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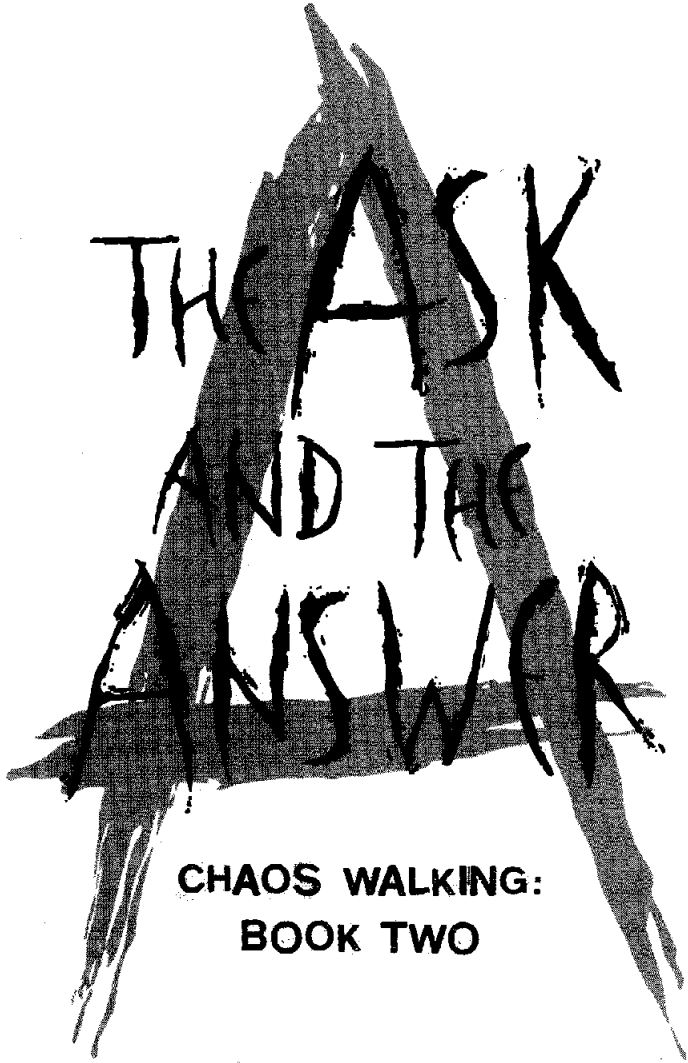
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PATRICK NESS



CHAOS WALKING:
BOOK TWO

WALKER
BOOKS

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THE END

"YOUR NOISE REVEALS YOU, TODD HEWITT."

A voice–

In the darkness–

I blink open my eyes. Everything is shadows and blur and it feels like the world's spinning and my blood is too hot and my brain is clogged and I can't think and it's dark–

I blink again.

Wait–

No, *wait*–

Just now, just *now* we were in the square–

Just now she was in my arms–

She was *dying* in my arms–

"Where is she?" I spit into the dark, tasting blood, my voice croaking, my Noise rising like a sudden hurricane, high and red and furious. "*WHERE IS SHE?*"

"I will be the one doing the asking here, Todd."

That voice.

His voice.

Somewhere in the dark.

Somewhere behind me, somewhere unseen.

Mayor Prentiss.

I blink again and the murk starts to turn into a vast room, the only light coming from a single window, a wide circle up high and far away, its glass not clear but coloured into shapes of New World and its two circling moons, the light from it slanting down onto me and nothing else.

"*What have you done with her?*" I say, loud, blinking against fresh blood trickling into my eyes. I try to reach up to clear it away but I find my hands are tied behind my back and panic rises in me and I struggle against the binds and my breathing speeds up and I shout again, "*WHERE IS SHE?*"

A fist comes from nowhere and punches me in the stomach.

I lean forward into the shock of it and realize I'm tied to a wooden chair, my feet bound to its legs, my shirt gone somewhere up on a dusty hillside and as I'm throwing up my empty stomach I notice there's carpet beneath me, repeating the same pattern of New World and its moons, over and over and over, stretching out for ever.

And I'm remembering we were in the square, in the square where I'd run, holding her, carrying her, telling her to stay alive, stay alive till we got safe, till we got to Haven so I could save her–

But there *weren't* no safety, no safety at all, there was just *him* and his men and they took her from me, they *took* her from my arms–

"You notice that he does not ask, *Where am I?*" says the Mayor's voice, moving out there, somewhere. "His first words are, *Where is she?*, and his Noise says the same. Interesting."

