

BLACK '91

CHAPTER ONE: "A LITTLE OFF COURSE"

The delivery van took the turn a little fast and rolled up on its left wheels, before setting down hard on all four. The driver was busy fumbling with the contraband tape player under the dash, hidden well but hard to reach from the driver's seat. He just missed two pedestrians at the next crosswalk, but he paid their swearing little attention. He finally clicked on the power button and felt every bit as energized as the hidden speakers now humming in the doors.

From a secret pocket within his vest, he withdrew a worn cassette. He held it up to the sun and read the title: "Freedom." The cover bore a small photo of a middle-aged man playing an acoustic guitar, wearing a tie-dyed shirt under his cotton overshirt, topped off with a Mao hat with a big white star on its front. "Ah, Neil, it's a shame ya had t' go underground," the driver said aloud, blowing through a red light two seconds late. He popped the tape into the illegal player, and instantly, illegal music filled the cab:

*There's colors on the street,
Red, white and blue,
People shufflin' their feet,
People sleepin' in their shoes.
But there's a warnin' sign on the road ahead,
There's a lot of people sayin' we'd be better off dead.
Don't feel like Satan, but I am to them,
So I try to forget it anyway I can.
Keep on rockin' in the free world...
Keep on rockin' in the free world...*

His head bounced in time with the pounding music, and his lips mouthed the words as he careened wildly down the street. His eyes swept both sides, looking for the ubiquitous Sound Patrol, who would as soon shoot him dead as arrest him for the tenth time.

"Pop Cops," he said aloud, laughing. That may have been what most people called them, but he preferred a different nickname for those specialized policemen. "The Fugue Fuzz," he said, laughing again. But he laughed loudest at the last one. "The Fosse Posse." He laughed so hard, he didn't notice the four people straggling across the street, a man and a tall woman, followed by a taller man helping a second woman. The four were in the middle of the street when the driver noticed them, and it wasn't really them he noticed, as much as it was the taller man's outfit: breeches and matching shirt of tanned buckskin, with a long knife at his belt, moccasins on his wide feet and a coonskin hat on his head.

The driver, lost in his own humor, reacted slowly. He steered the big rolling van a little right, but not far enough right to miss the first man and woman. He realized instantly he was going to hit the tall woman, maybe the guy next to her too, and braced for the impact. The driver closed his eyes for an instant, and because of that, he missed seeing the tall man scoop up the other woman in his free hand and barrel into the other man, sending all four of them sprawling into the muck-filled gutter along the city sidewalk.

The van roared past, splashing more slush on them as it did. The driver was just opening his eyes as he barreled down the street, wondering where the four had gone, and what had happened to prevent the accident. He took another right, as hard as the first one, and rolled up on the left wheels again as he took the corner.

Marion Wayler raised himself up from the slush and looked back at his friend Guthorm, who had just saved his life by body-blocking him into the gutter. "Thanks very much," he said sarcastically, shaking ice and grey snow from his hands.

"Not at all," the bigger man said. "Glad to do it."

The taller woman rubbed her shoulder where she had landed on it. "I thought this place was going to be safer than the target?"

"Doesn't appear that way so far," Wayler responded. He struggled to his feet, then leaned down to check on the other

woman. Her color was good, and she bore no signs of any injuries from the tumble. But her eyes were still glazed over, just as they had been since the three had found her eight hours ago. Wayler looked at Guthorm, still cradling her in his massive arms. "How is she?"

"How the hell should I know?" The big man swept off the ridiculous-looking coonskin cap and looked down at her limp form. "Don't even know who she is."

"Well, letting her catch pneumonia in the street won't help her condition, that's for sure," the taller woman said. She scanned the nearby businesses for some place to hide out. Her eyes lingered across an all-glass facade four doors down on the right, with a host of people visible inside. "There's a place with a crowd. Maybe we can blend in there."

"Sounds good, Aud," Wayler said to the taller woman. "We gotta rest up, lay low for a while, find out just where we are."

"Don't you mean 'when' we are?" Aud shot back, then shrugged. "Maybe we'll be able to blend in."

Wayler glanced back at Guthorm and his Davy Crocket outfit. "I doubt our clothing will allow that." He started walking, following the tall woman.

