

**PRAY
TO
STAY
DEAD**

MASON JAMES COLE



**NEW ORLEANS
2011**

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Pray to Stay Dead

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This book is lovingly dedicated to George A. Romero,
Tobe Hooper, Jack Ketchum, and Richard Milhous Nixon;
and to those wise few who know the truth:

The world ended in 1974.

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O N E

Her mother had been dead for three days, but Colleen couldn't quite get a grip on the idea. It was slick and slippery and it didn't seem real at all, even as it churned her stomach and wore her down with bureaucratic busywork and morbid decision-making. It was smoke and razor blades: she could not touch it, but it could open her flesh to the bone.

"I'm glad she's dead," said her brother.

She sneered but said nothing. In truth, Colleen had thought the same thing at several points over the past few days: shortly after someone from the hospital called to inform her that her mother was dead; while she made arrangements with the gaunt-faced funeral home director; while she stared at her mother lying in the casket, waxen and unreal. And again, moments ago, while sitting in the hush of the living room with her brother and waiting for Guy and the others to arrive. She had thought it more times than she knew, but she hadn't been able to say it. Daniel had no such reservations.

He sat on the edge of the sofa, hands hanging between his knees, head low. Staring at the floor. She didn't say anything until he looked up at her. His eyes were dry.

“How can you say that?” The expected response. It popped out like a cuckoo clock bird. It was bullshit.

“Come on,” he said, throwing himself back against the cushions, sandy hair in his eyes. “You haven’t thought it?”

“I just think that—”

“Of course you have.”

“I just—”

“And you *are* glad, right?”

Her eyes were dry too. She could cry only so much.

She nodded, but that wasn’t enough for him: “Then say it.”

“I don’t think—”

“Say it,” he said, whipping his hair from his face with a snap of the neck—a well-practiced move. “She isn’t listening.”

Colleen didn’t bother fighting him on this. Daniel declared himself an atheist three years ago, at the age of fifteen, shortly after he read an interview in which one of his idols—she couldn’t remember if it was Bowie or Lennon—mentioned Nietzsche. The next day, Daniel had returned from the library with a small stack of philosophy texts, and that was it. And he hadn’t let them forget—not even as Dorine Brockenbraugh lay on her deathbed asking for her children to pray with her. A derisive sigh, a roll of the eyes, a flip of the hair, and he was out of the room.

“Well?”

“What?”

He was still on it.

“Okay,” she said, thinking of her mother, not long before her death, sitting on the edge of the hospital bed following another invasive and humiliating round of tests, her brow shining with sweat, her needle-punctured arms dotted with small round band-aids. She’d looked her daughter in the eyes and exhaled once—*whoa*—her cheeks puffing, a marathon runner pausing a few miles from the finish line. The blasted look in her eyes: she was ready for the race to end.

“Okay, what?”

Colleen picked at a shredding cuticle. “I’m glad she’s dead.”

“I know you are,” he said, smiling, his teeth a jumble. “But why?”

“Why?”

“Yeah. Why are you glad she’s dead?”

“Because...” Colleen groped around for the right response. All that came to mind, however, all that seemed safe and right to speak, was the canned one, and Daniel knew it. Cuckoo on deck.

“Don’t you dare say ‘because she’s in a better place.’ I swear to God if you do I’ll come across this coffee table and give you a fat lip.”

“Because she’s in a better place?” she said, half smiling and shrugging.

“Yeah.” He shook his head and then whipped his hair into place again. He fished a joint and a lighter out of his shirt pocket and lit up.

“Jesus, Dan, *here?*” she said. He filled his lungs and blew smoke toward her. She waved it away. “You’re such a child.”

“Yeah, I really am.” He held up his joint. “This right here is why I’m glad. I’m glad because I can sit in my own damned living room and smoke grass if I want to. I’m glad because I don’t ever have to help bathe her and wipe her ass again. I’m glad because I don’t have to listen to her scream because the morphine isn’t doing shit.”

She looked down. He blew more smoke at her. She didn’t bother waving it away. Inhaled a little.

“And yeah, I’m glad she’s not in pain anymore. She’s not up in the sky, playing harps and bowling with Moses, but ceasing to exist is better than screaming yourself to sleep and shitting your pants.

“Most of all? I’m glad my life starts now. I’m glad that *yours* starts now. You’re *twenty-three*, Colleen. What if she’d lived another three years? Or maybe five? Jesus. Can you imagine that?”

“You wouldn’t have hung around.”

“But you, see, you think that’s a virtue. You’d have stayed by her side, holding her hand and talking to Jesus, all because she refused to allow anyone but her babies to care for her. And what about us? What if she had lived another five years and if both of us had stayed right here with her? Did she even think about that? Did she think about us, about what that would do to us—what it *was* doing to us? No, she didn’t.”

Colleen remembered the disappointment in her high school advisor’s eyes when she’d told him that she would not be starting college the following year. Her line about no longer having enough money wasn’t entirely true—her mom’s medical bills had taken a bloody chunk out of her college savings, yes, but she’d been awarded a healthy scholarship, and there simply had been no financial reason to postpone college. It was only for one year, she’d assured

him and herself and her friends, thinking in the shadows of her head that her mother would surely be gone by then. One year had turned to four, and now she was where she was. Her brother was right. He was an asshole, but he was right.

They sat without speaking for a few minutes. Daniel offered her what was left of his joint. She shook her head. He shrugged, tossed his hair back, and finished it himself, pressing it out on the bottom of his shoe. She watched the ashes fall to the carpet and wondered who would pass the vacuum cleaner. Daniel leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Colleen got up and went into her bedroom, pausing for a moment outside of her mother's bedroom. The door was closed and she had to beat back the habit to lean in and listen for the rhythmic and labored sound of her mother's breathing. She made herself grab hold of the slippery idea: there was only silence in there. She walked on.

In her bedroom, she gave her dresser a once-over, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything, then went into her bathroom and grabbed a few more pads, just in case. She was beginning to cramp up, and she was grateful that their plans for the coming week involved skis and not bathing suits.

She returned to the living room and stuffed the pads deep into her duffel bag, beneath the light blue slip and panties that she probably wouldn't be modeling for Guy, hoping Daniel didn't see, still private about feminine stuff around her brother. She sat across from him. His eyes were closed.

"You really still believe all of that shit?" he asked, sounding less like an asshole and more like someone who was genuinely interested in what she thought. "Life after death?"

"Sure," she said, and followed her words with a shrug. "I guess."

He leaned forward, eyes on her. She saw from the look in his eyes that he wanted to say something, that he was having a hard time holding back. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing." His coiled, about-to-strike energy dissipated, and he sank back against the couch.

"Nothing my ass, man. And since when do you not speak your mind."

"I'm tired of the conversation, is all. We're running in circles, and that's just a waste of time." He smiled. "Besides, you're a smart girl. You know the truth, even if you pretend not to."

"All right, already."

"That mom's in the ground. That you'll never see her again."

Colleen looked away, stared at the front door. Where the hell were the others already?

“That dead is dead.”

It was more than he had spoken to her in months, and it was there that the conversation dropped and didn't get up. A few minutes later Daniel heard the rumble of an engine outside. The doorbell rang, and Colleen hopped up and opened the front door. There Kimberly, Colleen's best friend since childhood, grabbed Colleen and squeezed.

“You okay, Brock?” Kimberly asked, touching Colleen's cheek. Daniel wasn't sure he'd ever heard Kim call Colleen by her first name.

“Yes,” Colleen said. “I just want to get out of here. Are we all set up?”

“Mm-hm! You ready to have a good time?”

“I've been ready.”

“Good.” Shifting into hushed tones, his sister and her best friend stepped from sight. Outside, someone said something. It sounded like Guy.

“Come on, idiot,” she shouted back at her brother, showing off just a bit.

Daniel shoved himself up from the couch, picked up his bag, and shuffled toward the front. Colleen's bag was where she left it, either on purpose or accidentally, just inside the door by his mother's godawful wrought iron umbrella stand. Wishing he were higher, he dropped to his knees and unzipped her bag and rummaged around until he found Colleen's pads. He pulled them out, chuckled once, and stood up. He tossed the pads behind the couch and, picking up their bags, left the house.

Outside, Colleen was greeting Guy. Adjusting his shoulder strap, Daniel stepped toward Kimberly.

“Hey, Kim,” he said, and wanted to punch himself in the nuts. He wondered if he sounded as puppy-dog wistful to Kimberly as he did to himself.

“Hello, Daniel,” she said, and his face grew hot. The dismissive tone of her voice said it all, and as he stepped past her and toward the back of the van, he wondered if she'd rolled her eyes. He was used to it. The manner with which she treated him was dependent on how many of her friends were around. If it was just the two of them, she treated him like a person, an equal. If the whole

gang was in tow, well, he merited only condescension and distance or outright indifference.

He'd known Kimberly since he was five, when she'd sleep over along with Colleen's other friends. Most of them came and went, but she remained, year after year. She was only a year older than he, and their bodies had begun to mature at roughly the same time. He'd watched her fill out her pajamas over the course of countless sleepovers, and on two flushed occasions he'd seen her naked.

When he was eleven, he'd awakened in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. His business complete, he'd opened the bathroom door and stepped into the hall, and there she was, wearing only her cotton undies and a sleepy-eyed look of surprise, her hair a mess. She'd covered her small breasts, and eased past him into the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it. Three years later, *déjà vu*: middle of the night, same hall, same bathroom. Only her breasts were larger, and she wore nothing at all. She didn't cover herself that time. A Mona Lisa smile on her lips, she had allowed his eyes to take in every inch.

Though both incidents had seemed accidental, he came to believe otherwise. For whatever reason, either to throw him a bone or simply to tease and torment or possibly to stroke her own ego, she'd elected to provide him with years of masturbatory fuel.

Making matters worse, they'd kissed once, not even a year ago. The party had been dim and loud, and they'd been drunk and high and rubbing against one another while, on the stereo, Arthur Brown bade them to burn. He was sure that the kiss had meant nothing to her, that it had been no different from the time she'd allowed him to stare at her tits, just as serendipitous, just as empty, but that was fine. When it came to Kimberly, he'd apparently take what he could get.

"How's Sunny?" Kimberly asked him as he pressed his duffel bag into the back of the van, atop everyone else's luggage.

"She's doing fine." It was a load. His girlfriend for the past seven months was drinking too much, and when she wasn't drinking she was dropping acid and screaming at the spiders on her arms or some shit, and the wall that had always existed between them was growing a little thicker each day.

He saw no reason to tell Kimberly any of that.

"She still coming?"

"She's meeting us sometime tomorrow, I think."

"All right."

"Yeah."

"Listen," she began, and he knew what was coming. It had to, they both knew it, but it was fine—at least she was talking to him with the spurs off. "You doing okay?"

"What, you mean because of my mom?"

"Yeah, you know..."

"Yeah, I'm doing just fine, thanks."

"Okay, that's good." She shuffled her feet, looking down, to the left, to the right—pretty much anywhere if it meant she didn't have to hold his gaze for more than three seconds.

"What?" he asked.

"What?" she answered.

"You want to tell me something," Daniel said. "So tell me."

"You smell like grass."

"I know," he said.

"You got any more?"

"A little, but it's shit. I got it from Greg."

"Shit."

"That's all he sells. Doesn't matter. We can get some more. You were saying?"

She looked over at Guy and Colleen, who stood talking, their faces close. Guy's hand was on Colleen's ass, pressing her to him.

"Richard is coming," she said. "We're going to pick him up."

"I know."

"I know you know, it's just that..."

"What?"

"I don't, you know...?"

"No," he said. His face was still hot, though for different reasons. "I don't think I do."

"Richard and I are pretty serious, okay?"

"That's great. Sunny and I are pretty serious, too. It happens sometimes when you put boys and girls together."

"I just didn't want you to get jealous. I know how you feel and—"

"I don't think you do, Kim, but everything's fine," he said. "Okay?"

“Okay.”

He left her standing at the rear of the van and slid himself across the back seat. Shit or not, he was feeling Greg’s cheap grass. He leaned back and closed his eyes. The van rocked as the others climbed into it.

“Look at this,” Guy said. “You didn’t save any for me, you dickhead?”

“I got a little more,” Daniel said, indicating the back of the van with his thumb.

“But it’s shit,” Kimberly said. Daniel didn’t open his eyes, but he could tell from the sound of her voice that she was sitting on the seat in front of him.

“He get it from Greg?” Guy asked.

“You know it,” Kimberly said.

By the time they picked up Richard, Daniel was having trouble staying awake. He nodded off, opened his eyes. Guy drove, laughing about something with Colleen. Bowie was on the radio, and Kimberly was making out with Richard. “Diamond Dogs” gave way to “Sweet Thing”—one of Guy’s 8-track tapes, then, not the radio, and when the tape was over, Colleen popped it out and pressed in Alice Cooper.

They drove north, exchanging civilization for dense redwood forest, laughing and talking and listening to one tape after another, never tuning in to the radio to hear the weather or to listen to the Top 40 or to check in on the general state of world affairs.

Daniel woke up at some point and rolled a fat one from the dwindling stash of Greg’s shitty grass in his bag, which they passed around. Only the front seat—Colleen and Guy—didn’t partake, until the joint was mostly spent, anyway. Colleen took it from Kimberly and, closing her eyes, filled her lungs. She coughed, of course, and everyone laughed.

Less than an hour later they arrived at their first stop on the road to three snow- and sex-filled days in Tahoe, a campsite in Sutter Creek, not far from Sacramento. Kimberly had talked it up, and it was as nice as she’d promised, and empty. Not a soul in sight.

They cooked hot dogs over an open fire, tried to skinny dip in the river but quit at about ankle level due to the cold (Daniel sat it out, opting to remain at

the campsite and read a dog-eared Frederik Pohl paperback), and when the sky darkened they fed the fire, hastily pitched three small tents, and retired.

Mercifully, Colleen had not yet started her period, so there was love, slow and steady and ever so quiet. Kimberly and Richard went at it like animals, grunting and panting and, in the end, laughing like maniacs. Daniel popped a few downers, even though he didn't really need them, and passed out.

They slept in and spent the next day lazing about. Kimberly and Richard walked into the woods and did not return for several hours. Colleen and Daniel argued while Guy silently watched, opening and closing his mouth at certain intervals, as if he'd had something to add but figured it just wasn't worth it. Daniel stomped away before long, and Colleen lay in Guy's arms staring up at the sky through the trees.

That night, they laughed around the campfire, and when the sound of gunfire popped in the distance, Kimberly asked when deer season opened. None of them knew. Later, pressed close to one another in their tent, Colleen and Guy tried to have sex.

"What?" Guy asked, his cock hard, pressed to her stomach.

"I can't stop thinking about her tonight," Colleen said, feeling around for the flashlight.

"Oh, jeeze," Guy said, and Colleen wasn't sure if he sounded sympathetic or annoyed. His dick certainly felt pissed off.

"I was fine last night," she said, finding the flashlight and clicking it on, illuminating the red interior of the tent. "Tonight I just keep seeing her face."

"Oh, hon," he said, holding her close, any trace of annoyance gone from his voice, his cock softening between them.

They talked for a little while and she fell asleep with the flashlight on.

The following morning, they were on the road by nine. Daniel was in a groggy daze, and by nine-thirty he was asleep again. They didn't tune in to the radio for several hours, by which point the world was already falling apart.

T W O

They came upon a half-red heap on the roadside. Colleen realized it was a deer, saw the glistening red knot bulging from its mouth, and looked away.

"Oh, God!" Kimberly said.

"Poor thing," Colleen replied.

"It's *alive*," Kimberly said, twisting in her seat. Still asleep, Daniel slumped against the window, his head tipped forward, his face entirely obscured by his hair.

"That's not possible," Richard said.

"He's right," Colleen said. "Its guts were hanging out of its mouth."

"Uh, not its guts," Daniel said, looking up and clearing his throat. He sounded amused. "That's not really possible. Maybe its stomach or something, but not its guts."

"Oh, who cares?" Colleen said. "You know what I mean."

"Guts are probably hanging out of its ass," he added, as if he hadn't heard her. He looked at Kimberly. She covered her mouth with her hand and watched as the deer disappeared from sight. "Kim, forget about it."

"I saw its legs moving. I'm telling you, I did," Kimberly said, looking at Colleen. "Come on, Brock, we have to do something."

Daniel shrugged. "Whatever."

Richard put his arm around her. "It looked dead to me," he said.

Kimberly looked like she was about to cry.

Guy moved the van onto the side of the road and brought it to a halt. "It was pretty messed up," he said, looking back at Kimberly. "I think it's dead, too, but if you think you saw it moving, I'll check it out, okay?"

Kimberly nodded.

Guy hopped out of the van. He went to the back, opened the doors, and, after a few seconds of rummaging, removed the tire iron from the spare tire well. They watched him walk in the direction of the fallen deer. Daniel grunted something, stirred, and went right back to sleeping.

"Damn." The deer was alive. God help him, he had no idea how the hell it could be, but it was.

The large doe had surely been struck, and by something big; its midsection was crushed and twisted almost entirely around, its hindquarters mashed flat. A dozen angles of pink ribs splayed open its torso. Its guts were indeed hanging from its ass. They were strewn across the ground behind the animal's broken hind legs, speckled with dirt. Pine needles clung to them, flies buzzed, and the air reeked of scat. The creature's front legs worked, the hooves digging into the dirt. Its head lolled. Its jaw worked as if it were trying to swallow whatever it was that bulged from its mouth. Its eyes slowly rolled in their sockets.

"Ugh," he said, slamming the tire-iron into its skull until its forelegs stopped moving.

Back at the van's open rear, he wiped the tire-iron clean with an oil-stained rag.

"It was alive?" Kimberly asked.

He nodded once and tossed the rag into the ditch. "Poor thing was damned tough."

Kimberly watched him put the tire iron away. "Thank you," she said.

Guy closed the doors.

As he slid into the van, Richard opened the side door and hopped out. "I gotta go," he said, and walked toward the edge of the road.

Daniel sat up, jerked his hair from his face, and blinked. “Piss break?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Sure,” Guy said. They got out.

Richard peed onto the crumbling base of a fallen redwood, making a paste of the red dust. He wanted to be someplace else. He didn’t like Kimberly’s friends and they didn’t like him. They thought he was an idiot and he guessed they weren’t totally unjustified in this opinion. They talked politics and literature and movies, things about which he knew little and cared less, so there Richard sat like a sack of potatoes waiting for it to break.

Sometimes when they were all around, Kim would ask him for his two cents, trying to make him a part of things, and if he was lucky he’d be able to parrot something she’d said to him earlier. It always seemed like they could tell. They made him feel dumb. And things weren’t much different when it was just the two of them. He tried to keep up, tried to pretend to care about the things that turned Kimberly on, statistics and movements, but he couldn’t—he just wasn’t wired that way.

It was all made more rough by the recent realization that he didn’t love her. He loved fucking her, for sure, and he liked her company when they were just hanging out, getting high or talking small. He didn’t like having to fake it, having to play the quiet type, but he did it if he had to, and he didn’t want to do it anymore.

If only for the sex, he could have gone on this way for God knew how long. His general apathy toward all things carried over into his own life, and though he didn’t care for the way things had gone whenever they all got together, he could deal with feeling like an idiot around Kim and her friends if he could still go to bed with her and have those pressure-free moments together.

He’d met Tatum Morrish nearly two months ago while at a party he and Kimberly were attending, and all that had changed. He felt at ease with Tatum, never in danger of being judged or evaluated. He didn’t feel stupid when he was with her, and the sex was as good as it was with Kimberly.

Richard didn’t care about much but he had no interest in hurting anyone, least of all someone as goodhearted as Kimberly. So he had avoided the

breakup, juggling both girls for as long as he could. He clued Tatum in just last week, promised her that he'd return from the trip to Tahoe free of Kimberly.

He would tell her. He would tell her soon. It would hurt, he knew, wishing there was some other way around it.

He zipped up and walked back toward the van.

"Hey," Kimberly said when she saw him.

"Hey," he said, and she leaned forward and kissed him. They were the same height, which was nice. He looked into her eyes and wondered if maybe it would be easier to just let her find out.

"I can't believe you threw out my pads."

"I didn't," Daniel said, looking down, hair in his face, trying and failing to suppress an idiot grin.

They stood at the back of the van, which was parked on the side of the road at the base of a densely forested hill. The van's doors were open, revealing their heaped luggage. Colleen's bag was opened, its contents strewn across the other bags: clothes, a hair dryer, a brush, a small zipper bag containing make-up. No pads.

Guy was a few yards away, peeing onto pine needles, his back to them. Kimberly and Richard had taken a walk, down a slope and out of sight.

"You lying asshole," Colleen said, pushing him with both hands. She didn't know why he bothered trying to lie to her. He wasn't very good at it—always shuffling his feet and looking around—but even at his best, his most bald-faced, she could see through him. She could see the lie in his unblinking eyes when he finally stopped looking around and decided to make eye contact, and she could hear it in his voice, which became stripped of emotion and oddly tremulous, the voice of the seven-year-old who'd broken her porcelain ballerina and blamed it on a non-existent earthquake.

"Hey," he said, stepping backward and rubbing his chest. "I said I was sorry."

Colleen laughed. "What the hell are you talking about? You didn't say you were sorry."

"I was going to, okay?" He looked around. Kimberly and Richard emerged a few hundred feet behind them, gazing up into the redwoods and walking close.

Kimberly looked back at them. Daniel's voice fell to a whisper. "And then you started screaming and shit, and I just—"

"Enough," she said, and took a quick step toward him. He stepped back, flinching. He had a good five inches on her, but she was still his Big Sister. As a child, she hadn't been above petty cruelty; she'd enjoyed making him cry on more than a handful of occasions. She wasn't proud of this, not necessarily, but she'd established herself as the boss then, and it was sometimes easy to slip back into the role. Daniel enjoyed battering people with his words, but when he thought he was maybe going to get posted, he was all nervous twitches and apologies.

"I'm sorry," he said. He shrugged, whipping the hair from his face, and she really wanted to punch his crooked teeth in.

"You're such a *child*," she said, and walked away, toward Guy, who was all zipped up and standing near the front of the van. He raised his eyebrows and opened his arms. She diplomatically sidestepped the embrace.

"You really think he did it on purpose? Maybe they fell out."

She looked back at Daniel, who shuffled away in search of a tree to piss on.

"They didn't fall out."

"You gotta go?" Guy asked, nodding toward the woods.

"Yeah."

"You need a hand?" He smiled.

"I'll manage."

She let him kiss the corner of her mouth and turned away, crossed the street and crab-walked down the slope. Twigs snapped beneath her feet. Somewhere nearby, in the direction from which they'd come, by the sound of it, an engine rumbled. Twenty or so feet down, the ground leveled out. She stopped there, dropped her pants and squatted, relieved to see that her disposable pad was spot free. They were about ninety minutes south of the nearest gas station/five and dime. They'd make it before she got messy.

Her urine pattered the ground. It smelled like her morning coffee. She stood, pulled up her pants, and took her time working her way up the incline, steadying herself, leaning forward and touching the ground before her. Some seemingly sturdy bumps in the terrain turned out to be thick rifts of gathered pine needles that fell apart under the barest pressure, sliding in a scatter down the hillside.

She reached the road and stood, wiped her hands on her jeans. The van's driver side door was open. Guy was half in, half out, as if he'd paused on his way out or in. Completely still.

He listened to the radio. Colleen could barely hear it, the drone of news. He looked at her and slid entirely from the seat, crossing over to where she stood. He was pale. He looked frightened. She wasn't used to seeing him that way.

"Come here," he said, looking around. He took her by the arm and led her to the van. Daniel approached them, a paltry joint hanging from his lips. Guy looked in the direction Kimberly and Richard had gone. "Hey, you two," he yelled. "Get up here. Now." He reached out and pulled the joint from Daniel's mouth, brought it to his own, inhaled.

"Hey," Daniel said. "What are you—"

"Shut up," Guy said. Daniel shut up and took his diminished joint when Guy passed it back to him.

Colleen said: "What's wr—"

He cut her off with a look, leaned in and turned up the volume. "Listen."

She listened, pressing herself closer to him. He held her. A moment later, Daniel leaned closer. He looked at Colleen, frowned, started to say something but didn't. Eventually Kimberly and Richard joined them.

"What the hell," Richard said, and no one responded.

"Oh, God," Kimberly said, looking at Colleen with tear-filled eyes. "The deer."

"It can't be," Daniel said, after the grim-voiced man reading the news looped around to the beginning of his report and began to repeat himself for the benefit of those just tuning in. "That's not possible."

They huddled around the driver side door and listened as the man on the radio once more announced that the CDC in Atlanta had confirmed countless reports over the last forty-eight hours that the recently dead were returning to life and attacking the living.

T H R E E

Reggie Turner slept through the first twelve hours of the end of the world.

He'd been in Houston, taking it easy after a sixteen-hour haul from Tucson, Arizona when the job offer came: deliver a load of industrial chillers to Sacramento within forty hours. It was a thirty-hour run with no trouble and no sleep. He slept for five hours and got to Sacramento in a little over twenty-eight hours, popping black mollies all the way.

Reggie didn't like the way speed made him feel—like a big rodent or a small monkey was trapped behind his ribs and was panicking, trying to tear its way out—but he did what he had to, and he got to Sacramento not long after sundown. This was a good thing, too—he hated walking around in the daylight after a long haul. Too damned bright.

He dumped his load and picked up another for a short run down to Fresno that didn't need to be there for twenty-four hours. Still flying from the mollies, he tried to cool his heels in Frank's, a small, smoky bar and grill not far from the rest stop where he'd get the last good night's sleep of his life.

Frank, whoever he was, was nowhere to be seen, but the blinds and the smoke made the waitress—her name was Maxine—look at least thirty-five.

He smiled and she smiled. He ordered a cheeseburger, fries, and a beer, and he decided he needed to fuck. First things first, though.

Sliding away from the bar and letting his eyes linger over Maxine's ass (nice for a white woman who'd already given forty a healthy push), he went to the pay phone, which was located between the bathroom doors. The combined smell of piss and urinal cakes and crap lingered here, as it did outside the bathrooms in every truck-stop bar and grill in America. No one looked at him as if he should get his black ass the fuck out the door and on the road. If they felt that way, and he was sure some of them did, then they did a better job of hiding it than the assholes in Houston.

He fed the payphone and dialed home. His mother answered on the third ring. They talked small for a few minutes and then he asked to talk to Nef. Nefertiti's mother had been on an Africa kick when she'd gotten pregnant and she'd insisted on giving their child a name that evoked the majesty of Ancient Egypt. When he'd asked her why they couldn't give their kid a normal name that wouldn't get its ass kicked at school, she'd called him an Uncle Tom and then tried to gouge out his eyes. Her Africa kick came around the same time as her cheap hard liquor kick, and she was a mean-ass drunk.

He didn't miss her.

"Hey, daddy," Nef said.

"Hey, baby. You have a good birthday?" She'd just turned seven.

"Yeah," she said, and it was such a short word, he didn't have time to decide whether he could hear sadness in her voice.

"You coming home soon?"

"Soon, honey."

"When?"

"I got one more job to do tomorrow, a little one, and then I'm on my way home. How's day after tomorrow sound?"

"Great!"

They talked and laughed. He asked her how school was, and if she'd gotten the present he'd mailed from Texas, and then she asked him how long he was going to stay home. As long as he could afford to, he told her. They wrapped it up and then he said a few more words to his mother. Yes, she'd picked up the check he'd wired her; yes, Nef was going to bed early and doing her homework and eating good. He said goodnight and when he returned to the bar his food was waiting for him.

He downed the food along with three more beers, eyeing Maxine and talking to her whenever she came by. Both of them knew the game well enough to tell that the other was playing it. He asked her what time she was getting off, and she spun it into a joke.

"I clock out at eight." It was fifteen after seven. "So I'm thinking maybe twenty minutes after eight?"

"And again at eight thirty."

She smiled, and they walked out to his truck a few minutes after eight. In the cramped sleeping quarters behind the seats, they undressed separately and got to work. She hadn't been off in her estimation, nor had he. They went at it with something like tired desperation, and when they were done no one said anything. The smell of cigarette smoke and charred meat clung to her hair; the smell of their bodies filled the small space in which they lay, side by side, like relations.

She sat up to light a cigarette and spied his dog tags, and he readied himself.

"You were over there?"

"Yes, I was."

"What was it like?"

"Like you heard it is."

"Something you don't like to talk about?" She'd never come right out and ask, not without an opening (they never did), but it was pretty damned obvious: she wanted to know if he'd killed anyone, and if so, how many; and what did it look like, smell like, feel like? He saw her eyes crawl over his body, scavenging for overlooked scars. Everyone was a ghoul, eager to wrench the bones from the dirt and see if there was anything wet left to suck out. Everyone wanted to hear about the bad stuff, about the brains popping and the blood flying. This had once surprised and disappointed him.

"No," he said. "Bad dreams." This was bullshit, the kind she wanted to hear and enough to make her uncomfortable. He didn't dream of Vietnam. He never dreamed of Vietnam, not of the good moments, the quiet moments in which it was possible to believe that you were not a second away from eating a bullet or being obliterated by a landmine; nor did he dream of the screams of the dying or of the asshole reckless superior he and a few of his fellows had gotten away with fragging. He hadn't had nightmares before combat, and he did not have

them now. Combat, he believed, did not change a man: it magnified him. He came out a bigger, truer version of himself, for better or worse.

No nightmares, but sometimes the images from 1965 would come to him when he was awake, and with total clarity: the sight of a cluster of VC coming apart in spurts and chunks as his M14 spat fire and tried to shake itself from his grip; the heaps of bodies, the crying children; the old man laughing and telling unintelligible yet obviously raunchy jokes on a Monday and lying waxen and still the following Wednesday, a mangy wild dog lapping clean the hollowed-out ruin of his skull.

Reggie yawned. The mollies were out of his system, the animal that was his heart had calmed, and the long haul was catching up with him. He sat up.

“You heading out?”

“I’m exhausted,” he said, his eyelids heavy. “I need sleep.”

“You can stay parked right here,” she said. He could see the hope in her eyes, or thought he could. Maybe she wanted more dick; maybe she wanted to press him for more about the war. Maybe she just wanted to be held, but he wanted her out of his truck.

“I know, but I need real sleep, and I bet this parking lot gets noisy.”

“Yeah.” She gazed at his chest, and the look of hope in her eyes had turned to a look of disappointment. “You going to the rest stop?” She nodded in its direction.

“Yeah. Nice and quiet.”

“Coming through town again?”

“Probably one day.” He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Okay.” She touched his chest and leaned in for a kiss. They dressed, and it was as awkward as it ever was.

“See you around,” she said as she walked away from his truck and toward her car. A Mac tractor rumbled through the parking lot. Good old boys with too little sense in their heads and too much beer in their bellies leaned against a pickup truck and hooted at Maxine as she got into her car.

Reggie got behind the wheel of his Kenworth, locked the doors, and fired her up. He drove to the rest stop, left the air running, and crawled into the back. He fell asleep to the sound of the truck’s idling diesel engine.

F O U R

The ride up the hill was long, made longer by hairpin curves. Daniel's threat to upchuck was the only thing spoken since they started listening to the radio. Guy clutched the steering wheel, his knuckles white, his forehead creased. Kimberly looked dazed. Richard held her close. He looked confused. The radio buzzed with static, and Colleen adjusted the dial until the hiss broke.

A few minutes into a report on the looting going on in Detroit, Daniel said, "I want to see the deer."

Guy said, "Why? It's dead. I took care of it."

"Right," Daniel said, amused. "I know, but don't you see what you're saying? It's dead now. So... let's see if it's come back."

"They're not saying anything about animals," Richard said.

"It was already dead," Kimberly said, glancing at Richard and then looking at the back of Guy's head. "Right?"

"I think so," he said. "It was in bad shape."

"So it was dead, and it came back, and you killed it again?" Daniel said, sneering.

"Yeah," said Guy. "I think so."

"So it's dead again."

No one said anything.

“That doesn’t make any fucking *sense*.” He laughed, his tone derisive and devoid of humor. “What’s going to stop it from coming back again? This is *bullshit*.” He threw himself back against the seat and allowed his hair to obscure his face. He pulled out more of Greg’s shitty pot and lit up without offering to share. The van filled with the filthy smell of shake and the radio’s lone hiss.

Kimberly squeezed Colleen’s shoulder. Richard spaced out.

