs in the right places at the right times."

"He's getting tired," Eric said, emerging from the corner of the room.

“I’m fine,” Cory replied. “I want to get this part out now.”

“Okay,” Eric replied. “But don’t wear yourself out.”

“So, how did you organize the attacks?” Horace asked, his pen poised over the notepad.

“Once we got the designators and four forward air traffic [\[MLE1\]](#) controllers, we called the area commanders in and had a planning session. We identified seventeen targets in the four AOs, and prioritized them so we took out the tanks and trucks first. We wanted to take away their ability to move and use the armor to respond to the fight on the border.”

“According to my understanding, they moved the tanks and most of the men to the border before you attacked.”

“The Army wanted us to attack everywhere, including in the cities. The original plan was for us to take out as much as we could before they started moving. Apparently, at some point, the Air Force changed their minds. They were afraid to bomb in towns and decided to wait until they were in the open. So, much of the Mexican armor and transport was spared from our attacks. After we hurt them enough, they realized that the Air Force was not going to bomb the cities, and moved everything into the urban areas. So, we did some damage, but nowhere near what we could have done. I wanted to attack in the towns as quickly as possible. In the end, they controlled the aircraft, so I lost that round.”

“We know that the Air Force decimated the columns that moved to the border,” Horace said. “They did get them south of Tucson, and that broke the back of the Mexican Army. We also know that the militia did, in fact, attack and push them out of all major cities,” he added. “Can you tell me what happened here in the cities?”

“When the original plan fell apart, we went from seventeen targets to only one in each city. The Mexicans left a token force in each AO at their headquarters. They severely underestimated our strength.” Cory paused for a moment and then added, “in retrospect, the Air Force saved a lot of militia lives by refusing to attack the facilities in town, and not having us attack the tanks and other hard targets. When we did attack the headquarters in each AO, we faced almost no armor or anything else that could have turned us back. I told all the local commanders to change whatever they had to change, but attack that evening. We were out of time and there was no way to fully coordinate the attacks, so I threw caution to the wind and hoped for the best. Truth be known, I exercised very little control over the other

commanders. I pretty much left them to make decisions and carry out operations. There was no real way to really control much, but the Army wanted a single commander, so we gave them one for appearance sake and to get their help.”

“That’s not how I understood it.”

“That’s how it was. History has a way of making heroes out of lucky fools.”

“Well, tell me what you can. It’s all valuable to me.”

Cory thought for a minute and then continued the story. “Flagstaff overran their headquarters without a fight. Tim negotiated a truce with the colonel they left in charge there. In Tucson, our team leader had a real fight on his hands. They were closer to the column that was moving southeast toward the border, but in the end they managed to get them out of their command and control center, and that’s when the Mexican Army threw in the towel and began heading back across the border. Phoenix was also a real fight and it took a full day to take out their headquarters. Here, we had a fairly bloody battle. But we prevailed in the end, and I know you know about all those battles because I read your book on the retaking of the Territory. So I’m not really sure why you’re asking these questions.”

“Well, different people see different things in the same story and have a different perspective, and I want to make sure I get it right.”

“You need to spend more time writing the articles about statehood and getting public opinion on our side. We need that to happen soon.”

“I’m working on one now that covers the time when you decided to introduce the legislation to prohibit the state from rejoining the Union for twenty years. It comes out tomorrow and explains the speech you made to the legislature and how you have now changed your mind. It’s a good piece and I am going to commission a poll next week to see how voters feel about getting back into statehood. I am guessing it will be a positive result for us, but voters are fickle and there’s no way to really know until the poll results are back.”

“When we get to a 55 percent approval to adopt statehood, come back and we can talk some more. Right now I’m going to take a nap, and Eric can tell you about the final battle for Prescott. He fought by my side and probably remembers more than I do.”

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CHAPTER NINE

EMP PLUS TWELVE MONTHS PRESCOTT, ARIZONA, TERRITORIAL CAPITAL

The men were ready. Everyone was well equipped and good to go. Eric fussed over all of them, making sure they had enough ammo and grenades to make the final attack on the county court house. After assigning medics to each group, he formed them up in ATVs that would transport them to town, and went to the cave to get Cory to address them. He stopped as he started to enter the cave when he heard Cory and Kate talking. He stepped to the side of the cave entrance and listened.