"Don't start with me," Guthorm said. He looked up at the towering buildings on either side of the street, and the dozens of passers-by who stared at him as he struggled with the unresisting woman. Throwing one of her lifeless arms over his wide shoulders, he aimed for the busy shop, muttering under his breath, "...then the old man throws his armor, long unused, across his shoulders, tottering with age; and he girds on his useless sword; about to die, he hurries toward the crowd of Greeks."

Wayler looked back over his shoulder. "Thucydides?"

"Nope," Guthorm said, smiling. "Virgil, *The Aeneid*."

"A group of outnumbered warriors attempt to storm an impregnable fortress over a misunderstood concept of honor and beauty," Wayler said with grim humor. "That sounds about right."

Inside, the place was loud and full of life. A scratchy television voice blared out from an old black-and-white set above a cash register in the back, and twenty patrons all vied for whatever airtime was left over. A few smoked, most drank coffee, and a couple of others off to the right dropped some kind of disgusting jelly substance into their eyes.

Aud walked regally through the crowded scene and found a table near the back, beside a towering wall of musty books and piled newspapers. Wayler pulled out a chair for the comatose woman as Guthorm gently placed her into it, then lowered her head carefully onto her crossed arms on the table top itself. Wayler took the chair beside the bookcase, the better able to scan the crowd and watch any new arrivals through the single front door. Aud motioned a serving person over, while Guthorm's eyes were taken by the books.

"What manner of stimulants do you provide here, my good man?" Aud asked, not meaning to sound imperious.

"Well, uh, your *highness*," the man emphasized, smiling through his goatee, "we got your legal beverages, your coffees and cappuccino and such, we got some decent home brewed ales, we got your stiffer alcoholic drinks, and we got some hellaciously good shakes. And if you're interested in something a little more on the wild side," he trailed off, rubbing the outer corner of his left eye with a stained index finger, as if it meant something significant.

"We've had enough wildness to last us for some time, thank you just the same. I believe I will have one of your shakes," Aud replied, smiling in return. "Don't shake it too much."

"Sure thing. What flavor do you want, princess?"

"Uh," Aud stalled, looking to Wayler and Guthorm for help. Wayler just stared back, willing to let her fumble her own way out of this. Guthorm was still wrapped up with the hundreds of books behind the table, and the thousands more that filled the other walls. "Um, I guess, I will have...apple?" She smiled hopefully.

"An apple shake?" the server replied incredulously. He placed both hands on his hips and said in a comical twang, "Y'all ain't from around here, 'ere ya?"

"Well then, what do you recommend?"

The server wrapped one hand around his bearded chin, studying her carefully. Aud carried herself gracefully, with an air of royalty that was clearly out of place in her current surroundings. She wore an interesting hairstyle, long, reddish-brown and braided, but wrapped around her neck like a shawl. Her blouse was simple cotton, but she wore tight-fitting leather pants and a similar jacket. The server studied her face, angular and taut, beautiful but dangerous in some undefineable way. Green eyes as clear as expensive jade, lips as crisp as winter's wind.

"For you, madam, I'd recommend a 'Double Chocolate Bombshell.'" He regarded her slim figure. "Could stand to add a few pounds anyway, in my humble opinion."

Wayler was about to step in and spare the server from Aud's swift and inevitable wrath, when Guthorm jumped into the conversation. "Chocolate? You have chocolate?" He smiled down at Wayler. "I like it here already."

"If you're a chocolate fan, you might wanna try our 'Death by Chocolate.' Brownie and fudge sauce. Practically lethal."

Guthorm's eyes squinted ever so slightly. "Two, please," he said softly, then to Wayler, "I might just want to stay."

"Two it is, big guy," then to Wayler, "and for you?"

"You have fruit juice?" When the server nodded, he said, "Half apple juice, half orange juice, a little bit of cranberry juice, with a twist of lemon. No vodka, please." The server nodded and was already turning away from the table when Wayler added, "And a large cup of coffee for the lady."

Aud stared blankly at Wayler, as he smiled and checked the comatose girl. "Marion, would you mind telling me exactly how you knew they served such an unusual beverage?"

"Simple." He pointed at a photocopied page taped to a wall nearby. "I glanced at the menu. It's called a Blender Bender."

