The After War

Sample Chapters

Brandon Zenner

Chapter 1

Brian and Steve

**B**rian Rhodes cracked open the solid steel trapdoor of the bunker, using his shoulder to carry its weight as he stepped up to the next rung of the ladder. A rush of warm, dusty air sucked down the entry chute, pulled in like a vacuum from the plank-board shed built to conceal the shelter door and the two men who had been hiding below ground. Brian kept his pistol at eye level as the metal door creaked, and a horizontal slit of light—real sunlight—hit his eyes for the first time in over two years.

Adrenaline and fear pumped in his chest, distracting him from that first breath of fresh air. The loose wooden floor of the shed lifted as the trapdoor opened and fell off to the side, disturbing the settled dust that covered everything in that tiny room. Particle clouds rose, the motes illuminated in the strips of sunlight shining through the slats of the wooden walls. Brian stifled back a sneeze.

At the bottom of the landing, Brian’s cousin Steven Driscoll stared upward, gripping the sides of the ladder.

“What’s up there, Bri—”

Brian hushed him with a shake of his open palm and continued up the ladder until he was standing outside. Carefully, he rested the heavy trapdoor against the far wall of the shed.

Brian looked down the entry chute to Steven at the bottom. He knew that five minutes ago, the only thought going through Steven’s mind had been the complete and utter fear of facing whatever unknown nature of humanity might remain outside that bunker door. Now his cousin looked panicked as the filtered light reflected the sheen of sweat on his forehead, his body tensed, as if the all-encompassing blackness in that room was squeezing him toward the exit. Steven’s eyes darted over his shoulder in the direction of the one piece of equipment they had not shut down entirely—the walk-in freezer. The red, glowing light from the switch illuminated the far wall. Steven seemed frozen, transfixed.

*Not the time to be thinking about what’s in there,* Brian thought.

Steven shuddered and turned to the ladder. He was halfway up when Brian hissed down to him.

“The gear, Steve. Pass the gear.”

Steven jumped to the landing and hefted the first, and then the second military-issue backpack up the passageway to Brian’s waiting hands. The large backpacks barely fit through the narrow opening with all the detachable pouches filled to the brim and the secondary detachable scout backpacks stuffed with the essentials.

The blackness of the bunker crept over Steven’s hands as he shoved the packs through the circular opening, briefly cutting off the sunlight from the outside. Brian saw that look in his cousin’s shadowy eyes, as if the darkness was seeping into his body and being filtered into his lungs from the air he breathed.

Brian was still heaving the second dark green backpack from the opening as Steven hurried to the mouth of the ladder, his broad shoulders and chest pinched momentarily at the narrow, circular entrance before pulling himself free.

Steven’s eyes were darting about the walls of the shed like those of a caged animal. For a moment, they were both silent, listening to the wind outside and the occasional chatter of birds far overhead. They pressed their faces to the cracks between the plank walls, blinking their eyes at the outside world, but all they could see were slivers of the vast fields beyond.

“All right then,” Brian whispered. “You keep lookout. I’ll cover the hatch.”

Steven swallowed and nodded.

Brian closed the metal door and turned the circular locking handle on the top. He grabbed a rusted length of chain hanging on the far wall among other rusted tools, wrapped it through the handle and an eye-loop bolt, and padlocked it shut. He placed the floorboards back in position, covering the stenciled diagram of an octopus that was etched into the top of the hatch door. A hammer and box of nails sat on the workbench where he had left them all that time ago.

A silky sheen of dust had settled over the handle, and when Brian brought the hammer down, the noise made Steven jolt. He turned to Brian. “Can’t you do that any quieter?”

Brian didn’t look up. His cousin was dumber than the box of nails rattling beside him as he hammered away. “What you seeing out there?”

“Ain’t nothing to see.” Steven turned back to the slat in the wall, and Brian continued hammering until the floorboards were secure.

