

FROM THE AUTHOR OF INFECTION Z

# RYAN CASEY

SEASON SEVEN

# DEAD DAYS

A POST APOCALYPTIC THRILLER

**DEAD DAYS**  
**SEASON SEVEN**

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RYAN CASEY

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**DEAD DAYS SEASON SEVEN**

**EPISODE THIRTY-SEVEN**  
**FERAL**

## PROLOGUE

Titus Barkley always lived by the mantra of living every day like it was his last.

Surviving in a post-apocalyptic landscape really brought a whole new meaning to that idea.

The mid-September afternoon sun was low and warm. Titus could never recall the autumn days being as intense as this. He wondered if something had changed along with the introduction of the infection, or if some kind of solar incident had affected the weather. Weirder shit had happened. He'd seen the red moon a few months back, the crazy way it made the infected react. He'd seen the new monsters, too. The ones all in black, with teeth as sharp as razors, as long as knives.

If there was one thing Titus knew for sure, it's that humanity really did know nothing. Not anymore. And to humanity, that was uncomfortable. Very fucking uncomfortable. All these years, decades, *centuries* of thinking we

know everything, and once again the rug had well and truly been pulled from beneath our feet.

It was liberating in a way. Staggering, just seeing how much the earth controlled us in ways we didn't understand; in ways we'd never truly understand.

But all he had to understand right now? He had to find some place safe for his people, and he had to do it fast.

He looked around at the vast expanse of the Rivington hills. He saw landmarks he used to drive past to work every day, taking them for granted. The Macron Stadium, where Bolton Wanderers played their football. The Bolton Arena, where several Commonwealth Games events were

once played. Horwich Parkway train station, where he first met Chrissie after a night bowling with his friends. He looked down there and he remembered her beautiful smile. That teasing look in her eyes. That luscious blonde hair trailing down her back.

He thought of her that way and he felt tightness in his throat.

It took a lot to keep that image the prevailing one, especially after he'd watched Chrissie get torn apart by the undead.

"How much further you seriously think we can go, Titus?"

Titus snapped out of the moment when he heard Sally's voice. He looked back at her, and at the rest of his group. There was Sally, Marco, Kurt. Not

many of them left. And Kurt was wounded. Hurt his ankle back in Blackburn. Sally and Marco were holding him up, dragging him along. Titus knew Sally wasn't too keen on that. She put on this big bravado about having the best interests of the group at heart, but really, Titus saw that act for what it was. An act.

She didn't care about their people. She only cared about herself. And given the first chance, she'd cut Kurt loose before Titus could click his fingers.

"We'll head down the hill. Check out the stadium. Maybe there'll be someplace to stay around there."

"You're losing your grip."

Titus didn't know what to say to Sally when she said things like that.

After all, he actually did have the best interests of his group at heart. It was her who was always dragging him down, trying to get him to do the things he really didn't want to do. "Trust me," he said.

"For how much longer?"

He wanted to answer Sally, as he heard Kurt gasping with pain, struggling for life.

But what could he possibly say to her?

"Just trust me."

He turned around and headed down the side of the hills, into the woodlands, towards Horwich—a place he used to call home.

The group moved as swiftly but smoothly as they could through the

trees. Titus never liked being in the woods. Always took him back to his childhood, when he got left behind in the middle of a Californian forest by a group of jerks older than him. They told him horror stories of bears and wolves, of spiders that could kill boys with one bite. He'd pissed his pants. Shat himself. Cried himself to sleep as the darkness surrounded him.

He'd moved to Britain not long after. He must've been the first person actually happy to be moving to Bolton from San Francisco in the history of man. Dad's job came first, as always, after he got a big position at a UK baking company. Titus kind of liked England from the second he got here. He liked the tighter-knit communities,

the friendliness of neighbours and the smallness of the schools. He'd liked everything about England, but one fear remained, right to this very day.

His fear of the woods.

He felt his heart pounding. The smell of his own sweat was strong in the air, which was always the case whenever he was nervous. He tasted sickliness in his throat that took him right back to that day he'd been left behind as a kid, crying and screaming in the lonely woodlands all through the night, swearing he saw movement in the branches.

