

THE WALKING DEAD
RISE OF THE GOVERNOR

By

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&

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PART ONE
THE HOLLOW MEN

"There's nothing glorious in dying.
Anyone can do it."

-- Johnny Rotten

ONE

It occurs to Brian Blake as he huddles in the musty darkness, the terror constricting his chest, the pain throbbing in his knees: If only he possessed a *second* pair of hands, he could cover his *own* ears, and maybe block out the noise of human heads being demolished. Sadly, the only hands Brian currently owns are busy right now, covering the tiny ears of a little girl in the closet next to him.

The seven-year-old keeps shuddering in his arms, jerking at the intermittent *THWACK-GAHHHH-THUMP* outside the closet. Then comes the silence, broken only by the sticky sound of boot steps on bloody tile, and a flurry of angry whispers out in the vestibule.

Brian starts coughing again. He can't help it. For days he has been fighting this god damned cold, a stubborn blight on his joints and sinuses that he cannot shake. It happens to him every fall, when the Georgia days start getting dank and gloomy. The dampness gets into his bones, saps his energy, and steals his breath. And now he feels the pounding stab of a fever with each cough.

Doubling over in another hacking, wheezing fit, he keeps his hands pressed down on little Penny's ears as he coughs. He knows the sound of his rasping is attracting all kinds of attention outside the closet door, out in the convolutions of the house, but there's nothing he can do about it. He sees tracings of light with each cough - like tiny filigrees of fireworks across his blind pupils.

The closet -- barely four feet wide, and maybe three feet deep -- is as dark as an inkwell, and it reeks of mothballs, mouse droppings, and old cedar. Plastic coat-bags hang down in the darkness, brushing the sides of Brian's face. Brian's younger brother Philip told him it was okay to cough in the closet. In fact, Brian was free to cough his fucking head off - it would draw out the monsters - but Brian better not give his goddamn cold to Philip's little girl. If he did, Philip would crack *Brian's* head open.

The coughing fit passes.

Moments later, another pair of lumbering footsteps disturb the silence outside the closet -- another dead thing entering the kill zone. Brian squeezes his hands tighter against Penny's ears, and the child flinches at another rendition of Skull Splitting in D-Minor.

If asked to describe the racket outside the closet, Brian Blake would probably revert to his days as a failed music store entrepreneur and tell you that the head-cracking sounds are like a percussive symphony they might play in hell - like some trippy outtake from Edgard Varese or a druggy drum solo from John Bonham -- with repeating verses and choruses: The heavy breathing of humans... the shambling footsteps of another moving corpse... the whistle of an axe... the *thunk* of steel sinking into flesh...

...and finally, the big finale, the splat of moist, dead weight on the slimy parquet.

Another break in the action sends fever-chills down Brian's spine. The silence closes in again. Eyes now adjusted to the darkness, Brian sees the first shimmer of thick arterial blood seeping under the bottom of the door. It looks like motor oil. He gently yanks his niece away from the spreading puddle, pulling her back against the boots and umbrellas along the back wall.

The hem of Penny Blake's little denim dress touches the blood. She quickly pulls the fabric away, and frantically rubs at the stain, as if the very absorption of the blood will infect her somehow.

Another convulsive coughing fit doubles Brian over. He fights it. He swallows the broken glass of a sore throat and pulls the little girl into a full-on embrace. He doesn't know what to do or say. He wants to help his niece. He wants to whisper something reassuring to her but cannot think of a single reassuring thing to whisper.

The girl's father would know what to say. Philip would know. He always knows what to say. Philip Blake is the guy who says the things that everybody else *wishes* they had said. He says what needs to be said, and he does what needs to be done. Like right now. He's out there with Bobby and Nick, doing what needs to be done... while Brian hunkers here in the dark like a scared rabbit, wishing he knew what to say to his niece.

Considering the fact that Brian Blake is the oldest of the two siblings, it's odd how Brian has always been the runt. Barely five feet seven in his boot heels, Brian Blake is a raw-boned scarecrow of a man scarcely able to fill out his black peg-leg jeans and torn Weezer t-shirt. A mousey goatee, macramé bracelets, and a thatch of dark Ichabod Crane hair complete the

picture of a thirty-five year old Bohemian waif stuck in Peter Pan limbo, now kneeling in the mothball scented gloom.

