



THE QUIET AFTER

FOLIANT: ONE

MIKE KRAUS

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FOLIANT

BOOK 1

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FOLIANT: ONE

By

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CONTENTS

[Want More Awesome Books?](#)

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[Read the Next Book in the Series](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

The O'Brian Family Los Angeles, California

Jason O'Brian leaned forward in the driver's seat, pressing his chest close to the steering wheel, both hands coiled around the contoured leather. Grunting, he rotated one shoulder as the incessant chorus of bleating horns barraged the RV from outside, like being caught in a war between several species of geese.

"You know," he said with a firm shake of his head, "I still remember when your parents agreed to loan us this beast," He slapped the steering wheel with the palm of his right hand, glancing toward his wife Samantha in the passenger seat. "We had plans. Long, winding dirt roads, nothing but the trees, the ocean and maybe the occasional campground."

Jason took a breath and straightened his arms, leaning back from the wheel.

"We made lists, Sam, remember? National parks, landmarks up and down the west coast. I remember very, very clearly."

"Don't say it, Jason." Samantha lifted a single eyebrow into a peaked arch above one narrowed, ice-blue eye.

He made an exaggerated motion to peer through the front slope of the RV's windshield.

"I swear, downtown L.A. must be nature's best-kept secret."

“You’re full of jokes today, aren’t you? How do you propose we drive down the west coast without going through Los Angeles?”

“What about you, kids? You remember those lists?” Jason looked up into the rear-view mirror, catching the attention of Elijah and Sarah in the back seat where they were both looking out the windows while absentmindedly stroking the family German Shepherd, Kale. “Pretty sure the only natural thing I’ve seen all day is Kale back there, and those whole-wheat chips your mom bought at the stop ‘n rob.”

“This is between you and Mom,” Elijah was quick to respond. “Leave us out of it!” He thumbed the earbuds back in his ears, exchanging an exaggeratedly wide-eyed look with his twin sister next to him.

“I see how it is.” Jason tapped the brakes and turned the wheel, fighting with the large RV to make its way around a slow-moving truck that filled the lane ahead.

“It would help if you knew how to drive this thing,” Sam remarked with a half-hearted smile. “I could always take over if you want.”

“Excuse me? I don’t remember ‘bumper-to-bumper traffic in a seven-ton box navigation’ being in the list of training exercises, do you?”

“No, but I did learn how to handle stress.” Sam laughed and Jason joined in with her, the two sharing in their exchange of good humor. She passed a quick glance at her rear-view mirror, the laugh dying on her lips.

“And I learned what a convoy looks like.” She leaned toward her mirror, craning her neck for a better angle. “Jason?” Her voice drew taut, a thin, gasping whisper as she clawed at the vinyl dashboard separating them from the windshield. “Check your mirror.”

Her husband jolted to attention, leaning to look into the driver’s side mirror. While the traffic around them was nearly at a standstill, the group of armored transports surged forward, charging at a rapid pace as they wove through traffic, horns blaring, cutting through the line of civilian vehicles. Jason’s mouth dropped open, his grip around the wheel tightening, drawing his skin into pale whiteness around the knuckles.

Sparks exploded in the mirror, the crunch of metal-on-metal deafening as the lead vehicle barreled into a space between cars too tight to fit. The front side panel of a box truck folded inward, crumpling as a twenty-ton transport hammered into it, knocking it aside to make room for the rest of the convoy. The other vehicles were concealed behind the lead transport, but the sounds of grinding metal and shattering glass flooded forward in a constant stream. As the transport lurched left, slamming hard into a small hatchback, a smaller, but equally determined Humvee was revealed behind it, trying to follow in its wake.

The mirror of a large-sized SUV burst apart as the transport struck it, scraping broadside, forcing the vehicle away as it did its best to speed forward. The almost deafening storm of honking horns intensified, growing in frequency and volume, complemented by the screams and shouts of displaced motorists. Second by second, the speeding convoy barreled its way through, carving a ragged, broken path through the traffic, parting the vehicles in an uneven thunder of colliding bumpers.

“Jason!” Samantha shouted, but Jason was already snapping into motion.

His grip tight around the wheel, he cranked it right and pumped the gas, grinding the RV’s bumper against a car in front of him, shoving it out of the way. Another vehicle slammed on its brakes, rubber squealing as it tried desperately to stop, leaving a sparse gap for the RV to work its way through. Mere seconds later, the convoy screamed past, the vehicle ahead of the RV thrown up and forward by the armored transport’s impact. Wheels left the pavement, spinning wildly, a chain-reaction of vehicular destruction tangling into a winding mass of crumpled metal ahead of them.

