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The Dead Lands

Written by Benjamin Percy

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CHAPTER I

THE WALL IS A constant in Simon's life, everywhere he looks, impossible to miss. Yet it is as common as dust, as heat, as the sun's blazing path across the sky, and it is easy to go days, weeks, without noticing it. It is of uneven height but at its tallest point reaches a hundred feet from the ground. In some places it is made from plaster and mortared stone, and in others, heaps of metal, the many-colored cars of another time, crushed and welded together into massive bricks that bleed rust when it rains.

There are those who guard the wall, who every day climb ropes and rebar ladders to position themselves as sentries upon its flat top, wide enough for ten men to walk abreast. They carry knives at their sides and bows on their backs. They wear wide-rimmed brown hats. Their skin is sunburned and sand scoured and their eyes pale and pocketed from the dark-glassed goggles they wear while staring into the wastes surrounding them. From the ground, they appear specks, no bigger than birds.

There is life inside the wall. There is death outside the wall. That is what they, the citizens of the Sanctuary, have been told over the 150 years since it was erected. Here, in what was once downtown St. Louis, they have laws, elections, currency, farms, wells, markets, a hospital, a prison, even a museum that offers the vestiges of the lost world. But outside—in the Dead Lands—in the sun-washed sandy reaches of the desert, among the dried wigs of sagebrush, the pines that twist upward like tormented souls, the sunken grocery stores and corroded gas pumps and crumbling weed-choked subdivisions, there are nightmares. And now someone is on the way to face the nightmares alone.

He can hear the drumbeats of the death parade echoing through the Sanctuary. A few minutes ago the sun sank below the wall.

Twilight is approaching, the end of the day and the end of a life, the traditional time for the police to escort their worst offenders to the execution site—through the gates, beyond the wall, to the altar.

Shadows drape the streets, but the last light still flames the tops of the highest buildings. The Dome—the home of the mayor, once the capitol building—glows like a half-moon against the paling sky.

Simon hurries to the gates. Not because he cares who has been sentenced to die, and not because he wants to witness the spectacle of the parade, but because others do. The roads and pathways there will be full of people. Distracted people. Distracted people who won't notice a hand slipping into their purse or pocket.

He crosses a wooden bridge that spans a sewage canal. He zigzags through a garden of agave, its serrated leaves biting at his ankles. Sotol and prickly pear and date palms and even a few gnarled cherry trees. He pauses briefly to pluck a handful of fruit and pop them into his mouth before starting on his way again. The cherries are shrunk and bitter and he sucks on them while darting down an alley busy with trash and rats and lean-tos and a VW minibus that has been converted to a shelter. This leads him to the central avenue, a wide, cobblestoned thoroughfare jammed with people. Some wear burlap and cotton and wool stitched from fresh materials. Some wear the leftovers of the world before—hoodies, jerseys, jeans, sneakers, boots—decayed polyester and threadbare denim patched with leather or plastic squares. Some paint their lips and their eyelids. Some wear necklaces that rattle with teeth and keys and bottle caps. Many are deformed, with shrunk arms or six-fingered hands or ears that look like babies' fists or slitted noses or blind white eyes. Many are tumored and blotched with burns and cancers from the sun. Many of the men have beards and many of the women long braids with feathers nested in them. Aside from the occasional bright flare of orange or red or yellow, most of what they wear is the color of stone and sand, shades of gray and brown. They all wear hats. And all of their mouths are raw and chapped from lack of water.

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Simon spits out the cherries' stones and joins them. He is short and slender for his age, so he is able to slip through the crush of bodies. He is good at this, sneaking his way through things—his body through buildings, his hands into pockets and drawers. His mousy hair and narrow face make him unnoticeable, forgettable, which suits him perfectly.

A jingle cart rolls by, dragged by a man with a mossy beard that reaches his waist. Dust rises in a cloud behind him, the dust that is everywhere. The cart—a welded collection of rusted license plates anchored to two different-size wheels—is covered with tiny bells that chime at every rut in the road. The man calls out his wares, medicines and candies, medicines and candies. No one pays him any attention. All eyes are on the procession worming its way down the avenue.

