

Autumn: The City

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Prologue

No warning.

No explanation.

The alarms began to ring and we were up and on the move in seconds. We had been conditioned to respond at speed. The routine was familiar from a thousand drills but I sensed immediately that this was different. I knew this was for real. I could taste fear and panic in the early morning air. I didn't know why. I didn't know what had happened. I had a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach that something was happening that was about to change everything. In silence we collected our kit and assembled at the transports. I could see trepidation and uncertainty in the faces of everyone around me. Even the officers - the men and women who took orders from above and controlled our every action - appeared bewildered and scared. Their fear and unexpected confusion was unsettling. It was clear that they knew as little as I did. We were on the road in minutes and the journey took less than an hour. The early morning darkness began to lift as we drove through the city. We brought chaos to the rush hour, stopping traffic from moving and preventing unsuspecting people from reaching their schools, offices and homes. I saw hundreds of people but I didn't allow myself to look into any of their faces. I didn't know what was going to happen to them. I forced myself to avoid remembering that somewhere out in the fragile normality of the morning were the people that I had known and loved.

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

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

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

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

Part I

1

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

Along with the rest of her work colleagues Donna worked an early shift one

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

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

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

As Joan died on the ground next to her Donna was distracted by the sound of Neil Peters, one of the junior managers, collapsing across his desk, showering his paperwork with spittle and blood as he retched and choked and fought for air. Jo Foster - one of her closest friends - was the next to be infected as she walked into the office. Donna watched helplessly as the other girl clawed at her neck and mouthed a hoarse and virtually silent scream of bitter pain, suffocation and fear before falling to the floor. She was dead before she hit the ground. Finally Trudy Phillips, the last of the early shift, panicked and began to stumble and run towards Donna as the searing, burning pain in her throat began. She had only managed to move a few meters forward before she lost consciousness and fell, dragging a computer off a nearby desk and sending it crashing to the ground, just inches away from where she now lay. Once Trudy was dead the world became still and terrifyingly silent..

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

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

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

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

The fact of the matter was, she decided, that she was where she was and there was little she could do about it. As impossible, unbelievable and grotesque as her circumstances were, she had no option but to try and pull herself together and find somewhere safe to sit and wait for something - anything - to happen. The most sensible place was the office she had just left. Its height provided some isolation and it was clean, spacious and relatively comfortable. She knew the layout and she knew where she could find food and drink in the staff restaurant. Best of all, security in the office was tight. Access to the working areas was strictly controlled by electronically tagged passes and from a conversation she'd had with an engineer last week, she knew that the security system itself ran independent of the mains electricity supply. Regardless of what happened to the rest of the building, therefore, power to the locks remained constant, and that meant that she was able to securely shut out the rest of the world until she was ready to face it again. The advantage may only have been a psychological one but it was enough. During the first few long hours of the nightmare that extra layer of security meant everything to her.

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

The first night took an eternity to pass and the second day even longer. She only emerged from her hiding place on a couple of occasions. Just after dawn she crept around the perimeter of the office and looked down onto the streets below, initially to check whether the situation had changed, but also to confirm that the bizarre and inexplicable events of the previous morning had actually taken place. During the dragging hours just gone Donna had begun to convince herself that the death of many thousands of innocent people couldn't really have happened so swiftly, viciously and without reason.

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

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

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

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

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

'Neil?'

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

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

Disorientated by the inexplicable reanimation, Donna left the office and began to climb the stairs. The corpse of Sylvia Peters, the office secretary, lay

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

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

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

2

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

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

The first sign that something was wrong had been an old man. Sitting two rows of seats in front of him he had started to cough and wheeze. His pain had increased dramatically in just a few seconds. Initially haunched forward, the pensioner had suddenly thrown himself back in his seat with violent force, terrified and fighting to breathe with his already inflamed throat burning with pain. Before Jack had fully appreciated the seriousness of his condition the pensioner had begun shaking and convulsing uncontrollably. He had been out of his seat and about to help when a twenty-five year old mother of three had yelled out in agony from the back of the bus. Her children had been screaming and crying too. Helpless, Jack had run towards them but had stopped and turned and moved back the other way when he realised that the driver of the bus was now also coughing and choking. He sprinted the length of the swaying, lurching vehicle and had reached the driver in time to see him retch and gag on the blood running freely down the inside of his throat. He collapsed over the wheel, losing control of the bus and sending it swinging out in a clumsy arc across the carriageway, smashing through traffic coming the other way and eventually ploughing into the front of a pub. Jack had been thrown to the ground, his head thumping against the metal base of one of the seats and knocking him out cold.

He had no idea how long he had been unconscious for. When he finally came round his vision was blurred and he had struggled to regain his balance on unresponsive, unsteady feet. He had picked himself up and dragged himself towards the front of the battered bus. The driver was dead. The rest of the passengers were dead too. Using the emergency release he had managed to force open the door and had stumbled out onto the street. A sight of unparalleled and completely inexplicable carnage had greeted him. As the people on the bus had died so, it seemed, had everyone else for as far as he could see. Numb, Jack had stood motionless for a good few minutes, his body remaining frozen and still while his eyes darted around the macabre scene. He began to count the bodies - ten, twenty, thirty and then more and more... The destruction around him appeared to be endless. He had waited expectedly for the silence to be shattered by the wail of approaching police, fire and ambulance sirens but nothing had arrived. With each passing minute the ominous

quiet had become heavier and heavier until he had been able to stand it no longer.

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

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

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

Once he'd arrived back home Jack had tried to make contact with the rest of the world. He had tried every one of the thirty or so phone numbers in his address book and had managed to make a few calls before the line finally went dead. No-one answered. He had listened to the radio for a while. The sound it had made was unsettling. He'd expected to hear hissing static but for a long time there was nothing, just an endless and empty silence. One station he had come across was still playing music. He had listened hopefully and nervously as the last few notes of a final song faded away, only to be replaced again by the same relentless silence that had descended everywhere else. In his mind he had pictured radio presenters, newsreaders, engineers and presenters lying dead in their studios, by default still broadcasting the aftereffects of whatever it was that had killed them.

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

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

Just before seven o'clock a sudden metallic crashing noise had shattered the quiet. With everything else so silent and still the clattering sound had

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

Jack had stared into her black and cold, emotionless eyes for an explanation. In the low light her skin had appeared taut and grey, waxy and translucent. Her mouth hung open as if she no longer had the energy to close it and her head had lolled heavily to one side. He had let the body go and it had immediately stumbled away, moving in the opposite direction to the way in which it had previously been travelling. Jack turned, sprinted back to his house, and had locked and bolted the door behind him. In a petrified, trance-like state he had wandered through his house and had spent an age in the kitchen, propped up against the sink for support, staring out into the garden and trying to make some sense of this bizarre new development. His dark and disjointed thoughts had been disturbed by the sudden appearance of his dead neighbour at the window. The body had tripped through a gap in the hedge that Jack had been meaning to repair for the last three summers. The old man's clumsy corpse had dragged itself around the garden constantly, changing direction whenever it came in contact with the hedge, a fence or the house. More than twelve hours had passed since Jack had seen the first body moving this morning. He had spent the rest of the day upstairs, hiding in his bedroom again, terrified. He packed a bag with clothes and food but when it came to moving he was too scared to leave. He knew he'd have to go outside eventually, but for now the familiarity and relative security of his home was all he had left.

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

3

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

Less than fifty meters into his journey and Jack stopped, turned around and took a few hesitant steps back towards his house. It looked temptingly safe and certain back there. He knew exactly what he'd find behind the locked door and where everything would be. Out here in the open, though, he didn't know

what was going to be waiting for him around the next corner. Too frightened to move forward into the unknown, but equally afraid of the consequences of turning tail and hiding alone in his home for days, possibly even weeks on end, he didn't know which way to turn. He stood in the middle of the street and cried like a child lost without its parents.

Jack gradually managed to placate himself by settling on a compromise. He decided that he would walk a little way further towards the town centre and that after an hour or two he would turn round and come back home. Tomorrow he would venture a little further, then further still the next day and the next day after that until he found other survivors. There had to be others, of that much he felt certain. Feeling a little better he began to walk towards the end of the road, wishing that he'd learnt to drive like just about everyone else he knew had done before they'd reached the age of twenty. He would have felt much safer in a car.

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

The complete and utter silence of the morning was overpowering. The darkness last night had been much the same - intense, relentless and uninterrupted by even a single street lamp. This morning apart from the sounds of the occasional gust of wind blowing litter and waste down the desolate and empty streets there was nothing. No cars. No planes. No music. No voices. Just a heavy, ominous and painfully empty silence. The noise his feet made as they scuffed along the pavement sounded as if they were being amplified a thousand times. Once or twice he cleared his throat, ready to shout out for help, but at the last moment his nerve had gone and he had decided against it. Much as he wanted to attract the attention of anyone who had survived, he was desperate not to attract the attention of anything else. And despite the fact that there didn't seem to be anything else left to attract, he didn't have the balls to take the chance. It all boiled down to the fact that he was scared. No, he wasn't just scared, he was damn terrified.

Portdown Park Road ran into Lancaster Road which led into Haleborne Lane which then merged with Ayre Street, the road which eventually widened and became one of the main routes into the heart of the city. In an hour Jack had walked the best part of three slow miles and he hadn't seen anything or anyone, apart from another twenty or thirty of the silent, stumbling bodies. Some of them - the majority of them in fact - he had been able to ignore and pass with little difficulty. They looked, to all intents and purposes, relatively normal, just a little dishevelled and unkempt and lacking in colour, almost monochrome. Once in a while, however, one of them would come along which instantly filled him with nervous nausea and fear. The reanimation of the dead, it seemed, had been completely random and without any obvious logical criteria. Five minutes ago Jack had passed a body that had clearly been involved in a horrific accident. It had been male, he thought, but he couldn't be completely sure. The body was covered from head to toe in vicious burns. There didn't appear to be a single area of skin that hadn't been charred beyond recognition. The hair had been burned away from the scalp and the face - or the black hole where the face had been - was completely unrecognisable, just a mangled, burnt mass. Some clothing still hung around the creature's desperate frame, flapping in the breeze. Most of it, however, had either burned away or melted into the

twisted, blackened flesh. But somehow it kept moving. Ignorant to the damage and deformation it had suffered and oblivious to any pain or shock it should have felt, the bloody thing just kept on moving. Its eyes were burned out empty sockets and it had no coordination but still it kept on dragging itself forward, clumsily crashing into walls, parked cars and other obstructions. It had been the smell more than anything that had tipped Jack over the edge. He'd caught a taste of the scent of scorched flesh on the breeze and had immediately dropped to his knees and emptied the contents of his stomach into the gutter.

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

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

'Hello,' he yelled, frightening himself with the volume of his own voice.

'Hello, is there anybody there?'

Nothing. No surprise. He tried again.

'Hello...'

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

'Hello...' he shouted again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No-one. What about you?'

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

'What's your name?' he asked softly.

'Clare Smith,' she mumbled.

'And are you from round here, Clare?'

She shook her head again.

'No, I live with my mum in Letchworth.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Dad was driving me to school,' she said quietly as she stared down at the floor between her feet. 'He lives right on the other side of town so we were coming through the city centre...' She paused to wipe her eyes and clear her throat. 'We pulled up at a set of traffic lights and Dad started to choke. I tried to help him but there was nothing I could do. We drove into the car in front and the car behind hit us. Dad just kept coughing and shaking until he died and I couldn't do anything...'

Clare's composure cracked and she lost control again. Jack took a few steps closer to her and knelt down in front of her chair. She grabbed hold of him

tightly and pulled herself towards him, burying her face in his chest. Still feeling a little awkward and unsure, he put his arms around her again and rocked her gently.

'Come on...' he soothed.

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

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

'It happened so quickly that no-one had time to react,' Jack mumbled. After a few long seconds of silent reflection he cleared his throat and spoke again.

'I've been heading into the centre of town,' he explained. 'I live out in the suburbs. I thought I might find a few more people that had survived round here.'

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

'You're the first.'

'So why have we survived?'

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

He stopped talking suddenly.

'And what...?' Clare pressed.

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

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

4

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

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

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

perimeter of the building.

There was a new found purpose to her actions.

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

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

It worked.

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

Paul waited until the world was dark before venturing out. He figured that the darkness should offer him some protection from the wandering bodies that he had watched staggering aimlessly up and down the desolate streets outside. He knew that in their present state they didn't seem to actually pose a threat to him, but the additional camouflage that the blackness of the night provided brought him some welcome comfort and reassurance. As long as he managed to avoid dwelling on the fact that these awkward and unpredictable figures had laid dead at his feet for the best part of two days before rising again, he was just about able to keep his fragile emotions in check. In the shadows and low light of early evening it was somehow easier to ignore the desperate condition of the rest of the world. From across the street a staggering dead body looked almost the same as someone who was still alive and who still possessed control, coordination and independence of thought. He had seen more than enough drunkards, addicts and down-and-outs in the city centre at night to be able to convince himself that what he was seeing now was just more of the same. Despite his fear and uncertainty, his comparative speed and agility made it possible for him to move among the bodies as if they were normal people trapped in a bizarre slow motion replay of their lives.

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

Rather than reassure him, now that he was outside he found the darkness unexpectedly unnerving. It unsettled him to see so many huge shop fronts and expensive window displays standing dark and unlit. Even the street lights were off. He found himself running through blackness and into more blackness. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and climbed up onto the top of a huge and, in his opinion, tasteless lump of concrete and steel street art. Light rain fell around him as he stood there with hands on hips, looking down over miles and miles of pitch-black city suburbs. Breathless he peered as far as he could into the distance, desperate to see something that would give him a little hope. Dejected he jumped down and walked away. There was nothing.

Numb and uncaring, Paul continued towards the department store where he forced his way in through a pile of fallen elderly shoppers. Although he had never shopped there himself he quickly found the food hall and filled numerous plastic carrier bags with food which he loaded into a shopping trolley and

pushed out through the silent checkouts. Pausing only to allow another one of the pitiful cadavers to drag itself past the front of the building, he stepped back outside into the night and wearily began to work his way back to the store where he'd been sheltering. For a while he thought about trying to get home. He'd considered it a few times before but it seemed too great a distance away for him to think about trying to cover alone while the situation remained so uncertain. Truth was he was a coward looking for excuses not to take risks but that didn't make any difference to his decision. What did it matter what anyone else might think of him, he thought, when there didn't seem to be anyone else left alive to care? Maybe he'd find a car and try and drive there in the morning, but then again maybe not.

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

Christ, he thought, he could see light.

Throwing the empty carton to one side, he got up and took a few steps away from the bus shelter. At the far end of the road adjacent to the one he'd been following he could see the silhouette of a tall office block which had been obscured from his view by other buildings until now. And there was no mistaking the fact that he could definitely see light. Halfway up the massive structure, in the midst of all the darkness he could definitely see light. And where there was light, he quickly decided, there had to be people.

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

Fourth floor - nothing.

Fifth floor - nothing.

Sixth floor - bodies.

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

Seventh floor.

Eighth floor.

Ninth floor.

Tenth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Are you...?' she started to say.

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

5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They spent a long hour together sitting on an expensive leather sofa, picking

at the food they'd collected and sharing a few moments of fragmented conversation. Although it was relatively early (around half-past eight) the darkness, silence and strain of the day combined to make it feel much later. They were both exhausted. In what remained of their world everything seemed to take a hundred times more effort to do than it had done before. And added to that, nothing could be done which didn't remind them both of all they once had but which now they had suddenly lost. By torchlight Jack flicked through a TV listings magazine he'd found in a dead shopper's bag. Most probably all of the celebrities pictured in the glossy pages were now dead. In any event none of it really mattered. What good were actors, presenters and celebrities now? 'We'll have more luck tomorrow, I'm sure of it,' Jack whispered hopefully (although not entirely convincingly).

'What do you mean?' Clare mumbled.

'We'll find someone else.'

'Where?'

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

She shrugged her shoulders.

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

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

Clare wasn't listening. She was crying again. Although he knew that he couldn't do anything to relieve her pain and fear, and even though he knew he wasn't the cause of her suffering, as the only adult around Jack couldn't help but feel responsible and protective towards her. Cautiously he rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, and then reached across and pulled her closer.

Half-expecting her to recoil and pull away, he was surprised when she did the opposite and leant her weight against him fully.

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

'Don't know,' he grunted honestly.

'But what caused it all?'

'I don't know,' he said again.

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

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

'But I don't know anything,' she protested tearfully.

'Exactly.'

A brief silence.

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

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

'How far do you think it's gone?'

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

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

'Maybe they don't think anyone survived?'

'Possible.'

'Or perhaps they can't get here?'

'What?'

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

'Don't know. You might be right.'

A difficult few minutes followed as both Jack and Clare stopped talking and

withdrew to think about what had happened again. It was a natural reaction but thinking didn't seem to help anyone. There were no easy answers and, even worse than the frustration of not being able to understand, thinking inevitably turned into remembering. And remembering hurt.

'Do you like this sofa?' Jack asked suddenly, making a deliberate attempt to start talking rubbish and stop trying to make sense of a senseless situation. Surprised, Clare managed half a smile.

'Not bothered, why?'

'Seen the price of it?'

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

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

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

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

'I think everyone's mums used to bring them here.'

'What, yours too?'

He nodded and sat back in his seat.

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

'Me too.'

'Hated it. Me and my brother both hated it.'

'Me too.'

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

Clare managed a stifled laugh and sniffed back another tear.

'I'm tired,' she said quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

'Goodnight.'

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

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

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

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

`So what did you do?' Donna asked.

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

`And...?'

`And we hit something, but we got away with it lightly. Nothing seemed to happen for ages and then I felt the impact. It was a real fucking wrench. It threw me right forward and I could hear metal groaning and snapping and breaking. I swear I'd have been badly injured if it wasn't for the bodies. There were so many of them they were like padding all around me. Once the train had stopped I managed to smash my way out through a window. When I got out I saw that we'd gone into the back of another train that was still at the platform. Christ knows how we managed to stay on the rails.'

`Were you hurt?'

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

`Painful?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

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

`So what did you do next?'

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

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

`You worked here?'

She nodded.

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

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

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

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

`Have some food,' she said, unable to think of anything else to say. She

pushed a packet of biscuits across the desk. Paul shook his head. 'You should eat something.'

'No thanks.'

'Drink?'

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

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

'Don't know,' she replied bluntly.

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

'What else is there to do?'

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

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

'I know, but I...'

'Look, I don't want to go out until I have to,' she continued, interrupting.

'Until I know what's caused all of this I want to stay as far away as I can from those bloody things out there.'

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

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

Donna sat in her chair and did the same.

7

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

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

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

He walked slowly through the quiet building towards the room where the woman who needed him lay. The corridor he moved along was dark and shadowy and was lined with doors leading to individual student rooms on either side. Using his torch to guide his way he glanced into a couple of the rooms as he passed them, the unexpected light causing mild panic amongst the survivors cowering

in the darkness. There may have been more than thirty or forty people sheltering in the building, but many of them were sheltering alone. Apart from a handful of people who had begun to group together, the majority of survivors chose to remain in frightened isolation, too afraid to move or to speak. The doctor found the room where the woman was resting. She was very attractive - tall, well-toned, strong and nine months pregnant with her first child. Croft was strangely drawn to Sonya Farley. His girlfriend - Natasha Rogers, a nurse in one of the burns units - was dead. In those painful first few minutes on Tuesday morning he had run from his building across to Tash's unit and had found her cold and lifeless on the ground with the rest of them, dead like everyone else. She had been eight weeks pregnant. They hadn't had chance to tell anyone about the baby, not even their parents. They'd only just got over the shock of the unexpected pregnancy themselves. Now Croft found that focussing his efforts and attention on Sonya helped his constant, gnawing pain to ease slightly. It somehow made it easier for him to cope with his loss, knowing that he would still be able to help Sonya to bring her baby into what remained of the battered world. And Christ alone knew that Sonya deserved help. When the disease had struck she'd been sitting in the middle of an eight mile traffic jam on the main motorway leading into town. She'd walked through more than four miles of unremitting horror and devastation to reach the hospital.

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

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

'You all right Dr Croft?' Yvonne asked.

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

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

Sunita nodded instinctively but otherwise didn't reply.

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

Yvonne smiled momentarily and then looked down at the ground as the sound of bird song in her memory was swallowed up and overtaken by the all consuming silence again, leaving her feeling empty, vulnerable and lost. She wiped a tear from her eye. She was in her early fifties but the strain of the last few days had left her looking much older. Her usually impeccable hairstyle was

frayed and untidy, her once smart business suit now crumpled and unkempt. Sunita sensed her grief and put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her close. She knew that Yvonne's husband had worked in an office across town and that, on the first morning, she'd gone there and found him dead at his desk, face down in a pile of papers.

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

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

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

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

'You checked on Sonya?' Sunita asked.

He nodded.

'She all right?'

'She's fine. She's sleeping.'

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

Croft finished his cigarette and dropped the glowing stub onto the floor before putting it out with his foot. He held his head in his hands. Without power it was as dark inside the building as the night was outside. The brightest lights were the glowing ends of Sunita and Yvonne's cigarettes moving through the cold air. Exhausted, the doctor closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. He'd tried several times in the last few hours to completely empty his head of all conscious thought and switch off but nothing seemed to work. Even the smallest, most insignificant noise or the slightest thought was enough to bring him crashing back to reality in seconds. And even though he was one of only a handful of people left alive, the disturbances and distractions were constant and unending.

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

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

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

'Why?'

'Because kids of a certain age will accept anything you tell them,' he explained. 'I envy some of them. A two year old will grow up thinking this is how it's always been, won't they? Bloody hell, imagine how much easier the last few days would have been if you hadn't had to spend hours and hours trying to work everything out? If we'd had someone who could have told us what

had happened and why, even if they weren't right, we could have just got on with sorting out the mess instead of trying to reason it out and explain it to ourselves.'

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

'We've probably all lost our parents,' Sunita mumbled.

'I know, but...'

Yvonne's words were interrupted by the noise of a body suddenly crashing into the glass double-doors directly in front of her. Nervously she stumbled back and tripped. Croft jumped to his feet and steadied her. Strangely curious he took a couple of slow, cautious steps closer to the corpse. Its gaunt face was pressed hard against the cold glass and it moved slowly along from left to right, leaving behind it a long smear of grease and a trail of bloody, germ-filled saliva. When it reached the end of the glass it clumsily turned around and began moving back in the opposite direction.

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

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

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

'Why?' Sunita whispered.

'Because it isn't going away.'

'What?'

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

'Like hell...'

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

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

Yvonne was scared. She found it almost impossible to bring herself to look at the diseased shell which had, less than a week ago, been a perfectly fit and well human being. She had crept halfway up the staircase and was peering down through the railings like a frightened child.

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

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

'Or?' Sunita pressed anxiously.

'Or they're changing.'

8

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

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

staircase, seeming for a few lingering moments to fill the entire building with noise.

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

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

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

'What?'

'Don't know. It was upstairs.'

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

'Apart from a couple of bodies that's right.'

'So what did you hear?'

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

'I don't know what it was. It sounded like...'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Christ,' she cursed as she stumbled back in surprise.

'What is it?' Paul hissed.

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

'So?'

'So the damn thing's watching me!'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

He began to walk towards her, stopping short when he saw the corpse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'You don't know what it's going to do either,' she snapped back. 'For God's

sake, this thing is trying to get to us. It wants help, it must do. This one's different to all the others I've seen...'

'But you can't just assume that...'

Paul's words were wasted. Donna wasn't listening and, besides, she'd already made her decision. The body in front of her looked pathetic and emaciated. Its movements were slow and laboured. But more to the point, it appeared to have some level of control, and that separated it from the hundreds of other corpses she'd seen. The creature continued to thump against the door. Donna flicked her pass at the sensor to her right and pulled the door open. The body dropped its arms and, for a second, stood still again.

'See,' she said, relieved. 'I told you it...'

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

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

'We've got to kill it,' Paul wailed.

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

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

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

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

'Do it!' Donna screamed again.

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

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

For more than an hour they were too afraid to move or even to make a sound.

Hiding behind desks in the training room, Donna and Paul sat close together. Occasionally one of them would pluck up the courage to peer out into the main office again. They could just about see onto the landing through the precious doors which separated them from the rest of the world. Although indistinct and unclear, they could see movement outside.

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

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

'Don't know for sure if it did.'

'What do you mean? Of course it attacked you!'

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

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

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

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

'What?'

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

'Now what?'

'How did they know we were here?'

'Don't know.'

'I think you disturbed them when you went to the toilet.'

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

'I know,' she interrupted, growing increasingly annoyed by his mounting hysteria. 'That's exactly what I'm saying. They couldn't move, now they can walk. At first they had very little control and coordination, now that seems to have improved. They couldn't hear us and I don't know if they could see us before, but now it seems that they can.'

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

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

'But can they feel it?'

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

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

'So what's going to happen next?'

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

'Don't know,' she muttered.

'So what do we do?'

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

Music woke Jack from his light sleep. He thought he was imagining it at first but no, there it was again. Faint and tinny, for the first time in almost a week he could definitely hear music. Once he was fully awake it took him a couple of seconds to get his bearings. He looked around and let his eyes

slowly become accustomed to the low morning light. The department store looked very different in daylight - completely different in fact to how he'd pictured it last night when it had been filled with nothing but shadows and darkness. He then remembered that he hadn't been alone last night and he sat up quickly and looked around for Clare.

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

'How are you this morning?' he asked.

She nodded and smiled sadly.

'I'm okay,' she replied. 'Look, I didn't mean to wake you up. I hope you don't mind the noise. I couldn't stand the quiet any longer. I found the stereo in the electrical department just past the beds.'

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

'Hungry?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'Not really.'

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

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

'I love this song,' Clare said as the next track on the CD began. She chewed thoughtfully on her chocolate and turned up the volume. She closed her eyes and for a precious few seconds tried to imagine she was somewhere else. To Jack the music sounded no different and no less processed and manufactured than the last bland track he'd heard. He remembered the days when music was played by real musicians and when talent mattered more than appearance and... and he could hear something else. He slammed his fist down on top of the stereo and stopped it playing.

'Hey...' Clare protested.

'Shh...' he hissed.

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

'What's going on?' she asked anxiously.

'Look,' he answered, nodding down in the direction of the figures beneath

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

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

'Must have been.'

'But why?'

'What d'you mean?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'But where are we going to go?'

'Don't know.'

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

'They won't get up here, will they?'

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

'But we can block the escalators off, can't we? We can use some of this furniture. They're never going to be strong enough to get through, are they?' Her simple logic stopped him in his tracks. He stopped packing and stared at her, struggling to answer. His throat was dry and he could feel beads of cold, nervous sweat running down his back.

'You might be right, but...'

'But what?'

`But we don't know for sure.'

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

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

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

10

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

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

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

`Where the fucking hell are we going?' Holmes, a stocky security guard, cursed from behind the steering wheel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

rotting body, smashing them beyond recognition. They were weak and they were beginning to decay and it took little effort to destroy them. The constant thud, thud, thud of diseased flesh against metal was sickening.

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

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

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

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

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

'We should try and get food first,' the older man gasped breathlessly as he ran down a dark and dank staircase, trying not to lose sight of his younger and fitter colleague. 'We'll take as much as we can carry. We can come back down for more if it's safe.'

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

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

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

The body dragged itself up off the ground and followed.

'They've got to be in there,' Jack whispered as he crept along the front of the high street shops with Clare at his side. From their department store lookout they had quickly lost sight of the car. Fortunately the trail of devastation and the huge mass of desperate bodies following in the vehicle's wake revealed the route it had taken. Even from a few hundred meters back along the road they could see that a vast collection of ragged figures had

stumbled along the street and gathered close to the entrance to the multi-storey car park.

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

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

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

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

'What?'

'The car? What colour was the car?'

'Dark red I think,' Clare replied quietly.

They had only managed to see the vehicle for a few seconds, and they had only really seen its roof at that. It had been surrounded by a constant shroud of bodies, making it almost impossible to see anything clearly. They didn't know what size, shape, make, model or style it was. There were hundreds of cars in the car park, all abandoned when their owners had perished.

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

Jack shook his head.

'No, we would have heard them.'

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

'Shh...' Jack interrupted, turning round and lifting a finger to his lips.

'They'll be here somewhere, they have to be. I haven't seen any other crowds like the one downstairs, have you?'

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

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

'How do you know?' asked Clare.

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

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

'And...?'

'And look...'

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

'So what do we do?'

'We wait for them to come back.'

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

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

Holmes wasn't listening. He was busy loading more food and drink into boxes

and bags which he then stacked into shopping trollies. Shaking his head with despair Heath continued emptying a shelf of dehydrated snack meals into a cardboard box. He carried the load over to Holmes and then stopped to complain again when he realised that the other man had filled most of his boxes with cans of beer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A couple of minutes later and Holmes returned. He threw more goods into the boot of the blood-splattered car and then turned and ran back down again.

Another couple of minutes and Heath emerged from the shadows again, closely followed by Holmes making his third trip. Jack couldn't wait any longer.

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

Holmes reacted instantly to the presence of an unexpected body. The fact that this body was communicating with him didn't register. He turned to face Jack and, giving him as little regard as he would any one of the thousands of corpses dragging themselves along the streets, he dropped his shoulder and charged into him, sending him flying across the car park.

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

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

'Get in the car,' he shouted to Clare.

Stunned and in considerable pain but nevertheless relieved, Jack slowly made

his way over to the car and opened the back door and collapsed onto the seat. Clare sat down next to him.

`You okay?' she whispered.

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

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

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

`I'm Jack Baxter,' he replied, still wheezing, `this is Clare. Thanks for...'

`You with anyone else or are there just two of you?' Holmes interrupted.

`Just the two of us. What about you?'

`There are about forty of us,' Heath answered.

`Does anyone know what's happened?' Jack asked hopefully.

Heath shook his head.

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

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

11

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

`Can't do what?'

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

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

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

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

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

`Jesus,' she sighed, `I don't know.'

`We can't sit here forever, can we?'

`But what are we going to gain from leaving?'

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

He was right. She didn't bother to acknowledge him but she had to admit that he was right. Much as she wanted to stay hidden in the office, she knew that if she followed her earlier line of thinking through, then more and more of

the bodies could be attracted to the scene until it became impossible for the two of them to get away. Her options looked decidedly bleak; take her chances with the diseased population or sit here and wait endlessly with this whinging mouse of a man. For a few seconds she sat and weighed up the odds before deciding it was time to move.

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

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

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

Donna thought for a moment.

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

Paul looked into space, thinking carefully. The expression on his face slowly began to change and Donna started to wonder whether she'd been hasty in her judgment of him. He had listened and he suddenly looked ready to overcome his obvious nervousness and take what was left of his life in his hands to leave the relative safety of the office.

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

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

'We could find ourselves a car and try and get away...'

Donna shook her head.

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

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

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

'If we could find somewhere with food supplies and drinks...'

'Christ, I could murder a drink...'

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

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

Paul stopped to think again.

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

'What's that?'

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

'I still don't think that body tried to do anything to me,' she interrupted, 'it just reacted to me being there. I think if I'd stood still and stayed quiet it would have walked straight past.'

'I'm not sure...'

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

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

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

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

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

'Can we afford not to? You're right, Paul, we could be trapped in here. There might be thousands of those things here in just a few hours, there might even

be that many out there now. We don't have an option.'

'When then? Now?'

'Tonight.'

'Why wait?'

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

12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They climbed a short staircase which led up to the main part of the ground floor. As they climbed the light increased. Jack and Clare looked from side to side as they were led across a wide, glass-fronted reception area. Tightly packed bodies were pressed against every available square inch of glass, being

forced forward by more and more of the sickly creatures that were slowly dragging themselves out of the city towards the university. The rest of the world had become painfully silent. The noise that the group of survivors made - no matter how slight and insignificant it seemed - was enough to attract the unwanted attention of the dead hordes. And the reaction of the nearest bodies to that noise as they smashed and crashed against the glass frequently resulted in sudden frenzied activity spreading through the masses with startling rapidity. In turn that activity attracted more and more of them. 'See that lot,' Heath said quietly, gesturing towards the bodies, 'started gathering here late last night. They seem to be able to hear us now.'

