

Autumn: The City



David Moody

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This book is a work of fiction. The characters and situations in this story are imaginary. No resemblance is intended between these characters and any real persons, either living or dead.

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the official AUTUMN website**

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Prologue

No warning.

No explanation.

The alarms began to ring and we were up and on the move in seconds. We had been conditioned to respond at speed. The routine was familiar from a thousand drills but I sensed immediately that this was different. I knew this was for real. I could taste fear and panic in the early morning air. I didn't know why. I didn't know what had happened. I had a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach that something was happening that was about to change everything.

In silence we collected our kit and assembled at the transports. I could see trepidation and uncertainty in the faces of everyone around me. Even the officers - the men and women who took orders from above and controlled our every action - appeared bewildered and scared. Their fear and unexpected confusion was unsettling. It was clear that they knew as little as I did.

We were on the road in minutes and the journey took less than an hour. The early morning darkness began to lift as we drove through the city. We brought chaos to the rush hour, stopping traffic from moving and preventing unsuspecting people from reaching their schools, offices and homes. I saw hundreds of people but I didn't allow myself to look into any of their faces. I didn't know what was going to happen to them. I forced myself to avoid remembering that somewhere out in the fragile normality of the morning were the people that I had known and loved.

We continued through the heart of the city and out through the suburbs following major roads and motorways which eventually ran deep into green and uncluttered countryside. The sky was grey and heavy and the light remained dull and low. The road narrowed to a rough and uneven gravel track but our speed didn't reduce until we'd reached the bunker.

We were among the first to arrive but within fifteen minutes the last transport sped down the ramp and into the hanger. Even before its engine had stopped I heard an officer give the order to shut the doors and seal off the base.

Whatever it was that was happening to the world outside, I knew it was a disaster of unimaginable proportions.

The very last shard of daylight disappeared as the bunker doors were closed. I picked up my kit and walked deeper underground.

Part I

1

For most of the last forty-eight hours Donna Yorke had hidden under a desk in a corner of the office where she'd worked since the summer. Without warning her familiar surroundings had become alien, nightmarish and cold. On Tuesday morning she had watched the world around her die.

Along with the rest of her work colleagues Donna worked an early shift one week in four. This week it had been her turn to get in first and open the post, switch on the computers and perform various other simple tasks so that the rest of her team could start working as soon as they arrived at their desks. She was glad that everything had happened so early in the day. She'd watched four of her friends die. If it had happened just half an hour later she'd have seen the other sixty-or-so people in the office suffer the same sudden, suffocating death. None of it made any sense. Cold and alone, she was too terrified to even start trying to look for answers.

From her ninth floor vantage point she had watched the destruction wash across the world outside like a tidal wave. Being so high above the city she hadn't heard anything. The first sign that something was wrong had been a bright explosion in the near distance, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. She'd watched with morbid fascination as a plume of billowing fire and dense black smoke had spewed up into the grey air from the gutted remains of a burning petrol station. The cars on the road nearby were scattered and smashed. Something huge had ploughed through the traffic,

crossed the dual carriageway and crashed into the pumps, immediately igniting the fuel stores. Had it been an out of control lorry, truck or tanker perhaps?

But that had just been the beginning, and the horror and devastation that followed had been relentless and of an unimaginable scale. All across the heavily industrialised east-side of the city she saw people falling to the ground. She could see them writhing and squirming and dying. And more vehicles were stopping too - some crashing and hitting each other, others just slowing to a halt. Donna watched as the destruction moved nearer. Like a shock wave it seemed to travel quickly across the city below her, rolling relentlessly towards her building. With fear making her legs heavy with nerves, she stumbled back and looked round for explanation and reassurance. One of her colleagues, Joan Alderney, had arrived to start work but by the time Donna had seen her the other woman had dropped to her knees, fighting for breath. Donna was at her side in seconds but there was nothing she could have done. Joan looked up at her with huge, desperate eyes and her body shook with furious, uncontrollable spasms and convulsions as she fought to draw in one last precious breath. Her face quickly drained to an ashen, oxygen-starved blue-grey and her lips were crimson red, stained by blood from the numerous swellings and sores that had ripped open in her throat.

As Joan died on the ground next to her Donna was distracted by the sound of Neil Peters, one of the junior managers, collapsing across his desk, showering his paperwork with spittle and blood as he retched and choked and fought for air. Jo Foster - one of her closest friends - was the next to be infected as she walked into the office. Donna watched helplessly as the other girl clawed at her neck and mouthed a hoarse and virtually silent scream of bitter pain, suffocation and fear before falling to the floor. She was dead before she hit the ground. Finally Trudy Phillips, the last of

the early shift, panicked and began to stumble and run towards Donna as the searing, burning pain in her throat began. She had only managed to move a few meters forward before she lost consciousness and fell, dragging a computer off a nearby desk and sending it crashing to the ground, just inches away from where she now lay. Once Trudy was dead the world became still and terrifyingly silent.

Donna's instinctive first reaction was to get out of the office, but as soon as she was outside she regretted having moved. The lifts still worked to take her down to the ground floor (although they had stopped by the time she returned to the building) and their sliding doors opened to reveal a scene of death and destruction on an incomprehensible scale. There were bodies all around the reception area. The security guard who had flirted with her less than half an hour ago was dead at his desk. One of the senior office managers - a man in his late forties called Woodward - lay trapped in the revolving door at the very front of the building, his lifeless face pressed hard against the glass. Jackie Prentice, another one of her work colleagues, was on the floor just a few meters away from her, buried under the weight of two dead men. A thick and quickly congealing dribble of blood had spilled from Jackie's open mouth and gathered in a sticky pool around her blanched face.

Without thinking she pushed her way through a side door and stepped out onto the street. Beyond the walls of the building the devastation had continued for as far as she could see in all directions. She could see hundreds, perhaps thousands of bodies whichever way she looked. Numb and unable to think clearly she walked away from the building and further into town. As she approached the main shopping area of the city the number of bodies had increased to such an extent that, in places, the ground was completely obscured - carpeted with a still warm mass of tangled and twisted human remains.

Donna had naturally assumed that she would find others like her who had somehow survived the carnage. It seemed unlikely, even impossible, that she had been the only one to have escaped, but after some two and a half hours of tripping and picking her way through the corpses and shouting for help she had heard nothing and had seen no-one. Occasionally she stopped walking and just stood and stared at the seemingly never-ending disintegration of the world which had appeared so normal and uneventful such a short time earlier. How could this have happened? What had happened? The sheer magnitude of the ruination was too much for her. Numbed by the massive scale of what had happened she eventually stopped and turned round and stumbled back towards the tall office block.

Home was a fifty minute train journey away - more than an hour by car - but Donna had known that going back to her flat would have helped little. Three months into a one year work experience placement from business school, she had chosen to live, study and work in a city over a hundred and fifty miles away from her family home. What she would have given to have been back with her parents in their nondescript little three bedroom semidetached house on the other side of the country. But what would she have found there? Had the effects of whatever had happened here reached as far as her home town? Would her parents have survived like she had or would she have found them dead and... and she knew that she couldn't bear to think about what might or might not have happened to them any longer.

The fact of the matter was, she decided, that she was where she was and there was little she could do about it. As impossible, unbelievable and grotesque as her circumstances were, she had no option but to try and pull herself together and find somewhere safe to sit and wait for something - anything - to happen. The most sensible place was the office she had just left. Its height provided some isola-

tion and it was clean, spacious and relatively comfortable. She knew the layout and she knew where she could find food and drink in the staff restaurant. Best of all, security in the office was tight. Access to the working areas was strictly controlled by electronically tagged passes and from a conversation she'd had with an engineer last week, she knew that the security system itself ran independent of the mains electricity supply. Regardless of what happened to the rest of the building, therefore, power to the locks remained constant, and that meant that she was able to securely shut out the rest of the world until she was ready to face it again. The advantage may only have been a psychological one but it was enough. During the first few long hours of the nightmare that extra layer of security meant everything to her.

Much of the rest of the first day had been spent collecting various supplies, initially from around the office and then, later, from several of the silent shops nearby. She found herself some warmer clothes, a sleeping bag and gas lamps from a camping store, food and drink and a radio and handheld television. By early evening she had carried everything up the many flights of stairs and had made herself a relatively warm and comfortable nest in the furthest corner of the office. As the light quickly faded away into darkness she tried every means available to her to make contact with the outside world. Her mobile phone didn't work. She couldn't even get a dialling tone on any of the office phones (and she tried more than twenty different handsets) and she couldn't find anything other than static and silence on the radio and television. When the city had become completely dark she gave up trying.

The first night took an eternity to pass and the second day even longer. She only emerged from her hiding place on a couple of occasions. Just after dawn she crept around the perimeter of the office and looked down onto the streets below, initially to check whether the situation had changed,

but also to confirm that the bizarre and inexplicable events of the previous morning had actually taken place. During the dragging hours just gone Donna had begun to convince herself that the death of many thousands of innocent people couldn't really have happened so swiftly, viciously and without reason.

From where she hid underneath the desk Donna caught sight of the foot of Joan Alderney's body, lying where she had fallen and died less than twenty-four hours earlier. Seeing the woman's corpse unnerved her to the point where she was unable to stop staring at it. The closeness of the body was unsettling - whenever she began to think about something else she would see it and it would remind her again of everything that had happened. Eventually she plucked up enough courage to take action. Fighting to keep her emotions and nausea in check, one at a time she dragged the stiff and contorted bodies of her four work colleagues down to the far end of the office, lay them side by side in the post room and covered them with a dust sheet taken from another floor where decorators had been working.

The third morning began in as bleak and hopeless a manner as the second day had ended. A little more confident, Donna crawled out from underneath the desk again and now sat in front of the computer that she usually used, staring at the monochrome reflection of her face in the screen. She had been attempting to distract herself by writing down song lyrics, addresses, the names of the players in the football team she supported and anything else she could remember when she heard the noise. It was coming from the far end of the floor. A tripping, stumbling, crashing sound which immediately made her jump up with unexpected hope and nervous concern. It seemed that her painful isolation was about to end. Cautiously she crept towards the other end of the long, rectangular building.

‘Hello,’ she hissed, her voice little more than an anxious whisper. ‘Is anybody there?’

No response. She took a few steps further forward and then stopped when she heard another noise. It was coming from the post room.

Donna pushed open the heavy swinging door and stood and stared in petrified disbelief. Neil Peters - the man she had watched fall and die in front of her just two days earlier - was moving. Swaying unsteadily on clumsy, uncoordinated feet and stumbling about lethargically, the dead man dragged himself across the room, stopping and turning awkwardly whenever he hit the wall or a desk or other obstruction and was unable to move any further forward. Instinctively Donna reached out and grabbed hold of him.

‘Neil?’

The body stopped moving when she held it. There was no resistance. She looked into its face, its skin greasy-grey and its eyes dark and misted with pupils fully dilated. Its mouth hung open and its chin and neck appeared bruised and were splattered with flecks of dried blood. With her disgust and abject fear quickly rising she released her grip and, immediately, the dead manager began to move again. It tripped and fell over the bodies of the other three workers on the floor and slowly struggled to pick itself up. Terrified Donna stumbled back out through the doors which swung shut after her, trapping the moving corpse inside. She looked to her right and pulled down on the top of a filing cabinet, sending it crashing down in front of the door and blocking the way out.

For a short while longer Donna watched through a small glass window in the door as the shell-like remains of her colleague staggered helplessly around the cluttered room. It moved continually. By chance the body occasionally looked in her direction. Its dry, emotionless eyes seemed to look through her and past her but never directly at her.

Disorientated by the inexplicable reanimation, Donna left the office and began to climb the stairs. The corpse of Sylvia Peters, the office secretary, lay just in front of her on the landing where it had fallen earlier in the week. As she neared the body a slow but very definite movement caught her eye. Donna watched as the fingers on the dead woman's left hand began to slowly move. Sobbing with fear, she turned and ran back to her hiding place on the ninth floor, pausing only to glance out of the nearest window and look down onto the world below.

The same bizarre and illogical thing was happening again and again down at street level. Most bodies remained motionless on the ground but many others were moving. Without reason, explanation or any real degree of control, cadavers which had laid motionless for almost two days were now beginning to move.

Picking up her things, Donna made her way to the tenth floor (where she already knew there were no bodies) and locked herself in one of the building's training rooms. There was no sign of the body of the secretary on the landing.

2

Every door and window in the small end-terraced house was locked. Jack Baxter stood in silence in his bedroom and peered out from behind the curtain as another corpse tripped down the middle of the road and staggered away into the inky-black darkness of the night. It had disappeared from view in seconds. What the hell was going on?

Coming home from a night shift early on Tuesday morning, he had been outside and unprotected when it had begun. Jack worked at a warehouse just outside the city centre. The bus route which he used to get home followed a loop past the warehouse, through the city centre, over to the other side of town and back again. The bulk of the passengers usually got off when they reached the main part of the city and, when it had happened on Tuesday morning, he had been one of only eight people left on board.

The first sign that something was wrong had been an old man. Sitting two rows of seats in front of him he had started to cough and wheeze. His pain had increased dramatically in just a few seconds. Initially haunched forward, the pensioner had suddenly thrown himself back in his seat with violent force, terrified and fighting to breathe with his already inflamed throat burning with pain. Before Jack had fully appreciated the seriousness of his condition the pensioner had begun shaking and convulsing uncontrollably. He had been out of his seat and about to help when a twenty-five year old mother of three had yelled out in agony from the back of the bus. Her children had been screaming and crying too. Helpless, Jack had run towards them but

had stopped and turned and moved back the other way when he realised that the driver of the bus was now also coughing and choking. He sprinted the length of the swaying, lurching vehicle and had reached the driver in time to see him retch and gag on the blood running freely down the inside of his throat. He collapsed over the wheel, losing control of the bus and sending it swinging out in a clumsy arc across the carriageway, smashing through traffic coming the other way and eventually ploughing into the front of a pub. Jack had been thrown to the ground, his head thumping against the metal base of one of the seats and knocking him out cold.

He had no idea how long he had been unconscious for. When he finally came round his vision was blurred and he had struggled to regain his balance on unresponsive, unsteady feet. He had picked himself up and dragged himself towards the front of the battered bus. The driver was dead. The rest of the passengers were dead too. Using the emergency release he had managed to force open the door and had stumbled out onto the street. A sight of unparalleled and completely inexplicable carnage had greeted him. As the people on the bus had died so, it seemed, had everyone else for as far as he could see.

Numb, Jack had stood motionless for a good few minutes, his body remaining frozen and still while his eyes darted around the macabre scene. He began to count the bodies - ten, twenty, thirty and then more and more... The destruction around him appeared to be endless. He had waited expectedly for the silence to be shattered by the wail of approaching police, fire and ambulance sirens but nothing had arrived. With each passing minute the ominous quiet had become heavier and heavier until he had been able to stand it no longer.

A breathless ten minute run through a suddenly alien landscape had got Jack home. Sights which had been ordinary, familiar and nondescript when he'd left for work the

previous evening had now become twisted, bizarre and grotesque. The supermarket where he'd done his shopping the previous afternoon had been on fire and he'd watched as unchecked flames devoured the glass-fronted entrance which he'd walked through a thousand times. In the playground of the primary school at the end of his road he had seen the fallen bodies of parents surrounded by the uniformed corpses of their small children. A car had driven into the front of a house seven doors down from his own. Through the rubble and dusty debris he had seen the body of the owner of the house slumped dead in her armchair.

What had happened made no sense. There were no obvious explanations. There was no-one else left to ask for answers. Apart from Jack there didn't seem to be anyone else left alive. Somehow in all of the destruction he seemed to be the only one to have survived.

Jack had lost his wife Denise to cancer some fifteen months earlier. In many ways having suffered such an immense loss then somehow made it easier for him to accept what had happened and continue to function now. He had already grieved. He was already used to coming home to a cold, quiet and empty house. That was why he'd been happy to work nights since she'd died. He had frequently avoided mixing with the general population since his wife had been taken from him. No-one understood what she'd been through and no-one could make it any easier to accept. Even now, four hundred and thirty-seven days after she'd passed away, the memory of the physical and mental anguish that he'd witnessed her suffer hurt a thousand times more than any pain or fear he'd felt whilst stepping through the bodies that first morning.

Once he'd arrived back home Jack had tried to make contact with the rest of the world. He had tried every one of the thirty or so phone numbers in his address book and had managed to make a few calls before the line finally went dead. No-one answered. He had listened to the radio for a

while. The sound it had made was unsettling. He'd expected to hear hissing static but for a long time there was nothing, just an endless and empty silence. One station he had come across was still playing music. He had listened hopefully and nervously as the last few notes of a final song faded away, only to be replaced again by the same relentless silence that had descended everywhere else. In his mind he had pictured radio presenters, newsreaders, engineers and presenters lying dead in their studios, by default still broadcasting the aftereffects of whatever it was that had killed them.

He had spent much of his time upstairs just watching the world outside, hoping and praying that something would soon happen to explain or even end the nightmare. But it didn't. Looking out from one of the back rooms he had seen the body of his elderly neighbour, Stan Chapman, lying twisted and motionless in the middle of his cold, wet lawn. No-one, it seemed, had been spared.

Because of his working hours Jack's days worked in reverse to most people. In spite of everything that had happened, by noon on the first day he was having trouble keeping his eyes open. He had drifted and dozed through a long and disorientating afternoon and evening and then had spent what felt like a painful eternity sat on the end of his bed in the darkness, wide awake, alone and petrified. And the next day had been even harder to endure. He did nothing except sit and think dark, frightening thoughts and ask himself countless questions which were impossible to answer. For a while he had contemplated going outside and looking for help but he had been too scared to venture any further than halfway down the staircase before turning back and returning to the relative safety of the upstairs rooms. As the early light of Thursday morning began to creep across the ravaged landscape, however, what remained of Jack's devastated world had been turned on its head once again.

Just before seven o'clock a sudden metallic crashing noise had shattered the quiet. With everything else so silent and still the clattering sound had seemed to take forever to fade away into nothing. For a few seconds Jack hadn't dared move, paralysed with nerves. He'd waited anxiously for something to happen and, now that it finally had, he had been almost too afraid to go and see what it was. Gradually, as his curiosity and the pressure of his isolation had overtaken his fear, he had made his way down to the front of the house and, after peering through the letterbox, had opened the door and cautiously stepped outside. Rolling down the middle of the road was a metal dustbin. Strangely relieved, Jack had taken a few steps away from the house to the end of the drive and had looked up and down the deserted street. But it wasn't deserted. In the shadows of the trees on the opposite side of the road he had just about been able to make out a solitary female figure moving slowly away. Suddenly more confident he had sprinted the length of the street and grabbed hold of the woman's shoulder. She had stopped moving instantly and just stood there, her back to Jack. Overcome with anxious emotion he hadn't stopped to wonder why she hadn't heard him or reacted to him in any other way. Instead he had simply turned her around to face him, desperate to see and to speak to someone else like him who had survived. But it had been immediately obvious that this poor soul hadn't escaped the nightmare, and that she had been another victim of the scourge that had torn across the city. She might have been moving, but she was as dead as the thousands of bodies still littering the silent streets.

Jack had stared into her black and cold, emotionless eyes for an explanation. In the low light her skin had appeared taut and grey, waxy and translucent. Her mouth hung open as if she no longer had the energy to close it and her head had lolled heavily to one side. He had let the body go and it had immediately stumbled away, moving in the

opposite direction to the way in which it had previously been travelling. Jack turned, sprinted back to his house, and had locked and bolted the door behind him. In a petrified, trance-like state he had wandered through his house and had spent an age in the kitchen, propped up against the sink for support, staring out into the garden and trying to make some sense of this bizarre new development. His dark and disjointed thoughts had been disturbed by the sudden appearance of his dead neighbour at the window. The body had tripped through a gap in the hedge that Jack had been meaning to repair for the last three summers. The old man's clumsy corpse had dragged itself around the garden constantly, changing direction whenever it came in contact with the hedge, a fence or the house.

More than twelve hours had passed since Jack had seen the first body moving this morning. He had spent the rest of the day upstairs, hiding in his bedroom again, terrified. He packed a bag with clothes and food but when it came to moving he was too scared to leave. He knew he'd have to go outside eventually, but for now the familiarity and relative security of his home was all he had left.

Even now he could occasionally hear the body of his next-door neighbour crashing aimlessly and relentlessly around the back garden.

3

Another endless night and morning alone was all that Jack could take. He sat at the top of the stairs and reached the inevitable conclusion that it was time to get out. The sooner he did it, the sooner he could get back he reasoned. With his rucksack already packed he nervously locked up his home and stepped outside shortly after one o'clock that afternoon. For a few precious moments the autumn day felt reassuringly normal. It was typically cold and dry yet threateningly dull and overcast. A brisk, gusting wind was fresh and welcome, disturbing the silence and occasionally disguising the smells of death and burning which otherwise hung heavy in the air.

Less than fifty meters into his journey and Jack stopped, turned around and took a few hesitant steps back towards his house. It looked temptingly safe and certain back there. He knew exactly what he'd find behind the locked door and where everything would be. Out here in the open, though, he didn't know what was going to be waiting for him around the next corner. Too frightened to move forward into the unknown, but equally afraid of the consequences of turning tail and hiding alone in his home for days, possibly even weeks on end, he didn't know which way to turn. He stood in the middle of the street and cried like a child lost without its parents.

Jack gradually managed to placate himself by settling on a compromise. He decided that he would walk a little way further towards the town centre and that after an hour or two he would turn round and come back home. Tomorrow

he would venture a little further, then further still the next day and the next day after that until he found other survivors. There had to be others, of that much he felt certain. Feeling a little better he began to walk towards the end of the road, wishing that he'd learnt to drive like just about everyone else he knew had done before they'd reached the age of twenty. He would have felt much safer in a car.

Jack stopped walking when he was halfway down Turnhope Street as the first moving body he'd seen since leaving home stumbled into view. He was just about able to cope with the corpses that littered the ground, but the ones that moved were still too much for him to stand. Despite the fact that they didn't seem to react to anything, he still felt undeniably threatened by their unnatural presence. As the body (the uniformed remains of a male traffic warden) approached, he instinctively stood still and pressed himself against the side of the nearest building, hoping that he would blend into the background and go unnoticed. His fears were unfounded. The corpse staggered past without even lifting its head. It dragged its feet along the ground painfully slowly and Jack watched as it listlessly walked further and further away, its arms hanging heavy at its sides, swaying with the rest of its uncoordinated movements.

The complete and utter silence of the afternoon was overpowering. The darkness last night had been much the same - intense, relentless and uninterrupted by even a single street lamp. This afternoon apart from the sounds of the occasional gust of wind blowing litter and waste down the desolate and empty streets there was nothing. No cars. No planes. No music. No voices. Just a heavy, ominous and painfully empty silence. The noise his feet made as they scuffed along the pavement sounded as if they were being amplified a thousand times. Once or twice he cleared his throat, ready to shout out for help, but at the last moment his nerve had gone and he had decided against it. Much as

he wanted to attract the attention of anyone who had survived, he was desperate not to attract the attention of anything else. And despite the fact that there didn't seem to be anything else left to attract, he didn't have the balls to take the chance. It all boiled down to the fact that he was scared. No, he wasn't just scared, he was damn terrified.