The deputies are dressed in black—broad-rimmed black hats, black shirts with a star on the breast tucked into black jeans tucked into black boots with sharp silver tips—their standard uniform. They wear holsters—for machetes, not for guns, since all firearms were long ago outlawed in the Sanctuary.

The first man carries a drum, a yellow hide stretched across a broad round frame. A skull is painted across its face and he slams a mallet against it. He walks in rhythm to the beat, every other step intoned by a deep, hollow bong. He is followed by two women with torches, the smoke trailing behind them, threading together in a black cloud that hangs over their prisoner. He is obscured by the smoke and by the crowd. He hunches over, his hair masking his face, his wrists and ankles bound by chains that rattle with his every trudging step. He is followed by two more deputies, who shove him along whenever he slows.

This is early summer. The day was as hot as an oven and twilight has brought little relief. Simon tries to breathe through his mouth. The odor of so many unwashed bodies unsettles his stomach. He jostles, trips, tickles, blows in an ear, making people move, and when they move, he takes advantage of their momentum and distraction and filches coins from pockets. Everyone's clothes are

coated with dust, so that when they move little puffs rise off them. A girl watches him sneak a loose ring off a woman's pinky. She is clutching a naked plastic doll with no eyes and half a head of hair. He smiles at her and brings a finger to his lips and she smiles back and hides behind her father's leg.

Everyone peers over each other's shoulders, trying to glimpse the prisoner. The drum sounds—again and again—and over its tolling a voice calls out loudly for them to move aside, move along. The crowd does as the man says, separating and then converging around the deputies once they pass by.

The voice belongs to Rickett Slade, their sheriff. He wears the same uniform as his officers. He is a massive man, thickset, with broad shoulders, a head like a pocked boulder, and hands the size and texture of rough pine planks. His eyes are too close together and lost beneath baggy folds of flesh. What little hair he has ringing his head is as pale and downy as corn silk. "Make way," he says. "Make way for the dead man who walks."

Simon slips a bracelet off a wrist, unclasps a necklace, some made of gold, some made of plastic, all worth something, even if only a trade at the bazaar, a brick of cheese, a loaf of bread. His pockets are nearly full and he has pushed his way to the front of the crowd when he looks up and sees the prisoner, really notices him for the first time. The jowly cheeks. The nose and cheeks brightly filamented with capillaries. The same mousy brown hair as his own. It is a face he recognizes. It is a face others in the crowd recognize, several of them whispering his name, Samuel.

His father.

Simon is familiar with death. It is impossible not to be in the Sanctuary. He has witnessed the lashings at the whipping posts. He has dodged the knives that flash in the streets and bars. He has seen his pale-skinned, rib-slatted mother laid out on a slab of stone with her breasts scarred over, both removed, though not in time to stop the tumors bulging like toads from the glands beneath her neck. But that doesn't stop him from feeling a dagger jab of dread. His father is being marched to his death.

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His father is a drunk, and when he is drunk he makes loud pronouncements about everything from the unfairness of the rations to the foolishness of their new mayor. He often spirals into dark moods that round his hands into fists, sharpen his words into blades. For this reason, the two of them haven't spoken much over the past year, ever since Simon took to the streets.

There was a time when they used to get along—when his father would wrestle with him or tell scary stories or play Billy Joel and Beatles songs on his guitar, when they would work together on the small garden that grew in their windowsill boxes. That was before Simon's mother died, before his father tried to purify his grief with gallons and gallons of tequila. On more than one occasion, after getting slapped across the face, knocked to the ground, or shoved in a closet, Simon wished him dead. Now the wish will come true and he wishes he could take it back.

Beyond the wall, hairless sand wolves roam with eyes as yellow as candle flame. There are giant spiders, with trapdoors netted over and dusted with sand. Snakes longer and wider than any man's arm, with fangs that can pierce leather. Big cats with claws that can shred metal like paper. Some say the flu—the cough and fever that brought about the ruin of the world—still hides in the throats of caves, in the closets of old buildings, riding the breeze like the spores of some black flower that will take root in your lungs, though most believe it perished alongside everything else.