When he’d hammered the last nail, Brian stood and dusted off his knees. “Give me a hand here.” He walked to the end of the workbench and took hold of the far corner. Steven grabbed the other end, and they carried the cumbersome piece of furniture over the hollow floorboards. Not that they had any desire to ever go back down into that underground room, but the sanctity of that place had to remain a secret … just in case. Plenty of food and water still remained in the storage room, and for all they knew, the outside world was nothing more than a burnt-out shell—the rivers dry, the soil infertile, and humanity wiped from the pages of existence like wet ink smeared over by a thumb.

They hoped and prayed that that was not the case. Not entirely, at least.

“You ready?” Brian asked.

“Hell, no.”

They grabbed their packs and hefted them over their shoulders, feeling the weight pull at them. Steven had his Winchester shotgun—passed down from his father—attached to the webbing of his pack, and Brian had his scoped hunting rifle attached to the webbing on his own pack. Both of these weapons had wooden stocks and were the only weapons in their inventory that were not jet-black and designed for warfare. They each carried identical assault rifles on tactical shoulder slings, and each also holstered a pistol. Spare magazines and ammunition for these weapons were stuffed in pouches and attached to their belts and gear. Most of their equipment was military issue and had never been fired.

Only moments ago, as they readied themselves to depart the bunker, they had traded in their well-worn jeans and flannel shirts for olive-drab jumpsuits, shin-high black boots, elbow and kneepads, and tactical vests. Brian thought the seams on Steven’s jumpsuit were going to bust as he watched his cousin wrest it over his burly chest, his bear-paw hands fumbling with the zipper. Brian’s own jumpsuit felt snug, but he was nowhere near his cousin in stature.

They were late leaving the bunker. The date on the calendar came and went. Brian had crossed it off with the big black marker and then both men just stood and stared at it.

“We gotta get moving,” Brian had said.

Steven nodded, and then added, “We ain’t ready.”

As time passed, it had become obvious they would never be truly ready to leave their lavish bunker. Despite spending two years underground and feeling on the verge of insanity, their bunker had carpeting and fluorescent lighting, separate bedrooms with real beds, and a TV with a video game system. The kitchen and living room were at the very center of the bunker in a domed room with cylindrical arms reaching out in separate directions—like the octopus logo on the trapdoor—to the various bedrooms, generator area, and storage.

As far as underground shelters went, theirs was indeed luxurious. All the same, Brian and Steven had not seen the light of day for more than a fraction of a second—that one time they *had* to open the hatch door. It was time to come out of hibernation to face the road ahead, and complete the task they had promised their Uncle Al they would take care of.

They crouched by the shed door, assault rifles armed and ready. They were clean in their new army jumpsuits, freshly shaven with rough-looking red faces, their hair trimmed short. Steven’s dark-blond hair was already plastered to his forehead with sweat.

Brian turned the handle of the door and pushed. The flimsy plywood bent in the middle, stuck at the bottom.

“It’s the vines there,” Steven said, pointing to the weeds protruding through the wooden slats. It took several shoves, along with a few hacks with Brian’s combat knife, until the door swung open.

The rush of air that hit their faces was laden with a southern dampness, smelling of wildflowers and the live oak trees covered in dangling moss that grew all over the property. Brian looked to the sky for the sun he so longed to see and feel, but the expansive heavens were overcast with rolling gray clouds.

They stood in the middle of a vast plain. In the distance was Steven’s house, where Brian had lived with his cousin for many years. An old plantation home, it had been passed down from generation to generation, until it was handed over to Steven. The luster and charm it once radiated was lost after the death of Steven’s parents, when he took up residence and failed to maintain the responsibilities of homeownership.

The house looked dark and cold on the horizon, a whispery building lost among the weeds and gray sky.

Brian turned to see the longing in Steven’s eyes. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “We ain’t going.”

Steven stared at the house—his house. The large picture window facing the valley was gone. Even from his distance, Brian could see the gentle inward and outward flutter of a large black tarp, perhaps a garbage bag, constructed to cover the window opening. There was a mound of something on the back porch that looked charred. This was not how they had left it.

Steven had that look that Brian knew so well. He was seeing red, but fear and uncertainty kept his anger from boiling over. Maybe all that time spent in solitude had given Steven the ability to control his anger, quell the tide of rage that so easily overtook him. Brian wasn’t so sure. How many fights had Brian pulled Steven away from throughout their lives, only moments before his cousin killed the other person? Brian couldn’t even guess. Once Steven would calm down, he’d go on to explain, “I just see red. All I see is red, and I can’t—I don’t think.”