Portdown Park Road ran into Lancaster Road which led into Haleborne Lane which then merged with Ayre Street, the road which eventually widened and became one of the main routes into the heart of the city. In an hour Jack had walked the best part of three slow miles and he hadn't seen anything or anyone, apart from another twenty or thirty of the silent, stumbling bodies. Some of them - the majority of them in fact - he had been able to ignore and pass with little difficulty. They looked, to all intents and purposes, relatively normal, just a little dishevelled and unkempt and lacking in colour, almost monochrome. Once in a while, however, one of them would come along which instantly filled him with nervous nausea and fear. The reanimation of the dead, it seemed, had been completely random and without any obvious logical criteria. Five minutes ago Jack had passed a body that had clearly been involved in a horrific accident. It had been male, he thought, but he couldn't be completely sure. The body was covered from head to toe in vicious burns. There didn't appear to be a single area of skin that hadn't been charred beyond recognition. The hair had been burned away from the scalp and the face - or the black hole where the face had been - was completely unrecognisable, just a mangled, burnt mass. Some clothing still hung around the creature's desperate frame, flapping in the breeze. Most of it, however, had either burned away or melted into the twisted, blackened flesh. But somehow it kept moving. Ignorant to the damage and deformation it had suffered and oblivious to any pain or shock it should have felt, the bloody thing just kept on moving. Its eyes were burned out empty sockets and it had no coordination

but still it kept on dragging itself forward, clumsily crashing into walls, parked cars and other obstructions. It had been the smell more than anything that had tipped Jack over the edge. He'd caught a taste of the scent of scorched flesh on the breeze and had immediately dropped to his knees and emptied the contents of his stomach into the gutter.

Although he'd decided to turn back if nothing happened, an unpredictable combination of curiosity and morbid fascination coupled with the desperate desire to actually find someone else alive kept Jack moving towards the centre of town. The further he got from his home, the more confident he gradually became but, as he neared the main hub of the city, the full enormity of what had happened was made painfully apparent. The small and insignificant suburb where he had lived had been brutally scarred by what had happened but that had been nothing compared to the city centre. Here, where there were far more tightly packed shops, offices, factories and other buildings the death and destruction appeared immense and unending. Jack was overcome by the magnitude of it all. Nothing seemed to have been left untouched by the silent killer early on Tuesday morning.

Walking down one side of a wide dual carriageway, he finally plucked up enough courage to shout out.

'Hello,' he yelled, frightening himself with the volume of his own voice. 'Hello, is there anybody there?'

Nothing. No surprise. He tried again.

'Hello...'

He stopped shouting and listened as the echoes of his words reverberated around the desolate city street, bouncing off the walls of lifeless buildings. Now that he seemed to be its only occupant, the world suddenly seemed vast and empty. In the far distance he heard a lone dog bark and howl.

'Hello...' he shouted again.

Dejected, he wondered whether it was worth going on. He had left his home with some hope, albeit a minimal amount, but now that had evaporated away to nothing. But how could he possibly be the only one left, he asked himself? Out of millions - possibly billions - of people affected, how could it be that he had survived when the rest of them had fallen and died? Did it have anything to do with where he'd been when it had happened? Did he just have a natural, inbuilt immunity? Was it because he worked nights? Was it something he'd eaten or not eaten? Nothing seemed beyond the realms of possibility anymore.

More pathetic, staggering bodies were all that he could see. Now that his initial fear and uncertainty at being out in the open had subsided, Jack was beginning to feel stronger and less threatened by those bodies which moved. He could see, hear, think and react. They, it seemed, could do nothing more than stumble about aimlessly.

He was getting closer and closer to the heart of the city with every step. Was it safe to go in there? Should he turn back now and head home? The main road gradually narrowed to a single lane in either direction and the sudden closeness of the buildings around him made him feel hemmed in and uneasy. He decided against shouting out again. There were even more bodies up ahead. He managed to walk past them with a new found nonchalance, even plucking up the courage to push one of them out of the way when it staggered randomly into his path.

Jack glanced over to his right where he saw one of the pathetic creatures sitting in the shadows of a shop doorway. He hadn't seen any of the corpses sitting still before, they seemed to move about constantly. Perhaps this was one that had fallen and died in the doorway where it had remained until now. He stopped and walked a little closer. As he approached the body raised its head and looked up at him, lifting its hands to shield its eyes from the bright autumn sun which had appeared momentarily through an unex-

pected gap in the heavy cloud cover. The figure in the doorway - a young girl, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age dressed in a creased and crumpled school uniform - slowly stood up and began to walk towards him. It took the two desperate, frightened individuals a good thirty seconds to realise and fully accept the fact that they had both found another survivor. Moving slowly and with caution at first, the girl broke into a run for the last few meters before wrapping her arms around Jack and sinking to her knees. He crouched down and held her as tightly as he could, as if he'd known her for fifty years and not seen her for ten. He'd finally found someone else alive.

After a few long and emotional seconds of silence, Jack looked around anxiously before taking the girl's hand in his and leading her towards the nearest building. It was a dental surgery. A cold, dark and small private practice which smelt of dust and decay still tinged with a sterile, antiseptic edge. The two survivors sat down together in a musty waiting room on hard plastic seats, surrounded by three motionless corpses that had been waiting to be seen by the now dead dentist since early Tuesday morning. A nurse was slumped across a counter to their right. The presence of the bodies didn't seem to matter. Being indoors helped Jack psychologically, regardless of how grim and desolate his new surroundings were.

At first neither survivor knew what to say to the other.

'I'm Jack...' he eventually stammered awkwardly.

'I heard you shouting...' she began to sob. She shook as she leant against him. The warmth of her body was welcome and reassuring. 'I didn't know where you were,' she continued. 'I heard you but I couldn't see you and...'

'Doesn't matter,' he whispered, stroking her hair and gently kissing the top of her head. 'It doesn't matter.'

'Have you seen anyone else?' the girl asked.

'No-one. What about you?'

She shook her head. Feeling fractionally better and more composed, she pushed herself away from Jack slightly and sat up in her seat. He watched as she wiped her face.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked softly.

‘Clare Smith,’ she mumbled.

‘And are you from round here, Clare?’

She shook her head again.

‘No, I live with my mum in Letchworth.’

‘So how did you end up in this part of town?’

‘I’d been stopping at my dad’s this weekend. We didn’t have any school on Monday so I stayed with him an extra day and...’

She stopped talking when the memory of her parents and the recollection of her sudden, unexplained loss came flooding back. She started to cry silently. Jack watched helplessly as a relentless stream of tears ran down her pale cheeks.

‘Look,’ he soothed, trying to make it easier for her, ‘you don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. If you want we could just...’

‘What happened?’ she asked suddenly, cutting across him and turning to look him square in the face for the first time. ‘What did this?’

Jack sighed, stood up and stepped over a corpse lying at his feet.

‘Don’t know,’ he replied, looking through a frosted-glass window into a small office area. ‘I was on my way home when it happened. I didn’t see anything until it was too late.’

Clare leant forward in her seat and held her head in her hands.

‘Dad was driving me to school,’ she said quietly as she stared down at the floor between her feet. ‘He lives right on the other side of town so we were coming through the city centre...’ She paused to wipe her eyes and clear her throat. ‘We pulled up at a set of traffic lights and Dad started to

choke. I tried to help him but there was nothing I could do. We drove into the car in front and the car behind hit us. Dad just kept coughing and shaking until he died and I couldn't do anything...'

Clare's composure cracked and she lost control again. Jack took a few steps closer to her and knelt down in front of her chair. She grabbed hold of him tightly and pulled herself towards him, burying her face in his chest. Still feeling a little awkward and unsure, he put his arms around her again and rocked her gently.

'Come on...' he soothed.

Clare wiped her eyes and continued to talk between heavy sobs.

'I got out of the car to try and get some help for Dad. I didn't even stop to think about what had happened to him. And when I got out I couldn't believe what I saw. Everything had stopped. We were stuck in the middle of the biggest crash you've ever seen. It looked like there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of cars all smashed into each other. I had to climb over them to get to the side of the road...'

'It happened so quickly that no-one had time to react,' Jack mumbled. After a few long seconds of silent reflection he cleared his throat and spoke again. 'I've been heading into the centre of town,' he explained. 'I live out in the suburbs. I thought I might find a few more people that had survived round here.'

'And you haven't found anyone?' Clare asked. Jack shook his head.

'You're the first.'

'So why have we survived?'

'No idea. I don't know anything more than you do. I mean, I was just sitting on the bus trying to get home and...'

He stopped talking suddenly.

'And what...?' Clare pressed.

‘Shh...’ he hissed, lifting a finger to his lips. He could hear something. He stood up and walked out of the waiting room, beckoning Clare to follow close behind. A twisting wooden staircase led from the ground floor up to the rest of the dental surgery. At the very top of the staircase were three doors leading to separate consulting rooms. Jack cautiously pushed the nearest door open. It swung forward, opening into a small square room dominated by a large treatment chair complete with dead patient. A dental nurse’s corpse lay at his feet. On the other side of the room the lethargic body of a dentist - wearing once hygienic white overalls covered with dribbles of blood - was trapped, its path blocked by the chair and an upturned cupboard of medical equipment. The corpse staggered helplessly from side to side.

‘Let’s go,’ Jack said under his breath. He turned and led Clare downstairs and back out onto the street.

4

Almost a hundred feet above the city centre Donna watched the world around her begin to decay.

Although she constantly felt anxious, nauseous and ready to break into a nervous panic at any moment, she somehow managed to maintain a surprising degree of control and, generally, was able to continue to think and act relatively rationally and sensibly. She wondered whether it was because she was in the place where she used to work? She had become used to switching off and detaching herself from her emotions in this grey and oppressive environment. In the same way she'd spent the last few weeks and months here processing work, she now found herself having to process the remains of her life. Had she been at home with its comfort, familiarity and memories she felt sure her emotions would have overtaken her by now.

Hunger and other more rudimentary needs had eventually forced her from the training room at the far end of the tenth floor of the office block. Locked in a cabinet that she had smashed her way into in the building manager's office on the ground floor, she had found a collection of safety lamps and torches. She presumed they would have been used in the event of an emergency or an evening evacuation of the building perhaps. She added the lamps from downstairs to the collection of lighting equipment she'd already gathered and, slowly and methodically, she spaced them around the windows on the tenth floor, eventually managing to work her way around three-quarters of the perimeter of the building.

There was a new found purpose to her actions.

Just after six o'clock, when the evening light began to fade away noticeably, she lit every last lamp and switched on every torch. Her plan was simple. She was desperate to find other survivors but she was also too scared and uncertain to go outside and look for them. She guessed that anyone else left alive in the city would probably feel the same. She decided that the most sensible thing she could do would be to let the rest of the world know where she was hiding.

In the otherwise utter blackness of the cold and lifeless night, the lights in the windows of the office block lit up her location like a beacon.

It worked.

Paul Castle, a music shop sales assistant in his early twenties, was painfully hungry but had been too afraid to leave the store where he had worked and where he'd watched customers and colleagues die in agony last Tuesday morning. He'd searched the entire store and, until now, had been able to find enough scraps to eat and drink from the vending machines dotted around the building. He'd known all along that going outside was inevitable, but he'd done all that he could to prevent it from happening for as long as possible. Now he knew he had no choice but to leave.

Paul waited until the world was dark before venturing out. He figured that the darkness should offer him some protection from the wandering bodies that he had watched staggering aimlessly up and down the desolate streets outside. He knew that in their present state they didn't seem to actually pose a threat to him, but the additional camouflage that the blackness of the night provided brought him some welcome comfort and reassurance. As long as he managed to avoid dwelling on the fact that these awkward and unpredictable figures had laid dead at his feet for the best part

of two days before rising again, he was just about able to keep his fragile emotions in check. In the shadows and low light of early evening it was somehow easier to ignore the desperate condition of the rest of the world. From across the street a staggering dead body looked almost the same as someone who was still alive and who still possessed control, coordination and independence of thought. He had seen more than enough drunkards, addicts and down-and-outs in the city centre at night to be able to convince himself that what he was seeing now was just more of the same. Despite his fear and uncertainty, his comparative speed and agility made it possible for him to move among the bodies as if they were normal people trapped in a bizarre slow motion replay of their lives.

There was little in the way of supermarkets and food stores in the city centre. This was a place where people had worked and shopped for gifts and luxuries, where they had studied and partied and where they had been entertained in cinemas, theatres and clubs. Paul quickly ran down a long concrete ramp close to where he had worked and then turned right and sprinted across the road in the direction of a newsagents and a high-class department store where he knew he would find a well stocked food-hall.

Rather than reassure him, now that he was outside he found the darkness unexpectedly unnerving. It unsettled him to see so many huge shop fronts and expensive window displays standing dark and unlit. Even the street lights were off. He found himself running through blackness and into more blackness. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and climbed up onto the top of a huge and, in his opinion, tasteless lump of concrete and steel street art. Light rain fell around him as he stood there with hands on hips, looking down over miles and miles of pitch-black city suburbs. Breathless he peered as far as he could into the distance, desperate to see something that would give him a

little hope. Dejected he jumped down and walked away. There was nothing.

Numb and uncaring, Paul continued towards the department store where he forced his way in through a pile of fallen elderly shoppers. Although he had never shopped there himself he quickly found the food hall and filled numerous plastic carrier bags with food which he loaded into a shopping trolley and pushed out through the silent check-outs. Pausing only to allow another one of the pitiful cadavers to drag itself past the front of the building, he stepped back outside into the night and wearily began to work his way back to the store where he'd been sheltering. For a while he thought about trying to get home. He'd considered it a few times before but it seemed too great a distance away for him to think about trying to cover alone while the situation remained so uncertain. Truth was he was a coward looking for excuses not to take risks but that didn't make any difference to his decision. What did it matter what anyone else might think of him, he thought, when there didn't seem to be anyone else left alive to care? Maybe he'd find a car and try and drive there in the morning, but then again maybe not.

The trolley made a deafening rattling and clattering noise as he pushed it along the block-paved city street. Still disorientated by the darkness, he paused to get his bearings. He pushed the trolley to one side and leant against a nearby bus shelter to drink from a carton of fruit juice which he'd taken from the department store. He opened the carton and drank from it thirstily, the strong, citrus flavour suddenly revitalising him. He'd hardly drunk anything all day and he practically emptied the carton in a short time. It was when he tipped his head back to drain the last few precious drops of juice that he saw the light.

Christ, he thought, he could see light.

Throwing the empty carton to one side, he got up and took a few steps away from the bus shelter. At the far end

of the road adjacent to the one he'd been following he could see the silhouette of a tall office block which had been obscured from his view by other buildings until now. And there was no mistaking the fact that he could definitely see light. Halfway up the massive structure, in the midst of all the darkness he could definitely see light. And where there was light, he quickly decided, there had to be people.

Suddenly filled with energy and a new found determination, he pushed the shopping trolley further into the shadows and turned and ran towards the office block. A body appeared from out of nowhere, its random path crossing his own by chance. Without thinking he shoved it to one side and it tripped and crumbled to the ground, silent and disaffected. Paul continued to move and to increase his speed. He had covered the length of the street and was outside the building in seconds. He glanced up, shielding his eyes from the spitting rain, making sure that he could still see the dull yellow glow coming from the windows high above. The main revolving door was blocked by fallen bodies but a side entrance remained clear and he pushed his way inside. The silent, mausoleum-like place smelled of must and the early stages of decay but Paul was, by now, becoming used to the scent of death which seemed to have permeated almost everywhere and soaked and stained everything. He didn't bother to try the lifts, choosing instead to head straight for the stairs. He climbed the first three flights at speed but then slowed dramatically as nerves and exhaustion quickly overcame his initial rush of adrenaline-fuelled excitement. With every step he took further up the building, so his unease and anxiety steadily grew. But he couldn't stop. For the first time since all of this had begun there was a very real chance he was about to find someone else alive.

Fourth floor - nothing.

Fifth floor - nothing.

Sixth floor - bodies.

Paul stepped over a corpse which was sprawled on the ground at the bottom of another flight of stairs before reaching out for the plastic-coated handrail and dragging himself up again. His mind was starting to play tricks. Had he actually seen a light at all? Was he going to be able to find the right floor? He forced himself to keep on climbing and clung on to the faintest glimmer of hope as he moved.

Seventh floor.

Eighth floor.

Ninth floor.

Tenth.

This was it. He could see the light even before he'd stepped off the staircase and onto the landing. A warm yellow glow which shone through the small windows in the doors which separated the office from the rest of the world. Panting heavily with the effort of the climb, Paul shook and yanked furiously at the door handle. It didn't move.

Inside the office Donna froze. She was back in the training room again, curled up in a sleeping bag, sitting on a comfortable swivel chair. Every nerve and fibre in her body suddenly became tense and heavy with nervous fear. She didn't dare move.

Paul shook the door again and banged at it with his fist. He couldn't see or hear anyone but that didn't matter, the light alone was more than enough reason for him to keep trying to force his way inside. Not making any progress he took a couple of steps back and then shoulder-charged the door. It rattled and shook in its frame but still it didn't open.

None of the bodies she'd come across possessed anywhere near enough strength to make that kind of noise, Donna thought. She wanted to believe that there was another survivor on the other side of the door but in her heart she didn't really think that would be the case. She hadn't seen or heard anyone else. She knew that she had no option

but to leave the relative safety of the training room and go and have a look.

The landing was about twenty feet long and five feet wide. Double doors at either end gave access to the open office space. Paul had turned left at the top of the stairs but the training room where Donna had been sheltering was to the right. Cautiously she picked up a torch and tiptoed to the door nearest to her. She shone the light through the small window and peered into the darkness, sure that she could see some movement at the far end of the landing. Suddenly aware of the light shining at him, Paul stopped what he was doing and slowly turned around. Donna instinctively pointed her torch down to the ground, frightened that she had been seen. Paul ran the length of the landing.

‘Let me in,’ he yelled, banging his fists against the door furiously. ‘For Christ’s sake, let me inside...’

He leant against the door and pressed his face against the glass, frustrated, frightened and breathing heavily. For a few moments Donna did nothing. Then, slowly, the reality of the situation dawned on her. The bodies that moved couldn’t speak. They couldn’t make decisions or move with any amount of control. The person on the other side of the door had to be a survivor. She flicked her pass at the sensor on the wall and the door unlocked and opened inwards. Paul fell into the office and collapsed in front of her.

‘Are you...?’ she started to say.

He looked up at her, tears rolling down his face, and then picked himself up and reached out for her. Locked together in an awkward, uncomfortable but ultimately welcome embrace, the two survivors stood in silence, both revelling in the sudden closeness of another living human being.

5

By the time Clare and Jack reached what had been the main shopping area of the city it was almost completely dark. Neither of them wanted to be outside at night. The world had been turned on its head and ripped apart in the last week and nothing could be taken for granted. In daylight it was difficult enough to try and keep track of what was happening around them. In darkness it would be virtually impossible.

Jack gently pushed Clare towards Bartrams department store. A huge and imposing building at the best of times, it had long been a focal point for city shoppers. Now, drenched in crimson-black gloom and crisscrossed by angular shadows cast by the moon above, its tall, grey walls and many small, square windows made it appear unnervingly prison-like.

‘We can stop here tonight,’ Jack whispered. ‘There’ll be food and stuff inside. We’ll be okay here.’

Clare didn’t reply. Exhausted and dejected, it was all she could do to put one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward. She hadn’t said very much since they’d been together. A few tearful sentences when they’d first met and a few grunted words since then had been all. Jack didn’t push her to make conversation. He felt and understood her pain. He was hurting too, of course, but he’d suffered loss like this before. Clare, he assumed, hadn’t. He tried to help her but his well-meaning words appeared to have very little positive effect.

‘I know it’s hard,’ he’d said a while back as they’d followed the main road into the remains of the high street. ‘My missus died last year. I know what you feel like. You think you’re hurting so much that you’ll never get over it but you will. Believe me, it will get easier.’

‘How can it get better?’ she’d cried. ‘How can it get better when I’ve lost everything?’

Other than that Clare hadn’t responded. Even Jack didn’t know if he really believed what he was saying. At least he’d had a reason and an explanation for the loss he’d suffered when his wife passed away, even if it had been impossible for him to accept that Denise had died. Clare’s loss had been completely unexpected and without any justification or obvious cause. Jack had looked long and hard into her drained and emotionless face as they had walked. How scared and bewildered she must have been feeling inside. He’d never had kids of his own but he’d often wished that he had. His brother had a couple of boys. Stuart was eight and Danny had been five a fortnight ago. It hurt to think about them now because he knew in his heart that they were gone. Thoughts of families and children filled his mind with a multitude of nightmare scenarios. As far as he could see there didn’t seem to be any reason or pattern as to who had survived this disaster, who had died or who appeared to at first have died but who had then dragged themselves back up again. What if young children had survived when their parents had died? How would they cope? How would they feed and look after themselves? For a second he pictured Danny, his youngest nephew, alone at home. Danny had done well in reception class at school. He’d learnt to read a handful of simple words and he could write his name. He could dress himself, he could count up to twenty and, if he really tried, he could just about tie his shoelace in a proper double-bow. But Danny couldn’t cook. He couldn’t find medicine if he became ill. He couldn’t

light a fire to keep himself warm. He couldn't defend himself against attack. He simply couldn't survive...

Their eventual arrival in the department store in the dead heart of the city brought Jack a welcome distraction from his increasingly dark, morbid and hopeless thoughts.

The large store had just opened for business when the disease or virus or whatever it was had struck on Tuesday. A row of large glass doors along the front of the building were open and it seemed, fortunately, that the vast majority of those dead shoppers who had risen up again inside the shop had managed to stumble back out onto the street.

Tired and emotionally drained, Jack and Clare wearily worked their way up through the store floor by floor. From the ground floor they collected scraps of food and extra clothing. On the first floor there was a small hardware department from where they took torches and lights. Using the now stationary escalators running up through the centre of the building as a staircase, they then climbed up to a second floor furniture department. It seemed that the higher they went, the fewer bodies they came across. The clumsy figures couldn't easily cope with climbing up stairs but they were, of course, prone to tripping and falling down. Jack and Clare felt safer the higher they managed to get above ground level. The solitary moving body that they did find on the second floor (trapped between a chest-of-drawers and a fallen wardrobe in a bedroom furniture display) offered no resistance as Jack reluctantly bundled it into a nearby toilet and blocked its way out with a set of bunk beds.

They spent a long hour together sitting on an expensive leather sofa, picking at the food they'd collected and sharing a few moments of fragmented conversation. Although it was relatively early (around half-past eight) the darkness, silence and strain of the day combined to make it feel much later. They were both exhausted. In what remained of their world everything seemed to take a hundred times more ef-

fort to do than it had done before. And added to that, nothing could be done which didn't remind them both of all they once had but which now they had suddenly lost. By torchlight Jack flicked through a TV listings magazine he'd found in a dead shopper's bag. Most probably all of the celebrities pictured in the glossy pages were now dead. In any event none of it really mattered. What good were actors, presenters and celebrities now?