A ranger once told Simon about a dead deer, found in the outlying forest, that looked as though it had been peeled open and turned inside out. The same fate he met a few weeks later, his head torn off and his belly emptied and his limbs gnashed down to bones. Beyond the wall, wildness took over, things with big claws and sacs of poison lay in wait. This—Simon can hear in the voices that tremble with fear and sadistic anticipation—is what awaits his father.

People begin to cry out and pull back, mobbing away from the gates, knowing they'll soon open, afraid of what might come hur-

rying out of the twilight. The sharp, reedy call of a bone whistle precedes the steel arm being lifted from its hangers. The double doors—made from logs reinforced with metal—are heaved open and the deputies continue into the gloom. They will take his father to the altar in the woods, a stone platform to which he will be chained.

Some people linger with ghoulish fascination, while others disperse, off to pursue whatever business remains for them this evening. The farmers in the stables milking heifers, butchering pigs. The tailors shearing sheep and spinning wool into yarn or treating the hides of animals with chemicals that bleach their hands a cancerous yellow. The tattooists inking designs onto arms and necks and faces. The whores spreading their legs on flea-specked mattresses. The bartenders filling tumblers full of eye-watering, throat-burning liquor. The jingle carts and pharmacists hawking snake poison and medicinal jellies and pills for coughs, kidney stones, genital infections. The vendors in the old warehouse selling clothes, pottery, tools, fruit, charred meat on a stick, whatever scraps the rangers bring back from their excursions beyond the wall: cracked and faded Happy Meal toys, dented espresso machines, football helmets with rotted-out padding, shattered tablets, laptops with sand spilling out of their keyboards. They are eager to return to normalcy—opening a window, tying a shoe—while his father will be torn to pieces.

Simon remains fixed in place. His eyes are on the wall. As if it has betrayed him. Betrayed his father. There are those whose jobs concern mending and fortifying the wall. That was his father's trade. His arms were crosshatched with cuts and his hands colored with bruises and caked with cement. He broke his leg once, after a fall from the upper reaches of the wall, and he healed oddly so that he seemed to drag himself about more than walk. And now the man who spent his life repairing and making fast the thing that holds the danger outside is now the man thrust from its safety.

The bird perches on the wall. It observes the prisoner hauled away, the crowd scattering, and then, with a creaking snap of its wings, it takes flight. It appears to be an owl, though not like any other in the world, made of metal and only a little larger than a man's fist.

Torches flare up all around the Sanctuary to fight the intruding night, and the owl's bronze feathers catch the light brightly when it flies from the wall, then over the gardens, the stables, the ropes of smoke that rise from chimneys and forges and ovens, the twisting streets busy with carts and dogs and bodies that stumble out of doorways. The wind blows cinders and dried bits of grass up into dust devils, and the owl blasts through them.

The skyscrapers and high-rises needle upward from the center of the Sanctuary—Old Town, they call it—and the mechanical owl darts between the canyons of them now. Some of them still have windows, but most are open-air, so that they appear like a vast and rotting honeycomb inside which people crouch like brown grubs.

The owl's wings whirr. Gears snap and tick beneath its breast. Within its glass eyes, an aperture contracts or expands depending on whether the owl casts its gaze at light or shadow.

The remains of downtown St. Louis have been built over and repurposed to the degree that someone who stepped across the centuries would not recognize one for the other, everything sunken and leaning and crumbling and patched together in a way that appears accidental, the city covered with a dusty skin and seeming in this way and many others a dying thing, its windows and archways hollowed eyes, its streets curving yellowed arteries, its buildings haggard bones, with its footsteps and hammer strokes and slammed doors like the beating of an arrhythmic heart and the many swarming bodies like black mites feeding on whatever might be scrapped, salvaged.

