

# Warden of the Overpass

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## Introduction

A highway is a promise written in concrete: if you follow this line, you will find food, family, a future. When the world fell apart, that promise did not disappear—it just became contested. *Warden of the Overpass* is a story about what happens when a single stretch of elevated road becomes the difference between a region holding together or tearing itself to rags. It's a military-focused action novel, but it is also a meditation on how power, duty, and survival braid together when every choice is

public and every mistake is permanent.

At the center stands Sergeant Mara Rios, a veteran who has seen too many frontiers collapse into confusion. She does not get to choose the mission; it chooses her when the platoon is tasked with holding the overpass at Mile 61—an exposed rib of highway that can feed or starve whole towns depending on who controls it. Rios understands that the ground dictates the fight: the lanes, the ramps, the choke points, the wind that carries sound and smell. She also understands people—how fear makes them fast and sloppy, how hope makes them stubborn, and how a fragile coalition of truckers, farmers, police holdovers, and refugees can either become a community or a stampede.

The enemies in this book are both monstrous and mundane. The undead are a relentless pressure, a weather of hunger that never tires. Human marauders are the opportunists of collapse, opportunistic and calculating, testing fences and faith with the same casual malice. Rios's platoon lives between these threats, learning that security is not a wall but a rhythm: watch and rest, signal and silence, patience and violence. Asymmetric strategies matter here not as clever tricks but as moral wagers—how much ambiguity a leader can accept to spare lives, how much misdirection a community can stomach to protect its children.

Leadership under stress is not heroic speeches; it is ration ledgers, radio checks, and triage in the rain. It is teaching a schoolteacher how to cover a lane without shaking, asking a teenager to be a runner at night, and telling a father that the gate will not open after curfew no matter who is on the other side. Rios trains civilians in the minimum they need to stay alive and guards her soldiers from the slow poison of exhaustion and certainty. She discovers that the hardest part of command is not giving orders—it is living with their echoes.

Ethics are not abstractions at Mile 61. Every checkpoint policy has a face. Every rule of engagement has a name. When a convoy hesitates, when a flare misfires, when a rumor spirals into panic, the overpass becomes a courtroom with no appeal. The novel does not flinch from the moral cost of strict security. It asks what it means to be safe and who gets to define safety when safety itself is a scarce resource. It asks what sacrifices a coalition can endure before it cracks, and whether mercy is a tactic or a creed.

If the book is gritty, it is because asphalt is gritty, and war grinds. The action is cinematic not to glorify violence but to honor detail: the thud of boots on expansion joints, the whisper of nylon under a poncho, the ghostly glow of a distant flare reflected on wet concrete. Strategic infrastructure shapes the tempo of every scene; the bridge is not a backdrop but a character that amplifies choices, punishes laziness, and rewards discipline. In this way, *Warden of the Overpass* aims to capture both the immediacy of a firefight and the slow, stubborn work of building something worth

defending.

This is a story about holding ground when the map is burning. It is about the scar on Sergeant Rios's hand and the bigger scars she refuses to leave on the people who trust her. It is about the last safe mile and the first hard truth: that survival without accountability becomes predation, and that leadership, at its best, is a promise kept under pressure. If you have ever wondered how a single piece of road can decide the fate of thousands, step onto the overpass and look down. The lanes are empty now, but they won't be for long.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Bridge at Mile Marker 61**

The overpass at Mile Marker 61 looked like something the Army had built in a hurry and then regretted immediately. It was a concrete ribbon flung across a shallow valley, four lanes wide, connecting a two-lane state road on the south side to an interstate interchange on the north. From the ground it seemed less like infrastructure and more like an accusation—some engineer's bright idea that now served as a tombstone for the traffic it was meant to carry. Sergeant Mara Rios stood at the base of the south on-ramp, tilted her head back, and let the wind slap her face. The wind up here never stopped. That was the first thing she'd noticed, three days ago, when the recon element had driven her out to take a look.

The wind carried smell, too. Asphalt baked by a summer sun that hadn't seemed to notice the collapse, and underneath it something faintly sweet and wrong, like fruit rotting in a dumpster behind a restaurant that no longer existed. She'd gotten used to that smell by now, the way you get used to the sound of your own boots on broken concrete. It was just the world reminding you it was dying. Not dead yet, though. That was the problem. The dead didn't stop rotting, and the living didn't stop moving, and somewhere between those two facts was the job she'd been handed.

Rios pulled her patrol cap lower against the glare and looked up at the overpass again. Four lanes, two in each direction, with a narrow concrete median that wasn't wide enough to park a truck on. The ramps were standard cloverleaf—tight, curving, bad sight lines. Anyone defending this position would need to worry about the approaches from four directions and the sky above, which was open and unobstructed for a thousand yards in every direction. A sniper's paradise or a meat grinder, depending on who held the high ground. Right now, nobody held it. Her platoon was supposed to change that by nightfall.

