

The Beginning

Snatchers, #1

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Published: 2015



Table of Contents

Dedication

Prologue



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 53

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Snatchers is a work of fiction, and many of the events in the book occur in real places. However, in these areas I have taken the liberty of exaggerating certain things that suited the book. Other places that are mentioned may not be real at all, so if you are from the area that I have written about, try not to be too upset that I have twisted a few things.

This is a book about a zombie apocalypse, so it does contain tension, gore, and scenes that could upset individuals, especially scenes involving children. It needs to be as real as possible, and in reality nobody would be exempt from such an unforgiving world.

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To my children. You are the sunshine of my life.

*Their people will become like walking corpses, their flesh rotting away.
Their eyes will shrivel in their sockets, and their tongues
will decay in their mouths
—Zechariah 14:12*

*The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil,
but by those who watch them without doing anything.
—Albert Einstein*

*Go, my people, enter your rooms
and shut the doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until his wrath has passed by.
—Isaiah 26: 19-20*

Prologue

June 7th

The darkness increased as the two men passed the last streetlight of the long, desolate road. The laughter amongst the two men escalated as they drunkenly began telling tales of their youth and what they used to get up to. Lee James and

his friend, Vince Kindl, staggered along the road and drunkenly decided to walk home rather than wait for a taxi.

They burst into song, and sang, rather badly, tunes from Oasis, U2 and The Beatles. After five songs had been murdered, the men began to settle down as they approached the beginning of the hill. It was a steep part of the road, but over the other side was where Vince stayed. Their pace began to slow down and both began to chat to one another again.

“Remember Carol MacDonald?” Lee James asked his friend, Vince.

Vince screwed his face in thought and shook his head. It seemed like a random question, he thought. “Never heard of her.”

“Aw, come on.” Lee nudged Vince in his side. “She used to go out with a guy called David Pointer, before he got married.”

“Oh yeah.” Vince nodded, but was still unsure if he knew the woman. “What about her?”

“Passed away last week.”

“Really? How old was she?”

“Thirty nine,” sighed Lee James, scratching at his dark hair. “She was hit by a car. She was in a pub in Little Haywood. She went outside and crossed the road. Hit and run.”

Vince ran his fingers over his badly-scarred face. “Thirty nine.” He lowered his head sadly. “That's no age.”

“Wouldn't surprise me if a member of the Murphy family had done it. Fucking scum.”

Vince lowered his head at the mention of the family from Haywood, and said sadly, “Me neither.”

“Shit.” Lee placed his hand on Vince's shoulder and said, “Sorry, mate. I didn't mean to bring up their name. I wasn't thinking. It's the drink talking.”

“No worries.”

The two men had another hundred yards to go before they reached the caravan park, where Vince lived, and were now over the peak of the hill. They could have spent the evening in the nearby pubs of The Spode Cottage or The Plum Pudding, but both men decided to go to The Ash Tree for a change, and sink one-too-many jars of ale. Neither men had work in the morning, so decided to take the opportunity to start the weekend early. Vince felt drunk, but wasn't as bad as his good friend, Lee James.

“Look!” Lee pointed up ahead and began to giggle.

Vince screwed his eyes to improve his vision and stated, “I can't see fuck all.”

Lee staggered a little and pointed again, whilst walking alongside his friend.

“Oh, I can see now,” said Vince, as they both descended down the hill, getting nearer to the caravan park.

On the poorly lit road, Vince could see, what looked like, a man curled up at the side of the road. Both men began to sober up as their adrenaline kicked in, and they both jogged nearer to the figure when they realised that he could be injured. They stopped next to the body and looked at one another, wondering what to do next.

“I'll check his pulse.” Lee James crouched down and felt the carotid artery.

“Anything?” asked Vince.

“Very faint.”

Vince pulled out his phone and began to ring for an ambulance. It took a while, but he eventually got through. Lee tried to talk to the man whilst Vince was talking to one of the operators. “He seems unconscious,” said Vince down the phone to the operator. “I think he's breathing.” The two-minute conversation ended with Vince saying to the operator, “Okay, thanks a lot.”

Lee stood up and asked, “Well?”

“They said five minutes.”

Both men glared at the curled-up man, his face didn't look familiar. Vince began dragging his nails over his short hair. “You can go, if you want,” said Vince. “I'll stay and wait for the ambulance.”

Vince was only yards away from the caravan park, where he stayed. Lee lived further on, another two miles away. “No, I'll wait.”

“I wonder what happened?”

“Take your pick.” Lee sniffed and gaped at the man with sympathy. “Attacked. Fell over while drunk... anything could have happened. Hit by a car. If he stops breathing we'll need to give him the kiss of life.”

Vince looked at the man and laughed, “Nah, fuck that. I'd rather shit in my hands and clap.”

“You always say that,” snickered Lee, and pointed at Vince in a fake-threatening manner. “Get some new lines.”

Staring at his friend's hand, Vince exclaimed, “What the fuck is that all over your hand?”

Lee glared at his limb and spoke with uncertainty in his voice. “Blood ... I think.”

“Is he bleeding then?”

Lee shrugged his shoulders. “Don't know. I only touched his neck. He must be.”

Vince bent down and tried to inspect the man's features in the dark area. He put on the flashlight on his phone and pointed it at the man's neck.

“Is he okay?” asked Lee.

Vince never answered.

“Vince? Is he okay?”

Vincent Kindl look perplexed and finally answered his friend. “I think he's been bitten.”

Chapter 1

June 9th

The evening was dragging gloriously to the twenty-three-year-old woman's delight, as another shift at the hospital was something she wasn't looking forward to at all. Karen Bradley's eyes reluctantly glared at the clock on the kitchen wall once again, as she sipped on a cup of tepid tea. She had four hours to go. Great!

What could she do in four hours?

She could sit and watch a film, then have a long hot soak in the new bath that was fitted in five weeks ago. Then sit back on the leather couch to count down the remainder of the minutes, before having to go through the same rigmarole of putting on her uniform, styling her hair, applying her light make-up, and mentally bracing herself for another arduous shift in the accident and emergency department.

The early evening was quiet, as her partner had gone on his usual night out on a Saturday. Despite that he had been working all week, she couldn't help but feel a little unhappy with his night of drinking. Most people were going out, and she was about to endure another long shift. She admitted that her anger towards her boyfriend was due to plain old jealousy, as it had been a while since she had been out with the girls or with her boyfriend. She was looking forward to her next set of days off.

Karen poured more hot water into her cup to freshen it up, grabbed a chocolate bar from the cupboard and walked into the living room. She then threw her legs to her side and put the TV on.

The first channel to come on was the twenty-four hour BBC news. She was about to put her romantic comedy TV programme on, which came with the package of the cable deal she had received, but her fingers remained still. The remote remained untouched, as her tired eyes continued to look at the TV.

The anchorman was called Ben Foster, and the individual he was interviewing was a woman called Helen Reading, who was an author of a book about the breakdown of society. Karen Bradley brushed her short brown hair behind her ears and listened to the interview, but it all seemed very bizarre. Ben Foster was in his late forties and she had always despised him, as she thought he was a bit of a leech that leered at his big-breasted guests, as well as Alison Jones, the weather girl.

The author was a doctor—a doctor of what, Karen didn't know—and although sitting, she seemed tall, gangly and wore thick brown-rimmed spectacles that matched her hair colour that sat in an old-fashioned bob style.

Over the last week or so, Karen had noticed that the news, as well as the local news, had been reporting an alarming increase of missing persons, attacks, murders and cases of insanity, amongst people across the country. People had been attacked by their own family and violence in hospitals had increased, especially when it came to bites. She was more than aware of this, as she had three cases of bite victims in her hospital the night before.

The previous night she saw on SKY News that passengers on a plane from London to New York had been evacuated at JFK airport, after a series of bites had taken place while over the Atlantic. The six attackers had been restrained by other passengers and were arrested, but had to be rushed to hospital under police guard, due to the severity of their wounds. These kinds of incidents were becoming more frequent as the days went by, and it unnerved her.

Karen turned her attention back to the TV and saw the two individuals on the screen had begun to discuss press blackout, and that it was extremely rare. On the TV, Helen Reading informed the smug Ben Foster that the occurrence of just one blackout should be regarded as an immediate red flag.

Foster argued that the violence was due to the world economy crash, but Reading seemed to already know what it was and disagreed wholeheartedly, as there were no other reports of violence in most other European countries. She was certain that any event causing the powers that be to clamp down, merited attention. Reading argued that the government knew what had been happening but didn't want a panic-stricken nation on their hands. She also claimed how unusual it was for a media-conscious government to cause a media blackout that had affected some channels, which she named, and said that the BBC would be next.

Still gazing at the TV, the off duty nurse took a sip from her tea and left her unopened chocolate bar sitting on the arm of her chair. Karen then closed her heavy brown eyes, sat back and rested her head, still listening to Ben and Helen from the TV, but a blanket of tiredness had already covered her.

She began to think about the man who was brought into casualty the night before, minutes before she left for home. Apparently, he had been attacked in a gang fight, and received bite wounds to his neck. She wondered how he was doing, as his wounds were so severe that he was airlifted to another hospital. She closed her eyes and continued to listen to the TV.

Maybe just a ten-minute dose, she thought.

On the TV, the debate continued.

Anchorman, Ben Foster argued: *“So if this sudden unrest that is occurring in the UK, and in some reports across Europe, is not from welfare cuts, job losses and spending cuts, what is actually causing it?”*

Reading: *“We’re not sure exactly—”*

Foster: *“You’re not sure? People are getting attacked now, this is no laughing matter.”*

Reading: *“It never has been.”*

Foster: *“So is there anything relevant you can tell the UK before we’re... shut down, as you say?”* There was huge sarcasm in Ben Foster's voice.

Reading: *“We don't want to panic people, but my colleagues and I have heard that there has been a Rabies-like infection that has occurred in recent weeks.”* Reading sighed and reluctantly continued. *“It's not actually rabies per se, but it's similar in the way it can be passed on by bites. We recently had reports of a low-level outbreak in the city of Derby, in the West Midlands. We don't know why it's happened or where it came from. We had forty-seven reported cases, which ranged over a two-week period. The infested area was small over a twenty-mile radius but had spread into rural villages and towns, and we fear it is now a wide epidemic, soon to be pandemic.”*

Foster: *“Pandemic?”* Foster shifted in his seat uncomfortably. This was news he wasn't expecting. Was she joking? But why would she?

Reading: *“Yes. We believe the incident that had happened in Paris, the pockets of incidents in Murcia, and the biting epidemic that happened on the New York flight is related to what is happening here. As far as the UK is concerned, we're at a class two stage now.”*

Foster: *“Class two? What's—”*

Reading: *“Class two is when urban or rural areas are infected, and we could have at least a couple of hundred of infected people, soon to be thousands. Class two outbreaks would most definitely attract media attention, hence the reason why we may be minutes—hours away from getting the plug pulled, but maybe they won't. The class one situation has been happening over the last two weeks without our knowing.”*

Foster: *“Why didn't they inform the public straight away? And why didn't they do something sooner?”*

Reading: *“Because they didn't want mass hysteria. And to answer your other question, the incidents that have occurred over the last few weeks were blamed on people letting off steam, due to poverty and social deprivation. Really, it was pockets of infected people, but not all stories were reported, some had been blocked. For example, in the first week in June there were eleven people bitten in Hexham in a Pizza Hut restaurant. The following day, four were taken to hospital with bites after a fight occurred in a pub in Hartlepool. These incidents were never reported.”*

Foster: *“Is there such thing as a class three situation?”*

Reading: *“Yes. Class three is when the infected are in their thousands. The mop-up process could take months. The government have already issued the military in the cities across the UK. Our army is pretty low in numbers, as we all know, with the cuts over the years. Expect riots, looters and widespread panic in the city of London.”*

Foster: *“Just London?”* Foster half-laughed. *“Typical. There are other places in the UK, aside from London! You do know that? And what about the people who live in cities in the north or rural towns and villages, miles away from the south?”*

Reading: *“There may be pockets of armed police, but they're just humans who would want to be with their families. They will only have themselves to depend on. Governments of any type are nothing more than a collection of human beings that are fearful, arrogant and incompetent as the rest of us. Even in perfect conditions, containing anything larger than a class two outbreak is extremely difficult. Imagine trying to quarantine a city like London or Birmingham.”*

Foster: *“A lot of people watching this will be very sceptical. We have two other experts on after you, concerning this, all with different theories.”*

Reading: *“There will be a lot of scepticism, and many other people coming on TV, if the channels are still on, will be putting across their own theories. But whatever the real reason, this—whatever it is—whether you believe it's a science made virus or an act of God, it's happening right now.”*

Foster: *“Is there a class four situation?”*

Reading: *“Yes. But you don't wanna know.”*

Although it was unplanned, Karen had fallen asleep. The last minute of the conversation that had occurred from the television hadn't been taken in, and she was oblivious that the world, as she knew it, was about to change for the worse.

Then suddenly her eyes opened and she could see a passionate preacher on the TV. She caught some of his words, but not all of it.

“My fellow Christians, we shall suffer in life, but Heaven will be our eternal life, so fear not! For everyone else, all you sinners, you asked for this! Instead of leading

a long life reeked with sin, Hell is coming to you now! It's coming to Earth. You have been ignoring the word of the Lord for too long, and now it's time to pay the price."

Karen turned down the volume of the TV and closed her eyes once more. Her body rested for a full hour and when she woke, she opened her eyes to see a blank screen in front of her. She never fretted why this was so and switched the TV off to go upstairs, read her book, then get ready for work. She had a tough night ahead of her, but what Karen Bradley didn't know, was that life from now on was going to be one constant struggle.

Chapter 2

June 10th

Morning had arrived, and the clouds were slowly prised open to allow the sun's rays to spill out onto the area through the now gaping gap. His head smarted and awoke to see his old foe, darkness, had finally disappeared. His window was shut, but he could hear the faint sound of a dog crying outside, like a broken-hearted man, as he lay on his bed. He suddenly remembered where he was, and why he was there.

It was his birthday.

Life begins at forty. What a myth!

Surely the fourth decade heralds the beginning of the end? Jack Slade thought, and had a slight chuckle to himself when he deliberated about that quote, despite his fragile condition. He thought about how many people he knew in their twenties or thirties who had had heart attacks or contracted cancer. There were none! Because most of the people that he had known and passed away through the years had all been over the age of forty, and Jack was certain that he was now at a more dangerous stage in his life.

He opened his sticky, sappy eyes. He was relieved to be still alive.

It was his birthday the day before, and it had to have been the saddest fortieth party a Friday night had ever witnessed in the city. To call it a party probably was an insult to the word itself. It was one man having a night of alcohol and substances, which some members of society wouldn't have approved of. Jack was alone, and had originally planned on hitting the clubs with a friend, but he had let him down at the last minute, leaving Jack to crawl the Glasgow bars alone.

Jack sat up from his bed and moaned as soon as his body went into a right angle shape.

His back was hunched over like a ninety-year-old man, and he placed both hands on his throbbing head. He felt under the weather and he knew it was self-inflicted, as his head smarted. This had been his worst ever hangover; even more atrocious than when he took a trip to Bournemouth to visit his friend who was attending the university there ten years ago. That had been another weekend drenched in alcohol.

Jack was originally from Rugeley, in Staffordshire, and he and his friend, James, had arranged one weekend to see their old friend, and took the three-hour

drive to the south of England, spending their time driving extremely fast, listening to dance music and smoking far too many cigarettes.

When they arrived at Bournemouth, they had spent a few hours in the campus and then proceeded to go to some of the nightclubs that Bournemouth had to offer. After spending most of the night drinking brandy and cokes, some of the boys had made the sensible decision to escort Jack home, as he was paralytic with alcohol and was bouncing off the walls. If they hadn't escorted him home, he was going to be escorted off the premises anyway, as the bouncers at the time were looking somewhat concerned.

Once he got back to the campus, Jack collapsed onto the floor where he slept for most of the night. When he awoke, and still drunk from the night before, he went to make himself a cup of tea and poured orange juice into his cup instead of milk—a story his friends still talked and laughed about many years after.

That was then, but now he was forty and should have known better.

He finally mustered the strength to place his feet onto the carpet of the room, and dressed in his jeans only, he stood to his feet. He was expecting the room to spin, but it never happened to his delight. He shuffled over to the bathroom and went in to deplete his bladder.

When he walked into the room, his attention was distracted. He approached the sink in the average-sized bathroom and looked in the large mirror. His short brown hair was sticking up like a toilet brush. He looked to be carrying a bit of weight, his chest and shoulders were in need of a wax, and he turned around to see that his back had too much hair for his liking. He wasn't impressed with his *Teen Wolf* look, and knew that sometime in the near future he was going to have to book himself another wax session in the salon that was only streets away from his work. It wasn't something he wanted to do, but it was a necessity if he wanted to remain attractive to the opposite sex—not that he was beating them off with a stick.

It would only be his third time visiting the salon, and although a requirement, he wasn't looking forward to it. The main experience that forced him to re-think his look was a year ago where he went over to a woman in a bar and spent three hours chatting to her. They exchanged numbers and saw one another the next night, this time meeting up in a restaurant. It was the second night he had seen her and she invited him back to her house. One thing led to another, they kissed furiously and began to undress one another, and as soon as she took his top off, she stared and placed her hand over her mouth.

This was never a good sign.

She made her excuses about a migraine and politely asked him to leave. Jack couldn't believe it; he was a bit hairy, that's all. It wasn't as if he had four nipples!

Jack was reasonably attractive, he had put on a little weight since his twenties, and his cheekbones had slowly disappeared. The side of his hair had begun to materialise grey hairs and at first he started to pluck them out, but he had succumbed to defeat after five years of plucking. The army of grey had still managed to multiply, despite the fact some of their early subordinates had been eliminated. They had started at the side of his hair, and it looked like their plan was to grow further up and multiply till they reached the top of the scalp.

He rubbed his stubbly face, and decided he needed a shave, as the hairs growing in the chin area were visibly grey despite the stubble only being a few days old.

Jack had never been married, and although he had had plenty of girlfriends who were not worth mentioning, there was not one he ever loved, not properly. The only girl that had meant something to him was Kerry Evans. He had met her ten years ago, and was surprised to have got her pregnant a few years later.

When she had his son, Thomas, they decided to get married. However, typical Jack Slade managed to mess things up, as he had a one-night stand with Kerry's best friend. Jack was content with keeping the shame a secret, but Kerry's best friend had other ideas. Overcome by guilt, she turned up at their house and confessed all, resulting in Jack packing his bags, as well as receiving superficial wounds to his face when a coffee mug hit him in the chin and shattered, causing minor lacerations. The marriage never happened.

There *were* good days with Kerry; they weren't all bad. His fondest memory was when he came out of the shower one evening, and nakedly marched towards the living room while she sat and watched TV. She took one look at him and asked him what the hell he was doing. Jokingly, Jack placed his hands on his hips and nodded downwards to his family jewels, and said, "Well, it's not gonna suck itself. But careful while you're down there, as it may contain nuts." She burst out laughing and told him to 'piss off.'

Snapping out of his daydreaming of the past, he sighed. After draining his bladder and drinking a pint of water from the tap, he felt a little cold and strolled out of the bathroom and went to the wardrobe to put on his jeans and a plain black T-shirt. He preferred plain T-shirts, especially black, as it made him look slimmer; other coloured shirts showed off his definition and bulges.

He sat back on the bed and pulled out his phone; there was one bar left on it. He needed to get home and charge it, however, he wasn't home; he was three miles from home. He was standing in a hotel room in Glasgow City Centre, and had hardly any recollection of where the weekend had gone.

It was now Sunday morning, and he had started drinking Friday night. He popped into the town and began drinking in a public house called, The Drum and Monkey. Two hours later, he began chatting to an older woman of about forty-five, who was with friends. As it was time for her friends to leave for another bar, she decided that she wanted to stay and talk some more with this reasonably attractive man that made her laugh thanks to his dark, sometimes cruel, sense of humour. Her friends were not happy with the decision, as she was a married woman. She won in the end, and her dispirited friends left and warned Jack to look after her.

After booking a night at the hotel and spending the night with the woman, she left the hotel at around 2am, and made it clear she didn't want to see him again. Jack admitted to himself that it was the worst sex he ever had since his twenties. During it, she constantly moaned about his breath, and when she told him to get off and give her oral pleasure instead, he did what he was told.

She enjoyed it and came within a minute. When he asked if she would finish him off, she said she was too tired and left the room, leaving him in limbo.

Feeling lucky, and possibly a little arrogant, he decided to splash out and booked the room for another night. He had plans to go out once again in the city centre, after all, it wasn't everyday he turned forty. The night itself felt dark, there were extra police about the city and Jack had seen some violent skirmishes between policeman and members of the public, which ruined his night for him.

As he now sat on his bed, his mother drifted into his mind. He had stopped having a relationship with his mother *and* his sister years ago, since he moved to Glasgow after meeting a Glaswegian girl in a club in Stafford.

He simply lost touch with his mother and sister, which was a pathetic excuse in this day and age with the technology that was available, and although it sounded harsh, the truth was that he just couldn't be bothered with them anymore, and he hadn't had a relationship with his father since he was ten years old. He wanted to be with the girl he had met, and although he felt guilty for leaving his son in Rugeley with Kerry, he still wanted to have a life. He saw his son once a fortnight and thought the move wouldn't make a jot of difference to him. His relationship with the girl didn't last long, but he decided to remain in Glasgow, as he enjoyed his office job and life in the 'big smoke.'

He looked at his watch; it was early. The maids were due in at 11am, which meant he needed to get out eventually and head for home, his real home. He headed for the bathroom for the second time, had a quick frantic shave and then it was time for a shower. He took off his black T-shirt and his jeans and stepped in the warm, welcoming shower.

The hot jets gently massaged his back and shoulders, and he slowly spun around so the whole of his body could experience this pleasure. He didn't want this experience to end, but decided to be strong and eventually turned the apparatus off.

After his shower had finished, he got dressed on his bed, putting on a fresh set of underwear and socks, followed by his jeans and the black T-shirt.

He sat and thought about his weekend experience. It was kind of sad that a man had to spend his fortieth alone in a hotel, he thought to himself. Then again, at least he got laid, well ... kind of.

He looked at his phone and snickered. There wasn't one message on his phone, despite this weekend being his birthday. He did, however, have seven missed calls, all from Kerry. He thought about his son for a second and wondered if anything had happened to him. He looked to his left, as he remained sitting on the bed, and then suddenly his phone chimed, telling him that he had received a text message. He opened the message and sighed; it was from Kerry.

What have I done now? Thomas' birthday isn't till next month, so it can't be that.

He wasn't due to see Thomas until next weekend. Maybe it was a belated happy birthday from his ex-lover? If it were, it would be his first one.

He read the first six words and smiled. Even in text form, Kerry always preferred to use, what she would call, proper English.

It read: How are you? Hope you're okay?

His eyes then narrowed in befuddlement when he read the next line. He read it again to make sure it wasn't the drink that was messing with his brain.

Thomas and I are going to barricade ourselves in until this stops. Keep safe.

He shook his head and read the whole message again. It didn't make sense. *Keep safe.* What did she mean by *keep safe*?

He had little life left in his phone, and decided to use it to call Kerry. Before he could implement his decision, the phone went off again.

Another message from Kerry!

Thomas keeps on asking after you. Are you okay? If so, please don't call me.

Jack scratched his head. *Please don't call me? That doesn't even make sense.*

Jack sent a message back: *I'm fine. What's going on?*

His phone received another message: *You don't know?*

He replied: *No!*

Ten seconds later, he received another message from his ex: *Turn on the TV.*

Chapter 3

H Wing had been unobtrusive all night.

Usually, when Janine Perry worked night shift, the buzzers would constantly go off between 10pm and 3am by prisoners wanting paracetamol for their headache, and then it would quieten down. She despised twelve-hour night shifts, but with doing these shifts, she got more days off in the month.

She was on with Jamie Thomson, also known as JT. He was okay, she thought. *Just okay.* He had dark, short hair, thirty-nine years old, quite muscular, but she didn't find him attractive. He looked like ex-military with his look, but she didn't know him well enough to be aware of his background.

Sure, they talked while on the night shift, but any personal questions would be shunned. She took the hint, and kept the conversation to basic topics such as the prisoners, television, music and films.

Their shift started at 10pm, they would turn up on the wings, sign the handover sheet, then their colleagues would perform lock-up and then go home at ten in the evening to leave Janine and Jamie to it. There were two houseblocks within the prison. On each houseblock there were four wings that consisted of seventy to ninety inmates. Once the wings were locked up and the roll count had been performed and the numbers collated, the four-slider doors that led to each wing were opened, and the officers sat in an office that they nicknamed, the bubble.

The bubble was the control section for that particular houseblock which, by computer and touch screen, opened and closed the doors to the wings and to the houseblock itself. This would be used constantly during the day with officers needing access to get on and off the wings, especially if prisoners needed to be escorted out of the wings to the canteen, the gym, the health centre, the education department or the visits area.

Janine had a reputation amongst the prison staff that she couldn't care less what she said, as most times she spoke her mind. Sometimes this had got her into trouble, but she wasn't caring. The money wasn't that great anyway, and even if she was sacked, she would just get another job. There was no pressure on her, as at the age of twenty-seven, she had no boyfriend and still lived with her mum and dad, so she had no mortgage to pay for.

This was the longest part of the night. The time between 7am and 10am was the longest three hours of the shift, because they couldn't wait for it to finish and this was also where the tiredness would kick in.

Janine gave off a loud, exaggerating yawn to break the quiet tension that had been smothering the two officers for the last hour. The conversation had dried up by 6:30am, and the officers still had a while to go. As the hours dragged by, the boisterousness from the inmates had begun to grow as the minutes progressed. Inmates were talking through their doors to communicate with their nearest neighbours. Janine began to sit up her fatigued body, and widened her eyes in a pitiful attempt to keep herself awake. The noises were becoming more audible from all four wings; some were now beginning to slam their hands on the doors.

“What time is it?” Jamie asked Janine. “I think the other shift should have been here half an hour ago.”

Because no one had turned up, it meant that the two of them were powerless until the other officers arrived. It wasn't till 9am that they could shut the slider doors that would seal off the wings, and then they could start opening the cell doors.

The clamour coming from all four wings grew so much, that Janine thought that if they hadn't been in the bubble, the noise would be resounding to human ears if they were on the wings.

Something was wrong.

Being in their cells for an extra thirty minutes wasn't helping, but the cons had never acted like this before, not collectively, not all three hundred of them!

Jamie looked at Janine; his concerned face made Janine's face drain. Jamie wasn't a guy that scared easily, he was one of the toughest officers there was, and the angst carved on his face made Janine gulping a challenging job. The pair of them sat in the bubble on their seats in front of the screens.

Jamie looked to the floor in thought, shook his head softly and looked up at Janine.

He said, “Something's not right. The inmates are sounding scared, and the other shift ain't even turned up.”

“What do you think it is?”

He slowly shrugged his shoulders. He didn't have the answer. “I think we should call the Governor.”

Jamie stood to his feet and stretched, arching his back and raising his arms in the air. The stretching lasted seconds, before he walked over to the phone. He looked up at Janine, and she nodded her head. She was sure Jamie's look was asking if they should really call the Governor, as he didn't like to be bothered for minor incidents.

In his years as an officer, Jamie had never experienced this kind of noise and panic coming from all four wings. Before he could dial the number, the phone went off. It was an officer from houseblock one—Janine and Jamie was situated in houseblock two—and Jamie immediately picked up the phone.

“We've got a situation up here,” the man from houseblock one announced over the phone.

“We have also,” Jamie spoke. “What's going on?”

“You don't know?”

“No, otherwise I wouldn't be asking.” Jamie could feel his temperature rising, his blood simmered.

The man on the other line said, “The TV channels are not working, so turn on the radio and call me back in ten minutes. We need to talk.”

Jamie walked over to the radio and switched it on. Janine didn't say a word; they both sat and listened to the information that was being delivered.

For ten minutes they sat and listened, Jamie shook his head throughout most of it, Janine gently sobbed through some of it.

Janine remained sitting and her left hand that flopped by the side of her body opened up, and Jamie instantly held it and looked at her. His strong face told her that it was going to be okay. As for the morning shift, it seemed there wasn't going to be another officer to walk through the gates of the prison.

The two of them sat slumped in their seats; the information had mentally drained them, and were both finding it difficult to take it all in. No wonder the prisoners were going mental. They all had access to radios and were probably listening to the information also.

“You have family?” she questioned.

“Thankfully, no. Well... not really. You?”

She nodded. “My mum and dad,, my brother.”

“No point going home, you live miles away and they'll be barricaded in their house, either that...”

Jamie allowed his sentence to trail off, he wasn't thinking. His thin smile to Janine was his way of apologising for his crass, yet realistic, comment. He continued to hold her hand.

“We should stay here,” Janine suggested. “There's a canteen. Fuck everyone else.”

“And what about the prisoners?”

Jamie had now let go of Janine's hand, not because she made a comment without engaging her brain—that was understandable as she was in shock, he simply let go because their palms were becoming clammy.

Janine thought about her male colleague's question. They couldn't stay in the prison and eat what was left in the canteen, while six to seven hundred inmates from both houseblocks slowly starved to death. Their conscience wouldn't allow that. If they did leave them, it would make them mass killers, worse than Seung-Hui Cho or Anders Breveik.

Janine opened her mouth, and she was ready to ask her male colleague what his next plan of action was. The ringing from the phone in the bubble prevented her from beginning her sentence. Jamie walked over to the phone and picked it up.

She stared at Jamie Thomson as he listened intently to the other officer on the line. Jamie quizzed, “What about the prisoners?” He hung up and looked over to Janine.

She had to ask. “What is it?”

“They're leaving,” Jamie announced.

“What about the prisoners? Our keys are different to the ones in houseblock one, they won't work.”

His body language suggested that the inmates in the houseblock were going to be left to their own devices.

“What are *we* going to do?” She stood to her feet, awaiting his answer. This was a unique situation and she wasn't embarrassed to admit that she was frightened.

She had already made up her mind that wherever Jamie Thomson went, she would go. It was selfish, but being by Jamie's side would enhance her own survival. She had seen him in action; she had seen him take down four prisoners in one go. He was a beast of a fighter and she wasn't going to leave his side. She just prayed her own family were okay.

Jamie at last had finished his pause, and finally answered Janine's question. “There's nothing we can do about the guys in the other houseblock. But we're gonna release *our* prisoners.”

Chapter 4

David Pointer had been given his first lie-in for months and embraced it with open arms. By day, David Pointer was a driving instructor and worked five days a week. His shifts were unpredictable as he worked for himself.

His wife, Davina, worked night shift as an auxiliary nurse at Stoke hospital. She only worked two nights a week, and spent the rest of her time keeping the house in order, shopping, taking care of the bills, and looking after their four-year-old daughter, Isobel.

Their daughter was still too young for Primary school, so the routine was to take her to nursery at 8:30am, then pick her up at 11:30am and then to think of things to keep her entertained, such as jigsaws, painting and playing with her toys. Davina preferred the old fashioned way of entertaining her daughter; she didn't want her four-year-old hooked on computer games before she was even in her first year at school.

David was awake; he looked over to the alarm clock and although it stated that he had slept for eleven hours, a personal record that David never even achieved when he was a teenager, he still felt powerless to get his body to move. He remained on the bed, his eyes glaring at the ceiling. He noticed a slight brown stain on the ceiling and made a mental note that that was his first job he was going to tackle, once he had had his breakfast.

He swung his legs to the side of the bed and managed to sit up on the side with his feet touching the floor. He looked over to a bag that was sitting in the corner of the room. He forgot it was Sunday, which meant it was swim day.

Every Sunday morning David would take Isobel to the local swimming baths; it was the highlight of the four-year-old's week. It was just her, spending the day with her daddy.

He got off the bed and, fully naked, he walked over to the bag that had been made up by Davina only an hour ago. The small Minnie Mouse rubber ring stood next to the bag that had the usual swimwear in it as well as shampoo and some towels. David pulled out his top drawer and put a pair of shorts on. On the front,

was a picture of Animal from *The Muppets*, a fun Christmas present from Davina. He also had matching socks, but decided to go for plain black.

He opened the blinds, took a glimpse out into the garden and gawped to the left and right, scanning the neighbours' gardens. The sun shone brilliantly and David sighed with contentment. It was going to be a glorious day, he thought to himself.

He opened the window to catch a stray breeze, and could hear a cacophony of sirens and, what sounded like, children shrieking from a few houses away. He smiled to himself and shut the window. He could have thought of worse places to live.

He put on his jeans standing up, feeling his lower back smarting as it always did when he first got out of bed, and managed the task successfully without falling over.

Downstairs, Davina Pointer was dressed in her grey housecoat, a Christmas present from David, and wore nothing underneath it. She had on her burgundy slippers, and was making herself a cup of coffee. This had been the first time David had slept in for a while, and she looked at the clock thinking that he certainly was embracing every minute. She had been up since 7am, and had spent most of the morning with the curtains drawn, reading with Isobel, and watching Peppa Pig.

It was now after ten, and she thought that twelve hours was more than enough for her husband. Now bored after spending three hours watching children's TV, she turned on her phone and logged onto her social network.

Her eyes widened. *Surely must be some mistake.*

She had never been so popular. She had thirteen messages on her personal message inbox. She placed the phone on the side of the sink, and patiently waited for the kettle to boil. She made her coffee, and with her right hand holding the cup and her left holding the phone, she began to scroll through the messages. She started from the bottom, and decided to work her way up from the earliest sent to the latest.

The first message was sent at 7:46am; it was from her sister who lived in Norwich. It read: *R u ok up there? Call me ASAP. Love you.*

Davina tucked her short brown hair behind her ears and shook her head. "What's wrong, sis?" she muttered to herself. "Has Barry left you again?"

She checked the second message of the thirteen. It was from her work colleague, Amanda, who was working the night before—Davina was due to go in on Tuesday night. It read: *Hi hun, can't make it tonight. I feel ill, gonna go to my bed and see how I feel later.*

Another five messages she had received were very short and asked her to put on the television. A couple others were random bullshit, apart from the one by her mother that was sent at 8:23am. It was Davina's final message.

It read: *Tried to call. Where are you? Your dad and me are hiding in the living room. They're banging on the windows, trying to get in. For God's sake, keep your doors locked. Get David to get you lot up in the attic. Look after that granddaughter of mine. Love you always, Mum.*

Davina stroked her upper lip with her forefinger and thumb, as if she had a moustache to play with. It was her thinking pose, but it didn't matter how hard

she thought, she couldn't fathom what was going on. She read her mum's message once again. *They're banging on the windows, trying to get in.* What does she mean?

She took a slurp from her piping cup of coffee and read the messages over and over. She placed her phone onto the side and strolled into the living room. Her daughter was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room, colouring in her books. Davina switched over the channel to the news.

The British news was proving difficult to get on; she punched in the channel number for the BBC and a message came up on the screen. There were four messages in bullet-points, telling the viewer that the programme was off the air due to the new circumstances that had occurred. It also advised people to stay indoors and to keep their doors and windows locked.

Davina placed her hand on her chest and immediately thought about a nuclear attack, but then she reminded herself of her mother's message. *They're banging on the windows, trying to get in.* It wasn't making any sense.

She decided to change the channel to CNN, as she couldn't get FOX news because it was a channel that they had to pay for, and it wasn't a channel that was in their package when they bought cable.

As Isobel continued to use her crayons innocently in the corner of the room, Davina's mind slowly managed to digest some of the information that was being fed to her. Her eyes narrowed and her forehead scrunched tightly, creating wrinkles.

Surely this has got to be a joke?

She flicked through other channels that she never knew existed, and looking at the images that were being shown on Russia Today and Al Jazeera, she realised this was no joke. She put the channel back on to CNN.

Davina looked up to the ceiling and could hear the gentle thuds coming from above; it sounded like David had finally awoken. Maybe he could make sense of all this. She got to her feet to greet her husband; her legs wobbled a little as she stood. The astonishment and surreal event of what was happening had stunned her so much she couldn't even feel her legs walking to the bottom of the stairs; it was as if she was floating.

They're banging on the windows, trying to get in.

"Morning," came David's tired greeting.

He trudged down the stairs, where at the bottom, Davina was waiting for him. Her skin was snowy white; the blood from her face had been wanted by other parts of her body. "Morning."

David stood still on the very last step and gazed at his wife; he was certain she had received a distressing phone call. A relative had died? Her mum? But then again, Davina was a sensitive soul. She also looked this way when she found out that Amy Winehouse had passed away. He didn't know what to think, so he asked her what was wrong.

She shook her head, and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I think you need to sit down and watch the TV. I'm just gonna double check the doors and windows are locked, and then go upstairs and get dressed."

"Okay." David's head was being suffocated by mystification.

Davina walked past him and checked the front door, as she went through the other rooms downstairs. David smiled at his daughter, who smiled back, and then

sat down on the brown leather couch and gaped at the television for a minute to be greeted by shaky mobile phone footage and presenters looking like they had seen a ghost.

Shit!

Chapter 5

It had been an arduous shift in the A and E department, and it had been a typical Saturday night/Sunday morning as the grade D staff nurse was coming to the end of her shift.

Her feet ached for her shoes to be kicked off, her head pounded and she would have welcomed eight hours sleep right now. It had been a crazier night than normal. So much so, that a four-man armed police guard had to be issued in the department, which had been the first time she had experienced anything like that—albeit she was only twenty-three and had only been qualified for two years.

At around midnight the usual drunks had wandered in; stomachs were pumped, some were aggressive than normal, and a junior doctor was even bitten by one of the drunks. It took three nurses to restrain the attacker, and that was when they needed to call the police. The junior doctor was treated and taken to another unit.

Around 6am, Staff Nurse Karen Bradley, had taken her break and found that the ward had been overrun with people who had received bite wounds, just like the gang member the night before. It had been a surreal night; three nurses as well as the junior doctor had been attacked, and she was seriously considering a new career.

The Saturday before, the department had dealt with twelve drunks, two stabbings and a young girl who had been killed by a hit and run driver. There had been a lot of local media attention surrounding the town, suggesting that knife crime was rising by an alarming rate. A week later, a biting epidemic seemed to be the new thing. What on earth next?

Since the government cuts, Karen had felt like she was trying to do her job with one hand tied behind her back. Beds were short; staff were not being replaced by the ones that were leaving, so the remaining staff had to deal with what crap was thrown at them. It had come to the point that they had to start and turn away patients, and refer them to the nearest hospital in Stoke, as Stafford was heaving.

Five minutes before her shift had finished, she and another nurse were attacked by an individual who ran in from the outside and tried to bite them. Luckily for the pair of them, nobody was injured as a police officer had restrained the crazed individual. Her boss had asked her to do some overtime, but she refused. She had had enough, and welcomed her two days off that she was due.

She walked out of the department briskly, almost in tears because of the crazy night that she had experienced, and went towards her vehicle which was thankfully parked near the A and E department, and she took the short journey to her Cherokee Jeep.

She fumbled for her keys once inside, fired the ignition, and slipped the jeep into first without putting on her seatbelt. She shook her head as she saw mindless idiots in a daze strolling around the staff car park; there were three to be exact, and one even ran with a hobble towards the department's entrance.

The hospital was away from the town centre, and almost in the middle of the countryside, which was a pain for patients who had no car, but Karen liked that, as she thought if the hospital was situated right in the heart of the town they would be inundated with patients with minor problems. Minor problems that could be solved with a small bandage, or a burn, that could have been easily treated with an immediate run of a cold tap.

She pulled out of the hospital car park and headed towards her hometown of Rugeley. She was missing her bed, and more importantly, couldn't wait to snuggle up to her boyfriend who always loved his lie-in on a Sunday, as he always went out with the boys on a Saturday night.

As she exited Stafford, she headed for the country. It was another two miles before she would reach her hometown, and blasted up her iPod and began to sing out to a track from a Stereophonics album she had purchased a few weeks ago. In the distance, she saw a figure up ahead who was shuffling slowly in the middle of the road.

Fuck 'em, she thought.

She had already done her bit working in that crazy hospital; she was too tired to play Mother Teresa and give a drunk a ride home. Besides, picking up a drunken man wouldn't have been one of her better ideas. Her Gary certainly wouldn't be too impressed with her kind-hearted behaviour, if she did indeed stop for the individual.

As the man stumbled to the other side of the road, she felt comfortable that she could pass him without slowing down, and more importantly not strike the drunken fellow.

At last, she entered the town and bizarrely saw a handful of people shuffling around the streets; two were in the road. She shook her head and wondered if it had been a charity 'drink yourself into oblivion weekend.' Too tired to even care, she pulled up into her quiet street, and parked the jeep into the drive. She looked at her house and sighed with contentment.

For a twenty-three-year-old, she was lucky to have such a place. With her twenty-six-year-old boyfriend being a newly qualified lawyer, she knew it was a place she couldn't afford on her own nurse's wage.

She stepped out of the jeep and headed towards the front door. She took a gander to her left in the desolate street. Her instincts also forced her to look to her right.

She saw one of her neighbours dressed in sports attire; it was Sharon Henderson. She was a fitness instructor at the local gym, and would religiously go for her Sunday morning jogs without fail. It seemed that this particular morning, her exercise session wasn't going to take place, as she tried to chat to a person that was stumbling towards her in the street. She asked if that person was okay, but there was no answer from the worn-looking individual, just a gentle moan. To Karen, he looked like a drunk—but more than that, he looked like a drunk that had been dragged through a hedge and then beaten up.

Karen saw the woman being pulled to the floor by the being she had never seen before.

“Sharon!” Karen called out, totally confused.

Her body nudged forward to help her neighbour who was situated twenty yards away, but fear had paralysed her legs temporarily and instead of helping the distressed woman, she stood and watched the whole event that was about to unravel before her shocked eyes.

She called out helplessly once more. “Sharon!”

Her neighbour never called back, and now her attacker fell on top of the fitness fanatic and buried its head into her neck. Karen couldn't see what was happening in this bizarre, surreal situation, but the high-pitched scream from her female neighbour suggested that her throat was being ripped out by the thing that was on top of her.

This was confirmed, when it lifted its head and blood ran from its mouth that chewed at something frantically. Its mastication was rushed and it went in for another bite. The screaming had stopped from Sharon as a pool of crimson developed around her neck area, and she lay lifeless on the pavement, apart from the twitch in her left leg. It stood to its feet as if it was bored by its prey and turned towards Karen.

Its face was pale, and the sunken black eyes and its bloodstained mandible, made it look like a Halloween costume—a very realistic Halloween costume. It took one look at her, and began moving towards her, quicker than she had imagined. Her heart pumped furiously as she frantically searched for her front door key and slotted it in, and took a look to her right again. He was gaining on her and was now on her drive, and although she had only looked for a brief second, his face looked ghastly, as if he was already dead. She let out a fearful shriek, gave the key a twist with her wrist and pushed the front door open, slammed it shut, locked it, and called out her boyfriend's name.

As soon as she shouted out Gary's name, she immediately released a furious jet-like release of vomit that landed on the hallway carpet with a heavy splat. The unusual feeling in her stomach was there for a few seconds before the release, which almost took her by surprise. She spat out the remaining chunks that stubbornly refused to budge out from the gaps of her teeth. Her right angle position returned back to vertical as she stood up straight, and could hear the moans coming from behind her as the awful face pressed itself against the frosted glass of the front door, smearing it with blood.

She sat down and picked up her landline phone and called the police. She waited for a full minute but there was no answer; she slammed the phone down to try and recollect her weird thoughts.

Did that really happen?

She wondered that if she managed to get through to the police and told them her story, they would probably just laugh on the other end of the line.

She walked into her living room and peered from the blinds out of her window. The corpse of Sharon Henderson was definitely there and remained on the pavement, which proved that Karen wasn't becoming demented. She went back to her front door to see that Sharon's attacker had gone, as if his attention had been seduced to go somewhere else. She went back into the living room, sat down, and

placed her juddering hands on her clammy forehead and tried to make sense of the episode that had just occurred.

It was proving difficult.

Chapter 6

Jack Slade took Kerry's advice to sit down and watch TV.

He flicked through the channels, but most of them were off. As he came across the FOX channel, he brought the volume up by another three notches and allowed the news to slowly, and grudgingly, sink in.

He blew out his lips to try and somehow release some of the tension out of his body. There were reports mainly coming from the USA, although there were three correspondents, one based in London, Dublin, and the other based in Calais.

Jack watched as the American male reporter based in London—who was originally there to report on a serial killer who had been caught stalking women for the last ten years—began his report. He could only tell the viewer mainly hearsay, and wasn't really revealing information that would benefit the public. The Dublin-based reporter could only offer the same information; it was clear they had no idea what was happening, and the Calais-based reporter told the viewers about the closure of the Channel Tunnel, and then went into the history of how it was made, stating indirectly that she also had no idea what was going on, and was trying to stretch out her so-called report.

One recorded video was played every five minutes. It was a video of a London politician being attacked by half a dozen people, and being eaten alive. The VT stopped there, as obviously the cameramen had either been attacked, or had the sense to make a run for it.

Jack watched it for twenty minutes before turning away from the TV; the reporters and newsreaders were constantly repeating themselves, experts were brought on to be interviewed and pretended to have the answers on something they knew nothing about.

Why don't the arrogant bastards just admit that they don't know?

He headed for the mini bar and pulled out a miniature bottle of Jim Beam. He swallowed it in one. This wasn't an attempt to get drunk once more; Jack's nerves were shot to pieces and the surrealism of what was occurring before his eyes had to be dealt with in whatever way he deemed fit. He headed towards the closed blinds, and stood opposite them with his hand on the cord ready to twist them open. He tried his best to control his breathing, and was dreading what was going to greet his eyes as he opened the blinds.

Without hesitating any longer and wanting to quench the intense build-up, he twisted the blinds open and pulled the cord to slowly open them fully. As they parted, he took a careful look out of his hotel window, expecting scenes of carnage.

The hotel was situated within Central Station, and as he looked out on Union Street, where opposite there was the usual shops like, Poundland and Burger King, he noticed there wasn't a soul in sight, which wasn't totally unusual as it was Sunday morning. Even on a Sunday morning, however, Jack expected

Glasgow to have one or two souls moping about. Maybe a drunk here and there, a police presence, or the odd Eastern European beggar that the city seemed plagued with these days, but there was nothing.

He looked back at his room and wondered if everyone had left the hotel. But where to? Somewhere remote where they could be considered safe? Or back home with their families? He looked back at his phone and read the text messages from Kerry once more. He thought about a chemical attack and maybe the gas had caused people to become crazy, but his brain suddenly reminded him from what he had seen on the TV that the theory had been quashed by the media, as nothing had been picked up.

It appeared that whatever scientist was being interviewed, the logical answer was that it was some kind of virus. Other reports began to filter through, but they were mainly theories. One claimed it could be a gas released and was a secretive infectious terrorist attack that was made in a Taliban laboratory. Another strongly claimed it was definitely a UK based virus originally, as there was only pockets of activity in other countries, whereas the UK was almost on its knees, and he fully believed that the virus was related to the attacks at a Newcastle Biochemical Research Centre at the beginning of June.

The religious leaders, however, predictably claimed that it was the apocalypse created by God. Jack knew that even with all of knowledge and scientific advancements today, humans still did not know everything.

The TV suggested that whatever was happening was only happening in some sections of Europe, yet the Far East were in mass panic, including reports that planes from Europe heading for the likes of China and Russia, were told to turn back or risk being shot down. Due to fuel shortages, there were reports that some planes were landing in fields. But the information was very limited as the virus, although spreading rapidly, was still in its infancy.

"Idiots!" Jack snarled at the television. "You don't even know what the fuck's going on. Do you? Just admit it!"

For a full minute, he stood on his feet, his knees literally knocking with fright, and he gazed at the hotel's carpet, drifting away into a self-hypnosis state.

What was he going to do? What was the best thing to do? What about Kerry? More importantly, what about his son, Thomas? His son lived in Rugeley. Four hundred miles away!

He grabbed his car keys off the side table, and sat back down onto the bed.

What should he do? Stay in the hotel room and hope for the best? Or chance his luck, head towards the car park and drive to his house, and lock himself in for the time being?

He decided on the latter option. He picked up the remote off the bed and put the TV onto standby, and before he could move off his bed, there was a gentle knock on his door.

Chapter 7

Jamie Thomson and Janine Perry were transfixed with panic, and nodded to one another that releasing the prisoners *was* the correct thing to do. The inmates' voices in their hundreds were releasing yells of panic and steel doors were being slammed, as they demanded to be let out. Jamie had tried to phone two of his officers from the other houseblock, but they were not answering the phone. Maybe they *have* gone, he thought.

He phoned the Governor who also never answered his phone. He did, however, get in contact with a female colleague at her home who said, in no uncertain terms, that the prison was the least of her worries now and that they should leave the place as soon as possible, because if the people in the control room decided to leave, then the electronic doors that led to the exit to the staff car park would be sealed and it'd be impossible to get through.

Jamie Thomson rang the control department again, and the two members of staff up in the control room were still there and undecided whether to leave or not. Jamie assumed that, like himself, these colleagues didn't have kids, otherwise they would have left by now. He was informed by control that his work colleagues had already left from houseblock one, meaning that nearly four hundred prisoners were locked up in the opposite building in their cells, and left to their own devices. Control asked Jamie what his intentions were.

He looked over to Janine and answered control's question. "I'm gonna open up each door on all four wings to the exercise yard; the prisoners can go through that door and jump the fence. Is there anything we can do about the prisoners in houseblock one?"

"Negative," control answered. "As you know, we can only control the doors *outside* the houseblocks. All doors that are controlled within the houseblock are controlled by people who work in the bubble where you're sitting, and even then you need the keys to open the cells. There's no one in the bubble in houseblock one anymore."

"Yeah, I know all that. But how come you let those officers out of the grounds, couldn't you have gently persuaded them to open up the prisoners?"

"They didn't want to open up the prisoners for fear of being attacked. The two officers have now left through the exercise yard on A Wing. They climbed the fence; they never went through the normal procedure of leaving the premises. Maybe they thought we wouldn't allow them out, or they assumed we, up in control, had already left. We can still see them now on the cameras, climbing another fence, they're nearly out of the grounds but the barbed wire is cutting them to shreds."

"Barbed wire?" Jamie shook his head. "Fuck. Forgot about that; better tell the prisoners to throw their bed sheets over, before they climb over."

Control said, "They're now in the car park, leaving with their cars. Both officers have families. Right, Delta Seven, I mean, Jamie, we're going. Good luck."

It wasn't that he didn't believe control, but he hung up and called the houseblock once more, just to be sure. He looked over to Janine and shook his head.

She asked, "What's wrong?"

"The officers have left houseblock one."

"They've just let the prisoners in there to starve, in their cells?" Janine placed her hand dramatically on her head, the sweaty palms sticking to her blonde hair.

Jamie nodded. He held up the phone to acknowledge that there was no one answering it. "Yep, looks like they've definitely gone."

"So what are we going to do?"

"I've got an emergency key to open or close the sliders, each door that leads to the wing. Here." He threw the key at Janine. "I want you to close all slider doors apart from E Wing. I'm gonna open every door that leads to the exercise yard on the four wings, but I'm gonna do it one by one. Don't want these fuckers attacking me, I'm sure they won't, though."

"What makes you think they won't?"

"Three things: One, I'm doing them a fucking favour. Two, I'm opening up the cells slowly, so the wing won't get congested. And three, by the time I've opened up the next cell, the prisoners from the previous one will be practically over the fence. If we open all four sliders, they may take their frustration out on the bubble. But like I said, we're doing them a favour so I can't really see that happening."

Said Janine, "I'll announce it over the speaker."

Janine spoke loudly in order for the rowdy, panic-stricken inmates to hear her. She forced a thin smile at her male colleague. She wasn't fully convinced that this plan wasn't going to backfire, but they couldn't leave them in there to starve like the prisoners in houseblock one. She put her lips to the microphone. "Attention inmates. Attention inmates." She paused to allow the prisoners to be quiet. "You've heard what's happening out there. Don't worry. We are going to let you out. We will start with E Wing, followed by F, G and finally H. You will leave via your exercise yard, and be sure to take sheets and duvets with you to protect you from the barbed wire. Forget that we are officers. Go home to your families; we are all in this together now."

She looked at Jamie and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, *how was that?*

Jamie nodded in approval, but couldn't help a sarcastic remark. "Very moving." Jamie continued, "Right, I better start. Just keep on repeating what you said before, while I unlock them."

Jamie left the bubble, and threw his radio to the floor, which was something he didn't need as it was mainly used to contact control. He saw the slider doors to wing F, G and H close, while E remained open.

He walked into the loud and boisterous wing that was drenched in voices of male panic that was building momentum once again, and opened up one door that stood next to the small wing's canteen. He walked into a short corridor to open the final door that let in welcomed air; it was the door that led to the exercise yard. It was a beautiful feeling when the wind brushed his face, and then suddenly doubts surrounded Jamie's mind.

Surely this is some kind of joke? Is letting the prisoners out really the correct decision?

He stopped arguing with himself and went back inside E Wing and opened up the door to the exercise yard. His heavy boots clonked up the metal staircase to the first floor. He started on the top floor, and sure enough, the first two prisoners that were unlocked never even gave Jamie any eye contact as they both ran with rolled up sheets under their arms and ran straight for the door that was opened on the side of the wing, the door that led to the exercise yard.

All four wings had taken nearly thirty minutes to complete, and not one prisoner verbally or physically attacked Jamie. He was a respected officer, and they were frightened individuals who wanted to be with their families or wanted out of the prison no matter what dangers lurked outside. Not all prisoners left immediately; some lagged behind and others wanted time to think about what they were about to do. Was it the right thing to leave?

Once all cells had been opened, he walked past the bubble and into the staff room for a pee; then came back out again minutes later.

Jamie returned back to the houseblock's control unit, nicknamed the bubble. He knocked on the door and Janine pressed a button to electronically allow the thirty-nine-year-old back in. She turned to him and wondered what he was going to do next. Was this the moment they went their separate ways? She was too scared to go out there on her own. She bit the bullet and asked him, "Where are you going to go?"

"If I can get to the gatehouse, I can break into the reception area, open the main doors where the deliveries turn up, and get a set of keys."

"Keys? What for?"

"So we can take one of the prison vans that we use to transport the cons to court and back."

Janine sighed and forced out a smile. "We?"

"Well, I assume you're coming with me, aren't you?"

She smiled and nodded her head, two tears appeared in each of her eyes, but refused to fall. "Definitely!" she exclaimed.

"Before we go, I think we better raid the staff's fridge and take bottles of water. We can toss them over the fence as we climb over."

Janine added, "We could just stay here, and get our food from the prisoners' cells. They all have food; there would be plenty of tea, coffee and water. I'm sure the prison has back-up generators. We could sleep in the bubble on a night, we—"

"We would go mad within a week. I could think of better places to go, besides, not too sure how long this place can go on until the electricity dies, and the generators won't last forever. If this thing is as bad as they say it is, it'll be like living in the dark ages. Could you spend your time on the wings in the darkness? Even in the daylight it's dark in here."

"At least we'll be alive."

Jamie shook his head; he didn't agree. "It's no way to live. Are you coming or not?"

Chapter 8

David Pointer reached for the remote and put the TV onto standby; he had seen enough. He then looked to his shaken wife, Davina, who was clearly distraught and confused about the news that was finally being soaked up by her brain.

He asked in a soft voice that was coated in shock, "So what happens now?"

She shrugged her shoulders; she was hoping that he would have some answers.

He quickly stood up; the room span once as he got to his feet too quickly. He looked over to his daughter, Isobel, who sat in the corner of the living room, innocently playing, oblivious to the catastrophe that was being broadcasted around the world.

He walked over to his daughter, stroked her blonde hair and kissed the back of her head; he then looked over to his wife. "Go upstairs, both of you get dressed."

"What about you?" Davina wiped her eyes.

"I'm gonna stay down here for a bit, get some food and water. We're going into the attic."

David walked over to his unopened living room blinds, and nervously placed his fingers inbetween them and carefully pulled them apart about two inches. The street was desolate; he shook his head. *There doesn't seem to be anybody about.*

David walked briskly around the house, as his wife and daughter began progressing upstairs. He checked the patio door in the back room; he pulled the blind down to the floor and struggled to move the leather couch against the door. As he dragged the couch towards the door, it had made a huge scratch on the wooden floor, something that would normally anger Davina, but under the circumstances David was sure it was something he wasn't going to be in trouble for.

Satisfied that the back room was secured, he shut the door behind him, went to the reception area and made sure the front door was locked. He knew it wasn't that strong and recognised that this was probably the weak spot of the house. It was locked, and he moved everything that he could think of against the front door, TVs, tables... any kind of furniture that would cause an obstacle.

No wonder the street is empty. Millions of people across the UK, possibly the world, are, or have been, doing exactly what I'm doing now.

He went into the living room and kitchen to make sure windows had been secured, then went into the cupboard under the sink and began to fill bags with food, bottles of water, medication—he was practically emptying the cupboards. He had two rucksacks full of food and water, and took one upstairs where his wife stood in their daughter's bedroom. Isobel was now playing with her play-kitchen.

He dumped one bag onto the floor; the couple never uttered a word to one another, they just looked at each other briefly, and then he went back downstairs for the other bag. Once he returned, he grabbed the metal pole and opened the latch to the attic that was situated in Isobel's room, and pulled down the metal ladders. "I'll do my best to block off the downstairs. From now on, we use the upstairs only for washing, baths... obviously not sleeping, 'cos that would be too dangerous."

Davina queried, "What happens if they get in?" She was hoping for a *they won't* response, but it never came.

"Then we stay in the attic."

"We can't survive in the attic alone."

"No, but there's a skylight. Which means, I can get out of the skylight and walk across the roofs of the houses and check other skylights, maybe break into the neighbour's house and see what the neighbours have left, food... whatever."

"David," Davina half-laughed and began to lecture her husband. "You can't just break into peoples' houses and rob them."

“Do you honestly think the neighbours are coming back? They're in New York for a week, and even if they do come back after this mess has been finished, do you think they'd be pissed with us for breaking into their house in order to survive?”

“We live in a terraced block of eight houses; what happens if the other neighbours have already done that?”

“Then that's fine. They need to do what they need to do to survive.”

“And what happens if things get so desperate, they try and break into our house, even though we're in here?”

“Then I need to protect us.” David pulled out a knife from his jeans, and he pointed over to the rucksack where Davina could see a hammer popping out of the bag. He said, “I'm off to get the other bag, want anything else?”

“Not that I can think of,” she whispered. “Tooth brushes, deodorant—we can leave that sort of stuff for later.”

“I should think about filling the bath upstairs.”

She looked at David with bemusement.

“Just in case something happens to the water system, whether it's turned off or gets polluted. We can't survive without water.”

She looked over to Isobel and went over to her cupboard to pick out her clothes. She had her back to her husband and he could see her head lowering. He walked up behind her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She turned around to reveal her tearstained cheeks; they gently hugged one another. Both of their tears rolled and ran onto each other's shoulders. When they broke away from one another, they began to adjust themselves. It was a brief moment of sadness, but they both felt better for letting themselves go for a minute.

As David left the room, he could hear his daughter asking, “Mummy, are you okay?”

He trudged down the stairs and cried harder than before. Now with his family out of the way, he broke down and cursed himself for doing so. He was supposed to be the strong one, and wasn't doing a very good job of it.

David looked behind him and made sure he was out of earshot from Davina and Isobel, and once satisfied that he was as alone as he could be, a cocktail of emotions burst out of him.

He ran the cold tap from the kitchen sink and cried hard, with his head resting on the kitchen worktop. He remained there for minutes until his psyche had instructed him to pull himself together. He closed his mouth and his lips in an attempt to keep the emotions in check, but like a bad cough or trying not to laugh in a hilarious situation, he couldn't manage this, and his mouth widened again as his sobbing continued.

