

THE REASON

BOOK ZERO

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First Edition.

Dedication

I dedicate this mini adventure to our Creator. I am made in His image, thus I create. Without Him, I cannot do anything.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

~philosopher George Santayana, 1905, from the book *The Life of Reason*.

Foreword

I'm just your average Joe—with some hard-earned skills.

I read the signs and interpreted them. A number of us did.

No one wanted to listen.

Over my fifty-two years, I watched our nation go from a melting pot of strength... to something else entirely. Something divided. Something unstable.

And recently, we all saw the result.

An opportunity opened. Paths were left unguarded. The most powerful nation in the world exposed its own weakness—and our enemies took advantage of it.

They struck the Achilles' heel... and felled the giant like a mighty oak that had become rotten.

But they misunderstood the consequences of their actions.

They crashed the system, the paper giant, but awakened the true giant...the citizen militia.

It now stands tall, feet planted on the foundation laid by our forefathers—their words, their warnings... and the line they drew in the sand.

– Bret Gordon, Free American Citizen

Prologue from *The Reason*: Book One

05/24/24 – Nashville, TN to San Jose, CA

Raindrops pelt the car's roof.

The sound reminds me of videos of poor souls caught in protests turning into riots, trying to drive through waves of people standing in their way, striking their cars. They are the first to cast stones, judging the occupants for things they did not do.

I'm concerned that the current protests in Los Angeles may swing the same way. Darkness encourages rioters to yank people out of their vehicles. To do unspeakable things. More and more of this despair creeps into our daily lives, much like this bleak night, clinging to our car as we speed through the rain.

Gripping the steering wheel tight, a chill runs through me as we cruise I-40 West. Jen's warm hand is in mine, the same grip we had under the cafeteria table when we were shy teenagers.

It chases the chill away.

Her 0530 flight out of Nashville International is looming. Jen sighs heavily, cutting the silence; it's full of the thing we cannot say: that neither one wants to be apart.

Thirty-two years married, plus the five years before that, and she still catches my eye.

"I feel it too," my voice steady despite the ache. "Every time you're gone, half of me goes with you."

She squeezes my hand, her warmth seeping through to my heart.

Two weeks apart.

"Bret, sometimes it just feels too long." I can hear tears in her voice.

“Sometimes?” I tease her. “How’d you know what I was thinking?”

“We’ve been together for so long. You know how it works. We can read each other’s minds.” Shoving me gently.

I smile and chuckle, knowing she speaks the truth.

She’s my world and has been since we were kids, practically raising each other. Fifteen when we started—stubborn as hell against her folks, who repeatedly tried to split us up.

I turn on the radio, higher than normal, given the storm. The broadcast is worrying. The voice on the radio breaks through our quiet banter, “Governor Olson of California is threatening secession again. This time, it’s over Washington D.C.’s handling of the undocumented immigrant groups’ rampage across several states. Those same people now sheltering in California. Meanwhile, a Chinese battle group has been sighted off the West Coast. With U.S. forces scattered on several fronts overseas, who is going to defend Los Angeles?”

“Our leaders have stretched our defense line so thin that it barely covers our home soil. The National Guard has been activated for precautionary measures in the southern states after bad actors tried—but failed—to coordinate attacks on multiple electr...”

I reach over and switch it off. In the dashboard’s glow, Jen’s jaw tightens; we’ve heard it before, but this time it feels closer.

Inevitable. Echoes of 1941. Infamy.

Jen lets out another deep sigh, possibly weighing the probabilities: “What if I’m there when it blows?”

Her voice falters: the strongest woman I know sounds storm-tossed.

“I’ll gladly turn us around. Head home. Right now. You know what I think is going to happen. What I’ve been preparing us for.” Giving her a sideways look. “I pray to God I’m wrong.”

“Me, too.” Nudging me. “But you know I can’t do that.”

“*Won’t.*”

“Okay, won’t.” She grows quiet, surprising me with both word and action. It’s not in her nature to give in. She is concerned.

“You’re tough,” I say, giving her a pep talk but hoping she’ll tell me to take her home. “But if anything happens, keep moving east like we planned, from RP to RP. Use the skills you’ve built. We’ve got it all figured out. I will come for you.” I squeeze her hand assuredly. She gives me a less-than-confident smile but squeezes back.

She’s my ‘Stands with a Fist.’ We stole the nickname from *Dances with Wolves*. It’s our inside joke, but it fits Jen perfectly. Her fighting has shifted from childhood brawls to battles for nurses. As a director now, she’s a shield for her staff and those seeking guidance.

Having the airport’s exit in view takes something out of me every time. *It’s too soon!*

We drift into the drop-off point, the storm hammering down. Brakes protest, echoing our unspoken sorrows.

Jen’s grip tightens. “I don’t want to go.” Her eyes glisten, and her lower lip quivers.

“I don’t want you to,” I rasp, pulling her close to me. My chest tightens with the dark possibilities.

This early in the morning, traffic and security are sparse, so we have a minute or two.

As we leave the car, the Tennessee humidity is thick, and the rain is dripping from the CR-V.

I retrieve her laptop pack and carry-on from the back seat. The airport doors whoosh open. The air from inside the terminal carries the conversation of two National Guardsmen speaking with security personnel.

They're too far away to distinguish their words clearly, but I'm able to catch 'militant groups.' Odd. They're in full battle-rattle with loaded M16s. On any day at the airport, seeing soldiers in uniform is normal but not usually armed. *If you see kitted-out military at the airport, something bad happened or...* Lightning flashes and thunder answers back. *Something is about to kick off.*

Hmm. I slam the liftgate shut.

My wife crashes into me, surprising me, locking her arms around me tightly. We feel the warm exchange of our love for each other. It feels right and is a reminder of what we're willing to fight for if it comes down to it.

"I love you," she whispers, pulling away just enough so her brown eyes can pierce my blue ones. Her hand touches my cheek; I lean in, lips brushing hers...

The storm is unforgiving, like life.

It crashes and rages, beating down on us. And as I breathe in Jen's scent, I wonder if this is the last time I'll ever hold her. Yet, even in the fiercest storms, our embrace holds—unbreakable. To the world, it's only a husband and wife clinging together. But I know the truth: we are already standing against the darkness, side by side, back-to-back, armor on, refusing to yield.

And in that silence between thunderclaps, I can almost hear the storm cry out: *Where do they come from? How do they stand so firm?*

The answer rises inside me, steady and defiant, as lightning splits the sky: *For love. For tribe. For family.*

Day 01

05/24/24

Getting out of Nashville airport is easier than I expected—at least physically. Mentally and emotionally... that's another story.

Jen's early departure brings me just enough time to avoid the usual crowds, but it also means I get a clearer look at what most people would probably miss later in the day. State Guard is already there, fully kitted, not just posted but moving with purpose. The way they position themselves near exits and access points tells me this isn't just for show. It doesn't sit right.

As I pull out, I catch in the rearview mirror what looks like the beginnings of checkpoint setups forming behind me. I have made it out just in time. That isn't luck.

Route 40 eastbound is light at this hour, just a few scattered vehicles moving at speed like any other normal morning. Westbound is the opposite—packed, steady flow into Nashville, the daily grind still intact.

If someone didn't know what was going on, they'd never guess our country is closer to tearing itself apart than it has been since the first Civil War.

From the outside, everything looks fine. But isn't that how things always start?

The radio is back on. It has become a habit lately.

"...Explain this to me," the host says, her tone caught between confusion and composure. "Both the Federal administration and California leadership identify as Democratic Socialists. So why are we seeing this level of conflict between them?"

I lean back slightly in the seat. This ought to be good.

“Well,” the analyst replies, “it’s not about shared ideology anymore. It’s about degrees of control and progression. California leadership believes they are the standard-bearer for socialist policy in the United States, and they see the current administration as either compromised or not moving aggressively enough.”

“So, this is... a purity conflict?”

“In a sense, yes. That’s why you’re seeing a refusal to cooperate with Federal agencies like ICE. The governor has already signaled that state police and National Guard units will not assist Federal enforcement operations.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. *He just drew that proverbial line.*

I turn into our driveway just as the report shifts—something about a Chinese naval battle group moving closer to the West Coast.

I back into the garage for a quicker egress, then cut the engine. Silence. Just the ticking of the CR-V cooling.

Phone buzzes. Too soon to be Jen. Greg. He remembers she is heading back to California this morning.

The match is lit, Hermano. Watch the powder keg—California and the southern border.

I stare at it for a second, then give a simple thumbs-up. No need for more. We both understand.

Even though she’s in the air, I type a message to Jen anyway.

Home. Missing you already.

This way, she'll have something good to read when she lands.

Opening the car door, replaying what Greg just relayed to me. Ryan, our oldest boy, in the Army Reserves, volunteered with others from his unit to fill gaps at...Fort Bliss, Texas.

Smack dab next to the Mexico-America border.

“Wunderbar!” I slam the door shut.

The dogs hear me before I even get the door open.

They hit me like a wave—Ash and Skye—tails going, paws up, noses working overtime like they were searching for her.

“Mommy’s gone for a bit, boys...” Even saying it aloud doesn’t sit right. Ash, pointed ears, always alert. Skye, floppy ones, attitude like he owns the place. Both loyal to a fault.

They sit and wait for a moment, expecting her to come through the door.

Moving into the kitchen, I pass the bedroom. That bed looks real inviting. Fatigue has already started creeping in—partly the drive, partly the early hour, mostly the Parkinson’s. Some days it just sits on me like a weight I can’t shake, draining everything before I even get started.

People don’t get that. “You don’t look like you have Parkinson’s.” That one never gets old.

What I'd like to say is—it's not all tremors, *my uneducated friend*. It's fatigue. It's anxiety. It's the slow stripping away of what you used to do without thinking. It's what made me leave my career as a physical therapist. Lost my job for no fault of my own. No warning. Six months later, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Five months after that, a triple bypass. After that, who would hire me with that history at my age? Being a PT is stressful and demanding, with quotas to meet. Jen and I decided that I would take care of things at home as she made a lucrative living.

Phone buzzes. Greg again.

She off? You staying up or crashing?

I stare at the screen for a second.

She's off.

My thumb hovers, then adds,

Still figuring the latter out. Sent.

People are predictable... once you understand them. Not magic. Not instinct. Just knowing the person, the situation, and the pressures acting on both. Same as tracking. Same principles. Different terrain.

I lean against the kitchen island and let out a slow breath.

The house feels too quiet. Empty. She's in California. Not Southern California, where it's heating up—but close enough that it doesn't matter. L.A. is roughly six hours from where she rents.

She knows the risks. I know them, too. Been watching this build for a while now—geopolitics, movement, positioning. China doesn't just “show up” somewhere. They prepare.

Still too early to feed the dogs. Too early for me to eat, as well. I usually wait until after training. “Alright, Bret,” I mutter. “Enough stalling. Start the morning ritual.”

Dynamic stretching. Chi Kung. Then Tai Chi.

Normally, I can drop into the form—connect, slow everything down, let the noise fade. Not today. Mind keeps wandering. Too many threads pulling at once. I try to observe, let them pass.

They don't.

Body now warmed up. Mind still scattered. I move into the workout room and let the frustration bleed out the only way I know how. Heavy bag. Wing Chun dummy. Every strike carries something behind it—Parkinson's, losing my career, Jen being gone, everything building out there in the world. There is more anger in it than usual. By the time I stop, I'm soaked. Body feels good.

Spirit... still wrestling.

Check the time. Past the boys' breakfast. Good excuse to pause. Get them fed. Watch them for a minute—simple, content, present. Then back to work. Work as in ‘house and yard work.’

So here I am. At home. Away from my wife. Staying busy to keep my mind off the inevitable decline of who I am. Finding a reason to give a damn.

After finishing up, I pass by the office. Her chair is empty.

I stand there looking, longing for her presence. Skye nudges my leg. Blue Heeler. Time to move. He's become my shadow and helicopter mom.

I let them out for their potty break, leaving the main door open for doggie door access. Letting them out, I pass our wall of family and tribe. My eyes settle on Lexi, Baby 'Peanut,' and Mark in West Virginia. I lightly straighten their picture frame. It's been a couple of weeks since we talked, but weeks to a month's time is normal for us. She has her own family. Now with Jen, that's different. They talk at least weekly.

Lexi naturally makes me think of John Luke. Our parental failure. I gaze at the last pic we have of him before... I clear my throat.

I should probably get myself some food.

Then a weighted walk.

By the time I return, the fatigue has circled back around.

My bed calls. I stand in the doorway. Considering it.

Then another thought.

Start carrying a pistol. All the time. Not just outside. Inside, too. Because you don't know when. You don't know where. It's not *if* anymore. It's *when*. And it's not just people. Out here, we've got strays. Dumped dogs. Neighborhood dogs running loose, unsupervised. Then we have... Coyotes.

Prepared—not paranoid. There's a difference.

I check the pantry. Three months' worth. Still building. Good if I'm staying put. Doesn't mean much if I have to leave. Because if things go sideways—I'm going west. I made a promise. And that promise might end up being the only reason I get up in the morning.

Later that night, after a shower, I sit on the edge of the bed. The boys are already in theirs, taking turns grooming each other as if nothing has changed.

I drop my head in my hands. Alone. Stripped down to what's left of me.

“What's my purpose now, Lord?”

Silence.

“What's my reason... to wake up and get out of bed each morning?”

End Day 01.

Day 02

05/25/24

I have one of those damn Parkinson's dreams again.

The kind where I yell out and wake myself up before I even realize what's happening.

This one had something to do with my father. He passed over about three years now, and I don't always dream about him, but when I do, it never feels like just a dream.

I was reaching for him.

In my dream state, there are... two planes of existence. That's the only way I can describe it. I am aware of where I am, and of where he is—and somehow—I break through my side of it. Pierce into his and grab hold of him just as everything starts to spin.

We pick up speed, holding onto each other.

Faster. Faster.

Like we are being pulled into something we can't stop.

Then—we merge. Not side by side. Not together. But into one... something.

One person. Floating. Surrounded by destruction and chaos.

And then his voice, clear as anything I've ever heard.

Listen, son... you must integrate your past, present, and future to survive what's coming. And it's coming, son.

I awake with the echo of his voice still ringing in my ears.

Later, Jen exhales softly through the phone. “Wow... I am so sorry I wasn't there for you. Your dreams lately are almost prophetic in substance. Have you noticed that?”

