

**THE
WALKING
DEAD**

**THE FALL OF THE GOVERNOR
PART TWO**

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TOR



First published in the US 2014 by Thomas Dunne Books,
an imprint of St Martin's Press

This edition published in the UK 2014 by Tor
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-6682-2

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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PART 1

Battlefield

I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.

—J. Robert Oppenheimer

ONE

The fire starts on the first floor, the flames licking up the cabbage rose wallpaper, unfurling across the plaster ceiling, and spewing black, noxious smoke through the hallways and bedrooms of the Farrel Street house, blinding him, choking the breath out of him. He darts across the dining room, searching for the back stairs, finding them, hurling down the old, rickety wooden risers into the musty darkness of the basement. “Philip?!—PHILIP?!—PHILLLLLLLLLLIP!!?!” He lurches across the filthy, water-marked cement floor, frantically scanning the dark cellar for his brother. Upstairs, the home blazes and crackles, the conflagration roaring through the cluttered chambers of the meager bungalow, the heat pressing down on the foundation. He whirls fecklessly in circles, scanning the shadowy reaches of the smoke-bound cellar, batting away cobwebs and choking on the acrid smoke and ammonia-rot stench of rancid canned beets, rat turds, and ancient fiberglass insulation. He can hear the creaking and thudding of wooden timbers collapsing onto the floor above him as the maelstrom rages out of control—which makes no sense because his little childhood home in Waynesboro, Georgia, never burned down in any fire as far as he can remember. But here it is, going up in a terrible inferno, and he can’t find his fucking brother. How did he get here? And where the fuck is Philip? He needs Philip. Goddamnit, Philip would know what to do! “PHILLLLLLLLLLLLLIIIP!” His hysterical cry comes out of him like a thin puff of air, a breathless chirp, a fading signal on a radio tuned to some

distant station. All at once he sees a portal in one of the basement walls—a strange, concave opening like a hatch on a submarine, a weird greenish glow emanating from within it—and he realizes that the opening is new. There was never such an opening in the basement of his childhood home on Farrel Street, but again, like black magic, here it fucking is. He stumbles toward the dim, radiant, green gash in the darkness. Pushing through the opening, he steps into an airless cinder-block garage stall. The chamber is empty. The walls bear the marks of torture—streaks of dark, drying blood and the frayed ends of ropes affixed to U-bolts—and the place radiates evil. Pure, unadulterated, preternatural evil. He wants out. He can't breathe. His flesh crawls. He can't make a sound other than a faint mewling noise coming from the deepest part of his lungs, an anguished moaning. He hears a noise and spins around and sees another gangrenous-green glowing portal, and he lunges toward it. He goes through the opening, and he finds himself in a pine grove outside Woodbury. He recognizes the clearing, the deadfall logs forming a natural little amphitheater—the ground carpeted in matted pine needles, fungus, and weeds. His heart quickens. This is an even worse place—a death scene. A figure emerges from the forest and steps into the pale light. It's his old friend, Nick Parsons, gangly and awkward as ever, lurching into the clearing with a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun, his face a sweaty mask of horror. "Dear Lord," Nick murmurs in a strangled voice. "Cleanse us of all this unrighteousness." Nick raises the shotgun. The muzzle looks gargantuan—like an enormous planet eclipsing the sun—pointing directly at him. "I renounce all sins," Nick drones in his sepulchral voice. "Forgive me, O Lord . . . forgive me." Nick pulls the trigger. The firing pin snaps. The slow-motion blast flares in a brilliant yellow corona—the rays of a dying sun—and he feels himself lifted out of his boots, slingshot into space, weightless, flying through darkness . . . toward a nimbus of celestial white light. This is it. This is the end of the world—his world—the end of everything. He screams. No sound comes from his lungs. This is death—the suffocating, magnesium-white void of nothingness—and very suddenly, like a switch being thrown, Brian Blake ceases to exist.

With the abruptness of a jump-cut in a motion picture, he is lying on the floor of his apartment in Woodbury—inert, frozen, pinned to the cold hardwood in paralyzing, icy pain—his breathing so labored and inhibited that his very cells seem to be gasping for life. His vision consists of a jagged, blurry, fractured view of the water-stained ceiling tiles—one eye completely blind, its orbital socket cold as if wind is blowing through it. The duct tape hanging off one side of his mouth, the tiny inhalations and exhalations through his bloody nostrils almost imperceptible to the casual listener, he tries to move but can't even turn his head. The sound of voices barely registers with his agony-gripped auditory nerves.

"What about the girl?" a voice asks from somewhere in the room.

"Fuck her, she's outside the safe zone by now—she ain't got a chance."

"What about him? Is he dead?"

Then another sound registers—a watery, garbled growl—which draws his attention to the edge of his vision. Seeing through the bleary retina of his one good eye, he can barely make out the tiny figure in the doorway across the room, her pale face mottled with decomposition, her pupil-less eyes like sparrow eggs. She lunges until her chain-link leash clangs loudly.

