

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ONE SECOND AFTER*

WILLIAM R.
FORSTCHEN

THE
FINAL
DAY

A NOVEL

William R. Forstchen



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK



New York

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For Robin

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been more than seven years since the publication of *One Second After*. Much has happened in the time since, as it of course does with all our lives. My daughter has matured into a fine young lady and graduated from college. Two and a half years ago, after giving a talk at a “prepper” conference, I met the true love of my life, my “Twin Flame,” and we were recently married. Many new friends have come into my life because of what I write, and a few have drifted away. New lives have joined my world, and some old friends have slipped away, in particular a beloved veteran of Omaha Beach, Andy Andrews. There have been great surprises, the biggest one being that what started out as a relatively unknown book catapulted to the *New York Times* bestseller list and some even claim it helped to trigger the Prepper Movement. If so, I only see my work as a small part of a phenomena now embraced by millions.

There have been disappointments as well, and the biggest one is that I wrote *One Second After* at the behest of close friends in politics who believed that even though it was a novel, it would lay before the American public the existential threat to national survival. I had an optimistic belief that the book would trigger political action to harden our electrical infrastructure and have a far more robust foreign policy to prevent such weapons from getting into the hands of those who would willingly launch an EMP attack. That has proven to be an utter failure and leaves me, and should leave all who read this, asking a most fundamental question: Why have our federal and state governments ignored this threat? In my own attempts to raise awareness and press for a political solution, I have, at times, been met with mocking disdain. It does remind me of the hypocrisy of those who lecture us about

guns, and do so while surrounded by professional guards who are indeed well armed, while extolling us to strip ourselves naked. The analogy between those two issues is apt and you can project what I mean from there.

It is why I now believe that the only response left is for “we the people” to be prepared individually, then turn to neighbors, friends, and so forth until we as an entire nation can indeed take care of ourselves. I write this only days after the tragedy in Orlando, Florida. The casualty list is over a hundred. I fear that soon it could be a thousand, ten thousand, and, in the event of an EMP, into the hundreds of millions. Being truly prepared, individually and as a nation, is the only way we can ever ensure our survival against the forces of darkness and hate.

Anyhow, this is supposed to be an acknowledgments, and if you have read this far, it is time to get on with my many well-deserved thank-yous. Without the support, trust, and efforts of my friends at Tor/Forge Books, you would not be reading these words. Thirty years ago, when first entering this business, I met Tom Doherty at a conference and decided even then that someday I hoped to work with him. He and his team are the ideal of a publishing crew that every author should hope for. Thanks must go as well to my agent, Eleanor Wood of Spectrum Literary Agency, and her son and daughter, who are now part of the firm. We’ve been together more than twenty-five years, watched our children grow, and she has always been by my side as a friend and advisor. A special thanks as well to my friends with Ascot Media Group. They are a public-relations firm second to none and have played an instrumental role in getting these stories about EMP out to the public and media.

If I tried to name all the friends who have stood by me, offered advice, and impacted my work, these pages would run on like an Oscar acceptance speech. Those of you reading this bought the book to get to a story! Therefore, as Lincoln used to say, “I shall keep this short and sweet like the widow’s dance.” Thanks must go to my friends, neighbors, and coworkers at Black Mountain and Montreat College. They have accepted and even embraced my setting of a story in our community with grace. Whether a crisis comes one day or not, this truly is the best place on earth to call your home and where I have spent nearly a quarter of a century teaching. Shortly after *One Second After* came out, I was asked by newfound friends at

Carolina Readiness to speak at a prepper conference they were sponsoring. I was expecting fifty guests or so, and I found instead over six hundred packing the room! That was just the start, and across these seven years I have met thousands of preppers ... people of common sense, ideals, and faith in their God and their country. I am honored to count all as friends. And finally, the teachers in my life, going back to Ida Singer, then Russ Beaulieu and Betty Kellor, to Gunther Rothenberg, and at my college men like Don King and William Hurt. I hope I have lived up to your expectations.