He splashed his face repeatedly whilst still crying, and washed out his burning eyes with the icy water. He had never cried that hard for years, not since the day of his mother's funeral in fact. His heartfelt emotion wasn't for himself, it was for his family, and it was for other families across the UK, possibly the world—if it had spread that far. He was certain that the world wasn't indestructible, and that the end of life, at least human life, was a threat that was very realistic, but he wasn't expecting this! And why now? Why in *his* lifetime did it have to happen now?

Whether it was ten years from now, or two hundred years, David Pointer was aware that the possibility of a global threat was very real. The KT extinction and the Clovis comet were realistic scenarios that scientists claimed had wiped out the dinosaurs and had changed the shape of the Earth, as people knew it now. David had read once about the Clovis comet and that thirteen thousand years ago it exploded over the Great Lakes, ignited the forest, spurred global cooling and killed a lot of species like mastodons.

Since the fifties, nuclear threat had always been around; that threat had diluted somewhat since the fall of the Soviet Union, but it was still there from other sources.

Despite David trying to get his head straight, he was finding it hard to fathom that some kind of virus was spreading through Britain like wild fire. The Spanish flu killed the same amount of people in two years than what the Black Death did in two hundred, which was only a matter of decades ago, but back then, bodies weren't coming back to life and attacking other people.

He sniffed hard and could feel the mucus running down the back of his throat and spat into the sink to clear it. *Stop acting like a pussy.* He splashed his face once more, turned the tap off and jogged back upstairs.

He had a family to protect.

Chapter 9

Karen Bradley looked around her house carefully; her body shook as she strolled through to the living room, but there was no sign of Gary there. For some reason, her instincts were telling her not to call him. She walked with gentle and careful feet from the living room to the kitchen, and content that there was no presence on the ground floor of the house, her thoughts focused about going upstairs.

He had been out the night before and she wondered if he was in at all. It wouldn't be the first time that Gary had got so drunk that he ended up on a friend's settee, or even a prison cell for the night, which happened the once—not a great move for a young lawyer.

She crept upstairs and was half-sobbing once she appeared on the landing. She stood motionless and couldn't stop thinking about her neighbour. She then heard a thump coming from her bedroom, as if someone had fallen out of bed. She blew out her cheeks and was now convinced that her boyfriend had made it home and was now getting up, possibly with a sore head and probably needing some TLC from Karen. But after witnessing the demise of Sharon Henderson and knowing that there was a killer on the street, she'd be lucky if she slept at all for the next few days. As soon as she talked to Gary, she promised herself that she would try the police again.

She stepped carefully towards her bedroom door, and gently pushed it open with the three fingers of her left hand. The door opened soundlessly, and she saw Gary standing in the corner of the bedroom with his back to her. She shook her head, convinced that the naked man was still drunk and had only got up for a pee.

She was unsure. About what, she didn't know.

Something wasn't right.

She called out his name with a whisper and he turned around. He looked awful; his skin was ivory, his eyes looked bruised and sunken, his overall physique looked... dead, and he didn't look that much different to the crazed man out in her street. *What the hell is going on?* As soon as he saw her, he released a groan and quickly shuffled towards her, which forced out a gasp from Karen and a gallop in her heartbeat.

"Gary, what's wrong?" was the only three words she could muster.

He was yards away from her, and his demeanour alerted her senses to run, she didn't know why, but she responded to those senses. She ran away from the naked, lifeless soul and galloped down her stairs.

Wait! What the hell was she doing? This was her boyfriend. This was Gary!

This was the same Gary who had proposed to her only a month ago, the same Gary who cried when she told him that she *would* marry him, and the same Gary who massaged her feet until she slept every time she came off nightshift.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs and could hear him stumbling about upstairs, and in no time, he appeared at the top, and he looked unsure whether to go down or not. She looked up at him. She gasped once she looked at his naked body again. It was strangely riddled with blue visible veins, and covered in contusions. That was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with? It didn't look like Gary; it didn't *feel* like Gary.

She placed her hand in her pocket and searched for her phone; she switched it on and she glared at what his next move was. He took one step forward and she took a sharp intake of breath; he took another step and progressed down by one step, getting a little closer, then another, but the fourth step didn't materialise. His clumsy and docile footing missed the next one and his body stumbled violently and quickly down the stairs. Karen let out a scream and moved out of the way of his path as his head smacked against the radiator with a hard clunk at the bottom of the stairs.

"Gary?" she sobbed.

She knelt down and touched his pale face, convinced he had knocked himself out. She now began to call for an ambulance *and* the police. Even before the fall, it looked like that he had somehow caught a virus, a virus that her knowledge had no answer for. He looked ill.

As she patiently waited for the call to be answered, she took another look at his naked body and ran her fingers down from the middle of his chest down to his stomach.

Like his face, his body was ashen, and he felt freezing. Exasperated by her phone, she hung up and said to herself that she'd try in another minute. Before she had time to check for breathing and for a pulse, her nose twitched the longer she remained by his side.

Her nose picked up an indescribable smell, almost like rotting meat or rancid fish. She knew it was coming from Gary, and this only added to her confusion. She put her fingers to his carotid artery and couldn't find a pulse. She now started to panic.

She suddenly got off her knees and ran to the downstairs toilet and for a second time she threw up, this time so violently, some of the vomit forced its way through her nostrils as well. As she spat into the toilet, she got to her feet, rinsed out her mouth and ripped off some toilet paper to blow out the remaining puke that grudgingly refused to leave from her nose. She wearily left the bathroom, and stepped over her boyfriend's body.

Now that her phone had been switched on, her phone began to vibrate furiously. At first she thought it was ringing, but when she pulled it out she noticed that she had seven missed calls and sixteen text messages.

She had a text off her half-sister, Kelly Bradley, who lived in Glasgow with their forty-five-year-old father, James, who she hadn't seen in years. She scrolled through her phone and most messages were telling her to be safe or telling her to put the TV on. She adhered to the latter and whilst standing and watching the TV in the living room, she called the emergency services once again. Her eyes gazed at the information that was being forced into her stubborn mind on the TV, and the more information her brain soaked up, the less important the phone call and her boyfriend seemed to be. After two minutes, she eventually hung up, put the TV onto mute and called her mum.

Thankfully her mum answered.

"Mum," she spoke with angst in her voice. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

She sat down on the sofa, as her frightened mother informed her daughter about what she had heard on the news so far. Karen could see for herself what was happening, as the pictures were being broadcasted like an advertisement for a new Hollywood horror flick.

It was a lot of information to take in, but the main words that came from her mother was: *Virus! They're dead—but they're not! They'll try and bite you! The whole of the UK is infected! How's Gary?*

Shit. Gary.

After she hung up, Karen turned around to see Gary slowly and clumsily getting to his feet.

Shit! Is he one of them?

He stumbled towards her rather quickly than she had anticipated. She called out his name constantly, hoping that something inside of him would click and he would return to his old self, but he looked dead, he looked like something out of a Hammer Horror episode.

He grabbed her and his grip startled her; he was a strong man anyway, but his stumbling gave her a false sense that he was weak or had been weakened by the illness, and as he stepped forward, his naked body forced himself on top of Karen who yelped as they both crashed to the floor.

It was obvious that the nature of his grip—and the fact that his gaping mouth tried to force its way towards her neck—convinced that whatever this is, it wasn't Gary anymore.

She used her hand to push under the chin to stop the mouth from progressing any further. She noticed his chin had a scratch underneath it. His cold, heavy body writhed on top of her. She screamed at the top of her voice to increase her aggression, raised her knees up and twisted her body with one swift turn to her right.

The thing that was once Gary, fell to the side of her. She got to her feet quickly and ran out of the room, grabbed her car keys and left through the front door, still wearing her nurses uniform. She jumped into her Cherokee Jeep and reversed out without looking behind her. As she headed out of her street, she noticed that there were two bodies shuffling around in the road, including the guy she had saw before she entered her house, the same one that killed Sharon Henderson.

Although it was hard to take in, she now knew what they were—or what her mother told her what they were—and what they were capable of. Considering there was a virus sweeping the nation, she expected there to be more than two bodies stumbling about the street—not that she was complaining.

As she headed towards the end of her street, she was tempted to run down one of the male stumblers, but decided that at such an early stage it would be better to try and keep her vehicle in pristine condition for as long as possible. She didn't know what lay ahead of her, and a damaged radiator before she even had left the street, would have been a massive inconvenience for her own survival.

She looked in her interior mirror and saw the two bodies mooching around.

Where was everyone else? Hiding in their houses? Dead?

Shit! She cursed mentally. She had left her phone in the house.

It was too late now. There was no chance she was going back in that house unarmed. Her mother's place was too far away to drive to, and she wanted to use as less fuel as possible, but firstly, she needed to find a place to park up and think.

At the moment it was impossible to think.

Chapter 10

“Who is it?”

The person behind the hotel room door never answered Jack Slade. He walked towards the door and placed his ear next to the wood. He jumped when the gentle knock appeared behind the door once again. Jack spoke through the door. “Who's there?”

“Open the door,” the voice urged in a whisper.

Jack blew out his cheeks in relief, and immediately opened the door. He was greeted by a large man, who looked at least thirty pounds overweight. His heavy breathing suggested that he needed to change his job, as his fitness was non-existent. Jack looked at the man's uniform; he seemed to be a security guard.

“Is there anybody else with you?” Jack asked the guard, who walked into the hotel room without waiting to be invited. Considering the crazy circumstances that were occurring, Jack was unbothered by this rude intrusion, and shut and locked the door once the rotund man was inside.

Still trying to catch his breath, the security guard shook his head and let out a breathy, “No.” He sat on Jack's bed and placed his hands on his clammy head.

Jack needed answers. “So what's happening? What do you know?”

The man raised his hand at Jack, telling the impatient, panic-stricken man to hold on for a minute while he caught his breath.

"*What's happening?*" the man half-snickered, his accent was Glaswegian, and was still breathing like an asthmatic in a feather factory. "The end of the world, that's what's happening. And what do *I* know? You watched the TV?"

Jack nodded.

"Then you know as much as I do. As for the hotel—"

"What *about* the hotel?"

"I've had to lock it up. It was crazy this morning."

"Crazy? How?"

"People leaving in their droves this morning; some people are refusing to come out of their rooms, but it's not my problem anymore. I even had one guest who hadn't seen the TV and went down to the kitchens, pissed off that there was no breakfast. I told him to either go back to his room or leave, and explained to him what was happening. It's not everyday you need to inform someone that the apocalypse is happening."

Jack taunted, "I wouldn't actually go that far."

"Really? Have you seen the news?"

"I've seen enough."

"This is gonna be global, mark my words. You can't escape God's doing."

Jack Slade never responded to the security guard's comments, and had just remembered that he didn't even know his name. As if the guard was psychic, he suddenly held out his hand and introduced himself as Robbie Owen.

Jack smiled and told Robbie *his* name, and then the usual ramblings of *do you have a family?* began and they discussed their family in a brief one-minute summary.

Jack informed Robbie that he feared for his six-year-old son, who lived over four hundred miles away in England. As far as distant relatives were concerned, like uncles and cousins, he wasn't caring too much about them, and he didn't expect them to be putting *him* on top of their agenda either.

Robbie, on the other hand, was in a horrific quandary. He wanted to get back to his wife and three children in a place in Glasgow called Nitshill, only a few miles from where Jack lived in Pollok. Jack did mention that he lived not so far away, and Robbie's eye lit up once that information was given to him.

Robbie quizzed, "So you gonna stay cooped up in here, or you gonna try and get home?"

Jack smiled thinly at his new companion and spoke. "I'm gonna try and get home. Why? You want a ride?"

Robbie lowered his head and half-laughed. He nodded and Jack could see tears forming in Robbie's eyes. "That would be great. Have you managed to contact your family?"

Jack responded with a single nod of the head. "You?"

"Can't get through, I've text her though. If she's watched the TV, then she's probably taken the advice of going upstairs and barricading herself in the room with the wee 'uns. Anyway, make the most of technology. It won't be long before everything goes down, even carrier pigeon will be difficult."

"What are you talking about?"

"Think about it. We all have phones, right? How long before they cease to stop working? Who's topping up the phones if there is nothing on the end of the other

line? Look at the complexity of the Internet. Who's gonna pull the levers? I remember seeing a documentary on the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe; those poor people were in a state for two months. Mobile phones were useless, and there was no Internet access. The only thing that worked was world band radio, and CBs that people worked by using a car battery. Where was the government? Nowhere to be found for five days."

Jack grew confused at Robbie's passionate rant, and he seemed a man that could lose his temper quite easily. He appeared to be someone not to get on the wrong side of. "What's your point?"

Robbie added, "My point is, when the shit hits the fan, you're on your own, my friend. I saw that places in London and other cities are being quarantined by the army, but if you live in a village or a wee town, you're fucked. I wonder how long it'll be before our army gets here?"

Jack said, "Probably never. We don't have the personnel. I think London will be the government's main priority. Can people still use the Internet though? I couldn't get anything on this shitty phone of mine."

"So far, but what's the fucking point, apart from e-mailing or Facebooking loved ones? If this thing goes on for more than a few weeks, people are going to be running out of food and water. The Internet is the least of their worries when you have an empty stomach and starving children. Even if electricity is still working, do you think when people are struggling to survive, people will be popping into the local cyber cafe for a wee hour if it was open?"

Again, Robbie's vexation grew the more he spoke and the more Jack asked questions. Jack felt it was understandable. Like everyone else, he was frightened, perplexed, and beleaguered that there was no support of any kind.

"I'm just saying, that's all," Jack spoke defensively.

Robbie smacked his lips together and bowed his head. Jack thought that that was the nearest he was going to get from Robbie as far as an apology was concerned, but it was something that didn't bother him, and something he didn't want to dwell on.

"So do you want that ride or not?"

Robbie smirked. "You bet. Please tell me you're parked in the hotel car park."

Jack Slade shook his head, and gave off an apologetic grin. "Afraid not. I'm parked at a NCP on Jamaica Street."

"That's a few streets away."

"Take it or leave it." Jack began to adjust himself, as if he was getting ready to leave.

"Lucky I brought these from the kitchen with me. We might need them." Robbie took out two kitchen utensils: a carving knife and a cleaver. He handed the cleaver to Jack, who immediately put it into his belt.

Jack tried a smile, but the moment he attempted it, his lower lip shimmered. "Shame."

"What?"

"You're a security guard. If we were in America you'd be carrying a gun."

"And attract attention with the noise from gunshots. What good would that do? We're trying to avoid these things, aren't we?"

"I don't even know what these *things* are. I just hope your God is looking down on us." Jack snapped, before opening the door.

"Just because evil happens in our world, does not mean that God is neither in control, nor sorrowful." Robbie walked over towards the window and pulled back the netting. His eyes widened, then narrowed as if he was trying to focus on something in particular. He continued to glare and waggled his head.

"What is it?" Jack was intrigued to know what it was that was disturbing the huge Glaswegian.

"This is the kind of shit that's happening across the country." He gestured with his hand for Jack to go and take a look.

Jack walked over to Robbie in no hurry at all, and half-closed his eyes as he usually did when a tense moment was building in the horror movies he used to watch. His eyes opened carefully and he could see three people crouched over a poor individual who was wriggling around, trying to get free. Jack reached for the handle and slowly opened the window, still transfixed on the scene that was occurring below him. As the window opened, the screams began to fill the room, they were horrific, and Jack was unaware that a grown man could make such a noise. The pain must have been indescribable. He shut the window tightly and looked at Robbie.

"Are they... *eating* him?"

Robbie nodded; his face was expressionless.

"But...?"

Jack couldn't find the words to finish his sentence, but Robbie understood the shock, as he felt the same when it first burst onto the television. The scenes of people being attacked on FOX and CNN were horrendous, although Robbie found it slightly funny in a black way that despite what was going on in the real world, he could still find a comedy channel and watch *Fawlty Towers*, *Cheers* or *The Big Bang Theory* if one felt the urge.

He obviously decided against it, and decided to see if people in the hotel were okay. He walked around the hotel, checking numerous doors for which he had the cardkey for all of them. Most people had already left the hotel; some stayed, and there were three occasions that Robbie never received an answer and opened the door to see that the people that were staying had reanimated, and had probably caught the virus while out. Unless, they were attacked, bitten or scratched by an infected rogue whilst out in the town, and then came back to the hotel, feeling unwell. He didn't have the answers.

This was a piece of information he didn't want to share with Jack, as he looked a nervous wreck as it was without informing him that some of these things were in the building, albeit, now locked in their rooms.

He wasn't sure if this was an airborne or a rabies-type virus that they were talking about on the TV. What he did know, was that it was happening, and he needed to be with his family. His priority wasn't to work out how this happened, it was to stay alive for his family and protect them.

But Robbie couldn't just go home.

For a start, he relied on public transport—which wasn't going to happen for the foreseeable future. The fear of the outside had kept Robbie in the hotel temporarily, but was still planning on leaving eventually. Thank God he had met

Jack, he thought. He was ready to go home and be with his family. Luckily, instead of walking it, he now had a lift, thanks to Jack Slade.

Chapter 11

“Where're we gonna go?”

Jamie Thomson already had the answer to Janine's question. “Anywhere in the countryside. The less populated, the less danger.”

He grabbed a stave from the bubble's locker and went into a storeroom on F Wing.

Janine was left alone while Jamie was on the wing, and she could feel a quiver in her throat that slowly made its way up into her face. Her cheeks wobbled, her bottom lip palpitated and her eyes watered. She was trying her hardest to contain her sobbing and was doing it successfully to a certain degree, and although it was abundantly clear she was upset, her emotions were being refused by the young woman to surface. She gulped hard a few times as if that would help, and to her surprise, it did.

She thought about her parents and knew they would be safe if they locked themselves in the house and didn't try anything rash or stupid. To her own surprise, her mind wandered and she thought about her ex-boyfriend, Chris, who she had been with for three years. She didn't know why she thought of him. Chris had been with someone else for the last six months, but what was happening now had somewhat proved that she still had feelings for him.

I hope he's okay.

She loved Chris; although he was hopeless in bed, it never bothered her too much. Chris was less endowed compared to her previous two lovers and this clearly affected his confidence, and even after three months of being together, the sex was a routine. Bedroom—Lights off—Same position—Two minutes—No orgasm.

She didn't want to upset him and dent his confidence even more, so the bedroom situation was never brought up, as it ended up becoming something to get out the way. So her astonishment was justified, when she found out he had been cheating on her with a work colleague at his branch. She wished nothing but the best for him as he left, and despite the cheating and his lack of desire and excitement in the bedroom, he was still the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with and have children with.

Jamie returned with a rolled up duvet under each arm; he threw one to Janine.

He put the bag on his back; Janine didn't ask him what was in it. She assumed it was the contents of the staff's fridge. They both left the bubble and walked onto H Wing and walked through the door that led to the exercise yard. Their sensitive eyes were greeted with the blinding sun. It was twenty-three degrees, a cold day for the population of Mexico City, but it was considered a hot day for the British.

They both looked at the top of the exercise fence, and both simultaneously dropped their duvets on the floor. There was no need for them, as the top of the fence that used to be covered in barbed wire was now covered in eighty cells worth

of duvets, pillows and sheets from the prisoners when they escaped—or when they were released. They both approached the fence. They could see that they were a few hundred yards from the exit. They could see the huge slider door near the gatehouse, and two escorting vans that were used to take prisoners to court and back.

They both tried to climb the fence; the holes were so tiny it made the task a lot more difficult than it should have been. Behind them, dozens of frantic male voices could be heard coming from the windows of the other houseblock, all begging for their lives to be spared. There was nothing either Jamie or Janine could do for them.

“Try and ignore them,” Jamie said to his female colleague.

Janine managed to get her petite frame over the fence before Jamie. Unfortunately for Jamie, he had the bigger hands and feet that were making it near impossible, but the heavy goods on his back as well didn't help. He thought about throwing the bag over the fence, but was worried if the tins and bottles inside would burst.

Janine waited at the bottom of the fence as she watched Jamie swing himself over to the other side, and began to climb down slowly and tentatively. Janine was guessing that Jamie might be scared of heights.

Once he reached the bottom, they wordlessly jogged towards the ten-foot slider door, which was the only thing that prevented them from getting to the outside. Janine looked through the gap of the slider door and nudged Jamie in the side and pointed towards a field outside the prison grounds. Jamie also took a look through the gap and they could see about twenty figures walking away from the grounds; they were definitely inmates and must have been the last lot Jamie had released. They didn't seem in too much of a rush, but then again, they weren't escaping; they had been released. The danger was now waiting for them in the outside world, so the cons' hesitancy was perfectly understandable.

As both officers approached the gate, Jamie placed his hands on his knees, bent over, and waited a minute to catch his breath. He refrained from reaching for a drink of water in his bag, and took out his class two key. He had three sets of keys, class one, two and three.

The class one key was for doors such as the linen room, the workshops, etc. The class two key was for outside gates, and the class three key was for the cells on houseblock two. Houseblock one keys were different. Officers couldn't use a houseblock two key on houseblock one. It was all to do with security, and it had been successful, as the prison had not experienced any escapes, until today.

Jamie opened up the gatehouse office with his key, not surprised to see it deserted. The gatehouse was the entrance that was used by officers and visitors. Each individual would enter the gatehouse, sign in, and then empty their pockets, take off their shoes and walk through a metal detector.

Jamie took a look around as Janine waited patiently outside; there was no sign of panic or disorder, and the gatehouse office was immaculate, apart from one coffee cup that had a full cup of cold coffee in it. It belonged to Alan Davies. Jamie knew that because he recognised the cup. In red print, it had: *Sex Instructor! First lesson free.*

He half-smiled to himself when he saw it; he hoped that Alan and his family would pull through this crisis—whatever it was.

He noticed a can of cola sitting on the desk; he looked behind him and selfishly opened the can and finished it within thirty seconds, wetting his rusty-like throat. He felt guilty for not telling or sharing with Janine, but the action had taken place now, and there was no time to dwell on it.

He took a set of keys off one of the hooks, and he looked at the key fob to look at what license plate number had been typed onto it. He then turned the red switch that opened the main slider, which was a huge steel door that was opened and used when vans came back from court and whenever deliveries would arrive. The huge slider could only be operated from the gatehouse, so once the slider was opened, and the officers had left, it would remain open. Jamie knew that a handful of prisoners had decided to stay behind, but the slider remaining open never concerned him. The cons were given an opportunity to leave, so it was up to them to take it.

Once the large door eventually opened fully, Jamie took his work keys and threw them to the floor. They were of no use to him on the outside, and the radio he had disbanded earlier only worked on an internal network within the prison grounds and was controlled by people from the control room.

He left the gatehouse for the last time, the door automatically locked behind him once he closed it. Janine also disposed of *her* equipment, and the pair of them headed for the carrier van.

There were two prison vans. The one that they took was a white INVESCO, ten thousand kilo diesel van. It had seven cells, a guard seat, a storage locker and a fridge. The other van was similar, but bigger, and Jamie was quite happy to stick to the smaller one that he had chosen, simply because it was smaller, and would need less petrol to move about.

Janine got into the front, once Jamie opened it by pressing the button on the key fob.

“Hang on a minute,” Jamie spoke to his female colleague.

He ran to the back of the van and began to empty his rucksack, putting the assortment of food and bottles of water into the van's fridge. He threw the bag into the store cupboard and was pleased to see two large jerry cans full of gas. It was probably only enough to fill half the tank, but it was better than nothing. Jamie had a feeling that most petrol stations may have been sucked dry, and with no individuals to deliver more fuel, it wouldn't be long before the whole country would have to use their feet as transportation.

He double-checked the seven cells to see if they were empty—he didn't know why he did this—and jumped back out, closed the back doors and got into the front. He started the engine and saw the fuel gauge was full. He blew out his cheeks and a smile developed on his face. Janine looked at the gauge and she also smiled.

The van left the premises and drove onto the car park; both individuals looked back at their cars sitting on their own. In the car park sat Janine's Renault Clio and Jamie's beloved Porsche, but they weren't practical now; a bulky van carrying food and water was far more practical and safer than their vehicles. Janine's phone was hidden in the glove compartment of her car, as they weren't allowed to

take them into the prison in case an inmate somehow managed to steal one of them. Jamie knew that she always kept hers in her car.

“Do you *want* your phone?” he asked Janine, as the van slowly pulled out of the car park. “Mine's at home.”

She looked at Jamie with suspicion. *And what if you've changed your mind and drive off? Get the van all to yourself.*

Soaked with paranoia, she murmured, “Just go.”

Their smiles turned into frowns, as they knew things would never be the same again. A lot of situations went through Jamie's head, things that he had forgotten to do. He thought that if he and Janine had stayed behind for a bit longer and had more time to think, they could have broken into the numerous vending machines around the prison. It was only chocolate and crisps, but it was food nevertheless and could come in handy one of the days. He also thought about the huge bottles that were inserted into the water coolers; they could have raided the storage cupboard and filled the back of the van with a few gallons of water. And what about the other prison van? If he wasn't in such a panic, he could have spent a few minutes trying to siphon the fuel out of the other van.

It was too late now; he didn't want to stop. At least they had some food and water. He knew why Janine wanted to stay behind, but what kind of a life would that be? There were resources out there in the big world: fuel, food, and maybe even shelter. Jamie wanted to live the best he could in such a dire situation, not hiding in some cold, dark prison, munching on crisps and eating cold tins of beans stolen from the inmates' cells.

Their windows were down on this glorious day—weather wise, and both individuals had their elbows resting on the side of the door. As soon as they spotted danger, the windows would be immediately up.

Janine finally spoke. “I wonder how all of this happened?”

Jamie kept his eyes on the road; he never looked at Janine or made any facial expression to suggest he had heard what she said. Jamie's answer to Janine's question wasn't quite the answer she was looking for, but he felt he was correct with his attitude.

“Doesn't matter what the cause was, or where it came from.” He finally looked at Janine with his face devoid of any emotion. “Whatever it is, it's here. It's how we deal with it from now on, that's all that matters now.”

Chapter 12

David Pointer made sure he was the last to get into the attic, and after he pulled up the ladders, he closed the hatch. What used to be used as storage was now going to be their home for God knows how long. Of course, they would be allowed to stay on the first floor during the day and use the toilet, etc., but David wanted his family in the attic right now, on the second floor.

He didn't know how many of those things were out there or how strong they were. He had come to the conclusion that if they remained in the attic for a day, and he checked out the house to see that there was no destruction and no sign of

those things trying to get in, they could live on the first floor of the house, but would have to sleep in the attic for safety purposes.

The downstairs was reasonably blocked off, making it difficult for even a normal human to get in. He and Davina had also moved a cupboard on top of the stairs for added protection.

David said, "I'm gonna go and search next door, see if there's any food we can have. We don't have that much."

"What? Isn't that stealing?"

"Let's not go through this again. I don't think the Nobles will be too bothered; they're in New York for Christ's sake."

"I dunno."

David walked around the small attic, and his anxiousness was already annoying a nervy Davina. "Remember that documentary we saw the other month?" David queried.

"Funny, I was thinking exactly the same thing. Are you talking about the Toxoplasma Gondii thing?"

"I think it was that."

The two of them were interrupted by young Isobel, and Davina continued to speak. "Just seems a tad hard to believe that a housecat can infect a thousand people every day with Toxoplasma just for eating an infected rat, and causing people to go... well, mad. Do you think that could be what's happening?"

"What else could it be? What did you make of what we saw on the TV?"

Davina never answered, as she didn't have a clue.

David kneeled down and kissed his wife who was sitting on the floor, now playing with her daughter. He kissed her on the lips and gave her a playful wink; as he stood up she grabbed his trouser leg and glared at him with consternation.

She said, "You don't have to do this."

He placed the knife and hammer by his wife's side, and put the rucksack back onto his back.

"I know." He placed his hand over his mouth before he released a cough. "But we need to get as much food as we can. We have a fridge and a cooker that are downstairs, but if the electrics go we'll be eating out of tins for the foreseeable future, and we don't have enough tins. And how long do you think the milk's gonna last? Did you bring enough cutlery with you from the kitchen?"

Davina nodded.

"Better get the tin opener to some use." David placed a comforting hand on his wife's shoulder. "Our Babs is gonna be hungry soon."

"Cold macaroni it is," Davina said with emotion that forced her to put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes glistened, but the tears remained in their home.

"What's wrong, mummy?" Isobel looked up, holding one of her dolls. "What's daddy done now?"

Both parents began to chortle audibly; David could feel his heart murmuring as he stared at his little girl. What kind of future was she going to have?

Then Isobel asked, "Mummy, can I play with your iPad?" Isobel was referring to the educational games that Davina would allow Isobel to play on as a treat.

"I forgot it, love," Davina spoke regrettably, and she then turned to David. "I left my phone downstairs as well."

“We'll get everything up, eventually. Don't worry.”

David leaned over and kissed both his girls on the forehead, opened the skylight and popped his head out and looked all around. He was hoping that the roof tiles weren't as slippery as they looked. He could see his neighbour's skylight that sat twenty yards away. “Pass me that hammer and knife.”

Davina passed him the claw hammer and knife; he blew her a kiss and told her to shut the window.

“What's it like out there?” she asked from below.

David was now out of the house and crouched on the roof; he looked at the sun and cloudless sky and took a deep breath in. “Peaceful.”

He blew his bemused daughter a kiss who was wondering what he was up to, and she remained glaring at her daddy, perplexed. The window was shut and a nervy David Pointer stood to his feet. He put the hammer into his belt and carefully climbed his way up to the pointy roof; a couple of tiles slipped off, but it wasn't enough to unnerve the thirty-nine-year-old. He got to the roof's highest point and sat down; he looked out onto his road and could see other streets as well.

The area was reasonably quiet; the sun blazed down on his head, and he thought that the day itself had become an oxymoron: It was a beautiful day, but below the sun, was a world where butchery was occurring, and David didn't have a hint on how or why it was happening.

To his left, he saw a family in their drive quickly and frantically packing up their car. Where were they going? He was dying to ask them. Did they know of somewhere better to go? Was staying in the house a recipe for disaster?

In the distance he could hear screaming; the curiosity had got the better of him and he decided to risk standing up on the highest point of his roof. He could now see the street behind his. There were about a dozen of those things spread out on the street; some were in the road, but others were banging on the windows of some of the houses. He could hear the screaming once more, and said under his breath. “Shut up. Don't you realise it's the noise they're attracted to?”

David didn't know this for sure, for all he knew, they could probably *smell* a human, but what gave him the idea of his noise theory was that a series of car alarms were going off, and these things seemed to ponder over towards the vehicles to check them out before moving away, probably because there was nothing to devour.

And then he saw it.

It was like a car crash, horrific, but he couldn't keep his eyes off it. It was a natural instinct, a morbid curiosity embedded into every human being. His body remained standing, but his legs almost knocked together with panic as he saw at the end of his own street, a woman running out of her own house.

She was being pursued by two of the things, and what unnerved David was that these things seemed slow at first, but once they spotted her, they ran clumsily after her like a couple of drunks. They couldn't run fast, it was more of a brisk walk, and this worried David so much he could feel his face move with fearfulness.

She fell over onto the road, and the things continued to pursue their feed. Knowing that she didn't stand a chance, David decided to avoid watching what had probably happened to thousands upon thousands of people. He sat back

down onto the roof and placed his hands over his ears to drown out the woman's faint, yet, blood curdling screams as she was being ripped to pieces.

David stood back up to his feet and walked the short journey carefully to the next skylight. He crouched down, and despite what was happening to the country—possibly the world, a twinge of guilt hit him as he pulled out the hammer from his belt to break into his neighbour's house. It only took a gentle knock to create the first crack and two attempts later, the glass fell through onto the floor of the neighbour's attic. He heard a clatter from underneath him and saw that his knife had fallen, and was making its way off the roof and landed in the guttering.

“Oh crap.”

Shrugging off the loss of a weapon, David carefully removed the remaining fragments of glass and jumped straight through, landing onto the bed. It looked like the attic had been converted into a bedroom.

His weight caused the bed to make a loud crack. He got up and scanned the room. It looked like the little girl's room. He looked down to the floor and saw that it was open-design, and that the small spiral staircase led to the first floor to the bedroom below. He stepped carefully down the staircase; it didn't seem too steady and it rocked as he progressed down. Maybe it was only designed for a child to go up and down.

The bottom of the staircase led to another bedroom; it seemed like the girl was spoilt as it looked like it was her second bedroom. It had pink walls and had Minnie Mouse matching curtains and a lamp shade. David exited out of the room, and with the hammer in his right hand he checked every room before making his way downstairs.

He walked into the kitchen, and was disappointed to see the fridge was almost empty. He cursed himself and called himself an idiot. Of course it was empty! *Why would you want to stock up a fridge if you were going to New York for a week?*

There were a few tins of tuna, a tin of pineapples, tomato soup and two tins of beans left in the cupboard. David took them and popped them into his bag. He took a walk into the living room; the blinds were drawn so the room was reasonably dark. He opened one of the cupboards and saw a collection of whiskeys. It was tempting, but he decided to refrain from taking them. It wasn't necessary; maybe if he was on his own he would fall into a well of self-pity, lock himself in a room and get terribly drunk. But he had a family to think about and to take care of.

He noticed by their landline phone that a green button was flashing. There was a message. He pressed the button and sat down as he waited for the beep to sound.

The voice sounded distressed and out of breath.

“Hey, it's Mark Noble and his family. We don't know if anyone will hear this, but this thing is starting to happen over here in New York, so it doesn't look like we're coming back for now. If any members of our family are listening to this, Tricia, Robert, mum, dad and Auntie Beryl, we love you all. We're stuck in our hotel and we don't know what to do, as all flights are grounded indefinitely.”

David could then hear a girl and a woman screaming in the background.

“I've gotta go, they're trying to get in. God help us!”

The message came to an end, and sent a large shiver through David's skeletal frame. He puffed out his cheeks and reached for the TV remote. David switched on the Noble's TV and scanned through the channels. The foreign channels were no longer broadcasting, at least in the UK, and the only channel he could find was the BBC. It was a black screen with white writing and had a list of bullet points.

**We believe it is a rabies-type virus.*

**If you're bitten. You ARE infected. Stay away from your family.*

**If attacked by more than one, there's a strong chance you'll be devoured, making reanimation impossible. Remember! They're not here to create more beings, they're here to feed and feed only.*

**They can't be reasoned with and will not feel pity. They may be slow, but they are determined.*

**They're attracted to warm flesh, sound, light and noise.*

**Stay indoors! If you stay indoors, you cut off the food supply.*

**Avoid them at all costs. However, if you damage the brain, you take out the beast.*

**Stay put for more information.*

The channel seemed to have a lot of information considering this thing had just happened, David thought. Maybe it was just guesswork for now. Or maybe they had known for days...weeks even, but didn't want to cause mass hysteria. He switched off the TV and half-laughed nervously. It was so surreal.

He got to his feet, ready to get back to the rooftop of the Noble's house. He thought about them for a brief second, and now presumed that they were probably deceased. It made him heavyhearted, but he needed to be strong for his family. He needed to shrug this feeling off; it was harsh, but he needed to do it, otherwise he would fall apart.

Chapter 13

Karen Bradley's Cherokee Jeep screeched its way over the Milford countryside; she was now two miles away from her hometown and didn't have a clue where she was going. At last she saw signs of life as she saw two vehicles. The two cars flashed her as they sped past, which at first pleased her.

It was hard to establish what the flashing actually meant. According to the Highway Code, flashing of headlights should only be used to let others know you are there, and not to use them as any other means. At first, she interpreted the flashing headlights by the two drivers as a good luck sign, but the more she thought about it, the more her mind went down a more macabre road.

Maybe they were flashing to warn me. Maybe what the flashing headlights actually meant was: "Turn back, it's too dangerous!"

She didn't know what to think now; she expected the road to be busier than this.

She could imagine the only people who went out in their cars were people from the cities, and other populated areas. Or people wanting to get back home from work or from holiday—or like Karen Bradley, not knowing where the hell to go to as *nowhere* seemed safe.

She was still driving in the small town of Milford, and turned left up a road adjacent to the Barley Mow public house, which was also near a house that was involved in a shooting incident in 1988, where Sir Peter Terry was shot at his home by the IRA.

She pulled into a desolate car park that was surrounded by nothing but greenery, which was used by teenagers in the summer. The kids would drive up to Milford greenery and park their cars on the grass, drink alcohol, and blast out music from their car stereos. She had done it herself once upon a time, when she was much younger.

She switched the car engine off and broke down in tears. She had lost Gary; she would never experience him massaging her feet ever again, or being a clumsy fool, or making the annoying grunting noise every time he started a sentence. She had lost him for good.

She took a bottle of juice out of her glove compartment and took a generous swig; she then wiped the tears from her cheeks with the palms of her hands. The sun was burning her skin through her windscreen, and she squinted as she turned the key in her car and put on the music system. She tried to search through the frequencies to see if any stations were working; she had found only two.

One was actually playing music. She couldn't believe it. Despite what was going on, there was still a station playing music, although she was certain it was on a loop, and there wasn't a DJ stupid enough to stay behind whilst all this mess was going on.

Not wanting to attract unnecessary attention, and also not being a Depeche Mode fan, she turned *I Feel You* off and searched for other stations. She eventually came across a station that had a male voice. His message seemed robotic, and after a minute of listening, it repeated itself again, suggesting that it was definitely an automated message and although the radio station was up and running, there was probably no one actually in the building.

It told people to stay indoors, not to make any noise, ration food, and try to avoid using light on an evening in case it attracted the beings. This information that was being given out suggested to Karen that this could be something that had been known about for weeks.

How did they know all this, so soon?

'Beings' was the word that it chose to use, and so far Karen had only had two experiences with these beings, one of them being her boyfriend.

If it was a rabies-type virus like they were guessing, she could only assume that it was the huge scratch that she saw on Gary's body during their struggle that had changed him. It must have happened when he was out with his pals, as there was no bite on his naked body; he then probably staggered home, then never woke up again—not as the *real* Gary.

Her tears fell once more, and she wondered how anyone would survive in this situation. She contemplated going back to her house; it would mean killing her own partner, but nowhere else appeared safe.

The situation was hopeless.

Maybe she could kill herself. But what with?

She shook her head and thought that many people across the country might have already used that option, not just people on their own, but families as well. She contemplated her situation, and then she thought of a direr scenario that there could be: Distraught parents out there, killing their own kids before taking their own lives, because if the beings didn't get them, then starvation and dehydration would kill them, and who would want that for their babies?

If these parents were convinced that their little souls were better off in heaven, rather than allowing them to live in a hell on Earth, who could blame them?

Karen wiped her eyes and had made a conscious decision to go back to her place; there were sufficient fluids there, and it was her home after all. Although the fridge was half-empty, it could be enough for her to survive for a week or two.

She stepped out of her jeep and opened the boot; she peeled back the cover where the spare tyre was kept and saw, next to it, the tyre iron. She took a hold of it and went back to her driver's seat. She blew out a stress-filled breath, and knew that this was the choice of weapon that was going to end Gary's life for a second time.

To massage her guilt, she kept on reminding herself that technically he was already dead, and it worked a little. The man that she loved was never coming back. The only thing that she would be destroying was his shell, which he wasn't living in anymore.

It had to be done!

She placed the tyre iron onto the passenger seat and put her head on the steering wheel. She was feeling nauseous; she retched a little, but nothing was brought up apart from a little acid that stung the back of her throat. She had never vomited so much in one morning, and was hoping it was finished with. She looked up, and in the corner of her eye she could see five figures stumbling towards the car. They were near the exit, and must have come from around the corner, where the six-foot bushes stretched along the main road.

Karen Bradley looked aghast, her eyes stretched as wide as they could, her heart galloped insanely as they quickly shuffled towards her Cherokee Jeep. Her quivering hands reached for her keys, still sitting in the ignition, and she pulled the vehicle towards the left. She was now facing parallel to the exit of the car park.

She stared at the five ghouls that were now fifty yards away, three of them looked like—what used to be—young men. Their skin was pale; eyes were sunken and almost black with contusions of some kind. They literally looked like moving corpses, and the other two beings looked like an elderly lady and a young girl, no older than fourteen, dressed in only her pants and her naked chest half-covered with fresh blood as if she had just fed. Her body was snow-white and bruised. She had a bite mark on her left forearm, whereas the others looked untouched.

Karen slipped the jeep into first and hesitated for a while. If she ran into five bodies, what could that possibly do to her engine? The last thing she needed was

to be stuck in the middle of nowhere with a damaged engine surrounded by these beings, as the radio and the TV had called them.

Fuck it!

She took off the handbrake, the gas pedal was down by two inches making the vehicle groan in fury, and there weren't many other options she had.

If she reversed, she would end up in a ditch.

She slowly brought up the clutch and the car moved and squealed towards the exit; she closed her eyes and could hear thud after thud as the jeep struck the bodies. She opened her eyes and cried out as she found herself on the wrong side of the road. She braked to a sudden halt, and looked behind her to see what carnage she had created.

Two of the individuals in the car park remained on the floor, two were struggling to get up, but the elderly lady was the one that shuffled towards the vehicle. They were unrelenting, had no fear, and only had one goal: to attack her and others. Maybe she missed the old lady, she supposed. But then, she swore she heard *five* quick thuds.

She pointlessly looked to her side to see if there was any traffic coming, and noticed ahead of her, a young girl with her mother that were out of harm's way and untouched by these things. They were both watching the event unfolding in the luxury of their own bedroom. The little girl innocently waved at Karen, which brought a surge of emotion to the young woman.

She looked into her rear view mirror to see the elderly lady only yards away from the back of her vehicle. With her hand, Karen instructed the mother to take her daughter away from the window. She did just that.

Karen selected reverse, she didn't know why, she could have easily drove off and headed for home. She put her foot to the floor and the jeep shot backwards; the elderly woman's head was in line with the back window and made a noisy thud as her head made impact. Karen looked behind her and saw dark blood, almost black, cover the back window where the head received its massive trauma.

She used the back wiper to clear her view and saw the elderly lady writhing about on the floor in front of her. She saw some of the others making their way towards her and that was when she had decided to leave, before she dug an even deeper hole that she couldn't get out of.

She pulled the vehicle forwards towards the writhing elderly woman, and drove over her head; the head popped underneath and spilled out its contents, as the one and a half tonnes of jeep that rolled over her had finally put her miserable second life to a devastating end. Karen refused to look back at the carnage behind her, and could only imagine what kind of mess her beloved motor had caused, and what state the tyres were in.

It was time to go home. She looked over to the passenger seat at the tyre iron and knew she had to destroy Gary, if she wanted back in the house.

She *had* to do it.

Chapter 14

Jack Slade and his new friend, Robbie, jogged their way through the hallways of the hotel. Jack felt uncomfortable doing this, as he didn't know what was lurking around the corner. Robbie assured him that the hotel was secure, and there had been no reports of people feeling unwell during the night and the chances of the things being in the hotel were nil, which was a blatant lie. Robbie felt he needed to protect Jack from this information from a selfish point of view. He needed to get home, and Jack provided the wheels. He didn't want to freak him out so much that the guest would lock himself back up in his hotel room, remain there, and hope for the best.

Robbie was officially coming to the end of his twelve-hour night shift and Jack thought that once his adrenaline wore off, his heavy colleague would be exhausted. They got to the staircase and jogged down flight after flight. It seemed to have taken ages to get to the bottom of the stairs. Robbie pulled out a set of keys. He unlocked the door that led to the reception area. It was lifeless, and Jack didn't remember it too much.

"Wait a minute," Jack spoke up.

He went over to the vending machine and kicked in the glass; he pulled out a couple of bottles of water and threw one to Robbie. Both men drank the bottles dry, threw the empty bottles to the floor before proceeding to the exit doors. They stepped out onto the barren streets of Glasgow City Centre, and Jack urged the security guard to follow him.

Jack pulled out his cleaver and Robbie did the same with the carving knife, both men were clearly shaking. They jogged past the building of Central Station and saw three cars that had been driven into one another. The cars were abandoned and the opened driver's side of the doors suggested that the drivers had fled on foot.

Was it due to panic? Or were they being chased?

They both turned left onto Argyle Street and headed under the bridge, heading for Jamaica Street. They both stopped running and turned their progression into a brisk walk. Jack by no means was a fit individual, and Robbie was glad of the change in pace.

"Hold up!" Robbie's voice echoed under the massive steel bridge where above, trains would normally move across. His voice echoed, piercing the quiet morning.

They continued to walk under the bridge, passing numerous shops on their travels to Jamaica Street. Two figures appeared from around the corner about twenty yards away from the two men. They were definitely not living anymore. These two figures literally looked like death.

Both characters looked like they used to be young men. One was dressed in a white bloodstained tracksuit, which told the two men that this thing had already attacked some poor soul. The other individual was dressed in a suit.

As humans, the two of them couldn't be so different, but now they had changed, they were now both the same and had the same goal in mind. They stumbled towards the men; the one in the tracksuit leading the way, with the suited individual being three yards behind.

"Cross the road," Jack instructed. He could feel the agitation flowing through his body.

Robbie shook his head. "Nah, we can take 'em."

“Just cross the fuckin' road! I thought you wanted to avoid them!”

Robbie wobbled his head in defiance. “They'll just follow us. Besides, if we do this now, it'll desensitise us for the next time. There'll be a time when we can't run away from these things.”

The suited figure fell over its own feet and was struggling to get up.

“Stand back,” Robbie commanded.

To the two men's surprise, the tracksuit individual sped up with a decent pace. Robbie jumped back and brought up his carving knife, ready. Now, he was almost face to face with the thing. He could see the pale skin, like polished ivory, and the blackness around the lifeless, milky doll-eyes that were wider than golf balls, and the coal coloured lips. It was a hideous sight to witness.

Although initially he hesitated, he pulled his knife back once more and rammed it through the left eye socket of the being. Black tar-like liquid dribbled out, as his weapon mashed up the eyeball, but the creature was still trying to progress forward, its arms now grabbing onto Robbie's shoulders.

A surge of panic shot through the man, and he used the last of his strength to force the knife deeper into the eye socket. It worked. The thing twitched like an epileptic, as he pulled the knife out. The black liquid ran off the knife onto the floor; it fell to its knees and fell face down with a deathly thump.

The other corpse was still struggling to get to his feet, and once it managed to get on all fours, Jack stepped forwards and brought down the cleaver. These were tools that belonged to a professional kitchen, so he predicted they would be sharper than the average household instrument, and he wasn't wrong.

The cleaver embedded four inches into the skull quite easily, however, trying to retrieve the instrument seemed a little more difficult. Jack struggled a while before the weapon came free, he received splash back from the skull, and was sprayed by the black gunk that spat on his face. It was just a sprinkle, but it was enough to make him stand in fright.

Jack screwed his eyes in confusion. Robbie patted him on the back and pulled out a hankie. “Don't worry, I don't think you can get the virus by their blood hitting your skin, or whatever it's supposed to be. If you get it in your eye or an opened wound however...” He glared at the gentle black spray that Jack was wiping off his face with the hankie. Robbie nudged Jack and pointed at the suited-being corpse. “No wonder he fell over, look at the state of his ankle.”

Jack threw the hankie to the floor and took a look. The ankle was twisted so badly that it had turned ninety degrees to the right, facing inwards.

Said Jack, “He probably did it when he was in human form, running away from those things.”

Robbie agreed. “Maybe it was the twisted ankle that cost him his life. Hard to run from these things when you're in that state.”

Jack shook his head. “I couldn't believe how quick the other one sped up, when he was heading for you.” Jack was still panting and said to Robbie, “I'm gonna have to get home soon, and get drastically fit. These fuckers are not as docile as they look. Like an alligator, they seem lifeless, until they attack you. I'm knackered already; that was hard work killing just *one* of them.”

Robbie looked up. “I'm trying to think if there's a gun shop in Glasgow.”

“A sword would be better. It's quiet, and you don't have to re-load a sword.” Jack shook his head. “Let's just go, the car park is just around the corner by the St Enoch Centre.”

Robbie nudged Jack and pointed to the floor. Jack could see his mobile phone smashed in two pieces and he mumbled an expletive under his breath. He picked the thing up, but immediately dropped it back onto the floor once he knew it was defunct.

The two men both bent over and wiped their utensils on the clothes of the deceased. They continued to walk under the bridge on Argyle Street, and finally came to Jamaica Street that was situated to their right. To their left was Union Street, and they both noticed seven figures shuffling about further up near the Burger King restaurant. They looked down to the rest of Argyle Street, which seemed devoid of life, human and the others.

They strolled down Jamaica Street, getting near the River Clyde; the car park was to their left which was situated around the back of the Matalan clothes store. They ran around the back and went inside the multi-storey car park and began to jog up the ascending road that curled round like a helter skelter.

“What floor is it?” Robbie asked with what little breath he had left, his voice echoing through the concrete-sheltered car park. His belly swung to the left and right like a pendulum, as his feet slapped the concrete with each step.

“Second,” Jack shouted back, he was ten yards in front of his new friend.

“Thank fuck!”

Robbie stopped and placed his hand on his knees, he was exhausted. His panting was hard, and there didn't seem to be any sign of his body recovering.

He thought to himself that maybe he should just wait for Jack to come down with his car, as it seemed frivolous that the pair of them needed to run up to the second floor, but Jack was already way ahead of him and had disappeared. For a brief panicky second, Robbie thought that maybe Jack would go without him. In a situation like this, it was pretty much every man for himself. Still looking up the steep road, Robbie began to cough. He then yawned and began to stretch out his arms.

He suddenly felt a hand on his thigh, which made him shoot up, straightening his back. He turned around to see three creatures almost ambush him. They looked like they were teenage girls, and seemed dressed in attire to suggest that they had been clubbing, but they were now not of human form.

Where the fuck did they come from?

Robbie lashed out manically with his knife, catching two of them in the face, although the wounds were only superficial. He kicked one of them that was wearing a mini skirt and it fell over. The one nearest, felt Robbie's wrath, as he brought down his carving knife that embedded deep into the top of the cranium of a blonde girl.

Fuck, they're strong!

The scantily dressed thing immediately fell, and he felt the bite of the other that had its hands on both of his shoulders and had bitten through his uniform and into his deltoid. He let out an angry shriek and pushed the girl over easily, thanks to the fact they were on an uphill and Robbie was higher than the rest on the incline. They both clambered back to their feet, and Robbie somehow managed the

energy to run up to the remaining rest of the road. A Vauxhall Meriva pulled up beside Robbie, and Jack ordered him to get in and Robbie duly obliged.

“What happened to you?” Jack screamed.

“Fucker bit me.”

“There are more of them? Maybe I should go out the proper exit, rather than down this road again.”

“Nah.” Robbie shook his head. “The proper exit has safety barriers, you would have to ram them to get by.”

“But I'm gonna have to ram those things to get past the other way.”

Robbie looked at Jack with demonic eyes. “Are we *really* having this conversation? Just fucking move. Let's get to your house first, so I can get myself bandaged up. I don't want the missus and the kids to see me like this. I hope you've got alcohol back at your house; this wound may be infected with all kinds of shit.”

Jack hit the gas pedal and headed back down the way they had ran up and sped at twenty around the curly road. He almost stopped when he saw the two figures, as his instincts told him to come off the gas and hit the brake. He hit the gas pedal harder and saw the two female things bounce off the car and roll along the ground like thrown dice.

“Well, that was fun.” Robbie winced, and held onto his bleeding shoulder.

Jack shook his head. “This is such a fucking weird day. This is possibly weirder than the time I was sleepwalking as a teenager, and my dad woke me up and found me in my sister's room as I was about to piss in her ear.”

Robbie, still clutching his wound, gazed at Jack in disbelief. “Thanks for sharing that.”

“Sorry.”

Chapter 15

They both travelled with their windows down; the cool air was a welcomed feeling as the sweat trickled down the officers' backs. Once they got to a residential area, Jamie informed Janine that the windows would have to go up and they would have to make do with the air conditioning the van had to offer.

Janine looked around at the countryside they were driving in, and had gone by this way every day mostly, and never had time to appreciate how beautiful the area was. It was also a great area for a prison. If they had had escapes, there weren't many hiding places for the cons to use. The nearest residence was a mile away, and finding the escapees would be no problem as there was no building to hide in, no crowd to be lost in, or any vehicle to break into to enhance their escape.

They had only been travelling for three minutes and Janine had an announcement to make to Jamie before they went any further.

“You're gonna have to stop. I need the toilet.”

“Seriously?” Jamie frowned at his partner, the corner of his lips dropping towards his chin.

Janine descended her head, and made a nodding gesture.

Jamie looked around; they were still in the countryside, everywhere was flat and the sign of trouble was non-existent. Even though it was early days, if they did need to stop, it may as well be now. "I suppose I'll go as well, seem as though it's clear."

Janine was still a little paranoid that Jamie could drive off and leave her, but her trust of him had grown a little, and she could hardly sit and piss herself.

He stopped the van and allowed Janine to jump out first. The engine was still running, and while he was waiting to kill some time, he tried the radio stations once more. By the time he had exhausted every station on the waves, Janine had returned.

"Right," Jamie opened the driver's side of the door, "my turn."

Janine took a swig of water from Jamie's bag and wondered how her family were. She unbuttoned her top button and took off her blue clip-on tie. She had noticed Jamie had already done this. It was too hot for the attire that they were wearing, and it didn't matter now. The world had now become a different place, they had no governor to answer to and had no job either.

Jamie noticed that Janine had literally emptied her bladder behind the vehicle as the golden puddle sat there a yard away from the back of the van. He wondered why she chose that particular area. Didn't she trust him? Was she paranoid that he would watch her by using the exterior mirrors?

He didn't want to dwell on it too much, as they hardly knew one another and only engaged in conversation on a professional basis when they were at work. He chose to use the side of the road and peed on the grass; it was a short affair as he didn't need to go that badly, but he thought he may as well try while they had stopped because he wasn't sure when would be the next available time to go. He returned to the van.

The van began to move again, and as they approached a tight bend that veered to the right, the pair of them took in the scenery and appreciated it. They both looked at a farm that was to their left in the distance and both peeped at one another. Were they thinking the same thing?

Go to the farm and beg the owners to put them up for a few nights while all this blows over? The thought had caressed Janine's mind, but Jamie himself suspected that they were onto a winner driving a secured van with food and water. Janine would rather have saved the fuel and just sat in the prison car park with the van locked and munched on the food they had, but Jamie was convinced there would be more food and fuel just waiting to be taken before thinking about some kind of refuge.

The van took a left and as it appeared on the new road, they could see four figures in the distance, walking with their backs to them. They both knew they were prisoners immediately, as all four were wearing the same clothes. They all donned blue trousers and red T-shirts.

"What do you reckon?" Jamie questioned Janine.

"Seriously?"

Jamie nodded.

Janine sighed unhappily, "If we pick them up, we pick nobody else up."

"I agree with that; we're definitely better in numbers. I'm just gonna slow down, see who they are."

"You don't think they'll attack us and take the van for themselves?"

"Nah, not these fellas." Jamie pointed at the four figures who were now facing them and frantically waving. "That's Pickle. He's a notorious drug dealer, but as honest as they come. If it was a member of the Murphy family, then I'd just drive on. We're better in numbers; don't worry about the food, we'll find more eventually."

As the van gained alongside the diminutive group, the four men held out their hands, desperate for the vehicle to pull over. The van pulled up adjacent to the cons, and Pickle was the first to approach Jamie's side of the door.

"Wanna ride?" Jamie smiled.

"Absolutely," Pickle cried, and all four inmates wore a relieved and excited grin. "I owe yer one, Jamie boy."

"Forget it, we're all in the same boat. As far as I'm concerned, considering what's happening out there, any fracas we've had in the past is forgotten about now." All four prisoners nodded in agreement. "We're all equal; to get through this we're better off sticking together."

Jamie switched the engine off and got out of the van, then Jamie and Pickle shook hands. Jamie knew that being in numbers would be more beneficial for his own safety. He knew Pickle; he didn't really know the other inmates, but knew Pickle would keep them in line.

Pickle had short brown hair, was a violent drug dealer, and slurred his words occasionally, but he and Jamie had always had a decent relationship on the wing. He knew that if Pickle was on his side, the other three wouldn't dare speak up or attempt anything untoward. Why would they? Not only had he released them from their cells, he was now giving them a ride!

"Let me introduce yer to these three fine gentleman," Pickle spoke; Jamie already knew one of the inmates but decided against interrupting Pickle. "This is KP, he looks like a dick, but he's okay."

"I already know KP," Jamie spoke, nodding towards the inmate.

Jamie was unsure about KP; he was another violent thug, but his violence wasn't related to drugs. He was a repeat violent offender, who spent most of his time in and out of jail.

"Of course yer do." Pickle beamed. "What about the other two?"

Jamie frowned, his face suggesting he was struggling for names. "I think those two only came in a few weeks ago, plus they're both from E Wing."

"This is Laz." Pickle pointed to a weedy-looking prisoner who looked middle-aged. "And this fine looking kid is called Grass."

Jamie waved at Grass, whose real name was Conor Snodgrass. Now Jamie remembered him!

Conor Snodgrass was only twenty years old and was in for rape, but he had told prisoners he was in for GBH. Jamie knew that if Pickle knew the background of Snodgrass, he would kill him there and then. He didn't feel comfortable having a rapist on board, especially with Janine in tow, but he knew that if he opened his mouth, the young boy would be kicked to death for sure by all three prisoners.

On a wing, rapists and child molesters were usually protected by officers to stop them being attacked by other inmates. Some prisons across the country would have separate wings for these types of criminals, but in Stafford prison, they had them on E wing where ten sex offenders lived, and these were protected by opening them up at different meal times, escorting them to the toilet, etc. Jamie hated them, not just because of the crime that they had committed, but the fact that he had to behave like a personal babysitter for them, but he wouldn't want young Grass to be killed, no matter what crime he did in the past.

"No offence," Jamie indicated to Pickle. "But we need to throw you guys in the back."

"That's perfectly fine with us, ain't that right, lads?"

All three of them agreed, with no reluctance on their faces.

"You got any food in the back?" KP called. "I could eat the scabs off a donkey's ring piece."

Jamie and Janine took a gander at one another.

"Don't worry!" Pickle exclaimed, almost as if he could read the two officers' intellects. "We won't eat all yer food, besides, once we make a stop off at ma house, we can get all the food we want and store them in the back o' the van."

"Got a place in mind?" Janine asked.

"Just name yer supermarket. Besides, I think there's a garage up the road, apart from petrol, there should be plenty o' food there as well."

"Sounds like a plan," Jamie responded excitedly. "We can get plenty of jerry cans from the garage and fill them up, but if the electrics go down in the gas stations, we're fucked, 'cos you need to use a switch to activate the pumps. What's at this house?"

"Guns," Pickle declared bluntly. "And there's plenty. So we need to head for Rugeley; there's a place that I think will be perfect. But firstly, I need to make a little stop on the way there. Agreed?"

Jamie smiled, the day was beginning to get better and stopping for Pickle had become a commendable idea.

Jamie spoke with zealous, "Right, Janine, let's get these guys in the back. We've got a garage to go to. By the way, lads, we'll keep those cells open, you're not prisoners now as far as I'm concerned."

Jamie pulled out the specially-designed cell key for the seven tiny cells of the van and put it into the glove compartment.

Janine let them in the back one by one; the cells were already opened and each inmate picked one for themselves. Janine gave them all polite smiles.

First to get in was young Grass; he gave her a shy look and she felt sorry for the young boy, he looked scared out of his wits. The next to go in was Laz; he looked about fifty and was very skinny, his head of hair was completely grey. KP was next to go in; she had heard of him being a tough nut, and despite donning a beard, which was something she didn't find appealing herself, he was an attractive man. He blew her a kiss as he got inside; she responded with a shy smile. It had been a while since she had been with male company.

Last to go in was Pickle. "Don't yer worry, kid." He pointed at Janine. "I'll keep these wee monkeys under control, okay?" He winked and got straight into one of the tiny cells.

“The toilets are at the back,” she announced, forgetting that these men had been in before.