'I know,' Jack replied, 'we found out this morning.'

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

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

In keeping with Keith Peterson's lack of interest in the new arrivals, every other survivor they passed also showed complete disinterest towards them. Most of them stared into space. One man was lying on his side on the floor, covered by a grey blanket and rocking steadily. His dark eyes were wide open like saucers. Clare thought to herself that he looked too afraid to shut them. After diagonally crossing the room Peterson took them outside through a fire escape and then walked through a small concrete courtyard towards another door. There were a few more people outside. An older woman sitting on a wooden bench wrapped in a thick overcoat nodded and managed half a smile at Clare as she followed the others through.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Bloody hell,' cursed Jack. 'What the was that?'

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

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

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

Jack let his words trail quietly away.

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

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

'You okay?' Jack asked.

'I'm all right,' she replied. 'You?'

He nodded.

'I'm fine. Let's get these rooms sorted out.'

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

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

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

13

By the time the city was bathed in darkness again Donna and Paul had decided what they were going to do. They planned to distract the bodies on the landing as they'd discussed earlier and then make a break for it. They hoped that their comparative strength and control would be enough to get them through the crowd outside the office doors. As the afternoon and early evening had worn on their simple plan had slowly gained more purpose and direction. There was no

question that they were doing the right thing. For the first time in days both of them could see a reason to try and do something positive, and they were both acutely aware of the fact that they had to do it quickly.

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

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

'And then we come back to this end?' Paul asked anxiously. He knew full well what they were going to do. They'd been planning it for hours. Going over the plan again and again seemed to help both of them.

Donna nodded.

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

'You sure?'

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

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

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

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

'What's the problem?' she hissed.

His mouth was dry and he couldn't answer.

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

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

Paul scrambled to his feet, suddenly feeling pathetic and ashamed but no less frightened and unsure than he had been. Donna's voice also provoked frantic activity out on the landing as the bodies again began to batter against the doors, trying hopelessly to force their way inside.

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

'Got everything?' she asked.

Paul swallowed hard.

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

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

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

`What we have to do,' Donna grunted, returning her attention to the lamps.

`Now shut up and get on with it.'

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

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

`Good, that's exactly what we want.'

`Is it?'

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

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

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

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

Paul instinctively began to backtrack.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Breathing deeply to try and calm her own shattered nerves, Donna cautiously walked away from the light and moved closer towards the doors. Through the small glass panels she could see the creatures outside reacting to her presence. The ferocity of their movements increased as she approached - she could see the reaction of the first bodies causing the second and the third to react, then the fourth, the fifth and the sixth and so on until the landing was filled with clumsy, awkward movement and action. She wondered what, if anything, was going through their decaying minds? Were they frightened of her? Did they want to harm her? Did they want her to help end their suffering? Whatever the reason she knew that ultimately it didn't matter.

Self-preservation was all that was important now.

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

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

`Okay?' Paul whispered.

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

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

the carpet and a pile of papers was alight.

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

'Let's get moving.'

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

Donna moved forward just enough to enable her to see through the doors and watch the bodies continuing to enter the office through the other entrance. Still more of them dragged themselves up the stairs and onto the landing. Paul watched the bodies around the light, which had now changed from a steady white-yellow to a flickering orange-red as the unchecked fire took hold. Some of the pitiful creatures walked into the flames, apparently ignorant to the heat and danger. Their ragged clothes were tinder dry and quickly began to smoulder and burn.

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

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

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

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

After waiting for another withered body to drag itself through the doorway Donna turned and forced her way out onto the stairs. She tripped down in the darkness, pushing random bodies to the side as she began to run down towards ground level and deflecting countless grabbing hands which reached out for her constantly. The heavy footsteps of the survivors on the concrete stairs echoed throughout the dead building as they ran down and down, turning one hundred and eighty degrees at the foot of each short flight and the start of the next. Numerous bodies continued to emerge from the darkness around them but the sheer strength, speed and fear of Donna and Paul was too much for any of the cadavers. They were knocked away and flung to the side like discarded rag dolls.

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

'You all right?' Paul asked quietly.

Donna nodded, shaking and breathing heavily.

'I'm okay,' she replied. 'You?'

'I'm fine.'

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

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

of the city.

14

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

The makeshift delivery room upstairs was brightly lit. Bright, that was, in comparison with the rest of the dark building. Several survivors had willingly given up torches and other lights to allow Phil Croft - the only person with any relevant medical experience - to deliver Sonya's baby. He was nervous and apprehensive. He hadn't done this for a while and this was only the third delivery that he'd been actively involved in. Paulette, the large and remarkably bright and enthusiastic lady standing at his side, had been involved in three times as many. And more than half of those births had been her own children. Croft was pleased to have her around. Having been in Sonya's unenviable position on no less than five occasions, she was essential to the first time mother-to-be's wellbeing tonight. Although Croft knew all the technical terms and he could monitor and react to mother and baby's vital signs, Paulette was able to do something far more important. She could reassure her. She could talk to Sonya. She could tell her when to push and when to relax, when to breathe in and when to breathe out. She could understand, anticipate and explain the pain and tell her how well she was doing and how much more she had left to do. Croft admired her ability to somehow shut out her own personal fear and loss and ignore the devastation beyond the university walls to allow her to concentrate on the young girl lying in nervous agony on the sweat-soaked bed next to her.

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

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

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

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

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

Fifty-five minutes later and the moment had arrived. Sonya's incredible pain again built to an almost unbearable crescendo before being dramatically

relieved as her baby was delivered in a sudden release of pressure and a rush of activity and emotion. Croft guided the child safely down onto the bed between its mother's ankles and gently wiped blood and other bodily fluids from its face. He clamped and cut the cord and then quickly whisked the baby away to the makeshift crib they'd prepared. His face was a picture of intense concentration as he checked the baby's vital signs and waited anxiously for it to respond.

The silence was deafening.

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

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

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

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

For a few blissful moments nothing else mattered. With huge, saucer eyes filled with tears of joy and relief, Sonya watched as the doctor wrapped her little baby in a soft blanket and carried her across the room. Ignoring the pain and discomfort she felt, she sat up and took the little bundle from him. Shutting out the rest of the world, she stared down into a beautiful, wrinkled, blotchy blue-pink face. She stroked the baby's cheek with a single gentle finger and revelled in the warmth, movement and noise that the little girl had innocently brought to her otherwise lifeless world.

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

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

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

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

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

The deadly contagion still hung heavy in the air.

Just minutes after being born the baby was dead.

15

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

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

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

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

'What?' Baxter replied.

'It means that this is definitely the end.'

'Why do you say that?'

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

Baxter stared into the darkness.

'You can't be sure,' he said quietly.

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

Tears began rolling freely down his tired face.

'You might still be right,' Baxter whispered.

Heath shook his head.

'I've got a son,' he continued, wiping his eyes again. 'He lives in Australia. My wife's been over there with them. She flew over three weeks ago to see the grandchildren. I know she's...'

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

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

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

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

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

'But you can't just dismiss everything that...'

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

'Well I...'

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

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

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

'What point are you making?'

'How many crashed cars have you seen? How many abandoned cars have you seen round here?'

'Hundreds, probably thousands, why?'

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

'I'm not sure I understand what you're saying...'

'What about your home? Did you own your house?'

'Yes.'

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

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

`God, yes,' he said quietly. `We had such a laugh. We hardly had anything. We sat on boxes and ate chips from a...'
`Just think about the fact that someone had memories like that about every single house you've passed, and chances are they're all dead now. Hundreds of them. Millions of them.'
`It doesn't bare thinking about.'
`But we should think about it. And what about children? Did you have children, Jack?'
He shook his head sadly.
`No, we wanted to but...'
`Every single corpse lying and rotting on the streets and every one of those bloody things outside this building, they were all somebody. They were all someone's son or daughter or brother or sister or...'
Heath stopped talking again. More tears trickled from his tired eyes.
`You okay?' Jack asked, hesitantly. He shook his head.
`This is the end,' he replied. `I tell you there's no doubt about it, this is the end.'

16

Sheer physical and emotional exhaustion had drained Sonya to the point of collapse. The cocktail of drugs hurriedly prescribed by Dr Croft had knocked her out for the best part of four hours, giving her body time to regain a little strength. When she woke it was shortly after five in the morning and it was dark, save for the first few rays of morning light which were beginning to edge cautiously into the room. She was still lying on the bed where she'd delivered. The body of her baby daughter lay in the crib at her side, wrapped in pure white blankets. As soon as she'd regained consciousness she reached out and picked the little girl up and held her tightly, keeping her safe. Instinctively but pointlessly she still wanted to protect her lifeless child. Whenever Sonya moved it hurt, but the physical pain and the other aftereffects of childbirth were nothing compared to the anguish and agony she felt inside. She felt empty and hollow as if everything of value inside her had been scraped out and thrown away. She felt detached from her surroundings, almost as if she was watching herself move but she wasn't actually there. She didn't know if she was warm or cold. She didn't know if she was tired or wide awake. She felt as if everything - her ability to communicate, to make decisions, to laugh or cry, to react or to hide - had gone. Her aching body was filled with nothing but relentless pain and remorse, tinged with anger and bitterness. Why did this have to happen?
Croft was asleep on a chair in the corridor outside the room. She could see his feet through the half-open door.
The pain she felt inside seemed to increase with each passing second. Several long minutes later, for the first time since her daughter had died, Sonya made a conscious decision.
Groaning with effort and discomfort, she sat upright and then swung her legs out over the side of the bed. She was bleeding heavily and had to wait for the blood to stop before lowering herself down. The floor beneath her feet was hard and cold. She grabbed a towelling dressing gown from a hook on the back of the door and struggled to put it on whilst still cradling her lifeless child. First one arm in, then the next, and then she wrapped the thick material around both herself and the baby.
The corridor was even colder.
Dragging her feet, Sonya slowly walked past Dr Croft. She could hear Paulette stirring in the next room. Apart from the woman's muffled movements and the sound of another solitary soul sobbing on a different floor, the building was icily silent. What do you know about pain, Sonya silently asked whoever it was who was crying. If only they knew how she felt.
The staircase was colder still.
Sonya found it difficult to climb the stairs. She was tired and she hurt and

she felt nauseous. The doctor seemed to have given her every drug he'd been able to find to help her get through the labour and then the grief. That, combined with the blood loss and drowsiness, had left her feeling bilious and faint. But somehow she managed to ignore everything and keep moving. The fifth floor, then the sixth, then the seventh. She wasn't sure how tall the building was, but she was certain that she had to be somewhere near the top floor now. She stopped and walked down another corridor to her right. She tried a few doors until one opened. It led into a small, square room similar to the one in which she'd just spent the night. In one corner there was a single bed with a suitcase on top, next to that a cheap dressing-table. On the table was a collection of letters and a couple of photographs of a group of happy, smiling people standing in a sun-drenched garden somewhere. Presumably the pictures were of the room's now deceased occupant and their dead family. Sonya tenderly cradled her baby close to her chest and looked down into its grey but still beautiful face. She stood in the centre of the room, rocking gently, instinctively soothing her dead child. Slowly she opened up her dressing gown and lifted the baby up to her face. She kissed its cold head and carefully laid it down on the bed next to the suitcase. Before moving she folded back the blankets to keep the little girl warm. She picked up a metal-framed chair and threw it through the window. The silent world was suddenly filled with unexpected noise as the glass shattered and the chair dropped into the rotting crowds gathered around the front of the building. Their unwanted interest immediately aroused, thousands upon thousands of creatures surged towards the building again. Sonya didn't look at them. She could hear other survivors down on the lower floors now, running around frantically, desperately trying to find where the sound had come from and terrified that the safety of their precious shelter had been compromised. Ignorant to the extent of the sudden movement and panic she had caused both inside and outside the building, Sonya dragged another chair across to the broken window. She picked her daughter up off the bed and, holding her close to her chest again, climbed up onto the chair before shuffling carefully onto the windowsill and sitting down. With her bare legs hanging out of the building and dangling in the cold morning air, she sat in silence and surveyed what remained of the world and its devastated population. There was a massive crowd of shuffling bodies below her - the vacant shells of ordinary people who had fallen and died last week before somehow dragging themselves back up from their undignified resting places. And beyond them were millions more bodies still, lying and rotting where they had died on that first morning. But none of them mattered. Even the bodies of the people that Sonya had known and loved and who were out there somewhere didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered. Sonya pressed her feet hard against the wall and leant forward and pushed herself out of the window. She fell headfirst, falling through three-quarters of a turn as she dropped heavily through the disease-filled air, crashing down on her back onto the roof of a parked car and killing herself instantly. The nearest of the sickly cadavers instinctively took slow, lumbering steps towards Sonya's body. With dull, clouded eyes they stared at her battered and smashed remains. In spite of the force of the impact, she still held her baby tightly.

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

lethal but they couldn't afford to let their emotions give them away. Staying so close to the desperate figures and being forced to pass them and move between them was almost impossible. Although he didn't dare speak out loud and say as much, Paul likened it to being forced to hold his hand in a bowl of boiling water. After spending several hours outside, exposed and vulnerable, the survivors had staggered into the restaurant to calm themselves and try and rest for a while.

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

'Christ,' he said as he pulled himself back inside.

'What?' mumbled Donna.

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

'Where?'

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

'So let's go the other way.'

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

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

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

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

17

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

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

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

Paul had gradually moved further ahead. He was a couple of meters in front of Donna now and there were several bodies between them. The sheer size of the crowd that they had become part of was surprising and daunting. Paul knew that there had to be a reason for the unexpected gathering and, with no other indication of where they might find help or safety, it seemed sensible to go along with the movement of the mass of corpses. The sun was beginning to rise to their right and, as the brilliant orange light spilled silently over the city for the first time that morning, Paul looked ahead and, for a moment, was sure that he could see movement in the windows of a large, modern building on the other side of the ring road. He wanted to turn around and tell Donna but he knew that he couldn't risk attempting any form of communication with her. Behind, Donna let her head hang heavily on her shoulders in the same way that the listless creatures around her did. To look up and around would show them that she was different. For as much of the time as she could she kept her eyes focussed on the ground around Paul's feet, desperately trying to keep track of his movements so that she didn't lose him. The crowd was becoming denser and more tightly packed and her nerves, comparative strength and natural speed made it increasingly difficult to match the slow and awkward pace of the shuffling cadavers all around her. Although all moving in the same general direction, the creatures had poor control over their movements and frequently lurched, tripped or staggered to one side or collided randomly with others. Paul allowed himself to look ahead again. Bright orange sunlight reflected back from the windows on the far right of the building, hurting his eyes. Perhaps that was all he'd seen, he thought dejectedly. Perhaps he hadn't seen movement after all, just the morning sun bouncing off the bronze-tinted windows. But no, there it was again. Knowing that he was taking a risk just by holding his head high and looking up, he continued to stare at the building ahead of him. He saw movement again. Christ, there were people in the windows. He was still a couple of hundred meters away but he could definitely see them now. Unlike the countless thousands of sickly bodies that surrounded him and Donna, he knew instantly that the people in the windows were different. They were grouped together in several rooms and they were largely still. They had control. They were communicating with each other. They were looking down at the bodies and the remains of the city and they were thinking and talking and pointing and planning and... and it seemed impossible. For a few seconds longer Paul wasn't fully able to accept what he was seeing until he was close enough for it to be undeniable. These people were alive. These people were survivors. Without thinking he reacted. He stopped and span around to look for Donna.

'Up there,' he yelled when he saw her, pointing towards the building in front

of them. 'Look!'

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

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

The sheer volume of bodies crammed around the front of the building made the main entrance appear impassable even from a distance. Already gasping for breath, Donna looked around anxiously for an alternative route. She was surrounded on all sides by the noxious corpses, every last one of which now seemed to turn and lurch awkwardly towards her. There wasn't time to make decisions. She just kept moving, hoping that her comparative strength would be enough to see her through. She sensed that Paul was close behind but didn't bother to check. He would have to look after himself. Stupid fucking idiot. She was on the ring road itself now. She tripped down the high kerb and began to run across the wide stretch of tarmac, managing to somehow continue to push the bodies away and also to avoid the wreckage of cars and rotting corpses strewn across her path. The crowd surged after her relentlessly, moving together slowly but ominously like some unstoppable thick and viscous liquid. Up and over the low central reservation barrier and she knew she was almost there. She could hear her foolish companion getting closer behind her now grunting and groaning with effort as he forced his way forward through the seemingly endless tide of the dead.

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

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

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

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

'Come on,' he hissed.

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

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

The back end of the truck where Paul was standing was less than three feet away from the outside wall of the building. Just above his head and to his right slightly was a small balcony. Without stopping to consider the risks he

leapt up and grabbed at the metalwork surrounding the balcony area. In a flurry of movement he reached out and wrapped his arm around one of the metal railings. He grimaced with pain as the sudden weight of his body threatened to wrench his shoulder from its joint. Slowly, and with much effort, he managed to pull himself up. Donna watched from the roof of the truck as he hauled himself up onto the narrow landing and began to smash his fists furiously against a double-glazed window.

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

After locating the window where Paul was standing the survivors forced it open and quickly pulled him inside. Using a ladder to bridge the gap between the building and the top of the truck, two men ventured out into the cold and inhospitable morning and brought Donna into the shelter.

18

Midday.

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

'How you feeling?' he asked.

'Crap,' she replied with brutal honesty.

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

'Donna.'

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

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

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

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

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

'You okay?' he asked.

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

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

'Steve, this is Donna.'

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

'Steve says there's almost fifty people here you know,' Paul whispered. 'Thank

God we found this place. He says that most of them don't...'

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

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

'So what's the plan?' he asked, trying desperately to ignore Donna's anger.

'What's going to happen next? Are we staying here or...?'

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

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

Paul ignored her.

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

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

'What you talking about?' he asked.

'I said we're starting to get a few ideas about what to do next, aren't we?' Holmes' face cracked into a broad, knowing grin.

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

'What you going to do?' Paul asked.

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

'What do you mean?'

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

'Sounds good,' Paul said, far from convinced.

'We're going to hit this town and...'

'You been outside recently?' Donna interrupted.

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

'Yeah, why?' he replied.

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

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

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

'Do you mind?' she scowled.

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

'This morning.'

'You been out there all this time?'

'Yes.'

'Grim, ain't it?'

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

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

Steve nodded.

'Damn right.'

Donna looked at the two men in disbelief. Was getting drunk really all that was left for them to do? With the world lying in tatters at their feet, did they not have any higher priorities? On one hand it seemed a sensible way to try and forget all that had happened and enjoy what time remained, but could their suggestion really be the only alternative? Given that she was surrounded by so much uncertainty she hadn't dared to start thinking about the future before now - until that moment she hadn't dared consider whether she even had a future to look forward to. Looking into Holmes' pathetic, grinning face, however, she knew that there had to be a better option than the seedy, selfish and dangerous escape that he and Steve Richards were planning for themselves. 'You can finish this,' she said as she stood up and dropped the tray of food on Holmes' lap. He turned and watched her as she walked away.

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

'Somewhere else,' she grunted.

'Where's somewhere else?'

'Somewhere away from blokes like you.'

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

Donna stopped walking and turned to face him.

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

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

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

'Fucking idiot,' Donna cursed as she stormed out of the hall and down the corridor back towards her room. She didn't even know if she'd be able to find the room again but that wasn't important. She just needed to get away from the others for a while longer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No English,' he said simply.

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

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

felt detached and alone, she thought, how the hell must he be feeling?
Dark thoughts filled Donna's mind.
The longer the silence in her room continued, the darker her thoughts became.

19

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

At the far end of the corridor was a narrow square landing leading onto a staircase. Floor to ceiling length windows let the grey autumnal light seep inside. Jack stood a short distance away from the nearest window and peered down into the mass of dark, decaying bodies still being drawn towards the university and, in particular, the accommodation block. Why did they stay, he wondered? He took a few cautious steps forward. His position was too far and too high for him to be seen by any of the bodies but he still took care to stay to the side and try and keep out of sight. He was terrified that one of the corpses might see him and start to react. He imagined the effect of that single reaction running through the entire crowd. He'd seen it happen several times before today - a slight disturbance in one part of the huge gathering would spread across the immense gathering like a shock wave. It had happened when the woman had jumped to her death from the window earlier. He could just about see her from where he was standing. Poor cow, he thought. He couldn't help thinking that she was better off where she was now.

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

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

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

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

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

Heath didn't answer.

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

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

'Have you tried reading?'

'No, have you?'

'I did,' he said, scratching the side of his bearded face. 'I used to lecture here. I went back to my office a couple of days ago and picked up a few books. Brought them back with me and sat down to read one but...'

'But what?'

'Couldn't do it.'

'Why?'

He shrugged his shoulders and rubbed his eyes. For a moment Jack looked up from the bodies and stared into the other man's drawn and weary face. 'Don't know,' he answered slowly. 'I just couldn't do it. I started to read a novel. I got through a few pages before I had to stop. All it did was remind me of what's happened and what I've lost and...'

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

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

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

'Sit and wait,' he said eventually.

'Is that it?'

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

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

Part II

20

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

Without any warning the precarious equilibrium was upset. On a cold, grey and wet Sunday morning some nineteen days after everything had begun, something finally happened.

Thirty miles west of the city where the survivors sheltered, in a bleak and nondescript field, lay the concealed entrance to a military bunker. Waiting underground inside the dark and grey building, shielded and protected from the dead world outside by thick, concrete walls and industrial strength air purification systems, were almost three hundred soldiers. As tired, frightened and disorientated as the bewildered survivors left out in the open above ground, they too had struggled to cope with the uncertainty of each passing hour. Inside the bunker no-one knew what had happened. From the most senior officer in the base down to the lowest in the ranks, no-one had anything more than a few scraps of unconfirmed information to go on. They had been acting on hurriedly given orders when they'd been scrambled on the first morning. There were many rumours about disease, weapons of mass destruction, germ warfare and contagion but no concrete facts to substantiate or confirm the hearsay. The men and women in the bunker didn't need to know the details of what had happened and neither, for that matter, did the officers in charge of the base. All they knew - all they needed to know - was that sooner or later they would be sent up to the surface to try and take control of whatever was left. The orders had finally been given by the base commander. Today was the day the first troops would go up to the surface.

Nineteen days we'd been underground.

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

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

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

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

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

Tests and air samples had shown that the disease was still present outside. Whatever kind of germ it was, it sounded stronger and more resilient than anything anyone had come across before. We were to wear full protective gear whilst outside. Any contamination and we would be unable to return to the bunker. There were orders to shoot and kill any of us who did not comply. A minimum of two days in the decontamination chamber would follow our planned five hours outside.

One of the medical officers fumbled his way through a briefing on the physical effects of the disease. It was obvious from his manner and the lack of any hard facts or statistics that most of his words were uncertain and, in all probability, untrue - they had to tell us something. He talked about a violent infection causing internal swellings and lesions which would most probably result in death or, at the very least, severe pain and secondary infection. He

talked about many thousands of people being killed outright. He talked about the possibility of others surviving, but in what condition it was not clear. He told us to be prepared to come across many, many casualties. Our mission was to assess the situation in the nearest city and then report back. No further operations could take place until our initial assessment had been made.

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

22

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

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

Cooper turned to look at Mark Thompson sitting next to him. He looked frightened. Even though the tinted visors on their cumbersome full-face breathing masks Cooper could see that the other man was scared. He could see it in his eyes - the way that although his head remained perfectly still and fixed forward, his eyes were darting frantically around the inside of the transport, never daring to settle on any one thing for fear of catching sight of whatever it was that was terrifying him. And that was still the problem, Cooper decided, it was not knowing. They'd been trained to deal with the aftermath of nuclear war, conventional war, terrorism and many other types of conflict or attack, but it was obvious that this was very different. The details of cause and effect were sparse, but it was already clear that no-one could have been trained to deal with anything like this.

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

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

The soldiers were sat in two rows along either side of the transport, facing

into the middle. Thompson suddenly got up out of his seat and leant across the inside of the machine to look out of a small square window between the heads of the two troops sitting directly opposite.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cooper shuffled around to look out of the window nearest to him. The temperature outside was low and the thick glass was smeared with condensation. He wiped it clear with the back of one gloved hand and peered out into the afternoon gloom.

'Christ...' he muttered under his breath.

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

They had reached the city centre.

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

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

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

Cooper stood motionless and stared into the city. Torrential rain drenched the grim scene like a mist. He watched the water run down a gutter towards him. A short distance from his feet lay several rapidly decomposing bodies. The world looked completely alien and unfamiliar. He had been to this city before. He

had driven along this road. Today it was unrecognisable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No response. The figures continued to move.

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

Still no response.

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

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

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

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

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

The troops turned and ran. Thompson was caught by the arm as the nearest few creatures reached out for him. He began to beat at the pitiful figures hanging onto him, battering them away with his fists and the end of his rifle. As quickly as he could break their hold, however, more gripped onto his suit.

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

'Come on,' he yelled, 'move!'

Terrified and disorientated by the mass of rotting faces in front of him, Thompson panicked and tried to force his way further forward through the

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

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

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

He could see Thompson again now.

What the hell was he doing?

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

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

Thompson ripped off his mask.

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

He stopped speaking abruptly and bent forward and began to cough violently. Doubled over with shock and sudden agony, the lining of his throat began to burn and swell, quickly cutting off his air supply. By the time Cooper had reached him he was already choking on the blood running down his windpipe and draining into his lungs. He dropped to the cold, wet ground and shook and convulsed next to Cooper's feet, spitting crimson blood onto the wet tarmac. Distracted by movement, Cooper saw that more bodies were approaching from every direction, dragging themselves towards the stranded soldiers. As the sound of the transport's engine faded away into the distance, he glanced down again and saw that the man on the ground was dead. As the bodies neared he stepped over the corpse of his colleague and began to run deeper into the town, hoping that he could find somewhere to shelter before making his move and heading back to the base.

The torrential rain was falling harder than ever, hissing down all around him and bouncing back up off the pavement. Cooper ran up a steady hill towards a small square shopping precinct littered with rotting human remains. There were many of the staggering survivors (if that was what they really were) around the scene, their reaction to him dulled and delayed by whatever it was that had happened to them. As Cooper brushed past it was all they could do to painfully turn themselves around and stumble after him hopelessly. As a soldier it was his duty to defend and protect these people, but it was clear

that they were already beyond hope. As a human being, therefore, his priorities became infinitely more selfish and personal. He needed to get away from the unrecognisable hell that this city had become. His own safety was his only remaining concern.

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

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

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

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

With panic and bile rising in his throat, Cooper ran diagonally across the room, jumping up onto desks to avoid making contact with the shadowy creatures around him. He jumped down to the floor and slid and crashed through a heavy fire door into a dark corridor. Pushing his way past another wandering body he reached the nearest staircase and began to climb up. He moved as quickly as he could until he had reached the top floor and could go no further. After trying three locked office doors he forced his way into a small, square store room. He slammed the door shut behind him and pulled a metal storage rack down to block it and prevent the people outside from getting in.

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

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

order to avoid it being compromised.

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

23

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

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

The survivors sheltering in the university had become cocooned in their hideaway. Too afraid to leave the relative safety of their building, the bravest of them had climbed up onto the roof, battling against violent weather conditions. From their high and precarious vantage point they had been unable to see the other people. They had, however, watched with mounting excitement as vast crowds of rotting bodies had begun to drift away from the university site and head back deeper into the city. Although thousands remained, the number of bodies left wandering outside the accommodation block had reduced reassuringly. The survivors knew, however, that it wouldn't take much to attract the collective attention of the dead and bring them staggering back to them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No, I just think...'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Too right I don't,' he replied, 'why should I?'

'Can't you see how our chances will improve if we work together?' Croft asked. Holmes looked up to the ceiling in despair.

'But that's my point, what chance have we got? Everybody in this damn building has lost absolutely everything. Getting out of here and trying to forget everything is the best option for anyone who's got any degree of sense left...'

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

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

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

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

Jack Baxter had been watching the increasingly tense conversation develop.

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

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

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

'...a survivor would know that anything up on the roof would probably have been put there intentionally,' added Donna, completing his sentence for him.

'If we're talking about lighting a fire, then a survivor would know that any blaze would most probably start somewhere inside the building and work its way up, it wouldn't start on top, would it?'

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

Donna looked at the frightened lecturer for a few long seconds before turning her back on him in frustration. She understood what he was saying, she just couldn't understand why it was such a issue for him. To her the solution to their problem and the potential side-effects were obvious and unavoidable. Increasing the number of bodies outside the building seemed to be a small price to pay if it meant they could make contact with other survivors - people with transport and weapons who, it seemed, were surviving out in the open.

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

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

The couple had heard the engine in the distance when the soldiers had emerged from their hidden base earlier in the day. At first it had seemed impossible to believe - since leaving the farmhouse neither of them had seen any indication that other people remained alive - not a single sound or movement that might have pointed to the existence of other survivors. But the noise of the engine had been definite and unmistakable, and it had filled them both with sudden unexpected hope where before they had felt nothing but pain, emptiness and desolation.

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

He was right.

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

The transport disappeared into the darkness. He stood up and ran cautiously along the exposed brow of the hill, following the machine until it was completely out of view. Where did the track lead? He stared into the darkness and contemplated what he had seen for a few silent seconds before remembering the danger of being alone outside and running back to the motorhome.

'Well?' Emma asked as he let himself back inside.

'Well what? I saw a bloody big army machine. Don't know exactly what it was but...'

'The army?'

'Looked like it,' Michael said breathlessly as he locked the door behind him and drew the thick curtains which they used to stop any light from spilling

out into the darkness and revealing their location to the rest of the world. 'Couldn't be sure, but it was definitely some kind of armoured machine.' 'Where did it go?' He shrugged his shoulders. Emma had an infuriating habit of asking questions which she knew he couldn't answer. 'It was following the track we found earlier,' he sighed, 'so I guess it was going wherever the track leads.' 'And where's that?' 'How the hell am I supposed to know? I suggest we should try and find out tomorrow.' 'Don't you want to look tonight?' 'No,' he replied, shaking his head. 'The light's almost gone. It's too dangerous. We'll wait until morning.'

24

Cooper was becoming increasingly claustrophobic in his protective suit. Made from a number of layers of rubberized material, as well as preventing any contamination from getting inside, it also stopped everything from getting out. Although it was cold in the building he was dripping with sweat. He decided he would make a move in a short while but, for now, he wanted to rest and gather his thoughts and prepare himself for the journey back to the base. He didn't relish the thought of having to fight his way back out of the city. And what if he couldn't get access to the base when he finally made it back there? What if they wouldn't let him inside because the decontamination process had already started for the others? What if they hadn't even made it back? He imagined having to wait outside on his own for days - unable to eat or drink or even to breathe freely. Christ, what exactly had happened to the world? He had been understandably preoccupied with the situation that he suddenly found himself in, so much so that the fate of the rest of the world seemed to have somehow temporarily passed him by. The effects of the virus had been devastating beyond compare, that much was clear, but what had the deadly disease actually done? Why had some people survived when others had died, and had those people actually survived at all? Their skin bore the same telltale signs of decomposition and decay as the corpses on the ground and they were unnaturally lethargic and slow. He stopped and checked himself. What was he actually saying here? Cooper shook his head and laughed and leant back against the nearest wall. Did he really think that those people he'd come across in the city were dead? Maybe the air had been filled not with disease but with some particularly effective hallucinogenic drug that had somehow breached the protection of his suit? Perhaps nothing that he thought he'd seen had actually happened? That was a marginally more plausible explanation of the bizarre events of the day so far. The world outside was relentlessly dark. He wondered whether he would be better making his move at night? Perhaps he would be safer under the cover of darkness? Whatever the people he'd come across were - contaminated survivors, reanimated corpses or hallucinations - he was clearly stronger and quicker than they were. He also had the advantage of having been trained to survive in the most extreme conditions. He was confident - or at least as confident as he could be in the circumstances - that he would be able to get out of the city. His stomach growled angrily with pangs of hunger. He'd done his best to ignore the mounting pain for the last couple of hours but it was getting worse. The gentle rumblings had now become severe cramps which twisted his gut and, to add to the discomfort, his bladder was full to capacity despite the fact that his throat was uncomfortably dry. He needed a distraction, and short of leaving the store room he couldn't immediately think of one. In a desperate attempt to occupy his mind for a while, Cooper began to look around the metal racking which surrounded him. Even a pen and paper would be sufficient - he could write his will or scribble pictures or do anything to

distract himself until the time was right to leave. Using the light from a small but powerful torch he'd carried strapped to his belt he peered dejectedly into the gloom.