'We'll have more luck tomorrow, I'm sure of it,' Jack whispered hopefully (although not entirely convincingly).

'What do you mean?' Clare mumbled.

'We'll find someone else.'

'Where?'

'I don't know. Look, this is a huge city. There must be more people left alive somewhere. You and I can't be the only ones left, can we?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Well we haven't seen anyone else, have we?'

'They must be sheltering. I stayed at home for a while before I went out, I bet there are hundreds of people sitting in their houses waiting for something to happen. They'll have to come out sooner or later to get food and drink and...'

Clare wasn't listening. She was crying again. Although he knew that he couldn't do anything to relieve her pain and fear, and even though he knew he wasn't the cause of her suffering, as the only adult around Jack couldn't help but feel responsible and protective towards her. Cautiously he rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, and then reached across and pulled her closer. Half-expecting her to recoil and pull away, he was surprised when she did the opposite and leant her weight against him fully.

'When is this going to stop?' she sobbed, drawing her knees up and making herself as small as possible.

'Don't know,' he grunted honestly.

'But what caused it all?'

‘I don’t know,’ he said again.

‘Will it happen to us? Is it just taking longer for us to...?’

‘I don’t know, Clare,’ he sighed with a hint of resigned frustration clear in his tired voice. ‘I don’t know anything and I can’t give you any answers. I know as much as you do.’

‘But I don’t know anything either,’ she protested tearfully.

‘Exactly.’

A brief silence.

‘No-one had a chance, did they?’ she mumbled.

‘There wasn’t any time, was there? I mean, from the little I saw whatever it was that did all of this seemed to spread across the city like wildfire. We don’t even know how far widespread this is.’

‘How far do you think it’s gone?’

Jack stopped to think for a second. It was the first time for a day or so that he’d actually been able to stop and think about the possible extent of the disaster.

‘No idea,’ he admitted. ‘But if this was a local thing then you’d have expected people to have arrived to help us by now.’

‘Maybe they don’t think anyone survived?’

‘Possible.’

‘Or perhaps they can’t get here?’

‘What?’

‘Maybe whatever it was that killed everyone is still in the air. Perhaps we’re immune to it and they can’t come here until it’s cleared?’

‘Don’t know. You might be right.’

A difficult few minutes followed as both Jack and Clare stopped talking and withdrew to think about what had happened again. It was a natural reaction but thinking didn’t seem to help anyone. There were no easy answers and, even worse than the frustration of not being able to under-

stand, thinking inevitably turned into remembering. And remembering hurt.

‘Do you like this sofa?’ Jack asked suddenly, making a deliberate attempt to start talking rubbish and stop trying to make sense of a senseless situation.

Surprised, Clare managed half a smile.

‘Not bothered, why?’

‘Seen the price of it?’

She was sitting on the price label. She sat up and looked at it.

‘Is that expensive? I’ve never had to buy a sofa.’

‘Expensive?’ he said, shaking his head in mock despair. ‘It’s outrageous. Me and Denise kitted out our whole house for just a little bit more than that. And that was a few years back. It’s this shop,’ he continued. ‘This shop was always for people that had money or those that thought they had.’

‘My mum liked this shop,’ Clare said quietly, still smiling faintly. ‘She used to bring us here when we were little.’

‘I think everyone’s mums used to bring them here.’

‘What, yours too?’

He nodded and sat back in his seat.

‘Yes, been here for years this place has. It used to be the only place around that sold school uniform. I used to get dragged here once a year in the holidays to get kitted out. And shoes too. We used to get our shoes from here.’

‘Me too.’

‘Hated it. Me and my brother both hated it.’

‘Me too.’

‘You could see the other kids going through exactly the same thing. There would be loads of us all lined up against the wall to have our feet measured. And we’d all start the next school term with the same shoes...’

Clare managed a stifled laugh and sniffed back another tear.

‘I’m tired,’ she said quietly.

‘Let’s go to bed,’ he grinned, shining his torch across the store to a line of seven double beds for sale.

The survivors gathered their belongings and silently made their way across the shop floor to the beds. Jack found duvets and pillows from another nearby display and tore off their plastic packaging as Clare sat down on the bed in the middle of the row of seven.

‘You sure you’re going to be all right here?’ he asked as he passed her a pillow.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she replied as she settled back and attempted to relax. ‘What about you?’

‘Oh, I’ll be okay,’ he said as he opened more bedding and threw it down on the bed next to Clare’s. He dragged a small bedside table across the room and put a lamp on top of it. The small circle of yellow-orange light it produced was comforting. ‘Goodnight then.’

‘Goodnight.’

Jack lay down and, after a few seconds of uncertainty, eventually closed his eyes. He was asleep in a surprisingly short time. He was exhausted. The mental and physical effort of just getting through each minute of the day had been relentless.

Now that their conversation had ended the world was silent again save for the occasional noise made by one of the few bodies left trapped in one of the store’s lower floors. Clare didn’t like being alone. Unable to sleep as easily as Jack, she picked up her duvet and pillow and curled up next to him on his bed. Her hurried movements woke him for a moment. He knew she was in bed with him but he didn’t react. Having her close was as reassuring for him as it was for her.

6

‘So there I was,’ Paul Castle explained, ‘I’m sat on the train and it’s coming into the station. I knew that something wasn’t right. I remember hearing the first few people starting to panic around me but I wasn’t thinking straight. All I could think about was the speed. I mean, we were just minutes away from the station and the driver hadn’t started slowing down. I’ve done that journey five times a week virtually every week for the last eighteen months and I’ve got to know where the train should start slowing down and where the brakes should kick in and...’

He stopped talking and turned to look out of the window at the darkness outside. Donna and Paul were sitting in the training room, both still trying to get used to the fact that they had found someone else alive.

‘So what did you do?’ Donna asked.

‘By then people were dying,’ he continued, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye and hoping that she hadn’t seen him. ‘Everywhere I looked they were just dropping and dying around me. I knew we were going to crash. I wasn’t thinking about what was happening to the rest of them, I just got down on the floor and covered my head with my hands and...’

‘And...?’

‘And we hit something, but we got away with it lightly. Nothing seemed to happen for ages and then I felt the impact. It was a real fucking wrench. It threw me right forward and I could hear metal groaning and snapping and breaking. I swear I’d have been badly injured if it wasn’t

for the bodies. There were so many of them they were like padding all around me. Once the train had stopped I managed to smash my way out through a window. When I got out I saw that we'd gone into the back of another train that was still at the platform. Christ knows how we managed to stay on the rails.'

'Were you hurt?'

'I did this,' Paul replied, lifting his shirt and turning around to show her his back. Even though the light was poor Donna could clearly see a huge purple and brown bruise running diagonally across the entire width of his back.

'Painful?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Not really,' he replied. 'Truth is I've hardly thought about it since everything happened.'

'So what did you do next?'

'I went to work. Christ, there's conditioning for you. I didn't know what else to do. I mean, I couldn't get home and I couldn't think of anywhere else to go. I figured that if I was at work then I'd at least have some shelter and protection. I knew where everything was.'

'I know what you mean. That's why I'm still here.'

'You worked here?'

She nodded.

'Typical, isn't it,' Paul grinned. 'You spend most of your life trying to get out of work then you end up trapped there when everything goes belly-up.'

'So was there anyone else around when you got there?'

'There were plenty of people there,' he replied, 'but no one else was alive. Jesus, all the people I'd been working with just the day before were dead. All those people that I'd known for ages just gone... You get to know the people you work with, don't you? I had mates there and we'd been out drinking at the weekend and now they're...'

He stopped talking and looked up at the ceiling to avoid eye contact before losing control and starting to cry again. Donna sat and watched from the other side of a wide grey desk. She said and felt nothing. Somehow she had managed to distance herself from the pain. Perhaps it was the shock of everything that had happened? Whatever the reason, inside she felt as dead as the thousands of bodies lying and rotting on the streets. It was as if every nerve in her body had been cauterised. She didn't seem to feel anything anymore. She knew that was a bad thing but, at that moment, it helped.

'Have some food,' she said, unable to think of anything else to say. She pushed a packet of biscuits across the desk. Paul shook his head. 'You should eat something.'

'No thanks.'

'Drink?'

She offered him a half-empty bottle of water. He nodded and wiped his face on his sleeve before taking the bottle from her and drinking thirstily.

'So what do we do now?' he asked as he screwed the lid of the bottle back on and passed it back. Donna shrugged her shoulders.

'Don't know,' she replied bluntly.

'I mean we can't just sit here, can we?'

'What else is there to do?'

'Christ, we should do something. We should get out there and find other people. See if we can actually find someone who knows what's going on...'

'Bloody hell, I haven't seen anyone else alive apart from you. I haven't found anyone who's still breathing, so what chance have we got of finding anyone who knows what's happened?'

'I know, but I...'

'Look, I don't want to go out until I have to,' she continued, interrupting. 'Until I know what's caused all of this I

want to stay as far away as I can from those bloody things out there.’

Her voice was cold, flat and tired and her message abrupt and definite. Paul didn’t bother trying to argue. He got up and made himself a makeshift bed from clothes and blankets underneath a desk.

He lay there in silence and stared up into the darkness for hours.

Donna sat in her chair and did the same.

7

Less than half a mile from the office block stood the first few buildings of a modern university campus. Separated from the rest of town by the six-lane ring road that ran along the front of a large and recently built accommodation block, the university grounds were vast. The medical school located at the far end of the complex formed part of one of the city's main hospitals. With specialist dental, children's, skin and burns departments, the hospital itself had been fundamental to the continuing health of the city's population. Tonight only one doctor remained on duty. Tonight there was only one doctor left alive.

The modern accommodation block had individual rooms for several hundred students. During the days since the disaster somewhere in the region of fifty survivors had gathered there. Some had been near the hospital or university when it had happened, others had found their way there by chance, a few dull lights and occasional signs of movement revealing the survivor's presence to the otherwise empty world. Dr Phil Croft, the last remaining medic, had just started his morning rounds when it had begun on Tuesday morning. He'd helplessly watched an entire ward full of people around him die. He had just discharged a young boy called Ashley with a clean bill of health after an appendectomy two weeks earlier. Seconds after finishing his examination of the boy the helpless child had fallen at the doctor's feet and was dead. And it hadn't just been the children. The nurses, parents, cleaners, helpers, his fellow doc-

tors and consultants too - everyone else on the ward had been struck down and killed within minutes.

But even now, now that the population had reduced from millions to, it seemed, less than hundreds, Croft was still on duty. It was something that came naturally to him, an instinctive, inbuilt response. One of the survivors needed medical attention and he felt duty bound to provide it.

He walked slowly through the quiet building towards the room where the woman who needed him lay. The corridor he moved along was dark and shadowy and was lined with doors leading to individual student rooms on either side. Using his torch to guide his way he glanced into a couple of the rooms as he passed them, the unexpected light causing mild panic amongst the survivors cowering in the darkness. There may have been more than forty people sheltering in the building, but many of them were sheltering alone. Apart from a handful of people who had begun to group together, the majority of survivors chose to remain in frightened isolation, too afraid to move or to speak.

The doctor found the room where the woman was resting. She was very attractive - tall, well-toned, strong and nine months pregnant with her first child. Croft was strangely drawn to Sonya Farley. His girlfriend - Natasha Rogers, a nurse in one of the burns units - was dead. In those painful first few minutes on Tuesday morning he had run from his building across to Tash's unit and had found her cold and lifeless on the ground with the rest of them, dead like everyone else. She had been eight weeks pregnant. They hadn't had chance to tell anyone about the baby, not even their parents. They'd only just got over the shock of the unexpected pregnancy themselves. Now Croft found that focussing his efforts and attention on Sonya helped his constant, gnawing pain to ease slightly. It somehow made it easier for him to cope with his loss, knowing that he would still be able to help Sonya to bring her baby into what re-

mained of the battered world. And Christ alone knew that Sonya deserved help. When the disease had struck she'd been sitting in the middle of an eight mile traffic jam on the main motorway leading into town. She'd walked through more than four miles of unremitting horror and devastation to reach the hospital.

Satisfied that she was well and leaving her sleeping soundly, Croft made his way downstairs. He entered a large rectangular assembly hall where a few survivors had gathered together. He found the lack of any noise or conversation more difficult to handle than the solitude and he kept moving, crossing the room diagonally and leaving by another exit. The fact that everyone had become so painfully withdrawn somehow made the situation harder for him to deal with but, then again, what was there to talk about? Did any of the survivors have anything in common? Even if they did, chances were that whatever interests they may have once shared were gone now. What was the point of talking to anyone else about your taste in food, clothes, film, music, books or anything anymore? And as every survivor who did speak quickly found to their cost, it didn't matter who you tried to talk to or what you talked about, every single conversation inevitably began and ended with pointless conjecture about what had happened to the rest of the dead world.

Croft needed nicotine. He walked the length of another corridor then turned right and sat on a step halfway down a short staircase which led to a glass-fronted entrance door. This small, secluded area had become something of a smoker's corner and two other survivors - Sunita, a student who lived in the building they were sheltering in and Yvonne, a legal secretary from a firm of solicitors on the other side of the ring road - were already stood there, smoking their cigarettes and staring out into the darkness. Croft had successfully kicked the habit five months ago but had started again yesterday. It didn't seem to matter any-

more. He lit his cigarette and acknowledged the two women who turned around to see who it was who had joined them.

‘You all right Dr Croft?’ Yvonne asked.

He nodded and blew a cloud of smoke out into the still air just in front of his face.

‘I’m okay,’ he replied, his voice quiet and tired. ‘You two?’

Sunita nodded instinctively but otherwise didn’t reply.

‘My Jim,’ Yvonne said softly, ‘he used to love the dark. Sometimes, when he couldn’t sleep, he’d get up and go and sit in the bay window at the back of the house and watch the sun come up. He used to love it when the birds started singing. If he was feeling romantic he’d wake me up and take me downstairs with him. Didn’t happen often, mind.’

Yvonne smiled momentarily and then looked down at the ground as the sound of bird song in her memory was swallowed up and overtaken by the all consuming silence again, leaving her feeling empty, vulnerable and lost. She wiped a tear from her eye. She was in her early fifties but the strain of the last few days had left her looking much older. Her usually impeccable hairstyle was frayed and untidy, her once smart business suit now crumpled and unkempt. Sunita sensed her grief and put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her close. She knew that Yvonne’s husband had worked in an office across town and that, on the first morning, she’d gone there and found him dead at his desk, face down in a pile of papers.

‘I can handle the dark as long as I’m not on my own,’ Sunita said. ‘When I’m on my own my mind starts to play tricks. I start convincing myself that there’s someone else there.’

‘You’d be lucky to find anyone these days,’ the doctor sighed. ‘Anyway, never mind the dark, I’m having enough trouble trying to deal with what’s happening in the light,’ he admitted.

‘You any closer to working out what’s happened yet?’ Yvonne asked innocently as she turned to look out of the window again.

Croft shook his head and looked away, trying to hide his sudden frustration and annoyance. Why did everyone assume that just because he was a doctor he’d somehow be able to find a reason and explanation for their impossible situation? Christ, no-one had ever come across anything like the virus or disease or whatever it was that had killed so many people in such a short period of time. And to his knowledge no-one had ever risen after two days without moving or breathing either. Nothing had ever happened like this before so of course he didn’t know what the bloody hell had caused it. With his sudden anger close to boiling to the surface he forced himself to bite his tongue and remain calm. Inside he felt like screaming at Yvonne and telling her to go and look for the answers to her questions in a fucking medical encyclopaedia but he knew it wouldn’t achieve anything other than to make an already unbearable situation more tense and unbearable still. He took a deep breath and sucked in another lungful of smoke. She wasn’t trying to wind him up. He silently reminded himself that she was just trying to get through this like everyone else.

‘You checked on Sonya?’ Sunita asked.

He nodded.

‘She all right?’

‘She’s fine. She’s sleeping.’

‘Lucky cow,’ mumbled Yvonne. ‘I haven’t slept properly for days.’

Croft finished his cigarette and dropped the glowing stub onto the floor before putting it out with his foot. He held his head in his hands. Without power it was as dark inside the building as the night was outside. The brightest lights were the glowing ends of Sunita and Yvonne’s cigarettes moving through the cold air. Exhausted, the doctor closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. He’d tried sev-

eral times in the last few hours to completely empty his head of all conscious thought and switch off but nothing seemed to work. Even the smallest, most insignificant noise or the slightest thought was enough to bring him crashing back to reality in seconds. And even though he was one of only a handful of people left alive, the disturbances and distractions were constant and unending.

‘You see that young lad who came in this morning?’ Yvonne asked Sunita. ‘Poor little bugger. Could only have been six or seven years old. One of the others spotted him running down the ring road. Said his mum had died and he’d come into town to try and find his dad. Wouldn’t be told that he was probably dead too...’

‘How are we supposed to explain this to the children?’ Sunita sighed. ‘If we can’t make sense of what’s happening, how are we supposed to make them understand?’

‘Depends how old they are,’ Croft said, lifting his head and looking up again.

‘Why?’

‘Because kids of a certain age will accept anything you tell them,’ he explained. ‘I envy some of them. A two year old will grow up thinking this is how it’s always been, won’t they? Bloody hell, imagine how much easier the last few days would have been if you hadn’t had to spend hours and hours trying to work everything out? If we’d had someone who could have told us what had happened and why, even if they weren’t right, we could have just got on with sorting out the mess instead of trying to reason it out and explain it to ourselves.’

‘But those poor kids,’ Yvonne continued. ‘Imagine losing your parents and being on your own like that.’

‘We’ve probably all lost our parents,’ Sunita mumbled. ‘I know, but...’

Yvonne’s words were interrupted by the noise of a body suddenly crashing into the glass double-doors directly in front of her. Nervously she stumbled back and tripped.

Croft jumped to his feet and steadied her. Strangely curious he took a couple of slow, cautious steps closer to the corpse. Its gaunt face was pressed hard against the cold glass and it moved slowly along from left to right, leaving behind it a long smear of grease and a trail of bloody, germ-filled saliva. When it reached the end of the glass it clumsily turned around and began moving back in the opposite direction.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ Croft asked under his breath.

‘What’s the matter?’ Sunita asked. She stared at the creature, her face screwed up with disgust. It didn’t look any different to any of the thousands of other diseased bodies she’d seen.

‘I don’t like this,’ the doctor admitted. He moved closer still and studied the figure’s staccato movements. ‘This one isn’t like the others.’

‘Why?’ Sunita whispered.

‘Because it isn’t going away.’

‘What?’

‘Look at it. By now it should have turned around and wandered off into the night again. It’s staying here for a reason. It’s almost as if it knows that we’re in here.’

‘Like hell...’

‘Give me another explanation then? I tell you, this body is watching us.’

As if to prove his point, he moved still closer towards the glass until his face was just inches away from that of the cadaver. He then moved across to his right and then, slowly and with painful lethargy, the body did the same. He moved back and, after a few seconds delay as it shuffled itself around, the corpse followed.

Yvonne was scared. She found it almost impossible to bring herself to look at the diseased shell which had, less than a week ago, been a perfectly fit and well human being.

She had crept halfway up the staircase and was peering down through the railings like a frightened child.

‘So what does it mean?’ she asked from a cautious distance.

‘One of two things,’ Croft replied, not taking his eyes off the body. ‘Either this one has somehow been less affected than the others...’

‘Or?’ Sunita pressed anxiously.

‘Or they’re changing.’

8

Paul got up when the sun began to rise through the tenth floor windows of the office block. His movements weren't through choice, his temporary bed had proved less than comfortable and the pressure on his bladder had become too much to stand. Using a security pass which Donna had taken from a corpse earlier in the week, he dragged himself out onto the landing and climbed the single flight of stairs to the nearest toilet. Stumbling over an inert body in the half-light he crashed noisily through the door into the little room which was as cold, dark and unpleasant as he'd imagined it would be. Another body was slumped on the ground in one of the cubicles and a musty, stagnant smell hung heavily in the air.

Still drugged with sleep and hurrying to get away from the bodies and back to the office, Paul tripped again on his way out of the toilet, falling clumsily down the last three steps and kicking a cleaner's bucket against a radiator. The sound of metal on metal echoed up and down the entire length of the staircase, seeming for a few lingering moments to fill the entire building with noise.

When he returned to the tenth floor Donna was awake. More than just awake she was up and alert, quickly changing her clothes and tying up her long hair.

'What's the matter?' he asked, immediately concerned. She had no reason to get up so quickly. She had no real reason to get up at all.

'I heard something,' she replied breathlessly as she tucked her shirt into her jeans.

‘What?’

‘Don’t know. It was upstairs.’

‘But you told me you’ve already been upstairs, haven’t you? You said there was nothing there.’

‘Apart from a couple of bodies that’s right.’

‘So what did you hear?’

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

‘I don’t know what it was. It sounded like...’

‘It was me,’ he interrupted nervously. ‘It’s still dark out there. I tripped over a body on my way up the stairs and I almost went right over on the way back down. I bet it...’

He didn’t bother to finish his sentence. Donna was still shaking her head.

‘I heard the bloody noise you made,’ she sighed. ‘The sound I heard was before that.’

An icy chill ran the length of Paul’s spine. He watched with mounting anxiety as Donna put on a jacket and did up the zipper. She walked towards the door out of the office and stopped just a few feet short of the exit.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘it was probably nothing. I’m just going to go and have a look around. I’ll only be a couple of minutes.’

‘It must have been me you heard,’ Paul continued to babble. ‘Like I said, I kicked a bucket into a radiator. It made a hell of a noise.’

Tired of listening to him moaning, Donna turned round, reached out for the door handle and then froze. Through the small glass panel in the door she could see a face staring back at her. Even though the light was poor she could tell that it was a cold, emotionless, rotting, dead face. The bloody thing was just stood there, staring at her.

‘Christ,’ she cursed as she stumbled back in surprise.

‘What is it?’ Paul hissed.

‘There’s a body here,’ she whispered, rooted to the spot.

‘So?’

‘So the damn thing’s watching me!’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

He began to walk towards her, stopping short when he saw the corpse. Completely silent and otherwise unnervingly still, the only visible movement came from its misted eyes which moved from side to side, looking from Donna to Paul and back again. It hadn’t been there when he’d returned from the toilet minutes earlier. Could it have followed him?

‘Why doesn’t it go?’ Donna asked. ‘It should just wander away like the rest of them. Why’s it staying here?’

Paul crept forward slightly to get a better view of the cadaver on the landing.

‘I don’t know,’ he mumbled, ‘maybe it’s...’ He stopped speaking immediately when the creature outside slowly lifted up a single diseased hand and smashed it down against the door. As the two survivors stood and watched in terrified disbelief, it thumped the door again. And again. And again. And again. And then with both hands, raining down a sudden torrent of weak, comparatively clumsy and completely unexpected blows on the door.