“Kate,” Cory said, “we’re going into battle tonight for our future, and I want you in my future. I get the fact that you are grieving over Don, but I am doing the same with Julie and the kids. Do you really want to live the rest of your life without loving anyone?”

“It’s too soon, Cory. Let’s go fight the battle and come back safe. At some point, we can talk about things. But right now, keep your head in the fight or you might lose it.”

Eric backed away from the cave entrance and walked back to where the fighters stood waiting. Later, Cory joined them and walked through the crowd, shaking hands and chatting with the assembled group.

“We good to go?” Cory asked Eric.

“Yes.”

“So everybody knows the plan?”

“We got it.”

“I’m going along. I can’t miss this.”

“Not a good idea.”

“No matter, I’m going.” Cory got into the nearest ATV, rested his M-16 against his thigh, and waited for the group to leave. Eric got in, waved his hand in a circle over his head, and then pointed down the trail toward town. The group of vehicles moved out. They moved through the forest in a long column of captured Humvees, ATVs, and a few captured trucks. No attempt at stealth was taken, and they turned onto Williamson Valley Road with

headlights blazing and quickly moved up to a high rate of speed. They turned toward the downtown plaza where the last Mexican outpost in town still operated and split into four columns, with each parking a block behind the square at every compass point.

Cory directed his group to the north side of the square, where his shooters took up positions behind a brick church. His two SAW gunners deployed to either side of the building, and his sappers kicked the door in and moved through the building to the front side, where they opened the windows and rested their carbines on the windowsills. As Cory entered the church, men rushed by him and pounded up the stairs to the second floor of the building. Cory examined the building more carefully. It was rectangular and parallel to the surrounding buildings.

On the south side of the square, the same scenario played out, with SAW gunners and sappers occupying the old Prescott Brewing Company building and the bank building on the corner. Again, men moved to the second floors of the buildings.

On the east and west side of the court house, the longer sides of the building, Cory ordered the .50s to be deployed in the old Palace Saloon and the abandoned hotel four doors down the street on the other side of the plaza. Both were also brick buildings and offered good cover. On those two sides, the difference was that they placed the .50s, in both locations, on both the ground floors and the roof.

“Is everyone in place?” Cory asked Eric.

“We’re good to go.”

Cory went to a window and donned his NVGs. He scanned the plaza and noted that no guards were in the streets. The court house was surrounded by razor wire, but the outposts weren’t manned. Cory scanned the building and saw there were crew-served automatic weapons at most of the windows on the building. He took the NVGs off and sat down with his back to the exterior wall. He again got up and looked at the building the Mexicans occupied and noted there were no lights on in the building. They were obviously ready for the attack.

“Crap,” he said, sitting down again.

“What?” Eric asked.

“They knew we were coming long before we got here. No lights on, sentry posts abandoned, and crew-served automatic weapons at almost every window. This is going to get nasty before it’s over, and we’re going to

lose a lot of men and women. The plan we made to assault across one side and overwhelm them might not work. Whoever decided to leave them here left them well armed.”

“Why don’t we ask for their surrender?”

Cory thought for a minute and said, “get on the radio and tell everyone to hold fast while I talk to the general.”

“On it.”

Cory got up, leaned out the window, and yelled, “General Sanchez. I want to meet you at the gate under a white flag.” A long moment passed and Cory heard the reply, “yes, but come unarmed and without your men.” Cory was surprised that the man’s English was unaccented, but shrugged it off as unimportant.

“Agreed,” he yelled back.

Cory turned to Eric and said, “do we have a Barrett on the front of the compound?”

“We have two: one on each corner on the roof at the Palace Saloon. They both have line of sight on the front gate.”

“Tell them to zero in on the general and take him out if I raise my right hand and run it through my hair.”

“Done.”

Cory removed his holster and placed it on the floor of the building, walked to the back entrance, and told Eric, “if I go down, you take them out. We need to end this now.”

“I don’t think this is smart.”

“It’s probably not, but this is going to be a real bloodbath if we can’t get surrender. We don’t have the air support we thought we would have when we planned this. There has been enough death and sadness in this fight to last me a lifetime. I have to go and see if we can work this out without further loss of life.”