Up high on the opposite side of the room he could see cardboard boxes. Most of the racking was loaded up with basic office supplies and stationery, but from where he stood he couldn't see what these boxes might contain. A mixture of inquisitiveness and sheer boredom and frustration drove him to climb up and check the boxes out. Disappointingly they held nothing more than printer cartridges and supplies.

Cooper lowered his foot to step down but lost his balance as the racking (which was not attached to the wall as he'd presumed) tipped forward slightly. He dropped down heavily and landed awkwardly on his back on top of a photocopier with a crash which, in the silence of the night, sounded disproportionately loud. Wincing with pain and surprise he then rolled off the top of the machine and tumbled onto the floor in an uncoordinated heap, smashing his head against more racking on the way down. Numb with surprise and breathing heavily, he lay where he had fallen for a moment and listened to other sounds which had suddenly begun to echo around the building, the clattering and crashing noises he'd made having disturbed the office's other occupants. With considerable effort he slowly dragged himself back onto his feet and brushed himself down.

He could feel air on his face.

Thrown into a desperate panic, Cooper scrambled around in the darkness for his torch. Switching it on, he shone it across the room and, in the light it gave off, saw that the visor of his face-mask was damaged. With his heart pounding in his chest his eyes followed the route of a snaking crack across the visor from bottom-left to top-right where he saw that the protective glass, perspex or whatever it was that the mask was made of had chipped.

An immediate, suffocating nausea washed over the soldier as he realised the implications of what had happened. His suit had been compromised. He had seen what the disease had done to Thompson earlier and he knew full well how quickly and violently his colleague had been infected and had died. After a split-second pause as the cold reality of his situation sunk in, he panicked. He covered the chip in the visor with his hand, hoping to prevent the disease from getting inside. With each second that passed so his fear increased. He struggled to find some tape with which he could repair the damage, knowing full well that, in all probability, his lungs had already been filled with the deadly germs. All that he could do now was wait for the inevitable to happen. Cooper screwed his eyes shut and waited.

He held his breath for as long as he could, hoping to prolong his life by a few precious seconds and knowing that the next time he breathed in might be the last.

A few seconds longer still and he ripped off the face-mask. He was already contaminated - he decided he might as well breathe his final breath freely and not through the sterilising filters in the breathing apparatus.

He leant against the window, breathing in the cold autumn air, and waited. After five minutes had passed he began to wonder why he wasn't dead. Or was he? Was this how the people who were still able to move had been affected? He didn't feel any different. It didn't hurt. He wasn't suffocating or choking as he'd seen Thompson suffering earlier.

It was several hours later when Cooper finally allowed himself to accept the fact that he so far seemed to have been left untouched by whatever it was that had ripped apart the rest of the world.

25

'They've got to be somewhere down that track,' Michael whispered, knocking back the last dregs of a mug of lukewarm black coffee. 'Whether they're a mile away or ten miles away, they're going to be down there somewhere.'

'So what do we do?' Emma asked, leaning across the melamine covered table and

watching the shadows dance across his face in the dull light of a flickering gas lamp. She was tired. It felt like they'd been talking about this for hours.

`Find them,' he said simply.

`But is that wise?'

`What do you mean?'

`If this really is the army or airforce or whatever, do we really want to get involved with them?'

`Do we have a choice? Whoever they are, they're obviously well organised. You never know, they might have an antidote or something. There could be bloody hundreds of them holded-up somewhere.'

`But we don't need an antidote.'

`I know that,' he snapped. `All I'm trying to say is that this whole thing might not be as hopeless as we've been thinking...'

`And anyway,' she continued unabated, ignoring everything he'd said, `everybody's already dead. It'd need to be a bloody good antidote to help those poor bastards out there.'

`Okay,' Michael sighed, annoyed by her flippancy and her reluctance to try and find some good in the day's events, `you've made your point.'

A brief moment of silence followed. Emma looked around the cramped motorhome where she'd spent virtually every minute of the last few days. She hoped with all her heart that Michael's optimism was justified. After the relentless grief, despair and fear which had burdened them both constantly since the nightmare had begun, the possibility that some semblance of normality might somehow be about to return to their lives was welcome and unexpected. But it was so unexpected that she wouldn't allow herself to believe it was true until the fragments of possibility and hope had been evidenced and cemented into reality.

`You okay?' Michael asked, concerned by how quiet and reflective she had suddenly become.

`I'm all right,' she answered sadly.

`Sure?'

She shook her head and looked down at the table.

`No,' she mumbled.

Suddenly uneasy and self-conscious, Michael shuffled awkwardly in his seat. He'd spent weeks with Emma now but there was still an occasional distance between them. He grew more and more relaxed and assured in her company each day, but moments like this felt uncomfortable. Truth was he didn't know what to say to her. He didn't know how to make her pain go away.

`What's wrong?'

She wiped her eyes and looked up at him.

`Sorry,' she sobbed, `I can't help it. Most of the time I'm okay, but then sometimes I...'

`What?'

Emma looked around the caravan, searching for the words to express how she felt.

`I just want this to stop,' she explained. `I want to go to sleep tonight and wake up in the morning and find everything back as it used to be. And if that's not going to happen, I want to wake up and find the bodies gone and the uncertainty gone and the fear gone and...'

`Shh...' he whispered, worried that her voice was becoming loud enough to be heard from outside. `Listen, you know as well as I do that the only certainty round here is that things are never going to get back to normal, don't you?' She nodded.

`Yes, but...'

`If this is all we've got left then we've got to make the most of it. We'll get used to living like this and...'

`But this isn't living,' she protested tearfully. `How can you call this living? This is barely existing for Christ's sake. Look at us, Mike. Look at what's happening to us. We smell. We're dirty. We haven't washed properly for

weeks. Our clothes are filthy. We both need to cut our hair and you need to shave. We're not eating properly or exercising or...'

'We're making do,' he interrupted. 'And when we can we'll find somewhere to live where we can wash and relax and grow our own food. We'll get new clothes and we'll build ourselves a bloody palace somewhere, okay?'

She sniffed back more tears.

'Okay,' she replied.

Michael stared into her tear-streaked face. She was right, but what could they do? As far as he could see there was no immediate way out of the situation they found themselves in. They had to remain mobile and go without some basic necessities in order to survive. He truly believed that things would change eventually, they had to. The bodies would decay away to nothing in time.

'Hungry?' he asked, looking for a way to distract Emma from her dark and difficult thoughts. She nodded and sank back into her seat.

'A little.'

'I'll get you something.'

She watched him as he stood up and walked the short length of the motorhome to the cramped kitchen area. Their vehicle shelter was safe but stifling. She might have been able to cope with the confined space had she been able to venture outside occasionally. As it was she was trapped, and she was finding the motorhome increasingly claustrophobic. Even though they had intentionally driven out into the middle of nowhere, for safety's sake they had draped thick blankets over every window and door to prevent any light from seeping out into the darkness and giving away their presence.

Almost three weeks had passed since the day the disease had struck but Emma still couldn't adjust to the way she was having to live. She'd known from the start that she'd probably never fully come to terms with the devastation and loss she'd experienced, but there were other much more subtle ways in which she was struggling. Having to remain deathly silent was harder than she would ever have imagined. She was growing tired of having to think about everything in terms of how much noise she was going to make.

Michael came back to the table and sat down. He carried with him more coffee and two pots of dehydrated snack food. Steam snaked up into the air from the top of each pot.

'Beef and tomato or sweet and sour?' he asked.

They had found a job-lot of these snacks in the storeroom of a small corner shop they'd looted earlier in the week. The food tasted awful but it was hot, easy to prepare and relatively nutritious.

'Can't stand sweet and sour,' she answered, 'but I prefer it to beef and tomato.'

He passed her the sweet and sour flavoured food and a fork. Still sniffing back tears she began to eat hungrily and without further complaint.

'I think they'll be back,' Michael said between mouthfuls of tasteless food.

'Who will?' asked Emma.

He looked at her in disbelief. How could she have forgotten already?

'Whoever it was I saw today,' he sighed. 'Remember? Bloody hell, Emma, anyone would think you didn't mind living in a shit-hole like this eating plastic food out of a plastic pot!'

'I'm sorry,' she said quietly. 'I'm tired. Look, I know how important this is to you...'

'Do you?' Michael snapped.

'Yes,' she insisted, 'of course I do.'

'Have you stopped to think where these people might be from? This might not be as widespread as we'd thought. Maybe it's only this country that's been affected...'

He stopped talking, aware that Emma had put down her fork and that she was staring at him.

'Don't do this,' she said softly, reaching her hand out across the table and gently squeezing his. 'Please don't let your imagination run away with you.'

Until we know more let's just keep our feet on the ground and take every day

as it comes. I don't want to start thinking things are going to change only to find that we're back in the same damn mess again and nothing's happened. Do you know what I'm trying to say?'

'No, not really.'

She sighed and squeezed his hand again.

'As far as I'm concerned you're all I've got left. You're the only thing left that I can count on. My family and friends are gone. I don't have a home any longer and I don't own anything other than what's in this van. The only thing I seem to be able to hold onto is you, and I'm not about to let you go.'

'You don't have to. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not suggesting that we do anything that's going to...'

'I don't want to take any chances, Mike. You know how much I hate all of this, but if this is as good as it's going to get then it's going to have to do.

Let's just keep our heads, take our time and not take any chances, okay?'

He looked across the table and into her eyes and nodded. Much as he wanted to follow the track and try and find the other survivors he knew that she was right. He felt strangely guilty for a moment. Did he give their relationship and need for each other the same importance that Emma appeared to? For a split second he tried to imagine being without her. He couldn't. She was all he had too.

26

Cooper woke up.

He couldn't remember falling asleep. He remembered sitting by the window last night, staring out into the darkness and listening to the rain but, other than that, nothing. He noticed the discarded face-mask on the floor and recollections of what had happened to him came flooding back. He felt okay. He was still breathing and he still had a pulse. As far as he could tell he was still fit and healthy and alive. Surely the disease would have affected him by now if it was going to affect him at all?

The morning outside was dry and, despite the sky being dull and overcast, relatively bright. The heavy smell of death and decay hung over the city like a dense cloud of polluting fog, tainting everything with its abhorrent scent. Now that he had discarded his breathing apparatus the stench was inescapable. Regardless, Cooper quickly decided that it was just about preferable to the processed and recycled air that he'd been forced to breathe for most of the last two and a half weeks. He reminded himself that he was in the middle of a large city and that the air would surely be cleaner and more palatable elsewhere. There would undoubtedly be better places than this.

For a short time he allowed his mind to wander. Instinctively he thought about making the return trip to the base. He'd already made basic mental plans and preparations before the realisation dawned on him that he didn't actually have to go back there if he didn't want to. It was only the sense of duty and misguided loyalty instilled through years of military service that had made him think that he should return. No doubt the other soldiers who had left the base with him yesterday would have given him up for dead by now - the officers would be more surprised if he did find his way back there now than if he remained missing in action. He suddenly found himself in a relatively fortunate position. He was free from the restrictions of military life and the confines of the bunker and, it seemed, immune from the germ that had destroyed pretty much everything else. What remained of the rest of the world was potentially his for the taking.

For a while Cooper alternated between feeling free and feeling compelled to return to his duties. He looked down into the alley below the window and watched a single bedraggled figure trip and stumble along. Should he do something to try and help here? Could he really disappear selfishly into the distance and leave everyone and everything else to rot? It was the scale of the disaster that ultimately convinced him there was nothing he could do. What did he think he could possibly hope to do for the thousands of diseased

people? It had been indicated that this was a global crisis. Even if he returned to the base, what could a handful of soldiers possibly do to help millions upon millions of dead or dying citizens? From where he was sitting it was painfully obvious that society and civilisation was as dead as any of the decaying bodies still lying face down in the gutter.

Feeling suddenly stronger and more confident Cooper decided to move. He didn't know what he was going to do or where he was going to go, he just knew that there had to be somewhere better than this cramped and cluttered storeroom. Still sweating profusely in his heavy suit (it had kept him warm through the night just ended) he peeled it off and dropped it to the ground, stripping it of any useful equipment. He felt cold and the sudden uncomfortable drop in temperature brought him crashing back to reality and reminded him of the enormity of the catastrophe that had befallen the country. For a while he considered trying to find his friends and family. Much as it hurt him to do so, he knew that it was better to believe they were already lost. If he did try and find them, chances were they'd be dead or dying and there would be nothing he'd be able to do for them. But then again, he thought, he seemed to have survived the disease, so why shouldn't they have done so also? What if his immunity was linked to his genetic make up? Strange to think that his survival this morning may well have only been possible because of some combination of DNA handed down to him unknowingly by his parents.

He cautiously moved the metal racking blocking his way and, with his automatic rifle held out in front of him, gently pushed the door open and peered out into the corridor. He glanced left and right and, once he was sure the way was clear, stepped out into the shadows. His footsteps echoed loudly on the linoleum floor and he soon heard muffled sounds nearby. Somewhere in the building something was reacting to his movements.

As he crept cautiously towards the staircase he had used yesterday, Cooper found himself thinking about the other troops who had been sent into town with him. If they had made it back to the bunker then he knew exactly where they'd be now - locked tight in the decontamination chamber. And how would they be feeling? Empty. Lifeless. They had seen the extent to which the world had been destroyed and they were probably more aware than anyone else of the apparent hopelessness of the situation. He guessed that they would be locked in the chamber for at least another day before being let back into the main complex. He was sure that the hours and days which then followed would be spent being debriefed by the senior officers. And what was there to look forward to after that? Nothing. Just more of the same - more dangerous excursions beyond the safety of the underground bunker followed by more excruciatingly slow decontamination followed by more questions. And then it would begin again. Cooper slowly made his way down the stairs, one at a time, taking care with each individual footstep to avoid making even a single unnecessary noise. As he moved towards ground level he questioned what it was the senior officers in the bunker thought they were going to achieve? As far as he could see the human race was over. Destroyed in less than half a day by a virus of unimaginable ferocity.

The soldier's stealth and silence allowed him to creep through the building without being seen or heard. He pushed open a heavy glass door and stepped outside. The morning was cold and the dull grey cloud so prevalent earlier was now beginning to break up letting occasional patches of blue appear. It was an exhilarating feeling seeing daylight again. It had been good yesterday to get out of the bunker but this was a thousand times better. For the first time in weeks he was free. For the first time in weeks Cooper was almost beginning to feel like a human being again.

He turned towards the heart of the city, moving down the alleyway in the same direction in which he had run yesterday. Another listless, bedraggled figure traipsed towards him awkwardly, its face and features made indistinct by bright autumn sunlight which had suddenly spilled across the scene. Cooper thought carefully for a moment, not sure how he should deal with it. Should he attack it before it attacked him? The pathetic creature looked so weak and

weary that he was instinctively sure it didn't pose a serious threat to him. Keeping his guard up he stood still and watched with morbid fascination as it moved closer and closer towards him. He remained routed to the spot, moving only his eyes. The figure stumbled past, seemingly oblivious to his presence. The unexpected sunlight disappeared when the pitiful body was alongside him. Despite the shadow he was still able to clearly see the full extent of the decay and deterioration of the creature's skin.

Once his way was clear Cooper moved forward again, taking care to stay pressed against the wall to his right, hiding in the relative darkness he found there. At the end of the alleyway was a junction. He followed a long, gently curved stretch of road round and found himself at the entrance to a large public square. In spite of all that he had already seen, the sight which greeted him took his breath away.

Cooper had last been to this city on a warm summer's day a couple of years ago. The tiered square had been a popular public meeting place and a well-known city landmark. He remembered sitting with friends outside a bar, drinking, laughing and generally wasting the day. His mind wandered momentarily as he surveyed the scene and thought about the time he'd spent here. He could almost hear the sound of the running water which had previously cascaded from a huge, modern fountain at the top of the square and run down decorative steps to a large shallow pool just a few meters away from where he stood. Today the steps were dry and the waterfall and fountain eerily silent. Last time he'd been here the water had been clear and bright. Today what remained was green-grey and stagnant. There was a bloated body floating in the deepest part of the pool.

There were figures nearby. He started to move again. It appeared that as long as he matched their slothful speed he didn't seem to attract any unwanted attention. These people were catatonic - moving but not thinking or reacting to anything but the most obvious stimulation. Occasionally pigeons would land in the square with a sudden burst of unexpected noise and movement. The arrival of the scavenging birds would cause the bodies to turn awkwardly and lurch and stagger towards them pointlessly.

Cooper felt strangely invincible. His immunity to the disease or virus or whatever seemed to set him apart from the remains of human beings he could see around him. The fact that he could still control his speed and movements gave him an irrefutable advantage, almost like an unexpected shield of protection or a cloak of invisibility. It really was as if the people couldn't see him unless he made it obvious that he was there.

The lone soldier's choices were endless but also strangely limited. In theory he had the rest of the world at his disposal, and yet at the same time nowhere was safe. Too much remained unknown and uncertain. Whilst he was as sure as he could be of his apparent immunity and relative strength today, who could say what might happen tomorrow? Allowing himself to become dangerously distracted, he tripped up one of the large concrete steps and dropped his rifle. It landed on the paving stones with a loud clatter that shattered the silence.

'Shit,' he cursed as he stooped to pick up the weapon. Before he had even lifted his head again he was aware of them. Approaching from all directions were sickly, diseased figures, pouring out from the shadows. For a few seconds it was all he could do to look around helplessly, desperately searching for a way out of the exposed public area. There seemed to be fewer bodies to his right and so he ran, pushing his way past the nearest few. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw that more and more of the bloody things were stumbling after him. Their speed was not a problem but their sudden sheer volume and apparent determination was. He struggled to contain his mounting panic.

Instinct forced him to run, but he knew that it was his noise and movement that had given his presence away. There were buildings on either side of him but swarms of bodies prevented him from getting to them easily. Desperate, he wrenched open the door of a telephone box and forced his way inside. Pushing away rotting hands that reached after him, he slammed the door shut and sank

down to the ground. With his back pressed against one side of the box and his feet pushed hard against the other, he looked up and watched with disgust as body after body smashed into the small glass cubicle. In seconds he was in almost total darkness - the light outside blocked out by the mass of diseased flesh that was pressed against the phone box. Cooper dropped his head and closed his eyes. Wait for a while, he thought, and they'll disappear.

27

Michael woke up with a start. It was just after ten in the morning.

'Listen,' he hissed.

Drugged with sleep, Emma propped herself up on her elbows.

'What?' she mumbled.

'Listen,' he hissed again.

In the distance, and disappearing quickly, was the sound of an engine.

'More people like we heard yesterday,' he said, jumping out of bed and struggling in the gloom to find his clothes and put them on. 'I've got to get out there and see where they're going.'

'Why?' asked Emma, confused.

'Stupid bloody question,' he snapped. 'You know why. These are survivors. These people could...'

'These people are leaving here,' she said, her voice still tired and heavy with sleep. 'There's no point going out now. All you're going to be able to do is watch them disappear.'

'That's got to be better than just sitting here and...'

'Why not wait? They came back yesterday, didn't they? Surely they'll come back again today?'

'Not necessarily,' he said as he pulled on his jeans and fastened his belt.

'No,' she yawned, 'not necessarily, but probably. You've got to admit, there's a damn good chance they'll be back later.'

'Yes, but...'

'But what?'

Michael stopped what he was doing and peered at Emma through the early morning gloom. Dejected, he threw his T-shirt down onto the bed in front of her and sat down heavily next to her feet. He knew she was right. In the time it had taken him to put on his jeans and socks the noise outside had already disappeared. Whoever these people were, he had to agree it was likely they'd be back again later.

'Come here,' Emma said quietly.

Michael looked up at her with sad, childlike eyes. She could see that he was struggling. As strong, resilient and brave as they both tried constantly to be for each other, it was becoming harder and harder just to get through each day. The lack of any news, direction or purpose was slowly killing them, and that was why Michael had reacted to the sound of the engine in the way that he had. Every last fibre of his body wanted to believe that the survivors they had heard would bring an end to the bleak and relentless nightmare that their once ordinary lives had become over the last few weeks.

Michael lay down on the bed next to Emma and rested his head on the pillow close to hers. She rolled over onto her side and looked deep into his tired face. He stared up at the ceiling, excited by the sound he'd heard but also angry and infuriated that he was still no closer to finding out who these survivors were and where they'd come from. He knew he'd probably get the answers to his questions in the near future but that wasn't good enough - he wanted to know now.

Emma wrapped her arm around him and pulled herself closer. He could feel her breath on the side of his face. It relaxed him. For a moment it made what was happening outside feel somewhat less important.

'They will be back you know,' she whispered again with real belief and conviction in her voice. Michael knew that she was right. 'I'm sure of it.'

It's too much of a coincidence for us to hear them travelling past here twice

in two days and back again last night. They must have a base nearby.'

'I know,' Michael grunted.

'We should move the van,' she suggested. 'Move it into a place overlooking the track.'

He nodded.

'Suppose so.'

'Look, that's what we'll do,' she said gently, still trying desperately to keep him positive and focussed. 'We'll drive across the hills until we find somewhere we can see the track from and we'll sit and wait. We can sit in the front and watch and as soon as we see them we'll try and follow them back to wherever it is they've come from.'

Michael nodded again. Her well-meaning words, although perhaps said more out of duty than belief, were welcome and appreciated. He was lucky to have Emma. He glanced across at her and lifted his hand and brushed a fallen curl of hair away from her face. She smiled and pulled herself even closer so that their faces were almost touching. He kissed her lightly on the cheek and then kissed her lips. He kissed her again and then pulled back slightly and stared deep into her eyes. Much as they both craved warmth, comfort, protection and countless other things, to be safe and to be this close to each other was enough for now.

28

Exhausted by the effort of moving silently through the diseased crowds, Cooper dragged himself on through the bleak remains of the city. Despite all of his training and preparation for dealing with nightmare scenarios, he was finding it increasingly difficult to keep moving forward. Every single step he took required more concentrated effort than it ever should have. Every time he turned his head he saw something else which shocked, repulsed, disgusted or terrified him. The cold, grey streets were littered with the abhorrent remains of broken, decaying bodies - the residue of thousands of innocent and unsuspecting plague victims. If he half-closed his eyes and tried to ignore the sickly, shuffling bodies that milled hopelessly around him then it felt like he was walking through a bizarre still photograph. It was almost as if the world had been frozen in an instant of time, and that every part of it was now dying the slowest and most painful death imaginable. He could no longer see any goodness around him, nothing positive. Death, decay and destruction dominated everywhere.

In half an hour he had reached the ring road which ran around the perimeter of the city centre. His geography and knowledge of the local area was fair but far from comprehensive. He looked hopefully at every road sign he passed, trying to find the name of a suburb or nearby village that he recognised or at least remembered something about. It made sense for him to head for somewhere right on the outskirts of the city, somewhere where the buildings were spread out over a decent area rather than being packed tightly together as they were in many of the closer inner-city districts. He'd had plenty of time to think about what he was going to do, but the constant distractions around him had prevented him from coming up with anything resembling a sensible or coherent plan of action. All that he really wanted was to find somewhere relatively safe and comfortable where he could stop and rest for a few days and take stock of everything. More than anything he needed to spend some time trying to work out what it was that had actually happened. He didn't expect to be able to find many answers (if he found any at all) but for the sake of his sanity he needed the opportunity to stop, take a deep breath and at least attempt to understand.

On Cooper's left as he trudged slowly down the middle of the ring road was the city centre proper and, just ahead and to his right, the first few buildings of the hospital and university complex. The road slowly dropped down and arched lazily to the left, and as he followed it around he became aware of something bizarre and initially inexplicable that made his blood run cold. Up

ahead, little more than a quarter of a mile away, was an immense crowd of bodies. Instinct urged him to turn around and head in the opposite direction but at the same time he knew that he didn't dare make such an obvious move. A sudden stop or an unexpected change in direction might attract the attention of the numerous random bodies moving close around him. From what he had already seen this morning he knew that something as simple and innocent as such a movement might cause him to be noticed, and the resulting disturbance would inevitably attract more and more of the rotting corpses to him like moths around a single light burning in an otherwise pitch-black room. Like it or not, he seemed to have no option but to keep moving forward, to keep walking towards the huge crowd.

He neared the bodies with the initial intent of shuffling around the furthest edge of the massive gathering and carrying on out of the city. As he approached, however, he began to ask himself why such a gathering had built up there in the first place? The answer, it occurred to him, was simple. The creatures seemed to be devoid of virtually all decision making capabilities and they only appeared to react to the most basic of stimuli. Something was drawing them to this place.

The wide road was strewn with the remains of wrecked cars and other vehicles, making it difficult for Cooper to be able to accurately estimate the number of bodies ahead of him. They appeared to be dragging themselves towards a large, modern building on the other side of the road, each one of them advancing forward painfully slowly until the sheer weight and number of tightly packed creatures ahead prevented them from getting any closer. Cooper made a slight alteration to his course so that he drifted towards the far side of the road where there were slightly fewer figures. He noticed that more and more of them were appearing almost constantly, dragging themselves out from the shadows of the city centre. The vast crowd was largely silent, save for the constant slow shuffling of rotting feet being dragged along the ground. Over this low background noise, however, he thought he could hear something else. Too wary of drawing attention to himself by lifting his head to dare look up, he stared at the ground in front of him and concentrated so that he could distinguish and identify this new sound. It took only a few seconds for it to become apparent that it was the cracking and popping of burning wood, accompanied by occasional snatches of human conversation. When he heard someone shout - even though the noise lasted for only a couple of seconds and was unintelligible - he knew beyond doubt that there were other survivors nearby. Unable to contain his curiosity and desire to see other living, breathing people like himself, he cautiously lifted his head and looked into the distance. A pall of dirty grey smoke was drifting lazily away from the top of the large building opposite. He squinted and saw that there were people on the roof. Although he only dared look for a few seconds, he thought he could see between five and eight of them and, despite having seen each of them for only a moment, he knew that they were survivors. He'd seen the remains of many offices and shops that had been scarred by fire, but the fact that this blaze was on the roof of the building left him in little doubt that it had been started deliberately. Against his better judgement, Cooper allowed himself to drift deeper into the crowd. He didn't dare shout to the survivors to make them aware of his presence, knowing instead that his only option was to slowly and cautiously make his way closer to the building. Just a few short footsteps further forward and he found himself deep within the bulk of the rotting crowd. Random decaying figures collided with him constantly and it was all that he could do to keep his nerve and not lose control. The smell of putrefaction was appalling. He'd been around death many times before during his years of service, but never anything like this. The cloying, relentless smell of decay hung like a thick, disease-ridden blanket smothering everything. Keeping control of his stomach was beginning to take almost as much effort and concentration as keeping control of his speed and his movements. The density of the crowd added to the confusion. All that Cooper could now see were shuffling bodies on every side. Although the creatures were withered and

relatively slight, there were so many of them and they were packed so tightly together that it was impossible to see clearly in any direction. Generally the heads of the figures hung heavily on their weary shoulders but Cooper knew that it was too dangerous for him to again look up and over the top of the crowd. He had to keep moving with the flow of the obnoxious masses and hope that luck would eventually push him in the right direction.

Although he tried for a while to convince himself otherwise, there was no escaping the fact that, after a few minutes, he was not making any real progress towards the building. There was very little that he could immediately do about it. He felt himself being pushed and buffeted away from the front of the building and out to his right, back along the ring road in the general direction from which he had just arrived. Again there was nothing he could do except keep moving and hope that chance would eventually allow him to drift back the other way. He stumbled and tripped over an inert body on the ground. In a fraction of a second he was able to regain control, keep his balance and not panic. Even as his boot smashed down onto decayed flesh and exposed bone he forced himself to remain steady and emotionless.

A subway.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw it. Just over to his right he became aware of the entrance to a subway which, he guessed, provided a pedestrian connection between the buildings on the side of the road he was heading towards and the rest of the city. Before the events of a few weeks ago the ring road would have been far too busy for people to try and cross by foot - it was proving awkward enough to negotiate now with the wreckage of hundreds of cars and other vehicles and countless bodies strewn randomly across the cold tarmac. Sensing that he was still going nowhere, Cooper decided to take a chance and head underground. Although there would surely be more bodies trapped down there, it would be darker and, he presumed, safer. Cautiously he began to veer off towards the sloping concrete entrance. His nervousness increased as he stared down the ramp into the approaching darkness. As he descended the light steadily faded and the smell intensified. Unnerved, a sickly sweat broke out across the soldier's brow - it reminded him of the moment he entered the bunker on that first morning three weeks ago.

Inside the subway was almost pitch black, much darker than he had expected. He was aware of some degree of movement around him but it seemed that most of the bodies had by now dragged themselves up above ground, their limited attention captured, no doubt, by the light and sound and the movement of the rest of the crowds out there. No more than twenty meters down and he came upon a T-junction where a second tunnel crossed the path of the one he'd been following.

The lack of light was disorientating. His eyes were slowly becoming accustomed to the low gloom but as he followed the second tunnel (moving, he hoped, towards the building with the fire on the roof) the light continued to fade. The smell outside had been bad enough but down here it was appalling - the sharp, musty stench of festering, rotting flesh which had been trapped underground, unable to easily escape out into the relatively fresh air on the surface. He could see slight shadows and movements all around him and, at times, it seemed as if the dark walls of the subway tunnel themselves were moving. He shuffled forward a step at a time, dragging his feet along the ground and clearing a path through the endless decaying human debris with his heavy boots. He was fairly sure that the tunnel he now followed was leading him along the length of the road and closer towards the front of the building he was aiming for. He needed to turn right again to reach the survivors.

A sudden unexpected collision sent Cooper tumbling heavily to the ground. He had walked into one of the stumbling bodies and, although there had been virtually no force in the impact, the surprise had sent him reeling. He fell awkwardly, landing on the chest of an indistinguishable corpse which collapsed under his weight.

'Fucking hell,' he yelled instinctively as he struggled to pick himself up and get his balance. His clumsy boots slipped and slid in pools of sticky gore

causing him to lose his balance again. Seconds later and he was steady on his feet. Breathing heavily he stood completely still in the middle of the subway, hoping to remain invisible and undetected in the darkness. He didn't need to be able to see to know that no matter how still and quiet he was now, it didn't matter. The damage had already been done. His fall and sudden outburst seemed to have attracted the unwanted attention of every one of the sickly bodies that remained underground. He could hear them turning awkwardly in the darkness and beginning to lurch towards him.

In a second the first grabbing hands were upon him. Outstretched, clumsy and easy to deflect, he brushed them off with his left hand and grabbed the rifle which had been slung over his shoulder with the right. He didn't know what effect the rifle would have on the creatures, it was just another instinctive reaction. He glanced back and caught sight of more shadowy movement in the nearby darkness. They were coming from all directions. He was surrounded. Cooper dropped his shoulder and ran forward. He moved as quickly as he dared in his half-blind and panic-stricken state as he smashed body after body to the side. He tried to feel his way ahead with the end of the rifle, frightened that in the blackness he might be about to run headfirst into a wall or some other obstruction. He knew that he had no alternative. He had to keep moving or risk being trapped underground in almost total darkness, buried under the weight of the ever increasing numbers of rotting bodies swarming around him. The end of his rifle effortlessly pierced the withered torso of another corpse like a bayonet and then hit a wall, sending a sudden jarring thud running through his body. Cooper had reached another junction. He had seconds to chose between turning right into another pitch-black tunnel or going left along another equally dark passageway. Although disorientated, his sense of direction suggested he should move right and, as he had no other information to base his decision on, that was what he did, pushing the cadaver off the end of his rifle and forcing his way through still more bodies towards where he believed he'd find the building and the survivors.