The man on the radio continued. There were more reports of attacks from assorted cities across the US, and Colleen felt her head grow light. Daniel was right about one thing: nothing made sense. They’d left home not even forty-eight hours ago. How could the world get turned inside out within two days?

Following a wrap-up of events, the other side had their say: a noted biologist from London disputed the reports that the dead were returning to life. Such a notion was preposterous, he said, and he promptly went on to blame the explosion of misinformation on the U.S. media.

“See?” Daniel said, looking hopeful. “I told you.”

A little over ten minutes later, he didn’t look quite as hopeful. The radio host played an interview with a doctor in Austin, Texas. The doctor confirmed that he’d been on hand for at least four revivals over the past two hours, and no, what he’d witnessed could not have been a living person reacting to the effects of an as-yet-unidentified viral or chemical agent that lowered vital signs and created the illusion of death, because in one of the three revivals the revived had been eviscerated in a construction site accident. The good doctor in London needed to get out of his office and go into the field.

Daniel grunted, finished his joint and mashed what was left of it against his sole. He coughed once and resumed his slump.

The interview ended, and the man on the radio actually broke for commercials.

“I knew it,” Kimberly said. “I knew the bastard was going to pull something like this.”

No one had to ask who the bastard was. For several months now, Kimberly has assured them that Tricky Dick would not be leaving office, no matter what truths came to light, and no matter how ready Americans were to get the hell out of Vietnam. He was here to stay, and he’d manufacture a disaster in order to permanently lodge himself in office.

Colleen had no love for Nixon, unlike her mother, who'd thought the man a saint—if they did something illegal at the Watergate, they probably had a very good reason for doing so—but she didn't think Kimberly was right about this. Whatever *this* was.

The commercials ended. The man on the radio cleared his throat. After a short lead-in for those just tuning in, he described video footage that was aired, only minutes ago, on CBS television affiliates across the country. The announcer didn't sound composed anymore. His voice was lower and softer and getting a little ragged.

In the footage, he said, that he had watched himself just now, a naked woman stumbled around an unidentified morgue in Gainesville, the Y-incision running down her torso, just flapping, her internal organs sitting in a heap on the stainless steel table beside the gurney, her stomach cavity clearly empty. Just an empty black hole.

"Oh, God," someone said. Daniel stomped his foot once.

A large blue pickup truck appeared behind them, quickly closing the distance. Its grille was dented, its headlights smashed. The driver blasted the horn, and Colleen swallowed down a shriek. He would run them off the road, and the last thing she'd see would be the face of the driver, slack and dead above the steering wheel.

Guy slowed the van and hugged the side of the road. When the stretch ahead was fairly straight, the truck shot past them, blowing its horn once more. In no time, it was gone from sight, and they were alone on the road.

The man on the radio interrupted himself once more, this time to read a report confirming that the walking dead were eating the flesh of the living.

"Fuck," Guy said, and nobody added to it.

The report was quickly followed by another. Countless law enforcement officials (not to mention armed citizens) had confirmed that the revived dead could be put down with a blow to the head or a bullet to the brain. It was, the newsman said with more than a touch of sarcasm, a morning of revelations.

Guy shot a glance back at Daniel, who continued to sulk. Colleen looked out at the world around them—just trees and blue sky, and damn it, it looked like it was supposed to look, there was nothing wrong with the world—and suddenly she never wanted to leave the van. It was safe here, and it always would be, as long as they didn't budge. Guy's right hand was on her shoulder, and she was crying, and she could see her mother's heavily made-up corpse at the wake,

plastic and unreal in the dim light of the funeral parlor viewing room, the smell of flowers barely concealing the stale and antiseptic reek of the place.

Her thoughts advanced one more step and overtook her.

“Oh, God,” she said, her chest heaving.

“What?” Guy pulled his hand away. “Are you going to throw up?”

“No,” she said, turning in her seat. “Daniel.”

He didn’t respond. He was asleep again.

“Daniel, oh my god.” She was going to pass out. Guy pulled over and the jerk was enough to shake Richard from his vacancy long enough to turn in his seat and push Daniel once, hard.

Daniel’s eyes sprang open. He jerked away, frightened.

“Daniel,” Colleen said once more and wondered if maybe she was going to throw up after all.

“What?”

“Mom,” she said.

Kimberly gasped.

“Damn,” Richard said.

“Lord,” said Guy.

And then it just hung there for a moment.

“I know,” was all Daniel said, slumping into himself once more.

Colleen wept. Guy snapped off the radio and held her. After a few minutes, she pulled away, palming tears from her face. “We should keep going,” she said, turning on the radio. She felt everyone else’s gaze on them, on her.

“I know.”

“So let’s keep going.”

He checked his side view mirror and took off.

“Where?” Daniel asked.

“There’s a little town at the bottom of this hill,” Guy said. “And a bigger one about twenty miles east.”

“Do we really want to go where people are?” Colleen asked.

“What else can we do?” Guy said, giving her a reassuring smile. “We need to get to a phone. I need to talk to Chris.”

“Oh, God,” Colleen said, punching her thigh. How had she not thought of Chris? Guy adored his little brother, a charming and hilarious six-year-old who was the spitting image of his big brother, right down to the ridiculous dimples,

and she was too busy assembling fears about her dead mother for the boy to even cross her mind. "I'm so sorry, I didn't even—"

"He's going to be okay," Guy said, more to himself than to anyone in the van with him, and Colleen lost it. Her tears came fast and hard, her shoulders rocked.

"Brock," Kimberly said, reaching for her friend. "Come here, honey." Colleen crawled into the back seat, sat beside Kimberly, who peeled away from Richard's embrace and settled into hers. They held each other until they got to town.

F I V E

Harlow was little more than a mostly-straight stretch of road bounded on both sides by redwood forest and located in the dip between two large hills. There were no houses visible through the trees, though several dirt roads broke off from the main road, marked by mailboxes perched atop leaning posts.

There was an old Baptist church that seemed to have been abandoned at some point, a small garage whose fading sign proclaimed it to be the location of Mr. Kim's Mechanic and Towing Services, and nothing else. Nothing else and no sign of life until they drew near the end of the mostly-straight stretch of road.

"Here," Guy said. "Good. They're open."

The parking lot was empty. A pale blue rust-spotted Crown Victoria sat on the side of the two-story building. The sign in the door was turned to OPEN.

An old man of forty or eighty (his wild beard, unkempt hair, and densely wrinkled face made it difficult to tell) sat on a bench next to the door leading into MISTY'S FOOD AND GAS. A large brown dog of no particular breed slept near his feet. In the shade of a tin overhang, the old man watched their approach from beneath bushy eyebrows. As they crunched into the gravel parking lot and past the two pumps (they were probably older than the Crown Vic),

he raised his right hand, held it there, beside his head, for just a second before allowing it to drift down to his lap.

"I don't think he's dead," Daniel said, and Richard gave a chuckle that started as a grunt and died as a sigh.

"You see what I see?" Guy asked.

"No," Kimberly said. "What?"

"He's got a gun," Colleen said. A rifle rested behind him on the bench, its butt and barrel visible to the left and right of the old man's narrow hips.

"Oh," Daniel said.

"Should we just keep going?" Kimberly asked.

"We need gas," Guy said.

"Food and gas," Richard said, as if it were a punch line meant to revive the chuckle.

"I need pads," Colleen said, and shot a hateful glance back at her brother, who looked away, his veil of hair dropping.

"Nobody do anything," Guy said.

"It's a good thing you said that," Daniel said. "Because I was about to rush out there and beat his face in with my bare hands."

"Your brother's an asshole," Guy said to Colleen, opening the door and getting out of the van. He stood with the door between him and the man on the bench, returned the old man's wave. "Hey, man."

"Hey, man." To the old man's right, barely seen in the gloom, something moved on the other side of the glass door leading into the place.

"Guy," Colleen said, her voice an inch above a whisper.

"Everything cool?" Guy asked the old man. Either he hadn't heard her or he was choosing to ignore her.

The old man sat up and leaned forward, his bushy brow knotted. His fifties, Colleen thought. He was maybe in his early fifties. "Everything sure as hell ain't cool, my man. You haven't heard?"

"We've heard," Guy said, stepping from behind the door, his hands held at chest height. "I mean between us, is all."

The big dog lifted its head and surveyed the visitors. Finding them of little to no interest, it seemed, it settled its snout onto its paws and closed its eyes.

"Is everything cool between us, you mean?" The man laughed, and Colleen realized that he was older than fifty. "I guess so. You're not dead and you don't look like you want to eat me, so, yeah. We're cool."

“Okay, good.”

“You see any of them yet?” the old man asked.

“Just a deer,” Guy said. “A few miles back. But no people. You?”

“Nothing, except on the news.” The old man sounded disappointed. He nodded toward the door. “Food inside. Misty cooked it a few hours ago, but it’s good.”

“Sounds good,” Guy said. He looked at Colleen. “Let’s go in.”

They filed out of the van. Colleen looked from the road to the store and back again, expecting to simultaneously be assaulted by walking corpses from the road and gunfire from within the shadowy confines of Misty’s Food and Gas. Guy walked over to her, placed a hand on each of her shoulders.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Not really.”

Nearby, Richard and Kimberly went through a similar ritual, their words hushed. Daniel shuffled along behind them, head low, hair in his face.

A bell jangled as they entered the store. The smell of food greeted them. The woman behind the counter—sixty-ish with a head of thick, closely-cropped silver hair—regarded them with an expressionless face and unblinking eyes. She looked like the guy on the radio had sounded: completely shaken. Behind her, a small black and white TV droned and flickered, the antenna atop it a mad jumble of tin foil and coat hangers.

“Hello,” Guy said, and the woman gave a curt little nod, the corners of her mouth barely twitching into the shadow of a smile. A short, portly man with a neatly-trimmed beard, a receding hairline, and thick glasses stood near the counter, hands perched on his round hips. He’d been watching the television, and Colleen suspected he was the form she’d seen moving around within the store.

“Can I use your phone?” Guy asked.

The woman gave him a disappointed little head shake and pushed the phone across the counter to him. “You can, but you won’t be able to reach anyone.”

Guy took the phone, dialed, waited. He looked hopeful for a second, his eyes wide, and then his hope was washed away by disappointment. He went through the ritual once more before placing the phone onto the cradle.

“The lines are busy,” he said, facing them.

“Damn it,” Richard said. Kimberly lowered her head. They all had loved ones somewhere, all but Colleen. There were relatives, yes—her uncle and cousins

in San Diego, her Aunt in Vermont—but relatives weren't always family, and everyone who mattered was right here beside her.

This was calming. This was devastating.

"Can I use it?" Kimberly asked, giving a little shrug. "You never know."

While Kimberly sought out her own private disappointment, Colleen looked around, took the place in: three aisles of groceries, a cooler, red-and-white-checked tablecloths draped across three tables located on the other end of the small room, just before the glass case filled with deli meats and cheeses. Behind the deli case, a small kitchen. Aside from the woman behind the counter and the short man looking at them like they were a stain on his best shirt, there did not appear to be anyone else there.

Kimberly placed the phone in the cradle, thanked the lady, and drifted over to Richard.

"Where you all from?" the woman behind the counter asked. Behind her, a wall of cigarette packs and a colorful quilt, neatly folded within a clear plastic baggie and covered in a kaleidoscope of geometric designs. The handwritten sign taped to the baggie said, **LOCALLY MADE HAND MADE ANGEL BLANKET.**

"Fresno," Colleen said, her eyes moving from the woman's grim face to the television behind her. It sat atop a file cabinet covered in magnets that held various faded and curled papers in place. A fluttering cramp closed a painful fist in her stomach.

"Fresno," said the portly guy, shaking his head. "You won't be going back there any time soon. Why the hell are you way up here?"

"Charles," the woman behind the counter said, and Colleen heard the warning in her voice, a warning laced with tired familiarity.

"Now, now, Misty," Charles said, waving a shushing hand at the stone-faced woman behind the counter. "Just let me talk to the kids, all right?" This, Colleen had no doubt, was a routine in Misty's Food and Gas: Charles hung around and annoyed the customers, and Misty tolerated it while tossing out idle threats.

"What are you doing up here?" Misty asked, overriding Charles, who got as far as opening his mouth.

"Well," Guy said, and Colleen pressed close to his side and gave the woman a weak smile and a nod. "We were on the way to Tahoe. Now?" He shook his head.

Seen through an undulating haze of static, the newscaster on the small

television had the same look on his face as everyone else. A map of Africa was superimposed over his left shoulder.

"It's everywhere," Guy said.

"Seems like it."

"They say what's causing it?" Daniel asked, sliding up to the counter.

"Not yet," she said. "Someone said it might be germ warfare."

"Who's saying?" Daniel asked.

"This guy on TV," the woman said. "But someone else that there wasn't any proof of that. Falwell was on earlier, talking about *Revelations*."

"*Revelation*," Charles said.

Misty shot him another look. "What?"

"It's *Revelation*. *The Revelation of Saint John*. Not *Revelations*." He adjusted his glasses, looked at each of them, and nodded once. "No s."

"Whatever," Misty said. "Falwell's a windbag, and you're an idiot if you buy his shit."

Daniel laughed once.

"It apparently started all at once, at the same time everywhere, so it's not a germ," Misty shrugged. "At least they think it's not. I'm Misty, by the way."

Colleen gave a half-hearted smile and introduced herself. Nobody followed suit.

The newscaster droned on:

"...from South Africa and the Middle East confirm earlier reports that th—" Static obscured his face and dissolved his words, and Misty leaned back and slapped the side of the television. The image came back, and the man's voice came through: "...of China is denying that the phenomenon is occurring there, despite the fact that one of the earliest confirmations the World Health Organization received came from a doctor in Beijing..."

"I don't think he did this," Kimberly said, sidling up to Colleen pressing close to her. Colleen was talking about Nixon again.

"No," Colleen said. "I don't think he did."

Pressed between the man she loved and her best friend, Colleen felt safe; she felt as safe as she had earlier, when she was certain that all they had to do was stay in the van.

"What about here in town?" Guy asked.

"What about it?" Charles said, sounding a little too suspicious.

"Anyone see anything?"

"No, hon," Misty said. "Connie Willits had a heart attack about three hours ago. Her husband and kids drove her out to Beistle. About twenty miles from here. There's a police station and a hospital."

"And more people," Charles.

"Yeah," Misty said, casting a tired glance at the television. "More people. And more people means more trouble, so we're in a good place."

"How many people live here?"

"I don't know," Misty said. "People around here stick to themselves, for the most part. Maybe two hundred?" She looked at Charles, eyebrows raised.

"Less than that," Charles said, shaking his head. "About a hundred."

"Jackass says about a hundred," Misty said, shrugging. Richard laughed.

"God," Charles said, disgusted. "This again." He turned away from the television and stomped toward the tables, where he pulled out a chair and sat down, his back to them.

Following a stern warning from the network anchor, a reel showing various shots of walking corpses was played.

"Oh," Guy said.

"My god," Colleen said. Beside her, Kimberly gasped.

"Jesus," Richard said. "No way, man."

Slack jaws, dead eyes. Skin like wax. Impossible wounds dry and gaping and roiling black with flies. There was the elderly woman they'd heard about on the radio, shambling naked through a morgue with her chest and stomach laid open in a clean Y-incision. There was a well-dressed man whose jaw and throat had either been ripped or blown away; the tip of his tongue rested atop the blood-soaked knot in his necktie. A man with no arms walking between stalled traffic on an interstate somewhere. A woman who held the stump of a severed arm to her eager and gnashing mouth. And so on, until the images of walking death were replaced by the grim face of the news anchor.

Colleen felt something churn in her stomach. Kimberly pulled away at some point and now wept in Richard's embrace. Guy held Colleen's hand too damn tight. Daniel left the store without a word, the bell jingling above his head.

"Do you have—" she began, making eye contact with the woman behind the counter.

"Bathroom's right there, hon," Misty said, nodding toward the back of the store, toward the kitchen. "To the left."

That's not what she was going to ask—not yet, anyway, that was going to

be her next question, after she found out where the pads were, but suddenly she had to be someplace else, someplace away from the television, someplace away from the woman behind the counter and the round man who clearly didn't want them there. Someplace away from her friends, even. She needed to be alone.

"Be right back," she said, stepping away from Guy and Kimberly, shouldering past Richard, and walking toward the deli. Through the entrance, she could see her brother loafing toward the road, his hands in his pockets, head down, dealing with things however he dealt with them. She walked down a short aisle, her eyes drifting across boxes of cereal, bags of rice, canned soup, canned fruit, and so on. She held out her right forefinger and left a trail through the road dust atop a box of Raisin Bran, and the menstrual cramps in her abdomen got together with the shocked nausea in her stomach and threatened to light fireworks.

The bathroom was small and neat. There were no obscenities scrawled on the walls and the scent of the air freshener wasn't struggling to conceal smells of human waste. She stared at herself in the mirror, suddenly seeing her mother's features—her mother's face—embedded within her own. She'd heard it all of her life, "Oh, you look just like your mother," but it had never really meant much to her, and she wasn't sure she ever really saw what they were talking about, anyway, or if they were just saying the kind of obligatory shit people say when they don't really have anything of value to say.

But she did. She looked like her mother. Not *just* like her, of course—her jaw was not as wide as her mother's jaw, and her nose wasn't quite so long, but she was as close to a dead ringer as one could be, and now she was all that was left of the woman. The rest, the sad, dead thing she'd watched her mother wither into, was—

What was her mother doing right now? Was she lying dead, her arms crossed on her wasted breast, as she had been when the funeral parlor attendant had gently closed the casket? Had her mother's overpowered body been spared the effects of whatever the hell was going on, or was she now awake somehow? Colleen hoped the cancer might stop it, as it had stopped her life, but perhaps the alien tissue would twitch to life and follow the same commands as the natural tissue, finally working in concert and giving her mother increasing strength and vitality.

Colleen splashed water on her face and when she was certain that her

breakfast wasn't going to come jetting up from her throat in an acidic gout, she turned from the mirror and lifted the toilet lid. The seat was clean, but she wiped it down anyway before sitting.

"Damn it," she said. There was a small red spot on her pad. A drop of blood tinked into the toilet bowl, and through the V of her thighs she could see the water in the toilet bowl turning pink.

The door was within reach. She opened it, just a crack, called for Guy, and shut the door again, locking it. A few seconds later, she heard him brush against the door. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"I forgot to get pads," she said.

"Have you asked Kim?"

"She didn't say anything when I said I needed them, so I figure she doesn't have any on her."

"Okay," he said. "You think they'll have some?"

"It's a *store*, right?" she snapped back, immediately sorry. She opened her mouth to apologize but he was already gone.

She sat there, feeling the world twist and coil into something unrecognizable beneath her feet, wondering how long it would be until she saw one of the dead things with her own eyes, wondering what the hell tomorrow would bring. Wondering what it would be like to be pulled down by a group of them and eaten alive, as was apparently happening across the globe, if the horrors being coughed up by the news were to be believed.

"Hon?"

"Yeah."

"She's out of stock."

"*Aggh.*"

"Yeah. She says most of the woman in town use cloth."

"Agh," she said, suddenly enraged. She roared: "*Fuck you, Daniel.*"

"He probably heard you," Guy said, a few seconds later, sounding both light and worried.

"Yeah," she said. "I hope he did." She wanted to punch her brother more than she ever had in her entire life, and that was saying something.

"Sorry," Guy said. Empty words—he had nothing to be sorry for—but she let them slide.

"Okay," she said. "I'll manage."

"You sure?"

“Do I have a choice?”

“I guess not,” he said. “We’ll find you something.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said, her tone telling him to get the hell away from the door. He did.

The pad in her panties had some life left. She pulled up her pants, flushed the toilet, and, washing her hands, stared at her face in the mirror until the flesh looked too white and her pores looked too large and she felt like maybe she was going crazy. Her stomach churned, at last giving up its contents, which arced out of her mouth and into the sink, splattering her hands.

“God,” she said, crying.

Daniel stood where the gravel parking lot met the road, his back to the store. He could feel the old man’s eyes on him, wanted to turn around and tell the old bastard to find something else to look at.

No weed left. He needed to get drunk. If ever he needed to get smashed and spread to the four corners of the earth, it was now.

He looked back at the store, wondering if maybe they had vodka. He hadn’t gotten a decent look around. They probably did, but you never knew with middle-of-nowhere dives like this. Maybe they were into Jesus, and would tell you to look elsewhere if you came looking for booze.

Some part of him was holding out hope that someone on the television would start making sense, hope that someone would figure out they’d been wrong and dead people could not get up and walk because they were fucking *dead*. But he’d seen the footage, and he didn’t want to see it again, and he could do without seeing Richard pawing all over Kimberly, without their glances and their hushed whispers. It was more off-putting even than seeing his sister get felt up.

He rubbed his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, pinching the soft flesh between his eyebrows. Hard, with his fingernails. It was a stupid thing to do—he was awake, damn it; this was no dream—but he did it anyway. He shook his head, turned to face the store, and saw a lone form walking down the street and toward him.

“Fuck,” he said, taking three steps backward, and the form lifted its arm and waved.

S I X

Reggie opened his eyes and sat up, blinking into the gloom and looking around. Had he actually been dreaming about Vietnam? About trudging beneath the dense jungle canopy and through the mud while insects buzzed and stung and bullets tore the foliage into green confetti?

He rubbed his face, tried to wipe away the remnants of the dream with hands that had taken many lives over the course of twelve fevered months in Vietnam. A stutter of distant gunfire opened his eyes. It sounded like a machine gun.

What the hell?

Another volley of gunfire sounded somewhere nearby. Suddenly alive, he shook off clinging exhaustion and pulled his sawed-off shotgun from beside his mattress. It was a double barrel, and it was always loaded.

He parted the thick curtains separating his sleeping hovel from the tractor's cab.

"Shit," he said, squinting, sunlight pouring in. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. A little after ten in the morning. He pulled on his boots and moved up to the front, keeping his head low. He pulled his sunglasses from the divider and put them on, looked around. There wasn't much to see. The rest

stop looked like any other. There was one other truck nearby—a monstrous new dark red Peterbilt emblazoned with blue flame patterns. The driver side door was open, though he saw no sign of the driver.

He waited for more gunfire. When none came, he exchanged his shotgun for his pistol, a Colt Combat Commander that had been at his side throughout his tour in 'Nam. He tucked it into his pants, covered it with his shirt before sliding out of the truck. The last thing he needed was for a cop to drive by and see him stalking around a rest stop with a sawed-off double-barrel clutched to his chest.

A car shot by on the interstate. It was going seventy or higher. Not long after, another car passed, weaving dangerously between lanes. More gunfire somewhere, though not nearly as close as before. Now a caravan of cars and trucks shot by, all of them heading northeast, the same as the others. Away from Sacramento.

He walked toward the interstate and looked in the direction of the Capital city.

“What the fuck,” he whispered. The sky above Sacramento was thick with smoke and studded with helicopters. Gunfire popped, closer this time. He returned to his rig and reached for the wheel when movement at the other end of the rest stop parking lot caught his eye. Near the bathrooms, a man walked, head hung low. His shirt was in tatters. With his right arm he clutched his left bicep, and his shirt and arm were stained with blood; it was unnaturally bright against his bone-white flesh. He was bleeding bad, and would die without help.

“Hey,” Reggie said, peeling away his shirt and walking toward the man, whose head moved in his direction, bobbing upward. “Hey, buddy, you okay?”

It was a stupid thing to say—the man clearly was not okay—but what else could he say? The bleeding man said nothing.

“Come on.” Reggie looked the man in the face, and something black took root in his soul. Shadows like snakes coiled in the corners of his vision, and his heart did something nasty. He felt cold, cold and afraid like a child.

The man walking toward him was dead.

Once, in '66, he'd come upon a South Vietnamese girl sleeping against a tree, her chin resting on her chest. Only she hadn't been sleeping. There had been no blood, none that he could see, anyway, and he never found out how she had died. To the casual eye she was just a girl sleeping against a tree, but there

were no casual eyes in Vietnam, and that girl had not been sleeping. She'd been dead for not even an hour, but there was no mistaking the lifelessness of her face.

And there was no mistaking the lifelessness of the bloody man walking toward him. The dead man walking toward him like something out of a nightmare, the dead man walking like some abomination, some blasphemy so great that to look at it was to go a little crazy.

A noise like a frightened yelp escaped Reggie's mouth, and he took a step backward, away from the dead man, and the ground threatened to hop up and slam into his face.

"Urrn," the dead man said, peeling his hand away from an arm covered in bite marks and reaching for Reggie, who stepped backward until his back bumped into his truck. He didn't think to pull his Colt and shoot the dead man, and he later realized that he was lucky to have backed into the truck. If he hadn't, panic might have driven him to leave behind reason and any chance of survival and run screaming into the woods behind the rest stop bathrooms.

The walking dead man didn't move correctly. It didn't move like a man. Life was movement; movement was born of life, came from within, damn it all, and this thing was not alive. Its lurches and jerks came from elsewhere, from outside, surely they did. For one deranged moment Reggie looked into the sky in search of the glimmer of strings that would lead up, through the clouds, and to the hands of some leering and godless puppeteer.

The thing tripped on its own feet and crashed to the ground. It made no effort to raise its hands and prevent its face from bouncing off the cement. A sound like a dry belch escaped its throat, and why not? Dead bodies belched all the time, especially when you hefted them onto more dead bodies, heaps of them stacked six or seven deep, bloating and changing in the heat and the moisture.

Reggie reached through the cold and smothering panic and got a hold on himself. By the time he slid behind the wheel and closed the door, the dead body was struggling to its feet. It stood, tottering, spinning in place, and it occurred to Reggie that the dead man was looking for him. It hadn't seen him crawl up and into the truck. He looked at the shirt balled up in his fist and then slipped it on.

Reggie watched the thing until he thought it would creep away and into someone else's nervous breakdown. He watched it until its eyes found his—

there was nothing there, of course: a corpse does not look back, even when its eyes are wide and looking right at you. A labored and obscene imitation of an expression moved across the thing's face. Having found what it was looking for, the dead body threw itself against the side of the truck and scratched at the door like a cat looking to come inside for the night.

Reggie turned on the radio and sat there for nearly thirty minutes, listening and watching. It was happening everywhere, whatever it was. The thing outside pawed at the door, weak and ineffectual. Before Reggie threw his truck into gear and rolled out of the rest stop, four other dead bodies had joined the first. He watched their steady advance with mute and detached horror. One of them was missing a good portion of its face and all of its left hand. Reggie heard the splintered edges of its radius and ulna scraping across his paint job. Two of them were unmarred, just like the long-ago dead girl sitting against the tree in that far away jungle. On the radio, news of a massive power outage on the East Coast broke. As evening approached, the newscaster reported, panic and violence were overtaking the citizens of New York City.

President Nixon had issued an Executive Order: all military personnel, either Active or Inactive, were to report to their nearest base. All Military Service Obligations, whether expired or not, had been indefinitely extended.

It wasn't happening, no way. Not a chance. Uncle Sam had gotten all he was gonna get from Reggie. Getting to Nef was the only thing that mattered now. To hell with everything else.

Again the senselessness, the madness, hit him. The dead did not walk, and, by virtue of the fact that they were, indeed, walking, one could only assume that somehow reality had been fractured. Soon the earth would boil blood and the sky would be sick with dragons.

A convoy of National Guard trucks rolled southwest, toward Sacramento, and Reggie knew that no matter what was true, what was really happening: he had to dump his load and get his ass home.

He rolled away from the dead people, out of the rest stop, and onto I-80, eastbound, away from whatever hell was happening in Sacramento. Half a mile down the road, he pulled over and got out, looked around. A speck shuffled across the interstate in the direction from which he'd come. There was no sign of anyone or anything else. No cars, no military convoys, no dead people. Sounds from somewhere: a dog barking, gunfire, sirens, the deep-bass *thump* of an explosion.

It didn't take him long to drop the straight-legs, detach the pneumatic brakes, ditch the trailer, and get a move on. He passed the aftermath of a three-vehicle accident, choking back the urge to stop and help. A man leaned against the trunk of the least-damaged car, a hand pressed to his bloodied face, a crowbar hanging from his other hand. A dead woman struggled to free herself from the wreckage.

He passed several slow-moving vehicles, sedans and station wagons and pickup trucks loaded down with personal belongings. He passed a stalled car. Its hood was open, steam billowed. A large collie watched from the backseat, and the car's driver waved to him. *Please help me*, the wave said, and Reggie kept moving. He couldn't afford to act a fool.

Further along, traffic bottlenecked. Folks drove their vehicles around a five-car pile-up.

It would be this way from here to home, if not worse. By nightfall, the interstate could be a stalled bumper-to-bumper hell, and people would leave behind their belongings and go on foot.

Laying into his horn, Reggie eased his truck across the grass median separating the eastbound and westbound lanes and onto I-80 West. The westbound lanes were all but deserted, and he wondered how long it was before those driving east decided to claim them. He pulled over and opened his road map. He'd have no trouble getting off of the interstate near Citrus Heights. From there he'd go south to 50, the El Dorado Freeway, which he'd take most of the way home to Nevada.

Nef must be scared—surely both of them were, but Reggie's mother was strong. She would be able to comfort Nef. He took solace in the fact that he was currently in a hell of a lot more danger than they were. Carlin was a small town, and that had to count for something, if the news on the radio was to be trusted. A small town contained only so many dead bodies at any given time.

"They're safe," he said, hoping he was right.

From the eastbound side of the interstate, the man with the overheated car and the collie watched him pass.

S E V E N

Kimberly sat at one of the tables, her face pressed into her palms, shuddering. She stared at the greasily polished wood grain. Richard sat beside her and hung his arm around her neck.

Colleen looked at Kimberly rocking, looked at Guy, looked at the television, which didn't really have anything new to report: things were still falling apart, increasing rate, colorful variety. Just like in the poem she'd read in high school. The center had not held. It had spun, disintegrating, into oblivion, and now they were all left standing around, blasted and waiting to be eaten.

Guy pulled his eyes from the television long enough to meet her eyes. His lips were a thin tight line, his brow creased. He shook his head once and went back to the TV.

"Something to eat, honey?" Misty asked.

"I don't know," Colleen said, ill. "Maybe in a little while."

"Anybody?"

There were a few shrugs. After no one answered, Guy spoke. "Probably later. Thanks."

"Yeah," Richard said, barely a mumble.

“Just let me know,” the old gal said, and when the portly guy sighed, she shot him an ugly look. “Why don’t you go home?”

“You’re making a mistake,” he said, with an exaggerated gesture.

“What the hell are you going on about, Charlie?” Misty asked, clearly tired of his bullshit. Unmindful of this exchange, Richard got up and went to the phone. He picked it up and dialed.

“You need to send them on their way and lock up,” he said, nodding toward the television. On the screen, a haggard-looking scientist was pointing to a diagram of the human brain and saying something about the limbic system, whatever the hell that was. “This isn’t blowing over, and you shouldn’t be giving your food to outsiders.”

“Shut the hell up and sit down, Charles,” Misty said, and rolled her eyes at Colleen. She turned a murderous look back to Charles. “Before I shoot you.”

“You don’t believe in guns,” Charles said.

“I’ll go outside and tell Crate to shoot you,” she said. “He’d be happy to. Now get out or shut up.”

Charles walked over to one of the tables, grabbed a chair, dragged it close enough to the counter to get a view of the television, and sat down.

The news cut from the scientist to a live shot of a reporter in the streets of Brooklyn. He was flanked by armed soldiers and behind him, a car burned. He said something about civil unrest, and then the soldier to his left opened fire. The soldier to his right followed suit, and the reporter crumpled to the ground, yelping. The camera shook. The ticker at the bottom of the screen read that President Nixon would be addressing the nation at six p.m., Atlantic time.

“This can’t be real,” Kimberly said, on the edge of hysteria. “It can’t be.”

Richard hung up the phone and returned to Kimberly’s side, stroked her back a bit, but wasn’t good for shit, really.

“Oh, hon,” Colleen said, sitting across from Kimberly and taking her hand. Richard looked dazed and stupid, and Colleen wanted to punch him in the nose. “We’re going to be okay. I promise.”

“You mean it,” Kimberly said, and she was a little girl again, all wide-eyed and hopeful.

“Yes, Kim. I promise,” Colleen said, realizing that her words were just as empty as Richard’s, she was just a better liar, as the best liars are those who are convinced they’re being truthful. What the hell *could* she say? What could any of them say?