Cory walked to the back door and exited the building, walked down the side until he came to the sidewalk on the plaza, and proceeded to the front gate of the compound that now surrounded the court house. He stopped in front of the gate, held his hands out to his sides with the palms facing toward the building, and waited for the other side to appear. The massive entrance to the building opened and a man in a dress uniform walked out. He approached Cory and stopped on the other side of the gate.

“You want our surrender?” he said as he approached, stopping short of the gate that surrounded the compound. He was a large man, burly, and his black eyes seemed to glow with a fierceness born in anger.

“Yes.”

“Not going to happen,” the man replied. Cory studied him for a moment before replying, “no reason to get all these men killed when your Army is already on the run back to the border.”

“This will be our Alamo.” His tone was mild, but his eyes continued to glow.

“That didn’t end too well for us.”

“It created something good. It’s a story of bravery unsurpassed until now.”

“Why don’t you take a few minutes to think it over?”

“I already have. You better go now.” He turned on his heels and walked back into the building.

“No luck,” Cory told Eric when he stepped through the door.

“We need to use the Barretts to take out as many of the crew-served weapons as we can. Get the spotters to identify those targets and tell them to call us and let us know when they’re ready.” Cory stood silently, desperately attempting to think of some way to keep his casualty rate down, while Eric went to the radio and whispered quietly into the microphone. After a minute, he returned and waited for further orders. Cory’s face suddenly lit up.

“What is it?” Eric asked.

“Come with me.” They went to the last window of the building they occupied, where Cory pointed toward the northeast corner of the courthouse. “Tell the sappers to make their approach directly at the corners of the buildings before tossing the grenades into the windows. That will leave the Mexicans only the two corner sets of windows to engage from. All the other windows won’t have an angle of fire.”

“Of course. That makes sense.”

“Okay. Now check out the heavy machine gun on the second floor on the windows to the right as we face the corner. You see how he has the barrel pointed as far to the right as it goes?”

“Yes.”

“Follow a path from the barrel to the building across the street.”

“It can’t reach our sappers,” Eric said excitedly. “It’s about 15 degrees short.”

“Yes. From now on we call that the weak corner and the ones that have line of fire that will reach our guys – the one on the left side in this case – the strong corner.”

“If we can keep the gunners in the strong corners down with the .50s, our guys get a pretty clean approach. If we head for the corner of the building, the Mexicans on the weak corner windows either have to shoot left-handed or lean out the windows to get a shot. Get our snipers to keep those weak corners under constant fire. I need the Barretts and .308s on the weak corner windows, one each for each window on that side. The fire has to be constant once it starts, so we need the .308s. On the strong corner, I want either a Ma Deuce or a pair of SAWs for each window. Again, constant fire. If the SAWS have to take turns while reloading, that’s fine. But we can’t stop firing until the sappers are hugging the walls of the courthouse. Get lots of ammo for the weapons and keep all our shooters as close to that corner as possible. That’s makes 90 percent of the Mexican fighting positions on the long side of the building useless. Their machine guns can’t traverse to fire at that angle.”

“Got it,” Eric replied, leaving Cory to review the plan in his head and worry about what he may have overlooked.

The sappers and assault teams stood in two stacks in the entryway of the former shoe store that sat at a perfect angle from the corner. Cory came down from the roof and asked the fighters to huddle before he spoke. He looked at the group and realized that almost half of them were women. Cory sighed at the idea that females were combatants, but pushed the thought away. He looked up again and said, “we have .50s and SAWs on every window. But you guys need to get through the razor wire and get on the building in less than two minutes. At that point, we might lose fire superiority and that would get you all killed.”

“Got it,” Lloyd replied. “Just keep them down for those two minutes and we’ll get the first floor corner cleared.”

“Okay, we are a go in two minutes.” Cory and Eric left the room and went back to the rooftop observatory where they intended to run the battle. Cory put on the NVGs again and Eric keyed the radio.

“Status?” Eric asked.

“We’re good,” Lloyd replied.

“On my command.”

“Roger.”

“Commence assault.”

Two sapper teams left the building and the first group of six reached the wire without incident, cut through the razor wire, and huddled around the opening they created. The second team moved up and ran through the wire.

“Open fire,” Cory said to Eric.