My head's throbbing along with my stomach and I'm waking up some more and I'm remembering I *fought* them, I fought them when they took her till the butt of a gun smashed against my temple and knocked me into blackness–

I swallow away the tightness in my throat, swallow away the panic and the fear–

Cuz this is the end, ain't it?

The end of it all.

The Mayor has me.

The Mayor has her.

"If you hurt her–" I say, the punch still aching in my belly. Mr Collins stands in front of me, half in shadow, Mr Collins who farmed corn and cauliflower and who tended the Mayor's horses and who stands over me now with a pistol in a holster, a rifle slung round his back and a fist rearing up to punch me again.

"She seemed quite hurt enough already, Todd," the Mayor says, stopping Mr Collins. "The poor thing."

My fists clench in their bindings. My Noise feels lumpy and half-battered but it still rises with the memory of Davy Prentiss's gun pointed at us, of her falling into my arms, of her bleeding and gasping–

And then I make it go even redder with the feel of my own fist landing on Davy Prentiss's face, of Davy Prentiss falling from his horse, his foot caught in the stirrup, dragged away like so much trash.

"Well," the Mayor says, "that explains the mysterious whereabouts of my *son*."

And if I didn't know better, I'd say he sounded almost *amused*.

But I notice the only way I can tell this is from the sound of his voice, a voice sharper and smarter than any old Prentisstown voice he might once have had, and that the nothing I heard coming from him when I ran into Haven is still a big nothing in whatever room this is and it's matched by a big nothing from Mr Collins.

They ain't got Noise.

Neither of 'em.

The only Noise here is mine, bellering like an injured calf.

I twist my neck to find the Mayor but it hurts too much to turn very far and all I can tell is that I'm sitting in the single beam of dusty, coloured sunlight in the middle of a room so big I can barely make out the walls in the far distance.

And then I do see a little table in the darkness, set back just far enough so I can't make out what's on it.

Just the shine of metal, glinting and promising things I don't wanna think about.

"He still thinks of me as Mayor," his voice says, sounding light and amused again.

"It's President Prentiss now, boy," grunts Mr Collins. "You'd do well to remember that."

"What have you done with her?" I say, trying to turn again, this way and that, wincing at the pain in my neck. "If you *touch* her, I'll–"

"You arrive in my town this very morning," interrupts the Mayor, "with nothing in your possession, not even the shirt on your back, just a girl in your arms who has suffered a terrible accident–"

My Noise surges. "It was no *accident*–"

"A very bad accident indeed," continues the Mayor, his voice giving the first hint of the impayshunce I heard when we met in the square. "So very bad that she is near death and here is the boy who we have spent so much of our time and energy trying to find, the boy who has caused us so much trouble, offering himself up to us *willingly*, offering to do anything we wish if we just *save the girl* and yet when we try to do just that–"

"Is she all right? Is she safe?"

The Mayor stops and Mr Collins steps forward and backhands me across the face. There's a long moment as the sting spreads across my cheek and I sit there, panting.

Then the Mayor steps into the circle of light, right in front of me.

He's still in his good clothes, crisp and clean as ever, as if there ain't a man underneath there at all, just a walking talking block of ice. Even Mr Collins has sweat marks and dirt and the smell you'd expect but not the Mayor, no.

The Mayor makes you look like yer nothing but a mess that needs cleaning up.

He faces me, leans down so he's looking into my eyes.

And then he gives me an asking, like he's only curious.

"What is her name, Todd?"

I blink, surprised. "What?"

"What is her name?" he repeats.

Surely he must know her name. Surely it must be in my Noise–

"You know her name," I say.

"I want you to tell me."

I look from him to Mr Collins, standing there with his arms crossed, his silence doing nothing to hide a look on his face that would happily pound me into the ground.

"One more time, Todd," says the Mayor lightly, "and I would very much like for you to answer. What is her name? This girl from across the worlds."

"If you know she's from across the worlds," I say, "then you must know her name."

And then the Mayor smiles, actually *smiles*.

And I feel more afraid than ever.

"That's not how this works, Todd. How this works is that I ask and you answer. Now. What is her name?"

"Where is she?"

"What's her name?"

"Tell me where she is and I'll tell you her name."