The bell above the entrance jingled. Daniel stepped in, reeking of pot and followed by someone else, a boy of roughly his age. He was sort of handsome, this new arrival, his features even and well-placed but a little droopy, as if he were made of wax and had been left by some careless god to sit in the sun for a little too long. His close-cropped hair was nearly black. His dark brown eyes took in the place. He gave them a little smile and a little nod as he shuffled in behind Daniel.

“Hey,” he said to Misty. A massive revolver hung from his hip, an old cowboy number, by the looks of it. Just like that, it was the wild, wild west.

Misty said. “Crazy shit, huh, Samson?”

“Unbelievable.”

“How’s Huff?”

“You know him. Nothing gets him down.”

“Yeah,” Misty said, and for just a second there it seemed to Colleen that the world had been righted. They were on their road trip up to Tahoe, and they’d stopped at this rustic little dive for some Food and Gas and they were listening to two rubes talk about some third rube and how nothing ever got him down. Rube Number Three would keep on truckin’, and so would they.

“Hungry?”

“Maybe in a little,” Samson said, turning to face Colleen. He smiled, less handsome now. His teeth were worse than Daniel’s. Tombstones. “Hey, there.”

“Hey,” Colleen said.

“Hey, man,” Guy said, moving forward and putting himself between Colleen and the new guy. It was an unnecessary move, but a cute one. She made a note to tease him about it later. If she got the chance.

“Samson Niebolt,” the new kid said, a little embarrassed. “After the guy in the Bible, if you were about to ask. My mom was weird. Just call me Sam, okay?”

“Sure,” Colleen said, a little uneasy. This Sam guy allowed his gaze to pass over all of them, but Colleen felt as if he were only really looking at her.

Another round of introductions later, they settled down and compared notes and watched television. Aside from a few radio reports, Sam wasn’t up to date on what was happening.

“...discuss your findings?” asked an exhausted looking black man who Colleen remembered seeing in a report on the Watergate break-in.

“Yes, well,” said a man identified by the text on the screen as Doctor Robert

Fuller, via satellite from New Orleans. He wore a crisp white lab coat above a suit and tie and thick glasses that reduced his eyes to small shiny points of light. He looked as exhausted and dazed as everyone else. He scratched his mustache, unmindful of the camera. “The revival window seems to be five to seven days.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Revivals worldwide happened at precisely the same time,” the doctor said, looking at his watch. “I don’t remember the time of occurrence off hand because I haven’t slept since then and I really could use some coffee.” He looked off screen, annoyed, holding an invisible cup to his mouth and making drinking motions.

“Doctor Fuller?”

Fuller shot a give-me-a-second glance into the camera. A disembodied hand passed him a cup of coffee. He sipped it, winced. “Fuckin’ hot. Jesus.”

“Doctor Fuller?”

“Yes,” the doctor said, facing the camera, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. “You were saying?”

“You were explaining what you meant by this window of revival—”

“Yes, the window of revival. The first corpses to revive, two days ago, had been dead for no longer than a week. The specimens we’ve seen thus far bear this out, and we’ve examined several corpses whose time of death—that is to say, o-original death—goes back a week and a half, two weeks, three weeks from the point of revival, and so on, and, well... well, there you go.”

“Are we any closer to—”

“That’s not to say that there isn’t some marginal brain activity in older corpses. There may very well be, and I’m pretty sure we’ll find out that there is, but this won’t matter for most people’s purposes. For whatever reason, these older intact corpses simply aren’t getting up and biting people.”

The camera held on Doctor Fuller while the newsman spoke: “Are we any closer to knowing what’s making this happen?” The doctor tried to sip his coffee again. Shaking his head, he tossed aside the cup, stood up, and walked away, trailing his microphone wire.

The image cut back to the frazzled newsman, who recapped what Fuller had said. Then, following yet another warning, they again rolled the montage of walking corpses, and everyone looked away. Everyone but Sam, who got up

from the table and walked over to the counter for a closer look at the television.

“Wow,” Sam said, looking back at them, mouth open. “That’s just... man. Daniel told me about it when we were out there, but Jesus, there’s nothing like seeing it with your own eyes.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Misty said.

“Oh, get real, Mis,” Charles said. “It won’t be long before one of them comes walking down the road.”

“You should talk less,” Misty said.

“Ah, jeeze,” Guy said. “Can you turn it up?”

Misty turned up the volume. Standing in a deserted press chamber complete with empty chairs and a podium bearing the presidential seal, a harried reporter elaborated on an earlier report that the Soviet Union had declared the use of nuclear weapons an “option” that was “on the table.”

“Use them on who?” Richard asked, looking around at them. “What the hell, man? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Daniel said, turning on the condescension.

“A good time to live up in the hills,” said Charles, laughing and shaking his head.

Outside, the dog barked.

Daniel leaned close to his sister.

“What are we doing?” he asked, his voice low, his stale breath on her ear.

“I don’t know,” she said, picking at the tablecloth. “Waiting here?”

“Waiting here for what? If any more people show up, this place is going to get out of hand. You know it.”

“Yeah,” Colleen said. “But where can we—”

“Sam said we could stay at his place. He lives right up the hill.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He lives with his dad and brother. He says they got a few acres, and there’s only one road leading to the house. He says we could ride out the whole thing there.”

“What’s up?” Guy asked, leaning in close on her other side. She told him.

“I don’t know,” Guy said. He sounded unconvinced. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

Colleen glanced over at Sam, who looked down at his hands, as if they were the most interesting things ever, curled as they were before the salt and pepper shakers. He’d been watching her. She opened her mouth to tell Daniel

that they'd find some other way, and her words were interrupted by the sound of the bell above the entrance. The dog was frenzied.

"Hey, there," Crate said, standing in the doorway, holding the rifle close to his chest, the barrel pointing at the ceiling. Colleen saw that she'd been right from the start: he was old. His early seventies, easy.

"What's going on, Crate?" Misty asked.

"I just—hush, Bilbo!" The dog quieted down, and Crate faced them once more. "Any of you want to come take a look at Mark Willits before I shoot him?"

The walking remains of Mark Willits were in bad shape. The dead man's hair—oily black going to gray at the temples—was matted to its forehead with dirt and blood. Its face was slack, the skin pale and bluish. Its throat was ragged and bloody, as were its lips. The front of its shirt was smeared dark with blood and gristly little chunks of something. Some of the blood was its own, Daniel knew, and some was far too fresh to rightly be on such a dead man.

The thing's right arm had been picked clean from the bicep down. Its left arm was in slightly better shape. A few bloody crescents were stamped into the meat of its forearm, and its fingers were intact. They slowly kneaded the air.

The corpse's pants and underwear, also heavily bloodstained, were pooled around its right ankle. Its left shoe was gone, and the flesh above its rumpled sock was bulging and discolored with settling blood. Its genitals were gone.

In a few seconds, Crate's words had sunk in, and then they all leapt up and made for the door. All except for Kimberly and Colleen, who'd held hands across the table. Kimberly, with tears in her eyes and a bubble of snot on her upper lip had said, quite simply: "I don't want to."

"Neither do I," Colleen said, looking back at Daniel and Guy, who'd lingered near the door. Richard was long gone.

"I," Guy had said, looking down for a second and then lifting his face to meet Colleen's eyes. "I have to."

A brisk nod had sufficed as Colleen's blessing.

"Okay," Crate said, looking back at them. Pacing near his master's feet, the dog barked again, and dead Mark Willits reacted, its jaw dropping, its eyes shifting left and right with reptilian slowness. Though its mouth worked, it was

silent. Save for the sound of its feet dragging through the gravel, the dead man made no noise.

"Bilbo *Baggins*," Crate hissed, made a face at the dog. "You shut the hell up right now." Bilbo whined and sat on his haunches and piped down, and Crate looked at them again. "Stay put. All of you."

Samson took a few steps forward, his right hand resting atop the large pistol hanging from his belt.

"You, too, Lash LaRue," the old man said. "You'll get your shot before this is over."

"Okay, Crate," Misty said, worried. Dead Willits was no more than three feet away from the old man, its good arm extended.

"Humph," Crate said. He lifted the rifle, pressed the barrel to Willits's chest, just above the heart, and gave him a push. The dead man ambled backward, nearly losing its balance. "Nothing to worry about," Crate yelled back, over his shoulder.

"I never really liked you," Crate said to Willits, nudging it once more with the rifle, nudging and poking, hard. He pressed the dead man's stomach, and a lifeless belch rattled in the thing's throat. "Always talking bullshit."

"Stop having fun and do it," Misty said.

"I like having fun, woman," Crate said. He pressed the barrel to the dead man's heart once more and pulled the trigger. The report was muffled. Nothing happened. He stepped back a few feet, steadied the rifle, and squeezed off a round into its left knee-cap.

"Woo," Crate said as Willits tottered and toppled and hit the ground face first, struggling like an infant to right itself. He stepped up to the fallen dead man, placed his left foot onto its back, pressed the barrel to its head, and pulled the trigger. Willits stopped moving even as everyone else jumped from the gun's shout.

Crate looked back at them.

"Christ," Richard said.

Guy gasped, like he'd been holding his breath. He looked a little pale.

Daniel understood how Guy felt. His head spun. He wasn't ill. He didn't think he was going to throw up. But he felt wrong. Everything felt wrong.

"Nope," Crate said, stepping away from his kill. "I don't think the news is making this up."

"Ah, crap," Misty said. "Is that Nelly?"

Another dead person shambled up the road.

"Looks like it," Crate said. "Damn."

"Mark's daughter," Samson said. "Nice girl."

Nelly was in pretty much the same shape as her father: bluish white, covered in blood and bites and moving with slow, clumsy deliberation. The dead girl's clothes had been ripped away—all that remained were the tattered collar and sleeves of its dress, its panties. Its shoes were gone, its socks were filthy. Its bare chest was a baby's food-crusting bib.

Crate walked toward it, taking his time. He looked back at them, yelled to Misty: "I don't see Mark Junior anywhere."

Misty looked down at her feet, and Daniel wondered if maybe the chunks of meat clinging to Nelly's bloodied chest were all they'd see of Junior.

"Okay," Guy said beside him, his voice a dry croak. "I've seen enough."

He went inside. The bell jingled. Crate leveled the rifle at the dead girl's face, and Daniel looked away. The shot seemed louder than the others.

"We need to get out of here," Guy said.

Colleen looked up at him and wiped tears from her face. Kimberly wept, her head lying atop her arms, which were folded atop the table. She looked like a kid taking a nap in class. "Where will we go?"

"I think maybe we should take that guy up on his offer." He shrugged, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He rubbed the fingers and thumb of his right hand and thumb together, fast—something he only did when he was nervous. "I don't know."

"He's weird."

"He may be," Guy said. "But what choice do—" The door jingled, and Daniel crept in. Before the door could fully close, Samson eased it open and stepped in behind him. Guy's voice dropped to a whisper. "We don't have much of a choice. We need to lay low someplace for a little while, before we..."

"You want to go home, too," she said.

"I do," Guy said. "I have to."

"Aw, look at that," Crate said from outside. He somehow sounded both disappointed and satisfied. "Here comes junior."

E I G H T

Sam—he really didn’t like to be called Samson; Colleen could see it in his face whenever Misty called him by his complete first name—looked happy when they agreed to come back to his place.

“Far out,” he said, smiling at them. “We’ll have a good time. My dad sells doors and windows that he pulls out of old houses set for demolition. Refinishes them and sells ’em way marked up. He and my little brother are down in Elk Grove right now, on a salvage run, but they should be back soon.”

“Is your dad going to mind us being there?” Colleen asked.

“Oh, no way,” Sam said, shaking his head and looking solemn. “He’s cool, man. We bring friends home all the time. Dad likes to party.”

No one said anything, and Sam’s smile relaxed. It really wasn’t party time. Colleen glanced at Guy, hoping to silently communicate what she’d told him not long ago: she didn’t like this kid. He was weird. Guy’s barely perceptible shrug was a reiteration of his previously-stated response to the matter: what choice did they have? Any port in a storm, and the dead were only going to keep coming to Misty’s.

The group talked idly, their conversation shifting back and forth from what was happening in the world to what they’d do once they got to Sam’s house, and

Colleen tried to tune them out. Daniel mostly listened and watched. Kimberly, no longer crying but still watery-eyed and pale, sat close to Richard, whose eyes shifted over to the front door as if he expected a dead body to come stumbling through it at any second, and he wasn't exactly crazy to suspect that.

Crate was outside cleaning his mess and keeping watch, Charles sat behind the counter, watching television, and Misty was in the kitchen, making a bit of a racket and filling the air with the scent of flame-broiled beef. Lunch was on her.

They ate their burgers and chips with little comment, aside from the obligatory restrained moans of satisfaction.

"Thank you," Colleen said, despite the fact that her burger was too greasy, the chips were stale, the bun was dry, and she was trying to be a vegetarian. "You didn't have to do this for us."

"She's right," Charles said from behind the counter, and Misty's gentle expression crumbled into one of annoyance bordering on rage. "Get your ass from behind my counter and get out."

"All I'm trying to say is—"

"*Out,*" Misty snapped. Charles winced, and Colleen realized that he and Misty were in some way involved with one another. Or had been. The casual hostility with which Misty spoke to him could come only from familiarity, from intimacy.

Charles took his time leaving. They finished their food, gathered and threw away their trash, and thanked Misty for her hospitality.

"It was nothing," she said. "But I think I'm going to close up after you leave."

"Yep, you should," Sam said.

"I'll be here if you need anything, though." She spoke to all of them, flipping a thumb toward the back of the room. "Just go around back and knock." She looked at Colleen, lowered her voice and leaned close. "Sorry about not having the napkins, honey."

"It's okay. I'll make it," Colleen said, glancing at the television screen. A live shot showed the Tel Aviv skyline. Fire churned, spitting black smoke into the night.

Outside, Crate had piled what was left of the Willits family into an ugly heap and was dousing them with gasoline. Colleen got the briefest glimpse of Junior before looking away, and her impression was of an armless flayed thing,

its face frozen in an expression of wide-eyed surprise, and of a madly grinning blood-shiny mouth, the lips either pulled back in a startled death-throe-rictus or simply chewed away.

Bilbo Baggins sniffed at a small pile of what must have been brain-matter, and Crate threatened to shoot him on the spot if he did a stupid fuck thing like eating that dead thing's diseased brains. His tail between his legs, Bilbo padded into the shade beneath the awning and threw himself onto the weather-worn boards.

"Take it easy, Crate," Sam said, crawling into the van behind Daniel.

"You, too." He squinted at them, fluffing his beard with one bony hand. He lifted his rifle and gave it a little shake. "First line of defense right here. They'll come from that way, if they come. You all should be safe up the hill. I'll hold them off."

"How many bullets you got," Richard asked, walking past Crate, leading Kimberly along as if she were blind.

"Enough for every man, woman, and child in town." He smiled. "About three or four times over."

"Jesus," Richard said.

"Him too."

Daniel was the last of them to climb into the van. He slid the door shut and sank into the seat next to Sam. Crate returned to his kills, tossing on a little more fuel.

Guy backed the van into the road and looked into his rearview mirror. There were no dead people. A gush of fire engulfed the Willits heap, and Harlow fell behind them. The trees pressed in, and the road twisted, angling upward.

"How far up?" Guy asked.

"About two miles, I think," Sam said. "Not far. I'll let you know."

Colleen turned on the radio. A weary-sounding black man with the vocal affectations of an evangelical preacher was urging people to work together, to stop fighting, and to face the crisis at hand with faith and solidarity. She pressed a tape into the deck, listened to about five seconds of Black Sabbath before turning off the player.

"Everything is going to be okay," Sam said, sounding a little too happy. Colleen turned around to face him, and she wondered if she was able to conceal her dislike for their new friend. His smile faltered, and she knew she had not been successful.

She did not care.

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

“I just do,” he said, shrugging. “Because I feel it. We’re going to be okay. You’re going to relax, and we’re going to be okay. And that—” he wagged a hand in the direction of the radio “—is all going to pass us by, just like every other horrible thing in the world has come and gone.”

“You really think so?” Kimberly asked.

“I do,” he said, holding his gaze on Colleen a little longer than he needed to before turning to face Kimberly. “We have the advantage. We’re up here, away from the cities and the hatred and the desperation.”

There was a joyous calm to his voice, the kind she imagined she’d hear in the confident tones of the pussy-hunting campus guru, or in the hushed proclamations of a religious zealot. Is that where they were going? To some oddball religious commune? Was Samson Niebolt going to try and woo them onto his dick with nonsense whispers of the hills and the trees sheltering them from the storm?

Kimberly looked at Sam with hope. Colleen faced forward. She looked at Guy and didn’t bother to whisper.

“We’re not staying long.”

She shifted her weight, uncomfortable. She could feel her flow pulse, feel her pad, her one last pad, god damn it, growing heavy with menstrual blood.

“Right up here,” Sam said.

The small handmade sign said NIEBOLT DOORS AND WINDOWS, and the narrow road was unpaved, just two well-worn wheel-ruts matted with pine needles. The van rocked and swayed up the hill. A dilapidated shed eased by on their right, and then the ground leveled out and the house came into view, a sprawling ranch-style brick structure that was maybe fifteen or twenty years old. It looked completely out of place, as if it some giant had plucked it up from suburb on the outskirts of L.A. and Frisbee-tossed it up into the redwoods.

“It’s kind of funny,” Sam said. “My mom’s idea. She wanted a house that looked like a real house, is what my dad said she told him. I’m not quite sure what that means, but...”

“Is your mother...” Kimberly said, leaving her query unfinished.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “She died when I was five. In childbirth.”

“Oh, God,” Kimberly said, and Colleen knew that her friend was all but in Sam’s bed. “That’s horrible. Did the baby live?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, looking pleased and proud. “Connor. You’ll meet him. He’s, like, totally crazy, but I love the little bastard.”

Kimberly laughed for the first time in what seemed like forever, and Colleen looked at Richard in an effort to find some understanding in his eyes, some knowledge of what was happening. If such knowledge existed, she could not find it.

Guy brought the van to a halt beside the house and looked back at Sam, eyebrows raised. Sam nodded.

They filed out of the van. The road they were on continued, past the house, past several well-kept sheds, arcing right, vanishing into the trees.

“Where are the windows and doors?” Daniel asked, doing his patented head-whip.

“Back there,” Sam said, lifting a hand toward the sheds. “His workshop is further up the road. He makes cabinets and tables, and my mom had him build his shop way up the hill so she wouldn’t have to hear him sawing and hammering.”

There was a light breeze and the air smelled of smoke. Colleen looked in the direction from which they’d come, at the trail sloping away until the woods swallowed it, and for the third time in less than twenty-four hours she was overcome with the certainty that she was safe. She was safe and they were safe, and they would remain safe for as long as they stayed put. This time, however, her certainty did not seem desperate or irrational.

For reasons that she or anyone else may never know, the dead were getting up and society was falling apart. By providence or blind and meaningless coincidence, they were in the middle of nowhere when the shit hit the fan, miles away from any major population center, not home in Fresno. And they were safe.

They’d heard no news regarding their home town, but she knew it would vary only in small, inconsequential details from the news coming out of every major city on the face of the earth. She wondered if she would ever see her house, and again came the thought of her mother, not really dead and not really alive, lying in darkness six feet beneath freshly churned dirt.

Sam helped unload their luggage, which he placed in the dim entry room of the

squat brick house he apparently shared with his father and brother. The place looked nicer on the outside than it did inside. The tile floor was dirty. To the left, just inside the front door, an old umbrella leaned in the corner, a heap of dirt-crusting boots lying before it, their laces splayed and entangled. The walls were bare. An empty vase sat atop a featureless little table. It was one of those quiet houses with a loud clock. A bead curtain obscured the dimly lit room beyond the vestibule.

They followed Sam through the beads and into a large living room that smelled stale like the inside of the confessional at St. Anthony's. Sam clicked on a lamp. The place hadn't been redecorated since the fifties. With its boxy art deco cabinet and nearly round screen, the television sitting atop four skinny legs across from the stained and sprung couch looked to Colleen like it may have been older than the house.

"That thing work?" Daniel asked, reading her mind.

Sam made a face. "Not so great, man, but we never watch it all that much, anyway."

There was a low coffee table between the couch and the television, its surface furry with dust.

"You can all crash here, I guess," Samson said. "No one really stays here anymore, not since mom died. Dad lives in his workshop, mostly, but he still comes down here when he misses her. It's pretty sad."

"Where do you and your brother stay?"

"My dad built us all a little place further up the road. I'll show you later."

The place felt like a frozen moment, a fading memory grown soft around the edges and losing definition.

"I think I'd just as soon set up our tents and enjoy the fresh air," Guy said, and Daniel murmured his agreement. "We really don't want to impose."

"Sure," Sam said. "I don't blame you. The place is a mess. You can't camp out forever, though, so maybe we can clean up a bit later on, right?"

"Maybe so," Guy said. "Is there a phone here?"

"There is, in the kitchen, but it's disconnected."

"Okay," Guy said, after a moment. "Is there a phone that isn't disconnected?"

"Up at my dad's workshop, yeah, but I don't think you'll reach anyone. I think they're all dead now."

"I'd still like to try."

"Oh, yeah," Sam said. "We'll head up that way in a bit. Last stop of the tour. Come on."

"Wait," Colleen said. "Can I use the bathroom?"

Sam looked uncertain for a second, uncertain and maybe a little worried, and then he brightened. "Of course." He indicated the hallway at the other end of the living room. "First door on the right."

Three of the four bulbs were dead, and the remaining one burned weakly behind frosted glass. A dingy shower curtain concealed a claw-foot bathtub that seemed out of place even in such a bizarre, unthemed hovel, and the toilet bowl was dry, the water having long since evaporated, leaving behind a brown ring as the only evidence that it had been there at all.

Colleen pressed the plunger and watched as the bowl filled with the stagnant contents of the toilet tank. Pipes gurgled and knocked. She waited for the tank to refill completely and then flushed again.

In the cabinet beneath the sink, she found a roll of toilet paper and a stack of neatly folded facecloths. She placed the toilet paper on the counter and took one of the towels from the middle of the stack. She thought about it for a second, took four more, and pressed them into her pockets. She removed a fifth towel and wiped down the toilet seat with it.

A few minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom, having disposed of her bloated and leaking pad and replaced it with one of the facecloths.

In the living room, Sam tried to get the television to work. The screen displayed only a dim haze of snow. He battered the side of the old beast and tussled with the rabbit ears, and a voice and face emerged from the snow, another grim network newscaster.

"...dent Nixon is urging Americans to cooperate with local and state law enforcement. Sources close to the President say that tonight's speech will outline his administration's 'plan of attack' regarding the current situation, in addition to addressing concerns over recent statements by Russian President Nikolai Podgorny that—"

The rabbit ears tipped backward and rattled to the floor behind the television, and the blizzard returned.

"Eh," Sam said, turning off the television. The circle of snow shrank to a small wavering point of light. "We'll get it working later, come on."

They followed him out of the house and up the trail.

"He's got a few hundred unfinished doors in there," Sam said, indicating

one of the sheds. "Some of them are good, but most of them are no good for anything but a nice big bonfire. We do that sometimes."

They passed another shed, and Sam went on about his father's doors and windows, but Colleen tuned him out. Daniel moved close and tugged her shirt once.

"What?"

"How are you?" he asked, giving her his best puppy dog face.

"I'm fine."

"Still mad at me?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm sorry, okay," he said, and she rolled his words over in her mind a few times. Not the words themselves, but the tone in which they were uttered. He sounded like he meant it.

"Okay," she said.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I already did it."

"Did what?"

She nodded toward Sam. "Stole a few facecloths from his bathroom."

Daniel laughed, and things were okay between them again. Maybe things wouldn't stay okay between them for long, but they were okay between them for now, and that made her happy. Guy looked back with confusion on his face, and she stepped away from her brother.

"What's funny?"

"Just patching things up with my idiot brother, is all."

"He is an idiot," Guy said. "But that's good."

They walked a bit more, and Colleen's thighs and calves burned. The incline was gradual, but it was taking its toll on her underused leg muscles.

"Where the hell are we going?" Richard asked, stopping to reach down and massage his right calf. Colleen wasn't the only one feeling it.

"Just a little more. I want to show you something."

A little further along, they came across the first of the doors: thick metal beasts with small glass windows inlaid with wire mesh, rust-spotted and stacked three or four thick and leaning against several of the young redwoods that made up this part of the forest.

"What's this about?" Daniel said, stepping up to one of the doors and touching the small window placed into the door at head height. Beneath the window,

the number 17, now faded from exposure to the elements, had been painted. "These come from a prison or something?"

"You'd think so," Sam said. "I thought the same thing, too, but they're just from a school. Dad got them cheap, but now they're rotting out here."

"This what you wanted to show us, man?" Daniel said. "Some doors leaning against trees?"

"No, no," Sam said. "I mean, yeah, I wanted to show you this, but I really want to show you where I live."

"How far is it?"

"Not much. And when we get there, we'll tighten our wigs, okay? All of us."

"Okay," Daniel said, sounding less annoyed.

Kimberly looked back at Colleen and, eyebrows raised, mouthed the words: "Tighten our wigs?"

Colleen pinched her thumb and forefinger together before her lips, sucking in her cheeks.

"Oh, yeah," Kimberly said. "Good."

The ground leveled out again, and three small cabins came into view, one in the center, at the end of the road, and one on either side of the path. There was a pickup truck parked next to the cabin on the left.

Colleen took Guy's hand and stopped. Kimberly looked back at them, and Colleen waved them on.

"We'll catch up."

"What's on your mind?" Guy asked, stroking her cheek.

"I miss you," she said, trying to gather together everything that was on her mind and say it in some way that made sense.

"You want to rest here a little while and then hit the road?" Guy said.

Colleen was momentarily confused, unsure if he meant here, in the middle of the road, or here, at Sam's father's place.

"I don't know," she said, after realizing he'd meant the latter. "I don't think so. I don't like Sam, but I think we're safe here for now."

"And then we'll go home."

"Home," she said, and just like that, she needed him. She needed his mouth on hers, his arms around her. She needed to touch him and to be touched by him, and she cursed her body for betraying her with its poorly-timed reliability. She had friends who didn't let their periods stop them—they'd fuck while

lying naked on the grass somewhere or they'd spread a beach towel on the bed, or something, but that wasn't for her and it wasn't for him. It hadn't been for her before, anyhow, but now?

In the face of what was happening, did it make sense that she was suddenly horny? That she wanted to find a clearing somewhere and bloody fuck like her nasty friends or, if Guy refused, simply pin him against a tree and suck his cock? She needed him inside her, one way or another, needed the comfort of that wet and awkward act to confirm that some things were as they should be and there was happiness to be found.

"I can't stop thinking of Chris, and I want to scream," he said, and unknowingly shamed her. "He must be so scared. And my mom, God."

"Your dad will take care of them."

"I know," he said, his eyes losing focus. He blinked several times, and she saw that he was crying. They pulled each other close and stayed that way until Guy told her that they should catch up.

Daniel and the others were in the clearing, laughing over something. Richard rubbed his calves, and Kimberly was doing squats.

"Damn good workout," Guy said.

"I'm used to it," Sam said, putting his fists on his hips like Superman.

"I'm not," Richard said, sitting down in the dirt.

The curtains in the window of the cabin to their right fluttered. Colleen opened her mouth to say something, and her words became a scream. The door leading into the center cabin burst open, and a man with a shotgun rushed at them.

"Get down," he screamed, sweeping the shotgun left and right and kicking Richard in the face. Head low, Sam walked over to the man and stood behind him, pulling the cowboy revolver from his belt. "Get the fuck down, all of you."

Colleen screamed and Kimberly screamed, and though she held onto Guy, strong hands pried her away and pressed her to the ground. Richard rolled in the dirt, his hands pressed to his face, blood flowing between his fingers.

More men appeared, each brandishing a shotgun, and Colleen screamed and screamed, and someone punched her in the stomach. She tasted dirt and rolled onto her side and squeezed her eyes shut.

"God," someone screamed. It might have been Guy or it might have been Richard, but it wasn't Daniel, she knew that much, because she heard him

crying. Kimberly's squeals became pained and inhuman, and their attackers laughed and taunted and roared with animal pleasure.

"Hold him down," someone said, and Colleen heard what sounded like the hollow metal thud.

"No, no, please—" It sounded like Guy.

"Why the hell are you—" Daniel.

"...going to fucking kill you, you son—" It was Guy.

"Going to what, man?"

"Whose is he?"

"Right there." This sounded like Samson.

Kimberly's screams crumbled into sharp, muffled gasps, and now someone's fist balled into Colleen's hair and wrenched her head back.

"Open your eyes." A growl.

"*You're going to kill me?*"

The *whoof* of exhalation that could only come from a blow to the stomach, and still Daniel wept somewhere, between blows.

"He said open your eyes." Hot breath in her ears and large hands on her face, fingers prying open her eyes. She jerked her head left and right, thrashing, slamming it backward in the hopes of busting a lip or smashing a nose. No luck, and through the tear-streaked flicker of her eyelids she saw two men pinning Guy to the side of the truck while another knelt before him, a shotgun resting in the dirt beside him.

"Come on," someone said, and: "Wow, man, I'm impressed." And: "God, no, please no, please God..." And: "No, no. Please, no. No, no, no."

Colleen squeezed her eyes shut and screamed until her screams became one with the screams of those around her. The fist in her hair tightened, and she was lifted and dragged forward.

"Open your eyes," someone said.

"Open them, you cunt."

She did. Shriveled and pale, Guy's genitals were inches from her face. She could smell him. She looked up, and through her tears found his face, his eyes.

He tried to say something, but it was little more than a growl. Tears streamed down his face. The cords stood out in his neck. He struggled. He was strong. They were stronger.

"Put it in your mouth."

She screamed, and her face was thrust into Guy's crotch.

“Do it.”

She opened her mouth, took him in, sobbing around Guy’s limp penis.

“Do it,” the voice screamed, the fist at the back of her head a knot of pain.

She closed her lips around Guy, gasping. Unseen, those around her yelped and hooted. Someone screamed, raw and incoherent and insane.

“Why?”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s it.”

“Stop stop stop.”

“*Open your fucking eyes.*” Again her eyelids were pried open. Guy’s penis was small and pitiful, his testicles tight and close to his body. A large hand reached in and seized Guy’s penis, tugging it forward. A blade flashed, and Guy roared in pain and someone laughed and Colleen screamed and screamed, her eyes clenched, her mind collapsing.

One of them smeared something warm and wet across her face, tried to press it into her mouth, but she locked her jaw and wrenched her head away. Another blow to the stomach, and she gasped and one of their attackers crammed something—*god, oh god it can’t be it can’t be*—into her mouth. She wretched and gagged and it fell from her mouth and onto the ground between her splayed fingers.

A heavy boot pushed her to the ground. Colleen rolled, her head lolling, the stink of blood in her nose, her mouth filled with its taste. Guy’s dick lay curled and bloody and dirt-speckled on the ground. She frantically smeared blood from her lips.

And then thunder. Thunder and blood, and one of their attackers crumpled to the ground, a ragged hole in his chest. She rolled and clambered to her feet, and then someone was on her, hammering her back and neck and face and head. She struggled, but not for long.

N I N E

He rolled through the small business district of Citrus Heights, eyes forward, trying to ignore what he saw. There were dead bodies in the streets, both walking and strewn across the road in tatters. Eyes forward, on the road, and a dead woman with a bloody smear for a face lifted its mouth from the open belly of a large dog to watch him pass. A bearded man clutching a small pistol walked toward her. Reggie rolled on, barely heard the pop of the gun behind him.

A heap of bodies burned in the parking lot of an In-n-Out, and a group of armed men clustered around a pickup truck, stuffing their faces with burgers and fries, knocking them down with sodas. They tried to flag him down. Maybe they just wanted to ask him something—to see if he'd passed through Sacramento, perhaps, or if he knew how bad things were on the interstate. Maybe they wanted to know what he was doing in their town. Maybe they wanted to pull a nigger from his truck and add him to the pyre.

He wasn't taking any chances. He kept on keeping on, and no one followed him. He wondered if maybe he should have taken a chance and stopped. He was getting hungry.

A line of abandoned cars and trucks blocked his path to the highway, stopped him in his tracks and cranked his heartbeat up a notch or two. His

sideview mirrors were empty for now. If this were a trap, it had been abandoned. He contemplated pushing through, but the blockade was two cars deep, and he did not want to get stuck. He had no choice but to leave the main road. He consulted his map, and when he looked up, he saw three dead bodies walking toward his truck. One of them, an older man with a sunken stomach and a black and bulging post-mortem erection, was naked. One, a child still wearing a baseball hat, dragged its twisted right foot behind. Its small right arm dangled and spun from a thin strand of gristle. The third, trundling up the rear, was an obese man wearing only a pair of shorts. His enormous belly had been ripped open. Yellow fat and purple innards bulged.