Turbines spike the tops of many buildings. They are made from rescued metal and they creak and groan and spin rustily in the wind that never stops blowing. They feed into unreliable wiring

that snakes through some of the buildings so that lights sputter on and off and empty sockets burn red and sometimes flare into fires. And the lives of the people here are energized in a similar manner—frayed and sizzling, capable at any given moment of burning out.

The signs are still there—Supercuts, Subway, McDonald's, Curves, Chili's, Chipotle, LensCrafters—though they are hard to spot, their colored plastic fractured and lichen spotted and dulled to the yellowy shade of an old man's teeth.

What was once a sandwich shop is now a blacksmith and welding studio. From its doorway steps a man who holds a clamp that grips a red-hot square of metal—maybe a door hinge or hoe blade—and he dunks it into a bucket of horse piss and follows the steam trailing upward and through it sees the owl blur overhead like a comet.

What was once a salon is now a dentist's office. In the corner a dryer chair sits like a dead astronaut. The studs grimace through the places where the drywall has rotted away. Near the open window, a dentist peers into a mouth of butter-colored teeth, one of them black, and, just when he secures it with his pliers, the owl flashes past his shop and he startles backward with the tooth uprooted and his patient screaming in his chair.

On a balcony an old woman lounges in a threadbare lawn chair that nearly sinks her bottom to the ground. She wears stockings that are wrinkled at the knees and rotted through to reveal her bony ankles. Her feet are stuffed into an ancient pair of laceless Nikes, the soles as hard as concrete. She drinks foul tea from a dented thermos. Above her hangs a wind chime of old cell phones that clatter in the breeze. When the owl buzzes by her, she shrieks and the thermos falls thirty feet before clanging and splattering the street below.

She knows whom the owl belongs to. They all do. And they fear it as they fear him.

The museum—once city hall—is one of the grandest buildings in the Sanctuary, six stories high, with a vaulted red-slate roof and marble floors and walls made of sandstone. It has the dark-

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windowed, stained-stone grandeur of a haunted mansion. Swallows squawk and scatter where they appear as scratches against the purple-black expanse of sky. The owl skitters to a stop on one of the upper windowsills. It approaches the glass pane and taps its beak.

In the street below, a few people pause to point at and whisper about the owl. “Magic,” some say. “Freak,” others say.

A richly patterned threadbare rug covers the floor. The walls are hidden behind bookshelves weighed down with leather tomes and yellowed maps carrying the geographies of unexplored worlds and an ancient US flag that bears seventeen stars, its red stripes faded to brown, its blues to black. The ceiling is angled with exposed timbers. Despite the heat of the day, a log flames in the fireplace, flanked by two stone horses made from onyx. The man seated at the desk is always cold. He wears an oversize gray wool cardigan. His hand now gathers the fabric tighter around his neck.

This is Lewis Meriwether, the curator. He is clean-shaven, unlike so many men, his milk-pale skin offset by the black hair sprouting stiffly from his head. He looks older than his thirty-three years, his posture slouched from all his time at his desk, his face long, with flattened cheekbones and a nose as sharp as the quill he keeps next to his inkpot. His eyes are blue but red rimmed. They bulge from all his time spent reading. He has been here all day and was here all of last night. He rarely sleeps, prefers night to day. The sun gives him headaches and burns his fair skin and drags all the people from their beds. He has never been fond of people. And they have never been fond of him. They whisper about him when they pass through the museum, startle from him when he makes a rare appearance, the wizard in the tower, the hermit in the cave.

Lanterns are lit throughout the room. The logs smolder in the

fireplace like dying suns. His desk is a lacquered red, its sides and legs carved into so many dragons twisting into each other. A map is unrolled before him, weighed down with a teacup, a yellow agate, a chipped plate carrying a black heel of bread, a candle burned down to a blistered nub. Every now and then he stirs a spoon through a bowl of cold corn mash. Otherwise he studies the map with a bone-handled magnifying glass that roams a ring of light across the brittle, yellowed paper. Here are snowcapped mountains, lush forests, rivers as thick and blue as a lizard's tongue—a landscape alien to the one he knows, what lies beyond the wall. His whole life he has spent dreaming of distant worlds. They call to him. And though he might imagine himself elsewhere, he feels safest and most comfortable here, at his desk, a voyeur.

His focus is so deep that he does not hear the owl tapping repeatedly at the glass. Nor does he hear the door open, the footsteps thudding across the floor. They belong to a muscular girl with short hair, square bangs. This is Ella, his aide. At the edge of his desk she stacks a tall armful of papers, brittle and torn and tied with twine, mismatched in size and font, some the computer print-outs of another time, others the remains of books that have lost their binding. When Lewis does not address her, she says, "What you asked for. From the archives."

He lifts a hand to acknowledge or dismiss her.

She makes no move to leave. Her mouth tightens into a bud.

He sighs through his nose and sets down the magnifying glass with a click and looks at her with his eyebrows raised in a question he doesn't bother asking.

"My hands are paper cut. And blistered from the lantern I've been carrying." She holds them up as evidence. "It took two hours to find what you wanted. I've been gone *two hours*. For two hours' worth of work, you'd think I deserved a thank-you. Wouldn't you think that?"

His fingers are as long as knitting needles. They lift the magnifying glass again, but before he peers through it, his eyes settle on

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the window, where the owl waits. “You may leave now.” He spits out his words like chips of ice.

She nods at his plate, his bowl. “You haven’t eaten.”

“I said you may leave. Now. Thank you.”

When the door clicks closed behind her, he rises from his desk and approaches the window. He lifts the latch and holds out his arm for the owl to climb upon. He can hear the ticking of its cogged wheels, the creaking twist of its knobs and gears, beneath which he detects a grinding that might be dust, the dust that creeps into everything. Later, he will have to unscrew the owl, brush it out, wipe clean and oil its guts.

But first he draws the curtains. The room falls into deeper shadow. He holds up his arm, as if to send the owl into flight. Instead it goes rigid. Something clicks and snaps inside it. Its eyes glow, circles of light. A milky projection spills quaveringly across the wall. Without expression he studies the march of the death parade, the crowd of people surrounding it, until the owl’s eyes dim and the projection sputters off and leaves him in darkness.



Simon hates what his father has become, but he doesn’t hate him. They share good memories. They share a complicated love. They share the same blood. And this is what compels him to do what he does next.

He brags that he knows his way around any door and into any room in the Sanctuary. Their new mayor talks often about how everyone needs to do their part, now more than ever, contribute to the common good, specialize in a trade, and Simon likes to think that this is his role: he is a thief, the very best of thieves. Light-fingered and considerate. He doesn’t hurt anyone, not like some brute in an alleyway. And he never leaves behind a mess—splintering a door, upending a drawer—never takes more than needs to be taken, redistributing wealth.

But what he never brags about—what he never tells anyone—is

that not only can he sneak his way into any corner of the Sanctuary; he can also sneak out.

His father is the one who told him about the sewers, the many tunnels that run beneath the ground, all of the entries cemented over. For safety, it was said. So that nothing could get in. “And so that no one, not a one of us, can get out of this reeking pit,” his father said. He was always saying things like this, calling the Sanctuary a prison, the politicians its wardens.

It was in the museum that Simon found the passage. He liked to go there sometimes—after hours, when no one could follow him around and yell at him for getting too close, for touching the artwork and artifacts. He liked to touch. But he never stole from the one place that belonged to everyone. Late at night he would crawl through a window and wander the many long, high-ceilinged rooms and put his face right up to the paintings, run his fingers along the brushstrokes. He would duck under the ropes to an exhibit—petting the scaled spine of an alligator, clacking his fingers across the keyboard of a dead-eyed computer, climbing into the Toyota on display to twist its many knobs and wrap his hands around the steering wheel. One time he fell asleep inside a covered wagon exhibit.

People said Lewis—the thin, strange man Simon saw sometimes at a distance—kept company with the devil. They said he studied black magic. They said he knew everything that ever happened and would happen. They said nothing escaped his notice in the Sanctuary. The owl was one of many spies, the rats and bats and cockroaches also in his service. Simon did not believe them enough to stay away from the museum, but he believed them enough to stay away from his quarters on the upper level. He looked often over his shoulder and one time startled at the sight of a lantern floating down the staircase, a figure descending and speaking softly, maybe talking to himself or maybe uttering some incantation.