“Take them out,” Eric said after keying the microphone, and the air filled with the song of heavy caliber weapons discharging on full auto. Cory watched the fight dispassionately and saw that the Mexicans were deploying RPGs from almost every window in the building. He watched two of them leave their launchers and impact the front of two buildings to the north, and then two more impacted the building he was on. He also saw another one where the Mexican soldier trying to shoot the RPG was taken out by one of the snipers, fell back into the room he fired from, and the RPG detonated in the building. Fire burst out of the window, and the rate of gunfire slowed for a moment, then picked up again and became a wall of sound that zeroed out any other sensation.

Cory turned his sight again to the sappers and saw they had breached the razor wire and the assault team was moving beyond them to the building. The second sapper team followed, carrying bags of grenades and C-4 charges, and fanned out around the north side of the building. After throwing grenades into the ground-floor windows, they moved to place charges in the side door of the building. Two were shot down by gunfire from the courthouse and another two died when grenades hailed down from the upper floors of the building. The assault team stacked up outside the door, waiting for the blast, and when the door blew off the building, they entered the opening, still in a stack, and fanned out to clear their side of the structure.

“Send in the second assault team,” Cory said.

“Second assault team, move,” Eric said into the radio. They both watched as another group of fighters ran across the square, through the wire, and into the building. The courthouse was now lighted with the fire from the RPG and the constant gunfire from within the building. The return fire from the building died down to the occasional rounds coming from the windows.

“Move the .50s to the southeast corner and assemble the last two sapper and assault teams there. Leave the SAWs here. Get Kate up here to run the fight on this side of the building. Tell her to send in the last of our fighters when that corner is cleared and get them moving toward the center of the building.” Cory paused, then added, “we need to get over there now. They’re going to be moving soldiers and weapons to this side of the building, so we need to hit them on the soft side they’re going to create when they move in this direction.”

“I’m on it.” Eric keyed the mic on his radio and issued Cory’s instructions to Kate.

Cory ran down the steps to the alley behind the store. He moved down the alley toward the next fighting position. He fist-bumped Kate as they passed each other; Cory turned and started to say something to her, but her back disappeared before he could utter a word. Eric came out of the stairwell, M-16 in hand, and the two men moved quietly until they reached the corner of Montezuma Street and Main Street, and waited for a pause in the gunfire before crossing the corner and getting back into the alleyways behind the plaza. His men were now forced into pauses in the assault as they stopped to reload, and the exchange of gunfire became even between the two sides. RPGs continued to hail out of the courthouse, and the damage to the buildings in the square was now noticeable. Several of Cory’s fighters’ bodies littered the square in front of the Palace Saloon, and more died in an RPG attack on the building next to it. Several more lay on the street between the courthouse and surrounding buildings. Cory noted that the medics were attending to them, after first dragging them from the street and into the buildings that formed a box around the central plaza. He said a silent prayer as they moved through the alleys, and they finally arrived to the southeast corner of the square. The crew-served weapons teams followed behind, lugging the tripods, weapons, and ammo with them.

“Same drill,” Cory said as they caught up with them. “One weapon on each window on this side of the building. I need suppressing fire to get our sappers in.”

“We’re on it.” The group disappeared up the steps of the city management building and set up their weapons.

“Are we guns up?” Cory asked.

“Not yet,” Eric replied. Cory turned toward the courthouse and saw several unarmed Mexican soldiers drop to the ground from the second-story

windows and begin running toward his position with hands held high. The men around him all raised their weapons and began firing at the soldiers.

“Cease fire!” Cory bellowed. The firing stopped, but everyone remained wary and tracked the movement of the soldiers as they approached.

“We surrender,” the lead man yelled, slowing as he approached the door where Cory stood with his weapon at the ready.

“Approach slowly with your hands up,” Cory replied. As the group passed through the door, a Mexican in an officer’s uniform stopped.

“You should tell your men to get down,” he said. When he saw Cory’s look of confusion, he added, “General Sanchez has the whole building rigged with explosives. He’s going to blow the whole thing when your fighters get to the third floor.” Cory examined the man carefully, looking for any sign of deceit. He found none.

“If you’re lying to me, I’ll kill you.”

“I know. That’s how you know I’m not lying.”

