

THE WESTERN FRONT

part 1 of 3

Archer Garrett

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events in this novel are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously; any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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1 Chron. 29:13

My wife, for her patience during this project.

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About this Book:

This is part 1 of a multipart series; I hope you enjoy my work.

Parts 2 & 3 are available on Amazon.com

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Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

-Habakkuk 1:4

Prologue

The south Texas sun had long since been replaced by the full harvest moon, but the day's arid temperatures had not yet fully retreated. The huge orange disk in the night sky appeared so close that one might reach out and touch it. The wind had refused to blow for days, amplifying the heat from earlier. Despite the miserable conditions, they were relieved; this would be their final patrol before heading back to their redoubt on the tip of South Padre Island for a much needed break. The members of the Texas State Guard's First Regiment were indeed soldiers, but few of them had real combat experience prior to this. The Alamo Guards were mostly known for their work in the aftermath of hurricanes and occasional support on the border. They took their new role in stride, as best they could, but none of the men in the squad had signed up for action like this. They had all removed their name tapes early in the operation after reports surfaced that some of the soldiers' families had started receiving death threats; they now communicated strictly by code names.

The three-story adobe-style mansion sitting on two acres just north of Lasara had served as their forward operating base for the past week. It was surrounded by fallow fields on three sides and the small southwestern town to the south; the view atop the high, flat roof was better than anywhere else for miles. The home's cast-in-place concrete walls provided excellent protection from small arms fire, and the surrounding eight foot high brick, perimeter

wall afforded them additional cover and security; in short, it was as perfect a location as was available. They wondered who the previous owner was, and if there would ever come a day when he could return. Pictures still hung on the wall: group shots while on vacation, during holidays and other memorable moments in the life of the now displaced family that once dwelled here. The owner's decision to install an indoor swimming pool was now a welcome reprieve for the weary soldiers, and a boost to morale in between patrols; it helped wash away the memories of the brutal south Texas heat, and fierce gun battles with men known for their vicious treatment of prisoners. The Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel had formed an uneasy alliance to push the gringos north; once the Americans were sufficiently broken, the cartels would divide the spoils and territory amongst themselves. The Z-G, as they were commonly referred to now, had developed a brutal reputation for flaying prisoners alive; this reputation had resulted in a mass exodus of locals some time back.

The unit's squad leader, now referred to simply as Barrett, leaned over several aerial, topographic and road maps spread out haphazardly on the billiards table in the salon, as he discussed the specifics of their final patrol with six of his men.

"Our scouts have observed several suspected hostile vehicles in and around Raymondville earlier this evening. The Z-G rarely practice light discipline, so they should be fairly simple to locate. We leave out in two hours; be ready. We will locate, identify and engage the targets, if they are in fact Z-G. Remember, all radio communication is to be in coded Spanish; if our communication is being monitored by them, or anyone else, hopefully it will sound like just another Z-G squabble over the airwaves. We are more likely to avoid a third

party encounter or Z-G reinforcements that way. I want redundant functionality checks on all equipment, especially the infrared lighting on the Humvees; this is our last night on vacation and we don't need any surprises. We've lost too many squads already, and I am particularly partial to this one."

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At 2100 hours, the sixteen guardsmen quietly pulled out of their lavish forward operating base into the disputed borderlands that was once south Texas. The mood of the men was probably not unlike the mood of a different group of Texans in a small, Spanish mission nearly two hundred years prior. Barrett had even taken his namesake from a kindred soul that had fought and died in that same mission. Their situation was not much different from their ancestors' situation either; the redoubt they had established on South Padre Island had been hugely successful in combating the cartels, but their success had begun to gain the attention of the cartels as well. The Alamo Guards had planted moored mines in the Port Mansfield Cut nearly forty miles north, effectively blocking the only safe passage into the waters beyond the barrier island. The cartels had only two options on the water: travel north one hundred miles and battle Port Aransas, or bring the fight to South Padre Island; they had decided on the island. The state guardsmen had repelled several combined land and sea assaults from the causeway and the pass, but the assaults were getting fiercer. The Alamo Guards of South Padre Island knew it was only a matter of time before they would all die, if reinforcements and supplies did not arrive soon.

After several minutes of driving, they located their quarry. With all of the vehicles' lights off, except for the imperceptible infrared lighting that increased the effectiveness of their night vision equipment, they closed to within five hundred feet of four, small pickups slowly cruising

east towards Raymondville on Highway 186. The big harvest moon was the guardsmen's enemy tonight as well, because it illuminated the plains and everything in it. An observant occupant in one of the pickup trucks would soon detect the four Humvees slowly approaching from behind. One of the guardsmen popped open the top hatch on the front Humvee and braced his elbows on the roof, as he peered through his night vision binoculars; the trucks' beds were filled with silhouettes of riders and their easily recognizable AK-47 rifles. He climbed back down into the Humvee as he said, "Our scouts were right Barrett; they ain't cowboys."

Barrett keyed his radio and tapped his finger against the microphone twice slowly and twice quickly – their confirmation code for hostiles. The four Humvees accelerated in unison, lurching forward with their diesel engines roaring like fearsome chupacabras. By the time the cartels realized they were being pursued, the angry three ton monsters were nearly on top of them; the men in the back of the pickups were too preoccupied with bracing for impact and yelling, "Go, go!" in thick Spanish that they never considered returning fire.

The Humvees were four wide and nearing 70 MPH as they reached the two rear pickups; the trucks' drivers were trying to accelerate, but were hopelessly blocked by the slower reactions of their amigos in front of them. One of the rear pickups jerked hard to the left and off the highway onto a dusty farm road; the high speed transition from asphalt to sand and gravel spun the light rear end of the truck around, and flung a man from the bed of the truck thirty feet before a sudden thud and a final bounce. The remaining, rear truck was no match for the two Humvees that slammed their massive winches and steel brush guards into its tailgate; an explosion of screams and wrinkling of sheet metal pierced the night's silence as the

pickup lurched forward, and was then pushed along the highway like some strange, landside Texan barge and tugboat. As the two outside Humvees launched forward, as if they were propelled from a slingshot, two men popped the top hatches of the center Humvees and engaged the vehicles' M134 Miniguns on the rear pickup; they each let nearly thirty rounds of 7.62 NATO loose, and annihilated the vehicle in less than a second.

The two front pickups were now well aware of what fate awaited them, so they roared forward with speeds that were unexpected from their rusted and dented exteriors. The two Humvees were nearing their top speed and closing quickly, but the trucks began to slowly pull away. The riders in the back had all witnessed the two Miniguns eviscerate the other pickup, and had no desire to elicit a similar response directed towards them; they suddenly disappeared below the walls of the trucks' beds. Barrett keyed up his radio again and spoke to his squad in coded Spanish.

"It's okay, let them pull off some, I'd rather not have AK rounds flying at us. Let's see if they lead us somewhere; if they get too far ahead, we'll just use the Miniguns."

The pickups swerved in opposite directions at an intersecting dirt road; The Humvees split up in pairs and began to gain back the lost ground. The drivers realized the flaw in their evasive maneuver, and within a mile were back on the straight asphalt drag of Highway 186. As they approached the city, they blew past a green road sign to their right that read:

Raymondville City Limit

Pop. 9733.

A mile into town as they passed the boxy, two-story City Hall, the Humvees' radio squawked to life, "Barrett, we've got company at our twelve on the 77 overpass; they look like Humvees, but smaller. Maybe MRAPS?"

"Yea, I see them. Those boys are a long way from home; I've seen Federales a few times, but no U.S. military south of Corpus Christi in months. Let's welcome them to the great state of Texas. Front two Humvees, get a man ready up top; as soon as the pickup trucks are under the overpass, hit them with the Mk 19. If a couple 40 mm grenades under the feet of our boys up top don't scare them back to Corpus, then maybe they will be worth having around."

The lighter and faster pickup trucks had a ten second lead on the Humvees as they approached the overpass. They would occasionally perform a slalom maneuver in the highway, as if the drivers anticipated another hailstorm from the Miniguns at any moment; their unease helped the Humvees maintain a closer tail than they otherwise would have. Barrett gripped the radio's microphone fiercely in anticipation with his gloved hand. He preferred to use the old style radio microphone while in the vehicle; it reminded him of a different time when wars were fought in distant lands, rather than American farm towns. Twenty seconds until the fireworks.

Barrett leaned forward, as he squinted through the front windshield with his night vision goggles, a smirk crept across his face; he keyed the mic, "Everybody ready up top?" Two *affirmatives* echoed back at him almost in unison. "Hold for my order." He craned his head up and noticed the guns on top of the three MRAPs.

Fifteen seconds.

The driver of the lead pickup was sweating and swearing profusely; at this point, he had no promise of a next breath. Their only hope, in his mind, was to make it to the overpass, swerve across two lanes to jump the highway's edge curb and pray he could manage to retain some semblance of control of the truck at 80 mph, to guide it around the sharp curve under the bridge that would take them south on to Highway 77 – and survival. He knew the Humvees could never negotiate the turn in time, so just maybe they would turn their attention to the other truck and engage them, while he made his way to Avondale and beyond.

Ten seconds.

Barrett studied what he could now identify as MRAP M-ATVs with their armaments pointed ominously downward.

Eight seconds.

His mind had been trying to process why they would allow friendlies to sweep under their barrels – unless, no – impossible, he could plainly see the markings on the vehicles from this distance.

Seven seconds.

They were obviously U.S. military. Weren't they? And yet, something was wrong.

Six seconds.

The driver of the lead pickup had maneuvered himself to the far right lane of the highway. The onramp for Highway 77 south was fast approaching. His palms were sweaty on the wheel, as he prepared for the suicide maneuver; he never bothered to look up at the overpass. His focus was on his exit strategy.

Five seconds.

Barrett's stomach was floating in his chest by the time he keyed the mic again; he couldn't risk the chance, and the time was now. "Up top, back in the Humvee, now! Order! Now!" The two men slid back in their cabins and slammed the top hatches shut. They were confused, and more than a little irritated; they were looking forward to rocking the world of the boys up top. As they finished the thought, they saw the first of the tracers hit the pickups in front of them and watched as the trucks seemed to buckle in pain from the hail of bullets. Then a lead, firestorm erupted on top of them. It seemed as if every square inch of their armored roof was clanging in unison. At any moment, Barrett knew the roof would surely relent and be torn apart.

The lead pickup truck careened off the road, into the ditch and then sailed through the air. Limp bodies were flung haphazardly from the bed of the flaming projectile. The other truck had spun several times and looked as if it would stop in the middle of the highway, until the front two Humvees slammed it forcefully to the other shoulder. The drivers of the rear Humvees had forecasted this maneuver and braked abruptly to avoid a collision, as their team in the front blazed a path. With the road ahead now clear, they accelerated ferociously.

Barrett quickly transitioned from shock to rage, and keyed the mic up in English for the first time.

"Shee-yit! We're on the same team!"

No response.

"This is the unit commander for Alpha Squad, Texas State Guards, First Regiment out of South Padre Island. Identify yourselves immediately or we *will* return fire."