Only right now, there were monsters in the woods. The monsters were real.

And he had to be sharp if he wanted

to deal with them.

He kept on moving down the hill. The area was quiet. Completely quiet. He hadn't seen an infected for hours, which he found strange. Of course, there weren't many people in the woods, so that made it an almost ideal place to live, in the cruellest twist of fate. The place of his nightmares, ideal. Just his luck.

"Titus, what's the goal here, man?" Marco asked. "What's the damned goal?"

"We keep moving," Titus said.

"Which is code for, 'I don't have a plan'," Sally said.

"Look. You don't need to follow me. You can walk away right now. Find your own path if that's what you really

want. But we've made it this far together. We've fought through so much shit to get here. We can't just give up now."

Titus saw Sally, Marco, and Kurt all looking at him with glazed eyes. He figured it's because he didn't lash out much. Never had done in his previous life, had no plans to in this life. But sometimes, the situation just demanded it. And if it got through to his people, then it got through to his people.

And then he realised they weren't looking at him.

They were looking beyond him.

He turned around. Squinted into the distance. He expected to see movement behind the leaves. One of those long-toothed beasts, or the monsters with the

fleshy, pulpy heads.

But it wasn't any of those things. It wasn't even something alive.

It was a cabin.

Titus walked slowly towards the cabin. His heart raced even more. There was nothing scarier than coming across the infected in the woods. But coming across weird, isolated cabins was definitely a close second.

"What d'you reckon?" Marco asked. "Shall we take a look?"

Titus kept on moving towards the cabin. His instincts told him this was wrong. That if he carried on walking, something very bad was going to happen. That this wasn't where he was heading. There were better places to go than here.

“We need to go inside,” Sally said, snapping through Titus’ thoughts. “We need to rest. Kurt needs it badly.”

Titus’ thoughts became muddled. He could take a quick look in the cabin. Just a quick look. How harmful could it be, really? But everything was just so... still. So quiet. Like there was someone around this place keeping an eye on it.

“There’s no debating it anymore,” Sally said. “We’re going inside.”

“I’m not so sure,” Titus said.

Sally stopped by Titus’ side. Shook her head. “You don’t get to make that decision anymore.”

Titus watched Sally walk towards the cabin, Marco and Kurt by her side. He watched them clamber up the steps, stop in front of the cabin door. He

watched them lift their hands and bang on it.

An echo through the woods. Silence.

“There’s no one in here,” Sally said.

Titus still didn’t feel right. He felt like the branches of the woods were watching him. Like there were people whispering between the trees. He looked through them. Scanned them, all around.

He had a duty to protect his people. He had a responsibility.

He couldn’t just walk away.

He took a step when he heard another branch snap behind him.

“Don’t move another fucking muscle,” the voice said.

It was a man’s voice, no doubt about that. It sounded quiet, though. Like it

was far away. Speaking of which... Titus couldn't be sure which direction he'd heard it from. Left? Right? Directly behind?

He started to turn around, slowly.

"I said, don't move a fucking muscle."

Again, Titus wasn't sure where the voice came from. He noticed in the corner of his eye that Sally, Marco, and Kurt were still at the door, but they weren't moving. They'd clearly heard the voice too.

"Titus?" Sally called.

"Lift your hands," the voice said.

Titus didn't want to. He didn't want to give in. Never liked giving in to bullies of any kind. "We're not here to hurt you, mate. We're just here for

shelter. We've got a wounded—"

"I don't give a shit what you've got. You're going to turn around from this cabin and you're going to fuck the hell off my property. Right this second."

Titus felt his stomach sink completely. He knew coming to this cabin was a bad idea. But then he heard Kurt whimpering with pain. In the distance, he heard groans—the unmistakable groans of infected. He owed it to his people to fight. To fight for this place. To fight for safety.

He wasn't giving up.

"We'll leave," Titus said. "But you're sending us to our deaths. We're good people."