‘I’m going to let it in,’ whispered Donna, her mouth dry and her pulse racing.

‘What?’ screamed Paul, unable to believe what he was hearing. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing? You don’t know what that thing will do if you let it in here...’

‘You don’t know what it’s going to do either,’ she snapped back. ‘For God’s sake, this thing is trying to get to us. It wants help, it must do. This one’s different to all the others I’ve seen...’

‘But you can’t just assume that...’

Paul’s words were wasted. Donna wasn’t listening and, besides, she’d already made her decision. The body in front of her looked pathetic and emaciated. Its movements were slow and laboured. But more to the point, it appeared to have some level of control, and that separated it from the hundreds of other corpses she’d seen. The creature contin-

ued to thump against the door. Donna flicked her pass at the sensor to her right and pulled the door open. The body dropped its arms and, for a second, stood still again.

‘See,’ she said, relieved. ‘I told you it...’

The creature lunged towards her, knocking her off balance and sending her thudding into the wall. With sudden energy - uncoordinated but unmistakably savage in intent - the remains of a rotting fifty-two year old man threw itself at Donna, its weak limbs flailing in the air around her face. Instinctively she lifted her hands to protect herself. Paul ran towards the obnoxious cadaver and grabbed it from behind, wincing in disgust as he tightened his grip and felt cold, hard, leathery flesh give way under the increasing pressure of his grip. With surprisingly little effort he yanked the body away and threw it down to the ground. Regardless of its unexpected speed and intent, it was still little more than a diseased and wasted shell.

‘Bloody thing,’ Donna spat. She pushed Paul to one side and stood over the corpse which was already struggling to pick itself up again. It leant over to one side and with claw-like, almost skeletal hands, made another lunge towards her.

‘We’ve got to kill it,’ Paul wailed.

‘How do we do that?’ Donna yelled. ‘Fucking thing’s been dead since Tuesday.’ It was only after she’d spoken that she realised how ridiculous her words sounded.

‘I don’t know!’ he screamed back at her. He looked around. Mounted on the wall just to the side of the entrance door was a fire extinguisher. He picked it up and raised it above his head. Donna, shaking with fear but fully aware of what Paul was doing, put one of her feet down hard on the creature’s bony chest. Half of her body weight was more than enough to keep it pinned down. It didn’t have the strength to reply.

‘Do it,’ she urged frantically. ‘For God’s sake, do it!’

Paul held the extinguisher high above the corpse. He watched its head thrashing helplessly from side to side with terrified fascination. Ashen, almost translucent skin was drawn tight across the emotionless face and its black, gaping mouth opened and closed continually without making a sound.

‘Do it!’ Donna screamed again.

He couldn’t move. Frozen. Terrified. Again the body tried to lunge and the sudden movement forced him into action. With his eyes screwed tightly shut Paul slammed the base of the metal cylinder down onto the head of the corpse on the ground. It hit the side of the face with a dull thud and a faint cracking sound as the cheekbone fractured. Slightly more confident in what he was doing, but with the sickening taste of bile rising in his throat, he lifted the fire extinguisher once again and hammered it down, this time smashing in the back of the skull. Finally the body lay still.

‘Let’s get it out of here,’ he said as he dropped the extinguisher. Donna held the door open as he dragged the creature out by its feet, leaving behind it a thick trail of dark, almost black blood on the pale purple carpet. Driven by a nauseous combination of shock, fear and adrenaline, he dragged it out through the landing door and left it on the staircase. There were more bodies on the stairs. Jesus Christ, he could see another three of the damn things - one tripping down towards him from the floor above, two more dragging themselves up painfully slowly from the floor below. Filled with panic and cold fear he turned and sprinted back to the office.

For more than an hour they were too afraid to move or even to make a sound. Hiding behind desks in the training room, Donna and Paul sat close together. Occasionally one of them would pluck up the courage to peer out into the main office again. They could just about see onto the landing through the precious doors which separated them from

the rest of the world. Although indistinct and unclear, they could see movement outside.

Donna sat upright and looked up and out of the window at the grey sky, trying to make some sense of what was happening. Paul lay on the carpet next to her, curled up in a ball.

‘Why did it attack you?’ he mumbled, finally able to bring himself to speak about what he’d seen.

‘Don’t know for sure if it did.’

‘What do you mean? Of course it attacked you!’

‘Are you really sure? How do you know it wasn’t trying to get us to help? How do you know...’

‘I don’t know,’ he whined, covering his head with his hands. ‘All I do know is that you should never have opened the bloody door in the first place.’

There was a sudden crash outside. It sounded like something falling down the stairs - the cleaner’s bucket Paul had kicked earlier perhaps? He decided that one of the bodies must have tripped over it.

‘It’s like they’re coming back to life,’ Donna mumbled.

‘What?’

‘They died last Tuesday. I know that’s true because I watched it happen and I checked enough of my friends to know that they were all dead. And then they started to move. It’s like they’re beginning to function again. They walked on Thursday, now...’

‘Now what?’

‘How did they know we were here?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘I think you disturbed them when you went to the toilet.’

‘But we’ve both been off the floor before now, haven’t we? How come they didn’t react to us then? I walked past a hundred of those damn things outside on the streets and not one of them reacted...’

‘I know,’ she interrupted, growing increasingly annoyed by his mounting hysteria. ‘That’s exactly what I’m saying.’

They couldn't move, now they can walk. At first they had very little control and coordination, now that seems to have improved. They couldn't hear us and I don't know if they could see us before, but now it seems that they can.'

'But why did it attack you?' he asked again, repeating his earlier question.

'Did it attack me? If their control is limited, what else could it have done? It couldn't ask for help, could it? Christ, Paul, look what's happening to them. They're full of disease. Their bodies are beginning to rot and decay. Imagine the pain they must be feeling.'

'But can they feel it?'

'I don't know. If they can move, my guess is that they must be able to feel something.'

Paul sat up and drew his knees up tight to his chest.

'So what's going to happen next?'

Donna shrugged her shoulders. Her head was spinning. She didn't want to think about it until she had to.

'Don't know,' she muttered.

'So what do we do?'

'For now we keep our heads down and we keep out of sight. Don't let them know we're in here.'

9

Music woke Jack from his light sleep. He thought he was imagining it at first but no, there it was again. Faint and tinny, for the first time in almost a week he could definitely hear music. Once he was fully awake it took him a couple of seconds to get his bearings. He looked around and let his eyes slowly become accustomed to the low morning light. The department store looked very different in daylight - completely different in fact to how he'd pictured it last night when it had been filled with nothing but shadows and darkness. He then remembered that he hadn't been alone last night and he sat up quickly and looked around for Clare.

'Over here,' she shouted from the other side of the store. She'd been watching him stirring for the last couple of minutes but hadn't wanted to wake him. Stiff, aching and tired, Jack swung his legs out over the side of the bed, got up and then slowly shuffled over to the dining room furniture display where she was sitting. He sat down opposite her at a large mahogany table. In the middle of the table was a small stereo unit. Clare was playing a CD. He didn't recognise the music. Although he didn't say anything to her he wished she'd turn it down. It wasn't particularly loud, he decided it just seemed that way because everything else was so deathly silent.

'How are you this morning?' he asked.

She nodded and smiled sadly.

'I'm okay,' she replied. 'Look, I didn't mean to wake you up. I hope you don't mind the noise. I couldn't stand

the quiet any longer. I found the stereo in the electrical department just past the beds.'

Jack looked back over his shoulder and noticed a huge bank of dead television screens a short distance behind the row of beds where they'd just spent the night. Still drugged by sleep he stood up again and walked back to where he'd left their belongings last night. After searching through his rucksack he found a little of the food which he'd brought with him. He took it back to Clare and sat down again.

'Hungry?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'Not really.'

'You should try and eat something. We both should.'

He opened up a plastic lunch box and took out some chocolate and fruit which he laid out on the table between them. Clare took a chocolate bar and unwrapped it. It was surprisingly good. The rich taste and smell of the food was reassuringly familiar and strangely comforting. She'd hardly eaten since Tuesday. After days of feeling nothing much more than sickening hurt and constant disorientation, the food provided a welcome distraction. For a moment it seemed that although they appeared to have lost everything, there was a slight chance that it might be possible for them to rediscover something resembling normality amongst the rubble of what remained of the lives they used to lead.

'I love this song,' Clare said as the next track on the CD began. She chewed thoughtfully on her chocolate and turned up the volume. She closed her eyes and for a precious few seconds tried to imagine she was somewhere else.

To Jack the music sounded no different and no less processed and manufactured than the last bland track he'd heard. He remembered the days when music was played by real musicians and when talent mattered more than appearance and... and he could hear something else. He slammed his fist down on top of the stereo and stopped it playing.

‘Hey...’ Clare protested.

‘Shh...’ he hissed.

He pushed his chair back and walked towards the escalators which snaked up through the centre of the department store. He could hear movement on the first floor below. Cautiously he peered over the top of the staircase and saw that a crowd of bodies had appeared. Unlike the clumsy bodies he’d seen earlier, these seemed to have a modicum of control. The light was poor but he could see, incredibly, that two or three of them had begun trying to climb up the motionless escalator towards him. They tripped over shop displays and random fallen corpses as they tried awkwardly to move forward. Clare suddenly appeared at his side, startling him.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked anxiously.

‘Look,’ he answered, nodding down in the direction of the figures beneath them. He concentrated his attention on the diseased body which had made most progress towards the second floor. It was now almost halfway up the escalator but had been forced to stop, its way ahead blocked by an upturned baby’s pushchair. Although it had been considerably darker last night it had been fairly easy for Jack and Clare to negotiate their way around such obstacles. The stilted movements of the desperate creatures below were nowhere near as controlled and precise as those of the survivors. As they crouched in silence in the shadows and watched, the crowd below them began to dissipate. Those bodies on the outside of the gathering were beginning to trip and stumble away.

‘Was it the music?’ Clare wondered. The corpses on the escalator seemed to be losing interest now. They were staggering back down to the first floor again.

‘Must have been.’

‘But why?’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well yesterday and the day before I spent ages shouting for help and they didn’t react then. I didn’t think they could hear us.’

Jack thought about what she’d said. She was right. He remembered the first moving body that he’d come across - the woman in the street outside his house. He’d run towards her breathlessly but she hadn’t reacted. The rest of the world had been quiet and there had been no other distractions that he’d been aware of. Surely the woman would have heard him approaching if she’d been able to?

Clare moved around Jack and took a couple of steps down the escalator.

‘Where you going?’ he hissed, concerned. At the raised volume of his voice the nearest body stopped moving and slowly turned back around again to face the survivors. Both Clare and Jack froze and hoped that they would merge into the shadows and not be seen. The body continued down the escalator.

Reaching over to one side, Clare wrestled a handbag free from the grip of an old woman whose lifeless corpse was sprawled across the escalator. She threw the bag down to the first floor, past the few remaining bodies and into a greetings card display. The display rattled and crashed to the floor and, almost instantly, the bodies returned. The survivors watched with increasing fear and uncertainty as the dead gathering regrouped around the sudden distraction. Clare turned and ran back towards Jack, her footsteps echoing loudly on the metal steps beneath her.

‘Bloody hell,’ mumbled Jack as he watched the bodies react to the sound of Clare moving. The listless figures were converging at the bottom of the escalator again. She pushed past him and ran back over to the table where they’d been eating just a few minutes earlier. Jack marched over to the beds, grabbed his bag and began frantically packing everything away. A familiarly sickening feeling of

helplessness, panic and disorientation had suddenly returned.

‘What are you doing?’ Clare asked, instinctively starting to gather up her own things.

‘Getting out,’ he replied in a hushed and frightened whisper. ‘Getting away from those things.’

‘But where are we going to go?’

‘Don’t know.’

Clare stopped and sat down at the table again. She held her head in her hands.

‘They won’t get up here, will they?’

‘I don’t know,’ Jack answered. ‘Give them enough time and they might. Who knows what they’ll do?’

‘But we can block the escalators off, can’t we? We can use some of this furniture. They’re never going to be strong enough to get through, are they?’

Her simple logic stopped him in his tracks. He stopped packing and stared at her, struggling to answer. His throat was dry and he could feel beads of cold, nervous sweat running down his back.

‘You might be right, but...’

‘But what?’

‘But we don’t know for sure.’

‘We don’t know anything really, do we?’ Clare rubbed her eyes and started to mess with the food Jack had left on the table. ‘I’m scared,’ she admitted. ‘I don’t want to go anywhere.’

Jack put down his rucksack and collapsed on the end of his bed. She was right. What would they gain from running? The top floors of the department store seemed as safe a place to hide as any.

A short time later Jack had calmed down enough to be able to creep quietly across the floor to the top of the escalator and look down again. He couldn’t see any bodies. In the silence of the morning they had all drifted away.

10

Shortly before noon the unexpected roar of an engine ripped through the silence. Clare and Jack jumped out of their seats and ran over to the huge display windows at the front of the department store which looked out over the city's main shopping street. They watched as a single car forced its way down the middle of the crowded road, ploughing into random staggering bodies and smashing them to the side or simply crushing them beneath its wheels.

'Let's get our stuff together,' Jack whispered in a surprisingly calm, collected and matter of fact voice before turning and sprinting frantically across the room, desperate to get out of the building before the car disappeared.

Inside the car Bernard Heath and Nathan Holmes looked anxiously from side to side, trying desperately to see something through the rotting crowds which converged on them from all directions. From their low vantage point there seemed to be no end to the hundreds of bodies around them.

'I can't see where the fucking hell I'm going,' Holmes, a stocky security guard, cursed from behind the steering wheel.

'I don't know,' the educated and comparatively well-spoken Heath replied. Until the world had been turned on its head last week he had been a university lecturer. More than twenty years spent in the company of students and other academics had left him dangerously under-prepared

for the sudden physical danger and conflict he now found himself facing.

‘There are a couple of restaurants just up here,’ Holmes said breathlessly. ‘They’ll have food.’

Heath didn’t respond. He was transfixed by the absolute horror he was witnessing all around the car. On every side there was nothing but relentless blood, death and disease. Spending the last few days sitting in the relative safety of the university accommodation block with the rest of the survivors hadn’t prepared him for any of this. He knew that he had to keep calm and not let his concentration wander or lose his nerve. All they had to do was fill the back of the car with food and whatever other useful supplies they could find and get back to the others. And even if these countless creatures looked abhorrent and grotesque, he had to remember that individually they were weak and could easily be brushed aside. But there were thousands upon thousands of them, and more seemed to be arriving with each passing second.

‘How the hell did this happen?’ Holmes mumbled to himself as he struggled to keep the car moving forward through the apparently endless devastation.

Heath lifted himself up in his seat to try and see over the heads of the mass of bodies and look further into the distance.

‘This isn’t going to work,’ he muttered. ‘It was a mistake coming out here. What the hell were we thinking of? Christ, there are so many of them we won’t be able to get out of the bloody car.’

Holmes didn’t answer. Instead, as they approached the useless traffic lights at what had once been one of the busiest junctions in the city, he wrenched the steering wheel to the left and turned the car. He pushed his foot down hard on the accelerator and winced in disgust as they collided with body after rotting body, smashing them beyond recognition. They were weak and they were beginning to decay

and it took little effort to destroy them. The constant thud, thud, thud of diseased flesh against metal was sickening.

‘Where are we going now?’ Heath asked anxiously. ‘I thought you said we were heading for a restaurant?’

‘I’ve had a better idea,’ Holmes grunted as he forced the car up the steep ramp entrance to a multi-storey car park built over a shopping mall. ‘I used to come here a lot,’ he said as he steered around the tight climbing curve of the entrance road, ‘we’ll get what we need here.’

Heath relaxed back in his seat momentarily. Now that they had left the main road the number of bodies had reduced dramatically. Still numerous on the lower levels of the car park they passed through, by the time they had reached the top only one or two figures remained to be seen. The sudden relief the university lecturer felt was immense.

Holmes stopped the car directly in front of the door which opened onto the staircase leading down to the mall. Climbing out into the open Heath allowed himself to briefly look down over the side of the car park into the chaos in the streets below. A large mass of dark, shadowy figures had slowly begun to climb the steep access road after the car. Although he had spent long hours looking at the remains of the world through the windows of the university, seeing how the city had been inexplicably raped and destroyed from a different perspective shocked Heath. It seemed that nothing and nowhere had escaped the destruction. He turned back to face the car and saw that a handful of bodies had emerged from the shadows and were lumbering awkwardly towards them. As soon as the engine of the car was switched off and silence returned, however, they began to drift away again.

‘Come on,’ Holmes snapped. He was already on his way down to the shopping area. Heath followed close behind.

‘We should try and get food first,’ the older man gasped breathlessly as he ran down a dark and dank staircase, try-

ing not to lose sight of his younger and fitter colleague. 'We'll take as much as we can carry. We can come back down for more if it's safe.'

Holmes wasn't listening. He crashed through a pair of heavy swinging doors at the bottom of the stairs and ran the length of a short, marble-floored corridor towards the shops. He paused at a second set of doors to let Heath catch up before pushing them open and stepping through.

The mall was silent. In the near distance he could see a few shuffling bodies, but other than that there was nothing - no movement, no sound. It was surprisingly dark. Being in the centre of a once busy and vibrant city, prior to the disaster the mall had been brightly illuminated at all times. This was the first time that either man had set foot in such a place without being surrounded by crowds of shoppers and without the benefit of artificial light and air conditioning. It felt cold and unnatural. It was alien and unnerving.

'There's a supermarket over in the far corner,' Heath gasped, still fighting to catch his breath through a combination of fear and sudden physical exertion. From the shadows of an open-fronted jewellers shop behind them a body lurched towards him and knocked him off balance. He yelped with surprise and disgust and struggled to push the obnoxious figure away. Without speaking Holmes pulled it away from him and threw it down to the ground. He kicked its head and then stamped on its face. He felt a certain degree of baseless vindication and satisfaction when it lay bloodied and battered at his feet.

The men ran towards the supermarket.

The body dragged itself up off the ground and followed.

'They've got to be in there,' Jack whispered as he crept along the front of the high street shops with Clare at his side. From their department store lookout they had quickly lost sight of the car. Fortunately the trail of devastation and the huge mass of desperate bodies following in the

vehicle's wake revealed the route it had taken. Even from a few hundred meters back along the road they could see that a vast collection of ragged figures had stumbled along the street and gathered close to the entrance to the multi-storey car park.

'They've got to have gone into the shopping centre,' Clare said quietly. 'They must have.'

In silence the two survivors continued to cautiously make their way towards the immense crowd of bodies. The events of the morning had allowed them to quickly deduce that it was primarily sound that the creatures were reacting to. Having braced themselves for some kind of bloody struggle once they were back out on the street, they discovered that as long as they were silent and moved at a painfully slow pace which matched that of the dead, they didn't seem to arouse any unwanted attention. Moving slowly between the rotting corpses and stepping through a sea of decaying human remains took more self control and determination than either Jack or Clare had imagined. The tortuous pace left them feeling exposed and vulnerable.

A journey which should have taken thirty seconds took more than fifteen minutes. Still silent, and daring to communicate only with subtle nods of the head and momentary facial expressions, the two survivors stayed close together. With almost unbearable disgust and trepidation they worked their way through the bulk of the emaciated crowd and began to climb the entrance road which led to the car park.

'What colour was it?' Jack asked, allowing himself to speak with a little more volume now that they were away from the majority of the bodies.

'What?'

'The car? What colour was the car?'

'Dark red I think,' Clare replied quietly.

They had only managed to see the vehicle for a few seconds, and they had only really seen its roof at that. It had

been surrounded by a constant shroud of bodies, making it almost impossible to see anything clearly. They didn't know what size, shape, make, model or style it was. There were hundreds of cars in the car park, all abandoned when their owners had perished.

'This is pointless,' Clare whined. 'They're probably long gone by now.'

Jack shook his head.

'No, we would have heard them.'

'I don't like being out here. What if those things on the street start to...'

'Shh...' Jack interrupted, turning round and lifting a finger to his lips. 'They'll be here somewhere, they have to be. I haven't seen any other crowds like the one down there, have you?'

He didn't wait for her answer and instead kept moving forward. The same logic that had guided Jack to the top floor of the department store last night was now making him gravitate towards the top storey of the car park. It seemed sensible to presume that a survivor would have gone up as far as they could, knowing that the lethargic bodies below would struggle to follow.

'That's it,' he said suddenly as they rounded a corner and reached the top level of the car park.

'How do you know?' asked Clare.

He walked towards a single car parked next to the staircase.

'Three reasons,' he explained quietly. 'First, you wouldn't normally park here, would you? Second,' he paused to lean down and touch the bonnet, 'the engine's still warm.'

'And...?'

'And look...'

He pointed at the number plate and radiator grille. The front of the car was dripping with blood and gore.

'So what do we do?'

‘We wait for them to come back.’

The two survivors crouched down in the shadows to the side of a large van.

‘That’s enough,’ Heath protested. ‘Come on, Nathan, we’re never going to get all that up those stairs, are we?’

Holmes wasn’t listening. He was busy loading more food and drink into boxes and bags which he then stacked into shopping trolleys. Shaking his head with despair Heath continued emptying a shelf of dehydrated snack meals into a cardboard box. He carried the load over to Holmes and then stopped to complain again when he realised that the other man had filled most of his boxes with cans of beer.

‘Now come on,’ he protested, ‘we’re here to collect food. We can take some drink back with us if we’ve got enough room but...’

Holmes leant forward until he was only inches from the lecturer’s face, immediately intimidating and silencing him.

‘Shut up,’ he hissed. ‘Look, I’m the one who’s put their neck on the line to come out here and get this stuff. If I want beer, I’ll take beer. And if I’ve forgotten anything that anyone else wants, well they can just get in the car and come and get it for themselves, can’t they?’

He turned his back on Heath and began pushing the first of the trolleys out of the supermarket and back towards the stairs. The older man watched for a good twenty seconds before realising that he was alone. Suddenly anxious and uncomfortable he quickly made his move, pushing one trolley ahead of him and dragging another one close behind.

Holmes slammed into the first set of double doors which opened out into the short corridor between the mall and the car park stairs. He pushed his trolleys in and shoved them towards the far end of the corridor, groaning with effort as he struggled with the cumbersome load.

‘I’m going back for more,’ Holmes said. ‘I’ll be a couple of minutes.’

He was gone before he'd given Heath chance to answer.

Tired and struggling, Heath moved his two trolleys towards the car park staircase. He stood and stared at the huge pile of supplies they had gathered. Breathless, he tried to work out how much they would actually manage to get into the car and how they were going to get any of it upstairs.

Holmes was back. The sound of him crashing through the doors again startled Heath.

'Come on,' he hissed as he pushed two more trolleys towards him. 'Start getting stuff up to the car.'

Picking up several badly packed carrier bags and a heavy cardboard box, Heath began to climb the steep grey stairs back to the top level of the car park. Becoming increasingly annoyed by the older man's lack of speed and fitness, Holmes followed close behind.

'Get a bloody move on, will you?' he shouted.