"GAH!" one of the male voices yelps as the tiny monster claws at him.

Philip tries desperately to speak, but the words catch in his scalded throat. His head weighs a thousand tons, and he tries again to speak with chapped, cracked, bleeding lips, tries to form breathless words that simply won't coalesce. He hears the deep baritone voice of Bruce Cooper.

"Okay—fuck this!" The telltale click of a safety disengaging on a semiautomatic fills the silence. "This girl's getting a bullet right—"

"N-nnggh!" Philip puts everything he has into his voice and manages another faint series of utterances. "D-duh—d-don't!" He takes another agonizing breath. He must protect his daughter Penny—regardless of the fact that she's already dead and has been

for over a year. She is all he has left in this world. She is everything. “D-don’t fucking touch her . . . DON’T DO IT!”

Both men snap their gazes toward the man on the floor, and for the briefest fraction of an instant, Philip gets a glimpse of their faces gaping down at him. Bruce, the taller man, is an African American with a shaved head, which now furrows with horror and repulsion. The other man, Gabe, is white and built like a Mack truck with his marine buzz cut and black turtleneck. From the look in their eyes, it’s clear that Philip Blake should be dead.

Lying on that blood-soaked four-by-eight piece of plywood, he has no idea how bad he must look—especially his face, which feels as though it’s been tenderized by an ice pick—and for one fleeting moment, the expressions on the faces of these crude, simple men gaping down at him set off a warning alarm in Philip’s brain. The woman who worked him over—*Michonne* is her name, if memory serves—did her job well. For his sins, she left him as close to death’s door as a person can be without going through it.

The Sicilians say revenge is a dish best served cold, but this gal delivered it with a steaming plate of agony. Getting his right arm amputated and cauterized just above the elbow is now the least of Philip’s problems. His left eye is currently lying on the side of his face, glued to his flesh by drying tendrils of bloody tissue. But worse than that—far worse for Philip Blake—is the sticky-cold sensation spreading up through his entrails from the site where his penis was detached with a flick of the woman’s fancy sword. The memory of that little flick—the sting of a metal wasp—now sends him back into the twilight of semiconsciousness. He can barely hear the voices.

“FUCK!” Bruce stares bug-eyed down at the once-fit, once-lean man with the handlebar mustache. “He’s alive!”

Gabe stares. “Shit, Bruce—the doc and Alice are fucking gone! What the hell are we going to do?”

At some point, another man has entered the apartment in a flurry of heavy breathing and the clanging of a pump-action shotgun. Philip can’t see who it is, or hear the voices very well. He

floats between consciousness and oblivion while the men hovering over him continue their terse, panicky exchange.

Bruce's voice: "You guys, lock this little shit up in the other room. I'm going to run downstairs and get Bob."

Gabe's voice next: "Bob?! The fucking drunk that's always sitting downstairs by the door?"

The voices begin to fade as the dark cold shroud draws down over Philip.

"—what the hell can he do—?"

"—probably not much—"

"—so why?—"

"—he can do more than either of us—"

Contrary to public opinion and the mythology of the movies, the average combat medic is not even *remotely* as skilled as an experienced, credentialed trauma surgeon or, for that matter, even a general practitioner. Most medics receive less than three months of training during boot camp, and even the most prodigious of these individuals rarely rises above the level of a common EMT or paramedic. They know basic first aid, a little CPR, and the rudiments of trauma care, and that's about it. They are thrown into the breach with battle units and expected to simply keep wounded soldiers breathing—or keep the circulatory system intact—until the victim can be transported to a mobile surgical unit. They are human tugboats—hardened by front-line conditions, calloused by witnessing a constant stream of suffering—expected only to Band-Aid and splint the sucking wounds of war.

Hospital Corpsman First Class Bob Stookey served a single tour with the Sixty-Eight Alpha company in Afghanistan thirteen years ago, at the tender age of thirty-six, getting deployed not long after the initial invasion. He was one of the older enlisted men at the time—his reasons for signing up had a lot to do with a divorce going sour at the time—and he became somewhat of a Dutch uncle to the youngsters around him. He started as a glorified

ambulance driver out of Camp Dwyer and worked his way up to battlefield medic by the following spring. He had a knack for keeping the boys entertained with lousy jokes and nonregulation sips from his ever-present flask of Jim Beam. He also had a soft heart—the grunts loved him for that—and he died a little bit every time he lost a marine. By the time he shipped back to the world one week after his thirty-seventh birthday, he had died one hundred and eleven times and was medicating the trauma with a half-quart of whiskey a day.

All of this Sturm und Drang of his past had long been drowned by the horror and clamor of the plague, as well as the excoriating loss of his secret love, Megan Lafferty, and the pain has grown so malignant within him that now—tonight—*this instant*—he is completely oblivious to the fact that he is about to be wrenched back onto the battlefield.