"There are no good people anymore," the man's voice said,

drifting towards Titus like it was coming from everywhere. "So you turn around and you fuck off in the direction you came from. Now."

Titus knew it was no use. He looked over at Sally. Looked her right in the eyes. It was a look he was dreading giving because he knew she'd know exactly what it meant. They had to drop to the ground, get their weapons out, and then they had to fight.

"Now," he muttered.

But then he felt something rip through his chest, splatter through his ribcage. He tasted strong, coppery blood in his mouth, and as much as he wanted to stay on his feet, he couldn't keep his weight elevated any longer.

He dropped to his knees. And as he

fell, he saw a bullet pierce through Sally's neck, leaving her gargling and choking on blood. He saw another bullet splatter right through Kurt's head, silencing him and putting him out of his misery. And then a final shot cracked open Marco's skull, sent his brains spilling all over the cabin walls.

Titus sat on his knees, his mind drifting, and held on to his aching chest. Everything around him had fallen apart. All this effort, all this fighting, and everything was gone.

He saw a man walking towards him. A man with dark hair. Dressed in black jeans, a leather jacket, a dirty white T-shirt underneath. He stopped in front of Titus. Raised his gun.

“Please don't—”

Titus didn't feel a thing again.

THE MAN LOWERED HIS GUN. Walked up to the cabin door. He stopped by the entrance to the cabin after climbing over the fallen bodies. More people to clean away. More people to discard. And damn. More brain to wash from the cabin walls.

He went to open the cabin door when he saw Jordanna staring at him, anger on her face.

“What the hell have you done this time, Riley? What in the name of fuck have you done this time?”

Riley dragged the heavy, dead body across the ground and felt nothing.

The afternoon sun had disappeared behind the clouds now. The air was thick and humid, uncharacteristic for September. There'd barely been any

rain all summer, and still hadn't been any now, in September. There were still streams nearby, though, access to fresh water, and they had plenty of bottles of water stashed away inside the cabin, so right now water wasn't an issue. They had plenty of food, too. Food they'd hunted. Food they'd gathered from houses and shops that held more goods than they'd ever need. No, food was good right now, too.

The only thing that wasn't good right now was the people trying to fuck Jordanna and his world up.

He dragged the man along, away from his cabin, by his ankles. He didn't look into the man's dead, vacant eyes because he'd looked into enough dead, vacant eyes by now to know they all

looked the same. He listened for the groans in the woods, still heard them somewhere in front of him, over by the cabin. But as long as the groans followed him, that was fine. They could feed on the bodies of the dead he'd killed. Or he could kill the undead, too, if there were too many of them.

There was always a purpose for everything in this world now. A food chain. A new way of life.

The autumn leaves crunched under his feet and under the man's heavy body. He had decent shoes on; shoes that Riley would have to try and squeeze into. He had some Timberlands of his own, but these were thicker. He'd give them to Jordanna if she didn't have tiny feet.

Besides, Jordanna wasn't quite as... well, *chilled* about the whole ordeal of killing people to keep themselves safe. Sure, Riley was hardly thrilled doing what he had to do to survive, but it was exactly that. Survival. Staying alive. There was no way around the nasty stuff in this world, not anymore.

He smelled an intense sourness in the air, so sour that it would've triggered his gag reflex in the old days, made the water he'd sipped and the berries he'd eaten earlier that day come sneaking up his oesophagus and out onto the ground below. Not anymore, though. He was used to the smell by now. Wouldn't be a very good post-apocalyptic survivor if he wasn't. The weak were the ones who struggled with

the sights, the smells, the sounds. Who let those sensory triggers get the better of them. And he had, for a time. He'd not always been this way. He'd been a fuck-up before the world ended, and then he'd turned a fuck-up again when he got too settled back at the Manchester Living Zone.

But those days were gone.

He knew how to survive now. What he had to do to survive.

He dragged the body and pushed it up beside the other corpses. The four people he'd had to kill when they'd tried to get inside his cabin. He hadn't *wanted* to kill them. Nobody *wanted* to kill, unless they were insane, which actually was a lot more prevalent in this world than he liked to admit.