Reggie turned left, slowly passing the dead bodies, which lifted their arms in an unintentional display of supplication, slack-jawed peasants begging for even a scrap of moldy bread. The small business district fell behind him. He passed an abandoned gas station. A hand-lettered sign taped to the pumps declared:

**OUT OF GAS
PRAY TO JESUS!**

He consulted his map once more.

“Shit and fuck,” he said, tracing a finger along Hazel Avenue. He was approaching the American River. There were two small bridges between him and Highway 50. If one of them was closed or cut off, he just might be fucked.

“Oh, well,” he said “Cross ‘em when I get to ‘em.” He turned right into a neighborhood comprised of small ranch style houses. Barring any unexpected obstructions, this was the quickest route to Hazel Avenue, which would take him south to a place called Nimbus, where he’d get onto 50.

Half the neighborhood had flown the coop, if the empty driveways were any indication. Aside from a few smashed windows, there was no sign of the wholesale looting and pillaging mentioned on the radio. Curtains parted and frightened faces watched his passage. A few folks had been smart enough to nudge their cars or trucks right up against their houses, barricading their front doors while making a quick escape easy.

He turned on the radio, caught the tail end of a report from the Middle East. Over the past twelve hours, the powder keg of Israel had erupted. Within

days, someone from within the PLO was reported to have said, Israel would be no more, and her people would be killing themselves upon the sands where the land met the sea. Gerald Ford said that Israel's allies would not forsake her in this time of trouble. When asked about Vietnam, he was terse: complete withdrawal from Vietnam was possible within weeks. American troops were needed right here, in the cities and streets of the United States of America. No one challenged the contradiction inherent in his words.

"Mother fuckers," Reggie said, not entirely sure who he was cursing, and that's when he saw the kid. Just a chubby white kid riding a yellow bicycle with blue wheels up and down the deserted street. It was a girl's bike with a banana seat. Sparkly tassels hung from the handlebars.

As Reggie passed him, the kid looked up and flashed a listless smile. Ignoring the guy and his dog on the interstate had been one thing, but this?

"Damn it," he said, bringing the truck to a halt. He looked around. The coast was clear. He watched the kid approach the truck in his side view mirror.

Beneath Reggie's window, the kid brought the bike to a halt in style, braking hard with his right foot and planting his left foot on the ground, his back wheel skidding a blue half-circle across the concrete.

"Nice move, kid," Reggie said, rolling down his window. "Now what the hell are you doing?"

"Riding my bike."

"I can see that, but what the hell are you doing? Don't you know what's going on?"

"Yeah," the kid said, and Reggie could see from the look in his eyes that he wasn't very smart. He looked dull and stupid, like the kind of kid who would grow up to kick his dog and punch his wife, and Reggie cursed himself for stopping. To hell with this dumb white boy. He had a daughter to get home to. "Dead people are coming back to life."

"Right," Reggie said, opening the door and getting out. "So why are you out here on your bike?"

"I don't know." The kid shrugged. His eyes fell to the pistol at Reggie's hip. "I guess I wanted to see one for myself."

"Have you?"

"Yeah," the kid said. "There's one down at the end of the road and it's trying to get up but I think a car hit it 'cause its guts are all smooshed out." He made a face.

"There are more back that way," Reggie said, tossing a thumb over his shoulder.

"You use that yet?" The kid's eyes were still on Reggie's Colt.

"No," Reggie said, looking around. "You should be home right now."

"I guess so," the kid said. "Do you think you will?"

"Will what?"

"Use your gun."

"Jesus, kid, I don't know." Now it was his turn to shrug. Why the hell was he wasting his time like this? "Probably."

"You should go down the road," the kid said, turning in place, looking back toward the end of the road. "Thataway and shoot the thing. It's pretty sad."

"Maybe I will."

"Can I come see?"

"That something you want to see?"

"I dunno." The kid scrunched up his face. "I guess so."

"You don't," Reggie said. "It's nothing you ever want to see. Where's your house?"

"Back there," the kid said, tossing his thumb over his shoulder in obvious imitation of Reggie.

"Are your parents home?"

"My dad moved out last year," the kid said. Somewhere far away, a machine gun ripped through someone or something. The kid winced, crouching.

"Where's your mother?"

"She left." The kid stared into space, his eyes going distant. More gunfire. The kid snapped back, looked Reggie in the eye. "She drinks a lot. She ran out of Blue Nun so she went to the store to get more."

"Jesus," Reggie said. "How long ago?"

"You shouldn't use the Lord's name in vain, mister."

"How long ago?"

"I dunno. This morning. She told me to stay inside, but..." He shrugged.

"Damn it," Reggie said.

"You think she's dead?"

"I'm going to take you home, okay?"

"You think she's dead?"

"I don't know, kid. I'm just going—you got a name?"

"Steven."

"I'm just going to take you home, Steven, and then I'm going to go. My little girl is waiting for me."

"How old is she?"

"Seven," Reggie said, remembering the last time he spoke to her. The radio said that the phones were out across most of the country, but suddenly he had to try. At the very least he had to try. "How old are you?"

"Eleven. What's her name?"

"Nefertiti."

"Weird name," the kid said, and looked instantly sorry. "I mean, it's kind of pretty."

"Don't worry about it. Let's get you home."

"I just live a few blocks that way," the kid said, flapping his hand in the direction of his house. "I can get there."

"I'm sure you can," Reggie said. "But I'm going to take you, anyway. And you're gonna stay inside. Give me this." Reggie put his hands on the bike's handlebars.

"What do you want with my bike?"

"I'm just going to strap it to the back of the truck. Do you know if your phone is wor—"

"Hey," someone shouted. "What the hell are you doing?"

Reggie turned, and it was too late to go for his Colt. The guy standing in the door of one of the houses that Reggie had taken to be abandoned had him in the sights of his hunting rifle.

"I'm helping the kid, man," Reggie said, freezing, raising his hands. "Just put the gun down and—"

"You fucking sick bastard," the guy said. His voice was slurred, and he was having trouble holding the rifle steady. Jesus, is that how people everywhere were reacting to this? By getting shitfaced?

"Listen, man, I was just—"

"You were just trying to get your dirty black hands on a little white boy, is what you were doing, you sick faggot. Get on your bike and go home, kid."

"Do it," Reggie said, glancing at the kid.

"Is that what you were..." the kid began, letting his words trail off. He looked at Reggie, fear and confusion warping his face.

"Jesus Christ, no, kid, now would you—"

The guy opened fire, squeezed off five frenzied shots. At least two of them struck Reggie's truck.

It was over quickly: Reggie leapt to his left, dropping and rolling and pulling his gun. His first two shots went wild, turning brick into powder and shattering a window. The last one caught the asshole in the stomach. The rifle hit the ground and the guy followed, wailing, his hands pressed to his belly.

Reggie got to his feet, looked around. The kid lay on his side in a spreading pool of blood, gasping. Reggie dropped to his knees and inspected the damage. The bullet had missed the kid's heart, but judging by the sound of his breathing it had punctured one of his lungs. Reggie could not find an exit wound. The bullet had bounced around inside the kid's ribcage.

"Hey, Steven." Reggie took his hand. The kid was going to be dead within minutes. "Just close your eyes and take a nap, okay? You're going to be fine."

The kid's eyes found him, and his body jerked. He tried to get away from Reggie.

"I wasn't going to hurt you," Reggie said. "You got to know that."

The kid coughed, his lips glistening red. A line of blood ran from his right nostril. There was fear in his eyes, and then the fear was gone and there was nothing there at all. His chest heaved and rattled. There was a rush of blood and bile from his mouth, and then it was over.

"Damn it," Reggie said, standing up. Behind him, the asshole was on his knees, trying to grasp his rifle with blood-slicked fingers.

"Aggh," he said, dropping the gun and falling back onto his ass. Reggie stomped toward him.

"You no good piece of shit," Reggie said, seizing the man by the shirt, pulling him to his feet, and slamming him into the doorframe—once, twice, again, again. The man reeked of blood and shit.

"I was just helping him," Reggie screamed, nose to nose with the man, who sputtered and yelped and clutched Reggie's wrists. Reggie tossed him to the ground, glowering. He paced back and forth on the lawn and, deciding, grabbed a handful of the man's hair and dragged him over to where the dead boy lay.

"What are you—" the man said, and Reggie kicked him in the ribs. He thought about kicking him in the stomach but didn't want a foot covered in shit and blood.

"You deserve this," he said, and crouched beside the man. He closed his right hand around the asshole's throat. "You fucking deserve this."

He let go, stood, and walked back toward the man's house. He stopped to pick up the hunting rifle, a well-kept pre-'64 Winchester. A good gun.

"Help me," the man said, weeping. "I'm sorry."

Pistol raised, Reggie entered the man's house and closed the door behind him. He stepped into the dimly lit living room. Against the wall, a large color television displayed the image of a burning building. Reggie glanced at the television and stepped into the kitchen. Placing the Winchester onto the couch, he walked to the sink and threw up.

Outside, the asshole screamed.

Reggie checked every one of the rooms, yelling out that any bastards hiding in here better throw their guns down and come out or he'd murder them on the spot. The place was empty. There were no family photos on the walls. A stack of magazines with names like *DUDE* and *SWANK* sat atop the toilet tank.

Back in the living room, Reggie sat down on the chair before the television and buried his face in his hands, tried to steady his breathing, to get his hands to stop shaking.

Why the hell had he stopped? The kid would be alive now, and the lonely son of a bitch outside would maybe be rubbing one out into the toilet right now instead of getting ripped apart.

Reggie lifted his face. There was a small table next to the chair. On it sat a lamp, a *TV Guide*, a half-empty bottle of Jack, and a telephone.

The lamp was off, the *TV Guide* was of no use, and the Jack lit a fire in his belly. Knowing what he'd hear, he picked up the receiver and brought it to his ear.

There was a dial tone.

He dialed home, cursing the slowness of the rotary dialer, pushing each number along. There was a distant click followed by the faint ghost chatter of someone else's frenzied conversation, and then the phone rang. And rang. On the eighth ring, someone picked up. Reggie's heart sank as quickly as his hopes had risen: a pre-recorded message informed him that all circuits were busy. He hung up.

In the kitchen, he found paper bags in the pantry and filled four of them with provisions: canned goods—beans and soup and, God help him, Spam—

and dry cereal and potato chips. Bottled soda and a half-eaten loaf of bread. A jar of pickles from the fridge. A can opener from the drawer next to the sink. A fork, a spoon, and a knife from the drawer next to that one.

He arranged the grocery bags beside the front door, walked into the living room, and tried the phone once more. Same story.

Outside, the asshole was still alive, lying on his side and curled into a ball, whimpering, quivering in shock, his arms shielding his face and head. Steven gnawed on a deflated length of intestine trailing from his stomach. The dead kid with the baseball cap sat beside him, tugging something from the asshole's stomach with his one good hand. They looked like best buddies sitting there like that, and Reggie wondered if they'd known each other.

The naked dead man was fifteen or so feet away. The fat one wearing shorts trundled along behind it. Steven looked up at him with stupid awareness, a knot of gut-rope hanging down across his chin. The other kid dropped the glistening thing it had pulled from the asshole's stomach, picked it up. Dropped it.

"I wasn't going to hurt you," he told Steven, and blew the top of the dead kid's head off. He put another bullet between the eyes of the one-armed kid, and then pointed the barrel of the gun at the asshole's head.

"Puh-puh-puh."

"You don't deserve this," Reggie said, and shot him.

Reggie walked toward the naked dead man, put a bullet between its eyes. He climbed into this truck, started it up, and backed it into the dead man's yard. He loaded most of the supplies he'd stolen from the man's house into his truck and then went back inside. He rummaged around until he found the rounds for the rifle. He inspected the window he'd shattered when returning the asshole's fire, and then he realized that the guy probably wasn't an asshole—just scared and stupid. What was he supposed to have thought, seeing Reggie taking the kid's bike?

"Damn it," Reggie said. Wanting to hit the road, to get to his daughter as quickly as possible, he instead sank into the chair before the television and brought the bottle of Jack to his lips. For now, it might be best to just lie low.

Reggie watched television and drank himself into a stupor but he never fell asleep. He tried to—he closed his eyes and tried to push everything out of his mind, but sleep would not come. At some point during the night he got up from the chair and went to the window, watched dead bodies shuffle by in the

buzzing glow of the streetlight. Then he watched more television, tried and failed to fall asleep.

He rose from the chair in the quiet hour before dawn, ate food from the fridge, freshened up in the dead man's bathroom, and was on the road by sunrise.

T E N

"I'm locking up," Misty said, and Crate looked up at her from his place on the bench. His rifle rested across his scrawny legs. Bilbo Baggins slept at his feet, snoring.

"Yeah?" Crate said, looking away, squinting.

"Yeah," she said, lifting the neck of her shirt and covering her nose and mouth. "God. How can you stand it?"

The air reeked of cooked meat. When she was a kid growing up in Mississippi, her grandfather roasted whole hogs on the spit after church on Sundays. Folks would come from all around town, and the smell in the air brought her back. She need only close her eyes, and it was like she was there. But the smell on the air was the smell of what was left of the Willits family, and that was wrong.

"Eh," Crate said, sounding a little confused. "It's really not all that bad a smell, I'm sorry to say." He looked at her. "Don't you think?"

"I'm gonna lock up now, okay?"

"I still remember how to let myself in, woman," the old man said, scratching his beard. "That piece of shit staying?"

"I think so," she said. Crate was right. Charlie was a piece of shit, but he was

a well-meaning piece of shit. And he was better company than her husband had been in years. "He isn't admitting it, but I think he's scared."

"No shit," Crate said, tapping his long fingernails on the stock of his rifle. "We're all scared, honey. But being scared ain't no reason to be a fucking coward, and that's all he ever was."

"I'll be in the back, Crate."

"I'll try to remember to knock," he said, looking up at her with that look in his eyes, the one that said he was about to say something hurtful. "Don't really want to walk in on you sucking his little yellow dick."

"That's nice," she said, deciding that defending herself wasn't worth a whole hell of a lot. She messed around with Charlie sometimes, when both of them couldn't really take messing around by themselves any longer; she couldn't remember the last time Crate was interested in sex. None of them were very happy about the whole thing, but beggars could not be choosers, and sometimes you just needed to sleep beside someone other than yourself. "Try not to fall asleep out here, okay?"

"Yeah."

"I'm serious," she said. He slept out here all the time, sometimes so deeply that, upon discovering him, several of her customers had come into her store to inform her that the old dude on the porch had died. "It's dangerous."

"Really now," he said, and the look in his eyes was the look she used to see just before he would hit her. She saw the look at least five times a week now, but Creighton Mumsford hadn't raised a hand to her in anger in nearly two decades, long before they'd stopped fucking. "How damned stupid do you think I am? Get your ass inside before I shoot you and burn you for one of those things. No one would know, Misty."

"Maybe you should just lie down and take a nap," she said. With her shirt over her nose, she could still smell the burnt-hog aroma of Mark Willits and family, only mingled with the scent of her own body. Sweat and armpits and the burgeoning stench of old age. "You want me to get you a pillow?"

"Run along," he said, pursing his thin lips and miming fellatio with his knotty right hand. He belched into his mouth, his sunken cheeks puffing. He blew it out and made a face. "Whoa," he said, waving at the air in front of his face. "That's rotten."

She closed the door and locked it, wondering how long it would be before things got worse. On the television, things were getting worse everywhere, and

she'd lived long enough to know that things never really got better. The bad shit merely took time off, every so often, giving you a chance to feel like things were looking up. But they weren't. They never were. And now, well—there would probably be no more time off for the bad shit.

She turned the sign around, letting the world know that Misty's Food and Gas was CLOSED, by God. Not that the sign would do any good. Locals knew to come around back and bother her, and, given the current state of things, newcomers looking to stock up in preparation for the end of the world would simply let themselves in. If Crate didn't shoot them, of course. And judging by the look in his eyes after he'd taken out the pitiful things that had, only this morning, been the Willitses, he'd almost certainly enjoy it.

After the kids from Fresno had driven away with Samson Niebolt, there had been no more dead visitors from Beistle. "Why would there?" Crate had said, an hour later, after she'd wondered aloud why that might be. "Mark and his kids were coming home. Whatever it was that they'd become, they still knew where home was, honey."

"That's..." she'd said, unable to finish.

"That's goddamn awful is what it is," Crate had said, his eyes haunted. He'd placed a hand on her knee.

It had been three hours since Junior had shown up and the kids from Fresno had gone up to the Niebolt property to smoke dope and mess around. The television said the same shit, only worse, worse and worse by the hour. She stepped behind the counter and retrieved the bottle of Jamaican rum she kept on the bottom shelf. She fished around for her glass, couldn't find it, and opted to take her poison straight from the source.

"...can't stress this enough, people." An angry-looking man with a shiny bald head, thick glasses that seemed to catch and hold the studio lights, and a ratty salt-and-pepper beard yelled on the television screen. "These *are* dead people. How and why the dead are returning to some reduced form of life is something we haven't figured out yet, but it's a fact, despite what this godforsaken imbecile sitting across from me is saying. I know it—"

The godforsaken imbecile tried to cut in, but the bald guy ran him down with words.

"I don't know why it's so hard for some of you to believe this," he said, looking into the camera. "I mean, how many people in this country believe

that a Jew who died two thousand years ago is still alive and planning his big comeback special. Come on, people, let's just look at the facts—"

Misty turned off the television. Bottle in hand, she went into the back.

Charlie lay across the bed. He'd taken off his shoes, and the bottoms of his socks were dirty. His shirt was tight against his large belly. The fingers of his right hand were closed around the neck of a bottle of gin. On the television, the guy she'd silenced out front continued his personal crusade against stupidity.

"...I am calm, you brick-headed son of a bitch," he said, his upper lip curled back in disgust. "I just can't believe what I'm hearing. With all you've seen, with all each and every one of us has seen, you're going to tell me that—"

"I'm just saying that we don't have the facts yet, is all," his opponent said, leaning forward. "There's no reason to be so damned belligerent. And there's no reason to start blaming this on the supernatural. We can—"

"The supernatural," the hothead screamed. "The *supernatural*? Who the hell said anything about the supernatural?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fallows, but the dead only come back to life in ghost stories, and there must be some other explain—"

Misty silenced the discussion once again.

"I was watching that," Charlie said.

"And you can go out front if you want to keep watching it," she said, walking over to the bed. He was lying on her side. She slept alone most of the time, but she still had her side of the bed. Charlie scooted over.

"I was waiting for the crazy one to punch the other guy," he said, and knocked back some gin.

"There's the door." She sat down on the edge of the bed, drank deeply of her own bottle. When she'd had enough, she capped it, set it on the nightstand, and lay back, kicking up her feet.

"No," Charlie said. He set his bottle on the other nightstand and, grunting with the effort, scooted over to her side and pressed himself close. She tensed.

"Not right now," she said, closing her eyes and resting her forearm across her face. "Are you nuts?"

"That's not what I mean," he said, rolling onto his side and placing an arm around her. "I just need to be held."

"Yeah," she said, relaxing.

They were asleep within ten minutes.

Less than an hour later, they were both awake.

“Jesus,” Misty said, sitting upright, her heart hammering. Crate stood in the bedroom doorway, rifle in hand. She blinked, realizing that the sound that had awakened her had been that of Crate hammering his fist against the bedroom door.

“Damn, Crate,” Charlie said, rubbing his chest.

“Sorry, you two,” Crate said, not looking particularly sorry about anything. “But you really need to wake up.”

“What is it?” Misty asked, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“Officer Tasgal is here.”

“He—who?” she said. Her mind felt like it was made of mud. She’d been dreaming, just seconds ago, though she could not remember of what. Images and sensations faded and were lost, and now there was only the bedroom and Crate and Charlie and dim evening light sifted through the curtains and the liquor on the nightstands. “Tasgal?”

“Yeah,” Crate said, nodding, talking to her as if she were a child. “Officer Tasgal. From Beistle. The one who looks like he’s sixteen. Ringing any bells?”

“Yeah,” she said, and of course she knew who he was talking about. She’d closed her eyes and thought of Eric Tasgal more than once while with Charlie. “I’m a little fuzzy. I was asleep.”

“He’s in trouble,” Crate said.

“Mnn?” she said, standing. Her head spun. The rum had put her down, and it wasn’t through with her.

“I think he’s been bitten.”

“Hey, Eric,” she said, stepping from the back and into her store. Eric sat at one of the tables, picking at the frayed and stained red and white checked tablecloth with his right hand. His left rested on his .357 Magnum, which lay on the table between the salt and the pepper.

“Miss Misty,” he said, looking up at her. Crate was wrong. Tasgal didn’t look sixteen. Typically more like eighteen, she thought, but today he looked a hard thirty. His skin, usually a healthy pink, was pasty. The flesh around his eyes was dark and puffy. The gauze bandage around his right forearm oozed blood.

“You okay?”

"I need a drink," he said.

"Some coffee?"

"A drink."

"Okay," she said. "Rum or gin?"

"Rum," he said. He picked at the blood-soaked bandage and winced.

"Be right back," she said.

She stepped past Crate, who stood watching Eric Tasgal with weary eyes. As she left the room, Tasgal said something to Crate. She wasn't sure what it was.

In the bedroom, Charlie sat rooted to the edge of the bed with booze in his hand and fear in his eyes. She grabbed her rum from the nightstand.

"What's going on?" Charlie asked, his eyes wide beneath a creased brow.

"He needs a drink," she said, and left. As she walked down the hall, Charlie turned on the television. From the sound of it, the screaming lunatic with the giant glasses was no longer on. The bell above the door rocked back and forth. Crate was gone, no doubt hunkering down on the bench with Bilbo Baggins at his feet.

"Thanks," Tasgal said, grasping the bottle of rum by the neck with his left hand. His right hand rested on the table. Misty twisted off the bottle cap and set it on the table. "Double thanks."

He took a hit from the bottle, just a little one. He made a hissing sound.

"My pleasure, Eric," she said, touching the back of the chair before her, steadying herself. She wondered if he could tell how drunk she was. "What happened?"

"Beistle is a madhouse," he said, looking up at her and shaking his head, slack-jawed. "It's just... it's just gone." He extended his left hand toward the chair. "Sit down."

She pulled out the chair, sat down, and watched as he gathered his thoughts. He stared down at table, and she allowed her gaze to drop to the seeping bandage. There was blood on the tablecloth. Tasgal sighed, and the mother inside of her, the mother she never got to be, wanted to place her hand on his. The wound on his arm—the very fact that he'd probably been bitten by one of those things—dictated otherwise. She would not touch him.

She looked at her bottle of Jamaican rum with a sense of loss, wishing she'd grabbed a glass on the way into the store.

"They're all dead," Tasgal said. She looked up from his arm, worried that he

noticed her staring at it. He hadn't. His eyes were on the bottle of rum, which he knocked back once more.

"Everybody in town?"

"God, no," he said, looking her in the eye. "Jim, Clark, fucking Cardo. Sheriff Kosana. Every cop in Beistle."

"My god," she said. She brought her hand to her mouth, mostly because it was what she was probably supposed to do. In truth, the news did not shock her. It saddened her, yes, but shocked? No. She'd watched the news for the past two days. She'd seen the mutilated dead bodies of three people who bought from her several times a week staggering through her parking lot. She was officially through being shocked.

E L E V E N

“We got the first call, God, was that just yesterday?” Tasgal stared at her, eyes wide, not waiting for an answer. She saw the gears of realization grinding behind his eyes. “No, yeah. Two days ago. I’d just come into the station. Was expecting another day of doing nothing, you know?”

“I know,” she said, suddenly wanting to hear what he had to say. Needing to hear it.

“It started at the hospital. It came through the switchboard as an assault, but by the time I got there, there was more than one report, and...”

He drank a little more rum, and then held the bottle out to her. She shook her head.

“No. You should pace yourself.”

“Gah,” he said, looking at the bottle as if it were a bee that had just stung him. “You’re probably right.”

“I drink a lot of water when I drink,” she said, and just like that they were talking casual. Just shooting the shit.

“Huh?”

“Yeah. No hangover the next day.”

“Huh,” he said, looking around. “There anything to eat?”

"Of course. Cold cut sandwich okay?"

"Perfect."

"Coming right up," she said, wishing he'd said a candy bar or a bag of chips would do. Her eyes felt like they each wanted to do their own thing, and she wasn't convinced that she could make it to the deli.

She managed to get there, taking her time, laughing once when she knocked over some canned soup. She downed a cup of water and made Tasgal a hearty sandwich, piling ham and roast beef and three different cheeses high between slices of home-baked bread. She grabbed a bag of chips from the rack, and served it all up with a cup of ice water.

He downed the first half of the sandwich in silence then looked up at her.

"Mm," he said, pulling a napkin from the fingerprint-stained silver dispenser and wiping his mouth. A drop of blood fell from his bandage and onto the table. He wiped it up. "God, this hurts."

"Oh, damn," she said, hopping up and returning to the table with a bottle of aspirin. She shook two into his hand, and when he asked for more she tapped out three more. He downed them with ice water. He was done with the rum for now.

"I was listening to the radio on the way over here, and let me tell you, I don't give a shit what some of those jokers are saying. These are dead people."

"I know," she said. "You probably saw the..." she nodded toward the front door.

"Yeah."

"Mark Willits and his two kids."

"God," he said. "I saw Connie at the hospital. She was dead. I saw Mark and Junior a little later, I think it was." He frowned, looking around the room and blinking his eyes. He looked like he was about to pass out. She wondered if it was booze or blood loss that was taking hold.

"Did you lose a lot of blood?" she said, nodding toward his arm.

"No," he said, shaking his head and looking hard at the rum. "It hurts like a bastard, but it's not that bad. Still, you know, what the hell does this mean?"

She didn't say anything.

"I think it's starting to get infected," he said, eyeing his right hand curled atop the table like some dead thing. Were the fingertips a little bluish? "Think maybe you can cut it off for me? I'm sure you got something in the deli that could do the job fast and clean."

She opened her mouth, and that was all. No words came. Tasgal's smile surprised her. "Kidding," he said. He frowned again. "I think. And look at this," he indicated the bottle of rum. "I contaminated your rum."

"No," she said, trying to sound as if the thought hadn't crossed her mind. "It's—"

"I understand," he said. "I should have asked for a glass."

She waited for him to resume his fractured tale, and suddenly she wanted another hit from her rum. She was grateful for the other bottle in her kitchen.

"I watched Mark and Junior pull Nelly to the ground," he said, and his chest heaved once. She thought he was going to cry. He didn't. "I wanted to shoot them, both of them. Nelly too, because by then there was no helping her. She was still alive, but, you know?"

Misty nodded once, trying to remember what the news had said about bites. She'd heard so much over the past forty-eight hours, so many conflicting reports, so much confusion.

"By then, I'd already gotten this," he shook his head. "We were at Proust's. You know Proust's, right?"

"Yeah," Misty said. Proust's was a large supermarket owned and operated by Eddie Proust and his family. Proust was a loudmouth and an asshole, and Misty wouldn't lose any sleep if Tasgal's tale ended with Proust getting his windpipe eaten out.

"We answered a call there," he said. "Clark and me. This was after the hospital, I think." He looked confused. "Wait, yeah, of course it was after the hospital. After the hospital and the funeral home. By then the National Guard was in town. Not a lot of them, and I got the idea that they were just as confused and messed up as the rest of us. Things weren't holding together all that much."

The bell above the door rang. Misty jumped, and Tasgal's hand twitched toward his gun. Crate shuffled in. He saw the looks on their faces and raised his eyebrows, amused.

"More of them?" Misty said.

Crate shook his head, looked at her as if she were stupid. "You should drink a little more," he said. "Me? I'm gonna smoke. Want some?"

Misty blinked at him.

"What?" Crate asked, half grinning. "You afraid the Beaver here is going to slap on the cuffs if we break out the grass?"

Tasgal laughed once.

“See?” Crate said, and vanished into the back.

Tasgal looked at her, his face scrunched up, trying to remember where he was.

“Proust’s,” she said.

“Yeah, Eddie Proust had a line of about fifty people outside of his store, and he called us out to make sure nobody went nuts and looted the place. There were two of us. Kosana was dead by that point, so things were already falling apart.”

“How?” she asked. She’d had a short fling with Mac Kosana, back when she was young and he was a deputy.

“Some drunk from up in the hills blew his chest out with a shotgun.”

Misty gasped. Despite her earlier feelings, real shock was setting in. Tasgal wasn’t telling a complete story, but he made sense, what he was saying was real, it had all happened to him. She could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. It was in the air, and she suddenly found herself quite afraid. It was just outside her door, and before long it would be inside, looking for something to eat.

“Eddie had the doors locked, and he was standing behind the glass all horse-faced and stupid, hollering for everyone to get back. His brothers were in there with him, and they all had shotguns. Hell, I think Ella had one, too. Cardo was in there with him, trying to keep the peace. Talk some sense into the idiot, or something.”

Crate walked back into the room with a joint hanging from his lip, nesting in the fibers of his beard.

“Here,” he said, and handed another joint to Tasgal along with a pack of matches. “On the house. It ain’t shit, too.”

“Thanks,” Tasgal said. He lit up and sucked in, eyes closed. “That’s nice. I don’t do this so much lately.” Crate left and the bell jingled. When Tasgal offered the joint to Misty, she shook her head and waited for him to go on.

“Oh, yeah—sorry.” He shrugged. “Clark and I got separated, and when Eddie opened the doors, everyone rushed in, and then it was just me and Clark, looking at each other. I remember looking around, making sure there weren’t any of those things around, and that’s when the yelling started inside.

“We went in, and Proust was standing there with Keith, um, I’m not sure what his last name is, the little red-headed guy.”

Misty nodded even though she didn’t know who he was talking about.

“That Keith guy was screaming in his face, and everyone else was yelling, and that’s when I realized what was going on. Eddie had hiked prices.”

“Oh, jeeze,” she said.

“Yeah. Through the roof,” Tasgal said. He grabbed the rum and took a shot, followed it with water. “Ah.”

“How’s your arm? Aspirin kicking in yet?”

“I think so,” he said, and held the joint up to his face, crossing his eyes a bit to look at it. “The idiot was asking something like five bucks for a dozen eggs. Two dollars for a can of beans. Like he was in his right mind.” Tasgal shook his head, fell silent.

“What happened?”

“That Keith guy shot him is what happened. Just reached up with a little pea-shooter and popped him right in the face. He dropped, and then everyone with a gun started shooting. I saw Cardo on the other side of the crowd, falling back, and then they charged the exit. I did the only thing I could do. I ran like hell, out of the store and around back.

“Things quieted down eventually, and then they came back and started cleaning the place out. There were a few gunshots inside, but I think they were just shooting the dead ones who were coming back, you know?”

“I got back to my car. Clark was sitting in the passenger seat, holding his leg and leaning against the door. He was bleeding real bad. I should have thought, but I didn’t, I just wanted to get the hell out of town. I drove this way for about ten minutes, I guess, passing up those things, passing up people who waved for me to stop and help them. They looked confused, like ‘Where the hell is the cop going?’ and I just kept going, talking to Clark, telling him that he was going to be okay. He’d grunt, and when he stopped grunting, I guess I just figured he’d passed out.”

He shook his head, laughed once. He looked at the bottle of rum as if were someone he didn’t trust.

“Then he sat up and, well, there it is.” He indicated the blood-soaked bandage with his left hand, which shook. “I screamed and emptied my gun into his head.” Tasgal crinkled his nose. He looked like a little boy who’d just stepped on a caterpillar. “He’s still in the car.”

He placed the joint in the ashtray. He considered the forgotten remnant of his sandwich, picked it up, and took a bite.

“You should probably lie down,” Charlie said from behind Misty. She looked

back at him. He stood near the door leading into the back, the bottle of gin in his right hand.

“Oh, hey, Charles,” Tasgal said.

“Hey,” Charlie said, walking over to them. He placed a hand on Misty’s shoulder. “Misty has a first aid kit in the bathroom. You want me to take a look at that?”