Her voice is slightly tinny through the cell phone, but it's warm enough to settle something in my chest.

"Ah, it's okay you're not here," I reply, though I don't really mean it that way. What am I supposed to say? She's the breadwinner. She's doing what she has to do. "I survived. And yeah... I've noticed."

Silence stretches between us, not awkward, just... heavy.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask.

"You know me," she says with a small sigh. "Fell asleep on the couch at 8:30, woke up around ten, stumbled to bed... lay there for about an hour scrolling on my phone with my mind racing."

"Yeah... sounds about right."

A beat passes.

"How was the airport?"

There's a pause on her end.

"Oh... that. You're not gonna like it."

My stomach tightens. "How so?"

"There were protesters inside. Waiting. Looking to cause problems. Police and Guard were everywhere—armed. Getting luggage was a mess. Outside was worse. More protesters... people getting nervous. Some were scared."

"What were they protesting?"

"Pro-immigration. They wanted the return of immigrants taken by ICE. It was loud... tense."

She exhales, and I can hear the edge in it.

"I heard after I got my Uber that they shut down rideshare access to the airport."

I straighten a bit. "You serious?"

“Bret... yes.”

Silence again.

“...If I had taken a later flight...” she trails off.

“Yeah... no bueno,” I say, keeping my voice level even though my mind is already running scenarios. “Maybe... think about an early flight home?” I already know her reaction to anything stronger.

“Babe... I thought about it, but—”

“I know,” I cut in, softer this time. “You feel responsible for those kids.”

Silence.

“They’ll be taken care of.” I add, “With or without you.”

Nothing at first.

For a second, I think the call has dropped.

“... Yeah,” she finally says, “I know.”

“But you spearheaded it,” I say. “You’re not walking away.”

“Babe... I have to see this through.”

I shake my head even though she can’t see it.

“You frustrate me, Jen. These gray hairs? That’s all you.”

She laughs, soft and tired.

“And I love you anyway,” I tell her.

“And I you.”

There’s a small shift in her tone. “I’d better go finish getting ready for work.”

“Yeah... I’ll find something to fill the day.”

“Please be careful, Bret. Don’t overdo it.”

I let the silence stretch just a little longer.

“... Yeah. You, too.”

Another pause.

“I don’t want to go,” she says, quieter now.

I can hear it in her voice.

“I know.”

I let it sit there.

“Bye.”

“See ya, babe. I do love you.”

“What?” I ask, just to hear it again.

“I said I love you.”

“I know. I heard you the first time.”

She laughs. “Goodbye, you big jerk.”

“Bye.”

The line goes dead.

The house is quiet again.

I turn on the TV and then Pandora—music for dogs.

Honestly, it’s just as good for people.

Talking to Jen helps while it’s happening.

Afterward... it hits harder.

I’m a little behind now because of the call, but when I stop and think about it, what do I actually *need* to do today?

Workout.

Eat.

Cut the grass.

Keep moving. Always keep moving. Parkinson’s loves it when you sit still. It creeps in. Takes over.

So, I combat it with movement. The morning ritual.

Mid-afternoon rolls around faster than expected.

The yard's done. Equipment put away.

As I walk back toward the house, I see Robert—retired, chubby, most of his weight up top—flagging me down.

He looks off. On edge, in a way I haven't seen before.

"Hey, Robert, how are you?" I call out.

As I get closer, I read his face.

"What's wrong? It's not Susan, is it?"

"Oh—no, no," he says quickly. "First—my manners. How have you been?"

"Fine," I cut him off gently. "What's going on?"

"Are you busy?"

"No. What do you need?"

"Follow me. Daisy... she's missing."

His little white poodle.

"What? When?"

"Today. She was here and then... gone. I remember you said—well, Jen said—you're some kind of woodsman?"

I let out a small chuckle. "Something like that. I'll take a look. No promises."

"I'll take anything."

"Go grab a drink. Sit on your deck," I tell him. "I'll see what I can find."

He hesitates. "Can I come along? I'll stay quiet."

"I work better alone," I say with a small smile.

He nods reluctantly. "Alright. I'll be on the deck."

Back inside, I gear up. Battle belt. Thigh strap. Glock 19. Then the 5.56 SBR, slung over my shoulder. Not looking for trouble. Just prepared in case it finds me. Coyotes... even in daylight.

I start near his garage. Plenty of bare dirt. Easy reading. Small tracks. Light. Fresh. Daisy.

She moves along the edge of the property line, heading up toward the field behind us.

I follow. The tracks lead me up the hill. Pause. Scan. There. A break in the grass. I move closer. Then I find it. The scene. Scattered fur. A couple feathers. The ground tells the rest. I stay kneeling for a while longer. Feeling the loss. The violence.

Nature.

Out of habit, before standing, I scan the area.

Now... to break the news.

“What’d you find?” Robert’s standing now, beer in hand. “What are you—going to war?” he adds, eyeing my gear.

I ignore it. “I found what happened. You’re not going to like it.”

“No, no—I’m good. Let’s hear it.”

“She was taken. Hawk.”

He blinks. “What?”

“She moved up the hill. Looked up. Saw it. Tried to outrun it, but...she didn’t make it.” Silence settles in.

“I’m sorry, Robert. I know what she meant to you and Susan.”

He’s quiet, looks down into his beer for a handful of beats. A long, drawn-out sigh escapes his lips, releasing what he was holding. Then, as if he just remembered something, he lifts his gaze. Searching my face. Questioning.

He shakes his head slowly. “Damn it. How do I tell my wife?”

“Carefully,” I say quietly.

“How do you know that’s what happened for sure?”

“It’s in the ground,” I say. “Weight shifts. Disturbances. It tells a story... her story, Robert.”

He nods, still processing. Then gestures at my gear again. “Still... looks like war.”

“Would you rather be a warrior in a garden... or a gardener in a war?”

He considers that. Gives a small “hmm.”

I’m already walking back to my house. “Have a good night.”

I hear him call out to me, so I turn to face him.

“Uh... thanks for the... um, closure. I appreciate it, really.”
He looks deflated.

I just wave to him with a nod and continue home.

The news is worse.

Protests are escalating. Still centered in Los Angeles, but reports—official and unofficial—are starting to line up. Violence is creeping in.

California's Governor, Olsen, is on screen, talking like everything's still under control.

"The people have the right to express their disappointment..."

I shake my head. That guy's off his rocker. People have the right to protest, but this? There's more going on here than anyone's saying aloud. And the Chinese fleet is still moving closer to the West Coast. I can't shake the feeling that it's all connected.

Phone buzzes. Jen. She's tired. Heading to bed.

Talk tomorrow.

I stare at the message longer than normal. God, I miss her.

I follow her lead. Get the dogs settled. Head to bed. Lights out.

End Day 02.

Day 03

05/26/24

I need to pull myself out of this.

I wake before the alarm again, somewhere around 0600—closer to 0615 if I'm being honest—and for a moment I just lie there, staring at the ceiling, trying to decide if I'm getting up or letting the weight of everything pin me back down.

My pistol rests beside me on the bed. It's not an afterthought anymore. It stays with me now. Every day.

It's light, balanced, fits my hand like it was made for it, and there's a certain reassurance in that—something solid in a world that's starting to feel anything but.

I push myself up and move into my routine, still stiff from sleep and from everything else that seems to be settling into my bones lately. It's too early for food; the dogs don't eat until 0800, so I hydrate and make my way to the computer.

Phone lights up. Text from Greg. Missed it earlier. Sent about three hours ago.

Jeez.

Hermano. I know you are, but I'm going to say it anyway—get prepared. Be ready. Sources say we're right. It's on its way.

I just stare at the screen.

I know what he's talking about. My insides turn inside out.

The Pacific. The positioning. The chatter about embedded insurgents crossing the southern border. The scary question: how long have they been here?

Pieces that didn't quite fit before are starting to line up now.
Bug in... or bug out. If it all goes sideways—I'm going west.
I made a promise.

And that promise doesn't get broken.

Even if it kills me.

"Alright," I mutter under my breath. "Enough thinking, Gordon."

Today's simple.

Range day. Clean weapons. Double triple check the gear.
Ammo. Food. Movement. Same routine.

Eat.

Then the range.

Keep moving.

The dogs are handled, fed, let out, and settled, and I start loading the CR-V—anything that goes bang comes with me. If I'm going to shoot, I'm going to make it count.

On the way out, I decide to swing by Dunham's to replace what I burn through.

Practice ammo. 55 grains.

Keep the 62 grain for when it matters.

The parking lot tells me something's off before I even kill the engine.

There's a line forming outside. Short... but growing. I step out, fall in at the back, and take a look around. Mixed crowd. Different ages, different backgrounds. Same energy. Quiet chatter. Ammo. Gear.

"Just in case."

More people keep showing up.

It's got that Black Friday feel to it but without the excitement—just tension sitting under the surface.

"Here they come!" someone yells. The doors unlock.

I hear the click and clack of the mechanisms before they even swing open, and then the whole line surges forward at once.

I move with it.

No point fighting the current.

Straight down the middle aisle.

Left toward firearms.

Bulk 5.56.

I don't hesitate.

I don't know when I'll get another chance like this. I start stacking boxes—enough for two thousand rounds of 62 grain—and by the time I'm done, the place is getting loud.

More bodies.

More noise.

More pressure.

Time to move.

Never stay in one place for too long.

The lines at the registers are already backed up when I get there.
I take my place and wait.

Two guys bolt for the door with merchandise.

“Stop!” an employee yells, starting after them.

The manager cuts him off. “Let them go. It’s not worth it.”

That right there tells me everything I need to know about
where we’re at.

The line inches forward.

The guy in front of me starts to stand out.

Too fidgety.

Eyes moving too much.

Sweating.

Hand buried in his jacket.

Don’t do it. Come on, man... We’re all in the same spot here.

The first customer finishes and leaves.

‘Fidgety’ steps up.

Shaking.

And then—he pulls a pistol.

Keeps it low.

Oriented at the cashier.

“G—give me all your money. N—now!”

Everything narrows.

I guess I could let it go, but I’m already in motion.

I step around the couple in front of me, draw clean, and press
the muzzle into the back of his head, before he even realizes I’ve
moved.

He flinches.

The crowd hushes and recoils, waiting.

“Take your hand off the gun,” I say, steady. “Both hands up.”

“Man, I just need—”

“I don’t care what you need; everyone needs something.” I cut him off, anger cutting through everything else. “Just do it, or I will shoot you, and they’ll drag you out of here.”

My heart’s pounding.

Sweat building. No bluff.

All I wanted to do was buy ammo and go to the range.

“Okay—okay!” he stammers, hands going up.

“Good.”

Employees rush in, grab him, pull him down and away.

Applause breaks out. Cheering.

I don’t want any of it.

The couple I’d stepped around gestured for me to go ahead.

“... and thank you, mister.”

“Don’t mention it,” I say, moving up.

I load the counter. The manager whispers something to the cashier while I stack box after box.

The cashier leans in just enough to be heard.

“You’re in luck,” he says quietly. “Buy one, get one free.”

He gives me a quick wink.

I nod. “Appreciate it.”

Outside.

Load the CR-V.

Sit there until it feels right to start moving again.

Five miles down the road, it hits.
Hands start shaking.
Breathing's off.
I pull over.
Sit there.
Twenty minutes before I feel steady enough to drive again.
Blow out a long breath.
Get back on the road.

Two hours later, I've got the range to myself. Quiet. Just me and the work. Sighting in doesn't take long. Running drills settles something in me. Everything's dialed in. Ready.

On the way home, I text Jen.

Missing you, mooks.

Phone buzzes almost immediately.
Too fast. Greg. Not her.

Turn on the news, Hermano.

I switch on the radio.

“...just in—Los Angeles protesters have ambushed and taken multiple ICE agents captive...”

I shut it off before they can repeat it.

My mind’s already moving.

Jen.

Get to Jen.

Get her out.

I pull into the driveway as her reply comes through.

OMG, babe, turn on the news!

I quickly back the CR-V in, don’t even shut the car down properly.

I leave everything and move inside fast enough that the dogs scatter out of my way.

TVs on. Volume up.

The footage is grainy. Dark. The banner across the bottom reads *Mature Content Advised*.

Flashlights cut through the frame.

Camera too close.

Voices overlap—Mandarin, Arabic—talking over each other.

Then it steadies.

Center screen - ICE agents.

Gagged.

Hands tied behind their backs.

Faces bruised, lower lips split, streaked with dirt and tears.

The camera moves from one to the next.

Then pulls back.

All of them on their knees.

A figure steps forward.

Blade catches the light.

Machete.

One of the agents is dragged forward.

I don't hear what's being said.

I'm locked on the blade.

On the agent.

Crying.

Pleading.

I don't look away.

I can't.

"Don't do it..." I whisper into the empty room. "Don't..."

The blade flashes.

—

The screen shows enough.

I stand there. Frozen. Separated from it by the screen, but not the reality of it or the consequences, this has just been released.

Heat bubbles up from somewhere deep, rising fast, tightening everything inside me until it needs out. I drive it into the Wavemaster, each punch landing harder than the last.

This. On our soil. Allowed by a governor who swore an oath. And people are celebrating it in American streets.

The bag takes the worst of my anger, bleeding off the pressure without breaking anything that can't be fixed.

How did we let it get this bad? Why?

End Day 03.

Day 04

05/27/24

Sleep doesn't come easy.

I don't think I got more than two hours straight at any point. Fragments of sleep were interrupted by flashes of what I saw. The agent. The blade. The sound it made, cutting through him.

That sound stuck.

It followed me into whatever sleep I managed to find.

0600 hours. I reach under the pillow and pull the pistol free, sitting up on the edge of the bed as I do. For a moment, I just sit there, letting the weight of the night settle and pass through me.

I set the pistol and the extra magazine on the nightstand. No sense keeping it buried now—I'll be making the bed anyway.

Deep breath in.

Head in my hands.

"Why..." I ask quietly, letting the word hang as I exhale.

Don't ask questions you already know the answers to...

The voice is gentle.

Masculine.

More a whisper than anything.

It feels right.

I lift my head slowly, scanning the room without moving anything but my eyes.

I've heard that voice before.

Of course you have... in that space between the quiet. And you know why.

“To glorify the Father,” I say under my breath, the words coming before I fully think them through.