Brian sucks in a hoarse breath and looks down at the doe-eyed Penny, her mute, horrified face ghostly in the darkness of the closet. The child has always been a quiet little girl, with an almost porcelain complexion, like that of a China doll, which has given her face an almost ethereal cast. But since her mother's death she has turned even further inward, becoming more wan and stoic, to the point of appearing almost translucent, with tendrils of raven black hair obscuring her huge eyes.

For the last three days, she has hardly said a word. Of course, they have been three *extraordinary* days -- and trauma works differently on children than it does on adults -- but Brian is worried that Penny is perhaps slipping into some kind of shock.

"It's gonna be okay, Kiddo," Brian whispers to her with a lame little cough as punctuation.

She says something without looking up at him. She mumbles it, staring down at the floor, a tear pearling on her dirty cheek.

"What was that, Pen?" Brian cradles her against him and wipes her tear.

She says something again, and again, and again, but not exactly to Brian. She says it more like a mantra, or a prayer, or an incantation: *It's never-ever going to be okay, never ever-ever-ever-ever.*

"Sshhhhh." He holds her head, pressing it gently against the folds of his t-shirt. He feels the damp heat of her face against his ribs. He covers her ears again as he hears the *THWACK* of another axe blade outside the closet, smashing through the membrane of a scalp, into the hard shell of a skull, through

the layers of dura, and into the pulpy gray gelatin of an Occipital lobe.

It makes a smacking noise like a baseball bat hitting a wet softball -- the ejaculate of blood like a mop head slapping the floor -- followed by a ghastly, wet thud. Oddly, that's the worse part for Brian: that hollow, moist, thump of a body landing on expensive ceramic tile. The tile is custom made for the house, with elaborate inlay and Aztec designs. It's a lovely house... or at least, it once was.

Again the noises cease.

Again the horrible dripping silence follows. Brian stifles a cough, holding it in like a firecracker that's about to pop, so he can better hear the minute changes in breathing outside the closet, the greasy footsteps shuffling through gore. But the place is dead silent now.

Brian feels the child seize up next to him - little Penny girding herself for another salvo of axe blows - but the silence stretches.

Inches away, the sound of a bolt clicking, and the closet doorknob turning, rashes Brian's body with gooseflesh. The door swings open.

"Okay, we're good." The baritone voice, whiskey-cured and smoky, comes from a man peering down into the recesses of the closet. Eyes blinking at the darkness, face shimmering with sweat, flush with the exertion of zombie disposal, Philip Blake holds a grue-slick axe in his workman's hand.

"You sure?" Brian utters.

Ignoring his brother, Philip gazes down at his daughter. "Everything's okay, Punkin, Daddy's okay."

"Are you sure?" Brian says with a cough.

Philip looks at his brother. "You mind covering your mouth, Sport?"

Brian wheezes, "You sure it's clear?"

"Punkin?" Philip Blake addresses his daughter tenderly, his faint southern drawl belying the bright, feral embers of violence just now fading in his eyes. "I'm gonna need y'all to stay right there for a minute. Awright? You stay right there until Daddy says it's okay to come out. You understand?"

With a slight nod, the pale little girl gives him a feeble gesture of understanding.

"C'mon, Sport," Philip urges his older brother out of the shadows. "Gonna need your help with the clean-up."

Brian struggles to his feet, pushing his way through the hanging overcoats.

He emerges from the closet and blinks at the harsh light of the vestibule. He stares and coughs and stares some more. For a brief moment, it looks as though the lavish entryway of the two-story Colonial, brightly lit by fancy copper chandeliers, is in the throes of being redecorated by a work crew afflicted by palsy. Great swaths of eggplant-purple spatters stain the teal green plaster walls. Rorschach patterns of black and crimson adorn the baseboards and moldings. Then the shapes on the floor register.