Misty looked up at Charlie, surprised. Sitting on his ass and running his mouth was Charlie’s speed. Actually offering to chip in and help? She thought maybe a call to the Vatican was in order, for surely she’d been on hand for a bona fide miracle. Then again, Charlie was scared, and Eric was an authority figure, an honest-to-God police officer charged with serving and protecting. Charlie felt safer with him around.

“No,” Tasgal said. “Not now, anyway. I have a kit, too, in the car. I pulled over and took care of it. Burns like a bastard. I don’t know why I didn’t pull him out back there.”

“We can take care of that,” Misty said. “Crate will be happy to light him up.”

“No,” Tasgal said. “Just wait. Things might, you don’t know... things might be better tomorrow. His wife will want to bury him. His head is mostly gone.”

Misty felt Charlie looking at her. She kept her eyes on Tasgal. He looked up at her, and then to Charlie. “Yes,” Tasgal said. “I need to lie down.” He looked at Misty, heavy-lidded, face pale, eyes dark. “Would that be okay, Miss Misty?”

“Of course,” Misty said. She didn’t think she sounded very enthusiastic.

“Okay,” Tasgal said, standing up a little too quickly, tipping over his chair. “Sorry. I just, I’ve been awake for, shit, how long?”

“A long time,” Misty said. She picked up the joint, careful not to touch the end that had been in his mouth. She mashed it into the ashtray.

“A long time, yeah,” he said, looking down at his arm. “Let me take care of this first. Don’t wanna leak all over your sofa.”

Forgetting his gun at the table, he left, dragged himself along like a dead thing. The bell jingled. Misty walked over to the television and turned it on. Tasgal returned with his first aid kit and disappeared into the bathroom. The news bounced from one disaster to another, and it wasn’t long before Misty realized that five minutes had gone by without a single mention of the walking dead. Riots, looting, open war in the Middle East, Soviet saber-rattling, and cities going up in flames. The dead may have triggered these events, but they

sure as hell weren't doing the looting or firing the guns or threatening to fill the sky with nukes.

"Okay," Tasgal said, holding up his arm. He'd replaced the bandages. "Good as new."

Misty nodded toward Charlie.

"Follow him," she said. "Get some rest, Eric. We're good for now. We'll wake you if we need you."

"Thanks," Tasgal said, and took a step toward Charlie. "Oh," he said, and grabbed his gun from the table before disappearing into the back.

She watched the news for a few more minutes, turning the dial from channel to channel, hoping to hear more on what to do about bites. No luck. They then showed dimly lit footage of a severed human head trying to bite the hand of a man who, laughing, waved his fingers inches from its mouth. She sighed and turned the damned thing off.

"Nothing we can do for him," Crate said. The sun had gone down, and the street lamp painted the parking lot a sickly piss yellow. Bilbo Baggins sat on his haunches, watching the road. Misty could smell the blackened heap on the gravel, but it no longer bothered her. It could be the lingering aroma of a cook-out—hot dogs and ribs and half-pound burgers. The charred bodies were far enough away from her to look like dirt or compost or something in the gloom.

"No," she said, and that wasn't really true. Admitting to herself, much less to Crate, what she knew they should do was about as easy as admitting that the smell of the Willits going up in flames had actually made her mouth water a little. "Well, there is but it's ugly."

"You think I should shoot him," Crate said, leaning forward and scratching Bilbo Baggins on the back of his head. The dog looked back at them, exhaled. It sounded a lot like a sigh.

Misty looked at Crate. She wasn't sure what to say, so she said nothing. Crate could take that however he wanted to.

"I'm not going to do that," he said. "Make too much of a mess in there." He shrugged. "And I'm not really all that comfortable with shooting a sleeping police officer, particularly a nice boy like Eric."

"I know, Crate, and I feel the same way. What if we—" She stopped, tensing

as the distant sound of an engine reached them. The sound swelled, headlights illuminated the road, and a truck passed, braking before it left their view, backing up, and turning into the parking lot.

"Hm," Crate said, stood up, cocked his rifle.

"I think it's Huff," Misty said, squinting into the headlights, which were promptly extinguished.

"Oh," Crate said, letting his aim go limp.

The truck stopped and Huffington Niebolt got out, all six feet and six inches of him. Strong thick arms and skinny legs and a gut that stretched the fabric of his blood-stained sleeveless t-shirt. The yellow light gleamed on his bald head, and his beard hung in a single braid, rested on the bulge of his belly.

"Hey, Huff," Crate said.

"Hello." Huff looked tired and lost. He sniffed the air and shot a glance at the remains of the Willits family. "Everybody okay here?"

"Not everybody," Misty said. "But we are. Where's Connor?" Three days ago, Huff's youngest son had been with him when they stopped in for Cokes on the way south.

Huff shook his head. He looked down at the bloodstained fabric of his shirt for just a hair of a second and then resolutely looked elsewhere.

"Oh, God," Misty said, walking to him, wrapping her arms around him. "Oh, Huff." He was stiff. He didn't return her embrace. She pulled away and looked up into his pock-marked face.

"How many have you seen in town?" he asked, and his breath stank of whisky.

"Just those three," Misty said, stepping back and indicating the blackened heap. "The Willitses."

"Huh," Huff said. "Three?"

"Not sure where Connie is."

"Any of my boys come through here?"

"Samson was here earlier. He met up with some kids from Fresno. Took them up to your place."

"That's good," he said. "Safe. How're you, Crate?"

"Been better, been worse," the old man said, shrugging. "I'm sorry about your boy."

"Me, too," Huff said. "He didn't really suffer, so I guess we should be grateful for the little things."

"We should," Crate said. "It's really bad out there?"

"Worse than bad," Huff said, knotting his brow. "It's the end."

"You need anything, Huff?" Misty asked, attempting derail one of Huff's end-of-the-world spiels before it really got rolling. What was happening was worse than anything Huff could prattle on about; she didn't care to hear him tack any of his insane ideas onto it. "Something to eat?"

"Nah," the big man said. "I got everything I need at home. I just saw you two sitting here and figured I'd check in." He looked back at the road. "I can't see why there would be many of them out this way, but if you feel safer, you're both welcome up at our place, okay?"

"Thanks, Huff," Misty said. "I think we're gonna stay here for now. Charlie is inside, drunk off his ass, and Eric Tasgal is asleep on the couch in the back."

"He's bit," Crate added.

"Oh," Huff said, drawing back his head. "That's not good."

"No," Misty said.

They exchanged a few more words, and then Huff left. Misty and Crate sat down. Bilbo Baggins farted and whined.

"That bite," Misty said.

"We really don't know anything about it."

"The television says the bites get infected."

"I haven't watched a lot of TV since this started, but I watched a little, and here's what I heard: someone talking about UFOs and aliens, someone else blaming it on Tricky Dick and voodoo at the same damn time, and Pat Robertson saying that Jesus was getting back at us for of Roe v. Wade. You'll understand if I don't put a lot of stock in what I hear on that television in there, honey," he said, scratching his beard. "Now, infection? Bites do that. I could bite you right now, and if you didn't take care of it, it would get infected."

"We're talking about a bite from a dead man."

"I know," he said, knotting his brow. "I know. But we have to wait."

"For?"

"Wait to see how he is in a few hours."

"Wait for him to die," she said.

"Yeah," Crate said, eyes wide. "Maybe so, yeah."

"We could try to get him some antibiotics."

"In town? In Beistle?" He looked at her until he was sure she would not answer. "No, we can't."

No one said anything for a few minutes. The night air was cool. Not too cool but Misty shivered anyway. She drew close to Crate, resting her head on his bony shoulder and closing her eyes.

"Hup," Crate said, nudging her. She sat up and blinked at him.

"I fell asleep?"

"For a few minutes. Look." He nodded toward the road. A dead body shuffled through the parking lot. Crate nudged Bilbo Baggins with his foot, but the dog was out cold.

"Dumb dog," Crate said, standing up and stepping from the deck and onto the gravel. He cocked his rifle.

At first glance, she thought maybe Tasgal had died in his sleep. He was sprawled across her couch on his back, his left arm hanging to the floor, his mouth open. His gun lay on the floor, beneath his hand. He seemed even paler than before but that could just have been a trick of the dim light cast from the standing lamp next to the couch. His wounded forearm rested on his chest. A quarter-sized circle of blood had seeped up through the fresh bandages. His bleeding had all but stopped.

Misty took a step backward, into Crate, and then Tasgal snorted and changed positions. His eyes drifted open, fluttered, and for a second her heart turned to ice. Then he mumbled something, closed his eyes, and was asleep once more.

"He got a fever?" Crate said.

"I don't know," she said.

"Check him."

"I really don't want to."

"Jesus, woman," Crate said. He leaned his rifle against the wall and walked over to where Tasgal lay, blocking her view of him.

"Nnn."

"Hey, Eric," Crate said. "It's just me, okay?"

"Mm."

"Just checkin' to see if you got a fever."

Misty waited, heart racing, waiting for Tasgal to take a bite out of Crate's hand, wondering if she'd be able to use the rifle on both of them.

“Okay, you’re good,” Crate said, picking up Tasgal’s gun. “Here’s your iron, cowboy.”

He stepped away from the couch, picked up his rifle, and looked at Misty. She raised her eyebrows.

“Mild fever,” Crate said, nudging past her. “We should keep an eye on it. Poor kid.”

Misty stood there for a while, watching the steady rise and fall of Tasgal’s chest until Charlie spoke up behind her, making her jump.

“What’s going on?” His words were slurred. She wondered how hard he’d hit the gin. She wondered how much was left, and how the hell she was going to get more, once the bottle was dry. “He okay?”

“I don’t know.” She looked at Charlie. He leaned against the wall, eyelids heavy. “You’re messed up.”

“You look worried.”

She sighed. Tasgal stirred again. She held her breath, stared at his chest until she was certain that he was still alive. “Do you have any rope?”

“Now, don’t let your head...”

“I have an extension cord somewhere, I think.”

“You ought to come to bed.”

Charlie didn’t drink much, but when he did he got as horny as a teenager. He thought he did, anyway. His dick was about as useful as a banana slug.

“*You* ought to go to bed, you useless turd,” she said, and left. Behind the counter, she turned on the television and watched the end of Nixon’s address to the nation. The criminal bastard looked frightened, far more so than he had while getting publicly grilled over the Watergate fiasco. This pleased her.

Outside, Crate’s stupid dog barked. The door opened and Crate came through and strode toward the back, noticed her behind the counter and skidded to a halt.

“Oh. Four more coming. I think the party’s starting.”

T W E L V E

The men burst from within the small buildings at the end of the road, pointing their shotguns and screaming at them to get down, *get the fuck down, right now*, and Richard did the only thing that made any sense. He got down, and just like that his face met with a gritty boot. He hit the ground with blood erupting from his nose.

One of them was on his back, knee pressed into his spine, prying his bloodied hands from his face, binding his wrists and ankles. He screamed and he tasted dirt and blood, but he did not fight. They had shotguns, and you did not fight shotguns.

There were four of them, including the one they'd picked up in town, and they moved with awful speed and precision. To Richard's left, Kimberly rolled and shrieked, her ankles and wrists also bound. Samson was on Colleen's back, clutching her hair in his fists, breathing into her ear in a very ugly way, and the man who had broken Richard's nose and bound his wrists had now planted his foot firmly in the middle of Richard's back, pinning him to the ground.

Also bound, Daniel screamed and struggled, rolled away from his own attacker, who pumped a foot into his stomach. Guy was big and it took two of

them to slam him against the pickup truck—Daniel’s attacker joined in, ramming the stock of his shotgun into Guy’s stomach.

“Guh,” Guy said, buckling forward. They slammed him against the truck once more. Richard closed his eyes and waited for it all to end, and when it didn’t he opened his eyes and watched as Colleen was dragged toward Guy. Samson and his friends sounded happy, and Richard screamed, and Kimberly screamed, and Daniel writhed in the dirt. The pressure on Richard’s back went away, and his attacker stepped away.

Now all four of them clustered around Colleen and Guy, and a shotgun leaned against the truck. Guy screamed and Colleen screamed. A shotgun leaned against the truck, and Daniel sat up, his hands free and working the rope binding his ankles.

A shotgun leaned against the truck and Daniel crawled toward it.

Guy saw the knife descending toward his genitals. He thought: *Oh, God, please let me die right now, please let my heart stop.* And: *Please let the blade be sharp.*

God met him halfway: his heart did not stop, but the knife separated his penis from his body as easily as a cruel child plucks the wings from a dragonfly. The pain was pretty much everything that ever was, all at once, and everywhere. Later, while lying in the dark and waiting to die and trying to navigate the minefield of his confused and fevered thoughts, he thought that the pain had been divine, if such a thing was possible.

Something exploded. His ears rang. Wet chunks of something pattered his bare legs.

They let go of him and he slid down the truck and onto his bare ass, blood jetting from the hole between his legs. Screaming, screaming—everyone was screaming—he raked his hands through the dirt, brought up handfuls, and pressed them into his wound. His pants and underwear were pooled between his thighs. He seized them and pressed them to his mud-packed wound. He was knocked to the ground, and the black spots throbbing at the corners of the world got bigger. Guy went away.

He spent most of the night swimming in and out of consciousness, and when clarity came, it brought one simple and terrible realization, an unwell-

come and searing thing that he turned over again and again, tried to make sense of: *They'd cut off his dick. They'd cut off his dick.*

And: *he'd slowed the bleeding.* Somehow he had. He was still bleeding, he could feel it, but it was a stinging trickle. He could last a long time like this.

He spoke occasionally to Daniel and Richard, who were nearby, but mostly he slept and quivered and cried out in pain, and when the birds sang and the world around him emerged in shades of darkest blue, he swam up from the haze of shock and delirium long enough to ask God to let him kill at least one of the bastards before they killed him.

The idiot, the fucking idiot, he didn't knot the rope tight enough. Now it slipped away and Daniel's hands were free, and he had a chance, damn it, they all had a chance now, because the idiots were crowded around Colleen and Guy, they were watching her, and he could see her between their shifting bodies. He could see what they forced her to do. The ropes came away from his ankles with ease. Guy screamed threats and Colleen wept and Daniel crawled. His fingers touched polished wood, and the shotgun felt heavy in his hands.

He roared like some animal and rose and pressed both barrels to the upper back of the one with the knife, the one who didn't know how to tie a knot, the one who'd been stupid enough to set down his shotgun. He pulled the trigger.

They were on him, screaming and cursing and kicking and punching. His head lolled, and the world went black, and at some point he realized that he was lying in the back of a pickup truck, bouncing and jostling and no doubt being driven to his death. He screamed around the rag packed into his mouth. It reeked of oil and gasoline. His tongue burned.

Richard, similarly muffled and screaming, stared into his eyes. Guy lay next to Richard, quivering. The truck bounced and rocked, and eventually it came to a stop.

They dragged Daniel from the back of the truck, took off his clothes and tied him to a tree. Two of them. Just two. The other was someplace else. The other was with Colleen and Kimberly. He'd never see either of them again.

Samson and the other one pulled Guy from the truck first. He was as limp as a rag doll, a corpse before rigor mortis sets in. His wrists and ankles were bound, the bloodied wad of his pants and underwear clamped between his

thighs. He still wore his shoes and socks. Richard came easier, helping himself along. Both were thrown onto the ground facing Daniel.

"You're so dead, man," the other said, holding a knife to Daniel's stomach. He looked a lot like Samson, only older and shorter. His nose was crooked, a bad break that had never been properly set. "I ought to open you up right here, you motherfucker. Watch your guts pop right out."

"Stop, Max," Samson said, walking over to them and putting a hand on the other one's shoulder. "I want to do it as badly as you do, but we gotta wait for Dad."

"With all the shit that's happening, do we even know he's gonna be back?" He pressed the tip of the blade into Daniel's chest, etched a short line across his breastbone. Samson pulled him away, and Daniel allowed his head to hang forward. He closed his eyes.

"We're waiting." Samson said again, and Daniel heard the threat in his voice. "Okay?"

"Faggot," Max whispered, punching Daniel in the stomach.

"Hoo," Daniel said. A thick rope of blood and spit spun to the ground.

"Get in the truck," Samson said. Daniel opened his eyes and lifted his head in time to see Max stomping away toward the truck. He stopped and kicked Richard in the lower back. Richard writhed, his face red, the veins standing out in his forehead.

Daniel started making blubbering sounds under his breath.

"What's that shit," Samson said. "You praying? You believe in God?"

Daniel felt a warm slick of saliva fall out of his mouth and separate from him. He breathed twice. "No."

"No? Huh." Samson seemed a little surprised. "You looked to me like maybe you did. Oh, well, I was just gonna let you know that he probably wasn't gonna help you. Guess you know that already though, huh?"

Samson walked away, got into the truck, backed out, and drove away, the truck rocking along the path, moving downhill and away from them.

There the three of them sat in the falling dark for a long time, under the bats and breezes.

"How tight are your ropes?" Richard asked at last.

"Tight," Daniel said, wriggling in place, the bark of the tree grinding into the flesh of his back. He was bound across the chest, beneath the armpits. The rope was looped around, circled his arms at the elbows, looped around again

and again, above and below his knees. His feet and hands tingled, sensation fading.

“God,” Richard said, and gave himself over to panic. He thrashed and screamed through clenched teeth. After a while, he fell quiet.

Guy grunted, his hands twitching behind his back. He fell silent, grew still. He said something, little more than a mumble. Something about Colleen, maybe. It was hard to tell.

Colleen. And Kimberly. God.

Daniel let panic take him, as well, screaming and crying and struggling against the ropes binding him to the tree. The cut in his chest burned, and his face felt like a toothache. The rope and the bark dug in, and yet somehow he eventually nodded off.

“Gah,” someone said, and Daniel opened his eyes. Night had fallen. The forest floor was awash in moonlight and shadow.

“Wuzzat?” Daniel said, and tried to move. His feet and hands were no longer tingling, they were simply dead. Something moved on the ground before him.

“Get,” Richard said, growling. “Get away.”

Daniel blinked into the black and silver gloom, and the form before him suddenly made sense. The coyote tugged at the blood-stained bundle of denim and cotton pressed between Guy’s legs.

“Go,” he tried to say, his voice ragged, like his throat. He coughed, and the coyote twitched, its plume of a tail dropping between its legs, its head low. It growled, tugged the cloth once more. An engine hummed, light played across the trees, and the coyote vanished.

Daniel raised his head. The pickup truck crunched to a halt, pretty much in the same place as before, and the doors popped opened. The headlights blinked out and were replaced by the single bobbing beam of a flashlight. It drew close, its circle of light gliding over Richard’s body, pausing for a moment on his glowering face before leaping over to Guy’s curled and still form, and then moving toward Daniel and filling his eyes.

He squinted, and the person holding the flashlight stepped up to him.

“You killed my boy,” the man said, dropping the hand holding the flashlight to his side. Turning it off and pocketing it. He stared at Daniel in the scattered moonlight. Blinded by the flashlight’s beam, it took a minute for Daniel to take in the full shape of man. He was tall and bald, and his gray beard hung in what looked like a triple braid down his chest and across his fat gut.

“Eh,” Daniel said. He cleared his throat, said the only thing that came to mind. “Fuck you.”

“Oh, stop that,” the man said. His voice was soothing, calm. “I’ll bet you’re smarter than that, son.”

“Huh-huh-huh,” Daniel said, and realized that he was shaking. Samson stood close behind the man who Daniel assumed was his father. Daniel let his head hang forward.

“You killed Marcus,” the man said. Stepping closer. His breath reeked. “Marcus wasn’t very smart, but he was my son, and you killed him. He’s the second child I lost since all of this started.”

“Good,” Daniel said. His mouth was dry. This was a shame. He wanted to spit in the creep’s face.

The man seized Daniel’s hair in his left hand and slammed the back of his head against the tree. With his right he pressed the barrel of a small revolver to Daniel’s cheek.

“Do it,” Daniel said.

“Not a chance, little boy,” the man said. He stepped back and holstered his gun. “You’re gonna die tomorrow morning, badly, and I just want you to spend the next few hours thinking about that, okay?”

T H I R T E E N

“Brock?” Kimberly said, staring into Colleen’s face. They were somewhere; she didn’t know where. Maybe in one of the three small cabins, impossible to be sure.

Her friend stared back, but her eyes were empty. There was blood on Colleen’s face, a thick crimson stipple and a small drying coil of something on her right cheek.

“*Come on, Brock,*” but Brock had nothing to say. She just stared and stared, and sometimes her eyes fluttered shut, but mostly she just stared, silent and unmoving except for her bottom lip—it quivered once or twice.

At some point, a semblance of clarity returned to her eyes, and Kim thought that she’d gotten through. That was important, getting through to her friend. If she got through, they could figure out how to get out of this.

She never got through. They came and took Colleen, who mumbled and screeched and slapped her own face, and Kim lay alone, her hands and ankles bound, but she was not alone for long.

“You’re not good enough for my daddy,” one of them said, and soon she learned that he was Daniel’s brother, Jacob.

“You’re good enough for me, though,” he said, grinning, and Kim screamed and struggled against the ropes binding her ankles and wrists. “Oh, yeah.”

She cried and she screamed some more, and Jacob freed her hands and her ankles and wrists and waved a gun in her face. She stared into the barrel and knew it would be better if the bastard pulled the trigger but she wasn’t brave enough to wish for it.

He didn’t. Instead, he led her into the forest and to a house of doors, where he bound her to a stinking and stained cot. She wept and she screamed and she wanted to sink her fingernails into his eyes, but the gun was in her face and that was really all it took. She let it happen, God help her—she allowed him to bind her to the cot, and that was it, at least she was still alive. She had a chance yet, she just had to take it. If she fought, she’d be dead.

There were two dead bodies in the house of doors. They hung writhing from chains and Jacob bragged that it was so easy, driving down to Santa Cruz and picking up homosexual men and taking them back here. No one cared about them; no one ever looked for missing fairies.

And no, he wasn’t one, he told her, slamming the handle of his gun into her face, breaking her nose, and that’s when she realized that she probably should have fought back or simply refused to lie on the cot. At the very least, she’d be dead.

They carried Colleen through the forest. She kicked and she screamed, and the trees spun and jerked and marched by in a blur. There was pain, distant and dull, and there were faces, enraged and scowling and cursing. Samson was no longer among them, she knew that much. There were four or five or six of them, she did not know how many, but she knew that one of them was dead. His blood was cool and tacky on her face. She’d looked into the open ruin of his chest, her ears ringing, the air heavy with the reek of gunpowder and blood and shit.

“That bastard,” one of them said, and it sounded to Colleen as if he were crying.

“Fucking bastard,” someone else said. “Fuck.”

Her head jerked to the right, hard.

“Don’t hit her again,” someone said, but the words didn’t really make sense

to her. She slept for a while, and for a time Kimberly was there and then she wasn't, and when Colleen opened her eyes there was no night and no day, only darkness. She lay in darkness, seemingly alone, a soft mattress beneath her. There was a pillow beneath her head. She rolled onto her side, pressed her face into the pillow and inhaled. Fresh. It smelled so fresh, like home, and soon she would be slaughtered. The world and hell had switched places, they were all going to die like animals, and she was lying in a freshly made bed that smelled like fabric softener.

Forms churned in the dark, not-really-there after-images like birthday party flash-burns taking shape, and with them the ghosts of sensations. The feel of Guy in her mouth, and his smell, his unwashed smell in her nose, the little soft mound of flesh below his navel pressed to her face, the hairs tickling her nostrils, and then the knife and the screams, the thunder and the blood.

What the hell had happened?

Colleen closed her eyes, for what it was worth, which was nothing: she could still see Guy's penis lying in the dirt, see a workboot-clad foot coming down onto it. She slapped at her face and screamed until screaming wasn't really possible anymore. She didn't fall asleep so much as shut down, and, mercifully, she did not dream.

She opened her eyes. Her left arm was extended, her hand resting on what could only be a bedside table, the small room in which she lay cast in the cool hues of early morning. Thin curtains covered the small room's only window. They fluttered. The air was fresh. She smelled dew and grass and dirt.

She sat up, looked around. There was a lamp on the bedside table. She turned it on. There was a door leading outside and a door leading to what she assumed was a bathroom. There was a chair in the corner and a glass of water beside the lamp. She brought it to her lips, and only after it was half gone did she consider that it may have been spiked with something. She considered it, and decided it didn't matter. Things could not get worse, she reasoned, and finished the rest of the water.

She looked down at herself. She still wore her jeans. They were filthy, the crotch dark with menstrual blood. She remembered Guy, the knife, and the flash of red blossoming just before she'd squeezed shut her eyes. Her stomach hitched, and the water she'd just swallowed arced out of her mouth and onto the floor. The strength to stand left her and she collapsed onto the bed, moaning.

Time passed. She went away again, and when she came back, it was brighter. There was a new smell in the room—cheap cologne. She sat up. Two people stood, watching her. A man of maybe sixty-five, tall and bald and built like a fortress, a fluffy gray beard hanging down to his stomach. A woman, early fifties, her dark hair pulled back from her face, her body concealed in a shapeless red dress that looked homemade.

“How are you feeling?” the man said, pulling up the chair from the corner. It creaked beneath his weight. The woman remained behind him.

Colleen’s head swam. Her gaze drifted from the man and the woman to the lamp. She lay on her side, staring at it. Guy’s screams seemed to have gotten trapped in her head, bounced around, kicked up echoes of echoes. The smell of blood was in her nose.

The woman stepped toward Colleen, sat down beside her, reached for her hand. She didn’t pull away, let her hand be held, but regarded the new hands holding her own like the jaws of a pit bull playing nice.

“I’m Huffington Niebolt, Sam’s dad,” said the man with the craggy face and the ridiculous beard. “But they all just call me Huff, so you can, too, okay?”

Colleen’s body rattled. She was shaking now. When had that begun, and when would it stop? The woman scooted closer, put an arm around her. “Shhh,” she whispered. “It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

“This is my wife, Embeth,” the man said, and Colleen allowed her eyes to drift from the lamp and to his face. He smiled. His perfect teeth seemed out of place in the weathered, wrinkled bed of his face. “She’s going to take care of you, okay? Get you all cleaned up. What’s your name?”

Colleen closed her eyes, pressed her face into her hands. Her chest heaved once, twice, and the tears came.

“You’re upset, I understand,” the man said. “I’m upset, too. This is hard enough for you, I know, without everything else that’s going on. But we have to work together here, okay? What’s your name, honey?”

Colleen allowed the woman to guide her into a sitting position. She touched Colleen’s chin, gave it a little nudge upward. “Tell him.”

“Cuh,” Colleen said through her tears, snot bubbling from her nose. She tried again, her words barely a mumble.

“Colleen? A pretty name for a pretty girl,” he said. “Am I right, Beth?”

“Yes,” the woman said. She stroked Colleen’s hair from her face, wiped her eyes and nose with a soft cloth.

“And the other girl? Kimberly, is it?”

Colleen looked up, met his gaze for the first time.

“Fu-fu-fuh,” she said, her eyes losing focus.

Huffington Niebolt smiled, shook his head. “What is it with you kids and your potty mouths? My boys are all the same way. It’s all fuck this and fuck that, man. Fuck you and fuck me.” He laughed, and it was the warm and welcoming laugh of a favorite uncle.

Colleen crushed her eyes shut and started keening, crushed her hands into each other and used them joined to beat her chest as she howled and the howl turned into a long, strained gasp.

“Okay, listen here,” he clapped his hands once, rubbed them together. “This isn’t going anywhere, but that’s okay. You’re a little messed up right now, and who can blame you? I don’t know what the hell is going on out there in the world, but I can promise you this. It will not reach us here. We’re safe.”

She heard the chair creak, heard his footfalls moving toward her, felt his fingers beneath her chin. He smelled of soap and cologne and mouthwash. Colleen looked up at him. She tensed, and the woman, her right arm around Colleen, pinned Colleen’s hands to her lap with her left hand.

“I got someplace to be this morning. Work to do. Gotta bury my boy. The one your brother killed.”

Colleen gasped. The man’s eyes widened.

“You didn’t know?” he asked, genuinely surprised. He seemed to think about it for a second, then shrugged. “Makes sense, I guess. From the sound of it, things were out of hand.” His face darkened. “You were not supposed to see what you saw. You weren’t supposed to be forced to do what they forced you to do, darling, and I want you to know that I’m sorry.

“My boys can get a little crazy when I’m not around.” He took a deep breath. “They don’t always listen to me, and one of them paid for it with his life because of this.”

He stood up, scooted his chair back into the corner and stepped toward the door.

“I lost another son, too, you know? My youngest,” he said, looking back. “Him I don’t get to bury. Now clean yourself up and take a look around afterwards. We’ve got a nice place here.”

Huffington Niebolt left, closing the door behind him. Colleen wept until no

tears would come, and the woman remained at her side, holding her hand. She stopped crying, drifting away once more, the world retreating.

“Come on, honey,” the woman said, startling her.

“Huh?”

“You really need to get cleaned up. Down there especially,” the woman said, once more easing Colleen into a sitting position. “Don’t want to get an infection.”

She stood, allowed herself to be led from the bed and to the bathroom, where the woman turned on the shower and peeled away Colleen’s clothes, balling them up and putting them on the floor next to the toilet.

The water was warm. Colleen allowed her face and her hair and her body to be washed, and when a voice in her mind told her to attack this strange bitch whose hands were lathering her hair, she ignored it. It was so distant, this voice, and she could barely tell what it said.

The woman dressed her—clean panties with a thick cloth pad, a bra that did not quite fit, and a red dress not unlike the one the woman wore. She saw that her own filthy clothes had gone from the bathroom, surely out with the rubbish. She sat her on the edge of the bed, and when the woman tried to slide socks onto her feet, Colleen took them away and did it herself. The woman, Embeth, handed Colleen a pair of slippers. They were comfortable.

Somewhere, a child laughed, and that wasn’t possible. Colleen shook her head once, sharply, like a horse trying to shoo a fly.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked the woman.

Colleen blinked. No more tears. She was all cried out. She didn’t have to close her eyes to see Guy’s dick lying in the dirt, but she could nudge the image away and to the side, and when she did that the voice urging her to lash out was louder. She’d listen to the voice. It was her only choice.

“No,” she said. She searched for something else to say, felt that other words were in order, but her mind was buzzing and empty at the same time. She choked down the urge to scream.

“Okay,” Embeth said. “Would you like to take a walk? The fresh air will be good for you, Colleen, and there’s really something you should see.”

“Sure,” Colleen said, wondering where Guy’s dick actually was now. Still in the dirt, in the same spot, drawing ants and flies? Where was Guy? Could you die from blood loss that way?

More laughter, more than one child, and she stood up, wondering if she'd gone insane.

"Good," Embeth said. She opened the door and stepped into the morning light, and Colleen saw that her hair was pulled into a braid. It hung down past her waist. Squinting, she trailed Embeth into a fenced-in yard roughly the size of a basketball court. The façade of the building behind her was part of the enclosure. Across from her, a door led into a building that ran the entire length of the courtyard. There were picnic tables and scattered toys and a flowerbed exploding with color. A see-saw, a swing set, a slide. The voice urging her to attack this woman was choked into silence.

Three women sat on a bench, each of them wearing the same damned amorphous red dress, their hair pulled back tight. One of them, clearly the youngest of the three, was very pregnant. They watched four laughing children chase one another around the courtyard. Embeth walked over to the other women. She looked back at Colleen, smiling.

One of the children, a plain-faced little girl no older than six, ran up to her.

"Are you Miss Colleen?" she asked. Her front teeth were missing. She grinned. "Wanna play with me?"

Colleen's legs gave out, and she crumpled to the ground.

F O U R T E E N

Scott Ardo, known to everyone in Beistle as Cardo since he was nine or ten, was the first police officer to arrive at Proust's. Ignoring the cries and the taunts of those gathered outside of the store, he shouldered his way to the entrance and rapped on the glass until Eddie Proust stopped ignoring him and came over.

"What?" Proust yelled, red-faced.

"You need to open up."

"What for? We're closed. Come back later."

Proust stomped away and Cardo was left staring at the ghost of himself in the glass door. He rubbed a hand over his stubbly head, leaned in close, looking over the top of his sunglasses. Proust reappeared, eyebrows raised.

"You see what's going on out here?" Cardo said. As if to accentuate his point, someone bumped into him. His nose bent against the glass, left a greasy smear.

Proust scowled. One of his meathead sons came over. He also scowled. Looked just like his dear old dad, too. If he looked around, Cardo was sure he'd see Proust's meathead grandsons lurking about, as well, each of them scowling.

"Looks to me like the problem is *out there*," Proust said, pressing his forefinger to the glass once for *out* and again for *there*.