*If he makes a charge for the house,* Brian thought, *I can’t stop him.*

Steven spat in the windswept grass. “I know we ain’t going. I don’t wanna go.”

“Let’s get on then.”

Brian patted his breast pocket, a final check for the folded weatherproof map. The route east was marked with a permanent felt-tipped marker. It was the route Uncle Al had traced for them over two years ago. Steven had a similar map folded in the breast pocket of his tactical vest, and he took it out and looked it over. Brian doubted his cousin could discern much from the lines and colors—he had once got lost walking to a bar one town over.

The two men stood up from their crouching position in the tall grass, turned from their old house, and began their trek into the unknown.

Chapter 2

Simon Kalispell

**S**imon’s qi was all out of whack.

It was time to go. It was time to leave the cabin.

But the fear of leaving the safety and security of the wilderness was a difficult obstacle to overcome. Although, due to recent events, the safety and security of the cabin was not as assuring as it once had been. The perimeter had been breached, and Simon was now *sure* that he was not the last person left alive in the world. Two years of absolute seclusion, deep in the woods of British Columbia, had made young Simon Kalispell believe all sorts of things.

He paced back and forth between the cabin and the van, his eyes darting this way and that, looking for things he might have forgotten to pack. He had been doing this, pacing back and forth, for over an hour, and the van was as packed as it was going to get.

“Winston! Winston, where the hell are you?” He clapped his hands and whistled. “Winston, you idiot. Come on, boy!” Then he remembered he’d put his dog in the passenger seat of the van ten minutes ago. He turned to see the half-Shepherd mix peeking his head through the window at hearing his name.

“Oh, right,” Simon said.

They stared at each other for a minute. Winston was panting against the window, his brown eyes wide and his tongue drooping over the side of his mouth. When Winston realized Simon didn’t actually need anything, he went back to lying down on the passenger seat, leaving the window foggy and smeared.

“Okay, okay ... what else do I need?” Simon began pacing again, pawing at his scraggly beard with jittering fingers, and then stopped mid-step. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

*Christ, I’m all out of whack.*

He took another deep breath and began repeating his mantra:

*I am the wind. I am the rock. I am the tree, and my roots grow deep ...*

He repeated this to himself over and over, feeling the grass under his feet, the brisk breeze through his beard and long hair. He wanted desperately to go down to the stream, take his clothing off, sit under the moss-covered pine tree—the one with the depression at the base that fit his body so well—and breathe and focus. It had been ages since he’d felt this sort of anxiety, this fear and panic, and it felt awful. He did not want to get into that van and turn the key. He did not want to leave the glory of nature behind and face the certain horrible realities of the world.

But he had to leave. Especially after last night.

The woods had told him it was time to go.

He had to listen.

Simon took two long and slow breaths, feeling the cool air touch his nostrils as he inhaled. His lungs expanded down to the pit of his stomach, and he held his breath to absorb every molecule of fresh oxygen. Then he exhaled in a whisper, feeling the warm air pass over his lips to be released back into the endless supply of flowing air all around.

He opened his eyes, walked toward the van, and opened the door for Winston. “Come on, stupid. Out. Let’s go.”

Winston, with his right ear raised and the left one floppy, looked at Simon with a cocked and furrowed expression that seemed to say, “What? I was sleeping.” But the old dog lumbered out of the car as instructed, and stretched his back while yawning. Simon scratched the patch of dark fur next to his ear, and then Winston lumbered off to his usual sunny spot on the grass.

Simon watched him sniff the ground and walk in circles until he settled and twisted into a ball. His big brown eyes closed, and Simon noticed that Winston’s fur had lightened over the past few months. His coat was mostly brown, with a lighter patch on his belly, and a few patches of black fur in random spots. Lately, the fur around his mouth and face had become riddled with white and gray.

“We’ll leave in an hour. I promise,” he called to Winston, who didn’t stir.