“BOB!”

Slumped against the bricks in front of the Governor’s place, half-conscious, dried spittle and ash across the front of his drab olive jacket, Bob stirs at the booming voice of Bruce Cooper. The darkness of night is slowly burning off with the dawn, and Bob has already started shaking from the chill winds and a restless night of fever dreams.

“Get up!” the big man orders as he lurches out of the building and comes over to Bob’s nest of soggy newspapers, ratty blankets, and empty bottles. “We need your help—upstairs! NOW!”

“W-what?” Bob rubs his grizzled face and belches stomach acids. “Why?”

“It’s the Governor!” Bruce reaches down and grabs hold of Bob’s limp arm. “You were an army medic, right?!”

“Marines . . . H-hospital Corps,” he stammers, feeling as though he’s being levered to his feet by a block and tackle. His head spins. “For about fifteen minutes . . . about a million years ago. I can’t do shit.”

Bruce stands him up like a mannequin, clutching him roughly by the shoulders. “Well, you’re going to fucking try!” He shakes

him. “The Governor’s been taking care of *you*—making sure you’re fed, that you don’t drink yourself to death—and now you’re going to return the favor.”

Bob swallows back his nausea, wipes his face, and gives a queasy nod. “Okay, take me to him.”

On their way through the foyer, up the staircase, and down the back hall, Bob is thinking it’s probably no big deal, the Governor’s got the flu or something, fucking stubbed his toe and now they’re overreacting like they always do. And as they hasten toward the last door on the left, Bruce practically pulling Bob’s arm out of its socket, just for an instant, Bob catches a whiff of something coppery and musky wafting out of the half-ajar door, and the odor sets off warning bells in Bob Stookey’s head. Right before Bruce yanks him inside the apartment—in that horrible instant before Bob clears the jamb and sees what’s waiting for him inside—he flashes back to the war.

The sudden and unbidden memory that streaks through his mind’s eye at that moment makes him flinch—the smell, that protein-rich stew that hung over the slapdash surgical unit in Parwan Province; the pile of pus-ridden bandages earmarked for incineration; the drain swirling with bile; those gurneys washed with blood cooking in the Afghan sun—all of this flickers through Bob’s brain in that split second before he sees the body on the floor of the apartment. The odor raises his hackles and makes him hold on to the jamb for purchase as Bruce shoves him into the vestibule, and Bob, at last, gets a good look at the Governor—or what remains of the man—on the desecrated plywood platform.

“I locked the girl away and untied his arm,” Gabe is saying, but Bob can hardly hear the man or see the other guy—another goon named Jameson, now crouched across the room, hands clasped awkwardly, eyes hot with panic—and the dizziness threatens to drag Bob to the floor. He gapes. Gabe’s voice warbles as if coming from underwater. “He’s passed out—but he’s still breathing.”

“Holy sh—!” Bob barely makes a noise, his voice squeezed and colorless. He falls to his knees. He stares and stares and stares at the contorted, scorched, blood-soaked, scourged remains of a man who once prowled the streets of the little kingdom of Woodbury like an Arthurian knight. Now the mangled body of Philip Blake begins to metamorphose in Bob Stookey’s mind into that poor young man from Alabama—Master Sergeant Bobby McCullam, the kid who haunts Bob’s dreams—the one who got half his body torn off by an IED outside Kandahar. Overlaying the Governor’s face, in a grotesque double image, Bob now sees the marine, that death mask of a face under a helmet—parboiled eyes and bloody grimace tucked into a chin strap—the terrible gaze fixing itself on Bob the Ambulance Driver. *Kill me*, the kid had muttered to Bob, who couldn’t do anything for the young man but load him into a sweltering cargo bay already crammed with dead marines. *Kill me*, the kid had said, and Bob was helpless and stricken mute, and the young marine had died with his eyes locked onto Bob’s. All this passes through Bob’s imagination in an instant, pulling the gorge up into his esophagus, filling his mouth with stomach acids, burning in the back of his throat, erupting in his nasal passages like liquid fire.

Bob twists around and roars vomit across the room’s filthy carpet.

The entire contents of his stomach—a twenty-four-hour liquid diet of cheap whiskey and occasional sips of Sterno—come frothing out, splattering the rug. On his hands and knees now, Bob heaves and heaves, his back arching, his body convulsing. He tries to speak between watery gasps. “I—I can’t—can’t even look at him.” He sucks air. A spastic shudder rocks through him. “I can’t—I can’t do anything f-for him!”

Bob feels a hand as strong as a vise tighten on the nape of his neck and a portion of his army fatigue jacket. The hand jerks him to his feet so violently, he’s practically yanked out of his boots.

“The doc and Alice are gone!” Bruce barks at him, their faces so close now, a fine mist of spittle sprays Bob as Bruce tightens his

grip on the back of Bob's neck. "If you don't do anything, he's going to FUCKING DIE!!" Bruce shakes the man. "DO YOU WANT HIM TO DIE?!"