He sighs, as if I've let him down. He nods once to Mr Collins, who steps forward and punches me again in the stomach.

"This is a simple transaction, Todd," the Mayor says, as I gag onto the carpet. "All you have to do is tell me what I want to know and this ends. The choice is yours. Genuinely, I have no wish to harm you further."

I'm breathing heavy, bent forward, the ache in my gut making it difficult to get enough air in me. I can feel my weight pulling at the bonds on my wrists and I can feel the blood on my face, sticky and drying, and I look out bleary-eyed from

my little prison of light in the middle of this room, this room with no exits–

This room where I'm gonna die–

This room–

This room where she ain't.

And something in me chooses.

If this is it, then something in me decides.

Decides not to say.

"You know her name," I say. "Kill me if you want but you know her name already."

And the Mayor just watches me.

The longest minute of my life passes with him watching me, reading me, seeing that I mean it.

And then he steps to the little wooden table.

I look to see but his back's hiding what he's doing. I hear him fiddling with things on top of it, a *thunk* of metal scraping against wood.

"*I'll do anything you want,*" he says and I reckernize he's aping my own words back at me. "*Just save her and I'll do anything you want.*"

"I ain't afraid of you," I say, tho my Noise says otherwise, thinking of all the things that could be on that table. "I ain't afraid to die."

And I wonder if I mean it.

He turns to me, keeping his hands behind his back so I can't see what he's picked up. "Because you're a man, Todd? Because a man isn't afraid to die?"

"Yeah," I say. "Cuz I'm a man."

"If I'm correct, your birthday is not for another fourteen days."

"That's just a number." I'm breathing heavy, my stomach flip-flopping from talking like this. "It don't mean *nothing*. If I was on Old World, I'd be–"

"You ain't on Old World, *boy*," Mr Collins says.

"I don't believe that's what he means, Mr Collins," the Mayor says, still looking at me. "Is it, Todd?"

I look back and forth twixt the two of 'em. "I've killed," I say. "I've killed."

"Yes, I believe you've killed," says the Mayor. "I can see the shame of it all over you. But the asking is who? *Who* did you kill?" He steps into the darkness outside the circle of light, whatever he picked up from the table still hidden as he walks behind me. "Or should I say *what*?"

"I killed Aaron," I say, trying to follow him, failing.

"Did you, now?" His lack of Noise is an awful thing, especially when you can't see him. It's not like the silence of a girl, a girl's silence is still active, still a living thing that makes a shape in all the Noise that clatters round it.

(I think of her, I think of her silence, the ache of it)

(I don't think of her name)

But with the Mayor, however he's done it, however he's made it so he and Mr Collins don't got Noise, it's like it's nothing, like a dead thing, no more shape nor Noise nor life in the world than a stone or a wall, a fortress you ain't never gonna conquer. I'm guessing he's reading my Noise but how can you tell with a man who's made himself of stone?

I show him what he wants anyway. I put the church under the waterfall at the front of my Noise. I put up all the truthful fight with Aaron, all the struggle and the blood, I put me fighting him and beating him and knocking him

to the ground, I put me taking out my knife.

I put me stabbing Aaron in the neck.

"There's truth there," says the Mayor. "But is it the whole truth?"

"It is," I say, raising my Noise loud and high to block out anything else he might hear. "It's the truth."

His voice is still amused. "I think you're lying to me, Todd."

"I ain't!" I practically shout. "I done what Aaron wanted! I murdered him! I became a man by yer own laws and you can have me in yer army and I'll do whatever you want, just tell me what you've done with her!"

I see Mr Collins notice a sign from behind me and he steps forward again, fist back and–

(I can't help it)

I jerk away from him so hard I drag the chair a few inches to the side–

(shut up)

And the punch never falls.

"Good," says the Mayor, sounding quietly pleased. "Good." He begins to move again in the darkness. "Let me explain a few things to you, Todd," he says. "You are in the main office of what was formerly the Cathedral of Haven and what yesterday became the Presidential Palace. I have brought you into my home in the hope of helping you. Helping you see that you are mistaken in this hopeless fight you put up against me, against us."

His voice moves behind Mr Collins–

His voice–

For a second it feels like he's not talking out loud–

Like he's talking right in my head–

Then it passes.

"My soldiers should arrive here tomorrow afternoon," he says, still moving. "You, Todd Hewitt, will first tell me what I ask of you and then you will be true to your word and you will assist me in our creation of a new society."