Pickle gave her the thumbs up. He was six foot in height, and his muscular frame was almost as fierce as his reputation, but the forty-three-year-old seemed to be a genuine guy—although shouldn't be crossed.

Janine was a little put out that the guys had turned up; she thought that her and Jamie were getting on great in the short space of time they were out together. Although she did see the benefits of them being around, as she felt safer in numbers especially now that one of them was going to give them guns, she was hoping that it wasn't going to turn into one big boys club. She had only just shut the door to the back of the van, and she was already feeling a little left out.

Chapter 16

As he got to the top of the roof of his neighbour's house, David Pointer had stood up quite easily, putting too much faith in the roof tiles beneath his feet. He side-stepped the short journey to his own skylight and took off the rucksack from his back; he knelt down and saw his wife playing with his daughter, and a languishing smile emerged on his face.

He gently knocked on the glass of the skylight and Davina stood up and opened it. David handed his wife the bag.

“Be back in two minutes,” he announced to his now unhappy wife.

“Where are you going?”

“I just wanna check on the Bairds.”

“Jesus, David, you can't be everyone's saviour, just stay here with us. With your own family.”

“They're a nice family, I just want to see if they and the two girls are okay.”

Davina snarled, “And what about *your* two girls? Can't you just ring 'em?”

“My phone is in the car. It's only next door-but-one, I promise I won't go any further.”

Davina didn't agree with her husband, but it was pointless arguing with him. She shook her head and waved at him as if to say, *do what you want!*

He shut the roof window—or skylight—and made his way back to the top of the roof once more, and the scenes had become more incredible since the last time he had looked. There was more of them roaming around the streets, at least six in his own street, and dozens in the next one. It was frightening to watch, and he turned around with his back facing the macabre scene, and stepped carefully—like a tightrope walker—across the roof.

The houses were built in an eight block of terraces, and David and Davina's was the one at the end, which meant they had one less bedroom, but they had a bigger garden and a drive.

He had finally made it to the third skylight across the block, his being the first, and peered in. People used their attics for various reasons. He used his as a storage room, the Nobles converted theirs into an extra bedroom for their

daughter, the Bairds seemed to have given up on theirs, as it looked like the inside of a shed; it was in a bad state. It looked like it was used for storage.

At least ours is neat and tidy, David thought. Which is where Davina could take all of the credit for that one.

David went to knock on the window of the skylight, but suddenly saw that it had been left slightly open, probably to let the air in on such a stuffy night. He opened it up and his instincts were telling him it was okay to go in.

He jumped inside, his feet slamming the wooden floor so hard that the soles of his feet stung. He had misjudged the height; it was higher than he had thought.

David walked over the closed hatch, bent down and spoke through it.

“Gerry, it's David Pointer from next door-but-one. If you can hear me, give me a holler.”

David waited for a whole minute. He knew this for certain because he timed it on his Accurist wristwatch. He tried again, and repeated the same sentence. Once again there was no answer, but this time he thought, fuck it.

He stood over the attic door and brought the heel of his shoe on top of the latch, although he was wary that there was a small chance he could fall through. He felt it give way a little, and brought it down once more to see it swing open, his momentum almost made him fall down the hatch. He fell backward onto the floor of the attic, and decided to gather his breath before descending to the first floor.

He was about to shout through the now opened hatch once more, but then he bit his lip. He wasn't sure there was anybody in; for all he knew, they could have fled. He couldn't remember if their car was sitting outside or not, so he wasn't entirely sure. Another scenario that entered his mind was that one of them could have been bitten; they could be one of *them* and still inside, and all he had was a hammer!

There was no spiral staircase in the attic, as their attic was like his. It had a set of ladders that needed lowering down. This is exactly what he did; he lowered them as quietly as he could. At least now, if he was to be attacked, there would be a convenient escape route. He stepped down carefully and once he finally reached the bottom of the ladders, he adjusted them so they were easier to climb in case of an emergency.

He crept out of the bedroom and was on the landing; the set-up was the same as his house. There was a bedroom to his left and another two doors to his right; one was another bedroom and a bathroom.

He looked to his left, and with the tips of his fingers, he gently pushed the door open to reveal an empty bedroom. He walked across the landing and looked down the stairs and shouted hello. He was confident that if his voice attracted unwanted attention, as far as the beings were concerned, he could outrun them and be on the roof by the time they got to the top of the stairs. After what he had witnessed from his roof, one thing he was certain of was that, individually, they didn't possess too much of a threat to the average man, but when they were in their hordes or packs, there was a bigger reason to worry.

He continued to glare down the stairs, but there was no answer. He looked behind him and began to check out the two doors to the landing's right. Convinced that the house was empty, his bladder had decided that it needed draining. After doing so, and not flushing just in case the noise attracted unwanted attention

from outside, he left the bathroom and went to the door next to it. Again, the door was closed like the other bedroom, but it hadn't been closed *properly*.

He placed his fingers on the door and pushed the door ajar, his psyche wasn't prepared to take in what he was about to see.

The first thing he could see was the cupboard up against the wall to the right, and he could also see the end of a bed. He stepped inside and walked further into the bedroom where he could now examine the whole of the bed, and the four lifeless figures lying at peace under the duvet. David knew the family well; they were the kind of family that kept themselves to themselves, but broke that rule with the Pointers because their daughters played with Isobel quite often. He tried his hardest to stop weeping.

Tears fell, but he held back his emotional outburst. He thought that the scene he was witnessing, was a scene that was probably happening to many families across the country.

Why would a parent want to bring a child into a new world like this? It was bad enough when humans ran the show.

David moved closer towards the front of the bed; the father was lying on his back with one of the twin girl's arms wrapped around him. The mother was on her side, spooning her other two-year-old daughter. Like their mother, the little girls were gorgeous things, blessed with long golden hair like a field of corn.

What must have those parents gone through at the time, knowing that they were responsible for their deaths?

They must have felt there was no other option. Their short little lives could leave the world sleeping with their parents, or being ripped to pieces by those... things!

Some people were holding out, others, like the Bairds, were not taking the chance.

David thought back to the scenario when the twin towers were burning and people began jumping to their deaths. Whatever option they chose, they were going to die anyway, so in this case, the parents picked the less cruel way to leave this Earth.

On the father's side of the bed, was a side table. On it, was a bottle of water with two empty bottles of painkillers lying on their side, and the powder that could be seen on the table suggested to David's mind that the tablets had to be crushed for the children to take them. The bodies, as well as the evidence how they died, was heartbreaking to see, as he could just imagine the scene and the build-up to it.

He shook his head and tried to erase it from his mind, as David Pointer being mentally ill wasn't an option, especially when he had a wife and a four-year-old daughter relying on him.

Although David wasn't an avid churchgoer, he dropped to his knees and began to say the Lord's Prayer. It was the only prayer he knew from his school days. He felt he needed to do or say something, before leaving the family alone.

He got back to his feet, and left the family in their bed. For a minute, he thought about going downstairs to see what food was available. He was sure his family had enough to keep them going for a week or two, besides, now that the family were dead, it seemed disrespectful to empty their cupboards, and his bag was back at his house anyway. He promised himself that if the supplies began running low he would go back and see what there was to consume. He was hoping it wasn't going

to come to that. He was sure that there would be some kind of government/army intervention by then—or at least, he hoped.

He crept downstairs out of interest, and not on the lookout for food, and peered into the kitchen, the bathroom and then finally the living room. The window of the living room had two of the infected against it; the crack on the window told him that they were trying to get in. As soon as they saw him, a new lease of energy was released and their groaning grew more boisterous. Their pale hands bashed against the huge pane of glass that had no chance of standing that kind of pressure for another ten minutes, he guessed.

One of them, who was dressed in work overalls as if they used to be a mechanic, banged on the window desperately with its fists, blood spat out of its mouth as it continued to moan, tormented that there was food inside, and the only thing that stood in the way was a pane of glass.

David decided not to hang about and ran upstairs; he got to the landing and began to climb the ladders back to the attic. He stopped climbing once he heard the shatter of glass from downstairs, and then continued to the top. He reached for the ladders to bring them back up. He was sure that the things weren't capable of climbing ladders, or stairs for that matter, due to atrophy.

Within a second, a seed of ambiguity was quickly planted in his psyche, and now he was thinking that maybe he wasn't entirely sure this was the case after all. So as an added precaution, he brought up the ladders and closed the hatch as extra insurance.

He could now hear the groans coming from the ground floor. They were in the house!

He didn't know whether they had the ability to climb in, or maybe they had just fallen in through the window after the glass had shattered, and then got back onto their feet. Whatever the reason, they were in, and it sounded like there were more than two of them.

He didn't hang around long enough to count them, and lifted himself up through the skylight. This was hard work; it had been a while since David had been to the gym, and even then, pull-ups were not his strong point. He only needed to do one to get him to the roof, but he struggled nevertheless.

He finally managed to get himself back onto the roof, and welcomed the sunshine that greeted him warmly. He had grazed his leg slightly from a stray tile, but with the way the world was at the moment, there were other things that were going to keep him from sleeping tonight.

He thought about the message from the Nobles. If it was happening in the UK *and* New York, then surely this could be a global catastrophe.

Chapter 17

Karen Bradley's jeep roared like a beast and turned right at the Globe Island, that was now being swarmed upon by at least twenty of the things, and she headed for Draycott Park, back to the area where she lived. She took another

look at the tyre iron on the passenger seat, and kept saying to herself under her breath, "He's already dead. He's already dead."

The seventh time she said it, she broke down for a few seconds and cleared her throat, mentally reprimanded herself for being weak, and widened her eyes into the shapes of flying saucers to stop them from crying. She wiped her eyes to clear her cloudy vision, and took a deep breath, as she turned left into her secluded street. She immediately touched the brake and didn't progress anymore.

She could see her street had at least ten of the things roaming around her road. If she went back to her house, she was convinced that they would bang on her windows until the glass eventually caved in. She didn't want to spend her time locked in her bedroom while these things roamed in the downstairs of her house. At least with wheels, she could move about, get food, get gas, get water, and go somewhere where it was less populated.

"Cocksuckers," she whispered with disdain. Her plan was up in the air. So what next?

She slipped the car into reverse and drove away from her street, heading towards the countryside. Her area was situated on the outskirts of Rugeley, and once she left the town, she would be greeted by two miles of countryside before reaching another populated area. If she continued to go straight on, she would end up in a smaller town called Hednesford. If she took the next left, she would drive up a steep hill and at the top was a secluded wooded area called Stile Cop, it was the highest point in Rugeley. It was popular with ramblers and dog walkers, and to the left and the right of the main steep road were the woods.

She planted her right foot on the gas pedal and sped out of the area. Suddenly her windscreen cracked. It gave her the fright of her life, and she let out a short shriek and lost control of the steering wheel, which span towards the left as she released it. The jeep veered sharply and smashed into a brick wall of a garden, belonging to one of the residents of Draycott Park. It was one of the last houses before the beginning of the countryside.

She straightened her back to compose herself; her neck felt a little stiff, but was aware that the damage to her would have been more extreme if she had been travelling at a higher speed. Her hand took hold of the key once again, and before she had chance to fire the engine once more, she had received another fright as her driver's door suddenly swung open.

A knife was held to her throat and she was told to get out. A middle-aged man leaned over and unbuckled her seatbelt. She scratched the man's face, and for her troubles received a light punch in her stomach. The wind was taken out of her and she was callously dragged out of the jeep; she tried to grab the man and ripped his pocket seeing his wallet fall to the floor. She was then plonked onto the warm tarmac, and as she tried to get up, a younger man, no older than twenty, swung his boot into her midriff. She curled up like a frightened hedgehog. Her weary eyes saw the individuals get into the jeep and the vehicle shot off and turned left as if it was heading for Stile Cop, but it could have been going anywhere, Hazelslade, Upper Longdon or Lichfield. All these places were only a few miles away.

She coughed and couldn't believe the way she had been dealt with. She would have stopped for the men if they'd flagged her, but they had other ideas. It was literally every man for himself.

Why didn't they have a car themselves? She couldn't fathom where they had come from. Maybe they had ran out or were short on fuel. Or maybe the jeep was more beneficial than their own vehicle, because it had more room. Another reason for her carjacking was probably for the vehicle itself. It had a hard steel bumper on the front, it was higher up than the average car, and as proved at Milford, was capable of creating damage to the things when it was going forwards or backwards, and it was less likely to cause engine damage when hitting the beings full-on.

She dragged herself to her feet, coughed a little and was finally beginning to get her breath back, although her stomach was still smarting.

She was on the outskirts of her town and ran over to the cars that sat on the drives; one by one she started to try the doors. She knew there was a chance that the residents were in, but what were they going to do, call the police? She was certain that a police force of any sort probably didn't exist anymore.

She suddenly stopped what she was doing. Why was she trying the cars? She didn't have keys for them, and she certainly hadn't watched enough American TV shows to know how to hotwire one.

She looked around on the main road, and she could see that every house had their curtains drawn. She ran over to the very end house that had a Vauxhall Corsa on the drive. She began to hammer on the front door of the house with her right fist. The commotion she was making was so rambunctious, it was loud enough to wake the first dozen houses, but she didn't care, like the men before her, she had become desperate. At last, a bedroom window opened above her where an elderly man peered over, he looked frightened to death.

"What do you want?" he whispered in fright, and looked over to his left.

"Let me in," Karen ordered with desperation.

"No chance. Besides, I've blocked up the entrance to the door now."

The man was on his way to closing his window when Karen spoke out. "At least give me your car keys."

"Fuck off," was the final reply from the old man as he shut his window.

Karen peered behind her, and once her eyes reported to her brain what she was seeing, her body furiously pumped with adrenaline. The pain in her stomach had miraculously disappeared, and her body had been given a new lease of energy. Without hesitation, she ran as fast as her legs would go. To *her* the legs weren't going fast enough as if they were made of lead, but it would have to do.

She could hear the shuffling behind her and could only assume that the noise from the initial carjacking, as well as the strident banging of doors from herself, had attracted these things. She took a quick look behind her, her neck cracking as she twisted it; there was nine of them and there was one particular one who moved quicker than the others. Some of the others were clumsy-looking, like drunks after a Saturday night, but the now solitary figure that was yards ahead of his compatriots, was even *gaining* on an unfit Karen.

She cursed out loud, and told herself not to turn around and to concentrate on running as hurriedly and as hard as she could, but she possessed an abhorrence image that played in her mind. She was scared that, as she was running, a hand would eventually reach out and pull her to the ground. If she was going to be attacked, she would preferably be face to face to give herself a fighting chance.

She turned left, and now was heading up the long, steep hill that led to a well-known beauty spot called Stile Cop, as well as the woods itself. She cried out in frustration, as even though her life depended on this, she knew she wasn't going to make it. She took another glance behind her, and could see that the hill didn't seem to be a problem for these creatures; they may as well have been moving on a flat surface. She was exhausted and could see the Stile Cop cemetery up ahead before where the incline started; she veered left to find the gates shut and locked. She placed her foot onto the railing and used every last bit of her strength to pull herself up and swing herself over the six-foot gates, and landed on her back onto the grass with a painful thud. She looked to her right as she lay on her back, her lungs burning with pain, aching for oxygen.

She could see the hideous beings all crowding around the gate, their arms reaching in, desperate to touch her, to grab her, to bite her. She was confident that the steel gates were strong enough to hold them, and she remained on her back for a further minute, trying to get her breath back, before getting to her feet.

Her heart skipped once she saw a dozen hands grabbing the gate and trying to shake it open, but it wasn't budging. She looked at the poor souls and saw that amongst them was a little boy called Harry—he lived in her street. Although recognisable, his face was pale; his mouth was bloody as if he had already fed on some poor individual. It was a strange predicament to be in.

Karen was in the local cemetery, and the boy who she had taught to whistle was desperate to rip her to pieces. She thought about if the worst came to the worst. There were nine of them, and she wouldn't stand a fighting chance, as she would be eaten in minutes; devoured before her very eyes until she passed out before her death. It was a death she wouldn't wish on her enemies—not that she had many.

She ran across to the other side of the cemetery, to the disgust of her admirers as they let out disgruntled-like groans as she moved further away. She climbed the fence and jumped onto the other side of the cemetery, and she was now in the woods.

If she ran through the woods to her left, she would be led out to another town called Brereton, but her plan was to avoid populated areas, as she thought the more populated, the more danger there was. She decided to head upwards through the woods; this would eventually lead to the Stile Cop beauty spot that was half a mile away. She could achieve this quicker by running along up the steep hill, but Stile Cop wasn't her intention, staying in the woods and being hidden was. She thought that there was a small chance that those things would eventually work out that if they walked around the perimeter of the cemetery fence, they could get into the woods and be on her trail, but it was a risk she was willing to take.

She decided on the woods for two reasons: one, she didn't really have much of a choice, and two; there were more obstacles for the things to get around. They didn't seem the brightest beings on the planet, but what they did have was a desire, their only goal—like hers—was to feed and survive, and they were determined in achieving that goal. They seemed devoid of much emotion, which told Karen that they had no sense of danger and feared nothing, which also made them extremely dangerous, and she guessed that they probably didn't sleep either, if they were classed as dead.

She had already tested out the theory of outrunning them on a flat road, and it was a battle she had nearly lost because of her already heavy and tired legs from working nightshift. The woods would provide a different scenario for them—or so she hoped. They walked and even ran awkwardly, and Karen was hoping that the woods would slow down their progress if they tried to follow her in.

She remembered playing in there as a kid, and if the place was similar to her memory she had of it as a child, then there was numerous obstacles that should slow them down like chopped down trunks from wood poachers, ditches, and a lot of rocks to climb, as well as the incline itself. Despite their persistence, balance didn't seem to be their strong point, even on a flat surface.

She waved her hands in front of her, brushing away the branches as she strolled through the condensed woods. She took one last look behind her before she progressed deeper, until the trees began to cover the sight of the cemetery. They were still at the gate, although one began to wander away back onto the road and headed back towards Rugeley. She could just about see this through the gaps in the trees, and it made her think that maybe the rest would follow the solitary figure back to the town.

She was convinced, however, that it was only a matter of time before they began stumbling their way up, following her trail. She still didn't understand too much about them; the only information she had was what she briefly saw on the television. She wasn't aware if they followed movement, or if they could actually pick up a scent the way animals did. She didn't have the answer, but she was aware there was a brook up ahead and that the first thing she was going to do was walk in it.

The two reasons she wanted to do this was to cool her body down—she was perspiring heavily and had no water on her. The other reason was to throw off a possible scent in case their instincts told them to enter further into the woods. Of course, she was unsure whether this would do any good and if it would slow down their progression, but she thought it couldn't do any harm. She had seen it many times in the movies before, where the bloodhounds were chasing the escaped prisoner, so she thought that it was worth a shot.

Chapter 18

As they finally left Glasgow City Centre over the bridge, Jack Slade turned the car right and drove through a small place called Tradeston. The traffic lights were still working, but obviously he wasn't adhering to their command.

As he passed the Springfield Quay, alongside the River Clyde, he saw another car in the distance and it flashed its headlights, and the driver gave Jack the thumbs up as he speedily passed his Vauxhall Meriva. Another two cars could be seen speeding out from a junction and waved at him as they went by. The two cars looked like they had children in them, and Jack hoped that wherever their destination, hopefully they would get there in one piece.

He zoomed through the lights, still naturally looking to the side to see if there were pedestrians waiting to cross, even though Paisley Road West was deserted.

He looked to his left to the passenger seat; Robbie was still in an uncomfortable position. His head was back and he continued to grab his injured shoulder from the car park incident. Jack had promised Robbie that when they got to his home, he would strap him up and try and call Robbie's family to see if they were okay. He looked to be having a fever, the blood looked drained from his face, and cold sweat emerged in pearly drops on his forehead. He then closed his eyes.

"Don't fall asleep on me now," Jack warned.

Robbie responded immediately by opening his eyes, and looked over to his driver and said, "I nearly dropped off there. Don't forget I've just done a twelve-hour nightshift."

"You can get some sleep when you get to my house," Jack said sternly.

As he began passing Bellahouston Park, he saw to the right of him, the large police station. "Wait a minute."

He pulled over, and got out of his car and ran over the empty road to the entrance of the police station. His feet stopped once he saw seven bodies lying on the tarmac of the police station's entrance. The bodies looked fresh and had been shot, and the concrete around them was covered in blood.

He attempted to shake the image off and then tried the large double glass doors that led to where the public would walk in for enquiries, but the doors were firmly shut, in fact, there were a few obstacles put in front of the door—a filing cabinet and a couple of tables.

He looked up to the first floor and saw the twitch of a set of blinds.

A police station would be perfect, he thought; they had guns, protected vans, and a secure building.

He shouted up at the first floor window, but there was zero response. The blinds twitched once more; he saw briefly two people gazing at the cause of the commotion.

He half-laughed at what was happening. He looked up at the sign over the reception area where a banner hung, it said: *Strathclyde Police: To protect your community*. He shook his head with dismay, and was certain that there was probably dozens upon dozens of uniformed officers in there. He really *was* on his own.

Jack lost all control and banged on the glass of the doors and began to sob. No words came out of his mouth; it was noises, noises of frustration and faintheartedness. He didn't really blame the police; if he was in their position he may have done the same, they were only human after all. He obliterated his tears and saliva with his uncovered forearm, and tried to compose himself.

Jack took another look up to the window, and lowered his head in defeat. He looked around to see no sign of life, no people and none of those beings either, just the seven bodies that lay on the tarmac behind him. The closer he looked, the more it appeared that they had been shot more than once. They had been massacred.

He then looked back at the police station and thought, surely not. *Did our own police force shoot these people? Why? Because they wanted to get in? Because they were scared and demanded why their police force had abandoned them? Were they shot because of the noise they were making?*

As he began to walk away he heard the window of the first floor open; in the background he could hear a few voices protesting about the opening of the window. Then he heard a voice say to a colleague, "It's just a man on his own."

The face of a middle-aged man peered out. The policeman above Jack finally spoke. "We have an armed unit inside, waiting for those...things. We can't help you; we're under strict instructions. I'm sorry; don't come back here. Good luck, wee guy."

Jack looked behind him and glared at the dead bodies, their blood covered the concrete steps. "And what happened to these people?"

The policeman then began to sob, and cried, "God, forgive us." He was then pulled away from view by a pair of hands and the window was shut firmly.

Jack stared at the bodies again in disbelief. After a thirty-second misbelieving gaze, he jogged over to the car to see Robbie had fallen asleep. He got into the car and drove away.

Five minutes later he was in Pollok. He was home.

He lived in a large and long street called Broomlaw Road, and although he had passed a dozen of the infected, the reasonably populated street was bare of human or other kind of life.

He pulled up on his drive and tried to wake Robbie up, but he wasn't budging. He tried slapping his face but the big man was in too much of a deep sleep. Unless Jack opened the passenger side of his door and kicked him out onto the floor, there didn't seem to be any way of waking him up, even then, he wasn't convinced that this would stir him.

He decided to leave the man inside the car; he wasn't bleeding heavily and providing the car was locked up, he was sure he would be safe, besides, Jack Slade wasn't preparing to hang around for too long. The sooner he dropped Robbie off at his home—wherever that was, the better. At least then the only thing he could concentrate on was driving south to see his son.

He had already made his mind up.

If he was going to die within the next week or month, he wanted his last days to be spent with his boy.

Jack got into his house and locked himself in; he needed caffeine and the first thing he did was fill the kettle. He got a teaspoon from his drawer and took two spoons of coffee and placed them in his mug. He then went into the cupboard and pulled out his bag; he walked back into the kitchen and began to fill his bag with whatever he thought was edible and drinkable, also some toiletries were placed inside.

Although extremely heavy, he was satisfied that his bag was as full as it could be. He opened the front door again and nervously scanned his street; one curtain twitched from across the road, and he could understand why the roads were not so busy. If people thought there was a chance they could die, they would rather die in their own homes with their families. But there were others, like Jack, who had no choice *but* to travel. He would rather stay in his house and wait for the situation to pass, but the waiting and not knowing whether his son was well or not, would torture him.

After putting the bag in the car and closing the boot, he walked back into the house.

He made his coffee, and plonked the bloodied cleaver that Robbie had given him by his feet as he sat down on the sofa.

He switched on the TV and found that the channels had been ditched apart from an announcement on the BBC. He reached down for his mug and took a noisy slurp of his coffee, and continued watching the TV for any movement. After ten minutes he stood to his feet, and walked to his bathroom to go for a pee, then returned to the living room.

In bemusement, he stared at the cleaver and picked it up and then scrunched his eyes outside and finally turned his attention to the mirror. "Well... this isn't weird at all." His sentence was drenched in sarcasm, but that was Jack Slade. Sarcasm was a part of his defensive mechanism, and the truth was, he was frightened to death at what was occurring. It was either sarcasm or tears.

He took a deep breath, took a bandage to wrap Robbie up, and was now ready to leave. He needed to wake Robbie up to ask him where he lived, then once he was dropped off, he could concentrate on seeing his boy. Danger or no danger, Thomas was his main priority and he needed to be with him. Hiding in his house and hoping that his son survived, would mentally torture him and wasn't an option as far as Jack Slade was concerned.

With the cleaver in hand, he headed for the door. He opened the door to the outside and his eyes immediately saw the sight of Robbie convulsing in the passenger seat of his car. It looked like he was having an epileptic fit.

As Jack stepped onto his drive and got nearer, he was sure that that wasn't the real situation that was occurring. Robbie had turned into one of *them*. Jack could tell by the look on his face that he was no longer human; his face was deathly-white, his eyes looked sunken and bruised, and he was foaming at the mouth, his arms flapping, desperate to get out of the vehicle, desperate to get to Jack.

Knowing that he needed the car, Jack approached the passenger side with apprehensive steps. He had to let him out.

He blew out his cheeks and reached for the passenger handle with his left hand; the defunct Robbie was smacking his head against the window of the door, desperate to get out. Blood emerged the more it smashed itself, and Jack thought that if this continued, then there was no chance he could drive nearly five hundred miles down south with a broken window, as it would be too dangerous.

Okay you fat fuck, calm down!

He opened the door immediately. The thing fell out onto the floor easily, as initially Robbie and Jack were not wearing seatbelts, and then it struggled to get to its feet.

Jack stepped backwards and was now back near his front door; the beast was by the car and was ten yards away from Jack. He looked at the wounded shoulder of Robbie, and had come to his own conclusion that that was how he received the infection.

The cleaver was held tightly. He ran at Robbie and took a swipe at the thing and caught its face. Jack felt his heart beating out of control, like it was going at the speed of a drumbeat from a frantic dance tune. He raised the cleaver once again and struck it across the face again, the thing was unfazed from the slice to its cheek. It was five yards away and Jack had promised himself that if the next swipe failed, then he would lock himself into the house. *Why ain't you going down?*

What was going on? He was supposed to be a poorly paid office worker in Glasgow City Centre, and now here he was, aiming a cleaver at an infected being who would gladly rip him to pieces with its own teeth!

He didn't have time to dwell on the surrealism that was unfolding, he knew that a lack of focus could cost him his life.

He then remembered how he and Robbie had taken care of the things in the city centre. He released one more strike that penetrated the front of the cranium. Jack let go of the embedded cleaver and took a defensive jump back. It stopped walking and then the thing overdramatically fell to its knees, like Dafoe in Platoon but without the outstretched arms, and collapsed face down two feet away from Jack's shoes. The dark blood oozed slowly out of the wound like thick oil.

He moved his shoes out of the way before it reached them. *Thank fuck for that.* He removed the cleaver and took a look at the passenger window and sighed; it desperately needed a clean. He went inside to find some cleaning utensils, but first, he needed to sit down before he passed out. He was still feeling fragile from his alcoholic indulgence over the weekend, and this strange pandemic wasn't helping matters as far as his nerves were concerned. He thought about Robbie's family and felt the suffocation of sadness, but appeased himself when he reminded himself that he was already dead before he hacked him to death.

Chapter 19

Their journey was wordless as they left the town of Stafford; there was a cloud of nervousness above them, as they didn't know what would greet them as they headed towards Cannock Chase. They didn't want to take the scenic route to get to the town of Rugeley, but they knew that there was a petrol station not so far away and Little Haywood was also a destination that Pickle wanted to stop at.

They had also agreed that getting food in a populated area could be counterproductive because of the amount of things that could be strolling about, and also there was more of a chance that the kiosks had been already looted in the more populated areas.

The van pulled up at the station. Apart from a blue abandoned Mazda snoozing on the forecourt, the area was barren. Jamie Thomson pulled up the parking brake and looked around; he then heard banging to the back of him, the prisoners were hinting to be let out and he assumed the hammering mainly came from Pickle.

Jamie jumped out of the van and opened up the back. All four prisoners jumped out and Laz headed towards the kiosk, followed by Pickle and Grass. As the three inmates began to loot the kiosk with no hesitation, Jamie asked Grass to find the authorisation switch in the kiosk, and once he flicked the switch, Jamie tried to top up the van with more fuel. It had only been running for a minute before the fuel began to spill out. The tank was already full.

Janine cocked her head out of the passenger window. "I thought you had a full tank, *and* jerry cans?"

“We have,” Jamie called back. “Just topping up, just dunno when the power will go down.”

KP walked to the passenger side and gave Janine a smile. She smiled back and said, “I know your face, but I don't think I ever worked on your wing.”

“Oh, I certainly know you.” KP grinned. “You're the prison pin-up.”

Janine assumed that this was supposed to be a compliment, but with most of the prisoners being incarcerated for so long, it was understandable that their chatting-up techniques had deteriorated over the years, due to lack of practice.

“Really?” Janine sounded unimpressed. “I'm about fourteen pounds overweight with a fat rear, and I'm the pin up?”

She used her fingers to comb back her short blonde hair over her ears; her body language made KP aware that although his patter was substandard, she seemed flattered by the male attention.

Two minutes later, the inmates came back from the kiosk with bags of food, pre-packed sandwiches, crisps and chocolate.

“Not the healthiest o' food,” Pickle admitted. “But it's food all the same. Once we get to ma place, we can stop off at the supermarket and get some real stuff.”

“Thanks for the help, KP!” Laz spoke with sarcasm.

KP held up his hand apologetically.

“There's plenty more water in there if yer no' too busy,” Pickle moaned as he struggled with the four bags of food, two bags in each hand.

“I'm on it,” KP said, and blew Pickle a kiss.

KP jogged towards the kiosk and was followed in by Jamie; they grabbed carrier bags and put the two litre bottles of water in them. They had managed to get three in each bag, which meant they were now leaving the establishment with twelve bottles—twenty-four litres of water. They placed the water in the back where Pickle seemed to be the organised one, by using three of the seven cells of the van as a store cupboard for the food.

“Need water?” KP asked Pickle.

Pickle nodded. “Got another cell that I could fill. Get plenty o' water and juice, even cans.”

“What about tea and coffee?” Jamie queried, but nobody had time to answer him.

“Guys!” Janine called out from the van. “I think it's time to go.”

Jamie, Laz and Grass turned to their right to look at Janine peering her head out of the passenger window. Pickle looked out also and saw Janine pointing towards the farmers field, next to the garage.

There were seven of them; all stumbling around as if they had just escaped from a psychiatric ward. They were spread out; the two at the front were reasonably close at about fifty yards away, and the others were further behind. The furthest away was about two hundred yards away. This was the group's first experience with the beings.

“Where did they come from?” Jamie asked.

“Must be the wee village about half a mile away from here,” Pickle responded.

“Better get outta here,” Jamie spoke, and began clapping his hands to hurry everybody up, forgetting he wasn't in the prison anymore.

KP tittered, “No way, this is an opportunity not to be missed.”

Pickle agreed and patted Jamie on the chest. "This is legal killing; us inmates have got some tension to get rid off. Remember what the radio said, KP. Damage the brain."

Jamie shook his head as the two men began to trot towards the field; Jamie looked at Grass, who cowered and went back into the van. Jamie knew that Grass would probably come unstuck against one of those things one on one, and although it may have looked cowardly, he picked the correct option in retreating to the van. Laz was the same; he was middle-aged and shook his head in exasperation at the two fools who were treating it like a big joke.

"It's ridiculous, if you ask me," Laz blabbed to Jamie, he looked about sixty probably due to his excessive drug taking on the wings, but Jamie was sure he was only in his forties. "All they're gonna do is get exhausted and possibly get blood over the only set of clothes they've got. Fuckin' idiots. What happens if one of them gets bitten? We'd have to leave them. We heard about this virus on the radio and TV in our cells before you let us out."

Jamie and Laz couldn't do anything now, but to watch as the two inmates let loose their fury and frustration on the first two beings. It was a fair distance away, and Jamie, although keeping his eyes on the 'fight,' walked around to see Janine.

"Don't ask," Jamie said before Janine had the chance to demand what on earth the muttonheads were up to.

Janine looked tetchy as the inmates struck the lifeless figures; the five others that sauntered behind them had managed to find an extra release of energy, and were gaining on them. Pickle and KP were now seen stamping on the head of one of them. As the other struggled to get to its feet, Pickle booted it in the face and stamped on its head three times. Noticing that the other five were half-galloping their way towards potential food, the prisoners retreated, which forced Jamie and Janine to breathe a sigh of relief as Pickle and KP began to run back towards the van.

Pickle looked out of breath when he returned, and spoke between breathing once he got back to the van. "T'was harder than I thought. We're gonna definitely need those guns," he laughed, almost out of breath, then pointed to Jamie. "Little Haywood first, then Rugeley."

"What's in Rugeley again?"

"The highest point, and possibly the safest place to go."

"If you mean Stile Cop, it's not technically in Rugeley."

"Just go," Pickle half-laughed, who was in no mood for a geography lesson, and got into the front of the van. Jamie and Janine looked at one another, wondering what he was doing. "We may be out in the open at Stile Cop, but we'd be out o' the way o' the carnage and it'd be easier for us to escape with a truck and the open roads in the countryside."

"Err," Jamie began, "are you sitting in the front with us?"

"Well, I need to show yer where to go, don't I?" Pickle jokingly protested.

KP arrived a second later. Also out of breath, and waved his hand in defeat. "Let's go." He took a look over at the abandoned Mazda and decided against it; it was tempting, but being in a secure van was probably the safest way to travel at the moment, even though he wasn't driving it.

He jumped into the back, and Janine got out to shut the back of the door. Jamie looked behind to see that the bodies of the dead were fifty yards away.

“Wait a second.” Pickle raised his hand, and Jamie, although he had taken off the parking brake, kept the van stationary using clutch control. The five remaining creatures shambled onto the forecourt, behind the van, and could be seen in the side mirror.

As soon as Janine returned to the van, Pickle ordered, “Slip it into reverse, and hit the gas hard.”

Jamie did what he was told and hit the gas pedal, feeling the thuds hitting the back of the van.

“Ooh, that's gotta hurt,” Pickle cackled, and clapped his hands in delight.

Jamie wasn't moved by Pickle's little plan, but was surprised to see Janine smiling to herself—she obviously found the incident funny.

Jamie was hoping that Pickle was going to be a bit more responsible once they were all carrying guns. The last thing they needed was a psycho with a gun and began using these things as some sort of duck shoot.

For the first time, Jamie began to have doubts about picking up the inmates. He hoped that he would be proved wrong.

Jamie looked over to Pickle, who gave the officer a cheeky wink.

The officer drove the van out of the forecourt and took a look at Janine, who gazed at him with a smile so small and thin, it looked like a stitch sitting under her nose. Her eyes looked glassy and her face was soaked in concern for the future. Jamie could understand how she felt. The inmates seemed pleased just to be free, and the whole enormity of what was happening to the country hadn't hit them yet, especially KP and Pickle.

Jamie blew air out of his mouth and gazed at the road ahead, wondering where it was going to take them. The future didn't look bright, but for now, he was still alive, and had to be thankful for that.

Chapter 20

According to her watch, it had been twenty minutes since the incident at the cemetery, and Karen Bradley had now finally calmed down. Her heart had stopped jabbing the inside of her chest, her breathing was now similar to a normal human being, rather than a person who sounded like their face had been temporarily covered with a polythene bag. Her perspiring had subsided, as before, her forehead was reminiscent of a dripping shower-head that hadn't been turned off properly.

She looked at her undecorated fingers and thought of Gary. When he had proposed he gave her a ring, but she always refused to wear it for work, as she was paranoid in case she lost it. It was still in her dresser drawer, but she was never going to get it back now. She had stopped walking for the last ten minutes, and as soon as she sat down, a heavy duvet of tiredness had covered her, and despite the horrendous situation the country was in, her body was aching for sleep.

Her head fell forwards an inch, and she bolted up as her sleep deprivation gave her a fright. She rubbed her hands over her face and playfully slapped herself. Her nightshift at the hospital was catching up with her, and now the adrenaline was wearing off and she was finding it difficult to keep her eyes open. She looked at her watch and knew that normally she would have been in bed for at least an hour by now, after a ten-minute foot massage from Gary.

She shot up, and her body was in a right angle shape and her back was now straight with tension. Karen placed the palm of her hands on the grass to compose herself and took a look at the time, she had been out for an hour.

She couldn't believe it.

She couldn't believe how stupid she had been.

It was an hour her body needed, but she was exposed out in the woods, and the cemetery incident happened only five hundred yards away. There was no guarantee that those things wouldn't follow her into the woods.

She brushed the grass and twigs out of her dark brown shoulder-length hair, and mustered up the energy to get to her feet. As soon as she did this, she heard a crack, and wasn't sure if it was her knee or a twig being stepped on in the distance—she was hoping it was her knee.

She heard another crack that confirmed that her knee wasn't the original culprit. And although she was certain she could outrun one of those things, now her body was refreshed a little, she still shook with trepidation.

It came from her right, deeper into the woods. She glared at the full bloomed, condensed, suffocating trees, and could see nothing but outstretched branches. She took a paranoid look around her, before glaring back in the same direction, in case she was surprised by one of them from behind. The more she stared, the more she wanted something to be there, so at least then she would know which way to run. It was the waiting that was killing her.

She looked around to see if there was anything she could use for a weapon; she moved five yards to her left and found a branch the same weight and length as a club.

She ripped off the smaller branches that were attached to the broken branch and kept it in her right hand. Now that the smaller twigs had been removed, it now resembled something that could damage an individual, if need be.

She took a practise swing as if she was playing softball, and was appeased that it wasn't too heavy to use if the moment of desperation arrived. She continued to gander into the crowded wood and thought that she saw a flash of a garment. Whoever was in there, they were wearing a red top. She was seriously thinking about running, but needed to see for definite that it was one of those things first.

Although she appreciated that it was a wacky thing she was executing, her mind was focused on following the figure that seemed to be twenty yards in front of her. Now she was walking deeper into the woods, and even though her own walk created the sound of rustling and the snapping of defunct twigs beneath her feet, she continued to pursue the figure that looked to be on its own.

The figure had stopped moving and as she crept closer, she was appreciative that her breathing was becoming less clamorous as the agitation intensified within her.

She wasn't certain that whatever *she* could see, had not seen *her*. As she was now only ten yards away from the motionless figure that remained on its feet, she dropped gently to her knees to get a better look, and grabbed the thick branch tightly, now with both hands wrapped around it. She waited for it to make a move. Despite only being ten yards away, the condensed area still hid most of the figure and the only thing she could make out was that it was wearing a red top and combat trousers. She was beginning to feel pain in her left calf and moved off her knees to a squatting position, which created a light rustle.

"Who's there?" a male voice quizzed in a threatening whisper.

Her eyes widened once the person spoke. It was human, a male human. She wasn't on her own. He asked the question again.

Karen stood to her feet. "Hello," came her short salutation.

His hands grabbed some of the branches that were disguising the female he could only half-see, and once he released the last branch, he walked into a spatial part of the woods where she was now standing. He was tall, had blonde, short hair, had a prominent chin and was carrying a sports bag on his back.

"Thank God." He placed the palm of his hand on his chest. "I thought I was all alone. My name is Oliver. Oliver Bellshaw."

Karen lowered the club, and never realised it was possible to release a half-laugh and a half-cry simultaneously, but she somehow managed it, and the relief she felt was immense.

"Karen," she began and held out her hand. "Karen Bradley."

As soon as she shook his hand, Karen sat down on the grass and put her head in her hands, she waved her dukes at Oliver apologetically. "I'm sorry, I'm just off nightshift and I'm knackered."

"Ah, I noticed the uniform. How did you get here?"

Oliver decided to sit next to Karen, and let out a lengthy sigh.

"It's crazy what's happening," Karen said, oblivious that she had just ignored Oliver's question. The tiredness was mashing with her head.

Oliver nodded. "I woke up and went down to my local shop for a newspaper. Got attacked on the way there by two drunks... at least at first I *thought* they were drunks. I ran off, but they followed me back home. I tried to call the police, couldn't get an answer. Then I made myself a cup of tea to calm myself down and I put the TV on. The only channel I could get was the foreign channels. I couldn't believe what was happening. Then I left again to see if my mother was okay, this time in my car, but I got stuck in a ditch."

Karen felt her nose all blocked up and unashamedly turned away from Oliver and emptied each individual nostril, by blowing out and pressing the other with her thumb. "What about your family?"

Unbothered by Karen's action, Oliver answered her question. "Well, I don't have kids, if that's what you mean. Me and the wife tried for years, but it never happened. Should be thankful now, I suppose. I only have my mum left."

She wiped her nose on her forearm once. She never made eye-contact when she asked him the next question, as if she wasn't really that interested. "Where's your wife?"

Oliver shrugged his shoulders. "We separated two years ago; I tried to ring her, but she has a new guy now. I suppose she's not my problem anymore, and I'm not hers either. She never tried to call me."

"Maybe there was a good reason for that." Karen pulled an awkward face once she said what she had said; it wasn't something that she could take back. She probably thought that Oliver had thought about this as well, but to hear from someone else that maybe your wife was dead, probably wasn't the easiest thing to hear.

Clearly upset by Karen's remark, Oliver cleared his throat and asked with a shudder in his voice. "What about you?"

"I had a boyfriend." Karen felt a dull ache in her stomach; a mixture of emotions and the beating she had received from her carjacking experience was the cause of this. She knew that she was seconds away from bursting into tears. "He turned into one of them."

"Bitten?"

Karen shook her head and screwed her face, creating wrinkles. "I don't know. I didn't see a bite. I think he was scratched, and then went to bed unaware he was infected."

Oliver shuffled his backside to get comfortable. "According to the TV, before I lost the picture, there has been some kind of rabies outbreak in the north. It seems that they're passing on the virus through the mouth."

Karen placed her hand over her mouth, and gulped to prevent her sobbing, forcing some contents to escape from her nose. She sniffed hard immediately, trying to hide her embarrassment and said, "I just can't believe it."

"They reckon if one of them bites you, you're screwed. If you get ambushed by a gang of them, then prepare for a fate worse than death. Being eaten alive isn't my way of going, I can tell you that. Crazy isn't it?"

"What is?" Karen quizzed.

"Our family members, whether it's cousins, nieces, nephews... are either dead, or are somewhere frightened to death, and for some reason I don't feel anything, not yet."

"You're probably numb, it's shock. I've had a few breakdowns already, I can tell you."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm incredibly sad, but don't feel the urge to cry yet."

"Probably the best way to be."

Karen yawned and Oliver noticed a little white gunk at the end of her lips; she looked dehydrated. He took off his bag and ruffled in it, then pulled out a litre of water and handed it to her.

"You sure?"

Oliver smirked. "Drink the lot, I've got more in here."

He also took out a chocolate bar and handed it to Karen, and then took out a can of coke for himself. He cracked the can open, and swigged it furiously, two drops of coke ran down each corner of his mouth. He scrunched the can and let out a huge belch, which made Karen smile, and he tossed the crushed can into the bushes.

"So what now?" he picked Karen's brains.

She shrugged her shoulders.

He added, "It's gonna be dark in ten hours, and we can't stay here permanently."

"What do you suggest?"

"Well, I was gonna try and walk along the main country road to that little village, Hazelslade. See if any kind people would put me up. I suppose putting up a camp at Stile Cop would be the safest bet, depends if the place is swarming with the Snatchers, I suppose."

"Snatchers?"

"Short for Bodysnatchers." Oliver smiled. "My little nickname for them—okay, so I heard it on the radio," he confessed. He looked at Karen, as she yawned once more. She looked exhausted.

"Look," Oliver began. "Let me make a suggestion. I know you hardly know me, but you look shattered. Why don't you get an hour, I was planning on resting myself anyhow."

Oliver was expecting Karen to spew out excuses that she didn't need any more sleep, and was surprised to see her nod in agreement. "I think we're pretty safe in here... for now."

In such a short space of time, she trusted him. This flattered him. He smiled at her and took a short handled axe and a jumper out of his bag. He suggested that she could use the jumper as a cushion if she wanted.

Overwhelmed by such a small gesture, she accepted his offer, pecked the kind man on the cheek, and was asleep within the minute.

Chapter 21

After taking in valuable seconds of sunlight onto his face, David Pointer side-stepped his way across the Baird's roof as all four family members lay dead in their bed beneath him. He was getting nearer to his house and was now on his neighbour's roof that belonged to the New York-stranded Noble family. He scanned the area below him with his scared eyes, and saw that his own street was becoming busier with the things.

He stood and eyeballed intently, trying to count the beasts using his index finger. In his street alone, he counted twenty-three. He felt that in a week, if no help was provided, he and his family were going to have to spend their days in the attic. It was surely only a matter of time before the creatures forced their way into his house. His front door wasn't very strong and could be kicked in by a ten-year-old; they never felt the urge to replace it, as the crime in the town was non-existent, apart from the odd drunken misdemeanour. He lived in a great community where everyone knew each other, and only one household in his street had a burglar alarm, proving how crime-free the place was.

He heard a groan coming from underneath him, and turned to see one of the creatures shuffling about in the Noble's back garden.

Shit! The gate at the front that leads to an alleyway into the back garden must have been opened. Which meant, if one of them could get in there, the back garden could be eventually entertaining the whole street.

His left foot slipped on one of the tiles and it brought back memories of David telling his neighbour that his roof was a disgrace, and that he should get it re-roofed in the next five years.

His neighbour claimed that they couldn't afford the ten grand that it cost, and that David should rightly mind his own fucking business. Even though it was none of his business, David was anxious for them to get it done, because it was making his house look untidy, and it was the only house of the block of eight that hadn't been re-tiled in the last ten years. From the outside it looked dirty and grimy, and it certainly felt like that under his feet. He hadn't noticed it before, as previously he walked across the spine of the roof, but now he was in the middle of it, desperate to get back to his family.

Thinking that the spine method was more than likely the safest way to get back to his own skylight, he headed upwards. A tile from underneath his left foot fell loose, causing him to fall flat on his stomach, and felt a dull sensation in his middle where he landed on the hammer that was tucked into his belt.

He could feel his body slowly sliding downwards, only about two inches per second, but it was enough to send panic through his body. His desperate hands tried to grab onto something that would stop his momentum, but all that happened was that he grabbed a tile that would immediately come away. His slow momentum was held up by the weak guttering where his two feet were pressed up against. He was unsure how to get out of the situation, and frantically looked behind him to see where the thing was.

He couldn't see where it was, so he accepted that it was probably underneath him by the house, waiting for his fall, and the falling tile that slid off and shattered on the concrete floor was to blame for attracting the thing.

He looked down to his left and saw the start of the house drainpipe, and thought that if he could somehow slide to the side and fall down to the drainpipe, he could hold on and swing himself back into his own garden. Then he could climb up his own drainpipe, providing he hadn't broken his leg, and head upwards onto his own roof, where the climb to the skylight should be a little less troublesome. Trying to climb upwards, back towards the spine of the roof was suicidal and not an option.

He wasn't thinking about the knife that was sitting in the guttering, he had completely forgot about that incident. The knife sat in the guttering only inches away from his feet, but he didn't even notice it.

Without an ounce of dawdling, he released his grip and allowed his body to slip, and threw his feet over the guttering to continue the slide and wrapped his arms around the drainpipe. It was easier than he had envisaged.

He could see beneath him, and his assumptions from before were correct, the ex-human being was underneath him. It was waiting on his fall, impatiently, and made an awful growling noise. The thing looked like it used to be an elderly gentleman. If it was a resident from his own street, he didn't recognise it.

David slid further down the drainpipe and looked to his left, seeing that his garden was only feet away. If he timed his jump wrong, there was a large chance that he could make contact with the six-foot wooden fence, which at best would leave him with broken ribs and he would fall back into his own garden. And at

worst, he could be left with broken ribs and into the garden where his predator stood.

As he slid further down the pipe, the desperate groans became more audible. David was now eight feet from the ground, and this was the moment he was going to use his feet to spring off the wall and land very uncomfortably on his grass lawn.

He feared that a damaged shoulder was going to be inevitable, but he preferred this option rather than facing what was waiting underneath him.

He leaned back, whilst clinging onto the pipe with desperate hands, and before he had the chance to push himself off over into his own garden, he could hear and feel the pipe giving way to his two hundred pound frame. It was now or never, but his reluctance to jump became his downfall, as the pipe moved further away from the house. A bracket that was drilled into the wall had come away, and David Pointer jumped backwards, facing the house, and landed on top of the thing that was waiting for him.

He quickly clambered to his feet, frightened that he was going to get bitten, and ran to the end of the Noble's garden like a frightened child.

The creature slowly got to its feet and staggered towards him. David looked at his fence, and thought that he could climb over it before the creature reached him, but something stopped him from doing this.

He felt that if he didn't dispose of this thing now, it would see him escaping and climbing to his roof. Meaning, that this almost unstoppable being would relentlessly try and get into his garden and this would also attract the attention of others. He needed to do this for the safety of Davina and Isobel.

He pulled out the hammer from his belt and saw the thing snarl like some prehistoric creature. He remembered what he saw on TV. *Aim for the head.* David was unsure whether one hammer blow would be enough, but with both hands he rained the first blow as it came into striking range. The thing fell to the floor, and David ran over to the other side of the garden, scared witless he was going to get grabbed or feel the awful teeth sinking into his warm flesh.

He went over and closed the wooden gate that led to the front of the house, in case others tried to get in. It slowly got to his feet, and sped towards him. The quickness of the thing took him by surprise the second time round; he nearly dropped the hammer but he autonomously rained another blow, this time catching the side of its head. It was a weak effort compared to the first one, but David put that down to lack of preparation because of the scare he received as the beast galloped towards him.

The thing wasn't that quick, it went after him about the speed of a gentle jog, but because initially the being looked docile and clumsy, the unexpected speed of its attack scared the shit out of him.

He ran to the other end of the garden once more; he saw a curtain twitch five-doors down, telling him that his family wasn't the only one trying to survive. He envisaged the whole street peering out towards the back, egging him on, urging him to kill at least one of those fuckers! He hardly felt like Crowe in *Gladiator*, neither did the back garden feel like the Coliseum, but knowing he was being watched spurred him on.

It trundled towards him, the same way a man would after consuming a bottle of vodka, and David's third and final blow smashed through the front skull of the creature; dark liquid spat out and went over his shoulder, thankfully missing his face altogether.

Its eyes rolled. The hammer was still embedded into the top of the skull as the thing fell to its side and collapsed onto the grass. David didn't have time to wallow in his victorious battle, or bow before his audience, as the wooden gate that he had just shut was being rattled.

There was more trying to get in from the street!

Many more!

Taking the hammer, he climbed the fence, and swung his body over to his own back garden and landed on his feet. He looked to his own gate, satisfied that it was bolted, and ran towards the back of his house, and although out of breath, he began to climb his own drainpipe, hoping that this one would hold out. It did.

Many tiles were lost as he climbed his way to his skylight, and before he knocked on the glass for his wife to let him in, he took a look over his right shoulder to the Noble's back garden. *Fuck! They're in!*

He shook his head with despair, and cursed himself for being so moronic, for being so nosey and for trying to be a damn hero! He had now put his family in danger, something a father should never do. He wondered even more now, if staying in his house was the right thing to do as he glared hypnotically at the garden.

"There's fucking loads of 'em," he muttered under his breath.

At least twenty of them roamed around, but they were still pouring into the back garden via the forced opened gate from the street. It was like a garden party for the dead, but where was the buffet? Some of them looked up at David and strolled towards the six-foot wooden obstacle that prevented them from getting to the house from the back.

David thought that the fence didn't matter, all they needed to do was go around the front and try and get in through the living room window. It was blocked off, but it hadn't been tested yet.

Surely it was only a matter of time before they forced their way in.

Chapter 22

Jack Slade finished slurping his tepid coffee and decided to go to the toilet before embarking on his journey south. After he had finished, he picked his landline phone up, and dialled Kerry's house number, as he didn't know her mobile number off the top of his head—that information was in his smashed phone on Argyle Street. It rung out, and after four rings, Jack Slade didn't know if calling Kerry would be a counterproductive action, but he needed to tell her that he was coming. There was no way he was going to stay in Glasgow; he wanted to be with his son, whatever it took.

Inside his head, a voice was telling him: *If they live in a remote or sufficiently defensible area, they may be safer than you are. Don't get yourself killed by rushing to them assuming they need your help.*

Jack knew that the greater distance between him and his son, the more difficult it would be to reach him, and there could be a good chance that he wouldn't be there when he arrived.

He thought about the loudness of her landline phone and if it would attract any of the things if they happened to be lurking outside while Kerry and his son, Thomas, was hiding away somewhere.

He contemplated hanging up, but then the phone was picked up.

Kerry whispered hello down the phone.

"It's me," Jack said.

"What are you doing? Why didn't you ring me on my mobile, e-mail me or chat to me on the network."

"My mobile's fucked, and I wanted to hear your voice, I wanted to hear Thomas' voice."

"Well, don't call again."

"What have you told him?"

"I had to tell him the truth; he saw someone get attacked in my street, and asked me what was going on. But I still don't think he really understands. He's only six. He was hysterical for ages, but he's okay now. I'll put him on."

There was a silence on the other end of the phone, and a minute later Jack heard the familiar voice of his six-year-old son.

"Hi, daddy."

As soon as those two words were spoken, Jack Slade's lower lip trembled with emotion. He sniffed in and cleared his throat. He didn't want his voice to be coated with fright; he already had a six-year-old boy who was probably scared to death at what was happening, and didn't want to concern him any further.

"Hi, son, what's happening?"

"Me and mummy are playing upstairs."

"Oh, that sounds good."

There was a long pause and his son spoke once more. "Daddy?"

"Yes, son, what is it?"

"There're monsters outside."

Jack could hear the emotion in his son's voice and tried to reassure his son that things were going to be okay, but Kerry had returned back onto the phone.

She snapped, "He's upset, don't call again, I'm unplugging the phone now. Stay safe, Jack."

"Kerry, I'm coming down."

She never heard the last sentence as she hung up the phone. Jack could understand why. Her priority was to keep her son safe, and he was the only thing that she was concerned about.

Jack didn't know the real situation that was occurring where Kerry was staying. For all he knew, there could have been dozens of them banging on Kerry's window, aching to get in, but he wasn't sure. Despite Kerry threatening to unplug the phone anyway, he promised himself that he wouldn't try and call again, no matter how much he wanted to hear his son's voice. If his phone hadn't have smashed in

the city centre when he was with Robbie, he could have pre-warned her that he was coming down by text.

Jack carefully opened his front door and could see at least seven of the things moping around the street, and he saw the body of Robbie lying in front of him as he got into his car. He threw his bag in the back and started the engine and reversed quickly out of his drive. He slipped the car into first and stamped his foot down on the accelerator, and he swerved to his left to avoid hitting two of the beings that were in the middle of the street. He turned left at the roundabout and headed for the shopping mall, which also had a petrol station.

He finally pulled up at the petrol station, hoping that not all the pumps had been drained and that the electricity was still working, as that was what controlled the pumps.

Jack was aware that most cities had standby diesel generators that automatically kicked in if the power grid stopped performing, but he had no intention of staying in a city like Glasgow; he wanted to go back to his hometown. Would there be any electricity there?

Jack knew that if there was nobody to check the electricity transmissions, and nobody left to use the electricity in the lines and the nuclear plants kept churning out power, the lines would overload and the grid would die. So even if the pumps were full, without electricity they were useless, and this was the reason why Jack wanted to get some jerry cans.

The forecourt was empty as he pulled up; he tried the opened door of the kiosk and went behind the counter to flick the authorisation switch, then went back out and filled his car. He looked around at the huge mall car park to find that there were a handful of cars there, probably workers who had decided it was too dangerous to go back home. Although he felt for the people that may be inside, his main goal was to stay alive for his son, and after he filled up, he headed towards the kiosk for the second time.

He headed towards the pre-packed sandwiches and ate two. One was a chicken mayo, the white bread seemed a little stale, and the other was a BLT. He wasn't hungry, but he didn't know when he would have the chance to stop and have something further to eat.

He took a small carton of milk from the fridge and washed the stubborn bread down with the white stuff. He drained three quarters of the milk and dropped it to the floor like a thug.

He walked around the small area, and had a look round to see if there was anything that could come in handy. He couldn't see any jerry cans on display, and thought they would have been perfect to top up with petrol. He was disturbed by a thud coming from the door that read: *Private—Staff Only*.

He heard the thud again and stepped towards it. It was a wooden door, but had a rectangle window about a foot long in the middle of it. He tried the door but it was locked. He peered into the window but he couldn't see anything, it was too dark. So he stepped closer, and gulped hard as his curiosity overcame his cowardice. His face pressed up against the glass, but like before, the darkness tried to persuade him that there was nothing to see.

He took a step backwards away from the door and saw to his right a light switch. Convinced that the switch was for the room he couldn't see in, he reached for it and flicked it.

The bright light rapidly filled and drenched the room with its yellow glow, and Jack could see one of the things on its knees eating what was left of a human. The thing looked up at the bulb and covered its eyes and made an awful cry; it seemed to despise the light, like a human would if they were drenched in darkness for a while.

Jack pressed his face against the glass and could see that the thing on its knees was wearing a uniform, probably someone who worked in the forecourt. It was unaware of Jack's presence, and continued to feast. All Jack could see was a huge dark pool on the floor, entrails strewn around like spaghetti, the legs were intact and hadn't been touched, but the head lay separate in the corner of the room. A uniform of some sort was also seen on what was left of the person that had been devoured. Jack thought that it might have been a work colleague.

Jack turned the light off, leaving the creature to eat his meal in peace. He had seen enough and was proud of himself that he never threw up his pre-packed sandwiches, although his stomach *was* performing cartwheels.

He couldn't understand how the two individuals were in that situation; the only conclusion he could fathom, was that the two workers were working nightshift and a creature attacked one of the workers. Maybe they then hid in the staff room, not knowing that one was infected.

With his cleaver in hand, he decided to leave the kiosk and headed back outside. He looked out to the car park once more and could see two of the things that weren't there previously; they were about five hundred yards away. He saw the revolving doors to the mall, and decided to check the place out.

The place had only been built five years ago, and was just what the community needed—not just for the shops, but for the jobs it created as well. It had over eighty shops and restaurants and attracted people from afar to visit the place.

He was going to need more clothes eventually as the weeks went by, and thought of a few stores that he could walk into and take a bag full of jeans, shirts and underwear to stick into the back of the car. The extra clothes didn't cross his mind back home, it didn't seem important, but he was here now, and if the place was empty then he was going to take the opportunity.

It was an idea that was quickly quashed as he trotted towards one of the entrances of the mall. There were three entrances in all, and his heart galloped as he saw a grisly sight.

The mall was packed; there were hundreds of the things moping around inside and some noticed Jack, standing, watching aghast. Some of them stumbled towards the glass and clawed at the windows, sometimes vomiting dark blood onto the pane. Also, the revolving doors, thankfully, appeared locked, and some of them were trying to get out via the revolving doors, but they weren't budging. It was like a prison for the dead.

Like the kiosk incident, Jack tried to guess what had happened in there. He assumed that either security had locked the place down to contain the incident, or it had been locked down by accident by the things entering the security office.

The place closed at 7pm, which was roughly around the time the breakout was being broadcasted on the Saturday, and Jack's theory was that the place, under instruction, had been locked down to stop other potential attackers from coming in. But unbeknown to them, a massacre was taking place on their own shop floor as people inside already had the virus, and may have already began attacking unsuspected shoppers.