Jason battled with the RV, navigating it into the next lane, forcing another line of cars to slam on their brakes, hammering horns shouting their displeasure. Voices followed the horns, the exact words muffled, but their intent and general meaning more than clear. He tracked the speeding convoy as he transitioned to the other lane, each car passing by in a mottled green blur of armor, glass and rubber tires. Jason didn’t bother to count them, too

focused on keeping the RV out of their way, cranking the wheel back left again to correct his angular path to the right.

“Dad, what’s going on?” Elijah yanked the earbuds out of his ears, eyes widening in the rearview mirror, his sister mirroring his movements as the pair became aware of the rapid change in scenery. Sarah clung tight to Kale as she rocked back and forth, nearly falling to the floor.

“Stay buckled up, Eli! You, too, Sarah! Just hold on tight, okay? Try to get Kale in her crate if you can!”

Samantha clicked the volume knob of the radio, twisting it right as Jason broadsided another car, jolting it sideways against a guardrail.

“—while the President has yet to speak at his rally at the Convention Center, there are reports coming through of some sort of disturbance in downtown Los Angeles. Uh, in fact, reports are coming through now of some sort of...” the voice trailed off as Jason shot a concerned look toward his wife, receiving only a shrug of her shoulders in response.

Jason hammered the brake pedal and steered left, scraping alongside a mid-sized passenger van. A shower of sparks erupted from the point of impact as the RV slewed left, grinding past another car, punching a wider gap within traffic ahead. Slowly the road rose ahead as they approached an onramp, lifting at an angle, the gaps widening between tightly clutched vehicles. Through the static of the radio speakers, the newscaster cleared his throat as he came back on the air.

“Reports are coming in from eyewitness accounts in downtown Los Angeles that there appears to be some sort of biological event. We repeat, a biological event appears to be occurring throughout downtown Los Angeles. If you are in or around the Los Angeles Convention Center, please seek alternate routes. Our phone lines are flooded with—”

The newscaster’s voice abruptly cut out, replaced with dead air as the RV crunched its way between two more cars, slapping them aside and charging up the onramp toward the elevated freeway standing a hundred yards above the streets of downtown LA. Shouts began to come from behind, filtering through the aluminum and glass sides of the vehicle, and a surge of foot

traffic swept behind them along the sidewalks and roads. Far in the distance, barely visible in the side mirrors, pedestrians and motorists were clawing at their throats, dropping to their knees, exiting their vehicles and convulsing on the ground.

“How far are we?” Jason asked through clenched teeth, his foot hammering harder on the gas.

Samantha was already checking her side mirror, sharpened nails digging into her palms. “Not far enough. Keep driving.”

“Mom? Dad? What’s going on?” Eli twisted around to try and peer through the back windshield, an entire RV length behind him. Sarah huddled close to her window, palms pressed to the glass, watching the swarming traffic and the wave of death that was drawing ever closer.

“We don’t know yet,” Jason replied, easing down on the accelerator.

“People out there – Mom, they’re—”

“I know – just hush, let your father drive. Jason! Look out!”

There was another jolting slam as he broadsided the front panel of an SUV. The impact sent the smaller vehicle skidding away and Jason corrected his over-steer, once more bringing the RV straight, trying to push them farther up the onramp. The engine gunned and roared, accented by a chortling growl of other high-powered motors and the distant shouts of confused, panicking pedestrians. Beneath them, the military caravan careened its way through the traffic, continuing to batter its way between vehicles, the lead vehicle forcing spaces wide enough for the following ones to fit through.

As he watched, a large tractor trailer slewed through the gap made by the caravan, then slammed headlong into one of the support columns holding the elevated freeway aloft. A massive bang of crushed metal erupted from the point of impact, glass exploding outward. Two other vehicles swerved around the suddenly halted truck, angling toward the road ahead. Each of them struck another support, one right after the next, the first car folding like an accordion as the second slammed into its rear end at high speed. The onramp banked sharply left and Jason refocused on the road as traffic began

to move again. Up ahead, a pickup swerved diagonally before them, brakes squealing before it struck the guardrail with enough momentum to buckle metal and rip the barricade from its moorings.

Jason stared wide-eyed as the truck tore through the mangled remains of the rail and plunged over the edge, vanishing from the elevated onramp and smashing hard onto the pavement below. Somewhere in the distance an explosion roared, the street beneath their tires shaking with the deep rumble of the detonation. The RV followed the gradual lefthand turn, two cars in their wake slamming together into a tangle of wreckage. As they followed the upward bend, Jason glanced out through his driver's side window at the streets far below.