With his legs and arms heavy with effort, Heath pushed his way back out into the car park and dropped his bags and boxes on the ground. Holmes unlocked the car and they began to cram their supplies into the boot. Hiding behind the van, Clare started to get up.

'Wait,' Jack mouthed. He turned back and watched as the two men disappeared back down the stairs. 'Let them load up the car first.'

A couple of minutes later and Holmes returned. He threw more goods into the boot of the blood-splattered car and then turned and ran back down again. Another couple of minutes and Heath emerged from the shadows again, closely followed by Holmes making his third trip. Jack couldn't wait any longer.

'Hey,' he said, standing up and stepping out into the light. 'Are you...?'

Holmes reacted instantly to the presence of an unexpected body. The fact that this body was communicating with him didn't register. He turned to face Jack and, giving

him as little regard as he would any one of the thousands of corpses dragging themselves along the streets, he dropped his shoulder and charged into him, sending him flying across the car park.

‘You stupid bloody idiot!’ Clare screamed, jumping up and pushing Holmes back against the car. ‘What the hell did you do that for?’

Realisation dawned. Holmes stood and stared at Jack as he rolled around on the cold ground, doubled up with pain. Heath pushed past him and helped Jack to his feet.

‘Get in the car,’ he shouted to Clare.

Stunned and in considerable pain but nevertheless relieved, Jack slowly made his way over to the car and opened the back door and collapsed onto the seat. Clare sat down next to him.

‘You okay?’ she whispered.

‘I’m all right,’ he replied, still clutching his chest and with his face screwed up in agony. His breathing was heavy.

Heath paced up and down anxiously in front of the car. Holmes had disappeared again. Moments later and he re-emerged from the staircase, carrying yet more provisions including, Heath noticed, his precious beer. They loaded the boot until it was filled to capacity. Holmes casually threw the remaining carrier bags of food at Clare who grabbed hold of them as he slammed the door shut.

Heath introduced himself as he sat down in front of them.

‘I’m Bernard Heath,’ he said as Holmes started the engine and turned the car in a quick, tight arc. He drove at speed back towards the entrance to the car park as the sweat-soaked and overweight university lecturer next to him struggled to turn round and face Jack and Clare.

‘I’m Jack Baxter,’ he replied, still wheezing, ‘this is Clare. Thanks for...’

‘You with anyone else or are there just two of you?’
Holmes interrupted.

‘Just the two of us. What about you?’

‘There are about forty of us,’ Heath answered.

‘Does anyone know what’s happened?’ Jack asked
hopefully.

Heath shook his head.

‘Haven’t got a clue,’ he replied and, with that, the brief
conversation abruptly ended.

Holmes drove back down the entrance ramp and deep
into the crowds of bodies, destroying any of them unfortu-
nate enough to stumble into his path.

11

‘I can’t do this,’ Paul said suddenly. It was the first time that either he or Donna had spoken for more than an hour.

‘Can’t do what?’

‘Stay here like this. I can’t handle it. I can’t just sit here knowing they’re out there waiting...’

‘Well you’re going to have to handle it, aren’t you? There’s not a lot else we can do.’

Still crouching in the training room where they’d hidden since the incident hours earlier, the two survivors knew that there were still bodies out on the landing. Occasionally Donna plucked up the courage to peer out through the window, immediately moving out of sight again at the faintest sign of activity in the corridor outside. She had spent the last hours trying to work out why the creatures were there at all. Had they been trapped by the heavy landing doors swinging shut, or had they made a conscious decision to wait there for the survivors to emerge again? Were they even capable of conscious decision making? It was impossible to tell.

Assuming that it had been sound that first attracted them to the tenth floor, Donna had come to the conclusion that it had been a domino effect of sorts that had drawn others to the scene. It seemed logical that the noise made by the first body trying to force its way inside had attracted another which in turn had attracted another and another and so on...

‘So what are we going to do?’ Paul moaned. Christ, he really was beginning to irritate Donna now.

‘Jesus,’ she sighed, ‘I don’t know.’

‘We can’t sit here forever, can we?’

‘But what are we going to gain from leaving?’

‘We’re ten floors up here. The only way out is to go down the staircase and if any more of those things appear then we’re going to have a hell of a job trying to get through them when we need to get out, aren’t we?’

He was right. She didn’t bother to acknowledge him but she had to admit that he was right. Much as she wanted to stay hidden in the office, she knew that if she followed her earlier line of thinking through, then more and more of the bodies could be attracted to the scene until it became impossible for the two of them to get away. Her options looked decidedly bleak; take her chances with the diseased population or sit here and wait endlessly with this whinging mouse of a man. For a few seconds she sat and weighed up the odds before deciding it was time to move.

‘All right then,’ she said, ‘let’s do it. We’ll try and find somewhere safer, if anywhere’s going to be any safer, that is.’

She watched Paul’s face. He looked terrified. Although he had been the one who had suggested they leave, it was obvious that the grim reality of his suggestion was only just beginning to sink in.

‘But how?’ he stammered. ‘How are we going to get past them. We don’t know how many of them are...’

Donna thought for a moment.

‘Distract them,’ she said eventually. ‘There are doors at either end of the landing, aren’t there? We’ll draw them towards one end of the office and then get out through the other.’

Paul looked into space, thinking carefully. The expression on his face slowly began to change and Donna started to wonder whether she’d been hasty in her judgment of him. He had listened and he suddenly looked ready to over-

come his obvious nervousness and take what was left of his life in his hands to leave the relative safety of the office.

‘Okay,’ he said quietly, his voice a little more positive and purposeful than it had been all morning, ‘so where do we go once we’re out there?’

‘Don’t know. From what I can see we can pretty much take our pick of the entire city, maybe even the country.’

‘We could find ourselves a car and try and get away...’

Donna shook her head.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea. If those things outside are able to hear us now, all we’d be doing is drawing more attention to ourselves. What we need is to find somewhere secure like this place, but with more than one way out.’

‘There must be hundreds of places like that round here. This is a city centre for God’s sake.’

‘There’s the main police station round the corner for a start. Then there’s the hospital, the university, shops, pubs...’

‘If we could find somewhere with food supplies and drinks...’

‘Christ, I could murder a drink...’

‘Or beds? What about finding somewhere with real beds? Bloody hell, a decent-sized house would do, wouldn’t it?’

‘There aren’t many houses round here,’ Donna said, suddenly feeling a fraction more positive about their situation. ‘But you’re right, when we’re ready we could head out into the suburbs, maybe even further?’

Paul stopped to think again.

‘There’s one thing that we’re not taking into consideration here,’ he sighed.

‘What’s that?’

‘The bodies. We both saw what that one tried to do to you. As soon as we go outside we’ll be...’

‘I still don’t think that body tried to do anything to me,’ she interrupted, ‘it just reacted to me being there. I think if

I'd stood still and stayed quiet it would have walked straight past.'

'I'm not sure...'

'They don't seem to be attacking each other, do they?'

'I don't know. I haven't seen enough to be able to say...'

'Look, assuming their senses are gradually returning, how would they know that we're not like the rest of them if we played dead? We're stronger and we look in better condition than they do, but after everything that's happened to them are they really going to be able to tell?'

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know. Can we afford to take a chance like that?'

'Can we afford not to? You're right, Paul, we could be trapped in here. There might be thousands of those things here in just a few hours, there might even be that many out there now. We don't have an option.'

'When then? Now?'

'Tonight.'

'Why wait?'

'If we're relying on the fact that their senses are poor, then why not wait a little longer until it's dark outside? If they can't see us properly in daylight, what chance have they got at night?'

12

Holmes drove the car the wrong way down the ring road, swerving around meandering bodies and avoiding the abandoned wrecks of other crashed vehicles. Slamming on the brake, he took a sharp right turn and followed a narrow service road between two grey university buildings and down around the back of the accommodation block. The number of bodies on the far side of the complex was considerably fewer. Clare looked up and saw people watching from the first floor windows of the large red-brick building.

Holmes parked the car on a grass verge a short distance away from the block, close to an enclosed artificial turf football pitch. In silence the four survivors quickly clambered out and grabbed as many bags and boxes as they could carry from the boot of the blood-soaked vehicle. Struggling with their loads and following Bernard Heath's lead they half-ran, half-walked towards an inconspicuous blue door which was being held open by another survivor. Holmes ran back to the car after dumping his first load of supplies indoors, not about to leave his precious beer outside after he'd risked so much to get it. He slammed the boot of the car shut and turned and scrambled back to the safety of the building, disappearing inside and pulling the door shut just seconds before the first of five approaching bodies could reach him.

'We'll come back for this lot later,' said Heath as he dropped another carrier bag on the large pile of supplies. 'I need a rest first.'

Jack stayed close to Heath as they walked deeper into the bowels of the building. It was dark, cold and quiet inside but it still felt safe and strangely welcoming. The surroundings didn't matter, he decided. All that he cared about was stopping still for a while and being with other people again.

'How many people did you say are here?' Jack asked. He'd already been told once but so much had happened so quickly that he hadn't been able to take everything in. Less than an hour ago he'd been sat in the remains of the department store with Clare. Until then she'd been the only other living person he'd seen.

'Forty or so, I think,' Heath replied. 'I'm not really sure. This whole part of the complex was mainly student accommodation. There are a few hundred individual rooms here and so far most people seem to be keeping themselves to themselves. Lots of them just found themselves a room and shut the door behind them and no-one's seen them since. There are a few of us who have started to spend time together and try and get things sorted out but there are many more who prefer to be alone.'

Leading the group through the building was a tall, willowy man named Keith Peterson. With his long hair in an untidy ponytail and wearing several layers of loose, warm clothing he looked as scruffy and unkempt as any of the corpses roaming outside. His face was pale and drained of emotion. He hadn't smiled, spoken or even raised an eyebrow when the car had returned with an additional two passengers. Jack attempted to catch his eye in an attempt to at least try and make contact but it was obvious that Peterson wasn't interested. The fact of the matter was that he, like just about everyone else, was struggling to make sense of the illogical hell that his previously structured and normal life had suddenly become.

They climbed a short staircase which led up to the main part of the ground floor. As they climbed the light in-

creased. Jack and Clare looked from side to side as they were led across a wide, glass-fronted reception area. Tightly packed bodies were pressed against every available square inch of glass, being forced forward by more and more of the sickly creatures that were slowly dragging themselves out of the city towards the university. The rest of the world had become painfully silent. The noise that the group of survivors made - no matter how slight and insignificant it seemed - was enough to attract the unwanted attention of the dead hordes. And the reaction of the nearest bodies to that noise as they smashed and crashed against the glass frequently resulted in sudden frenzied activity spreading through the masses with startling rapidity. In turn that activity attracted more and more of them.

‘See that lot,’ Heath said quietly, gesturing towards the bodies, ‘started gathering here late last night. They seem to be able to hear us now.’

‘I know,’ Jack replied, ‘we found out this morning.’

‘God alone knows what’s going on, but if they can hear us and see us today, what are they going to be able to do tomorrow? That’s why a few of us have been out for supplies. I think we’re going to batten down the hatches for a while.’

Clare was relieved when they turned right and began to walk down a darker, windowless corridor. At the end of the corridor was the entrance to a large assembly hall. Her eyes widened as they entered and as she saw that there were people scattered all around the edge of the room - living, breathing people, not empty shells like the pitiful things outside. The hall was generally quiet but now and then an occasional whispered conversation would quickly begin and then end with equal speed. The only constant noise came from a couple of very young children playing together in the furthest corner, blissfully ignorant to the pain and fear so obviously consuming everyone else.

In keeping with Keith Peterson's lack of interest in the new arrivals, every other survivor they passed also showed complete disinterest towards them. Most of them stared into space. One man was lying on his side on the floor, covered by a grey blanket and rocking steadily. His dark eyes were wide open like saucers. Clare thought to herself that he looked too afraid to shut them.

After diagonally crossing the room Peterson took them outside through a fire escape and then walked through a small concrete courtyard towards another door. There were a few more people outside. An older woman sitting on a wooden bench wrapped in a thick overcoat nodded and managed half a smile at Clare as she followed the others through.

'These are the rooms we're using,' Heath explained as they reached another connected part of the building. It looked and smelled much newer than the rest of the site. More flights of stairs and then they followed a long and narrow corridor with numerous small bedrooms running off on either side. 'Those of us who were here on the first day cleared the whole place,' he continued, slightly breathless. 'You won't find any bodies in here. Fortunately term hadn't started so there weren't many people around, just a few of the overseas students who had come back early.'

Peterson stopped walking. He turned round to face Clare and Jack and, for the first time, spoke.

'Most of us are on this floor,' he mumbled, his voice flat and monotone. 'Find yourselves an empty room. I suggest you stay on this side,' he said, nodding his head to the left. 'The other side overlooks the city. There are thousands of those bodies out there. We're trying to keep out of sight as much as we can.'

Jack nodded in appreciation as the thin, lifeless man walked back in the direction from which they had just come and then disappeared. Heath watched him go before speaking again.

‘Get yourself settled,’ he said softly. ‘I’m going back to the hall. Come down when you’re ready and we’ll get you something to eat.’

‘We really appreciate this,’ Jack said suddenly, his voice filling with very obvious and yet wholly unexpected emotion. ‘I didn’t think we were going to find anyone else who...’

Heath smiled and rested a reassuring hand on the other man’s shoulder.

‘It’s not a problem. I know exactly how you’re feeling,’ he sighed. ‘As does just about every other poor bastard unfortunate enough to be stuck here.’

The lecturer paused for a moment and thought carefully, as if he was poised to say something of great significance. But the words wouldn’t come. Instead he turned and began to walk back down the corridor, tired and in need of rest.

‘Thanks,’ Clare said. ‘I don’t know...’

Her words were abruptly truncated by a sudden scream of pain from somewhere else in the building. It seemed to be coming from somewhere on the floor above them.

‘Bloody hell,’ cursed Jack. ‘What the was that?’

‘Nothing to worry about,’ Heath explained, turning back around to face the other two. ‘We’ve got a lady upstairs who’s going to have a baby within the next couple of days. The doctor reckons it might even be born before the day’s out.’

Another scream. Jack looked down at Clare, concerned that the woman’s noise would upset the teenager.

‘Jesus,’ he said quietly. ‘What a time to have to go through that. I mean, it’s enough of an ordeal at the best of times, but now...?’

Jack let his words trail quietly away.

‘I know,’ said Heath. ‘Look, I’m going to leave you to it. I’ll see you both later, okay?’

With that he was gone. Jack and Clare were alone.

‘You okay?’ Jack asked.

‘I’m all right,’ she replied. ‘You?’

He nodded.

‘I’m fine. Let’s get these rooms sorted out.’

The rooms were small and compact but practical and more than sufficient compared to the department store where they’d spent the previous night. A narrow bed, a wardrobe, a couple of small cabinets, a desk, two chairs and a sink were all they contained but that was more than enough. They managed to find adjacent rooms two-thirds of the way down the corridor. Jack left his rucksack on the end of the bed, not bothering to empty its contents. There didn’t seem to be much point. Although the accommodation block seemed to be a remarkably safe and sensible place for them to shelter and hide in, he didn’t dare think that they might actually be able to stay there for any length of time. The world was full of so much uncertainty and fear that nothing could be taken for granted.

As more screams echoed through the building Clare sat down on a hard plastic chair by the window in her room and held her head in her hands. She felt ready to burst into tears but her emotions were not forthcoming. The relentless pressure of their bizarre situation seemed to be acting as a kind of stopper, preventing her from outwardly showing how she was really feeling. The room was cold and clinical and her sense of bewilderment and unfamiliarity was overpowering. It was only when she thought about her parents and everything else she had lost that she finally began to cry freely.

After just over ten minutes had passed Jack left his room and walked across the corridor to the room directly opposite. The panoramic view over the city from the window was, for a few seconds at least, impressive. But then, as his curiosity took hold, he allowed his eyes to wander down to street level. An massive crowd of diseased, staggering bodies surrounded the front of the building. And with the rest of the city appearing to be completely lifeless, he could see

more and more of them dragging themselves out of the shadows continually.

13

By the time the city was bathed in darkness again Donna and Paul had decided what they were going to do. They planned to distract the bodies on the landing as they'd discussed earlier and then make a break for it. They hoped that their comparative strength and control would be enough to get them through the crowd outside the office doors. As the afternoon and early evening had worn on their simple plan had slowly gained more purpose and direction. There was no question that they were doing the right thing. For the first time in days both of them could see a reason to try and do something positive, and they were both acutely aware of the fact that they had to do it quickly.

In the gloom of the dying day Donna had gathered her few belongings together and put on as much of the clothing she'd collected as was comfortable. The evening was bitterly cold. Even indoors her breath condensed in cool, billowing clouds around her mouth and nose. Across the room, still keeping low and out of sight, Paul had done the same with his things. The lamps around the office floor remained dull and unlit, the survivors electing to remain in darkness until they were completely ready to make their move.

'We need to stir them up at the other end of the room,' she whispered. 'We'll use the lamps and we'll make enough of a disturbance so that they try and get in through those doors.'

'And then we come back to this end?' Paul asked anxiously. He knew full well what they were going to do.

They'd been planning it for hours. Going over the plan again and again seemed to help both of them.

Donna nodded.

'We'll prop the doors open up there and let them get inside. We'll get ourselves back down here and wait for a couple of minutes until the bulk of them are in. Then we'll get out. They'll follow each other like sheep.'

'You sure?'

'Sure as I can be. Only one way of finding out for certain though, isn't there?'

Paul nodded nervously. He knew exactly what she meant. He also knew that it wouldn't be long now before they left the comparative safety of the office and stepped out into the unknown. He continued to go over the plan again and again in his head. It seemed to make sense and he couldn't think of any alternative. He knew in his heart that it was going to work, but as the minutes slowly ticked by and the inevitable approached he began to doubt himself.

'Make yourself useful,' Donna said, snapping him out of his daydream. 'Let's start getting the lamps together.'

She turned and walked out of the training room, leaving Paul sitting alone in the darkness. For a few seconds he stayed exactly where he was, suddenly too afraid to move. It didn't matter how long they'd talked about doing this, now that the time to act had actually arrived he wanted to curl up again and hide. Sensing that he hadn't followed her, Donna turned back.

'What's the problem?' she hissed.

His mouth was dry and he couldn't answer.

'I...' he began, not knowing what he was trying to say.

'Get off your backside and fucking move!' Donna cursed. She waited a second for him to spring into action but still he didn't move. 'Now!' she yelled.

Paul scrambled to his feet, suddenly feeling pathetic and ashamed but no less frightened and unsure than he had been. Donna's voice also provoked frantic activity out on

the landing as the bodies again began to batter against the doors, trying hopelessly to force their way inside.

The two survivors quickly made their way around the perimeter of the office, collecting the torches and lamps which Donna had placed there the previous evening. They then assembled them on a single desk in the furthest corner of the room, in full sight of the bodies behind the door.

‘Got everything?’ she asked.

Paul swallowed hard.

‘Think so,’ he mumbled nervously, realising that they would be making their move within minutes.

‘Good,’ she replied. She started to light the lamps and torches but stopped after only lighting four. The creatures outside were banging on the door again with even more force. Their simple, basic interests already aroused by the sound of Donna’s voice moments earlier, the bright light in the corner of the room now seemed to be enough to drive them into a frenzy. She glanced over her shoulder at the movement outside.

‘Bloody hell,’ Paul moaned. ‘Christ, what the hell are we doing?’

‘What we have to do,’ Donna grunted, returning her attention to the lamps. ‘Now shut up and get on with it.’

With his hands shaking with nerves Paul lit a match and began to light the gas lamps. The room was quickly filled with more light and with the faintly acidic smell and dull roar of burning jets of gas. The noise on the landing became even louder.

‘Shit,’ Paul cursed, ‘listen to them. All we’ve done is light a few lamps and the bloody things are going mad.’

‘Good, that’s exactly what we want.’

‘Is it?’

‘Of course it is. The more fired up they are, the better a distraction this is going to be.’

Paul wasn't convinced. He returned his attention to lighting the remaining lamps, trying unsuccessfully to blank out the noise coming from outside.

A couple of minutes later and it was done. The far right corner of the office was filled with bright light and a sudden warmth.

'Okay,' Donna whispered, stepping back into the shadows again, 'let's go.'

Paul instinctively began to backtrack.

'You're completely sure about this?' he mumbled, his mouth dry. 'But what happens if we get out there and...?'

She turned and stared at him, her face harshly illuminated from the right. The anger in her face was blindingly apparent.

'Just stop your damn whining and move,' she seethed. 'It's too late to back out now. Get back to the other end and get the bags ready.'

Relieved to be away from the revealing light he walked quickly away to the far end of the office.

'And keep out of sight,' she shouted after him. 'Don't let them see you. You screw this up and we're trapped.'

He didn't need her to tell him that, it was painfully obvious. Their actions were geared around the basic fact that there was only one way for them to get out of the building. If their escape route became blocked for any reason then that would be it. There would be no second chances.

Breathing deeply to try and calm her own shattered nerves, Donna cautiously walked away from the light and moved closer towards the doors. Through the small glass panels she could see the creatures outside reacting to her presence. The ferocity of their movements increased as she approached - she could see the reaction of the first bodies causing the second and the third to react, then the fourth, the fifth and the sixth and so on until the landing was filled with clumsy, awkward movement and action. She wondered what, if anything, was going through their decaying

minds? Were they frightened of her? Did they want to harm her? Did they want her to help end their suffering? Whatever the reason she knew that ultimately it didn't matter. Self-preservation was all that was important now.

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

For a split-second there was nothing. Then the force of the mass of bodies on the landing and stairs caused the crowd to surge forward, spilling into the office and sending countless corpses stumbling and tripping around her. The brightness of the light in the corner of the room was more of a distraction than she was. In the relative darkness she was able to turn and run back to the training room.

'Okay?' Paul whispered.

'Shut up,' she snapped. 'Keep quiet. If they hear us they'll start coming up this way.'

The two survivors crept quietly out of the training room and towards the other doors. Down at the far end of the office they could see a huge mass of dark, uncoordinated bodies continuing to flood into the room and head for the light. The first few of them reached out with cold, lifeless hands and grabbed inquisitively at the lamps. Unable to grip with clumsy, uncoordinated fingers and thumbs, one of the creatures knocked a lamp to the ground, shattering its protective glass cover and leaving the burning mantle exposed. Within seconds the carpet and a pile of papers was alight.

'Bloody hell,' Donna gasped as she watched the fire spread quickly.

'Let's get moving.'

'No, hold on. We should give it a little longer.'

Donna moved forward just enough to enable her to see through the doors and watch the bodies continuing to enter the office through the other entrance. Still more of them dragged themselves up the stairs and onto the landing. Paul watched the bodies around the light, which had now changed from a steady white-yellow to a flickering orange-

red as the unchecked fire took hold. Some of the pitiful creatures walked into the flames, apparently ignorant to the heat and danger. Their ragged clothes were tinder dry and quickly began to smoulder and burn.

‘We’ve got to go,’ Paul insisted. ‘Christ, that fire’s going to spread through this whole building. And when the gas bottles on the lamps start to go...’