Jack thought that all it took was one shopper to be bitten or scratched and then to walk into the mall, be taken to a room by security, if they were not feeling well, and then for the thing to attack security and cause a biting epidemic to rapidly spread among the confused shoppers. According to the BBC, the bitten ones took anything between an hour or longer to change, depending on the severity of the bite, as the virus from the mouth of one of the creatures would infect the bloodstream.

Jack was sure that it was all guesswork. No one knew a damn thing! Each theory contradicted another and he certainly didn't believe it was God's work. Had the big man finally tired of our selfish and greedy ways?

He shook his head like a parent's disapproval of a naughty child. The clothes would have to wait. He was then surprised to hear a female voice coming from above him.

He looked up to see two young girls, no older than twenty, looking out of one of the windows, about four floors up. There was a series of windows across the building quite high up, and Jack guessed that they were staff rooms, canteens and storage rooms.

"I can't stop," Jack informed the two frightened girls, apologetically.

"Please!" the blonde girl begged. "A woman collapsed, then got up and started attacking people. I only live up the road; just take me to see my parents. They're okay, I've been speaking to them by phone."

"I can't get up!" Jack protested. "There're hundreds of them inside, it's impossible."

She placed her hand over her mouth and began to cry. She looked behind her to the room she was in, and announced to someone, "He said there're hundreds of them downstairs."

The other girl also broke down and pleaded to Jack to help her. He knew why they were still there. They couldn't possibly escape by jumping, as the height from the window wouldn't necessarily kill them, but it could at least sprain an ankle or break a leg. And an individual with a broken leg would be an eventual limping meal for the determined man-eaters.

"Look." Jack was being suffocated by emotional blackmail, but his son was his top priority. "Just sit tight, and someone will come and rescue you."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry. I've gotta go."

Jack Slade jogged away from the complex and tried to hum in his head to drown out the desperate pleading and screams that were coming from the window. He turned around to see another three people hanging out of the window. The further he went away from them, the more the begging turned to vociferous verbal slandering. It went from: *Please help us! We're begging you!* to *You fucking pig! You're going to hell for this!*

Jack shook his head. There seemed to be dozens of people trapped, but he couldn't help them. He took a look behind him to see the two beings in the car park following him.

He never panicked, as they were too far away. He took hold of the cleaver and thought of striking them for a second, but changed his mind.

They were now ten yards away and he quickly opened his driver's side, threw the cleaver onto the passenger seat and drove out of the forecourt. One of them slapped the rear of his car as he sped off, and that was the nearest they got.

He drove the car out of the car park, and once he got on the main barren road, he pulled up at a bus stop once he was clear of danger and took another look behind him and then broke down.

Once he got himself together, he reprimanded himself for being so weak and shook his head at himself.

You shagwit, Slade!

Chapter 23

“Just stop here,” came Pickle's instruction once they reached Little Haywood.

Jamie adhered to the inmate and pulled on the handbrake of the van. The street had only one of the things moping about, but the main road they had turned off to get into was swarming with at least thirty of them shuffling around not knowing where to go, and clumsily bumping into one another.

Pickle jumped out of his van, confident that they wouldn't drive off without him, as he had the guns, and kicked his own front door in. He called out to see if his cousin was in, but there was no answer back. The fact that the door was easily kicked in, suggested that the lack of barricading meant that his cousin who was staying there had fled to go elsewhere once the news filtered through. Most probably to his mum's, Pickle thought.

He ran upstairs and went into the main bedroom. His cupboard had been ransacked, making him aware that his cousin had hurriedly packed a bag before leaving.

He got to the bottom of the bed and squatted with his hands underneath it. He lifted the bed and forced it to stand upright against the wall. Certain that the bed wasn't about to topple over him, he pulled out a piece of cut carpet and easily lifted three of the floorboards, where a small, yet, heavy bag hid.

He pulled out the sports bag, and tossed it round his shoulder. The space in the floorboard area was almost empty, apart from one object. He pulled out his prized possession, a weapon he had only used for practice. It wasn't something that had been used against another human being, the handguns dealt with that.

He pulled out his Browning B725 sporting shotgun, and blew the little dust that sat on the black barrel. In the bag, over his shoulder, were Browning hi-powered semi automatic pistols, nine millimetres, with cartridges for his shotgun and eighteen magazines for the pistols, excluding the ones already in the guns. Pickle

was now ready to leave. He heard the hooting of a horn coming from outside; it came from the van and he knew something wasn't quite right.

He looked out of his bedroom window and saw eight beings surrounding the van; there were more pouring into the street. The hooting of the horn didn't help matters, but Pickle was sure that Jamie only did it out of anguish.

Pickle quickly took off his prison jumper and T-shirt and picked out a plain black V-neck, he then doused himself with deodorant and ran down the stairs to the front door. He opened the door to be greeted by a street full of the things, at least thirty of them, and half of them scampered towards the front door, aching for a piece of his flesh. As he shut the door, they began to smack the palms of their hands against the glass. Pickle ran back upstairs into his bedroom. He opened his window and made a circular motion with his finger, ordering Jamie to turn the van around and back it up so he could jump onto the roof, as there was no way in hell he was going to get in it leaving through the front door.

Jamie knew exactly what Pickle meant, gave him the thumbs up and reversed the van around, crushing some of the hapless things underneath its seven and a half ton weight. None of them showed any facial expressions of pain, as their legs and chests were crushed. Those that had damaged limbs continued to move and dragged themselves towards the house. Pickle opened the window once the van gained nearer, and once it had reversed onto the front garden, he crouched onto the window ledge in preparation for his jump.

He was only going to have one chance at this, and knew if he messed it up, it could cost him his life. Holding his shotgun and with the bag around his shoulder, he jumped onto the roof of the van and was thankful he never slipped or rolled off onto the hard pavement. He banged the top of the cab to inform Jamie it was safe to go. Pickle lay on his front and held on in case there were any sudden movements or jerking.

He had a vision of the van jolting forward, and throwing him off into the crowd of the hungry scavengers. He knew that that kind of death had happened to many a people, but he couldn't think of a worse way to go than being eaten alive.

The van slowly drove off; Jamie, being aware that Pickle's position was rather dangerous, never slipped the van into anything higher than second. The things grabbed desperately at the van, the windows were clawed by the walking corpses, a wiper was almost ripped off as one desperately tried to climb onto the front.

The van shook from side to side as it slowly ran over some of the resolute barbarians. Bones continued to be crushed and on three occasions, heads popped like crushed grapes from the weight of the hefty vehicle's wheels, temporarily decorating the van's wheels with their mashed infected brains.

As soon as they exited the street onto the main road, which was now more congested than the street they had just left, Jamie increased the gas and put the gear into third to finally rid himself from the monsters. He frowned in his right wing mirror to see the last of them, slowly fading into the distance once they got onto the country road. They were now only a mile away from the town of Rugeley.

As they approached the Wolseley Arms public house, Pickle, who still clung onto the roof like Colt Seavers, banged on the roof of the van. The van turned right at the roundabout and pulled up on the country road.

Pleased that there wasn't a soul in sight and with the bag around his shoulder and the shotgun in his right hand, Pickle slid down the front of the van and jumped onto the road. He gave Jamie and Janine the thumbs up, and both officers exited the vehicle. The van was parked up in the pub's car park that was yards away from the River Trent.

"That was fucking mad!" Pickle exclaimed. His adrenaline was clear for all to see, as his body shook with excitement like a five-year-old child on Christmas day.

"There were loads of them." Janine shuddered. "Makes you wonder how places like London and Manchester are coping if that's what can happen to a little village."

"I'm sure the survival rate would be the same," Pickle expressed. "At least in the cities there're high up places, apartments and offices to hide in for a few days."

"Not much use if those things are *already* in your office or apartment," Jamie snickered falsely, the same way someone would politely laugh at a bad joke in order not to offend the storyteller.

Pickle went to the back of the van and opened up the vehicle; the three inmates spilled out of the back and groaned as they were introduced to sunlight once again.

"That was scary shit," Laz spoke, running his trembling fingers through his greasy grey hair. "Was that noise what I think it was?"

Pickle, Jamie and Janine all nodded simultaneously.

"Are you okay?" KP asked Pickle.

Pickle nodded and appeared a tad embarrassed with KP's concern, which baffled Janine.

KP sauntered over to the car park of the Wolseley Arms and stroked his short beard. He looked around at the pub and saw the sight of the River Trent that he hadn't seen in years. "Why don't we stay here for a night?"

"Why?" Pickle asked, and looked over at the pub. "So we can spend all night getting drunk?"

KP beamed. "And what's wrong with that? Besides, there should be plenty of food in there. I quite fancy a rib-eye steak myself. In the morning we can put whatever's left in the back of the van."

Jamie looked to Pickle. "He's got a point. We could stuff our faces for a night on good food, before we move on and have to eat what's in the back of the van."

Pickle stroked his chin, and a thin smile emerged on his face. "I think it's fair to say, I haven't had a decent meal in years." Pickle turned to Jamie and then said, "Yer do realise that four inmates who haven't had a proper drink in years and being allowed in a pub, isn't the greatest idea in the world? It's gonna be messy."

"That's all right," Jamie tittered. "We're all on the same side now, as long as they don't do anything stupid and attract unwanted attention. The pub looks solid enough, just make sure we lock up and we'll be fine."

Pickle took out his Browning shotgun. "Let *me* check the place out first."

"Erm... and where're our guns?" KP joked.

Pickle patted his sports bag. "You'll get them as soon as I've taught yer how to shoot 'em."

"And when will that be?"

“After I've checked the place out. This is the plan: Jamie and Janine have been on nightshift, so we should let 'em sleep for a few hours. Then we do a bit o' shooting practice, I'll show yer how to load, reload and take yer pistol apart, as it needs to be cleaned. We won't shoot much, don't wanna waste the bullets or attract too much attention. Then we can lock the place up, eat and get drunk. Then we head to Stile Cop in the morning.”

“I'll cook,” KP chipped in.

Laz looked at Jamie. “KP worked in the prison kitchens; he's a great cook.”

Jamie nodded his head. “I do know. I used to work there.”

Janine, who was standing next to Jamie, said to Laz. “He doesn't say much,” she spoke, referring to Grass, who was propped against the van, chewing on his fingernails.

“Nah,” Laz responded. “He's a quiet one; he's just a boy really. Probably just frightened; we all are.”

Pickle left the group to stretch their legs; he tried the main door of the pub and was pleased that forcing it open was unnecessary as it was already unlocked. He walked alone into the establishment and entered the lounge. It was an old-fashioned country pub that sat next to the bank of the river, and there was a fireplace at the end of the lounge, and all the seats and tables looked heavy and made from oak.

He looked into the barren bar area and was pleased to pick up a set of keys for the place as well as some menus. He put the shotgun down and looked through the menus. Everything that wasn't available in the prison was on the menu: Burgers, steaks, pizza, ribs, the more he read, the more he salivated and his stomach growled impatiently.

He carefully took the stairs and went to the first floor and checked the living arrangements. He checked the living room and bedrooms, and was satisfied—although a little baffled—that the owners had decided to leave once the crisis had been announced. There was no car in the car park to suggest that there was any sign of life inside, but he needed to be sure.

There was one more place to check.

The cellar.

Every pub had a cellar.

In the bar area there was a small wooden door; it was padlocked. Sure that the door led to the pub's cellar, Pickle placed his ear against it. He could hear faint groaning, and sighed as the moans told him that at least one of *them* was inside.

How did it get in there? Was it a worker?

He used the butt of the gun to break the lock, and after three attempts, it began to give way, but he felt the noise he was making probably enticed the thing to the door. He was correct, as the noise that he had made seemed so severe that he could hear thuds coming from behind the wooden door. He had attracted the attention of the creature and with no hesitation he opened the door, which revealed a former young girl dressed in waitress attire. It immediately raised its arms, reaching for Pickle; its face was grey, the eyes were lifeless and her mouth was almost purple. She looked more like a victim of domestic abuse more than anything else.

He responded by striking the thing hard in the face with the butt of the gun; it fell backward down the concrete ramp that was normally used to roll barrels of beer down. If it was steps, Pickle was pretty sure the thing wouldn't have been able to climb them to the door. It had struggled and crawled to get up, tumbling hard. He, at last, managed to find the light switch to the cellar that was situated outside to the left of him. The place lit up once he flicked it and it was like any normal cellar, apart from the body at the bottom of the ramp.

It had wine racks with numerous bottles, and barrels of beer situated in the corner. The body at the bottom began to flinch, and Pickle quickly trotted down and stood over the thing. It appeared that the frightened owners may have put the infected girl in there themselves, locked her in, and fled the establishment. He couldn't think of any other scenario that made sense how she got there in the first place.

Because the being was already in a precarious position and there was no danger to Pickle's life, he decided to save on a valuable cartridge. He turned the gun around and used the butt of the shotgun to hammer at the young girl's head that still lay on the floor.

He slammed the gun at the skull, and it eventually cracked like an Easter egg. A black substance oozed out of the top of the skull, and more followed as he delivered the final blow that revealed a black and diseased brain that half-slipped out like a stone from a ripped open peach. He felt queasy, but knew it had to be done.

He carefully placed his shotgun on the floor and dragged the body to the corner of the cellar; the smell from the body was foul, like a sewer full of dead fish. Pickle guessed that the body had already been technically dead for many hours, as only death could smell that bad.

He trotted back upstairs and wiped the butt of his pride and joy with a dusting cloth that sat on the bar. He walked through the lounge and stepped out into the glow of sunshine to greet his new friends.

"It's all clear."

Chapter 24

Oliver could hear the filtering whispers of leaves in the timid breeze, and the bracken clung to his feet as if they were anxious about something. The woods were surrounded by the call of crickets that sang beneath the shy sun that shone timidly through the gaps of the trees, and the wind hushed again, but this time, the leaves' voices were slightly muffled.

He looked at his watch. It had been half an hour since Karen had fallen asleep, and it was heading for midday. He could tell by her heavy snoring that she had fallen into a deep one. He spent the last thirty minutes exercising his neck muscles, not intentionally, but his unbalanced mind suffocated his thinking.

Every snap of a twig, every rustle of a branch, and every tweet from a bird, forced Oliver to twist around to see if the coast was clear. The woods were heavily overcrowded, so it wouldn't take much to be ambushed. He tried to brainwash his

mind by telling it over and over that if those things were to head for their area, he would hear their clumsy progression first. Because the things walked awkwardly, it would be impossible for them *not* to make any kind of noise.

He opened up his bag, took out a bottle of water and took a measurable gulp. He looked back at Karen and looked around, embarrassed what had to be done next. He could feel his bowels loosening and took out a kitchen roll from his bag. He stood to his feet, his knees cracking as he straightened the legs, and crept deeper into the woods with his short-handled axe in his left hand. He took one last look around him before dropping his trousers and squatting down.

A rustle behind him forced him to crack his neck, as he saw a figure move many yards away from him. It was a grey squirrel.

He laughed and whispered jokingly, "I can't go if I'm being watched."

As if the squirrel could understand English, it scampered off and left Oliver to complete his task. He used up six sheets of the kitchen roll, and left the evidence in a small, neat, smelly pile.

As he pulled his trousers up, he felt guilty for what he had done, but it was something that was out of his control. He walked through the bushes to see Karen still sleeping, but she had become restless. Her head was shaking from side to side, and she began murmuring nonsensical stuff that baffled Oliver.

He placed his hands on her shoulder, in two minds whether he should wake her up. Her murmuring was becoming more aggressive and he wrapped his arms around the distressed woman comfortingly.

She woke with a fright and pushed Oliver in the chest and screamed, "Get off me!"

"Relax." Oliver looked generally hurt at Karen's action. "You sounded distressed, I was just comforting you."

Karen breathed out and once her head became clearer, she shook her head and apologised. "I'm sorry. You caught me in mid-dream."

Oliver sat down next to her. "It sounded like a bad one."

Karen ran the palms of her clammy hands through her hair. "I was just re-living what happened this morning with Gary, and something that happened at Milford."

"I'm not being patronising," Oliver spoke with sincerity. "What you've gone through this morning is similar to what the rest of the survivors have gone through. Some have gone through worse and have seen their loved ones eaten before their very eyes. I'm not saying your story isn't horrific, but any survivors that we meet up with, if we meet up with any, they will have their own personal horror story to tell as well."

Karen reluctantly agreed with what Oliver had said, although it didn't make her feel any better. She felt he was hinting for her to stop feeling sorry for herself, but he was correct to say there were people worse off: People who had to witness their own family being ripped to pieces, their children, their parents.

Karen tried not to think about it and asked Oliver for a drink of water. She handed him back the bottle and rose to her feet and wiped the bottom of her nose with her thumb.

"Where are you going?"

"For a piss," she snapped.

Oliver tittered and joked, "That's not very lady-like."

“Well, neither are blowjobs, but you men don't complain about *that*.” Karen responded to his remark with disdain and disappeared for a few minutes.

The thirty-four-year-old man lay down on the grass and gazed at the broken bits of blue sky that he could see through the stretching trees. Although, unlike Karen, he had had a decent sleep the night before, he still could have gone for another hour. Now that his adrenaline had diminished, he felt exhausted. He sat back up, knowing that another minute of this tranquillity and he really *would* drift off.

Karen pulled up her underwear and her uniformed blue trousers. She looked at her trousers and it seemed an age ago since she worked at the hospital. Her black T-shirt was covered in grass and she brushed herself down.

She walked over to Oliver and saw that he wasn't there anymore. His bag lay on the floor, so she was definitely in the right place and couldn't wait to go further into the woods. She knew that the further they went in, the less condensed the trees were, and there was actual dirt paths they could follow. She heard the rustling, but whatever it was, it seemed too quick to be a Snatcher, as Oliver called them. She stood up straight and her nerve held, as it was Oliver who jogged through the trees.

“Where have you been?” she demanded, with relief in her tone.

“I heard a noise, I went back down and I could see the cemetery.”

“Idiot! There were nine of those things down there when I left. They could have seen you.”

“It's okay,” Oliver protested. “There's only one there at the edge of the woods, but the rest that you just mentioned don't seem to be there anymore. They must have gone back to the edge of town.”

“If we make so much as a noise, it'll be up here, and could bring more up along with the rest from Draycott Park. We're talking hundreds, and then maybe the population of the town will follow. We're then talking thousands.”

“It's okay.”

Oliver could see that Karen was becoming agitated, and began to bite her nails. She looked up at the thirty-something male. “Give me your axe.”

“Why?”

“Because if there's one, more will follow. We need to get rid of that one by the woods now.”

“You don't know that; they can't communicate with one another for Christ's sake.”

“Just give me the fuckin' axe.”

The mild-mannered Oliver Bellshaw was taken aback by the ferocity in Karen's voice. Oliver stood tall and shook his head defiantly. “No, I won't.”

Karen pulled out her thick branch that she had taken earlier, and showed it to Oliver, as if she was saying that if she didn't get the axe, she's gonna do it anyway with this.

Oliver stood firm, and Karen stormed by him. Oliver grabbed her arm and took a heavy left hook into his cheekbone for his troubles.

In a matter of minutes, their relationship had deteriorated, and Karen was heading for the solitary man-eater drifting their way. She didn't want to do it; she felt she had no choice.

Oliver wished he had kept his mouth shut; he sat down, convinced Karen was going to come back with a change of heart, but three minutes had passed and there was still no sign of her.

He paced up and down the small area that was circled by trees and hoped that she would come back in one piece. He wanted to go after her, but the truth was, he was petrified. He had never killed one of them before, and was quite content to spend his life running if it meant staying alive.

A faint rustling could be heard in front of him and was relieved to see Karen had returned. *Maybe once she saw it, she changed her mind.*

“Fuckin' cocksucker,” she muttered, as she wiped some of the dark spray off her left cheek and placed the thick branch onto the grass, staining the green blades with the creature's blood.

Oliver gulped hard. Karen was a woman, but she had more balls than he would ever have. She tried to shrug the killing off, but he could see she was a nervous wreck and felt it was something that she had to do. Oliver remained silent, but he offered her a bottle of water, and she took it off him without uttering a word.

Chapter 25

David Pointer and his wife sat in silence, mesmerized by their daughter who was playing with her tea set, completely oblivious to the crumbling decaying world around her.

The daughter and the mother both had a pee in one of the buckets whilst David was out, and he knew there and then, that this situation was going to grow worse as time went on. He never told his wife about the creatures and his episode in the back garden, he didn't want to worry her. He didn't want to tell her that they were almost surrounded. David was sure that this was information she didn't need to know.

He needed his highly-strung wife to be as calm as she could be, and extra negative information about the situation they were in would only enhance her angst, and David was certain that if Davina began freaking, their daughter would feed off this and would know that there was something wrong.

They looked at one another and smiled thinly; the situation they were in was hopeless. They had only been in the attic for a matter of hours, and already knew what each one was thinking: *We need to get out of here.*

Davina only knew half of the situation, and even without knowing that they were being surrounded by many of those things, she came to her own conclusion that the danger out there was horrendous, and this attic situation just wasn't going to work.

The choices were not attractive.

What did they want? To be cooped up and face a fate of eventual dehydration, or the fear of being torn to pieces? What kind of life is that for a four-year-old girl?

At first there was relief that they were somewhere reasonably safe, but a month down the line, they would be mentally ill with the boredom and enclosure. They would be starving, which meant David would have to leave the house and put his

life in danger to loot a place. Eventually, months down the line, there would be nothing left to loot. Houses and shops would be empty.

They needed to go somewhere where there were less of them, somewhere where the population was low. A farm maybe, or a little village like Colton or Hazelslade where the area was surrounded by the woods.

"I need the toilet." David smiled at his wife.

His wife pointed at the bucket, her face telling her husband that already she was losing hope. Not just for their survival, but for the future of her daughter.

"No," David spoke. "I mean I *really* need the toilet."

He went over to the latch and opened up the entrance to the attic.

"Where are you going, daddy?"

David gazed at his beautiful daughter, her blonde hair was getting longer and it was now nearly halfway down her back. She was wearing her favourite black leggings and her Barbie T-shirt and looked so sweet.

"I'm just nipping to the toilet, Babs."

Babs was Isobel's nickname. It was something they had called her a few times when she was a baby, and it somehow stuck.

"Are you going to make me something to eat? I'm still hungry." She bit her lower lip.

Most of the time Isobel would finish a sentence, she would gently bite her lower lip afterwards. Each parent didn't know why this was the case, it was just an endearing trait that she had. It made her look cuter, if that was at all possible.

Davina jumped in, "I'll make you something soon; why don't we have a nice tin of cold beans?"

"Yuk!"

David lowered the ladders as quietly as he could, and walked down them, now entering his daughter's bedroom on the first floor. He walked to the upstairs bathroom across the landing and sat on the toilet. Once minutes had passed, he stared into nothingness and daydreamed about his work. Poor Tom Bellion had a driving test tomorrow, and now he wasn't going to be able to make it. In fact, for all David knew, Tom Bellion could be dead right now.

The driving instructor placed his hand on the flusher and pushed it down. No.

He slapped his head for his stupidity. In the situation his family was in, this was no time to forget where he was, and although the noise from the flusher wasn't that bad, it was still a noise he wanted to avoid—any noise for that matter.

He opened his window once the noise of the flush had disappeared, and looked out of his bathroom window, out onto the street.

"If we don't go now, we never will," he spoke softly to himself.

His street was awash with the creatures, all mulling around. He could see frightened people across the road from him, looking through their bedroom windows upstairs, and some of the front doors of some of the houses were open, but where were they coming from?

David, Davina and Isobel hadn't left the house since yesterday morning because Isobel was complaining of a bad chest, which stopped her from going to her cousin's birthday party. Her bad chest probably saved her family, as either one of them could have got bitten or scratched. The truth was, he didn't really know how this disease was caught, he only knew what he had seen, and even that seemed to

have taken the experts by surprise, although it had been hinted that it had been around for a week or so.

All he needed to do was concentrate on the *now*, and work out a way on how to get out of this bubble of mayhem.

He ran down the stairs and checked out the state of his windows, and was surprised to see they were still holding up, but he thought this was because *they* hadn't heard a strident noise from the house yet. If that did happen, he was certain that hordes of the things would pile around his house and force their way through the glass. The barricade would last five minutes if they were lucky, and then the realistic scenario would be to stay in the attic, whilst listening to the ravenous creatures below them, moaning for food.

And what would that do to the fragile psyche of a four-year-old girl?

Her nightmares would be the least of her worries.

David sat on the bottom step and for the second time in one morning, he burst into tears. For the first time, he thought about his other family members, and would have tried to ring them from the landline if he knew their numbers, but they were punched into his mobile phone, which he had left in the glove compartment of his car. He had two older brothers; what were they doing now?

He had made a decision; he got to his feet, ran upstairs and shouted up to Davina into the attic. "Grab the bag, we're going."

"Where?"

"Anywhere, away from here."

Davina never protested; she knew that if she stayed in the attic, death would be an eventual certainty. It was an eventual certainty anyway, but she wanted some kind of life for her daughter. She wanted her daughter to be out in the open, maybe even meet up with more people on their journey, rather than living in fear, having nightmares and seeing people she cared about being eaten and ripped to shreds.

A nightmare whilst awake as well as being asleep, was too much for a little girl to endure. Isobel was a sensitive soul, and had nightmares for two days from watching a Disney's adaptation of Scrooge.

It was the scene when Goofy was playing the ghost of Christmas Past and appeared on the stairs following Donald Duck who was playing the role of Scrooge. Isobel shook with fright at that particular scene of that cartoon, and complained to her parents at bedtimes that there was a ghost on the stairs.

If that was how she reacted to a cartoon, how would she react to actually see in real life another human being eaten before her very eyes?

Davina thought that if they didn't take a chance now, her daughter would be mentally ill within a year, if they lasted that long.

David, carrying the two rucksacks, ushered Davina and Isobel down the stairs and gazed at his wife; he was holding the car keys and the backpack, and also on the key ring was the front door key.

He moved the items away from the door, and said, "It's clear on the drive; as soon as I open the door, get in the car quickly. The door's already open."

Davina was holding onto her daughter who was told to keep her eyes shut at all costs, no matter what.

"One, two, three!"

David swung the front door open and they ran out onto the drive; only one appeared on the drive but was easily dealt with by David, who kicked it in the stomach, forcing it to fall over temporarily. Satisfied his daughter and wife were safely in the passenger seat, he went to open the driver's door, threw the bags in, but was knocked over by one of the things. The thing that had originally approached their front window had now quickly turned, what little attention span it had, towards the man of the house, and more quickly followed.

He let out a shriek, as he was surprised of the quickness of four beings that forced him to scramble to his feet. He quickly escaped back into the house through the front door, and pressed the button on his fob, locking his wife and daughter in the car. He closed the front door, locked it, and could hear the muffled screams of his wife from behind his front door inside the locked car.

He went into his cabinet in the living room, knowing that it would only be a matter of time before they forced open the door, and he took out a bottle of whisky. He went into the kitchen, screwed off the bottle, and ripped off a piece of tea towel and stuck it into the bottle. He took a lighter from the kitchen drawer that Davina would use for her candles, lit the bottle and bolted upstairs. He opened the bedroom window and was unsure where to throw it.

Would this action be counterproductive? Would they be attracted to the fire or would they move away from it? If he threw it near the car, it may force them to temporarily flee, or the opposite could happen. They were already dead, so what's a little fire to them? Or, if he threw it *away* from the car, it may force them to either go towards the fire, away from the car, or flee from the fire and encourage more to surround the 'food' that was teasing them inside the vehicle.

He looked down to see his wife and daughter screaming, his wife looking up at him, begging him to do *something*.

He threw the bottle about ten yards away from the side of the car and the creatures dispersed rapidly and went towards the small explosion. For some reason the fire distracted them, but only for a few seconds. He ran back downstairs, only to find three of them by the vehicle.

As he left his house for the second time, he kicked one in the back. It fell over, and knocked over the other one that fell like a domino. The other one was on fire but was around the passenger side. David clicked the button on the fob and the motor was unlocked; Davina opened it for her husband, and he jumped in, fired the engine and reversed quickly out of his drive.

He locked all the doors and put his foot down and saw up ahead Sherree Taylor running out of her house, holding her four-month-old son, distress carved into her face.

They knew her reasonably well.

Her husband was a doctor and they had been trying for a baby for years, and then suddenly the little miracle happened. Davina was invited to the baby shower, and remained reasonably close friends with thirty-five-year-old Sherree.

Sherree banged on the passenger window, but there were too many of them in the street. If he stopped, his family would be finished.

Davina wept and closed her daughter's eyes. David constantly mouthed the words I'm sorry at Sherree as he slowly drove past his helpless neighbour.

The street was heaving with at least a hundred of the things now, and David only looked in his rear view mirror for a matter of seconds.

Within those seconds, he saw Sherree being pulled to the ground by at least seven of them, the baby being used almost like a tug of war game by two of the walking corpses, as one creature had it by its arms, and the other had the legs, as they fought for the flesh. He couldn't hear it, but he could see by the baby's facial expressions that it was in severe distress and could see it slowly coming apart.

That was when David looked away.

Davina turned around, as David sped away, and tried to see if she could see Sherree through her blurry soaked eyes. Sherree was a Christian woman and held gatherings on a Sunday afternoon for women only. She always politely asked Davina if she wanted to come along; Davina always politely declined her offer, but every week Sherree would still ask.

Sherree had married a Christian man years ago and had just the one child. They had tried for children for years, and ended up going through IVF to conceive which was looked down upon from some members of their church. They went through with it all the same, and with her husband being a doctor himself, he had no problem with IVF, no matter what some members of his church thought about the situation.

After their second attempt, she fell pregnant, and Karen remembered the excitement in Sherree's voice when she had conceived, telling Davina that it was a miracle and she thanked God.

Davina was a little perplexed about Sherree's statement, as Karen knew that it was medical science that had managed to allow her to have a child, and not God, who she had prayed to for years, begging for a child and received nothing in return. It reminded her of a footballer in France who had collapsed on the pitch and a medical team ran out onto the pitch, revived him. He was taken to hospital and managed a full recovery and was playing football again after three months.

Davina remembered the footballer in an interview, whilst he was in hospital, thanking God for his survival and had said that the episode had furthered his faith, if that was at all possible. Davina remembered David sitting and watching the news when it came on, shaking his head and saying angrily: "What a slap in the face that is for the medical team. If someone on the operating table dies, the surgeons get the blame. If the person on the operating table survives, the families thank God. What a peculiar world we live in."

Davina looked back as the car exited out of the street, and looked at the dead that sauntered around the streets, looking for more warm human flesh to devour, now that Sherree and her baby were no more.

Where was the husband? Work? Hiding? Dead?

Where's God now?

David had hit at least a dozen of the things as the family left the street in his Renault Clio, and turned onto Sandy Lane. David's third breakdown of the morning came as he drove, it was brief, but it was still a breakdown.

Chapter 26

The Vauxhall Meriva had been doing a hundred on its journey south. Jack Slade couldn't believe how empty the roads were. He had only passed three cars so far and put that down to the fact that people had either already got to their preferred destination, or they had decided that the safer option was to stay at home. He was expecting the motorway to be heaving, but it seemed that fear or maybe not knowing about what was happening was keeping the roads reasonably clear. He had seen a few cars on the forecourts of some garages he had passed, and seen a few vehicles going the other way, but other than that, nothing on *his* side of the motorway.

Why were some people heading north? Was it safer? Had they heard something?

There certainly wasn't any sign of the creatures making an appearance on the motorway itself, but Jack was sure that once the things decided that there was nothing left to eat in the towns and cities, *that* was when they would spill out into the countryside and motorways.

It was animal instinct.

If foxes found that there was nothing left to eat in the woods, they would risk themselves by trotting through the suburban streets in hope of a hearty meal. It was all about survival.

He had reached Blackpool and knew that in another two hours he would be in Rugeley. He took a glimpse at the fuel gauge and saw that it was a quarter full. He saw a sign coming up, stating that the next service station was ten miles away. His foot slammed the gas pedal down and pushed the car a further twenty. In a matter of minutes, the service station was clear up ahead and Jack slowed down as he came to the entrance.

Apart from two cars dosing idly, there was nothing else on the car park at the service station. Normally, he hated these places; he always found them too expensive.

He got out of the car and held the cleaver. The service station was like any other; it was like a mini shopping mall. It had a Burger King, a cafeteria, a Starbucks, a newsagents and an amusement arcade.

The garage was separate and situated behind the service station. Jack found the door to be open and walked slowly by all the shops and nervously looked in every one of them. Happy that the place was empty, he decided to use the toilet.

Once he came out of the toilet, he walked into the newsagents and picked up a couple of packets of Marlboro and a handful of lighters.

"Fuck it, I might be dead tomorrow. If the lung cancer doesn't eat me alive, *they* probably will."

He lit up a cigarette and had to sit down once he took his first drag. He hadn't touched a cigarette in five years, and this one was making him feel giddy, as if he had just stepped off the waltzers, but in a good, relaxed way. He only finished half of the cigarette before stamping it out onto the floor. It was a bad idea.

He walked into the Starbucks area and helped himself to a pre-packed sandwich and a caramel cake. He made himself a cappuccino and sat down with it at the end of the café, with a double dip chocolate muffin.

His cleaver sat on the table next to his free purchases. He knew he was wasting time relaxing, but he had to be focused, and driving that fast with no hazards to look out for, was exhausting for the just turned forty-year-old.

He looked at his watch, and informed himself that in two minutes he would move his derrière, top his car up, and get back on the road. He got out of his chair and helped himself to a bottle of water, and headed back towards the entrance. He stepped outside and looked up to the grey army of puffy clouds, threatening to ruin the beautiful, yet macabre day.

He peeped over towards the large car park and could see the garage. He saw that behind the car park was a farmers field. A farm would be the perfect place to be in this situation, Jack Slade thought.

They were in the middle of nowhere; there was cattle and poultry—so plenty of food. They would also be able to see the creatures coming from a mile away with all the flat land they had. Farmers were also well equipped with guns to shoot pesky foxes, and they also had heavy duty machinery like tractors and combine harvesters—ideal to use to escape or even use as a weapon if they wanted to save on cartridges and run over gangs of the dead.

Jack deliberated on the idea of taking Kerry and Thomas to a farm once he arrived at Rugeley. Although a more negative thought that crossed Jack's mind was that if he was the farmer, he would shoot any trespassers, not just creatures, but humans as well. It was all about survival now; things had changed and he was sure that the farmers would do anything to protect their family, and another mouth to feed would be detrimental to their food supply.

He looked to his left, away from the farmers fields, and saw three of the fiends walking lazily around the empty car park where the HGVs usually parked. He hadn't noticed them before, and realised that they must have appeared when he was inside the service station.

But where did they come from? A house nearby? The farm itself? Or did they used to work in the service station?

Jack didn't know the answer to the question, but he thought that the three would make good target practice if ever he were in possession of a gun.

His short daydream had been disturbed once a pair of glacial hands wrapped around his neck, and he instantly dropped the cleaver to the floor in fright and turned to see one of them face to face. He pushed it in the chest, but it stumbled back only a few yards, then it came at him with more ferocity. It was a large female and was wearing a Starbucks uniform. *Where did she come from?*

Aware that the others were gaining on him, he tried to push the female thing away from him, as they wrestled in the car park. He was surprised how strong it was, and the decaying smell from its mouth was awful, its mouth and tongue was almost black. Jack wasn't sure if it was from feeding or decay.

He pushed the ex-Starbucks worker back again and ran to his car. He took a look behind him and saw that if he stayed around for another three seconds, the other three would have caught up and he would have been killed for sure.

He started up his car and floored the gas pedal, making the car squeal out of the car park. The girl smacked her hands on the back of the car and almost ran after him.

Jack shook his head at his stupidity. He couldn't believe how stupid he had been. His unnecessary daydreaming had cost him the cleaver, and could have easily cost him his life.

He slammed his hands on the steering wheel in frustration, and was flabbergasted at the unpredictability of those things.

In such a short space of time, he had experienced that they would stop at nothing to get to their victim; he also realised that they shouldn't be underestimated. At first glance, they looked slow, but once they had a victim in sight, the speed in which they approached soon changed in some of them. The last experience was a learning curve for the forty-year-old, and the way the last one almost ran after his car was a frightening episode. In his limited experience, he had never seen any of them move that quickly. If he wanted to stay alive for his son and be able to protect him, he needed to be sharp at all times.

I wish I had a gun.

He then thought that having a gun in his possession could end up resulting in an accident, and the gunfire itself would probably attract others towards his presence.

He changed his mind about a gun the more he thought about it.

Maybe not.

He joked to himself that maybe a crossbow would be more beneficial, as at least it was quiet. But where was he going to get one of *them*? In most city or town centres probably, but the last thing he wanted to do was to drive into a populated area, to see if there was a gun shop.

The only populated area he had planned on going was the town where his son lived.

He was now in Stoke, and he was an hour away from his town; he was still trembling from his near-death experience. He suddenly heard a pop coming from outside, his steering became heavy and his car veered to the left down a bank.

Not now.

He had a flat, and could feel himself losing control of the vehicle. He prepared himself for impact.

Chapter 27

Pickle had managed to find a beam from the pub's roof that would take his weight. He jumped up and grabbed the beam and began his pull-ups. Now being out of the prison and having no gym to attend, he was going to try and exercise whenever he could. He knew that the lack of exercise would make him feel agitated eventually, and that was something that only affected him, and wasn't something the rest of the group was going to lose sleep over.

After finishing his five sets of fifteen reps, he urged Grass to go outside with him and join KP and Laz, who were sitting outside drinking almost their body weight in lemonade. Pickle had issued an alcohol ban until 7pm until the establishment was locked up. It was going to be their lodgings for the night.

Grass followed behind him and they entered outside into the warm, inviting sunshine, although the temperature had dropped somewhat. The sweat glistened on Pickle's forehead like a small army of pearly drops that refused to run down, and he welcomed the cool air that decreased his body temperature, and also welcomed that all around they could see for miles and there wasn't a single being in sight in the fields.

"Any signs?" Pickle walked over to Laz and KP who were sitting on the bank, staring into the River Trent.

"We just came back," Laz stated. "Checked the main roads, nothing."

"What about the wee garden centre over the road?"

KP sniggered, and looked up at Pickle. "What about it? We're not going inside a building that could be populated with those things, not until you give us the guns."

Pickle nodded and patted KP on the shoulder; he understood his concern, and wouldn't have entered the area himself if he had no sort of weapon on him. As he and KP found out by the garage, they were not easy things to kill, despite their lumbering ways. A head injury was the only way to put them down permanently, and a head injury with bare hands was a hard task to execute, as well as an exhausting one.

"I have a shotgun and four pistols," Pickle declared. "The shotgun's mine. I can't give that away."

"Don't worry about me," Laz expressed. "I don't want any gun, don't trust myself for a start. Besides, best thing about not having a gun is that I can just stay behind you whenever we enter buildings. I'm a coward, guys, always have been."

Pickle admired Laz's honesty. There was no point giving someone a gun if they didn't want one.

"What about you, Grass?" KP had a long blade of grass sitting in the corner of his mouth.

"Err... I dunno." He shifted uncomfortably and looked a bag of nerves.

"That's settled then." Pickle nodded. "KP, myself and the two officers get the pistols."

"Do I get the shotgun as well?" KP asked mischievously.

"No chance," Pickle snapped back, not picking up on KP's ribbing.

"Right then." KP got to his feet and began to brush himself down with the palm of his hands. "So you gonna show me how to use one?"

"Probably best if we wait till the officers wake up," Laz spoke; his wiry frame had sat down and begun sucking on a cigarette.

Laz was referring to Jamie and Janine, who had found a welcoming bed when searching through the property. Jamie trusted Pickle, and it was the ex-inmate who suggested that the two officers, who had been on nightshift, should get a few hours in the afternoon because they looked dead on their feet.

"No need," Pickle said, and he nodded towards the entrance of the pub.

Jamie stumbled out, still wearing his work attire, but now with his creased white shirt hanging out of his black trousers. He covered his eyes with his hand, as the sun greeted him.

"Where's the other one?" KP grilled gently.

Jamie answered, "Still sleeping, I guess. How should I know?"

“Oh... I thought you two...”

“No.” Jamie smiled. “We're just work colleagues.”

Jamie never thought about Janine in that way; he was never short of female company and was in no way strongly attracted to the young woman. He hadn't been in a relationship in years, but always kept himself 'busy' with a female here and there, thanks to the dating websites he visited.

Janine was reasonably attractive, Jamie thought. She had short blonde hair and blue eyes, but Jamie was more of a brunette man and wasn't overly keen on short hair on women. Also, she was a little heavy for his liking. She was hardly obese, but her extra pounds were evident on her behind, and he also liked the fitness type.

Jamie knew it was down to taste, as Janine detested too much muscle on a man as she said it looked unnatural. Jamie was one of those men.

“Ready for yer first lesson?” Pickle waved the gun in his right hand. “I'll show Janine later tonight.”

Jamie shrugged his shoulders, still tired.

Pickle held the gun up. “This is what the army used to use before we started using Glock 17s.” He looked over to Jamie to make sure he was paying attention. “The slide-lock back, means it out o' ammo. This gun is empty, but in times o' apprehension, cock it, so it's ready.”

Jamie pointed. “Does that hammer ever pinch anybody's hand? It looks awfully close.”

Pickle shook his head. “I've shot it before. Never had any bother with it. This is one o' the most accurate and smoothest recoiling guns ever made; it also has an amazing trigger. I know yer all novices, but if yer can't hit something from ten feet with a hi-power, I don't know what gun would possibly help yer.”

Pickle handed it to Jamie to have a feel. Then Jamie handed it to KP.

He handed it back to Pickle, who put a magazine in, and said to them, “The down side to this gun is the magazine disconnect. Bad enough that it's even there, but it rubs against the face o' the magazine every time the trigger is pulled. The finish o' every magazine yer have can alter yer trigger pull.”

The group all stared at one another; they had no idea what he was rambling about and Jamie decided to speak up. “All I want *you* to do,” Jamie began, “is to show me how to reload, and show me where the safety catch is.”

“Feeling pretty confident then?” KP giggled, stroking his thin dark beard.

“The only shooting I'll be doing is close-range shooting. Besides, if we start shooting practice, what's the betting that those things start making their way over here? I don't know about you guys, but I'm looking forward to locking myself inside of that place tonight, drinking too much beer, playing cards, eating whatever I can get my hands on, and drinking even more beer after that for just one night. Because I don't know how long I've got left, and I don't know if I'll ever have another night like that. And I don't want it to be spoilt by being surrounded by those things banging on the windows to get in. Don't get me wrong, the windows are solid thick, but how are we supposed to escape if there's three hundred surrounding the pub?”

“Fuck,” Pickle began to chortle. “That was some kind o' speech.”

“Just show me the basics, and I'll show Janine myself once she wakes up.”

“I'm already awake,” she yawned and stepped out into the daylight. “How am I supposed to sleep with you lot making a racket?”

Time dragged on and the moment came at last, and by Jamie's watch it was 7:07pm. KP had rustled up a fine banquet from what was available in the kitchen and the only negative of the night so far, was when Janine wanted a decent bottle of red to go with her steak.

Pickle showed her where the cellar was and a scream later, he realised he had forgot to tell the group about his experience with one of the people who used to work at the fine establishment.

After finishing the bottle in just under an hour, Janine had almost forgot about the corpse she had witnessed with the head opened. If she was told about it beforehand, it wouldn't have bothered her, but because she wasn't given any warning, it came as a shock.

The men played poker for hours, and a bored Janine decided to go upstairs and watch an old DVD while finishing the second bottle before passing out on the bed. She noticed the bedroom had no lock, and never even asked about sleeping arrangements. She assumed that she would have the room that she used for her nap, and went there without telling any of the guys.

She placed the dressing table chair against the knob of the bedroom door. She trusted Jamie, but the other four individuals were prisoners, and they were prisoners who hadn't been with a woman for a while.

She kind of feared that if she got drunk within the company of the other five, sexual tension might be increased within the room. She knew she wasn't supermodel material, but was pretty certain that most men were animals and would sleep with anything with a pulse.

Once satisfied nobody could get in, she cried for ten minutes to release some pent up stress, before watching the DVD. Hours later, with a little help from the alcohol she had consumed, sleep had beaten her once again and the rowdiness of the men from the ground floor faded away.

Chapter 28

Oliver Bellshaw and Karen Bradley had been in the woods for hours, and had reached an amicable agreement. Still exhausted from her nightshift and after a run-in with one of the creatures, she had decided to grab another hour in exchange so Oliver could also go for a nap. The thirty-four-year-old divorcee had a decent night's sleep the night before, but the whole event seemed to have exhausted him.

His story wasn't as exciting, as far as the other survivors were concerned, but he was alive, which he was sure that thousands upon thousands of individuals no longer had that pleasure anymore.

As Karen slept, he revisited his surreal morning.

As soon as Oliver was attacked outside the newsagents, he grabbed his phone, packed his bag, took his car, and drove the short journey from his house in

Hednesford through the countryside, heading towards the outskirts of Rugeley in order to get to his mother's.

As soon as he went by a tiny village called Slitting Mill, where he used to regularly go for meals at a public house called The Horns, he saw the presence of a dozen of the things wandering aimlessly around the streets. He reversed harshly to turn the car around and head the opposite direction, but his right back tyre slipped into a ditch.

Naturally engulfed in a cloud of hysteria, he opened the door unhesitatingly, took his bag that was sitting on the passengers seat, and began to run along the country road that headed back towards the main road that would lead into Rugeley if he turned left, or back to Hednesford if he turned right.

He decided on left, as he knew the state of the place back in his small town. He saw a couple of, what he called, Snatchers, roaming around on the outskirts of the part of Rugeley he wanted to enter, and knew that this was also a no-go area.

He cut across a fence and ran across a farmers field, as he was hoping that he wouldn't be seen and be followed. He was still unsure about what and who they were, and only knew what the TV had informed him on.

After spending five minutes running through the long grass, he decided to chance his luck back on the main road. He went over to the fence on his left and jumped over, and was now on the main road that led to Stile Cop and was facing almost opposite the cemetery. He ran by the cemetery and headed to a beauty spot, where a lot of people used to park and used the place as a picnic area, or as a base to park the car and go for a long walk.

Stile Cop was the largest beauty spot and was at the highest point. The one where Oliver arrived at was small, secluded, and lower down, near the bottom of the main road. On the main road, the vast amount of the woods were to the left, whereas to the right, was the farmers fields.

He wanted to head for Stile Cop but not the main road route, as he was paranoid that he may be seen from a distance by one of those things, resulting in him being tracked down by an army of the slow moving cannibals. When he arrived at the secluded area, he had made a decision to get to his destination through the woods. It was the hardest way, but he felt it was the safest, as on the road he felt exposed. He was certain that they would have trouble following him through a condensed wooded area that was on a slight hill.

Snapping out of his daydreaming, Oliver looked at his watch, it was nearly 5pm. Time had little relevance at the moment, but what it could still do was tell Oliver how near or far it was away from becoming dark. He had allowed Karen to sleep longer and now that his brain was active again, he now felt that his short sleep wasn't needed anymore.

He planned on eventually getting to the top of the hill at Stile Cop beauty spot. Then, he and Karen could make a camp temporarily until he decided what to do and where to go next. He was dreading the darkness that was only a matter of hours away, and knew that they both could easily get to the beauty spot within half an hour on foot, but other things needed to be considered. Oliver dreamed that not only a camp would have to be built, which could take hours, but some sort or perimeter fence or tripwire would have to be incorporated to let them know

through the night if they had company. All of this could take up to half a day to complete.

It would be a tense night, taking turns sleeping in the woods for the one night, but both exhausted individuals agreed that rest was imperative before making their way up to the beauty spot. The macabre hours would drag and the pair of them would be fortunate if any type of sleeping would take place. He thought that, despite this, their predicament was a lot safer than other situations he could think of, and staying in a populated area was definitely something he wouldn't consider again.

He still felt troubled that one of them that Karen had dealt with had attempted to make its way through the woods. If one of them had now tried *that*, maybe others would attempt again in the near future once food in the town began to run out.

The options were few and far between for the two of them, but he had camped before, many years ago, with a girlfriend at one of the beauty spots, and with the season being in summer, and with a full or even a half moon out, the area wouldn't be as dark as it could be. Oliver suddenly heard a car go by and smiled to himself. Any sign of life brought small joy, because it meant there was some hope.

He remained sitting up; his head constantly swinging to the left and to the right. He felt more relaxed than he did when he first entered the woods, but the paranoia was still there, although not as strong as before. He stared at a sleeping Karen and for the first time, realised that she was an attractive woman.

Her dark hair was tied back with an elastic band, her face was facing away from Oliver to the left, and he glared at her exposed neck, as a few drops of pearly perspiration sat on her neck, threatening to escape.

Despite the few droplets of sweat, Oliver thought about what it would be like to kiss that neck. He hadn't been with a woman in months, and thought to himself that despite what was happening in the world, a man was a man: pathetic, weak, and controlled by an organ that—for most women—was never enough to be satisfied with.

He held out his fingertips, and they shook with fear and excitement. The fear was in case she woke up and wondered what the fuck he was doing. And as for the excitement... *that* was plainly obvious. He was doing something he shouldn't.

He told himself that if she suddenly woke up, he would inform her that he was trying to remove a bug off of her. His fingers eventually reached their destination, as they gently slid down her neck and stopped near her collarbone.

The black T-shirt she was wearing was a little soaked with perspiration at the front, but it didn't stop his fingers running over the T-shirt and following the outline of her perked breasts. The more forbidden the area, the more he shook with excitement and trepidation. He contemplated on removing his fingers, but he couldn't help himself.

He gave Karen's nearest breast a gentle squeeze through her T-shirt, and she responded with a moan. He began to touch himself.

Oliver undid his zip; he was so aroused he couldn't stop himself. He looked around as if there could be somebody watching him, and began stroking the shaft with his right hand as Karen lay to his left, oblivious to what he was doing. He was

dying to moan as he rubbed the palm of his hand along the shaft up and down rapidly, but he knew her waking up would ruin the moment altogether.

He was getting close; he lay back next to the sleeping Karen Bradley, and always felt the orgasm was better when the penis was pointing upwards. Whenever he masturbated, he always lay on his back as he felt the intensity was better, and when he used to have sex with women, he always preferred and encouraged his partner to go on top whenever he was getting nearer.

He was seconds away from ejaculating, and now he was fantasising that Karen was giving him oral pleasure. As the feeling grew stronger, the more adventurous he became, as his left hand wandered towards Karen's breasts. He knew he'd be in serious shit if ever she woke up, but the danger and the fact he was caressing the breasts of an attractive woman he could never get in the real world, was heightening his pleasure.

He released a solitary grunt as he came, and his hand slipped under her bra and gently squeezed her breasts. He stroked her nipple with his thumb as the ejaculation was taking place.

As soon as the adrenaline started to wane, the regret and shame began to surface. He released his hand from Karen's breasts carefully, stood to his feet and walked over to a tree with his trousers round his ankles. He wiped his hand on the bark of the tree and his stubborn pee eventually cleaned out the tubes. It had been a while since he had performed any sexual activity, and only felt the urge once he saw Karen sleeping.

Now clean, and relieved he wasn't caught, he sat next to her and looked at her once again. The sweat glistened on her head and the top of her breasts, which complimented her body perfectly. Oliver shook his head at himself and felt a twinge in his groin once more. He felt that he could go again. He hadn't felt like this since he was a teenager. When he was fifteen, he watched a porn movie in his bedroom and managed to perform three times in a row.

He didn't know why this was happening; whether it was because he was stressed, or hadn't had it for a while. Or was it the simple fact that a beautiful woman was lying next to him? He didn't have the answer.

He cursed himself for his action and promised himself he would try and control himself. He took another look at Karen and was finding his second arousal a little disturbing. This time he decided to leave himself alone, but if he was one hundred percent certain that Karen wouldn't wake up, he was sure that he would probably have repeated what he had just done earlier, but maybe took it further.

He understood that in the old world he would be looking at a jail term, but then again, in the old world he wouldn't be hiding in the woods with this beauty in the first place.

Chapter 29

They had driven around their town for a while, stopping, then filling up, and sometimes allowing the car to be stationary for a while. They had been driving around for an hour now and managed to stock up from an already-burgled bakers

store. All that was left was some bread, milk and cakes, but it was better than nothing.

The town was empty, devoid of all life, and David Pointer felt reasonably relaxed when he solely went into the bakers to stock up with two bags of food. His wife and daughter remained locked in the car that was parked only twenty yards away and their destination hadn't been considered yet.

He jumped back in the car and looked at the fuel gauge; they had a full tank after filling up at a station near St Augustine's Church. They had come across pockets of beings, but never quite as bad as they experienced in their own street.

They had left their town of Rugeley, and after a mile of driving through bendy roads, their Renault Clio pulled up at the side of the country road.

"Are you sure about this?" Davina quizzed him.

"I'm not sure about anything anymore," was his honest response.

He got out of the car and walked towards a road that veered to the right. He knew where the road led to; it was a place he liked to come out to for a meal with his wife now and again, as he always liked the country style.

In the past, they would walk into one of the pubs to be greeted by a roaring coal fire; the country pubs had rooms with old fashioned wooden beams in. The food was of the highest quality as the place was surrounded by farmlands, so it didn't take a genius to know where they got their fresh produce from.

It was now impossible to get to, as he stared at the entrance to the village. He looked over to his wife who was glaring at him from the passenger side, and he shook his head. The slump of her shoulders told him that she was disappointed, but there wasn't a great deal he could do to overturn the situation.

They had friends there in Colton and were certain that they would put them up for a few nights, although they weren't answering their phones. The only entrance to the tiny village had been cordoned off. It looked like the barrier had been the idea of the villagers themselves and it consisted of a huge wagon parked across the main road, with a sign reading: *We are full. Outsiders will be shot.*

He stepped closer towards the sign to see if he could get a look under the wagon; there was no sign of life until he got to his feet. A shot rang out and David ducked and crouched. His shocked wife went to leave the car to see how her husband was, but he reacted by furiously waving his hand, telling her to get back to the car with their daughter, who was still sleeping in one of the back passenger seats.

He then heard a voice saying, "There's one of them behind the barrier!"

David remained in a half-crouched position; his hands were behind his head as if an officer of the law had pointed a gun at him, and decided to speak before another shot rang out. "I'm not one of them! I'm from Rugeley. Me and my family are looking for a place to stay!"

He could hear the boots of men heading his way, and the voice commanded him to stand up and put his arms by his side. David did what he was told.

He looked to the side of the wagon, looking for the two men and heard a whistle. He looked up to see the two men standing on top of the cab of the truck, their shotguns were not pointing and he felt no threat anymore.

The one on the left looked no older than twenty, and looked like he hadn't had a bath in weeks. The one on the right was in his forties, dressed in typical farmer attire: checked shirt, Wellington boots and a flap cap sitting on his head.

"Turn your car around and go back to where you came from," the man on the right spoke vehemently.

"We just want somewhere to stay the night," David protested meekly. "We have friends here. We wanted to get somewhere before it gets dark."

"Not anymore," the young boy on the left snapped. "We're looking after our own from now on."

"That's right," the man on the right nodded, "and anyone trying to get in will be shot, no matter *who* you are."

David almost showed his tears to the two men but fought them back swiftly. "So that's it?"

"That's it," the older one spoke. "Don't get me wrong, I wish you the best of luck, my friend, but we need to survive. We've only had two episodes of those things in a village of three hundred, so as far as we're concerned, that's good going. This is our way of keeping the situation under control."

"What happened to them?"

"Some kind of biting virus. I've seen it in dogs and foxes, but never in people. I shot them both, we burned them in a field afterwards."

"I don't know where to go. Any ideas? We're from Rugeley."

"You have guns?"

David shook his head.

The two men looked at one another, and David was waiting for them to burst into hysterics. The mocking never materialized, and the older gentleman said, "Then I'd go to the highest point."

"Etching Hill?"

The man shook his head, and this time almost laughed. "Etching Hill is high, but it's densely populated. I was thinking along the lines of Stile Cop or the industrial estate on the hill on the Hednesford Road. Just stay away from Little Haywood, that's where the Murphy family stay."

David nodded in agreement. He knew where the industrial estate place was; he once had a job there working for a painting and decorating company. There was also a cafe there that his dad religiously used to take him to on a Saturday for a cooked breakfast.

David turned around to head back to his car, and heard the voice of the man in his forties speak out one last sentence before he got into his vehicle. "Good luck, my friend. No hard feelings. The last thing this village needs is more mouths to feed."

David never responded, and was still miffed that the small village was prepared to send a family-of-three away back into that horrific world. Surely an extra three people wouldn't have made that much difference to the village. He came to the conclusion that their way of thinking was that, if you let one in, then others would follow.

David had turned the car around and headed back into Rugeley.

He didn't want to venture too far because he wanted to stay somewhere where there was familiarity. If he was going to get chased by these things, he would

rather be chased around the streets where he knew and lived, rather than a place where he could easily become lost and further the danger of his family even more, by driving into an area that was even more populated, or into a dead end.

He looked at Davina and gave his wife a comforting smile; she placed her hand on his cheek and a tear fell from her face, as if squeezed from a teat pipette. She looked behind her and saw Isobel, still asleep in her booster seat. Her head flopped forwards and even though she never usually had a nap anymore, they decided to leave her be.

"We're going to Hazelslade; see if it's quiet there. If it is, we'll see if someone might put us up. We'll stop off at Stile Cop first and get refreshments."

Davina nodded in agreement. "When Isobel wakes up, she'll be needing the toilet."

"We have one toilet roll in the bag, it'll do for now."

The car went by Power Station Road and headed back into the town. As they passed St Augustine's Church for a second time, David and Davina had noticed that the once empty street that ran across the circumference of the town centre, now, had at least twenty to thirty visitors, lifelessly wandering the streets.

Davina looked at David with horror scribbled on her face. As if he knew what question she was thinking, he began to speak.

"Maybe more have been bitten; remember what the TV said?"

She shook her head. "Vaguely."

"Maybe they were still changing."

"What do you mean?" Davina asked and leant to the right as David swerved around one of them.

"Think about it. You go out on a Saturday night, you go back home to your family after being bitten or scratched, and then you go to bed, not knowing that you've caught this virus. You then die in your sleep; then you reanimate and attack the rest of your family. Next thing you know, you've got one house with three or four of these things in it.

"You see, the reason why the streets were so quiet before, wasn't just because people were barricading themselves in, it's probably because some houses were infested with the things, and they just couldn't understand how to get out."

Davina nodded at her husband's theory and saw that some of the windows were smashed, and thought that they were probably smashed not just because some of them were trying to get in, but maybe some had changed inside and were trying to get out and feed.

Davina tried to joke, "You've been listening to that radio too much since we left."

Maybe his theory was correct.

Whatever the real reason, the episode had seemed to increase with terror, and as soon as they found a quiet place to stop, the better.

David was now leaving Rugeley and headed towards Sandy Lane; his car bypassed Draycott Park where there were more of them, but didn't seem to notice them as much. A lot of the creatures were crowded round in a small street, like young pupils watching a playground fight, and David could only assume that they were feasting on some poor bastard.

They left Draycott Park, exited the town, and continued along the Hednesford Road and turned left onto the Stile Cop Road.

“Nearly there,” he said. As the car reached the top of the hill, they turned left into the quiet and surprisingly uninhabited beauty spot, and pulled the car up.

The engine was switched off, and although they had been travelling by car, David was panting as if he had ran up the road. His eyes met Davina's and gave her a reassuring wink.

As David got out of the car to stretch his legs on the sandy surface of the beauty spot, Davina turned to her daughter and tried to wake her up by gently shaking her, whilst trying not to alarm the young four-year-old. David looked around and thought the place was almost perfect.

It felt like it was in the middle of nowhere, and it was high up. The only part he didn't like was the wooded area.