Simon ran then, bolted down to the basement, a vast storage area filled with wooden boxes, draped paintings, dust-cloaked

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specimens. He hid there for hours. A faint dripping caught his attention and he found in the floor a grate—and beyond the grate, a metal ladder that descended into darkness.

It was several weeks before he gained the courage to return and wander the tunnels below—and several weeks more before he discovered another grate with moonlight coursing through it. He climbed up to find himself outside the Sanctuary, along some ruined street where houses and storefronts had collapsed upon themselves and trees rose through blisters in the asphalt. He outsourced his thieving then. As if he was a ranger. From buildings and cars he pirated metals, plastics, leathers, to then pawn to vendors at the bazaar. If anyone ever asked where he came upon such a thing—a toaster, a phone, a trumpet, DVDs, a plastic tote full of eyeliner and brick-hard foundation, things that often had no value outside of curiosity—he would say he found it. That's all. He found it.

Just as he now finds his father. Chained and kneeling at the altar. Simon has been here before, what he believes to be some sort of town square, the altar at its center once a fountain, with the crumbled faces of children as spouts. The stone is painted with the blood of those chained here before his father.

At first Simon thinks it is too late. His father's skin appears gray and waxen in the moonlight. His head hangs low. Then Simon sees his chest rise and fall, hears a wheeze. He is sleeping or weeping. Weeping, Simon discovers when he climbs the altar and his father raises his head and widens his damp eyes and says, "Simon? No. No. What are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm here to save you."

"You shouldn't. You can't." There is no venom in his voice, none of the nastiness that made Simon leave him, just exhaustion, sadness, worry.

His father continues to protest as Simon examines his wrists, assessing the locks that hold him in place so tightly that his fingers are cold and lifeless. Simon keeps a thin knife with a hooked tip at his belt. He uses it now to pick at one of the keyholes at his father's wrist, prodding and twisting, feeling for the lever, listening for the

click. He is well practiced at this, but it still takes a long three minutes before the one hand, his right hand, falls free.

His father's wrist is bloodied and he cries out briefly at the cramps wracking him. Then he throws an arm around his son. Simon struggles against him, but his father has always been a big man and has put on even more weight from his drinking. Simon heaves but his father clings to him—not fighting him, the boy comes to realize, but hugging him.

“Dad! Quit it. There's no time for this.”

“Shh. It's too late, son.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can't you hear?” Both their bodies still for a moment. Then his father leans in, his mouth at Simon's ear, so that the whisper sounds like a shout, “Do you hear it?”

Simon listens. The adrenaline coursing through him creates a barely traceable hum at the edge of his hearing. At first that is the only sound. He studies the black buildings and the black trees and the blacker shadows between them. The wind rises and falls, as if the night is breathing. The branches murmur. Then comes a snap, a stick underfoot. Gravel crunches.

Something is coming. No, not one thing, but many, he realizes, as more sounds crackle and whisper and thud out in the darkness. Simon brings the knife to his father's other wrist and hurriedly stabs at the lock.

His father knocks away the knife. “You need to go,” he says—and then, “Please, son.” The desperate kindness in his voice is impossible to ignore. “Please. *Go*. Now.”

Simon wants to stay. He wants to fight. But his father pushes him and he stumbles away from the altar just as something hump-backed and four legged creeps into the square. The moon has sunk from sight, the night now lit by stars alone, and he cannot make out anything more than that: a hunched darkness, as if the night has congealed into a figure.

“Go!” his father says, and Simon finally listens, hurrying away as a second and then third creature join the first.

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“Here I am!” his father is yelling. “Over here!” Rattling the chains and whooping, making as much noise as possible to distract from Simon’s escape.

The yelling soon gives way to screaming. Simon runs. He cannot stop the tears that make the spaces between stars blur and the sky appear to gloss over with a phantasm.