“Tell everyone to clear the building immediately,” Cory said after turning to Eric. As Eric keyed the mic and began to issue the order, a massive roaring sound cracked the night air. The men instinctively ducked down as a rolling echo passed through the plaza, and stood in time to watch the debris from the roof of the courthouse rain down on the streets surrounding the building. A vast silence ensued. Cory gaped in disbelief, shook his head twice, and looked away. After a moment he turned to Eric and said, “have the prisoners taken to the county jail. Lock them up there until we can figure out what do with them.” Cory exited the building in time to see his fighters begin to stream into the plaza. Eric stood beside him for a moment. “We lost forty men and women in there, including Ed and Ann. I lost all those people because of one crazy bastard with a death wish.” He looked away for a moment, shook his head, and watched as two of the fighters approached the flagpole, yanked the lanyard loose, and brought the Mexican flag down. The cheering started when one of the men contemptuously tossed the flag into the garbage can by the flagpole. It continued as the second man attached the American flag and slowly began to raise it, almost as though expressing reverence by the slowness of the ascent.

Someone started singing “The Star Spangled Banner,” and the melody filled the plaza with close to a thousand voices participating. The sound filled the early morning air as the sunrise painted the plaza with light. By

the last stanza, Cory stood with his hand over his heart, tears streaming down his face.

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CHAPTER TEN

EMP PLUS 39 YEARS, 22 DAYS PRESCOTT, ARIZONA, TERRITORIAL CAPITAL

“Well, this is the day,” Horace said cheerfully. “They’re counting the votes.”

“Elections aren’t that predictable,” Cory replied. He was propped up in his bed watching the election results as they came in, and wore an expression of concern.

“We polled at over 58 percent. There is no doubt in my mind that this is going to pass and we will join the United States again as a state.”

“It’s going to take at least another hour to get the final results.”

Eric entered the room carrying a thermos and three cups. After pouring the coffee, he handed each man a cup and they all sat quietly watching the television set. As the tabulation continued, Horace finally broke the silence.

“Eric once told me that you ran for governor because you felt you had no choice.”

“That’s true.”

“Can you tell me why?”

Cory thought for a second before responding, “it’s a long story, but I guess we have time. I generally don’t talk about it because it makes me seem preachy. So, understand that I’ll answer the question, but in a way you may not like.” Horace pulled his notebook out and poised a pen over it, waiting patiently. After a moment, Cory turned to him and said, “it had to do with the EMP more than anything else. We all knew about them for decades before it actually happened. But we all walked around with our blinders on because the unthinkable was impossible. I was just as bad as everyone else. I just couldn’t imagine anything like that could happen to us. We were the greatest country in the world. Or so we thought.” He paused, again thinking, and added, “when I was growing up, we behaved like Spartans. We worked hard, were honest and rational for the most part, and treated each other with respect. Now, granted, I’ve spent my whole life here, so it’s all I really know. I know it may have been different in the cities,

but not here. Then, as time went on our society became more like Rome. Even here. We had dramatic increases in the welfare rolls and disability benefits for people who were completely healthy, but found it easier to take the handout.”

“That does sound a little preachy,” Horace commented.

“Yeah it does,” Eric agreed. “But it also happens to be true.”

“Again, we all knew that every great civilization before us eventually crumbled: Rome, the British Empire, the Aztecs. There was no shortage of examples that should have made it clear to us that we were about to fail as a nation. Our politics became mean-spirited and more concerned about maintaining power than doing what was right. We lost two wars we should have won because the American public didn’t have the stomach to commit to winning.”

“You’re referring to Afghanistan and Iraq?”

“You could throw Viet Nam in as well, I guess.” Cory paused, took a deep breath and continued, “people didn’t talk about the best thing to do for the country. They just yelled slogans at each other and committed to having everything their way or nothing. The notion of compromise, the fundamental building block of any political system, went out the window. The right took to preying on people’s fears and hatred, and the left stuck their head in a hole and pretended nothing was wrong. Each side was as responsible for the mess as the other. Nobody was about to let the facts get in the way of whatever they believed. We cut military spending to pay for social welfare programs. Many of the people didn’t need those programs. But it was better than working, and they felt entitled to it because they were raised in a society that tolerated non-productive members. So, our military never really had the money to prepare for the EMP the way we should have.”

“That’s why you banned welfare after you were elected?” Horace asked.

“I didn’t ban anything. The legislature voted the law into effect, and it still stands. I did introduce the bill.”

“You also introduced legislation to ban political parties and campaign contributions.”