Another body crashed into him, then another and another. With his shoulder dropped and his head down he charged forward, determined to keep moving at all costs through the sea of rotting flesh, terrified that he might be overcome by the unknown number of figures milling around him. At the back of his mind the nagging fear that his exit out of the subway might be blocked forced him to try and move faster and faster while his military training and commonsense pleaded with him to slow down. For a fraction of a second he looked up and saw a chink of light ahead through a gap between more lurching creatures. And he began to run with even more determination and speed.

He was getting closer to the light. Visible for fleeting moments between shadows and clumsy, staggering shapes, at that moment it was all that Cooper had to cling onto. He squeezed the trigger of his rifle and fired off a short round of shots, just enough to blast most of the bodies out of the way momentarily. With his path marginally clearer he sprinted forward with increased speed, watching the light around him increase steadily until he finally burst out into the open again. Relieved he stopped and shielded his eyes from the sudden brightness of the day as he looked anxiously from side to side. Already there were hordes of decaying shells advancing towards him, their interest having been aroused before he appeared by the noise of the shots echoing along the subway passages. His mouth was dry, his heart was pounding and his legs were heavy but he knew that he had to move and keep moving. The survivors were just ahead of him now. He knew that his survival depended on him reaching the building and attracting their attention.

More bodies spilled out of the subway after him and grabbing hands reached at him from behind, spurring him into action. With his rifle still gripped tight he raised the barrel of the weapon up into the air and fired off another volley of shots. After spending hours trying desperately to remain faceless and anonymous he was now ready to do all he could to make his presence known. 'Over here,' he screamed, looking up at the side of the tall redbrick building just ahead of him. 'Can anyone hear me?'

Down at ground level it was impossible for the lone soldier to be able to know if his cries had been enough to illicit any response. On the roof of the building, however, the second round of gunshots had triggered a flurry of excited and slightly anxious movement. Survivors moved nervously towards the edge of the roof and peered down, hoping to catch sight of the person that had fired the rifle amongst the countless thousands of vacuous bodies.

Cooper pushed himself towards the building, constantly looking for an entrance or open window or some other way to get inside. He could see plenty of doors but there were bodies pressed hard against them. There were plenty of windows too, but he knew that smashing them open would do more harm than good. He'd be letting himself into the building but, at the same time, he'd also be paving the way for a flood of decomposing figures to follow him through.

'Round the back,' a hoarse and directionless voice yelled at him. Cooper didn't waste time trying to locate the source of the sound, instead he sprinted away from the front of the building as instructed, smashing more of the lumbering cadavers away as he did.

Inside the accommodation block the frenzied activity continued as the survivors who had been up on the roof clattered down the nearest staircase to get to the ground floor. Some - Jack Baxter and Bernard Heath included - instinctively ran towards the assembly hall, intending to alert the rest of the survivors there and, perhaps, to find a way of distracting the bodies outside. A handful of others led by Donna Yorke and Phil Croft continued around to the back of the building where they pushed open an inconspicuous looking door and ran out into the daylight.

Slipping and tripping up a steep and wet grassy bank, Cooper heard the door open. He anxiously looked around and caught sight of the survivors who themselves were already surrounded by bodies. He could see six of them, three of whom were armed with large sticks and other makeshift weapons which they were using to batter the shuffling figures out of the way. He stumbled and fell before picking himself up again and continuing to push forward.

'There he is,' shouted Nick Braithwaite, a man who had hardly spoken since arriving at the university. He swung a snooker cue around his head like a sword, sending another three cadavers crumbling to the ground. Croft and another survivor moved forward slightly, hoping to clear a path for the soldier. Cooper smashed the butt of his rifle into the jaw of another corpse before pushing past the survivors and disappearing inside.

'He's in,' Donna yelled from just inside the doorway. 'Shut the bloody door!' The survivors outside began to retreat, still swinging their weapons furiously, the bodies still grabbing and reaching out for them. Braithwaite was the last man in, bringing in with him two of the desperate figures which clung onto him with diseased, claw-like hands. He dragged them further along a grey corridor before hitting out at them to try and release their relentless grip. As Donna

slammed the door shut and bolted it Keith Peterson grabbed the nearest corpse and lifted it up.

'Shit,' he said under his breath as he held it tightly by its spindly wrists and stared into its cold and expressionless face. The empty gaze which the creature returned chilled him to the bone. The decaying flesh around its wrists gave way under the force of his grip which nervously increased with each passing second.

'Just get rid of them,' Croft shouted nervously. Cooper yanked the body away from Peterson and pushed it against the wall. He lifted his rifle and put a single bullet through its head, right between the eyes. As the corpse slid down the wall (leaving a trail of black-red blood and shards of splintered bone behind it) the soldier turned and did the same to the second body. The remains of a dead vicar dropped to the ground in front of him.

The sound of the final gunshot echoed along the corridor and was gradually replaced by the ominous sound of body after body after body hurling itself against the door, trying desperately to reach the survivors safe inside.

`So where the fucking hell did you come from?' Nathan Holmes spat as the exhausted soldier and the group of six survivors entered the assembly hall. There were several other people in the room. They each individually stopped what they were doing and stared at the unexpected arrival.

`We were based just outside the city. Look, is there any chance that I could get...'

`Was it you who was shooting yesterday?' Holmes interrupted.

`Not me personally, but...'

`And the engine we heard, that was you too?'

Cooper nodded, exhausted. Much as he understood why it was happening, this sudden interrogation was the last thing he needed.

`That was us,' he answered.

`Us?'

`That's right.'

`So where are the others?'

`Back at the base I hope.'

`And why are you still here?'

`We got separated.'

`How come you can breathe? Are the others immune?'

Cooper shook his head.

`Don't think so. I don't know for sure. I only found out I was by chance. Look, could somebody please tell me exactly what happened here? I've been...'

`Aren't you the one who should be telling us what's happened?' asked Donna.

She walked across the room to stand directly between Holmes and the weary soldier. Cooper shrugged his shoulders.

`I don't know,' he replied. `None of us knew. We had a little information, but nothing...'

`What information?' Jack Baxter asked, moving closer.

`Like I say, no-one knew very much,' he explained. `We were told there was a disease. We knew that it was widespread and that it had probably killed thousands but nothing like...'

`So where were you when it happened?'

`What?'

`If you didn't know that you were immune until you got here, where have you been hiding for the last few weeks? How come the rest of you didn't get infected?'

`We were in a bunker.'

`You want to be thankful you didn't see any of it,' Bernard Heath sighed, sitting down a short distance away.

`What?'

`I said you ought to be grateful you were underground when it happen,' he continued. `It was more than thousands of people that died, it was millions of them. Bloody millions of them just dropping dead where they'd been standing. Christ, I don't expect there's a thousand people left alive.'

`So what about the ones outside? Are they...?' Cooper let his words fade into silence. No matter what he'd witnessed out on the streets, he couldn't bring himself to ask the impossible question which had played on his mind since he'd first arrived in the city.

`They're dead,' Baxter answered. `If I hadn't seen it myself I probably wouldn't believe it. They all died on the first morning. A couple of days later they started to move again.'

`But how could they...?' Cooper mumbled pointlessly.

`Don't know. Christ, we've got a doctor here and he doesn't know either. No-one knows.'

Phil Croft took Baxter's comment as his cue to become involved in the conversation.

`Your guess is as good as mine,' he said quietly. `No-one's ever seen anything like this before so there's no point asking me what's happened. Tell you the

truth, there's no point even trying to work it out.'

'Do you know what did it?' asked Paulette, the large and relentlessly effervescent lady who had been hanging on every word of the difficult exchange, hoping for answers. Her normally bright and energetic voice was suddenly quiet and uncharacteristically serious and flat.

Cooper shrugged his shoulders.

'No,' he admitted.

'Bloody hell,' Heath protested, 'you must have some idea. Were we attacked? Was it an accident?'

The soldier shook his weary head.

'I really don't know. It can't have been a missile attack because you'd have seen or heard something. I'd have heard something. We would have known if we were being attacked. We were trained to deal with that kind of situation.'

'So what are you saying?'

'I'm saying that this was different.'

'What about the speed of it?' Donna asked. 'I was nine floors up. I watched it move across the city. How could that have happened?'

'I'm starting to wonder whether it was already here,' Croft added. 'There's no way a disease or a virus could be carried on the wind that quickly, is there?'

'I've got no idea,' Cooper sighed. 'Look, I've got no reason to hide anything from you. If I knew anything then I'd tell you. Like I said, no-one that I was with seemed to know anything. There might be people somewhere who understand it all, but the officers in our base knew about as much as you do.'

Weary, Cooper collapsed into the nearest chair. Donna handed him a bottle of water and pulled another chair across the floor to sit next to him. There was a look of intense concentration on her face. Much as she was interested in the superficial and relatively unimportant details that Paulette and probably many others wanted to hear from the soldier, she wanted answers to other questions from him. Already her mind was working frantically, analysing what he had so far said and wondering whether this stranger might be able to bring some safety and stability into their bizarre and dangerous world. He had, it seemed, arrived in the city from a protected oasis of relative normality.

'So how many of you were there?' she asked.

Cooper drained the bottle of water dry and wiped his mouth and cleared his throat before responding.

'Where? How many of us were here yesterday or...?'

She shook her head.

'In the base. How many of you were in the base?'

'Couple of hundred I think. I'm not completely sure. Three hundred at the most.'

'Room for any more?'

'Don't know. Could be.'

'And are there more bases?'

He nodded.

'There were supposed to be more, but I don't know if anyone managed to get to them. I'm not even sure where they are. There's bound to be one close to the capital.'

'You must have some idea.'

'Why? I didn't know where our base was until I was in it. Look, these are the kind of places you don't know you're reached until you're standing on top of them. I've heard that some of these bunkers are in the middle of cities, others are more remote. Christ, you might have lived next door to one for the last ten years and not known anything about it.'

Phil Croft sat down next to Donna.

'If we could get to your base,' he began, the tone of his voice tentative and uncertain, 'would you be able to get us inside?'

'You're out of your fucking mind if you think I'm burying myself underground with the fucking army,' Nathan Holmes hissed from a short distance away.

'Completely out of your fucking mind.'

Croft shot a quick, disappointed glance in his direction and then turned back

to face the soldier again.

'Would they let us in?' he asked again.

Cooper couldn't answer with any certainty.

'They might,' he said quietly, 'but on the other hand they might not. They might not let me back in. It depends if the decontamination process works, I suppose. I left the base but I never made it back, did I? The others that left with me might not have been able to get back inside. If they couldn't remove all traces of the disease then they'd have left them on the surface. For all I know they might have let it in when we left. The whole bloody base might be dead by now.'

'What kind of protection did you have?' Donna asked.

'Inside or outside?'

'Outside.'

'Full body suits and the best breathing kits the government could buy,' he answered.

'So,' she continued, 'while you were away from the base you couldn't eat or drink or...?'

'Theoretically we could,' he interrupted, finishing her sentence for her. 'The suits were designed to let you eat and drink and get rid of waste but we didn't carry much in the way of supplies. We weren't intending to be above ground for too long.'

'What if those others can't get back into the base because their suit or their equipment's contaminated...?'

'They'll have left them on the surface.'

'To die?'

'Suppose so.'

'And did you know that when they ordered you to go outside?'

'No-one said as much but it doesn't take a genius to work it out, does it?'

'No wonder you're not rushing to get back.'

'Part of the job,' Cooper mumbled nonchalantly.

'And are you still on duty?' Croft quipped.

The soldier shook his head.

'I quit,' he said, deadpan. 'I quit the moment I found out I could breathe. You don't have to spend long out here to realise the whole planet's dead. I figured I might as well try and make the most of the little freedom I've got left. They probably think I'm dead anyway.'

'Might as well be,' muttered Holmes.

30

Ignorant to the potential dangers of being out alone, and with a sense of smug satisfaction warming him against the cold late autumn wind, Michael stood on top of a bleak hillside and watched as another truck full of soldiers clattered down the overgrown track back, he presumed, towards their base. He'd found the track again earlier and had followed it as far as he'd dared to go on foot before heading back to the relative safety of the motorhome. He and Emma had then driven to the point where he'd stopped walking. Michael sensed that they were near to finding the base and the return now of more troops in their transport was proof that they were close. Feeling more positive than he had been for days he turned around and put his thumbs up as a salute to what felt like a small but significant victory. The afternoon light was fading and cold rain was beginning to spit down. From the comparative warmth and comfort of the motorhome a short distance away Emma watched and waved back, acknowledging his achievement.

Before turning and going back inside, Michael looked down at the track for a little longer. There was a body walking along it now. A single pathetic, rotting, disease-ridden cadaver that pointlessly dragged itself along after the long gone transport. Even now after so many days and weeks had passed Michael found it hard to accept what had happened. He watched the lone figure with equal amounts of fear, hatred, pity and pain. Although they had

intentionally stayed as far away from the rest of the remains of the world as possible, coming into contact with the corpses was inevitable. As they had earlier watched the behaviour of the creatures change from the shelter of their farmhouse hideout, so they had since seen that change continue unabated. Whereas originally these reanimated bodies had been empty shells, now emotion, control and direction was undeniably beginning to return. It was almost as if their brains had been anaesthetised by the disease and the numbness was gradually fading. Originally hollow and unfeeling, the bodies now seemed to be gaining a purpose. First the ability to interpret and respond to basic stimuli had returned, then something resembling base emotion - the need to protect themselves and find an answer to their pain perhaps? More recently Michael had sensed a vicious inquisitiveness about the bodies which was quickly mutating into anger and hate.

It was cold. The wind, rain and low temperature reminded him that he wasn't safe. He ran to the motorhome.

'Well?' Emma asked as he let himself inside and closed, locked, barred and blacked-out the door behind him.

'More of them,' he answered, quietly and breathlessly.

'We're close, aren't we?'

He nodded and wiped the rain from his face and hair.

'We must be.'

A moment of silence followed. Michael took off his wet outdoor jacket and kicked off his muddy boots. Now that he was safely indoors Emma busied herself with what had become a nightly ritual - covering every window, vent and door with wooden boards and heavy black material. They knew that even the smallest pinprick of escaping light might be enough to attract the bodies. Emma didn't mind the gloom. It helped her to forget the cramped and squalid conditions that they found themselves living in.

'Tomorrow morning we should try and get closer again,' Michael whispered as he sat down opposite Emma at the small table. 'It doesn't matter how long it takes, does it? We'll take things one step at a time. I'll walk a little further down the track then we'll drive the van down when we know what's there.'

'Are you sure this is the right thing to do?'

'Of course it is, why?' Michael was surprised by her comment.

'Because this is the army we're dealing with here,' she explained. 'Do you think we're going to be welcome? They might not have come across any survivors yet. And look at the state of us. They'll probably think that we're dead and that we've just...'

'Do you really believe that?' he interrupted. He sighed and shook his head and looked down at the table.

'I don't know,' she stammered, unsure. 'We're the odd ones out around here, aren't we? They're not going to be expecting...'

'They're not going to be expecting fucking corpses to turn up in a camper van, are they?'

'No, but...'

'But what? They'll see the van, they'll see us and we'll be okay.'

'What if they see you when you're walking?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Sounds like you're just trying to find reasons not to do this.'

'Come on, that's not fair. I'm just worried that this won't work out.'

'It'll work out.'

'There are a hundred reasons why it might not. Christ, you told me they were wearing suits. They can't even walk out in the open. They can't breathe the air because it'll do to them what it did to the rest of the population.'

'Yes, and that's our get out, isn't it?'

'What do you mean?'

'If things don't work out the way we want, we'll walk.'

'You think they'll let us?'

'You think they'll have a choice?'

'I'm sorry,' Emma sighed, holding her head in her hands. 'I'm not trying to be negative. I just think we need to play this whole situation very carefully.' She knew that she was going to have trouble trying to contain Michael's eagerness and excitement. She knew where he was coming from, but his cavalier approach and lack of concern worried her. They both knew what the risks were. They had already lost just about everything they had. At the farmhouse they had fought to build themselves some kind of shelter and protection from the rest of the world, and despite their huge physical and mental advantage over the countless scores of plague victims they had lost it all in the blinking of an eye. One mistake was all that it had taken. And although sitting in a cold motorhome in the middle of a field was far from ideal, at least they now had some degree of control again. Emma had an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach that they were dangerously close to losing that control.

Every night felt like an eternity. The dark hours dragged endlessly. With no distractions or entertainment it was all that Michael and Emma could do not to dwell on the problems outside their door. Occasionally the situation became slightly lighter and more bearable. Most of the time, however, the musty atmosphere in the cramped motorhome was tense and overbearing. Conversation had continued to be sparse and difficult throughout the evening. As the couple had discovered on many occasions recently, there was very little they could talk about that didn't somehow lead them back to discussing everything that they had been doing their best to forget about and ignore. Going to bed sometimes brought temporarily relief, but much of the time it was of little help. The survivors would either lie there, unable to sleep, or they would manage to lose consciousness only to be jolted back into their bizarre reality by a dark nightmare or a sudden noise from the other side of the motorhome's paper-thin metal walls.

The only true comfort that Michael had found in the days and nights since his life had been turned upside down was Emma. As they lay in bed together, holding each other tightly, keeping each other warm, he relaxed in the comfort of her closeness. He loved the sound of her voice whispering in his ear late at night, and the gentle tickle of her breath on the side of his face somehow managed to remind him that, no matter how it often felt, he was still very much alive. The smell of her, the feel of her body against his, the warmth that she brought to the long, cold nights, all helped reassure him that the effort of survival had been worthwhile and that, despite the considerable odds stacked against them both, there remained a faint glimmer of hope that their situation would eventually improve. He clung to the thought that, one day, the two of them might be free to walk out in the open again without fear. He knew that it might happen someday. The rotting bodies were deteriorating and couldn't continue to function indefinitely, could they?

It was twenty past two in the morning. The wind was buffeting the side of the motorhome, rain was driving down and crashing onto the metal roof above them and they could hear a solitary body tripping and sliding randomly through the mud outside. It didn't seem to matter. For a few precious moments none of it seemed to matter to Michael. He was close to Emma and, for a couple of relaxing, refreshing and unexpected minutes he was somehow able to forget the hell outside.

31

'We should get out of here now,' Donna said, her mouth half-full of food.

'We're not going to gain anything from staying here. We should get out and head back to the base with Cooper.'

'What's there for us?' Bernard Heath asked anxiously.

'More than there is here,' she replied before returning her full attention to the scraps of food on her plate.

'Who says I'm going back to the bloody base?' Cooper muttered to himself, just loud enough for the others to hear.

Nine survivors sat together in semi-darkness and ate a scraped together meal in one of the university lecture rooms. The atmosphere throughout the building had changed noticeably since the soldier had arrived there earlier in the day. To many of the desperately frightened people gathered in the accommodation block his appearance had brought a faint glimmer of unexpected hope into their dark lives. To an equal number of others, however, his presence in the building had increased their unease and anxiety. Claustrophobic, monotonous and uncomfortable their world may well have become, but with the rest of the country lying in ruins around them, this was all they had left. The soldier's sudden unannounced and unexpected interference in their fragile existence was disproportionately unsettling. To make matters worse (if they possibly could get any worse) the noise and commotion that had accompanied Cooper's arrival had whipped the crowds of disease-ridden bodies outside into an unprecedented frenzy. Even now, many hours later, the creatures still fought to get closer to the building, banging hopelessly against exposed windows and doors with their rotting fists.

'Isn't it about time we started trying to make some decisions here?' Jack Baxter said suddenly, pushing away his plate of cold food and taking a swig from a can of drink. 'I mean,' he continued, 'we can't just sit here and wait indefinitely, can we?'

'We can if we want to,' Heath disagreed. 'It makes sense to sit tight and wait for...'

'Wait for what?' Donna wondered.

Sitting in the chair next to Donna, Clare looked from face to face in the low light. First Heath, then Baxter, then Cooper, then Donna and then back to Heath again. She waited for him to say something. In the gloom he looked haggard, old and weary as if he was carrying the weight of everyone's problems on his shoulders. She sensed that he was struggling to keep himself calm and controlled. She could see fear in his eyes.

'What I mean is...' he stammered. It was obvious that he didn't know what he meant.

'What are you planning to wait for?' Donna asked again. 'What exactly are you expecting to happen?'

Obviously uncomfortable and wishing he'd stayed quiet, Heath played with his food and picked up a paper towel which he screwed into a tight ball before throwing it into a nearby waste bin. He sank back in his chair and looked up for inspiration but nothing came.

'Don't know...' he finally admitted.

'Something's got to give eventually, hasn't it?' Baxter said.

'Like what?' asked Cooper.

'Well, things can't stay like this forever, can they? Nothing ever stays the same for too long. I mean, you turned up here today, didn't you? There will be more like you and...'

'There are more like me,' Cooper explained, 'but don't assume they're going to come back here. As far as they're concerned this is a dead place.'

'They might.'

'Yes, they might, but on balance they probably won't. As far as I was aware we were sent out on a reconnaissance mission and that was all. If the others made it back to the base and reported what they'd found then...'

'Then what?'

'Then they'll know that there's no real reason for anyone to come back here, won't they?'

'So what do you think they'll do?' Donna wondered. 'It doesn't matter where they go, they're going to find the same thing.'

Cooper shrugged his shoulders and continued eating.

'I really don't know. Like I said earlier, there were supposed to be other bases. I suppose they'll try and group together. But then again, maybe they'll just stay underground.'

'Christ, imagine spending the rest of your life in a bunker...' Phil Croft mumbled, finally making an effort and becoming part of the conversation.

`Better than not having the rest of your life,' Clare said quietly.

`You think so?' Cooper asked. `You didn't see what it was like down there. Anyway, we don't know for sure if those are the only options. Whatever happened here might not have happened everywhere. I think it did, but it's always possible that there are some safe areas people could get to.'

`I doubt it,' said Croft.

`But do you see what I'm saying?' Baxter continued, seizing on a lull in the conversation and picking up from where he'd last spoken. `You're talking about all these different scenarios but the bottom line is that something's inevitably going to change, isn't it? It's damn unlikely that nothing's going to happen. The law of averages says that things will never stay the same.'

`What the bloody hell are you talking about?' Steve Richards sighed from his seat in the darkness.

Baxter stared across the room in the general direction of the younger man. It was too dark for him to see exactly where he was sitting.

`Have you looked outside recently?' he asked, his voice suddenly cold and deadly serious.

`I try to avoid looking out of the window,' Richards smirked. `Too fucking grim for my liking.'

`Do yourself a favour and go and take a look out front will you? There are bloody thousands of those things out there now and none of them are going anywhere. For whatever reason they're attracted to us and there are more and more of them arriving every hour.'

`What's your point?' Richards asked.

`Seems to me there's going to come a time when the sheer volume of them outside is going to start causing us real problems.'

`Why? Do you think they'll get in?' wondered Heath, his voice low and nervous.

`They might,' Baxter replied, `but I don't think it's very likely. I'm thinking more about us trying to get out. We're going to have to leave here for supplies eventually, aren't we? There's only so much we can store here.'

`He's got a point,' Donna agreed.

`The more I think about it, the better the argument is for packing up and getting out of here right now,' Baxter continued.

`There's also a lot to be said for sitting still and waiting,' Phil Croft added. `But you are right, Jack, things are going to change no matter what we do. The bodies will change for a start.'

`How?'

`They're decomposing, aren't they? No matter how determined or persistent those bloody things are, there's going to come a time when they physically won't be able to do what they're doing any longer.'

`And how long's that going to be?' Donna pressed. `How long do you think it will take them to rot completely?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

`Six months,' he suggested although he was far from certain.

`Six months!' Heath protested.

Croft shrugged again.

`Could be. Might be longer. Might happen in half the time. There are a lot of unknown factors we're dealing with here.'

`Such as?'

`The disease for a start, we don't know what effect it might have on the speed of decomposition. And then there's the fact that they're above ground. I guess they'd rot quicker if they were buried, but it might be that exposure to the elements and the physical effort of moving around wears the bodies down at a faster rate. I don't know for sure.'

Donna suddenly stood up. The other survivors watched her.

`This is bloody brilliant,' she said with genuine excitement in her voice for the first time in weeks. `Do you hear what you're saying?' She looked around at the blank faces staring back at her. `Six months and we could be over the worst of this. Six bloody months and we might well be able to do whatever we damn well like again!'

`So we just need to find somewhere safe to hide out until then,' said Baxter. `Stay here,' Heath immediately suggested. `We can stay here until it's safe to move.'

`You haven't been listening, have you?'

`We need somewhere better than this, somewhere stronger and more isolated,' Donna announced.

`You need the base,' decided Cooper, his voice filled with resignation.

32

He didn't know how he had let it happen. In just a few minutes he had experienced a full range of emotions - from glorious realisation, joy and fulfillment through to shame, utter despair and regret. All of the confused and pent up feelings which Michael had forced himself to hold onto and suppress for weeks had now, in a moment of rash madness, been allowed to bubble to the surface and show themselves. The situation he now found himself in was painfully awkward and unexpected. He felt frustrated and embarrassed, exposed and naked.

It was early morning. Michael didn't wear a watch anymore but he knew by the low level of light beginning to trickle in through the skylight that it was about five or six o'clock, maybe a little later. He'd managed to sleep for a while but, ultimately, the night had been as long and interrupted as most other nights in the motorhome had so far been. But the last few hours had been subtly different. Lying next to Emma (who, in comparison, had slept relatively soundly) he had spent much of the hours just gone watching her. She had rolled over to face away from him in the darkness. Instinctively he had snuggled down behind her and put his arm around her body. His hand had brushed her breast. Both survivors were fully clothed, but just the sensation and the slightest touch of her warm, soft bosom had been unexpectedly exciting and had reminded him in an instant of feelings of desire and lust which had been forgotten for what felt like forever. He had pushed himself closer to her in the darkness, pressing himself against her, praying that she wouldn't wake up but, at the same time, wishing that she would respond. He had wished that she'd turn around and hold him and kiss him and stroke him and caress him and tell him that everything was going to be all right.

For a long time Michael had wrestled with his conscious. How could he allow himself to think about love and sex when the world outside was dead? What kind of a human being was he to even consider his own lust and sexual desires ahead of the devastation that had taken place beyond the fragile walls of the motorhome? But regardless of how his brain and his conscious screamed at him and demanded that he should behave, his heart and other more basic, carnal instincts drove him to act differently.

In the semi-darkness he reached down under the bedding and unzipped his trousers. Troubled and nervous at first, he began to touch himself in a way that had been forgotten since the nightmare had begun. Initially uncertain, with each passing second his quiet excitement had mounted steadily and soon he was moving quickly, enjoying the unexpected freedom and holding onto Emma as tightly as he could without waking her. She was the reason he was doing this. He knew that he didn't dare risk telling her how he felt for her and how much he wanted her but, for the first time, he finally allowed himself to consider, admit and accept the depth of his feelings for the only other human being remaining in his world.

His hand movements became quicker. Faster and faster as he reached the moment. Caution and control gave way to excitement. He couldn't stop. He knew that the silence and movement might betray him but he didn't care. He'd had a need - a physical lust - which needed to be fulfilled. And then it happened. The movement stopped, a split second pause and then sheer pleasure followed by relaxation.

Suddenly paranoid and self-conscious, Michael did up his trousers and immediately began trying to work out how he was going to clean the bedding and

his clothes without Emma asking questions or discovering what he had done. A once-familiar feeling of post-ejaculation regret bordering on disgust washed over him. What had he done? Christ, billions of people dead and there he was, wanking under the bedclothes like some dirty little schoolboy. He felt ashamed, and that shame increased infinitely when Emma rolled over. She was awake. Worse still, he could tell from her eyes (not that he dared look into them for any longer than a second) that she'd been awake for a while.

'You okay?' she asked.

Embarrassed, Michael nodded.

'Fine,' he grunted awkwardly. 'You?'

She smiled and rolled onto her back.

He looked away, too ashamed to dare make eye contact again. A heavy silence descended on the motorhome which seemed to Michael to last for hours but which only lasted seconds. Covering his groin with his hand and a discarded T-shirt he got up quickly and headed towards the confined bathroom space where he began to clean himself up, wincing with the cold as he sponged his clothing down with bottled water. How had he let it happen?

A hundred dark thoughts began to manifest themselves in his confused and guilty mind. Did Emma really know what he'd done? Was it such a crime? Would she want to leave and be apart from him? Had he actually done anything wrong? Could she trust him now? Would she despise him? Did she think he was some kind of pervert?

All of his questions were answered when he plucked up courage to return to the other room.

'It's all right, you know,' she said softly as he approached.

Even more ashamed than he had been when it had first happened, Michael was now mortified.

'What? You mean you...?' he stammered.

'It's perfectly natural,' she soothed, getting up from the bed and walking across the room to him.

'I just...' he began, not really knowing what it was that he was trying to say.

Sensing that any conversation would be difficult, Emma instead wrapped herself around Michael, burying her face in his chest for a moment before looking up into his eyes and then gently kissing his unshaven cheek. She ran her hands up and down his back and squeezed him tightly.

'Don't be ashamed,' she whispered. 'I understand.'

'Do you?'

She kissed his lips. She had kissed him before, but this time the contact between them was undeniably stronger. She stared into his face.

'I know how you feel,' she whispered.

33

The vast crowd outside the university building was still growing. Even now, several weeks after it had all begun, still more slothful, deteriorating bodies dragged themselves through the wreckage of the city centre and out towards the university complex. For the survivors gathered in there it was impossible to appreciate just how obvious their presence had become. The rest of the nearby locality remained shrouded in almost complete silence. The only sounds to be heard there were either natural or accidental - the noise of wind gusting through brittle-branched trees or clumsy, staggering corpses colliding with random objects and sending them crashing to the ground. In this dense and relentless vacuum even the slightest disturbance became amplified out of all proportion, and the reactions such disturbances provoked were similarly exaggerated. The population of the city had once numbered more than a million before being struck down en masse. Of those killed, more than a third had subsequently begun to move again and each one of those had slowly regained the ability to react and to respond to base stimulation. Seeing one body react would cause another to lurch instinctively towards the first, and then another

would follow and another and another. A single unexpected sound would often cause more than a hundred of the pathetic creatures to herd inquisitively in the same direction. The survivors, with their frequent but unintentional noise and movement and their occasional bonfire beacons, had succeeded in attracting the unwanted attention of a rotting crowd in excess of ten thousand bodies. From a glass-covered landing three floors down from the top of the building, Yvonne, the once prim and proper legal secretary, stood next to Bernard Heath and looked down on the vast hordes below. It was early morning. As usual neither of them could sleep.

'What are we going to do, Bernard?' she asked quietly, pulling a thick overcoat around her tightly to keep out the cold. As winter approached she was really beginning to feel the drop in temperature, perhaps because she hadn't eaten properly for almost a month. Both of the survivors were in their fifties and the physical strain of their ordeal was beginning to become painfully apparent. For no more obvious reason than their similar ages they had become close and had spent much time in each other's company over the last few long days.

'I don't know,' Heath replied sadly, staring intently into the crowds which stretched out in front of them.

'Do you think they're right, the people that say we should get out of here?'

'Don't know,' he mumbled again.

'I can't stand the thought of it. I can't bear the idea of being out there with those things. There are hundreds and hundreds of them. How are we supposed to get past?'

Heath didn't answer. Instead he simply slumped forward and rested his head against the cold glass. It was raining outside, a heavy and continuous drizzle which soaked everything and which made the dull and lifeless world seem darker, colder and ever more empty. Christ he was tired. He hadn't done any physical work to make him feel this way. Just existing in this nightmare was a continual strain that required constant effort.

Down below the bodies continued to push closer towards the building. So many had arrived now that those at the very front were being crushed by the sheer weight of the extraordinary volume of corpses behind. Despite the lack of space those creatures pressed against the windows and doors still tried hopelessly to move even further forward. They had neither the strength, space or ability to get inside the building but still they tried continually to reach the survivors on the other side of the wall.

'Hungry, Bernard?' Yvonne asked.

He shook his head.

'No. And anyway, even if I was, there's nothing left worth eating.'