Sagging in Bruce's grasp, Bob lets out a moan: "I—I—I don't—no."

"THEN FUCKING DO SOMETHING!!"

With a woozy nod, Bob turns back to the broken body on the floor. He feels the vise grip on his neck loosen. He crouches down and sees only the Governor now.

Bob sees all the blood running down the nude torso, forming sticky, maplike stains already drying and darkening in the dim light of the living room. He looks at the scorched stump of a right arm, and then surveys the breached eye socket all welled up with blood, the eyeball, as shiny and gelatinous as a soft-boiled egg, dangling off the side of the man's face on tendrils of tissue. He makes note of the swamp of rich arterial blood gathered down around the man's privates. And finally Bob notices the shallow, labored breathing—the man's chest barely rising and falling.

Something snaps inside Bob Stookey—sobering him with the speed and intensity of smelling salts. Maybe it's the old war footing coming back. There's no time for hesitation on the battlefield—no room for repulsion or fear or paralysis—one just has to move. Fast. Imperfectly. Just move. Triage is everything. Stop the bleeding first, keep the air passages clear, maintain a pulse, and then figure out how to move the victim. But more than that, Bob seizes up right then with a wave of emotion.

He never had kids, but the surge of empathy he suddenly feels for this man recalls the adrenaline that flows through a parent at the scene of a car wreck, the ability to lift a thousand pounds of Detroit steel off a child pinned beneath the wreckage. This man cared about Bob. The Governor treated Bob with kindness, even tenderness—always making a point to check in with Bob, make sure Bob had enough food and water and blankets and a place to stay. The revelation steadies Bob, girds him, clears his vision and focuses his thoughts. His heart stops racing, and he reaches down

to depress a fingertip against the Governor's blood-soaked jugular. The pulse is so weak it could be mistaken for a fluttering pupa inside a fleshy cocoon.

Bob's voice comes out of him in a low, steady, authoritative tone. "I'm going to need clean bandages, tape—and some peroxide." Nobody sees Bob's face changing. He wipes strands of his greasy, pomaded hair back over his pate. His eyes narrow, nested in deep crow's-feet and wrinkles. His brow furrows with the intensity of a master gambler getting ready to play his hand. "Then, we'll need to get him to the infirmary." At last he looks up at the other men, his voice taking on an even deeper gravity. "I'll do what I can."

TWO

Rumors bounce around town that day with the haphazard trajectory of a pinball game. While Bruce and Gabe keep the Governor's condition under wraps, the glaring absence of Woodbury's leadership causes much speculation and whispering. At first, the prevailing wisdom is that the Governor, Dr. Stevens, Martinez, and Alice all stole away before dawn the previous day on an emergency mission—the purpose of which remains shrouded in mystery. The men on the wall each have a different version. One kid swears he saw Martinez taking a group of unidentified helpers out in a cargo truck on a predawn supply run. But this story loses much of its credence by midmorning when all the vehicles are accounted for. Another guard—the young wannabe gangbanger named Curtis, the kid whom Martinez unexpectedly relieved at the end of the east alley the previous night—claims that Martinez lit out on foot by himself. This rumor also loses steam when most of those left behind realize that the doctor and Alice are also missing, along with the Governor himself, as well as the wounded stranger who was being treated in the infirmary. The stoic man stationed outside the Governor's apartment building with the assault rifle has nothing to say on the matter and won't let anyone pass, nor will the guard at the top of the staircase leading down to the infirmary—both situations doing nothing to quell the rumor mill.

By late afternoon, Austin pieces together the real story. He's

been hearing rumblings that an escape has occurred—most likely the strangers he saw with the Governor a week and a half ago—and it all makes a lot more sense when he runs into Marianne Dolan, the matronly woman whose boy has been spiking a fever for twenty-four hours now. The woman tells Austin how she saw Stevens very early that morning, before dawn, hurrying across town with his doctor's bag. She can't remember for sure if he was with a group of people. She has a vague memory of seeing a cluster of folks waiting for him under an awning at the end of the street (near the corner where she stopped him), but she's not positive about that. She remembers asking the doctor if he could possibly take a look at her boy later, and he said sure, but he seemed jittery, like he was in a hurry. With a little prodding, Marianne does suddenly remember seeing Martinez and Alice a few minutes later, hurrying down the street with the doctor, and then she remembers wondering who the others were—the strangers accompanying them—the big guy, the kid, the black lady.

Austin thanks her and immediately goes over to Lilly's and tells her the whole story. Through process of elimination, they deduce that the whole group slipped out of town, unseen, at the end of the east alley—the gangbanger's story lines up with this conclusion—and they decide to go over there. Austin brings his binoculars. He also brings his gun for some reason. The tension in the little town is running high by this time. When they arrive at the makeshift wall at the end of the alley, there's nobody there. All the guards have congregated on the other side of town near the main barricades, to continue spreading gossip and smoke and pass around flasks of cheap booze.