He steps into the light again, stopping in front of me, his hands still behind his back, whatever he picked up still hidden.

"But the process I want to begin here, Todd," he says, "is the one where you learn that I am not your enemy."

I'm so surprised I stop being afraid for a second.

Not my enemy?

I open my eyes wide.

Not my enemy?

"No, Todd," he says. "Not your enemy."

"Yer a murderer," I say, without thinking.

"I am a general," he says. "Nothing more, nothing less."

I stare at him. "You killed people on yer march here. You killed the people of Farbranch."

"Regrettable things happen in wartime, but that war is now over."

"I saw you shoot them," I say, hating how the words of a man without Noise sound so solid, so much like unmoveable stone.

"Me personally, Todd?"

I swallow away a sour taste. "No, but it was a war *you started*!"

"It was necessary," he says. "To save a sick and dying planet."

My breathing is getting faster, my mind getting cloudier, my head heavier than ever. But my Noise is redder, too. "You murdered Cillian."

"Deeply regrettable," he says. "He would have made a fine soldier."

"You killed my mother," I say, my voice catching (shut up), my Noise filling with rage and grief, my eyes screwing up with tears (shut up, shut up, shut up). "You killed all the women of Prentisstown."

"Do you believe everything you hear, Todd?"

There's a silence, a real one, as even my own Noise takes this in. "I have no desire to kill women," he adds. "I never did."

My mouth drops open. "Yes, you *did*–"

"Now is not the time for a history lesson."

"Yer a *liar*!"

"And you presume to know everything, do you?" His voice goes cold and he steps away from me and Mr Collins strikes me so hard on the side of the head I nearly fall over onto the floor.

"Yer a LIAR AND A MURDERER!" I shout, my ears still ringing from the punch.

Mr Collins hits me again the other way, hard as a block of wood.

"I am *not* your enemy, Todd," the Mayor says again. "Please stop making me do this to you."

My head is hurting so bad I don't say nothing. I *can't* say nothing. I can't say the word he wants. I can't say nothing else without getting beaten senseless.

This is the end. It's gotta be the end. They won't let me live. They won't let *her* live.

It's gotta be the end.

"I hope it *is* the end," the Mayor says, his voice actually making the sounds of truth. "I hope you'll tell me what I want to know so we can stop all this."

And then he says–

Then he says–

He says, "Please."

I look up, blinking thru the swelling coming up round my eyes.

His face has a look of concern on it, a look of almost *pleading*.

What the hell? What the ruddy hell?

And I hear the buzz of it inside my head again–

Different than just hearing someone's Noise–

PLEASE like it's said in my own voice–

PLEASE like it's coming from me–

Pressing on me–

On my insides–

Making me feel like I wanna say it–

PLEASE–

"The things you think you know, Todd," the Mayor says, his voice still twining around inside my own head. "Those things aren't true."

And then I remember–

I remember Ben–

I remember Ben saying the same thing to me–

Ben who I lost–

And my Noise hardens, right there.

Cutting him off.

The Mayor's face loses the look of pleading.

"All right," he says, frowning a little. "But remember that it is your choice." He stands up straight. "What is her name?"

"You know her name."

Mr Collins strikes me across the head, careening me sideways.

"What is her name?"

"You already know it–"

Boom, another blow, this time the other way.

"What is her name?"

"No."

Boom.

"Tell me her name."

"No!"

BOOM!

"What is her *name*, Todd?"

"EFF YOU!"

Except I don't say "eff" and Mr Collins hits me so hard my head whips back and the chair over-balances and I do topple sideways to the floor, taking the chair with me. I slam into the carpet, hands tied so I can't catch myself, my eyes filling up with little New Worlds till there ain't nothing else to see.

I breathe into the carpet.

The toes of the Mayor's boots approach my face.

"I am not your enemy, Todd Hewitt," he says one more time. "Just tell me her name and this will all stop."

I take in a breath and have to cough it away.

I take in another and say what I have to say.

"Yer a murderer."

Another silence.

"So be it," says the Mayor.

His feet move away and I feel Mr Collins pull my chair up from the floor, taking me up with it, my body groaning against its own weight, till I'm sat up again in the circle of coloured light. My eyes are so swollen now I can't hardly see Mr Collins at all even tho he's right in front of me.