The airwaves were again momentarily silent, until a man finally responded, "Oh my God; sir, do you have any casualties?" The voice of the squad leader was strained and audibly distraught. All protocol had been dropped.

The other Humvees had been following the exchange and responded to Barrett almost in unison in their code, "All clear, Sir."

Barrett engaged the squad leader again, "Negative on the casualties. We are taking up a defensive position; I want you and your squad off that damn bridge and down here with me, on foot. We have a lot to talk about."

"Affirmative, sir; we're coming down."

One

He drifted in and out of that state of consciousness that was not quite asleep, not quite awake. The sun was beginning to crest the loblolly and slash pine tops to his right and kiss the pasture beyond with its warmth. As twilight fled once again, he was gently tugged away from his lull by the morning rays of light. Jake was not sure how long it had been since he had last heard the coffee perking, but even a bitter cup would be satisfying enough. He grabbed the long-barreled revolver from the table beside him and slid it into the worn, leather holster as he sauntered into the kitchen. A smile crept across his face, as he poured the cup and stirred in the smallest amount of creamer. The percolator was just another small trespass against what was to be expected, and he relished in that.

His stroll back outside was more purposeful, as he began to feel the steamy coffee's effects. Jake gripped the revolver and slid it back onto the table, as he surveyed the back of his property and the adjoining pastures. It was peaceful and inviting, everything the world had long ceased to be. The spring fog acted like a thick blanket over the distant pond in front of him. Several wood ducks quacked argumentatively amongst themselves as they meandered aimlessly across the water, occasionally dipping beneath the surface for a hapless minnow, or perhaps some spongy pond weed. He could faintly see a few white oaks beyond the fog and the pines, as the fields eventually gave way to the stands of timber and finally the hardwood

swamp beyond. Satisfied with the serenity, he downed the last of his coffee and stepped off the deck to scan the rest of the property, and reflect.

He thought to himself, *how did we ever get so far off the right path?* He knew the answer, even as he asked himself. It was incremental; the seemingly small and unrelated choices a people make are what ultimately destroy it. The swings of society's pendulum were almost always met with a near-equal and opposite force, but the culture's rudder never got quite back on the true course. It was the nudges in the wrong direction: the values of a wiser generation that never connected with their sons and daughters; the lessons of history that were lost or rewritten. He paused for a moment as he plucked a cold-hardy mandarin and rubbed his thumb across the leathery and pitted skin before continuing. One day, a point of singularity is inevitably reached: the nudges soon enough become shoves, and reality seems to change in days and weeks, rather than generations. A paradigm shift occurs before a society's eyes, if they choose to see it.

In one motion he lobbed the unripe citrus and lifted his hand to wave to Franklin Thames, his neighbor. Frank easily had three long and hard decades on Jake. His skin was weathered by years of working the land, and his world view was molded by the time spent in reflection of wars fought long ago that he was too young to understand at the time. He wore faded brown overalls with a dusty, half-breed, western hat. Frank's right arm cradled his ancient, lever-action carbine, and his left hand pinched a hand-rolled cigarette. Frank was standing over a heap in his pasture as he motioned Jake his way. Sasha, Jake's German shepherd, was already with Frank, contently occupied with something firmly held in her mouth;

he was the only other man Sasha would tolerate. Jake had tried to break her from leaving, but if Frank was tending to the cattle, she would split time between the two men. Jake eventually relented, partly because he knew Frank appreciated her keeping watch for him while he worked.

Jake spread the barbed wire wide enough to duck through, and approached the two; the heap on the ground was now obvious to him. Frank took one last drag of the tobacco before stamping it out with the Cuban heel of his boot.

"Jake, what are we going to do? This is the second one this month. I guess it's finally made it here."

Jake examined the partially field dressed calf, its most prized cuts crudely removed sometime the night before. The object in Sasha's mouth Jake had noticed from a distance was a bone of some sort that she had retrieved from the remains.

"Frank, I'm sorry; we never heard a thing. How many calves does that leave you with?"

"Ten, but I expect them to be gone before much longer, if I don't make provisions to bring them in closer to the house. I don't have the manpower to watch the livestock and defend the house."

"I heard from Mr. Gaston that a farm not far from here was attacked two nights ago; there were about six of them. The gunfire woke the neighbors; they started returning fire after they realized what was going on. They hit one of them; he bled out after his friends left him."

The family didn't even realize he was there until the next morning; everyone was too afraid to go outside."

"Yea, I heard about that. The sheriff showed up and took the body, but they didn't even collect shell casings, nor do a proper investigation. Son, they're trying damn hard to stem the tide and losing ground every day, we're on our own out here."

The two men continued on with what might be considered the small talk of some strange new world. Sasha playfully gnawed at her bone, occasionally looking up at the two and tilting her head to the side, as if to admit confusion at some bit of news or gossip. The men praised the acts of the now famous neighbors, and how lucky the unnamed farm was to actually have neighbors close enough to hear and respond to the violence. The two men realized, without mention, the similarities between the unnamed farm and their own. Jake had bought twenty acres from Frank nearly ten years earlier - a parcel right next to the Thames homestead, much to the chagrin of Frank's children. The two had met through a realtor friend of Frank's; she knew his situation: Frank needed the liquidity to continue running the farm, but didn't want to openly list the property and deal with the numerous, random, potential buyers stalking through the tall ryegrass and under the aging pecan trees that dotted his winter pasture. She told him that it was just part of the process, but he refused: "You'll know the right buyer when you meet him – and when you do, send him my way." And so she did; Franklin Thames and Jake Sellers had a longneck and a long talk befitting old friends in Frank's hayloft overlooking the property that first evening, and began the process of transfer the next day. It took another week to formalize the purchase, but to both men the handshake at the conclusion

of the first evening was the true point of sale. Relative to the other homesteads and farmhouses, Jake's house was unusually close to Frank's old ranch style home, but the two families from different eras enjoyed the friendship that blossomed from that closeness.

The men exchanged a few final words and nodded as they parted; Sasha stood to stretch, let out a high pitched whine as she yawned, and trotted off with Jake. Jake and Sasha crossed the fence and continued to the back of the property to finish the morning outing. The cool morning air began to betray the welcome arrival of autumn; the gentle breeze of the season would soon enough rustle the buttery, nut-like fruits from their perches high in the branches of the near-perfectly aligned rows of pecan trees. He looked forward to trading them for some of Mrs. Thames' locally renowned pecan pies in return.

Jake's pleasant anticipation was soon reigned in as his mind focused back on the reality of his situation; it had been peaceful enough for longer than any of them expected, but now the problems of the urban, and subsequently suburban areas had finally reached their sleepy community. Besides the price of everything multiplying by a factor of at least five and the mass unemployment, the first truly noticeable effect of the troubling storm cloud that had settled over them, was the increasingly common blackouts.

The first instance seemed innocent enough, a sub-station failure during a thunderstorm that probably just needed a quick repair by the utility company. When the utility crew arrived onsite, they were violently ambushed, beaten and robbed. By the second or third ambush, a worker was kidnapped and ransomed. The workers eventually refused to perform any repairs without a police escort. In the beginning this delayed the restoration of electricity by several

hours, but as violence increased in the cities, the delay would often be a day or longer. This seemed to escalate the cycle of violence and unrest, fueled by the swift deterioration of the peoples' expected quality of life.

His mind continued to wander as he approached the back of his house. His wife's silhouette appeared at the threshold of the back French doors.

"Come on in hun, breakfast is almost ready."

Jake stopped for a moment and grinned at her, his right hand instinctively coming to rest on the worn wooden grip of the Ruger .357. Sasha poked her head between his legs, plopped down on her haunches and looked at Kate.

"What are you two trouble makers staring at?" Kate struggled to mask the smile that was slowly creeping across her face as she playfully put her hands on her hips and feigned disdain.

"We just wanted to take you in for a moment; you look beautiful."

"Oh hush!" she quipped, still smiling, "I look like a wreck; save your smooth talk for when you need it!" She spun abruptly, hiding her blushing cheeks from him and marched back inside in an exaggerated manner. Jake grinned and scratched Sasha behind her ears before starting towards the house. Her tail wagged in delight as she bounded along beside him.

Katelyn planted a loud kiss on Jake's lips, and then smiled as she handed him two plates; he grinned as he spun and carried them to the rectangular oak table in the small dining nook.

He admired her figure as she grabbed her plate and a fresh pot of coffee and walked towards him; she shot him a wink and then poured the coffee into three cups already waiting on the table. Jake's brother Geram was slowly dragging himself to the table with one eye still closed. He stretched his arms to the ceiling and slumped into the chair opposite of Jake. "Kate you're too good to this man; bacon, eggs and home-grown blueberries – you got a sister?"

She laughed, "Yes I am and you know she's married, Geram."

"That's alright, as long as you make an extra plate when you cook for this guy, I can cope." Geram grinned as he popped a half-frozen blueberry in his mouth and finished defrosting it with a sip of his coffee.

"You'll have a plate here as long as you want it," Jake added. He finished his first egg, then continued, "Mr. Thames lost a calf last night to some poachers; they field dressed it in the pasture and left what they couldn't carry, or perhaps fit in an ice chest. Did you see anything last night on your watch?"

"I had a dark SUV creep by us and the Thames' at about zero one hundred, but I never saw them come back by. I tried to get a number of the occupants with the binoculars, but it was too dark to see inside the vehicle, even with the full moon."

Jake nodded, "The only vehicle that I saw on my watch had the same description; they came by around 4 o'clock, but they weren't creeping."

"That would have given them enough time to scout and get the calf."

Jake nodded in agreement as he stabbed several blueberries with his fork and lifted them to his mouth. The light banter at the beginning of breakfast had faded and the three were more solemn now. Kate topped off the boys' cups and left them alone as she went to feed Sasha some scraps.

Jake pushed his plate aside and leaned forward, eyeing Geram, "It's been two days since you showed up. They don't let you just drop in on family for several days while you're in active duty. You ready to talk yet, SEAL?"

Two

The muddy waters of the Tombigbee and Alabama Rivers converged just north of Mt. Vernon. The recent heavy rains in upstate Alabama had caused the rivers to swell well past flood stage much earlier than normal this year. The rivers were set to crest two days from now; most of the logging roads that dutifully followed the ridges of the river swamp had several feet of water over them already. The deer, hogs and other wild game had long since retreated to higher and drier grounds. Of all nights, this night deep in the backwoods of the river swamp should have been the domain of croaking bullfrogs and grunting alligators, but not tonight.

A hush rolled across the cutoff between the two rivers, interrupted by the ascending groan of a distant but approaching outboard motor. The low groan had little to do with the unnatural hush across the swamp; it was the blood curdling howl that emanated from somewhere seemingly within it. Immediately after, a second, more primal howl answered; finally, they cried out in unison. This strange chorus of animal and mechanical baffled the lords and princes of this natural kingdom; they felt compelled to their silence as they waited in anticipation of this strange, midnight wayfarer.