“Didn’t have much luck with that,” Cory replied sheepishly. “Asking politicians to not band together in groups is like asking an antelope to behave like a puma. I should have known better.” He appeared lost in thought for a moment, then added, “Don used to refer to people who

weren't completely self-sufficient as 'sheeple.' I thought it was a little harsh at the time, and maybe it still is; but I do see a grain of truth in the term. The fact is that humans are herd animals, and going along with the group, even if it's wrong, is most often a lot easier than going your own way."

"They're going to announce the election results," Eric interrupted. The three men fell silent as the announcer came on the air and reported that the tally was final, with 61 percent of the voters casting their ballots to rejoin the Union.

Eric walked over to the bed and gently hugged Cory, who then leaned back into the bed, looked at Horace, and said, "you did it. Thank you."

"We did it." Horace shook the bony hand offered to him and smiled. "I guess I have some more to write later today."

"Eric, go over to the closet and get the flag. Give it to Horace." Eric strode to the closet and removed a wooden box and handed it to Horace. "That's the flag we raised in the plaza on the day we ended the war with Mexico." Horace stared at the box with a glazed expression. "I want you to give that to the governor and tell him to use it at the flag-raising ceremony. It's planned for tomorrow at sunrise."

"How do you know that? Horace asked. "They haven't announced anything yet,"

"The governor called me last night and told me that if it passed, the ceremony would be tomorrow morning."

"Of course," Horace sighed, before taking the flag from Cory and leaving the room.

The following morning, the three men assembled in Cory's room. Eric opened the window so nothing would obstruct their view of the ceremony. The plaza below them was filled to capacity. As the governor's limousine pulled into the square, the crowd erupted with cheers. People waved small American flags and hugged each other as the governor moved to the flagpole, brought down the territorial flag, attached the Star and Stripes, and slowly hoisted it up the pole. Cory cried the entire time, tears flowing over his wrinkled cheeks and dripping off his chin. Eric and Horace both welled up, but fought off the urge to weep openly.

"This flag was given to me personally by Governor Cory Redding," the governor announced through a bullhorn. "He wants you to know that despite the tattered appearance of the flag, it was the one he put up the day

we threw the Mexicans out of the Territory and became free people again.” The cheering in the plaza grew to an ear-splitting volume as the crowd began to move toward the flagpole.

“I finally made right the last thing I had to make right,” Cory whispered. “I’m pretty tired. Could hardly sleep last night. Would you mind heading down to the plaza and joining the celebration while I take a nap?”

“Not at all,” Horace said. “I need to get a quote from the governor anyway.” The two men left the room, exited the hospital, and started walking to the plaza.

“You know, we’ll probably never see him again,” Eric said sadly.

“I know,” Horace replied in a whisper.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

EMP PLUS 39 YEARS, 21 DAYS THE RANCH OUTSIDE PRESCOTT, ARIZONA

Eric leaned his backpack against the wall of what had been Don's ranch home. It was the original safe haven for the group of preppers that later became Cory's family. He squinted against the sun as he watched Horace approach. It was a clear day with a powerful sun that etched shadows on the Bradshaw Mountains, away in the distance, but plainly visible in the clear mountain air.

"Morning," Horace said as he got out of the car and walked over to where Cory stood. The men shook hands and then stared down at Cory's grave, right where it was supposed to be.

"That took some doing," Eric said.

"The governor came around when I showed him the letter and the article I was going to publish. He pushed hard to have Cory buried in the state cemetery, but compromised with me. So he got a public ceremony in town, but Cory got buried here. "

"Did you go to the ceremony yesterday?" Eric asked.

"I had to go. I had to cover it for the newspaper." Horace paused for a moment, then added, "I didn't really want to go." He shrugged once and stood silently for a long moment.

"What was it like?"

"There were thousands of people there. They strung loud-speakers all over the place and transmitted the ceremony on all the television stations."

"The hearse delivered the casket yesterday afternoon and they dug the grave. I filled it in after they left."

"What's with the backpack?" Horace asked.

"I'm heading up into the mountains when we're done here."

"What are we doing here?" Horace thought. He wanted to ask about the meeting Eric requested over the phone when they spoke that morning, but decided to wait.

"Take this." Eric handed a thick manila envelope to Horace. "It's a deed to this ranch."

"You own this?"

“Cory deeded it to me four years ago when he went into the home.”