He was right. The survivor's food stores were running dangerously low. They had ransacked every square inch of the university complex and had managed to survive so far by finding sufficient canteens, restaurants and vending machines to strip bare of food and other supplies. Although they had ventured into the city frequently during the early days to get provisions, the risks had increased substantially since then. Even men like Nathan Holmes who had originally seemed so full of bravado and contempt for the bodies had now become reluctant to even take a single footstep outside.

The longer Bernard and Yvonne stared into the rotting masses below, the more the horror and complete hopelessness of their situation became apparent. Down and just to their right was the body of Sonya Farley, still somehow holding onto what remained of her baby. Sonya's body was decaying as quickly now as the corpses surrounding her. Deeper into the vile crowd, at the point where those bodies still able to move forward reached the many thousands who were rammed tight against the walls of the university building, more base animal instincts were beginning to be displayed. Yvonne watched with morbid curiosity and mounting disgust as the occasional corpse ripped and tore at the others around it, seemingly desperate to get closer to the building. She had never been able to stomach violence, and this angry hate chilled her to the core. This hate was uncontrolled and directionless. As much as it seemed that the

bodies were directing their sudden aggression towards the countless cadavers preventing them from moving forward, it was clear that was for no other reason than just because they were there and in the way. Yvonne knew that she too would doubtless be a victim of the same venom if she ever found herself face to face with one of the abhorrent creatures.

Bernard too was watching the behaviour of the bodies. They were changing, and he found himself wondering why they were reacting in this way. He was an intelligent man and, much as confusing emotions such as fear and despair had tainted and distorted his view of the world, he knew that the rapidly changing behaviour of the creatures must have been following a logical pattern. As he peered down into the disease-ridden sea of shuffling figures below, he considered the chronology of their decline. He'd thought about this countless times before. Since they had risen after their bodies had died on the first morning there had been a gradual but marked change in their condition. The corpses were rotting. Even from the distance the survivors were observing from, that much was obvious and undeniable. It seemed that the virus or disease or whatever had initially killed the bodies outright, but that something inside them had somehow survived. It was almost as if parts of the brain had been anaesthetised, and that the effects of the anaesthetic were gradually wearing off. The ability to move again had been the first sign, soon followed by the unwelcome ability to again react to external stimulation. And for a long time that was as far as the creature's limited recovery seemed to have progressed. Other basic needs remained unfulfilled - they apparently had no desire to eat or drink or rest - they seemed just to exist in a permanent state of constant and pointless animation. Heath concluded (as he had done numerous times before) that the only part of the creature's brains to have survived was that area which governed base, primordial instinct.

But there was another change now manifesting itself.

Heath had noticed it beginning to develop over the last few days, perhaps even as long ago as last week. The bodies were now more aggressive than before. There was a new determination and energy about them. Physically they continued to deteriorate, but mentally they had changed. He looked down into the area of the immense crowd where the bodies were struggling with each other again. Some of these creatures were beginning to fight.

'See what they're doing?' he said quietly. 'Just watch them.'

Heath looked up and saw that Yvonne had gone. He hadn't heard her leave.

Unconcerned, he looked out of the window again and returned his attention to the dead. Where a cold and emotionless apathy had previously prevailed, new energies were beginning to show. The bodies were exhibiting signs of rage and anger. Whereas they had so far swarmed around the survivors because, he'd presumed, there were no other distractions, he now wondered whether they wanted more? Could these bodies now be gathered around the university looking for answers from the living, or were they blaming them for what had happened? Did the bodies now see the survivors as the enemy?

As dawn approached and the morning light increased revealing more and more of the scarred world, the university lecturer's thoughts gradually became darker and more sinister. He found himself dwelling on thoughts of the pain the figures below must be enduring. Their bodies were rotting around them.

In his former life Heath had lectured in English Literature. He often considered the emotions of the characters he had studied and about which he had taught. Pain so often seemed to go hand in hand with any number of other emotions. Heath remembered experiencing pain himself. Not a particularly practical man, he'd frequently hit his thumb with a hammer when trying to hang pictures, and he often caught his head on one particularly badly placed shelf in his office. His first reaction to sudden pain had often been to curse - sometimes even to lash out and punch a wall or throw something in anger. Perhaps that was what was happening to the decomposing bodies traipsing constantly through the city streets? Perhaps their increasing anger and violence were direct reactions to their suffering?

His line of thinking continued down into even darker territories. The displays

of violence he'd noticed recently may well have been the first signs of further changes. With decay and disintegration tearing apart the remains of the corpses, their pain and, logically, their anger, hate and frustration would be likely to increase rapidly. If the anger and hate he had witnessed was connected to pain, then it was likely things were going to get much, much worse before they started to get any better. There were more than ten thousand of the damn things out there.

34

The long day dragged unbearably. After many hours of arguments, counter-arguments and frustration, the atmosphere in the assembly hall was deteriorating rapidly. By early evening tempers were wearing dangerously thin. 'Have you looked out of the bloody window recently?' Baxter spat angrily. 'Do you know what's out there?'

'More to the point,' Donna interrupted angrily, 'have you seen what's still in here? Have you seen the level of our supplies? I tell you, we won't last long if we don't do something soon...'

'She's right,' Cooper added from across the room. 'Staying here isn't going to be an option for much longer.'

'And what the fuck do you know?' Nathan Holmes yelled, his voice hoarse and strained with emotion. This argument had been raging for the best part of an hour with, it seemed, much of the venom directed towards him personally. 'I'm sure you know a hell of a lot more than you're letting on,' he snapped. 'I bet you know exactly what caused all of this fucking mess to happen.'

'I wish I did,' the soldier sighed. 'Then at least I might know what to do.' Frightened faces peered out from every corner of the hall, illuminated by numerous candles, torches and lamps. The light in the room was dull and uneven leaving even more people hidden in darkness. For once almost all the survivors sheltering in the building were gathered together - even the most reclusive of them having been drawn out of hiding by the events surrounding the soldier's recent arrival. For many others the hall had become the only room they used. Being alone in the individual rooms they had previously occupied had become too unsettling for most. Better to snatch a few moments of sleep in the company of others than to spend endless hours alone, wide awake and on edge.

'Look,' Donna continued, 'Phil reckons that in six months time the bodies will have rotted away to just about nothing. Isn't that right, Phil?'

She peered round in the darkness, trying to find the doctor. He was sitting on the floor just a few meters from where she was standing. He'd been trying to avoid getting dragged into the conversation. Instead he'd been busying himself by trying to keep a seven year old boy interested in a jigsaw puzzle and hoping that he'd be able to stop him crying.

'Something like that,' he grunted, 'give or take a few weeks either way.'

'So we'll wait here for six months,' Holmes announced.

Donna shook her head. Once full of macho pretense, the odious man was now letting his true colours show. His plans to get out of the building and take what he wanted from the dead city had been forgotten. He was as scared as the rest of the survivors, but he didn't have the intelligence to deal with his feelings. His fear displayed itself as antagonism and anger.

'Which part of this don't you understand, Nathan,' she sighed. 'We haven't got enough supplies here to last for six more days, never mind six months. We've got to go out into the city now, whether you like it or not.'

Holmes didn't respond. He'd never admit as much, but he was intimidated by Donna. He didn't have the ability to be able to reply to her words with anything that resembled a sensible and coherent argument as to why they should lock themselves down and stay put until the countless bodies outside had finally fallen again.

'She's right,' Baxter said, stepping forward out of the shadows into which he'd subconsciously retreated as the argument had become more heated. 'We don't have an option really. If you stop and...'

`What the fuck do you know?' Holmes spat, suddenly feeling more confident. He knew that he could handle Jack Baxter.

Refusing to rise to the other man's anger, Jack ran his fingers through his hair and stared at him through the darkness.

`I know as much as you do, Nathan,' he said, pointing his finger accusingly and shaking his head. `But if you forget about how you're feeling and take a look at the whole picture, it seems we don't have any choice.'

Several hours later and the anger and raised voices that had filled the hall had been long forgotten by many of the survivors. Nathan Holmes had disappeared into the depths of the building and with him much of the conflict and hostility seemed to have gone too. Apart from a few mumbled conversations and the low and dull but ever-present noise of the bodies outside the assembly room was largely silent. Jack Baxter sat with his back against the wall doing his best to fade into the already drab and inconspicuous background. The benefit of darkness, he thought to himself, was that he could hide without having to move. He could observe things happening nearby whilst still managing to feel like he was a safe distance away.

Baxter was sitting in a corner of the room near to Cooper, Croft and Donna. Clare lay next to him on a makeshift bed made from folded blankets. She was sleeping relatively soundly. He frequently watched her when she was asleep, feeling as if he had a responsibility to protect her because he was the one who had been with her the longest. She was a pretty girl with soft, delicate features which, for once, looked untroubled and relaxed. It wasn't often that...

`What do you think, Jack?' he heard Phil Croft ask. At the mention of his name he looked up.

`What?' he mumbled.

`You're not with us, are you?' smiled Donna.

`Nothing against any of you,' he smiled, looking deeper into the darkness and trying to focus on the others, `but I wish I was anywhere but here.'

Cooper kept the conversation on track.

`We were talking about getting out of here,' he began.

`What, still?' he moaned. `Christ, haven't you got anything better to talk about?'

`No,' Donna replied abruptly. `Bloody hell, what else is there to talk about?' He shrugged his shoulders.

`Decided where we're going yet then?'

Silence. It was one thing talking about what they should do, but when it came to actually making decisions it was difficult to get any of the survivors to speak out with any conviction.

`We're not completely sure whether...' muttered Croft before Cooper interrupted.

`Isn't it obvious?' he sighed.

`There's only one place we can go, isn't there?' Donna added.

`Your base?' ventured Baxter.

`Much as I don't like the thought of going back there, we don't seem to have much choice at the moment.'

`So will your people let us inside?' he asked.

`They might. I don't know.'

`I don't think they will.'

Everyone looked at Jack.

`Why not?' Donna asked.

`I know we seem to be immune to whatever's done all this,' he explained, his voice tired and low, `but I bet we're still carrying it. If it's a disease then we're going to be full of it, aren't we? It'll be in our lungs and in our blood. There's no way they're going to let us inside if we're going to bring it in with us.'

`We've just got to hope the decontamination process is good enough to clean us up properly then, haven't we?' Cooper said.

`Do you think it will be?'

`Don't know,' he admitted after a moment of careful consideration.

`There's another problem of course,' yawned Croft. The doctor was incredibly tired but he knew it wasn't worth trying to sleep.

`What's that?' Cooper asked.

`How the hell are we going to get there?'

`How many people are here?'

`Between forty and fifty,' he replied.

`And how many will leave with us?'

`No idea. Probably not that many. Say half.'

`Theoretically we can take our pick of just about anything we can find in the city,' said Donna.

`If we can get to it,' interrupted Baxter.

`So what do you suggest?' Cooper asked. `We need to be sensible about this. We're not going to be able to just drive out of here in a convoy of cars, are we?'

`What did you arrive in? We heard it but we didn't see it.'

`Armoured patrol carrier. I could probably drive one of those if we had one, but I don't expect we'll find anything like that round here...'

Baxter managed half a smile.

`You might be surprised,' Donna said quietly. The other faces turned to look at her.

`What have you got in mind?'

`There's a courthouse near here,' she replied.

`And?'

`And round the back there's a loading bay.'

`A loading bay?' Croft mumbled. He wasn't at all sure where her logic was leading.

`We could see it from the office where I worked. We used to watch them unloading when there was a big trial on,' she explained. `The prison vans used to pull up around the back and reverse inside to deliver and collect the prisoners.'

`So?'

`Think about it. Prison vans are designed to carry people. More than that, they're strong and they're safe. They're as close to a bloody armoured patrol carrier as we're going to get.'

`Are there any vans there now?'

`How am I supposed to know? There's a good chance there will be though. Just about every morning you'd see at least one of them pulling up. Logic says that if the courts were going to be in session when all of this started, there would have been prisoners there.'

`I know the court,' Baxter whispered secretively. `But how are we supposed to get there? It's halfway across town.'

`Don't know,' Donna admitted.

`I can't see how we're going to get past the crowds out there. And even if we do manage to get through, how are we supposed to get back here again? Christ, imagine what the noise of a load of prison vans will do to them?'

Cooper took a swig from a cup of cold black coffee that he'd made almost an hour earlier. He winced at its bitter aftertaste.

`Seems to me that whatever we do is going to drive them crazy,' he said, `but there isn't any alternative. We've already decided that we're going to have to go out at some point.'

`Any suggestions?' asked Donna expectantly.

`I came up through a subway.'

`That's going to help us get out there,' she sighed. `Getting back without them seeing or hearing us is going to be impossible if we manage to get our hands on some kind of transport.'

`We could go out at night,' Croft offered.

`Not a good idea,' Cooper responded. `I know what you're saying, but you've got to add up the risks and balance them all out, haven't you? Whatever we do

we're bound to attract attention to ourselves because of the noise we make if nothing else. If we go out in the dark then we're just going to make it harder for ourselves. They'll still react to us so we might as well go out in the daylight and give ourselves the best possible chance.'

'If we're really going to do this,' Donna continued, 'then we need to think very carefully before we put a single foot outside. From what I've seen of those things out there they seem to be getting more and more aggressive each day. We have to get everything we need in one trip.'

'We can do it,' Cooper insisted. 'A few of us need to get out there, get what we need and get back. Once the excitement's died down again we can get everyone who wants to leave together and we can move.'

Jack Baxter lay down on the cold, hard floor next to Clare and listened as the conversation continued. He agreed with everything that was being suggested, but the fact that it was right didn't make it any easier to deal with. Within the walls of the university it had to an extent become possible to isolate themselves from events outside. The sudden realisation that they were about to leave the safety of the building and head back out into the unknown was terrifying. Unavoidable, necessary and terrifying.

35

'What you doing out here?'

Donna turned round and saw that Nathan Holmes was standing behind her. She was sitting on a wooden bench in a small enclosed courtyard just to the side of the assembly hall. She often sat there to think and be alone, and after the long conversations of the last few hours she craved a change of surroundings. The three meter square area of concrete buried between university buildings was as close as she could safely get to being outside.

She didn't want anyone's company, least of all Holmes. She turned her back on him. Unperturbed, he sat down next to her.

'What do you want?' she sighed.

'Nothing,' he answered. 'Just thought I'd come and talk to you, that's all.'

'Why would you want to do that? It's three o'clock in the morning for Christs' sake.'

He shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette.

'Don't know,' he replied, leaning back and looking up at a patch of dark and cloudy sky between the tall buildings which stretched up around them.

'I haven't got anything to say to you anyway,' she mumbled.

'You had plenty to say earlier.'

'You asked for it. You're a fucking arsehole.'

Holmes shook his head in mock disapproval.

'Don't know why you've got it in for me,' he grinned. 'Just because I stand up for myself and don't want to risk...'

'Your fucking problem,' Donna hissed, standing up and moving away from Holmes, 'is that you don't think about anyone but yourself. And worse than that, all the things you say and the decisions you make are based on fear. You're too damn frightened to even think straight.'

'You don't know what you're talking about,' he snarled. The tone in his voice had suddenly changed. He sounded angry and yet also strangely defensive. Donna had obviously touched a nerve. 'You haven't got a bloody clue what you're talking about.'

'Let's be honest,' she continued, 'the only reason why you've been making such a noise about staying here is that you're too scared to leave. You can't face the prospect of...'

'Bullshit,' he snapped. 'Are you serious? The reason I'm staying here is...'

'The reason you're staying here is because you haven't got the balls to step outside.'

'I don't want to be attacked by a thousand bloody dead bodies, that's why I'm not moving,' he protested.

'Rubbish.'

`You take a single step outside and they'll swallow you up. There are fucking thousands of them.'

`So what would you do if they get inside?'

`They won't.'

`They might. They probably will at some point.'

`I'll deal with that when it happens. I tell you now, I'm not going out there to risk my neck unless I've got no other option.'

`You haven't got any other options.'

`I'll decide when I'm going to make my move.'

`You'll never do it. You're a bloody coward. You're just going to sit here and rot...'

`You shut your fucking mouth or I'll...'

`You'll do what? Come on, big man, what exactly are you going to do? You'll still be sat in here when the rest of us leave. You'll die in this fucking place.'

Holmes jumped up from the bench and lurched towards Donna. She stumbled backwards towards the door which led to the assembly hall and collided with Phil Croft. He'd been standing in the doorway for the best part of a minute. `Everything okay?' he asked, grabbing hold of Donna's shoulders. She steadied herself and turned and pushed her way past him. `Fine,' she mumbled as she disappeared into the darkness. Holmes and the doctor exchanged glances before Croft turned and followed Donna back into the building.

36

The sound of rotting hands smashing against the side of the motorhome woke Michael. It had happened before - maybe three or four times in the last couple of days - and he was quickly becoming used to disposing of the sickly, nuisance cadavers. Most times it was just a single body that stumbled upon the vehicle by chance. This morning he could hear at least two of them. Tired and cold he sat on the end of the bed and pulled on his boots.

Through a slight gap in one of the heavy curtains he saw that it was a bright and sunny day outside. That was why the bodies had appeared, he decided. They often seemed to be attracted to the motorhome when the cloud cover was light and the sun was shining. Michael had deduced that the sun reflecting on the metal and glass caught their attention. They were parked at the edge of a large field and there were no other man-made objects to attract or distract the dead.

Emma was shuffling in the bed, the noise having disturbed her also. She covered her head with a pillow to block out the banging as Michael pulled back the nearest curtain and peered outside. He pressed his face hard against the window, trying to locate the bodies. One of them was close to the door (he could just about see it from where he was) and from the direction of the noise he guessed that the other was up towards the front of the motorhome, banging relentlessly on the bonnet. Yawning he got up and walked down towards the door, pausing only to pick up a crowbar which he'd left at the side of the little gas stove in the cramped kitchen area.

`Be careful,' Emma said, sitting up quickly when she realised he was about to go outside.

`I'll be fine,' he grunted as he opened the door and stepped out.

The morning air was bracing and fresh. The sky was deep, clear blue and it was relentlessly bright out in the open. Michael covered his eyes to shield them from the sun.

The first body was no more than six feet away and it was already coming towards him, clumsy but moving with an unnerving speed. Michael did little more than stand and look at it for a moment. It seemed to have been relatively young when it had died. A white male (he thought) dressed in the shabby remains of construction site worker's overalls, its face was cold and vacuous and its skin blue-green and pulled tight over bone.

`Morning,' he muttered under his breath as he lifted the crowbar and slammed it down on the crown of the body's skull. He felt the bone shatter and give way with hardly any resistance. As time marched slowly onwards, Michael thought, so the rotting creatures were definitely becoming physically weaker. Their intent and drive continued to increase ominously, but as each day passed the empty cadavers were showing signs of becoming unsteady and frail. The body tripped back and then stood motionless for an instant before regaining its balance and lurching forward again. Michael lifted the crowbar for a second time and plunged it down like a spear into the centre of the creature's head, smashing through the area of skull that he had weakened with his first blow. With what remained of its brain now destroyed, the diseased figure crumbled to the dew-soaked ground, twisted and motionless. The second body was smaller (it had been a child but Michael forced himself not to think about that). Its unwanted interest aroused by the noises accompanying Michael's disposal of the other corpse, it moved around the front of the motorhome and dragged itself towards the survivor. He marched quickly towards it and dispatched it with a single swipe of the heavy metal crowbar to the side of the head.

As he dragged the two bodies away to a safe distance from the motorhome, Michael found himself thinking just how easy destroying them had become. He only did it when he absolutely needed to, but the point was that he could now do it. Even as recently as last week it had still been difficult. In spite of their condition, and as dangerous, repulsive and alien as they had become, it had been hard not to keep thinking about them as people. But recently things had begun to change. The life that he had once led - the life that these grotesque things had shared in their previous condition - was becoming little more than a fading memory. This new and uncomfortable, scavenging existence had somehow become normality. His old life with all its trappings now seemed distant and at times almost incomprehensible. The further away those memories were, the weaker his emotional ties to the bodies became. Now they meant nothing. They were just an inconvenience. Occasionally a threat. He lay the bodies at the base of a tree on the other side of the field and walked back towards the motorhome. He was about to climb the steps and go back inside when he heard the sound of an engine. Emma heard it too. She appeared in the doorway behind him.

`I'll go and check it out,' he said. Emma nodded.

A quick sprint towards the track they had spent the last few days following and Michael was able to look down and follow the progress of yet another transport full of soldiers. They were heading away from their base. No doubt they would return again later.

He watched them until they had disappeared.

Today's the day, he decided. Today we're going to follow them back.

Michael's plan was simple. Move the motorhome down from the hills and sit and wait somewhere near to the track. As soon as the transport appears again, follow it at a safe distance and find the base.

Simple.

Back inside, Emma was waiting for him.

`Okay?' she asked as he closed the door and took off his boots. He nodded and smiled.

`More of them,' he said as he walked towards her. She was back in bed. `When we're ready we'll drive down towards the track and find somewhere to sit and wait for them to come back.'

She nodded and threw back the bedcovers, stretching out her arms and gesturing for him to come closer. He lay down with her and held her tightly. The warmth of her body was soothing and relaxing, despite the fact that they were still both fully dressed to protect them against the autumn cold.

`Think this is it?' she asked.

`Might be,' he replied. `Best chance we've had so far.'

`Think we're doing the right thing?'

`Definitely, don't you?'

`I'm warming to the idea.'

`We've got to try, haven't we? We can't just walk away from these people. Who knows what they might have or what they might be able to tell us?'

`I trust you,' she whispered, pulling him closer. `I know you wouldn't do anything if you didn't think it was right.'

`I'm not about to take any risks that I don't think are justified,' he explained. `The only thing I've got left is you. You're my priority. I won't let us take any chances we don't need to.'

Emma was about to tell Michael how much she needed him but stopped herself having already told him many times before. She thought about telling him how being with him had made her hellish life almost bearable at times. She thought about telling him how she wished they could have met when everything had been normal and...

She didn't say anything. Instead she just held him.

37

Croft, Donna, Baxter and the others had slept little. Their lives had become so bleak and helpless that all the sudden talk about actually making a stand and trying to do something positive seemed to finally have forced many of the survivors into taking action. During the long, slow hours of the early morning so far the various rough ideas and half-considered suggestions which had been discussed in the darkness last night had gradually been shaped and formed into something that was beginning to resemble a coherent plan. Those who had volunteered to be directly involved knew that they were about to risk everything but, if they didn't take those risks, they knew that what remained of their lives would hardly be worth living. At least this way they were giving themselves a chance. If they didn't do anything they'd be spending their last long days and weeks just sitting in worsening squalor and waiting for the end to arrive. Cooper had summed it up when he'd told them earlier that their options were either to sit and wait for the bodies to get inside the building, to slowly starve to death or to risk everything by trying to get away from the city. And with the number of bodies outside still increasing, the probability that their shelter would be breached became more real with each passing hour.

Donna was ready to do it. Taking care to keep out of sight she stood in a dark doorway and looked out across the marble-floored reception area towards the glass entrance doors at the front of the building. No-one ever came out here anymore, and it was obvious why. A thousand dead faces stared back in her direction. She knew that she was too far away and was sufficiently hidden by enough shadow not to be seen and so stayed where she was and looked deep into the mass of poor, pathetic creatures outside. It was a hellish scene. The combined weight of thousands upon thousands of bodies continued to push forward and crush those nearest the front. If many more of the damn things arrive, she decided, it was inevitable that a door or window somewhere would give way. The thought of what might happen was almost too frightening to consider - the building would be filled with an unstoppable torrent of desperate, stumbling cadavers in seconds. Donna already knew that they were doing the right thing by trying to get out. Looking deep into the rotting crowd just served to make her even more certain.

The reception area was dark with the natural light which would normally have flooded in through the glass doors having been blocked out by the sheer weight of bodies. It was difficult to make out individual faces and features from where she was standing - the crowd seemed to have become a single endless sea of grey-green, decaying flesh. If she stared at a particular area for long enough she could occasionally make out something recognisable such as an open mouth, clouded eyes or something similar. But it was the movement that really disturbed her. The entire discoloured mass seemed to constantly be moving. Despite being pressed hard against the glass, the crushed bodies still

twitched and flinched continually, trying pointlessly to move further forward and get into the university complex. With morbid fascination driving her she looked deeper and deeper into the crowd until the sound of other survivors nearby distracted her. She forced herself to turn away and try to think about something else.

The plan they had collectively come up with to get them out of the building was relatively straightforward and flexible; six survivors would leave the university by a back exit where there were fewer bodies. Using the subways which Cooper had used to get in (hoping, of course, that purposely slow movements and hidden emotions would still fool the cadavers) they would make their way over to the court building. They were then going to force their way inside, find the loading bay, get whatever transport they could and then get back to the university in as short a timescale as possible.

And what if it didn't work? They all knew that there were a thousand and one things that might go wrong. What if they couldn't get through the subway? What if they got into the court building and found that there were no prison vans there? What if the vans wouldn't start? Truth was that none of them had thought about such eventualities. There was nothing they could do about any of them until they had actually happened and they were faced with dealing with the fallout. Going outside was the biggest risk. The rest of the city was theoretically theirs for the taking once they were actually out there. And if they didn't find what they wanted in the courthouse, they'd just move on and find it somewhere else. This had been a vast and sprawling city. Donna was confident they'd be able to find what they needed eventually.

She slowly walked back to the assembly hall. Although she wasn't going out into the city herself she felt sick with nerves. She tried to remain positive and focus on her part of the plan. Once the others had returned with, hopefully, sufficient transport, they had arranged to park the vehicles deep inside the university complex away from the bulk of the bodies. In the meantime Donna was to try and take charge of the other survivors who intended leaving the city with them. She had been tasked to organise them to get their supplies packed and prepared for the journey. The transportation would be left parked on an artificial turf football pitch which was surrounded by a high wire-mesh fence. It would be Donna's responsibility to get the survivors and their belongings organised so that they could get out of the building and over to the vehicles as quickly and safely as possible.

Although nowhere near as difficult as going out into the open, Donna didn't relish the task ahead. It was going to be difficult trying to get any of these people to move. She walked dejectedly through the hall, looking at the empty, silent, stoney-faced survivors sitting around the edges of the room. A short time earlier Cooper and Croft had announced their plans to the rest of the disparate group. There had been little reaction. She didn't know how many of them intended leaving the university and how many instead would remain within the building, paralysed by their fear and uncertainty. They couldn't force anyone to go. They were taking the children - it didn't seem right to leave them there - but the others were free to make their own choices.

It seemed to Donna that the emotionally-drained people cowering nervously in this building were increasingly beginning to resemble the weak and directionless bodies outside. Eaten up with bitter pain and directionless anger, devoid of all energy and trapped in a seemingly pointless and endless existence, some of the living appeared little better than the dead.

38

It was time. Six volunteer survivors stood outside at the back of the accommodation block in a small, sheltered alcove where several tall, overflowing and foul-smelling waste bins were stored. There were no bodies around that they could see. Various building extensions, walls, fences and other obstructions seemed to have prevented the creatures from stumbling round to the area.

'Ready?' Phil Croft asked. The others looked far from sure. The doctor did up the zip on the fleece he was wearing. It was a cold afternoon. Although fairly bright, there was a threat of rain in the air and ominously heavy clouds were approaching from the east.

'Suppose so,' Paul Castle mumbled. 'Never going to be a good time for this though, is there?'

'If you can't handle it why don't you just go back inside?' Jack Baxter snapped nervously. 'Quit fucking moaning.'

'Give it a break you old... ' Castle began.

'Okay,' Cooper said, cutting across the increasingly nervous conversation and having to raise his voice to make himself heard over the gusting wind, 'this is where we shut up. Anyone speaks and draws attention to us once we're out there and we're history. I tell you, those bodies aren't quick or strong enough on their own, but if you do something stupid and end up with a hundred of them coming at you, you're going to have real problems.'

Baxter thrust his cold hands into his jacket pockets and leant back against the red-brick wall behind him. He was terrified. Perhaps that was why he'd reacted so angrily to Castle's nervous complaint seconds earlier. He'd been close to throwing up before they'd left the safety of the building. He didn't tell the others, of course. They'd all been so sure of their plans when they'd spoken this morning and last night. Doing this had seemed such a good idea before they'd actually stepped out into the open and stood there unprotected. A single body tripped across a footpath a short distance ahead of them. The six survivors stared in silence and watched anxiously as it moved awkwardly away. Steve Armitage (a long-distance lorry driver who had hardly spoken until today but who had volunteered to do this because he could drive a truck and because he could no longer stand being trapped indoors) licked his dry lips and nervously lit a cigarette.

'Put that bloody thing out,' Croft hissed quietly. 'You fucking idiot! We're trying to blend in here. How many of those damn things have you seen smoking?' Armitage dropped the cigarette down onto the ground and stubbed it out with his foot.

'Sorry,' he whispered apologetically. 'Not thinking. Bit nervous.'

Cooper's military training was beginning to show. Although he may well have been as scared and apprehensive as the other five men, it was not at all noticeable. He remained calm and collected, as if this was something he did every day.

'Don't worry, Steve,' he said softly, doing his best to reassure the struggling lorry driver. 'We can do this, you know. We just have to keep our nerve and stick together. Take your time, don't do anything stupid and we'll be okay.'

Bernard Heath was, surprisingly, the sixth survivor who had ventured out into the open. Although it had seemed that his cowardice and nerves had been steadily increasing during the days and weeks of their confinement, he remained a sensible and rational man at heart. He had gradually come to accept that his earlier protestations and demands that they should stay inside were driven more by fear than any rational thought processes. Much as he still preferred the idea of staying locked away in the accommodation block, he understood that was no longer an option. Perhaps trying to make amends for the conflict and arguments he had helped prolong recently, he had volunteered to be one of the first to leave the protection of the building.

Cooper glanced round at the faces of the others before nodding his head in the general direction of the city centre and starting to walk. Weighed down heavily with their individual nerves and trepidation, the six men began to move towards the dead heart of the town in slow, shuffling single file.

The door from which they had emerged from their shelter had been hidden around the back of the building. As the majority of bodies had reached the university from the direction of the town, the survivors came across relatively few of them at first. Those corpses they did see were distracted - banging and scratching incessantly at the sides of the building, trying to get inside

despite the fact that it was clearly pointless. Cooper kept his head low, doing his best to imitate the weary, slothful movements of the dead. Untrained and having been shut away inside for some considerable time, the other men were unable to match his military self-control and found it difficult to camouflage their strained emotions. They couldn't help but stare at the nightmarish scene which quickly unfolded around them.

It was the noise they noticed first. Unexpected and unsettling, the constant low sounds served to emphasise the sudden closeness and reality of the danger. Inside the university they had become used to the quiet. Outside, however, things were very different. There remained an eerie, vacuous silence where the noise of traffic and the day-to-day had once been but, at the same time, a low and constant humming and moaning filled the air - the sound of bodies dragging their feet along the ground and the buzzing of millions of insects feeding off their decaying flesh. The noxious smell of the rotting corpses was stifling. Jack Baxter felt the bile rising in his stomach. He didn't know if he was going to be able to handle this.

Cooper shuffled away in the general direction of the subway which he had originally used to reach the university. He didn't relish the idea of disappearing down into that dark and foreboding hole again. The crowd, however, had swollen to such an extent that it was difficult to be sure whereabouts the entrance was. For a moment he toyed with the idea of simply taking a chance and staying above ground and just running to reach the courthouse. He knew that he couldn't do that without talking to the others first, and he knew that he couldn't communicate with them in any way without alerting the corpses to their presence. The icy fear he felt when he risked a quick sideways glance into the vast gathering of bodies a little way ahead kept him focussed.

'Jesus Christ,' he heard someone say from a short distance behind him. The voice wasn't particularly loud, but in this dangerous and unpredictable environment even a whisper was too much of a risk to take. Cooper lifted his hand and cautiously turned his head to try and remind the others of the danger. What he saw made him freeze with horror.

'Shit,' he hissed under his breath.

The bodies were reacting. Too far away to have heard the voices, the corpses were beginning to make definite conscious movements towards the exposed survivors. Those on the nearest edge of the massive crowd had lifted their rotting heads and were looking at the line of men slowly snaking towards the subway. A few of the bodies had begun to stagger away from the main group and were now lurching towards them. As those corpses moved so the attention of others was caught and, in seconds, a deadly chain reaction had begun. Like the first battalions of a relentless advancing army the cadavers began to approach.