Simon walked into the woods. He followed the stream until he arrived at his spot—his pine tree—and extended his hand to touch the rough bark, feeling the patches of soft fleshy moss against his palm. He swung his M1A scoped rifle from his shoulder, rested it against the tree, and then unbuckled his belt and coiled his holstered pistol on the ground. Then he removed his flannel jacket and T-shirt, and stood as steady as the trees all around, his body as skinny and hard as a thin birch. Plummets of steam escaped with his breath as he watched the water flow down the narrow stream. He stood tall, hands by his side, palms out, letting the wind from above the water cleanse every inch of his body, rejuvenate his skin, and renew his resolve.

*Breathing in, I see the wave come in. Breathing out, I see the wave go out. Breathing in, I see the never-coming-in and the never-going-out of the water as a whole.*

A moment passed as he contemplated this mantra, which he’d spent countless hours pondering, and then he bent to the stream. He dipped his hands into the frigid water and splashed handfuls of it over his face and beard. Despite the cold, Simon could feel the coming of spring in the air and water, and that made him all the more reluctant to leave.

Two winters alone, stuck in the cabin—once for almost two weeks straight, trapped inside by the snow—was maddening. He had faith in his ability to hunt and gather edible plants, but it was foolish to believe he could master nature. Controlling the environment was out of his hands.

This last winter was long and harsh, with the snow coming down in an endless supply. When the snow finally broke, and Simon tunneled his way out the bedroom window to the top of the snowdrift that almost entombed the entire cabin, his stockpile of food had been largely diminished. The fresh meat and jerky were down to the last few meals, and there were only a few bags of grain left, along with several boxes of emergency rations.

He caught and killed a small marmot with a snare trap the second day out, skinned and cleaned it, and roasted it whole. He fed Winston the scraps, and the dog devoured the flesh and bones entirely. Winston had been living off a scoop a day of fire-dried vegetable kibble left over from the previous year’s harvest, before the winter overtook the garden. The dog’s desire for meat had been ravenous.

The cold water on Simon’s face reminded him that he was in the present moment, and that it was not wise to stress over what may come in the future, or what might have already passed, no matter how painful or uncertain those thoughts may be. Future events will happen as they unfold, and the past cannot be accounted for.

His reflection in the water stared back at him, distorted with the light rippling. Simon unsheathed his Buck knife and tested the blade against his thumb. It was sharp enough to shave. He grabbed the tuft of his beard in his fist, and gently, without yanking, cut a handful away, dropping the scraggly hair in the water where it drifted out of sight.

When he had gotten his beard as short as possible with the knife, he used a pair of nail scissors to cut the hair down to his skin. He repeated the process with the hair on his head, methodically, until it was as neat as he could make it. When he finished, he washed his face, and the coldness of the water on his vulnerable skin was shocking. Even the air from the slight breeze made his cheeks and neck tingle and sting. His reflection over the moving water looked different. Younger, maybe, although he still looked much older than his mid-twenties. His reflection reminded him of his youth, and that living in the wilderness had a way of making his years on the earth irrelevant.

The face looking back at him was a face he barely recognized.

It was hard to remember what he had been like before fleeing to the woods. He was soft back then, well fed. Living in the wild had reshaped him, made him lean and strong with a sinewy strength.

He leaned his back against the tree and sat with folded legs. He focused on his breathing, but the sensation of the breeze hitting his newly shaven face felt funny, and it was hard to stop touching his tender cheeks. Laughter was hard to suppress, his mind and body fighting the meditation.

This went on for some time until Simon realized that the laughter itself was the meditation he needed. A weight had been lifted off his chest without him even realizing it, and his mind had shed some of the clutter that fear and uncertainty had poisoned it with. He put on his shirt, jacket, and holster, shouldered his rifle, and started toward the van.

“Winston! Come here, dummy. Come on, boy.”

Winston poked his head up from his coiled position, stood and stretched his back, and then lumbered toward the van. Simon opened the door, and Winston jumped in the passenger seat. Simon cracked the window and decided to take one last tour of the cabin just to be sure nothing was left behind. Again, just to be sure—although he was positive nothing was.