She checked her watch. 1347 hours. Three hours and thirteen minutes until sunset, if the weather held, which it wouldn't, because the sky to the west had that bruised look

that meant rain before dark. She'd learned to read the sky the way her grandmother had taught her to read people—by paying attention to what was shifting underneath the surface. Rain meant mud on the ramps, slick concrete, reduced visibility, and morale dropping faster than the barometer. It also meant the undead moved differently. Slower, sometimes, but also more desperate, like they could smell the water and knew it washed things away.

She turned and looked back down the slope toward the valley, where a dirt track connected the overpass to what had once been a truck stop. The truck stop was still there, barely—a cluster of low buildings with shattered windows and a parking lot full of vehicles that would never move again. Some had been stripped for parts, some had been burned, and three of them had been pushed together in a crude barricade that someone had tried to build without any engineering sense whatsoever. She'd noted it in her report. Somebody down there had instinct for defense, at least. Not enough instinct to know you couldn't stop a truck with two sedans and a minivan, but instinct nonetheless.

"Staff Sergeant, you seeing this?"

Rios looked over her shoulder. Corporal Dex Hall was approaching from the south, walking the shoulder of the old highway with his rifle slung and his expression caught somewhere between curiosity and nausea. He was a tall kid, maybe twenty-four, with the kind of sun-bleached hair that no amount of regulation could fully suppress. He'd been with the platoon since before the collapse, which made him a veteran by default, and he had a habit of asking questions that Rios didn't have answers to. She'd learned to tolerate it.

"Seeing what, Hall?"

"The barricade at the truck stop. Somebody's been living there. Looks recent."

"Looks desperate," Rios corrected. She pointed at the arrangement of vehicles. "That wouldn't stop a pickup going twenty miles an hour. Whoever built that is hoping the engine noise scares people off, not that the barrier holds. Which tells me they don't have anything heavier than a shotgun."

Hall nodded slowly, absorbing this the way he absorbed most tactical observations—quietly, with a slight furrow between his brows that she'd come to recognize as his thinking face. He'd been a supply clerk at Fort Drum before everything went south. Logistics MOS, administrative brain, the kind of soldier who could make a spreadsheet sing but had never fired a shot outside a qualification range. The collapse had changed his job description overnight. Now he carried an M4, and he carried it with the earnestness of a man who understood that it was the most important thing he'd ever held.

"Think they're friendly?" Hall asked.

"I think they're scared. Don't confuse the two." Rios pulled out a dog-eared map—the paper kind, because batteries died and satellites went silent—and unfolded it to the section she'd marked in red grease pencil. Mile 61. The junction between state Route 14 and Interstate 80. On the map it looked like an afterthought, a small knot where two roads met. In reality, it was the only elevated crossing for thirty miles in either direction, the last viable route connecting the refugee camps in the Willamette Valley to the supply corridors running north toward Portland. If you controlled Mile 61, you controlled the flow of food, medicine, ammunition, and people. If you didn't, you were irrelevant.

The platoon had eleven soldiers fit for duty. Three weeks ago, there had been thirty-two. She didn't think about the number thirty-two, because thinking about it didn't change anything and it did change other things, like her ability to sleep. Eleven soldiers. Two with injuries that hadn't fully healed. One with a cough that wouldn't go away and that she suspected might be more than dust. They had four Humvees, one of which kept throwing a rod knock that Private Vang had fixed twice with baling wire and prayer. They had a working radio with a range of maybe ten miles in open terrain, less in the valley. They had four hundred rounds of 5.56 per rifle, two hundred rounds for the squad automatic weapon, and a crate of fragmentation grenades that was lighter than it should have been.

They also had something that wasn't on any requisition form. A coalition. Sort of.

Rios had been a soldier long enough to know that coalitions were like sandcastles—they looked solid until the first wave hit. But the people in the valley needed the overpass, and she needed the people in the valley. The truckers who still ran the north-south corridor needed a safe place to rest and refuel. The farmers who'd organized into a loose commune down past the river needed access to markets, or at least to other markets than the one operated by the Reeslings, who had turned their grain elevator into a fortress and were charging protection rates that would have made a Chicago gangster blush. And then there were the refugees, which was a word Rios used loosely to describe the hundreds of people who'd wandered into the valley on foot, in cars, on bicycles, carrying whatever they could and leaving behind whatever they couldn't carry, including, in many cases, their sanity.

All of these people wanted the same thing: to be left alone. All of them, eventually, would have to choose between being left alone and being left alive. That was the math. Rios hated the math.