My mouth is dry, and my throat is tight. It’s hard to articulate my question both physically and emotionally. It needs to be broached...

“Is this... is this the end for us?”

I AM... the beginning and the end... not this fallen state you’re living in.

I bolt upright.

Still in bed.

Heart hammering.

Every sense switched on.

I reach under Jen’s pillow for the pistol—

Not there.

For a split second, everything freezes.

I could have sworn—

Mid-thought, I turn, swinging my legs off the bed.

The nightstand.

There it is.

Pistol.

Magazine.

Exactly where I set it.

I let out a breath.

“Okay... I’m awake now.”

But I don't fully believe it.

I need out of this room.

The dogs feel it, too.

They're already moving, anxious, like they can't get out fast enough.

"Alright, settle," I say, moving past them into the kitchen.

Food time.

Something to focus on instead of what just happened.

I grab two cans and hold them out.

"Alright, Ash—your pick."

He sniffs one.

Then the other.

Chooses.

"Carrots it is," I mutter, cracking it open.

The TV clicks on in the background.

Of course, it's California.

Phone buzzes before I can even focus on the screen.

Greg.

Morning, my friend. Federal troops—Marines—are slated to hit mid-afternoon into the night. NODs. No local support.

I smirk despite myself.

Wunderbar.

His reply is quick.

Right. Be ready. Out.

I move through the routine. The motions are there, but my mind keeps circling back—dream, voice, what I saw on the news.

The world's starting to crack open, and now I've got... whatever **that** was layered on top of it.

Doesn't matter.

Work still needs to be done.

Weapons next. A couple more ARs to clean. Two pistols. Then gear. Everything needs to be squared away. If I have to move, I'm not scrambling.

I pause for a second. Thinking it through. When the time comes, I should stop at Greg's first. Drop the gear there. Stage supplies. Think ahead.

"Jerry cans. Fill them," I say out loud, more to organize my thoughts than anything else. "Extend range."

I scratch the dogs behind the ears. "You two stay put."

Stepping out toward the garage, I catch movement on the ridge behind the house.

Coyotes.

Several of them. They scatter as I step into view. All except one. Black. Bigger. He holds his ground just long enough to watch me. Then turns and disappears.

That's not concerning.

If things keep going the way they are—animals. People. Doesn't matter. I need something in the vehicle at all times. Something more than my pistol.

Shorty 7.5 inch AR. Truck gun. Bandolier. Ready.

Jerry cans loaded into the CR-V. Chest bag secure. Truck gun on the passenger seat. Belted in like a loved one.

Garage door lifts. Time to top off.

The drive's quiet. Pleasant.

The gas station has no other customers.

Just me and the attendant.

I start fueling, setting up the cans, when another vehicle pulls in.

Older guy steps out. He starts pumping gas, then reaches into his truck and pulls out an AR, 16 inch.

Slings it casually.

We lock eyes.

Just a nod.

Nothing needs saying.

Then—engine noise.

Loud.

Too fast.

A lifted truck tears into the lot from the rear.

Six ruffians inside.

Acting like they own the place.

They swing wide, doing donuts around the older man on his way back from the store.

Pushing him, testing him.

Then peel off toward the diesel pumps.

The man unslings his rifle.

I catch his eye and raise a hand.

Wait.

He nods.

I shift position, moving behind the front of my CR-V.

The truck gun bag comes with me.

No point being exposed.

One of them steps out.

Loud.

Aggressive.

“Well, what do we have here? Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumb. You see us coming—you should just leave.”

Here we go.

“I was just filling up,” I say evenly. “On my way out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean to us?” he snaps, already wound tight.

Knife comes out.

Others back him up—bats, shotguns, pistols.

Six of them.

Distance is about fifty, maybe seventy feet.

Alright, Bret.

You’re scared.

Good.

Use it.

I set the 7.5 inch on the hood.

Bandolier beside it.

Flip the dot on.

Charge it—make sure they see and hear it.

Then brace behind the engine block.

“Alright, gentlemen,” I call out. “You’re in the open. I’m not.”

I nod toward the older man.

The leader, loudmouth, “You honestly believe you can take all six of us?”

“I’ll take that bet. Between the two of us, we can drop all six of you if you keep this up.”

I lock onto the loud one.

“And I guarantee—you’re first.”

One of the others shifts.

“Pops... you sure about that? We’ve got guns, too.”

I almost shake my head.

“Mister,” I say, “you’ve got handguns and scatterguns. None of that’s getting through what I’m behind.” I tap the hood lightly.

“With this? I don’t need clean hits. I just need pieces.”

“I don’t think you’ve got it in you to—”

I fire.

One round.

Clean.

Splits the bat in his buddy’s hands.

Wood snaps.

He jumps back, dropping it.

“Dude... we should just go, man. You see how chill he is?”

“Yeah, almost like he wants us to attack.” I overhear a third one say.

The leader hesitates. Then backs down just enough to save face. “Alright, pops. You win this one. But I’d keep your eyes open.”

They pile back into their truck, making noise on the way out like it means something.

Then they’re gone.

Silence settles back in.

The older man approaches, hand extended.

“Patrick Reese. Call me Pat. Thank you.”

“Bret Gordon,” I say, shaking it. “We look out for each other.”

He nods, then gestures toward the rifle.

“That’s a hell of a setup.”

“Built it myself,” I say. “Mix and match.”

“Were they reading you right? Or were you bluffing?”

“Only in cards, Pat. Only in cards.”

We talked for a few minutes.

Nothing deep.

Just enough.

I suggest we should vacate the premises before the authorities make an appearance.

Pat’s quite confident, “I’m an ex-cop from these parts. I know them and vice versa, so I got this one, Bret.”

“You sure?” I give him a way out.

He blows it off, “Pfft, no problem. I’m not concerned. Technically, it was self-defense, and no one got injured or killed, so...” He lets it trail off and extends his hand again.

“What about those? What can we call them other than ‘assholes?’” I take his hand in mine, shaking it.

He makes a face, and it tells me all I need to know about what he thinks of them, “those ‘Marauders?’ You made sure they won’t be back around... today.” He returns my shake. “Just watch your six going home.” He gives me a look I understand.

“Right. Good call, and thanks, Pat, for the backup.”

“Hell, Bret, you didn’t need me here. I just watched,” he says, chuckling. “Godspeed, friend.”

“Same, Pat.”

We part ways.

I don’t go straight home. Take a few turns. Loop around. Switchbacks. Make sure no one’s trailing. Only when I’m satisfied do I head back.

Later that night—phone to my ear. It’s Jen.

“Hey, babe... anything exciting happen today?”

End Day 04.

Day 05

05/28/24

0315 hours—Home.

The dogs wake me before anything else does—barking at the windows, low growls rumbling in their chests. Outside, beneath their noise, I can make out a deeper growling... and the crying of an animal.

A deer?

Whatever it is, I'm not going out there at this hour.

"Leave it! Ash, Skye. Bed." They both grumble and hem and haw but reluctantly return to their beds.

While they're settling down and still grumbling, I check the cameras. Too foggy.

I'll take a look when the sun's up.

0830

The dogs want out, but I'm still in bed. "I'm awake." They're getting restless. I'm staring at the ceiling, replaying what happened earlier.

Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I can't change... I'm trying, Lord. I finish my thoughts as I tear my eyes off the ceiling.

"Alright, boys, I'm moving." That causes more excitement, leaping up on the bed and horseplay between the brothers. "Okay, off, off." They tear out of the room toward the front of the house.

If only I had that energy... I pull on a pair of shorts. I let the boys out front in their doggie corral to do their business. Morning Parkinson's meds taken. Vitamins later. I want to get out back and get a look sooner than later. Pushing my routine back is acceptable for one day. I slip my EDC chest bag over my head and secure it. It could come in handy if I decide to follow a trail. Shoes, not Crocks. Crocks and trails don't complement each other well.

I get out of the house and into the yard before the boys rush back inside. I can hear Skye's bark, echoing from the front yard. The morning air is cool against my legs, and a light mist hugs the grass. During my scan of the area, I notice Robert is already tinkering in his garage.

The dew is heavy. Each step wets my shoes. The garden fencing is caved in, alright. Looking closer at the ground, there's grass and dirt kicked up. Signs of a struggle. *Some animal had a rough early morning.*

Before I start studying the tracks, my phone sounds. More than likely, it's Greg because Jen's either on her way or already working. Phone sounds again. I check my messages. Yup, Greg is first. I jump over Greg's message to Jen's text.

Good morning, my love. Dreamed of us. Hope you slept well. I'm just getting to work. Text me when you can.

I reply immediately.

Morning, my amazing wife. Broken sleep. Will tell you about it later. Love ya.

I receive a heart emoji, which makes me smile.

I want to ignore Greg's text and get into these tracks, but... I open it.

Morning, Hermano. Marines pushed in hard during the night to their advantage. NVGs. They and the federalized National Guard from several other states made tons of arrests, but their actions had a negative outcome. All the protests are now full-blown riots. I've enclosed snapshots taken from a video source. The real operation was retrieving the ICE agents' bodies. They were successful. Come visit me if you can make it. Bret, everything is pointing to a real collapse, as we hypothesized. Be ready. Signing off for now. Tribe and family.

My curiosity about the pics outweighs the curiosity about the tracks.

The images show coordinated, military-style movement among the rioters. Faces uncovered in some stills—caught mid-scuffle. The instigators look like militant Islamists and Chinese military-aged males. Likely the same group that spread terror from the southern border into Southern California, claiming they were immigrants. Using our own policies against us.

Their strategy is clear: Push the division in this country to the breaking point.

And Jen's in California.

Lord, give me the serenity...

A couple more beats before getting back to the tracks.

I'm drawn into the ridges and valleys of each track. Coyote, not a domestic dog. Large. Deer. Again large. Tufts of fur on the ground and some stuck to the metal fencing.

My ears pick up the sound first. Robert's walking my way.

I come to a kneeling position to greet him. "Good morning, Bret. Checking your gardening?" he says, looking down at me over his glasses, only half seeing what I'm doing.

"Morning, Robert. How're you and Susan doing?"

"Ah, it's going alright. That damn grass in front of our house. I've been trying to get it to green up, and no matter what I do... ah, well." He throws his hands in the air. "Grass guy told me it'll green up soon. I don't. Oh geez," he says, taking a step back. He finally notices the caved-in fence and torn-up ground. "Is that blood?" He squints, pointing to the rust-colored grass.

"Yes, it is." I sigh.

"What happened?" he says, bending forward, inspecting the scene.

"The ground's telling me that a large coyote took out a deer." I pause and shift my eyes to him. "I'll bet you anything, it was that big black one that's been spotted in the neighborhood."

"How can you be so sure?" Looking down at me.

"Coyote tracks are more oval, and toes are more compact. Their nail marks are sharper and more distinct. They travel in single files, often registering, while dogs walk in a wandering pattern."

"Uh, registering?" Robert asks, looking for clarification.

"Fancy word for describing the way they walk. Single file, stepping in the track in front of them, to save energy, especially if it's bad weather like lots of snow."

“Um, okay, and how do you know this?” Curiosity makes him ask.

“Books, taking classes, putting in dirt time—it’s fascinating to understand what something is doing by looking at their tracks.”

“Dirt time?”

“Oh, practice time.”

“What’s, uh, the bag on your chest?” he asks, tapping his.

“I reckon some would call it a man purse. It keeps my hands free. You can take a look,” I say, exposing its contents. “Got enough Parkinson’s meds for two days, pain medication, battery block, multitool, wallet. To name a few items. Then, back in here, a pistol with extra mags.”

“Geez, you always carry?”

“Yes. I’d rather have than have not. Do you have a fire extinguisher in your kitchen?”

“Good point,” he admits.

“It’s even more relevant now, with California increasing its threat of secession and the riots getting ugly.”

“That’s California, Bret; it won’t matter in a week. They have protests about something every day. And don’t get me started on those Mexicans.”

“You mean the Latinos? They’re not all bad, and I don’t like people coming into our country illegally either. What does concern me is whether they’re someone’s work mule. They work long hours, get paid next to nothing, so they can pay off the coyotes that brought them here.” Robert has his mouth open to retort, but I cut him short, “And speaking of coyotes...” My gaze follows the obvious drag marks up the knoll into the field. I happen to look up and see a circle of buzzards.

“Well, Bret, be careful, I’ll see ya,” he says, returning to his garage.

“Yeah, I will. And, Robert, there is a storm coming.”

He slows and nods his head out of being polite but not out of understanding.

I like Robert. He’s not a bad guy, not even close. Ninety-nine percent of the U.S. population can’t tell the difference between a domestic dog track and a wild coyote’s. They don’t see the difference until the coyotes start attacking. Then, knowing the difference is too late.

The deer was dragged just as I had guessed, and the buzzards are marking its last resting spot. From this distance, the high tan and brown grasses conceal the remains but not the large birds picking at scraps. They take flight as I approach, and what I see is a mess. The coyotes feasted on the deer and left the rest for the scavengers.

The natural way of things—*I hope we aren’t the deer in the coming chaos*, I think, while walking back to the house.

End Day 05.

Day 06

05/29/24

Morning rolls in heavy. Not tired heavy. Pressure heavy, like the southern humidity. It's just waiting outside to pounce.

I'm up before the alarm again. No dreams this time. Just... awake. Mind squirming, trying to grasp a hold of something... elusive.

"Alright," I mutter, "let's move." The boys have been waiting and watching me. They feel it, too. Animals always do.

Routine stays the same. Hasn't changed. I'm trying to settle something that doesn't want to be settled, and Tai Chi isn't working. Well, it's not the form. It's me. Too much on my mind.

I turn the TV on. Volume low. Just enough to hear. Not enough to let it take over. "...overnight clashes between Federal forces and demonstrators have intensified..." Clashes. That's a polite word for it. Footage rolls. Smoke and fire. Crowds surging, throwing what they laid their hands on. Lines of Marines moving in formation. Different from the police. Cleaner. Faster. More deliberate. They're not there to manage. They're there to end it.

Phone buzzes. It's Greg.

Hermano. Those 'mostly peaceful' rioters pushed back, and the Federal forces were split. Some are hiding, some are cornered, and some are dead, being paraded in the streets.

Sounds a lot like Mogadishu. I send it without thinking. I'm texting an apology while he's replying, but I don't get it sent in time.