"You're right," Cardo said. "And you're making it worse. These people are coming through, one way or another. The longer you keep these doors locked, the worse it's gonna be when they come through."

"I'll shoot them if they break through these doors," Proust said. "We've got guns."

"I'm sure you do, now," Cardo said, closing his eyes and leaning his forehead against the cool glass. He opened them and looked at Proust. "When are you gonna open for business?"

"When we're ready," Proust said. He looked at his watch. "Maybe an hour."

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready."

From what he could tell, Proust and family had moved things around. Bags of rice and beans and canned goods stood in heaps near the front of the store, and some of the aisles had been roped off. A handwritten sign declared:

"Cash"
ONLY
!!! NO CHECKS!!!

Someone bumped into Cardo again, and this time it felt intentional. He looked back, and everyone looked everywhere but at him. He asked those nearest him to back away. They did. He didn't expect that level of courtesy to last. He pointed to his ear and then to the door, cupped his hands around his mouth and pressed them to the glass. It took Proust a few seconds to catch his drift. He pressed his ear to the glass.

"Listen," Cardo said. "I understand where you're coming from, Eddie, but you gotta help buy us some time, okay? Tasgal and Clark just radioed. They're on the way. They'll help control the crowd, but you at least have to let me in, make it look like we're negotiating, buy ourselves some time."

He pulled away from the glass. Proust regarded him with mistrust.

"Okay?" Cardo asked, not bothering to raise his voice.

Proust looked back at his son, who stepped away and vanished from sight.

"You leave your gun outside."

"No, I don't," Cardo said.

Proust glowered at him.

“Open it.”

“Okay,” Proust said, jabbing a finger at the crowd. “*Make them get back.*”

Cardo told everyone to step back and quiet down for a second, and they listened, though there were many taunts, and more than a few of the people in the crowd cried bullshit.

“I’m going in,” Cardo yelled, palms held before him. “Just, please, everyone calm down—he’s opening the doors soon, okay? We’re going to figure this out. I can’t stop all of you from smashing these doors, but I’m asking you not to. Proust and his sons are looking for a reason to start shooting their guns. Don’t give them one, okay?”

Cardo turned away from the crowd and stared at Proust through the glass, raised his eyebrows. Proust unlocked the door and Cardo slipped into the store without incident.

“Jesus,” he said, leaning across the counter and looking Eddie Proust in the eye. “This is a bad idea, man. You’re messing up big time.”

“This is America is what it is,” Proust said, sliding his holstered gun onto his belt. “A lot might be changing out there, but that hasn’t.”

“Damn,” Cardo said, putting the customer service desk between himself and the entrance. Proust’s boys carried shotguns in plain sight of the people pressed against the glass storefront. They’d paraded them around for the last five minutes, after Proust let them know the doors were opening in ten. He’d given the crowd time to spread the word.

“Open up,” Proust said a few minutes later, and his son did. They filed in, giving the shotgun a wide berth, looking around, eyes wide. There was a Proust family member stationed the head of every aisle, each carrying a gun.

“Hey, Troy,” Eddie Proust said as Troy Matthews walked by and picked up a can of kerosene. Proust smiled as if it were any old day. Matthews looked dazed. There was a spot of blood on his cheek.

Bodies pressed in, and Cardo backed away. Tasgal and Clark were outside. He saw flashes of them between the jostled forms pouring into the store. They wouldn’t be able to do a damned thing. Cardo looked behind him, down the

empty aisle and toward the back of the store. Wouldn't be long now before someone noticed the prices.

"Oh, come on, Eddie," a short man with close-cropped red hair and a nose that seemed too small for his face yelled, indignant. "This is ridiculous."

"I'm sorry, Keith, it's just business," Proust said, speaking to the short man in the same tough-luck tone he probably used on folks who tried to get a refund on an open box of detergent. "You know as well as I do that the trucks aren't coming anytime soon. This is—"

Everyone yelled at once, and then the little redhead lifted his arm. There was a muffled pop, and the back of Eddie Proust's head flapped open as if on a spring-loaded hinge. The crowd surged. By the time the air filled with the thundering chorus of gunfire, Cardo was halfway to the back of the store.

He pushed through the swinging doors and into the back hallway, his gun out and ready. He put his back to the wall and looked left, right—there was no one around. At the end of the hall, a door led to the alley behind the store. It was chained and padlocked shut. He could shoot the lock, but that might draw unwanted attention.

The door to his left was labeled WOMEN. He wasn't sure where MEN was, considered lying low in the ladies' room but then decided that he needed to be higher. There was a two-way mirror located at the center of the store, between the meat display and the bank of coolers containing milk and juice.

A door at the end of the hall led right. He pushed it open, revealed a staircase—eight steps leading up, a right turn, eight more steps.

He opened the door at the top of the stairs, and one of Proust's meathead grandsons turned and lifted the large gun in his small hands. Cardo looked right down the barrel. It bobbed and weaved. There was a puff of smoke, and in the close quarters the sound was like cannon fire. The bullet thrummed past Cardo's right ear and slammed into the wall behind him. His hands took over, squeezed three rounds into the kid's surprised face, pummeling it into some kind of spurting cubist mess. The kid's body hit the ground, the misshapen sack that had been his head flopping forward onto his chest.

"Gah," Cardo said, backing out of the small office and sliding down the wall, watching a sticky wad of what must have been brain matter roll slowly down the fabric of the boy's Superman t-shirt. The dead boy's hands twitched in his lap, and he pissed his pants.

Cardo leaned sideways and vomited onto the top step, and continued to stare into the ruin of the kid's head until the sight of it ceased to make sense.

"Stupid bastard," Cardo screamed, looking at the gun in his hand and throwing it onto the floor as if it were something hot. He wasn't sure who he was cursing—Proust, Proust's dumb grandson, or himself.

Downstairs, there were more gunshots. Someone screamed in pain, and the place sounded as if it were being ransacked. It quieted down eventually. He waited for the sound of people—alive or dead—finding their way into the hall and onto the stairs, but it never came.

Cardo stood up, took off his uniform shirt, stepped into the small office, and used the shirt to cover the dead boy's obliterated head. He picked up his gun, holstered it. The massive gun that Proust had left in the care of his twelve-year-old grandson lay on the floor between the boy's splayed legs. Crouching, Cardo lifted it, wiped a spot of blood from the barrel onto his pants, and set the gun atop the desk placed before the window that looked down on the interior of the store.

He dragged the kid's remains into the hall, careful to not upset the placement of the shirt that concealed the damage that he'd done. He stepped into the small office, shut and locked the door.

For two hours, he watched as a steady stream of Beistle residents filed into Proust's Supermarket and picked the shelves clean. There were dead bodies everywhere, and not the walking kind. As far as he could tell, all of them were in about the same shape as the kid out on the landing.

He reached for his radio and found that he had lost it somewhere along the way. He picked up the phone to confirm it was dead, and it was. There was a small television on the floor beneath the desk. He picked it up, set it atop the blotter, and plugged it in. The picture was a fuzzy mess, and no amount of adjusting the antenna made a difference, so he turned it off and sat staring into the store.

By the third hour, the place was empty. A dead body wandered in, seemed to take the place in, and then backed out and dragged itself someplace else.

There were bullets for Proust's gun in one of the desk drawers. He stood up, replaced the bullet the kid had fired, pocketed the others. Sliding his new gun into his belt, Cardo opened the door and left.

Downstairs, a dead man stood before the bathroom door, tugging at the knob. A large piece of broken glass jutted from its throat. Smaller shards glis-

tened like jewels across its forehead. Its cheeks hung in tatters revealing the musculature of its jaw. Cardo was past the dead thing before it realized he was even there.

His shoes crunched across broken glass. The acrid reek of blood and pine oil and bleach hung in the air. He nearly slipped on blood. It pooled on the tile, mingled with soft drinks and beer. Behind him, someone gasped—a raspy exhalation that could have come from either the living or the dead. Unseen feet shuffled across something that crinkled and crunched, and Cardo was certain—absolutely certain—that it was a bag of Lay’s potato chips.

There was life in the parking lot, actual living life. People rummaged through the products strewn across the ground. They stopped what they were doing long enough to give him a once-over and promptly got back to their work.

Not far from his cruiser, a dead woman lay near an overturned shopping cart. The cart, no doubt once brimming with looted goods, was empty. A plastic gallon jug lay empty in a puddle of milk mixed with the blood surrounding the woman’s diminished head.

“You okay, Cardo?”

“Not really,” Cardo said, looking back at the person addressing him. Jerry Smith, a long-haired stone-freak who’d never gotten the news that the Summer of Love had actually ended. They’d shared a few grades in high school, but nothing more. Sometimes it seems like no one in Beistle was going anywhere. If this were so, then Jerry Smith was getting there a little faster than the rest of them. “You?”

“Not really, man.” Smith had a case of beer under each arm. “I’m sorry about this,” he said, indicating the beer.

“It’s no big deal,” Cardo said, walking over to his cruiser and cursing. The front left fender of the car was crumpled in. The headlight was smashed and half of the grille lay on the ground. The front wheel was both flat and twisted in such a way that told him the axle was screwed.

Good thing home was a ten minute walk.

“I saw that happen,” Smith said. He sounded proud, eager to talk.

“Yeah?”

“You wanna know who did it?”

“Not really,” Cardo said, shrugging.

“It was Carl Perkins, from over in Harlow?”

"This is a damn mess. Could still use the radio."

"He got bit," Smith said. "He was in bad shape."

"You see any more pork around?"

"Pork?" Smith asked, and the confusion in his eyes cleared. He laughed, obviously surprised to hear Cardo using a word typically reserved for folks who didn't like the police. He shook his head. "No. Oh, yeah, wait. Tasgal. He got into his car. I was still in there, but I saw him through the window. I think Clark was with him. Clark got shot."

"Oh," Cardo said. "Damn it. Where did they go?"

"Away," Smith said.

"Okay. How's your mom?"

"She died yesterday."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Cardo said, sliding behind the wheel of his cruiser and checking the closed band radio. Dead air, distant voices muttering, and no more.

"I got no place to go, really."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Smith opened his mouth to say something, but Cardo silenced him with an upheld hand.

"Go home and drink your beer, Jerry," he said, walking past the man and toward Main Street. "Try not to get eaten."

Cardo walked toward his house. Before he got there, he'd have to pass through the heart of town. From the looks of it, that's where all of the action was.

He walked, and in his mind he saw the kid's head open up and deflate. Eyes open or closed, it didn't matter: the kid was right there.

What else was he supposed to have done? Well, he didn't want to think too hard on that. He could have kicked the gun out of the kid's hand. He was close enough to do that. Kick the gun or kick the kid in the chest. Step to the side and just pluck the gun out of his little hands.

The way the kid's arms had quivered, it was obvious that he was having a hard time holding up the hand cannon. Did he really think the kid had been strong enough to cock the gun once more before Cardo could take two steps and close the distance between them?

After firing, did the kid even have a decent grip on the thing? Had the gun already left his small hands before Cardo opened fire?

Three shots?

“God,” he said.

There was a large crowd gathered before the fire station. He walked through them, head low, making eye contact sparingly. Bodies parted around him. Familiar faces turned to watch him pass, eyes wide and eyes weary. And guns; lots of guns. Rifles and shotguns; pistols hanging from hips like it was Dodge City. The folks who didn’t have guns had baseball bats and pitchforks.

“Hey, Cardo,” someone said, and he just walked. It sounded like Mike Hanson, and this was good. He liked Mike, and was happy to know that Mike was alive, but that’s where it ended. He had no desire to hang around and swap war stories and speculate about what tomorrow would bring. He needed to be home and drunk and in his chair, and he needed the Proust kid out of his head.

They didn’t really need him around anyway. If he stopped walking and joined this band of survivors, it would be as one of them, not as the law. They were the law now. Out there, he’d just be another gun, and they had more than enough of those.

Across the street, bodies were lined up three rows deep in the BEISTLE BAKE parking lot. Their faces were covered in sheets or blankets or shirts. Sheets of paper and cardboard bearing handwritten names were pinned or taped to their chests, identifying the corpses for any relatives who wished to claim them. People sat weeping beside a few of them. A woman knelt, the ragdoll body of a toddler across her lap. The baby moved, but its movements were all wrong. A man knelt behind the woman, his face pressed into her shoulder.

Further down, a tangled and charred heap of limbs and torsos smoldered in the evening light. Not everyone had friends or family. He wondered if anyone would find the Proust kid, and what his name had been, anyway.

It wasn’t until he got past the throng that he realized what was wrong—he hadn’t seen any soldiers. The National Guard had pulled out.

Cardo lived in a two-room hovel at the end of Main Street. Despite its size, the place was not an embarrassment. It was relatively new, and in very nice shape. Cardo kept it nice and neat, inside and out, and he was happy to bring women here on the rare Saturday night that found him knocking back beers at

the Redwood Tavern and looking for a little love. Better than all of that, it was paid for.

The dead body standing in Cardo's yard looked as if it had been dragged through fire and broken glass. The parts of its body that were not charred were stripped to the muscle. The corpse had a hard time walking, and he wondered who it was and where it had come from. So much was missing that he could not tell if he were looking at the remains of a man or a woman.

He stepped into his yard and looked around, pulling his gun and leveling it at the side of the thing's head. Like the corpse trying to get into the bathroom at Proust's, this one had not yet noticed him. It tried to turn in place and stumbled on its own twisted ankles, collapsing to the ground and lying facedown on the grass. A belch rattled through the dead thing's throat, and Cardo felt his stomach tighten.

He shot the thing through the back of the head. This close, he noticed an ornate jade earring nearly lost in the blackened remains of the thing's left ear.

"Oh." It was Cora Wareheim. She lived three blocks down the road, worked at the bowling alley on weekdays, told fortunes on the weekend, and was the single mother of two small girls.

He went inside and looked around for a sheet of paper. Not finding one, he ripped the front from a Raisin Bran box and, using a black marker that he found in a cluttered drawer to the right of the kitchen sink, scrawled her name on it.

Outside, he placed it on the dead woman's back. He looked around, frowned at the stone frog that sat in the flower-free flowerbed to the right of the front door. It had belonged to the previous owner, and he'd seen no reason to get rid of it. He placed it atop the placard on the dead woman's back and went inside, locking the door.

Five minutes later, Cardo sat in his recliner, two guns resting on the tray next to his chair and a fifth of good whisky tipped bottoms up. For some reason, the local CBS affiliate was playing an episode of *The Honeymooners*. He didn't bother changing the channel. There was news on the other channels, but the news made him remember the sight of the stupid, scared Proust kid's face turning inside out. Ralph and Ed Norton and the whisky burning its way down his throat helped him to forget.

The events of the last two days caught up to him. He closed his eyes and slept for nearly eight hours. The news was on when he opened his eyes, and

he'd spilled half of the whisky between his legs. The sun was down. It was nearly nine.

He got up and went to the bathroom, returned to the living room and ate stale Rice Krispies dry from the box. On the television, an obviously tired and annoyed doctor was explaining that life had simply been redefined, that these things could not be considered dead because dead bodies could not possibly walk or see or do any of the things that these creatures were doing.

Cardo nodded off again, opened his eyes four hours later to the whupping sound of a helicopter. He stood up, legs tingly and stiff, and stumbled toward the door, opened it. Cora's body made him jump. He'd forgotten about it. He'd forgotten his guns, too, but that was okay—aside from Cora, there were no dead bodies within sight, walking or otherwise.

A large low-flying helicopter circled the town. It was military, he knew that much. Beyond that, he had no idea what he was looking at. It had two rotors, and it looked a lot like the choppers he'd seen in news footage from 'Nam, dropping down from the sky and extracting injured soldiers, dumping off fresh ones.

He watched, expected the chopper to set down across town, on the Beistle High football field, or to maybe fill the night sky with parachutes. Neither happened. Instead, the chopper looped around, away from where he stood, toward the highway. It spun around once more and headed back toward Beistle. At first he thought something was wrong, that the helicopter had caught fire: a dirty white plume trailed from the underbelly of the helicopter, billowing out and descending upon the town.

"Oh, God," he said. He ran into his house, grabbed his guns, and was out the door. He didn't bother closing it behind him.

F I F T E E N

The bridges were not a problem. On the first one there was a burning car. A black thing stumbled in the middle of the road, clutching at the air with hands that had no fingers. Reggie ran it down, wincing at the sound it made coming apart beneath his truck, but that was it. No Army blockade, no blown-out bridge, no road choked bumper to bumper with abandoned vehicles.

On an empty stretch of Highway 50 some fifteen miles east of Nimbus, he pulled over to the side of the road, threw together a sandwich, and found himself thinking about Erma, his ex-wife.

They'd met in line at the bank. Six months out of 'Nam and he had already purchased his truck. It was his, almost fully paid for. He'd been depositing a check, and she'd been trying to get a small loan so that she could prevent her father's house from going into foreclosure. They'd hit it off as well as one could expect: she spent the night at his place, and they didn't waste any time. He was impressed with her body, and she was impressed with the fact that he was self-employed. "I never met a self-employed man who wasn't a pimp," she'd said, adding that all of her other men had been freeloaders and bums.

Reggie had no idea how he stacked up as a parent, but if he had one ounce of wisdom to one day impart to Nef, it was this: never marry someone simply

because the two of you were good at fucking. At the end of the day, that's all he and Erma had. Before and after, they talked, sure, but if they made the mistake of talking too much, it became plain: aside from their ability to make the other one's head explode in bed (or in the kitchen or on the living room floor or in the back yard), there was just nothing else there at all, nothing but bullshit.

By the time he admitted this to himself, it was too late. She was pregnant, and drinking, and her claws had come out. He tried to get her to stop drinking while pregnant and she threatened to have an abortion.

His mother asked why he didn't tell her to go ahead, do him a damned favor. Cut his losses and move on, but no, absolutely not. People could do what they wanted to do, he really didn't care, and what he wanted to do was be a father. He wanted to raise the child growing in Erma's stomach, and didn't think it should be denied a chance at life simply because he'd fucked up and married the wrong woman. Besides, he'd told himself, they'd figure out a way to make things work. Once the baby came, things would be better.

No such luck. She put up a fight, but the judge had no trouble deciding where Nef belonged. By then, Erma had been arrested for assault and battery after mopping the floor with another woman at a pool hall, and Reggie had established himself as someone who was taking care of business. He thought maybe it had hurt the beady-eyed white judge to have to side with a highway-bound black man, but what else was he going to do? Rule in favor of an abusive alcoholic who got into bar fights and actually referred to him as *slave master* and *cracker* while on the stand?

The last time he saw her was at his mother's house. It was Nef's fourth birthday. She called ahead, asked if she could come see her baby girl. She sounded sincere, so he said yes. Did it count as violating her restraining order if he told her that she could come?

She came with her new man in tow, a real jive turkey who wore a thread-bare suit and who reeked of grass. Erma was visibly drunk, and neither of them left when he told them to. Reggie ruined the party, called the police. By the time they arrived, he'd already punched out Erma's new man, and was two inches away from popping her one in the lip, as well.

He wondered where she was now. Not now, really, because she was either dead or huddled somewhere, afraid and waiting to die. But three days ago, before all of this—what had she been up to? She wasn't with the joker who'd taken her to the party, her knew that much. Beyond that, he knew nothing. She

could've been six months in the ground or selling herself on street corners, or maybe she'd pulled herself together and had been singing in her cousin's church every Sunday morning and looking for a real man and a second shot at being a mother.

Not likely, but he sincerely hoped it were so. He never wanted to see her again, but he didn't wish her any pain or harm. He'd done his best to protect her from both, and she'd rewarded his dedication with abuse—of herself, of Reggie, and of Nef. Amazingly, she had never struck their daughter—lucky for Erma—but drinking yourself stupid and passing out facedown in your vomit while under the same roof as your child is abuse enough, and it was heading in that direction, anyway. She would have put her hands on Nef, and Reggie would have put his hands on her, and where would any of them be now?

Erma was either alive or dead or neither, and that did not matter. Nef was the only thing that mattered, and he would get to her. He had to get to her. Beyond that, who knew?

He did too much last night and it was catching up with him. A hangover was taking root behind his heavy eyes. He finished off his sandwich and moved on to a bag of potato chips. Against his better judgment, he washed it all down with Coke quickly followed by a long hit from the bottle of Jack.

He ate a few more chips and knocked back a little more whisky, and soon regretted it. His movements were already slower, his eyes feeling as if they were moving around in syrup. He was warm all over, and in spite of everything that was going on, he had to sleep. Not one to mix poisons, he didn't spend much time contemplating the bottle of black mollies in his kit. Maybe later, but not now.

He got out of the truck and walked to the edge of the road, where he pissed onto a smashed Budweiser can. The road was empty in both directions. A few miles back, development had given way to trees, which now rose up on either side of the road for as far as he could see. Sacramento could be an inferno and he wouldn't know it, not from here. From here, everything looked and sounded right. It was nice out.

Ten minutes later he rumbled past the exit to 49. A few hundred feet away, someone walked down the center of the road. As he drew closer, he saw that it was a woman covered in blood pretty much from head to toe. Closer still, and he could tell that she was dead. She moved in the same lifeless and unnatural manner as the others he'd seen. He sped up, inching the truck to the right so

as to avoid her, and she lifted her head and seemed to look directly at him. Her face was a blank. Her eyes were empty.

Further along, he brought the truck to a halt, just outside of Placerville. Positioned diagonally, a trailer bed blocked both lanes. The front of the trailer was on the side facing away from him, otherwise he could have backed up, hitched it, and pulled it out of the way. Pushing it out of the way would have been an option, were it not for the cars parked ten deep on the other side of the trailer.

Placerville had pulled up the Welcome mat and locked its doors. He could see no one, but he didn't rule out that he was being watched from the trees. In fact, his face could at that very moment be in the crosshairs of some sharpshooter's thirty-ought-six.

He backed up and turned around, and once more found himself facing the blood-smearred woman. Where the hell had she come from, anyway? Pulling up alongside her, he rolled down his window and waited for her to get close enough to guarantee that he would not miss. She scratched at his door and he put a bullet between her eyes, blowing away the silence and rousing a churning cloud of birds into the air.

Reggie rolled up the window, placed the gun on the passenger seat, and unfolded his map. 49 would take him north, back to I-80. So far, he'd encountered two roadblocks. How many similar obstacles dotted the map between here and home?

He threw his truck into gear and headed toward the 49 North exit, feeling it happen with each passing mile marker: he was shutting down. His mind and his body were going under, fast. It had happened to him in Vietnam, not long after his first real action. He'd been in a few firefights before, yeah, but those had amounted to little more than spraying lead into the foliage and watching trees come apart in chunks. This had been real:

Murdock had been making some kind of joke about the size and lean of his own prick—it was tailor made for the small and slanted poon he'd be slamming, come leave this weekend, and then the air was thrumming with lead, and Murdock's face had vanished in a pink burst of skull bits, brain matter, and blossomed scalp. Bullets buzzed and buzzed and Kaufmann had taken one in the thigh and Reggie had spun and whirled and crashed through the foliage, screaming and tripping, and there, right there, not even ten feet from where he stood, the little yellow bastard who'd done this to them, frowning and fidgeting

with his smoking machine gun, which had jammed up, or something. His gun was caked in dried dirt, just like him.

“Motherfucker,” Reggie had said, raising his machine gun and opening fire, keeping his eyes open no matter how badly he wanted to squeeze them shut, needing to see the way the little man simply *unzipped*.

Somehow they all made it back to base alive, all save Murdock, of course, who had been reduced from an animated, mule-faced wiseass to a lifeless tangle of limbs with no face. That night, lying on his cot and staring up into the darkness of the tent that served as their sleeping quarters, Reggie wondered just how the fuck he was going to get to sleep. How could he, when to close his eyes was to see Murdock’s face coming apart, to see it lying there, unrecognizable as human, save for the single brown eye glistening from the pulp in a glued state of surprise?

And then he’d shut down, just like that, and slept through into the following afternoon.

It was happening now, and the Jack Daniels was not helping. To make matters work, compulsively, awfully, he downed even more. His hands were a blur on the steering wheel. His eyelids felt swollen.

He drove until he encountered a flat brick building that had once been a bakery of some sort. The sign above the boarded shut front entrance was faded, and Reggie could not tell if it said BUNNY BREAD or SUNNY BREAD. He wasn’t sure if it was the sign’s fault or the fault of his eyes. He pulled the truck to the side of the road, checked the road for walking corpses, and, seeing that the coast was clear, maneuvered the large vehicle across the broken paved parking lot and around the back of the building, where four rust-colored loading doors thrust over a trash-strewn loading bay.

Parking the truck and killing the engine, he crawled into the back of the truck with his shotgun and his pistol and his newly-acquired Winchester. Pushing aside the supplies he’d taken from the asshole’s home, he spread himself across his bed and, taking one final draft from the bottle of Jack, closed his eyes and checked out.

When he opened his eyes, it was full dark outside, and nearly thirteen hours had passed. Thirteen hours during which, by the grace of God or by sheer godless chance, no one had stopped and broken into his truck while he slept. Thirteen hours during which his daughter could have died a thousand times.

“I’m coming, baby,” he said, not liking the sound of his voice in the silence.

The darkness outside of the truck was complete. There was no starlight, no moon. No ambient spillover from a nearby town. Just pure, primal night—an utter and perfect darkness in which anything could move, unseen, and wait.

He sat, awake and wide-eyed, pressed toward the back of his sleeping quarters, staring out though the windshield and into the blackness, the sound of his breath and the wet sounds of his mouth the only sounds in the universe, both unnaturally loud within his head.

Slowly the sky distinguished itself from the black obelisk of the bakery, and soon after the world emerged in shades of dark blue.

There were no dead around. He ate breakfast—a Spam sandwich on sliced bread, chips, and dry cereal chased with orange juice—and then took a leak and a dump in the weeds at the place where the concrete met an overgrown field littered with trash and scrawny trees.

As he crawled into his truck, the early-morning silence was undone with the unmistakable staccato burst of machine-gun fire. Silence followed by more bullets, and had that been the sound of someone screaming in the hushed and breathless moments between bursts of gunfire?

“Shit,” he said, looking around, dipping his head down a few inches, shoulders raised, old habits taking over. He retrieved his Colt and his shotgun and got low, waited in silence.

Not ten minutes later, the sound of engines—lots of them—grumbled in the silence. As he waited, the growl grew louder, and soon a large convoy rumbled by. His heart raced; fear twisted and squirmed, tried to take hold, but logic won: he couldn’t see them. The bakery blocked them from his view and him from theirs. They’d be gone in a minute—he just had to wait.

“Damn it,” he whispered, his curiosity getting the better of him. He peered around the edge of the bakery, knowing full well what he was about to see yet unable to resist. It was an Army convoy. Four Sheridans trundled by, one after another, followed by several Jeeps. He was about to ease himself out of sight when a civilian truck rolled into view, trailing the Jeeps: a panel truck followed by a pickup truck pulling a trailer used for transporting livestock. He could not see what the livestock trailer had carried, but he had no trouble making out the huddled human forms packed into the back of the panel truck. Men and woman pressed shoulder to shoulder, and he had no idea if they were alive or dead.

Another panel truck came into view, and Reggie moved out of sight, put the

building between himself and his brothers in arms. He grabbed his tags and tossed them into his collar. The metal was cold against his bare skin.

He sighed. He wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. He had no idea what the Army was up to with their commandeered civilian trucks and their strange cargo, and he did not care. All that mattered now was that they were in his road, and that they be permitted to get a good lead on him before he struck out.

One more night. He had to stay put one more night.

"God damn it," he said, kicking dust and pebbles into the air.

In the truck, Reggie listened to the radio for a while, learned that there was nothing new to learn. The hours passed slowly. He read a three-week-old issue of *Time* for a little while, found that he could not focus, and swapped *Time* for *Penthouse* and tried to jerk off and failed. Ready to bust out of his skin, he downed some more Jack and passed out for a little while, opening his eyes a little before three in the morning.

Just before dawn, he opened the kit in his divider and fished out a single white-capped amber pill bottle. Twisted off the cap and poured the little red and black bitches into his large palm. Twelve left. He returned the pills to the bottle and twisted the cap until it clicked several times. Placed the bottle in the divider. There were a lot of miles between himself and his daughter, and his ass was done with sleep.

S I X T E E N

Guy died just after dawn. Following hours of unresponsive silence interspersed with incoherent mumbles, his breathing had become labored and thick. Phlegm rattled in his throat, a weak quiver passed through his body, and that was it.

“Guy,” Richard said, jabbing his right elbow into Guy’s back. “Hey, man, you okay?”

Daniel hung from the tree, his legs rigid beneath the thick ropes that had scoured his flesh raw in the night. His head hung forward, his hair stubbornly shrouding his face, and for a moment Richard was certain that he was utterly alone in the swelling light of morning. Daniel had died, as well, suffocated by the ropes encircling his naked chest.

No: his chest rose and fell beneath the ropes.

“Daniel.” Barely a croak. He cleared his throat and managed to yell this time.

“Hn,” Daniel said, lifting his head.

“He’s dead,” Richard said.

Daniel made a sound that was halfway between a sigh and a dismissive grunt, allowed his head to drop forward once again.

“We need...” Richard said, allowing his words to wither in his mouth. *We*

need to do something is what he'd meant to say, and no words had ever tasted more false crossing his tongue. If they were lucky, they'd die quickly today. There was little hope for much else.

Less than five minutes after dying, Guy tugged at the ropes binding his hands behind his back and to Richard's wrists. For a small and fleeting and pitiful moment, Richard assumed that he was wrong, that Guy had not died, that he'd merely passed out once more. Maybe he was going down for the count, but he was not out yet.

Then the other half of the nightmare asserted itself. Its warmth rapidly fading, the dead body to his back struggled against its restraints.

"God," Daniel said, his voice little more than a whisper. He made a half-hearted attempt against the ropes, gave up.

Richard screamed and struggled and the ropes holding him to the writhing corpse gave nothing; seemed, in fact, to tighten.

"Guh," Guy said. The sound was little more than air passing over vocal chords grown taut in death. There was nothing behind it; it was as devoid of intent and intelligence as the sound made by the wind howling through the attic of a crumbling and abandoned house.

The ropes did their job. None of them slipped free. Night and shadow retreated. The dead man to his back repeated the same listless motions, gently rocking against Richard's back. By the time the sunlight touched his face, he had slipped into a deep and dreamless sleep.

"Wake up." Someone slapped his cheek.

Richard opened his eyes, blinking. It was so much brighter now. The sun was nearly directly above them. Samson stood over him, looking down, his face blank.

"How long's he been dead?"

Richard stared. He wasn't sure who Samson was talking to, nor did he care.

"Hey," Sam said, nudging him with his foot and pointing at Guy, eyebrows raised.

"Don't know," Richard said. "A few hours."

Sam had the same look of fascination Richard had seen on his face back at Misty's, a million years ago. They were all there, Sam and Max and the other one, who was pale, taller and older than the brothers. If he were related to them, he didn't look it.

The old man with the braided beard was there, too, his muscular arms folded above his gut. He was in incredible shape for a man his age. Even his round gut looked hard. He was leather and stone.

Max stood before Daniel, his arms at his side. The old man walked over to Sam, looked down at Richard. "Morning," he said, smiling. His teeth looked too straight and too white to be anything but fake.

"Why?" It was all Richard could manage.

"Why?" Huffington Niebolt said, crouching. His knees popped, though he did not seem to notice. His braided beard hung between his legs. He tilted his head sideways. "I've seen a lot of people die, son, and the one thing they always ask in the end—the ones who get to see death coming, of course—is *why*. Why?"

He smiled again, his face beaming, and looked at each of them, in turn, except for Daniel, who was awake and alert and watching. To Richard's back, Guy writhed, agitated.

"Why, why, why?" Huffington Niebolt shook his head and laughed, garrulous and genuine. Once more he met Richard's eye. The old man's smile vanished. The humor bled from his eyes. "*Why* is all there is. *Why* is all there ever was."

He stood up. "Jacob," he said, his voice as devoid of humor as his face. The taller one, Jacob, stepped over to him, looking like a child in need of instruction.

"Cut them loose," Huffington Niebolt said, indicating Richard. "Put him over there. And don't let that one bite off your fingers, Jacob, because I will blow your head off before the damned thing has a chance to swallow your pinky."

