

PROLOGUE

*R*ing. Ring.

The time was 7:40 A.M. I reached for the phone.

“Do you have your axe?” came the voice on the other end. It was Mad Dog.

“Yes.”

“Is your axe sharp?”

“No, but I can sharpen it while you’re driving here.”

“How about your knife?”

“Got it.”

“Everything needs to be nice and sharp.”

Fuck, I’m supposed to kill a goat today. And I couldn’t even kill the spider in my room last night. Really. Sadly. I just put a drinking glass over it, covered the opening with a saucer, then set it free outside. I’m a victim of my own empathy. I wouldn’t be too happy if someone squished me flat, so it seems cruel to do the same to another living thing.

Fifteen minutes later, Mad Dog pulled up in a weathered blue Dodge Ram 3500 truck with skull-and-crossbones floor mats and a lone bumper sticker depicting a gun sight next to the proclamation THIS IS MY PEACE SYMBOL.

The goat peered curiously at me from a beige dog cage in the

back of the truck. It was much cuter than I'd expected. It had a wide smile, silky white fur, and a gentle disposition. I began to feel sick.

Symptoms: dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath.

I turned away. I didn't want to pet it, befriend it, name it, or grow attached to it in any way. If I did, there was no way I'd be able to go through with this.

My girlfriend Katie, whom I'd brought along for moral support, felt the same way. "Oh my God—it just *baa'd* at me," she squealed in delight and horror. "I can't look. I'll fall in love with it."

So much for moral support.

"Is this wrong?" I asked Mad Dog as we drove into the forest in grim silence. "I need a moral justification for doing this."

"This is the circle of life," he answered coldly, without sympathy. He was thin, with ropy muscles, a receding hairline, piercing blue eyes, and a brown handlebar mustache. His hat was emblazoned with the Revolutionary War slogan "Don't tread on me," and his sleeveless T-shirt advertised his handmade knives.

"Every steak you bought at Safeway started out looking like this," he continued. "If you need a rationalization, you're hungry and you need to eat today. And if you want to eat, something has to die." Then he leaned forward, flipped on his stereo, and blasted AC/DC's "Kicked in the Teeth."

Unlike me, Mad Dog was a real man. He could chop wood, make fire, forge weapons, kill his own food, and defend himself with his bare hands. In other words, he could survive on his own—without Commonwealth Edison, without AT&T, without Exxon, without McDonald's, without Wal-Mart, without two and a half centuries of American civilization and industry.

And that's exactly why I was with him right now, crossing a moral boundary from which there was no return.



“Help me look for a good hanging tree,” Mad Dog ordered as he stopped at a clearing deep in the forest and turned off the engine.

Every moment, this felt more and more like a Mafia execution. In the distance, I saw a deer bound across a clearing and disappear into the forest. It was such a strong, beautiful, graceful animal. I didn’t think I could ever shoot one.

Unless Mad Dog told me to.

After finding the tree and throwing pigging rope over a branch, we returned to the truck and stood at the rear bumper next to the goat cage. “This is your protein source.” Mad Dog began his lecture. “Right along its neck is its carotid artery. You’re going to straddle the goat, push your knife through from one side to the other, and cut out the throat. Then we’re going to hang it, skin it, and butcher it.”

Symptoms: dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath, self-disgust, guilt.

He let the goat out of the cage and put a leash around its neck. It walked up to me and nuzzled its head against my leg. Then it stepped away and peed and shat on the ground.

“The more waste it passes now,” Mad Dog said, “the better.”

This was when reality set in. I felt, in that moment, like I was going to hell. The goat was able to handle a leash. It waited until it was out of the cage to relieve itself. It was practically domesticated. I didn’t have to kill it. I could always ask Mad Dog if I could just keep it as a pet.

“Don’t anthropomorphize your prey,” Mad Dog barked when I confided this to him. “Most animals won’t piss and shit where they lay down.”

“I’ve been trying not to get attached,” I told him. “That’s why I haven’t given it a name.”

“I have,” Katie blurted. “I named it Bettie. B-E-T-T-I-E.”

“When did you do that?”

“When she fluttered her little eyes at me.”

That was the last thing I needed to hear.

Symptoms: everything, nothing, complete and total panic.

I wasn't sure I could go through with this.

I was wearing an olive baseball cap, a matching army shirt, khaki cargo pants, and a gun belt with a Springfield Armory XD nine-millimeter on one side and a three-inch RAT knife on the other. This wasn't me. Until a month ago, I'd rarely even worn cargo pants or baseball caps, let alone guns or knives.

Why, I asked myself, was I about to do this?