“So, Kate gave it to Cory?”

“That’s right.”

“Who are you deeding it to?”

“The state. But two conditions have to be met before the deed can transfer. It requires the state to make a museum out of the place, and it requires that you have a final say in all matters concerning the museum.”

“He’ll never agree to that.”

“Yes, he will,” Eric assured him.

“How do you know?”

“Because he’s been after us to put a museum here since Cory moved back to town.”

“I’ll try,” Horace agreed.

“Good. I have some things to show you before I leave. Follow me.” Cory walked across the yard and stopped in front of the dilapidated barn. He spun the dial on a large combination lock that secured the side door, opened it, turned on the light, and motioned for Horace to follow. Crossing the interior of the barn, he stopped at a large safe, spun the dial, and opened it. Eric reached in and pulled out a pile of composition notebooks held together by a large rubber band.

“There are seven of these,” Eric said as he placed them on a workbench. He removed the rubber band and handed the first notebook to Horace.

“That’s Don’s journal. It begins a year before the EMP and ends at the time of his death.” Horace gaped down at the journal in disbelief. Eric picked up the next two notebooks and handed them over. “Those are my journals, and they start at the time I moved to the ranch and end last week.”

“My God! This is treasure!” Horace exclaimed, his face glowing with excitement.

“I’ve saved the best for last.”

“It gets better?”

“These last four are Kate’s journals, and they begin around the time the EMP happened and end at her death. I’ve read all of them, and I can tell you these are the most complete. If you really want to know what these people were like, what they feared and wanted, how they worked together, and the rest, these are the journals to read.”

“What makes them special?”

“Like we said before, Kate was the glue that held everything together. She had a remarkable eye for people and motives, and she was an unusually gifted writer. She was extraordinary in every way, and I never really understood how incredible she was until I read her journals.”

“Thank you,” Horace whispered, his face still filled with wonder as he stared at the journals.

“One more thing. Everything that the group used is in this barn. When the war ended, Cory and I took everything apart and placed it in those boxes. It’s all there. The drones, the spare weapons, the sensors, cameras, and all the things they made to survive.”

“My God! This is everything we need for the museum.”

“It is,” Eric agreed. The two men stood in an awkward silence for a moment.

“So when are you coming back?” Horace asked.

“I don’t really know.”

“Can you tell me why you’re leaving?”

“Same reason as Cory. My responsibilities are done, just like when he left office. I never wanted to be his caretaker. But I did it because it was my duty. Now that Cory’s gone, I’m free to go back and live as I did before he resurfaced. I love the forest and would rather be there any day.”

“But there’s work left to do. The museum. Don’t you want to see that?”

“I just passed the mantle to you in case you didn’t notice. And there are many things in those journals that people today will see as harsh, even brutal. You make sure you put the context around what those things meant at the time. These were not people who sought out trouble, but they were people who knew how to respond to it.” Eric paused for a moment, then added, “we all did things that would look horrible today in the world we live in. At the time, they were just what we did to survive. I’m really worried that people who read these journals, or what you write, will think we were monsters. Please use this very carefully, and remember, you weren’t there, and you have no idea how bad it was. That’s all I ask.”

I’ll do my best.”

“People need to know about this, Horace. They need to understand how terrible it all was. How hard it was to survive. They need to understand what made these people fight back after the EMP and during the war. You have to bring this to life so it will never happens again.”

“You know you can’t stop man from destroying everything that is good. It’s his nature.”

“I know you’re right. But maybe we can slow them down some. If that’s all we get out of all of this, I will be a happy man.”

“I’ll do my best,” he repeated.

“I’ll be back from time to time. If you need to ask me questions, leave a note by Cory’s grave and I’ll come find you.” Eric offered his hand, shook firmly, and walked out of the barn. After touching each headstone and bowing his head, he hoisted his pack and settled it on his back, picked up his old .308, and moved toward the forest.

Horace put the journals in the front seat of his car and turned to see Eric striding into the forest. He watched until he was no longer visible, glanced again at the gravesite, and began to plan the museum as he drove back to town. He had stories to tell; many stories to tell.

Eric turned around and watched the car leave the ranch. He placed his rifle on the ground, took off the backpack, and again looked at the graveyard. “One story ends, and another begins,” he whispered to himself.

The End

[\[MLF1\]??](#)

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