"I can't believe they would go with them," Lilly says to Austin, holding a moth-eaten shawl around her shoulders to ward off the chill as she stands on top of the semitrailer blocking the alley from the outer world. A hastily constructed wall of hammered steel plates lines one side of the trailer. On the other side stretches the danger zone of dark side streets, rickety fire escapes, shadowy vestibules, and abandoned buildings given over to the walkers, all

of it extending into the lonely outskirts of Woodbury. “Just bail on us without a word?” Lilly marvels softly, shaking her head, staring out at the opaque, black shadows of the pine barrens. The trees sway and flag menacingly in the breeze. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Austin stands next to her in his denim jacket, his long hair loose and tossing in the wind. By this point, dusk is setting in, the wind has cooled, and intermittent gusts swirl trash across the alley behind them, only adding to the desolate feeling of the place. “If you think about it, the whole thing makes a crazy kind of sense,” he says.

Lilly shivers and looks at him. “How do you mean?”

“Well, for one thing, Stevens hates the Governor’s guts—right? I mean that’s obvious.”

Lilly gazes out at the wasted landscape draped in gathering shadows. “The doctor’s a good man but he never understood the situation we’re in.”

“Really?” Austin sniffs. “I don’t know.” He thinks about it for a moment. “Didn’t you guys try to take over last year? Stage a coup or whatever?”

Lilly looks at him. “That was a mistake.” She looks out at the woods again. “We didn’t see the . . . practical reasons for the things he does.”

“The Governor?” Austin gives her a noncommittal glance, his hair blowing across his narrow face. “Seriously? You call the shit he does ‘practical’?”

Lilly gives him another look. “This is our home now, Austin. It’s secure. It’s a place where we can raise our child.”

Austin doesn’t say anything. Neither of them notices the dark figure weaving out of the trees a hundred and fifty yards away.

“People have enough to eat,” Lilly goes on. “They have resources. They have a future here in Woodbury. All because of the Governor.”

Lilly shivers in the chill, and Austin takes off his denim jacket. He drapes it over her shoulders. Lilly gives him a glance.

At first she considers objecting, handing it back to him, but then she just smiles. She finds his constant mothering kind of adorable. Since learning that she's pregnant with his child, Austin Ballard has transformed. He has stopped talking about finding more weed to smoke and has stopped acting like a slacker and most importantly has stopped hitting on any available woman who crosses his path. He genuinely adores Lilly Caul, and he sincerely loves the whole concept of being a father, of raising a new generation as a hedge against the end of the world. He has—at least in Lilly's eyes—instantly grown up right in front of her.

While Lilly is thinking all this, the shambling figure approaches from the distance. It's a hundred yards away now, and coming into view. An adult male clad in a blood-spattered white coat, its dead face upturned and rotating like a satellite dish, it lumbers back and forth across the gravel road, making a winding path toward the barricade as though homing in on some olfactory beacon, some predatory scent drawing it toward the town. Neither Lilly nor Austin notices the figure yet, their thoughts consumed by the exodus of their friends.

"*Alice* I can understand," Austin says at last. "She would follow Doc Stevens into hell if he wanted her to. But Martinez is the one I can't figure out. He always seemed so . . . I don't know . . . *gung ho* or something."

Lilly shrugs. "Martinez is a tough nut to crack. He helped us last winter. I always thought he was kind of ambivalent about the whole thing." Lilly thinks about it some more. "I don't know if I ever trusted him completely. I guess it doesn't matter now."

"Yeah, but—" Austin falls silent. "Hold on a second." He sees the figure approaching. "Hold on." He reaches for the binoculars hanging around his neck. He peers through the lenses at the figure, now closing the distance to fifty yards or so.

"What is it?" Lilly sees the walker shuffling toward them but at first doesn't make much of it. The sighting of an errant corpse weaving out of the trees has become commonplace around here, and Aus-

tin has his Glock, so there's really nothing to worry about. "What's the matter?"

"Is that—?" Austin fiddles with the dial on his field glasses and takes a closer look. "It couldn't be. Holy shit, I think it *is*."

"What?" Lilly reaches for the binoculars. "Let me have a look."

Austin says nothing, just hands her the binoculars and stares at the approaching figure.

Lilly raises the binoculars to her eyes and focuses the lenses, and all at once she gets very still and lets out a soft, hissing exhalation of air: "Oh my God."

With awkward, lurching strides, the recently deceased man approaches the alley barricade as though he's a dog being drawn there by a subsonic whistle. Lilly and Austin hurriedly climb down the stepladder and then circle around the trailer to a spot where a narrow gap between the semi and the adjacent building is fenced off with rusty chain link and a crown of barbed wire. Lilly stares through the cyclone fence at the creature lumbering toward her.