The voice of the TV announcer increased in stridency as he dove into a new story. *"Four men were taken into custody today on suspicion of guerrilla performance. Michael Custer, Timothy Jakes and Walter Kerry were arrested by undercover Music Police at a favorite local hangout, Cricket Hill, near Wilson Avenue on the Lakefront."* Jarring images accompanied the report, images of average-looking teenagers being brutally handled by heavily-armed policemen and women. Compassion was not evident. *"A small group of protesters were detained, to help the police with their investigations."* Four or five people being pulled by their feet or their hair constituted the bulk of the detentions.

"Well," Marion Wayler said, placing his hands palm down on the table. "I know where we are now." In the glow of a few final images of bleeding civilians being tossed into a paddy wagon, he added, "I could be wrong, but I think we're in Chicago."

The server arrived soon after with the coffee and milk shake. Aud hesitated between the long thin silver spoon and the paper wrapped straw, until Wayler showed her how to sink the unwrapped straw in and begin with the spoon. As she swirled the first spoonful around her mouth, her eyes blinked in pleasant surprise. "So this is chocolate? This explains quite a lot."

When the server returned with the virgin Blender Bender and a small ceramic bowl of steaming coffee, Wayler asked, "You got a copy of today's paper?"

"Tribune or 'Times?" the server asked. When Wayler didn't reply, he asked, "Are you a Ricco fan?"

"Can't say that I am," was Wayler's cautious reply.

Smiling, the server reached behind the table and slid a paper from off the top of a deep pile. "Ya gotta read today's column. It's about all the arrests lately for guerrilla rock."

Wayler accepted the paper and stared at the front page. Aud leaned forward, trailing the spoon tip from her mouth. "I'm sorry, but did you say they were arresting people for playing with rocks?"

"Not playing *with* rocks, for *playing* rock. Rock music." The server studied the group with a little more scrutiny this time. "Where you all been?"

"We've been out of town, lately," Wayler said distractedly.

"And my Deaths with Chocolate?" Guthorm said into the air, without turning around.

"You're up next, Dan'l Boone." The server disappeared around the corner.

Wayler held the paper out for Aud's perusal. He pointed to the small line under the header, which read, 'December 21st, 1990.' He smiled grimly, and Aud let the spoon drop back into the tall milkshake glass. She accepted the paper and read the bold headline: "President Bull in England, Last Chance For Peace." Her eyes skipped down the majority of the story, and flipped to the inside page faster than it seemed humanly possible. She flashed down the full page of text there, and two more following in the next ten seconds or so, then refolded the paper and placed it delicately back on the table, like a dangerous snake that might strike at any moment. "They're on the brink of war." She pushed her shake away with a steady, perfectly manicured hand.

Guthorm sat down opposite Aud with a thick book in his meaty hands. "This is fascinating," he said, flipping through pages while his eyes fairly danced in his head. "This writer, this Fort fellow, listen to what he says here: 'Science is established preposterousness. The science of today is the superstition of tomorrow. The science of tomorrow is the superstition of today.' Hah! Said that in the thirty-first year of the Twentieth century. Hah *hah!* Was *he* ever ahead of his time!"

Two large plates were plopped down beside his book, and Guthorm gazed in utter amazement upon the extravagant chocolate desserts. The book was temporarily forgotten, as he picked up a fork in each hand and began eating first from plate, then the other. It may have been five bites or it may have been ten, when he realized the server was still standing beside the table, obviously waiting for something. "Oh! Excuse me, I seem to have forgotten what little manners I've picked up since landing here," Guthorm said, wiping a bit of brownie from one lip. He reached into a pouch that hung from his leather belt, next to the Bowie knife. He pulled out a small green wallet and passed his hand once, twice, three times over its outside, then opened it and drew out three perfectly crisp twenty-dollar bills.

"Sorry sir, but I need to see your ration card first." The server seemed genuinely apologetic.

Guthorm looked across at Wayler who shook his head. "Um, I must have left it...at home?" Guthorm eyed the two half-eaten desserts with surprising hunger. "Can I bring it tomorrow?"

Before the server could recite the standard reply, two beefy goons strolled in through the front door. They swaggered more than walked, and they seemed to put everyone in the place on notice with their very presence. Each one wore a long heavy grey leather trenchcoat and thick black boots and dangled business-like billy clubs from their right wrists, but the most noticeable thing about their odd get-up was the red armband each wore across their right bicep. Blood-red the armbands were, with a large white circle in the middle. Upon the white circle was emblazoned a thick black capital letter 'B,' and all of the patrons who dared eyeball that symbol, did so with unconcealed loathing.