"Come on, Huff," Jacob said. "I'm not—"

"You're not talking back to me, son, is what you're not," Niebolt said, showing Jacob the back of his hand. "I've seen these things at work with my own eyes. You haven't. I watched them rip your little brother's belly open and fight over his insides while he screamed for me to help him. So shut the fuck up and be careful, okay?"

"Okay."

Jacob, related to the others after all, leaned over, reached into the hollow between Richard's and Guy's lower backs, where their bound hands touched, and seized the ropes. They gave with little effort.

Large hands seized Richard beneath his armpits and lifted, dragged him over to a nearby tree.

“Sit,” Jacob said, leaning Richard’s back against the tree trunk. Richard’s lower spine seemed to have fused in the night. A barbed spike of pain twisted between his shoulder blades. He stared down at his bound ankles, wriggling his toes within his shoes. They tingled.

Richard looked up. Jacob glowered, the muscles in his thick neck standing out, his jaw clamped tight, his small dark eyes fixed on Richard. Behind him, the other two looked from Daniel to Richard to Guy’s writhing corpse. Each of them held a shotgun.

“This is not something that I ever anticipated,” Huffington Niebolt said, looming over Guy’s writhing corpse. Using one booted foot, he rolled the dead man onto its back, pinning it with a well-worn heel to the breastbone. Guy’s corpse opened its mouth and gnawed on air. Niebolt smiled once more. Like his voice, his smile was warm and inviting. “Unanticipated and terrible, but much deserved.

“Yes,” he said, took his foot off of the living corpse, and turned to face Daniel. “Terrible, but much deserved.” He brushed a square fingertip across the scabbed cut on Daniel’s breastbone. “Who did this?”

“Me,” Max said.

“Hunh,” Niebolt said, picking at the cut until it glistened with fresh blood. Daniel jerked left and right, as if maybe he could wiggle all the way around to the other side of the tree. “Impatient.”

“Whu,” Daniel said.

Niebolt looked back at Richard. “I think he was trying to ask why,” he said. Richard held his gaze until he looked away, faced Daniel. “Okay. Let’s make this happen.”

Richard sat at the base of the tree and did the only thing he could do: he watched.

Daniel kept his eyes on the ground. Somewhere inside, the child he once was, the one who believed his mother’s words to be nothing less than the gospel, the truth, cowered and prayed. Begged the God who was not there to save him, to take this cup from his lips. There or not, God’s response was as it had been

when His own Son had wept for a way out of pain and torment: He didn't do shit.

"Why? I'll tell you why, son," Huffington Niebolt said, once more clutching Daniel's hair in one large fist and pressing his head to the tree. "Open your eyes. Good.

"Because I can, that's why. And because it is what you deserve." He released Daniel's hair. Eyes closed, Daniel did not have the strength to hold up his head. It hung forward, and he became aware for the first time of the stench. He'd soiled himself in the night.

"Let me tell you something, all of you," Niebolt said, his voice swelling with pride. Daniel would not set eyes on the man ever again, not if he could help it, but he saw him nonetheless, leering and prideful, his chest puffed out. "Most of you know this story. At least two of you don't, so.

"I was twenty-two years old," Niebolt said, "Not much older than you, I think," tapping a finger against Daniel's bare chest, "I killed a man with these hands."

Daniel did not lift his head, did not open his eyes, yet he knew: the old man's tight fists hovered in the air between them.

"Nineteen-thirty-one, if I'm not mistaken. I killed him in the ring in a smoke-filled joint outside of New Orleans while the rabble screamed for more. Harry Cordeaux. The poor bastard called himself Harry 'The Hammer,' and I humiliated him in the third and took his life in the fourth."

A hand closed around Daniel's throat.

"I beat a man to death with my hands, boy," Niebolt said, his voice shot through with awe and fascination, the voice of a convert. "I beat him until he was nothing, no more. Just an empty body with a stupid look on its face.

"I'm sixty-five years old, and I don't feel a day over thirty, son, and I want to beat you to death against this tree. I want to snap your ribs and tear your organs. With these hands."

Niebolt drove his fists into Daniel's stomach three times, maybe four. Daniel gasped.

"I want to, but I'm not. You remember me telling you about Charlie, Max?"

"Yeah," one of the others said. Shotgun in hand, he took a step forward. He was built like the old man, but his skin was darker, olive-skinned. His dark eyes were set wide in a round and unpleasant face.

“His name was something Gui, but we all called him Charlie, just like our boys call the gooks over there in that useless war. Charlie Gui.”

“Gah,” Daniel said, coughing. His stomach muscles were loose and hot. Colors swirled behind his eyes. God continued to do nothing.

“He was a Chinaman,” Niebolt said, and Daniel could tell that he was talking directly to him once more. “An old yellow thing made of wrinkles and bones. He lived in the same building as me and my mom in San Francisco. This was a few years before I hit the road and saw the country and figured out just what it was I was supposed to be doing while the planet grinded its way toward death.

“God, I guess I was fourteen. Charlie used to sit out in front of the building on this little folding chair, just looking off at whatever, and he and I got to talking one day.” Niebolt laughed. “He got to talking, I should say. I just listened. His English was pretty good. I understood just about everything he said, except for the times he’d launch into some lightning-fast Chinese, of course. He told me all sorts of things I really didn’t hold onto. Things about his time spent working on the train tracks or logging out near Mendocino. Things about his time in China.

“But there’s one thing I never forgot: When he was a child, I think he said ten or twelve, he attended a public execution. His father made him do it, told him that he had to know what happened to those who spoke out against the dynasty. You know anything about *Ling Chi*?”

Daniel lifted his head, opened his eyes, looked at the old man despite his vow to himself. His eyes were dry, and his vision was blurred. He found the old man’s face and held it.

“Just kill me,” he gasped.

“Oh, look at you, educated boy,” Niebolt said. His cruelty notwithstanding, Huffington Niebolt was an honest man. He was impressed.

The last of his strength depleted, Daniel could no longer hold his head up. It swung forward. He licked his lips with a tongue that seemed to have been fashioned from sand. His mind turned away from those two words, Jesus, God, *Ling Chi*, the Death of a Thousand Cuts, the Slow Slicing, and retreated into the darkness, far, far into the darkness, but not so far that the old man’s words did not reach him. And not so far that he could escape the pain that would soon define his final moments alive.

“Charlie told me he kept his eyes closed for most of the execution. He said it was bad. I saw some pictures of the act, once. From just before I was born,

actually. Right before it was banned. Charlie was right—it *was* bad. And I saw it again, with my own eyes, in a Chicago basement in 1942. That was worse than those black and white photos. You can see the pain in the photos, but you can't hear it—the sound of blade slicing through flesh. The whimper coming from the poor bastard's throat. Like a baby."

"Jesus," someone shouted. "Stop this!"

It took Daniel a moment to realize it was Richard, the asshole who was fucking Kimberly.

"Shut up," someone else yelled. Richard gasped, the wind crushed from his lungs.

"So last night," Niebolt said, "after I came out here and introduced myself to you, I went back to my home and fell asleep wondering how I was going to kill you. On the one hand, I've got these."

Another volley of fists to Daniel's stomach. He gagged and felt his bowels empty down his thighs in a hot liquid rush.

"And I've got this."

Cold steel pressed to the flesh above Daniel's right nipple, just beneath the rope. Daniel tensed, preparing himself for the pain, struggling to retreat deeper into the darkness. He'd reached the wall—he could go no further. He waited, eyes clenched, lips drawn back from his teeth, far too weak to struggle. There was no pain. The blade withdrew.

"The world you and your friends come from is not the real world, and you are not human beings. Not as history defines them, anyway. Humanity, like life, is cruel. Nothing is true but pain and blood, and your flowers and your happenings and your protests and peace marches flail in opposition to that truth. And one does not oppose truth."

For an immeasurable moment, Daniel thought that maybe Niebolt had splashed ice water onto his chest. Then the pain hit and he opened his mouth and screamed.

Samson Niebolt's words washed over Richard. In one ear and out the other, as his and everyone else's mom used to say. His words did not matter. What did was the fillet knife in his hand, and the way he waved it so close to Daniel's bare chest, brandished it inches from his face. The way he punctuated his

sentences with it and described arcs in the air while speaking to Daniel, slicing deeply into nothing, inching closer and closer to Daniel until—

The strip of flesh curled away from Daniel's chest with shocking ease. It hung from his stomach like an elongated and bleeding tongue. Daniel screamed. Richard screamed, too, and Samson muttered something while the one named Max laughed.

Richard closed his eyes, squeezed them shut and begged for death, just a quick death, please God, a heart attack or a stroke, and Daniel's screams soon disintegrated into wet, choking gasps.

"Come here, you," the old man said. "Hold his head."

Daniel no longer sounded human.

Richard opened his eyes. He didn't want to but he did. He opened his eyes and he screamed and he screamed and Daniel wheezed and gurgled and choked on his own blood.

Niebolt stepped back, admired his work. Max stood beside him, wiping his bloody hands on his shirt. Daniel's nose was gone, just two bloody skeletal slits now bubbling blood. His lips were gone. So too was one of his ears, maybe both of them—Richard could not tell. So were his eyelids.

"Wait," Niebolt said, stepping once more toward Daniel. Richard stared at the ground while the old man scalped Colleen's brother, wincing at the wet-towel sound of Daniel's flesh being peeled away from his skull. He looked up when he knew it was over, unable to do otherwise.

Daniel shook, gasped and bubbled, his face raw and glistening, a surprised and grinning skull pouring blood down his naked body. His scalp was draped over his shoulder. The old man wiped the knife clean on one denim clad thigh, slid it into its sheath, and pumped another left hook into Daniel's abdomen. The tongue-like flap of meat hanging from Daniel's chest waggled. Richard leaned forward, his stomach twisting itself into an acid tangle.

"Get back," Niebolt said, waving his sons away. Plucking the scalp from Daniel's shoulder, he strode over to Guy's corpse, rolled it onto its stomach, and untied the ropes securing its arms and legs.

"Here, here, you filth," Niebolt said, waving Daniel's dripping scalp above Guy's mouth. The bound corpse clamped its teeth onto the offered treat. The dead thing tugged on the scalp like a dog trying to pry a saliva-soggy scrap of rawhide from its master's hand, and the old man wrenched it away. A hairy scrap of flesh hung from between Guy's lips.

The old man circled Guy's corpse, cut the ropes binding its wrists. He placed Daniel's scalp onto its head, an oozing and bloodied wig, Daniel's bangs hanging into its eyes like a parody.

Daniel whimpered and gurgled and wheezed. Blood flowed from his head and from the long wound on his chest, and the flap of flesh glistened in the morning light and rocked gently back and forth, slapping against his stomach. No one said anything. All eyes were on Guy's corpse, which struggled to its feet. It fell three times, right onto its face.

"Holy shit," one of them said. Another laughed.

At last, Guy's body found its feet. It tottered, Daniel's scalp dripping blood into its eyes, the bloody pants falling to the ground and revealing the wadded underwear dangling from its crotch, glued in place with caked-on blood.

"Ur," it seemed to say, stomach gases passing over its vocal cords. Its head wavered. Its fingers worked the air. It seemed confused.

"Hey," Samson said, loud, and Guy's corpse looked in his direction. Its eyes widened, and it took a step toward him, its bare ass toward Richard.

Huffington Niebolt stepped behind the thing that was Guy and seized the back of its shirt in one fist. "This way." He guided Guy's corpse toward Daniel, who had slipped beyond the realm of screams. His shiny butcher-shop head hung low, and if not for Daniel's heaving chest, Richard would have thought him dead.

"This way, you piece of shit," Niebolt said.

"Don't touch it," Jacob said. "Who knows what kind of diseases it has."

"Shut up," the old man said, pushing the dead thing closer to Daniel, closer, closer still. It swayed from left to right, and for a moment Richard thought it was going to pitch sideways and sprawl once more on the ground. It steadied itself, its wavering head growing still, its groping hands descending toward the crimson swath dangling across Daniel's stomach, seizing it in both hands and tugging.

The meat came away with little more than a moist whisper. Daniel did not respond. He quivered and gasped and wheezed, but there would be no more screams. Stumbling backward, Guy's corpse pressed the dripping strip of meat to its mouth. It took a few drunken sideways steps, its jaw working. Smacking like a child, it sank to its knees.

Niebolt took one tentative step toward the dead thing and its meal. Daniel mewled once.

"Stay back," Samson said.

Richard struggled with his ropes, falling at last onto his side, where he grew still and hopeless.

"Shut the hell up," the old man said, easing himself toward the feasting corpse, standing at last within its reach.

"It's got food," he said. "It doesn't care about me." He clenched his thick right hand into a fist and drove it into the side of the dead thing's head. It toppled, the remains of its meal trailing from its mouth.

Niebolt stepped back, watched as it struggled onto its knees and pawed at its bloody mouth. The remains of the strip of flesh sliced from Daniel's chest lay on the ground. The dead thing grabbed it, brought it to its mouth once more. Nibbled once, and then tossed it away. Its eyes settled on Niebolt, who stepped to the side, revealing Daniel, bloody and naked and warm.

"*God*," Richard said. "Enough. Kill him, at least, you bastard."

"Shut up," one of the shotgunners said, waving his weapon toward Richard.

Guy's corpse stood, stumbled up to Daniel, and threw itself on him like a lover, its eager mouth exploring his throat. Daniel's breath came and went in blood-choked whistles through the ragged hole in his windpipe.

Guy's corpse slowly spun in place, face and hands slick with blood and little wads of flesh. Richard did not close his eyes. He did not look away, could not shut out the horror simply because he did not want to open his eyes and find it moving toward him, inches away, its lips peeled back from blood-streaked teeth. Because of this simple fear, he watched Daniel die.

There were no final screams. Daniel went slack, utterly and completely slack, a rattle working its way from within his chest. A watery surge of vomit issued forth from his mouth and onto the ground, and he was done.

Guy's corpse didn't bother returning to its meal. It took a few steps away from Daniel, probed its mouth once more, and looked down at the length of its body. It grabbed the blood-stiff briefs clinging to its crotch and peeled them away, revealed the circle of open flesh where its penis had been. It dropped the underwear and looked around once more, its heavy-lidded gaze finding Richard.

"Uur," it said, the left side of its mouth twitching into something that would have looked like a half-smile on someone alive.

“No,” Richard said, turning a pleading face to the old man. “Don’t let this happen, man, I’m begging you.”

Huffington Niebolt stared at Richard with unblinking eyes. He folded his arms across his chest, tight, like he was trying to contain himself. His muscled forearms rested atop the shelf of his gut, pinning his braided beard to his shirt.

Guy’s corpse tripped on its own feet and stumbled once again to the ground. It struggled for a few seconds, gained its bearings, limited as they were, and once more settled its eyes onto Richard. Like it knew he was helpless, and that to make a play for the others would be pointless. They had guns and fists. They could fight back.

Not bothering to stand, the dead thing dug its fingers into the dirt and the grass and crawled like a baby toward him.

“I’m serious,” Richard said, panic unraveling his heart. Soon he would be braying like a madman. “I’ll do anything, okay? Just don’t let this happen. Don’t let this happen.”

The old man raised his eyebrows. Guy’s fingers found the soles of Richard’s shoes. Samson and his brothers watched with grim anticipation. Max smiled. Richard writhed and kicked and fell onto his side. Guy’s corpse stopped fumbling with Richard’s feet and, reorienting itself, crawled toward his face. Heart hammering, he lashed out with his bound feet, sunk his heels into the ground, and pushed himself away. He opened his mouth to beg Niebolt for mercy. Instead, he screamed. To his own ears, he sounded like an animal.

“Enough of this,” Niebolt said, pointing at Max. “Pull it away.”

Scowling, Max stomped over, seized Guy’s corpse by the ankles, and dragged it facedown away from Richard.

“That’s far enough,” Niebolt said.

Max let go of the thing’s sock-clad ankles. He rubbed his hands on his jeans, cursing under his breath, stepping forward and pressing his right foot onto the back of the dead thing’s head. It flailed, pawing Max’s shoe.

“Tie it up,” Niebolt said, walking over to where Richard lay. He stopped, his large hands on his hips, looking down at Richard. “You got a name, boy?”

Richard opened his mouth, and Niebolt pressed the worn sole of his right boot to Richard’s lips, mashing them against his teeth.

“Just so you know: if you tell me ‘fuck you,’ I’m gonna kick your face in

right here. And that's not just some figure of speech bullshit, or anything. I'll goddamn kick it in, you hear?"

Richard blinked up at the old man.

"You hear?" Niebolt said, his leathery forehead creasing over his raised eyebrows. He gave Richard's face a painful nudge.

"Yes," Richard said against the bottom of the man's boot, his words muffled. Dirt crunched between his teeth.

"Mm?" Niebolt pulled his foot away from Richard's face.

"Okay."

"So?"

"What?" Richard asked, his mind not letting go of the image of the old man's boot kicking his face until it was a ragged and bloody hole.

Niebolt laughed, looked around at his sons. Settled his gaze once more on Richard. "Your name."

"Richard."

"Richard?" Niebolt asked, nodding. "Richard. Just like the good man in the White House. You vote for him, Richard?"

"Nuh," Richard said, spitting. "No."

"No, I wouldn't think so," Niebolt said, scratching his chin. "A young man like you. Of course you didn't."

Behind Niebolt, Daniel's corpse lifted his head and looked around. Niebolt followed Richard's gaze, looked back at him.

"Happens fast, doesn't it, Dick?" Niebolt said, shaking his head. "Amazing."

Max sat on Guy's back, straddling him. He placed his left hand in the dead thing's head and forced its facedown into the dirt.

"You probably get called Dick all the time, huh, Richard?"

"Sometimes," Richard said. "When I was younger."

"Probably didn't like it."

"No."

"I don't blame you, Rich. Can I call you Rich?"

"Sure."

"Good," Niebolt said, reaching down and pulling Richard to his feet and slamming him against the tree to his back. Richard's knees buckled.

"Stay on your feet, now, Rich. Be a man."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Not that again. You should know better."

Niebolt punched him in the stomach. Gasping, Richard sank to the ground, a white-hot knot of pain spreading through his guts.

"I got better things to do, Rich," Niebolt said. "Big things happening out there, as you know. Jacob?"

"Yeah?" Jacob asked, stepping up beside his father.

"You take care of Rich here, okay?"

Jacob regarded Richard, his face a heavy-lidded blank. "Okay," he said.

"But—" Sam said, appearing at Niebolt's other shoulder.

"But nothing," the old man said. "Don't make me knock your teeth out, Samson." The old man looked down at Richard, one last time. He smiled. "Have fun."

A few minutes later, Richard was alone with Jacob. Guy's corpse tried to roll onto its back. Daniel's scalp slid from its head and lay rumpled on the ground. Tied to the tree, Daniel's corpse looked left and right, left and right, as if it were still trying to shake the hair from its eyes.

"My dad's old," Jacob said, dropping to his knees beside Richard. "He does things his way. We don't always agree, but he's old, and I think he may be a little crazy, because I really don't believe most of the things he tells us. Most of it is just nuts, man." Jacob shrugged. "Sometimes, though, he lets us do things our way."

Jacob slid a large serrated knife from the sheath at his hip. He held it up between them, looking past the blade and into Richard's eyes.

"Like now," Jacob said, pushing Richard down and onto his chest. His fingers moved up Richard's back and into his hair, and he pressed Richard's face to the ground. Richard screamed.

Jacob moved down. Richard squeezed his eyes shut, his scream dissolving into an incoherent prayer. He tasted dirt. He begged God and cursed God, and he waited for pain that did not come. There was a tugging at his ankles, his wrists. Steel touched his flesh but did not open it. The ropes fell away. Jacob stood, rolling Richard onto his back with his right foot.

Richard held his hands before his face, wiggled his fingers, stared at the rope marks on his wrists, felt blood tingling back into his limbs.

Jacob smiled, took a few steps back.

"I'm not the kind of guy who likes things handed to me, all nice and wrapped up," he said, looking Richard up and down. "I like to earn what's mine. I'm gonna give you five minutes."

“What?” Richard asked, sitting up and massaging his calf muscles.

“Five minutes,” Jacob said, producing a cigarette from a box in his shirt pocket and lighting up. “Then I’m coming after your ass. Or you can sit there and rub your leg for five minutes, and I’ll just kill you right here, but I’d really like you to run.”

Using the nearest tree, Richard pulled himself to his feet. He flexed his leg muscles, wiggled his toes. Looked at Jacob.

“Don’t think about it,” Jacob said, sheathing the knife and pulling the pistol from his hip.

“You’re all insane,” Richard said, taking a step away from the tree. His feet had not stopped tingling.

Jacob tapped his bare wrist. “Four minutes,” he said. “You should really go.”

“I’ll kill you,” Richard said.

“I’m sure you will,” Jacob said, bringing the cigarette to his lips with his left hand and shooing Richard with his right.

Richard took three uneasy steps away from Jacob and, bumping into a tree and stumbling once, ran into the forest.

S E V E N T E E N

Tricky Dick was on the tube, urging Americans to be vigilant in this time of trouble, to do what needed to be done and to cooperate with local law enforcement.

At Misty's, local law enforcement was unconscious on the couch in the living room behind the store, an infected bite on its arm. Crate was outside. Charlie sat at the middle table, drinking his fourth beer since Tasgal had passed out. Misty sat across from him, looking down at the table and listening to the television while working over her own beer and wondering just what the hell they were going to do with Eric Tasgal.

Not long after Crate had taken out the four corpses loafing their way across the parking lot and toward Misty's place, Stacy Knox had bicycled in on a cloud of self-importance and body odor. She'd given the burning heap of bodies a wide berth, muttered under her breath, and asked Misty if she could come inside for a bit—she was feeling lonely, her equanimity was crumbling, and she needed to be around other people.

"Sure," Misty had said, wanting to kick herself in the ass. Stacy rarely came by, and when she did, it was merely to gossip, to speak in hushed tones about which planet was in retrograde that month, and to speculate on the where-

abouts of her husband's spirit, which was, she assured all who would listen, moving onward and upward through the astral planes. He still managed to send messages back to her, messages that filtered down through higher realms and entered their own in the form of a single leaf resting on a windowsill or the bird calling out in the silence of evening. Or the patterns made by whisky spilled across the kitchen table, or maybe even the shape of her crap, for all Misty knew, all curled and flakey at the bottom of the toilet bowl. If, that was, Stacy Knox didn't do her business in the woods behind her house, and Misty wouldn't have placed money on it.

As for Stacy's husband, Misty marveled over the fact that he was the first man to sail into the astral plane via a self-imposed mouthful of buckshot. Stacy had been hard enough to swallow before, but now?

Misty's nastier side was sorry that Stacy hadn't come stumbling up to the store dead and hungry. At least Crate could have shot her then...

On the television, Nixon said that they were doing everything within their power to confront the crisis at hand, as well as the other crises that had arisen in the hours since the dead began to rise. When asked to comment on the rumors that the phenomenon was the result of a Department of Defense-funded biological warfare experiment gone terribly wrong, Nixon denied it without hesitation.

"That is patently ridiculous," he said. "Reports from around the globe have confirmed that this event began taking place everywhere *at the same time*. That's not how germ warfare works, Ted, and you know it."

"Lying snake," Stacy Knox said, sitting alone at one of the tables and holding the crystal that hung from a length of twine around her neck, gazing into its multifaceted depths. She wasn't even forty, though she could easily pass for thirty. She had that much going for her, even though she told folks to call her Starshine. Most everyone in town obliged, of course, even if they thought it was bullshit, but Misty had little tolerance for such nonsense. Not then, and especially not now. The time for nonsense was over.

"Shut it," Misty said, what little patience she had going up in flames.

"I'm sorry," Stacy said, dropping the crystal against her chest, where it found peace in the valley. "You don't have to be so negative, though."

"She's not, Starshine," Charlie said, continuing to pile beer atop hard liquor. Misty had taken away the gin bottle, and Charlie had simply gone to the cooler.

He looked at Stacy's face, which was pretty enough, before staring at her large chest. "Jesus, you're annoying."

"Okay, Charlie," Misty said. "You should probably go into the back and lie down. I'm not in the mood to hear your voice any more."

"I'm not tired," Charlie said, his words slurring together. "I'm wide awake and listening to the President and he's telling us what to do."

"You're shitfaced and you're going to pass out at that table."

"He's telling us how to get out of this mess and I'll be damned..."

"And I'm not gonna help your ass to bed."

"...damned if I'm gonna miss it, this is the broadcast of the decade," but he was already facing away from the screen, rolling his eyeballs in search of his bottle.

"Go lay down, Charlie," Misty growled.

Charlie wavered like an out-of-use marionette before turning slightly and saying, deliberately, with the authority of a man who has just won the argument, "Tasgal is on the couch."

"The *bed*," Misty said through clenched teeth. "Now please let me listen to this, damn it."

"Who's Tasgal?" Stacy asked. Misty didn't even bother looking at her—just rolled her eyes and shook her head and continued to stare down Charlie. He weathered it for a few seconds then gave in, got to his feet, and took his time getting to the back.

"If Crate were in here, he'd take you for one of them and shoot your ass."

"Urm," Charles said, reaching the door that lead to the living quarters behind the store. He looked back and shook his head, eyelids heavy. "We should tie him up." He shrugged and belched. "I guess." He turned and left.

"What's he talking about?" Stacy asked.

"He's drunk," she said, downing her beer and getting up from the table, walking to the counter, where she paced, her eyes on the television. "Now just be quiet a second, okay? Get yourself something to drink from the cooler."

"Oh," Stacy said, eyes wide, acting surprised, like she hadn't been waiting for the invitation. "You sure?"

"Please."

"Okay, then," Stacy said. She pushed away from the table and went over to the cooler. Glass tinked against glass, and she returned with a bottle of Miller Lite. "Thanks."

“Mnn,” Misty said, staring through the television. Richard Nixon attempted to field questions from a gang of reporters all trying to out-shout the others. The President lifted his hands and begged for silence. The Secret Service guys to his left and right were getting shifty, looking nervous. To Misty, it looked as if they were about to drag their boss out of the room, or maybe put a few rounds into the ceiling to quiet down the commoners.

Neither happened. The room got itself under control long enough for someone from CBS to ask Nixon to confirm the report that Soviet submarines had been detected just off the coast of Alaska.

“To hell with that,” another reporter shouted. “What about the Gulf of Mexico? They’re in the Gulf of Mexico, Mr. President, or are you *unable to comment* on that at this point?”

“I’ll be back,” Misty said. “Stay right here.” Stacy looked at Misty down the length of the bottle held to her lips. She raised her eyebrows. Misty stepped outside. The bell did its thing.

“Yeah,” Crate said, drinking from an old liquor jug filled with water. Misty could not remember the last time he’d gotten drunk, and the joint he’d smoked earlier was, as far as she knew, the first he’d had in months. He was on the ball, the old bastard, and if they survived this, it would probably be because of him.

“When do you want to do it?”

“Sooner the better, I guess,” he said, frowning up at the light illuminating the parking lot. “Think I ought to shoot it?”

She read his gaze. “Why?”

“This place stands out at night. We could use a little darkness.”

“We won’t be able to see them.”

“My eyes are just fine, woman. I’ll see them when I need to see them. Better than theirs, leastways. With the lights out, maybe they’ll just keep on walking by,” he said, leaning forward and looking toward the door leading into the store. “Gotta turn out the lights in the store, too. Move everyone into the back.”

“You sure about this?”

“I’m sure I don’t want to know what it feels like to be eaten alive. I’m tired, Mis. I need some sleep.”

“But I think we—”

Crate waved an annoyed hand at her face. "I didn't say now, damn it. I know what we need to do right now, so let's do it."

They stepped into the store. Stacy opened her second beer. She looked up at Crate, let her eyes drop down to the rifle in his hands for a second, and smiled. "You coming in here to shoot me, Crate?"

"You should be so lucky," he said.

Misty locked the door.

"What's going on," Stacy asked. "Are there more?"

"Not yet, there aren't," Crate said, leaning his rifle against the waist-high ice cream cooler. He stepped over to the counter, his eyes on the television. An anchorwoman with her face cinched up like a purse spoke of Soviet troop buildup along the border of someplace she'd never heard of.

"Nothing's looking good," Misty said.

"Huh," Crate said, and shrugged. "No real surprise there."

Misty kept her eyes on the screen. Crate watched television a little longer, before grabbing his rifle and stepping toward back of the store.

"Where you off to," Stacy asked.

"We got a little business to take care of, Starshine," he said, frowning at her. "You stay put. Come on, Mis."

"I hope I'm as frisky as the two of you when I'm your age," Stacy said. She smiled and knocked back her Miller Lite.

"Yeah," Crate said, and left. Misty followed.

Tasgal lay with his injured forearm across his face. His gun lay on his stomach, his left hand resting atop it. His mouth was open. He'd kicked off his boots.

"Eric," Misty said, nudging him. "Wake up, kiddo."

Eric Tasgal mumbled, shifted. Misty stared at the gun on the young policeman's chest, hoping his fingers would draw away from it. They didn't.

"Eric." Louder this time, with a little more force. He jerked his right arm away from his face. His left hand seized the gun and his eyes opened. He blinked up at her, his eyes devoid of comprehension, and she yelped, backing away, nearly stumbling. Certain that he would open fire.

He didn't raise the gun. The confused look on his face gave way to awareness, and he licked his lips, blinking.

"Sorry I startled you," she said, stepping toward him. Behind her, unseen in the darkened hallway, Crate sighed. She wanted to punch his teeth down his throat.

Tasgal looked down at the gun in his left hand. "I... I startled you," he said, sitting up. He placed the gun beside him on the couch and moaned softly, working the fingers of his right hand.

"You okay?" Misty asked.

He made a fist and winced, looked up at her. His face was too pale.

"No," he said. "This hurts like hell."

"All I have is aspirin," she said. "Aspirin and grass."

"Yeah," he said, leaning back and staring down at his right forearm, which rested on his lap like a dead fish. Above the place where he'd been bitten, the gauze was stained deep red bordering on brown. Gingerly, he poked at the bandage with his left forefinger. He sucked air between his clenched teeth, looked up at Misty. "Now would be good."

"Okay," Misty said. "You should stand up. Come for a walk."

"What?" Tasgal asked, leaning forward.

"On the television, they were saying, they said that people who had been bitten should keep as active as possible."

"Bullshit," he said.

She shook inside but held to it. "Something about blood flow. I'm... I'm just telling you what they said."

He sighed, "Yeah, I know. Bastards'll say anything to try and keep you in line and not asking questions," but got up anyway. "Well, I do have to take a piss," he said. His voice was slurred. He was groggy and weak, and maybe still a little drunk, and if they were careful they'd get through this. "Got to change this."

He rose, arms outstretched, and Misty stepped close, offered to steady him.

"I'm okay," he said, seeming to get his bearings. "Thanks."

He took a step away from the couch, leaving his gun behind. Misty held her breath. This was going to work. Tasgal took another step toward the hall, and stopped, looking back at his gun. Damn it.

"Okay," Misty said, stepping into the hall, away from Tasgal. Crate emerged from the shadows and leveled his rifle at Tasgal's face.

"Leave the gun where it is," he said.

Tasgal froze, mouth open. He wavered in place, blinked his eyes. “Whu,” he said.

“Get on your knees,” Crate said. Misty lingered behind him, biting her lip, her heart hammering. “I’m serious, Eric. Get down on your knees and don’t go for the gun, or I’ll kill you.”

Something clarified slightly in Tasgal and he went into officer mode. “Let’s be calm, sure we can talk about—”

“You’re bit, Eric,” Misty said.

“TV says you’re going to become one of those things,” Crate said. That also wasn’t entirely true. Different people had said different things, but who could be trusted? “There’s no helping it. I’d probably be doing you a favor, shooting you, but you never know. They might find a cure.”

“I’m a police officer, Crate,” Tasgal said, holding his hands at chest level, palms outward. His fingers shook. He took two small steps toward Crate, who backed into Misty. “You’re breaking the law.”

“I’m protecting myself,” Crate said. “You might be dangerous.”

“Then why don’t you let me get in my car and leave?” Tasgal said, starting to sway from side to side. “I’ll drive on out of here. Just... jus...”

“Get on your knees, boy,” Crate said. “I’m about to shoot you.”

“Hurts,” Tasgal said. “I really need to use the bathroom.”

“Let him,” Misty said, moving past Crate and toward the couch. “Don’t move.”

“Don’t move,” Crate said. “I will shoot you.”

Misty seized the gun from the couch and stepped backward, away from Tasgal. She looked down at the gun and found that she hated the feel of it in her hands. Not knowing what to do with it, she slid it into her waistband and stepped into the hall.