At this close proximity—the walker is now about ten feet away—Lilly can just make out the tall, thin physique; the patrician nose; the thinning, sandy hair. The man's eyeglasses are missing, but the drab-white lab coat is unmistakable. Torn and gouged in tufts, soaked in blood now as black as crude oil, the coat hangs in shreds.

"Oh my God, no . . . no, no, no," Lilly utters in absolute despair.

The creature suddenly fixes its nickel-plated gaze on Lilly and Austin, and it lunges at them, arms reaching instinctively, fingers curling into claws, blackened lips peeling away from a mouth full of slimy-black teeth—a horrible breathy snarl vibrating out of its maw.

Lilly jerks back with a start when the thing that was once Dr. Stevens bangs into the fence.

"Jesus . . . Jesus Christ," Austin mutters, reaching for his Glock.

The chain link rattles as the former physician claws and bumps ineffectually against the barrier. His previously intelligent face is now reduced to a road map of livid veins and marble-white flesh, his neck and shoulders mangled to a bloody pulp as if they had passed through a garbage disposal. His eyes, which once perpetually gleamed with irony and sarcasm, are now an opaque white, refracting the twilight like geodes. His jaws gape as he tries to bite Lilly through the fence.

Lilly senses the muzzle of Austin's Glock rising up in her peripheral vision. "No, wait!" She waves Austin back and stares at the walker. "God . . . no. Just wait. Wait. I need to—we can't just—God *damn* it."

Austin's voice lowers an octave, goes cold and hoarse with revulsion. "They must have—"

"He must have turned back," Lilly interrupts. "Maybe he had second thoughts, decided to come back."

"Or maybe they killed him," Austin ventures. "Fucking evil dicks."

The creature in the lab coat hasn't taken its shoe-button eyes off Lilly as it gnashes its teeth and works its blackened lips around snapping teeth, as though trying to bite the air or perhaps to speak. It cocks its head for a moment as though recognizing something through the fence, something important in its prey, something like muscle memory. Lilly meets its gaze for a moment.

The strange tableau—walker and human only inches away from each other, staring into each other's eyes—doesn't last more than a moment. But in that horrible instant, Lilly feels the weight of the whole plague, the enormity of it, the terrible emptiness of the world's end pressing down on her. Here is a man who once ministered to the sick, advised all walks of life, cracked wise and slung witticisms—a man of integrity and humor and audacity and empathy for the weak. Here is the pinnacle of mankind—the highest-functioning member of the human race—stripped of everything that could be called human, diminished to a drooling, feral, neuro-

logical bundle of tics. The tears well up in Lilly's eyes without her even being aware of them—the only sign of her anguish the blurring of that livid face in front of her.

At last, Austin's strangled voice wrenches her out of this terrible reverie. "We gotta do it," he says. He has his silencer out now, and he's screwing it on the gun's barrel. "We owe it to Stevens, right?"

Lilly bows her head. She can't look at the thing anymore. "You're right."

"Stand back, Lilly."

"Wait."

Austin looks at her. "What is it?"

"Just . . . gimme a second, okay?"

"Sure."

Lilly stares at the ground, taking deep breaths, clenching her fists. Austin waits. The thing on the other side of the fence sputters and snarls. With a sudden jerk, Lilly spins toward Austin and grabs the gun.

She sticks the muzzle through an opening in the fence and shoots the walker point-blank in the head—the dry clap of the slide echoing off the sky—the single blast slamming through the top of Dr. Stevens's skull, taking off the back of his head.

The monster folds unceremoniously to the ground in a fountain of blood. Lilly lowers the gun and stares at the remains. A pool of black cerebrospinal fluid gathers under the body.

A moment of stillness passes, the thumping of Lilly's pulse the only sound in her ears now. Austin stands beside her, waiting.

At last she turns to him and says, "You think you could find a shovel?"

They bury the body inside the barricade, in the hard earth of a vacant lot along the fence. By the time they get the hole dug, which isn't easy, full darkness has set in, the stars coming out in profusion, a full moon rising. The air turns cold and clammy, the sweat

on the back of Austin's neck chilling him to the bone. He climbs out of the trench and helps Lilly lower the doctor's remains into the grave.

Then Austin backs away and lets Lilly have her moment standing over the gravesite, gazing down at the body, before he fills in the crater.

"Dr. Stevens," she says so softly that Austin has to cock his head to hear her, "you were . . . a true character. In some ways you were the voice of reason. I didn't always agree with you, but I always respected you. This town will miss you desperately—not just because of the service you provided but because it won't be the same around here without you."

A pause follows, and Austin glances up, wondering if she's done.

"I would have been proud to have you deliver my baby," she says then, her voice breaking. She sniffs back the tears. "As it is . . . we have a lot of challenges ahead of us. I hope you're in a better place now. I hope we all will be someday. I hope this craziness ends soon. I'm sorry you didn't make it long enough to see that day. God bless you, Dr. Stevens . . . and may your soul rest in peace."

