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# WEEK ZERO - THE NEW BEGINNING

Stronghold Book Three

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## Chapter 1

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Tuesday, 5:30 AM  
Near Moccasin, Montana

**W**ith a flashlight, Deacon Hale did a final check on the supplies he'd stowed in the back of the Ford pickup. He hated how much of the success of this mission (and there was no doubt he had started to think of it as exactly that: a mission) depended on the reliability of a vehicle that was older than he was.

The previous evening, after his pregnant sister-in-law Louise and her friend Sandy Kaplan had gone to bed, he, along with his brother Roger, and Bob Timmer and his wife Karen had collected the supplies he'd need. Efficiently, Karen had organized food: a dozen hard-boiled eggs, two boxes of granola bars, a box of instant oatmeal, a jar of peanuts, plus all the chicken tenders that Louise had purchased at the Burger Barn the previous day. There was also an industrial-sized thermos of coffee.

Deacon flashed the light around the rest of the supplies he'd stowed behind the truck's bench seat. Along with the food, there were four one-gallon jugs of water, three sleeping bags and a tarp. Four five-gallon cans of gasoline had been strapped down in the truck's open bed, but Deacon had wanted to put everything else inside the cab, away from prying eyes. Karen had found some random winter gear her grandchildren had left: hats, gloves, and an extra jacket. On the very top of the pile, there was also a Vanguard deer rifle and a box of shells.

Deacon looked back at the food, frankly worried sick. The supplies were not generous. If he found Lori Dovner and her children in a hurry, it was enough to get there and back to the Timmers'.

If the truck continued to run.

What if the truck didn't make it? What then? Deacon was an experienced operator, a professional soldier who was forced to meet stringent physical training requirements on an on-going basis. He could steal a bike. Hell, he could cover thirty to forty miles a day on foot if he had to. But once he had Lori and the children? He looked at the supplies Karen had assembled. Enough food to get him there easily, and enough more to cover maybe one day on the road. If they were on foot for any significant period of time, they wouldn't make it without more food – a lot more food. Deacon knew that if his own caloric intake dropped below 1500 calories per day for any length of time, his performance would decline fast.

Roger walked up carrying the last can of syphoned gasoline, with Bob Timmer following. "You've got twenty gallons," he said, "plus a hose and funnel in the tool kit." They had debated whether to carry more, but they were starting with two nearly full tanks in the truck – almost twenty gallons, and Bob Timmer had said he thought the gas mileage would be closer to fifteen a gallon than ten. With the trip calculated at slightly under 300 miles, they should have plenty of gas. Plus, with

abandoned cars everywhere, ironically, extra gas was probably the one thing he did not have to worry about.

“Hand me the flashlight, son,” said Bob.

Deacon did, and Bob spread a worn paper map out of the driver’s seat of the truck. “That road atlas you have doesn’t show all the roads,” he said. “I found this in the glove box of Karen’s car.” From all appearances, the large road map of the state of Montana that Bob spread out by the light of the flashlight was at least thirty years old, the fragile paper tearing at the folds. Bob carefully opened it to expose the area he wanted to show Deacon. “I marked this for you.” With a gnarled farmer’s finger, he traced a route was outlined with a yellow highlighter. “Biggest problem you’re going to have, as I see it, is there just aren’t too many places you can cross the Yellowstone River. You can cross on 191 at Big Timber – obviously you know that. Next place to cross is almost thirty miles east, here, at Reed Point. And then, another ten miles east, at Springtime, the interstate itself crosses the Yellowstone. If you get in trouble on 191, either going down or coming back and you can’t cross in Big Timber, you’re going to have to find another place to cross. No two ways around that, and I’d say your next best option is Reed Point. Now, the road north from there is probably terrible – might even be gravel in some places – but you still should be able to get home mostly on back roads.” He folded the fragile map and handed it to Deacon. “Roger told me the gal might be running from some trouble. Back roads might be your best bet, if it comes down to it.” He touched an open area on the Montana map. “I’ll tell you one thing: out here, you’re not going to have to worry about anyone stealing the truck.”

The morning light was starting to rise, and in the cold air, Deacon realized he could now see his breath and the other men now without the flashlight. He flipped it off, had to save

the batteries. Had to, he reflected, start saving just about everything. "I'm sorry if we're bringing trouble to your door."

Bob reached out and put his hand on Deacon's shoulder. "Don't worry about it, son. You just get that lady and her kids here. Once you all are here, ain't no way on the planet anyone is ever going to find them." Bob's expression grew serious. "Then, maybe we can talk about our daughter and her family. In Billings? My wife..." Bob Timmer paused for a long moment. "My wife is setting quite a store on what you said last night. About being able to find 'em. Our littlest grandson is only three months, and..." Timmer's voice thickened with emotion.

Deacon had no desire to tell Bob Timmer the truth, which was that getting to the rest area and back to the Timmers' home in the ancient truck was going to be difficult enough. He could not even imagine how he was going to get into a big city like Billings, and get a family out on foot. Still, Deacon realized, it was best to be prepared. "Do you know their address?"

"What?"

"The address. Where your daughter lives."

"I thought you said..."

"I did," Deacon interrupted. "I have every intention of getting Lori Dovner and her family, and then getting back here just as fast as I can. But you never know what might go wrong, and if somehow, I end up in Billings, it would be best to have it."

"Good thinking," Bob said thoughtfully. "I'll get it for you." He went back up the porch steps, passing Roger on his way down the stairs. Deacon walked around the truck and carefully tucked the map into the glovebox. Roger came up next to him and handed him his side arm. "Two side arms, and a rifle," he said. "You should be fine."

"And Miller has a hunting rifle," Deacon responded. "He said so. I am thinking only two of us can shoot anyway."

Roger snorted. “You don’t think Lori went to sniper school?”

“Doubt it.”

Roger’s voice grew serious. “She’s tougher than you think, Deacon. I spent the last five years not liking her much, but,” he exhaled heavily, “I guess we’re all past that now. If it comes down to protecting her kids, you might be surprised.”

“I won’t be surprised. She put ‘em in a car and drove almost three thousand miles in a week.” Deacon slammed the passenger door. In spite of everything, in spite of the fact that it had been nearly six years since he’d any contact with her, her inexplicable rejection still made him angry, and he couldn’t resist one small jab. “From all reports, she does pretty well on her own.”

Roger obviously heard the subtext. “Deacon...” he said a warning tone in his voice.

Deacon ignored him. “I got this, Rog. She’ll do what’s necessary, of that I have no doubt. And so will I.”

The front door of the house opened again, and Bob Timmer came out, silhouetted from behind by the glow of a kerosene lamp. Wordlessly, he slipped a scrap of paper into Deacon’s hand.

Roger reached out and clapped a hand to his brother’s shoulder. “You take care, brother,” he said.

Deacon, a veteran of more tough deployments than he could count, had no time for emotion or long goodbyes. “I’ll be back before you know it, Roger. I swear I will. And meanwhile, like we said, you get every scrap of food down at your house and bring it up here.” Deacon gave his brother the same advice they’d given Bob Timmer the previous day. “Don’t wait. After what we heard on the radio last night...” Deacon’s voice trailed off. “I’m telling you. Don’t wait.”

“I won’t,” Roger responded quietly, and without another word, Deacon slipped the old truck into gear.

7:15 AM  
Harlowton, Montana

“Wake up, sir,” Jonas Miller’s voice came into the cab. “Deacon, wake up. We’re coming into Harlowton.”

Deacon opened his eyes, instantly alert. On pure instinct, he reached down, touched his side arm, and then scanned the road ahead. Nothing.

After picking Jonas up at the school in Hobson, they had decided that, if the roads were clear, Jonas would drive. Deacon, between organizing supplies, syphoning gas, checking the firearms, and packing the truck, had not put his head onto the pillow until well after 2:00 a.m.

And then, as much as he didn’t want to admit it, thoughts of the woman he’d known briefly six years earlier had haunted him. For the first year or two, when he’d met a woman at a bar or gotten to know another female officer, inevitably his first thoughts were always to compare her to Lori. Then simultaneously, he would be forced to tamp those thoughts down. She was out of his life, probably forever and he had to accept that. Somehow, over the last year or two, that toxic thinking had finally stopped, and he had actually had a relationship that lasted nearly a year. He and the woman had eventually parted ways, but when they did so, he could honestly say it had nothing to do with residual feelings for Lori. Yes, it had taken awhile, but what he had told Roger was true: he had pushed her from his thoughts nearly completely.

But not last night. The stresses of the day and the uncertainty of the next had piled on. Lori’s inexplicable rejection of him was suddenly as raw as it had been nearly six years earlier.



And now, if all went well, he'd see her again in just a few hours. As much as he knew he had to push personal drama aside and focus, once he hit the sack, he found he couldn't. He'd tossed and turned, barely dozing before his alarm went off at 5:00. "Welcome to the next evolution," he'd muttered, angry with himself. If there was one thing he knew from training, you ate and slept when you had the opportunity. Three hours of sleep was not much, but it was a whole lot better than zero hours, and he'd squandered the opportunity to get it.

When Jonas had reported that he'd fallen asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow on the cot at the shelter, Deacon realized the smart move was to try to catch a bit of shut-eye in the car. In spite of what had happened hours earlier, in general Deacon was efficient at sleeping anywhere, including, it appeared in the cramped front seat of a rattletrap fifty-year-old pickup.

The sun had come up, it was clear and beautiful, and Highway 191 was flat as pancake. Jonas had assured Deacon he'd wake him if they saw anyone, and Deacon knew it was in his best interest to trust the younger man. While there were certainly Army infantry soldiers Deacon wouldn't trust to tie their own shoes, Miller had been Airborne. He'd spent the last five years jumping out of airplanes and learning how to survive once you hit the ground. Leaving Jonas with instructions to wake him the instant he saw any sort of trouble, he'd crammed one of the sleeping bags between his head and the window and let himself drift off.