It is, and it isn't. It's a multicultural large city in one of our largest states in America. He says it matter-of-factly. Then, **No need to apologize Hermano. You can bring up the Mog. I can pull my big boy pants up all by myself now.** He texts along with the smiley crazy face emoji.

Fair enough. I type: **Is L.A. lost?**

Several beats go by and nothing. It's so long that I'm sliding my phone inside my chest bag when it grabs my attention again.

Yes.

Riots are spreading. Not shrinking. Warn Jen and be ready.

I stare at his text blankly. *Figures.* Then I type back.

You do know why we call her "Stands with a Fist." Right?

I get the crying laughing emoji. **Sorry, funny at your cost. Buena suerte.**

Yeah, thanks. Knowing luck is what I need.

Back to the screen. Governor Olsen. He looks tired. But not afraid. That's the problem. Standing at the podium, all eyes on him gives him a false sense of invincibility... because of the high he's riding.

“...the Federal government's actions have directly contributed to the violence we are seeing across our state...”

Deflect. Redirect. Blame. Right out of the old political playbook.

“...California will not tolerate Federal overreach into our sovereign responsibilities...” he continues, drunk on the moment and what it means for history. Good or bad, he's just solidified his place in the timeline.

He just said it aloud. *Sovereign*. The ability to govern thyself. I lean forward. Volume up.

“...if Federal forces are not withdrawn within 24 hours—by 0800—we will be forced to take further action to protect the people of California...”

Forced. Like he doesn't have a choice. “...including separation from Federal authority.”

There it is. Clear. Clean. No walking that back. Crossed the line.

The boys shift. Low growl from Ash. “Yeah,” I say quietly. “You hear it, too.”

Olsen keeps talking. Sanctuary policies. State rights. Protection. All the right words. All the wrong timing. He thinks he's in control. He's not.

After all the scripted Q & As are finished, one of the reporters stops his rushed exit. "Mr. Governor. What will be the fates of the embattled Federal troops in L.A.? Some are trapped, others on the run, and the number of the dead is rising."

Trying not to look annoyed by her question, "Naomi, if the Federal government complies with our... um, deadline, we'll do everything in our power to recover them and return them to their families. We're not unsympathetic. Thank you, thank you."

Naomi Watts tries one last question, asking the hard one, "What about the photos of many rioters that appear to be Chinese military males and militant Islamists?" The room goes silent for a beat.

He pauses—barely—then rushes out, leaving the question hanging.

Phone buzzes again.

Jen.

Hey babe. Things are a little tense here, but nothing crazy where I'm at. Don't worry. How are you?

I exhale. She's still in the calm zone. Good. For now. I type. Stop. Delete. Type again.

I'm good. Just watching everything unravel. You might want to keep an eye on the news today. Things are shifting.

Three dots. Then—

I will. Promise. Love you.

I stare at her reply a second longer, realizing she doesn't quite get the predicament she and many others are in.

I wish you would look into an earlier flight. Love you too.

I couldn't not say anything. Phone rings. Jen. "Hey."

"Hi, do you really think I need to leave earlier? Because where I'm standing, it's pretty chill here. They continue to reinforce the promised ability to leave. There's no time limit on that." She quickly rambles through it all. Like she had to get it out before I could say anything.

"Jen. The governor of the state you're in just threatened to secede from the union. That is normally a bad thing, and bad things usually follow that type of announcement."

"Babe. Okay, I'll look into an earlier flight before bed tonight. I'll let you know what I find."

"Alright. That's all I can ask for, and thanks."

"Only for you. Well, I have things to do and flights to look at. Love ya."

"I know." I smile at the phone. She chuckles. Click.

Back outside to the garage. I need some movement. So, another gear check. Not because I forgot anything. Because repetition builds certainty.

Mags. Full. Fuel. Good.

Ruck cinched tight. Ready.

Truck gun. Secured.

I step out into the yard. Scan the ridge. Nothing on a visual. But that doesn't mean empty. Secure the garage side door. My back toward the yard, something's running my way. Turning toward the possible threat. Hand reaching for my pistol. I stop before drawing. It's just 'Bella,' a Belgian Malinois that lives two houses down. She's around six months and is left to run and fend for herself. Beautiful, soft coat and friendly as hell. My dogs lose their minds when she's around. She's happy to see me, and I give her attention until the wind shifts. She notices the change, too. It carries a sound. Distant. Hard to place. Could be traffic. Could be something else. The world feels... thinner. Like the layer between normal and not is wearing out.

I catch myself standing still too long. "I gotta go, Bella. Bye," I say, giving her one last pet. "You should head home. Those coyotes keep venturing closer and closer. I wouldn't want them getting you." She just watches me go to our back door, then runs off.

Back inside. The TV again. Split screen now. Multiple cities. Not just California anymore.

Texas. Arizona. Florida. It's spreading quickly. This isn't containment. This is ignition.

On the TV, analysts are talking. Trying to keep it together. "...there are growing concerns that what we're seeing may be coordinated rather than spontaneous..."

No kidding. Where'd they get these analysts?

"...Federal response capacity may become strained if multiple regions continue to destabilize simultaneously..."

May? I shake my head. Too late for "may."

Afternoon drags. Not slow. Heavy. Every hour feels like it matters.

No new messages from Greg.

That's not comforting.

Fixing myself an egg, plus a turkey sausage burrito for an afternoon late lunch, my phone sounds off.

New text message. I wait until I settle everything at the dining room table.

The boys are under my feet, hoping for a handout or at least something falling to the floor.

Opening the text, it's an old airsoft buddy from Wisconsin. Ben Schulz. Callsign 'Knox'. He's a few years younger than me

but still plays airsoft with his fifteen-man team. His teenage son, Declan, plays, too. Definite father-son bonding time.

Good Morning, Brother. It's about that time again to check in. Especially with this California thing blowing a gasket.

A while ago, we decided to keep in touch at least every month. Make sure we're both good. He's also married.

Hey, Ben, glad you reached out. My phone is quite active as of late and yes it's about what happening out west. Sent.

As you know, we have ex and active duty military members on our team as well as police. Our intel in L.A. is lost and watch the border. His text reads.

Yessir, same. We believe it's coming. Are you guys good to go? The Mrs. and family? I type.

Yessir. We are. I was hoping to get you and your family back up here for another session of live fire drills and range time. It looks to me, brother, that we'll be doing the real thing.

I think so too. You watch your six and keep Wisconsin safe.

LOL Sure thing Bret. And you too. If... you know what may happen happens, it's been good knowing you and proud to call you brother.

Same brother, same. Send.

I gotta go, Bret. Godspeed.

God bless.

Wow. I'm glad that happened. He beat me to the punch and texted me first. He's got a great group of guys, real steel or airsoft. Either way, they're capable.

Jen sends one more text around evening.

Heading to bed early. Long day. Have time to say good night?

I read it twice. *What about the flight?*

Yeah. Of course.

“Hi, I like hearing your voice, especially when I go to bed,” she says, yawning. “Flights, I was able to get an earlier flight.”

Excited. “Great! What day?” I ask, smiling broadly.

“It’s still Friday, but instead of the afternoon, it’s a morning flight. Best I could do, babe.”

I’m quiet far longer than I should be, I suppose.

“Bret? You there?” Sounding worried.

“Yeah, I’m here. It’s just... disappointing, is all. I’m okay. You tried. What can we do?” I ask.

“Yeah, well. I’m beat, and I’m glad I got to hear your voice,” she says with a smile. I can hear it in her words.

“I’m glad, too. Good night.”

“Good night, babe. Sleep well,” she says quietly.

“You, too.” Click.

Night settles in. Quiet. The boys are restless again. Not barking. Just... alert. I sit on the edge of the bed. Pistol in hand. Not aimed. Not needed. Just there. “Twenty-four hours,” I say. That’s what he gave them in California. That’s what he gave everyone. But it’s not a warning. It’s a countdown.

Lights off. Dark room. Eyes open. Waiting.

End Day 06.

Day 07

05/30/24

I wake up before the alarm. Again. But this time it's different. There's no grogginess. No hesitation. No lingering in that half-asleep state. I'm just... on. Eyes open. Mind clear. Like something already happened—and I'm late to it. I reach for the phone before I even sit up. Screen lights my face in the dark. Notifications several deep. News alerts. Missed updates.

My stomach tightens. Yeah. Something happened.

I swing my legs off the bed, grab the pistol without thinking, and stand. The boys are already up. No barking. No excitement. Just watching.

"Alright," I say quietly, "let's see it." Living room to turn the TV on. Volume up. Every channel. Same thing.

Governor Olsen. Live.

He looks different today. Not tired. Not defensive. Resolved. "...as of 0800 this morning, the State of California is formally exercising its right to self-governance..."

There it is.

"...and will no longer recognize Federal authority within state borders."

Clean. Direct. No hesitation. Secession. It's real. The room feels smaller. I don't move. Don't blink. Just listen.

"...this decision was not made lightly, but in response to continued Federal aggression against the people of California..."

He believes it. That's the problem.

"...we are committed to ensuring stability, safety, and continuity for all residents and visitors within our state..."

Visitors. My jaw tightens. *Jen.*

"...to those currently in California, who are not residents, we are implementing safe travel corridors to allow for orderly departure..."

There's the promise.

"...you'll be protected."

I let out a slow breath. No, you won't. And it's her husband's job to protect her, not some confused state governor.

The phone buzzes.

Jen.

Hey... I'm sure you're watching. It's a little crazy, but they're saying we're fine here. They're letting people leave. Flights still look good.

I stare at it. She believes it. Of course she does. Because right now, it looks believable.

Please, don't be upset; they did ensure safe passage for non-residents just like you hoped in this type of scenario.

I type. Stop. Delete. What do you even say?

Be careful. Stay aware. Don't assume anything.

Not enough. Never enough. Three dots.

I will. Promise. I've got a couple more days, and I'm out of here. Try not to worry, okay?

I close my eyes. Just for a second. Couple more days. "Yeah..." I mutter. "Let's hope you've got that." I don't respond. Not right away. *Because anything I say past this point is going to sound like fear.* And she doesn't need that. Not yet.

Greg cuts in, right on time.

Hermano. It's official. CA just broke. This is the trigger. Watch what happens next.

I type back.

Watching.

And I am. Every channel. Every feed. Every angle.

Markets reacting. Politicians are scrambling. States making statements. Some condemning.

Some... not.

That's new. There's hesitation. Fracture. Lines forming. This isn't just California. This is a blueprint. I mute the TV. Silence hits hard.

My reflection stares back at me from the black screen. "You knew it was coming," I say quietly. *But knowing—and seeing—aren't the same thing.*

The boys shift behind me. Ash lets out a low, uneasy huff.

"Yeah," I say. "I don't like it either." I move, finally.

Garage. Lift gate is open. Everything's still there exactly where I left it.

Rifle. Mags. Fuel. Bag. Ready. I run a hand along the edge of the case. Not yet. That's the hardest part. Being ready—and not getting the go code. I close it up and go back inside.

TV's still on. Volume low again. Different angle now. Federal response.

“...the administration has not yet issued a formal statement regarding California’s declaration...”

Of course not. Too big. Too fast. They’re behind. Or they’re choosing not to be in front. Neither is good.

Afternoon drifts. The atmosphere continues to feel heavy. Though nothing explodes. Nothing collapses. That’s what makes it worse. It holds. Like a breath no one’s released yet.

Awaiting the dominoes to fall.

Jen sends a picture.

Hospital room. Kids smiling. She’s smiling, too. Like it’s just another day, I stare at it longer than I should. Two realities. Same time. She’s in one. I’m in the other.

I type: **Proud of you.**

Send. Because it’s true. Even if I hate where she is right now.

Evening comes.

And so does intel from Greg. It’s short.

Movement in the Pacific. Fleet holding position.

Too clean.

Yeah. I know what that means. They're not reacting. They're waiting. Just like me. Night settles in. The house is graveyard quiet.

I sit on the edge of the bed. Same as last night. Pistol in hand. Not raised. Just there. "Alright," I say under my breath, "it's real now." No more "if." No more "maybe." Just timing.

I look toward the door. Then back at the phone. Then down at the floor where the boys are curled up.

"They said you're protected," I murmur.

A beat.

"We'll see." Lights off. Eyes open. Waiting—but different now. Because the line's been crossed by one, and there's no going back. For anyone.

End Day 07.

Day 08

05/31/24

I slept, which is surprising. Not good sleep. Not deep. But enough that when I open my eyes, it takes me a second to remember why everything feels... off. Then it hits. California. I sit up slow. No rush. No panic. That's new. Yesterday, I burned through that. What's left now is something quieter.

Acceptance.

“Okay,” I say under my breath, “let’s see what today looks like.” The boys stretch out, one at a time. No tension in them this morning. That catches my attention. Yesterday, they felt it. Today? Calm. That’s not better. That’s a shift.

TV on. Coffee going. Routine stays intact. Every channel’s still on it. But the tone’s different. Less urgency. More... explanation.

“...markets are stabilizing this morning after yesterday’s announcement...”

Stabilizing. That can’t be right. Our country is imploding.

“...California officials continue to reassure both residents and visitors that infrastructure and services remain uninterrupted...”

Of course they are. They have to sell it, or they lose the leverage and momentum. More importantly, the public's trust.

Footage rolls. Traffic moving. People walking. Shops open. Normal. Too normal.

Split screen with interviews. "Honestly, it hasn't affected my day-to-day at all," one guy says, shrugging into the camera. "Feels like politics as usual." Another— "I think it's a good thing. California is leading the way. We always did. It feels good to break away from the red states. We'll see how fast they want us back. Hollywood, the almonds. You'll see. Mark my words."

I lean back. Just another step in the process. Normalization. People don't react to slow change. They adapt to it. That's how you miss the moment it matters.

Phone buzzes. Jen.

Morning! Everything's still good here. The hospital's running normal. Flight's still on schedule. Told you :)

I stare at the smiley face. She's relaxed. That means where she is, she still feels safe. I type:

Glad to hear it. Stay sharp anyway. For me.

Send. I don't send any pushback. No warning. Not yet. What she said sparks something visceral in my gut. You know you're in

trouble when your government repeatedly tells you everything is okay.

Greg texts a few minutes later.

Too quiet.

I smirk. **Yeah.**

That's all either of us needs.