‘I know,’ Donna interrupted, standing up straight and picking up her few belongings. She watched the crowd through the door for a moment longer before stepping back to look at the fire. Several bodies were burning (and still moving) now, as was a desk and chair. Thick brown smoke was billowing up and was beginning to roll along the low ceiling towards them.

Donna flicked her security pass casually at the control panel at the side of the door and then quietly pushed it open. Even now after the bodies had been able to get into the room for several minutes there were still more of them on the landing, tripping towards the open office doors. She looked back momentarily to check that Paul was with her and then led him out towards the staircase. Silently they crept along the landing with their backs pressed against the wall, terrified that they would be seen by the diseased hordes which continued to crowd towards the light. Donna stopped just short of the open door which led out onto the staircase.

‘Okay?’ she mouthed silently. Paul nodded. ‘Just keep moving forward until we get outside.’

After waiting for another withered body to drag itself through the doorway Donna turned and forced her way out onto the stairs. She tripped down in the darkness, pushing random bodies to the side as she began to run down towards ground level and deflecting countless grabbing hands which reached out for her constantly. The heavy footsteps of the survivors on the concrete stairs echoed throughout the dead building as they ran down and down, turning one

hundred and eighty degrees at the foot of each short flight and the start of the next. Numerous bodies continued to emerge from the darkness around them but the sheer strength, speed and fear of Donna and Paul was too much for any of the cadavers. They were knocked away and flung to the side like discarded rag dolls.

Through another door and they had reached the reception area. Still more dark and indistinguishable bodies approached but the survivors did not allow themselves to be distracted. Donna led Paul down a final staircase and out into the office car park through an insignificant basement entrance. The car park was empty. In the safety of the shadows and the darkness they stopped.

‘You all right?’ Paul asked quietly.

Donna nodded, shaking and breathing heavily.

‘I’m okay,’ she replied. ‘You?’

‘I’m fine.’

Disturbed by a huge noise from above, Donna took a few steps out into the centre of the car park and looked up. She could see the floor from which they had just escaped. The windows along two-thirds of the length of the building were lit up, illuminated by fierce yellow-orange flames. Even from where they stood, many meters below, they could hear the crackle and pop of the fire as it consumed the office. The sudden muffled bang of an exploding gas cylinder and the cracking of glass made them both catch their breath.

Without saying another word, and walking slowly for fear of attracting the attention of the sickly, withered bodies randomly moving nearby, Paul and Donna left the car park and began to head towards the centre of the city.

14

The atmosphere in the university accommodation block was by turn tense and expectant. Those survivors who had chosen to emerge from their rooms had gathered in the assembly hall where they sat in silence and waited pensively for something - anything - to happen. It was impossible for any of them to rest or sleep most of the time but tonight it was particularly difficult. Deep in the bowels of the building Sonya Farley was reaching the final stages of a long and painful labour. Her pain could be heard and felt in every corner of every otherwise silent room.

The makeshift delivery room upstairs was brightly lit. Bright, that was, in comparison with the rest of the dark building. Several survivors had willingly given up torches and other lights to allow Phil Croft - the only person with any relevant medical experience - to deliver Sonya's baby. He was nervous and apprehensive. He hadn't done this for a while and this was only the third delivery that he'd been actively involved in. Paulette, the large and remarkably bright and enthusiastic lady standing at his side, had been involved in three times as many. And more than half of those births had been her own children. Croft was pleased to have her around. Having been in Sonya's unenviable position on no less than five occasions, she was essential to the first time mother-to-be's well-being tonight. Although Croft knew all the technical terms and he could monitor and react to mother and baby's vital signs, Paulette was able to do something far more important. She could reassure her. She could talk to Sonya. She could tell her when

to push and when to relax, when to breathe in and when to breathe out. She could understand, anticipate and explain the pain and tell her how well she was doing and how much more she had left to do. Croft admired her ability to somehow shut out her own personal fear and loss and ignore the devastation beyond the university walls to allow her to concentrate on the young girl lying in nervous agony on the sweat-soaked bed next to her.

‘Come on, lover,’ she said softly, gently stroking Sonya’s forehead and at the same time gripping her hand tightly. ‘You’ve not got long left to go now. We’ll have this baby born within the hour.’

Sonya’s face screwed up in pain as another contraction peaked. Croft crouched at the end of the bed, feeling momentarily redundant and helpless and wishing that he could have used some of the monitoring equipment and pain-relieving drugs sitting silent and useless in the nearby hospital. He administered what medicines he could, but they had little effect. Sonya was fully dilated. He could see the first wisps of greasy dark hair on the top of the baby’s head.

‘Nearly there,’ he said quietly.

Sonya relaxed momentarily as the pain faded away. Apart from the expected agony and emotion of childbirth she felt surprisingly calm. This was just how the midwife had said it would be during the pre-natal classes she’d attended. Even though it hurt more than any pain she’d ever felt before, it somehow felt good. It was positive pain, and she knew it was right. Nothing in what remained of her life made sense anymore except this. Her husband was gone. Her friends and family were dead. She had lost her home and possessions and she had nothing left except the precious little person inside her who was about to be born. And it felt so right. For the first time since the nightmare had begun something was happening as it was supposed to.

Another sharp contraction. They were becoming unbearable. Sonya screamed out in agony and squeezed Paulette's hand so tightly that the other woman winced in pain.

'Come on,' she soothed, crouching lower so that her face was close to Sonya's. 'Baby's ready to come now.'

Fifty-five minutes later and the moment had arrived. Sonya's incredible pain again built to an almost unbearable crescendo before being dramatically relieved as her baby was delivered in a sudden release of pressure and a rush of activity and emotion. Croft guided the child safely down onto the bed between its mother's ankles and gently wiped blood and other bodily fluids from its face. He clamped and cut the cord and then quickly whisked the baby away to the makeshift crib they'd prepared. His face was a picture of intense concentration as he checked the baby's vital signs and waited anxiously for it to respond.

The silence was deafening.

'You did it, lover,' whispered Paulette, kissing the top of Sonya's sweat-soaked head.

Sonya watched with unexpected nervousness as Croft worked on her child. When she'd first fallen pregnant she remembered her mother telling her that this was the worst part - the wait for the baby to realise it had been born and to start to breathe and react for itself. She'd tried to prepare herself but it was impossible. Every long second of silence felt like hours.

Then it happened. A sudden, shrill and piercing cry of surprise and realisation from the child in the crib. Croft glanced across at Sonya and smiled.

'Perfect little baby girl,' he said. 'Well done.'

For a few blissful moments nothing else mattered. With huge, saucer eyes filled with tears of joy and relief, Sonya watched as the doctor wrapped her little baby in a soft blanket and carried her across the room. Ignoring the pain and discomfort she felt, she sat up and took the little bundle

from him. Shutting out the rest of the world, she stared down into a beautiful, wrinkled, blotchy blue-pink face. She stroked the baby's cheek with a single gentle finger and revelled in the warmth, movement and noise that the little girl had innocently brought to her otherwise lifeless world.

'What are you going to call her?' asked Paulette, peering over the mother's shoulder.

'Don't know,' Sonya replied quietly. 'We had a few ideas for names but we hadn't settled on anything for definite.'

'Take your time and get it right. I always said it was easier to give them a name once you knew what they looked like. Until then you...'

Paulette suddenly stopped talking. The baby had stopped crying. The room was quiet.

The three adults in the room exchanged nervous glances. Both women looked to Croft for an explanation. When he remained silent Sonya looked down and gave her little girl's hand a gentle squeeze. Nothing. And then the baby opened its mouth wide and let out a sudden, rasping cry. The cry turned into a helpless splutter. Then another cough. Then another and another until the high-pitched coughing had become a constant scream of innocent, helpless agony. Sonya held her daughter close to her breast, desperate to help but knowing that there was nothing she could do. Croft tried to help and take the baby from her but she wouldn't let go. They knew what was happening.

The deadly contagion still hung heavy in the air.
Just minutes after being born the baby was dead.

15

Croft broke the news to the handful of survivors gathered in the assembly hall before heading back upstairs to look after the heavily sedated Sonya. The range of drugs available to him had been desperately limited. He pumped the devastated girl full of whatever he could find until she'd finally stopped screaming and slipped into unconsciousness.

Jack Baxter sat with Bernard Heath in a corner of the hall. Clare lay on a foam mattress next to them. The two men had talked intermittently for a few hours with neither man able to even contemplate sleep. In that time Baxter had been given the opportunity to ask some of the questions which had weighed heavy on his mind since last Tuesday morning. Heath, of course, had been unable to answer any of them, but the conversation seemed to have helped nevertheless.

On hearing the news that the baby had died, Heath began to cry. He seemed ashamed by his show of emotion and tried unsuccessfully to hide his tears from Baxter.

'You know what this means, don't you?' he said after a few minutes of silence, his voice unsteady.

'What?' Baxter replied.

'It means that this is definitely the end.'

'Why do you say that?'

'It's got to be over now, hasn't it? There are only a handful of us left now and it looks like we can't reproduce. So as far as I can see that's the end of the human race, Jack.'

Baxter stared into the darkness.

‘You can’t be sure,’ he said quietly.

‘We can’t be sure about anything, but you’ve got to admit, it doesn’t look good, does it? I’d started to think that there might have been some hope for us. I’d been thinking that whatever makes people like you and I immune might make our children immune or our brothers or...’

Tears began rolling freely down his tired face.

‘You might still be right,’ Baxter whispered.

Heath shook his head.

‘I’ve got a son,’ he continued, wiping his eyes again.

‘He lives in Australia. My wife’s been over there with them. She flew over three weeks ago to see the grandchildren. I know she’s...’

‘She’s probably with them now,’ he interrupted, anticipating what he was about to say and instinctively saying the opposite. ‘For all you know they could be safe. It might only be this country that’s affected. We might...’

‘I know they’re dead,’ Heath interrupted sadly. ‘Doesn’t matter what you say, I know they’re dead.’

Baxter rubbed his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. He knew what he was hearing was right.

‘Until we know for certain though...’ he began, about to try pointlessly to persuade Heath that there was still some hope.

‘Don’t waste your time, Jack,’ Heath interrupted, sitting upright and staring into the other man’s face. ‘There’s no point holding on to dreams or half-baked ideas or...’

‘But you can’t just dismiss everything that...’

‘Listen, can you really say you’ve stopped to try and appreciate the scale of what’s happened here?’

‘Well I...’

‘I hadn’t. But something struck me a couple of days ago that puts all of this into perspective. Did you own a car?’

‘Never learnt to drive,’ Baxter answered, surprised by the question he’d been asked. ‘Why?’

‘I remember when I brought my first car home. My mother thought it was a death trap and my old dad spent the day outside with me trying to get the engine tuned. I’ll never forget that day...’

‘What point are you making?’

‘How many crashed cars have you seen? How many abandoned cars have you seen round here?’

‘Hundreds, probably thousands, why?’

‘Because somebody owned every single one of them. Every single one of those cars was someone’s pride and joy.’

‘I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying...’

‘What about your home? Did you own your house?’

‘Yes.’

‘Remember the feeling when you picked up the key and walked inside? Remember your first night there when it was your house and you could shut the front door and forget about everyone else?’

A faint smile crossed Jack’s face as he remembered setting up home with his dear departed Denise.

‘God, yes,’ he said quietly. ‘We had such a laugh. We hardly had anything. We sat on boxes and ate chips from a...’

‘Just think about the fact that someone had memories like that about every single house you’ve passed, and chances are they’re all dead now. Hundreds of them. Millions of them.’

‘It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

‘But we should think about it. And what about children? Did you have children, Jack?’

He shook his head sadly.

‘No, we wanted to but...’

‘Every single corpse lying and rotting on the streets and every one of those bloody things outside this building, they were all somebody. They were all someone’s son or daughter or brother or sister or...’

Heath stopped talking again. More tears trickled from his tired eyes.

‘You okay?’ Jack asked, hesitantly. He shook his head.

‘This is the end,’ he replied. ‘I tell you there’s no doubt about it, this is the end.’

16

Sheer physical and emotional exhaustion had drained Sonya to the point of collapse. The cocktail of drugs hurriedly prescribed by Dr Croft had knocked her out for the best part of four hours, giving her body time to regain a little strength. When she woke it was shortly after five in the morning and it was dark, save for the first few rays of morning light which were beginning to edge cautiously into the room. She was still lying on the bed where she'd delivered. The body of her baby daughter lay in the crib at her side, wrapped in pure white blankets. As soon as she'd regained consciousness she reached out and picked the little girl up and held her tightly, keeping her safe. Instinctively but pointlessly she still wanted to protect her lifeless child.

Whenever Sonya moved it hurt, but the physical pain and the other after-effects of childbirth were nothing compared to the anguish and agony she felt inside. She felt empty and hollow as if everything of value inside her had been scraped out and thrown away. She felt detached from her surroundings, almost as if she was watching herself move but she wasn't actually there. She didn't know if she was warm or cold. She didn't know if she was tired or wide awake. She felt as if everything - her ability to communicate, to make decisions, to laugh or cry, to react or to hide - had gone. Her aching body was filled with nothing but relentless pain and remorse, tinged with anger and bitterness. Why did this have to happen?

Croft was asleep on a chair in the corridor outside the room. She could see his feet through the half-open door.

The pain she felt inside seemed to increase with each passing second. Several long minutes later, for the first time since her daughter had died, Sonya made a conscious decision.

Groaning with effort and discomfort, she sat upright and then swung her legs out over the side of the bed. She was bleeding heavily and had to wait for the blood to stop before lowering herself down. The floor beneath her feet was hard and cold. She grabbed a towelling dressing gown from a hook on the back of the door and struggled to put it on whilst still cradling her lifeless child. First one arm in, then the next, and then she wrapped the thick material around both herself and the baby.

The corridor was even colder.

Dragging her feet, Sonya slowly walked past Dr Croft. She could hear Paulette stirring in the next room. Apart from the woman's muffled movements and the sound of another solitary soul sobbing on a different floor, the building was icily silent. What do you know about pain, Sonya silently asked whoever it was who was crying. If only they knew how she felt.

The staircase was colder still.

Sonya found it difficult to climb the stairs. She was tired and she hurt and she felt nauseous. The doctor seemed to have given her every drug he'd been able to find to help her get through the labour and then the grief. That, combined with the blood loss and drowsiness, had left her feeling bilious and faint. But somehow she managed to ignore everything and keep moving.

The fifth floor, then the sixth, then the seventh. She wasn't sure how tall the building was, but she was certain that she had to be somewhere near the top floor now. She stopped and walked down another corridor to her right. She tried a few doors until one opened. It led into a small, square room similar to the one in which she'd just spent the night. In one corner there was a single bed with a suitcase

on top, next to that a cheap dressing-table. On the table was a collection of letters and a couple of photographs of a group of happy, smiling people standing in a sun-drenched garden somewhere. Presumably the pictures were of the room's now deceased occupant and their dead family.

Sonya tenderly cradled her baby close to her chest and looked down into its grey but still beautiful face. She stood in the centre of the room, rocking gently, instinctively soothing her dead child. Slowly she opened up her dressing gown and lifted the baby up to her face. She kissed its cold head and carefully laid it down on the bed next to the suitcase. Before moving she folded back the blankets to keep the little girl warm.

She picked up a metal-framed chair and threw it through the window.

The silent world was suddenly filled with unexpected noise as the glass shattered and the chair dropped into the rotting crowds gathered around the front of the building. Their unwanted interest immediately aroused, thousands upon thousands of creatures surged towards the building again. Sonya didn't look at them. She could hear other survivors down on the lower floors now, running around frantically, desperately trying to find where the sound had come from and terrified that the safety of their precious shelter had been compromised.

Ignorant to the extent of the sudden movement and panic she had caused both inside and outside the building, Sonya dragged another chair across to the broken window. She picked her daughter up off the bed and, holding her close to her chest again, climbed up onto the chair before shuffling carefully onto the windowsill and sitting down. With her bare legs hanging out of the building and dangling in the cold morning air, she sat in silence and surveyed what remained of the world and its devastated population. There was a massive crowd of shuffling bodies below her - the vacant shells of ordinary people who had fallen and

died last week before somehow dragging themselves back up from their undignified resting places. And beyond them were millions more bodies still, lying and rotting where they had died on that first morning. But none of them mattered. Even the bodies of the people that Sonya had known and loved and who were out there somewhere didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered.

Sonya pressed her feet hard against the wall and leant forward and pushed herself out of the window. She fell headfirst, falling through three-quarters of a turn as she dropped heavily through the disease-filled air, crashing down on her back onto the roof of a parked car and killing herself instantly.

The nearest of the sickly cadavers instinctively took slow, lumbering steps towards Sonya's body. With dull, clouded eyes they stared at her battered and smashed remains. In spite of the force of the impact, she still held her baby tightly.

The sound of the window shattering echoed around the empty town. Paul and Donna heard it and it prompted them to move. They had spent the last three and a half hours sitting in a third floor, glass-fronted pizza restaurant. Their earlier supposition that slow movements and silence would be enough to avoid attracting the attention of the wandering bodies had thankfully proved to be correct. What they hadn't bargained on, however, was the effort involved in maintaining such a slow and tedious pace in close proximity to such unpredictable danger. Instinct constantly urged both of them to either hide away from the bodies or destroy them but they could do neither. The creatures were obnoxious, repellent and, for all that Paul and Donna knew, potentially lethal but they couldn't afford to let their emotions give them away. Staying so close to the desperate figures and being forced to pass them and move between them was almost impossible. Although he didn't dare speak out loud

and say as much, Paul likened it to being forced to hold his hand in a bowl of boiling water. After spending several hours outside, exposed and vulnerable, the survivors had staggered into the restaurant to calm themselves and try and rest for a while.

Half of the restaurant had been destroyed by fire, and the vicious flames had left plastic tables and chairs mangled and misshapen. An explosion in the kitchens had blown a hole in the wall of the building the size of a small car, and it was through the hole that they heard the sound of the window being smashed. Holding onto the twisted and blackened remains of an oven for support, Paul leant out of the building and looked up and down the desolate street below. The light was low and a single figure moving away from the scene was all that he could see at first. Gradually his eyes became used to the light and were able to focus in the gloom. Then he saw the crowd. Hundreds, possibly thousands of bodies were gathered together in an area perhaps half a mile away. It took a few long seconds before the importance of his discovery finally registered.

‘Christ,’ he said as he pulled himself back inside.

‘What?’ mumbled Donna.

‘There’s a crowd down there,’ he explained. ‘Bloody hundreds of the damn things.’

‘Where?’

‘The ring road. They’re down by the university I think.’

‘So let’s go the other way.’

Tired, Donna picked up her belongings and started to get ready to leave.

‘We should go towards it,’ Paul said. There was an unsurprising lack of certainty and conviction in his voice. He knew that what he was saying was right, but he also knew that they would be taking an immense risk. Replace putting a hand into a bowl of boiling water, he thought, thinking back to his earlier analogy, with diving into a swimming pool full.

‘Why?’ Donna asked. She was exhausted. All she wanted to do was stay still and sleep.

‘Because if these things are attracted by sound and movement,’ he explained, ‘then there’s something over there that’s keeping them interested.’

17

Stay calm, keep steady and keep moving Donna silently repeated to herself over and over again as she walked with Paul towards the huge mass of dark bodies in the very near distance. The short journey from the pizza restaurant to the edge of the ring road had taken somewhere in the region of three-quarters of an hour, many times longer than it should have. And with each step forward they had taken, so the nervousness and apprehension felt by both survivors had steadily increased. They were walking into the lion's den. In just a few minutes they would be surrounded by rotting corpses on all sides, and a single unexpected movement or sound could well be enough to start a chain reaction within the crowd that might feasibly engulf them and leave them with no means of escape. On their own the bodies were weak and were more an inconvenience than a threat. In a crowd of this size, however, the danger was undeniable and there was no obvious way out other than to turn and run back into the city. Donna knew that there would be as many bodies again waiting for them back there.

The smell was appalling. Since they'd left the office and gone out into the open they'd been aware of a suffocating, noxious taste in the air which steadily increased as they approached the mass of decaying bodies. It was the smell of death and disease, and it seemed to coat and tarnish everything. Struggling to keep her nerve, Donna watched the corpse nearest to her left out of the corner of her eye. It had once been a girl - about her height and age perhaps - but now it was barely recognisable. She might even have

known the pathetic creature before it had been struck down by whatever it was that had laid waste to the world less than a week ago. The early morning light was still low but there was enough illumination for Donna to be able to make out what remained of the girl's features. Her once pale and smooth skin had been eaten away by disease and decay, leaving it with an unnatural blue-green tinge. Blistering, weeping sores had erupted around her mouth and nose. Her mouth hung open heavily and a thick string of bloody, germ-filled saliva trickled down the side of her face. Her once well-fitting clothes now rustled and flapped against her willowy frame in the cold morning breeze. Donna couldn't look away from the remains of the girl. In a strange way it was easier to concentrate on just one of the bodies rather than look around at the rest of the crowd. Each one of them was abhorrent and repulsive in their own way. She was frightened that the next one she looked at might be more grotesque and even more repellent than the last. She was frightened that she might happen to see one of the creatures that was so badly decomposed and damaged by the savage affliction that she wouldn't be able to contain her disgust. She had to keep reminding herself that one slip, one single unexpected sound, might be enough to bring everything crashing down around them.

Paul had gradually moved further ahead. He was a couple of meters in front of Donna now and there were several bodies between them. The sheer size of the crowd that they had become part of was surprising and daunting. Paul knew that there had to be a reason for the unexpected gathering and, with no other indication of where they might find help or safety, it seemed sensible to go along with the movement of the mass of corpses. The sun was beginning to rise to their right and, as the brilliant orange light spilled silently over the city for the first time that morning, Paul looked ahead and, for a moment, was sure that he could see movement in the windows of a large, modern building on the

other side of the ring road. He wanted to turn around and tell Donna but he knew that he couldn't risk attempting any form of communication with her.

Behind, Donna let her head hang heavily on her shoulders in the same way that the listless creatures around her did. To look up and around would show them that she was different. For as much of the time as she could she kept her eyes focussed on the ground around Paul's feet, desperately trying to keep track of his movements so that she didn't lose him. The crowd was becoming denser and more tightly packed and her nerves, comparative strength and natural speed made it increasingly difficult to match the slow and awkward pace of the shuffling cadavers all around her. Although all moving in the same general direction, the creatures had poor control over their movements and frequently lurched, tripped or staggered to one side or collided randomly with others.

Paul allowed himself to look ahead again. Bright orange sunlight reflected back from the windows on the far right of the building, hurting his eyes. Perhaps that was all he'd seen, he thought dejectedly. Perhaps he hadn't seen movement after all, just the morning sun bouncing off the bronze-tinted windows. But no, there it was again. Knowing that he was taking a risk just by holding his head high and looking up, he continued to stare at the building ahead of him. He saw movement again. Christ, there were people in the windows. He was still a couple of hundred meters away but he could definitely see them now. Unlike the countless thousands of sickly bodies that surrounded him and Donna, he knew instantly that the people in the windows were different. They were grouped together in several rooms and they were largely still. They had control. They were communicating with each other. They were looking down at the bodies and the remains of the city and they were thinking and talking and pointing and planning and... and it seemed impossible. For a few seconds longer Paul

wasn't fully able to accept what he was seeing until he was close enough for it to be undeniable. These people were alive. These people were survivors. Without thinking he reacted. He stopped and span around to look for Donna.