“Bathroom is that way,” she said, looking to her left. “Come on, Crate.”

Crate backed out of the living room, gave Tasgal enough room to creep by and work his way to the bathroom.

“Three minutes,” Crate said.

Tasgal closed the door behind him.

Crate turned to Misty, his bushy eyebrows drawn together. “You think he can get out the window?”

“Not without making a racket,” she said. The window was behind the toilet,

and was covered by a rack of shelves cluttered with shampoo bottles, lotions, shaving cream, Gold Bond, deodorant spray, more. "Tape's in the washroom."

Misty stepped into the store. Stacy was on her third beer. Nixon was no longer on the television. Yet again, the news was showing footage of reanimated corpses. A head connected to a horribly mutilated torso by little more than a strand of gristle looked around, its jaw silently working.

"This is horrible," Stacy said. "Goddess must be angry."

"She's fucking furious," Misty said, picking up one of the chairs.

"What are you doing?" Stacy asked, her words running together like sand.

"Changing a light bulb," Misty said, opening the door and stepping into the back. She heard the toilet running. Crate was gone. She brought the chair into the living room, placed it before the television.

Tasgal stood just outside the bathroom, leaning against the wall, and for a second Misty thought that he was dead. "Hurts," he said, peeled himself from the wall, and took a step toward her.

"Now," she said, touching the gun awkwardly jutting from the waistband of her pants.

"Now, now." Crate appeared at her side, handed her a thick roll of duct tape. "You'll shoot your stupid self in the twat," he said, sliding the gun from her waistband and into one of his baggy front pockets.

"On your knees," Crate said, pointing the rifle at Tasgal's chest. When the young cop didn't react, Crate cocked the rifle and raised his eyebrows.

Tasgal knelt, assuming the position. He placed his hands behind his head, wincing.

"We're not going to hurt you," Crate said. "I promise, Eric. This is just for our safety. You understand, right?"

Tasgal stared at them.

"Here," Crate said, passing a clean facecloth to Misty. She looked at it, looked up at him, confused. Crate pointed to his own mouth. "Gag."

"Oh," Misty said, eyeing Crate.

"What?"

"Why the hell are you making him get down on his knees, Crate?" She threw a thumb over her shoulder. "I can tape him to that chair from here."

"Aw, fine," Crate snapped, making a face.

"I'm sorry," Misty said, looking at Tasgal. He leaned against the wall. "We need you to stand up, okay?"

"This isn't right," Tasgal said. He looked tired and confused, but there was something else, now, just underneath the pain and exhaustion: anger. "You shouldn't do this."

"We have to," Misty said, giving Eric Tasgal a smile that felt like dirt on her lips. The kid was dying, and they were treating him like an enemy. She looked at Crate. "Do we?"

"What?"

"Do we have to do this?"

"Oh, come on, Misty." Crate rolled his eyes. "You said it yourself. We can't watch him twenty-four hours a day. We have to sleep and we have to watch the place."

"And we can't throw him out," she said, looking back and forth between Crate and Eric, who climbed to his feet.

"Right," Crate said, looking at Tasgal. "So for now we tie you up. If help shows up, or something, we'll let you go, okay?"

"Enough talk," Misty said, wanting to be done with it.

"Yeah," Crate said. "Enough talk. Let's go."

Outside, Bilbo Baggins piped up.

"Ah, hell," Crate said. "More of them."

"Nothing we can do about it now," she said.

Tasgal leaned against the wall. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

"Come on," Misty said, and Tasgal's legs curled beneath him. He slid down the wall. His head lolled toward Misty and Crate. He glowered at them, shivering.

"Get up," Crate added, poking at the air with his rifle.

"Not going anywhere," Tasgal said, and closed his eyes.

"Okay," Crate said. "What are we going to do now?"

Misty pushed the barrel of the rifle toward the floor. She opened her mouth to speak. Out front, someone hammered on the glass door leading into the store. Misty heard Stacy yelp once, and then the hammering resumed.

"Shit," Misty said, looking at Crate. "Let's go."

"What about—"

"He's not going anywhere."

She stepped into the store and almost slammed into Stacy, who was walking toward the back door. Her eyes were bulging out of her sockets, her mouth

was open, working like a fish sucking air, and Misty thought she looked like a person whose equanimity was definitely shot all to hell.

"There's someone outside," Stacy said. "I think it could be them."

"Them who?" Crate asked, stepping toward the door.

"The dead."

"I don't think they knock," Misty said, following Crate. She looked back at Stacy, who inched toward the door leading into the back. "Stay out here."

"Misty?" someone said from the other side of the door—a man, by the sound of it, though Misty could not tell who. "You in there?"

"Yeah," Misty shouted back. "Wait a second."

Crate unlocked the door and then stepped back, raising the rifle. By now, Misty realized, his wiry old arms must be tired. "It's open," he said. "Come in."

The door opened and Jeff Karlatos popped his head in. He saw the gun and fell to his knees on the threshold, his hands held up before him.

"God," he said. "It's me, Jeff, I—"

"Okay," Misty said, once more pushing the barrel of Crate's rifle toward the ground. "I'm sorry, Jeff." She helped him up, though he didn't need it. "We're all a little jumpy."

Crate grunted something and shuffled over to the table, where Stacy had returned to her beer.

"God, yeah," Jeff said. He was in his early thirties, skinny except for a soft pot-belly, and half bald. Toss in the Coke-bottle glasses, and you had yourself a perpetually single guy. He worked for the phone company in Beistle, but came by at least once a month for a roast beef sandwich with sour cream and onion potato chips. This summed up Misty's knowledge of him. "Have you heard yet?"

"Heard?" Misty said. She looked back at Crate, who was sitting across from Stacy and staring at her tits. "What happened?"

Before he could answer, the sound of a rattling muffler zipped by, moving northward. Another car followed it.

"They gassed Beistle."

"What?" Misty said, cold with fear. Crate pushed away from the table. His eyes were bloodshot, and Misty noticed for the first time that he was pale. He was crashing. "Who?"

"The Army, I guess. About thirty minutes ago. A helicopter."

"I heard the chopper," Crate said.

"It passed over town. Circled it. We went out into the street and watched, thinking maybe they were dropping supplies, but no. It was a gas of some kind. Looked yellow, but it was hard to tell."

"Jesus," Crate said.

"You know what it is?" Misty asked.

"No," Crate said, shaking his head. "But I'm sure it isn't good."

"I saw something on TV about that," Stacy said. Her eyes were still saucers, and she no longer sounded drunk. "Just before coming over here. Reports about a gas being tested on the dead in some places."

"Yeah," Jeff said, jittery and impatient. "Right here."

"What did it do?"

"Look, man, I got in my car and peeled out. I wasn't the only one." As if to prove his point, more vehicles raced past the store. "Hey, I'm getting the hell out of here. The wind's blowing east, mostly, so you should be all right. I just wanted to let you know and see if you could sell me some food."

Misty looked over at the deli case, and for the first time Charlie's earlier complaints made sense. "Of course," she said, and made her way to the deli.

"Thanks. Just a little something to tide me over until I get where I'm going."

"Where is that?" Crate asked, rising from the table and walking toward them.

"North?" Jeff shrugged.

"I'll make you a sandwich," she said.

"Thanks," Jeff said.

Crate peeked through the blinds and then stepped out of the store. Jingle jangle.

Jeff stood before the counter and watched television. Cronkite was pressing a Defense Department official for confirmation on reports that Soviet nuclear subs were in place along both coasts as well as in the Gulf of Mexico, that one of them had actually made it nearly one hundred miles up the Mississippi River before being intercepted and escorted back into international waters.

The sliced meat would not last, so she made two heaping roast beef sandwiches, as well as a turkey and Swiss on French bread.

"Insane, huh?" Stacy said. Misty looked up in time to see Jeff look from the TV and toward Stacy, who sat holding her fourth beer, if Misty's tally was good.

“Yeah,” Jeff said, sounding as stiff and awkward as he looked. “Insane.”

They fell silent. Finishing the sandwiches, Misty saw Jeff shoot a few glances back at Stacy, and she hoped that he’d get over his shyness and keep talking, if only so she could see his face when Stacy opened her mouth and told him about her husband’s spirit speaking to her from within her crystal or some shit.

There would be no small favors: even in the face of the collapse of civilization, Jeff was too ill-equipped to talk to a pretty girl. And Stacy was too lost in her beer to care. More so, she was clearly terrified. It took a lot to keep her quiet.

Misty bagged the sandwiches, grabbed a second bag, and on the way to the counter tossed in a can of baked beans and a can of Vienna sausage, as well as a large sack of chips.

“Oh,” Jeff said, taking the bags. “I can’t buy all of this.”

“Take it, Jeff.”

Either he was slow or he was faking it. He made a show of realizing what she meant, and then thanked her. He shot another glance at Stacy, and Misty wondered if he’d ever been with a woman. On the television, the Manhattan skyline spit flames into the night sky. Misty figured that if Jeff hadn’t gotten any yet, he probably wasn’t going to.

“You got an ice chest?” she asked.

“In the trunk,” Jeff said, holding the bags of food to his chest. “It’s empty.”

“Get a bag of ice and get moving.”

He did.

“I think I can smell something on the air,” Crate said, locking the door. Tongue lolling and tail wagging, Bilbo Baggins seemed to be trying to trip him. “Taste it maybe. Could just be my imagination.”

“There’s no saying it would even have a smell,” Misty said. “Don’t they add something to propane to make it smell like that?”

“If it’s one of Uncle Sam’s home brews, it could probably smell like a burger and fries if they wanted it to.”

“We should stay in for a while.”

“Wind’s still blowing east,” Crate said.

"We should move his car," Misty said.

Crate scratched his cheek and grunted.

"Someone could come looking for him."

"Well, then, he was here for a little while today, and then he went out into the woods because someone was yelling for help." Crate looked pleased. "Never came back."

"Yeah, okay," Misty said. "That's fine, but people see a cop car and they see help."

Crate laughed: a brief, low rattle. "You and me, we know different people."

It made her smile. Sometimes the old man wasn't half bad. She stretched with a yawn. "You know what I mean. It's like a beacon."

"Oh," Crate said. "So now you want to start turning folks away?"

Her smile broke. She allowed herself to look at the TV, which showed a throng of corpses stumbling around the parking lot of what appeared to be a hospital, then back to Crate, who seemed to be expecting an answer.

She squeezed her hands together. "I don't think we have much of a choice."

"Yep," he said, rubbing his eyes. "We need to get the lights off in here, and I should go out and shoot out the big light."

"Fuck, Crate."

"What?"

"Shoot out the big light?"

"Yeah."

"You can turn it off at the breaker box, you lunatic."

"Oh," he said, grinning. "Yeah. But first, we have to finish things up."

In the bedroom, Charlie snored. Tasgal was fast asleep when they'd left him, his face pressed to the carpet. No longer clammy and cold, he burned with fever.

"He should be shot," Crate said.

"We're not going to shoot him."

"We wouldn't be shooting him, Mis. I would."

"You're not shooting him," she said. "Not now you're not. If you have to later, then you have to, but not now. Maybe there will be a vaccine or something."

"You never know," Crate said. There was not an ounce of hope in his voice.

“Right,” Misty said.

She dropped to her knees and bound Tasgal’s ankles with tape.

“We should move him,” Crate said. “Get him out of here. God, we could be infected already, keeping him in here.”

“Then there isn’t much point in moving him, is there?”

“You know what I mean, woman,” Crate said, looking down at her, frowning. “We can’t keep untying him every time he has to take a piss, and eventually he’s gonna shit his pants. You want to deal with that?”

Misty stared at Crate.

“I’m not wiping his ass,” he said.

“Damn it, Crate, what do you want me to do?”

“He’s gonna die, and then he’s going to wake up or whatever it is they do. He’s already dead. He needs to be put out of his misery.”

“We’ll move him.”

Crate stared at her, frowning deeply, his bushy eyebrows drawing together. He clutched his rifle, the forefinger of his right hand less than an inch from the trigger, the skin over his knuckles taut. She thought he was going to do it, anyway, just pump a round into the back of Tasgal’s head and be done with it—and what could she possibly do then?

But he didn’t shoot Tasgal. He listened to her, as he always did, head down, like an old dog long broken.

“Okay,” he said, the tension going out of his withered old frame. He seemed to melt a little. “My place?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Your place.”

Crate’s place was a small one-room apartment out back—little more than four walls, a roof, a bed, a fridge, and a window with a rattling A/C unit. It had started as a shed, and Crate had gradually converted it to a more livable environment, a place where, he said, he could go when they weren’t getting along, where he could read in peace while she watched her soap operas and her game shows. Eventually the place became his place, and she slept alone.

“Okay,” he said, following a few strained and silent moments. “How?”

“The wheelbarrow.”

“That’ll do it,” he said. “When?”

“Right now.”

Sprawled on the floor with his hands bound behind his back, Tasgal grunted.

E I G H T E E N

“Are you okay?” the girl asked. Colleen opened her mouth and tried to speak, and if any words came out, she did not hear them. She looked down at the amorphous red dress spread around her like blood in a crime scene photo, and felt the soft moist blades of grass beneath her knees and between her fingers, like gravel and broken glass. She tried and failed to make sense of the scene before her.

It was a playground. There was grass and a concrete path and a swing set and some monkey bars. A bench and a picnic table and a barbecue pit and trees and potted plants and a sandbox, and she was being held captive by the very same people who had forced her to suck her boyfriend’s cock before they sliced it off inches away from her face.

And now there were children. A smiling girl of maybe six, cherubic twin boys with yellow hair and eyes blue like the impossible sky, and a toddler banging together two from a vast array of brightly colored blocks.

She opened her mouth again, and nothing came out.

“I think she’s sick,” said the girl, looking back at the women seated side by side on the bench, and they all stood, their dresses fluttering like ghosts, it seemed to Colleen, but her eyes, sticky with tears and imbalanced with de-

lirium, had invented the flutter. The air was still. Still because of the high wall encircling the courtyard. The wind sighed through the tress around her, around the enclosure in which she found herself, failing again and again to blink away the image of her boyfriend's dick lying in the dirt, but it barely reached her—was little more than a whisper against her scalp.

The women approached and encircled and settled around her, their dresses pooling and mingling with her own, a crime scene photo of a massacre.

Guy screamed defiance and she took him into her mouth and the blade came down and the blood was so damned bright and hot. It spilled in a hot gush across her hands, where it cooled in a heartbeat and dried and flaked away.

She blinked, and it wasn't all of the women before her, just the girl and the first woman, the one the man had called... what had he called her? The other women watched. So too did the twins, who approached Colleen. One of the women on the bench called to them, told them to step back, and they did.

The girl said her name was Lissa. Colleen tried to hold onto that, saying the name over and over in her head, like a mantra, holding it to her heart like a talisman. Lissa, Lissa, Lissa, and the dead are coming to life and eating the living and the last time she saw Guy he was sitting with his back to the truck and packing his groin with dirt and dead oak leaves. Blood pumped through his fingers like water from a hose on a hot summer day.

Lissa said something and then Beth or Embeth or whatever her name was spoke and Colleen looked from one to the other, one to the other. She struggled to make sense of their faces and words. Lissa was six years old, and she spoke with the intelligence and maturity of someone much older. She found her brothers to be terribly annoying, and was thrilled to have Colleen around. Lissa took her by the hand, and Embeth asked the girl if she'd keep an eye on Colleen for a second.

"Sure," Lissa said, and Colleen wondered how many times her mind could cave in upon itself before she was screaming at the sky and ripping out her own eyes. She wondered if her mom was blinking into the darkness of her casket, and if the old man with the gun, Crate, was still enjoying himself. She thought of Daniel and Kimberly and Richard and the corpses heaped on the gravel outside of MISTY'S FOOD AND GAS. Or had it been GAS AND FOOD? She couldn't remember, just as she couldn't remember when the last time things had been normal.

Her mouth was open. She had no idea how long it had been open, and she closed it. The woman—Embeth, her name was Embeth, though the old guy with the beard had called her Beth—floated away on her dress like a ghost, and the girl talked and talked and talked. She must have been six, with her sexless body and her little boy's face and her missing teeth. Her hair was in a braid down her back. Smiling, she asked if Colleen wanted to play Pat-a-Cake. Colleen said nothing and lifted her hands. She barely felt the girl's little palms on hers.

The boys watched.

"You're my new best friend," Lissa said, nearly whispering. "I like Sally but she's quiet and doesn't like to play. Do you know some games?"

Colleen blinked, her head spinning. She tried to focus on the girl's face, but she just kept seeing the shot they were playing on the TV at Misty's. The woman stumbling around the morgue with her chest splayed open, her breasts peeled away in symmetrical folds from her ribcage.

"It's going to be okay," the girl said, and Colleen tried to smile. It felt like a wound on her face and she choked back the impulse to throttle the girl, to sink her thumbs into her windpipe. To listen to it crunch beneath her hand. "You're safe here. We're all safe here."

Safe here. Safe here. Did the girl know what was going on outside? Colleen closed her eyes, and there was Guy's dick again. Guy's dick, and Daniel's face framed against the fabric of the couch in her mother's house, head jerking, hair dancing. Pot churning in the air. And Kimberly.

She tried to remember the last time she'd seen Kimberly, Kimberly who had been coming apart since the deer; her best friend since childhood, a sweet and honest girl, a friend, was not here in this strange place of women and children. Why was this, and where was Kimberly right now?

Was she alive? Were any of them alive?

Her heart hurt, her stomach tore at itself, and still the girl talked and talked, holding Colleen's hand and stroking it and assuring her that she was just a little sick and that she'd be better in no time.

Colleen stared at the girl, trying not to want to kill her. Her mother was dead and her friends were gone and the dead were walking around, but this girl, this not-very-pretty girl had done nothing wrong. Colleen put her hands on the girl's shoulders, a gesture of intimacy, and stared harder. Colleen stared and told herself not to hurt the girl, she was innocent, even as she felt the tips

of her thumbs come to rest on the girl's collarbones and then give a slight crush like testing a pear for ripeness. She intended for it to be harder but couldn't get her fingers to obey.

The girl seemed surprised and Colleen let her separate and back away.

The twins were running in circles and babbling. The women on the bench went on sitting, kept on watching her. There was a second bench nearby, totally empty, but they were packed together on the other bench. Embeth loomed over them, watching Colleen. The little boy with the blocks could not be bothered to do anything other than bang them together upon his colorful blanket. Colleen wasn't sure, but she thought Sally was the youngest one, the pregnant one who looked like she was about to burst. And there was something about the blanket, damn it, with its candy-colored geometric patterns.

Lissa prattled on, talking about her brothers and the time her father took her down to the river to fish and she fell in and almost drowned. Colleen tried not to vomit, tried to keep the image of the heap of corpses in the parking lot. She waited and waited for the next horror, and all that came was the girl's smile and the laughter of the twins. The *thok thok thok* of the toddler banging his blocks together.

"Papa Huff made those for him," Lissa said.

Colleen stared at her.

"The blocks. He makes the neatest things."

The twins raced by, screaming laughter. They looked no older than four, straddling the line between toddler and big boy, their faces big-cheeked and baby-like, their bodies beginning to elongate. Identically dressed and chasing one another in endless figure-eights, they looked like some kind of optical illusion.

They ran up to Colleen and stood watching her, panting. One of them had his small hands splayed on his knees. Their eyebrows were so blond they were nearly invisible, standing out only because their faces were nearly purple with exertion.

"Hey," one of them said.

"Hey," said the other, smiling.

"Are you Miss Colleen?" the first one said.

"You're our new mommy," the second one said.

Colleen felt her face go numb and wanted to ask what they meant but her

tongue was made of... she couldn't really tell, but it wasn't made of tongue, that much was certain. "No," she finally made the non-tongue say.

"You're not?" they both asked, just out of sync with one another.

"Sure she is, you dummies," Lissa said, beaming.

"I'm Jack," the first one said, jabbing a small thumb into his chest.

"I'm David," said the other, showing her a mouth full of little white baby teeth. "We kill giants."

Colleen moved her eyes away from the twins and across the courtyard, expecting actual giants to lumber from the trees and into view. Why not? It made as much sense and anything else. When she was certain that no goliaths would appear, she looked at the kids.

"Giants are real," Jack said, looking grim.

"I'm the giant," David yelled, shoving Jack, who plopped onto his bottom. Laughing, David ran away. Laughing, Jack hopped to his feet and took chase.

Colleen watched them dumbly and then realized that her feet had gone to sleep. She was on her knees in the dirt, and shifted her weight onto her rear. She looked at the small boy who sat on a colorful blanket before the four women on the bench.

"That's Huff Junior," the girl next to her said. "He's almost two. He's pretty nice. He—oh, what's wrong?"

The little girl's small warm fingers on her face and on her shoulders.

"You're frowning. You look sad."

Colleen kept on frowning and looking sad. She opened her mouth again to say something, but all that came out was a scratchy little yelp that reminded her of the sound of dying puppies.

"You should talk," the girl said, and already Colleen found herself wondering what the girl's name was, damn it. She'd held onto it and held onto it, but there it was, gone.

Embeth and the other three women sat watching the child and speaking to one another in hushed tones that barely reached Colleen's ears. She let her eyes drift into the grass before the pool of her dress, and when she looked up, Embeth stood directly over her. She smiled with her eyes.

"Can you give us a few minutes, Lissa," Embeth said, and there it was—Lissa. Yes, Lissa. She was a nice girl, and Colleen was wrong to imagine her thumbs crumpling the girl's windpipe.

"Okay, Mama Beth," Lissa said, hopping up, planting a quick kiss onto Col-

leen's forehead, and running over to Jack, who'd pinned David to the ground, tickling him. David's laughter sounded a second or two away from becoming screams of terror.

"How are you?" Embeth asked, looking down at Colleen. The sound of her voice sliced through the fog churning around Colleen's head. Like the man whose sons had violently taken them captive, this woman seemed sincere. It made as much sense as the dead walking.

When Colleen didn't answer, Embeth reached out to her. "Help you up?"

She took the woman's hand. It was warm and comforting, like Lissa's, and that didn't make sense, either. And it was alive and vital, so much more alive and vital than her mother's hand in the weeks before her death—bones sheathed in papery flesh. Holding this living and vital and senseless hand, Colleen allowed herself to be lifted to her feet.

Embeth guided her toward the women seated on the bench. One of them now held the small boy, Huff Junior, on her knee, bouncing him. Blood flashed in her mind, and Colleen saw herself seizing the child by his small ankles and slamming him against the top of the picnic table until he came apart in her hands like a broken doll.

Lissa chased Jack and David, who laughed and ran a few times around Colleen and Embeth before racing to the other side of the courtyard.

"They're something else, aren't they?" Embeth said.

Hanging above the television in the living room of her mother's house, there was a photograph of her and Daniel playing in a heap of fallen red leaves at the base of a slide. She didn't remember where or when the photo was taken, but she remembered the way she'd felt then, the way she felt whenever she looked at the photo.

Watching Lissa and the Giant Killers tumble across the grass, she thought of that photo, and reminded her once more that these children had done no wrong.

The three women stood. "Whoa," Sally said, holding her right hand to her lower back, legs bowed beneath her formless dress, stomach bulging.

"This is Colleen," Embeth said.

"Hello, Colleen," the pregnant woman said, bowing her head once.

"This is Sally," Embeth said.

"Sally has been with us for, how long is it now, Sally?"

"Almost seven months now."

Been with them. Been with them. Sally had been with them for seven months. Colleen held Sally's gaze, unsure just what it was she saw in the woman's eyes, and try as she might, she could not focus on the moment. The realization—what's she'd been forced to do, what she'd seen, what they'd done to her and to her brother and to her friends—hit her once again. The fiery knot in her stomach tightened, and her head plunged into fog.

The other women rose, and Embeth introduced them.

The woman holding the child was Mathilda. She was thirty-five, with sandy hair and thin lips. Her plain face was deeply lined and tanned from years spent in the sun. Unlike Sally, Mathilda shook Colleen's hand. Her hands were rough. She'd been there since she was twenty-four.

Evie didn't nod or shake hands. She held Colleen's gaze for a few seconds before looking down. She was a few years older than Mathilda and had been with them since she was sixteen. Her black hair was going gray at the temples, and she was the prettiest of the four women. Her naturally olive skin did not appear to have been toughened by the sun, and Colleen knew that if she shook her hand, she'd find it soft.

"It's nice to meet you, Colleen," Sally said. She took one of Colleen's hands in both of hers. "Be strong, girl."

"Oh, honey," Embeth said, stroking Colleen's cheek. "Sit down."

The bench was warm. Sally sat beside her, leaving a person's width between them. Embeth said something about her and the other women having things to do, and that Sally would take care of her for now. Mathilda rocked the child, and Lissa and the twins laughed and played, and Colleen tried to hold on to what they said to her, tried to make sense of their words, but she could not—the words came apart at the seams, the letters rearranging themselves into pidgin.

Colleen stared at her hands, folded together as if in prayer on her lap, and when next her awareness expanded enough to encompass her surroundings, the shadows were a little longer, and she was alone with Sally.

"I've been waiting for you," Sally said.

Colleen's head took a thousand years to turn on her neck. Sally's face was unreadable.

"You're drugged," Sally said. "You will be for some time, until they're sure you're not going to freak out and try to get away. No, no—don't try to talk. Just listen, okay?"

Colleen nodded once.

“Mathilda was a nurse before Huff got a hold of her. Huff knows people in town. Gets all the medical supplies we could ever need.”

No one said anything for a little while or for longer—Colleen could not tell.

“Anyway, yeah. I’ve been waiting for you,” Sally said, sliding closer to Colleen and speaking quietly. “Not you specifically, but someone like you. Someone new. I’m not one of those brainwashed bitches, so don’t let the act fool you.”

There was hope, just like that. The fog around her mind still held sway, but it had thinned enough to allow Colleen to find her tongue. “Oh, God,” she said, and bit her tongue, hanging on Sally’s next words.

“I’ll make this quick, because one of them could come back at any moment, and you never know where one of the boys is creeping around. Huff steals women. He steals women and he knocks them up and he raises the kids to think he’s some kind of wise man, and he takes the women as his brides.”

Colleen opened her mouth. Closed it. Sally took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“We were on vacation, my husband and me and our son. William. They were both named William,” Sally said. Her eyes were on Colleen, but Colleen could tell that she was looking someplace else. “Driving down to San Francisco for the week. Huff and one of his youngest boy, the one who got killed yesterday, were on the side of the road. Huff said his truck was broken, and asked for a ride up the hill. We said sure, an old guy and his son, why not? It was just up the hill.”

Tears welled in the woman’s eyes, and she wiped them away. “Oh,” she said, sitting back. Using both hands, she smoothed the cloth of her dress tight across the bulge of her stomach.

“What is it?” Colleen asked, finding her voice.

Sally raised her eyebrows, smiling. “Watch,” she said, biting her lower lip. A single tear inched down her left cheek. The child inside of her kicked. Something—an elbow or a knee or its small butt—traced a path across the tight dome of her belly.

“That’s...” Colleen said, not bothering to finish. She wasn’t sure what it was. It was either beautiful or terrible, depending on how she looked at it. It made as little sense as anything else, and, like the sight of Lissa playing with the twins, somehow made things so much worse.

“My son isn’t going to grow up here,” she said, placing both of her hands atop the swell of her stomach, fingers interlaced. She chuckled bitterly. “Listen to me. My *son*, as if I have any idea what it is.”

“What happened?”

“Same thing that happened to you,” Sally said, staring forward, lips tight. “They attacked us as soon as we got up here. They dragged my husband and my son away, screaming and crying, and I never saw them again.”

“They took me here, and I went through what you’re going through right now. I met Huff and Embeth and then the others. The kids.”

Sally looked at Colleen, her brow creased, tight like her lips. There was strength in her eyes. Fury.

“Embeth has been here for over thirty years. She believes everything he says. She’s no different from him. Mathilda buys it and eats it too, and so does Evie, for the most part, but she’s starting to see holes in the wall he’s built. She’s noticed...” Sally paused, thinking. She smiled. “Evie has noticed *inconsistencies* in the bastard’s stories. Maybe she’s starting to see the big picture.” She shrugged. “Maybe she isn’t.”

Sally sighed. Colleen could not tell that Sally had been wound tight until she saw and felt the tension go out of the woman’s form.

“I don’t dare tell her what I’m planning. She’d hear me, and she’d know I was right, but his fingers are in her like she was a wad of dough. She’d run to him, and I’d be dead.”

Sally’s stomach bounced. She smiled, and looked over at Colleen, who pulled her hand away.

“No,” Sally said. “You can touch it. Here.” She took Colleen’s hand and placed it onto her stomach. Within seconds, the little life within moved beneath her fingers.

“Wow,” Colleen said.

“Yeah, really, huh?” Sally said, nodding. “All of the kids here belong to Huff. All but this one.” A gentle tap upon her stomach, and the child within leapt. “I was pregnant before I got here. I was going to tell William as soon as we got to San Francisco.” She smiled at Colleen, blinking away tears. “Huff’s good, the bastard. He has a way about him. You met him, right?”

“Yes,” Colleen said. “Once. This morning.”

“Then you know what I mean. He soothes and he comforts, and you believe everything he says, because it’s so damn smooth, right?”

"I guess so," Colleen said, and she wanted to close her eyes. Her mind was still made of soup. "He seemed sincere. So sorry that—" She couldn't finish, and Sally didn't seem to notice.

"You'll see just what I mean tonight." Her words were coming quicker now, tighter, as if she wanted to get it all out and was running out of time. "And if you're here long enough, you'll start to buy it. Sometimes I do. And sometimes I think it would be easier if I gave in." She shrugged. "They seem happy."

She stroked her belly and gazed into it, her eyes someplace else. Her voice was jagged with anger. "He lies, and his lies are getting more and more ridiculous. I mean, they've been far out from the start—you'll hear the one about the angel, I'm sure—but he's slipping. He's pushing it."

"What," Colleen said, struggling over her words. Sally watched her, waited. "What do you mean?"

"The whole point of this place is so that a family, *his* family, can survive the end of the world. He likes to say sometimes that he's like Noah, which is funny because he doesn't believe in God."

"But you said something—"

"The angel?" Sally shook her head. "Crazy never really makes sense, does it? But that's just it—when Evie was taken, back then? He told the angel story, only it was just about a woman who helped him when he was hurt, not an actual angel from Heaven. At least, that's how she remembers it, and that's why she's having her doubts."

"Oh."

"Anyway, my point is, since I got here, he told us that the end would come in our lifetimes. Not the end of the world, but of civilization."

Colleen stared at the woman's face, a chill moving through her body.

"Since I've been here, he's told us that nuclear war was around the corner. But just this morning, he changed his tune. His kid got killed somehow, I have no idea how, and maybe that pushed him over the edge. But he spews the crap and they lap it up. They all believe him, Jesus, probably even Evie."

"About what?" Colleen asked, knowing what would come next.

"He told us this morning that the dead were coming back to life. Can you believe that?" Sally's eyes were wide. "Coming back to life and eating people."

"Unbelievable," Colleen said, deciding instantly, without consideration, that she would let this woman go on believing that up was still up. "What did you mean earlier?"

“What?” Sally said. She sounded a little disappointed, as if she expected Colleen to comment further on Huff’s mad claims.

“When you said you were waiting for me.”

“Oh,” she said, looking around, rubbing her stomach with her right hand, fingers splayed. “I’m getting out of here, and I need help. I can’t trust anyone. You’re the only one whose eyes aren’t glazed over.”

“How?”

“I don’t know yet,” Sally said. “But I do know this: I’m having my child, I’m healing. We’re going to lie low for a little while, and then we’re gone.” She looked at Colleen, eyebrows raised.

“Okay,” Colleen said, dropping her gaze. Sally’s stomach jumped three times. They sat in silence until the sun reached the top of the sky and the clouds parted and the heat became too much to bear.

“Come on,” Sally said, rising to her feet, bowlegged and grunting. She held each of Colleen’s hands in her own and helped her to her feet. “Let’s go inside.”

“Jailbreak,” Colleen said.

“Yeah,” Sally said. “Jailbreak.”

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T H E A U T H O R

Mason James Cole is the pseudonym of an apparently mild-mannered conservative type who doesn't want his family and friends to know he writes stuff like this. His boring but lucrative job keeps him on the road five months out of the year, and that's when he watches scary movies, reads scary books, and writes scary stories. He smiles and nods through church every Sunday and secretly votes Green. He lives in Farmington, Utah.

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