Outside. Air's different today. Hard to explain. Still. Even the wind feels like it's holding back. I walk the property line. Not looking for anything specific. Just... looking. Tracks from the other day are still here. Coyote. Deer. Predator. Prey. Nothing disturbed them. No rain. No traffic. Just... preserved. Like a snapshot. I crouch down, running a finger along the edge of one of the impressions. "That's the moment," I mutter. Right there. Before everything ended for one of them. I stand. Scan the ridge. Nothing moves. But I know better now. Just because you don't see it, doesn't mean it's not there.

Back inside the garage. I'm looking over gear again. Not checking. Refining. What do I actually need? What's excess? What slows me down? Things that make holes and plug holes are non-negotiable. The battery pack gets topped off, so does the handheld radio. Medical moves to the outer pouch. IFAK on my

belt, along with a separate booboo kit. Large main med kit in my ruck. Extra tourniquet in my chest rig dangler. Everything has a reason now. No more “just in case.” If it’s there, it earns its place.

In the house, the TV is in the background again. Different voices. Same message.

“...Federal response remains measured...”

“...no escalation at this time...”

“...dialogue is ongoing...”

Dialogue. I shake my head. They think this is still a negotiation. It’s not. It’s positioning.

Afternoon rolls in. Nothing breaks. No major violence. No collapse. Just... steady. Phone stays quiet, too. Even Greg drops off. That’s when it really settles in. Everyone’s waiting. Even the people who don’t realize they are.

The news channels and the internet are lit up with photos and videos of celebrations in Southern California. The rioters are setting up their own tent cities and checkpoints. Some are featured on some social media channel telling the reporter, “We’re out here providing order for our own. And if you’re a non-Californian, you’re going to have a bad day. Doesn’t matter what Olsen says. We’re in charge.”

Wunderbar!

Jen sends a picture mid-afternoon. Coffee cup. Break room. Another nurse in the background laughing.

Caption: **See? Normal :)**

I stare at it. Then at the TV. Two worlds. Same time. Only one of them is real.

And it's not hers.

Evening. Sun dropping behind the ridge. The light hits different. Long shadows. Everything stretched out. I sit on the back step with the boys. They're relaxed. Content. Like nothing's wrong. I scratch behind Ash's ears. "You'd tell me if something was coming, wouldn't you?" He just leans into it. Fair enough.

Inside. Final check. Doors locked. Gear staged. Phone charged. Same as every night now. But it doesn't feel like preparation anymore. It feels like... Waiting for confirmation. TV goes quiet. Muted. I don't need it anymore. I already know. Whatever's coming—it's not going to announce itself. It's just going to be there. Lights off. Bed. Pistol within reach. Eyes open in the dark. Not restless. Not anxious. Just... ready. Because today proved something. The world doesn't end loud. It ends quiet. And most people won't even notice—until it's already over.

End Day 08.

Day 09

06/01/24

0600 hours.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and my hand finds it before my eyes are fully open. I'm already half awake. Seems like that's becoming the new normal.

Jen.

I don't realize I'm smiling until I open the message.

Good morning, my love. Up early. Dreamed of you again. Wish I were home. Be safe today.

I stare at it a second longer than I need to, letting it do what her voice usually does. Settle me. Remind me there's still something good in this world besides smoke, noise, and politicians pretending they're not the ones lighting matches.

Wish you were here too. Be careful out there. Love you.

The three dots appear, disappear, then appear again.

Then a heart.

That'll have to do.

I sit up slowly and work through the stiffness, letting my body remember how to be useful. Another day. Another round of trying to stay ahead of whatever this is becoming.

Practice first.

Battle belt on. Threaded. Locked. Set. Mid-rise thigh strap secured. Chest rig over my head and settled into place. Glock

press-checked and seated in the holster with that little click that sounds a lot more comforting these days than it probably should. The HK416 rests on top of my dresser. I take it up, check it, and let the sling fall across my chest.

I glance at the clock.

Start time.

Moving through the house with a rifle inside your own walls feels ridiculous until it doesn't. First room slow and deliberate. Corners. Angles. Breathing steady. Second room. Third. Hallway. Kitchen. Living room. Skye watches me at first, head cocked, then decides he's part of the operation and follows room to room like he's supervising. Ash stays back, probably judging both of us.

Last room clear.

Back to center.

Scan again.

Habit.

I check the clock. Faster than yesterday. Cleaner, too. Not perfect, but getting there.

Phone buzzes.

The rifle hangs from the sling while I fish the phone out of the kangaroo pouch.

Greg.

Mano, you said something weird happened concerning a cryptic text message early this morning?

I stare at that for a second then type back.

0240. Phone call then text. Or text then call. Felt like one triggered the other.

His reply is almost immediate.

Send it.

I scroll back and copy the string.

Sevens. Too many of them. Broken up by commas. It looks like nonsense, which usually means either it is, or I'm not meant to understand it.

I send it.

A beat passes.

I know people. I'm on it. Later.

Yeah.

That tracks.

Phone away. Rifle up.

Round one again.

By the fourth run, sweat's building under the chest rig. Movement still controlled, still deliberate, but my body's starting to argue with me. Parkinson's doesn't care that the world might be ending. Fatigue still collects its toll. I ignore it for now.

Phone buzzes again.

Unknown number.

I almost let it go, but something in me doesn't.

"... Yeah."

A pause.

“...Bret.”

I freeze.

“...Matty?”

“Yeah.”

Everything in me settles a notch at the sound of his voice.
“Damn. Good to hear from you.”

“Likewise.”

That’s Matthias. No wasted words. Never needed them.

“You good?” he asks.

“Yeah. I’m upright.”

“Good enough.”

Silence sits between us, but it isn’t empty. It’s familiar. Old family quiet. The kind that carries years of things not said and somehow still understood.

“You’re carrying now,” he says.

A statement, not a question, “Yeah.”

“Everywhere?”

“...Yeah.” I roll my eyes like a younger brother.

“Good.”

His tone shifts just enough that I straighten without meaning to.

“Things aren’t lining up right.”

I lean against the counter and look out toward the ridge.

“What are you seeing?”

“Movement. Coordinated. Not random.”

My jaw tightens. “Foreign?”

“Feels like it.”

“Greg’s seeing the same.”

“Then listen to him.”

“I am.”

“You sleeping?”

I huff a breath. “Not really.”

“Fix that.”

“Working on it.”

“Do more than that.”

Of course.

I almost smile because that’s him, too. No sympathy. Just orders wrapped in concern.

“You’re thinking about going west,” he says.

Not a question.

“... Yeah.”

“Then don’t hesitate when it’s time.”

That one sticks.

He lets the silence work for a second before continuing.

“You remember what I told you back in PA?”

“Don’t rush into stupid.”

“Right. But don’t freeze outside the door either.”

I nod even though he can’t see it. “I hear you.”

“I’m here if I can be,” he says, voice quieter now. “And if I’m not...”

He doesn’t finish.

Doesn’t have to.

“... I know.”

Another pause.

“Proud of you, kid.”

That lands harder than expected.

“Thanks, Matty.”

“Stay sharp.”

The call ends.

I lower the phone and stand there for a few seconds, rifle still hanging from me, sweat cooling under my shirt.

The house feels steadier somehow.

Not safer.

Just steadier.

The boys get fed after that. Ash devours his like every meal might be his last, and Skye watches me halfway through like he's making sure I'm still functioning before he decides to finish. Normal. Almost.

Phone buzzes again.

I check the screen.

Davis. It's been, what, almost ten years.

I answer more slowly this time.

"...Davis."

"...Bret."

This silence is different. Heavier. Not the comfortable quiet Matthias carries. This one has weight and old distance in it.

"I know we haven't been close," he says.

"Yeah."

"That's on both of us."

A beat.

"What's coming isn't going to be pretty."

My grip tightens around the phone.

"And it's not like those airsoft games."

"Davis—"

"Let me finish."

Firm. Not angry. Just Davis.

“I know you’ve got what it takes,” he says. “You wouldn’t still be here if you didn’t. You’re a Gordon.”

I stare toward the hallway, not really seeing it.

“Yeah.”

“You know what that means.”

“I do.”

“You make it through this.”

Not advice. Not encouragement. An order.

“Watch your six. Don’t hesitate.”

Then his voice drops just enough to make my stomach tighten.

“I’ll be going dark.”

“Davis...”

Another pause. Longer this time.

“...I love ya, little brother.”

Click.

“Davis?”

Nothing.

I keep the phone against my ear like that might somehow bring him back.

It doesn’t.

That one felt different.

The afternoon drifts by in pieces after that. Training. Cleaning. Rechecking gear. Letting the dogs out. Letting them in. Listening to the news without trusting a word. Watching the country split itself into camps, while the talking heads act like it’s some fascinating political experiment instead of a slow-motion execution of the Republic.

Phone buzzes again.

Ross.

I answer.

“...Ross.”

“...Bret.”

Slow. Steady. That old tone makes you listen whether you want to or not.

“Storm’s here.”

Not coming.

Here.

I sit down.

“...Yeah.”

“I feel it.”

“Good,” he says. “Means you’re paying attention.”

A pause.

“You remember what Dad used to say?”

“Stand your ground.”

A low hum of approval comes through the speaker.

“Family first.”

“Always.”

Silence again, but calmer than Davis. Ross has a way of making even bad news sound like something you can still shoulder if you stand right.

“You keep your head,” he says. “Don’t get pulled into the noise.”

“I won’t.”

“Good.”

Another pause.

“Proud of you, son.”

That word hits different coming from him.

“...Thanks, Ross.”

“God’s watching.”

“Always.”

Click.

I sit there afterward with the phone in my hand, feeling like the past reached out and touched me three different ways. Matthias with the practical warning. Davis with the goodbye that wasn’t quite a goodbye. Ross with the old family gravity.

Different voices.

Same message.

The storm’s here.

Evening settles in quietly.

With so many people reaching out to me, I start feeling like a heel of a father, so I finally call Ryan at Fort Bliss.

I dial, expecting to hear his voice, hoping for it more than I want to admit. Voicemail. I call again. Voicemail. The last time, I leave one. “Hey, Rye. Country’s trying its best to eat itself, and I wanted to know you’re alright. Call me. Any time. I mean it. Love ya, son.” I hang up and stare at the phone for a bit. Nothing.

The dogs are down for the night by 2130, same as always. They’ll come out once or twice, look at me like, “It’s bedtime, genius,” then walk back like they’ve done their duty. The house is dim. No reason to light it up for two dogs and me.

Phone buzzes late.

Greg. I answer immediately. “Talk to me.”

“You’re not gonna like this, Hermano.”

My stomach tightens. “Try me.”

“That code you sent?” A pause. “It’s not random.”

I lean forward. “What is it?”

“Activation sequence.”

Everything in me stills.

“Pattern of sevens ties to lunar cycle markers. Commas break it into phases. Timing windows.”

“Timing for what?”

His silence answers before he does. “Coordinated actions.”

My grip tightens on the phone.

“Multiple cells. Different locations. Same clock.”

“When?”

“Soon.” Another pause. “Very soon.”

Silence stretches between us.

“That’s why it felt wrong,” I say.

“Yeah. Because it wasn’t meant for you.”

“Then why did I get it?”

“Don’t know yet for sure. Could be as simple as one digit off. Signal got bumped at the tower. Could be a number of things.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel better.”

“Wasn’t trying to.” He blows out a breath. “I’m digging. I’ll call when I have more.”

“Greg...”

“Yeah?”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” This pause is different.

“...It’s already in motion.”

Click.

I lower the phone slowly and look around the house. The dogs. The furniture. The shadows in the hallway. Everything normal. Everything quiet.

But underneath it, something's moving.

My family. Friends. All connected.

All different voices. Same warning. This isn't random. It's coordinated.

And it's already started.

End Day 09.

Day 10

06/02/24

Going to sleep was the easy part. Staying asleep was the problem. I wake up every couple of hours, sometimes from dreams, sometimes from nothing at all. Just eyes open in the dark with Greg's words rattling around in my head. Activation sequence. Multiple cells. Same clock.

No bueno.

By morning, sitting on the edge of the bed felt like part of the routine now. Feet on the floor. Dogs shifting around. Me trying to convince my body it had a reason to move.

Only four days left.

Jen is still on track to fly home on the sixth, and I've held onto that harder than I probably should. With Governor Olsen's record of lying to his own people, trusting anything coming out of California felt stupid, but letting my mind run wild isn't going to help either.

One problem at a time, Bret.

The boys shoot through the doggy door to handle their business, Skye first, like always, chest out and head up as if the whole world is his responsibility. Ash follows close behind, less dramatic but just as aware.

Skye's the watchdog between the two of them. Alpha, too, whether Ash agrees or not. He checks the yard before he fully commits to anything, nose high, ears moving, looking for trouble he can't name.

Smart dog.

I move into the morning ritual because that's what I have. Routine. Movement. Breath. Don't let the mind eat itself before breakfast.

I eat around noon, then sit alone procrastinating before calling Lexi. West Virginia. My daughter. My kiddo.

The line rings twice.

“Hi!

“How are you, kiddo?”

There is a pause, and I could hear her deciding which version of herself to give me.

“Eh. It is what it is.”

Of course, she would pick that one. Trying to sound strong. Trying to sound like she hasn't been watching the same world tear itself in half as the rest of us.

“Kiddo, it's me. You don't need to put up a front.”

She goes quiet just long enough for the mask to slip.

“I'm scared, Dad. I'm—I don't know... Jennie, everything...”

I close my eyes. “Yeah.”

“I'm scared for Jennie. She's so young, she doesn't have a clue what's coming, and it just keeps getting worse. Darker.” Her voice tightens. “If the Feds had just left those undocumented immigrants alone, maybe we wouldn't be here.”

I let out a slow breath through my nose, not angry at her, just tired of the lie working the way it was designed to work.

“Kiddo, listen to me. Those aren’t just immigrants. Not all of them. Some of the ones leading this mess are Chinese insurgents and militant Islamists using the crowd as cover.”

“Dad... really?”

“This isn’t political BS. I’ve seen the stills. Greg has sources I’d trust with my life and yours. This isn’t random. It is a psyop. Push the right buttons. Use our own arguments against us, divide us even more, and then...”

She finished softly, “...here we are.”

“...here we are. One state secedes, and others are threatening.”

“Are you sure about the pics?”

“As sure as I can be without standing there myself.” That lands. I hear my daughter exhale.