In closing, I wrote in *One Second After* that it was my fervent prayer that thirty years hence my books would be forgotten, and if recalled at all, it would be that the darkness I feared never came to pass and my daughter went on to a life that she would live in peace. I still pray for that. I once believed my government would act to ensure our safety when it came to threats such as EMP and attack by radical groups around the world. I now have my doubts, at least short term, that such will be the case. I now place my faith of a peaceful future in your hands, my fellow citizens, it is up to us to act proactively so that this nation of, by, and for the people does not perish from the earth.

[William R. Forstchen](#)

June 2016

PROLOGUE

DAY 920 SINCE “THE DAY”

This is the BBC News. It is 3:00 Greenwich War Time, broadcasting to our friends in the Western Hemisphere on this the 920th day since the start of the war.

Later in this program, we will provide an in-depth report about the tragic aftermath of the full-scale nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan, followed by a report about the situation in the Middle East where the conflict continues to rage between Israel and its neighboring states—except for Jordan, which today reaffirmed its alliance with Israel against the Caliphate and its allies.

But first the news from the United States:

Today the self-declared federal government based in Bluemont announced that the former states of Virginia and Maryland have been brought up to what the government defines as “Level One” status, meaning that all forces allegedly in conflict with the “Reconstituted Federal Authority in Bluemont,” as it now describes itself, have been pacified.

The Bluemont government announced earlier in the year that it has abandoned its plans to establish the Army of National Recovery, more commonly referred to as the ANR. Today’s announcement of the completion of establishing stabilized status in those two mid-Atlantic states has been attributed to actions waged by the traditional armed forces of the United States. The Bluemont government declared that the victory was achieved by units withdrawn from confrontation with China’s occupation of states in

the West and other units that were in service overseas on the day the war started.

After our reporting of other news of the day, a panel of experts will discuss the apparently changing status of the situation in North America.

But first, this message for our friends in the western provinces of Chinese-occupied Canada: "The chair is against the door." I repeat, "The chair is against the door."

CHAPTER ONE

DAY 920 SINCE “THE DAY”

“Do you remember the opening line of that book by Charles Dickens, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’?”

John Matherson whispered the famous line with hands wrapped around a warm mug filled with, of all things, coffee—*real* coffee. He looked over at his friend Forrest Burnett, who had arrived bearing the precious gift. Where it had been looted from John had learned never to ask.

Forrest’s crooked face, twisted up by his old Afghan wound, left eye socket covered with a patch that certainly gave him a pirate look, smiled in reply.

“Wasn’t that from the movie where the guy gets his head cut off by the French mob at the end?” Forrest replied.

John chuckled. “Yeah, something like that.”

“That guy was crazy, stepping in to take his friend’s place at the guillotine, and to top it off, the guy who gets rescued escapes with the girl. Never did like that movie. Why mention it?”

John sighed, standing up and walking over to the window of his office to look out.

The first snow of late autumn had arrived early this year, blanketing the Montreat College campus with half a foot or more. Old-timers prognosticating over woolly caterpillars and nut-gathering squirrels had predicted this was going to be a tough one, and this early November snow appeared to be the first proof.

Before the Day, a first snow, for John, was a time of relaxation and happy memories. Classes were usually canceled, forewarned by the Weather Channel on the Internet. He would have stocked in extra firewood, and it would be a long day of reading by the fire, Jennifer and Elizabeth outside

playing, coming in soaking wet for some hot chocolate, and later in the day board games like Clue or Monopoly. If the power went out, so what? It added to the cozy feel, at least for the first few days, camping out by the fireplace and watching the woods fill up with snow.

Before the Day ...

Jennifer is dead. His eldest daughter, Elizabeth, all of nineteen years old, was a mother with a two-year-old son and had finally taken a further step away and moved out of the house in Montreat. She had married Seth Robinson—the son of his old neighbor and close friend Lee—and was living with her new husband, and they were already expecting a child.