He stood facing the entrance of the secluded area; to the right of him was the woods, but to the left of him was a steep hill that was on such a decline, it would be humanly impossible to walk down without falling over. The decline was covered in grass and fresh bracken. It would be impossible for those things to get up. The only way they could get up was through the woods, if that was possible, or by walking up the steep Stile Cop Road—an impossible task for David to cycle when he was a kid.

His thoughts went back to Sherree from his street, and his throat began to swell hard as he saw the destruction of her four-month-old baby being replayed in his head. He tried to shake the memory off and knew that keeping busy was the only way to stop this thing from sinking in.

There was no point running away from it mentally; it was happening, whether he liked it or not.

Chapter 30

June 11th

It was early Monday morning, and Jack Slade released a strident and exaggerated yawn. He looked at his watch; it was nearly 7am and his stomach was grumbling for food.

He sat up and couldn't understand why the car was in the position it was in. It then came back to him that his tyre had burst and he must have blacked out. His head was throbbing so hard, it was making him feel woozy. Wondering why the airbag never worked, he stepped out of the vehicle and stretched his elastic legs; he checked his body for any kinds of injuries, but the only injury he had sustained was minor whiplash.

He took a look at his car and saw that both tyres had burst. The front was badly damaged at the side, and the rear was in an even worse state, so much that Jack couldn't get the boot open. “Fuck!” he yelled. His bag was in there.

He began to rub his aching head and couldn't believe he had been out for so long.

Cursing his luck, he headed back for the main road. He knew he was totally exposed, but at the same time, he didn't want to be somewhere enclosed where he

could get ambushed. If he could see one of those things it would be a simple feat to outrun it, or so he hoped.

The road was bendy and he had made this journey numerous times by car, and was sure that he was about forty miles from his old town. Forty miles was a lot for an individual on foot, and he deliberated that as soon as he clocked a car or any other type of vehicle, he would try and hitchhike it back to the town. He thought about stealing a car, if ever he came across an abandoned one, but he had never hotwired a car before, he didn't know if it was even possible. If the worst came to the worst, he would have to break into a house and find the keys to a car. It seemed a little drastic, but he was desperate to get to his son.

Fifteen minutes and two miles later of thinking about crazy situations he could end up in that were filling his head, he saw a car in the distance. Just seeing the car furiously pumped adrenaline through his bloodstream, and a newfound energy overcame him.

He began to sprint towards the car, and as he approached nearer, he could see it was a Ford Focus. His jog turned to a brisk walk once he was ten yards away from the vehicle, and his walk slowed as he soon realised it had been left vacant.

He popped his head through the already-opened door, and took a look into the front to see the keys still dangling from the ignition. He looked around; making sure it was safe. He was surrounded by a lot of shrubbery and it had briefly crossed his mind that a gang of desperados could jump out on him and kick him to death if they wanted the vehicle for themselves. It seemed unrealistic, but Jack knew that if this thing continued for months, fuel, food, water, and even medication would be fought over. Jack had never thought to raid a chemist. It would have been handy, even if it were just for a first aid kit.

As soon as his eyes finished scanning the front of the car, his misbelieving eyes stared at the passenger seat. He turned away to vomit on the road, his black jeans almost paying the price with some splash-back, as it slapped the hard concrete ferociously. He wiped his mouth and spat the last chunk of vomit lodged inbetween his teeth.

He used his thumb and index finger of his right hand to wipe the water in his eyes, and looked back into the car to make sure he wasn't dreaming. The left of the passenger seat was covered in blood. The belt was strapped together and hadn't been unclipped, and the only thing that was left of what used to be sitting in the seat, was one little finger, some entrails and a severed arm that sat to the right. A pair of headphones and a pocket games console sat covered in blood. A teenager possibly.

Jack came to the horrific conclusion that because the seat hadn't been unclipped, the person must have been eaten there and then, and was devoured so much, they came away in pieces. But he couldn't understand why the person didn't try and escape, and why the driver's seat was clean.

Maybe the driver got out to fight off the things as his or her daughter or son sat innocently in the back, unaware what was happening, and too engrossed in their game. Or maybe they simply ran off.

He couldn't believe that the second theory had happened; it was unthinkable for a parent to leave their child to a horde of human-eating beings. He couldn't make out what had happened, or even why the car couldn't have driven straight through

the things. What was blocking the road? Maybe they decided to fall asleep for the night in what at first looked like, a long and harmless, uninhabited road.

Whatever the reason for the tragedy, he knew he had to switch it off from his mind, as scenes like these were not unique anymore.

He shut the door of the car and continued to walk along the road. He was desperate, but he wasn't prepared to take a car that was in that state. The fact that possibly a young person had been killed in the vehicle, unnerved him, and from a selfish, and some would say, a harsh point of view, he didn't fancy driving the remaining forty miles of the journey with the horrendous smell of death tormenting his nasal area.

He was hoping for some wheels soon, as his stomach was now aching to be fed, and he wasn't sure how much energy he had left in him, especially now that whatever was left in his stomach wasn't there anymore.

More monotonous minutes passed as his tired legs soldiered on, and he saw something else up ahead that made his heart gallop. He came to another scene after another mile was completed, and this time, from what he could see, it involved two cars and a motorbike.

The two cars looked to have collided with one another as both front bonnets were crushed a little. A head-on collision, it looked like to Jack. The motorbike lay on the grass and Jack thought that the rider might have lost control of the vehicle and came off, leaving the bike to slide across the road before hitting the grassy bank. But where were the accident victims? There was no sign of blood or body parts, so he could only assume that the individuals involved in the accident had fled the area in panic. Maybe this road used to be swarming with the beasts.

After what he had witnessed earlier on, he carefully stepped towards the carnage. To his right, was a wooded area, and he was aware that danger could be prowling all around him. He peered into both cars, but both of them were empty. There was no sign of carnage, no blood, no dead bodies.

Both cars were spotless and Jack couldn't fathom on what had happened. Inspecting the front of both cars, he was sure that they were un-drivable, most probably with radiator damage, so he set his sights on the motorbike. It had been years since he had ridden one, especially one of this size.

Its bodywork was lime green, and it looked like a BMW with a 1300cc engine. Apart from a few scratches, it appeared that the bike was in working order, and like the car a mile down the road, the keys were in the ignition. There must have been some of those things here. It was the only conclusion he could come up with on why someone would leave a perfectly working motorbike.

Whatever the real reason, his or her loss was Jack Slade's gain. He was taking it. The motorbike would expose him and provide no shield like a car would, but it was all he had, and there were positives with this vehicle, especially if it were needed to escape through a field or an alleyway. Jack convinced himself that there were pros and cons riding a motorbike or driving a car.

A motorbike in this current climate, Jackie boy? Are you completely insane?

Chapter 31

He stepped out of the Wolseley Arms pub and breathed in the country air. It smelt wonderful to be free, but he knew that, not so far away, the smell of death was awash in towns and cities all across the nation and possibly other countries. It was something he was trying not to think about and was glad to a certain degree that TVs were down, as the only thing reporters would show the world from now on was the carnage across the country, and would give an insight to the average human on how they were going to eventually die.

Harry Branston felt his freshly shaven face, that was achieved with cold water and a used razor from the owner—he guessed—and span slowly around, gawping at the area he was in. He was now standing in the middle of the pub's car park, yards away from the van. He saw the river, and the main road leading to Stafford, and he could see the garden centre and the road that led to Rugeley and Little Haywood, where they were the day before.

It was only a mile up the road, where dozens upon dozens of the things were when the van left the premises, and he was reasonably surprised that he couldn't even see one of them.

He spent the night with KP, and slept restlessly, and could have sworn he had heard noises outside. On two occasions he went downstairs into the dark, barren lounge of the pub, only to find nothing inside. He checked the doors and looked out of the windows. He saw shadows moving, but wasn't sure that it was anything untoward.

For minutes, he glared until the tiredness and the effects of the alcohol that had been consumed were beginning to take their toll once again.

He checked his watch and knew he was the first to rise; the rest seemed to have over-indulged more than him as far as the booze was concerned. He walked slowly over to the river; it looked to be in a dirty condition and he was surprised if any fish dwelled in that murky watery place.

Pickle—Harry Branston—screwed his eyes and continued to walk towards the river. He was now out of the car park and stood on the grassy bank that had a reasonable steep decline. He saw a hundred yards down the river, a body. When he was in the car park, that's what he thought it was, but he wanted to make sure. *Poor soul.*

He took a deep breath in as he saw the washed up corpse on the bank and didn't understand why he—he assumed it was a *he*—wasn't walking around with the rest of the dead. *Maybe he tried to escape as a human via the river and drowned.*

His thoughts were shattered when he heard the rest of the group talking in the background and KP shouting his name, wondering where he was.

Time to go back.

He whispered a prayer for the dead man, turned around and went back to the car park to meet his nervous group who were wondering where he had gone.

Chapter 32

They shared an orange juice between them, and sat eating a cold tin of beans. Twenty-four hours ago, Karen Bradley would have turned her nose up at such a breakfast, but her stomach ached for food, any food.

The two of them had decided to take turns in sleeping the night before. Oliver slept from 9pm to 4am, whereas Karen managed another four hours sleep afterwards. The pair of them both admitted that the sitting around was killing their psyche. The boredom was self-evident as the conversation, once it had covered most of their personal and private life, went onto the subjects of politics, religion and why what was happening, was happening.

Karen spoke up, "So now we're all fed, and refreshed, do you think we can make our way up to Stile Cop? It should only be a thirty to forty minute walk if we take it easy."

"Sounds like a plan." Oliver smiled; his gaze lingered a little longer for Karen's liking. "The incline's a bit of a bitch, but it has to be done."

"If I wasn't so exhausted, we could have made it last night."

"Maybe." Oliver nodded. "I do sometimes think we'd be better off in here, where no one can see us."

"True, but up at the beauty spot, we could set up camp nearby; the higher we are, the safer we are. Besides, a lot of other people might have the same idea, so there may be a few of us eventually. Safer in numbers."

Oliver smiled. He was thinking along those lines not so long ago, but there was still a fraction of him wondering if the woods would be a better hiding place.

The two remained sitting on the grass, their knees tucked into their chest trying to muster the energy to get to their weary feet and make the walk to one of the highest points in the area. Karen knew the day before that the incline of the walk was the main factor why she couldn't go on as well as the lack of sleep she had received since the virus outbreak. She now felt reasonably refreshed—normal even, and combed her brown hair back with her fingers, and tightened up the bobble on her short ponytail.

"I need a shower," she gasped.

Oliver smirked. "Oh, I dunno. You look good to me."

"Oh, please." Karen shook her head.

"What's wrong? You're an attractive woman."

"Am I really?" There was a huge tone of sarcasm in Karen's voice and she wasn't impressed with the compliment from this man.

"Well, I wouldn't say no."

"I lost my boyfriend yesterday and it hasn't even hit me yet. I was attacked and carjacked by two men, we've only just met, I haven't washed in more than twenty four hours, and if you want me to be brutally honest, I'm not attracted to you anyway."

"What harm could it do?"

Karen took a look at Oliver's face; he had changed somewhat over the last few hours, his eyes looked demonic. "Are you serious?" Karen laughed when she asked the question.

Oliver leaned over and placed his hand inbetween Karen's thighs, just above her knee. His hand then gently stroked her inner thigh and slowly made its way upwards. Karen stopped the progression with her own hand. He pushed her hand

away and grabbed her crotch; she tried to push him away and said, "What the fuck are you doing?"

Oliver was losing control; he grabbed her by the hair and Karen let out a small shriek. He threw her to the ground and sat on top of her, his knees resting on her arms, preventing her from escaping. He leaned over and began kissing the side of her neck and using his tongue to inspect her facial features. His right hand slipped under her light blue uniform trousers and she shrieked as his clumsy, clammy hands pulled out a few pubic hairs as he felt for her opening. He stopped what he was doing, and leaned over towards her and went to kiss the side of her neck while he unzipped his own trousers.

Karen threw her head forward, her forehead connecting violently with Oliver's nose. He let out a shriek as immediately his nose bled; she then used her bodyweight to throw him off and he landed to the side; she then grabbed her club and smacked him across the face as he lay on the floor.

"You can stay away from me from now on!" Karen screamed. "Or I'll kill you, understand me?"

Oliver wearily got to his feet; his face was unrecognisable with the blood he was losing from the damage to his nose and to the side of his cheek. His face looked disfigured, and Karen assumed that the blow from her club had probably fractured his cheekbone. He ran at Karen, which took her by surprise, and she responded by pushing her foot forward into his stomach, winding the man, but also making him fall to the floor.

"What the fuck? What are you doing?" she yelled.

Oliver slavered, "I just wanted to make love to you."

Karen laughed and scrunched her face in befuddlement. "You fucking men," she said with disdain. "You only think with your dicks, and you don't even know how to use *them* properly. We're living in an apocalyptic world, and you want to empty your *balls*? Seriously?"

There was no sign of Oliver letting up as he struggled quickly to his feet, and as he did this, Karen bent down and reached for his small axe lying on the grass. As he hobbled within her vicinity for a second time, she never panicked and seemed in control as if she knew exactly what to do.

As he staggered towards her, she suddenly crouched and swung the axe into the side of his left knee. He let out a painful scream and fell to the floor. She wanted to disable him, not kill him. At least this way, it would prevent him from following her. It may have put his own life in danger by now having a handicap, but it was *him* that chose to attack *her*, she was just protecting herself.

The blood seeped through his combat trousers, and with the axe in her hand, she walked over to the damaged Oliver Bellshaw. He flinched as she stood over him, and using the small axe to lean on, she crouched down towards him.

"I want you from now on to go that way." She pointed to the outskirts of the woods by the main road. "I don't want you anywhere near these woods anymore, got it?"

He nodded pathetically, and continued with his whimpering.

"Right." She stood to her feet. "I'll be keeping your bag. If I see you again, I'll kill you next time."

Oliver began to sob; his bloodied face looked full of regret, but Karen wasn't falling for his pathetic response.

"Just go," she snarled.

He stood to his feet painfully, as she took a couple of steps backwards, and he turned around and hopped uncomfortably away from her, towards the main road. It wasn't too far away, but for a man with *his* injuries, a yard would feel like a hundred.

She remained stationary for a few minutes and could hear the sound of a vehicle in the background. She cocked her head to one side to get a better listen and found that the vehicle was groaning louder. It was coming up the main road; she was split in two whether to flag the vehicle down and try and catch a ride before Oliver got to it first, or just to stick it out on her own.

She had enough food in her bag to last another three days if she rationed it. She decided to stay on her own, as flagging down a vehicle could be potentially opening up another can of worms, she thought. Oliver was initially a nice guy, but twenty-four hours later, he had changed. There was destruction happening across the country, but not everybody was pulling together for the sake of mankind.

Karen thought that, now that there was probably no police presence and a feeling of lawlessness across the land, the surviving humans might take larger risks and think that they could get away with violence, because there was no law to break anymore.

She suddenly heard the engine of the van to the right side of her, she obviously couldn't see anything because of the condensed trees, but a thud was heard as the van's engine began to decrease in sound as it travelled further away, making its way to the top of Stile Cop Road.

It sounded like it had hit something... or someone.

Oliver.

Chapter 33

"How much food have we got left?"

Davina had come back from the trees to drain her bladder, and sat with the passenger seat door open. She looked at her watch; it was nearly 11am.

David never answered her question; he was singing songs to Isobel who had decided to give breakfast a miss. Father and daughter were standing by the boot of their Renault. David now had a stick in his hand, and was scrawling figures with the stick in the sandy surface of the beauty spot. He was teaching her how to play noughts and crosses.

Davina never repeated her question, and walked around to the boot of the car and opened it to ruffle through the bag. "Not much," she sighed.

David told Isobel to give him a minute, and he walked over to his wife. There was a silence amongst the couple and Davina looked at David with sadness in her eyes. "How do you think it's come to this?"

David shrugged his shoulders and looked over to Isobel, who gave him a cheeky wave. He said with a hint of sarcasm, "Take your pick. Are our alien overlords

returning to reclaim the planet? Maybe it's a government conspiracy to curb population growth? Is it God's doing?"

"But... are they dead or alive? If they're dead, why do they eat?"

David sighed and took on a more serious tone. "Look, I only know the same as you. Are they alive? What is your definition of alive? Spiritual? Biological? As for eating; is it just to spread the virus or do they really need the food? Does their digestive system work? But they don't breathe and their heart doesn't pump, or does it? All it needs is the brain and nervous system to move, but without a digestive system and a working heart, the body would shrivel up and dry up and decompose within weeks."

"So what are you saying?"

"Remember what the TV said. The best hope we have is to keep away from these things for as long as possible, and hopefully necrotic degradation will eventually kill them off."

"Necrotic degradation? What's that?"

"I thought you were in the medical field?"

Davina wasn't in the mood for David's sarcasm. "David, as you know, I'm...or was, an auxiliary nurse, which means, all I do is take blood and change beds. I'm not fully qualified."

"Basically, what it means is that they're rotting. So if we humans can steer clear, hopefully they'll wither and collapse. But, even if they did all die, we'd still be in a world where life would never be the same."

"What do you mean?"

"What would you rather face? A gang of unarmed stumblers, or a group of armed human vicious males, desperate for food?"

"Neither," Davina cackled.

David leant over and kissed her on the forehead. "Me neither."

She went to the dashboard of the car and took out his phone; it had one bar left and she tried to ring her mum again. It was the answer machine once more. She shook her head in frustration and almost threw the phone to the floor. She was disheartened that there were no text messages either. She switched off the phone to try and preserve its life, and placed it back into the glove compartment.

David walked towards her and placed his hands comfortingly on her shoulders. "We'll get through this."

"Will we?" She sobbed gently, trying not to attract the attention of their daughter. They both tried to keep their emotions in check for the sake of Isobel, but it was easier said than done.

"Daddy," came the innocent voice behind him.

"Yeah, Babs."

"It's your turn." She handed him the stick.

David took the stick off his daughter and gazed at the beautiful little thing. She was so innocent in such a macabre world. How on earth was he going to protect her?

David looked to his right to see the shoulders of Davina shuddering up and down, as she was still crying.

Tinged with sadness, David delicately brushed his fingers through his daughter's blonde hair and almost fell to pieces himself once again. He made his

mark on the sand, and she excitedly took it off him and made her mark and threw her hands in the air. "I win, I win."

"Right, you go and practice on your own for a while, and I'll be back in two minutes."

"Okay," she responded with no protest.

He walked away from his daughter and kissed the back of his wife's head. He then made his way to the driver's side, put his keys into the ignition, and put the radio on.

"I thought you already tried that?" Davina spoke from behind.

"Just seeing if there's any new info."

The only station that was working was a BBC station. It was still broadcasting the same information. It was on a loop, and after a few minutes the same information would be repeated, but David wanted to see if anything new had been added.

It was still the same: a bitten human would be infected; they could be killed by damaging the brain, and they believed that they were attracted by noise and light. There wasn't anything else that had been added since the last time he listened.

Davina was sick of crying, but she couldn't help it.

"Mummy, what's wrong?" Isobel had walked up to her mum, and saw the distressed thirty-four-year-old clinging onto the boot of the car, the tears rolling down her cheeks rapidly.

Davina wiped her tears with the back of her hands and turned to face her daughter who was now becoming upset herself. The youngster was feeding off the negative vibes that were occurring around her, and Davina knew it would be impossible to completely protect her.

Davina knelt down and embraced her daughter, and squeezed her hard. Although Davina knew that her baby had no idea what was happening, she was aware that something was wrong; she had been caught up with the emotion of it all.

When Davina went to her friend's mother's funeral, she felt the tidal wave of emotion in the church procession, and although she never really knew her mother that well, she cried all the same, as if she was a family member herself.

Isobel was feeling the same, feeding off her mother's foreboding.

David walked around to the boot of the car and watched his girls hugging one another; they both broke their embrace and stared at David. He smiled weakly, and approached the girls and crouched down to Isobel's level. They all embraced as a family.

"It's gonna be okay. I promise," David spoke softly, and kissed both of the tearstained cheeks of his girls.

"How do you know that?" There was anger in Davina's voice. She stood to her feet. "You keep saying that! We should have stayed in the house; there's no going back now!"

David stood up himself so he could speak to his wife at eye level. "We couldn't stay in there, it was too dangerous. You knew that!"

David halted his rant and looked down to his daughter; she looked frightened, her face shook and her tears fell freely. She knew there was something wrong, but had no clue what it was. She was four years old, but she wasn't stupid.

“Could you stop arguing, please,” the little thing spoke delicately. “I’m feeling sad.”

Chapter 34

The lime green 1300cc BMW roared its way along the Stafford Road. It passed the Wolseley Arms pub and now continued to growl audibly along the Rugeley Road. He looked around, and was still feeling queasy about a fly he had accidentally swallowed as he rode past the Darlaston Inn, back in Stoke.

He was enjoying the newfound freedom on his new toy, but the downside of not riding without a helmet was the suicidal insects that hit him in the face the faster he went through the country roads. There was two occasions where his eyes were nearly damaged from the kamikaze blue bottles, but a third paid the price by flying right into Jack Slade's mouth.

The journey was uneventful, apart from the odd sighting of the beings, but Jack put this quiet episode down to the fact that he had remained on the country roads, and stayed away from the populated areas by going the long way around. He knew being on the bike was plain stupidity, but it was only temporary. He knew that if there were groups of them, he would probably have to turn the vehicle around for fear of being pulled off.

When he reached Rugeley, he rode the bike into a street called Crabtree Road; it was adjacent to a Primary school called John Bamford, which his son, Thomas, had started attending.

The bike was parked up by seven Crabtree Road, and Jack looked at the old house. He hadn't been back for a while. It had been too long. He had been a crappy father, and it was typical that the week that he promised himself that it was all going to change before it was too late, disaster had struck.

He looked around the barren street; curtains were drawn, and people were obviously inside but probably scared out of their wits. He walked towards the house and peered around to check the back garden. It was all clear.

He knocked the window, but there was no answer. Were they hiding inside? He couldn't tell if Kerry was in by looking for her car, as there was no drive and the street was full of parked cars. Jack was unsure if Kerry possessed a car or could even drive at all!

He looked and could see there was no sign of barricading, which told him that they were out. To be certain, he picked up a rock from the garden's rockery and gently tapped the glass of the living room window. He thought that breaking in would make them vulnerable, but promised to board the broken pane up if Kerry and Thomas were in the house.

The glass gave way gently, and Jack slipped his arm in and opened the side window. The side window of the living room was just enough for him to squeeze through, and he jumped onto the burgundy carpet of the living room. He scanned the room and, even though he had only checked one room, he was certain that the house was barren. The disappointment on his face was self-evident knowing there

was nobody home, and weighed down with frustration, a surge of anger ran through his frame.

He didn't even call out for Kerry; he jogged his way upstairs and checked the remaining rooms nevertheless. The last room he checked was the bathroom, and as soon as he saw the toilet, his bowels reminded him that they were due to be emptied. Aware that he was in the middle of some kind of apocalypse where flesh eating beings roamed, he felt reasonably relaxed spending time on the toilet, and took it a stage further when he had a quick cold shower for two minutes, before putting his clothes back on.

He went down to the ground floor and took a look in the fridge. There was no bread or milk. He made do with a huge slice of Wensleydale cheese, a packet of crisps, and a packet of jaffa cakes. To add some health to the equation, he devoured the almost black banana and drank the remains of the OJ that sat under the sink.

He couldn't comprehend where she could have gone, so he decided to pick up her landline phone. He thought about calling her mum's to see if she was there with Thomas, but he didn't know her number, and even if he did, he remembered the verbal he was given by Kerry when he phoned her back in Glasgow. He didn't know what the situation was at her mum's; it could have been reasonably peaceful, or the house could be surrounded. He was going to ride there instead. It was only two miles away; it was the only place he could think of where they could be.

She had to be at her mum's!

He left the house with a full stomach and started up the bike. It squealed its way away from the empty Crabtree Road, heading towards Fair Oak. He turned left and headed out of Rugeley through a place called Slitting Mill, which sat on the outskirts of Cannock Chase. That was when he saw his first group of beings sauntering along the main road, just outside the Horns Pub.

The noise of his cycle made their heads turn and all eleven that were there, including one that looked no older than eight, outstretched their arms and desperately tried to grab Jack as he weaved around them. The last one he had passed almost ended in an unhappy ending, as he felt the tight grip of the thing grabbing the sleeve of his T-shirt, forcing Jack's arm to lash back at the fiend, forcing him to drive the bike for a couple of seconds one-handed.

The short incident had made him temporarily lose control of the bike, it wobbled slightly and it headed towards the crash barrier.

Only quick thinking from Jack had prevented the episode ending in a bloody result. He slowed the bike down and turned it to the left, missing the barrier by three yards. He was almost stationary before the bike increased its speed once again. The slowing down of the vehicle had given the creatures false hope. They turned and made an awful groaning sound; their decaying mouths open at the thought of warm flesh. Jack sped off, and took a quick look behind him, as the bike growled and taunted them.

Jesus Christ, they're almost running!

Jack was pretty confident that outrunning those things would be a task that could be achievable, providing there were obstacles that could prevent them from attacking him. If he ran up a jagged hill or a set of steps, *that* would halt their

progress, as they seemed clumsy and unbalanced. Running away on a flat stretch of road, however, could be a different story altogether.

They weren't going to win any races, but what they did have was a will never to stop. Jack thought that as a human, eventually you would have to stop to get your breath back, they, on the other hand, would not, and probably had no breath to get back anyway.

He was sure that they didn't feel the burning sensation people got in their lungs, or pains in the chest, or even tiredness. They would probably continue, robotic like, until something or someone stopped them from achieving their feeding goal.

He had experienced his first encounter with a large group of them and nearly paid the price. He knew the bike had to go eventually.

Chapter 35

They were reasonably stocked up with supplies that they had in the van, but Pickle told KP to head for the nearest supermarket to stock up even more. If they left it any longer, most of the food would be off or gone, taken by other desperate looters. There wasn't much room in the back as it was, but with six mouths to feed the supplies weren't going to last long.

The group had tried to convince Pickle to stop and check if there were any vacant houses that had been fled, but he was adamant that Stile Cop was their safest bet. It was in the open so they couldn't get trapped, unlike being in a house, and it was high up and in the middle of nowhere, away from populated areas.

With Pickle opting to go in the back for a change, KP was driving the van and turned to his right to see that passengers, Jamie and Janine, were daydreaming, their eyes staring into nothingness. The trees and shrubs whizzed past their eyes as the van reached forty, and the streetlights, with their long necks, look to be giving them and their vehicle the guard of honour as they progressed along the road.

As they ventured into Rugeley, they saw a few beings and realised that Pickle's theory was correct, and that staying anywhere residential so early was a recipe for disaster. The people who were trapped in their houses had no choice and had to stay where they were, but the group did have a choice, and the middle of nowhere seemed an appropriate destination.

KP decided to go the quickest way out of the town and went through Slitting Mill, rather than through Draycott. The van turned left and travelled along the Hednesford Road as if it was re-entering Rugeley the Draycott Park way. All three could see a few of the beings deep into the estate, and small gatherings of the dead were in their dozens around the town. They were roaming together, but why? Were they herding together out of instinct?

The van turned right onto Stile Cop Road and it was a road KP knew well. It was a road he and his friend used to cycle up on a weekend, when he was a child. When they were children the feeling of relief once they had cycled to get to top of

the hill was immense, and once they were at the top, they had three options as they came to a crossroad.

Option one was to turn left and head into Brereton—Rugeley's neighbouring town. Option two was to go straight on and ride into a village called Upper Longdon. The third option would be to turn right, cycle for another mile and enter another small town called Hazelslade. Very rarely, a fourth option would be introduced. That fourth option would be to turn around and head back down Stile Cop Road. Any cyclist going down that hill could pick up a speed of twenty, easily.

As they bypassed the garden of death and its headstones—Stile Cop Cemetery—they looked to their left to see the condensed woods. KP looked at the digital clock fitted into the van's dashboard. It was nearly 11am.

KP's daydream of yesteryear came to an abrupt end when he heard a scream.

“Watch out!” Janine shrieked.

KP saw a figure for no more than a second that stumbled out into the middle of the road. The face was covered in blood, and its left hand was holding onto its left knee. KP's right foot applied more pressure on the gas pedal and the figure in the middle of the road was hit instantly. The van and the people inside it jumped up as the wheels of the heavy vehicle went over the body.

“Was that one of *them*?” Jamie said, his voice raised and filled with concern.

“Absolutely,” KP answered, but he was unsure.

They turned left as they drove by the beauty spot where they were going to park after their visit to the supermarket, and Jamie saw that there was a family there already. KP then made the short drive to the supermarket and almost collided with a green BMW motorbike on the way. The supermarket was situated on Power Station Road, and they had taken the long way around, but KP was under instruction by Pickle that they should drive the circumference of the town, rather than through it, in case they attracted unwanted attention from afar.

The drive lasted another seven minutes, when at last, they reached their destination.

“Well, here we are,” KP announced. “Let's get as much food as we can, providing the place hasn't been looted already.”

Jamie jumped out of the van, into the car park of the twenty-four hour supermarket, and saw that the place had a few cars in it. He scratched his short brown hair and sighed hard. How did it come to this?

“Do you think there's anyone inside?” Janine probed.

“Dunno.” Jamie shrugged his shoulders. “There're cars here. Why would people leave without their cars?”

Janine tried to quickly scan the car park as Jamie opened up the back to let out Pickle, Laz and Grass. She estimated that at least twenty cars were in the car park, and she was hoping they all belonged to staff that were hiding.

“Right, guys,” Pickle announced. “Guns ready. Remember what I showed yer.”

He then pointed at Grass and Laz. “You two grab a trolley. We're *all* going.”

In a loose four-two formation, the *four* being the gunmen and the *two* being Laz and Grass with their trolleys in front, they entered the place through the main entrance of the automatic slider doors.

On the first floor was the food section; there were thirty aisles where customers paid for their items. To the right, was an escalator, where a huge range of clothes

were normally sold. Four of them held Browning pistols, and Pickle's shotgun was strapped loosely on his back with a homemade strap that was made from a belt that he borrowed off Janine when they were in the Wolseley Arms pub.

"Once we get some food, I'm going up there," Jamie snorted, and pointed towards the escalator leading to the first floor clothes section. "Can't wait to get out of this uniform."

"First things first," Pickle cackled.

"Get plenty of fruit." Janine turned to Laz, who now had a smouldering cigarette hanging out from the corner of his mouth. Laz looked at Janine; he could see her physically shaking, holding the pistol. She'll be no good to anyone, he thought.

"Not *too* much fruit," KP snapped. "Be lucky if the fruit lasts a day, look at those bananas, they're almost black."

Janine felt that KP had a good point; the aisles of the place were reasonably well-stocked, and only looked half-empty. The advantage that they had was that the supermarket was a mile away from civilization, so it was hardly walking distance for the average human, and even less so because of what was happening.

The place was built purposely near an industrial estate to attract, not just the residents of Rugeley, but people from afar like Armitage, Brereton and other small towns.

They shuffled together in a loose oval shape and KP turned to Pickle and looked at the way the group was slowly moving, and said, "Do you think this is absolutely necessary?"

Pickle smirked thinly and shook his head. "Probably not. We'll probably get things done a lot quicker if we split up."

"Why don't you guys take a look around?" Jamie suggested to KP and Pickle. "Janine and I will stay with Laz and Grass."

"Good idea." KP winked at Jamie and didn't need to be persuaded to stay. He walked off on his own and disappeared behind an aisle.

Pickle took a bottle of apple juice and opened the bottle, and turned to the group. "KP has left the back o' the van open, so once yer loaded the van, meet us at the bottom o' the escalator for those of yer who want fresh clothes. For those who don't, yer can stay by the van. Who wants fresh clothes?"

All four put their hands up. Pickle grinned. "Okay, see yer all in about half an hour then." Pickle walked on and left the four to their own devices.

"What next?" Jamie announced, and looked over to Laz.

"Erm... some of those already cooked chickens!" Laz said with excitement. "They smell nice."

After finishing their shopping trip, they then loaded the already-opened van. The four returned back to the barren supermarket, headed for the escalator and saw KP appear at the top, his Browning tucked into the front of his trousers. He was now wearing blue chinos and a black dressy shirt with a collar. Pickle appeared dressed in camouflage gear. He wore combat trousers and a round-neck-shirt to match.

Jamie sniggered to himself, and made a joke with Grass and Laz that Pickle thought he was Rambo.

"It's all clear," Pickle shouted down.

The rest of the group responded by running up the defunct escalator, excited about their new change of clothes. The place was half the size of the supermarket's ground floor; the other half appeared to be offices, staff rooms and canteens.

The clothes section was like a maze and the clothes racks were at six feet in height, so most of the group couldn't see over. The group had excitedly split up and were spread out among the first floor. Janine had already a handful of clothes and was heading towards the changing area.

Laz walked away from the group and walked along the balcony that looked onto the ground floor. He walked by the toilets and staff room, and headed towards the offices.

"Where're you going?" Grass shouted after Laz.

"Gonna see if any of these phones are working in these offices."

Grass immediately followed Laz, and didn't want to waste the opportunity to phone his mum and dad.

Laz tried the door and was pleased to find it was open. He stepped into the offices and began checking the phones. Grass had decided to take a different route and went into the toilet to drain his bladder.

Once the twenty-year-old had finished, he washed his hands and exited out of the area. He was now on the balcony, looking over the ground floor, and to his right he could see the clothes section from afar. To his left, he could see through the windows of the offices, and saw Laz frantically checking the phones. From what he could see of Laz's body language, it didn't look good.

Grass walked on and could smell the unmistakable aroma of ground coffee coming from the staff room, but there was something else he could smell mixed in with the aroma of coffee: The smell of rotten meat.

Maybe I've got time to make a fresh pot.

With zero hesitancy, he tried the door, and as it opened he was suddenly engulfed by an accumulation of bodies and the awful odour of death and groaning.

The momentum of their strength forced Grass to scream out and he almost went over the balcony. The dozen or so creatures spilled out of the room and grabbed and tore at him as he desperately tried to flee. He felt the first bite sink into his neck and he let out a terrifying, blood-curdling scream that attracted the attention of the rest of his group, including a horrified Laz.

Laz looked on in horror from the offices, as at least twelve of the things brought down the youngster and began to attack him. He could see at the other side, the group coming together to witness the destruction of young Conor Snodgrass. Three of the things ignored the bloody feast that was happening, and advanced towards the group at the clothes section instead.

Laz was safe for now. But what was going to be the end product? Him, stuck in the offices with these things trying to get in, as the group safely retreated back to Stile Cop with a van full of food and water? No chance!

Laz opened the office door and was now standing back on the balcony. He saw the remains of Grass being devoured by seven of the things that looked like they used to work at the place, as they were all dressed in similar attire.

He felt queasy as he saw one of them pushing its hand into the ripped-off head of the young man and scooping out the brains and shoving the findings into its mouth rapidly, as if someone was about to steal it from them. Another two were

biting into his legs and the torso couldn't be seen at all, apart from what used to be inside it, which had spilled out all over the balcony.

Laz assumed that the frightened staff must have locked themselves in as the outbreak was announced, and maybe one of them had already been bitten or scratched by an infected customer or member of staff. He could only imagine what carnage had taken place in the staff room as they changed into these mindless freaks. It appeared that they had no idea on how to get out of the staff room once they had turned. That was until Grass came along and kicked the hornet's nest.

"What shall we do?" Jamie asked; his face was etched with panic, as slowly, three of the creatures dragged their feet towards the group.

"Shoot the fuckers!" KP exclaimed. "In the head!"

The group adhered to KP's advice and did exactly that.

It was self-evident that target practice hadn't been introduced, as some bullets from the four pistols that were being unleashed, hit the torso of some of those things. It took a few seconds before the first one fell to its knees and fiercely hit the floor face down.

Seeing that there were some bullet holes in the wall that had completely missed them, Pickle spoke out. "Wait till they get nearer!"

There were now seven of them about thirty yards away, the nearest two were ten yards in front, and the remaining five that were devouring the rest of Grass, seemed unruffled about the noise that was being generated by the weapons.

The first one in front of the group of the beings was an obese-looking young girl; she was virtually unrecognisable now as her face was ashen, her mouth and clothes stained with other peoples' blood, and she walked as if she had spent twelve hours in a pub with Oliver Reed.

KP stepped forwards, pointed his Browning at the girl and took her out with one clean shot, which took him by surprise. The rest followed suit and one by one, they fell. Some of the shots were still not hitting the target, but they eventually fell like dominoes, as if someone had just kicked over a line of mannequins.

Seven of the bodies were slumped on the floor; black fluid left the entrance of the wounds from some of the bodies, like a slow oil spill. Pickle and the rest of the group walked forwards onto the balcony; the four creatures that had devoured Grass, got to their feet. They looked up and began walking towards the group, except one. Its attention was distracted by the presence of Laz standing outside the office. Laz went back into the offices and hid himself in the ladies toilets that were situated near the photocopier. Pickle aimed from afar, and took himself by surprise when he released a shot and saw the lone ghoul take a fall before it got to the offices.

As the three others staggered towards the gun-wielding group, two went down immediately from Jamie and KP's guns. Jamie and KP continued to pull at the triggers and found that their magazines were empty.

Pickle smiled and said, "Allow me." The third, now twenty yards away, speeded up at the same speed as a jogger.

"Let me," Janine jumped in nervously. "I don't think I've got one yet."

Pickle stepped to the side and Janine shook so much, she needed two hands to hold the gun. She finally fired two rounds; one skimmed the outside of the neck.

As it got closer, she made no mistake with the second shot that hit the thing in the left eye socket. It fell with a heavy thump.

“Well done.” Pickle patted Janine on the shoulder. It was never meant to be a patronising comment from Pickle, and Janine never took it that way. She was almost in tears and her hands shook violently from her first experience of firing a handgun.

Pickle said, “Back in a minute.”

Pickle saw something from afar that unnerved him. He marched his muscular frame over the balcony. He tried not to look at what was left of Grass, and stepped over the bloody remains that were scattered across the area.

Pickle could see Laz, now wrestling with one of them as they both fell out of the ladies toilets in the offices. The thing was on top of him, and Laz was trying his utmost to fight off the creature, but Pickle felt Laz was too weak to last too long. Laz was weedy; he was unfit and was on the wrong side of forty.

The creature turned around to see Pickle enter the offices, holding the shotgun the wrong way round. The butt of the shotgun hit it twice; its head cracked open and left a dark stain against the wall as it fell to the floor. Another violent crashing blow would have surely emptied the contents of the head, but Pickle temporarily refrained himself from doing so, unlike what he did with the female worker back at the Wolseley Arms pub.

He stood back as Laz tried to recover his breathing, and this time instead of bringing the gun down, he delivered a blow by swinging the butt of the shotgun like a baseball bat, into the side of the head of what used to look like, a teenage checkout girl. What she was doing in the toilet, he didn't know. It lay motionless on the floor, and Pickle was satisfied that the incident wasn't quite as messy as it was back at the pub; he was now feeling nauseous after witnessing what had happened to young Grass.

Almost in tears, the exhausted Laz staggered to his feet, and tried to speak but was finding it an arduous task.

Pickle wiped the butt off the gun on the office carpet and strapped the gun back around his shoulder, the belt hanging loosely. “Where the fuck did *she* come from?” Pickle quizzed.

Said Laz, “I dunno. She was in there when I went in. I opened the door to get out as soon as I saw her, but she grabbed me...”

“This is fucking mental!”

“Her fuckin' breath stunk.” Laz tried to make a joke about a situation that had made him piss his shorts.

“Not too sure they can actually breathe, aren't they technically dead? Must be the decay in the mouth area yer referring to.”

Laz looked out of the office windows and his saddened eyes glared at the middle of the balcony. “Fuckin' shame about Grass.”

Pickle sighed and smacked his lips together. “I'm gonna have to take responsibility for that one.”

“It's not your fault, Pickle!”

“I should have checked the area properly. It was me that said *all clear* and I shouldn't have allowed two unarmed men go into that situation.”

“If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I just fucked off and he followed me.”

“Whatever; we’ll talk about it later. We need to get out o’ here.”

The two men heard the groaning of the girl that was lying on her back.

Fucker's still alive!

An exhausted Pickle asked Laz politely to step aside, and pulled out his pistol from his belt and responded to the noise with two short sharp bursts of gunfire to the cranium from his Browning pistol. The back of the head began to re-decorate the beige carpet with the black liquid that ran out of its damaged skull.

“Let's hope that this isn't a regular thing.” Laz looked at his hands that were shaking violently and winced as he touched his right arm. He began to light up a cigarette.

“Tell me about it,” Pickle spoke, taking the cigarette directly from Laz's mouth and took in a long deep suck, then handed it back to him. “Between the four o' us, we wasted about forty bullets on twelve of those things. Jamie and KP had emptied their magazines and there was some still left standing.”

“Probably first time nerves. I know *I* couldn't do it.”

Pickle approached the window that was situated in the office, and looked out onto the car park. He could see six more shuffling about in the car park; all were spaced out and the threat seemed pretty low, but he didn't want to hang about, especially the way his inexperienced group fired their pistols.

“Think we better leave,” Pickle announced. “We've got company.”

Chapter 36

It had only been a day and a half since the warning came through on the radio. At first he thought it was a hoax, or he had accidentally received a station that was broadcasting a science fiction audio book. The more he listened, the more the information was sponged by his disbelieving brain.

This was no prank, and this was no audio book either... this was the real thing. It seemed ridiculous that something like this could happen.

But why not!

He thought about the documentary he had watched on malaria, which kills millions a year, one every thirty seconds.

Hundreds of years ago it was the bubonic plague that killed twenty five million people across Europe, and another twenty five million across the globe. Just because medical science had moved on dramatically over the centuries, it didn't mean that man was safe from every living virus that threatened mankind.

To Gary Jenson, it was the nature of the virus that unnerved him and had caused mass panic on his wing. Paranoid that the officers had known about this through the night and had left them to their own devices, the prisoners banged their doors with their fists, and he was one of them hammering the steel. His hands were still smarting from that panic-stricken incident. Some prisoners were irate, some even wept, as there was no immediate response to their torment.

When Jamie Thomson finally opened his door, Gary's panic had subsided once he had time to think. He sat motionless on his bed and calmly slurped on his

coffee that he had made five minutes before. He heard the excitement of the voices, as one by one the doors were opened, and after ten minutes, the wing fell silent.

Gary didn't understand the excitement of the other prisoners that were being released. Sure, they were now free men, but free in what kind of world? Maybe they had family they wanted to see. Maybe they were confident of getting to their homes, being with their families, and remaining there until the virus had passed. Maybe after the virus had passed, they thought that they could start again, and live as free men. Despite it turning into a horrific world out there, Gary thought that the opportunity for most of the inmates was too much to resist.

He, on the other hand, had other ideas. At first he wanted to stay. He thought he was the only one stupid enough to stay. The plan was to stay behind and hope in a matter of weeks that this virus would blow over. He was too much of a coward to go out there into the unknown.

He had a girlfriend, but aside from that the only family member he had left was his father, and the abusive drunken old man was a waste of space who Gary wouldn't piss on if the old man were on fire. Gary had already come to the conclusion that he would rather take his chances inside. Even more so once he stepped out of his cell.

Now with a coffee in his right hand, he walked out of his cell and stood on the first floor balcony, looking over the ground floor of the wing. The slider doors were left open, and the crack of light that spilled onto the wing near the canteen, suggested that the exercise yard door had been left open, too.

Gary raised a wry smile once he had noticed this. In his own cell, he had a huge jar of coffee, plenty of cigarettes, tins of tuna, and bread. On the wing's canteen, he knew they had cupboards of biscuits and sandwiches, and whatever else was left in the other cells from the inmates.

He walked across the balcony and trotted down the steel steps with his mug still in his right hand. He walked the full length of the ground floor to the slider, and peered into the other three wings. There was one inmate that he saw, who was strolling around the place on his own. He seemed to have the same idea as Gary. But what if there were others, many others, and they were still in their cells?

Gary took one last gulp of his coffee and placed the mug on the floor and took the black liner out of the plastic bin. Fortunately, apart from some cans and a banana skin, the bag was empty, as the bin had been recently changed.

He went round all the cells on his wing and was pleased to see every inmate, apart from himself, had left. He was unsure whether the rest of the wings were vacant and told himself that he would worry about that another day.

He collected as much food as he could and put them in the black bag; this process took thirty minutes to execute. He had enough to last weeks, and felt he needed to do this on that particular Sunday before someone else beat him to it. He had spent most of his Sunday sitting around on his bed, smoking cigarettes, and waiting for other inmates from other wings from houseblock two to introduce themselves, but it never happened.

It was now Monday afternoon, and the boredom was killing him. He couldn't possibly survive in his cell with no working TV. He had a working stereo, like other inmates had, but he felt it was too early to announce to the whole of houseblock two that someone else had stayed behind. He decided to do the inevitable and

creep around the wings to see if there were signs of others. Initially, he was too frightened to do this, but he couldn't hide in his cell forever.

Maybe they could work together. Or maybe they would kill one another over food in order to survive. That was the risk, he thought. That was probably why the remaining inmates were keeping themselves to themselves, as they didn't know who had decided to remain inside.

Gary left his wing with ease, as each slider door of the wings were left open by the officers. It felt peculiar to leave his wing without the presence of an officer walking beside him. He walked through the opened slider door, went by the bubble, and peered into G and F Wing. Although he never stepped inside, the wings were eerily soundless and this gave him a shudder. He entered E Wing and like the others, it seemed desolate, but he knew that wasn't true, as he had already seen the figure on E Wing lolloping around. He could tell it was an inmate and not an officer, because they were all dressed the same, with their blue trousers and red polo shirts.

Gary hesitantly walked around and decided that calling out was a bad idea. He gently walked up the steel steps to get to the first floor, trying to make as little noise as possible. All the cell doors were opened, and he peered in each cell. It appeared on this wing that everyone had decided to take their chances outside, except one. He didn't recognise the face but the poor young boy had decided that cutting his wrists was a better option than being out there, where humans were now considered food by certain individuals.

Maybe he had no family to turn to, Gary thought.

It never baffled Gary where the young boy could have got a blade from to make the cuts, it was sometimes easier to get drugs and weapons in prison than on the outside. He stared at the lifeless body; his face was light blue, he was curled up like a frightened hedgehog and the sheets were heavily stained.

"Poor bastard," Gary uttered under his breath.

He checked the last few cells and decided that he should return back to his own wing.

"Damn shame," a voice appeared behind Gary.

Shocked by the unexpected presence, he gasped and turned around.

The man was in his thirties, stocky build and his head was shaved bald. The tattoos on his forearm suggested that he was in, or used to be in, a gang before being incarcerated.

"Jason Bonser," he announced and held out his hand. "You might have heard of me."

"Gary."

The truth was, Gary hadn't been in prison long and didn't know who he was, but didn't want to say so. He felt that men like Jason Bonser thrived on reputation and the last thing he wanted to do was disrespect a gang member who was twice the size of him, and inform him that he had never heard of him.

Gary shook his hand, and Jason squeezed his very hard. He didn't know whether it was done on purpose to make a statement, or if it was natural. If it was natural, then Jason Bonser was as powerful as he looked as far as the strength department was concerned.

"So this is it then." Gary smirked. "Just the two of us."

“Three of us, actually,” Bonser corrected.

“Three?”

“A guy called Kyle Horan is on the other wings checking the place out. We decided to lay low for a day, now we're seeing who's stayed behind. Not many.”

“What's he like?”

“He's a good guy,” Bonser appeased Gary. “He's one of *my* crew.”

“Oh.”

Gary wasn't sure that two members of the same gang *and* him, was a great combination. Nothing had been said yet, and already he felt threatened. What happens if they want him out the way? What would they do if they found he had a cell full of food? He wished he had stayed in his cell now, but with the two of them now starting to search the wings, he came to the conclusion that it would only be a matter of time before he would be found anyway.

Kyle Horan finally made an appearance and bellowed to Bonser. “Well, that's been taken care of!”

“Erm... Kyle.” Bonser turned around to his colleague and pointed at Gary. Noticing him for the first time, Kyle stopped in his tracks.

“A new guy,” Kyle spoke, but his voice seemed mocking and a little threatening to Gary. “I don't know his face.”

These two individuals were hardcore, Gary had convinced himself. These two figures that stood before him were probably inside for gang killings, whereas *he* was in for stealing cars. If these two began to turn nasty, he wouldn't stand a chance.

“So what cell are you in, Gary?” Jason asked him.

He didn't have time to think. “H sixty-seven,” he lied.

“H sixty-seven? Let's have a look in your cell.”

All three walked onto H Wing. Gary walked in front of the two menacing men and was certain that a blow to the back of his head was going to occur, but it never came. He took in a deep breath and walked into H sixty-seven.

“Stand outside,” Kyle demanded.

At this point, Gary knew he was in bad company. These guys now weren't even pretending to be nice.

They both searched through the cupboards and under the bed as well as the mattress.

Jason looked over to Gary, who was standing by the side of the door. “What did you stay behind for? There's nothing here, no food or nothing.”

Gary shrugged his shoulders. “It just seemed too bad outside to leave, the radio mentioned people being attacked.”

“We have a stash of food,” Kyle informed Gary. “But you're getting fuck all.”

This is it! This is the part where they're going to kick me to death. I'm another mouth to feed, so technically to them, I'm a threat. Come on, man. Think!

Gary shook his head. “I don't want anything to eat. I just want to hide in my cell, and die peacefully.”

Bonser glared at Gary. “What?”

“I have no family on the outside, so what is there to live for?”

Jason and Kyle looked at one another and burst out laughing like a couple of teenagers. Gary kept his straight-face on, and stared intently at the two men,

trying to prove that he was serious about the words that had fallen out of his mouth.

"This guy's crazy," Kyle snorted. "Once we've cleared the cells, I think we better stay away from this wing; the place will be stinking once he pops his clogs."

"Well," Jason held out his hand, and managed one last chuckle, "I wish you luck, my friend, but I know I'd rather be out there than stuck in here, starving to death."

"I have nothing out there," Gary responded. "No family or nothing. Why didn't you guys leave?"

The two men both smiled at one another, and Jason pulled out a mobile phone from his trouser pocket that had been smuggled in. Most dealers would try and get phones snuck in, most failed. "I've called people, family members, gang members, and it's fucking gruesome out there. A lot of people are dead. The last call I made was a few hours ago this morning. I called my sister, she was hysterical and as I was speaking to her, the fuckers were trying to get in. I heard windows smashed and then the line went dead."

"But you guys can't stay in here forever. Surely, the food will run out soon enough."

"True, and that is when we jump the fence, not while this pandemic is at its highest. Why put yourself at risk? Hopefully, by the time me and Kyle get out, most of these fuckers will be dead or the army would have control over the country by then. I dunno, we just need to survive, and an extra mouth to feed is not what we need. But if you're convinced that sooner or later the world's gonna go to hell in a handcart anyway and would rather die slowly in your cell, then that's up to you, brother."

Kyle grinned. "I could make it quicker for you, if you want."

"No, I want to do it this way. It'll give me time to pray and think about my loved ones from the past," Gary spoke with conviction, fooling both men convincingly. "It's what I want."

Bonser looked around the cell. "Well, there ain't any food in here, so I suppose I believe you."

"What if he's bullshittin'?" Kyle sneered. "I reckon he's only stayed behind 'cos he's too chicken shit to go outside."

Gary screwed his eyes and bravely taunted, "So why are you still here, then?"

Kyle never answered Gary, but his face was full of rage.

"And if you decide *not* to die and leave?" Bonser snarled a little, whilst asking the question.

Gary knew where Bonser was coming from.

Gary was certain that apart from the extra mouth to feed, him escaping would also be seen as a risk for the two men. If Gary was out in the world, he would have information about a certain prison that was stocked full of food and now only had two inmates in there. That kind of information could be detrimental for Bonser and Horan, especially if the information reached armed bandits or other types of desperados. A full or a half-full prison would be impossible and suicidal to break into, but if the houseblock only had two prisoners left, it made them vulnerable.

Gary finally answered, "I won't. Don't worry; if I wanted to leave I would have done with the rest of the cons. I'm staying, whatever happens. At least in here I get

to choose the way I die. Out there is a different matter altogether. How many of the four hundred inmates will survive out there, if what they say on the radio is true?"

Bonser gulped hard. "Not many... I suppose."

"We're all gonna die." Gary was convincing with his act. "Might as well be in here."

Both men nodded with satisfaction.

Gary sighed, "Think I might go to the exercise yard for some air."

"I wouldn't go out there," Kyle chuckled. "It's grim."

"I'll go anyway."

The two men patted Gary on the back and headed back to H Wing's slider and strolled back onto E Wing.

Gary could just about hear Bonser saying to Kyle, "I believe him. We'll check the cells on his wing for food in a few days. We have enough at the moment."

Gary reached the ground floor, and breathed a sigh of relief. His real cell was H fifty-six which was across the balcony, and if the pair of them knew that that was his cell and found out that he had food stashed away in his toilet cubicle and under his bed, they would know he was lying and kill him for sure. It had now turned into a game he couldn't win. *Better change the name cards on the door in case they come back.*

He was sure that they would be back to search the wing and cells for food, and Gary had an idea to take the food out of his cell and spread the food out into various cells. So when they came searching, it wouldn't look so suspicious, rather than finding a stash of food in the one cell.

He was relieved that the two men didn't ask him about the photograph of a family that was stuck on the wall of cell H sixty-seven or had noticed the name card on the cell door actually read, *Frank Jones – Remand.*

He looked out to the opened exercise yard door and wondered why the two intimidating men encouraged him not to go out. *It's grim?* One thing was for sure; he couldn't stay on his wing anymore. Jumping the fence wasn't an option either, as now it was a necessity. If he stayed and they came back to check on him in a matter of days and found that he hadn't lost a pound of weight, suspicions would be at their highest. And he needed to jump the fence when they were away; if they saw him climbing the fence, they could catch him and kill him. He would only have one chance at it.

He stepped outside into the humid air, where his ears were immediately assaulted with screams of panic from all around and above him. He could make out at least six voices and the longer he stood in the exercise yard, the voices increased and felt like they were multiplying.

He looked over to where the noise was coming from, to see the usual sight of A Wing from houseblock one. He could see arms hanging out of the narrowly opened windows, cups were being hit against the window to attract his attention, but they needn't have bothered. A cacophony of sentences were thrown at him, and he couldn't make them all out, but the half dozen he could understand, informed Gary that prisoners from the other houseblock had been locked up and left to starve to death.

Even if Gary could somehow get into the houseblock, he would have trouble trying to get the steel cell doors open anyway. He felt helpless, and all he could do was apologise continuously.

He finally understood what the two men meant now by avoiding the yard, and decided that the next time he went out there, would be when he eventually climbed over the fence.

He then looked ahead and saw that the huge main slider door—the entrance/exit to the place for vehicles—was left open.

Oh shit!

At least with the slider open, he didn't need to jump the wall, but what it did mean was that the main gate to the prison grounds was open, meaning, any of those things from the outside could get in, and he was sure that the two inmates inside didn't realise this yet, as their exercise yard on E Wing had a different view altogether.

Do it now! The voice screamed in his head, but he refrained from doing so. Gary wanted to be properly rested, fed and hydrated before he made the jump, as he didn't know what he was about to face on the outside.

Chapter 37

The green BMW bike was now entering the small town of Hazelslade. The first thing it rode by, as he turned left down the steep declining road, was the pub on the right and the primary school to his left. He could see beyond the road about half a dozen of them in the distance. He turned right at the next road, which was opposite the huge fishing pond that was situated near the woods, and turned right into the street of Kerry's mum's house.

Two of the things sauntered around the street and Jack was unsure whether the noise from his new vehicle would be a hindrance for him and could attract the attention of the fiends from afar. The two creatures immediately turned and noticed his presence. They were fifty yards away at the bottom of the street, and Jack was now standing and keeping the bike upright. The house he wanted was the end one to the right of the street.

He allowed them to gain on him and waited patiently for them to approach him. As they approached nearer, he saw that the two males looked no older than twenty, and both wore black attire, matching their dyed hair to represent the gothic music they used to listen to before they were turned.

Their T-shirts had bands on them that Jack had never heard of, and the one on the left had a spike-piercing through its nose. Their ivory skin was noticeable as they managed another five yards, and Jack thought that as humans they probably looked the same as they did now.

Once they were ten yards away from him, he thrashed the accelerator and drove the bike around them; with the Slitting Mill incident still fresh in his mind, he didn't want to give them a sniff of a chance of grabbing him. Jack then turned into the drive and dropped the bike onto the front lawn of the garden, took out the

keys, and climbed the garage, as the two hapless things desperately and clumsily walked towards him.

He jumped off the garage and was now behind the fence. He walked and peered into the living room of Kerry's mum's, but there was no sign of life. He could now hear the groaning of the things from behind the fence. Suddenly he heard a voice from above him. He looked up to see an elderly lady whose face was quivering with fear. She looked like she was ready to burst into tears.

"It's okay." Jack raised his hand apologetically. "I'm looking for someone."

The old woman spoke, "They might be in the church, some of them left for the church; others went to a village hall. It was a big group of people from here."

"What about Kerry? Was there a woman here called Kerry Evans?"

"I know Kerry. She was here. She came up to see her mum."

He looked up to see the elderly woman; she looked no younger than seventy. "Did they have a little boy with them?"

"Yes, young Thomas," she said tearfully. "Please leave, you're putting us all in danger being here."

She shut the window slowly and he heard the beginnings of her sobbing, until the closed window prevented him from hearing any more. He didn't have great knowledge of the area outside the small village, but he knew there was only one church and it was situated half a mile away, he had no idea about any village hall. All he needed to do now was distract his small fan club so he could get back onto his bike.

He pulled himself back up onto the garage, where he was now overlooking the things that were staring up at him. He was certain he could outrun them. He jumped off the garage and rolled to the side as if he had just performed a parachute jump. They didn't waste any time on pursuing the man, and he quickly ran to the front garden to pick the heavy bike up. He started the engine first time and sped off before the things were anywhere near him.

He looked behind to see that these weren't quite as persistent as the creatures he bumped into at Slitting Mill. They stumbled around the street as if they had already forgot about his presence, whereas some of the group from Slitting Mill were almost running after him.

Nothing was black and white with these creatures, and Jack wondered how long it would be before someone could work out how these things ticked, if anything could cure them, and what was being done in terms of help for the UK population. It was only a couple of days in, and Jack was hopeful that the country was weeks away from cures and help, as the country, and possibly the world, would be in a state of shock and consternation for a while before a metaphorical slap in the face was needed.

One of Jack's fears was that if this was a UK problem only, the rest of the world would cut their losses. It was an island, and the problem could be contained, especially with military intervention. Considering that the Western world had been ignoring the atrocities in Sudan or civil war in Sri Lanka, then why suddenly bend over backwards for the UK?

It was difficult to know what was happening with the lack of knowledge he had and information available. The only thing he could concentrate on was to look after himself and make sure his son was still alive. Some none-western countries

may feel that this was exactly what Britain deserved for the hardship they had caused on the world. Was this God's way of finally punishing the United Kingdom, for the British Empire's atrocities that had been committed over the centuries?

Jack pulled up at the main road, which was adjacent to the fishing pond. He pulled the bike off the road and slowly rode the beast through the long grass where he came near a wooden fence. He stepped off the bike to see that the pond was surrounded by the wooden fence where the panels went across horizontally.

The fence was only four feet in height, and the thickness of the panels already told him that he was going to need something hardcore to break or saw through them, if he wanted to take the bike as well. He had two choices. He could ride around and find another way in. Or, he could ditch the bike temporarily and go on foot. He was aware that walking into the woods unarmed was a dangerous option, but finding his son was the only thing that kept him going.