“Well, Mark and I talked,” she says. “Because of how our house is situated, below everyone’s radar, we’ve decided to stay put as long as we can.”

Her voice betrays her at the end. She wants me to bless the decision, but she also wants me to tell her the truth.

“You’re doing the right thing. If you’re safe, sheltering in place is smarter than bugging out. For a lot of reasons. Pantry decent?”

“Yeah. We started late, but we have vegetable gardens. We didn’t really... I don’t know. We didn’t give your warning weight until, ya know, the world started catching up to what you saw.”

“I just read the signs.”

“Yeah, well, you read them and we, we didn’t believe you.” Her voice cracks a little. “We’re... I’m sorry.”

“Kiddo, we’re good. It’s hard to believe something that big when your own eyes aren’t seeing it yet. That’s normal.” I lean back in the chair, trying to soften the moment before it breaks both of us. “Where’s Peanut?”

“She’s down for a nap. You could talk to her if she wakes up.”

“That’s alright. Let her sleep. You might want to grab some rest, too, while you can.”

“Yeah.” Another pause. “I don’t want to hang up, though.”

I gave a small laugh. “Just like your mother.”

“Yeah,” she admits quietly.

“Speaking of which, are you talking to her much?”

“Oh, yeah. About every day. She’s worried, too.”

“She should be. We’re scattered all over the place.” That opens the door neither of us wants to walk through.

“We don’t even know where John Luke is,” Lexi says. “And Ryan... I’m afraid to ask because you didn’t volunteer anything.”

I stare toward the window. “He’s at Fort Bliss.”

“Oh, wonderful,” she says, the sarcasm snapping out before the fear can.

“Yeah. That about covers it.”

“What about John Luke?”

“Last I knew, Army. That’s all I’ve got.”

She doesn’t answer right away. Nothing about that sits well. Not with her. Not with me.

“Listen,” I say, shifting forward. “If this goes south, I’m texting you Greg McDonnel’s address. Southwest Kentucky. You get there if you can’t stay where you are.”

“Where are you going to be?”

The question comes quieter than the rest. “Going west to get your mother.”

“Seriously?”

“Dead serious.”

“Dad...”

“I know.”

“Please, be careful.”

“I will.”

“You always say that.”

“And I’m saying it again.”

She lets out a breath that is almost a laugh.

“I love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too, kiddo.” I hang up first so she doesn’t have to.

For a minute, I just sit there with the phone in my hand, feeling the distance between everyone I love. Jen in California. Ryan at Bliss. Lexi in West Virginia. John Luke somewhere out there in the dark, assuming he is even where I think he is. My brothers all scattered. Greg plugged into whatever network he had buried beneath the surface.

Family first.

Easy words until the map stretches everyone beyond reach.

The rest of the day became chores because they don’t ask questions. Garden checked. Rain barrels inspected. Plywood counted and staged. If I had to leave for Jen, the house needs to look like someone at least gives a damn before walking away from it.

Tomorrow, I’ll start covering windows. Not because plywood stops determined people. Because it slows casual ones. And, sometimes, that’s enough.

That night, the news tries to sell national dismemberment like a business opportunity. Two talking heads smile from a split screen like they are discussing vacation property.

“Glenda,” the host says, “with West Coast states and East Coast states discussing their own regional coalitions, what positive outcomes could come from this type of political realignment?”

Political realignment? I snort before she even answers.

“Well, Jer, trade competition could benefit everyone. California, for example, could leverage access to its agricultural exports—nuts, fruits, wine—and negotiate from a position of strength as a state, pardon me, as a country.”

I mute it.

“Lady, Florida grows fruit, too,” I say to the room.

The boys don’t care. Ash lifts his head, decides I’m talking to him, and puts it back down.

Per Greg and his back-channel grapevine, the public isn’t even getting the full picture yet. Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Illinois have already signed some kind of treaty agreement calling themselves the North American Socialist Territories.

NAST.

Because apparently, stupid names are free when countries start breaking apart.

Curiosity gets me, so I unmute the TV.

Glenda was still going.

“...and perhaps this allows North America to serve differing political identities better. People can live among like-minded citizens and feel represented rather than forced into constant conflict.”

I mute her again.

“No, lady. The citizens didn’t vote for this.”

That is the part no one wants to say. Politicians are carving up the country as if it belongs to them, like the rest of us are furniture to be moved into the correct ideological room. We, the average citizens, the ones with mortgages, children, dogs, jobs, gardens, bad knees, sick parents, and people we love in the wrong damn places, are going to pay for their pissing match.

“That’s not how it’s supposed to work,” I mutter.

The room goes quiet again. I check my phone one more time. Nothing from Jen. Nothing from Greg. Nothing from Ryan. I set it down, then pick it back up because apparently that is who I am now.

Four days.

Just get her home.

End Day 10.

Day 11

06/03/24

The boys ensure I don't get much sleep.

Coyotes run the ridge most of the night, and every time they open up, Ash and Skye answer like it's their job. It's hard to stay asleep when your own dogs are announcing to the world that something's out there. By morning, I am running on fumes, already knowing I'll need a nap later, just to stay sharp.

Still, the ritual doesn't care how you feel.

We move through it. Feed, water, movement, breath. By the time I realize it, we are already past the worst of the morning and into something resembling normal.

I'm in the middle of working the boys—treats, commands, reinforcing what they already know—when my phone buzzes.

Jen.

I answer before the second ring.

“Hello.”

“I forgot to turn my ringer on,” she says quickly, a little breathless. “Babe, what's up? Are you okay?”

I can hear that edge. Not panic, but close enough to recognize.

“I'm good,” I say. “Got your text earlier. Just wanted to hear your voice.”

A small exhale on her end.

“Good. How'd you sleep?”

I look toward the back door where the boys are pacing.

“Coyotes and the boys don't mix.”

She gives a tired laugh. “Sleep is... rough now. Too many unknowns. You know?”

“Yeah. I know.”

A pause settles in, not awkward, just heavy with everything we aren't saying.

“So far, flights are still on,” she says. “And they're still saying non-residents can leave.”

“They're saying a lot of things,” I reply, keeping my tone even. “I wouldn't count on any of it holding.”

“I know,” she says softly. “I'm just... trying to hold onto something.”

“I get it.”

Another pause.

“Hey, babe, I need to take this call coming through,” she says. “I do love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Click.

I stared at the phone a second, then smirk to myself.

“I know.”

I step out onto the front porch with a cup of coffee that has already gone cold and lean against the railing, letting the quiet settle around me. For a few minutes, it almost feels normal.

Then my phone rings again.

My neighbor, Robert.

“You ready for me, so we can get this done?”

“Yessir. Come on over.”

He's there in under two minutes, which tells me he's been waiting.

The boys lose their minds at the back door, barking like they've discovered a new species. I open it and let Robert in.

“Morning, Bret.”

“What do we have here?” I ask, nodding at the rifle case in his hand.

“Mind if I set it here?”

He lays it on the dining room table and opens it up.

Basic AR. Smith & Wesson M&P. Clean. Untouched.

“Where’d you get that?” I ask.

“Sporting goods store,” he says. “Last one they had, I think. Figured I’ve got a pistol already, might as well get something with a little more reach. Just in case all this...” He gestures vaguely. “...goes bad.”

It already has, but I let that slide.

“I need to know how to use it,” he adds. “Take it apart. Clean it. All that.”

I nod. “We’ll get you squared away. Let’s knock that out, then we’ll start on the plywood.”

He hesitates a second, then asks, “You’re serious about going after her, aren’t you?”

I don’t even think about the answer.

“Dead serious.”

He studies me, then lets out a low whistle. “How long you two been together?”

“Since we were kids. About seventy-five percent of my life.”

He shakes his head slowly. “Yeah... that’s worth dying for.”

“Let’s make sure it doesn’t come to that,” I say, tapping the rifle. “Now, let’s see what you bought.”

Two hours later, we have the basics down and have moved outside to start boarding up the windows.

The power flickers twice while we work, long enough to notice, short enough to keep going. Not random. Not anymore.

We set a sheet in place, and I drive the first screw home.

“You’re really going,” Robert says.

I glance at him.

“You know I am.”

He nods like he’s expecting nothing else.

“Well... Susan and I will keep an eye on your place while you’re gone. Best we can.”

I finish the last screw and step back.

“I appreciate that. More than you know.”

“What are neighbors for?” he says with a small smile.

We work in silence for a bit, then he wipes his hands on his jeans.

“Sorry, we didn’t get all of it done.”

“We hit the important parts,” I say. “I’ll finish the rest.”

“You sure?”

“I’ll holler if I need you.”

“Alright. Susan’s probably got dinner on. Good luck, Bret. And... I hope you don’t have to go.”

“Me, too.” Before he leaves. “Robert, give me a second,” I let him outside to grab an old business card to write on.

Still standing patiently waiting, he notices the business card. “What’s this?” indicating the white card.

The breeze is picking up again.

“This?” I hold it up in between us. “This is a kind of get out of hell card.” His face is bathed in confusion.

“This is yours,” I say, handing it to him as if it were precious as diamonds. As it may be.

“It’s an address,” he says, flipping it over. “Kentucky?”

“I would be remiss as a neighbor if I didn’t share this with you. This is a reliable and trustworthy friend. He’s very well connected. I’m sure if things get rough here, he’ll point you in a safer direction to live.”

He gives me a skeptical look, “He’s not part of that militia on the TV, is he?”

“No. He’s just dialed in and has connections. Ex-cop. Loves to help. No gimmicks, just looking out for my neighbor.”

“Well, alright, Bret. Thank you!” Shaking my hand.

He gives a final nod and heads back across the yard.

I check my phone as soon as I go back inside.

Greg.

Hermano, insurgents are moving through the southern states, hitting infrastructure—power stations, PDs, fire departments, hospitals—then disappearing back across the border. Same playbook as Vietnam. Laos. Cambodia.

There won’t be anyone telling us we can’t go after them this time.

I stare at the message.

True.

A few seconds later, another comes through.

She'll be okay if this goes south. She's tough.

I didn't respond to that part.

How's Marie?

I'm dodging, and we both know it.

He comes back quick.

Rising to the occasion. Talks between states and feds are going nowhere. Those seceded states are stalling—positioning. We're on the edge, Bret. If we fall... no bueno. Stay ready.

Always. BTW, I gave my neighbor your addy in case he needs a new place to hang.

Several seconds tick by. I find myself hoping I didn't overstep.

Understood and no problem. Glad to be of service, Hermano. Out.

I set the phone down.

Stay ready.

As if I have a choice.

Before dark, I head out back to deal with the compost and to clean up after the dogs.

Something feels off before I even see it.

Then I do.

Bella.

Torn up. Dumped like trash.

I just stand there, staring, unbelieving.

Then it hits all at once—anger, guilt, the memory of her running up to me just to say hi and spread some joy.

“That son of a bitch...”

I bend forward, hands on my knees, trying to get a breath that wouldn't come.

“This ends tonight.”

Late afternoon. I'm on the porch with my LWRC, with Robert beside me.

“You wanted to learn,” I say quietly. “Here's your chance. You're my backup. We start there, just past the concrete slab in the grass. If things go bad, we fall back to the porch. Got it?”

“Y-yeah,” he says. “Just... nervous.”

“Good. Means you're paying attention. Keep your muzzle downrange and not at me, and we'll be fine. Safety on?”

He checks, then grimaces. “No.”

“Alright. First lesson. Safety stays on until you're ready to fire, and you've got a clear target and background.”

He tries to flip it.

“It won't budge.”

“Charge it.”

Click-clack.

“Try it now.”

“I’ll be damned,” he mutters. “Safety on.”

“Common thing,” I say. “Hammer’s forward; it won’t engage. Now you’re hot. Treat it that way.”

We move out and drop into position just beyond the concrete, spacing ourselves out.

“I’m glad we’re in the country,” he says.

“Yeah. Makes this easier.”

He hesitates, then adds, “You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

“These coyotes took a little girl a few days ago.”

I close my eyes for a split second.

“Then we must end it tonight,” I say quietly. “You and me.”

“I’m with you.”

The light starts to fade, everything turning that gray that makes distance harder to judge and shapes harder to trust.

The bait sits out where we’ve placed it, scent carrying just enough.

We wait.

And then I see him.

Black. Bigger than the rest. Moving slow, deliberate, like he owns the ground he walks on.

He pauses at the ridge, scanning, then starts down toward the bait.

“Bret,” Robert whispers too loudly.

“I see him.”

The rest of the pack hang back, just shapes against the fading light.

This one comes forward alone.

The old one.

The one testing us.

The crosshairs settle on him, illuminating just enough to hold clean.

He stops.

Ears and nose working. Nose points in different angles testing the air.

Then they go still.

His head turns.

Locks on us.

I draw in a breath.

“He’s gonna bolt,” I whisper.

“Wha—”

The pack breaks first, shadows melting back over the ridge.

The old one turns with them, giving me a clean side profile.

Perfect.

I squeeze.

The shot cracks through the evening and echoes across the neighborhood.

Silence ensues... announcing to the coyotes... it is done.

End Day 11.

Day 12

06/04/24

Morning ritual. Done.

TV's on, but I'm not really watching it. Background noise, more than anything. I made a call to have the city come pick up the coyote from last night—the old one. The phone just rings then shoots to a full voice mailbox. That's fine.

I'm glad the rest of the pack broke when they did. Taking out one was necessary. Taking out two or three generations would've been something else entirely. Still justified... but heavier.

I recruit Robert to help put the old coyote in the tractor's cart.

Man, is he heavy.

We place him in the nearby woods.

Back at the house.

The tools are already laid out to finish the windows. I've just started setting the first piece when my phone goes off.

Jen.

I answer quick. "Hey."

Her voice comes in fast, tight with concern. "Are you okay? You usually text me before now."

"I'm good," I say, easing into it. "Got moving right away this morning. Had to deal with something."

"What kind of something?" she asks, already bracing.

I hesitate just enough for her to hear it.

"Coyote. The one I told you about. I took him out last night."

“What? Bret—are you okay? Is everyone okay?”

“The humans are,” I say quietly. “Bella didn’t make it.”

Silence.

Then— “No... not Bella.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my God... she loved everyone.” Her voice cracks, then steadies, but only just. “How is this the same world we grew up in? Built a life in? Raised our kids in?”

I look out across the yard.