The truck was quite literally their lifeline. As much as Deacon wanted to get to the rest area, his concerns about the truck were never-ending. This was a classic vehicle, Timmer had explained. One of his sons liked to take it to classic car shows and "cruise-ins," and because of that, it had been maintained to highway standards, at least in theory. Deacon had checked, and the tires, at least, were relatively new and one

thing he didn't have to worry about. That didn't mean that some of the belts and hoses weren't decades old. This truck, Bob had explained, had power steering and power brakes, one of the first years that Ford offered these options. While the systems allegedly still worked, and would make the truck easier to drive, it also meant a lot more things that could go wrong.

Because of that, he had counseled Jonas to keep their speeds under fifty. On these country roads, particularly during fall mating season, the risks of hitting a large mammal were ever-present, and while most vehicle / animal collisions involved deer, even this far south occasionally, Roger had warned him, you still saw elk. Because of that, even though it had been nearly two hours since Deacon had left the Timmers' home, they'd come only a little more than seventy miles.

Harlowton was fifty miles south of Hobson, roughly two thirds of the way between Hobson and Big Timber, where they would pick up the interstate to go east to the rest area. Deacon remembered Harlowton from his trip to Roger and Louise's house, when Roger had picked him up at the airport in Bozeman. Was it only one week ago? He'd lived a lifetime in the last twenty-four hours.

This area of Montana was flat as a pancake and Harlowton didn't look much different than Hobson. Houses along the road were low and modest. Lawns were green if people watered, barren scrub if they didn't. Businesses were auto parts and hardware stores, feed stores, and Dairy Queens. Deacon also saw signs for a hospital, Heartland Memorial. He wondered briefly if it was any better equipped or doing any better than the hospital in Lewiston.

Deacon stretched his long legs in the cramped enclosure as he looked around. "Have you seen anyone at all?"

"No," Jonas answered. "I would have gotten you up if I had. Empty cars – a bunch of those – but no one waiting for a ride. There are a lot of Hutterite colonies right through here,

though. Six, maybe even eight of them. They probably did exactly what my Uncle Jacob did: hook up a tractor and go looking for folks.” Jonas let out a brief chuckle. “I’ve got relatives in all of them, probably.”

“Don’t laugh,” Deacon warned. “That might come in handy.”

A large hand-lettered sign at an intersection pointed toward Hillcrest Elementary School. “The governor’s announcement to open all the elementary schools was genius,” Deacon commented as they passed the sign. “It gives each community a place to organize.”

“I wonder if they’ve done it in other states.”

Deacon snorted. “In some places, maybe. But I don’t even want to think about what people are waking up to in the big cities.” The president had said that planes had crashed all over the United States; Deacon was fairly sure he’d seen one come down himself within twenty miles of Roger and Louise’s farm. If that were true, the most logical place for planes to crash were on landing and takeoff. At a large airport like Chicago’s O’Hare or Atlanta’s Hartfield, planes landed and took off at a rate of one every two or three minutes. That meant that in the immediate vicinity of some of the big cities eight or ten passenger planes might have crashed. The images that conjured were beyond horrific.

At the next intersection, a similar sign pointed to the hospital, and in the very next block, incredibly, a coffee shop sported a hinged whiteboard on the road. “We’re open,” it announced. “Cash only.” And then in smaller letters: “Fresh doughnuts.” Two four-wheeler ATVs were parked in front of the shop and, incredibly, a saddled horse was tied to a parking meter, his snuffing breath visible in the cold morning air.

“Fresh doughnuts,” Jonas had muttered hopefully, hardly daring to glance over at Deacon. “Wow.”

Deacon didn’t miss the hint. He had scanned the area and

not seeing anything that worried him, allowed, “I guess I could use some coffee and a doughnut. You go in, I’ll stay with the truck.”

Jonas’s huge smile was a clear answer that Deacon’s response was the one he’d hoped for. Three minutes later, he’d emerged with a small bag in one hand and a carrier with two paper coffee cups in the other. He slipped back into the driver’s seat of the truck. “They’re still hot,” he said. “They got a generator big enough to run their fryer and fridge. And their latte machine.” He indicated a coffee cup. “I got myself one, I guessed you were more a traditional black coffee drinker, but I can go back in and get another if you want.”

“No, I’ll just drink coffee in just about any form, but I’m a SEAL. We don’t drink lattes. Black is fine. Thanks.” Deacon took the offered cup and doughnut and bit into the warm treat, savoring the first taste of barely-cooled icing around sweet warm cake. “Anyone in there?” he asked around a mouthful.

“Maybe five people. All locals, looked like. Everyone knows about the president’s address even if they didn’t hear it, and no one has a clue what to do next.” Jonas took a bite. “They said we were the first folks to come by in a working vehicle. Wondered if we knew anything more.”

“Pretty much like that everywhere, I guess.” Deacon finished his doughnut. “They say anything else?”

“Just to be careful.”

“Yeah,” Deacon responded. “People seem to be saying that a lot.” He downed his coffee – no cupholder – and after verifying that Jonas was still fine to continue driving, promptly fell back asleep.