Clayton threw his head back once again and let out a howl befitting some mythical beast, to the untrained ear at least. He knew it drove Moses crazy; he was already bounding to and fro in the custom-built, shallow-draft, aluminum boat. Moses could abstain no longer, as

he put his front paws on the bow and offered up his interpretation for any lycanthropes that may have been confused by Clayton's less than perfect rendition. Clayton let out a bellowing laugh at Moses, and then leaned forward to bang the drywell in several quick successions; Moses instinctively crawled into the bottom of the boat just as it performed a perfectly timed "S" motion. The two stumps were not visible even in the daylight hours, but Clayton knew exactly where they were; this swamp was his.

An onlooker would be convinced of his lunacy, if not because of the spectacle of his howls, then absolutely because of his choice to brave the unpredictable floodwaters at near-full throttle by only the light of a full moon that was all but hidden by the thick canopy of willows, maples and Spanish moss above. Clayton was no fool though; his homemade apparatus of a motorcycle helmet and night vision goggles transformed him into a backwater demigod of sorts, and he reveled in it. This night was his.

As they emerged from the darkness of the cutoff and into moonlit river, he twisted the throttle as far back as it would go; they both ducked low as the boat cut a diagonal path across the 700' wide river to the small tributary, commonly called a slough locally, on the other side. In less than thirty seconds, they were back in the welcome confines of darkness and cover.

After they braved one final bend, he yanked kill switch from the "mud motor". He leveraged the boat's momentum to push it through the thick wall of vegetation and trees that grew along the submerged banks; the pair drifted into a clearing a couple hundred feet beyond. A shy, alligator snapping turtle on a nearby log dove into the murky depths to avoid their presence.

Clayton crawled to the front of the boat, grasped the damp bow rope and tied a quick clove hitch to a nearby cypress tree. As they waited and listened, he quietly opened the cooler and retrieved two biscuits and some rope sausage. He tossed one of the biscuits to the Catahoula Cur dog, and he caught it mid-air. Clay flicked his folding knife open and split the sausage into two even portions. Moses appreciated the gesture of equality, so he licked Clayton's hand before taking the cold meat. As they enjoyed their snacks and listened for the sounds of any would-be followers, Clayton grabbed a wooden paddle and shoved it down into the black water to determine a depth. The depth check was more of an old habit than a necessity; his boat could take off from nine inches of muck without any problems. Once on a plane, he needed less than a half inch of water over soft mud to navigate the swamp. Clayton finished his biscuit and leaned back in his seat to take in the wonder of his artificially green hued surroundings.

Spanish moss and thick, gnarled vines hung from the cypress and white oaks that surrounded his hidden enclave. He counted six giant fox squirrel nests that dotted the nearby oak trees. He noted several pairs of widely spaced eyes on the water, staring back at him. The alligators' curiosity was emboldened when Clayton made his night runs without lighting; often they would drift within several feet of his boat. Their presence did not bother Clayton or Moses, as long as they were safe in the boat, and the alligators remained in the water. The cool night air was a welcome relief from the southern sun's relentless barrage. Clayton hoped the flood was a herald of an early frost that would usher in a short reprieve from the horde of insects that had started to swarm them as soon as they drifted to a stop.

They waited a half hour and failed to detect any indication of human life in the swamp.

Satisfied that they were indeed alone, Clayton tugged the knot loose from the cypress tree and eased the boat to an idle as they slowly continued on their way. They idled down the slough for another half hour and then killed the motor again. Clayton grabbed a long wooden pole and quietly pushed the boat through the thick vegetation at the slough's edge until he could see through the cover on the other side. He peered through the leaves and across the empty lake to the shore beyond.

Sodium-vapor and halogen lamps pierced the darkness on the opposite shore, reflecting off the lake's water like a poor substitute for the starless sky. Dozens of small camps supported by weathered, timber piling towered over the surrounding cypress knots; their roofs extending increasingly higher into the night air as they continued up the gentle slopes. Many of the closest camps already had several feet of water beneath them. Clayton was surprised to see the small community so well-illuminated, they had not had power for at least two weeks.

Clayton scanned the shore by the landing for any signs of movement, but found none. He scratched Moses' head and whispered "See anyone, boy?" Moses stood up on the bow and sniffed the sweet night air, before turning back and climbing over the drywell. "Me neither, maybe next week; let's head home."

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As they made their way back home, Clayton's demeanor was much more reserved. He reflected on a past life in another world; he had once been a very successful contractor and entrepreneur. His first million was hard earned through long days, sleepless nights and relentless ambition. He did anything that would turn a profit: residential developments, industrial plant shutdowns, demolition, offshore and countless other types of work. He particularly loved demolition work because he could get paid to remove the old structure, crush the brick and concrete, and resell it as base material for roadways and parking areas – plus it was pure, unbridled fun to slam a four-ton wrecking ball into a building.

He soon realized the real money was in being an owner/developer. He would research undeveloped areas, purchase raw land, develop shopping centers, sell a few outlying parcels to help recoup his investment and lease the shops. He successfully repeated his formula multiple times; the next few million were earned much easier than the first. A new way of doing business came with the territory however, and he despised it. The permits, regulations and laws were countless and restrictive. The government inspectors had an endless repertoire of building and environmental codes that they could deem a developer in violation of, regardless if he actually was or not, seemingly at their whim. A single owl that was considered endangered could reduce a profitable endeavor to a crawl through red tape with the only light at the end of the tunnel a dim flicker of hopelessly breaking even. Of course there was another way, a way

to make all of the troubles disappear. It started innocent enough and could almost be justified, if you remembered to check your morality at the door. Before long, it was easier for him to count the people he was not buying; it seemed everyone wanted to stick their hands deep into his pockets. Clayton Sellers grew to despise the realities of the “easy” life he had long dreamed of.

It has been said that every man should know his number. He should have an amount, however large it may be, so that if he ever reaches it then he can consider himself a success and politely back away from the table with his soul intact. If he does not know his number, greed will surely devour him; he will forsake everything, and everyone, in his pursuits. The man with a number knows wealth to be a means; the man without knows wealth only as an unobtainable end.

Three years ago, Clayton reached his number. He dumped it all: the businesses, properties in town, stocks, bonds and all the racketeers that had made a living off of his talents and hard work. They could keep their broken system; he would disappear into his gulch – and he wasn’t the only one that was cashing in their chips and leaving the table. A groundswell of principled men were breaking away from the clutches of the bloated leviathan that was crushing them.

He bought two thousand acres in the middle of the river swamp for less than a song; even he was blown away that the struggling timber company had accepted his lowball offer. It wasn’t prime land by any definition; most of the property flooded when the muddy waters of the surrounding rivers swelled beyond their banks. Clayton did not mind the flooding though;

in a typical year the property would flood enough to foil most of the poachers, but the water was still shallow enough to restrict access to all but the most specialized of vessels – a vessel much like his of course. He leased the surrounding twenty thousand acres from the same timber company as a buffer, beyond that was mostly state wildlife reserve. Clayton's theory of life was one of irony: sometimes the only way to spit oneself out of the beast was to feign defeat and allow it to swallow you whole, so that one day you might have the leverage to go forth and never look back.

After a long, uneventful ride back, they finally were within sight of home. Home was a one room cedar camp house, on timber piles, nestled in a grove of swamp oaks; their massive branches entirely ensconced the brown, metal roof. Soon enough, he would be laying in his bed on cold winter nights listening to the huge swamp oak acorns clatter on the roof like errant golf balls.

Clayton had to float all of the building materials in to the site, which was a daunting feat in its own right. The work was made harder by the remoteness of the site and his determination to keep the location a secret. It took nearly six months to build the camp; three of Clayton's closest friends helped him with most of the work. Actually, they were probably his only friends, if you were to ask him. Everybody that knew Clayton liked him, but if he was not certain he could trust someone with his life, they were just acquaintances to him.

The screened porch wrapped around the entirety of the camp; on the front, a wide staircase descended into the muddy floodwaters below. Clayton estimated the depth to be about two feet at the stairs. He killed the motor and drifted towards the camp. Moses, who

had been napping, awoke and bounded to the bow of the boat. Clayton guided the vessel alongside the stairs with expert skill and looped a stern rope around one of the staircase's rail posts. He crawled to the bow and did the same, before climbing over the rails and onto solid footing. Moses whined as he struggled to squeeze between two rail posts; Clayton laughed at Moses' expense and patted him on the side of his ever growing belly. They turned and started up the stairs; the smell of fresh cornbread wafted to Moses' nose first, as he suddenly pushed off with his back paws and bounded up to the top. Clayton laughed as he caught a whiff, "Boy, if you eat any more, I'll have to leave you here next time." Moses turned and whined, then spun back around and nudged the screened door with his wet snout.

Claire opened the front door, and the aroma from within was almost too much for Moses; he burst into the camp and stood with impatience next to the wood burning stove. Clayton greeted her with a weak smile and a kiss on the cheek; she shared his worry.

"No sign of them yet, hun?"

"No ma'am."

"They'll turn up soon enough; come on in, I have fresh cornbread and catfish."

"Mmm, you sure know how to end a bad day on a good note." He dropped a catfish filet in Moses' open mouth and it disappeared instantly down his throat.

Clayton grabbed three filets and two wedges cornbread, and sat down at the table across from Claire. Moses had already devoured another filet and far too much cornbread; he now rested contently in front of the door. Clayton smiled; Moses knew his post. Claire was

reading her Bible by the bluish hue of a LED lamp. She cleared her throat, looked up and said,
“Listen to this:

‘But when they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.’

Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, ‘This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day. ‘But the people refused to listen to Samuel. ‘No!’ they

said. ‘We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.’

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. The LORD answered, ‘Listen to them and give them a king.’”

Clayton finished the last of his cornbread and sat in silence for a few minutes, considering the verses. Claire watched him intensely. Finally, she broke the silence, “Do you think we asked for this?”

“I know I didn’t.”

“That’s not what I meant, you know that. We the people; society. We.”

He rubbed his scraggly beard and thought for a while before finally answering. The playful demeanor from earlier was gone, “I’m not sure; if we didn’t ask for it, we sure beat around the bush with Him, though. If you believe in the Lord, you don’t go acting like we have for the last hundred years or so without knowing you’re pissing Him off. If you don’t believe in Him, you still don’t go acting like we have without knowing you’re screwing up the balance of ought to and ought not. So in that respect, I guess it was bound to happen; we just lucked up and got to live through it.”

“Maybe we’re supposed to live through it. You and I and the family.”

“Maybe so, babe. I’ve always heard it said that you are where you are and when you are for a reason, even if it is a bit part. Hey, did I tell you that dinner was perfect?”

“No, I don’t believe you did.”

“Well it was, perfect. I love you; let’s get some rest.”

Three

Geram took his time with his coffee and stared somewhere beyond Jake, as if searching for the proper way to start. He finally let out a deep sigh and began, “Tell me what you know about Texas and the border.”

“Texas; all we really get is the official word since most of the internet has been shut down. There are some wild rumors floating around, but it’s impossible to verify anything. The news basically says the border is hot right now, but the local state guards are supporting the National Guard and Border Patrol in hopes of containing it; the border ranchers are in big trouble, but everywhere else is basically the same as here: the big cities are full of protestors and riots, the suburbs are getting dangerous and it’s starting to spill into rural areas. Martial law and curfews abound.”

Geram rocked back in his chair, balancing on the two back legs as he closed his eyes and began, “It’s much worse bro, I’ve seen it myself. The border isn’t hot, it’s on fire; we’ve basically lost soil a hundred miles deep in most places along the border. San Antonio and Corpus Christi are on the front lines of the war, fighting in the streets for their southern suburbs. Fort Bliss is an island surrounded by a sea of hostility. Tucson is behind enemy lines and Phoenix is split in half. People are fleeing north like refugees to places like Houston, Dallas and Albuquerque. Many who have seen the worst aren’t even stopping there; they’re leaving

the border states altogether. The citizens down there are convinced the Feds are willing to cede those states as a sort of pacification. Besides, they say, we can't afford or aren't willing to push back hard enough for these cartels to fear us."

"War? Like a real war?"

"Yep, like a real war except it's on our own soil; but wait, it gets worse." Geram's eyes were wide open now, and he was leaning forward intensely. "We were told that six Humvees had been stolen by the drug cartels from a National Guard armory, and it was our mission to search and destroy. Their last known whereabouts was in Raymondville; that's northwest of Brownsville, not far from the border. We headed south on Highway 77 from Corpus Christi in four M-ATVs on a night run; there were twelve of us. It was eerie; the northbound shoulder of Highway 77 was lined with cars that had broken down or simply run out of fuel. Some cars never made it to the shoulder, people just left them in the highway; like I said, a real foreboding feeling. It looked like I-10 after Katrina, except much worse. The fact that our trucks were completely blacked out and we were viewing these scenes through the green hues of our night vision equipment only added to our unease.

Southbound 77 was wide open, so we made good time to Raymondville. Jake, I swear this is the truth, the sign at the city limits was spray-painted with the words, '*Gringos turn back or die*' and had a pike on each side of it."

Geram paused for a moment as if to collect his thoughts, and continued. "There were heads on the pikes, human heads – Americans' heads. We slowed down to a more reserved

speed and each put a man up top. I was one of the four; you could say we had the best, or maybe the worst, view. I had an M2 Browning; the rest of the guys had M240s.

Mission briefing said to be alert for signs of territory disputes between the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, but that was an understatement. It looked like a war zone: burned cars, buildings destroyed and piles of rubble – in America.

But here's where it didn't make sense to us – we were ordered to stay on our secure frequency. They said several squads had been ambushed after being contacted by English speaking hostiles posing as local farmers or friendly state patrols. Under no circumstance were we to monitor outside communications. The mere thought was simply ridiculous to our squad leader, to say the least; his thought was we might as well be going in blindfolded. It wasn't in his squad's best interest, so it wasn't in his playbook, and we weren't about to argue with that.

Raymondville isn't that big, so it didn't take long to find a good observation point and locate our S&D – that's search and destroy."

Jake interrupted, "I know what S&D is, bro."

Geram chuckled, "My fault; anyway, we stopped on the overpass on the east side of town, and positioned three guns on the southbound lane looking west, straight down Highway 186. The fourth gun was on the northbound lane covering our rear. The place was like a ghost town, so it was easy to detect movement. The drive south had put us all on edge, and we were ready for a pound of flesh for what was happening here. From my vantage point I could see

churches, fast food restaurants, all sorts of stores and shops – it was your typical small town.

My chest was burning with anger. After about an hour, we saw them.

It couldn't have been any more perfect: we heard the gunfire before they were in our line of sight, then several sets of faint headlights. Two small Toyota trucks were screaming east on 186, straight towards us; they were approximately three miles out when we first had a good view. Behind them were four of our six S&Ds in hot pursuit, but losing ground. From that distance, we had a little over two minutes before they would be under us; the two cartels were focused on each other and even if they did see us, it's not like either group would stop trading fire with each other long enough to engage us. We were ordered by our squad leader to hold our fire until they were almost under us; we would then send a wall of lead down at a thirty degree angle and let their momentum push them through it. Any surviving vehicles could be picked off at our leisure on the other side by the fourth gun and small arms fire.

We scanned the radio frequencies and heard what sounded like an exchange between the two groups – fast paced, heated Spanish peppered with expletives that even our translator couldn't make sense of. As they approached, we set our sights as ordered; waiting, waiting – it seemed like a lifetime. Finally, we were given the order to fire; in an instant I had taken a deep breath and engaged the butterfly trigger on the back of the rifle. The world erupted around me in gunfire and explosions, but it took me a second or two to realize that I wasn't firing – I'd forgot to remove the spent brass I had wedged behind the trigger as a sort of safety! By then it was too late, the vehicles were careening under the bridge at varying angles with bellowing smoke, flames and screeching tires.

One of the pickup trucks veered off and slid sideways along the right shoulder of the highway. The truck continued down into the ditch, then up and out as it performed a magnificent flaming barrel roll, aided by a concrete drain pipe's sloped headwall. The second truck spun and almost managed to come to a complete stop in the middle of the highway, but instantly was punted to the left shoulder as the two front Humvees slammed into its side simultaneously. To our surprise the four Humvees accelerated out from underneath us two-wide, straddling the center of the Highway 186. Our rear guard opened fire on the Humvees, but we never imagined what would happen next. A booming voice came across their radio:

'Sheee-yit! We're on the same team!' The booming voice was in that undeniable west Texas cowboy drawl. I immediately felt sick; there was no doubt in my mind we now had American blood on our hands.

Four

William Galleani smashed his first cigarette of the morning in the ashtray, rolled out of bed, crawled along the wall to the blinds and gingerly peaked through; he had absolutely no desire to become a martyr for the cause. He crawled a several feet from the window, before standing and walking the remaining distance to the bathroom. He took a long look in the mirror to size himself up. He was an unlikely leader; he was short and diminutive with the slightest bit of stubble beginning to show on his face and neck. His short, jet-black hair was now all but hidden beneath the micro fleece skullcap as he pulled it snugly onto his head. The dark hair was such a stark contrast to his pale skin; it exaggerated his look of ethereality. His dark brown eyes were deeply set in his skull in a manner that made him look eternally exhausted. After brushing his teeth, he stumbled into the meager kitchen and started a pot of coffee.

William had started SPARC (*Socialists, Political Anarchists, Radicals and Communists*) only five short years ago, and now he was a major player on the new national, political scene. He had speaking invitations at university campuses, and meetings with media moguls - behind closed doors of course; he secretly had the ear of powerful politicians, labor leaders and even several foreign diplomats that represented countries all the way from banana republics, to former cold-war superpowers, to modern-day players.

To be honest, which he seldom was, more of his organization's financial support came from outside of the country than within. His group had exploded on the scene a mere six months ago when the unrest first started in D.C.; while other groups' leadership was apprehensive at first to openly challenge police, SPARC would employ tactics to antagonize the officers into responding with force. SPARC would then flood social media outlets with videos of their agents being beaten while they innocently bleated like lambs; these videos were soon picked up by major media outlets and delivered into the living rooms of America and across the world. These successful tactics led to the cannibalization of other organizations' members and replication by groups in other countries. SPARC's ranks quickly swelled with young radicals of all stripes that were demoralized by the endless marching and shouting they had grown nauseatingly accustomed to.

SPARC now had branches in major cities all across the country, and they were adding to their ranks with each new documented clash with police. His army of revolutionaries was potentially much larger since copycat groups had popped up in the smaller cities where he did not yet have a presence. William had plans for them as well; if they did not assimilate under his wide umbrella of chaos when he came to town, he would use his powerful contacts to destroy them. He credited his charisma and powerful oratories as the source of his magnetism; in a world of revolutionaries and activists as varied as the colors in the spectrum, he had managed to bring them together and focus their energy towards his goals.

Apparently, his allies in congress were much more powerful than even he had anticipated; he had expected a climactic, highly publicized exchange with the federal

government, but they had largely ignored him. A handful of the more radical politicians praised him and were sometimes even spotted at his rallies. Or perhaps America had truly become a paper tiger, shackled by the political correctness of this age. If that was so, it would make things much simpler for him. The local and state governments alone were no match for his agents of revolution; their budgets were already broken, their pensions already drained. All they could do was make idle threats at press conferences while SPARC gleefully burned their cities to the ground. And if the city leaders or police decided to get too heavy handed, SPARC would make a house call and terrorize their families. William did not want complete submission, however; violence feeds violence: a well-defined and visible enemy worked to his benefit.

The coffee gurgled as if to announce it was ready to be poured. William grabbed yesterday's styrofoam cup and filled it to the top. Today was an important day for him; today would be the day they were granted the means to up the ante. The riots had been successful in that they had brought him respect and power, but they had also provided him a platform to leverage so that he could transition to phase two.

There were two types of people in the streets right now, the revolutionaries and the opportunists. The opportunists used the riots as a means to loot; the revolutionaries of course looted as well, but that was not their goal. A paradigm shift was their ultimate goal; a shift to whatever radical ideology that they held dear to their hearts. William needed a third type of person in the street, his opposition; the *constitutionalist* type.

William simply called them the “*opposition*”. There were dozens of derogatory terms out there he could have used, but he preferred to anesthetize them. Therefore, if you have an opposition to your cause, you simply eradicate it. Besides, euphemisms worked better around his more sophisticated supporters, so it was a matter of etiquette to settle on the term.

For the most part, the opposition was nowhere to be seen, actually. The opposition mostly resided in suburban and rural settings and avoided the urban areas at all costs now; those outlying areas were where SPARC was weakest. As long as their property was respected, the opposition stayed home. He expected so much more out of these people; they had been so vocal about rights and liberties, freedom and revolution. Even now, faced with anarchy in the streets and the tightening grip of martial law, they pulled their curtains tight and barred their doors like cowards. Ever the optimists, they hoped to weather the storm, wait for order to be restored, and maybe rebuild their country, but William was not going anywhere, anytime soon. He needed something to strike fear into their hearts, fear for what they believed in; the kind of fear that motivated men to act.

The pre-paid cell phone rudely interrupted his silent contemplation, as it vibrated on the counter beside the coffee pot. He strolled to the kitchen and topped off his cup as he checked the incoming number.

“Yes?”

“Hey, how are things there?”

The pleasantries only seemed to annoy William. He should know by now.

"Fine; how is the procurement process?"

There was a long pause, then, "It's taking longer than we anticipated. Everyone is paranoid; this is serious, Will."

William rattled a cigarette partially from his soft pack and withdrew the remainder of it with his lips. His tone grew sarcastic and abrasive, "*I know exactly how serious this is; I wouldn't have called in my favor to you if it wasn't serious. I am on a timeline and I need you to deliver me some results. No more delays. Now, tell me the status.*"

"Well, the secondary objective is complete and awaiting approval to proceed. The primary objective is still being negotiated. The talks are productive, but like I said, everybody is scared. I think I can have the terms nailed down by the end of this week and the delivery by the end of the following."

He lit the cigarette and took a long drag, allowing the realities of the conversation to sink in.