"Hey, mac! Bring my pal an' me a couple o' tall brewskis! An' no waterin' 'em down this time, ya get me?" The two toughs laughed heartily at each other, then stood behind a guy and his girl at a window-side table.

"Well?" one tough said to the sitting man. "Are you leavin' soon?"

"In a little while," the patron gamely replied.

One tough shook his head. "Not soon enough." He picked up the chair by the top crosspiece and unceremoniously dumped the occupant to the floor. The toughs laughed, but no one else in the place moved. Some of them seemed to have even stopped breathing. The only action came from the guy's date. She calmly stood up, her eyes burning hatred into the tough who had dumped her date, and slapped him with all her might right across the cheek.

The tough looked incredulously at his partner, then laughed even harder. He only stopped laughing when he viciously

backhanded the girl across her jaw, knocking her against the window behind her. She slumped quickly to the floor, falling in a heap beside her concerned boyfriend.

One of the guards pointed and laughed and was about to take the seat himself, when a large hand touched him gently on the shoulder. He turned to see Guthorm standing beside him, holding the thick book in his left hand.

"No, Guthorm, don't!" Aud hissed through clenched teeth.

Guthorm waved her away with his free hand. With his other, he held the thick book up for the tough to see. "Pardon me sir, but do you know what this book says?"

"Haven't a clue, pal," the tough said, shifting his stance to face Guthorm with his entire body. Guthorm actually had the advantage of height over the one tough, though the other was closer in size. "Why don'cha tell me?"

"Delighted!" Guthorm glanced down at the cover of the book, then brought it up with both hands in a flash against the bottom of the tough's jaw. The sudden force of the blow knocked the tough out cold on his feet, though it was a few seconds before he slowly toppled over backwards. Guthorm used that time to mention to the dropping tough, "It says here that you're quite the rude fellow."

The other tough growled low in his throat and reached for the short rod hanging from a lanyard at his right wrist. He twisted a ring near the handgrip and thwacked Guthorm over the back of the head with it, full force. Sparks flew where the baton met Guthorm's skull, but all Guthorm did was to slowly turn 'round to meet him eye to eye. "And it says here you're ugly." The heavy book smashed into the second tough's nose, breaking it and sending that one crashing over the chair behind him, landing roughly beside his partner. "And that didn't help a bit, I daresay."

Suddenly, the place erupted into silent but enthusiastic activity. Aud and Wayler jumped to their feet, standing back to back. Aud had her hands up in a defensive posture, looking as if she were about to perform some cheap magic trick. Wayler had gripped his chair and held it in both hands, low, ready to swing or block. But nobody came near them. Instead, the crowd was a model of pre-planned activity. While four patrons rushed to grab the knocked-out toughs by the ankles and drag them into the back, others scurried around cleaning up the little blood that was spilled, helping the slapped girl to her feet before she was ushered out the side door with her boyfriend. Another chair appeared from somewhere to replace the one splintered by the tough's fall, while two other patrons stood by the window and the door, watching out for any other unwelcome guests.

Some of the patrons, only a few, held their hands up to either side of their temples and looked straight down at open books or cups of coffee, shielding their eyes from what was happening, almost as if they were trying to ignore what was going on around them.

Wayler and Aud relaxed their guard when they realized no one was concerned with them. Guthorm strolled back to their table slowly, the book open to a section he seemed to find most entertaining. The server had his hand on the tv sound knob, having increased the volume to cover the bustling activity. "*President Bull addressed Parliament today,*" the announcer intoned in screaming words, "*asking for a peaceful end to the hostilities in the east. He warned that the U.S. was ready to defend its rights worldwide, and cautioned the Soviets to expect full and complete retaliation, if pushed in that direction.*"

When everything seemed to be back to normal, the sound went back down, the busy patrons each found their seats and the ignorant patrons dropped their hands. They all carried on with what they had been doing previously, though every now and then, a cautious eye drifted to the tall man dressed in brown leather standing in the back, laughing aloud as he read from a book called "Lo!"