'Up there,' he yelled when he saw her, pointing towards the building in front of them. 'Look!'

She stared back at him with a look of terrified disbelief on her face, not listening to what he was saying, just stunned that he had been stupid enough to shatter the protective silence that they had managed to maintain for so long. Already aware that the bodies around her were beginning to react, she dropped her head again and hoped that Paul would shut up and do the same.

It was too late. The first bodies began to push past her, their speed suddenly increased.

'Run you fucking idiot!' she shouted. Without waiting for his response, she dropped her shoulder and began to run towards the building ahead. She collided with body after body after body with each impact sending the weak figures tumbling to the ground and causing more and more of them to react. Already numerous clumsy and diseased hands were trying to grab hold of Paul. He wrestled them away and followed after Donna in her wake.

The sheer volume of bodies crammed around the front of the building made the main entrance appear impassable even from a distance. Already gasping for breath, Donna looked around anxiously for an alternative route. She was surrounded on all sides by the noxious corpses, every last one of which now seemed to turn and lurch awkwardly towards her. There wasn't time to make decisions. She just kept moving, hoping that her comparative strength would be enough to see her through. She sensed that Paul was close behind but didn't bother to check. He would have to look after himself. Stupid fucking idiot.

She was on the ring road itself now. She tripped down the high kerb and began to run across the wide stretch of

tarmac, managing to somehow continue to push the bodies away and also to avoid the wreckage of cars and rotting corpses strewn across her path. The crowd surged after her relentlessly, moving together slowly but ominously like some unstoppable thick and viscous liquid. Up and over the low central reservation barrier and she knew she was almost there. She could hear her foolish companion getting closer behind her now grunting and groaning with effort as he forced his way forward through the seemingly endless tide of the dead.

‘Go right!’ she heard him shout and she immediately changed direction. The building in front of them was long and narrow but they were considerably closer to the right side than the left. It seemed logical to try and get around the back, but who was to say that there wasn’t a crowd twice as big behind the building? The alternatives were bleak. She kept moving.

The bodies were tightly packed against the front entrance. Donna rounded the corner and saw, to her relief, that there were considerably fewer of them to the side of the building, no doubt, she decided, because virtually all of the corpses would have approached from the direction of the city centre. Slipping around the side of a red and white striped entry barrier she took a deep breath, pushed another two corpses out of the way and continued to move forward.

‘Climb up!’ she heard Paul yell from behind. ‘Get off the ground.’

Donna looked around helplessly, not sure what he was expecting her to do. He answered her questions as he suddenly appeared next to her and pushed his way through the hordes towards a large delivery truck that was parked alongside the building. Grabbing hold of the passenger side wing mirror he hauled himself up and away from the grabbing hands below. He lay flat across the roof of the truck and reached back down for Donna.

‘Come on,’ he hissed.

Exhausted, she pushed her way through to the lorry and clambered up. By the time she had reached the top of the truck Paul was already making his way along the length of the vehicle towards the rear end. Donna followed before stopping and falling to her knees once she was safe.

‘Help!’ she yelled desperately, praying that someone inside the building would hear her.

The back end of the truck where Paul was standing was less than three feet away from the outside wall of the building. Just above his head and to his right slightly was a small balcony. Without stopping to consider the risks he leapt up and grabbed at the metalwork surrounding the balcony area. In a flurry of movement he reached out and wrapped his arm around one of the metal railings. He grimaced with pain as the sudden weight of his body threatened to wrench his shoulder from its joint. Slowly, and with much effort, he managed to pull himself up. Donna watched from the roof of the truck as he hauled himself up onto the narrow landing and began to smash his fists furiously against a double-glazed window.

Donna lay down and rolled over onto her back and looked up into the grey morning sky above her. The noise that Paul was making quickly faded into silence as she relaxed, as did the constant shuffling of the relentless crowd of bodies swarming around the front of the building and around the truck. She stared into the clouds moving over her head and watched as they blew across from left to right. If I look up and I keep looking up, she thought, then everything seems normal. If I don’t look down then I can pretend that none of this is happening. Just for a few seconds I can pretend it’s not happening.

After locating the window where Paul was standing the survivors forced it open and quickly pulled him inside. Using a ladder to bridge the gap between the building and the

top of the truck, two men ventured out into the cold and inhospitable morning and brought Donna into the shelter.

18

Midday.

Donna had managed to sleep for a few hours. It was the first time in a week she'd had a proper bed and even though it was in a cold and unfamiliar place, it still felt reassuringly comfortable and safe. A man she hadn't seen before walked past the door to the room she'd been sleeping in and, seeing that she was awake, stopped to talk to her.

'How you feeling?' he asked.

'Crap,' she replied with brutal honesty.

'I'm Bernard Heath,' he said, taking a couple of steps into the room.

'Donna.'

He nodded and, feeling suddenly awkward and not knowing what to say, looked around the room rather than stare at her lying on the bed.

'Look,' he said after a few long seconds had passed, 'would you like to come downstairs with me? I can get you some food or something to drink or...'

Donna was up and on her feet before he'd finished his question. She was starving. Heath led her along the corridor and down the stairs.

'Bloody hell,' she muttered under her breath as she walked into the assembly hall. She began to cry. She couldn't help herself. She'd given up hope of ever seeing so many people together again. She counted between ten and twenty of them. In one corner a handful of subdued children played quietly. Elsewhere people sat around the edges of the room, generally keeping themselves to them-

selves. Heath fetched her some food from an adjoining kitchen.

Standing in the middle of the hall with a tray in her hands, Donna suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable. She looked around for somewhere to sit and caught sight of Paul Castle sitting next to another man. Despite the fact that she still wanted to punch him in the face for the stupid stunt he'd pulled this morning, he was the only other person that she knew. Wearily she dragged herself across the room and sat down next to him.

'You okay?' he asked.

She nodded and grunted but didn't properly answer. She began to eat the crackers and cheese spread that she'd been given. Her hands shook as she tried to spread with a plastic knife. It was bitterly cold inside the building.

'This is Steve,' Paul continued, introducing the man sitting next to him. 'Steve, this is Donna.'

'Hi, Donna,' Steve said wearily, managing half a smile. Donna managed another grunt.

'Steve says there's almost fifty people here you know,' Paul whispered. 'Thank God we found this place. He says that most of them don't...'

'Finding it wasn't difficult,' Donna said, swallowing a mouthful of food and finally finding enough energy and interest to bring herself to speak, 'it was getting here that was the hard part. It wouldn't have been so much of a problem if it hadn't been for you, you stupid bloody idiot!'

Paul looked down at his feet and turned back to face Steve.

'So what's the plan?' he asked, trying desperately to ignore Donna's anger. 'What's going to happen next? Are we staying here or...?'

'As far as I can tell there is no plan, mate,' Steve replied.

'And if there was you'd only go and screw it up,' Donna snapped.

Paul ignored her.

‘Don’t think anyone knows what to do next,’ Steve continued. ‘Seems like it’s going to be as bad wherever you go so you might as well stay put. A couple of us have got a few ideas brewing though, haven’t we, Nathan?’

Nathan Holmes was walking across the hall on his way back to his room. At the mention of his name he stopped and turned round. Bored and glad of any distraction he pulled up a chair and sat down in front of Steve and Paul.

‘What you talking about?’ he asked.

‘I said we’re starting to get a few ideas about what to do next, aren’t we?’

Holmes’ face cracked into a broad, knowing grin.

‘Too right,’ he said, his voice lowered to a whisper.

‘What you going to do?’ Paul asked.

‘When those things outside start to drift away,’ he explained, ‘we’re going out on the town.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean we’re going to shut ourselves in one of the clubs round here and we’re going to have the biggest fucking party you’ve ever seen. We’re going to blow all the drinks and drugs we can find in the place. And when they start to wear off and we start to come back down, we’re going on to the next club and we’re going to do it all over again. The biggest bloody pub crawl in history!’

‘Sounds good,’ Paul said, far from convinced.

‘We’re going to hit this town and...’

‘You been outside recently?’ Donna interrupted.

Holmes leant back on his chair to get a look at the woman who had interrupted him.

‘Yeah, why?’ he replied.

‘Because there’s nothing left out there, that’s why,’ she sighed.

‘Exactly. That’s why we’re going to do it. Nothing matters when you’ve had a few drinks.’

She shook her head sadly and returned her attention to her food. Holmes leant across and helped himself to a cracker.

‘Do you mind?’ she scowled.

‘Not at all,’ he replied in a smug, self-assured voice. ‘Haven’t seen you before,’ he said, chewing on her food, ‘when did you get here?’

‘This morning.’

‘You been out there all this time?’

‘Yes.’

‘Grim, ain’t it?’

Donna nodded. She didn’t want to talk to Holmes. She didn’t really want to talk to anyone, least of all this brash and irritating man. Much as she’d craved company and conversation at times recently, she now needed space and time alone. Getting away from the office and finding the survivors had brought a brief respite from the cold emptiness of the remains of the world. It was only now that she’d found a relatively safe and quiet shelter that the full horror of what had happened had returned to haunt her. With other survivors in close proximity for the first time she felt able to try and deal with her pain, fear and uncertainty. Although she needed other people close, she also needed to be by herself. She didn’t really have anything against Holmes (she’d put up with countless men like him in numerous bars and clubs before now), but at that moment she didn’t want anything to do with him either.

‘I tell you,’ he continued, completely oblivious to Donna’s lack of interest in him, ‘there is no way I’m sitting in here with this lot for much longer. Soon as I’m ready I’m getting out. We’ve got the whole bloody country out there just waiting for us, isn’t that right, Steve?’

Steve nodded.

‘Damn right.’

Donna looked at the two men in disbelief. Was getting drunk really all that was left for them to do? With the world

lying in tatters at their feet, did they not have any higher priorities? On one hand it seemed a sensible way to try and forget all that had happened and enjoy what time remained, but could their suggestion really be the only alternative? Given that she was surrounded by so much uncertainty she hadn't dared to start thinking about the future before now - until that moment she hadn't dared consider whether she even had a future to look forward to. Looking into Holmes' pathetic, grinning face, however, she knew that there had to be a better option than the seedy, selfish and dangerous escape that he and Steve Richards were planning for themselves.

'You can finish this,' she said as she stood up and dropped the tray of food on Holmes' lap. He turned and watched her as she walked away.

'Where you going?' he asked, getting up and following her.

'Somewhere else,' she grunted.

'Where's somewhere else?'

'Somewhere away from blokes like you.'

'I've got some bad news for you,' he said, walking alongside her, 'blokes like me are all that's left.'

Donna stopped walking and turned to face him.

'Listen,' she said quietly, 'I'm twenty-four years old, I'm female and I'm blonde. I've had to deal with fucking idiots like you for as long as I can remember. I've seen hundreds of your type, full of mouth and fighting talk but you've got no balls. If you're all that's left, I'll be spending the rest of my time on my own. Now will you leave me alone?'

Not about to let her know if her words were having any effect on him, Holmes simply smirked.

'I'll see you around then,' he grinned.

'Fucking idiot,' Donna cursed as she stormed out of the hall and down the corridor back towards her room. She didn't even know if she'd be able to find the room again

but that wasn't important. She just needed to get away from the others for a while longer.

Donna got lost in the accommodation block. The corridors looked the same, the rooms looked the same and the staircases looked the same. She remembered that her room was the third or fourth along from the stairs, but she couldn't remember whether it was on the second or third floor.

She opened a third-floor door which looked vaguely familiar. It was instantly obvious that it wasn't her room - a young oriental man was sitting on the bed, staring into space.

'Sorry,' she mumbled instinctively. 'I got the wrong room. I didn't mean to disturb...'

He looked up at her and smiled for a moment. He looked so lost and helpless. Her heart immediately went out to the poor man.

'Are you okay?' she asked. He nodded. 'Have you had any food? Do you need me to show you where the hall is?'

The man responded only with another smile and another nod of the head.

'No English,' he said simply.

'I'm in the room next door,' Donna said slowly, pointing down the corridor and hoping that she was right. 'Let me know if you need anything, okay?'

Another nod and another smile and Donna left the man alone and returned to her room. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes tightly shut. For a while she couldn't get his face out of her head. As if everything that had happened wasn't hard enough already, this poor sod was having to cope with it all without being able to understand a word that the other survivors said. If she felt detached and alone, she thought, how the hell must he be feeling?

Dark thoughts filled Donna's mind.

The longer the silence in her room continued, the darker her thoughts became.

19

Jack Baxter left his room and walked to the end of the corridor. He wasn't planning on going anywhere in particular, he just needed a change of surroundings. Like many of the other desperate individuals sheltering in the university, the relative quiet and lack of distractions in the building had left him with nothing to do but dwell on the inexplicable hell that his life had become. Jack had spent most of the day sitting on the end of his bed just thinking. He couldn't even remember what he'd been thinking about.

At the far end of the corridor was a narrow square landing leading onto a staircase. Floor to ceiling length windows let the grey autumnal light seep inside. Jack stood a short distance away from the nearest window and peered down into the mass of dark, decaying bodies still being drawn towards the university and, in particular, the accommodation block. Why did they stay, he wondered? He took a few cautious steps forward. His position was too far and too high for him to be seen by any of the bodies but he still took care to stay to the side and try and keep out of sight. He was terrified that one of the corpses might see him and start to react. He imagined the effect of that single reaction running through the entire crowd. He'd seen it happen several times before today - a slight disturbance in one part of the huge gathering would spread across the immense gathering like a shock wave. It had happened when the woman had jumped to her death from the window earlier. He could just about see her from where he was standing. Poor cow,

he thought. He couldn't help thinking that she was better off where she was now.

'Bloody mess, isn't it?' a sudden and expected voice said from close behind him. Jack quickly turned around to see that it was Bernard Heath. He'd noticed that Heath seemed to have a real problem with being on his own. He could often be seen walking around the building in search of someone to be with. 'Sorry, Jack,' Heath continued, 'I didn't mean to disturb you. It's just that I saw you standing here and I thought I'd check that you were...'

'I'm fine,' Jack said quietly, anticipating his concerns and truncating his sentence.

Heath took a few steps forward and peered down into the rotting crowd.

'I reckon this lot will start to disappear sooner or later,' he said with a tone of unexpected optimism in his voice. 'As soon as something happens somewhere else to attract their attention, they'll be off.'

'Like what?' Jack asked. 'There's not really very much going on out there, is there?'

Heath didn't answer.

'I'll tell you what's getting to me,' he said instead, his voice quiet and tired and unexpectedly candid, 'it's how slowly everything seems to happen around here. I mean, I'm sitting downstairs with the rest of them and no-one says a word. I look up at the clock and get distracted. Next time I look at the clock it feels like ages later but only a couple of minutes have gone by...'

'That's why I'm out here,' Jack mumbled, still staring into the dark crowd below. 'I was just sitting in my room staring at the walls and going out of my bloody mind.'

'Have you tried reading?'

'No, have you?'

'I did,' he said, scratching the side of his bearded face. 'I used to lecture here. I went back to my office a couple of

days ago and picked up a few books. Brought them back with me and sat down to read one but...'

'But what?'

'Couldn't do it.'

'Why?'

He shrugged his shoulders and rubbed his eyes. For a moment Jack looked up from the bodies and stared into the other man's drawn and weary face.

'Don't know,' he answered slowly. 'I just couldn't do it. I started to read a novel. I got through a few pages before I had to stop. All it did was remind me of what's happened and what I've lost and...'

He stopped talking, feeling suddenly awkward and somewhat embarrassed that he was letting his feelings show so readily again.

'So what happens next then?' wondered Jack, sensing Heath's pain and making a conscious effort to change the focus of the conversation from dwelling on what had gone to trying to look forward.

Heath went through the motions of thinking carefully for a few moments. It was pointless really - he'd spent most of the last week pondering endless variations on the question he'd just been asked and in all that time he hadn't managed to find any answers.

'Sit and wait,' he said eventually.

'Is that it?'

'I can't see that there's anything else we can do.'

For a while the two men stood side by side in silence and looked out over the remains of the diseased, battered world. Several minutes later Heath walked away, soon followed by Jack who dejectedly made his way back to his room. He lay down on the bed and tried to sleep. Sleep was just about the only way he knew to block out the nightmare for a while.

Part II

20

In the desolate, dead and diseased shell that the city had become very little changed from day to day. Thousands of corpses continued to shuffle endlessly through the shadows, their bodies gradually decaying but their mental strength and control somehow continuing to slowly return. Although the survivors remained quiet and largely out of sight, the absence of other sounds and distractions throughout the surrounding area continued to draw unwanted crowds of ragged, stumbling figures towards the university. Inside their shelter the frightened, desperate people sat and watched and waited for something - anything - to happen. For two painfully long and drawn out weeks nothing changed.

Without any warning the precarious equilibrium was upset.

On a cold, grey and wet Sunday morning some nineteen days after everything had begun, something finally happened.

Thirty miles west of the city where the survivors sheltered, in a bleak and nondescript field, lay the concealed entrance to a military bunker. Waiting underground inside the dark and grey building, shielded and protected from the dead world outside by thick, concrete walls and industrial strength air purification systems, were almost three hundred soldiers. As tired, frightened and disorientated as the bewildered survivors left out in the open above ground, they too had struggled to cope with the uncertainty of each

passing hour. Inside the bunker no-one knew what had happened. From the most senior officer in the base down to the lowest in the ranks, no-one had anything more than a few scraps of unconfirmed information to go on. They had been acting on hurriedly given orders when they'd been scrambled on the first morning. There were many rumours about disease, weapons of mass destruction, germ warfare and contagion but no concrete facts to substantiate or confirm the hearsay. The men and women in the bunker didn't need to know the details of what had happened and neither, for that matter, did the officers in charge of the base. All they knew - all they needed to know - was that sooner or later they would be sent up to the surface to try and take control of whatever was left.

The orders had finally been given by the base commander.

Today was the day the first troops would go above ground.

21

Cooper

Nineteen days we'd been underground.

More than four hundred and fifty hours without seeing daylight or being told what was happening or why we were there.

There had been little to do in the bunker from virtually the moment we had arrived. Once our equipment had been unpacked, stored and checked our general duties were done save for occasional mundane domestic tasks. No-one left the base so there was nothing to get ready or repair. We ate, cleaned, exercised and slept but other than that we did little else. Time and time again I had thought about the moment when the orders would finally come and, occasionally, I had actually looked forward to it happening. In many ways it seemed preferable to just sitting there and waiting. No-one talked much about what might have happened above ground. Whether anyone actually knew or not I wasn't sure. There was a small part of me that didn't want to know because there seemed to be some bizarre safety and comfort in ignorance. I tried not to think about my family and friends that were left out there but with nothing else to do it was difficult not to remember them. The not-knowing made me question my priorities - I had joined the forces to protect people and yet there we were, tucked up safely underground while the rest of the population - and everyone that had ever meant anything to me - endured whatever it was that was happening to the world. Good or bad (and we all

knew in our hearts that what was happening was a million times worse than just bad) we all needed some answers. I might even have deserted if I'd been able to get outside.

When the orders finally came I didn't want to move. It had been rumoured that the first party was about to leave the base but I hadn't expected to be among them. The hours between being told I was going and the moment we left the bunker disappeared with incredible speed.

The briefing before we went above ground answered a handful of questions, but it also left me asking countless more. The base commander pleaded ignorance, and I had to admit that he was convincing. I had known Richardson - or I had, at least, been aware of him and his reputation - for more than seven years since I was first posted out of Danford and I had no reason to doubt his honesty. What would he hope to gain from lying now that we were about to leave? The situation up on the surface was obviously so dire and hopeless that hiding the truth from the troops would only hamper our mission.

He talked in very general and nonspecific terms about a disease or virus. He couldn't tell us where it had come from or how, but it had swept across the country with unprecedented speed and ferocity on the morning we came below ground. We had been close to being caught ourselves, he told us. The soldiers heading to other bases had not been so fortunate. Richardson explained that the disease had also been found in other countries and that its virulent nature made it likely that the rest of the world had been infected. Much of what he told us was presumption and some of it little more than pure speculation. Nothing he said could be quantified or substantiated.

Tests and air samples had shown that the disease was still present outside. Whatever kind of germ it was, it sounded stronger and more resilient than anything anyone had come across before. We were to wear full protective gear whilst outside. Any contamination and we would be

unable to return to the bunker. There were orders to shoot and kill any of us who did not comply. Anything up to two days in the decontamination chamber would follow our planned five hours outside.

One of the medical officers fumbled his way through a briefing on the physical effects of the disease. It was obvious from his manner and the lack of any hard facts or statistics that most of his words were uncertain and, in all probability, untrue but they had to tell us something. He talked about a violent infection causing internal swellings and lesions which would most probably result in death or, at the very least, severe pain and secondary infection. He talked about many thousands of people being killed outright. He talked about the possibility of others surviving, but in what condition it was not clear. He told us to be prepared to come across many, many casualties. Our mission was to assess the situation in the nearest city and then report back. No further operations could take place until our initial assessment had been made.

After the briefing we spent an hour preparing our kit and the transport and putting on our protective gear. I was scared. I sat in the transport with the others and shook and sobbed like a child.

22

The quiet of the countryside was suddenly shattered as the bunker doors opened and the armoured transport emerged at speed into the dull light of a cold and wet Sunday afternoon. The heavy and powerful machine roared up the access ramp, climbed a steep incline and then followed the track away from the concealed base.

It took the troops more than an hour to travel the thirty or so miles to the city. They followed a direct route along major roads littered with the wrecks of crashed cars and the decaying remains of countless bodies. Occasionally figures appeared in the near distance and at the sides of the road but they were lethargic and painfully slow, seeming to drag themselves along with considerable effort. The soldiers didn't stop to offer assistance or investigate. The driver of the transport had his orders, and those orders were to go directly to the heart of the city. It didn't seem to matter anyway. What could they do for these first survivors? What could fifteen soldiers possibly do to help millions of plague victims?

Cooper turned to look at Mark Thompson sitting next to him. He looked frightened. Even though the tinted visors on their cumbersome full-face breathing masks Cooper could see that the other man was scared. He could see it in his eyes - the way that although his head remained perfectly still and fixed forward, his eyes were darting frantically around the inside of the transport, never daring to settle on any one thing for fear of catching sight of whatever it was that was terrifying him. And that was still the

problem, Cooper decided, it was not knowing. They'd been trained to deal with the aftermath of nuclear war, conventional war, terrorism and many other types of conflict or attack, but it was obvious that this was very different. The details of cause and effect were sparse, but it was already clear that no-one could have been trained to deal with anything like this.