"That sounds acceptable. Two weeks, not three, not five; two, got it?"

He could hear the relief in the man's voice, "Yes, got it. Perfect. Now, what about the secondary objective; should we execute?"

"Absolutely not; if everyone is paranoid like you say, then that might push them away from the table altogether. Just keep pushing, but don't push them away. Call me in a week; I'll send you my new number."

William smiled as he ended the call and took another long drag of the tobacco. He strolled to the closet and rummaged for a minute before retrieving a dark hoodie and some jeans. News like this called for a celebration; after he pulled on the jeans he checked his watch, it was six o'clock. He grabbed the land line and dialed. The phone rang five or six times before a man's voice groaned from the other end.

"What?"

"Great news, get up. Meet me at the spot."

"What time is it? I went to bed like four hours ago, I think; I was torching storefronts and drinking Jägermeister all night. I don't even want to think about drinks."

"Yea you do; now get up, meet me there in twenty minutes."

Click.

Days like this were what it was all about. He adjusted the Kevlar vest under the hoodie before grabbing his Walther PPS and dashing out the door.

Five

Barrett and Governor Baker pulled out of the heliport, and north onto Channel View Loop in the utility terrain vehicle, a small four-wheel drive buggy that seated four. The area contained by the loop had been cleared of all travel trailers and RVs to make room for the state guards' equipment. The sky was cloudy but still beautiful; the warm, salty air beckoned anyone within its domain to the wide, sandy beaches just east of the pavement. The waves were larger and more violent than normal today.

In another world, the beach would have been saturated with tourists taking surfing lessons, snorkeling, jumping waves on jet skis, fishing the jetty or simply basking in the South Texas sun. Perhaps a wedding would be taking place on the beach behind one of the condos; the bride and groom would be whisked away after the ceremony, leaving the guests to occupy their evening with fried seafood and draft beer at Louie's Backyard – a sprawling bar and restaurant on the water. Today, the only visitors were the gulls and black skimmers patrolling the beaches for unsuspecting sand crabs and fish.

Governor Baker surveyed the six Amphibious Assault Vehicles and Strykers that he had begged from the Marines and Army over a month ago. The Army had loaned Texas ten Strykers and the Marines had offered up six AAVs. The governor had sent three of each to South Padre Island after they were operable. They were in miserable condition when Texas took delivery,

obviously pulled from some repair queue; it took nearly three weeks of working around the clock to get them serviceable. Two of the “amtracks”, as the AAVs were referred to by their previous owners, were still having mechanical issues; fortunately, there were several, experienced, diesel mechanics among the ranks of the guardsmen stationed on the island. The AAVs were equipped with Bushmaster 25mm auto cannons, and the Strykers were equipped with 40mm automatic grenade launchers. The arrival of these vehicles provided a much needed boost to the morale of the fighting men on the island. Before their arrival, all that the guardsmen had were their Humvees, and more recently four MRAP M-ATVs. The official reason for the governor’s visit was to personally deliver the vehicles to the island, but Barrett knew better.

Barrett and Governor Baker had simply shook hands as they were introduced, and had not spoken since he requested that the governor buckle up, prior to pulling out on the road. He knew the governor had not come this far south into a war zone to shoot the breeze with a tired soldier. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably, as he waited for the governor to break the silence. Finally, Governor Baker cleared his throat and casually motioned his hand towards the new vehicles.

“Those ought to make a difference down here Sergeant - ah, I didn’t catch your last name.”

“No sir; we don’t use our names down here. It’s too dangerous for our families. You’re welcome to call me Sergeant or Barrett, and yes sir they will make a world of difference, thank you.”

"My pleasure, Barrett; I'm just sorry it didn't happen sooner."

"I understand sir; there's more red tape than usual, I imagine."

The governor snorted in disgust, "I seem to be surrounded by red tape and at the top of everyone's blacklist. Texas can't seem to catch a break. If it ain't trouble down here, it's the wildfires, or the drought, or the riots, or the Feds; I just don't know anymore."

Barrett nodded in agreement and followed the loop north; they had almost made it back around to the heliport. Governor Baker looked out over the beach to the east and motioned once again, "Turn off here; take us down to the beach."

They turned off the hot, asphalt pavement and onto the wide beach. The small buggy easily managed the sandy terrain, as they turned south to navigate around the exposed oil pipeline that sat audaciously on the beach, and then back north. Barrett drove out to the sand that was saturated from the crashing waves to give them a smoother ride. An occasional rogue wave would crash into their tires on the right side and splash water onto the governor's well-worn, western-style boots. The governor almost seemed to smile for a moment as he spoke, "I used to come here in the off season with my wife. I always loved this place; as you're coming over the causeway you feel like you're leaving Texas; when you see the pipeline on the beach, you know without a doubt you're still here." The men glanced at each other and chuckled.

"This is far enough; stop here."

They had traveled nearly a mile north from where they turned on the beach; they were now parked in front of several large dunes nestled between two vacant resorts. Barrett turned

off the engine so that he could hear the waves crashing on the shoreline. He listened to the calming sound and waited for the governor to speak.

"Barrett, I'm sure you know why I'm really here."

"Yes sir, but you probably should debrief them, or our commanding officer; I don't know how much I can help."

"That'll come soon enough. I wanted to talk to you first." Governor Baker stepped out onto the beach and casually strolled to the water. "So they have been locked up for about ten days?"

"They have been on watch for eleven days, sir. They've had free reign of one of the barracks; they eat what we eat every night, and have a deck of cards and some other things to keep them occupied. We even gave them a radio so they can listen to Radio Lonestar."

Radio Lonestar was an initiative by the governor to get the truth out to Texans, and citizens of neighboring states. The Federal government had effectively nationalized all media outlets and severely limited internet communications. The Feds had complete control over what information was disseminated; talking heads stiffly read from prompts and bantered back and forth in orchestrated displays like wooden marionettes. Radio music stations played loops of their respective music genres without interruption from an on-air personality. Talk radio had disappeared except for a select few public radio outlets. Radio Lonestar had been the first shot across the Fed's bow, in their own minds. Immediately after it began airing, the Feds found excuses to pull funding and military support from Texas. All Federal air support had been

withdrawn from the state and most ground support had been pulled, with the exception of a few strategic locations, such as Corpus Christi. The Feds acted independently and refused to share intelligence with Texas. Except for the support of a few neighboring states, mainly Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, Texas was on its own. New Mexico and Arizona were sharing intelligence with their neighbor, but could offer no logistical or financial support because of their own problems. The states that were helping were mostly doing so to prevent the border disaster from spilling into their territory.

The governor stared out at the horizon for a few moments and then said, "There are only six of them. I was told there were originally twelve; where are the rest?"

Barrett knew the governor's question would come up and had been considering the best way to respond. He had decided that the whole truth without any excuses would be his best route.

"We let six soldiers ride back on a supply boat that had come from Pascagoula. We gave them civilian clothes, their service pistol and their knife; the rest of the gear is here."

"That's an awful brazen decision on the part of this facility, son. I wasn't informed of this decision prior to my arrival. Tell me one good reason why I shouldn't discharge every officer on base, or even worse."

"Sir, with all due respect, we tried for three days straight to contact command control at Camp Mabry. We didn't get a response until day five; by then, they were gone. I know Austin is under a lot of pressure right now, but we're not getting any support; it's like we've been

forgotten. Some of the boys have taken to calling this place Alamo Island, for more than one reason. Our situation is extremely dynamic; we don't have a week or so to make our decisions down here."

"The whole damn state's situation is '*dynamic*' sergeant; I have cities on fire, refugees in the streets and good people are starving and looting. Petro is twenty dollars per gallon; trucks have quit their routes, shelves are empty and now I hear that the Feds may have tried to assassinate Texas State Guardsmen and y'all let half of them go!"

Governor Baker cursed furiously and kicked at the beach. After a few moments of the uncharacteristic display, he carefully removed his aviator's sunglasses and gently wiped the lenses on his buttoned shirt, before placing them back over his eyes.

"Look, I know it is tough down here; we're asking a lot from y'all. I know support from Austin is abhorrent, but please tell me you've more than that as an excuse?"

Barrett squared up with the governor in a respectful, but forceful stance.

"Sir, those men are my brothers, I was a SEAL before I came back home. I spent a lot of time in places that this government will deny I ever visited; I've captured and interrogated people alongside the CIA that are still officially wanted. I lived for the extraction jobs, but interrogation was what I did best. It wasn't the kind of interrogation you're thinking though; I just sat and talked with them, usually before the advanced techniques started. It's the subtle tells that give us away; the words that make our eyes dart away or twitch, that make our breathing change or our pulse quicken. Places, names, dates, I could dissect someone without

ever picking up a scalpel. If you don't believe me, ask anyone here to play me in seven-card stud. Those men had no idea what they were being ordered to do; I stake my honor on that."

"That's a little better excuse." Governor Baker thought for a moment while examining the man beside him, "So, they had no idea Americans were in those Hummers?"

"No sir, as far as they knew the Humvees were stolen by cartels. They also couldn't have known that we had up-armored much of our fleet; had they known that, they would have showed up with heavier armaments."

"Why were they sent, why not just send in an air strike?"

"Well sir, you did sign the ban on all Federal drones in Texan airspace after the incidents in Dallas three months back; plus, the Feds know the border is flush with the eyes of our own drones. Besides, the Air Force has been gone so long they probably reasoned it would raise a red flag to have their jets in the sky. The Feds likely figured that some friendly fire casualties by ground troops could be explained away easier than a calculated attack from high above. That's my speculation, at least."

The incident in Dallas three months back was three Federal drone crashes in one week in Dallas. The Federal government accused Texans of shooting the drones out of the sky. The third crash killed a three year old girl named Amy Montenago and her mother in their loft apartment on Commerce Street. The state legislature drafted a bill overnight that banned all Federal drones in Texas airspace; the local media took to calling the measure "Amy's Law". The Feds threatened lawsuits and the withdrawal of transportation funding, but the damage was

done; the public was outraged. The Federal government eventually relented because their problems were widespread already, and they did not want to risk a confrontation with the wildly popular Governor Baker, who was well known for his fiery speeches on states' rights, and the increasing government encroachment on citizens' rights and lives.

"Sounds like you've thought this through." Governor Baker turned his back and stared aimlessly down the beach as if he were looking for someone or something for guidance. "I swear if this holds up to scrutiny," his words trailed off until they were lost in the sounds of the waves, "we have a so much trouble coming our way, I can't even begin to articulate it."

Barrett took a few steps backwards without saying a word and sunk into the seat of the UTV. He let out a sigh and struggled to find words, but nothing came. The governor slowly turned back around and walked to his side of the small, four-wheel drive vehicle and sat down.

"Let's go."

Barrett cranked the engine and spun the back wheels for a moment, as they struggled for traction. As they accelerated down the beach, the governor looked at Barrett and asked, "But why let the six go? I don't understand."