“It isn’t,” I say. “Not anymore.”

Another pause.

“Robert said that same coyote took a little girl recently,” I add. “It had to go.”

She exhales slowly.

“As long as my husband’s alright... I’m okay with that.”

“I am.”

“I’d better get back,” she says. “I just needed to hear your voice. One more day, Bret. Then, I’m home.”

“One more day,” I repeat.

“I can’t wait.”

“Mismo, mi amor.”

She hangs up before either of us says anything else about something we can’t do anything about.

I get two more sheets of plywood up before the phone rings again.

Greg.

That alone tells me something's shifted—he doesn't call unless it matters.

“Hola, mi amigo. ¿Cómo estás?” he says in a light tone.

“Está bien. Gracias. ¿Qué tal?”

“Keep the mainstream media on,” he says, dropping the tone. “Sources are saying militia elements are coming out of the shadows. Filling the gaps where Federal response is thin.”

I lean against the wall, drill still in hand.

“They're real, then.”

“Oh yeah,” he says. “Always were. Just not visible. Middle states are starting to align—Free America, that's what they're calling it. They'll push back on whoever's hitting the southern states. Same groups hitting bases like Bliss.”

I shake my head slowly.

“We were right.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Doesn't feel as good as we thought it would.”

“No,” I admit. “It doesn't.”

A beat.

“If this cooks off,” he adds, “stop by before you head west.”

“I will.”

“Tribe and family.”

“Always.”

He hangs up.

I finish the plywood alone, the boys drifting in and out like they're supervising. Ash checks the perimeter every few minutes. Skye

stays closer, watching me, watching the house, like he's trying to understand why things feel different even if everything looks the same.

I don't have much of an appetite. I force something down anyway.

Fuel.

Nothing more.

The TV catches my attention again—actual footage this time.

Militia units.

Not rumor. Not speculation.

Men moving with purpose. Organized. Equipped. Not government, not law enforcement... something else. Something in between.

They're pushing south, engaging whoever's been hitting infrastructure. No clear uniforms. No single flag. Just patches, symbols, different gear, same direction.

It's messy.

It's real.

And it's happening faster than anyone on the news seems ready to admit.

"They're here," I mutter.

I don't even know who "they" is anymore.

I run through my gear again, not because I need to, but because repetition builds confidence. Mags topped off—but not overfilled. Learned that lesson already. Too much tension, and you're fighting your own equipment when it matters most.

Everything has its place.

Everything earns its place.

Evening drags in slow.

Jen texts. Simple. Tired. Still working.

I reply.

She deserves normal, even if it's a lie we both agree to believe for a few more hours.

I end up on the couch, watching the news until I drift off without meaning to.

Skye wakes me.

Not barking. Not frantic. Just a nudge of his nose and a low grunt like he's got a job to do.

I blink at him.

"Yeah... I'm awake." Blurry eyed I check my watch "...0217 hours!"

Skye pokes me again and grunts louder.

"Okay, okay. I'm getting up, see."

He takes a couple of steps back, waits.

I push myself up, and he turns, leading the way down the hallway to the master bedroom, like he's done it a hundred times. Ash is already in his bed when we get there.

"Funny dog," I mutter.

Skye waits until I start getting ready for bed, moves over to Ash, then circles twice and drops into his spot next to his brother, like that's the end of it.

His herding job done, instinct satisfied.

Lights out.

But before I close my eyes, I reach for the remote one more time. I shouldn't but...

Volume low.

Different angle now.

Not just cities.

Highways.

Drone shots and shaky phone footage of lines of vehicles heading north. Packed. Overloaded. People riding in truck beds, trailers, whatever they can find. Others on foot. Backpacks. Kids. Dogs. Anything they can carry.

American refugees.

From our own states. This isn't some Third World country we're watching collapse on prime-time.

"...people are leaving southern regions in large numbers," a voice says over the footage. "Heading north into areas not yet affected by widespread violence..."

Not yet.

That part doesn't get said aloud, but it hangs there anyway.

I watch a man walking along the side of the road with a little girl on his shoulders, her arms wrapped around his head like she thinks he can carry her forever.

Another clip—an older couple, pushing a shopping cart down the side of a road, everything they own rattling inside it.

Cars are abandoned where they've run out of gas.

People just... moving.

North.

Away from something they don't understand, toward something they hope will hold.

I mute it.

The room goes quiet.

"That's coming," I say under my breath.

Not panic.

Not speculation.

Just a matter of time.

I set the remote down.

Recline.

Dogs are breathing steadily on the floor.

House still standing.

For now.

Eyes open in the dark a little longer than usual.

Then finally—sleep.

End Day 12.

Day 13

06/05/24

0230 hours.

The sound drags me up from somewhere deep and wrong—shrill, close, persistent. Not a clean wake up. More like I'm fighting my way to the surface.

I'm on my back, dressed. Chest rig still on. In bed. Phone buzzing on my chest like it's trying to burn through me.

"...h-hello?"

Static. Thick. Heavy.

Then—

"Dad... Dad... It's Ryan!"

Everything snaps into place.

"Ryan?"

Gunfire. Not distant. Not muffled. Real. Voices shouting over each other, layered chaos bleeding through the line.

"Rye? Where are you? Bliss?"

"...Dad—it's me. I love you, Dad—"

The line tears apart.

Gone.

"Ryan!"

I'm already redialing before the silence even settles.

Again.

Again.

"This number is no longer in service."

I stare at the screen like it's lying to me.

"That's... that's not possible."

Redial.

Same message.

“Son of a—”

I stop myself mid-motion, arm cocked like I’m about to spike the phone into the floor.

This is my only lifeline. Breathing heavy, room closing in.

I sit down hard on the edge of the bed, face in my hands, pistol and phone beside me.

“Lord...” My voice is rough, barely there. “Watch over my family. Cover them. Remind me I don’t have to carry this alone. Amen.”

Silence.

All the individuals. Friends and family, whom I worry about.

John Luke... where the hell are you?

The anger comes in waves, hot and sharp. I start pacing, not even aware I’m moving until I’m already across the room. The boys are huddled in Jen’s closet, pressed together, watching me like they’re trying to decide if I’m a threat or not.

They don’t like this version of me.

Neither do I.

Need an outlet, now.

“Boys... I’m going to the workout room.”

They don’t follow.

Good.

I hit the Wavemaster like it owes me something.

This wasn’t a bad connection.

That was real.

Every strike gets harder, with each name.

Ryan.

Jen.

Lexi.

John Luke.

My brothers.

Knox.

This world—those refugees.

“What is it becoming?” I growl, driving the bag back, watching it rock, coming back for more.

I lose track of time.

Lose track of everything.

Until I don't.

I come to, flat on my back on the mat, sunlight cutting through the blinds in thin lines. My chest rig's still on. Sweat's dried cold on my skin.

The boys are there now.

One on each side.

Didn't follow me in... but they came when it was over.

“Yeah...” I mutter, dragging a hand down my face. “I'm good.”

Ryan.

The thought's a punch that never left.

Jen doesn't know yet.

And I'm the one who has to tell her.

I sit there, staring at nothing.

Last night doesn't mean he's—

No.

Don't go there.

Don't give it life.
He's a Gordon. That name means something.
The boys start licking my face, persistent as hell.
"Alright—alright," I mutter, pushing them back. "Leave it...
leave it."
They finally back off.
"Good boys."
I sit up slow.
"Let's move. That's all we've got right now."

The boys are fed, watered and settled.
My chest still aches like something's sitting on it.
I grab the remote and turn the TV on.
Drone feed over Fort Bliss.
It's a mess.
Just what I wanted to see, but... it is confirmation.
Surrounded on three sides. North side still open—for now.
Camp McGregor, just across the New Mexico border, is
getting hammered, too.
The footage doesn't hide anything.
Rocket plumes streak in.
Explosions are walking across the base.
Tanks pushing, some firing, some taking hits and
disappearing into fireballs.
APCs moving fast, returning fire until they don't.
Apaches cutting across the frame, laying down lines of death.
No clean lines.

No control.

Just chaos with structure behind it.

I don't move.

I just watch.

What else can I do?

Have faith and believe, echoes in the dark corners of my mind.

“C’mon, Rye...” I whisper. “C’mon...”

Then the feed cuts.

Static.

I drop back onto the couch, staring at the blank screen like it's going to give me something if I wait long enough.

“They’re estimating casualties—” some voice starts, but it’s background noise.

He’s alive.

I’d know if he wasn’t.

Wouldn’t I?

I lean forward, elbows on knees.

“I need to get to him.”

The thought’s not even fully formed before something else pulls me out of it.

Buzzing.

Distant at first.

Then closer.

Persistent.

Jen still in California. Now Ryan. I’m one man. How am I going to pull this off by myself?

Ash jumps up beside me and rests his head on my thigh.

Skye sprawls across my feet.

Pressure.

Grounding.

The only way they know how.

The buzzing doesn't stop.

My phone.

I drag it out of my pocket.

Jen.

I answer before it rings again.

"Hey—" She's already crying. Not loud. Not hysterical. The kind that comes after you've already emptied everything.

"...you were watching it, too," she says. "I know you were."

"Yeah."

"Our son is in that," she says, voice shaking. "Bret... he's in the middle of that."

"I know." It's all I've got. "I know."

"I want you here," she says. "I just... I want you here to hold me."

"I know," I say quietly. "You know I would if I could."

Silence.

Heavy.

"Any chance you can get out earlier?" I ask.

"No." A beat. "Nothing earlier than what I already have." She exhales hard. "What was the point of my coming out here? What did I accomplish? I should've stayed home. Helped you. You knew this was coming."

"Jen."

She keeps going. "I should've listened—"

“Jen.” She stops.

“You made a decision,” I say, steady. “We live with it. No blame. That doesn’t help anything. You get on that plane. You get home. That’s the mission. What are you?”

A pause.

“I’m a winner,” she says softly.

“Damn right, you are.”

“Well, if I’m a winner,” she adds, voice leveling out, “then so are you.”

I huff a breath. “Nah. I’m a *wiener*. Oscar Mayer.”

There’s a beat. Then she lets out a broken laugh.

“You’re such a jerk.”

“Yeah. That’s why you married me.”

“Bret...” She steadies herself. “What about Ryan?”

It’s out in the open. The question, neither of us wants to answer.

“What can we do right now?” I say. “You get home; we figure it out. If we have to, we make a run to Texas. Jimmy’s in Austin. I’m sure he’ll be happy to help.”

“Mad Max run?” she asks, half disbelief, half something else.

“For family.” A pause.

“Yeah,” she says quietly. “For family.”

Another breath. “All we can do right now is pray and believe,” I add. “The rest... not in our hands.”

“I know,” she says. “It’s just... hard.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to hang up.”

“You got work?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, I’ll make it easy,” I say. “Goodbye, babe. Love you. One more night.”

“One more night,” she echoes. “I love you more.”

“Not possible.”

Click.

The room goes quiet again.

Deafening quiet.

Jimmy! How could I forget Jimmy?

I’m surprised he hasn’t contacted me. He must be busy preparing. We’ve talked at length about this being a possibility.

He wasn’t completely sold on the idea.

A quick text.

Hey, knucklehead. How is everything?

Send. And I wait.

Back to the TV. I turn the volume back up.

“...there appears to be a lull in fighting around Fort Bliss...”
the reporter says.

I shake my head. “You’ve got a gift for stating the obvious.”

I mute it again. The boys are still here. I take a minute, run my hands through their fur, grounding myself. “Alright,” I say quietly. “I’m okay. Let’s get you outside.”

I feel the wood of the deck under my feet as the boys run down into the corral. I’m just starting to lean against a post when my phone goes off.

Incoming text–Jimmy.

Hey Bret, sorry I haven't contacted sooner. Business is through the roof with all this craziness. You?

Well enough. Preparing for the worst. How bout you?

Yeah, well, I believe you now. Seeing is believing, right? I'm working on getting Shelly and Lena out before the thirteenth. Then me and Tim will follow. The government assures us that Austin's good so... we have time.

The thirteenth, happy early bday! It's coming up fast, old man. Say hey to Shelly and Lena for me. Is Meeko still around?

Ah, thx. It's not going to be the same this year, right? This world. Meeko is missing. He got away from us one night and just took off.

Ah, man, I'm sorry.

Yeah, me too. He was a great dog.

Long empty pause.

Jimmy? Hello?

**I'm back but gotta run. I have a call on the other end.
Cya!**

To myself, “I hope I get to see ya.”

Later, I turn the volume back on—not for Bliss this time.

The camera’s somewhere on a highway. Northbound. Lines of cars. Miles of them. Some moving. Some not.

People walking alongside them. Backpacks on. Kids. Dogs on ropes or just following because they don’t know any better.

American refugees.

“...we’re seeing a continued mass exodus north out of southern states,” a reporter says. “Law enforcement is overwhelmed. Many departments have stopped responding to non-critical calls entirely—”

Footage cuts to a city. Looting. Storefronts blown open. Groups moving in and out like it’s organized, not random. Taking what they want, burning what they don’t.

Police cars parked. Lights on. No officers. Or if they’re there, they’re outnumbered.

“...PDs are stretched beyond capacity,” the voice continues. “Some are pulling back to protect critical infrastructure only...”

Another cut.

Militia.

Same guys I saw earlier.

Now they’re moving with civilians—directing traffic, handing out water, pulling people off the road, setting up makeshift checkpoints.

Redirecting and protecting.

Different clip. Same group engaging something off camera. Controlled fire. Short bursts. Movement. Return fire from somewhere unseen.

Then silence.

“...local residents are beginning to assist militia elements,” the reporter adds. “Forming ad hoc support networks—food, shelter, transportation—”

Interview clip.

Guy in his thirties, scruffy beard, plate carrier that doesn't quite fit.

“We're not waiting on anyone anymore,” he says into the camera. “We protect our own. That's it. That's the rule now.”

Reporter asks, “And who's that?”

“Americans, who else?” The scruffy man walks away toward the fire line, shaking his head.

Leaving the reporter wearing a bewildered look; alone and holding his microphone.

The station quickly cuts to another clip.

Older man. Calm. Eyes steady.

“They come here to hurt people; we're here to stop them. It's that simple.”

Another.

Younger kid. Barely twenty.

“We're not the military. We're not the government. We're just... done letting it happen.”

The camera pans back to the road. Northbound.

Endless.

I mute it again.