The axe was no longer stuck in the large chopping log, which meant it was packed. *Check*. He opened the door to the cabin and looked at the barren living room and kitchen. He already missed the magnificent cast-iron stove in the living room, which kept the cabin warm during the most frigid of nights. As he walked past, he let his fingers glide over the cold metal. How many nights had he warmed his hands before the radiant heat of the thick metal sides?

The first thing Simon had done when he arrived at the cabin over two seasons ago was drag the mattress out of the bedroom and into the living room, across from the cast-iron stove. There was no sense wasting wood to heat both rooms, especially in the dead of winter when trekking outside was dangerous and difficult. Before the winters hit, Simon filled the majority of the bedroom with chopped wood, from floor to ceiling. The remainder of the bedroom he used for food storage, since the room remained significantly colder than the rest of the cabin.

He had pried up several floorboards and dug out the earth below until the hole was large enough to fit the small refrigerator on its back with the doors swinging upward. The cold emanating from the ground did a good job keeping the interior chilled, and animals and insects could not get inside.

During the winter months, he gathered snow from outside the window and packed it around the edges of the refrigerator. The meat inside would freeze and remain fresh for as long as he replenished the snow.

Simon checked the spare room, opened the refrigerator door, checked the pantries in the kitchen, slid open the drawers, but found nothing that he needed.

He removed the stack of photographs he had tucked in the breast pocket of his shirt, and flipped from one to the other. His free hand slowly contracted into a fist, and his heartbeat quickened. He tucked the pictures back in his pocket, buttoned the flap, and walked out of the cabin.

*This is it. It’s time to go.*

The small moving van was the kind used by contractors and construction workers. Words on the side said, *Kalispell Sports*,but the letters were painted over and could only be seen up close.

Simon slid the side door open and took quick inventory. All the food and perishables, including the few boxes of canned goods and meal replacement bars—mostly expired—were all raised several inches off the floor of the van by improvised risers that Simon had made out of logs, sticks, and some bricks he found in a pile behind the cabin. He touched the carpeted floor. It felt dry.

Two fifty-five-gallon steel-drum barrels were tied against the sidewall. The bottom of one barrel was corroded and rusted to the point of near bursting with a fragile bump the size of a golf ball sticking out from the side.

Simon had removed the tarp covering the van several weeks ago when the snow had finally melted, and when he slid the side door open, the pungent vapors of gasoline flooded his nostrils. The smell was so appalling that he gagged and covered his nose with his shirt. Three of the four barrels had corroded, and two of them had cracked at the base, causing gasoline to dribble out during the winter months. Nearly a hundred gallons of fuel had soaked through the carpet and trickled out to the ground.

Seeing the empty barrels frightened Simon to his core.

The reality that he might be stuck in the deep woods of British Columbia, almost three thousand miles from home, without any fuel, scared him more than anything he had yet witnessed. It was the deciding factor on whether or not it was time to go. Seeing the human tracks, only a few hours fresh and just a half-mile outside of camp, was frightening enough. And actually *seeing* people pass in the woods just a week later had been horrifying. Awful-looking people, draped in ragged cloaks, and so rancid that Simon could smell their caked-on gore from where he hid high in a tree. The thought of being truly stranded, with such loathsome wanderers coming about, gave him nightmares.

He rechecked the two remaining barrels. A blanket was folded in a square and duct-taped to the side of the corroded bottom of one of them. It was the best he could do, and he hoped to God that the barrel would hold long enough for him to use the remaining fuel, or transfer it to another barrel. But even if the barrel did hold, two drums of fuel would not be enough to get him home. He would have to do the one thing that he had planned specifically *not* to do—scavenge. And even if he did find fuel, there was a real chance that the gasoline would be spoiled. His own barrels were past expiration, and despite them containing large quantities of stabilizers and the barrels secured airtight—until the recent leak—the fuel could stop powering the engine at any moment.

Simon couldn’t let his mind wander to such thoughts. His fuel was still burning, and he would have to take his chances with anything he could find on the road.

The back of the van was packed and secure to the best of Simon’s ability. He slid the door closed and went to the driver’s side. Winston lifted his head as he entered, and Simon could hear his tail wagging against the seat.