How that as well had changed after the Day. Only a few years back, the line had become that twenty-five was the new eighteen. Most kids were expected to go to college, get a degree, start their first job on the career ladder, date for a while, at last find the right partner, settle down, and around twenty-eight to thirty finally start a family. It was again like the world at the time of the Civil War—to marry at sixteen, seventeen. An unmarried girl at twenty-one was seen as already becoming an old maid.

No longer, and the historian in John read it as something that was primal, that after a tribe, a city, an entire country had lost so many lives in a war, the paradigm shifted to marrying young and starting families young—the so-called baby boom of the late '40s and '50s a recent example.

At the other end of this age spectrum, Jen—dear old Jen, mother-in-law of his first marriage to Mary—was gone. Perhaps in a different time, her life might have gone on for another five, even ten to fifteen years. But gone now as well were all the hospitals and medications that extended life, and thus something primal occurred with the elderly. Once they had seen too much tragedy, the will to live for so many was simply extinguished.

She had quietly slipped away in August. He had seen it far too often after the Day—the elderly one day calmly saying that they had experienced enough of life with all its vicissitudes and it was time to leave. He found her one evening sitting “alone” out on the sunporch, happily talking with her husband, young Jennifer, and her daughter—his wife, Mary, who had died long before the Day. She was talking to ghostly presences. He stood silent, eavesdropping as she talked and laughed softly to replies that were silent, at least to his ears.

Makala had slipped up to his side, listened as well for a moment with tears streaming down her face. Makala then guided him to the far end of the house, telling him to leave her be, that, as a nurse, she had often seen such, a clear sign that the beloved who had already crossed over were gathering to help in the final journey.

Jen insisted upon going to sleep that evening not in her own bed but out on the sunporch that looked out over young Jennifer's grave. They found her there in the morning, as if just gently asleep.

They buried her next to Jennifer. Yet another thread that connected John to a former life severed that day.

Even his old familiar office was gone, burned out in the fight with Fredericks back in the spring. It was decided to move what was left up to the Montreat campus and set up a new town office in the basement of Gaither Hall, a logical decision after it had served as the backup command post during that fight. It had been suggested to actually move it into the now-empty office of the college president, but John could not concur.

That office complex held for him a deep symbolic significance. When a special meeting involving representatives from across the ever-expanding "State of Carolina" took place, he would unlock that room for use. Centered on the office wall opposite the desk of the college president was the famed painting of George Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge. It was a reminder of his friend Dan Hunt, who once occupied that room and died in the first year after the start of the war.

His own office downstairs in the basement of Gaither was an easy walk from his home and just down the slope from the college was the new "factory," christened "the Dreamworks." Within the walls of what had once been Anderson Auditorium, full-scale production was under way, assembling new electrical generators complete with wirework for drawing out copper wire for the generators and the stringing of power lines.

The electrical light that illuminated his office regularly flickered as power fluctuated up and down; the system was, after all, jury-rigged, very much a learn-as-you-go process.

The snow was picking up again, swirling around the small campus commons below Gaither, the tattered American flag that had flown during

the air battle with Fredericks's Apache choppers standing out stiff in the northeasterly blow.

Watching such moments with the first snow of autumn falling had once indeed been the best of times, and he tried to not let melancholy take hold. He was actually drinking real coffee, the room was illuminated by an actual electric lightbulb, and the woodstove that students had installed in the room was radiating a pleasant heat the way only a wood-fired stove could.

"Why so depressed, John?" Forrest asked.

John heard a match striking and looked over his shoulder and saw Forrest leaning back in his chair and of all things actually lighting a cigarette. Merciful God, how he now longed for one as well, but the promise to his dying daughter and the potential explosion from Makala if she ever detected the scent on his breath was enough to restrain him, even though he did step closer and inhale the drifting smoke.

"Just the snowfall triggering a lot of memories this morning," John replied, settling back into his office chair, his gaze still lingering on the snow dancing on the wind. The sound of laughter echoed, and he caught a glimpse of a couple of his students sliding down the slope on a makeshift sled. Kids, long ago hardened by war and backbreaking labor to repair the damage of the spring battles to Gaither Hall before the onset of winter, were taking a break and again being kids. Their unit commander, Kevin Malady, would soon be out with a shout for them to get back to work, but for the moment, he was glad to see them enjoying themselves.

"Yeah, same here," Forrest said, gaze drifting off as he absently reached over with his one hand to scratch the stump of his missing arm.

"Feeling it again?" John asked.

"Ghost limb, they call it," Forrest said with a chuckle. "Yeah, it feels like it's still there and itchy as hell. Memories of snow for me get all screwed up by this." He motioned toward the missing limb with his good hand and then up to the eye patch.

"I loved to hunt as a kid; we always got a lot more snow over on the north side of Mount Mitchell than you did here. Easy to track deer, fox, bear. Friends and I would even camp out in it, get a deer, and then just stay out in the woods for days living off the venison and some potatoes and corn we packed along." He smiled wistfully. "And more than a few mason jars of

shine and a bit of homegrown weed as well. A lot better than sitting in a damn boring history class in school, and given the way the world is now, a better education for our futures as well.”

“For someone who apparently hated history classes, you sure know a lot about it,” John said with a smile.

“Oh yeah, you were once a history professor. What good did that do you when it came to surviving in this mess?”

“It helps at times, Forrest.”

“Okay, I guess it did when it came to running things and getting that ‘Declaration,’ as you folks call it, written. Lot of good that will do, though, if the BBC reports are true.”

“Gave me the idea for how to face off against the Posse.”

“You mean you used Hannibal’s plan for the Battle of Cannae?”

John smiled at that and nodded. “Seems you know more history than you let on, Forrest. Often the mark of a good leader, which you sure as hell were and still are.”

“And it should have told me not to volunteer for that extra tour of duty in Afghanistan. The way it was being fought by the time I shipped there, it had turned into another Vietnam. Build laagers, hunker down, can’t shoot even when shot at, and the bad guys own the rest of the countryside while we wandered around like fools trying to win ‘hearts and minds.’”

Forrest shifted his gaze to the storm outside as he took one final drag clear down to the filter and let the cigarette burn out. He stood up and went to the window, pulled the flimsy curtain back, looked out, and sighed.

“When I copped all of this in Afghanistan it was a day like this one.” He motioned again to the eye patch and the missing arm. “It was a freeze-your-ass-off day. Still haunted by the memory of all that pink frozen slush where the rest of my squad lay, blown apart, the crunching sound of footfalls on snow as the bastards who ambushed us came in to make sure we were all dead and loot our weapons and gear. That’s my memory of snow now.”

John was silent. It was the most detail his friend, who but six months back had been an enemy who had damn near killed him, had yet said about the day he was torn apart in a war all but forgotten now.

Several minutes passed as they silently sipped their contraband coffee, a gift Forrest would show up with occasionally with a clear “don’t ask, don’t

tell” understanding between them. Forrest lit another Dunhill, smoked it halfway down, and then pinched the flame out, sticking what was left into his breast pocket.

“To what do I owe the honor of your visit today?” John finally asked, for it was a very long trek over the mountains, requiring several gallons of precious gas for Forrest’s Polaris six-wheeler.

“You’ve heard the BBC reports about Roanoke being pulled in with the government up in Bluemont?”

“Yeah, I was about to suggest the state council getting together here this weekend to talk it over. It is only prudent to expect we might be next on their list.”

“I expected an immediate response after the way we trashed their ANR unit back in the spring, and then nothing. But I think something has got to be stirring by this point.”

“Why I said, ‘Best of times, worst of times,’” John replied, watching as the last wisps of smoke from Forrest’s cigarette coiled toward the ceiling and then disappeared.

“‘Best of times, worst of times,’” and this time it was Forrest. “I was hoping for a winter of peace after so much crap these last few years.”

“You think it will go bad?”

“If you expect shit to happen, John, you’ll never be surprised when it does.”

“Thanks for that cogent piece of advice.”

“The price of a good cup of coffee and the offer of a cigarette. Anyhow, beyond bearing potential bad news, I thought I’d hang around here for a few days. With the storm, it’d be a good time to teach some of your kids winter survival stuff.”

“Good idea. What made you think of it?”

“Because before it’s done, I think they’ll be fighting a winter campaign, my friend. Up in the mountains of Afghanistan, it was colder than Valley Forge, the Bulge, even the Chosin Reservoir in Korea. The Afghans understood it; more than a few out there with me did not. I don’t want to see that again.”

“You think it will come to that?”

“Don’t you?”

John did not reply. There were far too many other worries at the moment. The harvest was barely adequate to see his rapidly expanding community through the winter, especially with this early onset of autumn snow when there should have still been time to gather in additional forage. Two years ago, his worries extended only as far as Montreat, Black Mountain, and Swannanoa, but in the exuberant days after the defeat of the forces from the government at Bluemont, dozens of other communities had allied in, as far south as Flat Rock and Saluda, north to the Tennessee border, east to the outskirts of Hickory, nearly sixty thousand people in all. A tragic number when it was realized that more than a half million had once lived in the same region.

The city dwellers who had survived in the ruins of Asheville were of course welcomed, but few came in with any kind of resources, having lived hand to mouth on what could be scavenged from that once upscale new age-oriented community. It was the backwoods communities like Marion, even Morganton, with groups surviving like the one led by Forrest who joined with a quid pro quo of skills and even access to food that really counted in what all were now calling “the State of Carolina.”

Forrest was usually not the talkative type, and John remained silent. Something else was up with this man, and John waited him out.

“Someone came into my camp yesterday,” Forrest finally offered. “I think you should come back with me and meet him.”

“Who is he, and why?”

“Some of my people found him wandering on Interstate 26. Poor bastard is pretty far gone—several ribs broken, bad frostbite, and coming down with pneumonia. He got jumped by some marauders on the road and took a severe beating. Chances are he’ll be dead in a few days, so we decided he should stay put and you come to him.”

John did not reply. Forrest was not given to extreme reactions; months earlier, he had come into Black Mountain, leading nearly fifty of his community, after they were hit by an air attack from Fredericks’s Apaches. The man had been gut shot and kept refusing treatment until those with him were treated first. If he judged their refugee to be too sick to travel, John wouldn’t question the decision.

“Who is he?”

“Says he’s a major with the regular army. Claimed he served alongside you years ago. Name of Quentin Reynolds. That he was with the army that took Roanoke.”

“Quentin?” John whispered. The name struck somewhere, but if they had served together, that was close on to a couple of decades ago.

“Claims he was an adjutant to a General Bob Scales who’s in charge up there.”

“Bob Scales?” And with that, John sat bolt upright. It was Bob whom he had been speaking to at the Pentagon when the EMP hit. It was Bob who had been his mentor during his army career and who had arranged through the good ole boy network his teaching position at Montreat when John left the military to nurse Mary through her final months in the town where she had grown up. “Bob is alive?”

“He didn’t say that—just that he served with him.”

“Still, I got to talk with him,” John said excitedly. He looked back out the window; the storm was picking up. “Think we can make it now if we left today?”

“If it’s like this down here, I wouldn’t want to venture crossing over Craggy Gap and the Mount Mitchell range with night setting in. It was really blowing in as I came over this morning. Best let it settle down first.”

“Damn it.” John sighed. “This Quentin, think he’ll make it?”

“Can’t say, to be frank. Just had a gut sense I should come over and tell you. Anyhow, who is this Bob Scales?”

“I served with him years ago and thought he had died when things went down. If he is in charge of things up in Roanoke, my God, I got to find out.”

John’s worried thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Paul Hawkins running across the commons, head bowed low against the storm. Paul barged into the room, bringing with him a cold blast of air, Forrest cursing for him to close the damned door.

“John, you gotta come see something now!” Paul cried, features alight with a broad grin, made rather comical by the mantle of snow dripping from his broad-brimmed hat.

It was Paul and his wife, Becka, who had discovered the nineteenth-century journals of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, known as the IEEE, in the college library’s basement, the trade magazine for

the new industry of electricity. Filled with discussions and debates about the new science of electrical engineering, complete with detailed patent applications by the likes of Edison, Tesla, and Westinghouse, it was a discovery that ignited the plan to restore electricity, a “blueprint,” to bring their community back online.

“What is it, Paul? I’m kind of preoccupied at the moment with some news Forrest brought in.” He nodded to his friend sitting in the corner.

“Can’t explain it; you just got to see it now. You too, Forrest.”

John looked over at Forrest.

“You sure we can’t go back over the mountain today?” John asked anxiously.

Forrest shook his head. “Maybe first light tomorrow.”

John knew better than to second-guess Forrest, and he sighed. It would have to wait. He looked over at Paul, forced a smile, and nodded.

“Well, let’s go see what has you all fired up.”

If Paul thought there was something worth going out into a blizzard for, it had to at least be interesting.

The two pulled on jackets and, with heads tucked down, followed Paul out into the gale, Forrest cursing all the way as they followed Paul on the walkway that led up to the old library. The storm was of such intensity that John realized Forrest was right; to cross over the six-thousand-foot-high mountain range in this weather, no matter how urgent the mission, would be suicide.

The library, a building that architecturally had never fit into the classic native stone construction of most of the other buildings on campus, had always been a source of woe. It had leaky ceilings, and even before the Day, it had been sealed off for a semester because of the dampness and mold.

Once into the building and his hat and scarf removed, John took a deep breath and knew his allergies would soon nail him. The main part of the building was dark, the sound of dripping water echoing. A single light shone through the swinging doorway leading into the back office, where Paul and his young wife had taken up quarters, preferring to live there rather than in so many of the well-built and now-abandoned homes and cabins that surrounded the campus. At least this part of the cavernous building was warm and cheery, a large woodstove providing heat. Becka was there,

balancing a newborn twin on each arm, and John smiled at the sight of them, going up to kiss Becka lightly on the forehead.

“How you doing, young lady?”

“Feeling better thanks to Makala’s attention and help.” As she spoke, one of the newborns stirred, whimpered slightly, and then nuzzled back in against her mother.

As is too often common with twins, they had been a month premature. There was a time when that was not much of a concern with nearly all hospitals providing intensive care neonatal centers. But now? The babies had come into the world in what was the community’s local hospital in the old hotel, the Assembly Inn, on the far side of campus. John’s wife, who was due herself in another two months, had taken charge, and rather than let them return to their makeshift home in the library, she had ordered the three to stay at their home, setting up a nursery in the sunroom and hovering over all three during the first crucial weeks.

It had been an emotional experience for John, his home again echoing with the late-night cries of newborns, the sight of a very pregnant Makala up with them every night, in the morning holding one of the girls while an exhausted Becka nursed the other.

The sunporch had been the final sickroom for his daughter, Jennifer, who died there. It was also where his mother-in-law, Jen, had slipped away. He had tried to balance all, death and new life in the same room, and in some small way, it had helped to ease his grief and heartrending memories.

John fought down the temptation to ask to hold one of the twins for a moment. Makala had repeatedly warned that in this now heavily germ-laden world, the less exposure they had to others over the next few months, the better. Paul, after a quick kiss to Becka’s forehead and a fond look at the girls, was already pointing the way to the basement door.

John and Forrest followed him down into the darkness, and at the bottom of the stairs, Paul flicked a switch and a single fluorescent light flickered to life. It was definitely something John and Forrest were still not really used to—a flick of a switch and a light comes on. The town’s electrical grid was still slowly expanding from its first base at Lake Susan, and half a dozen other hydro projects were under way across the State of Carolina, but electric was still strictly rationed to public facilities and even then only ran for half a