The Outrage Plague

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

When the first person “turned,” it happened under the fluorescent lights of a discount grocery store, between the canned soup aisle and the endcap of patriotic paper plates.

A woman named Darlene Caldwell—fifty-eight, church volunteer, a little too loud at PTA meetings back when those existed—stood frozen with a cart full of soda and instant noodles. Her phone was tilted toward her face like a devotional object. Her lips moved as if she were reading scripture, but the words weren’t prayers.

“Wake up,” she whispered. “Wake up. Wake up.”

The store clerk, a teenager with a nose ring and a look that said I have already quit mentally, called out, “Ma’am? You okay?”

Darlene blinked once, slow and dry, and lifted her head. Her pupils were wide. Her eyes didn’t track the clerk like a person’s eyes. They tracked like a camera hunting a face.

“Traitor,” Darlene said, and the word didn’t carry emotion. It carried instruction.

The teenager laughed nervously. “What?”

Darlene opened her mouth wider than necessary and made a sound like a broken ringtone—half groan, half chant—and shoved her cart forward.

The cart slammed the clerks knees. The teenager yelped. Darlene leaned across the shopping cart and, without warning, bit down on the clerks forearm.

Reading sample — continued

Not a nibble. Not a frenzy. Just… an efficient bite, like she was checking the ripeness of fruit.

The security camera caught it all, of course. The footage hit the local feed within minutes, and it was clipped, captioned, and weaponized into a thousand versions before the ambulance even arrived.

CITIZEN DEFENDS SELF AGAINST DEEP STATE CASHIER. PROOF THE YOUTH ARE INFECTED. SHE DID WHAT WE ALL SHOULD DO.

And underneath every version, the same comment thread, repeating itself like a prayer book dropped into a shredder:

Wake up. They’re lying. They’re coming for you. Wake up.

That was the first week of the Outrage Plague.

By the second week, people weren’t asking if the story was real.

They were asking which version of it they could use.

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Cal Reese wasn’t supposed to be the kind of person who noticed patterns.

He was thirty-six, a small-town newspaper editor in a town that no longer had the kind of advertising that kept newspapers alive. The Briar County Ledger came out online and, once a week, on paper for the handful of subscribers who still liked the smell of ink and the comfort of corners you could fold.