'What the fuck is going on?' a terrified Phil Croft demanded, forgetting himself. The sound of his voice caused hundreds more vile creatures to look up and begin to peel away from the crowd and move towards them. 'You said they'd ignore us if we...'

Cooper knew there was no time to stand and argue. By all accounts the behaviour of the bodies had been changing constantly since the day they'd been infected - in the short time he'd been away from his base he'd seen them become more aggressive. A few days earlier slow movements and feigned lethargy had been sufficient to fool the dead. Today the creatures appeared to be reacting with unmistakable intent. Although still awkward and clumsy, today they were moving with ominous speed and purpose.

'Move!' Cooper ordered. 'Just get to the fucking courthouse now!'

Without waiting for further instruction the survivors turned and sprinted towards the city centre. Cooper led the way but, not knowing the city particularly well, he ran without direction.

'This way!' Paul Castle shouted, running away to the soldier's left. The others followed as swarms of bodies gathered around them. Castle glanced back over his shoulder. His speed and panic was such that it was impossible to make

out details, instead he was just aware of an increasing dark mass of cadavers following them. Terrified, he turned back around and ran into a single random corpse, sending it flying to the ground.¹⁵⁴

Castle, the soldier and the doctor were relatively young and in good health. Baxter and Heath, although somewhat older, were also able to keep up. Steve Armitage, however, was struggling. With tears of panic and fear running freely down his face, the overweight truck driver lashed out at the countless figures which lurched and lunged towards him. For the moment the force of his large bulk was enough to keep them at bay. It was difficult to keep sight of the rest of the group ahead, such was the number of ragged bodies that crisscrossed his path and grabbed at him with clumsy, decaying hands. They weren't going to make it. From what he'd been told he guessed the courthouse was still a fair distance away. Cooper knew he could do it, but it was doubtful whether the older men would keep up.

'Over there,' he yelled, suddenly changing direction and moving to his right. He needed to find shelter. It didn't matter what or where, they just needed to get out of sight for a time until the crowd's interest in them had dissipated. He pushed open a heavy door in the middle of a small, glass-fronted bookshop and held it open for the other survivors. 'Go through to the back,' he yelled as Heath and Baxter crashed breathlessly past him. Armitage was almost there. Cooper reached out and grabbed his arm and pulled him through. 'Get out of sight.'

Croft dragged a bookcase and low reading table across the door once Cooper had managed to push it shut. Already there were rotting faces pressed against the glass, smashing their fists against the window, trying to get at the survivors inside. Cooper gently pushed Croft deeper into the building.

The others were waiting in a small, square office.

'What the hell are we going to do now?' Heath asked anxiously. He looked at Armitage. The red-faced man was slumped over a desk in the middle of the room, fighting to get his breath back.

'We keep going,' Croft said. 'What option have we got? We can either turn back and fight our way through a fucking huge crowd of bodies, or we can do what we came out here to do, get some transport organised, and then fight our way back through a fucking huge crowd of bodies.'

His humour wasn't appreciated. Regardless, the rest of the men knew that they didn't have a choice.

'Where exactly are we?' Cooper asked. 'Where are we in relation to the court?' Castle, standing with his hands on his hips and breathing heavily, cleared his throat and looked round.

'Not too far to go,' he replied, moving slightly so that he could look through another door and out towards the back of the building. 'I reckon it'll be easier if we go through the back.'

'Fine,' Cooper said. 'We ready?'

Armitage looked up in disbelief.

'Give us a minute,' he complained.

'You can rest when we've found ourselves a fleet of trucks, okay?'

The lorry driver covered his head in despair and then pushed himself back up.

'All right?' Baxter asked.

Armitage nodded.

'Lead the way, Paul,' Cooper ordered. Trembling with nerves Castle did as he was told, cautiously creeping through the building until he reached the back door which opened out into a communal loading area shared with a number of neighbouring shops. A narrow service road ran along the back of the buildings. As far as he could see there were no bodies nearby.

'Which way?' Cooper whispered. Castle nodded to his right. 'Okay,' the soldier continued, 'stick together and not a bloody sound from anyone, understand?'

No-one responded. 'Let's go.'

Castle began to walk away from the shop, pressing himself against the nearest wall and doing his best to blend into the shadows. In the middle of the group Armitage silently cursed his condition. He wished that he was younger and

fitter. Although no doubt amplified in his mind, he feared that the sound of his heavy breathing might be enough to bring the bodies to them again.

The service road carried on for a hundred meters or so before taking a sharp right and rejoining the main road. Castle paused just before the turning.

'How far?' Cooper asked, his voice deathly quiet.

'Carry on along this road and we'll reach another junction,' he replied, nodding further down the service road. 'Go left and the court's at the top of the main shopping street. A few hundred yards probably.'

'What's it look like?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Big building, bronzed glass in the windows, steps up to the front door.'

'Who else knows what it looks like?'

The other men, who had now grouped around Castle and the soldier, nodded.

Baxter wasn't sure.

'Is it by... ' he began.

'Follow the rest of us,' Cooper snapped. 'Wait here for a second. I'll go and see what's around.'

Silently creeping further down the service road, he stopped when he reached the point where it merged with the main road. Cautiously he stuck his head around the corner and looked up and down the once busy street. There were plenty of bodies around, but considerably fewer than they had seen before they'd taken shelter in the bookshop. He guessed that the disturbance they'd caused back at the university would have resulted in many of the corpses gravitating around that area. He made his way back to the others.

'There are a fair few of them about,' he said quietly. 'The only way to get through them is to ignore them. Try and forget they're there. Run through them. They can't match speed and the power we've got.'

'A few thousand of the bastards could...' Armitage moaned.

'There aren't a few thousand out there,' Cooper replied, 'but there will be if you panic so shut up, take a deep fucking breath and follow me.'

Without waiting for a response he headed back towards the main road. The rest of the survivors followed behind, their nervousness increasing with every step. Bernard Heath took deep breaths of stagnant air in an attempt to fill his lungs with oxygen before they started running again.

Cooper paused and turned back to make sure they were together.

'Ready?' he asked. No response. He turned and ran. Instinctively the others followed at a frantic pace.

Immediately those straggling bodies left in the street turned and moved towards the sudden disturbance. Cooper led the way, pushing corpses away to the side as he forced his way forward. Castle was close behind. A myriad of unexpected emotions ran through his mind as he moved. As the inhabitants of the city had rotted and decayed, so the city itself also appeared to have deteriorated. The once familiar sights of streets that he'd walked along hundreds of times seemed to have changed almost beyond recognition. Unchecked moss and weeds grew between the cracks in the pavements and climbed the walls of cold and silent buildings. Motionless, skeletal corpses lay in the gutter being steadily devoured by the passage of time and by the numerous rodents and insects which fed off their disintegrating flesh. A random body lashed out and caught him off-guard. He grabbed it by the neck and threw it into a crowd of three more advancing cadavers.

'Left!' he shouted at the soldier who, in his haste and desire to keep moving, had just passed the turning. Castle changed direction, followed closely by the rest of the men who were all somehow managing to keep a comparable pace. Bernard Heath and Steve Armitage in particular were moving with unexpected velocity and newfound determination. Pure adrenaline and fear was driving them to run like men half their ages.

Disorientated by its overgrown appearance and the sudden effort of the sprint through the streets, it took Phil Croft a while to recognise the court building. As he swerved to avoid another lurching body his eyes locked onto the steep steps which led up from ground level to the court's imposing

bronzetinted glass entrance doors. Cooper, Castle and Heath were already there. They held the doors open for the others and then slammed them shut and barred them once they were all inside. Half of the men dropped to their knees and struggled to catch their breath. The remaining three realised immediately that there were suddenly movements in the shadows all around them. Within thirty seconds some fifteen ragged figures had appeared in the building's vast reception area. Countless more slammed into the door and began to try and beat their way inside.

'Get rid of them,' Cooper ordered. 'Go for the head and try and take them out. We'll get this area cleared and then we can slow it down a gear.'

Looking round for inspiration he picked up a nearby metal tube (which had previously held up a sign instructing visitors to the court to wait to be searched by security) and moved towards the closest body. What had once been a policewoman dragged itself towards him with willowy arms outstretched. He swung the heavy metal tube through the air and smashed it into the side of the corpse's head. Deep crimson blood, almost black, began to ooze steadily from a gash above the body's shattered cheekbone. It moved forward again. Cooper lashed out again and again, his fifth strike finally making the pitiful creature crumble, leaving it limp and motionless on the dusty marble floor. Armitage stood in numb terror as an elderly cadaver stumbled towards him. With empty, emotionless eyes it stared at him and he found himself unable to look away or to react in any other way. Suddenly too close to be avoided, the lorry driver screwed up his face in disgust and lifted his arms to prevent the pathetic figure from advancing any further forward. Although the body squirmed relentlessly in his grip, the survivor's strength was clearly too much for it to overcome. Becoming suddenly more confident now that he was aware of the physical gulf between the living and the dead, Armitage pushed the body away and into the nearest wall with angry force. The corpse stopped and then turned and began to move towards him again. This time Armitage grabbed hold of the rotting head, just below the chin, and, with weeks of pent up fear and frustration behind him, he slammed it against the wall, almost crushing it completely.

They were cutting through the bodies with incredible ease. The lethargic movements, slow reactions and comparative weakness of the cadavers was no match for the strength and coordination of even the most tired and unfit survivor. In less than five minutes the reception area had been cleared.

'Good job,' Croft said. He was breathing heavily.

Paul Castle acknowledged their efforts.

'Bloody hell,' he gasped, clearly surprised, 'they were nothing, were they? Christ we could have torn a thousand of them apart...'

'But there are millions out there,' Bernard Heath reminded him. The university lecturer's voice was solemn and resigned.

'Don't think that's it,' Cooper said. 'There will be more of them around the building. Just keep moving and don't let your guard down.'

With that he began to move towards a nearby corridor.

'Where you going?' asked Armitage, wiping his grease and gore-covered hands on the back of his trousers. Cooper gestured towards a brass sign on the wall.

'Juror's suite,' he replied. His answer was met with blank looks from the others. 'Jurors sit in on trials,' he explained. 'Trials happen in court rooms. Prisoners stand in the dock in court rooms...'

'And...?' pressed Castle.

'And the prisoners have to get from the prison vans to the dock, don't they? We'll work our way back through the building.'

39

'Christ,' mumbled Clare as she looked down from a high window onto the remains of the huge crowd outside the university building. 'Look at them! Just look at them!'

Donna had been sitting silently on the stairs holding her head in her hands,

waiting impatiently and anxiously for the men to return. They had been gone for almost an hour. She got up and slowly walked over to where Clare was standing.

'Bloody hell...' she gasped as she stared into the mayhem below.

The bodies were moving with more force and speed than she'd ever seen before. Those nearest the centre of the city were continuing to break away from the main group and were stumbling away from the university complex in the general direction in which the six survivors had disappeared earlier. This wasn't any random coincidence. It was obvious that the corpses were moving with a purpose and a new found drive. And as the figures continued to stagger away, so more and more of them followed.

'What's happening to them?' Clare asked. 'What are they doing?' Down in the middle of the crowd she could see bodies beginning to fight with others to move through the immense gathering.

'It's like they're waking up,' Donna replied under her breath.

In horror she pressed her face against the cold glass and watched the shadowy figures continue to move. In some ways it was almost as if they were beginning to herd like wild animals. Their movements were unerringly similar to a shoal of fish or a flock of migrating birds slowed down to a fraction of their natural pace. The implications were devastating.

'Where are you going?' Clare wondered as Donna moved back towards the staircase. Her voice was trembling and light.

'Back down to the others. Coming?'

Clare didn't move.

'Do you think they're going to be able to get back...'

Donna shook her head and answered abruptly.

'I don't know. There are thousands and thousands of those bloody things out there. All it's going to take is for one of the men to get caught and...'

'But why is this happening? Why have they started to behave like this now?'

Donna shrugged her shoulders.

'Who knows,' she replied. 'Whatever the reason, we need to get away from this place as soon as we can.'

40

Having forced their way through the juror's lounge, several connecting corridors and staircases and a vast and grandiose court room, the six survivors nervously worked their way back from the dock and eventually found themselves at the entrance to the prisoner cells buried deep within the bowels of the court complex. The other five men stood and watched anxiously as Phil Croft struggled to remove a bunch of keys from the belt of a long-deceased prison guard lying stiff and twisted on the floor. Croft yanked the keys free, stood up and began to try and unlock the strengthened metal door which was preventing them from moving any further forward.

'Come on,' Paul Castle moaned. He could hear more movement in other parts of the building around them.

'I'm going as fast as I can,' hissed Croft as he systematically worked his way through the keys. His hands were shaking through a combination of nerves, exhaustion and pure adrenaline. With a welcome click and a heavy thud the seventh key opened the door.

'Well done,' said Cooper as he pushed past. He marched quickly down a narrow corridor which opened out into a grey office area with a chest height reception desk straight ahead. This, he decided, had to be where the prisoners were booked in and out of the court. Secondary corridors ran off to the left and the right. To his right were the cells. To his left the exit. Through a toughened glass window in the exit door he could see a wide, open area reminiscent of the transport hanger back at the underground base he'd come from. It had to be the loading bay. 'This way,' he grunted.

With an unexpected flash of sudden, uncoordinated movement a lone meandering body dragged itself out of the shadows and lurched towards him. With a single

sharp and instinctive reaction he clenched his right hand into a fist and threw a powerful punch at the obnoxious figure, catching it square in the face. For a moment it stood and swayed in front of him, the battered and mangled remains of its rotting features having been made unrecognisable by the brute force of the soldier's punch. As dark, sticky blood began to seep down from the black hole where its nose had been, the creature dropped to the ground.

Cooper beckoned the men towards the exit. The door which led down from the corridor to the garage and loading bay was ajar, propped open by the trapped torso of another motionless corpse that had fallen unceremoniously weeks earlier. He stepped over the body and ran down a short flight of concrete steps. The others followed close behind.

'Close the door,' Jack Baxter shouted to Bernard Heath as he brought up the rear. Heath immediately did as he was told, pushing the obstructive body back into the corridor and out of the way before slamming the door shut and tripping down the steps. Panting nervously, he leant against the nearest wall to catch his breath again. Several long seconds had passed before he could bear to lift his head and look around the loading bay. Had the risks they'd taken been worth it?

'You okay, Bernard?' asked Croft. The doctor's question made him look up. He nodded, stood upright and took a few tired steps into the main garage area. He had hoped to see it full of prison vans and other similar vehicles but he was disappointed. There were two lorries that he could see - one long enough to have three doors and several small square windows down the side, the other around two thirds the length of the first - and a single police van. Steve Armitage was already climbing into the cab of the largest lorry, settling into the seat and checking over the controls.

'Can you drive it?' Cooper asked. Armitage looked down at him and scowled.

'If we can get it started then I can bloody well drive it,' he replied, somewhat offended.

Bernard Heath began to check over the smaller truck while Croft concentrated his attention on the van. He found its last driver dead at the wheel, haunched forward with his frozen face fixed in a grotesque expression of devastating pain and absolute fear. The chin of the corpse and much of the dashboard of the van were covered in drops of coagulated blood. For a moment the doctor stood and stared at the pitiful sight. What utter terror and agony must each of these people have experienced, he wondered? As he began to yank the stiff and awkward cadaver out of the vehicle he was disturbed by the sudden sound of corpses outside beginning to smash against the outside of the huge metal loading bay doors, the survivor's voices having alerted them to their presence there. As much as the body he was shifting must have suffered, he thought, at least this man's torment was over. For the desperate creatures still moving (and, for that matter, for himself and his fellow survivors too) the fear, confusion, disorientation and pain seemed set to continue indefinitely.

Cooper left the loading bay and ran back to the reception area through which they'd passed just a few minutes earlier. He was looking for the keys to the vehicles they had found. Grasped in the skeletal fingers of another dust covered body slumped on the floor in a small office behind the tall reception counter he found the key to a slim metal cabinet mounted on the wall. Inside the cabinet were door keys, drawer keys, desk keys and many other keys of countless shapes and sizes. He grabbed everything which looked as though it might belong to a car, truck or van and ran back to the loading bay.

Having dragged the body away from the van Croft turned his attention to trying to get the engine started. Fortunately he had found the keys he needed on the ground in the footwell between the body's feet. He sat in the driver's seat and fumbled with the ignition. After a month of inactivity he didn't hold out much hope of them getting any of the vehicles going.

'Can you hear them?' Castle asked as he watched Croft work. Croft glanced up and looked through the windscreen towards the loading bay doors. It sounded as if they were being battered by a continual stream of bodies outside. He looked

down towards the bottom of the steel shutters. He could see the metal rattling and shaking in its frame.

'Of course I can bloody well hear them,' he grunted as he returned his concentration to getting the van moving. 'More to the point, they can hear us.'

He turned the key in the ignition. The engine began to turn over but then died pathetically. His last words rang round his head as he tried the key again. The noise they were going to make getting these vehicles back to the university would be deafening. The grim reality of the situation was quickly dawning on him. It was clear that even without the engines the noise they had already made had been enough to attract many bodies to the other side of the loading bay doors, and he knew that those bodies would, in turn, draw more and more to the scene. They were quickly being surrounded. The options left now seemed simple and bleak. Get out in the van and the lorries or don't get out at all.

Heath had more success with the smaller truck. Having managed to find the right key from the collection Cooper had brought back with him from the office, he tried the engine a couple of times before, on the third attempt, it dramatically spluttered and burst into life, filling the loading bay with rough, mechanical noise and belching out dirty grey floor-hugging clouds of fumes. Never before had the taste of carbon monoxide and lead been so welcome, the university lecturer thought to himself as he accelerated the engine. Momentarily elated the other men quickly realised that now that one vehicle had started, it would most probably be possible to get the others started too. Heath watched cautiously as the needle on the fuel gauge slowly climbed across the dial, finally stopping just short of the three-quarters full mark. Even over the throaty roar of the engine they could clearly hear more and more of the bodies thudding against the door outside.

'Bernard,' Armitage yelled, 'pull up in front of me and we'll get this one started.'

The lorry driver had also managed to locate the keys to his vehicle from the pile Cooper had found. He watched from his cab as Heath slowly pulled forward in the smaller truck and swung round in front of the larger vehicle. Armitage climbed down and ran over to an area in the far right corner of the loading bay which seemed to have been used as a makeshift garage and repair shop of sorts. Managing to locate a set of heavy duty jump leads he quickly moved back to the trucks, opened the bonnets and started work.

Paul Castle nudged Croft who was still trying unsuccessfully to get the van's engine to fire.

'Join the queue,' he said. 'Wait till they've got the other truck going and then get them to do the same with the van.'

Croft nodded. He gestured for Castle to move to the side and then released the handbrake, allowing the van to slowly roll a few feet forward. He turned the steering wheel and guided the vehicle closer to the trucks.

Ten minutes later and all three vehicles were started and were running. The six men stood together in the middle of the loading bay and hurriedly arranged their exit plans. Much as the university had seemed the most cold, uncomfortable and impersonal of prisons recently, every one of the men desperately wanted to be back there now.

'Do we wait?' Heath asked. 'Should we shut the engines off and hope some of the bodies disappear?'

'No point,' Croft answered. 'We might as well just go for it. The amount of bloody noise we've made will have brought hundreds of them here. It'll take days for them to disappear.'

'He's right,' Cooper agreed. 'We're not going to gain anything from putting this off.'

'Are we going to fit everyone in here?' Baxter wondered, thinking out loud. He stared at the three vehicles and tried to visualise how they were going to cram the survivors and their belongings in.

'We're going to have to,' mumbled Croft. 'There's no way we can risk trying to come out here again. Anyway, if...'

His words were interrupted by yet more smashing and clattering on the other side of the metal loading bay door. The noise acted as a grim reminder that before they could think about getting out of the city, they'd first need to get out of the court building and find their way back to the university. The doctor walked across the loading bay and stopped just short of the doors. Doing his best to ignore the constant, violent battering coming from outside, he crouched down to examine the locking mechanism. The doors, it seemed, were manufactured in a kind of concertina style. Once they'd managed to unlock them, therefore, they would slide open. Equally keen to get out and get moving and feeling useless and redundant because he couldn't drive, Jack Baxter also began to study the locks.

'Christ knows how we're going to get these open,' he muttered. 'These would have been powered doors. We'll be hard pushed to get them open without any electricity.'

'We can do it,' said Cooper from close behind. 'We'll take the locks out, free any restraints and then force them open.'

'Force them open with what?' Baxter asked.

'The bloody trucks, what else?' the soldier snapped.

He lay down on the ground and stared at the bottom of the door. Light was trickling in from outside and was being blocked intermittently by the constant movements of the many random bodies milling around the other side of the barrier. With an outstretched hand Cooper tried to feel the door mechanism and understand how it worked. He could feel a metal runner buried in the concrete and it followed that some kind of pin would follow the track and keep the door in line. There would no doubt also be something similar at the top. He stood up and returned his attention to the lock which Croft was still examining studiously.

'Think you can get it open?' he asked.

'If I hit it hard enough I can open anything!' the doctor smirked.

Steve Armitage appeared at their side with various spanners, wrenches and other tools.

'Found these over there,' he said, gesturing over towards the area of the loading bay where he had earlier found the jump leads. Cooper took one of the heavier wrenches from him and began to smash the lock. Croft stepped back. The noise the soldier was making was deafening, and the implications were obvious. 'Get into the trucks,' Baxter shouted to the others. As the only non-driver he felt duty bound to carry on working to get the doors open. 'When we get this done there'll be thousands of bloody bodies in here.'

Croft and Armitage returned to their vehicles. Paul Castle settled himself in the driver's seat of the smaller prison van which Heath had started. Just ahead of them Cooper continued to batter the lock, feeling it weaken with every deafening blow. Another thirty seconds and it was released.

'That it?' Bernard Heath asked from close behind.

Cooper shook the door and tried to slide it open a fraction. It wouldn't move. 'Must be other restraints,' he mumbled. He took a step back and then looked up and down at the area where the door met the frame. He could see that there were two more locks or bolts, one about a third of the way up the side of the door, the other a third down.

Heath gestured for Croft to bring the van over. The doctor edged the vehicle forward cautiously and stopped just short of the door. The lecturer hauled himself up onto the bonnet of the van and then stepped up onto its roof.

'Pass me something to get this open with,' he shouted down to the others.

Cooper passed up a heavy steel lump hammer with which Heath immediately began to batter the metal. His pulse raced with adrenaline, effort and fear as he smashed the hammer down again and again. His arm ached but he didn't stop. He could sense the vast crowd waiting for them on the other side of the metal door but it didn't seem to matter. He wanted to be away from this place.

Directly below where Heath was working Cooper was leaning across the van and

had started to try and free the one remaining restraint, prising it open with a metal crowbar. Although this was a secure door it was by no means impassable. It would never had needed to be impenetrable - there had been enough security both outside and around the courthouse to prevent or deter escape. He guessed that had a prisoner tried to get away like this they would have been surrounded and captured long before they'd got this far. He thought for a fraction of a second about the level of noise they were making and the distance the sound would have travelled. Bodies for miles around would by now be staggering relentlessly towards the courthouse. He felt almost as if they were ringing a bizarre church bell, calling a decaying flock to worship. The door began to move. Cooper had forced the bottom latch open. With the first restraint now released he moved out of the way and looked up at Heath who continued to hammer relentlessly on the metal. Sweat poured from his brow and his right arm was tired and heavy, exhausted by the effort of pounding against the door with the hammer.

`Almost there?' Cooper asked.

`Almost there,' he panted in reply.

The soldier readied himself to open the door. By default Phil Croft would be the first driver to leave the building and he tried to visualise his route back to the university. He never used to drive through town. It had always been so busy that public transport had been by far the quickest and easiest way to get to and from work.

`Got it,' Heath finally yelled. Relieved, he threw the hammer to one side and clambered down from the top of the van, gasping for breath. He dragged himself towards the larger of the two prison trucks and climbed into the passenger's seat next to Armitage.

Cooper beckoned for Castle and Armitage to move their vehicles as close to the back of the police van as possible. Space in the garage was limited. The two drivers pointed the front of their trucks towards the exit and readied themselves to move.

`Okay?' Cooper asked Croft. The doctor nodded and leant across the van to open the other door ready for Cooper.

The soldier opened the loading bay.

Hundreds of bodies began to pour into the building, pushing themselves away from the dense crowds behind them and grabbing at the stagnant air ahead. They flooded around the vehicles. Cooper sprinted the short distance to the van and threw himself in through the open door. Sitting up he kicked and punched at the numerous corpses that reached out after him before slamming the door shut.

`Move!' he screamed.

Croft jammed his foot down onto the accelerator and sent the van flying forward, tearing through the rotting masses and obliterating those creatures unfortunate enough to get in the way. Behind them the two trucks began to move, slower than the van but with even more strength and devastating force. The second and third vehicles followed in the bloody wake of the first.

`Can't see a frigging thing,' snapped Croft as body after body smashed into the windscreen.

`Doesn't matter,' Cooper replied as he shuffled into his seat. `Just keep moving. Just get away from here.'

The crowd was huge and, it seemed, apparently endless. Their relatively low driving position made it impossible for Cooper and Croft to fully appreciate the appalling sight which could be seen by the other four men from their higher vantage points in the cabs of the trucks. A never-ending sea of decaying bodies, all dragging themselves senselessly towards the court and after the vehicles driving hurriedly away. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of emotionless, empty shells lurching helplessly towards the source of the sound and movement that had suddenly filled their otherwise empty world.

`Which way?' Croft asked, shouting to make himself heard over the sound of cold metal hitting decaying flesh.

`I thought you said you knew this place,' Cooper replied, annoyed.

`I did,' the doctor snapped back. `Problem is I knew it before all of this happened. I knew it before there were a million fucking corpses rotting in the streets.'

Angry and frightened, Croft turned right along a wide road which he knew would take them deeper into the city centre.

`Where you going?' Cooper demanded, struggling to see through the bodies which surrounded them.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and grabbed hold of the steering wheel again as it was wrenched from his hands momentarily as he clipped the kerb. Despite having been away from the court for almost a minute now they seemed to be no closer to reaching the edge of the disease-ridden crowd. Unable to see anything much at street level he looked up at the buildings which surrounded them and managed to work out roughly where they were.

`Got it,' he said suddenly. `I'm going to drive the wrong way down the ring road. That should get us back home.'

A couple of hundred meters further and they reached a large traffic island and flyover littered with bodies and with the twisted wrecks of crashed cars, buses and other vehicles. He managed to weave a path through the remains. With less control but considerably more power, the two trucks behind smashed their way through after them.

41

`They're coming!' shouted one of the survivors from a lookout position on the third floor of the university accommodation block. The building was otherwise quiet and the disembodied voice of the lookout quickly travelled down empty corridors and into the various room where the rest of the survivors sat and waited. Donna and Keith Peterson were the first to react. They jumped up from where they had been waiting anxiously in the assembly hall and sprinted quickly through the complex. They headed over to a balcony on the side of the building which overlooked the enclosed football pitch that they had earlier agreed to use as a temporary lock-up for their vehicles until they were ready to leave the city.

Donna pushed her way out through double-fronted glass doors and leant precariously over the edge of the balcony, craning her neck to try and catch sight of the returning survivors while, at the same time, doing her best to ignore the nauseous vertigo and fear she felt hanging a hundred feet above the crowds of corpses. She could hear some kind of transport approaching but the disorientating silence of the world made it impossible for her to be able to tell how far away they were and in which direction they were travelling. There were relatively few bodies on the ground below the balcony - perhaps only a hundred or so - and Donna also thought that their numbers appeared to have reduced somewhat around the part of the front of the building that she could see. The noise and distractions caused by the survivors being in another part of the city had temporarily tempted a large proportion of the immense crowd of figures away from the university. It was obvious, however, that the return of the six men would inevitably also result in the return of massive swarms of the decaying corpses.

`I can see them,' Keith Peterson said. He had climbed up onto the metal safety barrier surrounding the balcony and was holding onto the door they had just come through for support.

`Are they all there?' Donna asked anxiously.

`Can't tell,' Peterson replied. `There are at least three of them. I can see a van and two trucks.'

The blood-splattered convoy slowly pulled into view, the white fronts of the van and the trucks having been soaked with the gore and dripping remains of a thousand collisions with a thousand rotting bodies. Inside the lead van Phil Croft steered towards the welcome sight of the university buildings with Cooper at his side still trying to peer through the mayhem of countless random figures, trying to locate the track which would take them off the main road

and deeper into the centre of the complex. Ignorant to the danger of the huge and powerful machines, the pathetic corpses continued relentlessly to gravitate around the vehicles.

Croft took a sudden sharp left. He recognised the narrow road. He knew that it would take them all the way around the back of the building and allow them full access to the rest of the site. He glanced up into the rear view mirror and, amongst the confusion, watched as first one and then both trucks turned and followed him away from the main road.

'Not far now,' he said quietly. Cooper didn't respond. Instead he turned around on his seat and stared up at the accommodation block which they were slowly passing. He was looking for the other survivors, wanting to be sure that they knew they had returned. He saw Donna and Peterson first, and then noticed other faces peering out from different windows on different levels. The group still hadn't been able to make any definite plans or work out the precise details of the afternoon's risky excursion out into the open. Their main aims had quickly been identified and agreed upon. The more practical points, however, had been knowingly overlooked. Where was the sense in trying to iron out fine details, they had decided, when no-one knew whether or not their main objectives were going to be achieved? Now that the men had succeeded in getting transport, the intentional shortfalls in their planning were unnerving and daunting.

'So what do we do now?' asked Croft as they drove towards the wiremesh enclosed football pitch. They could already see that the gate was closed. To get out and open it would be taking a huge risk and to smash through would open the entire area up to the wandering bodies.

'Just keep moving,' answered Cooper, swinging himself around and sitting back down. 'We're going to have to drive through the gate.'

'But we'll...' Croft began to protest.

'Go through, reverse up and we'll use the van to block off the entrance once the others are through.'

'So how are we going to get back inside if we're going to block the fucking exit?'

Cooper shook his head, resigned and irritated by the doctor's obvious nerves.

'We're not going to be able to do anything for some time,' he explained, holding onto the sides of his seat as the van bumped and rocked as it ploughed through still more bodies. 'The noise we're making is going to bring thousands of these bloody things here.'

'We could make a run for it.'

'We could, but I think we should sit tight and wait for a while. Doesn't matter if we don't get back inside for a couple of hours. Hopefully there will be fewer of them around by then.'

Cooper braced himself as Croft accelerated towards the metal gate blocking the entrance to the football pitch. Steve Armitage watched from the larger of the two trucks following close behind.

'If he can't do it,' the lorry driver grunted, 'then I'll get through it with this thing.'

'You'll take half the bloody fence with you,' snapped Bernard Heath sitting next to him. As they had neared the university so Heath's nervousness and apprehension had increased considerably. He knew the time was coming for them to risk leaving their shelter.

The four men following watched as the police van careered into the gate. The force of the impact was enough to twist and smash it out of shape, leaving the buckled metal barrier hanging half-open, held in place by one stubborn hinge. Croft reversed a few meters back and then drove forward again, forcing the remains of the gate to one side and driving onto the football pitch. Suddenly free and able to move without obstruction, the doctor turned the van around in a large circle. He watched with nervous fascination as the bodies began to arrive. The diseased shells collided with the rattling wire-mesh barrier around the entire perimeter of the football pitch.

'This is going to be tight,' Armitage muttered as he lined up the truck and

drove through the space where the metal gate had been. An experienced driver, the sides of his vehicle missed the fence by little more than a few centimeters on either side.

Seeing that the first truck had entered the football pitch unscathed gave Paul Castle a false faith in his own abilities. He forced the smaller truck forward and winced as the passenger side scraped along the gatepost.

As soon as the last of the three vehicles was safe within the confines of the metal fence Croft parked the van across the width of the entrance, blocking access to the football pitch for the hundreds of staggering cadavers which dragged themselves towards the survivors. Steve Armitage parked his vehicle in the middle of the pitch. After obliterating three bodies which had managed to squeeze onto the playing field in the short time between the last vehicle entering and Croft closing the gap, Paul Castle did the same.

'Get out of sight,' Cooper ordered as he ran from the van towards the larger of the two trucks. 'Get in the back of this one.'

All around the football pitch bodies continued to collide noisily and clumsily with the fence. Where between ten and twenty had stood moments before, now hundreds of ragged, bedraggled figures stood and smashed their rotting hands against the barrier, grabbing and shaking the wire-mesh and trying hopelessly to get at the survivors inside.

Needing no further encouragement, the five other men followed Cooper into the back of the truck. Taking care not to fully shut the heavy, security locked door, the soldier collapsed down onto a nearby metal bench.

'Did it,' he said quietly. The military authority and direction previously so clear in his voice had suddenly been dropped and had been replaced with obvious relief. The other tired faces around him looked similarly relieved.

'So what do we do now?' Jack Baxter asked. 'Looks like we're stuck out here for a while.'

'Let's just take it easy,' the soldier replied. 'Nothing else to do but sit and wait.'

42

Michael Collins sat anxiously behind the wheel of the motorhome with Emma at his side. They had been stopped in this location for almost six hours, neither of them daring to move for fear that they might miss the return of the soldiers they'd seen leaving earlier this morning. The wait was becoming unbearable. Michael was beginning to wonder whether they were going to come back. Anything could have happened to the scouting party.

The motorhome was parked in a field adjacent to the track they'd discovered. By nestling the large and cumbersome vehicle on the other side of a greystone wall and underneath heavy tree cover they had camouflaged themselves to an extent and their relative invisibility was reassuring. The otherwise bright day had been interrupted by an unexpected shower of rain a short while earlier and drops of water still fell steadily from the overhanging trees, clattering down onto the metal roof and providing an eerie soundtrack to the afternoon. Apart from those few random sounds the world was quiet and deceptively peaceful.

'Want something to drink?' Emma asked.

Michael shook his head.

'No thanks,' he replied abruptly. His stomach was churning with nerves and uncertainty.

For what felt like the hundredth time in the last hour he turned and looked over his shoulder, peering back down the track in the direction in which the soldiers had disappeared earlier. He stared into the distance, hoping that he would soon see movement but, at the same time, also strangely relieved that nothing seemed to be happening.

Emma slid across the front seats and put her hand around his shoulder. He didn't respond. She leant over and kissed the side of his cheek. Still no response. He wasn't ignoring her, he simply had far too much on his mind for

him to be able to react towards her in the way he normally would have done. If he was honest with himself he wanted nothing more than to be open and unrestrained and tell her exactly how much she meant to him, but now wasn't the time. They had been out in the open for too long. They needed something which resembled stability and order back in their lives before they could move on. The bottom line was that they both needed more than they presently had, and Michael hoped and prayed that the soldiers they had seen would bring them the relative security and comfort they desired.

'I hate it when you're this quiet,' Emma said, her face still close to his.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm okay,' he replied, subdued. Much as he wanted her close, he also wished she'd leave him alone to think.

'What we need to do,' she continued, 'is find...'

'Shh...' he snapped, interrupting.170

'What?'

'Listen.'

Emma did as she was told. She pushed herself away from Michael and sat on the edge of her seat and listened carefully. She could hear the sound of an engine approaching.

'This is it,' said Michael as he turned the key in the ignition, causing the cumbersome motorhome's engine to rumble into life. He sat motionless in his seat and watched the road behind through the large wing mirror to his side. Although the stone wall obscured much of his view he was able to see the point where the track snaked away into the distance and disappeared. The soldiers in their transport eventually appeared over the brow of a low hill, their vehicle's bright headlights burning brilliantly in the gloom of the late afternoon. He watched as they drove closer and closer until his line of vision was blocked by the wall. A few seconds later and he saw them pass, the dark green roof of the transport just visible over the top of the grey stones. He began to cautiously nudge the motorhome forward.

'Don't follow too close behind,' Emma said nervously. 'They don't know who we are. They might turn on us and...'

Michael wasn't listening. He inched out of the field, driving just far enough forward to enable him to see the transport working its way down the track. When it was almost out of sight he accelerated.

Travelling without his headlamps on (hoping to avoid being noticed) Michael followed the bright brake lights of the vehicle in front. Keeping a sensible distance between them the survivors watched as the transport drove around to the right and then to the left. Two hundred meters further down and the track narrowed and became even more rough and uneven. The sides of the road became steep banks, leaving Michael with no option but to keep moving forward and temporarily blocking their view of the soldiers ahead. The motorhome was not made for travelling over such harsh terrain. One of the front wheels sank down into a muddy pothole causing the vehicle to lurch to one side and its chassis to scrape along the ground momentarily.

'Christ,' Emma moaned. 'This isn't a good idea. As soon as we can we should get off this track and...'

'We're fine,' Michael snapped, annoyed and trying hard to concentrate. 'It doesn't matter what happens to this thing. It's not like we've got garage bills to pay or anything. As soon as we find where these soldiers are hiding out we can clear our stuff out and ditch it.'

'I know but we don't know how far away they are...'

Emma let her words trail away. The banks on either side of the track quickly dropped down again as they drove through an area of woodland. Brittle branched trees suddenly surrounded the motorhome and the military transport ahead, reducing still further the already low light levels. The track curved and twisted in apparently random and unexpected directions. Still not prepared to use his headlamps, Michael was forced to slow down to almost walking pace. A random body smashed against the side of the motorhome.

'Jesus Christ,' cursed Emma as she stared at the figure in the side mirror.

She watched as, in silhouette, it turned and stumbled after them. The transport disappeared from view momentarily. With relief Michael caught sight of it again as they emerged from the small forested area. He steered through a narrow gateway and over a cattle-grid which shook and rattled the struggling machine. Once through the gate they were suddenly free to travel across an otherwise empty and featureless field. In the near distance the transport began to slow down. Michael gently eased off the accelerator as he began to catch up with the vehicle in front.

'But there's nothing here...' he whispered.

'There's got to be.'

The powerful military machine stopped. Concerned, Michael stopped too.

'Shit,' he cursed. 'They've seen us. They must have seen us.'

His heart began to pound in his chest as he stared at the motionless greygreen machine just ahead. His concentration was so intense that he failed to notice the three bodies which dragged themselves across the empty field and moved towards them. When he did finally catch sight of them he paid them little attention. They didn't matter.

'What's going on?' Emma asked, cold with nerves and afraid.

'Don't know. I think they might have...'

Without warning the transport began to move again. With a sudden loud roar and a belch of dirty grey exhaust fumes it began to power forward with unexpected speed and force. It drove up and over a grassy ridge that had been unnoticeable in the low light, and then disappeared down a steep incline and out of sight.

'That's it,' Michael said, forcing the motorhome forward again. 'That's got to be it.'

He approached the ridge with dangerous speed and mounting trepidation. Both of the survivors knew the importance of the moment.

'Careful,' Emma hissed as the motorhome dipped to one side as one of the back wheels clattered through another deep pothole. Michael didn't respond, fixing his concentration on following the soldiers instead. Not knowing what was on the other side of the ridge he accelerated hard again. With his heart in his mouth he pushed himself back in his seat as the front of their vehicle climbed up momentarily before dropping down into the darkness like a stomach-churning fairground ride. At first all he could see were the lights of the soldier's vehicle. Seconds later they had gone, swallowed up by something unseen in the blackness.

'Where did they go?' asked Emma.

'How the hell should I know?' Michael shouted in reply. The velocity of the motorhome increased as they sped down the incline. He fumbled with the switches at the side of the steering wheel, trying desperately to turn on the lights whilst maintaining control of the vehicle. Seconds later and the ground levelled out. The front of the motorhome began to smash into shadowy shapes in the increasing darkness. Michael found the lights and switched them on. There was no sign of the military transport. There was no visible sign of the base. For as far as they could see the field they found themselves driving through was filled with hundreds upon hundreds of bodies.

Terrified and not able to see an obvious way out of the field, Michael immediately slammed on the brakes, switched the lights off again and silenced the engine. He looked out over a sea of rotting heads, desperately hoping to catch sight of something man-made amongst the decaying flesh. There was nothing. As the nearest creatures began to smash their rotting fists against the sides of the motorhome he instinctively grabbed hold of Emma's hand and dragged her into the back of the vehicle. Pulling a blanket off the bed to cover them both he threw her down into a small space between the bed and the table - a place where they'd hidden numerous times before. He held her tightly and pulled the blanket over their heads as the deafening noise increased.

Donna ran the length of the university complex with Clare following close behind. They quickly worked their way through a labyrinth of dark, featureless corridors, hoping that they would be able to remember the way back to the others. After several minutes of running Donna decided that they had gone far enough.

'This'll do,' she said breathlessly, slowing down to walking pace and resting her hands on her hips.

'Where are we going to do it?' asked Clare.

Donna looked around. There was an exit door to her right. Through small, square, safety glass panels she could see a narrow concrete pathway which led to a detached storage building.

'Perfect,' she whispered as she carefully forced open the door and stepped out into the night.

The pathway between the main university complex and the storage building was little over twenty meters long and, to Donna's relief, was also completely enclosed by other buildings and by sturdy security fences. For once she was happy to risk being out in the open. Apart from a single twisted and gnarled corpse lying motionless to the side of the path she couldn't see any bodies. The evening was rapidly drawing in and the light was disappearing quickly. Once she was satisfied that there were no signs of movement nearby she ran over to the second building and forced her way inside. Her eyes quickly became accustomed to the shadow and gloom as she looked around the cold and silent building.

'Sheets,' Clare hissed, pointing towards a metal rack on the far side of the room they found themselves standing in. She walked over and began to make a pile against the wall furthest from the door. Donna added a stack of papers and wooden furniture to the mound.

'That's enough,' she said quietly as she looked curiously into a second room. Obviously some kind of maintenance stores, the shelves on the long and narrow walls of the room were loaded with bottles, tubs and cartons of bleach, disinfectant and countless other chemicals used by cleaners and janitors. Clare instinctively backed up towards the main door as Donna reappeared and crouched down and struck a match which she used to set light to a pile of once important invoices and bills. The paper instantly began to smoulder and burn. She lit another match and did the same again a little further into the pile. The orange glow ate quickly into the tinder-dry paper and cloth and in less than a minute the room was filled with bright flickering light and wispy-grey smoke. The fire grew in size rapidly. Donna stepped back and stood still for a few seconds until she was sure that the blaze was properly established. She watched with satisfaction as the fire quickly ate through the linen and wood and then began to lick at nearby curtains and against the wall. The building would be completely ablaze in next to no time.

'Think this is going to work?' Clare asked.

'Should do,' Donna replied as she led the younger girl out of the building and down the path back towards the main university complex. As they walked she could hear the crackle and spit of the fire behind her and could see the reflection of tall, dancing flames in nearby windows. 'All we want is a distraction,' she continued. 'Just enough to get the attention of the bulk of the crowd and get them moving in this direction. As soon as they're away from the trucks we can think about trying to get out of here.'

They stood and watched for a minute longer before turning and running back to the others.

Less than a quarter of an hour later the entire university complex was rocked by a sudden and unexpected explosion. Survivors dashed to the nearest window to see what had happened.

'Bloody hell,' Nathan Holmes spat, 'what did you two set fire to?'

Clare shrugged her shoulders, almost embarrassed. Donna peered out into the darkness as a second, smaller explosion ripped through the night, rattling the frame of the window she was looking through. The blaze they'd started in the

storage building had been unchecked and it had only been a matter of time before the flames had reached something flammable. She had hoped it would happen. The bigger the distraction, the more chance they had of getting over to the trucks and getting away.

'Why don't you just shut up, Nathan?' she snapped. 'How can you criticise us? What were you doing while we were out? Fuck all as usual. What have you ever done to help round here?'

'Why should I help? What's the point?'

Donna sighed and turned to face him. She stared into his wide, angry eyes.

'The point is,' she began, her voice trembling with rage, 'that we might still have a chance to get out of here with something. We might be able to get out of here before this whole place comes crashing down and...'

'But why? Why are you bothering?'

'We've talked about this a hundred times before...'

'But why are you bothering?' Holmes demanded again, his voice hoarse and cracked with emotion.

'Because I'm not prepared to sit here and wait for...' she couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

'Wait for what?'

'Wait for the end. Wait for something to happen that's going to...'

'What you're doing,' Holmes said, taking a few steps closer to Donna, 'is running around and risking your lives like a bunch of fucking idiots. Whatever you do, none of it's going to make any difference. Get yourself out of this mess and you'll just end up in another fucking hole. It'll go on and on and on until...'

'Just shut up,' Donna interrupted. 'There are frightened people listening to you. You're not helping the situation.'

'You're creating the fucking situation! And I know there are frightened people in here because I'm one of them.'

Holmes' final comment stunned and silenced Donna and stopped her in her tracks. For the first time she could remember Nathan Holmes - the difficult, obnoxious, offensive and weak little man who had caused more than his fair share of ill-feeling and resentment within the group of survivors - was apparently being candid and honest. For the first time she could remember he seemed to be allowing his public image to drop and his true feelings be seen. Perhaps the realisation that the status quo had been challenged and that, no matter what he decided to do next, his situation was inevitably about to change had brought about this sudden and unexpected change of heart. Whatever the reason, Donna felt sick to her stomach because he had made her think. For a moment he had made her question what they were doing. Was there really any point in doing any of this?

Outside in the back of the truck Baxter, Cooper and the others had heard the explosion too. Croft cautiously peered through one of the small, dark windows in the side of the prison van.

'Christ,' he muttered.

'What is it?' Armitage asked, immediately concerned.

'Fire,' he replied. 'Look, over on the far side of the university. Something's on fire.'

'Where?' demanded Cooper, leaning over to his right and craning his neck to look out through another window.

'What's going on?' said Heath, immediately fearing the worst.

For a moment no-one spoke, each man privately contemplating what had happened and fearing the worst. Croft was the first to try and make sense of the situation.

'They've started it on purpose, haven't they?' he said quietly, turning back around to face the others. 'They must have. I think that fire is close to the medical school. It's certainly nowhere near the part of the building we've been using. They must have started it deliberately.'

'But why?'

The doctor sighed.

'Isn't it obvious?'

It clearly wasn't.

'Jesus, look at the bodies,' Baxter said excitedly as he moved to look out of a third window. 'They're moving.' 176

'Of course they are,' Croft continued. 'They're distracting them so that we can get back inside.'

The chain reaction that Donna had been counting on was slowly spreading through the rotting crowds which still surrounded the perimeter of the football pitch. As the corpses nearest to the fire and explosion had been drawn closer to the distraction, their reactions had moved like a ripple through water and their clumsy movements had attracted the attention of others. Slowly and awkwardly the entire diseased mass seemed to be staggering towards the searing heat and bright light at the far end of the university complex.

'Time to go,' Cooper hissed.

'We should give it a while,' Heath mumbled nervously. 'There are still hundreds of them around. If we go outside now we'll be...'

'Time to go,' the soldier repeated. 'They're moving away from us. We'll have an advantage if we're moving through them from behind. By the time they realise we're there we'll already have passed them.'

'What are we going to do about the van?' Croft asked, remembering that he had parked it across the entrance to the pitch.

'Someone will have to stop,' Heath suggested.

'Two should stay, just in case,' added Cooper.

'I'll do it,' volunteered Armitage. 'I'll only slow you down. I'm out of shape. I've already done more running today than I have for years...'

'I'll stay here,' Paul Castle mumbled. Although unsure, the thought of staying outside with the van and the trucks seemed slightly preferable to going into the dark night unprotected.

'We'll move the van back,' Armitage said, 'and then block the exit again as soon as you're through, okay?'

By the time the lorry driver had finished speaking Cooper was already out of the truck and on his way over towards the van. Croft handed Armitage the keys and followed the other man into the darkness.

'Back to the door we used this afternoon, okay?' Cooper reminded the others as they nervously grouped near to the remains of the mangled metal gate.

Armitage climbed into the van and looked down at Croft, Cooper, Baxter and Heath. Baxter nodded for him to start the engine and he turned the key, sending a sudden splutter of noise and fumes into the cold night and causing more than a hundred bodies to turn and begin moving back towards the football pitch. Realising what was happening he slammed the van into reverse and skidded back a few meters to open up the exit. As soon as a large enough gap had been opened the four survivors ran forward into the darkness. Armitage drove forward and blocked the entrance off again.

Still somewhat sluggish and clumsy, but now with undeniable control and intent, the corpses stumbled towards the van. The light was low and the comparative speed of the four survivors was such that the creatures were not aware of them until they were close. A half-naked cadaver lashed out at Croft and knocked him off balance momentarily as he pushed his way back towards the university. Bernard Heath, running with his shoulder dropped, charged body after body out of the way as he let his momentum carry him back to the shelter.

The ground was wet and uneven, a combination of autumn mist and some earlier rain having left a layer of surface water almost everywhere. Cooper slipped and fell and, by the time he was back up on his feet again, six bodies were within a meter of him. He punched and kicked his way through them and continued on towards the building. He was the last one to reach the sheltered area where the waste bins were stored and where the door they'd used earlier was. Croft was already there and had it open. He ushered the other men inside

quickly.

'Get in,' he hissed. Cooper pushed past and listened with relief as the door slammed shut behind him.

44

Michael and Emma lay motionless on the floor of the motorhome, still hidden beneath a heavy blanket and daring not to move an inch for fear of attracting the bodies again. There were still hundreds of them nearby - the survivors could sense their closeness - but their interest in the vehicle and its occupants finally seemed to have dissipated. For a while the relentless banging and rocking of the motorhome had stopped.

'So what the hell are we going to do now?' Emma asked, her voice the quietest of anxious whispers.

'Don't see we've got much choice,' Michael replied, equally quietly. 'Those soldiers seemed to just disappear. We have to be close. Their base must be here somewhere.'

'How are we supposed to find it? We're not exactly going to be able to get up and go walking around outside, are we?'

'We don't have to. We'll just wait here and...'

'Wait here and what? Just keep hiding on the floor with a bloody blanket over our heads? For God's sake, how are we suppose to...?'

'So what else do we do?' he hissed, interrupting her. 'Do you want me to start the engine and try and drive us out of here? Imagine what that's going to do to those bloody animals around us.'

Emma didn't answer. Instead she buried her head in hands and did her best to hide all the desperate emotions she was feeling. Not since being trapped in the attic room in the farmhouse from which they'd recently fled had she felt such fear and hopelessness. Just when she thought their situation couldn't get any worse, they had taken another fall. Their options appeared to be simple and bleak - sit and wait as Michael had suggested or risk everything by trying to get away. Unable to contain her feelings, she began to sob. Instinctively Michael shuffled closer and wrapped his arm around her.

'We'll get out of this, you know,' he whispered, his voice softer and his face just inches from hers. 'Trust me. We'll find a way to...'

'How?' she pleaded. 'How can we?' Although she hadn't seen a crowd of this size for the best part of two weeks, she knew that one body would invariably attract the attention of another and, therefore, a hundred bodies would attract a thousand more. Every second that they lay still together and waited made their situation more dangerous.

'We'll get out of this,' he said again, doing his best to reassure her when it was obvious that he was far from sure himself. 'I swear those soldiers are still close. Their base was always going to be difficult to find, wasn't it? They're going to have to come out into the open again sooner or later and then we'll...'

'I think we should just give this up as a bad idea,' Emma sighed dejectedly. She looked deep into Michael's eyes and, for a moment, considered telling him just how empty and hollow she felt. She had trusted him and he had let her down. This had been his idea. She'd wanted to be more cautious. She felt strangely cheated, almost betrayed even.

'What?' he mumbled.

'I said we should give this up as a bad idea,' she repeated. She stopped speaking momentarily as the motorhome shook. Another body had collided with the thin metal wall a short distance from where she and Michael were sitting. That single, apparently random collision and the sound it created drew more of the obnoxious cadavers back to the vehicle. Seconds later and the air was filled with a deafening clattering again. Not seeming to care anymore, Emma carried on speaking regardless. 'I think we should wait for a while and then just get the hell out of here. We were doing okay back at the farmhouse, weren't we? We'll find somewhere like that again, I'm sure of it.'

`How many times have we been through this? There are millions and millions of fucking bodies staggering around this country and they're not about to start leaving us alone now, are they? And we weren't doing okay back at the farmhouse, because if we were we'd still be there now, wouldn't we? Accept it, no matter where we go, no matter what we do, they're going to be snapping at our heels constantly.'

`Yes, but...'

`But nothing. Look, I'm sorry this hasn't worked out, I still think it will. I just need to stop running for a while, Em. I'm tired.'

`And you really think these soldiers are just going to open their arms and help us?'

Michael thought for a moment before answering.

`Yes.'

45

It was early morning, just before three. Time to leave.

The survivors sheltering in the university complex had been left with few choices. They were surrounded by an ever-increasing crowd filled with sickness and disease and now, it seemed, pain, suffering and anger also. In leaving the building to fetch the vehicles and by lighting the fire to temporarily draw the bodies away from the trucks and the main accommodation block, the desperate group had succeeded in making every last one of the vile, rotting creatures throughout the entire city aware of exactly where it was they were hiding. Donna and Clare's well-meaning distraction had become an unwanted beacon and most people quickly accepted that it would only be a matter of time before the expanding crowds outside became too large and fierce a tide for the few despairing souls inside to be able to keep at bay. The earlier question `should we go?' had, for many people, now been replaced by `when do we go?' The noise and confusion associated with the return of the six men meant that every last one of the survivors gathered in the university building knew that they had made it back. More to the point, each individual also knew that, like it or not, the time had come for them personally to make serious decisions affecting the course of what remained of their futures. To take their chances and leave or to stay and wait? Risk everything out in the open, or risk just as much by sitting in the shadows and hiding and waiting until something happened? Even after such a length of time spent in the same building together, the group remained as disparate and desperate as ever. Opinion was divided and never shared or discussed. Fully understanding the unique dilemma that each of the survivors faced, Donna, Cooper, Croft and the others did nothing to try and persuade people to come with them. They announced they were leaving, but there didn't seem to be any point in trying once again to explain the benefits of getting away from the university and the city. Similarly, there didn't seem to be any point in starting more senseless arguments about who was wrong and who was right. None of it mattered anymore.

Working quickly and with real purpose, those survivors who had elected to leave cleared their rooms and storage areas and collected their useful belongings in a long, dark corridor. At the far end of the corridor stood the door the six men had earlier used to get in and out of the complex. Standing by the door and waiting anxiously, Jack Baxter counted about thirty men, women and children and tried to visualise how they were going to fit into the two prison trucks and the smaller police van.. They would be tight on space, and many of the bags and boxes that each survivor carried would doubtless be left behind.

The vast majority of the crowd of bodies continued to swarm around the raging fire at the other end of the complex. It seemed sensible to get out now and make the most of the existing distraction before it burnt itself out. The nervous survivors, many of whom hadn't dared take even a single step outside in almost a month, prepared themselves to run through the darkness towards the vehicles waiting on the football pitch.

For a while before they made their move Baxter found himself watching the other people more than he had done since he'd first arrived at the university. Even now he remained distant and detached from almost all of them. He didn't even know the names of more than half of them. Some faces he'd seen every day, others he'd only seen perhaps once or twice, three he didn't recognise at all. There was a complete and wholly understandable and expected lack of togetherness and direction throughout the ragtag gathering. Many of these people, it seemed, didn't even care if they survived. In some ways their lives were already over and they were as cold, lethargic and devoid of emotion as the cadavers outside. Those survivors who recognised the true hopelessness of the situation - those even more resigned to failure and despair than those waiting in the corridor to take a chance on freedom - were the people who had chosen to remain elsewhere in the building and not leave.

It was time to move.

'Okay, Jack?' Cooper asked quietly, disturbing Baxter. He didn't know how he had found himself at the front of the queue. He glanced back along the line and a row of frightened faces stared back at him in expectation. He knew what was out beyond the door and, because they had no other source of information, he felt that they were looking towards him, Cooper, Croft and Heath for guidance and reassurance. Baxter felt unable to provide help on any level. The expressions on the faces around him were desperately sad and forlorn. The people looked as nervous and unsure as pressganged soldiers in a plane during wartime, about to make their first parachute jump into enemy territory. 'Now's as good a time as any,' mumbled Baxter, eventually remembering to reply. 'Might as well go for it.'

Cooper nodded and moved across the corridor so that he could be seen by the rest of the survivors. Donna watched him anxiously.

'Okay,' he began, looking up and down the faces in the semi-darkness, 'this is it. If you don't think you can go through with it, disappear now.' He paused for a few seconds, giving people a chance to make their final decisions. 'As soon as we open this door you need to start running. Move faster than you've ever run before. Push your way through the bodies and don't try and fight. Just hit them hard and you'll get through.'

Standing a little way further down the line, Phil Croft spoke up.

'Don't stop if you start to get tired because you won't make it. Whatever happens, keep moving. You can stop when you reach the trucks.'

Baxter rested his hand on the door handle and waited for the signal.

'What if they don't see us?' a nervous voice asked from somewhere in the middle of the gathering.

'Who?'

'The blokes in the van, what if they don't see us coming and let us in?'

An anxious ripple of mumbled conversation worked its way through the group of survivors.

'Then the first one of us who gets to the van bangs on the window until they realise what's happening and shift the bloody thing, okay?' Cooper replied.

'But what if they...?'

'Don't worry about it,' the soldier interrupted, 'they'll see us.'

'But what if...?'

Cooper sensed that the questions attempting to be fired in his direction were nervous and instinctive. They were little more than delaying tactics. He ignored them and nodded at Baxter.

'Do it,' he said, his voice a little louder, 'open the door, Jack.'

Knowing that if he hesitated he'd begin trying to talk himself out of opening the door, Baxter slammed the handle down and threw it open. Along with those survivors standing directly behind him, for a moment he simply stood still and stared out into the night. Cold wind and a light rain blew into his face. He could clearly see the football pitch and the van blocking the entrance, but in the darkness it seemed an immeasurable distance away. And worse still, between him and the vehicles he could see bodies. There appeared to be hundreds of them shuffling, staggering and limping across the scene in silhouette.

Unmistakable with their stilted, pained movements and lethargic but ominous determination and persistence, the nearest few had already turned and were advancing quickly towards the building.

'Go, Jack!' Cooper shouted. 'Fucking move!'

The older man immediately began to run. Full of thoughts and concerns for the others whilst they had all been safe indoors, he now sprinted across the grass and tarmac pathways in selfish isolation, for the moment only interested in his own survival. He knocked one body out of the way, then another and then another. Within seconds his heart was beating in his chest with a force he could hardly contain and his lungs were on fire. A few seconds later still and some of the younger, fitter survivors had passed him. The van didn't seem to be getting any closer.

The rest of the survivors pushed their way out of the university building. Loaded up with bags of belongings they forced themselves through the swarming, rotting crowds. Men and women, young and old, all moved forward together in absolute terror, praying that they would get through, terrified that they would be swallowed up by the diseased masses. Towards the back of the group some of the stronger men and women carried the smallest children. The delighted squeals coming from a two year old boy were muffled by the groans of effort and moans of pure fear coming from Erica Carter, the middle-aged woman who had taken it upon herself to carry him on her back.

Paul Castle and Steve Armitage sat in the front of the van oblivious. The hours since they had volunteered to stay behind and look after the vehicles had dragged unbearably. Still surrounded by swarming corpses attracted by the earlier noise, and with no idea when the survivors would make their move, the two men had sat together in silence, too afraid to move or even talk to each other. The van remained parked across the entrance to the football pitch. Sitting in the front passenger seat, Castle struggled to keep his tired eyes open. He glanced through the window to his left and the sudden sight of movement made him sit up with a start.

'Fucking hell,' he cursed.

'What is it?' Armitage asked, immediately concerned.

'Oh, Jesus,' he whined, 'they're coming for us.'

'What?'

'Loads of fucking bodies,' he continued to wail. 'Christ, they're coming towards the van.'

Armitage leant across the width of the van to look through the steamed-up window.

'You fucking idiot,' he snapped, sitting back in his seat and starting the engine. 'That's our lot.'

Castle wiped his tired eyes and peered deeper into the darkness. A sudden movement and the ominous thump of a body slamming heavily into the side of the van next to him made him recoil with fright and surprise. The screaming face at his window, although he didn't recognise it, belonged to a survivor.

The noise of the engine again whipped the rotting figures which remained near to the football pitch into a feverish frenzy. They began to clatter against the fence, some grabbing hold of the wire-mesh with bony fingers and pulling and shaking it furiously. The night air was filled with noise as Armitage flicked on the van's headlights and reversed back, allowing the first survivors and an equal number of random bodies to flood onto the football pitch.

'How am I supposed to know when they're all in?' the driver mumbled nervously. Castle didn't answer at first.

'There's Cooper,' he eventually replied. He watched as the soldier stopped at the gate and ushered in the remaining stragglers. Feeling suddenly useless he jumped down from the van and ran round to help Cooper fend off the hordes of inquisitive corpses trying to push their way inside.

'Can't see anyone else,' Cooper shouted as he pushed away another lunging body and grabbed hold of another survivor. Castle didn't need to be told twice. He ran onto the football pitch as the other man gestured for Armitage to move forward and block off the entrance again.

The pitch, quiet until a few moments earlier, had suddenly become a frenzied melee of activity and fear. Diseased corpses mingled with survivors who, in the low light and cold of the night, struggled to tell one from the other. Sensing the confusion, Armitage climbed out of the van and ran over to the nearest of the prison trucks, pushing several bodies out of the way as he did so. Hauling himself up into the cab of the smaller vehicle he fumbled in the darkness for the keys. Eventually managing to find them he turned them a notch and switched on the headlamps, immediately flooding part of the football pitch with bright light. Suddenly able to distinguish fellow humans from the empty shadows of corpses, the survivors began to clear the pitch. Fragile and weak bodies were beaten and smashed beyond recognition by frightened men and women. Others - the old and the very young - cowered in fear around the prison trucks. With their weight considerably reduced as much of their flesh was withered and decayed, Cooper and several others were able to pick up the wiry-framed cadavers and literally hurl them over the fence and back out into the darkness. Donna watched with a mixture of fascination and disgust as one corpse landed at the feet of a group of five more which immediately set about it, tearing it apart.

A piercing scream rang out from Dawn Parker, a twenty-four year old survivor who suddenly found herself surrounded by bodies in a corner of the playing field. More grabbing hands attempted to reach for her through the wire barrier as she fell to the ground and covered her face. The first corpses dropped down and began to thump and smash at her with clumsy fists. Donna and Baxter ran to her aid and pulled and yanked the bodies away. Standing a short distance behind, Keith Peterson and another man disposed of the cadavers over the top of the fence.

Another few minutes and it was done. The pitch was clear.

'Get them into the trucks,' Croft shouted as he started to bundle terrified survivors into the back of the prison vehicles. Desperate people forced and pushed their way into the transports which they hoped and prayed would soon take them to safety. Seventeen climbed into the back of the largest vehicle and another twelve into the second. Armitage and Croft took the controls of one of the trucks each whilst Cooper, Donna, Baxter and three others headed for the van. Cooper clambered into the driving seat.

'You sure you can remember the way?' Donna asked as she sat down behind him. He nodded and slammed and locked the door. He wound down the window at his side.

'Ready?' the soldier screamed into the night. Two sets of brilliant white headlights flashed back at him in acknowledgment. He put the van into gear, turned around in a tight circle and then clattered out of the football pitch and back towards the road. Donna looked over her shoulder and watched as the two trucks began to slowly trundle after them.

Fighting hard to keep his concentration and to keep moving in the right direction, Cooper slammed his foot down on the accelerator as body after body hurled itself in front of the van.

46

Standing in silence in the window of a first floor bedroom, Nathan Holmes and Steve Richards watched the convoy of survivors disappear into the night.

'They're bloody idiots,' Holmes said. 'They're wasting their time.'