Traffic congealed like a week-old scab, vehicles clotting the road, creating a barricade of buckled metal in the wake of the military convoy's passing. Littered throughout stopped cars and trucks, people opened their doors and stepped out only to slump to the ground, motionless, joining the throngs of pedestrians that were no longer running, but strewn about on the sidewalks and crossings. They were too far away from the RV for Jason to make out the details, but no one was moving, and even the honking and jostling of the traffic had gone eerily silent and still.

"Jason? Are you seeing this?" Samantha pointed out the opposite window as Kale barked furiously in the background. "Everyone's just..."

"I know."

"Something's going on down there. We need to get *higher*, get away from it!"

"I know, I'm trying!"

Vehicles no longer moved on the surface streets, the bustling traffic turned to an ocean of stalled motorists, the narrow gaps between cars filled by collapsed, motionless figures. Smoke rose both from the crashes beneath the overpass and in the distance, twisting in wide spirals, fueled by a base of glowing oranges and reds. The onramp made one more gradual bend, which Jason followed, using the RV's bulk to push his way through until they pulled up onto the elevated freeway, several stories above the pavement

below. More cloying smoke boiled at the base of the support columns, a thickening cloud obscuring the horrors beneath them. Up ahead, other vehicles stopped along the freeway shoulder, people standing outside their cars and trucks, staring back toward the downtown congestion.

Jason braked the RV, bringing it to a shuddering halt and gripped the handle of the driver's side door. "Jason!" Samantha grabbed at his arm, stopping him. "What are you doing?"

"They're okay." He nodded toward the others standing on the elevated freeway.

"We don't even know what's going on!"

"That's what I'm going to try to find out." He looked into the mirror at his twins, both of whom were staring out their windows. "You all stay here, keep the doors locked. I'll be back in a flash."

Jason tugged the handle of the door and pushed it open before Samantha could stop him, stepping out from the RV and down onto the pavement of the freeway. The ground was firm, yet swayed slightly as he stood there, like walking the deck of a cruise ship on unsteady seas. An overpowering smell of gas and smoke rolled over him, swirling upward through the gaps in the roadway. Reaching behind him, he closed the door of the RV and stepped to the edge of the overpass, staring out at the carnage.

A vast sea of stalled traffic and dead bodies filled the distance between where he stood and the area surrounding the Los Angeles Convention Center, a massive carpet of glittering metal, starred glass and slumped corpses. Even within his limited field of vision there had to have been thousands dead, if not tens of thousands. His eyes stung with the stink of fuel and lingering smoke, his swimming head causing him to sway in slow circles. The opposite door slammed, and Samantha swept around the front of the RV, face pale and eyes wide.

"Jason! Are you—"

"I'm okay," he blurted out. "I just feel a little dizzy is all." Jason swayed gently again, moving uneasily from one side to the next.

“It’s not you.” Sam pressed her hands to his arms and squeezed tightly.
“It’s the freeway *moving*! Get in the RV. Get in *right now*!”

CHAPTER TWO

The O'Brian Family Los Angeles, California

Jason stared wide-eyed across the sea of carnage beneath the elevated highway. Traffic was a patchwork quilt of stalled and smoking vehicles, a ragged gouge dug by the military convoy terminating at the support structure holding the roadway above a vast sea of death. His throat burned raw with the thickening smoke, tears streaming free from his stinging, blinking eyes. Shock drove a stake through his spine, sticking his feet to the underlying pavement, his body rigid and fixed like a stone statue.

“Jason!” Samantha shouted, staying close to the RV. “Did you hear me?”

He took a single step back from the edge, still hypnotized by the wreckage spread out beneath them. Downtown Los Angeles pushed out to the north, little more than a smoking wasteland of stalled cars, trucks and tractor trailers. The square blockade of the convention center fell within his view far in the distance, a short way to the left of the circular sports arena famous for hosting football games and musical venues. There was no sense of revelry, no anticipation of an entertaining show, just the smoldering wreckage of a city, once vibrant with life.

Buildings were clustered one on top of the next, just like the stopped vehicles blocking the roads, a relentless, claustrophobic barrage of concrete, stone and glass shrapnel. Smoke twisted from the equally gray façade of

tightly grouped buildings, the glitter of glass windows gleaming beneath the gaze of the late morning sun. Bodies littered the sidewalk and shoulders, some draped over the hoods of cars, others slumped out from barely opened doors, filling the narrow empty spaces between stopped vehicles. The ever-present smoke formed an acrid, throat-burning reek that soured Jason's stomach.

Helicopter rotors swept the air above them and he craned his neck, staring up into the sunbaked sky. At least three pale-colored copters fell into view, a swirling trio of newscasters, each fighting for a better angle. A short distance away, another group of bystanders on the overpass lifted their hands, shouting at the helicopters, begging for an attempted rescue. However, they made no attempt to come closer, instead circling for a better angle, far more concerned with the headlines than with actually saving lives.