"Sir, those men forfeited their lives and freedom when they refused to execute their orders, and they knew that. They could have killed us all out there but they chose a more honorable route and will surely suffer for it. All those six men that left have in this world are their families, and we couldn't hold them from that. All the six men that stayed have left is us."

"Fair enough; take me to the men that may have put the *Republic* back in Texas."

Six

Church started at dusk today, but the next date or time would not be set until the end of the meeting tonight. The church council randomly selected their meeting dates and times: Tuesday morning, Friday night, Wednesday evening; sometimes they would just meet at a church member's house instead. Wherever they met, they parked their vehicles out of site of the highway; they were afraid their homes would be targeted while they were gone, so they tried to keep any outsiders guessing. Church was so important in times like these, but it wasn't just the service they came for nowadays; after song and worship, Reverend Lenton would preach a short sermon and then the after-service meeting would begin. The after-service meetings usually lasted about an hour, and mostly consisted of local word of mouth news. Several church members were HAM radio operators, so they were able to bring news from across the country and around the world. The collection and distribution of information had truly become a commodity more precious than many items once considered luxuries in the old world. Communication items as basic as simple as a scanner and a citizen's band radio could detect trouble and rally neighbors to the defense of the community when needed, and save lives.

Jake and Geram had their rifles slung across their backs as they made the final preparations for the short trip to the church. The evening had brought with it unusually cool

winds from the west; the breeze stirred the oak and maple trees in front of the house and warned of the dark, storm clouds that were beginning to gather on the horizon. Jake crossed the short distance between his home and Frank's, as Kate cranked the old four-wheel drive SUV and Geram hopped in the back seat. Jake knocked on the door and yelled, "Frank, it's Jake; you ready?"

Several moments later Frank opened the door, "Ready for what?"

"Church is in twenty minutes; are you and Mrs. Thames still riding with us?"

"Oh, I forgot all about it. I'm not used to the meeting times constantly changing yet, I guess I'm getting old. I'm sorry, son; I already have dinner cooking on the stove. You three go ahead and come back by here after you're done; you can eat with me tonight and catch me up on the news. Besides, that will give me an excuse to eat twice." Frank smiled and Jake chuckled.

"If Mrs. Thames knew of your plans, she'd send you with us and finish dinner herself."

"That's why we're not going to tell the Misses, Jake." They laughed again.

"Okay, Okay; we'll be back in about two hours. See you both then."

As Jake turned and was walking off, Frank leaned outside and said, "Looks like a storm is coming tonight."

"Yea, I think we might get some rain, but the storm is already here Frank."

"I guess you're right."

Jake stopped for a moment and considered his next words as he had a dozen times over the past few weeks; he decided now was as good a time as any.

"Frank, I don't want to offend you; you've weathered some tough things in your life and I know that, but why don't you and Mrs. Thames move in with us for a while? We have plenty of room and Geram and I can put up some more fencing and move all the livestock closer to our house. Our house is much more defensible, and you know Kate just adores you both," Jake shrugged and looked down, "We're just worried about you."

Frank struggled for a moment to maintain his composure before speaking, "I would like that, Jake. Let's talk about it more tonight."

Jake grinned wide and nodded before turning to meet Geram and Kate who were waiting in the road in front of Frank's house. Frank stepped out on the covered front porch and spoke once again, "Jake, thank you. You're more of a son than my own blood; I'm glad you're here."

Jake turned around one last time, still smiling, "That's what we're here to do Frank, take care of our own; we'll see you in a couple hours."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jake thought Reverend Lenton was in true form tonight; tonight's sermon was on the dangers of idolatry. The reverend identified idolatry as a good thing that becomes the ultimate thing. Idolatry causes men to jump out of windows when stock markets crash; it causes men to kick a chair out from underneath them when they lose their job or home. The symptoms of idolatry were everywhere, and Jake reasoned they were likely the cause of much of the suffering in the world around him these days.

After the service, the ladies prepared coffee while the men talked about community wide defensive strategies. This was Geram's first meeting, and the men were particularly interested in hearing the opinions of a career soldier. He rocked back in his chair as he typically did before speaking his thoughts, "We have several strategic points that the community should consider reinforcing, so that we can keep ourselves safer. We have Miller's Creek that crosses the access to us on the north and east. A few miles out to the west and south we have thick forests and some bottoms that stay wet year-round. At the bridges over Miller's Creek, we could take a tractor with a bucket on the front and dig out the highway approaches to the bridges several feet deep. We could do similar to the south and west in the bottoms. The more it rains, the more these cuts will erode and become even more difficult to cross. People could still cross by foot of course, but not with vehicles. I think we could handle a few stragglers if we

organize community patrols, but the organized raids by vehicles are getting out of control. Plus, if we put determined intruders to walking to get to us, they'll be tired before they make it to our checkpoints, and that'll give us one more advantage."

The ladies were just coming in with coffee for everyone as Geram finished his thoughts. Mr. Richardson interjected as the ladies were finding their seats.

"I like your thoughts Geram, but that would completely cut us off from the outside world. We could construct some timber bridges to cross the ditches if we had to, but they would have to be set in place with a tractor; there would be no quick way out of here. I can accept that, but everyone needs to consider what that means for themselves and their families."

An old, wiry man with a long white beard spoke up as Mr. Richardson trailed off, "That's fine by me. I've been talking with some folks on the HAM, and I can say it's only getting worse out there. Cities everywhere are in total chaos as people have ran out of money and have no means to earn more. Food distribution centers are overwhelmed, and the military can barely keep them running orderly. We've got plenty here to last us longer than most places."

A teary eyed old lady spoke up in a grief laden voice, "I agree with Ron, things are only getting worse. I got a call from my daughter-in-law in Baltimore a few days ago; it was horrible, she just cried and cried about how they should have come down here with us. They haven't had power or running water for weeks; their phone service was restored for a few minutes so she was able to make the call, but I guess they've lost it again. She's hearing talk of a dollar

devaluation soon. She said that everyone up there is afraid that the Federal government is going to collapse and then they won't have any food; she said the government is afraid that several states will decide to pull together and leave the union. She doesn't think the government has the capability to handle something like that at this point."

Several nervous conversations erupted from within the group. People discussed violent home invasions that had recently happened nearby, a rash of house fires that could only be arson and the multitude of livestock thefts. A farmer in a dusty ball cap with a blistered red face, from years of working the fields interrupted the cacophony with a booming voice, "I believe it's settled, we do our best to shut ourselves off from this hopelessness; if there's anyone within the sound of my voice that disagrees, I give you the floor now."

Silence.

"Alright, we'll start tomorrow; I'll offer up my tractor to help with the north bridge, is there anyone willing to help with the others?" Several hands shot up from amongst the group. "Good; thank you. We start work first thing tomorrow. We'll need all the help we can get; if you're able-bodied, we could use you. Let's conclude tonight's meeting with a prayer, and plan on seeing everyone again in three days at noon. Be careful; I want all of you back here with us next time."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

In the past, Kate thought he drive home from the church was peaceful and serene; the countryside was mostly cotton, corn and soybean fields, depending on what stage the particular field was in its rotation. When it was not crop fields beyond the shoulder's edge, it was open pastures with Red and Black Angus cattle dotting the flat, green sea of Bermuda grass. An occasional cedar-planked barn or old, brick farm house interrupted the scenery. Barbed wire fencing seemed to go on forever: along the road, crossing fields and surrounding the old farm houses. On any given day, the herds could be seen seeking relief from the heat in shallow ponds, or the sparse stands of oak and pecan trees. Tonight's drive was tense however; any time spent away from the safety of one's home was dangerous now.

Kate captained the old but reliable Ford Bronco, as Jake leaned out the passenger side window with his high intensity spotlight, scanning the sides of the road for trouble or ambushes. They would slow down in front of the farmhouses to sweep the spotlight across the front yard and check on their neighbors. Geram sat in the back seat with the scoped FN FAL .308 rifle, that he had borrowed from his brother, across his lap. The optic was a first generation night vision scope. The moon was waning but was still large and bright enough to provide ample light to compensate for the old technology of the optic.

Jake slowly scanned left and right, squinting for signs of any inconsistencies: tire tracks in an abandoned driveway, an unfamiliar vehicle along the edge of the road - anything that could foreshadow the trouble that may lie ahead. He saw nothing of concern, only the occasional white eyes of a raccoon high above in the trees, or the tiny red eyes of a hundred spiders along the shoulders of the road.

Kate turned onto their narrow, paved back road that had more asphalt patches than original pavement. Jake sighed in relief under his breath, knowing that they would soon be enjoying dinner and coffee at Frank's house, as they discussed the moving arrangements they would execute over the next several days. Kate had squealed in excitement as he broke the news during the ride to church; Mrs. Thames helped fill a void she had struggled with since the loss of her own mother. Mrs. Thames was grandmotherly in nature, and a master of everything from canning to crocheting; Kate was looking forward to spending more time with her "adopted mother".

As they drove under the final stretch of the live oak canopy that enveloped most of their road, Kate slammed hard on the breaks as Jake shouted to stop. A dark SUV was parked in front of the Thames' home with all four doors still open. The Thames' front door was open and appeared to be sagging from the top hinge. Jake switched the spotlight off and fumbled for the AR pistol that was at his feet, as his eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. Geram had already slipped out of the back seat and was getting in position in the ditch alongside the road. Kate switched off the headlights and turned towards Jake for guidance as her eyes began to tear up. Jake leaned over and put his hand on hers as he tried to whisper in his most reassuring

voice, "Baby, I'm going to get out now and go down to Geram. We'll watch the house for a moment and then decide what to do next. I need you to turn around and go to the Richardson's farm; I need you to keep your headlights off if you can, Okay?"

Kate whispered, "Okay," her voice cracking with emotion.

"Good, when you get to the Richardson's, have him send his boys down here on horseback. We might need their help. Stay with the Richardson's until we come for you."

Kate began to gently sob and grasped his hand, "Please be careful."

"I always am; now go, and tell them to please hurry back."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jake wanted to rush forward to the house, but Geram kept urging him to stay for a little while longer. The winds from earlier were growing fiercer now and Geram reasoned the temperature must have dropped five degrees from when they left the church; the rain would be here in mere minutes. Lightning was already illuminating the horizon. He scanned the front of the house slowly with the night vision scope, searching for any signs of movement. He panned to the right of the house and to the left, then over to Jake and Kate's front yard; no movement anywhere.

A single droplet of rain landed on his forehead as he turned and whispered to Jake, "I don't see any movement in the windows or on the side of the house either; your house looks clear also. The right side of the place has only one window, so by approaching from that side you'll have less chance of being spotted by someone inside. I want you to move low and slow, until you reach the front corner of the house; step over the rail of the porch and move along the wall, making sure you move under the windows – not in front of them. Stop when you're about five feet from the front door; once you're in position I will come up behind you. When I tap you on the shoulder you will crouch low and push through the door; at that point I want you to turn on your light, on the front of your rifle, and swing right. I'll have to use my pistol at

that point, so you'll be our primary gun. As I clear the door frame, I'll turn on my pistol light and swing left. Got it?"

Jake nodded and replied, "Got it." The rain was starting to intensify as thunder rumbled in the distance.