But they'd given each other the look. He'd seen it. The man and the woman. They'd given each other the look, and at that point, he knew he'd have to kill them.

He looked down at the pile of bodies. It was strange, in a way, seeing them now their lives had been snuffed out in a flash. They weren't suffering anymore, at least. Their pain was all over. Not that he cared. He felt no attachment to anyone but Jordanna anymore. He'd done attachment. He'd tried it, and it'd fucked him over. He'd grown attached to his group. To his friends. To people like Pedro, Chloë, Tamara. And he'd grown attached to James, too.

Then shit had gone down, and

James had taken Jordanna out into these woods. Shot her in the stomach.

Taken her baby—*Riley's* baby—away from them.

When a friend does a thing like that, it has a funny way of fucking with your trust.

All his trust in other people died when James fired that bullet.

Forever.

He never liked recalling the next part, so he started whistling as he crouched down beside the man with the curly, greying hair, the one who'd been doing all the talking. Riley looked away as he sliced through the skin on his neck and he cut his flesh. He could taste the cooling blood in the air, but still he kept his focus away, kept on

whistling until he'd severed the spinal cord, taken the head away.

And then he kept on whistling as he walked over to the stakes he had surrounding this place on the road nearest the motorway, the most likely place by which people would exit. The best place for a deterrent to keep people away.

He stuck the head of the man he'd killed on the stake.

Then he looked at the line of the other eight people he'd propped up on these stakes, their faces in various stages of decomposition, some of them chewed at by the infected.

For a split second, he felt the sheer horror of his actions. Of what he'd done. Of everything he'd done.

And in a moment, it was gone.

When he turned around to head back to the cabin, he saw Jordanna standing there and staring at him.

Her face was pale. She looked at his hands, then up at his face. He saw the way she looked at him—like he was a monster. And he guessed he was, in a way. But he was also just a natural progression from the old days. A classic hunter protecting his territory.

“Didn’t think you liked it out here,” Riley said.

Jordanna shook her head. Then she turned away and stormed back to the cabin.

Riley knew right then they were going to have one of *those* conversations, whether he liked it or

not.

IT DIDN'T TAKE Jordanna long to bring up the events earlier that day.

It was still light out, but night was approaching. They sat at the table in the dusty old shack, some spit-roasted rabbit between them. Riley ravaged his, tucked right into it. Jordanna ate slowly, cautiously, as the juicy, charred flesh hit Riley's lips.

When Riley looked up, he saw Jordanna glaring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You know exactly what."

Riley put down his rabbit kebab. "Sorry. Forgot you prefer the arse end."

"Don't joke about this, Riley. What

you did out there. What you've been doing out there these last two months. It's... I don't know what to think about it. I'm worried you're falling into an abyss. A cold one, at that."

Riley could get where Jordanna was coming from. As he looked into her brown eyes, that scar above her lip, he could see the genuine concern on her face. But she didn't have any reason to be concerned. He was just surviving. Just doing what he had to. "That coldness is fine."

"It's not when it means killing people. Severing their heads. Putting them on stakes to keep people away. When did you get so cold about other people?"

"That coldness saved your life, I

think you'll remember. And maybe if I'd been a bit fucking colder sooner, I could've saved our kid's life, too."

Jordanna's cheeks flushed. She put down her rabbit kebab. "One, do not bring that child into this conversation, or any conversation ever again. Two, I think you'll remember damned well that it wasn't your coldness that saved us, but someone else's warmth."

Riley sat back, chomping down on a fatty piece of rabbit. He recalled sitting there, a dying Jordanna bleeding out in his arms. He recalled hearing the Orions get closer. Then finding the strength to get up. Fleeing them. Running away, as fast as he could.

He recalled running until he reached an old veterinary practice.

Bumping into a man called Kirk in there, who'd been surviving alone inside there with a bunch of animals ever since the world collapsed.

Kirk wasn't a medical expert on humans. But he'd used his knowledge and his abilities to help Jordanna. To help her miscarry. To stitch her up again.

Kirk had helped them survive.

But for doing that, Kirk and his animals had died.