She descended the slope toward the truck stop, Hall shadowing her at a respectful three paces. The dirt path was soft underfoot, churned up by boots and wheels and

the occasional hasty departure. She could see the barricade more clearly now—a real mess of crumpled hoods and twisted metal, held together by ratchet straps that had clearly been overtightened. One of the minivans had a child's car seat still buckled in the back. She looked away from that.

"Hey!" a voice called out from behind the barricade. "State your business."

Rios stopped. She raised both hands, palms out, the universal gesture that predated civilization and would probably outlast it. "Sergeant Mara Rios, United States Army. I'm here with a platoon to assess the overpass for a defensive position. Looking to establish a cooperative arrangement with anyone in the area."

A long pause. She counted the seconds—seven, eight, nine. Then a man stepped out from behind one of the sedans. He was older than her, maybe mid-fifties, with a gray beard that had grown ragged at the edges and hands that looked like they hadn't been washed since the power went out but were steady enough to hold a shotgun that was pointed, for the moment, at the dirt.

"Cooperative arrangement," he repeated, as if tasting the words. "That's a new one. Last group that came through said cooperative, and they took our diesel and left us with a flat tire and a bullet hole in the water tank."

"Last group didn't have fifty-seven people to feed," Hall said, surprising Rios. He'd stepped forward without being told to, rifle still slung, and he was looking at the makeshift encampment behind the barricade—a row of tents, a tarp rigged as a rain shelter over a fire pit, clotheslines strung between vehicles. A lot of people here. More than two or three families. She did a quick head count: eleven, maybe twelve visible, with the possibility of more in the tents.

The man with the shotgun studied Hall, then Rios, then her again. His eyes moved to the rifle Hall carried and lingered there for a beat too long.

"We got a lot of mouths," the man said. "And not a lot of food. And not a lot of patience for soldiers who promise cooperation and then—"

"I'm not here to make promises," Rios said. "I'm here to offer terms. The overpass is a choke point. It's the only way to move vehicles north for thirty miles. We can hold it, and we can keep it open for trade and travel, or we can hold it and shut it down, or someone else can take it and do whatever they want with it. Those are the options. I'm offering you the option where your truck stop doesn't become a kill zone."

He didn't lower the gun, but he shifted his weight back, just slightly, the way a dog does when it decides you might not be worth biting. "What about the others?"

"The others who?"

"The ones in the road. The ones that don't stop."

Rios followed his gaze north, toward the overpass, where the concrete stretched out like a pale scar against the green hillside. She could see them, or at least she could see what they looked like from a distance—dark shapes moving slowly near the far end of the bridge, maybe three, maybe four, shambling along the shoulder with their arms out and their heads tilted at that angle she'd learned to recognize as not-quite-alive.

"Those are why I'm here," she said.

The man looked at her for a long moment, then lowered the shotgun an inch. It was the most encouraging concession she'd gotten from a civilian in three weeks.

"You got a name, soldier?" he asked.

"Rios. Sergeant Rios."

"I'm Dale. Dale Hadley. I run this truck stop—ran it, I guess, since there ain't no one trucking anymore. You and your people want to use that bridge, you got a deal with me first. That's how it works now."

Rios almost smiled. Almost. "How does it work?"

"You prove you're not just passing through. You help with the fence. You show us how to—" He stopped, apparently realizing how much he was about to ask for. "We got skills. Farming, mechanics, carpentry. What we don't got is people willing to stand on a bridge and keep things from crossing it."

"Not crossing it," Rios said. "Keeping things from coming across it that shouldn't. There's a difference, and it's the difference between a checkpoint and a barricade."

Dale studied her, and she could see the calculation happening behind his eyes—every scar on the overpass, every abandoned vehicle, every rumor he'd heard about what happened to communities that let the wrong people through their gates. He was deciding whether she was telling the truth, whether she could back it up, and whether whatever she could back it up with was worth the price of trusting a uniform again.

Then he nodded, once, and stepped aside.

The overpass waited above them, massive and indifferent, its expansion joints clicking

softly in the wind like teeth chattering in a skull. Rios stood at the base and looked up, feeling the familiar flutter in her stomach that she'd never quite gotten used to—the feeling that came from standing at the bottom of something she had to climb, knowing that what she found at the top would determine whether the next month would be a fight or a funeral.

"All right, Hall," she said. "Let's go see what we're working with."

The climb was harder than it looked. The on-ramp was a smooth curve of concrete with no guardrail, and the surface was littered with debris—a shredded tire here, a collapsed traffic sign there, a shopping cart that somebody had pushed to the top and left as if making a statement about consumer culture. Rios moved carefully, her boots finding purchase on the cracked surface, her rifle up and sweeping in slow arcs. Hall followed, and behind them, two more soldiers from the advance element—Private Torres, who could field-strip a weapon blindfolded and reassemble it with her teeth, and Kim, whose specialty was communications and whose specialty was about to become very important if the radio situation up top was anything like Rios feared.