"One more thing, you know the house as good as anyone. As soon as we clear the entrance, move us to the next door that will get us through the house the safest without exposing our backs to gunfire. We go room to room and we don't stop until the whole house is clear, even if we find someone injured. We have to save ourselves before we can save anyone else."

"Okay."

"Two quick shots center mass; no questions, no orders, we just engage."

"Understood."

"Okay bro, now get moving."

Seven

Franklin Thames waved to the Bronco as Kate drove off; he turned, walked back into the house and to the kitchen to finish dinner. He took the remainder of the venison tenderloin out of the sink and began to slice it in to quarter-inch thick steaks. He dipped them one by one in yard eggs and fresh milk, then rolled them in flour and gently laid them in the hot oil in the cast-iron skillet. The steaks crackled and popped in the cooking oil as Frank opened the oak cabinet and retrieved a simple but elegant crystal tumbler. He retrieved the tall bottle from atop the cabinet, poured some of the scotch into the glass and swooshed it around before taking a sip. Frank peered out of his dirty kitchen window at the pastures behind his home, as he took another sip of the single malt scotch; he afforded himself only an occasional drink. He would love more, but in times like these you preserved the finer vestiges of life as long as you could.

He selected a fork from the silverware drawer, flipped the steaks over in the skillet and then walked over to the pantry. He searched among the various canned goods and hand labeled jars for several seconds before finally clutching his half used jar of cane syrup. The jar was from a batch that was several years old, and had come from an old friend that had no doubt perfected the syrup making process, or at least Frank thought so. The sweet, cane syrup would go perfectly with the fried steaks he was cooking and the biscuits that Mrs. Thames had prepared and left in the oven to keep warm. He placed the syrup on the kitchen table and

pulled an old brass lighter from his pocket; he flicked the lighter, lit the three large, white candles that occupied the center of the table and sat down.

Mrs. Thames rested her hand on his shoulder to steady herself as she made her way to the stove. She removed the last of the steaks from the skillet and placed them on the platter Frank had used to stack the others.

“Are you cooking for an army, Franklin Thames?” She asked.

“Kate and Jake and his brother are coming by after church tonight. I’m sorry, I forgot to tell you.”

“It’s alright dear. Things have been so different lately it’s easy to forget. I’ll make some more biscuits.” She carried the platter of venison to the table and sat beside him. “What were you two talking about on the porch earlier?”

“Jake asked us to move in with them. One house is easier to keep watch over and he said they would help bring all the livestock up close to his house so they would be safer. I think we should do it, at least until things get better.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea, dear.”

Frank got up to fix them both a glass of water and grabbed a small bowl to pour the syrup in. They ate the few biscuits she had prepared as well as several of the steaks before contently retiring to their living room. Frank reclined in his leather chair and pulled a hand rolled cigarette out of his shirt pocket.

"I might let you get away with smoking in the house old man, but if I've known Kate Sellers a day, I know she will never let it happen in her home."

"Maybe so woman, but I'm not in Kate's house yet." Frank smiled at her as he lit the cigarette and took the first drag.

"You better watch your tone old man, or I'll leave you here all by yourself. Then who'll listen to you bellyache?"

They laughed for a moment, then Frank climbed out of his chair and disappeared into the kitchen; he emerged with two tumblers, one half full and one with just a splash of scotch.

"Here you go, my dear."

"Frank, you know I don't drink."

"I know you don't drink, but this deserves a toast." He handed her the glass. "To a house full of kids, again."

"I suppose I can drink to that, just this once." She smiled as they clinked their tumblers and took the tiniest sip of the caramel colored liquid. "Frank, how do you drink this mess?"

"One sip at a time, my dear. I'm going to finish this glass and take a nap, wake me up in an hour or so, please."

"Alright, I'll make some more biscuits and put up the steaks until they get here." She struggled for a moment to stand, and slowly walked back into the kitchen as Frank finished the scotch in two large gulps, smashed the cigarette in the ash tray, smiled and closed his eyes.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The headlights in the driveway awoke Frank from his nap; he eased out of his leather recliner and walked to the window to peak out of the blinds. The vehicle's silhouette was larger than what he anticipated, but his mind was still foggy from his nap; he stared out of the slit as he tried to process what he was seeing. Four armed men were quietly slipping out of the long, dark SUV and carefully moving towards the front door. His heart jumped and his pulse quickened as his mind finally processed what his eyes were already aware of. He turned and moved towards the kitchen as quickly as his stiff body would allow as he yelled to his wife, "Margaret, hide; we got trouble!"

He heard no response from her as he fumbled in the dark kitchen corner for the lever action carbine he kept loaded and ready. As he found and gripped the steel action of the carbine and pulled it up to his shoulder, he heard something crash against the front door. The reinforced frame and solid wood door held true and bought Frank a few extra moments to gather his thoughts and get in position behind the kitchen counter. He shouldered his carbine and tilted his cheek down and onto the stock, as he steadied his aim through the kitchen doorway that afforded him a view into the living room and at the front door; the front sight was blurry to his old eyes, but the front door was clear as ever as the living room windows welcomed in the illumination of the large moon that hung in the sky. He said a silent prayer

and counted his blessings; an hour later and the moon would likely be hidden by the dark storm clouds that were drifting his way.

As the intruder crashed into the door again, Frank fired two, successive rounds through the door with such brutal efficiency that it sounded almost as if it had been a burst from a semi-automatic rifle; the ancient carbine's action was as smooth as butter as he worked the oversized lever forward, then back, forward, then back. He heard a thud on the porch outside, as a man's voice erupted with groans and curses as he writhed painfully on the old, wooden planks.

Another man tried to lean in and fire into the house with his rifle, but Frank hit him squarely in the forehead; the man never made a sound as his knees buckled and he slid down the wall. Frank heard no sounds except for the high pitched ringing in his ears. He slid the counter drawer to his right open and fumbled with the box of .30-.30 rounds that were inside, while still trying to maintain watch of the front door; he had four rounds remaining in the carbine.

Suddenly a blur of a figure leaped past the opening of the door and almost immediately afterwards a fourth intruder stuck his rifle into the opening and fired fifteen or twenty indiscriminate rounds; Frank couldn't keep count as he laid on the floor, he had dropped the box of ammo as the intruder had started firing and cartridges rolled around him on the floor. He grabbed several rounds and stuffed them in his pockets; he fumbled for several more and pushed them into the opening on the rifle's action.

He watched the drywall explode around him as the intruder's rounds perforated his home. Canning jars burst like bombs and debris flew through the air, as dust and smoke began to fill the kitchen. Frank tried to stand and return fire, but a second volley filled the air around him again. He crawled out from behind the counter and along the kitchen wall, until he reached the threshold from the kitchen to the living room and beyond.

His body ached from the awkward movements that it was not accustomed to; he alternated between trying to count the number of rounds that were fired at him and praying for at least Margaret's life, if not his own. He leaned around the threshold and steadied his rifle at the living room wall beside where the gun appeared from sporadically. As the intruder's rifle swung into sight for a third volley, Frank unloaded all seven rounds into an area the size of a tombstone in the wall, on the left side of the door. He watched the rifle clatter to the porch and lay motionless.

Frank rolled onto his side and coughed in pain; only now did he realize he had been shot in both legs and his left shoulder. Perhaps he collapsed to the floor rather than took cover, he thought to himself. He never saw the figure that was watching him through the back, kitchen window. He struggled to sit up against the wall and catch his breath, but never accomplished his final task. He never felt the high-powered, rifle round as it pierced his skull and killed him instantly.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The stranger smashed the butt of his rifle through the glass pane in the door and reached in to unlock the dead bolt. He stepped into the kitchen in his black western boots and swaggered over to the old man; he patted his lifeless body down and found the hand rolled cigarettes in his pocket. He retrieved one and rolled it between his fingers for a moment before lighting it, as he stepped over Frank and into the living room.

He walked out onto the front porch and looked at the mess that lay before him: two of his help were lying on the porch dead and the third was spitting and coughing up blood. He removed the Beretta from his shoulder holster and rested it against the dying man's head. The man began to sob and beg for his life, but before he could articulate his reasons, the man in the black boots squeezed the trigger. The injured man's now lifeless body collapsed on the porch.

His boots were noisy as he walked down the porch and peaked around the corner to Jake's house; no sign of anyone home. This had turned into a full-on damn mess, no question about it. He took one final drag of the tobacco and tossed the remainder of it into the yard. He reckoned it was time to find the old woman and force her to open the vault; if she refused, he would just have to kill her and open it by himself.

He strolled back into the living room and down the hallway; his boots were loud on the old, pine floor. He let fingernails on his left hand scrape against the hallway wall as he walked; he pushed the doors open with the tip of the rifle's barrel and swept the interior rooms before

proceeding. The man in the black boots smirked as he reached the final door of the long hallway and stepped inside.

She was sitting in an ancient rocking-chair in the far corner of the room; it had been her grandmother's once, long ago. The craftsmanship was apparent; it was built to withstand the tests of time. The walls around her were covered with hand-made crafts of her own and her foremothers; in her lap rested a beautiful, half-finished quilt. She wore a baby-blue dress with a pattern of smiling, little, yellow chicks; she had made two others just like it for her sisters. Sometimes they would all wear their dresses while they were out together; the complements they received about the outfits from strangers always made her smile.

The man in the black boots had forced his presence into their home and killed the man she had loved for the better part of her life. A man who could be hard and rough because his life had been; but always tried to be gentle with her. This intruder had taken the spiritual leader of their home, and for the first time since she could remember, she felt rage; but this man who had destroyed their life was in *her* room now.

They never exchanged words as she pulled the trigger of the cocked, snub-nosed .38 revolver that she had concealed beneath her quilt. The muzzle blast burned the fabric, as the hollow-point bullet punched through the quilt and violently tore through muscle, before fragmenting violently as it collided into the man's upper left pelvis. He groaned in pain and took a short step back, before finding support on his right leg; he raised the rifle to his shoulder.

Her arthritic hands struggled painfully to re-cock the revolver, so that she could fire again. She gave up and straightened her posture while leaning defiantly toward him, as the barrel leveled with her chest. He fired three times into her and she slumped awkwardly; in her final breath, she saw Frank waiting with an outstretched hand, and she smiled.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The man in the black boots cursed and coughed, nothing was going as planned. Church was tonight and the old man and woman were supposed to be gone. He sat on the bench and leaned against the old wooden piano to regain his composure; his pelvis throbbed and his pants were beginning to stain crimson from the blood. After several minutes of rest, he stood again and hobbled out into the hallway to try his luck with the vault.

As he turned the corner into the hallway and looked up, a giant, dark blur sailed through the air and collided with his chest; he shrieked as the creature sunk its sharp fangs deep into his cheek and then his neck. The momentum from the collision propelled him backwards and back into the room. A hot pain he had never experienced before pulsated throughout his face; as he fell backwards he dropped the rifle and it clattered about his feet in the hallway.