She lowers her head then, and Austin waits for Lilly's tears to pass before he starts filling in the hole.

The next morning, Lilly awakens early, her mind going in many directions all at once.

She lies in bed—the room just beginning to lighten in the pre-dawn glow—Austin slumbering next to her. The two of them have been sleeping together since Lilly broke the news to Austin two days ago that she's carrying his baby. So far, in the wake of the revelation, they have been inseparable, and their rapport is easy and natural. For now, they're keeping the news to themselves, but Lilly is dying to tell others about it—maybe the Sterns, maybe Bob, perhaps even the Governor. She's riding a wave of euphoria and feels for the first time since she arrived in Woodbury that she has a

fighting chance to be happy, to survive this insanity. Austin has a lot to do with that, but so does the Governor.

And therein lies the problem. She hasn't seen a trace of the missing leader for forty-eight hours, and she doesn't buy the rumors that the Governor went out on a scouting party to find the escapees. If Woodbury is under the threat of attack—which, Lilly worries, is a real possibility—then it seems to her that the Governor would be needed right here, fortifying the town, preparing to defend it. Where the hell is he? There are other rumors flying around, but she's not buying any of them. She needs to find out what the deal is herself; she needs to see the Governor with her own eyes.

She gently untangles herself from the blankets and climbs out of bed, careful not to waken Austin. He's been a sweetheart to her these last couple of days, and the sound of his low, deep breathing gives her a good feeling. He deserves a good night's rest—especially in the wake of recent events. But Lilly is as restless as a caged animal and has to find out what's going on with the Governor. She walks across the room feeling dizzy and nauseous.

She's had morning sickness from the get-go, but not just in the morning. That high, queasy feeling in the upper GI area has been coming in waves throughout the day—every day—sometimes taking her to the verge of throwing up, sometimes less so, but always churning in her gut like a fist. She has yet to vomit and wonders if that might bring her some relief. She's been belching regularly, and that eases the nausea somewhat but not much. Maybe anxiety plays a part in it—her fear for the future, for the town's safety in the wake of these escapes, for the mounting number of walkers in the area—but part of it, she is convinced, is the normal trials and travails of the first trimester. Like a lot of expecting women riding the roller coaster of hormones, a part of her is grateful for the queasiness—it means on some fundamental level that all systems are go.

Getting dressed as quietly as possible, she practices the deep breathing exercises she once saw on some TV girlie gabfest, a factoid buried in her far-flung media memory banks. In through the nose,

out through the mouth, slow and deep and even. She pulls on her jeans, steps into her boots, and grabs her Ruger semiautomatic, which is loaded with a ten-round clip, and nestles it into the back of her belt.

For some reason, a fleeting memory of her father crosses her mind as she pulls on a cable-knit sweater and checks herself in a broken mirror sitting on top of boxes, canted against the plaster wall, reflecting a fractured slice of her narrow, freckled face. Had Everett Caul survived the initial surge of undead that swept across Metro Atlanta last year, the old man would be bursting at the seams with excitement right now. Had he not been brutally torn from the outer door of that rogue bus by a horde of biters, he would be pampering Lilly and saying things like, “A little gal in your condition shouldn’t be shootin’ firearms, missy.” Everett Caul raised Lilly well after the death of his wife from breast cancer back when Lilly was only seven years old. The old man raised his daughter with a tender touch, and had always been proud of Lilly, but the prospects of Everett Caul becoming a grandfather—spoiling her child, teaching the kid how to make fishing lures and soap out of beef tallow—stops Lilly cold at that broken mirror in the predawn light of her bedroom.

She lowers her head and begins to softly weep at the loss of her dad, her lungs hitching with emotion, making strangled hissing noises in the silent room, her tears tracking down the front of her sweater. She can’t remember crying like this—even when Josh got killed—and she gasps for air, holding her hand to the bridge of her nose. Her skull throbs. Maybe it’s just the “condition” she’s in, but she feels the sadness roiling within her like the waves of a storm-tossed sea.

“Enough of this shit,” she scolds herself under her breath, biting off the sorrow and the grief.

She draws her gun. Racks the slide. Checks the safety and tucks it back in her belt.

Then she walks out.

The day dawns clear, the sky bright and high, as Lilly strides down Main Street, her hands in her pockets, making note of the general mood of the few Woodburians who cross her path. She sees Gus with an armful of fuel cans, awkwardly negotiating the loading dock steps behind the warehouse on Pecan Street. She sees the Sizemore girls playing tic-tac-throw on the pavement of an alley under the watchful gaze of their mother, Elizabeth, who cradles a shotgun. The vibe on Woodbury's streets is strangely calm and sanguine—apparently the rumor mill has quieted down for the time being—although Lilly detects an odd undertow of jitters threading through the people. She can sense its presence in furtive glances and the speed with which folks are crossing streets and carrying supplies through doors and passageways. It makes Lilly think of those old Westerns that used to play on Sunday afternoons on the Fox station in Atlanta. Invariably, at some point, some old grizzled cowboy would say, "It's quiet . . . maybe a little too quiet." With a shrug, Lilly shakes off the feeling and turns south at the corner of Main and Durand.