He made the decision to temporarily leave the bike and finish the remainder of the journey on foot. He laid the bike on its side in the long grass, so that when he came back it would still be there, sleeping, waiting for its new master, hopefully with Kerry and Thomas in tow. He was certain it wouldn't get stolen, as the long grass was the perfect camouflage for a 1300cc BMW that had lime green paintwork on its body, but the sooner he could get a car with keys, the better. He wouldn't know where to start if he wanted to hotwire one, but the Slitting Mill incident had highlighted that he'd be better with a sheet of metal around him whilst travelling.

He looked by the pond and into the condensed wooded area. It was a part of Cannock Chase he didn't know well at all, most of the Chase surrounded every town. Cannock itself had acres upon acres of wooded area around its perimeter of its town, as well as Hazelslade. Some would mistake the Stile Cop woods on the outskirts of Rugeley as a part of Cannock Chase, but that was a smaller, separate wood on its own, which ended at the top of the hill of the large beauty spot.

Jack trounced through the grass and kept on looking at his feet to make sure there was nothing untoward hiding in the grass. The forty-year-old continued to scan the grass and was feeling the wetness under the arms of his black T-shirt. He could murder a cigarette.

As he got to the pond, he sat down on one of the wooden benches. It was a beautiful place and he could understand why people would choose to live in such a small town.

My clutch has gone. Can't get my arse into gear.

He cursed himself for being lazy and got back to his feet. The only way he could get to the woods was to walk around the pond, and he wanted to look for his son and make his way back to the bike before daylight began to diminish.

He glared into the pond. He wondered why grown men would pay a fee to sit and fish there; the water looked filthy and he couldn't fathom what kind of fish lived in the pond, if any. What was the point of fishing? All it was to Jack was grown men drowning maggots.

Lost in self-hypnosis, Jack slowly came around and managed to get his brain in gear; he had returned to reality. It was surreal reality, but it was reality all the same, whether he liked it or not. He could feel a pain in his stomach and put his hand there.

Before he managed to make another step forward, the sound of rustling came from the side of him. It was one of them. He quickly snapped out of his daydreaming and ran away from the solitary being as it stumbled through the long grass.

Jack could feel the surge of nervous energy pumping furiously through his frame, and he knew if he continued to run, it would only follow him into the woods. He turned to face the thing. It released a groan and looked bloated. Jack allowed it to get nearer and then brought his foot into the stomach of the vagrant. It fell backwards, giving Jack a little time.

Jack began to run the circumference of the pond, his eyes scanning for anything that could be used as a weapon; the cleaver would have been perfect right now.

The thing chased after him slowly, like a deformed butler you would see in one of the old horror movies. Jack finally found a jagged rock that fitted perfectly in his hand, and it was more than suitable for an execution. He turned around and stood his ground, waiting for it. He felt sick with nerves as it gained on him, and he pulled his right arm back as if he was about to throw a baseball. Once in range, he narrowed his eyes and threw his arm forwards and connected with its skull. He was surprised at what he witnessed.

Jack didn't know whether it was his strength, the fact that the thing was heading towards him, or if it had a weak skull, but the mess that his solitary strike had created was almost on a par of what a shotgun could have done. He felt the fragments of bone brush his hand as the rock smashed straight through, causing irreparable damage from the skull down to the nasal area.

Black blood splashed out onto his shirt, little splats was felt hitting him in the face and covering his hand and rock, and the creature fell immediately as the damage to the brain was self-evident. Jack didn't need a doctor to tell him that the brain had been severely damaged. Just looking at the extent of the damage to the head and face, made it obvious that the creature wouldn't be getting up again.

Jack dropped the dripping rock onto the ground, and gaped at the body and the black oily hole where a face use to be. His sickness had only increased once the ordeal was over, and he walked over to the pond to splash his face and wash his hands.

He looked at his hand where it was scraped by bone fragments, and was pleased that the attack hadn't broken his skin. He used some of the pond water to drench his shirt. He wanted to get rid of the oily stuff off his shirt, and cool himself down from the humidity as well.

He sat down and his thoughts raced through his mind of the insane weekend that he had endured so far, and how close he had come to being killed. He thought about Robbie and having to execute him in his own drive with a cleaver. Even that thought alone was surreal. He reminisced about the dead bodies outside the police station, being attacked at the service station, the abandoned car, and being grabbed at Slitting Mill, and now being practically ambushed by one of them—although he admitted to himself that if he had been paying attention, he would have spotted the thing through the tall grass a lot earlier.

He looked at the pond and understood that going into water would be a futile and suicidal thing to do if ever a gang of the beings were chasing him. If these things were already dead, then it was impossible for them to drown.

Was nowhere safe?

He understood that in the major cities, the carnage would be even more distressing, and would be swarming with the things. In his small experience so far, he had witnessed hordes of them in some areas, and other areas were relatively quiet. He shook his head. He had to find his son and go somewhere safe soon, as the more he travelled, the more he was likely to be attacked.

Still feeling sick, Jack placed his weary head into his lap and waited for the feeling to pass. The food that he consumed at Kerry's home had managed to stay down, and the only thing Jack released was tears.

The unreal disaster to mankind had begun to hit him hard. He cried for his son, as he didn't know whether he was alive or dead. He was unsure about his other relatives who he had hardly given a second thought about so far, and for the first time, he wondered about his friends, his work colleagues and even his neighbours.

There was so much going on in the last few days, and with survival being the only goal, his brain never had the time to think about anything else or other people.

He wiped his eyes and made a start to get to his feet; he felt thirsty and could taste in his mouth that his breath wasn't the best. *Shit. Smells like a monkey's arse.* He had more things to worry about than bad breath.

He headed for the woods, and it was a task he wasn't looking forward to as he mentally prepared himself for the worse case scenario, but he needed to find his son, whatever it took.

Chapter 38

The van turned into the beauty spot of Stile Cop; it was the highest point of the area. The men and Janine got out of the van, still shocked from Grass's death, and waved at the Pointer family. The Pointer family waved back, although unsure of their new guests. Pickle walked the short twenty-yard journey towards the Renault Clio and held out his hand.

"Harry Branston," he greeted warmly with a smile. "But people call me Pickle."

"David." David Pointer shook Pickle's hand. "But most people call me David."

"At least yer still have yer sense o' humour; that's what got our forefathers through the Second World War."

David introduced his family to Pickle, and he returned the favour by introducing the Pointers to his own crew, although Laz remained in the back of the van, as he was feeling unwell.

KP walked over to the edge of the beauty spot. It had a steep decline of bracken and grass and it overlooked the town of Brereton. Further on, he could see Rugeley's power station, and as he turned around to the back of him, he could see the woods.

“Where do they lead?” KP asked David Pointer, referring to the woods. David was taken aback by KP's presence, and stared at the individual for a few seconds, making David glare back. “I'm trying to be friendly.”

David answered, “The woods lead nowhere really; a farmers field, the cemetery. If you continue by the woods and turn right, you come to the town of Rugeley, and there's a little place called Draycott Park.”

KP said, “I know some of the area, but I only lived here for the first ten years of my life.”

The two men stood in a bubble of unsettling silence, but both men refused to turn their back on the view, and remained transfixed hypnotically at the miles of land their eyes could register.

David cleared his throat and with KP, he continued to stare out at the view from the edge of the beauty spot, and spoke up. “It's beautiful, isn't it?”

KP nodded the once, and his unimpressed remark was, “It's okay, I suppose. Is that your wife and daughter?” KP nodded over to Davina's direction. She was sitting in the Clio, helping her daughter get fed.

David nodded. “We couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Wanna meet them?”

“And why would I want to do that?” KP felt a little agitated that there was already a family at the beauty spot. The last thing he wanted was more mouths to feed and people who were incapable of defending themselves, but it was a troubling subject he wasn't prepared to bring up, not when there was a little girl involved.

Pickle and Jamie watched KP and David talking to one another and he winked at Janine. “I think this will do for a while.”

“We could have stayed in the pub for a few more nights,” Janine snorted.

“There was only enough food in that kitchen for another day. And what happens if we were trapped? Where would yer run to?” Pickle looked around the spacious Stile Cop area and took a large breath in. “Up here, we stand a better chance o' survival and there's more options to escape, if we really have to.”

Pickle walked over to the driver's side of the Renault Clio that was already open, and peered into the car and gave Davina and Isobel a friendly smile. Davina looked at Pickle nervously as he spoke. “I suppose yer wondering why we've turned up in that big ole van?”

Davina never looked at Pickle and made the remark, “You escaped from prison?”

Pickle smacked his lips together and nodded once. “Yes, but we mean no one any harm. We just want to survive like everyone else.”

Davina gave her daughter the last spoonful of cold macaroni and cheese; Isobel winced every time she swallowed the cold substance. Davina sighed, “We'll probably be leaving soon, so we won't be in your way.”

“There's no need for that.” Pickle glared at Davina's short brown hair; she was very attractive, despite that she donned no make-up. It looked like she suffered from sleep deprivation, and her breath was malodorous, probably from the lack of hydration or not cleaning her teeth for a while.

“Everything okay?” David Pointer walked over and Pickle stood up and turned to face the lucky man that was married to Davina.

Pickle looked at the slight man of average height, his dark hair needed a wash. Pickle said, “Listen... David.”

David raised his eyebrows.

Continued Pickle, "There's no need for you and yer family to leave. It's bad out there, and it's only gonna get worse. We have plenty o' food, water, we have toilet roll, soap, toothbrushes."

"I could rustle you up a cooked chicken salad right now," Janine interjected with a warm smile. She felt empathy for the frightened family.

David looked over to Davina and they both smiled.

"We were just going to stay here a little while," David tried to explain.

"Well," Pickle said. "I think this place is perfect. We have a van full o' fuel, food and water, and we're at the highest point o' the area. We couldn't be any safer."

"We could be in a secure house." David smiled thinly.

"Being in a house, means being in a populated area. And being in a populated area—"

"And we have guns." Jamie pulled out the Browning out from his trouser belt.

Pickle smiled at the family. "But we're not very good with 'em."

Jamie stood next to Pickle and said softly, "We're gonna have to think about getting an itinerary made up; someone needs to keep watch round the clock."

"Good idea." Pickle nodded. "As harsh as it may sound, I think we'll use the van to temporarily block the entrance off. It's not just for those crazies out there; it's also for any more travellers that may want to use this place as a base." Pickle turned to David Pointer. "No offence to you and yer family, David, but I think we have enough mouths to feed now."

David looked over to where KP was standing and looked back at Pickle.

"Don't worry about him," Pickle spoke with assurance. "He's not good with new company, plus, we lost someone only minutes ago and it was horrific to see. But yer probably have seen worse than us. There's one more o' us in the back o' the van, but he's a little ill. Stress... probably."

"What do we do when the stuff runs out?" David asked, referring to the supplies Pickle had been speaking about.

Pickle shrugged his shoulders; he didn't have an answer to the question, as he wasn't looking that far forward. He was living his life, from now on, day by day. He could understand why David was so concerned, though. He had a daughter; he wanted to see her grow up and live a normal life—whatever normal would mean from now on. Pickle looked over to Jamie for support.

Jamie responded, "We get some more, until the supermarket is cleared."

David asked, "And once it's cleared?"

"We go to another, and another." Jamie smiled with confidence, but was becoming a little agitated with David's realistic concern.

"And when the fuel dries up? And the shops are empty?"

Pickle laughed and patted David on his back due to his lack of optimism. "Then we get ourselves some crossbows or make some bow and arrows and start hunting deer, like we used to when we were young boys. Don't worry about tomorrow, live for today. Take each day as it comes if yer can. Today we're still alive and have food, there're others out there who are in a worse situation than we're in right now."

"Anyway." It was Jamie's turn to speak. "It'll probably be over by then."

“Probably,” was the negative response from David Pointer. He didn't have the optimism that the new people shared, but was glad of the extra food and felt even better when he saw them carrying weapons. Not only did his family have food now, but there was security as well.

Half of Pickle's body went into the Clio, and as he reached over to the opened glove compartment, he pulled out a mobile that he had spotted.

Davina was affronted by Pickle's cheek, but this was a man who had a crew carrying guns with a van full of food. He wasn't somebody she should upset; she needed to keep Pickle sweet for the sake of her daughter.

Pickle looked at the phone. “Could yer get a signal up here?”

“Sometimes,” Davina answered. “Trouble is, it drains the battery.”

“Tell me about it. It's flat.” He placed it back into the glove compartment, and then he joked to Jamie. “I take it, Stile Cop doesn't have WiFi.”

“Excuse me, Harry,” Davina spoke from the back of the car.

“Yes, treacle.”

“Do you think me and my daughter could use some shampoo, a toothbrush and some toothpaste, if you have any? Don't worry about water. We won't need good drinking water to wash. There's a brook in the woods not far from here.”

“Of course yer can.”

“Thank you, mister,” Isobel spoke at last. “My teeth are beginning to hurt.”

Pickle looked perplexed, and Davina explained to him that if ever Isobel forgot to brush her teeth, her teeth would start to ache.

Pickle stared at the little girl; her hair was golden and had the biggest beautiful eyes, like saucers.

“I'll get what you need,” Janine spoke, and walked to the back of the van, and then put some products under her arm. She came back and leaned over to Davina. “I have other things available if you need them.” Janine winked. Davina shook her head, as she didn't know what Janine was getting at.

Janine sighed comically, “Woman stuff.”

“Oh, right.” Davina snickered a little. “I'm okay for now. I think I have another two weeks before I need to worry about that.”

“Where is this brook?” Pickle quizzed and took out his Browning. “You two are not going in there alone.”

“I'll go with them,” David insisted. “They're *my* family.”

Pickle laughed and shook his head. “Don't worry, Mr Pointer. I wasn't inside for rape if that's what yer were thinkin'. I tell yer what; all four o' us should go. Janine, Jamie and KP can get the barbecue started.”

David looked at Pickle with surprise.

Said Pickle, “Oh yeah, we have a barbecue as well.” He bent over and playfully squeezed the cheek of Isobel. “We'll get this little one a proper meal, not cold beans or macaroni out o' a can.”

Isobel's face beamed with excitement, even though she had just eaten. “Can I have a beefburger?”

“Yer can have whatever yer want, darling?”

The group of four, being David's family and Pickle, began their small journey into the woods, and Pickle informed KP that they would be fifteen minutes at the most. They walked away from the sandy area where the van and car was parked.

David Pointer turned around before entering the woods and could see KP staring at him. KP wasn't happy that there were more mouths to feed, and David Pointer knew it.

Chapter 39

An anxious Gary Jenson crept from his new cell back to his old cell, and began to pig out on a couple of sandwiches. He grabbed a plastic bottle of coke and walked back to his H sixty-seven cell; his eyes were staring at the slider, making sure he wasn't being watched by the two thugs.

It took a while before the mastication process could be finished, as he had put too much bread into his mouth. He tried to speed it up by taking a swig of the coke, which moistened the ball of food, which he then managed to swallow with ease.

He was in two minds again whether to stay or jump the fence. It seemed far more dangerous outside, but at least if his life was in danger, he would have somewhere to run, but now that the entrance slider was open, he didn't seem to have a choice.

He sat down on his bed and flicked the kettle for another drink of coffee. Realising he had left his mug on the ground floor of the wing, he got to his feet and pulled out another cup from his shelf and put the generous spoonful of coffee into the mug with a splash of milk. He turned on the radio and found that the original station where the information had come from, the one that caused the mass panic on the wings, was no longer working.

He fiddled with his radio and managed to find a station, but the language was in French. He turned the dial very slowly and managed to get another reception; this time it sounded like an American station, either that or it was an American host on a British station.

For the first minute, Gary couldn't make out what was being said. Gary didn't know whether it was live or a recording on a loop. The crackle infuriated him a little, but considering where he was, it was a miracle he could get a signal in the first place. He thought about going outside, but the sound of the individual on the radio would only be drowned out by the screams and wails of the prisoners from houseblock one, demanding and begging to be let out.

He stuck his ear to the speaker of the small radio and realised he had missed the beginning of the programme, and it sounded like the host was interviewing a so-called expert on why the pandemic was happening.

He couldn't make out the remains of the answer, to whatever the last question was, and listened out for the host's next question. The person being grilled was a Professor of Sciences from Edinburgh University.

By listening to the next question, it appeared to Gary that the interview was in its early stages.

Host: *"So do we know what caused the virus?"*

Professor: *"They don't know. The same answer to the question: How was the*

universe created? Why do we yawn? Does the G spot exist? They don't really know, but are sometimes too arrogant to admit they don't know themselves. But we understand that the first recording of an attack, as such, was the first week in June in the Northern Institute for Cancer Research, in Newcastle."

Host: *"Which countries are affected?"*

Professor: *"They're guessing that the virus is mainly in the UK, although pockets of the virus has been reported in other countries thanks to aviation, such as France, Germany and New York, as well as Dubai. Everyone from Russia, China, or India are in a state of sheer panic and paranoia. There are reports that China, Russia, Belarus and Poland have already put up borders, but we'll see what happens."*

Host: *"What about our army?"*

Professor: *(laughs) "Our army is not even the top ten biggest in the world, which is not great. We have nearly two hundred thousand personnel. Even the army of Thailand, Vietnam, Turkey, Egypt and Brazil are bigger than ours. We also need to take into account that some of them are still overseas, and others may have fled to be with their families. Two hundred thousand army personnel to protect sixty million UK citizens is a tall order."*

Host: *"Will we get help?"*

Professor: *"In a word, no. Is anyone giving France or any other countries help? So what makes us so special? Countries are scared of the virus getting into their own land. To be perfectly honest, I think it's going to be hard for the world to contain this, as it's probably already a global threat thanks to aviation."*

Host: *"What are these creatures called?"*

Professor: *"There are various terms, and nicknames. The so-called experts basically called them "things" but I've heard all kinds of names in such a short space of time. Ghouls, Deadheads and Snatchers—short for Bodysnatchers. I suppose it's like asking the question, what do you call the USA? Is it the USA? United States of America? The United States? America? or North America? Is it Britain? Great Britain? United Kingdom? Or the UK?"*

Host: *(sighs impatiently) "How are they killed?"*

Professor: *"If you stab or shoot at them in the body, it won't do a jot. They bleed dark liquid because they're technically dead. It's the brain that keeps them moving. If you penetrate their head and damage the brain, it will cause the same damage as if you attack a human. That's the only part of their body that's still alive."*

Host: *"So really, they're alive?"*

Professor: *"No, they're dead, they have no heartbeat. Although the brain is still working, it has been ravaged by the virus."*

Host: *"How many people are affected?"*

Professor: *"We all are!"*

Host: *(sighs) "How many people are infected?"*

Professor: *"No one knows yet, but I'm guessing that there are possibly a few million in the UK. At the moment, there are probably millions of survivors in the UK. Think about the families that have barricaded themselves in their houses and army personnel having to remain in their barracks. Because the news broke on a Saturday and Sunday, most people, thankfully, were at home. If this had*

happened during the week, with every one at work, getting taxis, trains, children in schools, etc, it would have been carnage to the extreme."

Host: *"So there's a lot of hope for people?"*

Professor: *"Well, this is the easy bit. It'll be interesting to see what happens once the food and drink supply runs out. It may take weeks, months, once the food has gone from every household. Those who are brave enough to go outside and loot the shops for more food will survive longer, provided they don't get caught by one of them, but once the supermarkets have been stripped bare, what happens next? I think it's fair to say the suicide rate in the UK will rocket in the next couple of months. Also, if these things don't die out in the next few months, then some people will starve to death."*

Host: *"What about food aid from other countries? Is this where our army can be useful and deliver food to quarantined places?"*

Professor: *"It will be happening in the near future. Supplies will only be dropped in quarantined areas in London, but we know of other quarantined places in Manchester, Birmingham and Cardiff. Then it's up to us to spread it evenly across the UK. Can't see it somehow, there's too many mouths to feed in London alone, and probably not all countries will come together and help us out. There would be too much fear of entering our air space, plus, we're hardly the most popular nation in the world, are we?"*

Host: *"What's the government doing?"*

Professor: *(laughs) "Nothing. They're hiding, probably underground or somewhere where there is a huge military presence, having a nice roast beef dinner as we speak. I can see there will be a lot of the food supplies heading their way. Some sources claim that the Prime Minister has left the country, nice eh? Everyone is scared. No one knows what's going on. Russia could nuke France right now, and no one would give a hoot, apart from the French, because this contamination is so big, it's the only thing people are thinking and worried about."*

Host: *"Any reaction from our allies overseas?"*

Professor: *"Oh yes! They're showing huge concern." (There was sarcasm in the professor's voice).*

Host: *"That's it?"*

Professor: *"That's it!"*

Host: *"We're hearing a lot of planes have been grounded, is this a safety precaution?"*

Professor: *"Of course, just think if you're on business or on holiday in Scotland or England, and you're scratched or bitten and you fly to the USA or India. They reckon that's how it spread to London. Also, local flights were turning up at Heathrow and Gatwick, with possible infected people. Then people were falling into comas and being transported to hospitals across the capital; you can guess the rest. By the time they decided to ground all flights, it was too late; people were getting bitten in crowded airports. There was also reports of a train load of infected spilling out on Kings Cross."*

Host: *"Isn't the virus already in America?"*

Professor: *"An outbreak occurred on a flight heading to New York. The Captain announced that panicky passengers were banging the cockpit door to get in; he made an emergency landing. They thought it was a terrorist attack and once the*

plane landed, the doors were opened and the army opened fired on the passengers, most were reanimated. One army officer was bitten by a reanimated four-year-old boy; the soldier in question shot the boy in the head, and then turned the gun on himself. But yes, it is rumoured that New York has been cordoned off, but thankfully, like ourselves, it's an island and the rest of America is pretty safe for now."

Host: "We had to rely on USA news such as Fox and CNN, why?"

Professor: "Our newsreaders, cameramen and reporters are only human, too. In this time of crisis, what would most people do? Keep reading the news, or try and be with your family and flee or barricade yourself in? I know what I would do."

Host: "Is it true that the Chinese Air Force have shot down all passenger flights from the sky over their airspace?"

Professor: "We've heard the rumours. If it's true, then thousands upon thousands of people from all nationalities have been killed needlessly. Once this has all died down, there will be an investigation into that particular incident. Apparently, they were told to turn around and go back where they came from. Obviously some planes don't have the fuel to do that, so refused to do it and paid a heavy price."

Host: "There have been a dozen unconfirmed reports that the USA have also shot down planes from Europe. Is this true?"

Professor: "Yes. There were also two reportedly shot down in the Canadian skies. Basically, all planes that refused to turn around were taken care of. Other governments have done it, too. I know it sounds bad, but there are twenty three thousand flights in the USA alone, thirty thousand in Europe. Even if a thousand had been shot down, the governments had to act, because if the infection does get overseas, it's because of aviation that it has spread, and then we've got a serious world pandemic. Remember, the virus is spread through biting. It's not airborne, so it can be controlled to a certain degree. I was brought on here to discuss the things that are plaguing us; I don't have much idea what's happening regarding flight paths or government control, I'm not a politician. I thought we were here to discuss these things, to try and help the people of this country?"

Host: "I'm sorry, these are just random questions. I don't actually have a list in front of me. Let's go back to the... Snatchers, I think you called them."

Professor: "Bodysnatchers, that's right."

Host: "Do they bite you or just eat you?"

Professor: "Depends. If there are a couple of them, and they bite you and you manage to escape, you will reanimate. Could take an hour, maybe longer, maybe less. We don't know. Depends on the severity of the wound. A little infected nick may take longer to reanimate than a bite. Why do they bite? I'm guessing...instinct."

Host: "So if they scratch you, would you be infected?"

Professor: "Yes. If you're scratched or the bite is not so deep, it could take a while before the infection kicks in; we don't know why this is the case. If you run into a horde of them, and can't escape, they'll eat you alive, and you won't reanimate because they'll be nothing left of you. Their purpose is the same as yours. It's to survive. They don't care about creating other ghouls, they want to

feed.”

Host: “What are they attracted to?”

Professor: “They're attracted to noise ... you! If you go hiding in a supermarket or in the woods—remote places where there's no people, don't be surprised to wake up surrounded by these things. Like wild animals, if the food supply starts to die, they'll go elsewhere to find it.”

Host: “So they can smell you?”

Professor: “I don't have the answer to that. Probably! But if you live in the city, and the food supply is running short, they're going to explore other places like any normal animal would.”

Host: “So if their purpose is to eat, then is it safe to say that a lack of food would see these things die out eventually?”

Professor: “Well, technically they're dead from the neck down, so we still don't understand why they feed anyway. If it's not instinct, then we're hoping that lack of food could be one of the reasons for their eventual demise, but we're assuming that general decomposition is our best hope. Only time will tell.”

Host: “Most people can't use their mobile phones anymore, why is that?”

Professor: “There are simple reasons really. Ran out of money, battery dying. You might be an office worker trapped, and your charger might be at home. Also, if they're on an automated system, then they would shut off without payment being made. Also, think about who's going to power the towers? Who will give maintenance to these towers? You?”

Host: “If a normal person is shot in the heart, could they rise as a Snatcher?”

Professor: “No, the dead are not rising. This isn't something out of a Michael Jackson video. There are no corpses digging themselves out of graveyards. The only way you can become one of these is if you are bitten or scratched by an infected individual, or if their blood gets into your eye or an opened wound.”

Host: “Ever heard of nanobots?”

Professor: “Of course. Scientists have already created a nano-cyborg by fusing a tiny silicone chip to a virus. Within a decade they reckon they'll have these things crawling inside our brain and setting up neural connections to replace the damaged ones. So they could end up re-wiring our thoughts. Some day they'll be in our heads and will be programmed to continue after we've died. They can form their own pathways, which means they can use your brain to keep operating your limbs after you've died right up until you rot to pieces.”

Host: “Is there a good chance that this is already happening?”

Professor: “Absolutely. But that is completely different to what we're dealing with now. I'm still convinced this all started on the 2nd June, when a researcher from the NICR was attacked by a lab rat where it had been injected with a genetically engineered variant of the measles virus.”

Gary switched the radio off; it sounded grim outside and he came to the conclusion that there was danger everywhere whatever option he chose. Being beaten to death was something he wouldn't wish for, but being eaten alive and ripped to pieces by a pack of cannibalistic infected humans, wasn't the best way to go either.

He shook his head at what his next move was going to be. It was obvious. With the slider door open, he was going to have to make a move. Gary was indecisive at the best of times but knew one thing for certain: He needed to make the jump.

Chapter 40

Jack Slade had spent an hour in the woods and apart from coming across two deers and a grass snake, there was no sign of life or any sign of the beings either, and more importantly, he hadn't found his son yet. The church that the old woman had been mentioned was empty, and he felt the old woman might have told him that story just to get rid of him.

Jack had a feeling that Kerry wouldn't take his son alone in the woods unless there was a group of them, and he knew there was a village hall at the end of the small woods, and was going to investigate the area while he was there.

After checking out the empty church, he re-entered the woods and continued walking through the clustered area and was feeling his legs growing heavier with every step he made. He was coming towards the end of the wooded area; he knew that, because he could see the main road through the trees. In ordinary circumstances he would have known earlier that he was coming to the end of the area, as he would usually be able to hear the sound of engines moaning past in the distance.

As he came out of the other side of the woodland, he felt the cool air massage his build. The heat from inside the woods was intense, and he was pleased to be in the open air. He could feel soft trickles of sweat running down and tickling the middle of his back, and he looked along the main road to try and get his bearings. Walking along to the right would lead to Cannock, a populated town that should be avoided. To his left, would take him to Brereton and back into Rugeley.

He decided to go left, not because he wanted to go through Brereton and into Rugeley town centre, but because he knew that there was a village hall half a mile away. He didn't want to venture too far away from the bike, as he wanted to keep using the vehicle for as long as he could until a suitable car was available.

He felt a little vulnerable and should have taken a knife when he was at Kerry's house, but his vulnerability would double if he lost his bike and ended up on foot for the foreseeable future. He had made his mind up that after searching the village hall, he would head back through the woods and back to the bike before the darkness snuck up on him.

His pace began to slow as he finished walking around the bendy road, and he looked up into the white cloudy cotton sky and embraced the breeze that glided over his features. He wiped his clammy forehead with the sleeve of his shirt and headed towards the huge oak door of the village hall. He wanted to walk around to stare through the windows to make sure it was safe first, but the windows had been blacked out.

He envisaged about knocking on the window, but two scenarios stopped him from doing so. If there was a creature in there, the last thing he wanted to do was arouse its senses. On the other hand, if there were people in there, knocking on

the window may inject fear into the poor souls, as they would wonder who and what was out there. He decided to try the door. If it was locked, then there was a strong chance that someone may be inside.

He placed his trembling hand on the steel handle of the huge Victorian-like door. His disappointment increased when the door soundlessly opened. He peered his head around the door and saw the main hall was bare. There were chairs stacked up in the corner, a place probably used for town meetings, etc., and further along the main hall was a door. Jack assumed that the door led to other rooms such as offices and toilets. He allowed the door to close gently by itself and crept along the wooden floor, unsure whether one of the floorboards would cry out in pain with his heavy footsteps. As soon as he reached the end of the hall, he placed his ear to the door and listened out for anything untoward. Satisfied that behind it the danger was low, he entered through the door that led into a small corridor. An office was to the left and further down, as he had guessed, was a set of ladies and gentlemen bathrooms.

Jack went to the office entrance and placed his hand on the doorknob. On the door was a bronze plaque and it gave the name, Harold Balding. He was about to try it when he heard a ruffling sound. It sounded like a distressed animal. He went to twist the knob and could feel it was locked. It twisted, but the door wasn't budging.

He placed his ear by the door once again and the disturbed sound was getting more audible as if it knew Jack was there. Jack hadn't checked the doors to the bathroom, and decided to check them out before attempting to speak out. He walked into the ladies bathroom and found that the area was small with only two cubicles; they were both empty. The next room was the gents; he didn't know why, but he was more cautious with this room, and almost never went in because he was petrified. He quickly took a look in, and again found the place lifeless.

Once it was obvious that there was no sign of Thomas or Kerry, he strolled back down the corridor and his curiosity had now got the better of him. He tried the door to the office once again, and decided to lie on the dusty floor to see what was happening in the room he couldn't get in.

He lay on his stomach and turned his head to his right; he peered under the rather large gap. He could see what looked like the wheels of a wheelchair, with a body writhing around on the floor like an epileptic under a strobe light. Although he couldn't see too much, it appeared that this wriggling figure, which looked like a man who was wheelchair-bound, had got the virus. He had either locked himself in the office for other peoples' protection, or someone had done it for him.

Whatever his situation, it seemed he was beyond help, and Jack stood up and moved towards the main door and left the small village hall. He walked back out into the nippy air and his eyes were magnetically attracted to something in the left corner of his vision.

He saw one of *them*, stumbling away from him.

He crept across the road and decided that apart from finding his son, his number one priority was to find somewhere to stay before darkness fell, as it would make his adventure a lot more perilous. He contemplated getting to his bike and riding back to the village hall, but with knowing that some of those things

were walking around the area as well as the noise from the thing inside the office, sleep would be virtually impossible.

He jogged through the woods and occasionally looked to the ground, aware that the area was full of adders—the only poisonous snake Britain had—and found that as the day marched on and as the clouds fused together, it seemed darker in the woods than before.

His running continued for a few more minutes before he stopped and saw another one of the things on its knees, eating something. He remained transfixed at the uncomfortable scene, and screwed his face as if he had just sucked on a lemon. He was prepared to run, but the creature was fifty yards away, at least, had its back to him, and didn't know he was there, as its full attention was on its new feed. He felt it would be more advantageous to finish off his journey by walking. He would be less exhausted and create less noise on doing so.

As Jack walked on, his paranoia made him look back several times as he walked away, but the ravenous beast continued feasting on what now looked like a fawn. His mind projected a brief image of the beast hearing Jack, and then getting to its feet and leaving the animal to pursue him in the quickest way it could. Jack's continuous looking back had eventually stopped once it disappeared from view, and he was glad. He rubbed the side of his neck and it felt he had minor whiplash from all the twisting and turning, but it was probably from where the tyres blew out in his silver Meriva on the M6.

How did it catch such a quick animal? Was it just by chance he managed to snare it?

He came to the edge of the woods and was greeted by the pond once more. The body remained lying to the side of the pond with its face caved in, and Jack made a decision to walk around the other way, as he didn't want to be anywhere near the corpse. As soon as he jumped over the fence, he went over to the bike and stood it up. A thought had scurried across his mind, thinking back to the scene of the fawn being devoured.

Jack shook his head to shake off his daydreaming, and started the bike. He needed a place to stay. And as for Thomas, where was he going to look now? He was running out of ideas. He didn't have his phone since it shattered back in Glasgow, and he wasn't sure that Kerry had hers anyway.

The situation was becoming melancholic. He sped off and knew that being allowed in by one of the houses was not going to happen. He didn't want to break into any of them either, in case it resulted in him being attacked by those things inside, or by an overprotective family that hadn't reanimated. It was too risky.

It was a warm night, so he decided to sleep on top of one of the garages that were attached to the houses of the street he was on. He thought that there was a miniscule chance of Kerry coming back to her mum's, so remained in the street, but refrained from actually breaking in, just in case they did come back. Although he had done it at Kerry's house in Crabtree Road, he thought that a broken window or lock was not a good idea while this was going on, but if the nights got any cooler, he may not have a choice.

He was sure that the residents wouldn't mind his presence while they were boarded up, although the noise of the bike was a concern and he decided to travel slowly with little revs.

He noticed the street was empty, switched the bike off and walked it to a house at the end of the street and noticed there was no car in the drive. Either they never possessed a car, or the owner had fled the scene and tried their luck elsewhere.

He stood the bike up and peered into the living room. It was barricaded. There were people inside. He walked through to the back garden and was greeted by three of the beings in the garden, moping around looking for a way out, and there was more in the next one. They hadn't noticed his presence and Jack decided that sleeping on the garage was the only option he had. He was deadbeat, and couldn't possibly continue any further.

The garage was eight foot in height and he was super confident that, unless they could smell him, they would be unaware of his presence if he remained quiet enough, and if they were aware he was there, they would be unable to climb the garage anyway. Whatever the outcome, he was preparing himself for a restless night, but sleep was necessary. It seemed insane to sleep on top of a garage where there was three man-eaters to the back of him in the garden, but this was the most exhausted he had ever felt.

His ears picked up the shuffling from underneath and behind him, as he lay down with his arms behind his back, staring up at the sky. The roof was hard and bumpy, as he could feel the gravel digging into the back of his head. He lay on his side and curled up, already feeling a slight chill. His eyes were getting weighty, and his exhausted body finally succumbed to tiredness.

Chapter 41

Pickle stood guard with his Browning pistol tightly gripped as the Pointers, with the exception of David, washed their bodies in the cold brook and brushed their teeth.

Pickle was aware that the paranoid father was eyeing him to make sure he wasn't lusting after his wife, and more importantly, his little girl. Pickle was on high-alert despite the father's paranoia, and occasionally the inmate had to look over the direction of his wife and daughter, making sure that nothing was about to attack them from the condensed trees. The brook wasn't the cleanest of waters, and only drinkable if it came to desperate times. Pickle was hoping that that situation would never materialise.

He looked around the wood and found that the darkness had fallen quite rapidly.

"We're gonna have to hurry this up," Pickle politely announced to the family.

His neck twisted from left to right, constantly, as his eyes were straining to focus around the dusky area. Noticing Pickle's consternation, David ushered his wife and daughter away from the brook.

Davina put the toiletries in a carrier bag and carried them, as David picked up his daughter and placed her on his shoulders. Isobel was complaining about the tree branches scraping her head, and David was trying to quicken his pace as the long walk felt longer with extra weight on his shoulders, and even more so with his

stomach groaning to be fed. His thoughts dreamed about the barbecue that was going to be waiting for them.

Chicken breasts, burgers, sausages and steaks!

He was salivating just at those words alone, and he hadn't even smelt anything yet.

Isobel turned around to Pickle who was walking behind the family; his Browning was held in the right hand, cocked and the safety catch on.

"Mr Pickle?" she said in a sweet voice.

Pickle chortled and shook his head. "Just call me Harry, darling."

"Harry, are you a police officer?" Isobel bit her lower lip.

Pickle laughed again and probably thought it was the gun that gave her that impression; David and Davina joined in the hilarity, and laughed with their daughter.

"God no. I'm the opposite."

He could see her little face working overtime, and she finally asked, "What do you mean?"

"I used to be a bad man, who the police didn't like."

"Why? What did you do?"

The parents were wondering the same, and David was praying that it wasn't for a sex crime.

"I used to sell bad substances to desperate people," Pickle said honestly. "But no' anymore."

They were two minutes away from the beauty spot, and David was convinced he could smell burning red meat, unless it was his imagination.

"What's that?" Isobel queried.

All three adults stopped in their tracks; the area was becoming less condensed since they left the brook, which was a sign that they were getting nearer to the beauty spot. The ground was bumpy with small ditches and broken branches, and the slight incline increased their energy that was needed to make it.

It obviously felt so easy on the way to the brook, but now that they were walking up and were getting hungry, they were becoming a little impatient and agitated, especially David.

"What was *what*, honey?" David was wide-eyed and glared at Pickle. "What did you see, Babs?"

Isobel said, "I thought I saw something."

Pickle ushered the family to continue, and once they got to the edge of the woods and the beginning of the beauty spot, they could see KP standing over a small fire, with the van parked across the entrance, and their own car in its original place.

As soon as he put Isobel back on the floor, David was startled when Pickle grabbed his shirt. "I'm gonna check it out, I won't be long. If it's one o' *them*, we can't let it wander around while we're up here."

"Do you want me to get the others?"

"No point worrying them; tell them I'm takin' a piss."

David nodded.

Pickle turned back into the woods, and knew there was little time to waste, as the blue, bruised-looking sky was growing gloomier by the minute. He sneaked

roughly where Isobel thought she had seen something, and his senses were alert once he heard the snap of a branch.

His eyes narrowed, but it didn't enhance his vision in the dusky light; it was night vision goggles that he required to see anything. He took a step closer, and could feel the tension rushing through him. Should he shout out if there's anyone there? He was caught in two minds; whatever or whoever it was, it was going to have to be confronted nevertheless.

Suddenly the sight of trees fell downwards from his vision; he felt a violent thud hit him in the middle of his face and fell backwards as his eyes pissed out salt water, which was a reaction to his smarting nose. All he could see now, was a blurred version of the darkening, starless sky.

"I'm sorry," came a female voice he wasn't familiar voice. "I thought you were one of *them*."

Pickle slowly sat up, and touched his nose, it wasn't broken but it was definitely bleeding.

"What are yer doing here?" he spoke at last. "Jesus, I could o' shot yer."

"Same as you, trying to survive."

Pickle looked at the woman; she was attractive and there was something else about her that he found endearing. There hadn't been many people that had managed to put him down over the years, certainly not a woman. She brushed her brown hair behind her ears and looked generally sorry for her understandable action.

"Pickle." He held out his hand, and placed his gun into the back of his trousers.

She stared at the hand suspiciously, and Pickle was confused by this behaviour and took a look at his hand. Realising it had his blood on it, he wiped the hand on his combat trousers and held it out for a second time.

"Karen Bradley." She shook it this time, and asked another question. "Where you from?"

Pickle laughed, and dabbed his bleeding nose on his camouflage shirt that he had earlier took from the supermarket. "Prison," he replied.

He could tell by Karen's face that she didn't understand, so he explained it to her in short, as daylight was nearly over. "I have a crew, we got out o' prison, there's five of us, and two o' them are officers."

Again, the facial expression of Karen suggested that she was finding his explanation hard to fathom.

"I'll explain later; there's also a nice family up there. Obviously we're all frightened to death, but we have guns, a van full o' food and water. Come and join us."

Pickle realised that he had earlier made a statement about blocking the entrance with the van so other people couldn't get in, which would give them another mouth to feed, but he liked Karen, he liked her a lot, and she was on her own. It wasn't as if she had turned up at the spot with a van full of hungry people.

"Sounds too good to be true." She smiled with suspicion.

"How have yer managed so far?"

She turned her head over her shoulder and nodded through the trees. "Got a bag full of tins over there."

"Fancy a barbecue?"

She nodded with a grin. "Now that sounds magic."

She sniffed and emptied the contents of each nostril onto the floor, by using her thumb. She sniffed hard as she finished her nose-emptying and apologised to the muscular inmate.

"That's okay." He beamed. "It's not as if we live in a civilised world anymore, right?"

Chapter 42

He had made his decision; it was going to happen sooner or later and there was no chance he could pull off his fake starvation, and the opened slider door was messing with his head. He had no bag to take with him and decided on his original plan: stuff his face till he was almost sick, and then escape.

He was hoping that the food would keep him going for a day or two if need be, and wasn't worried about hydration. He was going to hydrate himself before he left as well as leaving with a half litre bottle.

Gary Jenson had so far eaten two pre-packed BLT sandwiches, two scotch eggs and a full packet of chocolate biscuits that accompanied his piping hot mug of coffee. He took a generous swig of water and decided, despite the darkness outside, he would jump the fence, and if there were no cars to break into, he would spend the night hidden on the grounds until daylight. So long as the two thugs thought he was out of the way, he was convinced that he would be safe.

His bowels were telling him that a clearout was needed before he proceeded with his adventure. After the action had taken place, he peered out of his cell, and saw the two inmates walking on the ground floor of E Wing. Gary was convinced that Jason Bonser and Kyle Horan had probably killed any remaining prisoners that had decided to stay behind, but he wasn't entirely sure, as he hadn't been on F or G wing.

He trotted his way down the steel steps, and bolted out of the door into the exercise yard.

Gary was aware that his escape would fuel the men's paranoia. In their eyes, if this prisoner escaped and told people from the outside that there was a prison full of food with only two inmates inside, Gary could come back with other people and could break in, especially with the main gate being open, which they still didn't know about yet.

He breathed in the fresh air and mentally embraced it; it was the first time he had experienced the night air for months. He looked up to the houseblock one windows, and it seemed relatively quiet.

God, they must be starving in there, Gary thought.

He looked at the fence that would lead across the football pitch and into the reception area of the prison, and thought to himself that the 'escape' looked fairly easy. The huge slider door near the reception area that was used for deliveries and taking prisoners to and from court, was already open, and that was going to make his escape less troublesome.

He looked around and saw the fence in front of him; it looked unsteady, probably because it had felt the weight of prisoner after prisoner climbing it the other day, and with the barbed wire being covered with duvets, sheets and pillows, the only thing Gary had to fear was if he lost his grip and fell to the floor.

Being injured and out in this new world that was developing, wouldn't be the best way to start his newfound freedom. He needed to survive, and the only person he could think of who would put him up was Jemma.

Jemma Marlow had the patience of a saint. Her parents had scolded her for being in a relationship with a jailbird, but she was in love. Before Gary's incarceration, he had set up a place in Hazelslade with Jemma, a few months before Christmas, and as usual, had messed things up by being caught stealing a car. In the past, that was how he made his money. He would steal a high-quality car, hand it into an associate, he was then given a small cut, and then he would do it all again.

He had promised Jemma that he would get a real job and try and keep on the straight and narrow. It lasted only months. The only job he could get was working in a cafe, flipping burgers. Outside of the job, he was making extra pocket money by stealing a car a night, and then heading home without arousing suspicion. His downfall was to steal an unmarked police car in the car park of a supermarket. Unbeknown to Gary Jenson, the officers were inside the supermarket's café, eating their breakfasts.

It wasn't a story a criminal like Gary would brag about, but somehow the story about the stolen police car had surfaced on the wing and had made Gary a little bit of a hero, but also a figure of fun.

He jumped onto the fence with his small hands just about being able to grip the wiry pattern of the fence, and although having trouble getting his toes in the gaps, he never fell once. *Now, the tough bit.*

His body lay on the top where the duvets were, and despite the protection he had, he could still feel the barbed wire trying to pierce its way through the sheets, duvets and cushions that sat on top of it. It made him wonder how sore it would be if he ever became tangled up in the stuff for real without any kind of protection. Not entirely calm with heights, he swung himself over to the other side of the fence, where the floodlights lit up the football pitch.

"Where the fuck are *you* going?"

Gary nearly released his grip in fright, and quickly climbed down as Kyle Horan and Jason Bonser marched over to the other side of the fence on H Wing's yard.

"I thought you wanted to die in here," Kyle snarled, and pushed the fence with the palm of his hand, making it rock. "Were you making a fool out of us?"

"I changed my mind."

"What are you playing at?" Bonser intervened.

Gary sighed, "Look, I lied to you. I thought it'd only be a matter of time before you guys were gonna kill me, because if I stayed, I'd be another mouth to feed. And if I left, you'd be paranoid that I could tell people about the abandoned prison that's got weeks of food with only two inmates inside. Not only that, I've just noticed that the slider door is open. Within a few days, the grounds could be crawling with those things. All of that combined, I don't feel safe here."

“Shit.” Bonser stared at the huge opened door from afar. It was the first time he had noticed it, as their own exercise yard on E Wing never had the same view as H Wing. “Just come back,” Bonser spoke with assured calmness. “There's enough food for everyone, it's too dangerous out there.”

“Everyone is dead out there,” Kyle Horan spoke.

Gary shook his head, and was certain that they wanted him back so they could finish him off. To them, Gary was a dangerous source of information and could be a massive threat to Bonser's and Horan's food supply. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe paranoia was playing with him. “You don't know that.”

Bonser added, “You don't know either.”

“Look, guys, I won't tell anyone that there's only two people left on the houseblock and a prison full of food, if that's what you're worried about. Why would I? I have no intention of coming back. In fact, go to H fifty-six.”

“H fifty-six?” Bonser's eyes narrowed. “What's in H fifty-six?”

“A shit load of food, that's what. Don't come after me guys. I'll be gone before you make the fence. I'll even see if I can get that slider door shut for you.”

“You'll never get inside a secure building like that.” Bonser pointed at the gatehouse.

Gary turned his back, half-expecting the fence to be rattling with the two men climbing after him, but it never materialised. He jogged across the football pitch, which caused a few begging voices, from behind him in houseblock one, to restart their stories of woe.

He shut out the noise and heard from behind him, “Hey fella!”

Gary stopped running and turned around, it was Bonser; he raised his hand at Gary. “Good luck.”

“You too,” Gary responded, and continued to jog towards the slider. Maybe he was being paranoid? Maybe they had no intention of doing him harm?

Kyle turned to Bonser. “If he so much as tells anyone about this place and that there's just the two of us left, we could be in a shit load of trouble if a clan comes back in numbers...with weapons.”

Bonser sighed, “I trust him. Besides, we're in the middle of nowhere. You're gonna have to be pretty desperate to break into this place. Let's not forget, we're not going to be in here forever ourselves, just until we run out of resources. By then, this... thing should have died down, or at least be under control by then.”

“I hope you're right.” Kyle then nodded over to the opened slider. “If he can't get that thing shut, what happens if those things come in through there?”

Bonser gulped then shrugged his shoulders. “Let's worry about that if it happens.”

Gary ran with ease. One thing Gary hadn't lost when he was incarcerated was his cardio fitness; he had spent four days a week in the gym, using the treadmill. At the time, this was looked down upon by most inmates, as the preference was to lift weights and bulk themselves up as much as they could, whereas Gary preferred to keep his heart in good working order and remained slight in body shape.

He stopped running once he walked past the huge main slider. Bonser was right, there was no chance he could get into the gatehouse. Gary continued to

walk and was now in the car park, where only two cars remained sitting under the yellow flooded area thanks to the lights from above.

He looked around to see if the area was unthreatened; he had heard about what was happening, but so far he had no first-hand experience with any of the deadheads—which was one of the names given to them by the media.

The area was clear, but he didn't want to hang around too long. Thank goodness there were two cars in the park; he didn't fancy walking the country roads of Stafford in the darkness, and the safer option of staying on the grounds until daylight never really appealed to him either.

The first car that he walked over to was a white Clio, not his first choice of car and a bit girlie for him. He remembered his friend Gavin Johnson had bought a cherry coloured Clio and was ribbed by his friends for weeks for his purchase. Gary went along with the ribbing, but deep down thought the car looked decent and only joined in because of peer pressure. It even came to the point where they refused to get in the car, if ever they were taking a ride out somewhere. Gavin Johnson stuck to his guns for as long as he could, but eventually caved in and sold the car for a black Astra.

Gavin Johnson. I wonder what he's doing now? I wonder if he's alive?

The Clio held his attention only shortly as he began to salivate over the red Porsche 911.

Gary was bemused that it was still sitting there. He thought that the slider door was only opened when the officers had left last, as he noticed a prison van missing. Most of the prisoners left the exercise yard and scaled the wall at the sides of the prison. If they were allowed to simply walk out of the front gate, there was no chance those cars would still be sitting there, Gary thought.

Forgetting that the surveillance cameras around the car park weren't being watched and controlled by no one anymore, out of habit, Gary took a look around before he unscrewed the aerial off the Clio and used it to prise the door of the Porsche open.

The looking was an automatic rule of his, and he released a breathy laugh as soon as he made his careful observations, realising they were unnecessary.

He then sat in the driver's seat and looked under the steering wheel; took off the cover, and took the wires from behind the ignition. He put the cables together and twisted them tightly and then predictably, the car started. He had done this a hundred times before. Different cars had different methods, and normally he would go to 'work' using a screwdriver, a torch and some strong tape to keep the cables together.

As the engine came alive, he hit the gas pedal a few times to get a feel of the car, and a smile scattered across his face. He hit the gas pedal once more and could feel the excitement rushing through his bloodstream; he took a sharp intake of breath and blew out his cheeks to try and dampen some of the excitement that was making him shake.

He made himself comfortable, and reached over for the door handle to shut the door. He locked all doors as a safety measure, and the car excitedly squealed its way out of the car park.

Next stop, Hazelslade.

Chapter 43

KP had spent an hour slaving over the coal barbecue, and everyone seemed satisfied, apart from Jamie who was standing a hundred yards away from the camp, as it was *his* turn to stand guard in case of any unwanted surprises emerged out of the woods.

The barbecue was at the end of the beauty spot, where over the edge was a steep hill full of bracken. Jamie looked to his left and saw the prison van doing its job by blocking the entrance successfully. He had another ten minutes before he would be released from his duty, as David Pointer was next. David didn't have a gun, but the whole point of standing guard was to inform the rest of the group if anything untoward could be seen or heard, which would result in the unarmed to hide in the vehicles, and the armed to remove the problem, or problems.

Jamie had had a burger and a chicken breast washed down with some lemonade; his stomach was full and he was looking forward to resting his weary legs, as the campfire was looking incredibly inviting. Once the unarmed David walked over to Jamie to relieve him, Jamie walked over towards the campfire and sat in a circle with the others. It was hard work standing in one position for a certain amount of time, and it reminded him whenever he did extra shifts back at the prison in the visits hall.

Janine puffed out a bored sigh, and bemoaned, "How long is this gonna be, staying out here, exposed like this?"

"Stop your whining," KP snorted. "You're alive, you've got food, and once this dies down a little, you can break into any house you want. But for the time being, we need to stay away from populated areas."

"Has anyone checked on Laz?" Jamie asked.

KP shook his head. "He doesn't look good; he's pale."

"I gave him some medicine before, but he's still the same." Janine said, she looked over to Jamie and asked him to sit next to her.

Pickle was chewing on his last burger and said with a mouth full of food, "I'll check on him in a moment."

KP looked over to Pickle and felt uneasy. Pickle smiled thinly and gave him his trademark, reassuring wink.

"I'm gonna go and see how Laz is," Pickle announced to the group; he stood to his feet and stretched, then slowly wandered over with his tired feet dragging on the sandy area, reluctantly being forced towards the back of the prison van.

KP took a swig from the small bottle of water and handed it over to Jamie. He took it while Janine's head wearily rested on his shoulder.

"Not quite as good as the Wolseley Arms." KP tried to break the silence.

"Nowhere near," Jamie half-laughed. "I think it's gonna be a while before I drink like that again."

"Ever wondered how it came to this?"

For the first time, Jamie could hear fretfulness coated in KP's words.

It was a question that everyone was probably wondering, but with all the madness, they hadn't had a chance to think about it too much. "Well, they reckon

it's an aggressive form of rabies, or it could be some kind of new and unknown airborne virus.”

“A bit like SARS or the bird flu?” Karen questioned, picking out a strand of chicken with her index finger in her front teeth. She was new to the group, but wasn't shy in any way.

KP giggled mockingly at the new girl and shook his head, making Karen feel enraged. “Nah, you and me know, Missy, that it's a little bit more serious than that.”

“I *have* been out there.”

“Really? When was the last time you saw someone being eaten right before your eyes?”

“Cut it out,” Jamie said with a sharp whisper, aware now that Janine was asleep on his shoulder. “It's not a competition, for Christ's sake. I'm sure we've all got our own personal story from what has happened over the weekend, but it's how we deal with it. That's all that matters now.”

KP smirked at Karen from behind the yellow flames of the fire that licked the air; his smirk disappeared when she mouthed the word cocksucker in his direction.

“What are they?” KP asked. “I mean, what's wrong with them, are they sick? Are they dead? Undead? Their brain still kinda works, but they have no heartbeat, but yet they still move. They do seem to have *some* instincts.”

Karen spoke up, “I class them as dead. Radio reports say they have no heartbeat; they don't breathe. So if they *are* alive, they're not really human. Whatever they are, they're now the enemy. They're a threat to mankind's existence.”

“Maybe it wasn't an accidental virus,” a sceptical Jamie spoke up. “It's probably these scientists. Look at cloning and stem-cell research. I read that the Chinese had created something in order to vastly reduce the population, to free up reserves like food, water... even fuel.”

“That's bullshit, JT,” KP laughed, and even Karen managed a smirk.

“It's true. According to this website I was reading, it's called reanimation. The Chinese scientists inject a person, and the brain then dies from the outside in. The outside being the cortex—the nice part of you that makes you human, and what is left is the part that controls basic motor function and primitive instincts. You don't need the cortex of the brain to live, you just need the stem.”

“So let's get this straight,” KP was confused by Jamie's story. “You take a brain-dead patient, use these techniques to re-grow the brain stem, and you now have a mindless body shambling around, no thoughts and no personality, nothing but a cloud of base instincts and impulses?”

“Pretty much.”

“What do *you* reckon? You're a nurse.” KP looked over at Karen, waiting for an answer.

“I think the rabies-type theory is the one that seems more likely. I heard that the virus started in this country, in a lab, not China, or anywhere else. Rabies is caught when saliva enters your bloodstream, and animals that get it have a tendency to bite, become aggressive and some get a fear of water. But this is obviously a different, more aggressive type.”

“How d'ya mean?” KP quizzed.

“Well, for one, it's quicker. It could take ages for symptoms of rabies to occur, but with these things... I dunno, it seems to take them less time.”

KP smirked and looked over to Karen. “What did you call them again, I forgot?”

“Snatchers,” Karen said.

“Snatchers, I like that. Okay,” KP said, waving his hands to get everybody's attention. “I have a joke. Why did the Snatcher cross the road?”

“To eat the chicken,” Karen answered with a grin, knowing she had ruined KP's moment.

Pickle and Laz walked along the sandy area. They passed the small laughter of the group by the campfire, and at one point, Pickle had to take hold of Laz's arm to stop him from falling over. He was weak; he had lost his appetite and wanted nothing more than to stay in the back of the van and sleep, but Pickle had insisted that he needed fresh air and being stuck in the stuffy van was doing his temperature no favours.

They walked to the edge of the spot, and Pickle insisted that they should go down further a few more yards. The steep incline put Laz off, but Pickle helped him down, although there was a minor incident that involved Laz falling, which almost caused them both to tumble. The two of them had disappeared from the view of everyone else, who continued to sit around, chatting by the dying fire.

Pickle helped Laz to sit, and he seemed to take an age to sit down next to him. They both stared at the beauty of the starless sky that was now a deep, intense azure colour.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” Pickle breathed in.

“Sure is.” Laz shook with the cold, but felt it was what his body needed, as he was sure he had lost pounds of weight in water. “It's good to be out.”

Pickle smiled sympathetically at the ill man. He didn't look good at all. “Why don't yer lie down?”

“I think I'll do that.” Laz lay down and ran his cold, clammy hands through his grey hair. “I feel terrible.”

“Yer wanna cushion, there's one in the van?”

Laz thought for a moment. It seemed strange he was being looked after by a notorious drug baron. He nodded his head with a weak smile. “And a blanket, if there's one going spare.”

“Sure thing. I'll get some water too; yer probably dehydrated bein' stuck in that van.”

Pickle walked back to the van eyeing up KP, who glared back and saw that Karen now had a blanket wrapped around her. He was sure that there should be at least one left, and wasn't disappointed when he got to the van. He took the blanket out and walked by the campfire once more with a cushion in the other hand. He could still feel KP's eyes burning in the back of his head.

He walked twenty yards down the steep hill and put the blanket on the floor. Laz looked like he was asleep; he couldn't see properly because of the darkness, but Pickle knew his face was snow-white. Pickle called his name with a whisper, but his face never flinched.

He gently placed the pillow over Laz's head, pulled out the Browning in his right hand, pushed the barrel into the pillow and released two shots.

The body made one solitary jerk from the first bullet. The shots were muffled, but still loud enough to be heard by everyone. He removed the cushion, that smouldered, and tossed it as far as he could down the hill. He refused to look at Laz's face as he placed the blanket over the fresh corpse, and whispered a prayer.

Pickle ambled by the camp once again, with all members around the fire staring at him. KP shouted over to Pickle, "I would have done it sooner." Pickle ignored the remark, and saw that Davina was staring at him through the Clio where she sat up and her daughter was sleeping. He walked over to a nervous-looking David Pointer who was wondering what was going on.

Pickle told him, "Get some sleep, I'll take over from here."

"What was that all about?"

Pickle thought that he owed David an explanation. They were a family that were probably not exposed to violence, and David Pointer deserved to know why a camp member had just shot his own man.

"When we took the food from the supermarket, we were attacked, we lost one of our guys. Laz was bitten, not much, but bitten all the same. I needed to be sure, *really* sure. As soon as the fever kicked in, I knew he was fucked. You saw the state he was in, he was probably minutes from turning into one o' *them*."

David thought about the safety of his wife and daughter, and nodded in agreement with Pickle that he had done the right thing.

Pickle continued, "If anyone is bitten, anyone! Then they are a threat to the camp."

"Even you?"

"David, if I somehow get bitten, I'll put a bullet in ma own 'ead within a minute, I can guarantee yer that."

"We can't just leave him there."

"No." Pickle lowered his head. "Yer right, he deserves better. I'm gonna go and take care of it. Be back in ten, maybe twenty."

Chapter 44

The red Porsche screeched its way down the long and lonely road, and Gary Jenson was loving his newfound freedom so much, he had almost forgot what was happening in the world and why he had managed to escape prison so easily in the first place.

He slipped the car into a lower gear to climb the hill, and the vehicle temporarily left the road by inches like a scene from Knight Rider, as the peak of the hill acted as a ramp. He was now at Milford and had just driven by the Barley Mow pub, where he had gone sometimes for a nice surf and turf.

He came across his first experience of the infected as he glanced quickly to his right where the grassland was, and saw at least a dozen strolling around the edge of the field, and it looked to him that they had no idea where they were going. He wondered: if his lights had picked up at least twelve at the edge of the field, the

darkness probably disguised the fact that there were maybe hundreds more behind them in the shadows.

He slowed down to get a better look at the last one, before his car drove past Shugborough Hall and entered the snaky roads that had woods on either side. He observed the thing with inquisitive eyes and the image of it rattled his vertebrae. He had seen enough, and began to speed up before it got too close to the vehicle. He took a peep in his rear view mirror as the last one faded away and was gobbled up by the night, and then his focus and his eyes remained back on the road.

Gary was aware that the country roads had taken many young lives over the years, so he killed his speed and put his full beam on, lighting up the whole countryside, drenching the woodlands in glorious white to enhance his vision.