Sasha growled and continued to rip at the intruder's face in a primal display of pure rage. The man struggled to pry her from his face with his hands, but she refused to relent. He mustered all of his remaining strength and arched back on his shoulders; he worked his boots under Sasha's chest as best he could. Suddenly, he pushed as hard as he could with his legs; Sasha growled and snapped at the air as she sailed backwards into the hall. She landed with a thud and was momentarily dazed. With a quick motion, he spun and grabbed the bottom of the door; as he pulled the door shut, Sasha wedged her head between the door and the frame.

As he pulled the door with his hand, he kicked Sasha in the center of her face. She whimpered and stumbled backwards as the door slammed shut in front of her.

The man in the black boots rolled on the floor in agony as he tried to gather his thoughts of what to do next. He could hear the beast still in the hall, snarling and scratching at the door. He touched his face and neck to gauge the damage and immediately recoiled in horror; bits of bloody meat hung in tatters from his cheek and throat. He crawled to the corner and grabbed an old, wooden cane that was propped against the wall. He steadied himself between the cane and the piano, as he lifted himself up to his feet. He hobbled over to Mrs. Thames and flung the quilt on the floor in a heap. He pried the revolver from her hand and then turned around as he made his way to the window.

He tumbled from the window onto the mud and grass below, and wheezed as the hard landing expelled the air from his lungs. He weakly limped to the corner of the house to make his way back to the safety of his SUV; when he peaked around to the front, he saw a figure slowly and purposefully moving towards the house. He cursed under his breath and turned back to make his way to the thick woods and deep swamp beyond the Thames' pasture.

Eight

Jake did not notice the bodies on the front porch until he had already pressed himself against the wall of the house; they were hidden from the view of the ditch, and he had been focused on the windows. He cursed under his breath for not noticing sooner. He carefully climbed onto the porch and slowly moved along the wall, just like Geram had instructed; he ducked under the windows and planned his steps purposefully to avoid making any unnecessary noise. Jake could feel his heart pounding in his chest and the adrenaline coursing through his veins; he did not have the combat experience of his brother, so he had to focus very hard to remain calm.

As he reached a point on the wall several feet from the door, he pressed his back against it and listen for any sounds from within the house, but heard nothing. He watched Geram as he drifted like a ghost towards him; Jake was amazed at how his brother moved within the shadows. At times he would catch a glimpse, only for Geram to disappear again. Knowing his rear was covered, Jake rolled to face the door, and any trouble that may be coming their way.

Jake stared at the three bodies that lay at his feet. Someone, most likely Frank, had done quite well. He hoped against hope that Frank was still inside somewhere, perhaps tending to a superficial wound; he knew the odds were against his old friend, but he refused to

entertain any other thoughts. He noted the military style weaponry the men carried and thought of the old lever gun that Frank likely used; he was amazed at the damage Frank had managed to inflict.

Jake was momentarily startled by the tap on his left shoulder before realizing it was Geram. Geram leaned in close and whispered softly, "Swing right, whenever you're ready."

Jake crouched low as he felt his brother lean in and steady his pistol over Jake's left shoulder. Geram had slung his rifle across his back; the magnified scope would be difficult to utilize in the confined spaces of the house. Jake counted to three, rolled around the door frame, into the living room and to the right. Geram swung left immediately behind him; they moved through the door as if they were a single living organism.

Jake stayed low as they moved through the living room, past the large stone fireplace and towards the kitchen. Geram followed closely behind as he fixed his pistol on the hallway to their right. They stopped for a moment along the interior wall that separated the living room and kitchen. Jake noted the bullet holes that riddled the wall around them; he tilted his head back and mouthed, "*Frank*", and then motioned with his head towards the kitchen. Geram nodded and then considered the situation; if they called out and indicated their presence, they would compromise themselves to anyone else remaining in the house. If they did not, and Frank was indeed in the kitchen, either he or they could be shot; neither scenario was desirable. Geram looked down at Jake and shook his head no; they had to take their chances with the kitchen.

As they swept into the kitchen, Jake's heart sunk as he saw Frank's body on the split-brick floor. He dropped to one knee and placed his hand on Frank's shoulder, but he knew from the head wound Frank had died immediately. Geram grabbed Jake by the collar and pulled him back to his feet; he shook his head *no* again and pointed to the rest of the house. They had to ensure their own safety; mourning would have to come later.

Once they were back in the living room, they prepared to perform the same clearing maneuver into the hallway. As they readied themselves for the motion, they heard a low growl emanate from somewhere at end of the hall. It grew louder as the beast moved up the hall towards them; they could hear the echo of its claws as they scratched the wood flooring in the hall. Jake held up his fist to Geram as if to say, "*Hold*"; he hoped it was indeed Sasha. They slowly backed away from the threshold and crouched low to give themselves some standoff room for the encounter.

As Sasha bounded into the room, her fierce growl turned into a high pitched whine; she sprung at Jake and knocked him off balance and onto the large rug that rested in the center of the room. As she licked his face and neck, Jake forgot about Frank for a moment and smiled with relief; Geram walked over and dropped to one knee to rub her head. He whispered to Jake, "If she was in that hall waiting quietly, I doubt there is anyone left in this house. We should still be careful, though. Can you make her stay here?"

"Yea, she will stay."

"Okay, let's finish off the house."

Jake whispered a command in Czech to Sasha and she plopped down on her haunches and stared at the front door, waiting patiently for her next order. The men stood up and once again prepare to clear the remainder of the house. In one fluid motion they cleared the hall, then each room along the hall until they had come to the final door. They noticed Sasha's claws had scratched nearly all of the paint off the bottom half of the door.

Jake grasped the door knob as quietly as possible and turned it until it refused his motions; he held it in position until they were ready to rush the room. As he shouldered into the door and pushed it open, he swung right once again and noticed her body. His heart sunk in sorrow, as he realized that his worst fears were indeed reality; both people that he had cherished as if they were his own mother and father were now dead far before their time. He gently laid her slumping body out on the floor and covered it with her partially finished quilt.

Geram dropped down to one knee beside Jake and whispered, "Bro, I'm so sorry for all of this; Frank and Mrs. Thames. I can't imagine the loss you're feeling; but whoever did this is still alive, look at the window."

He pointed his pistol at the window so that the light would illuminate the broken glass and blood stains. Jake shouted another command in Czech and Sasha bounded into the room instantly; he spoke again and she rushed to the window and began to inhale the blood scent. She turned, rushed out of the back room and down the hall. The men readied their weapons and followed after her.

As the three burst out of the house, they were met by Levi and Eli Richardson on horseback. The twins had been nervously waiting in the heavy rain for Jake and Geram. Levi called out to the brothers, "How bad is it?"

Jake ordered Sasha to stop then responded, "They're both gone, Levi."

"God help us. What about the people that did this?"

"We think at least one of them is still alive, maybe more; they went out the back window. We're going after them."

"We're right behind you, lead the way."

Jake once again called out to Sasha, and she continued around to the back of the house. As she reached the shattered back window, she planted her nose in the mud and blood where the man in the black boots had fallen. She growled menacingly and followed the trail towards the northern woods line.

Levi and Eli dismounted at the first barbed wire fence, leaving their horses to search for shelter from the storm as they continued forward. Sasha was nearly twenty feet ahead of the men now, her pace quickening as the blood became more abundant. At the second fence, the men found a chrome, snub-nosed revolver lying in the mud. Eli reached down and grabbed the small handgun with a leather, gloved hand and pushed it into the oversized pocket of his raincoat. Levi stepped on the middle, barbed-wire strand with his boot and pushed down hard, while lifting up with his left hand on the top strand, allowing the other men to duck through the fence.

The rain was now falling at nearly a forty five degree angle, as the winds gusted around the men. Lightning struck somewhere behind them and the boom of thunder followed immediately after; they could hear the horses' nervous whinnies. The few trees in the field, leafless and bare, looked like angry, gnarled claws in the flashes of lightning.

The men's boots sloshed on the saturated ground, their hair was matted to their foreheads and their clothing clung to their drenched bodies. Suddenly, up ahead, Sasha stopped abruptly; her growl intensified as she began to circle a heap in the field beyond her. Geram crouched and peered through the lens of the night vision scope; he motioned everyone ahead.

Jake made it to Sasha first and gently rubbed her head while whispering, "Good girl; good girl." He walked beyond her several feet and stood over the man's body.

Eli was right behind Jake; he dropped down in the mud and checked the pulse of the man in the black boot's neck, "He's still alive," he croaked.

"Good." Jake struck the man's rib cage with his boot with all of the strength he could martial. The man groaned and coughed as he curled up to protect himself from a second blow.

"Jake! You can't do that!"

"Why not? Isn't this the least that he deserves, Eli?" Jake struck the man as hard as he could again.

"Jake! Enough!" Levi wrapped his thick bicep around Jake's throat and dragged him away from the man on the ground, "That's not how we do it, Jake. You know that; we're not like him."

Eli rolled the man over on his back and exclaimed, "Damn, look at his face – what did that?"

Geram replied as he walked up behind the three men, "Probably Sasha; she was in the house when we got there. Lord, she got him good."

The man's face was barely recognizable, but Eli leaned in close with his flashlight nonetheless. He studied the features for a second before whispering, "It can't be."

"What? Who is it?" His brother replied.

"This is Sam Coleman; from across the creek. He has the orchard over on Smithtown Road. He must have known that church was tonight and thought we would all be away. He, he looks pretty bad; he's lost a lot of blood. I'm not sure that he'll make it."

"Good," Jake replied, "Let him die."

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Sam Coleman died in the field not long after they found him. The Richardson twins carried Sam out of the field and laid his body across the back of Eli's horse. They carried him to the Thames' front porch and left him with the other bodies. Mr. Richardson had already sent notice to the sheriff, and he was expected in the next day or so; he was on the other side of the county investigating another home invasion that had gone horribly wrong.

Jake and Geram shook hands and exchanged farewells with the twins before leaving for Jake's house. As they walked back home Jake finally broke the silence between them, "I'm sorry about how I reacted back there, it was out of my character."

"You don't owe me an apology; I probably would've done much worse."

"Maybe I don't, but I still feel the need."

"Look brother, I know this is new for you. You're doing better than I did the first time I lost someone; I know the full weight of it hasn't come to bear yet, but it will, and you'll find some way to cope. The important thing is you've realized your mistakes and you're remorseful; that man, Sam, he lost his direction. A year ago, if you would have told him he would be dead in a field because he violently attacked his neighbors, he probably would have thrown a punch at you."

“I thought this place would be different than other places. I thought people here would stand by each other.”

“I don’t know if anywhere is truly safe anymore.”

“We can’t stay, not anymore. This is going to hit everyone hard; trust will be lost. We might as well be on our own.”

“You’re right.”

“Three days; for three days we’ll try and get some rest and gather together as many supplies as we can. We’ll honor Frank and Mrs. Thames, have a service. After that, we leave.”

“Where do you want to go, Jake?”

“The only place I can think of that might be safe.”

Geram smiled and nodded in agreement as he draped his arm around Jake’s neck.

Please visit Amazon for Part 2 & 3 of the Western Front, and the sequel, Kratocracy.