I hear the Mayor at the small table again. I hear him moving things round on the top. I hear again the scrape of metal.

I hear him step up beside me.

And after all that promising, here it really, finally is.

My end.

I'm sorry, I think. *I'm so, so sorry.*

The Mayor puts a hand on my shoulder and I flinch away from it but he keeps it there, pressing down steadily. I can't see what he's holding, but he's bringing something towards me, towards my face, something hard and metal and filled with pain and ready to make me suffer and end my life and there's a hole inside me that I need to crawl into, away from all this, down deep and black, and I know this is the end, the end of all things, I can never escape from here and he'll kill me and kill her and there's no chance, no life, no hope, nothing.

I'm sorry.

And the Mayor lays a bandage across my face.

I gasp from the coolness of it and jerk away from his hands but he keeps pressing it gently into the lump on my forehead and onto the wounds on my face and chin, his body so close I can smell it, the cleanliness of it, the woody odour of his soap, the breath from his nose brushing over my

cheek, his fingers touching my cuts almost tenderly, dressing the swelling round my eyes, the splits on my lip, and I can feel the bandages get to work almost instantly, feel the swelling going right down, the painkillers flooding into my system, and I think for a second how *good* the bandages are in Haven, how much like *her* bandages, and the relief comes so quick, so unexpected that my throat clenches and I have to swallow it away.

"I am not the man you think I am, Todd," the Mayor says quietly, almost right into my ear, putting another bandage on my neck. "I did not do the things you think I did. I asked my son to bring you back. I did not ask him to shoot anyone. I did not ask Aaron to kill you."

"Yer a liar," I say but my voice is weak and I'm shaking from the effort of keeping the weep out of it (shut up).

The Mayor puts more bandages across the bruises on my chest and stomach, so gentle I can barely stand it, so gentle it's almost like he cares how it feels.

"I *do* care, Todd," he says. "There will be time for you to learn the truth of that."

He moves behind me and puts another bandage around the bindings on my wrists, taking my hands and rubbing feeling back into them with his thumbs.

"There will be time," he says, "for you to come to trust me. For you, perhaps, to come to even *like* me. To even think of me, one day, as a kind of father to you, Todd."

It feels like my Noise is melting away with all the drugs, with all the pain disappearing, with me disappearing along with it, like he's killing me after all, but with the cure instead of the punishment.

I can't keep the weep from my throat, my eyes, my voice.

"Please," I say. "Please."

But I don't know what I mean.

"The war is over, Todd," the Mayor says again. "We are making a new world. This planet finally and truly living up to its name. Believe me when I say, once you see it, you'll *want* to be part of it."

I breathe into the darkness.

"You could be a leader of men, Todd. You have proven yourself very special."

I keep breathing, trying to hold on to it but feeling myself slip away.

"How can I know?" I finally say, my voice a croak, a slur, a thing not quite real. "How can I know she's even still alive?"

"You can't," says the Mayor. "You only have my word."

And waits again.

"And if I do it," I say. "If I do what you say, you'll save her?"

"We will do whatever's necessary," he says.

Without pain, it feels almost like I don't have a body at all, almost like I'm a ghost, sitting in a chair, blinded and eternal.

Like I'm dead already.

Cuz how do you know yer alive if you don't hurt?

"We are the choices we make, Todd," the Mayor says. "Nothing more, nothing less. I'd like you to choose to tell me. I would like that very much indeed."

Under the bandages is just further darkness.

Just me, alone in the black.

Alone with his voice.

I don't know what to do.

I don't know anything.

(what do I do?)

But if there's a chance, if there's even a *chance*–

"Is it really such a sacrifice, Todd?" the Mayor says, listening to me think. "Here, at the end of the past? At the beginning of the future?"

No. No, I can't. He's a liar and a murderer, no matter what he says–

"I'm waiting, Todd."

But she might be alive, he might keep her alive–

"We are nearing your last opportunity, Todd."

I raise my head. The movement opens the bandages some and I squint up into the light, up towards the Mayor's face.

It's blank as ever.

It's the empty, lifeless wall.

I might as well be talking into a bottomless pit.

I might as well *be* the bottomless pit.

I look away. I look down.

"Viola," I say into the carpet. "Her name's Viola."

The Mayor lets out a long, pleased-sounding breath. "Good, Todd," he says. "I thank you."

He turns to Mr Collins.

"Lock him up."