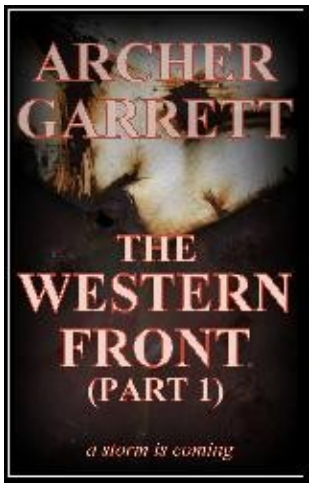
the WESTERN FRONT (Part 1 of 3)

By : archerg

Darkness has descended upon the world; the fabric of society has been torn asunder, sovereign nations collapse under their own burdens, once stable governments are ushered into revolution and allies of old are thrust into war. The tentacles of darkness have inevitably traveled across the Atlantic and are now tightening their grip on the American republic. Now, faced with a collapsing economy, a failing currency and a society that is swiftly casting its humanity aside, the United States stands at the precipice of a bedlam and malevolence not witnessed since the fall of Rome.



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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 authorâ s imagination or are used fictitiously; any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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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

Questions and comments can be sent to: acotwf@gmail.com

Visit me on the web: www.acotwf.blogspot.com

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The south Texas sun had long since been replaced by the full harvest moon, but the dayâ s arid temperatures had not yet fully retreated.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 Guardâ 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 soldiersâ 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 homeâ 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 ownerâ 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 unitâ 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.

â 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 donâ t need any surprises. Weâ ve lost too many squads already, and I am particularly partial to this one.â

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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 ancestorsâ 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 vehiclesâ 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 guardsmenâ 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 trucksâ beds were filled with silhouettes of riders and their easily recognizable AK-47 rifles. He climbed back down into the Humvee as he said, â Our scouts were right Barrett; they ainâ t cowboys.â

Barrett keyed his radio and tapped his finger against the microphone twice slowly and twice quickly â 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, â Go, go!â 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 trucksâ 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 nightâ 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 vehiclesâ 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 trucksâ beds. Barrett keyed up his radio again and spoke to his squad in coded Spanish.

â Itâ s okay, let them pull off some, Iâ d rather not have AK rounds flying at us. Letâ s see if they lead us somewhere; if they get too far ahead, weâ ll just use the Miniguns.â

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 Humveesâ radio squawked to life, â Barrett, weâ ve got company at our twelve on the 77 overpass; they look like Humvees, but smaller. Maybe MRAPS?â

â Yeah, I see them. Those boys are a long way from home; Iâ ve seen Federales a few times, but no U.S. military south of Corpus Christi in months. Letâ 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 donâ t scare them back to Corpus, then maybe they will be worth having around.â

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 radioâ 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, â Everybody ready up top?â Two *affirmatives* echoed back at him almost in unison. â Hold for my order.â 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 highwayâ 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 â 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 â unless, no â impossible, he could plainly see the markings on the vehicles from this distance.

Seven seconds.

They were obviously U.S. military. Werenâ 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.

Barrettâ s stomach was floating in his chest by the time he keyed the mic again; he couldnâ t risk the chance, and the time was now. â Up top, back in the Humvee, now! Order! Now!â 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.

â Shee-yit! Weâ re on the same team!â

No response.

â 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.â

The airwaves were again momentarily silent, until a man finally responded, â Oh my God; sir, do you have any casualties?â 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, â All clear, Sir.â

Barrett engaged the squad leader again, â 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.â

â Affirmative, sir; weâ re coming down.â

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 coffeeâ 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 societyâ s pendulum were almost always met with a near-equal and opposite force, but the cultureâ 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 societyâ 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. Frankâ 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, Jakeâ 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.

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

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

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

â Ten, but I expect them to be gone before much longer, if I donâ t make provisions to bring them in closer to the house. I donâ t have the manpower to watch the livestock and defend the house.â

â 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 didnâ t even realize he was there until the next morning; everyone was too afraid to go outside.â

â Yeah, I heard about that. The sheriff showed up and took the body, but they didnâ t even collect shell casings, nor do a proper investigation. Son, theyâ re trying damn hard to stem the tide and losing ground every day, weâ re on our own out here.â

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 Frankâ s children. The two had met through a realtor friend of Frankâ s; she knew his situation: Frank needed the liquidity to continue running the farm, but didnâ 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: â Youâ ll know the right buyer when you meet him â and when you do, send him my way.â And so she did; Franklin Thames and Jake Sellers had a longneck and a long talk befitting old friends in Frankâ 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, Jakeâ s house was unusually close to Frankâ 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. Thamesâ locally renowned pecan pies in return.

Jakeâ 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 peoplesâ expected quality of life.

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

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

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.

â What are you two trouble makers staring at?â 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.