Despite the lights being on, his vision still wasn't great and he was aware that his concentration levels needed to be high, which was justified, as after just thirty seconds along the treacherous road, the car had to be steered quickly to the left when one of them appeared out of the wooded area and stumbled into the middle.

Gary decided to kill his speed even more, just so that he could get to his destination without being involved in a crash. The last thing he needed was to crash his vehicle. Two scenarios entered his head if a crash ever did occur.

Scenario one, was Gary crashing his newly stolen car into a tree and being trapped there while the contaminated beings were outside of the vehicle, trying desperately to claw their way in and feast on the trapped victim.

The second scenario was if Gary had crashed the car and had managed to exit the vehicle; he would be more than likely chased by those things from all angles of the darkness where he couldn't see. It would feel like a permanent ambush and the experience would be frightening to the extreme.

He couldn't picture which one was more horrific.

He took his foot off the gas, dropped the gear into fourth and did a steady thirty along the curly roads that were a hazard for an experienced driver, even in the daylight.

His car was coming to the end of the bendy country roads and, as he passed the Wolseley Arms pub, he could see up ahead, drenched in white light from the full beam, that there was scores of them scattered along the road, all heading towards the small town of Rugeley.

He apologised to his new car, dropped a gear and did his utmost to avoid hitting the things as he swerved around them, but one was bouncing off the vehicle every other second. He left a trail of carnage behind him and as he flew by the last couple of them, he knew he had damaged the exterior of the vehicle. But that didn't matter; all that mattered was for him to be in a safe place, preferably at his girlfriend's house.

He entered the town of Rugeley and went through the quiet Slitting Mill way. He turned left at Globe Island where the street, Horsefair, was now infested with the things, and took the car up to Sandy Lane, which was almost clear compared to the town centre.

As he ventured by the outskirts of the Pear Tree Estate, he entered Draycott Park, which also had streets full of the things roaming around. He turned left and hit the gas pedal as his Porsche sped up Stile Cop Road, and once he passed the

cemetery and got to the top of the hill, he could see to his left, a prison van blocking the Stile Cop beauty spot's entrance.

Was it from *his* prison?

Shrugging this off, he turned right and headed for Hazelslade, hoping that his girl would still be there. Now he was out, he was desperate to see her, but was also desperate for a place to stay.

His mind wandered back to when he escaped the prison, and how quiet the car park was. Maybe he should have slept in the car park and looked for his girlfriend during the daylight. Hindsight was playing with him, but the scenario of sleeping in the car, in the prison car park and being surrounded by those things as he slept, was also a very real incident that could have occurred.

He was pleased that he hadn't seen any more of the beings since he left Draycott Park, and was hoping that the small village of Hazelslade was almost untouched by the parasites. His thoughts went back to what he witnessed when he drove by the Wolseley Arms pub, where dozens upon dozens of them were heading into the town. He thought that even if Hazelslade was almost untouched, it would only be a matter of time before the hungry, contaminated creatures invaded the place.

He looked to his left as he progressed slowly down the main road and saw a figure lying on the garage. Was it one of them?

He pulled the car over in the quiet street. The figure lying on top of the garage appeared to move and Gary, who was sure the street was safe, stepped out of the car and took a step closer to investigate. He could hear murmurings coming from behind the fence that belonged to the house. It unnerved him, as it told him that some of those things were in the back garden; he turned on his heels and jogged back to his car.

"Wait," he heard a whispery voice pierce the night.

The figure stood and jumped onto the floor from the garage roof. His movement had stirred the beings from behind the fence and they were now beginning to slap it furiously, knowing that there was something or someone behind the fence worth devouring.

The figure jogged towards Gary; he introduced himself as Jack Slade.

"I've come here to see my girlfriend," Gary said coldly. "She lives at the end of the street, and I don't have time for passengers."

"It's okay," Jack spoke with assurance. "I'm looking for my ex-girlfriend—my son more than anything else. Kerry Evans? You know her?"

Gary shook his head. "Nah; never heard of her."

"You better go; it's not safe round here. The streets are reasonably quiet, but there're loads of those things in the back gardens of these houses, some are trapped."

Gary was almost about to step into the car, when he turned to Jack. "Need a bed for the night?"

Jack nodded frantically. He thought he would never ask.

Gary took one look at the bike and glared back at Jack. "You got a death wish or something?"

"It's handy, for weaving in and out of alleys and stuff."

Gary shook his head disapprovingly. "Oh well, it's your funeral. Let's go."

They both took the short journey to the end of the street, individually. Jack was on the bike with Gary in the damaged, but still driveable, Porsche. They pulled up at the house, and both walked up the drive with fear forcing them to twist their neck left and right, as the darkness had become an excellent way to cover up the evil that could potentially stalk them.

Jack gently slapped Gary on the shoulder and pointed up the road where three of the creatures appeared to be heading their way. They had either spotted them, or the noise of the vehicles had attracted their attention.

"I hope you've got a key for this place?" Jack half-joked.

"Usually under the plant pot," Gary said. "At least, that's where she used to leave it."

"Really?"

"It's just a village, no crime. It's one of those places where you can leave your door open."

Gary peered inside the living room window and saw that there was no one in, and looked like there were no signs of barricading, as the furniture was still immaculately placed. This disappointed him, as it meant that his girlfriend had left. She could be anywhere.

He looked under the plant pot that sat idly on the concrete doorstep, and grabbed the spare key and let himself and Jack inside. He locked the door behind him and walked through the house. He flicked a light switch at the bottom of the stairs and the landing light on the top of the stairs came on.

"This is the only light that goes on," he instructed to Jack. "And keep the curtains closed."

"Fair enough, don't wanna be attracting those fuckers during the night."

Jack picked up an iPad that was sitting on the fireplace and opened it up; he began pressing a few keys. "Well, the Internet's still working," he announced. "I wonder if you can still get online news?"

Gary shook his head, his body language soaked in negativity. "Check any of the papers online, see what it says about what's been happening recently. What about Facebook? If your Kerry or my Jemma's phones are working, they might have put something on."

Jack tapped the Facebook app and shook his head. "Not working."

Jack sat down, placed the iPad on his lap and, for a few minutes, glared at the online news sites. The madness that was occurring where they were, was nothing compared to what the main cities were being subjected to, as he showed Gary some of the articles that somehow had been released. Despite what was happening, there were pockets of journalists out there still trying to do their job.

They're probably releasing statements online because they're still stuck in their office.

Jack announced, "So what do we do now?"

Gary shrugged his shoulders. "Probably be best if I stay here, in case she comes back. Probably the best thing to do is stay inside. Think about it, those clumsy things will suffer, after tripping, walking off of bridges and stumbling around on dark cloudy nights. They'll eventually be limbless, toothless and with every bone in their body broken.

“Seriously, in the event of this kind of disaster, just stay inside, watch all the episodes of *Lost* back to back, then walk out on your lawn with your rake and tidy up the afters. That's what we should do.”

“I like your style.” Jack smiled. “And I wish it was as simple as that, but I need to find my son.”

Gary picked the landline phone up. “Still working. Wanna give Kerry a ring on her mobile, or try her house?”

“My phone got smashed back in Glasgow. I don't know her number off the top of my head.”

“Where're they from?”

“Rugeley. But they came over here to her mother's, but they could be back in Rugeley, as when I went to her mother's I was told they'd left... I don't really know anymore. I just wanna see them.”

Gary was lost in thought and told Jack he'd be back in a minute. Gary left the house and went to his neighbour's. Jack wondered what the hell he was doing and peered out of the window to see Gary talking to someone through their letterbox. A minute later he was back.

Gary was wearing a wide smile on his face.

“What?” Jack said,

“Was talking to Doris, next door. Poor woman's out of her mind. She said that a large group were outside here, a day or so ago, and left with a reasonable sized convoy. Jemma was with them, and she recognised your Kerry and her mother with a little boy.”

“What? Really?”

“This is a village of about four... five hundred people, most of 'em are old folk. If they're not together now, they certainly *left* together.”

Jack added, “The old woman down the street said a load of people from here left in groups and some went to a church, while others went to a village hall, or something.”

Gary smiled. “So your Kerry and my Jemma could be together?”

Jack sat down in one of the armchairs; his body language gave off negative, beaten vibes. “Maybe.”

Gary spoke with confidence. “In the morning, we'll check some of the halls, but we can't venture too far, it's too dangerous. Then I need to pop to Rugeley. It's the nearest place where there's a petrol station and I need to top up before things get *real* messy.”

Jack thought the idea was desperate, and *was*. He looked around the living room and shook his head. “Why are you doing this for me?”

Gary shrugged his shoulders. “I dunno. We're in the same boat now; we may as well help one another. If you find your son, then there's a good chance Jemma will be there with them.”

Gary stood to his feet and went into the bottom cupboard that sat next to the TV and pulled out a bottle of whisky. “Once you've finished messing on the Internet and we've barricaded ourselves upstairs, what do you say to a wee tippie.”

Jack's weekend had already been an alcohol-fuelled party and a day off for his liver would be welcomed, but he didn't want to offend his gracious host, and replied, “Sounds good to me.”

Chapter 45

KP felt for Laz, and thought about him as he stood guard near the wooded area of Stile Cop. Although he insisted to Pickle that someone should also stand guard by the edge of the beauty spot where there was a massive decline, Pickle refused and comforted the anxious KP by informing him that the hill was almost humanly impossible to climb, and that meant completely impossible for any one of those clumsy and unstable deadheads as well.

Comforted by Pickle's confidence, he finally agreed with his fellow ex-inmate and stood in his area without verbally challenging him. KP occasionally looked to his left to make sure there was nothing unusual clambering out of the woods, and then to his right as he watched the shocked group, David Pointer, Pickle, Jamie, Janine and Karen sitting around the dying fire. Davina was sleeping in the car with her daughter. KP could see that Janine was somehow fast asleep on Jamie's shoulder, which was probably a wise move, as she was up next on guard duty.

He swapped the pistol from one hand to the next every few seconds, almost as if he was playing catch with himself. It was his way of stopping himself from losing his grip. His clammy hands were annoying him, and every time he swapped the gun, the free hand was wiped on his trousers and vice versa. The safety catch on his Browning was off and the gun was cocked, he was taking nothing for granted.

As the fire burned humbly, the group passed between them a two-litre bottle of diet cherry cola around the campfire. Pickle had asked the group if they were thirsty, and it was the first thing he took out the van. The group never protested, as they were sick of the sights of water, despite deep down knowing that this vital liquid was the best thing for their dehydration.

Karen was the last to take a generous swig and screwed the lid back on and placed it beside her feet. Janine was sleeping on Jamie's shoulder, Jamie's eyes were half-closed, David Pointer's head was lowered, staring at the shoes on his feet, and Pickle and Karen, who sat next to one another, sat in quiet.

The pair of them had spent an hour in each other's company, and Pickle showed Karen how to load and reload the Browning pistol in case she had to fire one. He also showed her where the safety catch was and informed her that target practice was not advisable, as it may attract unwanted attention, which she agreed.

He told her that later he would teach her how to dismantle the gun, and piece it back together as, in order for it to work consistently, it regularly needed cleaning. Pickle told Karen that the SAS used to carry the Browning cocked with the safety catch on, to allow for a quicker draw and fire. He also used this method in case anything threatening took them by surprise.

The group were ready for sleep, if that at all was possible after the death of Laz. The Pointers had their car, and there was a cell each inside the prison van for the rest of them, whilst one of them stood guard during the night. The tiny cells were not designed for sleeping, they were designed for inmates to stand up in, but curled up in a ball on the floor was achievable.

Karen finally broke the silence and turned her attention to Pickle, who was sitting to her left. "Shame about Laz."

Pickle shifted awkwardly, and took a while to reply to her comment. "It is. He was a decent enough bloke. I didn't have a shovel, so it had to be a shallow grave. I had to use the heel of ma boots mainly. Still, I couldn't just leave him there, it would be disrespectful to leave him there to rot away."

"Not only that," Karen added softly. "He'd stink the place out; attract all kinds of wildlife."

Pickle turned to his right to look at the attractive twenty-three-year-old, and shook his head at her strange response. "Are yer always this cold?" he asked with a half-smile.

"I never used to be, but a few days ago I was working in a hospital, trying to pay the mortgage. Now, in the space of a couple of days, I've had to toughen up after losing my boyfriend, my family may be dead, and everything I took for granted like television, food, even my car, has changed. My way of life has changed, which means my priorities have changed."

"Everybody's in the same boat." This time it was Pickle's turn to be cold, but Karen knew there was a touch of realism in what he had said.

"Yeah, I know. I'm not feeling sorry for myself." Karen's response was defensive, and decided to change the subject before the conversation turned into a blazing row. She said, "How's your nose?"

He touched it gently with his left hand and winced. "Still sore."

"Sorry about that."

Another gulf of quietude threatened to surround them, and Karen was ready to turn in. Her backside from sitting on the hard sand was becoming sore, as if she had been punched, and her eyes were becoming heavy.

Pickle had prevented her leaving, temporarily, as he returned to their original talk. "Yer say yer priorities have changed. So what are yer priorities, now?"

Karen thought long and hard about Pickle's question and released a long and fabricated moan. She felt his eyes gazing at her during her deliberation, and it didn't feel like any normal gaze, it was something she felt uncomfortable with, the way Oliver had stared at her during their latter hours in the woods.

She thought the worst of Pickle for a minute. Here was a man who had been incarcerated for God knows how long, and had been locked away from women. He was now out in a lawless land, and anything could happen. If he raped her by gunpoint, who was going to convict him if the law had ceased to exist?

"My priorities?" Karen was finally getting around to answer Pickle's question. "My main priority is to stay alive."

"Is that it?"

She nodded without eyeing him. "That's it. So long as I'm breathing, there's always hope."

"So if we ever get surrounded by those things, and it's just me and yer carryin' guns, what would yer do?"

"Honestly?" Karen smiled. "I'd put a bullet in your leg, and make a run for it as those cocksuckers tore you to pieces. At least then it would give *me* a chance to escape."

Pickle giggled and slapped his right knee, he pointed at Karen. "I knew yer were going to say that." He then cleared his throat and spat onto the floor beside him.

"Oh, I'm not joking."

His tittering began to subside, and his smile very slowly disappeared from his face. He cleared his throat, and although originally affronted by Karen's comment, he simultaneously began to respect her for her honesty and her toughness.

Pickle was a tough nut, but here was a twenty-three-year-old nurse who seemed mentally tougher than him. Instead of crippling her like it had for David Pointer, this new terrifying event had made her stronger, and he admired that. She had mental strength that *she* probably thought she never had.

"In that case," Pickle indicated with a grin. "Maybe I shouldn't give yer this."

Pickle handed Karen his nine-millimetre Browning.

She glared at him with mischievousness. Was he joking?

He then tossed two magazines onto her lap, and including the magazine in the pistol she was now the proud owner of a pistol and thirty-nine bullets.

"What about you?"

Pickle chuckled softly and stood up his B725 shotgun that was resting by the side of his legs. "I have this baby."

"How...?"

Pickle elevated his eyebrows, waiting for Karen to finish her question. She didn't, so he completed it for her. "*How did I get a hold of the guns?*"

Karen nodded with a suspicious scowl. She knew he was a prisoner, but didn't think he was a hardcore criminal. He didn't look the type. Pickle was very muscular, but she felt there was a gentle side to the man. Maybe she was wrong.

"Let's just say I used to be a bad boy, and we'll leave it at that." A hush came over the two weary individuals and Pickle decided to keep the chat going. "Yer a nurse, Karen. How do yer think something like this could happen—medically, I mean?"

Karen gently shook her head. "I'm a nurse, not a scientist. But, if I'm guessing... a virulent rabies-influenza viral hybrid, could lead to masses of infected victims turning into violent creatures. I had this discussion with KP earlier. The radio I listened to reckons it could be rabies related or some kind of malfunction of a cure vaccine."

"I suppose it depends on yer beliefs." Pickle grinned. "I believe it's God's doing, but if yer a Darwinist or heavily into science, ma theory would be laughed at."

Karen spoke, "I don't know. I don't think we'll ever get to find out, although it may be related to the incident that happened in Newcastle. Jamie mentioned terrorists before, and everyone laughed at him, but why not? The world has amazing scientists who can clone people, so a mixture of the rabies and flu virus wouldn't take much to create in a laboratory."

"Yet, they can't find a cure for the cold."

"Well, that's true." Karen began to sit up, straightening her back and leaned over to Pickle. "In order to make someone become one of those Snatchers in the first place, the virus would have to destroy all of the brain except for the amygdala, which is responsible for the flight or fight instinct and the medulla oblongata, which is responsible for processing neurological signals from the brain and spinal cord, movements such as walking and grabbing. The virus would have to rip the

brain down to its most basic components known as ataxic neurodegenerative satiety deficiency syndrome, or ANSD.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Pickle mocked gently.

Added Karen, “After creating a virus capable of destroying all parts of the brain necessary for reasoning and awareness, then they would next determine its method of transmission. The virus doesn’t have to be airborne to cause a crisis. The biting is a slower process than an airborne virus, but it can still be effective if we don’t get on top of the catastrophe.

“I’m only guessing, but these things seem to respond by biting because another critical part of the brain—the ventromedial hypothalamus—is broken, which normally tells you when you’ve eaten enough. The brain’s frontal lobes, responsible for problem solving, are devoured by the virus so they can’t make complex decisions. Impairment in the cerebellum means they can’t walk well, either.”

“But yer don’t know tha’ for sure.” Pickle smiled. “Interesting theory, though. But I’ll stick with ma God theory. It’s simpler.”

Karen smiled and shook her head. “Have you noticed some are quicker than others?”

Pickle nodded. “Something to do with rigor mortis, isn’t it?”

“These things are supposed to be dead, right? Normally, when a body dies, chemical changes happen which stiffens the body. This starts about three to four hours after death, then reaches maximum stiffness, and gradually dissipates about two days or so afterwards. So the slightly quicker ones are probably the ones that have been dead for a few days or could be the ones that have just been infected.”

Their conversation came to a halt, as they both listened as a vehicle drove by the area. It was a vehicle they couldn’t see because of the darkness and the bulky van blocking the entrance.

“I love that sound,” Karen grunted.

“Yep,” Pickle agreed. “It tells us that there’re more survivors out there.”

Pickle cleared his throat and threw in another question at his intriguing guest in order to avoid the uncomfortable silence that was almost sneaking upon them and threatening the night to come to a close, which is what a tired Karen Bradley actually really wanted.

“So tell me, Karen, have yer ever wanted a family?”

Karen laughed out loud at the unexpected question, which made a sleepy Jamie and Janine jump simultaneously, as they still sat opposite on the other side of the timid fire. David never flinched. He was still in a self-hypnotic state, still trying to come to terms with the events that were unravelling, and wasn’t listening to a word they were saying anyhow.

Answered Karen, “Once upon a time, maybe, not now. Who in their right mind would want to give birth in a ditch and bring up a baby in this shitty world? It’d be madness.”

“Humanity needs to continue.”

“And why the fuck should *I* be responsible for that?” Karen scolded bluntly. “I’ll tell you this, there’ll be no cock going anywhere near *me* anymore. It’s too risky, and besides, most men are shit in the sack anyway.”

Pickle smiled calmly. "That's a romantic way o' looking at it."

"I don't give a shit. Any man comes near me, they'll soon know about it."

Pickle narrowed his eyes suspiciously; cocked his head to one side like a baffled dog, and lifted his chin. "Is that an indirect threat towards me, by any chance?"

Noticing the tone in Pickle's voice, Karen backed down with her aggression and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm just saying; that's all."

"Let's get one thing straight, Karen." Pickle leaned over towards her as the fire by them was almost out, and the only light the spot had was the light of the full moon that hung above them. "One: directly or indirectly, never threaten me, especially when I give yer food and water that cost the life o' two men, that's just disrespectful. Two: any potential rapist in this camp who attacks either you, Davina or Janine will be personally shot in the balls by yours truly."

Karen had underestimated the man, and now saw in the man's eyes a potential psychotic individual who was definitely something more than a petty criminal. She didn't want to appear to be intimidated by this man, even though she did disrespect him and he probably deserved an apology, which she told herself he wasn't going to get.

Karen raised her eyebrows and unflinchingly quizzed, "And three?"

"Three," Pickle began and looked around to see who was listening, David was almost asleep. "Yer don't have to worry about me personally. Yer attractive, any fool can see that, but yer not ma type."

Karen grinned and was unconvinced by Pickle's speech. "I probably wasn't Oliver's type either, but he forced himself on top of me."

"Who's Oliver?"

"Some guy I met in the woods, before I met you lot. Before I got to the woods, I got carjacked and was assaulted by two men, so I ran to the woods because there was nowhere else to go, and that's when I met Oliver. He seemed nice at first; shared his food and water when I needed it. We stayed overnight, and took turns sleeping while one stood guard. Then suddenly, he changed. I don't understand why. Anyway, I gave him a beating and he shot off."

Pickle understood Karen's paranoia more than ever after her brief story, and he felt that she needed to trust the group if ever they were to survive. His sympathy grew for her and his anger that boiled when she made the indirect threat had diminished. He tried to explain the Oliver situation to Karen, without sounding like he was justifying it. "Maybe he thought: here is an attractive woman who I could never get in the real world, I've probably only got days or weeks to live, and there's no law in the land anymore. So what the hell."

"Maybe," she sniffed, and could feel herself getting emotional. "It doesn't give him the right to do that, or anyone else for that matter. So forgive me if I seem a little paranoid about men at the moment. I know it should be the last thing I should be concerned about, considering what's out there."

"That won't happen here. Like I said, any man who rapes in this camp will be seriously dealt with."

"And how do I know I can trust *you*?"

Pickle sighed, and this time he took no offence. Instead, his face was warm and sincere and he ran his fingers through his short brown hair. He stared at Karen with his dark eyes and said, "Because... I'm gay."

Chapter 46

June 12th

It was Tuesday, and their heads were extremely sore.

Jack Slade had had the unhealthiest weekend of his life. He had spent the weekend boozing before news of the outbreak was revealed, and his nutrition and hydration hadn't been great since the panic had spread; but he was alive and was at least thankful for that. His host, Gary Jenson, had been a life-saver, as Jack wasn't at all confident that a good night's sleep would have been achieved by sleeping on top of a garage, where below him, only yards away, was a group of beings desperate to taste his warm flesh.

Making use of the electricity that was still working, they replenished their energy levels with breakfast. Two cups of tea and a cooked breakfast later, they hesitantly left the premises and both went to the red Porsche and was pleased that the street was empty. Gary suggested to Jack that maybe he should leave the bike, as it was a ridiculous way to travel considering the circumstances, he didn't look fit, and it seemed silly to use two vehicles and waste valuable fuel for the short trip to Rugeley. Gary didn't want to leave the house unattended in case Jemma contacted the house, but he wanted to go out to get one last fuel trip, and he also felt it was better to be out in numbers, which Jack agreed.

Jack had also agreed that both men going into the car was probably safer, as there was a big chance of getting snatched and pulled off if he took the bike—an experience that almost happened to him at Slitting Mill.

With his head not being in the best condition, he agreed that the bike, as well as his tender condition, could be a hindrance to their goal of getting petrol.

Jack shut the front door behind him and saw that the street was barren. He took his time getting into the Porsche as Gary waited patiently. Jack threw his head back and released a long sigh.

“Feeling rough?” Gary began to chuckle.

Jack smiled. “Just a tad.”

“Here's a tip.” Gary started the engine. “Don't drink two thirds of a whisky bottle the night before you have to go out and face man-eating creatures.”

“It was the only way I could get some sleep. I just got carried away.”

They headed out and the car had zoomed through the village; it headed towards Stile Cop and went onto the main road. Jack was in the passenger seat and looked to his right to see a white bulky prison van blocking the entrance of the beauty spot.

“I passed that place last night. Looks like some sort of camp,” Gary said. “Maybe we should try in there. Maybe they might know where the girls are? I know it's a long shot.”

“Okay.”

The car stopped, and Gary reversed rapidly ten yards and pulled up at the side of the road, opposite where the van was. Gary and Jack stepped out of the sports

car and hesitantly crossed the road, unaware what could be greeting them. They stood behind the van, looking for a way in without having to climb under it.

Their presence had been detected, however, and they were quickly questioned about their unexpected visit.

“Can I help you, my friend?” came a voice from behind the van, but they couldn't see the individual.

Gary elected himself as spokesperson, and began to speak. “We're not looking for refuge, we're looking for a girl called Kerry, a six-year-old boy called Thomas, and a girl called Jemma Marlow.”

“There are eight people here, but no one by that name, I'm sorry.”

“If anyone by that name does pop up, could you tell them that Jack Slade and Gary Jenson are looking for them, and we're in Gary's house on Barnaby Street.”

There was a brief pause. “I thought I recognised that voice.”

Gary thought for a few seconds until his brain realised the voice did seem familiar. “Pickle? But... how?”

“Same as you, friend, we were let out, in fact we've got KP, Officer Thomson and Officer Perry here as well. Sorry we can't let you in, there're too many mouths to feed. We're gonna stay here for a few days before seeking refuge elsewhere.”

“Don't worry about it, we don't want in anyway. Oh, do me a favour,” Gary said.

Pickle replied. “What is it?”

“Tell Jamie and the girl, thanks. They didn't need to let us out, they could have just left us there to rot.”

“Will do.”

“Okay,” Gary spoke with an excited tone his voice, knowing that some of his old inmates had made it. “Best of luck.”

“You too.”

The two men knew it was a long shot looking for them at the Stile Cop beauty spot, but at least that was one place less to look now. If ever Jemma or Kerry ended up at Stile Cop somehow, then at least now, either girl would know that they were looking for them.

Unaware that the car he was in belonged to Officer Thomson, Gary drove it down the steep hill, passing the cemetery on the right. The two noticed a body lying in the side of the road and gently swerved round it in order not to damage the Porsche's wheels. The car had received a lot of dents in its bodywork from before, but luckily the engine and wheels hadn't been damaged so far.

The vehicle turned left away from Draycott Park and headed towards Slitting Mill. Jack had advised Gary that although he had experienced a few of the things in Slitting Mill, Draycott Park was more heavily populated with them. There was only two ways to get into Rugeley from where they were, and the Slitting Mill route was agreed to be the safest, as it proved.

Jack and Gary sat silently as the car cruised through the road, passing an abandoned car in a ditch, and half a dozen of the things could be seen in the woods at the perimeter of Cannock Chase, and another two roamed at the side of the road. They went by the dangerous area with no problems, and another half a mile later, they were in the town centre.

They passed a house that had a banner hanging from the bedroom window; it read: *Help! Alive inside!* Gary shook his head and knew that it was for the benefit

of the army—or whoever else could turn up to rescue. He thought to himself that if bandits or desperados saw that, the family inside would be taken for everything they had.

The car came to an abrupt stop outside the park, which was situated opposite the bus station where the town centre began. Gary and Jack got out of the car and looked down the road to see many of them wandering aimlessly around the street. They were too far to notice the two men, but the scene was still unnerving all the same.

Gary looked up to the block of apartments that sat to the right of the park, and saw three sets of curtains twitching. Others were not so shy, as another two had pulled the curtains back and stared out to see what the two men were up to.

Gary thought, Poor bastards! Probably still living off the food that's left in their apartment.

He thought about what would happen a few weeks or months down the line once the food began to disappear. Would people still stay indoors? Would they rather starve to death than risk going out and being a meal for one of those things? Or would they take the risk? Maybe some would decide that the world was too much of a horrific place to live in now, and decided to kill themselves.

Maybe some had already made that decision.

This wasn't their main concern. Their main concern was the red pick-up truck in the forecourt of the petrol station a hundred yards away from them, as well as the four men standing around, with two of them donning shotguns as if they owned the place.

"It doesn't matter," Jack spoke, urging Gary back into the car.

"I know." Gary was calm.

"Let's go, before they spot us."

They drove away and the atmosphere was different to the one on the way there. They both engaged in conversation, despite the disappointment of the petrol station being occupied. They checked another two, but found that all pumps were drained. Gary still remained calm, despite the frustration of the lack of petrol. The car was reasonably okay, but a few jerry cans full of petrol could keep them going for weeks, if need be. "We'll try again in a few hours. Any longer than that and I think these things will be impossible to avoid."

"What if those guys are still here, sucking the place dry?"

"Nah." Gary shook his head. "I've got a feeling they're preparing themselves for a long journey."

The car turned a corner, away from the eyes of the men, and the vehicle casually did thirty along the main road.

"Shame our families weren't here," Gary said, stating the obvious.

"I know."

"At least then we could raid some shops, get a car full of food and water, and then barricade ourselves in the house for a couple of months until this virus, or whatever it is, starts to die out as well as those things."

Jack was perplexed on Gary's confidence. "What makes you think those things are gonna die out?"

Gary sniffed and placed the car in a higher gear once he was round the sharp bend. Gary shrugged. "Think about it. Why do people eat?"

Jack paused for a second and thought about the potential-trick question. "Because they're hungry. To survive."

"Exactly, probably the same reason *they* do. You cut off the food supply, then surely they'll become weaker and die."

"Interesting theory; not too sure they're actually eating because of hunger, though."

"I heard a broadcast on the radio," Gary began a fresh story, changing the subject. "It told us that most of the UK is pretty much contaminated, so don't expect in a few days the British army coming in and helping us out. That ain't gonna happen; even our beloved Royal Family and Prime Minister have left the country. Fuckers! If the people of Britain get through this, then God help them. The surviving people of this country will set Buckingham Palace and Downing Street on fire. There'll be riots galore."

"I'm sure it's the same everywhere, in some other countries," Jack noted, trying to justify the disappearance of the countries' leaders.

"I was just thinking," Gary scrunched his face. "Surely if these things are classed as dead, apart from the brain itself, surely in hot countries like Australia, India, Iran and some areas of America, like Texas, must be able to contain the problem better than what *we* can?"

Jack looked at Gary who looked back and flashed him a smile. Jack shook his head. "That's if they've got this problem, I think it's mainly a UK thing, but explain."

"Well, if they're considered *already* dead, surely day by day they're rotting away? And in extreme heat, those things can't survive too long before they literally fall to pieces. It'd be like watching chicken falling off a bone."

"Interesting theory," Jack agreed. "But it doesn't help the likes of us and other mild countries, does it?"

"Well, if they're dead, I'm sure they're still prone to rot, even as they shamble around the streets. I reckon as soon as you become one of them, thanks to bacteria, you automatically have an expiry date, then fall to the floor and never get back up again. Have you noticed some of those things are quite bloated?"

"Some I suppose, I've never really stood around long enough to check them out."

"Neither have I, but I think that's the bacteria. Dead bodies bloat because bacteria causes gases."

Jack added, "Sounds like you know your stuff. What else did this broadcast tell you?"

"A few things, but there was another station I managed to get a hold of. I think the reason why this contagious sickness has taken the country by surprise is because we hadn't been told about it and it's been going on for a week or so in isolated areas, but now it has multiplied. Think about it, you're out from the pub, you get bitten or scratched by one of them thinking that the attack was by an insane drunk, then go to bed and think nothing more of it. Some might have gone to bed on the Friday or Saturday night unknowing they had it, some probably complained of feeling unwell. Then suddenly, by the early hours of the morning, that person wakes up reanimated and attacks the family, and then you've got a houseful of the things. Poor bastards. I bet some of the victims were probably

sleeping in their beds when they were attacked by their own dad, mum, son... whatever.”

Jack knew the reality, but it was something he didn't want to think about. His thoughts went back to the abandoned car he had found and the bloodied seat. Then he accepted what Gary had just said, and a horrific film began to play in his mind of an infected individual attacking its family. There was no chance a baby could be reanimated in such a situation.

When another human became bitten, they would automatically try and fight off the attacker and run away with an infected bite, unless there was more than one of them. A baby, on the other hand, could not fight off such an attack, and even if there was just one of those things, a defenceless baby would be painfully ripped apart and devoured within minutes.

His eyes filled once the 'film' had stopped playing, and he thought about Thomas. He saw Gary in the corner of his eye looking at him. He wiped his eyes and cleared his throat quietly. A silence threatened to envelope them for the remainder of the short journey, but an upset Jack decided to keep the conversation going. “Do you think we'll get through this, y'know, humans?”

“For sure.” Gary nodded confidently.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Look, Jack, this not one of your dumb movies where everyone is running around the streets screaming for their lives and are out in their hundreds looting shops. We've seen it ourselves; people have barricaded themselves in. Only the desperate, like us, are out in the open. According to what I've heard, these things don't have the intelligence to climb or jump, or pick locks. Sure, because they're desperate, they might eventually be able to get up a flight of stairs after a period of time, but overall, the landscape works in our favour. If you live in the countryside, like us, then there are less of them. If you live in a city, there'd be more of them, but there would also be more of a chance of skyscrapers, high rise apartments—secured places *they* couldn't get to.”

“Unless, people who live in these high rise apartments had been bitten and started attacking people *within* the building.”

Gary ignored Jack's comment and continued to talk. “This virus exploded over the weekend. Imagine if it had snowballed during the week. People in offices attacked, children in schools and nurseries getting ripped to shreds. Most people would be trapped at their work, but thankfully most of them are at home, so there's a positive for you. History has shown that in most awful situations, people don't always act like the panicky idiots you see in the movies.”

“And what if you're wrong?”

Gary shifted in his seat uncomfortably and cleared his throat. He had no immediate answer to Jack's negative, yet realistic question.

Gary beamed restlessly and gazed at his passenger, and said with a cheeky grin, “Then we're all fucked.”

Chapter 47

The morning had been a dull affair for all members, but they were still breathing and had to be grateful for that after what they had all collectively witnessed over the last few days.

It was now late afternoon, and the female Pointers, mother and daughter, walked hand in hand down through to the wooded area. The wind was gentle, like the breath of a baby, and their noses picked up a rich odour of the suffocating greenery. David walked in front, carrying a toilet roll that he had got from the van, and KP grudgingly walked behind, his gun at the ready.

KP was not amused when Pickle announced that he was on babysitting duty for the Pointers, as it was Jamie's turn. Jamie was suffering with diarrhoea and had been absent from the beauty spot for the last thirty minutes. KP's cooking was to blame, which offended the prison cook and replied to Jamie that if he wanted to continue eating out of tins or start making his own dinner, that was fine by him.

Although hoping him a speedy recovery, KP was wondering how much toilet roll was going to be wasted while Jamie spent his time squatting behind a bush. They had agreed to go back to the brook so Davina could splash her face, also, Isobel was fretful that someone would be able to see her as she went for her number two, and wasn't best pleased that KP was in tow with the family.

She kept turning around to stare at the frightening man as they walked through the trees, and he would respond by playfully sticking his tongue out, trying his best to let the young girl know he wasn't a threat.

They all stopped as they reached the brook and KP was wishing they would shake a leg, as his bladder was desperate in need of emptying.

"Mummy," came the sweet voice of her four-year-old daughter. "I can't go if that man watches me."

"He won't watch you, silly," Davina kissed her daughter on the cheek. "He's here to protect us."

"Is that why he has that big gun?"

"That's *exactly* why he has that big gun."

Davina walked over to the brook and began to use the cool water to splash her face and cool her frame down. Isobel walked over to a secluded area and David shielded his daughter from potential prying eyes.

KP wasn't offended by this; if it was his own daughter he would have done exactly the same, and thought that maybe David was doing this to prevent KP from becoming embarrassed, *as well* as his daughter. David had hardly said two words to KP, but the prisoner wasn't bothered by his rudeness. He didn't care for the family, however, he wouldn't like to see any harm come to them either.

KP tried to wait as patiently as he could. He looked over to Davina who was washing her hair in the brook with a bar of soap. It was a completely different scenario to what she was used to. She missed her hot jet shower, her shampoo and conditioner, and hadn't washed her private parts for a while.

KP's legs began shaking impatiently and he tapped his thigh as if he was playing the drums, hoping that the family would get the hint that he was growing impatient and wanted to go as soon as possible. He tapped harder in order to speed up the process, but the family weren't budging, and his bladder was at bursting point.

He overheard Isobel say to her dad, "It's stuck."

“You're probably just constipated, Babs,” her father responded. “You need to drink some more water.”

“I don't like water. It doesn't taste of anything.”

KP sighed so impatiently that David turned his head around and snarled. “She's only four! What's your fucking problem?”

“Daddy!” his daughter scolded, followed by Davina reprimanding him from ten yards away from the brook, and telling the irate father to watch his mouth in front of their little girl.

“Fuck this shit,” KP muttered under his breath. “I haven't broken out of prison to baby-sit you fuckers.”

With his cheeks flushed with rage, KP went behind one of the trees, and placed his Browning on the grass beside his shoes. He released his penis and realised it was semi hard.

He then finally began to pee, and let out a hushed sigh as the urine gushed out. His bladder had been aching, and as the flow was coming to an end, he looked around over his shoulder, lowered his head and sniffed hard. The smell coming from his penis wasn't great, and he definitely needed a shower. The last drops fell from him and he gave it a quick shake, and on doing so, he heard the petrified screams of Davina.

Oh Shit!

He frantically looked around for his gun and picked up the Browning, and ran from behind the tree to see Davina and David wrestling with one of the creatures as Isobel stood yards away, screaming.

KP ran over to Isobel. “Run, run straight through the trees.” He pointed towards the woodland. “Run through the trees and tell the others.”

She shook her head; fear had paralysed her petite body and KP realised he was wasting valuable seconds negotiating with a four-year-old girl.

“Sit there then!” he roared.

The beast look liked it used to be female; it was heavy and looked middle aged. KP told David, who kept on repeatedly punching the thing in the face, to get the fuck out of the way.

David pushed the thing away, as KP ran to the side of the thing and stood five yards away. He then put one slug into the side of its head, spraying the leaves with the awful, black oily liquid. The thing fell to the ground with a thump, and David and Davina looked on in horror as their daughter sat on her own, still squealing.

The daughter shrieked as the horror unfolded, and putting a gory end to the being's miserable life had only intensified the child's shrieks. It was something she had never seen before; it was something that had been shielded from her by her parents. Now the four-year-old had witnessed her first killing, and it scared her. It scared the hell out of her so much, that she had wet herself unashamedly as she continued to scream.

“I'll see to Isobel,” David insisted.

He ran over to his distressed daughter and gave her a cuddle. KP took a few steps forward in Davina's direction as she frantically washed the stubborn stuff off her face. He watched, as she quickly washed her face and exposed arms, by splashing the arms and rubbing the opposite hand up and down. She winced as

her right hand rubbed her forearm, and not knowing she was being watched, she looked under her forearm to see a mark where she, with instinct, had used to try and protect herself.

She had been bitten, and once she realised this, she placed her hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying. She started to look around and KP quickly switched his head the other way, trying to make out that he hadn't seen her injury. KP felt useless, so instead of standing motionless, he decided to grab the legs of the deceased body and dragged it further into the woods away from view of the hysterical four-year-old girl.

David continued to console his daughter and looked over to a clearly shaken Davina who gave her family a huge cuddle.

KP had returned back from disposing of the body, and nodded at Isobel and said to David, "Shut her up! The place'll be swarming if you don't keep her quiet."

"Why don't you take her back to the camp?" Davina insisted to David. "Also, Pickle will be on his way after all that screaming and gunfire, tell him everything's fine."

"What about you?" asked David.

"KP will take me back up. I need to finish off here."

"That piece of shit! He should have been watching us!"

Davina added, "No point going over that now. Take Isobel back to the camp."

"Mummy!" Isobel cried.

With her eyes saturated in tears, she kissed her little girl on the lips. "I love you, my darling, now go with daddy." David gave her a confused look and she gave him a reassuring smile. She said, "Just let me wash my face."

Carrying his distressed daughter, he ran the short journey through the trees and was back at the camp within a minute, where a nervous Pickle and co were ready to go in after hearing the hullabaloo.

Davina walked over to KP and greeted him with a fake, cold smile, as she wiped her wet hands on her shirt to dry them. Her eyes were drenched in sadness, and the left corner of her top lip quivered slightly with despondency.

"What is it?" he queried her.

"You saw it, didn't you?" The smile was a brave one, as he could see the fear in her rainy eyes.

He nodded his head.

She walked in front of him, heading back the same way to the camp, and said in an emotional voice, "If I keep walking, I'll be back at the camp within a minute. I don't want my daughter to see me change into one of those things. Better make it quick."

Without hesitation, KP pointed his gun at the back of her head; she was now yards away and still moving. He squeezed the trigger once, and watched the woman fall to the floor. He kept a hold of the gun and fell to his knees himself.

It had only been a few days, but the new world was getting to him. It took a minute for the hurry of footwear to come bursting through the condensed trees. KP's first shot had alarmed the group initially, but the second forced them all to enter the woods, including David, with the exception of Isobel and Janine.

KP looked up to see David, Pickle and Karen.

David looked to his left to see his dead wife and crouched down and wept hard, the word *no* was constantly spoken with his disbelieving voice; he went to cuddle her and found that the back of her head had been significantly disfigured.

"We thought it was a Snatcher," Karen said, explaining why most of them had turned up.

Pickle and David could see that Davina had been bitten. They both looked at a distraught KP who remained knelt on the grass. David gently placed his wife back onto the grass and ran over to KP, only to be grabbed and held back by Pickle.

David screamed, "You bastard! You didn't even give her a chance!"

"She was bitten." Pickle tried to make the grief-stricken widower see sense. "She would have become one o' them!"

"She'd be okay, if he hadn't have disappeared!" David cried out and broke down, repeating Davina's name over and over. Karen gave him the shoulder to cry on, and was feeling herself being caught up with the negative emotion of this sad episode.

Pickle walked over to an upset KP who was desperately fighting back the tears; he hadn't seen him this way before. "What happened?"

"I was bursting..."

"So yer decided to go for a piss, and leave a family helpless?"

KP never answered; there was nothing that could make him feel any worse than he already did. He wanted the ground to open up and swallow him.

Karen shook her head, and flashed a threatening glare KP's way. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Pickle raised his hand at Karen, telling her not to give KP any more grief. "What's done is done."

David broke away from Karen, remained on his knees and wept like a child. His moans and wails seemed impossible for a man to produce, but he managed to achieve it. After a minute of heartbreak, he eventually struggled to his feet.

"I don't want my little girl seeing this," David said tearfully, and went back over to Davina. "What am I going to tell her?"

"She won't see her," Pickle said with confidence. "I'm gonna bury her myself, when it's time. It'll be shallow, 'cos I have no spade. I'll do the best I can, just like I did with Laz."

David nodded frantically, his face thanking Pickle for his kindness and remained hugging his dead wife, his right hand firmly on the back of her head where the trauma was situated.

Pickle grabbed David, and whispered in his ear, "Yer daughter needs yer."

David wailed, "I can't leave her like this."

"Yeah, yer can," Pickle responded coldly. "She doesn't need yer anymore, yer daughter *does*."

David looked up at Pickle, in two minds whether to hit him or not, but Pickle's eyes were comforting and he could feel David's hurt.

Pickle placed his hand on the back of Davina's head and sighed, "I'll take good care o' her."

Chapter 48

“It's time.”

Jack was pleased that he was alive, but the monotony of waiting around, having no television or any other technology to appease his mind, was mentally torturing him. He knew he was better off than most people, but couldn't help feeling selfish about the situation. All he wanted to know was if Thomas was safe.

If Thomas had been taken to some secluded castle in the country, surrounded by armed guards, he would never have left Glasgow and would have stayed barricaded in his own house like everyone else, but as a father, he felt it was his duty to protect his son.

Gary, on the other hand, was used to the monotony, and the waiting around was normal for him, being an ex-inmate. He never felt it necessary to tell Jack about his former life—although he had found out once he started talking to Pickle at Stile Cop. Why would he? He had no interest in what *Jack* used to do for a living. It didn't matter now. Jobs didn't matter anymore, just like politics and the economy.

Peoples' goals had changed; now it was all about survival. Gary and Jack were now survivors in a new, and more dangerous world, not just because of what the virus had done to turn these creatures against man, but the fact that the dark side of man was still due to appear.

Jack sat nonchalantly in the seat, unable to get up, and thought about what the world was going to be like from now on. Humans would now isolate themselves from one another, drenched in paranoia, simply because as the weeks went by and the fuel, food and water dried up, they would turn on each other in order to survive.

Jack could already see images of people being beaten to death for their car. These types of scenarios seemed ridiculous, but Jack was sure it would eventually be a reality as lives would be lost over a gallon of water, or food, or anything else for that matter.

If a man had something that could keep someone alive for just one day, he could be killed for it. That's why the farmers had boarded their places up and put a warning outside. He was sure that they *would* shoot trespassers if ever someone trespassed or tried to steal a chicken—or something else that was deemed edible. Family came first, and that was all the owners of the farms were doing. They were looking after their own.

In a time of disaster, would humanity pull together? Bullshit!

It was every man for himself.

It wasn't just the infected that would be a threat to the family, but humans as well. These families who were barricaded in their own homes weren't going to stay there forever, especially once the food began to run short. That was when the worst of it would happen. People spilling out onto the streets amongst the infected, and willing to do almost anything in order to feed their families, was what was about to occur.

They needed gas, and the two men walked out into the street, and this time they both carried a knife each. Gary insisted that Jack shouldn't take the bike again because it was too dangerous; he agreed wholeheartedly.

Gary took out an empty watering can and placed it in the boot of the car and was going to fill it full of fuel once he got to a petrol station. The nearest petrol station was a mile or so away in Rugeley—the one that was being guarded a few hours earlier, and they promised themselves that this was the last time they were going to venture in the town, whatever the outcome, because of the risks.

The Porsche was three quarters full, but topping it up was probably a wise move before desperate motorists drained all the pumps. Satisfied the street was clear, he went back into the house and took a drink of water.

It was time to make their second short trip to Rugeley—and hopefully their last, and they were hoping that the streets were just as quiet as they were before. Jack could see that Gary was acting cool but his tension was for all to see.

The two men entered Slitting Mill where it was populated with the creatures, and again, the car drove around them with Jack in the passenger seat, closing his eyes until the danger had passed.

They saw up ahead that the same garage was now vacant and they both looked at one another and smiled, although there was a little paranoia that the pumps may be empty. Thankfully they weren't, and the Porsche and the watering can were filled to the brim. Jack assumed that once people began to leave their houses due to lack of resources, *that* was when the fuel would be drained—if electricity was still functioning—as people would have to travel to get to areas where food used to be sold. For now, the roads were still quiet, but he was sure that that would change in the next few weeks once desperation kicked in.

Jack popped into the ransacked kiosk and grabbed himself two bottles of cherry coke, three packets of cigarettes and stuffed two lighters in his pocket as well. He handed the bottle to Gary, who took it with him into the car.

Now they had topped up their vehicle with gas, the next plan was to go back home, sit tight, and hope that Jemma would contact them somehow. There was nothing more they could do, apart from check on the two village halls on the way back, as they were running out of ideas as well as time.

Gary accelerated in the direction of Slitting Mill once more. As they approached the area some two minutes later, the Porsche slowed right down and Jack could see why.

There was at least seventy beings spread out along the main road, and there may have been more. The two men's presence was noticed immediately, and their approach towards Jack and Gary sent a shiver, as some of them were quite quick, almost at jogging speed.

Jack sighed. *This is definitely the last time we're going into Rugeley.*

It seemed to Jack that sooner would be better to get in contact with his son rather than later, because day by day, the population of these things appeared to be multiplying, as some of the roads weren't so desolate anymore.

The car ventured a different way and went up Sandy Lane where some roamed along the path. As they rode by the Pear Tree Estate, they got to the edge of Draycott Park where the new houses were built. The scene was horrendous; Jack

opened his eyes, and both he and Gary looked at one another and shook their heads.

There were hundreds of them, and like before, they had found a release of energy as the two men gazed in horror. They looked like they had come from all walks of life; there were men, women, and children amongst the moving dead, and some seemed in better shape than others as far as the skin was concerned.

Jack noticed a handful of the beings' skin was peeling off their faces and had to look away from the repugnant image. The crowd of beings marched excitedly towards the two men, and Gary looked at Jack. "We're practically surrounded. They must have come from other towns. I'm gonna ram the fuckers. It's the only way to get through."

He slipped the sports car into first and hit the gas pedal; the wheels screeched painfully along the road, producing smoke, and the car did its job by furiously striking a bulk of the crowd. Jack's heart was in his mouth, and watched the windscreen crack as well as being decorated with blood and decay. His nerves were shot to pieces, and the relief was immense once they went by the danger zone.

Once they finally managed to drive through Draycott Park and pass the 'Welcome to Rugeley' sign—as they were now technically a hundred yards in the country and out of the town, Gary pulled the car over and saw the smoke spewing out of the engine.

Jack stepped out of the passenger side and was aware that the things were gaining on them in their hundreds, and the mixture of groans from the beings was growing louder as they approached nearer. The damage the car had taken, after hitting so many bodies, was for all to see. Gary didn't need to be a qualified mechanic to tell him that the car was beyond repair.

"Not now!" Gary exclaimed, and hit the bonnet with his fist.

He grabbed the duster from the glove compartment and leaped out of the car and didn't need to pop open the bonnet, he knew what the problem was.

Jack grabbed his sleeve and said with dark derision, "A bit late to be cleaning the car now, don't you think? Let's go."

Gary shrugged him off and demanded. "Give me one of your lighters."

"What?"

"Stop messing about. Just do it. If we run, they'll just keep on chasing us and chasing us until we collapse. Maybe this'll block them off. Don't get me wrong, I'm as fit as they come, but they'll just keep following us."

"Fire won't kill them. Anyway, you'll just entice more of them."

"More of them?" Gary nodded over to where they were. They were already in their hundreds.

Jack reluctantly handed him one of the lighters, and Gary went to the boot and took out the heavy watering can full of gas and emptied it all over the road and underneath the car. He waited for them to gain a few more yards and then lit the duster.

He threw the burning material on the floor where he began pouring, and ran as fast as he could, with Jack following suit. The entire road, as well as the car, lit up like a napalm strike and the two men had misjudged the intense heat that came from the fire, and Jack especially, was mortified to be taken off his feet with such

force. He thought he was going to break every bone in his body once he hit the road.

With just grazes to their hinge joints, they brushed themselves down, and took a few steps backwards as the fire increased. They decided to jog gently up Stile Cop Road.

It appeared that the knives that they were both carrying were still there, and as they approached the beginning of the main road to their left, they saw six of the figures stumble through the fire like drunken stuntmen, as if it wasn't there. It hadn't worked as well as Gary wanted, as the beings continued to move through the fire.

This loathsome scene the men were witnessing increased their nervous energy, and their jog turned into a sprint as they began to run up Stile Cop Road. As soon as Gary approached the Stile Cop cemetery, he had to stop as he felt his left hamstring twinge with pain. They had only run three hundred yards, but he felt his leg smarting. He looked up to the sky and welcomed the rain that began to lash down on his overheated skin.

"Oh, shit on a stick." Jack had managed to say those words through whatever breath he had left. He nodded towards the edge of the woods that began at the end of the cemetery.

One by one, three hideous beings stumbled clumsily from out of the woods onto the road. All creatures were male, and both men pulled out their six-inch knives automatically on seeing the heinous beasts.

Gary shook with fright, and knew that outrunning these creatures with a tweaked hamstring was going to be difficult. Jack looked over to him, with false bravado etched on his face. "Don't worry, I've done this before. It's a piece of cake. Well, actually it's not..."

"What do I do?" Gary panicked.

"Aim for the head. Just don't get any blood in your eyes."

Both men began attacking all three of the creatures and Gary was apprehensive that he was outnumbered, and two of them lumbered towards *his* direction. He released cries of panic as he stabbed the first one that approached him and he couldn't understand how his knife was penetrating the face, but nothing was happening.

He briefly looked over to Jack whose blade was rammed deep into the top of the head of his attacker. Gary slashed at the attackers' arms that were desperately trying to grab him. His slashing technique had removed some of the fingers of the unbothered creatures, but then Gary grabbed the knife with both hands, closed his eyes and used a sledgehammer technique to bring the knife down into the skull of his first attacker.

A splat of dark blood spat out from the wound as soon it was penetrated, but he had no time to gather his breath or pull out the knife as the embedded weapon fell with the creature. Then a cold pair of hands grabbed his face.

Despite being an ex-inmate, Gary wasn't used to this kind of confrontation and violence, and could feel his bowels loosening as they both fell and now the second creature was on top of him. The stench from its body was forcing him to retch, and whilst doing this, he was trying to fight off the surprisingly strong, cold creature that groaned in his face at the same time.

He didn't know what to do, and remembered a technique he had seen in a horror movie once, and stuck one of his thumbs into the cold left eye socket of the creature. He retched once more and screwed his face with repulsion, as he began to implement this desperate technique he stole from Bruce Campbell. He tried to force the thumb in as far as he could. He could feel the acid in the back of his throat whilst he was performing this macabre action, and dark gunk poured over his hand and out onto his T-shirt as his thumb went further in and began to damage the brain.

He pulled out his thumb and forced it back in once more, and it seemed to be taking effect as the thing writhed around, out of control. His other thumb went into the other eye socket, and now both eyes pissed out the oily, smelly liquid. The inside of the sockets were freezing, as if he had shoved his thumb in a pile of mince that had just defrosted. He moved the thumbs around from side to side furiously and was aware that what he was doing was so vigorous, that he was in danger of breaking his thumbs.

The creature eventually stopped writhing, and Gary pulled out his thumbs that was covered in black gunk and wiped it on his trousers. Jack had come over and grabbed the thing off of Gary, and dragged it off his new friend and placed it to the side of the road. He grabbed the other two bodies as Gary tried to get his breath back, and again, dragged them to the side of the road. He could see another body further up the road, that was also at the side, and knew this was the kindest thing to do rather than just leaving them, as humans would eventually need the road to use in a matter of days or weeks once they began leaving their homes.

Gary shook his head at Jack, checked himself for scratches and then snarled with little breath. "A piece of cake? I had two of the fuckers!"

Jack giggled nervously. "Well, you did try and kill one of them with your thumbs." Jack helped his colleague up and looked at his T-shirt. It looked like he had had an accident with an oil canister, and Jack then turned to the bodies that were so violently dealt with. "Good work, my friend."

"We're not finished yet."

Jack Slade frowned and moved his head to one side. "What are you talking about?"

Gary pointed.

Jack put his hands on his hips and sighed. "That's not good."

The two men tried to capture their breath, and saw the horrific scene of the horde heading their way from Draycott Park and onto the main road that *they* were on.

Most of the creatures were burning, some smouldering, others had managed to walk through the fireball hardly untouched and turned left onto Stile Cop Road. Both men knew that the fire wasn't going to last forever, and even if the burning ones and their brains were eventually devoured by the fire, there would be more from behind that would be less damaged as the fire died down.

Gary instructed, "We'll go the farmers field way. It will be safer, less chance of being ambushed, and be more awkward for those dozy bastards to walk across."

Gary and Jack went under the barbed wire fence and began to jog along the field. Jack looked to the small army, gathering at the bottom of the road, and could see some of the things were following them onto the field after falling

through the fence, but the barbed wire fence was troublesome for most of the creatures. He thought that most of the things would probably suffer trying to follow them on such uneven ground, let alone trying to get past the barbed wire.

As soon as they managed five hundred yards across the field, Gary was still ahead of Jack, despite his injury, and Jack turned around. The field was filling up, but he could also see in the distance that many were heading *up* Stile Cop Road, rather than following them.

Shit. Jack thought about the camp that was set up on the beauty spot. *I hope they'll be okay.*

If only ten or twenty made their way up Stile Cop Road, Jack still thought that the camp might be in trouble. He looked at the dying fireball from a distance, and couldn't help thinking that the explosion could attract many of them from afar. Like flies round shit, they could turn up in their thousands.

Although it was an act of desperation, Jack felt that Gary's act could be detrimental for the people up at Stile Cop, but from a positive slant it would also clear some of the town, which would benefit the residents and give them space to leave their infested town, especially for the people who had barricaded themselves in their houses in Draycott Park.

He sped up to get to Gary, burdened with guilt.

Chapter 49

Isobel hadn't stopped screaming since the attack of her mother, and David was ordered by Pickle to get back into the Renault Clio as, although he was sympathetic to his loss, the screaming of the young girl was making the camp vulnerable for potential further attacks if they could be heard from afar.

It did worry the camp that if there was one of them, there could be more. The group were hoping that it was an isolated incident and the being that turned up was a stray, but they couldn't be sure.

Janine went over to the car and her eyes filled as she saw the two distressed souls hugging one another as if their lives depended on it. David was naturally hysterical, but his attempt of calmness for the sake of his little girl was not happening, as he wasn't just mourning for his wife, but he suffered for his daughter as well who was hysterical from seeing the being appearing and then being executed.

She didn't even know that she had just lost her mother.

David clung onto his baby girl and was convinced that this was just the beginning, and his daughter would receive many mental scars once the month of June had come to a close, if they made it that far.

This was no life for a little girl—for anyone, for that matter.

Isobel kept on asking for her mummy, and David told her again and again that she was coming soon.

Janine opened the door and wept. "David, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"Shut the door," he screamed, and leaned forward and said in a threatening whisper. "I haven't told her yet."

She did as she was told; she carefully shut the door and wandered towards Jamie's direction and stood helplessly in the middle of the beauty spot like everyone else. KP's head was lowered with mortification. He knew he was partly to blame for the tragedy that had occurred, and wanted to just walk away from the group. It was something he was deliberating. KP was sure that if David was carrying one of Pickle's Brownings, he would have been dead right now.

Jamie and Janine were comforting one another and both glared at KP; he wanted to respond to their uncomfortable staring, but considering the circumstances, he felt that he had to take whatever was dished out to him from the group. Pickle walked over to KP, almost feeling sorry for the man, and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," KP spoke at last, biting his bottom lip, feeling the hairs of his beard tickling his top lip. "It was a stupid thing to do."

"It's no' as if yer did this on purpose," Pickle whispered, out of earshot from the rest of the group. "Besides, these people might have been dead already if they hadn't found us. Yer sure there was only one o' those things?"

KP nodded.

"I had to kill Laz, and you've had to kill the woman. We have to do what we have to do to protect the camp. It's hard, but a necessity."

"What's left of it. We're diminishing by the hour."

Pickle looked around and noticed the camp was engulfed in shock, and their eyes were focused elsewhere. He gave KP a quick hug, and patted him on the back. "We'll get through this."

KP wasn't sure about this, but decided not to question Pickle's confidence. He walked over to the Clio and ignored Pickle's protests. He exhaled out hard and opened the car door, making Isobel scream even more as the opening of the door gave her a fright. She was now face to face with the man who executed the thing so violently in front of her eyes.

"What the hell do you want?" David demanded. "Leave us alone."

"I'm sorry," KP announced. "For what it's worth, she wanted me to do it."

"Close the fucking door!" David placed his hands over Isobel's ears. "She doesn't know."

KP normally didn't allow to be spoken to like that, hence one of the reasons why he was serving a sentence, but his sympathy for the family was so overpowering, that even the hard-faced criminal was becoming frustrated with himself as he felt the water beginning to fill the bottom of the his sockets. He shut the door and walked away.

Janine walked over to KP, her face teary and filled with angst. "What were you thinking?"

"I had no choice. She was gonna turn, eventually."

"I don't mean killing her, I mean, not paying attention. You're the one with the gun, and now a family has been torn apart."

KP responded coldly, "There're many families out there that have been torn apart, quite literally."

Janine slapped him hard across the face. He took it, but the anger in his face was for all to see. Jamie was about to walk over to drag Janine away, but Karen beat him to it.

Janine walked away from KP and had left Karen alone with him; they both stood out of earshot from the group.

“For what it's worth,” Karen spoke with a hushed tone. “I know you're hurting, but what you did afterwards was correct. You can't go back now; what's happened has happened. Deal with it.”

His eyebrows were raised after Karen's short talk, and looked at the twenty-three-year-old as she walked away, still wearing her light blue NHS nurse uniformed trousers, and he went over to the Clio to comfort the family.

Fifteen minutes had passed, and Pickle and Jamie had come out of the wooded area after digging Davina's grave. Pickle went to the back of the van and washed his grubby hands, then whistled over to KP and gestured with his hand to follow him into the woods. Jamie sat down next to Janine, feeling exhausted. Pickle was holding a sheet he had got from the back of the van, and KP followed him in. Minutes later they were both standing over Davina's body.

They carefully turned her over onto her back and placed a sheet on the floor next to the body. They then picked up Davina's body, KP had the legs, and Pickle took the arms and placed her on the sheet. They wrapped her in the sheet that they took from the van, and placed her in the shallow grave that Pickle and Jamie had dug earlier. They used their boots to put the piled soil over the body, and after another five minutes of patting the earth to make it look smooth, Pickle began making a crucifix, made of two branches that were tied together with some string that KP had found in the glove compartment of the van.

Satisfied that that was the best they could do, Pickle turned to KP and told him to go and get David. It seemed incredibly harsh to bury a man's wife who had only been dead for a matter of minutes, but Pickle didn't have anywhere to preserve the body and didn't want to leave it in the woods for hours for all kinds of creatures to have a nibble at. It was more respectful this way, and David had reluctantly agreed on this.

Laz's body had been buried near the edge of the beauty spot, but David insisted that he wanted her buried where she died and away from his daughter's eyes, which was a little dangerous, considering it was one of those things that emerged from the woods that killed her.

Once the burial had taken place, the ceremony itself was going to be attended by Pickle and David only, although Pickle tried to persuade David for Isobel to be told and to also attend the ceremony to say goodbye to her mother. His advice fell on deaf ears.

“I think it's better if yer stay away,” Pickle said to KP; his voice was calm and never wanted his friend to be offended by what he had just told him.

“You think?” KP said with sarcasm. “Considering it was my fault that she got bitten, and it was me that put a bullet in her head. You may be correct.”

Pickle never responded to his sarcasm and felt sorry for KP; he was going to wait until the night drew in before he would have a talk with him and give him some kind words of comfort.

Pickle stuck the handmade crucifix at the beginning of the grave and gave it a twist to ensure it went in further. There was nothing around that could decorate it; there was no rocks, pebbles... nothing. It was as basic as it could get, and he

hoped that David understood that despite the basic-looking burial, he had put a lot more effort into this than he did with Laz's burial.

Laz didn't even have a service; it was more like a 'so long buddy' and then he and KP walked away from the grave and that was it finished with.

David appeared through the trees, his eyes still raw from the emotion that forced his eyes to leak profusely.

Pickle asked, "No Isobel with yer?"

David shook his head, sadly. "She's with the girls. She doesn't know what's going on. She thinks her mummy's hurt and gone to hospital."

"She thinks? Or is that what yer told her?"

David ignored Pickle's question, and felt that considering it was one of *his* men that was responsible for his wife's death, he had no say in what he told his daughter.

David needed to protect Isobel as much as he could, and if that meant lying to her about her mother's death, then so be it. She was distraught enough as it was, and she screamed for her daddy when he walked away from her, leaving Janine to comfort her. Janine had to hold the little girl back when David walked away into the woods to meet Pickle for the private burial.

David could only imagine how much more trauma and confusion it would cause if he sat his daughter down and told her that she would never see her mummy again. So he opted not to tell her the truth for now.

Pickle whispered, "Sorry, it had to be done so quickly."

David nodded and accepted Pickle's apology.

"If any animals from the woods comes near and they... eat... her... oh fuck."

"It's okay." David placed his hands on Pickle's shoulder. "I know what you mean. She needs to be rid of as soon as possible."

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that." Pickle was astonished at David's comment, but was certain it was just the shock talking.

"It's okay, let's get this over with."

Pickle's chest caved inwards and he pushed out a sigh. "I spent years reading the Bible in the prison, so I can say a few words if yer want me to."

David confessed tearfully, "Davina and I never believed in that kinda stuff... but that would be good."

Pickle cleared his throat and paused for a second, he didn't know where to start. For a moment he nearly blurted out the words, *Dearly beloved*, which would have been totally inconsiderate, although there was a miniscule chance it could have lightened the mood.

Pickle bowed his head in an attempt to start again and then raised his head and began to speak. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

Pickle paused and looked at the distraught David, his heart went out to him, and instead of getting stronger, Pickle was feeling that this new world was weakening him. *For Christ's sake, I used to torture people for fun, and now my heart is breaking for a man I hardly know.*

He thought of a short poem he had written for his father's funeral and incorporated it into the private service he was presenting.

"God took you in his loving arms. He saw you needed rest. His garden must be beautiful. For he only takes the best."

Pickle's eyes watched the broken man as the tears ran off his face like a dripping tap, and remembered a passage from his prison days.

He continued, "There is but one freedom, to put oneself right with death. After that, everything is possible. I cannot force you to believe in God. Believing in God amounts to coming to terms with death. When you have accepted death; the problem of God will be solved, and not the reverse. God bless you, Davina. You don't have to worry, as your daughter will be in safe hands. David will look after her, *we* will look after her."

"We're not staying here," David pointed out.

Not wanting to create animosity between the pair of them, Pickle chose to ignore David's confession for fear of creating an argument at the burial of his wife. He tried desperately hard to think of other passages that he thought would be fitting for the situation they were in, but David's comment had thrown Pickle, and now he couldn't think straight.

"I don't know what else to say," Pickle commented, and shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

David admitted, "I still remember the Lord's Prayer from school."

Pickle nodded. "Then we'll finish off with that." He cleared his throat. "Our Father..."

Chapter 50

An hour had passed, and the car of the Clio's engine was switched on, which alerted everyone's attention. The vehicle began to slowly move and was adjacent to the prison van that was blocking the entrance. David rolled the window down and Pickle stuck his head in the window and saw a distraught Isobel leaning forward in the back of the car, clutching onto her daddy's sleeve.

"Where the hell are yer going?" Pickle questioned.

"We're leaving. It's too dangerous here. I told you I wasn't staying."

"Yer leaving *now*? But we have food, we have guns."

"That's right, you have guns. One of them has killed my wife."

David realised what he had just said and turned around to see the reaction on his daughter's face, but was oblivious about what the conversation was about, and was still unaware that her mum was no longer alive.

"But she was already bitten."

"And whose fault was that? Who was supposed to be watching out for her?"

Pickle's face was stony; he released a breath out, and pushed his lips out making a circular motion, like a smoker trying to make smoke rings. "Where yer gonna go?"

“Anywhere, but here. What happens if a swarm of those things come up during the night? Me and Isobel would be in danger with just this car as protection. You lot have the comfort of sleeping in a secured van.”

Pickle thinned his lips and could understand David's predicament. “I can swap and make room for you two. The farting and the snoring would probably drive yer mad though.”

“Move the van, or I'll roll this thing down the hill instead. Don't think I won't do it!”

There was a look of defeat etched on Pickle's face and he nodded. “Fine, I'll move it maself.”

Karen and Janine walked over to David as he waited as patiently as he could for Pickle to move the van, which he had just got into. His eagerness was for all to see, as his hand shook as they rested on the steering wheel. If he could release a scream of frustration, anger and mourning, he would do, but his little girl was with him and he needed to stay calm for *her*, although deep down he was hurting inside and the pains in his chest occurred every time he took a deep breath in.

“Are you sure you won't change your mind?” Janine quizzed hopelessly. “At least take some food with you.”

A fuming David never even acknowledged her and continued to stare straight ahead. He wanted to see the back of the camp, and felt they were better off away from these cursed people and away from the exposure of the outdoors.

“Goodbye, Isobel,” Janine said with an emotional flutter in her voice. “I'll see you soon.”

The four-year-old stared at Janine and managed a thin, but brave smile. Neither one of them had the time to get to know one another, but on looks alone, Karen and Janine could see that she was such a sweet thing, and if the opportunity had ever arose, if they ever had brought a daughter into the old world, they would be more than satisfied if she had turned out like little Isobel.

“Don't worry about us,” David added with gritted teeth. “At least we'll be safe where we're going.”

The prison van began to reverse back and David turned to his daughter and asked her to sit back into her seat, as it would be safer for her.

She agreed without a fight, and he got out of the family car quickly, strapped her in and kissed her on the forehead for being a good girl and for doing what she was told.

He wasted no time in driving through the only way in and out, and left the Stile Cop beauty spot quickly. He checked his rearview mirror and saw Janine and Karen waving sadly behind them. Isobel was looking out behind her, waving back, confused about what was going on and where she was going.

“Where's Mummy? Where are we going, daddy?” she sobbed.

“Somewhere safe, Babs,” he replied with a frog in his throat, and put his window back up. “Somewhere where nobody can hurt us. Mummy's meeting us there.”

As he left the area, he saw a fire in the rear view mirror, it was so far away he couldn't make out what it was, but it wasn't of any concern of his and decided to hit the accelerator.

The drive continued through the country roads, through Upper Longdon, and they entered the main road that led to the town of Lichfield. David had no clue where to go, and the last thing his daughter needed was to see more of those things that would no doubt be in the heavily populated town of Lichfield.

He veered left, down a country road he had never been to before. He didn't even know the name of the place, but it looked like one of those places that probably had a population of about a couple of hundred, had one pub and one shop. It was farmland, and the two main farms had a 'trespassers will be shot' sign on the front gate, which reminded him of the episode in Colton.

Fearing his determination to find a safe bed for the night would indeed get him shot and leave his daughter an orphan, he continued down the bendy roads, and he could see that the weather was now beginning to turn for the worse. The heavens began to open and he put the wipers on to medium speed to ensure his view wasn't restricted and that *he* wasn't distracted as well.

He was leaving, what looked like, the last house of the small village and saw five of the creatures stumbling around the road.

"Don't look, Babs," he ordered.

He turned around and saw that his instruction was fruitless, as she had slipped away into unconsciousness. Probably the stress of witnessing the execution, as well as the bumpy car ride had made her fall asleep. David was thankful, and floored the gas pedal, hitting two of the things, one going under the car.

David prayed that the car wasn't too damaged, especially as far as the electrics were concerned. He continued through the country road and took a gander to the right, where something caught his eye. At least nine of them were in a crowd, on their knees, in a field feasting on, what looked like, a cow. He shook his head, still unable to come to terms what had been happening over the last few days.

The car left the area and went round a sharp bend, which revealed a long road. He stopped the car suddenly, and gulped hard. There was dozens of them walking in the same direction, towards the village, towards the car. He saw that the nearest being was at least three hundred yards away, but nevertheless, it was an awesome and frightening sight to see, as the small army of the creatures lumbered towards his direction. His body was overwhelmed with so much apprehension that he had temporarily forgot how to put the car into reverse. He crunched the gears on a couple of occasions before finally getting the gear he wanted, and went back the way he had come from.

He had no idea what to do. Back to Stile Cop? Back to Rugeley?

It was only a few days into this pandemic, and he was already sick of running.

The Renault Clio passed two more isolated houses; both had garages that were wide open, as if the owners had got into their cars and fled the place in a rush. David decided to stop. He took one look back at his daughter and stepped out into the pouring rain.

He ran over to the main window of the two houses, but there was nothing inside. He banged on both front doors for a minute, his clothes getting soaked in the process. He decided to give up, realising the situation was hopeless. He ran over to the garages and decided that the first abandoned garage was the one he was going to drive into.

Again, he slipped the car into reverse, and this time managed to find the gear first time, and slowly reversed into the garage. He got out of the car and shut the garage door, and stuck the light on. He got back into the car, knowing that those things were probably five minutes or so from entering the village.

He looked over his left shoulder to see his baby girl, still dressed in her black leggings and her Barbie T-shirt, her arms wrapped around her body, giving herself comfort, with her usual sleeping face and her ruby lips pouting perfectly.

She looked angelic, and David broke down. His head fell on the top of the rim of the steering wheel and liquid from almost every orifice fell out from his face, his shoulders shrugged up and down as the crying began to become uncontrollable.

As his eyes remained closed, he could see Davina as she was when she was in her twenties. Her hair was brown, down to her back, and her figure was slightly more slender, unspoilt by childbirth, and it was just how he remembered her during their courting days. Those were the days they would just look at one another and rip each other's clothes off, those were the days he used to sometimes stroke her to sleep and be thankful for such a wonderful woman.

He loved her that much it scared him. It scared him what he would do if ever she left him for somebody else; it scared him to think that she could be taken away from him, by a road accident or some debilitating disease.

They used to discuss this subject when they were in bed together, along with other topics, and David had told Davina that selfishly he wanted to be the one to go first, as she was mentally stronger than him as he just wouldn't cope.

He was right; he wasn't coping now, and she hadn't even been gone for a couple of hours.

He remained sat in his seat and took another look at his beautiful daughter who was sound asleep.

With the garage door tightly shut, he put down the windows of the car and placed his head back on the steering wheel and sniffed hard to prevent his runny nose from starting again.

He hit the gas pedal furiously for a few seconds.

He apologised to his wife, and thrashed the gas pedal once more.

He then apologised to Isobel, before stamping on the accelerator another time.

He finally apologised to God, someone or something he claimed not to believe in, and he once more applied pressure on the gas.

His head remained sitting on the steering wheel, as the carbon monoxide snaked its way into the car, already beginning to poison their bodies. He coughed gently as the poison danced its way into the airwaves of both father and daughter. He managed to find one last ounce of energy to apply pressure on the pedal for one final time and kept his foot there.

He did so until he coughed once more; his foot slipped off the gas pedal and he and his daughter left the new cruel world, peacefully.

Chapter 51

Jamie Thomson had spent his guard-time making himself useful. He was carrying a little weight despite his decent size, and knew that this new world of running and lack of food was going to make the thirty-nine-year-old, very fit and very lean.

Taking advice from Pickle and watching him train when it was his turn to guard, Jamie had performed six sets of pull-ups using the strong branch of the tree that hung above his head, followed by push ups.

Pickle swore blind to Jamie that it was the pull-ups that gave him his muscular back and informed Jamie that to increase proper size, squats or deadlifts was the answer, but at the moment they would have to make do with what they had. It was the first lot of exercises he had done for years, and knew that his muscles were going to suffer from it in the morning.

He looked over to the camp where KP was starting another small fire, and Pickle threw a metal tray over it and placed eight potatoes on top. It looked like after the barbecue, the group were beginning to ration the food and make dinnertime more basic. He couldn't grumble. He had had good food the night before, despite his minor bowel altercation afterwards, and had a fair amount of alcohol and food before that at the Wolseley Arms pub. It was inevitable the food was going to get more basic; at least they *had* food.

The gun that he had was only going to be used in case of an extreme emergency. Even if one of them appeared from out of nowhere, he would rather resort to clubbing its brains in, rather than wasting a single bullet. Pickle had pre-warned them to do their best to refrain from using their guns in case the noise attracted the things from afar; the two gunshots from KP in the woods, from earlier, had seemed to have passed without any kind of danger so far.

He saw a bored Janine saunter over; her fingers brushed back her now greasy blonde hair. He greeted the twenty-seven-year-old with a warm, welcoming smile.

"It's not your turn yet, is it?"

"Nah." She stretched out her arms and yawned loudly and unabashed. "Just killing time. I see you've been working out."

Jamie shrugged, and released an embarrassed grin. "Preparing myself for the outside world. We can't stay here forever. And these woods don't seem to be safe either, despite the hill."

Janine said, "Pickle said that thing was just a stray."

Jamie guffawed falsely, "And he knows that because he's checked the whole of the woods?"

Janine paused with her stretching, and lowered her arms and turned to Jamie and narrowed her eyes inquisitively. "You said we can't stay here forever. Why not?"

Jamie twitched his shoulders; he wasn't expecting Janine to question him. "Well, once that supermarket has been cleared out, where are we gonna get food from?"

Janine playfully twisted her hair like a child and shrugged. "There's another one three miles up the road, outside the village."

"Exactly, *three* miles up the road. So we'll be using fuel as well. It's all gotta run out one day."

The mood was sombre, and Janine never thought for a second that Jamie was feeling sorry for himself, although he looked genuinely down. Janine was certain that he was trying to look to the future with realism rather than false hope.

She tried to lighten the mood and stroked his arm. "We've got guns now," she joked. "We could take a farm, kill the family and have their livestock."

Jamie grinned, and mockingly wagged his finger at her naughty remark. "That is so wrong, on so many levels."

Janine and Jamie remained in a silent state for a long twenty seconds. Their eyes both wandered over towards the fresh fire that sat burning in the middle of the sandy region.

Janine spoke once more. "Has it ever crossed your mind that one morning Pickle and KP will just up sticks and leave us in the lurch and take the van?"

Jamie shook his head and pouted his bottom lip. "No. Why would they do that?"

"In case we start running out of food, and they decide they'd be better off being just the two of them, and then suddenly shoot off with *our* van."

"But then, why would he give us a gun each?"

Janine was lost in thought and produced a menacing grin, Jamie could see her little mind was doing overtime. "What if *we* ran off together and leave Pickle, KP and that new girl? It's practically an armoured van, and it's full of food."

Jamie placed his hand on his forehead, and couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You're a naughty girl."

"I've been naughtier," she playfully giggled and quickly raised her eyebrows.

Was she joking?

"You know at first, I never fancied you at all," she confessed.

"Really?"

"I thought you were a meathead. Now, I think you're a sexy meathead."

She turned around and walked away. He playfully smacked Janine's bum as she walked off, and she left his presence, giggling to herself as she walked back to the camp and tried her hardest to make a depressed KP smile.

It had taken nearly two hours for Jack Slade and Gary Jenson to reach the house, and it had been quiet, apart from seeing a group of about fifteen of the creatures from a distance at the edge of the village. They got to the top of the road, where the pub sat to the right and the primary school was on the opposite side of the road, and they could see that the danger was small.

They had slowly walked the last mile, as neither one had any energy left. What had got them through the first mile was the last bit of adrenaline that pumped through them after the attack. A mile later, the adrenaline was beginning to wane and their legs were becoming heavy and Gary could feel his hamstring pull again.

The darkness was creeping up on them, and they passed the primary school railings and marched down the road, drenched in sweat and rain. Gary looked to the skies and noticed it turning into a darker shade of blue between the dark abusive clouds; the day was coming to a close once again.

They were so confident that the danger was limited where they now were, they strolled down the long road towards the house, as if they were just two regular guys walking back from the pub without a care in the world.

They finally got back into the street and could see that there wasn't a soul around. The street was also in complete darkness, apart from the streetlights. They got to the house to find that the BMW bike had been stolen whilst they were away. Unbothered by this, they went inside and Gary checked if the house still had electricity.

For now, it did.

They locked the doors and began moving furniture against it. They placed the cupboard back at the bottom of the stairs.

Something had caught Gary's left eye. It was a tiny flashing green dot, and as his head swivelled around towards the answer machine, it flashed to say that there was one message on it.

Gary gestured to Jack to stand next to him before he pressed the button. Jack gently patted a nervous Gary on the back and told him to go ahead. He exhaled out and his index finger pushed the silver button on the machine.

Machine: *"You have one message. Message received today at four-thirty-six-pm."*

It was followed by a long and exaggerated beep.

It was Jemma's voice. *"Hello, this is Jemma Marlow,"* at this point, Gary broke down and shouted 'yes.' *"If you're listening to this, then you're in my house. There are twelve of us. We are all well, considering, and we still have a small amount of food left from what we took from our homes. The names of the people I am with are Jason Barton, Kevin Houston, Oliver Newton, Karen and Sean West, Yoler Parkinson, Ian Jenson, Paul Parker, Lee Hayward, myself, Jemma Marlow, Clare and Kerry Evans and Thomas Slade. If anyone is related to these people, please ring or come to us at the Longdon Community Hall, just outside of Hazelslade, near Cannock. I'm calling from the hall's landline as our cell phones have either gone flat or the signal is impossible. The number is 555 63524."*

Gary looked to his side and saw Jack with his head in his hands; he was crying. Gary sat slowly and placed his arm comfortingly around his older compatriot.

"Thomas is with Jemma. They're alive," Gary whispered.

Jack nodded and lifted his head up to reveal his stained cheeks and his bloodshot eyes. He struggled to find words at first and stammered. "I c-can't b-b-believe it. If I never had met you..." Jack pulled himself together. "Where is the place?"

Gary grinned. "About a mile up the road. It's in the middle of nowhere and quite secure."

"What are we waiting for?" Jack stood quickly to his feet.

Gary raised his hand. "We're not going anywhere tonight! I need to ice this leg; I'm knackered, and we now have no transport and it'll be getting dark soon."

"I can't stand here knowing my son is up the road."

"Well, you're gonna have to. We're knackered. Let's get a decent night's sleep, and I'll steal a car in the morning and we'll make our way up. I'll give them a ring right now."

Gary shook as he picked up the phone and felt similar to the first ever time he spoke to Jemma.

Jack watched him intently as he slowly dialled the landline number that Jemma had given out on the message. As soon as he pushed the last number, he stood up straight and blew out an overwrought breath that would have been strong enough

to blow out sixty candles on a sixtieth birthday cake. Jack was unsure whether to call them at all in case the phone alerted outside predators, but Jemma had given out the number, so he assumed that it must be reasonably safe where they were.

"Hello," Gary greeted. Jack could see from Gary's glassy eyes that it was Jemma that had picked up the phone.

The conversation was teary and short. Gary explained very briefly that he had escaped from prison and he also informed Jemma that he was heading their way first thing in the morning.

"One more thing," Gary said to his girlfriend, as the short conversation was coming to a close. "You have a little boy called Thomas Slade there, put him on. I have his daddy standing next to me, believe it or not."

Gary passed the phone over to Jack, and Jack held the clammy handle of the phone. "Hello."

There was a pause on the other end, and Jack waited another few seconds and opened his mouth to say hello once more, when he was cut short by a voice he so desperately wanted to hear.

"Daddy?"

"Hi, son," Jack sniffled, and was finding it desperately difficult to restrict his emotions. "How are ya?"

"Okay, I suppose. Mum's been crying a lot. She keeps on saying she has something in her eye."

"What are you doing?"

The question wasn't needed, but it was hard to engage in a conversation with a six-year-old-boy, Jack just wanted to hear his voice, he didn't care, as the last time he heard his voice he seemed scared and mentioned the 'monsters' trying to get in. This time he seemed a lot more relaxed and his voice demonstrated to Jack that his boy was in a safe place.

"Not a lot. My mum says I'm on holiday, but they won't let me outside, and there's no swimming pool."

Jack chuckled and shook his head at his innocence. That's what he loved about kids. They saw the good in most people and were completely unaware of what a shitty world they actually lived in, and this was before the infection had taken place.

"I love you, son."

Thomas had no time to respond as the voice on the other end had been replaced with Kerry's.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?" There was genuine concern in Kerry's voice for her ex-lover, and Jack was touched by this.

"I needed to see him, Kez. I went to your house, but it was empty. I thought about checking your mother's. I met a guy called Gary, he's Jemma's boyfriend."

"As long as you're okay. Jemma told me that you and this Gary are coming up tomorrow morning?"

"That's right."

"Just be careful."

"Careful? I managed to travel from Glasgow without any hitches, didn't I?" He lied, trying not to worry the mother of his child. "We'll be up first thing, as soon as we get a car."

“I'll see you then. Stay safe.”

Jack hung up and didn't have time to emotionally collapse, as they were both immediately distracted by the sudden screaming in the distance that was coming from outside. He and Gary looked at one another and ran upstairs, heading for the bedroom window that would give a better view of what was occurring.

They both peered out and saw a father and young son running out of the house, whilst being slowly chased by a group of seven creatures along the main road that was clear only minutes ago. The boy looked no older than ten, and Gary and Jack felt for the poor soul who was probably wondering, like everyone else, what was going on?

He and his father disappeared up the road as they went by the last streetlight and then were swallowed up by the darkness that had quickly arrived. *I wonder where the mother is?* Gary thought.

Jack moved away from the window and sat on the bed. He rubbed his tired eyes and reminisced over the last four days of his life so far. It had been a surreal weekend, even by Jack Slade's standards.

He had never drunk so much in one weekend; then suddenly the epidemic materialised, or was it a pandemic? He wasn't entirely sure.

The lack of technology left people in the dark whether this was a European or global problem. He had also been attacked numerous times by beings trying to eat him; he had killed, and had been the proud owner of a BMW motorbike. And he was now finally going to be reunited with his son.

Any other man would have had a breakdown by now, he thought.

“Looks like there's a few hanging around, now it's getting dark.” Gary spoke, still staring out of the window.

“We better start barricading a little bit better downstairs.”

Gary agreed with Jack's comment and spotted a silver Mazda that sat lazily on a drive, opposite the house. “I think I've just spotted our wheels for tomorrow.”

Chapter 52

June 13th

The hours went by like days, as the monotony crept upon the camp in the mid-afternoon, and as the hours passed, like a leech, it sucked all the enthusiasm out of them and refused to go away.

It was now a new day, not quite dawn, and the dark blue sky stretched over the area with a fat grinning moon hanging above the camp. The wind was relentless and the noise coming through the trees was eerie.

It was Jamie's turn again on watch-duty, and he was beginning to feel his eyes shut, then his body would jump in fright and he would be awake once more. Again, it reminded him of the visits section.

When he first started the prison, he was in visits permanently and had to stand in one spot for most of the twelve-hour shift, and keep his eye on any prisoners passing drugs or any other contraband. Some of the things he witnessed in there

was a real eye-opener, watching desperate people resort to desperate things, just to get drugs onto the wings.

Babies were used to pass drugs, as wives and girlfriends would put their hand in the baby's nappy and pull out a wrap of narcotics, place it in their mouth and pass the substance to the partner by kissing them, moving it from mouth to mouth and allowing the inmate to swallow the substance.

On other occasions, women wearing short skirts, would put their hands in their panties and pull out a small bag of drugs and again, place it in their mouth and pass the drug. Even grown men had done this, brothers and fathers kissing their own flesh and blood just to pass drugs.

The unfortunate and frustrating thing was that once the drug was passed and swallowed, there was nothing the prison could do about it, even if it had been seen. It had to be grabbed before the passing would take place.

Jamie looked around the creepy area, and thought where he was *now* was much worse than in the prison. At least back in his old job he wasn't in danger of being *eaten* by the prisoners.

He looked at his wristwatch and it told him that there was another hour to go before Pickle's turn. He looked to his left and now that the Pointers had gone, the camp seemed empty. The Renault Clio was no longer there, and all he could see was the silhouette of the bulky van sitting by the entrance where his four friends slept inside. He thought about Davina; he felt sad for the woman.

He peeped to his right to stare into the woods, but all he could see was blackness. It was an eerie sight to behold and he couldn't wait for the sun to arrive.

The sky was cloudless, making the area not as dusky as it could have been, but it was still a frightening place to stand alone. Jamie had never shot the pistol since the supermarket incident, and still wasn't confident he could take out one of those things on his own if he really had to.

He remembered how he shook when he fired it for the first time, and how his confidence grew as they eventually fell, but that was in a group situation. He was now on his own and knew the camp would be in better hands with someone like Pickle standing guard, who was used to shooting people, as it was part of his old job description.

He could feel his eyes going again, but this time a shot of adrenaline helped to spring him back into life. A snap of a branch appeared to the side of him that he could just about hear through the sound of the wind whistling in his ears.

God, what was that smell? He wondered.

He stared into the blackness and could see spots appearing before his eyes. His gaze continued as he began to attempt some breathing exercises in order to lower his irregular heart rate.

He was surprised how he was feeling. On the prison wings he was fearless, feared and respected by most of the inmates. That was in a controlled situation; he was now in an alien situation where relentless creatures were out there, and were programmed never to stop unless they received irreparable damage to their brain.

He was holding the weapon that could do exactly *that* irreparable damage, but his confidence was lacking. Another rustle was heard; this time it happened in

front of him, and this had caused another surge of adrenaline to sprint through his arteries.

Whatever it was, he could hear it getting nearer and then he heard an animal-like squeal, which caused chest pains on both sides of the ex-prison officer. He clutched the left side of his chest where his heart was situated and was bent over.

Every time he breathed in, the pain intensified and he winced whenever the cramp increased. He decided to hold his breath and was on his knees now, still staring in the direction of the noise, and whatever it was, it was getting nearer. He tried to breathe in gently, and this time the pain wasn't as intense, so he got off his knees and staggered to his feet once more.

Shall I warn the group?

Whatever had caused the tension that had temporarily crippled Jamie Thomson, it had finally darted out of the woods at such a speed that Jamie let out a frightened yell. His eyes quickly followed the anxious animal that had ran out of the wooded area; it looked like an adult deer, and although the pain had returned and he had gone back to his kneeling position, he managed to raise a smile. He was glad that he hadn't called for back-up, as he thought he would have looked like a coward. He was pleased to be in a group situation and wanted to play an integral part in it.

The back door of the van opened and out came Janine. "You okay?" There was concern in her voice for him, as all she could see was the silhouette of Jamie on his knees.

"It's okay, I'm fine." He raised his arm high, knowing that from that distance, she would find it hard to see him properly. "It was a deer! It gave me a bit of a scare."

A bit of a scare? You nearly shat yourself, Jamie boy!

Jamie could then hear the voice of KP coming from within the van. "For fuck's sake, shut the door. It's freezin' in here." She did as she was told.

Jamie was sure that KP's telling off was exaggerated and uncalled for.

Jamie thought that the night, despite the shower earlier, was actually quite humid, and he had spent the night himself without asking to borrow a coat or an extra piece of clothing. He had his suspicions that KP was being tortured with the guilt of what happened to Davina, which also drove the remaining Pointers away. Jamie thought that if all of that guilt was feasting away on *his* mind, he wouldn't be able to sleep for days.

The wind continue to blow, and whistled into Jamie's ears and teased him to the point that its teasing was getting beyond annoying, and this was the downfall to being at the highest point of the area. His nose twitched as the awful smell grew stronger and assaulted Jamie's snout; it was so bad now that it was making him feel sick.

Suddenly, he released a frightened gasp as a pair of icy hands grabbed the back of his neck, and he could feel his frame being dragged by a strong presence to the floor. Jamie tried to turn around and he could smell and hear the groaning of one of the creatures, as it was centimetres away from his face.

It was a surreal few seconds, but the surreal moment had evaporated once he felt the first bite into his shoulder. The pain brought him back to an unwanted reality. He released a composed shriek as the wound began to smart almost

immediately. He, at last, managed to fight the strong ambusher off, and he ran a few yards before collapsing to the sandy floor, dropping his gun.

The pain in his shoulder was of something he had never experienced in all his days. He remained sitting on the floor, his hand hopelessly covering his wound. The thing was ten yards away from him and staggered towards him with little effort to speed up, almost as if it knew its prey was defunct anyway.

Jamie was finding it increasingly difficult to control his breathing, and his eyes widened to the shape of golf balls as he saw silhouettes of more of them slowly scrambling out of the woods. At first he thought that his tired eyes and the dark was playing tricks on him, and when he stared into the woods, he thought that the trees were slowly dancing and moving towards him.

It had now turned out that there was an army of the things, and it looked like to his eyes that the woods had come alive. He had no time to count them, but he estimated that there were at least thirty of them, and God knows how many were following behind, making their way up. Jamie could feel the scream of fear lodged in his throat, but found it impossible to release it.

Why now did they choose to come through in their hundreds? What attracted them? Jamie wondered. Was it KP's shooting from earlier? Did one hear the sound and make its way up, while dozens followed? Or was it Isobel's screaming? Was it something else that had attracted their attention to walk up Stile Cop?

The original being that had attacked him, shambled forwards towards him and it almost looked like that this creature, who in human form looked like a male in its twenties, was responsible for leading the rest into the woods and further up.

Jamie placed his hand on the floor to lift himself back up and felt the stinging pain shoot through his arm. He managed to let out a scream of fright, and this caused the remaining four individuals in the van to jump out of the back.

"Jamie!" Janine screamed. "Oh God, Jamie!"

She ran towards him, forcing Pickle to run after her. She felt two strong hands grab each of her shoulders, which pressed down and stopped her in her tracks; she then twisted herself around to face Pickle.

"Get off me," she yelled, and slapped him across the face. "I can't leave him there."

Unruffled by Janine's slap, Pickle pleaded, "If yer have to go, then take this. Don't shoot until I say!"

He handed Janine her Browning, and he raised his shotgun. KP came out running behind and could see the small army appearing in numbers out from the trees. A sound coming from behind him forced his head to turn around, as he heard the van being pounded by a hundred fists.

"They're everywhere!" KP exclaimed. "They're not just in the woods. They're at the entrance, banging on the side of the van trying to find a way in. Quick, let's all get back in the van, Jamie's fucked."

"I'm not leaving him!" Janine screamed.

"We're gonna have to leave." Karen was the last to emerge from the van, holding a handgun, and without hesitating, she ran up to Jamie's attacker and from ten yards away she squeezed the trigger once. This had been the first time she had fired the pistol and she had not an ounce of hesitation in her. Jamie's attacker fell to the floor.

“For Christ’s sake!” Pickle yelled over the dozens of moans from the dead, and glared at Karen with demonic eyes. “Why don't yer set off a flare and let them all know where we are?”

“Too late for that,” Karen sniped back, and nodded to the woods, to see dozens upon dozens still spilling out of the darkness and onto the sandy area.

Janine ran over to Jamie to pick him up, not caring that a swarm of them were literally yards away from her. It was a struggle, and as she managed to eventually get him up, she used her left hand to throw her own Browning to the feet of Karen and she shouted, “Cover me!”

Karen and KP released slugs from their pistols and saw heads exploding, before hitting the floor with a deathly thump. Pickle's shotgun was causing the most damage; sometimes two went down as the cartridge hit them, producing a domino effect of exploding heads occurring in a straight pattern.

Karen had used up her magazine, and instead of reloading, she put the empty gun into her trouser side pocket, and began using Janine's. Two more shots were fired from the gun, and two more heads at close range burst open, spilling black gunk onto the floor as they continued to fall, but they were all aware that there were too many of them.

Karen saw the bodies circling them, and stated the obvious. “We've gotta go! Now!” She then looked over to see that it was impossible to get to the van with the amount of bodies on the beauty spot.

Janine let out a shriek as three of them grabbed her.

She was pulled to the floor, but she held onto Jamie. She had already been bitten in her left tricep and now she felt the side of her stomach being bitten into several times, as they crowded around the two officers, circling them. The creatures were not just standing and crouching over her and Jamie, some were lying on their chests and crawling through the crowd to get a better chance of getting at the two delicious humans.

Janine looked over to Jamie and he stared into nothingness through shock and had stopped fighting them off. Cold sets of fingers dug into his mouth and ripped his face off in front of her eyes. He didn't scream once.

She felt another bite into her shoulder and her screams of pain and for help were pointless, as one of the things lying on top of her legs opened its decayed mouth and took a huge chunk through her trousers, inbetween her legs.

Karen, KP and Pickle pointed their guns from ten yards away, over in Janine and Jamie's direction. For fear of shooting them by accident, neither one squeezed their trigger. They never attempted to help Janine, as they saw her being bitten and all three knew that with one bite, she was good as dead.

Instead, the remainder of the group responded by only firing at those who gained on *them*. They all walked backwards, away from the two officers and were now being circled by at least twenty of the dead. They continued to carefully aim in order not to waste a single bullet and fired.

The attack of the two officers was a huge distraction as most of the things were attracted to the free lunch, and this gave the remainder of the group valuable seconds of survival. The creatures wasted no time in devouring and ripping off the bloody limbs of the pair of the officers and because the dead had circled around

them, the officers now couldn't be seen, but the horrific screams from Janine were unmistakable.

KP looked at Karen; the panic scrawled on his face was self-evident. They watched in horror as severed arms and the entrails of both of their short-lived friends, were being devoured by the cannibals, as gaps in the crowd began to appear now, as some of the things began to stand up from the massacre and faced the three survivors, knowing there was other warm flesh on offer.

Karen looked behind her and pointed towards the van, there was many of them on the beauty spot now, and this made getting to the doors of the van a pointless and suicidal exercise.

“Shit!” KP screamed; he had never been so frightened in all his life. “What the fuck are we gonna do now?” He looked behind him, down the steep hill that led to acres of bracken. “Let's just run for it!”

“We can't leave the van,” Pickle yelled, “We won't last five minutes out there on foot, in the darkness.”

“I'll create a diversion,” Karen shouted over the moans and groans off the hundred or so things that were almost encircling them.

The three survivors were all now standing on the edge of the beauty spot, behind them was the steep hill covered in healthy bracken—their only way of escape. They could have easily outrun the things, but they didn't want to leave the van, as well as the supplies inside, behind.

Karen began re-loading the other gun. “You and KP go a few yards down the hill, then run across so you're near the van. Once you can see it's clear, get in. I'll go further back to create a diversion. That should get some of them away from the van. Once they get near me, I'm gonna run down the hill and head for the crossroads to the right while you two are getting the thing moving; most of the dopey cocksuckers will just fall anyway trying to chase me. Get the van and meet me at the crossroads at the other end of Stile Cop Road.”

KP and Pickle nodded in agreement to her plan, as it wasn't as if they had time to deliberate on it. Karen sidestepped ten yards to the left, away from the two men who had now disappeared from view as they ran down the hill. Karen saw that some of them were not falling for this trick, as some went over the direction where KP and Pickle had disappeared from, so she began to shout and holler in a desperate attempt to attract their attention.

Once it began to work, she raised both of the loaded Brownings. Her inexperienced hands shook with fear as they got nearer, and with guns cocked, she began squeezing the triggers. Only one bullet was wasted, as she allowed them to get near her before giving them a bullet each to end their miserable lives.

As they gained nearer, she backed a little and moved back from the grotesque-looking things. All around her they dropped to the floor as the bullets made their violent impact. Some of them were getting so close, and her T-shirt was being soaked as if someone with a wet paintbrush was flicking her with every shot that was taken.

She kept her eyes at a squint, paranoid the blood could get in there, and she could now feel her heels on the edge of the area and she looked over where the van was. The doors to the van looked reasonably clear, making it possible for the two inmates to reappear further along the beauty spot, get in the van and escape

without being attacked themselves. It was too dark to see, but Karen thought that they should be near the van by now.

She knew if she stayed a few seconds longer she was going to be snatched and would end up with the same fate as Janine and Jamie. She squeezed the trigger for one last time, and her last victim was so close that the gun was shoved in its mouth when she pulled it. She turned away from the risky shooting so the spray didn't hit her face.

That was the messiest of the lot, and as she turned around to run down the steep hill, she could feel dozens of dead hands desperately grabbing and snatching at her clothes and her hair as she turned to face the hill. The momentum of her fall allowed their grip to be futile, although she lost a handful of hairs from the grabbing. She began to pick up speed down the steep decline; she could feel her legs were not going quick enough for how quick the body wanted her to go, and she fell over to the floor and grazed her palms on the hard dirt, thankfully not losing the pistols that still remained tightly gripped by her hands.

She stood up immediately and looked up at the edge of the beauty spot from the bottom of the hill, and saw the silhouette of body after body clumsily falling over the edge and tumbling after and towards her down the steep hill.

Noticing that the ones that fell first were now staggering to their feet twenty yards away from her presence as the decline was beginning to subside, she picked up the pace once more and was coming to the end of the hill and was now running on a flat surface.

She could just about see the crossroads ahead in the darkness, and wondered where the van was. She turned around and looked up to see the beauty spot from an angle she had never seen before; it looked almost like a mountain.

Again, she wondered where the van was; it was taking its time but when she looked up, she saw the headlights come on. It was finally beginning to move from the Stile Cop area.

They had made it! They were inside! The plan had worked!

Because of the amount of bodies that it was being surrounded by after seeing the inmates climb in, the vehicle was struggling to move as it shunted back and forwards in order to get out onto the main road. Karen needed to get to the crossroads quick, as she was certain that the things that came from the woods, and the things that had made their way up the Stile Cop Road that were initially banging on the van, would more-than-likely follow the van to the crossroads, albeit slowly.

She needed to turn up early. If she turned up late, there would be too many of them, and Pickle and KP could decide that it would be too dangerous to hang around for her.

She ran hard, as the van at last was moving slowly, and made it to the crossroads. Her body was drenched in light from the moving van's headlights in the distance, which made her feel vulnerable as it highlighted her presence.

The vehicle finally began to pick up pace as it progressed on the main road towards her, while it crushed and ran over body after body. As the van got nearer, her frame became even more lit up as the headlights got closer. She could see in the murky distance, the creatures from the beauty spot area beginning to spill out of the entrance, onto the main road and hurriedly heading to the van.

This didn't unnerve Karen as, van or no van, the things were a fair distance away, and could be outrun. What did bother her was that she couldn't see what was to her right or behind her. She was standing on a crossroads, in the middle of the country where there was no streetlights, and all that surrounded her was woods, darkness, and the headlights of the prison van. The main thing that worried her was that she might be vulnerable from the right as when she fled down the hill, many of them followed her. Sure, they fell down clumsily, but they still eventually got to their feet and were probably stumbling towards her as she stood anxiously waiting, but she couldn't see the things. Not yet.

The van stopped at the crossroads, only yards from Karen who was in front, and KP stuck his head out of the window and fired a shot near the young woman. She quickly turned around as she heard a thump behind her, and because of the light from the van's headlights she saw one of them a metre away from her, lying face down with the contents of its head oozing out from where the bullet penetrated it. It was ten yards behind her. KP had spotted it and had saved her life. Great shot!

Pickle stuck his head out of the driver's side window and calmly said to Karen. "Err, anytime this week, if that's all right with yer, Missy."

He pointed behind her. She turned around to see three beings walking down the adjacent road and could now hear the shuffling of many feet coming from her right—most probably the things that pursued her as she descended down the hill.

She pulled out the two Brownings; cocked both of them, and focused on the three behind her and began to release some of the contents of the magazines. She fired eleven bullets and all three of them eventually fell, as the headshots were eventually successful.

"Come on, Lara Croft!" Pickle instructed sharply, with a tinge of sarcasm, but mainly anger. "Yer wasting bullets *and* time!"

"Move your fuckin' butt, or we're going!" KP urged. "There're hundreds behind us, about thirty seconds away."

She stuck the guns into her belt and ran to the already-opened passenger side of the van and went to jump in. Suddenly, from out of the darkness, she felt a pair of cold hands grab her arms, making it impossible to draw her guns, and she let out a frightened shriek.

She stared into the black lifeless eyes of the bloated female being, and saw that there were many not far behind her from the right road. She struggled to reach for her guns that were stuck in her belt, and KP decided to save her life for a second time and pointed his gun and squeezed the trigger, but his magazine was empty.

Karen managed to release one of her arms and threw her elbow forwards into the face of the beast and was told by Pickle to 'get the fuck out of the way.'

She ducked and lay on the road, while simultaneously KP hit the floor by the passenger seat, which was followed by Pickle releasing another cartridge from his Browning shotgun from the driver's seat. The head of Karen's attacker exploded, decorating some of the passenger door, that was opened, with dark blood and brain matter. KP got back up off the van's floor, his ears smarting, and Karen didn't need a second invitation. She jumped inside, closed the passenger door and wound the passenger window fully up.

“Don't ever fuckin' do that again. That was a waste o' a cartridge,” Pickle pointed out, and then changed the tone in his voice immediately to a more softer manner. “Are yer okay? Yer bitten?”

Karen shook her head.

“Yer sure yer never shot a gun before?” Pickle looked at Karen with sceptical eyes.

“Of course,” she sniffed.

“Yer didn't even hesitate,” Pickle said. “I'll give yer credit for that, although yer nearly wasted a full magazine on three o' them.”

“It's not as if I'm shooting actual people, is it?” Karen shrugged, although underneath she was a nervous wreck, and KP could see through her fake bravado. After all, she was still a nurse.

Their temporary break had allowed a lot of the beings to catch up to the van and Pickle slipped the van into first, ready to get the van moving again, and could feel the van rocking from side to side. He thrashed the gas. *Jesus, there must be at least a hundred of the things around us from all angles.*

It took a while, but the van eventually got moving, crushing anything that dared to go in front. The van jumbled around as ten bodies felt the weight of the van. Some of the things had limbs crushed and didn't show any signs of pain on their emotionless face. Two bodies were almost halved in two as the wheels went over their torso, their rotten guts spewing out onto the tarmac, and another two heads popped like champagne bottles, smearing the tarmac with the contents of what used to be inside their diseased craniums.

Once ahead seemed clear, the van began to pick up momentum. Pickle checked the offside mirror and saw the army of the dead, slowly but surely, disappearing as the van progressed straight ahead at the crossroads.

“Do me a favour?” KP asked Karen, who was staring out of the window as the last remaining beings of the crowd slammed their hands against the side of the van.

“What is it?”

“Pass me a bullet,” KP ordered with a sad smile.

“What for?” Karen and Pickle both asked collectively.

The van was now progressing nicely along the long country road, heading towards Upper Longdon; the beings had disappeared from view.

“For me.” KP pulled his sleeve back and revealed a small bite mark. It was small, but it was a bite all the same. “One of them got me up there, as we were trying to get in the van.”

Pickle began to shed tears and repeated the word *no* constantly when he saw the wound. His reaction touched, yet, confused Karen.

Karen knew that KP was infected and never hesitated as she emptied the magazine from one of her guns and passed KP the one solitary bullet he asked for.

“Stop the van,” KP demanded, loading the bullet.

“No chance,” came Pickle's reply, wiping his blurry eyes with his forearm, staining his combat shirt that he had taken from the supermarket.

“Come on, don't be a hypocrite. You had to kill Laz. I shot Davina. Now it's my turn.” KP put the barrel of the Browning to his left temple. “If you don't stop, I'll do

it right here. I don't know how long I've got before I turn into one of them. Could be hours, could be less.”

Karen put her magazine back into the pistol and turned to Pickle. “Just stop the van.”

The van came to an abrupt halt, and Pickle slammed his forehead on the steering wheel and began to sob gently.

KP touched Karen's face affectionately and opened the door, slammed it shut and went around to the driver. KP opened the driver's side of the door, and stared at Pickle, who refused to look at the man. KP could feel himself getting emotional and fed off Pickle's distress. He touched Pickle's face tenderly, leaned over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Goodbye, Harry Branston.” KP managed a thin smile. “I love you.”

Pickle's head remained on the steering wheel and found it too hard to look at KP, let alone, say goodbye.

KP shut the door firmly and walked away onto the main road that was surrounded by, what seemed like, an everlasting forest. KP disappeared into the darkness and was never to be seen again.

Pickle raised his head off the steering wheel and looked in his wing mirror, and even though his lover was maybe only yards away, only darkness could be seen.

He composed himself and slowly drove away, and tried to keep his emotions intact with little success. It was clear to Karen that she was now sitting next to a broken man. He continued to drive slowly, as the tears were making his vision impaired. Karen sat silently and looked at the distressed Pickle; her feelings were becoming fragile also, as she felt for her driver.

She realised that she had forgotten to thank KP for saving her life; she looked in her side mirror in hope that he was still there, but he had gone. Pickle revved the van hard and had kept it in an unnecessary lower gear. She was about to advise him to change gear and then suddenly stopped herself, as she had an idea why he was doing it.

The loud revving continued as the van loudly growled through the snaky roads. The audible revving of the engine did make them more vulnerable as far as attracting the dead were concerned, but it was also loud enough to drown out a gunshot. KP's eventual gunshot.

Pickle turned the van at a sharp right bend, and finally slipped it into a higher gear it craved.

Karen took a look in the glove compartment and took out some hankies. She began to use them to wipe away some of the debris on the passenger side door where Pickle had shot one of them, but she was running out of hankies to remove the stubborn liquid. She wound down the window and threw the used tissues out, pulled the window back up and gawped at the distraught driver once more.

“About KP,” she began. “I'm sorry. I didn't know that you two...”

Suddenly a figure could be seen up ahead. Pickle increased the pressure on the gas pedal, as he was unsure if it was a ghoul or not. As he passed the figure to his left, nearest to Karen in the passenger seat, it looked to be a young man and he began to frantically wave. Karen's eyes followed the man and could see, thanks to the headlights, in dark blue letters on his white T-shirt: *Slightly Damaged Human*.

“He was human,” she announced, as the van went by him.

Pickle remained transfixed, looking through the windscreen and shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, well. Good luck to him."

He never stopped for the frightened individual; he had no intention of stopping, but Karen refrained from trying to persuade him. Pickle was hurting, and a confrontation about picking somebody up they didn't even know was something Karen decided to avoid. She didn't want to start a fight with a man that had just lost his lover.

She then thought about Jamie and Janine. Her throat began to swell.

Chapter 53

Jack's eyes remained staring at the ceiling, a mental exercise he had been performing for the last hour. He looked at the digital alarm clock. It was Wednesday, 5:23am.

He wondered if Gary in the other room had slept. The main reason for Jack's mild insomnia was excitement, because he was hours away from seeing his son. He roughly estimated that he was lucky to have got three hours, which even then, had three intermissions.

The first intermission was getting up at 1am for a pee, the other two interruptions that woke him were due to noises coming from outside. A faint scream from a woman was heard that either sounded that it was from a distance, or it occurred within a building. Nevertheless, it was enough to wake Jack and spring him out of bed to rush towards the bedroom window.

He was situated in the back bedroom, whereas Gary was in the front bedroom that overlooked the main road the house was on. All Jack could see was acres of back gardens, belonging to the residents of the street. It was frustrating that he couldn't see anything, and for all he knew, Gary could be fast asleep whilst there were hundreds of the dead piling onto the main road. Jack was hoping that this wasn't the case, as the more populated the area, the less chance and hope they had to leave the house to get to the Longdon Village Hall.

Jack decided enough was enough and got off the bed where he remained fully-clothed. He put his shoes on, that sat at the end of the bed where he had kicked them off, and gave off a sigh of frustration. He was hoping for two things: he was hoping that Gary was already awake, and that the street wasn't littered with those critters.

He crept towards the bedroom door and entered the landing area. He went into the bathroom and emptied his bladder. He could have been quieter but was sort of hoping that his movement would stir Gary. Jack couldn't delay any further; he wanted to see his son.

"Jack." Gary's voice came from the front bedroom. "Come in here."

Jack smiled and left the bathroom without flushing the toilet.

Without washing his hands, he entered the front bedroom to see a fully-dressed Gary Jenson with the palms of his hands flat on the windowsill, standing and gaping outside.

Jack walked over to the window and stood next to his new buddy. *Shit!*

Jack couldn't believe what he was seeing. "How many, do ya think?"

Gary shrugged his shoulders. "A hundred, maybe two."

Both men looked out and saw hordes of the dead rambling around the street, sometimes clumsily, walking into streetlights that were still working, and sometimes walking into one another. Jack and Gary knew from first-hand experience that this dopey look they had shouldn't be seen as a weakness, for as soon as they saw what *they* deemed as food, their eagerness and quickness was surprising, yet frightening at the same time.

"We're never gonna get out of here," Jack said; his voice was downbeat and drenched in negativity.

"We should be okay. I think the brighter the day is, the less they are in numbers. According to the announcement, they're not big fans of the light, so let's pray for the sun, or we might be in for a struggle later today."

"Look at the fuckers!" Jack snarled with hatred. "It's as if they know there're people here. So where do you think they go during the day?"

Gary shook his head. "Dunno, a place where there's a better chance of food. Maybe a place where there's shelter from sunshine."

"The woods?"

"Yep, maybe. And what are we surrounded by?"

Jack half-laughed and shook his head in defeat. "The woods."

"So just because we can't see many of them during the day, doesn't mean we're not surrounded. I think staying on the roads is the safest all round option. Don't get me wrong; what I heard on the radio was probably bullshit, guesswork. You know what these so-called experts are like. They don't have the words *I don't know* in their vocabulary. They would rather make up some shit rather than admit that they don't know, or that they were wrong.

"But what I *did* notice is that now two nights in a row, they seem to appear from nowhere, and when the day turns, a large percentage of them, not all of them, seem to disappear somewhere else."

Jack continued to gawp at the scene that was making the hairs on his arms stand tall. "Well, if your theories are correct, the winter is gonna be a fucking massacre. You know what Britain's like in the height of winter. Sometimes it gets dark at 4pm and can stay like that for about fourteen hours."

"We'll give it another hour or so, then I'll jump over and steal that silver Mazda over there."

Jack raised his hand and began waving. Gary wondered what he was doing; he looked across the street and saw a young girl, about eight, looking out of her bedroom window, clutching onto her teddy for comfort.

The girl waved back, and an arm grabbed her by the shoulder and gently pulled her away from the window by her father. He looked across to Gary and Jack, and gave them a polite wave, they both waved back, and the father—they assumed—closed the curtains.

"When's this all gonna end?" Jack sighed and sounded like a beaten man.

Gary snickered falsely and said, "This is just the beginning. We're only into the early hours of day...five? Six? Just look in that short space of time how many people we know have been taken from us. This is a holiday compared to what is waiting for us later on. This is only gonna get worse, and there'll be more of them,

you mark my words. And as the weeks go by, and as they grow in numbers, food and water will disappear. God help us all then.”

Jack knew what Gary was saying was correct; his comment wasn't appreciated, but surprising, considering Gary was the confident one a day ago, talking about humans surviving this disaster. Maybe he was changing his mind.

Jack was hoping for some kind of positivity from his new friend, some hope. Jack felt that, although tired and down beaten, he felt he should be the one to raise spirits and say something upbeat. He knew that if all hope was lost, there'd be no point in carrying on.

Jack added, “I'm sure there'll be many survivors when this blows over. Let's hope *we* become some of the lucky ones.”

“The lucky ones.” Gary tittered mockingly, not meaning to antagonise Jack, but did all the same.

“Did I say something funny?” Jack sniped with gritted teeth.

“My friend,” Gary patted Jack on the back, “the lucky ones are already dead.”

They had stopped for a few hours to rest, but sleep was impossible whilst they were still near the woods. The van purred along the roads that were now beginning to be easier to see since the sky had turned up its brightness, and the van eventually came to a halt. Pickle pulled up the parking brake and sat silently, staring along the country road. They hadn't passed a single house or farm for the last mile and he needed to stop to clear his eyes.

“What's wrong?” Karen had to ask. She knew there were many things that were wrong, but something new was irritating him.

“Many things,” Pickle replied in a whisper.

“Okay, what's wrong right now?”

Pickle released a depressing sigh. “I don't even know where to go.”

“Just go somewhere quiet and try and get some sleep,” Karen suggested. “We have plenty of food to last us for a few days at least, and the van is still practically full of fuel.”

Pickle sat in a sad state; his perky character had been sapped over the days, and Karen had noticed that the man she had met in the woods was different to the one that now sat next to her. There was only so many kicks in the stomach one man could take, and she feared that he was losing the will to live.

“Is this the way it's gonna be from now on? Struggling to survive?”

“Yep,” Karen snapped coldly.

Pickle looked at Karen and wondered what the twenty-three-year-old nurse used to be like. Did she used to be funny? Go out drinking at the weekends with her friends? Was she romantic? Did she used to cry at the sad classics? Did she ever want a family? Whatever she used to be, Pickle was sure that the person sitting next to him was a lot different to the one that was working in a hospital and looking after patients a week ago.

“Do yer ever think about him?” Pickle licked his dry bottom lip, awaiting Karen's answer.

“If you're referring to my boyfriend, Gary, then, yes, of course. But he's dead, probably like most of my family and friends as well. I try not to think about it.”

"It's just..." Pickle paused and didn't want to offend or start a petty argument with Karen. "You seem a bit... like a cold fish."

Karen's facial expressions told Pickle that she was agreeing with him. "I'm not a heartless bitch. I can tell you now, I did nothing but cry for the first night. It's not going to bring him back, neither is self-pity. You need to man-up and stop feeling sorry for yourself."

Pickle's face was like thunder; he was torn in three whether to shoot her, verbally abuse her, or ignore the rash comment that she had just made.

"Okay, maybe that was a little harsh." She smiled apologetically. "You lost your partner only hours ago, and I'm saying stuff like that. I'm sorry."

Pickle was amazed by the power of the apology.

Seconds earlier he wanted to harm her, and now those two words seemed to quash his temper very rapidly. He liked her again, but was still baffled, yet, encouraged by her mental toughness and determination to continue living. He thought that she was still hurting and was putting up a front. He felt that she was a little reckless, and back at the crossroads she seemed too trigger-happy, as if she was enjoying the situation, which he thought might be a concern in the future.

It had been a mad few days, and even his most bloody of weekends as a drug dealer had nothing on this. He threw his mind back to the Wolseley Arms and the night he, KP, Janine, Jamie, Laz and Grass had. It was probably the best night he had had in years; and then his mind wandered to the dark side of the last few days: Grass' horrific death, having to shoot Laz, losing Davina. Then there were the two officers, responsible for his freedom, dying, and of course, KP.

He wiped a solitary tear that threatened to fall from his left eye and thought about David and Isobel. He hoped that they had found somewhere safe to stay.

He started the van up and slipped the gear stick into first.

"You made a decision?" Karen asked the question, whilst checking the remaining magazines she had.

Pickle looked at the two guns that Karen was holding, and although they were two Brownings down, after Jamie's attack and KP walking off with the other to end his own life, he realised that he was still better off than most and made a promise that from now on, self-pity was banned from his list of emotions. Karen's fighting attitude had to be the correct one in order to survive in this world, and at the moment, she was putting him to shame.

Pickle told Karen that there was a multi-storey car park a mile up the road by the village of Hazelslade, near the town of Cannock. They were going to drive to the place, providing it was safe, stay there for a few more hours to sleep, and then think about what they were going to do next with fresh heads, rather than with the tired ones they had at the moment.

It took nearly ten minutes to get there, and the van parked up at the top of the desolate car park on the fourth floor. Pickle blew out a long, drawn out breath and put his arms behind his back to stretch.

He pushed out his chest so hard he felt he could crack his sternum. He opened the driver's side of the door and got out. Karen followed suit.

They both stretched their legs and wandered over to the edge of the floor. They both leaned with their stomachs against the wall, overlooking the villages and

towns. The view was perfect and daylight was beginning to creep up to start another day, and knowing the events that were occurring below them was the only thing putting a dampener on the experience.

"We'll need to invest in some goggles," Karen joked, but her quivering face wasn't fooling Pickle. She was on the verge of tears.

At last, he thought. Some humanity.

"What for?" he questioned.

"If we kill these things at close range, there's a good chance blood can get in your eye. Oh, gonna need a respirator as well, but then again, you tend to get used to the smell after a while."

Pickle sighed and spoke, "Could do with a katana or some other type of sword. These bullets won't last forever."

The cool air that caressed their faces was glorious, and both closed their eyes as the light wind massaged their damp scalps.

Pickle still had his eyes closed. "Do yer read, Karen?"

She nodded, and opened her eyes to look at the man to the side of her. "I used to, why?"

"Sometimes that was all there was to do in prison. I remember reading a quote that said: *Sometimes, even to live is an act of courage.* I think I know what they mean now. In the future, we're gonna have to do some remarkable and horrific things in order to survive."

"It's gonna be scary times ahead," Karen agreed. "But if we let these things terrify us, life won't be worth living."

"Are yer a religious person, Karen?" Pickle was still enjoying the fresh air and breathed in a large gulp of it with his eyelids still firmly shut.

"Not really."

"I remember a passage in the book of Zechariah. It went something like this: *Their flesh will rot while they are still standing, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. On the day, men will be stricken by the Lord with great panic. Neighbours will engage in hand combat against each other.* That's what is happening now! Even if yer a non-believer, yer have to admit, that's some freaky shit."

Karen *was* a non-believer and changed the topic with a question. "Where are we going tomorrow?"

Pickle shrugged his shoulders, and wagged his head. "I want to go somewhere where I can be normal."

Karen said with a cheeky smirk, "Nowhere then."

Pickle smiled broadly and put his arm around her and kissed her on the head. His eyes produced more tears, tears for KP. "Let's see what tomorrow brings. Maybe one day we can all be normal again, whatever that means."

They both looked out and admired the view for another two minutes before deciding to rest for a while. It had only been days since the outbreak had been announced, and it had been days of sheer horror.

Unfortunately, the horror had just begun.