It was uncomfortably hot in the protective suit. Cooper knew that his life depended on the protection, of course, but the oppressive atmosphere beneath the layers of treated material and rubber did nothing to calm his nerves. The initial burst of adrenaline he had felt on leaving the bunker had died down now that they had been away from their protective prison for some time. He now felt claustrophobic and wanted to return to the base. His mouth was dry and he needed to drink but he was afraid to risk compromising his suit. Eating, drinking, going to the toilet and many other simple and ordinary tasks would be difficult and risky until they were back. To remove any part of the suit for even a few seconds might be enough to let in the vicious virus that, if the information his officers had was correct, could quickly end his life. Judging by the number of bodies scattered on the ground around them as the drove through the suburbs and into the city, this was a disease that had killed many, many thousands more than it had spared.

Heavy rain clattered down constantly on the metal roof above the soldier's heads, echoing around the transport. There was next to no conversation. Other than the rain and the sound of the machine's groaning engine there was an oppressive and all-consuming silence which was only disturbed by sudden brief explosions of static conversation from the radio and equally brief and factual reports to the officers back at the base.

The soldiers were sat in two rows along either side of the transport, facing into the middle. Thompson suddenly got up out of his seat and leant across the inside of the ma-

chine to look out of a small square window between the heads of the two troops sitting directly opposite.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said, loud enough for the others to hear. There was sudden movement throughout the vehicle as rest of the soldiers immediately turned to see what it was that their colleague had spotted deep in the murky-greyness of the late September afternoon. All around them they could see movement. Slow and laboured but still very definite movement.

They had reached what Cooper called the ‘inner-suburbs’ of the city - a ring of small shopping areas and high streets which had once been villages in their own right but which had since been swallowed up and consumed by the ever-expanding city centre. These areas were the first real pockets of civilisation that the soldiers had driven through since leaving the base. There were many more bodies on the ground here, and there were many more figures moving nearby too.

‘Why ain’t they moved any of the bodies yet?’ asked one of the soldiers, thinking out loud, his voice muffled by his face-mask.

‘And what the hell are those others doing outside?’ said another, watching through a back window as a quickly growing crowd of moving figures dragged themselves pointlessly along the road after the transport. ‘If these people are sick then what the hell are they doing out here in the open? It’s pissing down for Christ’s sake.’

‘Who says they’re sick,’ asked Thompson. ‘These are supposed to be the survivors, aren’t they?’

‘Have you seen them?’ the other soldier replied nervously, his mouth suddenly dry. ‘Jesus, look at the state of them. They’ve got fucking scraps of clothes on and they don’t look like they’ve eaten for weeks. Bloody hell, this lot look as bad as the dead ones on the ground.’

Cooper shuffled around to look out of the window nearest to him. The temperature outside was low and the thick

glass was smeared with condensation. He wiped it clear with the back of one gloved hand and peered out into the afternoon gloom.

‘Christ...’ he muttered under his breath.

The world outside the window looked as if it had been totally drained of all colour. Perhaps naively he had expected to find a disorganised and unkempt but otherwise relatively normal city scene - after all, he thought, there hadn’t been any fighting on the streets, had there? This didn’t sound like it had been a war or battle which would cause damage to buildings and property. Where he had expected to see a thousand familiar colours, however, he instead saw little more than a thousand different dull shades of grey and black. And the same was true of the people he could see too. Devoid of all energy, they were dragging themselves along with painful effort and a lack of any speed and almost all coordination. It was as if they’d given up all hope.

They had reached the city centre.

The driver slammed on the brakes and for a second the only sound which could be heard inside the transport was the driving rain pounding against the metal roof just above the soldier’s heads. The troops sat back into their seats and waited apprehensively for the order to move to be given.

‘Okay,’ the officer in charge yelled from his position at the front of the powerful machine, ‘I want you outside now. Get a perimeter formed around the transport. Move!’

The nearest soldier pushed open the heavy door at the back of the vehicle and led the others outside. In a well-rehearsed manoeuvre the troops fanned out and formed a loose circle around the machine. The driver remained behind the wheel - ready to get them away quickly - while the officer in charge stood shoulder to shoulder with the men and women under his command.

Cooper stood motionless and stared into the city. Torrential rain drenched the grim scene like a mist. He

watched the water run down a gutter towards him. A short distance from his feet lay several rapidly decomposing bodies. The world looked completely alien and unfamiliar. He had been to this city before. He had driven along this road. Today it was unrecognisable.

The people were approaching. Difficult to see at first because of the gloom and the low light of the day and their drained and ragged appearance, they dragged themselves towards the soldiers. Silent, awkward and desperate, they neared the troops.

‘So what are we supposed to do?’ hissed Lance Jackson, a twenty-two year old soldier who looked no older than seventeen. He shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot, holding his automatic rifle tight against his chest.

The commanding officer forgave his lack of discipline. He was scared too, although he didn’t allow himself to show it.

‘Keep your nerve, son,’ he said from close behind, resting a reassuring hand on Jackson’s shoulder. ‘Just remember that these people are going to want help and answers from us, and we’re in no position to provide either. Stay calm and alert and we’ll...’

His words faded into silence as he watched the first bodies stagger ever closer. They were near enough for the soldiers to be able to see their pained faces, ravaged by disease and decay. Each one of the troops seemed to focus on whichever one of the pitiful, bedraggled creatures was nearest. The commander watched a dead thirty-eight year old office worker lurch towards him. What remained of the woman lifted its weary head to look in his direction. It seemed to fix him with a cold, emotionless stare from dark, sunken eyes.

‘Fucking hell,’ the commander cursed, letting his guard and his nerve slip for the first time in seventeen years of active service with the forces.

The bodies continued to shuffle forward. The soldiers were becoming increasingly anxious. Amanda Brice, standing four men round to Cooper's right, lifted her rifle and took aim. Others did the same. Cooper cleared his throat and readied his own weapon.

'Stop moving,' the commander shouted towards the helpless people. 'Stay where you are. We're here to...'

No response. The figures continued to move.

'I repeat,' the commander bellowed again, 'stay where you are and no harm will come to you...'

Still no response.

The nearest body was now little more than a couple of meters away from Brice. Terrified by the cold and unnatural expression on its drawn and pallid face, she aimed her rifle into the air just inches above the diseased man's head and pulled the trigger. Ignorant to any danger, it staggered forward again.

'Jesus Christ,' she cursed under her breath. 'What the hell is the matter with them?'

The figures continued to advance, closing in on the circle of soldiers. Filled with fear and confused and disorientated by her increasing panic, Brice aimed at the body in front of her and fired, sending a single bullet thudding into the dead flesh just above the creature's right knee. It crumbled and fell to the ground but then immediately began to drag itself back up again, seemingly oblivious to its injury. Brice stared into the dead face approaching her. There was no expression of pain or any display of emotion whatsoever. She fired again. And again. And again.

The bodies were close now, just feet away, and a decision needed to be taken.

'Get back inside,' the commander shouted, already on his way into the transport. 'Let's get out of here.'

The troops turned and ran. Thompson was caught by the arm as the nearest few creatures reached out for him. He began to beat at the pitiful figures hanging onto him, batter-

ing them away with his fists and the end of his rifle. As quickly as he could break their hold, however, more gripped onto his suit.

The only other soldier left outside, Cooper tried to pull his colleague free. Out of the corner of his eye he was aware that the others had disappeared into the back of the transport, crowds of grey figures following close behind.

‘Come on,’ he yelled, ‘move!’

Terrified and disorientated by the mass of rotting faces in front of him, Thompson panicked and tried to force his way further forward through the ever-increasing crowd. Cooper tried again to drag him back. Still swinging his fists furiously, the first soldier battered his way through the decaying hordes, his comparative strength meeting with little resistance. He had quickly pushed his way through the main mass of cadavers to an area where they were considerably fewer in number. Still surrounded, Cooper glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the transport had been swallowed up by more of the abhorrent figures. Obviously aware that his path back to their armoured vehicle had been cut-off, Thompson swung out at another few random corpses before pushing his way through the crowd and running deeper into the dark shadows of the centre of the city.

‘Shit,’ Cooper snapped. The transport was beginning to push through the growing crowds and move away, the roar of its powerful engine filling the cold afternoon air. More and more of the shell-like bodies began to drag themselves after the machine as it began to move. The situation was dangerously unpredictable and Cooper knew that the others wouldn’t wait or try to collect Thompson and himself. Their only priority now would be to return to the base and report back. It didn’t matter how many of them made it back there, as long as someone returned the mission objectives would have been achieved.

Cooper looked back and watched as Thompson rounded a corner and disappeared from view. Bloody idiot, he

thought as he wrestled himself free from still more of the bodies that grabbed and clutched at him incessantly. With the transport quickly moving away in the opposite direction he knew he had little choice but to follow his colleague into the centre of town. As he ran after the other man, smashing weak and clumsy figures away on either side, he began to silently make plans to get himself and Thompson back to the bunker. He knew the way back out of the city and the route to the base. It would just be a question of finding a car or some other form of transport and...

He could see Thompson again now.

What the hell was he doing?

The soldier was running up the middle of a sloping street lined with shops and cafes. There were several nondescript figures advancing awkwardly towards him. Seemingly ignorant to their presence, Thompson stopped moving and turned back to face Cooper.

'For God's sake,' Cooper yelled, his voice muffled by his breathing apparatus but still loud enough for the other man to hear, 'what are you doing?'

Thompson ripped off his mask.

'I'm not going back,' he shouted, his tired face flushed red and full of emotion. 'Look at this bloody place! It's a fucking nightmare. These people are...'

He stopped speaking abruptly and bent forward and began to cough violently. Doubled over with shock and sudden agony, the lining of his throat began to burn and swell, quickly cutting off his air supply. By the time Cooper had reached him he was already choking on the blood running down his windpipe and draining into his lungs. He dropped to the cold, wet ground and shook and convulsed next to Cooper's feet, spitting crimson blood onto the wet tarmac.

Distracted by movement, Cooper saw that more bodies were approaching from every direction, dragging themselves towards the stranded soldiers. As the sound of the transport's engine faded away into the distance, he glanced

down again and saw that the man on the ground was dead. As the bodies neared he stepped over the corpse of his colleague and began to run deeper into the town, hoping that he could find somewhere to shelter before making his move and heading back to the base.

The torrential rain was falling harder than ever, hissing down all around him and bouncing back up off the pavement. Cooper ran up a steady hill towards a small square shopping precinct littered with rotting human remains. There were many of the staggering survivors (if that was what they really were) around the scene, their reaction to him dulled and delayed by whatever it was that had happened to them. As Cooper brushed past it was all they could do to painfully turn themselves around and stumble after him hopelessly. As a soldier it was his duty to defend and protect these people, but it was clear that they were already beyond hope. As a human being, therefore, his priorities became infinitely more selfish and personal. He needed to get away from the unrecognisable hell that this city had become. His own safety was his only remaining concern.

A sharp right took him down a dark and narrow passageway, lined on either side by tall office buildings. There the driving rain echoed louder than ever before in the confined space. There were people ahead. The passageway was tight and he knew it would be difficult to get through them. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed that still more of them were following him from the other direction. He was boxed-in and, although these poor creatures seemed individually weak and unimportant, there were far too many of them for him to simply dismiss them as not being a threat. By the same token, however, he didn't want to cause them any harm. They were suffering. They were obviously very weak and undernourished. They were innocent and hadn't done anything wrong.

Halfway down the passageway was a large waste bin which Cooper scrambled onto. From there he was able to

haul himself up onto a metal fire escape ladder. He climbed to a first floor window which he smashed with a single kick from one of his heavily booted feet. Clambering through the splintered wooden frame and shattered glass he found himself standing in a large, open-plan office. There were more silent people inside, all in a similar condition to those walking the rain-soaked streets. They immediately turned and began to move towards him, their dark, clouded eyes following his every move. As they approached him he found himself wondering why, after living through the hell which had obviously taken place just under three weeks ago, these people were still at work. Why hadn't they left to find their families and homes?

'Look,' he began, struggling to know what to say, 'please don't be afraid. I'm not going to...'

It was pointless. The people in the building were as withdrawn and catatonic as those dragging themselves along outside. Cooper stared with mounting horror into the nearest face. Once a young and attractive graduate trainee, this woman's blistered, peeling skin was now tinged with an unnatural blue-green hue. He glanced down at one of the inert bodies slumped across a desk next to him. Even though he was looking through a tinted visor, it occurred to him that those bodies which were still moving and those that were motionless seemed to all be in the same despicable condition. He'd seen it before when he'd been out in the field on active duty. This was the look of death. These people were rotting...

With panic and bile rising in his throat, Cooper ran diagonally across the room, jumping up onto desks to avoid making contact with the shadowy creatures around him. He jumped down to the floor and slid and crashed through a heavy fire door into a dark corridor. Pushing his way past another wandering body he reached the nearest staircase and began to climb up. He moved as quickly as he could until he had reached the top floor and could go no further.

After trying three locked office doors he forced his way into a small, square store room. He slammed the door shut behind him and pulled a metal storage rack down to block it and prevent the people outside from getting in.

Twenty minutes later, when Cooper had caught his breath and managed to calm himself down slightly, he walked across the room to a single window and peered out over the remains of the world outside. He could see bodies drifting aimlessly along the otherwise silent and deserted city streets. He could hear them moving around in other parts of the building too.

His transport was long gone and Thompson was dead. He was completely alone.

As time dragged slowly on, it wasn't so much the surroundings that frightened the soldier, it was the unknown and invisible killer which obviously still hung in the contaminated air like a predator poised for the kill. He had witnessed for himself the speed at which it had attacked and destroyed Thompson. Cooper knew that his life depended on his protective suit. He would have to make his move and get back to the bunker sooner rather than later in order to avoid it being compromised.

And as the long afternoon wore on towards evening Cooper's thoughts steadily became more morose. He began to wonder whether there was any point in going back to the base at all? What was there for him? Was a comparatively long life spent underground in hiding any better than a few hours or days of freedom on the contaminated surface?

23

The dead world was like a vacuum. Even the slightest noise travelled huge distances, carried for miles on otherwise undisturbed gusts of wind. The movement of the soldiers in their powerful transport created waves of interest along the entire length of their journey - from the rolling and exposed hills around the bunker itself right through to the cold heart of the city.

In the university accommodation block every single survivor had been stirred and encouraged by the sounds outside. More than just another random crash or unexplained disturbance as they had heard many times before, the noises they heard through the rain today were different. They were purposeful, intentional, mechanical noises. They were sounds which were obviously being made by other survivors. And the gun shots and shouting that filled the air had confirmed beyond doubt that other people had managed to continue to exist through the mayhem.

The survivors sheltering in the university had become cocooned in their hideaway. Too afraid to leave the relative safety of their building, the bravest of them had climbed up onto the roof, battling against violent weather conditions. From their high and precarious vantage point they had been unable to see the other people. They had, however, watched with mounting excitement as vast crowds of rotting bodies had begun to drift away from the university site and head back deeper into the city. Although thousands remained, the number of bodies left wandering outside the accommodation block had reduced reassuringly. The survivors knew,

however, that it wouldn't take much to attract the collective attention of the dead and bring them staggering back to them.

And that was the quandary that split the group in two.

'I'm not going to do anything that's going to bring those bloody things back here,' snapped Bernard Heath. The sudden force and nervous energy and volume in his voice belied the fact that fear was the only reason he was opposed to the plan that had been put forward.

'For God's sake, Bernard,' Donna sighed, 'can't you see what we're saying here? We know that whatever we do will bring the bodies back, but chances are it'll bring those survivors to us as well. Do you really think we can afford to stay out here on our own for very much longer?'

'But we're not out here on our own, are we?' he argued. 'There are more than forty of us here.'

'That's as maybe,' she replied, 'but how many of them are in this room with us now? How many people do you actually see each day?'

Heath looked around the assembly hall. She was right, less than half of the total number of people in the building were in the room with them. It was rare to see more than ten of them together. Most continued to cower in silence in their individual rooms.

'We're stuck here,' Phil Croft volunteered from across the hall. 'Okay, that's not proved to be too much of a problem so far, but give it a few more weeks and this shelter we've got here could well turn into a prison.'

'No matter what we do those bodies will keep returning here,' Donna continued. 'The rest of the city is silent. We can't help but draw attention to ourselves, can we?'

'We can try,' Heath protested. 'We could...'

'We could what? Shut ourselves in a single room up high and hold our breath so they can't hear us breathing?'

'No, I just think...'

‘You’ve seen how those things are beginning to behave, haven’t you?’ she asked, her voice weary. ‘They’re becoming more and more active every day. I know they’re not particularly strong on their own but given the numbers we’re dealing with here...’

‘And we’re going to need to go out for supplies again soon,’ said Croft. ‘And as time goes on we’ll need to go further and further afield to get those supplies. We’re going to be spending longer out in the open.’

‘We need to start getting ourselves organised,’ Donna continued. ‘Get some kind of routine and order to what we’re doing. We need to find a way of letting those other survivors know we’re here without...’

Sat in the corner of the room, Nathan Holmes got up and walked towards the nearest exit.

‘You’re a bunch of fucking idiots,’ he spat. The rest of the people in the hall turned and stared at him. ‘Look at you. What are you trying to do here? Think you’re going to build some brave new fucking world out of...’

‘We’re not trying to do anything except...’ Donna began before Holmes interrupted.

‘What you’re trying to do is pointless. It’s all pointless. You shouldn’t even be wasting your time talking about it. As soon as I can I’m getting out of here and I’m going to...’

‘We all know exactly what you’re going to do,’ Donna sighed. ‘You’re going to drink yourself stupid so that you can forget everything. We’ve heard you say it a thousand times. You don’t give a damn about anyone but yourself.’

‘Too right I don’t,’ he replied, ‘why should I?’

‘Can’t you see how our chances will improve if we work together?’ Croft asked.

Holmes looked up to the ceiling in despair.

‘But that’s my point, what chance have we got? Everybody in this damn building has lost absolutely everything. Getting out of here and trying to forget everything is the

best option for anyone who's got any degree of sense left...'

'You're confusing sense and selfishness,' Donna mumbled under her breath.

'Look,' Croft said, the patience in his voice wearing thin, 'all we're talking about doing here is setting up some kind of beacon so that if and when those others come back they'll know where we are and they'll come to us. We're not trying to make great plans for the future because we don't know if any of us have got a fucking future!'

'But your beacon will attract the bodies,' protested Heath.

'For Christ's sake, man,' Croft seethed. 'Can't you see that's a risk we're going to have to take?'

Jack Baxter had been watching the increasingly tense conversation develop.

'What if we put a beacon on the roof?' he asked.

'What's that going to achieve?' Heath wondered.

'Think about it, if we put some kind of beacon up on high then it's not going to be immediately obvious to the bodies but a survivor...'

'...a survivor would know that anything up on the roof would probably have been put there intentionally,' added Donna, completing his sentence for him. 'If we're talking about lighting a fire, then a survivor would know that any blaze would most probably start somewhere inside the building and work its way up, it wouldn't start on top, would it?'

'I understand that,' moaned Heath, sitting down on an uncomfortable plastic chair, 'but if and when those other people get here, they're going to bring the bodies with them, aren't they? It's not going to matter how careful you are with your bloody beacon, is it?'

Donna looked at the frightened lecturer for a few long seconds before turning her back on him in frustration. She understood what he was saying, she just couldn't under-

stand why it was such a issue for him. To her the solution to their problem and the potential side-effects were obvious and unavoidable. Increasing the number of bodies outside the building seemed to be a small price to pay if it meant they could make contact with other survivors - people with transport and weapons who, it seemed, were surviving out in the open.

Just over thirty miles from the city, and two and a half miles away from the concealed entrance to the underground bunker, two survivors sat together in nervous silence. Hiding in a relatively well-appointed motorhome they had taken from outside another dead town just three days ago, the couple had driven out to the most exposed and isolated area of land they had been able to find.

Since being forced to leave the farmhouse where they had previously sheltered, Michael Collins and Emma Mitchell had lived from hand to mouth like scavenging animals. Five days ago the building where they had hidden in relatively safety for the best part of two weeks had been overrun by hundreds of wandering corpses, attracted to their remote and otherwise inconspicuous location by the activity and sounds the survivors had made simply by existing. They had taken many precautions to separate themselves from the rotting remains of the population, but all their efforts had ultimately been in vain. Michael and Emma had learnt to their bitter cost that there was no way of escaping the unwanted attentions of millions upon millions of desperate, diseased and increasingly vicious corpses.

The couple had heard the engine in the distance when the soldiers had emerged from their hidden base earlier in the day. At first it had seemed impossible to believe - since leaving the farmhouse neither of them had seen any indication that other people remained alive - not a single sound or movement that might have pointed to the existence of other

survivors. But the noise of the engine had been definite and unmistakable, and it had filled them both with sudden unexpected hope where before they had felt nothing but pain, emptiness and desolation.

By the time they were out of the motorhome and were able to look for the source of the sound the soldiers had been long gone. They did, however, stumble upon a straight gravel track at the bottom of a hill near to where they were parked. In the absence of any other roads or pathways for miles around, the track seemed logically to be a good starting point in their search for other survivors. Michael had supposed that anyone else attempting to survive in this brutal, inhospitable world might have found themselves a base similar to the farmhouse where he and Emma had hidden. It followed that if these people were heading out for supplies, there was a fairly good chance they would be back again before long.

He was right.

The darkness of early evening had all but swallowed up the last light of the gloomy afternoon when they heard the sound again. Distant and faint at first, it had quickly increased in volume. Ignorant to the dangers of being outside and exposed, Michael threw open the motorhome door and jumped down the steps. He sprinted across the long, rain-soaked grass and crouched down on a small rocky outcrop from where he was able to get a clear view of a long stretch of the track below. And then he saw it - a huge, powerful military transporter which roared defiantly along the track. Michael couldn't see the driver of the vehicle, or how many people were inside, but it didn't matter. More important than just finding other survivors, he now knew that these people were strong and well organised. And if they really were the military, what did that mean? How many hundreds of them could there be nearby?

The transport disappeared into the darkness. He stood up and ran cautiously along the exposed brow of the hill, fol-

lowing the machine until it was completely out of view. Where did the track lead? He stared into the darkness and contemplated what he had seen for a few silent seconds before remembering the danger of being alone outside and running back to the motorhome.

‘Well?’ Emma asked as he let himself back inside.

‘Well what? I saw a bloody big army machine. Don’t know exactly what it was but...’

‘The army?’

‘Looked like it,’ Michael said breathlessly as he locked the door behind him and drew the thick curtains which they used to stop any light from spilling out into the darkness and revealing their location to the rest of the world. ‘Couldn’t be sure, but it was definitely some kind of armoured machine.’

‘Where did it go?’

He shrugged his shoulders. Emma had an infuriating habit of asking questions which she knew he couldn’t answer.

‘It was following the track we found earlier,’ he sighed, ‘so I guess it was going wherever the track leads.’

‘And where’s that?’

‘How the hell am I supposed to know? I suggest we should try and find out tomorrow.’

‘Don’t you want to look tonight?’

‘No,’ he replied, shaking his head. ‘The light’s almost gone. It’s too dangerous. We’ll wait until morning.’