Because I wanted to survive. This is what people did for protein before there were farms and slaughterhouses and packing plants and refrigerated trucks and interstate highways and grocery stores.

I never thought the day would come when I'd have to make a backup plan.



A BRIEF CONFESSION

I've begun to look at the world through apocalypse eyes.

It usually begins in airports. That's when I get the first portent of doom. I imagine explosions, sirens, walls blown apart, bodies ripped from life.

Then, as I gaze out of the taxi window on my way home, I see people bustling around on their daily routine, endless rows of office buildings and tenements teeming with activity, thousands of automobiles rushing somewhere important. And it all seems so solid, so permanent, so unmovable, so absolutely necessary.

But all it would take is one war, one riot, one dirty bomb, one natural disaster, one marauding army, one economic catastrophe, one vial containing one virus, to bring it all smashing down. We've seen it happen in Hiroshima. In Dresden. In My Lai. In Rwanda. In Baghdad. In Halabja. In New Orleans.

Our society, which seems so sturdily built out of concrete and custom, is just a temporary resting place, a hotel our civilization checked into a couple hundred years ago and must one day check out of. It's an inevitability tourists can't help but realize when visiting Mayan ruins, Egyptian ruins, Roman ruins. How long will it be before someone is visiting American ruins?

That's how the world looks through apocalypse eyes. You start

filling in the blanks between a thriving city and a devastated one. You imagine how it could happen, what it would look like, and whether you and the people you love could escape.

Of course I don't want it to happen. Hopefully, it will never happen. But for the first time in my life, I feel there's a possibility it will. And that's enough to motivate me. To motivate me to save myself and my loved ones while there's still time.

I don't want to be hiding in cellars, fighting old women for a scrap of bread, taking forced marches at gunpoint, dying of cholera in refugee camps, or anything else I've read about in history books. I want to be writing those history books on a beach far away from the mess that self-serving politicians, crooked CEOs, and committed madmen are making of the Western world.

I want to be the one who gets away. The winner of the survival lottery.

I didn't always think like this. But then again, I was naive. I belong to the American generation that believed it was beyond history. Collectively, nothing bad had happened to us like it had to every generation before. Those who came of age in the first twenty years of the century had World War I. The next twenty years were marked by the Great Depression. The following twenty years began with World War II. The next generation inherited Vietnam.

And then, from 1980 to the close of the century—nothing. Or at least no war, no national catastrophe, no defining event powerful enough to pull us outside our self-centered, solipsistic world, outside our preoccupation with ourselves and our financial and emotional well-being, outside our comfort zone.

But then, swiftly and without warning, it happened.

History happened to us.

Terrorist attacks. Natural disasters. Domestic crackdowns. Economic collapse.



I can't tell you the exact date along the way I lost faith in the system, because for me there were five of them, each chronicled in the section that follows. And over the course of this gradual awakening—which perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, covered the span of the Bush administration—I decided to equip myself with the tools necessary to survive whatever politics and history threw at me next.

By the time the Obama administration stepped in with a message of hope and change, it was too late to undo the damage. Because I now know that, even in America, anything can happen.

Preparing myself for hard times has been an incredibly challenging task, because some people were born tough. I wasn't. My parents live on the forty-second floor of a seventy-two-story building in Chicago. They didn't camp, hunt, farm, cook, or even fix things themselves.

As for learning skills after leaving home, I spent most of my adult life as a music writer for the *New York Times*, so I can tell you anything you want to know about rock and hip-hop, but nothing about repairing things or building fires or defending yourself. In fact, I've never even been in a fight in my life, though I have been mugged twice.

In short, if the system ever did break down, the only useful skill I really had was the ability to write about it. Perhaps, at best, I could talk someone with practical knowledge into helping me out. Or maybe they'd just mug me.

But that wouldn't happen anymore. Today I can draw a holstered pistol in 1.5 seconds, aim at a target seven yards away, and shoot it twice in the heart. I can start a fire by rubbing two pieces of wood together. I can identify seven hundred types of footprints when tracking animals and humans. I can survive in the wild with nothing but a knife and the clothes on my back. I can find water in the desert, extract drinkable fluids from the ocean,

deliver a baby, fly a plane, pick locks, hot-wire cars, build homes, set traps, evade bounty hunters, suture a bullet wound, kill a man with my bare hands, and escape across the border with documents identifying me as the citizen of a small island republic.

When the shit hits the fan, you're going to want to find me. And you'll want to be doing whatever I'm doing. Because I've learned from the best.

You can call me crazy if you want.

Or you can listen to the story of the eight years it took to open my eyes, realize my country can't protect me, and do something about it.

It just may save your life.