“Yeah,” I say quietly. “It's started.”

Not loud. Not all at once.

But it's moving. And it's not stopping.

I don't turn it off.

Another clip rolls—different camera, steadier. Someone with a clue behind it.

A group this time. Not scattered. Not reacting but positioned.

Tree line behind them. Open road to their front. Vehicles staggered for cover, not parked. Fields of fire overlap cleanly. No wasted movement. No one's talking unless they have to.

In the middle of it—him.

Professionally kitted out. Ballistic helmet with just the right mix on it. Balanced. Balaclava to hide his features. Eyes moving without moving his head. Rifle low, not slung, not tense. Just there. Like it belongs.

Guys around him aren't looking at the camera. They're watching sectors. Working angles. One on glass. One scanning rear. Another adjusting something on a radio without breaking posture.

Yeah... I know the type.

Veteran.

Lethal.

Quiet in charge.

The reporter starts to talk—he lifts a hand just enough.

They shut up.

He steps forward half a pace. Doesn't square up for the camera. Doesn't posture.

Just speaks.

“We're not here to replace anything,” he says, voice calm, even. “We're here to fill the gap.”

No rush. No wasted words.

“Law enforcement’s getting hit from every direction. Infrastructure’s under attack. Civilians are caught in the middle.”

A glance over his shoulder—one of his guys shifts ten feet left, covering a blind spot without being told.

He turns back.

“So we stepped in.”

He doesn’t say *why*.

Doesn’t need to.

“We’re organized. We’re communicating. We’ve got elements spread across multiple states. You’re seeing pieces of it on the news.”

A beat.

“This isn’t random. It’s coordinated. It has to be.”

The camera zooms a touch. You can see it in his eyes—he’s already thinking three steps past this conversation.

“Our mission’s simple,” he continues. “Protect civilians. Support local law enforcement, where they’re still standing. Identify and engage hostile elements when necessary.”

No bravado.

Just facts.

“We don’t go looking for a fight. But we don’t walk away from one either. And we finish it.”

Behind him, one of the younger guys kneels, eyeing the tree line. Another adjusts a barricade without being told.

Disciplined.

Clean.

Real.

“We’ve got numbers,” he says. “More than people think. And more coming online every day.”

He lets that sit.

“Veterans. Prior service. Civilians who decided they weren’t going to wait for permission anymore.”

A faint shift in tone. Not louder. Just... heavier.

“This country doesn’t belong to politicians. It belongs to the people standing in it.”

Silence for a second.

Wind moves through the grass behind them.

“If you’re moving north,” he adds, “stay off the main routes when you can. Travel in groups. Keep your heads on a swivel. If you see us—don’t panic. We’re not your enemy.”

A glance again. Quick. Controlled.

Someone off camera signals something.

He nods once.

“We’re not here to chase ghosts,” he says, eyes still working the tree line. “We hold here. We stabilize what we can.”

A beat.

“Because if we don’t hold the line here, there won’t be a line left.”

“That’s all I’ve got,” he says. “We’ve got work to do.”

He steps back.

No dramatic exit.

No lingering look.

He’s already done.

The reporter is speechless. The camera hangs on the group for a second longer—guys shifting, covering, moving.

They’ve done this before.

Then it cuts.
I sit there a minute, staring at the blank screen.
“Yeah...” I mutter.
“I know you.”
Not him specifically.
But the type.
The kind that doesn’t talk unless it matters.
The kind you follow without being told to.
The kind that doesn’t lose.
Even when he doesn’t win.
I lean back, slow.
The boys settle in closer without being called.
“Free America,” I say under my breath.
Not a question.
Not hope.
Recognition.
Then I look back at the screen, even though it’s gone to
something else.
“About damn time.”

End Day 13.

Day 14

06/06/24

I wake up already behind the day.

Not tired—drained. Like, I never really came back from the night.

Today is Jen's travel day.

I lean into the routine anyway. Pills. Vitamins. Feed the boys. Coffee, I barely taste. Something to keep my head straight.

TV's already on. Volume low.

They're not easing into it anymore.

Maps. Red clusters from Florida to Texas. Hundreds of hits overnight. Not just military. Not just police. Churches were hit. Hundreds. Maybe thousands torched. Still burning. The smoke fills the sky above. Hospitals weren't safe. Hit in coordination. We should've known. Schools. Elder care. Synagogues. Even news stations.

Places nobody expects to fight.

Places nobody's ready.

Easy, soft targets. Known targets of militant Islamists. Cowards.

Some of these places were made targets by politicians' anti-gun policies. Now making these areas easy pickings for the insurgents.

Daylight attacks. Bold. Or lack of training or night optics. Cameras rolling. Some of the stations don't even cut away—just keep broadcasting while everything goes sideways behind the anchors.

One crew was cut down mid-broadcast. The camera now on its side capturing the surprised look forever on her face.

I stand there, bowl in hand, watching it like it's not real.

But it is.

Bliss is bad. McGregor worse.

This?

This is everywhere along the southern border and into the southern states.

I glance at my phone.

Nothing from Greg.

That doesn't bode well.

Jen texted earlier. Flights still on. Heading to the airport. She sounds... hopeful.

This is when we find out the worth of Governor Olsen's promises.

"Alright," I mutter, more to myself than anything.

I bow my head anyway.

"Lord, get her home."

Simple. All I've got.

I sit down, finally, and actually watch.

Different feed now. Southern town. Not a big one.

Smoke drifting through the streets. Sirens—seem everywhere. Not organized. Just noise.

Camera shakes, then steadies.

National Guard on one corner. Police are trying to hold a line behind a couple of cruisers. And then—militia.

Not separate.

Together.

One of the officers goes down. Hard. Leg maybe. He's trying to crawl, can't get traction.

No one hesitates.

Militia guy breaks from cover, low and fast. Gets to him, grabs his vest, lifts him clean and drags him back behind the line.

Another guy already has a med kit open. Works without looking up.

They've both done this before.

Guard shifts position to cover the gap.

Police tighten the line.

No yelling. No confusion.

Just... movement.

Like they've practiced together for years.

The reporter's talking over it, but I don't hear a word.

I just watch the carry.

The hand on the back of the wounded officer's neck. Keeping his head steady.

Small thing. Means everything.

I exhale slow. "Alright..." I say under my breath.

"Alright." *Maybe we're not dead yet.*

I sit there a minute longer, watching them hold the line.

Then my phone buzzes.

Greg.

I don't wait. I open it.

Mano. This is it. What we feared. Foreign boots on American soil. I'm going dark. Stop and see me. Out.

I read it twice. Doesn't change.

“Yeah...” I whisper. “Figured.”

I set the phone down, but I don't move.

Not yet.

I stare at the screen, but I'm not seeing it anymore.

Just pieces lining up.

Matty.

Davis.

Ross.

Greg.

Knox.

Same message. Different voices.

It's here. It's been here all along.

The only difference now?

Phone buzzes again.

They're in the light. And they can be seen...

Jen.

I'm on it before it finishes.

...they can be hurt.

I already know something's wrong.

Her message is short and direct.

Uber attacked. Driver dead. Chinese soldiers everywhere.

I'm okay. Moving east like we planned. Love you.

I read it once. Then again.

Remember your training. You've got this. I'm on my way.

Love, your Bret.

They can be stopped.

The room goes quiet. No, not the room.

Me.

No more waiting. It's time.

I stand. Slow at first.

Then faster.

"Boys." They're up before I finish it.

They know. They always know.

"Mom needs us." Ears up. Locked in.

"Car. Now." No hesitation.

They're gone toward the garage before I am.

I move. Not rushed. Not panicked.

But with renewed purpose.

I grab the last of my meds. Check the bag—already packed.

Good.

The doorway momentarily holds me in place.

I turn back. Take it all in. An almost whisper.

The house.

The way the light hits the wall. The marks on the floor. The little things you don't see until you think you might not see them again.

"Yeah..." I murmur. "Alright."

I step into the garage.

They're already in position at the lift gate, tails moving, thinking this is a trip.

It is. Just not the kind they think.

Eager for an adventure, Skye leaps in while it's still opening.

Ash hesitates for half a second.

Unsure at first, but if his brother's going...

He then commits. That's Ash.

After securing them, it's my turn to climb in. I adjust the mirrors out of habit.

Garage door groans open.

Feels louder than usual.

And slower than I want.

I sit there one beat longer.

Hands on the wheel.

Breathe in. Out.

"We're on our way, babe," I say quietly.

"We're coming."

I put it in gear.

End Day 14.

Technical Glossary

APC - Armored Personnel Carrier. A military vehicle designed to transport troops under armored protection.

AR-15/AR - ArmaLite Rifle platform. Common modern sporting/tactical rifle platform used throughout the conflict.

Army Reserves - Reserve component of the United States Army.

Ash - One of Bret's two dogs. Alert, loyal, pointed ears. Protective companion.

Battle Belt - A tactical belt setup carrying magazines, medical gear, a holster, and essential combat equipment.

Battle-Rattle - Slang for full combat gear and equipment worn by soldiers or militia.

Bella - A young Belgian Malinois living near Bret's home. Friendly, energetic, often roaming freely.

Bliss / Fort Bliss - Major U.S. Army installation located in Texas near the Mexican border. One of the first large military targets attacked during the collapse.

Bug In - Remaining in place and fortifying a location rather than evacuating.

Bug Out - Leaving home or current location during a crisis to relocate to a safer area.

California Secession - California's declaration of independence from Federal authority, triggering nationwide instability.

Camp McGregor - Military training facility in New Mexico near Fort Bliss. Also targeted during the coordinated attacks.

Chi Kung / Qigong - Ancient Chinese breathing and movement practice used by Bret for health, focus, and mental discipline.

CR-V - Bret's Honda CR-V. His primary vehicle during the opening collapse.

Coyotes - Wild predators frequently seen near Bret's property. Also metaphorically connected to human traffickers and infiltrators.

Daisy - Robert's missing white poodle.

Dunham's - Sporting goods store where Bret purchases ammunition and encounters escalating public instability.

EDC Chest Bag - Everyday carry tactical chest bag containing Bret's essentials such as medications, wallet, multitool, batteries, and firearm equipment.

Federalized National Guard - National Guard forces placed under direct Federal command during the unrest.

Free America - Rumored alliance of militias emerging across the middle states to resist collapse, insurgency, and foreign infiltration.

Glock 19 - Compact 9mm pistol carried daily by Bret.

Greg - Bret's longtime friend and trusted contact. Connected to militia intelligence and preparedness networks.

ICE - Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Federal agency targeted during the riots and executions shown on live television.

Jen Gordon - Bret's wife. Travel nurse/director stranded in California during the beginning of the collapse.

John Luke - Bret and Jen's estranged son. Formerly joined the Army. His absence weighs heavily on the family.

Knox - Callsign for Ben Schulz, Bret's friend from Wisconsin. Leader of an airsoft and preparedness group that later becomes influential in the resistance movement.

L.A. / Los Angeles - Primary epicenter of riots, insurgency, and California's collapse.

Mag / Magazine - Ammunition feeding device for firearms.

Manual Therapy - Hands-on physical therapy techniques requiring strength, endurance, and sustained force application.

Marines - United States Marine Corps forces deployed into California during the riots and insurgency.

Militia - Citizen resistance groups preparing to defend communities, infrastructure, and the nation from collapse and foreign threats.

Mogadishu - Reference to the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia. Used as a comparison for urban combat and trapped Federal forces.

NODs - Night Observation Devices / Night Vision Goggles.

NVGs - Night Vision Goggles.

Pandora - Music streaming service Bret uses to calm the dogs and himself.

Parkinson's Disease - Degenerative neurological condition affecting Bret physically and emotionally throughout the series.

Pat / Patrick Reese - Former police officer Bret encounters during the gas station confrontation.

Physical Therapist (PT) - Bret's former profession before Parkinson's and health complications forced him out of practice.

Protests / Riots - Civil unrest escalating into organized violence across California and eventually the southern United States.

Range Day - Bret's firearms practice and weapons verification routine.

Robert - Bret's neighbor. Retired, practical, largely unaware of how severe the situation is becoming.

RP - Rally Point. Preplanned meeting or regrouping location used in emergencies.

SBR - Short-Barreled Rifle.

Skye - Bret's Blue Heeler. Highly loyal, intuitive, and deeply bonded to Bret.

"Stands with a Fist" - Private nickname Bret uses for Jen, inspired by *Dances with Wolves*.

State Guard - State-level military/security force seen deploying around Nashville airport early in the crisis.

Tai Chi - Martial movement discipline practiced by Bret for focus, balance, mobility, and emotional control.

Truck Gun - Compact rifle kept inside a vehicle for emergency defensive use.

Wavemaster - Freestanding heavy punching bag used by Bret during training and emotional release.

Weighted Walk - Part of Bret's exercise and Parkinson's management routine.

Wing Chun Dummy - Wooden martial arts training apparatus used by Bret during workouts.

“Wunderbar” - German expression frequently used by Bret sarcastically or humorously meaning “wonderful” or “great.”

About the Author

Will Goodwin is a lifelong artist—visual artist, illustrator, graphic designer, and Doctor of Physical Therapy. He is a husband and father of three.

In October 2018, Will was diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's disease. Four months later, on February 7, 2019, he suffered a widow-maker heart attack. He should have died. He didn't.

In May 2023, he began writing—and hasn't stopped since.

Will Goodwin writes the way he lives: with grit, clarity, and unflinching honesty. A student of faith, warfare, and the American soul, his work carries real-world intensity and spiritual depth. His stories are driven by truth—the truth of sacrifice, the truth of family, and the truth that darkness only wins when the righteous stay silent.

When he's not writing, Will studies scripture, trains, prepares, and reflects on the cost of freedom in a world growing increasingly unrecognizable.

The Reason is not just fiction. It is a reflection of where we've been, where we're going, and what we risk losing if we fail to stand.

Will lives in Tennessee with his wife and family, surrounded by hills, hard truths, and the enduring belief that liberty is always worth fighting for.

Available Now.

Book One: Tribe and Family

The collapse didn't come without warning.

It came while people were still arguing, still distracted, still convinced it couldn't happen here.

Bret Gordon saw it coming.

He just didn't realize how fast everything would burn.

When the system fails, and the world turns violent overnight, survival isn't about comfort or preparation anymore, it's about who you stand with... and what you're willing to do to protect them.

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