The Orions had found their next meal, and it was an absolute feast.

"If you hadn't trusted Kirk, I'd be dead. We probably both would."

Jordanna stood. Took the remains of her rabbit over to the waste area, tossing it inside. Then she walked over

to the candle and blew it out.

“Where you going?”

“Bed,” she said. “Got a headache.”

“Why don’t you stay up and—”

“Got a headache.”

Jordanna walked away. He knew what her problem was. She wanted to leave this place. She’d said it so many times already—she didn’t want to be stuck here forever. She thought they were going nowhere.

But right here was safe. Right here was just the two of them, trusting one another.

That suited Riley fine.

“We aren’t leaving here,” he said, as Jordanna pushed the bedroom door open.

She stopped. Stood still. “Speak for

yourself.”

Riley wanted to ask her what she meant by that. If she was planning on leaving. Because he couldn't let her leave. He couldn't be apart from her. She was the only reason he was still surviving in the first place.

He considered a life outside this place. A life of putting faith in other people. A life of trusting the motives, the intentions, of others, and it terrified him.

He stood from the table and started to head towards the bedroom for a lie down too when he heard a bang outside.

Then, voices.

He rushed over to the window. Peeked outside.

“What was that?” Jordanna asked.

Riley felt dread build in his chest.

He tightened his grip on his knife and his gun.

“People,” he said.

Riley held on to his gun tightly as he looked through the window and waited for the oncoming survivors.

The clouds suffocated the sun as daylight waned. All around, in the trees, Riley swore he saw movement.

Figures drifting towards his cabin, towards Jordanna and him. He could hear the sounds of voices talking to one another; of footsteps crunching through the branches on the ground. He still couldn't see them, not clearly. But he knew they were there. He knew they were coming.

And he knew what he'd have to do when he finally laid eyes on them.

The only thing he could do.

He tightened his shaky grip on the gun even harder than he had been gripping it already. He stayed crouched down, right beneath the main downstairs window of the cabin, just peeking out. The more footsteps and voices he heard, the more the taste of sick built up in his throat. The more the

smells of death surrounded him, reminding him of all the things he'd lost at the hands of other people; of all the times his world had collapsed around him, all because of other people.

Sure, the creatures and the Orions were a threat. They were the ones who'd destabilised this world. But humans had taken way more away from him than creatures had ever managed.

After all, humans were still the ones who ruled this world. The creatures were just a distraction. A nasty landmine in the background.

The real danger of the creatures? Not the creatures themselves, but the conditions they'd created for other people to live out their deadly fantasies.

He saw them, then. Saw the first member of the group step from behind the branches. A curly, dark haired man. A pale look on his narrow face and a long green trench coat. In his hand, a rifle.

Funny thing about the end of the world. Even though guns were outlawed in Britain way before the end, it's amazing just how many guns you discovered in the Dead Days. Most of the weapons had been used by the army, but many of those had fallen, so people had found weapons and ammo to scavenge for their own purposes. Plus, there were armouries. Licensed gun stores. Way, way more firearms than you'd believe.

Think you're safe? Think again.

Another person came from behind the trees. And then another, and another, and before Riley knew it, he was staring out of the cabin at fifteen people. His heart raced. Why hadn't they seen the deterrent? The heads on the stakes weren't easy to put together. They were supposed to be a warning. They were supposed to keep people like this away.

So why weren't they going away?

"I can take them from here," Riley said, observing that only a couple of them had guns.

He started to ascend when he felt Jordanna's hand on his arm. "No."

He looked into her chocolate brown eyes. Jordanna had a way of getting through to him like no one else ever

had. She only had to look at him in a certain way for him to know whether he was doing something right or wrong.

But what was right or wrong anymore? Riley used to think he was a good person. That he was on the good side. But now he killed people to protect himself, to protect his home. Did that make him a bad person?

All the people he'd fought against. Mr Fletch. The groups on the road. They'd all seemed bad to him. They'd all seemed like they were the bad in the world, and he was the good. The right.

But now he saw how it was: they were all just the heroes of their own stories. