

**SECONDS COUNT**

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FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAIN CABIN - DAY

A new Mercedes station wagon stops in front of a gorgeous, cabin on a glorious Fall day. Out of the car slips Supreme Court chief justice TANNER RHODES, 65, as fit and gray as one can expect. Dressed for the woods.

From the other side slips MELISSA, 45, alluring, looks 10 years younger, a trophy wife. She extracts two glossy dogs from the car and follows Tanner onto the porch.

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN GREAT ROOM - DAY

A room decorated as only the rich can afford. Melissa, with dogs, enters, followed by Tanner. He grabs her, and she releases the dogs. Tanner and Melissa kiss passionately--until they hear the sound of CLAPPING.

They break to face WALTER, 50, as plain as dirt, a man who projects no particular persona. The dogs sniff and pant at Walter's feet.

TANNER

Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?

WALTER

Call me Walter, and I'm here to teach a lesson--or to learn one.

TANNER

Well, Walter, I'm afraid you're trespassing. I have to ask you to leave.

WALTER

I'm afraid I can't do that.

TANNER

I don't want any trouble. Just leave, and we'll forget about the trespass.

WALTER

If I leave, no one will have learned anything.

MELISSA

Tanner?

Tanner puts Melissa behind him.

TANNER  
Don't make me call the sheriff.  
That won't help either of us.

WALTER  
(petting dogs)  
You're not going to call the  
sheriff.

TANNER  
Want to bet?

Walter pulls out a pistol and aims it at Tanner.

WALTER  
You'd lose that bet, judge. Now,  
why don't you and your wife have a  
seat.

MELISSA  
Tanner?

TANNER  
Do what he says.

Tanner and Melissa sit facing Walter.

TANNER  
We're not carrying a lot of cash,  
but you're welcome to it. Credit  
cards and phones too. Just take  
what you want and go.

WALTER  
I'm amazed that you think losing  
some money and a few trinkets would  
teach a lesson. I suppose rich  
people believe money can solve any  
problem.

TANNER  
I'm not rich.

WALTER  
House in D.C., house in Boston,  
this place in the mountains, a  
Supreme Court Chief Justice  
teaching seminars in addition to  
your salary and book royalties.  
Are you claiming to be poor, judge?

TANNER  
We're comfortable. I won't  
apologize for that.

WALTER

You misunderstand. I don't care how rich you are. I'm simply trying to establish a forum of truth. You're rich by most standards. We both know that, and we should both admit it.

TANNER

If you say so.

WALTER

I do, but wealth hardly matters. I'm not here to rob you.

TANNER

Then why are you aiming a gun at us? Going to kill us?

MELISSA

Don't say that.

WALTER

It doesn't have to come to that, but it might.

TANNER

You don't scare me.

WALTER

I should hope not. Fear will only make things that much harder. You need a clear head, judge.

Melissa begins to moan, afraid.

WALTER

Please, Melissa, keep it together.

TANNER

Don't talk to my wife. In fact, let her go. It's me you have a problem with.

WALTER

Indeed, it is you, or rather your legal opinions.

TANNER

Don't think for a minute you can influence my opinions.

WALTER

Oh no, I want to believe your future votes will be based on the law and wisdom. It's your past opinions that bother me.

TANNER

Past? I don't understand.

WALTER

You're familiar with the second amendment to the constitution.

TANNER

You're one of those?

WALTER

(smiling)

I suppose I am. But I'm ahead of myself. First things first.

Walter produces a length of rope and tosses it to Tanner.

WALTER

Please tie Melissa to the chair.

Tanner looks at the rope.

WALTER

If you make me do it, I guarantee it will be vastly more uncomfortable for her.

Tanner grabs rope and ties Melissa to the chair.

MELISSA

Tanner? Please?

TANNER

It's going to be all right. I'm certain Walter and I can work things out.

WALTER

It's certain that things can work out, judge.

(produces a gag and tosses it)

Screaming would be bad too.

Tanner gags his wife and returns to his chair.

TANNER

Satisfied?

WALTER

Hardly, but it's a start. Now, since time is of the essence, let's get on with our discussion.

TANNER

Discussions don't occur at the point of a gun.

WALTER

Spare me your indignation. No one employs more coercion than the government.

TANNER

You dislike government?

WALTER

My likes and dislikes are not on trial here, judge. Let's return to the second amendment. You're familiar with it?

TANNER

I'm chief justice. I'm familiar with all aspects of our constitution.

WALTER

Excellent. And do you believe in the amendment?

TANNER

Yes, as far as it goes.

WALTER

That's the problem. Despite the clear language of the amendment, you believe in limits, don't you.

TANNER

I refuse to discuss either the law or my decisions. Your gun doesn't frighten me.

WALTER

Only a foolish man disregards a firearm, but I applaud your courage. Bravo. Now, let's get back to the right to bear arms.

TANNER

I have always supported the right to bear arms.

WALTER  
With limits, judge, with limits.

TANNER  
Reasonable limits.

WALTER  
Ah, the rub, reasonable limits.  
Well, let's test those reasonable  
limits.

TANNER  
I'm not going to--

WALTER  
YES YOU ARE!

They stare daggers for a moment.

WALTER  
I know what you're thinking.  
You're thinking that if you could  
reach your rifle in the den, you'd  
handle things all right, wouldn't  
you.

TANNER  
You have no idea what I'm thinking.

WALTER  
Owen versus McManus

TANNER  
What?

WALTER  
Owen V McManus, surely you haven't  
forgotten the case.

TANNER  
Of course not, but what does it  
have to do with this?

WALTER  
In Owen V McManus you upheld a  
lower court ruling that allowed a  
state to register and confiscate  
assault rifles.

TANNER  
I don't understand.

WALTER

According to the law, your semi-automatic rifle qualifies as an assault weapon and has been confiscated.

TANNER

That's absurd. It's for foxes and wild boar and varmints.

WALTER

Your finding, judge, not mine. But not to worry, you'll get your chance to save the day.

TANNER

You're mad.

WALTER

Wills versus Brown.

TANNER

What is this, some sort of judicial review?

WALTER

In Wills, you upheld a law forcing gun owners to keep their firearms and ammunition in lockable containers. A reasonable constraint in your parlance.

TANNER

I can hardly lock up my rifle in a cabinet I don't own.

WALTER

Oh, but you do. In the den is a gun safe. Inside the safe is a firearm and ammunition, just as the law demands.

TANNER

I don't get it. Why a gun safe?

WALTER

Because that's the only hope you have. You have exactly one minute to open the safe and grab the firearm before I shoot your dog...or your wife.

TANNER

You're insane.



WALTER

Concentrate, judge, you'll need to remember the combination to the safe, although I've made it exceedingly easy. It's your birthday, right 03, left 21, right 50.

TANNER

You're serious?

WALTER

And I have to confess to being more than generous. A minute is an incredibly long time considering I could shoot all of you right now in less than twenty seconds.

TANNER

If you think for one second that I'm going to--

WALTER

Oh, yes, you can run if you wish. Even if you use your car, you'll never find help within your three minute window.

TANNER

Three minutes? I thought you said one.

WALTER

Well, one minute for the first victim, and another victim every minute after.

TANNER

You wouldn't dare.

WALTER

(showing watch)

Your minute starts...now.

Tanner regards Walter a moment before he leaps to his feet and runs into the next room.

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN DEN - DAY

Tanner bursts into the room and looks around, spotting the gun safe in the corner. He charges to it and immediately spins the dial. With shaking hands he turns it one way and then another. He jerks the handle, and it doesn't open.

WALTER (O.S.)  
THIRTY SECONDS.

Tanner takes a deep breath and forces himself to slow down. He carefully spins the dial, jerks the handle, and viola! The door swings open.

On the shelf in front of him is an automatic pistol. He grabs it, turns, and stops. There's no magazine in the butt. As he turns back to the safe a GUNSHOT comes from the next room.

For a moment, Tanner can't move. Then, he grabs a magazine off the shelf and jams it into the pistol. He works the slide, turns away, and stops. He lowers the hammer and pulls the slide again, expecting a cartridge to eject. Nothing happens. He works the slide again. Nothing.

He ejects the magazine and looks at it, empty. Laying down the pistol, he grabs a box of cartridges.

His fingers barely work as he loads the magazine, dropping as many cartridges as he manages to feed. With an anguished cry, he slams home the magazine and works the slide until a cartridge is ejected.

A second GUNSHOT echoes through the house.

Tanner runs for the door.

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN GREAT ROOM - DAY

Gun in hand, Tanner leaps into the room. Walter's chair is empty. Both dogs lie on the wood floor. He spins to his wife, tears running down her cheeks. As he steps toward her, her eyes glance to the side, a tell.

Tanner whirls to Walter who stands in front of a window. Tanner pulls the trigger without even aiming.

Nothing happens.

Tanner ejects a cartridge and tries again. Nothing. He stares at the firearm. What is he doing wrong?

WALTER  
Jan V Autrey.

TANNER  
What?

WALTER  
Biometric locks do not impose an undue burden according to your august opinion. That's your wife's pistol. Yours is on the bottom shelf.

Tanner looks at the gun once before he hurls it a Walter. It passes harmlessly and shatters the window. Then, he spins and runs into the den.

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN DEN - DAY

Tanner reaches the safe and grunts as he slides to his knees. He grabs a magazine and box of ammo. He's faster this time, but he's still slow. Panting, almost in tears, he seats the magazine as the third GUNSHOT rocks the house.

TANNER  
NOOOOOOOO!

He lunges to his feet. Working the slide, he lurches into the great room.

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN GREAT ROOM - DAY

Tanner stumbles into the room where Melissa slumps in her chair. He starts for her.

WALTER  
JUDGE!

Tanner whirls to face Walter.

TANNER  
You bastard!

Tanner pulls the trigger, but again nothing happens. Frowning, he works the slide and tries again. Nothing.

WALTER  
Don't bother. It won't fire.

TANNER  
But you, you said--

WALTER  
I took the precaution of removing the firing pin, judge. I didn't come here to die.

TANNER  
Then, go ahead and kill me. Don't stop with my wife.

WALTER  
No one's going to die.

TANNER  
I heard...

Walter holds up a tranquilizer pistol

WALTER  
Maybe a headache when she wakes up.  
No permanent damage.

Tanner slumps, dropping the pistol.

TANNER  
Why?

WALTER  
When seconds count, judge, even a  
tiny extra burden can cost lives.  
You had a generous three minutes,  
and you failed miserably. If you  
were carrying a firearm or had one  
in a handy drawer, you would have  
succeeded. Time, time costs. I  
hope you understand that now.

Walter starts for the door.

TANNER  
You're not leaving, not after this.

WALTER  
We both know my weapon works.  
Don't be more stupid than you  
already are.

Tanner can only watch as Walter leaves. He moves to his  
wife, looks at her, and slowly slides into his chair.

FADE OUT.