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

â Oh hush!â she quipped, still smiling, â I look like a wreck; save your smooth talk for when you need it!â 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 Jakeâ 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. Jakeâ 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. â Kate youâ re too good to this man; bacon, eggs and home-grown blueberries â you got a sister?â

She laughed, â Yes I am and you know sheâ s married, Geram.â

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

â Youâ ll have a plate here as long as you want it,â Jake added. He finished his first egg, then continued, â Mr. Thames lost a calf last night to some poachers; they field dressed it in the pasture and left what they couldnâ t carry, or perhaps fit in an ice chest. Did you see anything last night on your watch?â

â I had a dark SUV creep by us and the Thamesâ 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.â

Jake nodded, â The only vehicle that I saw on my watch had the same description; they came by around 4 oâ clock, but they werenâ t creeping.â

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

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 boysâ cups and left them alone as she went to feed Sasha some scraps.

Jake pushed his plate aside and leaned forward, eyeing Geram, â Itâ s been two days since you showed up. They donâ t let you just drop in on family for several days while youâ re in active duty. You ready to talk yet, SEAL?â

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 Claytonâ 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 *â Sâ* 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 700â 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 â mud motorâ . He leveraged the boatâ 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 Claytonâ 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 space eyes on the water, staring back at him. The alligatorsâ 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 sunâ 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 sloughâ 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 lakeâ 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 Mosesâ head and whispered â See anyone, boy?â Moses stood up on the bow and sniffed the sweet night air, before turning back and climbing over the drywell. â Me neither, maybe next week; letâ s head home.â

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As they made their way back home, Claytonâ 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 â 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 â easyâ 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 wasnâ 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 wasnâ 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 â 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. Claytonâ 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 Claytonâ 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 staircaseâ 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 Mosesâ 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 Mosesâ nose first, as he suddenly pushed off with his back paws and bounded up to the top. Clayton laughed as he caught a whiff, â Boy, if you eat any more, Iâ ll have to leave you here next time.â 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.

â No sign of them yet, hun?â

â No maâ am.â

â Theyâ ll turn up soon enough; come on in, I have fresh cornbread and catfish.â

â Mmm, you sure know how to end a bad day on a good note.â He dropped a catfish filet in Mosesâ 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, â Listen to this:

â But when they said, â Give us a king to lead us,â this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: â 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.â

Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, â 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. â But the people refused to listen to Samuel. â No!â they said. â 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.â

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. The Lord answered, â Listen to them and give them a king.â â

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, â Do you think we asked for this?â

â I know I didnâ t.â

â Thatâ s not what I meant, you know that. We the people; society. We.â

He rubbed his scraggly beard and thought for a while before finally answering. The playful demeanor from earlier was gone, â Iâ m not sure; if we didnâ t ask for it, we sure beat around the bush with Him, though. If you believe in the Lord, you donâ t go acting like we have for the last hundred years or so without knowing youâ re pissing Him off. If you donâ t believe in Him, you still donâ t go acting like we have without knowing youâ 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.â

â Maybe weâ re supposed to live through it. You and I and the family.â

â Maybe so, babe. Iâ 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?â

â No, I donâ t believe you did.â

â Well it was, perfect. I love you; letâ s get some rest.â

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, â Tell me what you know about Texas and the border.â

â 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 itâ 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 itâ s starting to spill into rural areas. Martial law and curfews abound.â

Geram rocked back in his chair, balancing on the two back legs as he closed his eyes and began, â Itâ s much worse bro, Iâ ve seen it myself. The border isnâ t hot, itâ s on fire; weâ 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 arenâ t even stopping there; theyâ 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 canâ t afford or arenâ t willing to push back hard enough for these cartels to fear us.â

â War? Like a real war?â

â Yep, like a real war except itâ s on our own soil; but wait, it gets worse.â Geramâ s eyes were wide open now, and he was leaning forward intensely. â 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; thatâ 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, *â Gringos turn back or dieâ* and had a pike on each side of it.â

Geram paused for a moment as if to collect his thoughts, and continued. â There were heads on the pikes, human heads â Americansâ 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 â in America.

But hereâ s where it didnâ t make sense to us â 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 wasnâ t in his squadâ s best interest, so it wasnâ t in his playbook, and we werenâ t about to argue with that.

Raymondville isnâ t that big, so it didnâ t take long to find a good observation point and locate our S&D â thatâ s search and destroy.â

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

Geram chuckled, â 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 â it was your typical small town. My chest was burning with anger. After about an hour, we saw them.

It couldnâ 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, itâ 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 â fast paced, heated Spanish peppered with expletives that even our translator couldnâ t make sense of. As they approached, we set our sights as ordered; waiting, waiting â 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 wasnâ t firing â Iâ 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 pipeâ 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:

â Sheee-yit! Weâ re on the same team!â 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 etherealness. 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 organizationâ 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 groupsâ 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 organizationsâ members and replication by groups in other countries. SPARCâ 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 yesterdayâ 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 â *opposition*â . 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.

â Yes?â

â Hey, how are things there?â

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

â Fine; how is the procurement process?â

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

William rattled a cigarette partially from his soft pack and withdrew the remainder of it with his lips. His tone grew sarcastic and abrasive, â *I know exactly how serious this is*; I wouldnâ t have called in my favor to you if it wasnâ t serious.

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