"They're dead," he gasped, turning toward his wife, making his way directly to the RV's driver's side.

"Who?"

"Everyone." The word was bitter in his mouth.

"If they're all dead there isn't much we can do. But first things first. Get back in the RV, Jason. That dizzy feeling isn't you, it's the whole highway!"

As if on cue, the road shifted beneath Jason's feet, his forward stride jostling as the pavement threatened to swing out from under him. A whining groan of strain bellowed from the supports beneath the multi-lane freeway and, from somewhere nearby, a shrill voice screamed in abject terror. Jason wheeled toward the scream, the same group of bystanders focusing their attention on the bridge beneath them instead of the helicopters above.

"Kids!" Samantha shouted, her voice echoing above the backdrop of wailing sirens, far into the distance. "Get strapped in! We need to move right now! Jason, I need you here with me, *now!*"

She bolted toward the passenger door, disappearing beyond the front of the RV. Jason swung up the steps and pulled the driver's side door open, even as the road shifted again, a sudden sideways lurch that threatened to knock him off the stairs and back onto its cracked surface. Lunging into the

driver's side, he jerked himself into the seat, gripping the steering wheel for purchase as the RV leaned sharply left. A ragged, uneven crack formed in the pavement, the roadway buckling as a dark line of fracture split its surface. Undulating snapping tore from the cracked and buckled concrete, a sudden whiplash whine of something critical giving way. Jason stared out his window as the guardrail to his left dipped sharply down, a massive chunk of the road breaking off and tumbling from view.

Up ahead, a throng of traffic clotted the road, people darting frantically, a few other survivors fortunate to have made it to the higher altitude that had apparently protected them from death below. Those same bystanders who had been begging a helicopter for rescue scattered, trying to make it to their vehicles, as if there was anywhere for them to go. A woman sprinted toward a green hatchback, but the road shuddered violently, slowing her sprint. Seconds later, a slab of elevated freeway jerked downward, a crack widening, and then broke away, her hatchback vanishing into the void. She leaped to her feet and screamed a wild, feral sound, leaping toward the falling car as if she might grab it and drag it back up, single-handedly. Instead, another violent crack smashed the road like a hammer, and a chunk of pavement beneath her gave way, swallowing her screams down to the blistered roadway far below.

"Onramp!" Samantha shouted, clutching Jason's right arm. "Behind us! There! Reverse, get us onto that ramp!"

Jason swallowed a thick lump of tension down his throat, leaning over his wife to get a look through her window. His rearview mirror was useless, snapped off and reduced to jagged metal, leaving him no view.

"Just trust me! I'll navigate."

Jason nodded, twisting the key and gunning the ignition. Ahead of them, the road collapsed, one side of the freeway lunging up like a drawbridge, a sudden upward slam that sent a young man cartwheeling down into the abyss. Jason ground the gears, finally finding reverse, his fingers gripping tight around the wheel.

“Go! Straight back! Just drive!” Samantha leaned toward the mirror and Jason followed her instructions.

His foot hammered the gas and the RV lurched, even as the cracks spread like spider webs on the road before them. More chunks of elevated freeway snapped off and fell, exposing blunt bones of rebar. A violent shudder shook the road just ahead, a chunk of pavement nearly disintegrating by the front tires of the RV. Thick clumps of it broke apart and away, the front tires dipping suddenly forward as the RV teetered, sliding toward the empty air. Jason slammed the accelerator, the gear already punched into reverse, the back tires whirling wildly, elevated just enough to not grip pavement. They slid, scraping against the road as they moved toward the collapsed freeway before them, larger chunks of ragged rock breaking loose.

“Back!” Jason screamed so loud his smoke-seared throat burned even more. “Sam! Kids! Get in the back, we need some weight!”

Samantha understood, unclasping her seatbelt and throwing herself backwards over the rear seat. The twins tore their own belts loose, scrambling to their feet, the three of them pushing through the narrow space into the living quarters of the RV, Kale barking and whining from inside her crate where it sat on the floor near the sofa. Metal scraped on pavement as the RV inched forward, more road shattered into fragments, spilling away. Every one of the bystanders who had been huddled around their vehicles were gone and what remained of the elevated highway was jigsaw puzzle fragments barely held together by fraying strands.

“We’re here!” Samantha shouted, the three of them surging toward the rear and the RV gently eased back, the weight shifting.

Jason slammed the gas, the rear tires spinning wildly until finally rubber squealed a shrill scream, striking pavement and taking hold. The RV lurched back, screaming away from the collapsing road, barely avoiding another large section of crumbling asphalt as it vanished from view. The RV backtracked, striking a car with a muffled crunch, though at a shallow enough angle that it pushed the vehicle away and kept moving.