They reached the top and fanned out. The view was everything Rios had worried about and nothing she hadn't already planned for. The overpass deck was roughly eight hundred feet long, forty feet wide, with a shoulder on each side that was barely wide enough for a person to stand on. The median was concrete, waist-high, and would provide cover from small arms fire from the south but was useless against anything lobbed from the north. The road surface was cratered in places where vehicles had been abandoned and set on fire, the black scars still visible even three months after the collapse. Rust was starting to bloom on the expansion joints, and the rebar in the concrete showed through like veins in a dying hand.

But the position had potential. That was the word Rios used in her head, because she wasn't the kind of commander who fell in love with terrain—she was the kind who respected it enough to use it honestly. The overpass sat on a slight rise, giving anyone standing on it a clear view south for about half a mile and north for almost a mile, until the road dipped into a stand of Douglas firs that had grown thick along the river. To the east and west, the valley opened up—farmland gone to weeds, a river visible as a thin silver thread, and the rooftops of what had once been a small suburban community, now a grid of dark windows and sagging fences. On a clear day you could see the smoke from Portland. Today, with the bruise spreading across the western sky, you couldn't see much of anything beyond two miles.

"Defensible," Rios said, more to herself than anyone.

"Defensible how?" Kim asked. She was younger than Hall by a couple of years, soft-spoken, with a habit of tapping her index finger against her rifle stock when she was thinking. The tapping had driven Rios crazy for the first week until she realized it

helped Kim focus and that shutting it down would cost more in morale than it saved in patience.

"Defensible with work," Rios said. She walked to the south edge and looked over. The drop to the valley floor was maybe thirty feet—enough to kill you, not enough to guarantee you wouldn't get up afterward. She'd seen the undead survive falls that would have killed them twice over, tumbling and snapping like broken toys and then pulling themselves upright with a groan that sounded like tearing metal. "We turn the median into a fighting position, rig the barricades on both ends of the deck, and use the ramps as funnels. Anyone coming up has to cross forty feet of open concrete with no cover. That's the theory."

"The theory," Hall said from behind her, "is that the undead don't shoot back."

"They don't need to. They just need to get close enough to bite, and we're out of the game. We're not fighting an army, we're fighting weather. Slow pressure from every direction until something gives."

Hall was quiet for a moment. Below them, Dale and a few others had emerged from the truck stop and were staring up at the overpass, looking for all the world like people watching a storm approach. One of them—a woman in a red jacket, her hair pulled back tight—was pointing at something on the road south of the truck stop and shouting. Hall turned his binoculars that direction.

"I see a group," he said. "Six, maybe eight of them. Coming up the road from the south. Moving slow. Not... not right, Staff Sergeant."

Rios took the binoculars and confirmed what she already knew. The group was a mix of undead and something worse—people who were still upright, still coordinated, but clearly not interested in a friendly chat. Marauders, most likely, traveling with a small undead escort the way wolves travel with ravens. She'd seen the pattern before: the dead kept the living off balance, and the living used the confusion to get what they wanted.

"Get the rest of the platoon to the top," she said quietly. "Now. Before that group gets close enough to see we have boots on concrete."

Hall nodded and moved fast down the ramp. Rios stayed where she was, watching the group through the binoculars. The wind shifted, and for a moment she caught the smell on them—the sour, unmistakable smell of the undead, layered over with wood smoke and something chemical, like motor oil. The marauders masked their smell. They'd learned that trick early.

She checked her magazine. Nine rounds in, one in the chamber. She'd make it count if

she had to, but she had a bigger problem. Eight people on the road, eleven soldiers on the overpass, and a village full of civilians who had just been told the bridge was now someone else's responsibility. The math was different now. The math was always different now.

Below, Dale had stopped shouting. He and his people watched the approaching group with the flat, resigned expressions of people who had seen death arrive too many times to flinch at it anymore. The woman in the red jacket was still pointing, but now she was shaking her head.

Rios climbed down to meet them, because this was where the real work started—not on the overpass, but in the space between a promise and a threat. She needed Dale and his people to understand that the soldiers weren't occupiers. She needed the platoon to understand that the civilians weren't cargo. And she needed the group on the road to understand that Mile Marker 61 had a warden now.

She reached the bottom and looked up one more time at the overpass, its lanes empty and gleaming in the late afternoon light. Somewhere up there, Hall was getting the squad together, checking fields of fire, doing the hundred small things that turned a stretch of concrete into a fortress. He was scared, of course he was. Everyone was scared. The trick was making the fear useful.

The trick was making the fear useful before the sun went down.

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