Her plan is to try the Governor's apartment first—the previous day she got nowhere with Earl, the tattooed biker guarding the entrance—and if that doesn't yield any information, then she'll try the infirmary. She's heard murmurings among the town gossip-mongers that the Governor sustained injuries during a struggle to prevent the strangers from escaping. But at this point, Lilly doesn't know what or whom to believe. All she knows is that the longer the town goes without a plan, without consensus, without information, the more vulnerable they'll become.

She sees the Governor's building in the distance—as well as the guard pacing across the entrance—and she starts to rehearse what she's going to say, when she notices a figure trundling down the street. The man lugs two enormous thirty-gallon containers of filtered water, and moves with the intense haste of somebody rushing to put out a fire. Squat, broad-shouldered, and bullish, he wears a tattered turtleneck, which is dark under the arms with sweat, and army fatigue pants tucked into his hobnail boots. His big

crew-cut head has an awkward forward lean to it like the prow of a storm-rocked ship as he hauls the jugs toward the center of town—toward the racetrack.

“GABE!”

Lilly tries to keep her voice even as she calls out, tries not to appear too alarmed, but the shout comes out tinged with hysteria. She hasn’t seen Gabe in forty-eight hours, not since the strangers escaped in such a shroud of mystery two days ago, and she has a feeling Gabe knows exactly what’s going on. The big, burly man remains one of the Governor’s closest lieutenants and confidantes—an attack dog that has completely sublimated its own personality in favor of serving the iron-fisted town tyrant.

“Huh?” Gabe looks up with a startled, vexed expression. He can hear footsteps but can’t see who’s approaching. He whirls around with the heavy weight dragging on his arms. “Ww-wha—?”

“Gabe, what’s going on?” Lilly says breathlessly as she clamors up to him. She swallows back the jitters and stanches her racing pulse. Then she lowers her voice. “Where the hell is the Governor?”

“I can’t talk right now,” Gabe says, and pushes past her, hauling the water containers down the sidewalk.

“Wait!—Gabe!—Hold on a second.” She chases after him, and clutches at his beefy arm. “Just tell me what’s going on!”

Gabe pauses, glances over his shoulder to see if anybody else is within earshot. The street is deserted. Gabe keeps his voice low. “Nothing’s going on, Lilly. Just mind your own fucking business.”

“Gabe, c’mon.” She shoots a glance over her shoulder, then looks back at him. “All I’m asking is . . . is he here? Is he in Woodbury?”

Gabe sets the containers down with a grunt. He runs fingers through his short-cropped, sandy hair, his scalp moist with perspiration. Right then Lilly notices something disconcerting about this barrel-chested bull of a man, something she has never seen before. His hands are shaking. He spits on the street. “Okay . . . look. Tell everybody . . . tell them . . .” He pauses, swallowing

hard, looking down, shaking his head. "I don't know . . . tell them everything's okay, the Governor's okay, and there's nothing to worry about."

"If there's nothing to worry about, where the fuck *is* he, Gabe?"

He looks at her. "He's . . . here. He's . . . dealing with some shit right now."

"What shit?"

"Goddamnit—I told you to mind your fucking business!" Gabe catches himself, the gravelly boom of his voice echoing across the far warrens of stone alleyways and brick storefronts. He takes a deep breath and calms down. "Look, I gotta go. The Governor needs this water."

"Gabe, listen to me." Lilly steps in closer and gets in his face. "If you know what's going on, tell me . . . because the town is starting to come apart at the seams not knowing anything. People are making shit up. The guys at the wall are starting to not show up for their shifts." Something inside Lilly hardens then, like a block of ice. All her fear and doubt drains out of her, leaving behind a cold, calculating, ticking intellect. She holds Gabe's wide, shifting gray eyes in her gaze. "Look at me."

"Huh?"

"Look at me, Gabe."

He looks at her, his eyes narrowing with anger. "What the fuck is your problem, lady—you think you can talk to me like that?"

"I care about this town, Gabe." She stands her ground, nose to nose with this nervous, snorting bull. "Listen to what I'm telling you. I need this town to work. Do you understand? Now tell me what's going on. If there's nothing wrong, you got no reason to hide anything."

"Goddamnit, Lilly—"

"Talk to me, Gabe." She arc-welds her gaze into him. "If there's a problem, you need me on your side. I can help. Ask the Governor. I'm on his side. I need him on that wall. I need him keeping people sharp."

At last, the portly man in the turtleneck deflates. He looks at the ground. His voice comes out paper-thin, reedy and defeated, like a little boy admitting to being naughty. “If I show you what’s going on . . . you gotta promise to keep it on the down-low.”

Lilly just stares at him, wondering how bad it could be.