Richards didn't respond. He was crying. Holmes glanced over his shoulder and looked at the other man momentarily before turning back to look out of the window again. To his left he could see the fading taillights of the trucks and the van. Hundreds of staggering bodies followed pointlessly in the wake of the vehicles. To his right the huge blaze at the other end of the university complex was continuing to draw thousands upon thousands of cadavers to the scene. He glanced back at Richards again.

'Okay, mate, you ready?' he asked. Richards nodded and sniffed. 'Going to be a good night, this is.'

Holmes picked up an outdoor jacket which he had left hanging on the back of a nearby chair. He put the jacket on and did up the zip. Still crying, Richards pulled on a warm fleece.

`Sure you're up for this?'

Richards nodded again.

The two men left the room and walked down the dark and silent corridor to the staircase. Together, they then made their way down to the ground floor. They stopped at an inconspicuous window in the corner of a similarly dark and inconspicuous room. Holmes turned to face Richards.

`Pub or club?' he asked.

Richards managed half a smile.

`Start with a pub. We can always go on to a club later.'

`The Crown or The Lazy Fox?'

Richards thought for a moment.

`The Crown. It's closer.'

Grinning, Holmes leant forward and gently teased open the window in front of them. After peering up and down along the outside wall of the building momentarily he climbed up onto the windowsill and jumped down into the middle of an overgrown flower bed. Richards followed close behind. Filled with fear and nerves, and knowing that this was most probably to be his last night alive, he stopped walking and began to cry again.

`Think about it this way,' Holmes soothed, `those idiots that left here tonight, they've got nothing left to look forward to except more grief. You and me, mate, we've got it made. It's going to get harder and harder for the rest of them. It's going to get easier for us.'

Holmes crept forward until he reached the edge of a narrow pathway.

`Nathan, I...' Richards began.

`Trust me,' Holmes interrupted.

With that he turned and began to jog away from the university. Richards followed close behind, breaking into a sprint as Holmes did the same, afraid that he was going to be left behind.

The two men emerged from a narrow side street onto a section of the ring road which was swarming with bodies. As the number of bodies around him increased, so Holmes moved with a nervous urgency, pushing his way through the rancid crowds. Driven by a combination of terror and disgust, Richards matched his speed, smashing corpse after corpse out of his way.

After reaching the far side of the carriageway, Holmes turned left into another wide and silent street and headed for the shadowy remains of The Crown public house, a large pub which occupied a prominent position on the corner of two once busy main roads. Panting with exhaustion from the sudden sprint, he crashed through the swinging entrance door, followed seconds later by Richards.

`Okay?' he asked.

Richards was bent over double with his hands on his knees, fighting to catch his breath.

`I'm okay,' he replied.

The now familiar dull thud of bodies smashing against the outside of the door made the two men look up. Holmes immediately began to pile tables, chairs, cigarette machines and anything else he could find in front of the entrance to prevent the odious corpses from forcing their way inside. Richards walked deeper into the building. The pub was empty. It had been closed when the disaster had happened.

`What are you drinking?' he asked as he walked around to the back of the bar.

`Anything you can lay your hands on,' Holmes replied as he finished blocking the door. He peered through a gap in the mountain of furniture he had just created and watched as the sickly cadavers in the street tried hopelessly to force their way into the building.

As Richards busied himself behind the bar Holmes dragged two leather armchairs across the room and set them in front of a fireplace, one on either side. He smashed a table and stool and built up a fire in the hearth with the

splintered wood. Richards carried several bottles of spirits over and sat down. He poured them both a drink.

'Cigar?' Holmes asked, disappearing across the room and grabbing a handful of cigars and boxes of matches from a display at the back of the bar.

'I don't smoke,' Richards sighed.

'You should start,' Holmes grinned. 'Last chance, mate.'

Richards helped himself to a single cigar, took off the cellophane wrapper and lit it. After lighting the fire using bar towels soaked in whiskey as a fuse, Holmes did the same.

The two men sat back in the dull orange glow and began to drink.

'This is as good as it's going to get,' Holmes said quietly, his voice drained of the antagonism and venom that had been so prevalent during the previous days and weeks. 'All you have to do now,' he continued, 'is drink and smoke and relax. Make sure you drink enough because they're going to get in at some point. And if we manage to make it to the morning, we'll just drink some more.'

Richards was crying again. The drink quickly began to take the edge off the pain.

'Bloody hell, they're already at the windows,' he said. Holmes looked up and saw that there were countless shadowy shapes swarming on the other side of the glass. He could still hear the bodies clattering and banging against the front door. If the noise didn't attract them, he thought, the light from the fire certainly would.

'Drink up,' he said, 'and think yourself lucky. Tonight everyone else is either dead or on the run. We're in the best place we could be.'

Richards didn't know if he agreed. The more he drank, however, the more he realised he didn't care.

It took just over an hour for the crowd outside to build to such a size that sheer pressure forced them inside. A street level window behind and to the right of Holmes and Richards smashed sending a thousand shards of glass and a hundred bodies spilling into the pub. Already too drunk to react or fight, the two men sat in their chairs and continued to drink as the building filled with rotting flesh.

47

Almost five o'clock. The clattering of heavy rain against the roof of the motorhome woke Michael who had fallen asleep a few minutes earlier, still lying next to Emma on the cold, hard floor. The sound of the rain was deafening. He allowed himself to cautiously roll over and peer out from underneath the blanket which had covered them both since they'd been forced to try and disappear from view many hours earlier. The light was low and he slowly climbed to his feet. His bones ached painfully as he stood upright. The water running down the windows blurred his view of the outside world. The sudden lack of visibility combined with the unexpected but welcome noise gave him enough cover to be able to risk moving around. He quickly worked his way around the sides of the motorhome, blocking each window with heavy curtains and boards. Also awake, Emma sat up and watched him in silence. When he'd finished she too crawled out of the shadows and stood next to him.

'This is a real fucking mess,' he said under his breath as he peered out through a narrow crack between the curtains at the nearest window. 'There are thousands of bodies here.'

He slowly walked the length of the motorhome and sat down in the driver's seat. Emma remained close behind. She crouched down next to him and grabbed hold of his hand.

'So what do you want to do?' she asked.

'Don't know.'

Michael gingerly lifted up another curtain edge and stared outside. All that he could see were corpses. Soaked by the heavy rain and tightly packed together, they were crammed into the field, surrounding the motorhome on every

side.

'We have to do something.'

'We've got to be right on top of the base,' he said. 'There must be an entrance round here somewhere. These bodies wouldn't be here if there wasn't something attracting them. We're out in the middle of nowhere, for Christ's sake.'

'So what do you suggest?'

Michael didn't answer immediately. His attention had been caught by a group of bodies about a hundred meters away. For no apparent reason they seemed to be fighting, almost ripping each other apart. An unstoppable reaction to the sudden outburst of movement and violence quickly spread through much of the rest of the gathering.

'All we can do is wait,' he replied. 'We either wait for the soldiers to appear again and try and get their attention or we wait until this crowd starts to thin out and try and get away from here.'

'When's that likely to happen?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'No idea. Sometime in the next six months I should think.'

She didn't appreciate his answer.

'Be serious,' she sighed. 'We can't just sit here indefinitely, can we?'

He shrugged his shoulders again.

'If we can't get out of here then we don't seem to have much choice.'

48

Cooper wished that he'd thought to try and set up some kind of communication system between the van and the two prison trucks. Even a couple of basic two way radios would have been sufficient. As if the effort of driving through the devastated remains of the country wasn't enough, he was also having to contend with appalling weather conditions and keep his speed slow enough so that he didn't lose the two trucks which laboured slowly after the van. It wasn't going to be easy to find the base again. He knew the general route but the morning light was low and everything seemed to have changed since he'd last driven there. The world around him had continued to rot, crumble and decay rendering it frequently unrecognisable. Relentless heavy rain added to the confusion.

The huge, dark shadows of the city which had surrounded them constantly for weeks were now nothing more than distant specks on the murky horizon behind them. The convoy of vehicles made slow progress away from the dead town and deeper into the countryside. Cooper drove along the hard shoulder of a macabre motorway scene. The lanes of the wide road were strewn with the tightly packed wrecks of thousands of crashed cars. Once one of the busiest stretches of motorway in the country, the road was now a bizarre sight - a frozen, rusting, rotting traffic jam.

Cooper rubbed his eyes and massaged his temples. Concerned, Donna leant forward to speak to him.

'You all right?' she asked.

'Fine,' he snapped as he steered around the remains of a car which had smashed into the back of another, leaving its boot sticking out in his path. He glanced up into the rear view mirror and watched as Steve Armitage ploughed the larger truck into the car, sending it flipping up into the air and spiralling down onto the top of other vehicles, crushing the bodies still trapped helplessly inside.

The underground base was located some thirty miles outside the city and they had already travelled almost two thirds of the distance. Although increasingly unsure of its precise location, Cooper did remember the names of the villages nearby and was fairly confident of finding his way there again. The complex was buried in a remote and inconspicuous area of land. By its very nature it was always going to be difficult to find.

The sound of a truck's horn cut through the otherwise still morning air. Donna

turned and peered through the back window of the van. A short distance behind them Steve Armitage had slowed down and was flashing his lights furiously. 'Shit,' Cooper cursed, slamming on the brakes and bringing the van to a sudden stop.

'What is it?' Jack Baxter asked anxiously.

'Don't know,' Cooper replied. 'Can't see the other truck.'

Baxter opened the door and jumped out of the van and ran back down the road towards the first truck. He climbed up onto the driver's footplate. Armitage wound the window down to speak to him.

'What's the matter?' he asked, wiping spitting rain from his face.

Armitage gestured over his shoulder.

'They're stuck,' he said simply. 'I think I clipped the side of a car and dragged it out into his way.'

Baxter peered further down the road. Armitage was right. The back of the truck had become entangled with the wreck of a car and had somehow tugged it out across the narrow stretch of road which the convoy had been moving along.

Cooper suddenly appeared at his side.

'Too much noise. Kill the engine,' he said to Armitage who quickly did as he was told. The soldier silently surveyed the scene. 'He'll have to smash his way through. There's no other way of getting through and we can't afford to leave either of the trucks behind. We're tight enough on space as it is.'

Armitage nodded.

'This lot are beginning to suffer,' he said quietly, nodding his head towards the back of the truck. The vehicle hadn't been designed to carry as many passengers as it was carrying this morning. The survivors and their belongings were crammed into an uncomfortably tight space.

'I'll tell Croft,' Cooper said. 'Get back to the van, Jack.'

Baxter wasn't listening.

'Jesus Christ,' he mumbled.

'What's the matter?' Cooper asked.

Baxter didn't reply. Instead he simply pointed at the vast column of stationary vehicles next to them. Cooper followed the older man's line of vision and immediately saw what it was that had attracted his attention. Unable to open the doors of their crashed vehicles or even to escape from the confines of their safety belts, every wreck contained at least one body. Whilst some were unmoving, many others were thrashing around in their seats, trapped but trying desperately to get out and reach the survivors standing at the side of the road. At first appearing motionless and still, the longer that Cooper and Baxter stared into the endless line of crashed traffic, the more frantic movement they could see.

'Bloody hell...' Baxter muttered.

'Get moving, Jack,' Cooper ordered. He pushed Baxter back towards the van while he began to sprint further down the road towards the stranded truck. Even from a distance he could hear its engine straining and groaning as Phil Croft tried desperately to force his way through the blockage. As he ran the soldier gestured for Croft to reverse back down the motorway. He knew that they needed to move quickly. To his right was a steep embankment and beyond that several fields and an out-of-town shopping complex. He could see numerous shadowy bodies making their way away from the dark buildings and advancing across the fields with ominous speed towards the motorway disturbance. Croft stopped the truck and Cooper shouted to him.

'Just put your fucking foot down,' he screamed. 'You've got to try and smash your way through.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not used to driving anything this big. I don't know how far I can push it...'

'Shut up and do it!' Cooper yelled. 'Worry about it when it goes wrong, not before.'

The bodies in the field were close. The nearest few were beginning to clamber up the embankment. Noticing that Cooper appeared agitated and distracted by something out of his vision, Croft did as he was told. Ignoring the terrified

screams and moans from the back of the truck he moved forward again and accelerated faster and faster. He smashed into the wrecked car which blocked his way, trapping it under his bumper. It dragged and scraped along the road for a few seconds before working its way loose and tumbling down the embankment. Free to move again, Croft edged towards the back of the other truck and waited for Cooper to scramble back to the van at the front of the convoy.

In less than a minute they were moving again.

The stretch of motorway where they had stopped was suddenly swarming with bodies.

49

As grimy-grey daylight gradually crept across another cold, wet and foreboding morning, so Cooper's orientation and recollection slowly returned. Landmarks and familiar place names helped crystallize his thoughts and reassure him that he was leading the survivors in the right direction. They passed through a lifeless village which he clearly remembered. Empty and dead for more than a month, many of the cottages and homes which lined the main street had been burned to the ground, others were charred and scarred by smoke, dirt and decay. Sudden movement surrounded the convoy as the noise of their engines caused nearby bodies to emerge from the shadows and surge towards the road. Their reactions still relatively slow, the bulk of the bodies did not appear until the vehicles had passed by. A lone corpse, however, stumbled into the road a short distance ahead of the van. Cooper accelerated and obliterated the creature with a brief moment of effort and no consideration or remorse whatsoever.

Through the village and back out onto an empty and exposed country road which twisted and turned precariously as it worked its way between fields and hills. The narrow road began to climb a steep gradient. Now sure of his surroundings, Cooper turned the steering wheel to the right and sent the van careering down an even narrower track which sloped downwards and which was virtually invisible from the road. With his heart in his mouth Steve Armitage followed, slowly coaxing the cumbersome prison truck down the track whilst, at the same time, taking care not to lose sight of the soldier ahead. Armitage was used to driving trucks. The doctor driving the third vehicle was not. His pulse raced and his hands were moist with nervous sweat.

'Fucking hell,' he snapped as his truck began its unsteady descent. The height of the bonnet in front of him meant that he drove the first few feet virtually blind. More through luck than judgement he managed to keep the vehicle on course.

The track straightened out quickly, running below but parallel with the road. Donna sat in the back of the van and wondered just how many hidden routes like this existed. They would never have found this place if they hadn't had the soldier with them. If he had chosen to stay behind in the city then they'd have been forced to do the same. Whether the others liked it or not, each one of them owed Cooper a debt of gratitude.

A hairpin right quickly followed by another steep descent and then the track suddenly cut across a wide field buried deep within a steep and otherwise inaccessible valley. The shadows of huge protective hills reared up on either side. Donna felt safer already.

'You never know where these places are until you've reached them,' Cooper yawned as they trundled down the hidden road.

'So if we're going to have trouble finding it,' Donna said, leaning forward and peering over the soldier's shoulder, 'then this base should be pretty safe.'

'You'd hope so.'

The track began to climb and then dipped down again, crossing a wide stream at a shallow ford. The three vehicles powered through the water, sending low waves rippling away on either side. Cooper could see the tops of the first few

trees ahead. He knew that they were close now. The sides of the track became steep banks and he increased his speed.

Phil Croft wiped his face and forced himself to concentrate on the uneven road which stretched out in front of him. He was becoming used to the size and handling of the prison truck now, but driving a machine of such power was something which didn't come naturally to him. The larger truck in front was being driven with obvious skill and precision by Armitage. Under Croft's guidance the smaller vehicle skidded and slipped across the uneven road surface alarmingly. He could hear murmurs of concern and discontent from the survivors in the back but he ignored them. They'd already had to live through much greater hardships to get this far.

At the front of the convoy Cooper yanked the steering wheel around to the right to follow a sudden and unexpectedly sharp bend in the track. The steep banks on either side had fallen away again leaving a clear view of the narrow roadway as it disappeared into a dark and dense forest of brittle branched trees. With real concern for the others he looked into his mirrors and watched as Armitage slowed down to a virtual stop and teased the heavy truck around the bend.

More dips, furrows and twists in the track as it began to wind its way through the grey and shadowy forest. There were bodies nearby. Armitage noticed them first from his high vantage point. They were staggering through the undergrowth, tripping over rocks and half-buried tree roots and then scrambling back up again and lurching towards the unexpected convoy. The truck driver didn't say anything to the others travelling with him. His vehicle was huge. He knew that these few diseased cadavers posed no threat.

Cooper knew that they had almost reached the base. The last traces of doubt and uncertainty in his mind disappeared as he drove through a narrow gate and over a cattle grid which shook the van and its passengers. As the trees and vegetation around them thinned away to nothing he allowed himself to put his foot down on the accelerator and steam ahead with relieved intent. The track cut through a relatively featureless field and then quickly climbed towards a slight rise. The base lay on the other side.

'Must be getting close now,' Armitage muttered as he followed Cooper out of the forest. Once through the gate he increased his speed to match that of the van just ahead of them.

Reacting to the sudden increase in the speed of the other two vehicles, Phil Croft looked up and panicked. Afraid of losing sight of them (although he knew there was no way that he would) he too slammed his foot down on the accelerator pedal. The truck began to lurch and sway uncomfortably.

'Bloody hell,' Paul Castle moaned from the passenger seat, 'slow down will you.'

Croft wasn't listening. He yanked the steering wheel hard to the left, trying desperately to follow the track and get through the gate.

The police van disappeared over the ridge. As Armitage followed he glanced back in his mirror and watched helplessly as the front wheel of the smaller truck behind him hit a moss-covered boulder and was forced up into the air. The sheer weight of the unbalanced truck tipped it over onto its side and the speed at which it had been travelling caused it to skid along the muddy ground, stopping only when it smashed into the gatepost. The battered machine came to a sudden halt half in and half out of the forest.

Dazed, Croft lay still, slumped forward heavily in his seat, hanging in mid-air and held in position by his safety belt. Beneath him lay the dead body of Paul Castle who had been thrown out of his seat by the force of the impact. His head had smashed against the windscreen. Oozing blood mixed with shards of broken glass around his lifeless face.

Croft managed to lift his head and open his eyes momentarily. He was aware of movement. As the first few bodies appeared and began to beat against the shattered windscreen he lost consciousness.

Exhausted and almost asleep, Michael was slumped forward against the steering wheel of the motorhome. A sudden noise made him jolt upright in his seat, instantly awake.

'Jesus Christ,' he cursed as the police van thundered past and tore into the field packed with bodies. 'Where the fucking hell did that come from?' Emma ran to his side and watched with surprise and disbelief as the van ripped a bloody path through the mass of wandering corpses. Before she could speak the prison truck appeared.

'Follow them,' she gasped, her mouth dry with sudden shock and nerves. With his heart pounding and his hands shaking Michael started the engine and attempted to move the motorhome forwards. All around them bodies were reacting with ominous strength and fury to the sudden melee. Some staggered after the van and the truck, others turned and lurched quickly towards the lumbering bulk of the motorhome. The police van skidded to a halt about a hundred meters ahead, the once white (but now muddy brown and blood-soaked) truck a few meters further on. They watched as a man hung out of the side of the truck and began to gesture furiously to the people in the van. He was waving back in the direction of the incline that they had just powered over. Seconds later the reversing lights on the back of the van were suddenly illuminated and the vehicle sped back towards the motorhome, its engine whining and its wheels churning mud, gore and rotting flesh up into the cold morning air. The driver slammed on the brakes when the two vehicles were parallel. There was a gap of less than a metre between them. He wound down his window and shouted over to Emma.

'Any room inside?' Cooper yelled. Still stunned, Emma could only nod her head in reply. 'How many of you are in there?'

'Just two of us,' she stammered. 'We think there's a base here...'

'One of our trucks has gone down in the forest,' the soldier shouted back. 'I need to go back for them. Can you have my passengers?'

Emma didn't know how to respond. Could these people be trusted? Instantly sensing her obvious unease Michael leant across and took over the conversation. Whether they could trust them or not, it didn't matter. These people were survivors. It had to be worth taking a chance.

'There's a side door,' he shouted. 'Get them out of the back of the van and I'll open up.'

Without waiting for the other man to respond Michael left his seat and ran down the inside of the motorhome to the door. He threw it open and immediately began kicking, pushing and hitting out of the way the countless sickly cadavers that reached out for him. A meter and a half away the back of the van flew open and four survivors jumped down into the field, slipping and sliding in the muddy confusion. Michael reached out and grabbed hold of Donna, hauling her quickly to safety. Between them they dragged the other three inside before slamming the door shut.

Jack Baxter pulled the van door closed before climbing back into the front and sitting down next to Cooper. He glanced over his shoulder and checked that the others were safe.

'They're in,' he gasped, panting heavily with effort. 'Let's move.'

Donna and the other three survivors from the city collapsed into the back of the motorhome as the police van pulled away outside. Bodies all around the long vehicle smashed their decaying fists against the thin metal walls, fighting to get at the people inside.

'There's a base or something round here,' Emma mumbled, her composure slowly beginning to return. 'We were trying to get in.'

Donna nodded.

'Cooper came from here,' she said, nodding in the direction of van that was moving back towards the ridge. 'He's going to get us inside.'

'How many of you are there?' Michael asked as he sat back down in the driver's seat.

'About thirty,' she replied, following him.

Thirty people, Michael thought. The hopelessness that had weighed him down for almost a month suddenly began to lift. Ignorant to the hundreds of diseased cadavers still fighting to get at them, he allowed himself the faintest smile of satisfaction.

Cooper was struggling. The already rough ground had been churned up by the numerous military vehicles that had driven to and from the base recently. The constantly swarming bodies made it virtually impossible for him to keep the van moving in a straight line along the uneven track and the tired engine struggled to climb back up towards the ridge. They stopped moving. The van's wheels span furiously, sending more and more mud flying into the air but failing to grip the ground. The soldier took his foot off the pedals and let the heavy vehicle roll a short distance back down the hill.

'We're never going to get back up there,' Baxter said.

'We'll go round,' Cooper replied, glancing from left to right and trying to work out which side of the hill to attack. He chose to go right and powered forward again. The ground was more level and, to his relief, he was finally able to build up a little speed. He pushed harder and harder, knocking more and more rag-doll bodies flying, until his velocity was such that he could risk attempting the climb again. Baxter held onto the sides of his seat as Cooper swerved back round to the left and forced the van through the remains of the crowd and up over the top of the ridge. The effort of the screaming engine was suddenly reduced as they reached the crest and began to travel along the flat again.

'Bloody hell,' Baxter said as they approached the prison truck lying stranded on its side. 'What a damn mess.'

Cooper stopped the van a short distance back and surveyed the scene. The number of bodies nearby meant that they couldn't risk getting out and attempting a rescue on foot. Although the majority of them remained in the field near the entrance to the base, many more had obviously been congregating nearby. The front of the truck was surrounded by a dense throng of some thirty lurching, grabbing cadavers.

'How the hell are we going to do this?' Baxter asked.

Cooper didn't bother to answer. Instead he drove forward again, turned the van round in a tight arc and began to reverse towards the truck's upturned cab. Distracted by the noise of the approaching vehicle, the bodies turned and began to move towards them.

'Open the doors,' he yelled as he leant out of the window to his side and steered the van back. Baxter quickly scrambled out of his seat and crawled to the far end of the van. He threw the doors open and then jumped back as the van smashed into the cab of the truck. A random body, trapped by broken legs pinned between the two vehicles, thrashed its arms furiously. Before Baxter could react Cooper was with him. The soldier punched the corpse in the face repeatedly until it dropped down and lay still.

The cab of the truck was sideways on, leaving the survivors just enough clearance to be able to clamber up and over its battered bulk.

'We'll get them out from the back and bring them over the top,' Cooper explained, wiping his bloodied hands on the back of his trousers. 'We'll get Paul and Phil out first.'

Carefully choosing his spot for fear of causing further injury to the two men, Cooper lifted a single heavy boot and kicked the centre of the cracked windscreen. Already weakened, the window gave way after just a few blows. Baxter leant forward and looked down at Paul Castle's bloody body.

'Poor sod,' he sighed, 'he's gone.'

Cooper nodded as he worked to unfasten Croft's seatbelt. Once freed, the unconscious bulk of the doctor dropped into his arms. He pulled the injured medic free from the wreckage and laid him down carefully. Baxter frowned and tried to ignore the bodies battering on the sides of the van. The bloody irony of it, he thought. The only survivor who had the medical knowledge to make good injuries like these was the one who lay there wounded.

'Get ready to help them in,' Cooper said as he climbed out of the van. He

hauled himself up onto the upward facing driver's door and ran the length of the side of the truck. There was a door halfway between the front and back. He yanked at the handle but it wouldn't move. He could hear the people trapped inside thumping on the wall, trying desperately to get out.

'Get me the keys,' he yelled back to Baxter who was watching helplessly. The older man did as he was instructed, reaching in through what was left of the shattered windscreen and twisting his arm around the steering column until his outstretched fingers made contact with the keys. From his awkward angle he tried to tease the keys free and succeeded, only for them to drop to the ground and land in the puddle of coagulating blood around Paul Castle's icywhite face. With equal amounts of revulsion, nausea and sadness he closed his eyes and leant down and grabbed at the keys, wiping them clean on his jacket as he lifted them up.

'Here,' he shouted, throwing them up onto the side of the truck. Cooper picked them up and immediately dropped to his knees by the door. There were many keys on the bunch and it took several attempts before he found the right one. Eventually the lock clicked, the door opened outwards and the arms, head and body of the first bruised and bloodied survivor quickly emerged.

'Get ready Jack,' the soldier yelled, 'they're on their way to you.' He leant down and began to help a middle-aged woman out of the truck. Helped by more survivors pushing her out from inside, she was soon free. 'Get yourself down into the van,' Cooper said gently as he reached down for the next person.

'Jack's waiting there for you.'

On her hands and knees, the woman shuffled towards the front of the truck. As she moved she looked down at the increasing crowds of bodies gathering on either side. Sensing her unease, Baxter coaxed her forward.

'Come on,' he said, 'nearly there.'

Back on top of the vehicle Cooper had pulled two children and another woman free. He peered back inside and counted another seven people still waiting. He could also see a corpse. He didn't recognise the man who lay face down on the ground, crushed by the others in the sudden impact and crash.

Baxter climbed out onto the truck to help the children down. As he guided more survivors into the van, Cooper screamed more instructions to him.

'Get behind the wheel.'

'I can't,' Baxter replied frantically. 'I can't drive.'

'Then find someone who can,' the soldier frantically barked. 'Do it now, for fucking hell's sake!'

'I'll do it,' the first woman to have been rescued mumbled. 'You'll have to tell me where to...'

'What's your name?'

'Jean,' she replied. 'I don't know if...'

Baxter wasn't listening.

'I'll give you a shout when we're ready to move,' he said, pushing her forward. She clambered into the driver's seat and froze as she looked up and around. A dense crowd of grotesque faces stared back at her, their clouded eyes filled with pain and a savage intent bordering on hate. She looked down at the ground and tried to keep control of her fragile emotions. The bloody things were banging on the glass around her now. She held her head in her hands and prayed that they would soon be able to move.

'Last one,' Cooper yelled from on top of the truck. Moments later the final survivor appeared and climbed down into the van. Cooper was close behind.

'Pull forward and close the doors,' he ordered.

'Pull forward,' Baxter repeated. The woman in the front of the van pushed down on the accelerator and eased the van slowly forward, pushing steadily into the rotting crowd which surrounded them. As soon as they were far enough from the remains of the truck to be able to close the doors, Baxter looked up at Cooper.

'Close the fucking doors,' the soldier said again. Helped by another survivor Baxter pulled the doors shut. The van rocked momentarily as the soldier jumped onto the roof from the cab of the truck. Losing his footing, Cooper threw

himself flat and edged towards the front of the vehicle. He smashed his fist onto the windscreen and gestured forward. 'Move!' he ordered. 'Just fucking move!'

The van lurched forward again. Cooper pressed his face down against the cold metal and held on for all he was worth.

Back in the middle of the field Michael sat nervously behind the wheel of the motorhome waiting for the van to reappear.

'This isn't good,' he muttered. 'I think we should go and...'

He stopped talking when the van powered over the ridge and began a fast and uncoordinated descent back into the field, obliterating countless bedraggled bodies. Cooper clung onto the top of the van, his feet and one hand wrapped around the roof bars. With his one free hand he gestured towards Michael for him to drive around a small mound in the centre of the field. Michael immediately did as instructed, as did Steve Armitage following close behind. The remaining prison truck belched clouds of noxious exhaust fumes into the morning air already polluted by the rancid stench of death and decay.

Around the back of the mound, completely hidden from view from all other approaches, was a huge grey door, partially sunken into the ground. Bodies swarmed around the three vehicles with frantic energy and bile.

'Hit the horn!' Donna screamed as soon as she saw the door. 'Let them know we're here.'

Michael slammed his fist down on the horn. Seconds later Armitage did the same. The woman driving the van did the same as it trundled round the corner. The air was filled with noise, and the noise drove what remained of the massive crowd wild.

The motorhome stopped just meters away from the huge concealed entrance.

'What now?' Michael demanded. 'For Christ's sake, what are we supposed to do now?'

'Just keep sounding the horn,' Donna sighed. 'They'll hear us eventually.'

'And so will every corpse in the fucking country,' he hissed under his breath.

Without warning the doors began to slide open. Painfully slowly, the heavy barriers began to part. As soon as a wide enough gap had appeared a stream of soldiers in protective clothing emerged, every inch of their bodies hidden. They aimed their weapons into the crowds and began to fire indiscriminately. Bodies began falling to the ground. The space left by each fallen corpse was immediately filled by several more.

Without waiting for instruction, as soon as the gap in the doors was wide enough Michael accelerated and drove into the base. It was immense. He had never seen anything like it. The prison truck forced its way inside, followed close behind by the police van. Cooper climbed down from the roof and looked around. His exhaustion, nerves and fear were immediately replaced by a claustrophobic and cold familiarity.

The sound of gunshots continued to fill the air as the soldiers closed the doors and picked off the last few bodies, throwing their remains back out into the open before the doors slammed shut.

Michael, Emma, Donna, Baxter, Cooper, Heath and the rest of the survivors gathered in the centre of a cavernous and well-lit hanger packed with a vast array of military hardware. The soldiers surrounded the exhausted group. The guns that had moments earlier been pointed at the bodies outside were now pointed at them.

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Safe.

Oblivious to the danger of the weapons pointed at them, the survivors stood close together and waited for instructions. One of the soldiers stepped forward. Cooper took a similar step forward to meet him.

'Sir!' he snapped instinctively, saluting and standing to attention. He couldn't see who was behind the soldier's protective facemask.

'Cooper?' the faceless officer said with surprise clearly evident in his

voice, despite it being muffled and distorted by the heavy breathing apparatus. 'Where the hell have you been, soldier? We thought you were long gone. Welcome back.'

The weapons were lowered.

No more words.

Under continuous guard the survivors were crammed into a decontamination chamber. Those troops who had ventured out into the open with them laughed and joked in a similar chamber adjacent to the first. The initial relief and euphoria felt by the people from outside quickly disappeared. Exhausted and empty they sat and stared into space or slept or cried as their bodies were cleaned and every last trace of the disease was removed from them.

Emma lay on a hard wooden bench, her head resting on Michael's lap. She looked up into his tired face and wondered what would happen next. Would the questions they'd both been asking since the first morning of the nightmare finally be answered by someone in this cavernous base? Would someone be able to explain what had happened to their world?

From the little that Cooper had been able to tell them, the decontamination process would last for more than a day. As the hours crept slowly by she drifted in and out of consciousness. Although still restless and uneasy in these new and alien surroundings, for the first time she was able to move and speak freely without fear of being hunted out and attacked by vicious bodies. No matter how highly trained they were, the soldiers with their guns and masks seemed to be nowhere near as much a threat as what remained of the rest of the population outside. These people, she hoped, were rational and controlled. The millions of decaying bodies on the surface were not.

In order to conserve power the electric light in the decontamination chamber was switched off. Emma curled up with Michael and waited silently for the next day to arrive. Although she wasn't completely sure, she thought it would be Friday. Almost four weeks since it had begun. Almost two weeks since they'd lost the farmhouse.

Maybe tomorrow would be the day when everything would begin to make sense again.

In the arms of the man who had come to mean everything to her, and surrounded by more survivors than she'd ever thought she'd see again, Emma relaxed and slept and began to feel human again.

Safe.

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