Six bodies lie akimbo in bloody heaps. Ages and genders are obscured by the wet carnage, the mottled, livid skin tones, and the misshapen skulls. The largest lies in a spreading pool of bile at the foot of the great circular staircase. Another one, perhaps the lady of the house, perhaps once a convivial hostess of peach cobbler and Southern hospitality, is now splayed across the lovely white parquet floor in a contorted mess, a stringer of wormy grey matter flagging from her breeched cranium.

Brian Blake feels his gorge rising, his throat involuntarily dilating.

"Okay, gentlemen, we got our work cut out for us," Philip is saying, addressing his two cronies, Nick and Bobby, as well as his brother, but Brian can barely hear over the sick thump of his own heartbeat.

He sees the other remains - over the last two days, Philip has started calling the ones they destroy "twice cooked pork" - strewn along the dark, burnished baseboards at the threshold of the living room. Maybe the teenage children who once lived here, maybe visitors who suffered the Southern inhospitality of an infected bite, these bodies lie in sunbursts of arterial spray. One of them, their dented head lying face down like a spilled soup pan, still pumps its scarlet fluids across the floor with the profusion of a breeched fire hydrant. A couple of others still have small hatchet blades embedded in their crania, sunk down to the hilt, like the flags of explorers triumphantly stuck into once-unattainable summits.

Brian's hand flies up to his mouth, as if he might stem the tide rising up his esophagus. He feels a tapping sensation on the top of his skull, as though a moth is ticking against his scalp. He looks up.

Blood drips from the overhead chandelier, a droplet landing on Brian's nose.

"Nick, why don't you go grab some of them tarps we saw earlier in the -"

Brian falls to his knees, hunches forward, and roars vomit across the parquet. The steaming flood of khaki-colored bile sluices across the tiles, mingling with the spoor of the fallen dead.

Tears burn Brian's eyes as he heaves four days of soul-sickness onto the floor.

* * *

Philip Blake lets out a tense sigh, the buzz of adrenaline still coursing through him. For a moment he makes no effort to go to his brother's side, but simply stands there, setting down his bloody axe, rolling his eyes. It's a miracle Philip doesn't have a groove worn into the tops of his eye sockets from all the eye rolling he's done over the years on his brother's account. But what else is Philip supposed to do? The poor son of bitch is family, and family is family... especially in off-the-scale times such as these.

The resemblance is sure there -- nothing Philip can do about *that*. A tall, rangy, sinewy man with the ropy muscles of a tradesman, Philip Blake shares the same dark features as his brother, the same dark almond eyes and coal black hair of their Mexican-American mother. Mama Rose's maiden name was Garcia, and her features had dominated the lineage over those of the boy's father, a big, coarse, alcoholic of Scots-Irish descent named Ed Blake. But Philip, three years younger than Brian, had gotten all the muscle.

He now stands over six feet tall in his faded jeans, work boots, and chambray shirt, with the Fu Manchu mustache and jailhouse tats of a biker; and he is about to move his imposing figure over to his retching brother, and maybe say something harsh, when he stops himself. He hears something he doesn't like coming from across the vestibule.

Bobby Marsh, an old high school pal of Philip's, stands near the base of the staircase, wiping an axe blade on his size XXL jeans. A portly thirty-two year old junior college dropout, his long greasy brown hair pulled back in a rattail, Bobby Marsh is not exactly obese, but definitely overweight, definitely the type of guy his Burke County High classmates

would call a butterball. He now giggles with nervous, edgy, belly-shivering laughter as he watches Brian Blake vomit. The giggling is colorless and hollow - a sort of tic - which Bobby cannot seem to control.

The anxious giggling had started three days ago when one of the first of the undead had lumbered out of a service bay at a gas station near the Augusta airport. Clad in blood soaked overalls, the grease monkey shuffled out of hiding with a trail of toilet paper on his heel, and the thing had tried to make a meal out of Bobby's fat neck before Philip had stepped in and clobbered the thing with a crow bar.

The discovery that day -- that a major blow to the head does the job quite nicely -- had led to more nervous chortling on Bobby's part - definitely a defense mechanism - with a lot of anxious chatter about it being "*something in the water, man, like the black-fucking-plague.*" But Philip didn't want to hear about reasons for this shit-storm then, and he sure doesn't want to hear about them now.

"Hey!" Philip addresses the heavy-set man. "You still think this is *funny?*"

Bobby's laughter dies.

On the other side of the room, near a window overlooking the dark expanse of a back yard, which is currently shrouded in night, a fourth figure watches uneasily. Nick Parsons, another friend from Philip's wayward childhood, is a compact, lean thirty-something with the kind of prep-school grooming and marine-cut hair of an eternal jock. The religious one of the bunch, Nick has taken the longest to get used to the idea of destroying things that were once human. Now his khakis and sneakers are stippled with blood, and his eyes burn with trauma, as he watches Philip approach Bobby.

"Sorry, man," Bobby mutters.

"My daughter's in there," Philip says, coming nose to nose with Marsh. The volatile chemicals of rage and panic and pain can instantly ignite in Philip Blake.

Bobby looks at the blood slick floor. "Sorry, sorry."

"Go get the tarps, Bobby."

Six feet away, Brian Blake, still on his hands and knees, expels the last of his stomach contents, and continues to dry-heave.

Philip goes over to his older brother, kneels by him. "Let it out."

"I'm - uh -" Brian croaks, sniffing, trying to form a complete thought.

Philip gently lays a big, grimy, calloused hand on his brother's hunched shoulders. "It's okay, Bro... just let it all out."

"I'm - s-sorry."

"It's alright."

Brian gets himself under control, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Y-you think you got all of them?"

"I do."

"You sure?"

"Yep."

"You searched... everywhere? In the basement and stuff?"

"Yes sir, we did. All the bedrooms... even the attic. Last one came out of hiding at the sound of that fucking cough, loud enough to wake the fucking dead. Teenage girl, tried to have one of Bobby's chins for lunch."

Brian swallows a raw, painful swallow. "These people... they... *lived* here."

Philip sighs. "Not anymore."

Brian manages to look around the room, then gazes up at his brother. Brian's face is wet with tears. "But they were like... a family."

Philip nods, and he doesn't say anything. He feels like giving his brother a shrug - *so fucking what* - but all he does is keep nodding. He's not thinking about the zombified family he just dispatched, or the implications of all the mind-numbing butchery he's already wreaked over the last three days -- slaughtering individuals who were recently soccer moms and mailmen and gas station attendants. Yesterday, Brian had gone off on some bullshit intellectual tangent about the difference between morals and ethics in this situation: morally, one should never kill, ever, but ethically, which is subtly different, one should maintain the policy of killing only if it's in self defense. But Philip doesn't see what they're doing as killing. You can't kill a thing that's already been killed. What you do is squash it like a bug, and move on, and stop *thinking* so much.

The fact is, right now, Philip isn't even thinking about the next move his little ragtag group will make -- which is probably going to be entirely up to him (he has become the *de facto* leader of this bunch, and he might as well face it). Right now, Philip Blake is focused on a single objective: Since the nightmare started less than seventy-two hours ago, and folks started turning - for reasons nobody has yet been able to figure out -- all that Philip Blake has been able to think about is protecting Penny. It was why he got the hell out of his hometown, Waynesboro, two days ago.

A small farming community on the eastern edge of central Georgia, the place had gone to hell quickly when folks had started dying and coming back. But it was Penny's safety that had ultimately convinced Philip to fly the coop. It was because of Penny he had enlisted the help of his old high school

buddies; and it was because of Penny he had set out for Atlanta, where, according to the news, refugee centers were being set up. It was all because of Penny. Penny is all that Philip Blake has left. She is the only thing keeping him going - the only salve on his wounded soul.

Long before this inexplicable epidemic had broken out, the void in Philip's heart would pang at 3:00 a.m on sleepless nights. That's the exact hour he had lost his wife - hard to believe it's been nearly four years now - on a rain-slick highway south of Athens. Sarah had been visiting a friend at the University of Georgia, and she'd been drinking, and she lost control of her car on a winding road in Wilkes County.

From the moment he had identified the body, Philip knew he would never be the same. He had no qualms about doing the right thing - taking on two jobs to keep Penny fed and clothed and cared for - but he would never be the same. Maybe that's why all this was happening. God's little gag. When the locusts come, and the river runs red with blood, the guy with the most to lose gets to the lead the pack.

"Doesn't matter who they were," Philip finally says to his brother. "Or *what* they were."

"Yeah... I guess you're right." By this point, Brian has managed to sit up, cross-legged now, taking deep wheezing breaths. He watches Bobby and Nick across the room, unrolling large canvas tarps and shaking open garbage bags. They begin rolling corpses, still dripping, into the tarps.

"Only thing that matters is we got this place cleaned out now," Philip says. "We can stay here tonight, and if we can score some gas in the morning, we can make it to Atlanta tomorrow."

"Doesn't make any sense though," Brian mutters now, glancing from corpse to corpse.

"What are you talking about?"

"Look at them."

"What?" Philip glances over his shoulder at the gruesome remains of the matriarch being rolled up in a tarp. "What about 'em?"

"It's just the family."

"So?"

Brian coughs into his sleeve, then wipes his mouth. "What I'm saying is... you got the mother, the father, four teenage kids... and that's like *it*."

"Yeah, so what?"

Brian looks up at Philip. "So, how the hell does something like this happen? They all... *turned together*? Did one of them get bitten and bring it back inside?"

Philip thinks about it for a moment - after all, he's still trying to figure out just exactly what is going on, too, how this madness works - but finally Philip gets tired of thinking about it and says, "C'mon, get off your lazy ass and help us."

It takes them about an hour to get the place cleaned up. Penny stays in the closet for the duration of the process. Philip brings her a stuffed animal from one of the kid's rooms, and tells her it won't be long before she can come out. Brian mops the blood, coughing fitfully, while the other three men drag the canvas-covered corpses -- two large and four smaller ones - out the back sliding doors and across the large cedar deck.

The late September night-sky above them is as clear and cold as a black ocean, a riot of stars shining down, taunting them with their impassive, cheerful twinkling. The breaths of the three men show in the darkness as they drag the bundles

across dew frosted planks. They carry pick-axes on their belts. Philip has a gun stuffed down the back of his belt. It's an old twenty-two Ruger that he bought at a flea market years ago, but nobody wants to rouse the dead with the bark of gunfire right now. They can hear the telltale drone of walking dead on the wind - garbled moaning sounds, shuffling footsteps - coming from somewhere in the darkness of the neighboring yards.

It's been an unusually nippy early-autumn in Georgia, and tonight the mercury is supposed to dip into the lower forties, perhaps even the upper thirties. Or at least that's what the local AM radio station claimed before it petered out in a gust of static. Up to this point in their journey, Philip and his crew have been monitoring TV, radio, and the Internet on Brian's Blackberry.

Amidst the general chaos, the news reports have been assuring people that everything is just peachy-keen - your trusty government is in control of the situation -- and this little bump in the road will be smoothed out in a matter of hours. Regular warnings chime in on civil defense frequencies, admonishing folks to stay indoors, and keep out of sparsely populated areas, and wash their hands frequently, and drink bottled water, and blah, blah, blah.

Of course, nobody has any answers. And maybe the most ominous sign of all is the increasing number of station failures. Thankfully, gas stations still have gas, grocery stores are still stocked, and electrical grids and stoplights and police stations and all the infrastructural paraphernalia of civilization seem to be hanging on.

But Philip worries that a loss of power will raise the stakes in unimaginable ways.

"Let's put 'em in the Dumpsters behind the garage," Philip says so softly he's almost whispering, dragging two canvas

bundles up to the wooden fence adjacent to the three-car garage. He wants to do this swiftly and silently. He doesn't want to attract any zombies. No fires, no sharp noises, no gunshots if he can help it.

There's a narrow gravel alley behind the seven-foot cedar fence, serving the rank and file of spacious garages lining the back yards. Nick drags his load over to the fence gate, a solid slab of cedar planks with a wrought iron handle. He drops the bundle and opens the gate.

An upright corpse is waiting for him on the other side of the gate.

"LOOK OUT, Y'ALL!" Bobby Marsh cries out.

"Shut the fuck up!" Philip hisses, reaching for the pick-axe on his belt, already half-way to the gate.

Nick recoils.

The zombie lurches at him, chomping, missing his left pectoral by millimeters, the sound of yellow dentures snapping impotently like the clicking of castanets - and in the moonlight, Nick can see that it's an elderly adult male in a tattered I-Zod sweater, golf slacks, and expensive cleats, the lunar gleam shining in its milky, cataract-filmed eyes: *somebody's grandfather.*

Nick gets one good glimpse at the thing before stumbling backward over his own feet and falling onto his ass on the lush carpet of Kentucky bluegrass. The dead golfer lumbers through the gap and onto the lawn when a flash of rusty steel arcs through the air.

The business end of Philip's pick-axe lands squarely in the monster's head, cracking the coconut-like shell of the old man's skull, piercing the dense, fibrous membrane of the *Dura Mater* and sinking into the gelatinous parietal lobe. It makes a sound like celery snapping and sends a clot of dark brackish fluid

into the air. The insectile verve on the grandfather's face instantly dims, like a cartoon whose projection system has just jammed.

The zombie folds to the ground with the inelegant deflation of an empty laundry sack.

The pick axe, still deeply embedded, pulls Philip forward and down. He yanks at it. The point is stuck. "Shut the motherfucking gate now, shut the gate, and do it quietly, goddamn it," Philip says, still affecting a frenzied stage whisper, slamming his left Chippewa steel-toed logger boot down on the breeched skull of the cadaver.

The other two men move as if in some synchronized dance, Bobby quickly dropping his load and rushing over to the gate. Nick struggles to his feet and backs away in a horrified stupor. Bobby quickly latches the wrought iron lever. It makes a hollow metallic rattle that is so noisy it echoes across the dark lawns.

At last, Philip wrenches the pick from the stubborn crag of the zombie's skull - it comes out with a soft smooch - and he is turning toward the remains of the family, his mind swimming with panic, when he hears something odd, something unexpected, coming from the house.

He looks up and sees the rear of the Colonial, the window glass lit brilliantly from within.

Brian is silhouetted behind the sliding glass door, tapping on the pane, motioning for Philip and the others to hurry back, right now. Urgency burns in Brian's expression. It has nothing to do with the dead golfer - Philip can tell - something is wrong.

Oh God, please let it not have to do with Penny.

Philip drops the pick-axe and crosses the lawn in seconds flat.

"What about the stiffbs?" Bobby Marsh is calling after Philip.

"Leave 'em!" Philip yells, vaulting up the deck steps and rushing to the sliding doors.

Brian is waiting with the slider ajar. "I gotta show you something, man," he says.

"What is it? Is it Penny? Is she okay?" Philip is out of breath as he slips back into the house. Bobby and Nick are coming across the deck, and they too slip into the warmth of the Colonial.

"Penny's fine," Brian says. He's holding a framed photograph. "She's fine. Says she doesn't mind staying in the closet a little while longer."

"Judas Priest, Brian, what the fuck?!" Philip catches his breath, his hands balled into fists.

"I gotta show you something. You want to stay here tonight?" Brian turns toward the sliding glass door. "Look. The family died together in here, right? All six of them? Six?"

Philip wipes his face. "Spit it out, man."

"Look. Somehow they all turned *together*. As a family, right?" Brian coughs, then points out at the six pale bundles lying near the garage. "There's six of them out there on the grass. Look. Mom and dad and four kids."

"So fucking *what*?"

Brian holds up a portrait in a frame, the family from a happier time, all smiling awkwardly, dressed in their starched Sunday best. "I found this on the piano," he says.

"And...?"

Brian points at the youngest child in the photo, a boy of eleven or twelve years old, little navy blue suit, blonde bangs, stiff smile.

Brian looks at his brother and says very gravely, "There's seven of them in the picture."