“Good boy, Winston.” He scratched the dog behind the ears, and Winston panted and licked at his hand. “I hope you’re ready, because I’m not.”

Simon dug the keys from the smallbackpack he kept on the floor below Winston. The backpack was loaded with just enough supplies to survive if he ever had to make a run for it. He called it his “get the hell out of Dodge” bag. He put the key in the ignition. The engine rattled and revved, and after a moment, sputtered to life. Simon watched through the rearview mirror as clouds of dark blue smoke rose from the muffler. To keep the battery charged, Simon made sure to start up the van every few weeks to a month, and never did the engine disappoint. It was a good van.

He continued staring at the rearview mirror, lost in a trance. The smoke rose and dissipated in the air, flooding his memory with visions from when he had first entered that van, departing from home into the unknown: the smoke rising from the brick-lined driveway in that early morning, the frost beginning to melt as it twinkled over the windshield, his father holding his mother in her robe and slippers as she cried into his shoulder. The sun was barely up ... and Simon had driven away.

Winston barked, and Simon came back to reality. Five minutes had passed. Simon took a deep breath, feeling the rattling of the motor through the steering wheel, and he shifted into drive.

“Hope you peed before, because you’re not getting another chance for a while.”

Winston wrinkled his nose and sat up in the seat to stick his panting face out the window. Soon, the van was lurching over the overgrown dirt driveway that would take them to the highway.

Simon had scouted the path earlier that day, cutting back overgrown branches and moving a few large rocks that he did not remember being there when he first arrived. But still, the road was rough, and every bounce made his heart skip a beat. He paid close attention to the damaged barrel in the back, smelling the air for the pungent odor of fresh gasoline, and listening for the sounds of trickling fluid.

The van crawled into the woods. Simon’s gaze was drawn to the reflection of the cabin in the side mirror as it became obscured from sight behind trees and brush, until the structure he had called home for the past two years disappeared. It was just as before, only this time, his mother and father were not standing behind him, watching him leave. This time they would be waiting for him to arrive—he knew it in his heart. They just had to be.

With the cabin out of sight, all that remained was the road ahead. When he came to the highway that intersected the long dirt driveway, Simon put the van in park and climbed out. He removed the branches used to cover the entrance and peered out over the sweeping interstate, listening to the wind.

The roadway stretched on for miles in either direction, up and around large and small hills, seemingly endless. Nothing stirred. No movement at all. Sticks, leaves, and branches littered the pavement, and Simon thought it was possible that the road had not been traveled upon since he’d first arrived.

Back in the van, he checked the rounds in his rifle, and then did the same for his Colt .45. He laid the rifle and pistol on the console between the two seats.

Then he put the van in drive, moved forward several feet, and stepped out of the van again to replace the branches covering the entrance to the dirt driveway. He looked back one last time before returning to the idling van.

“This is it, boy—now or never.” He looked at Winston. “How about some music before jumping in, hmm?”

On his drive there, Simon was glad to have found an old company cell phone with a collection of music on it, since he had forgotten to bring music himself. The music was classical, which Simon didn’t mind. It reminded him of his father. The blaring of horns and the sharp keys of pianos were constantly bellowing through the closed door of his dad’s office in the mansion he’d grown up in overlooking the Ridgeline River.

The phone’s digital display read *Beethoven: Sonatas & Concertos*. Violin Sonata No. 5 came through the speakers. Simon pushed *Next* until he heard the shrill, telltale violin introduction to Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No. 9. He closed his eyes and took in the music like a plant absorbing the sun.

“All right, Winston. Let’s go.”

The van inched to the edge of the highway, and Simon looked both ways once more. Still, he saw nothing. He realized he had turned on his blinker out of habit, and flicked it off.

“No need for that, Winston,” he said and turned left on the highway, traveling eastbound. His hands were trembling on the wheel.

The road before him was long and straight, and thick on either side with rolling hills covered with tall, lush, green pine trees, cedars, junipers, hemlocks, spruce, and firs.

Simon’s vision was bright with fear, and his whole body began shaking and sweating as he drove back into the world.

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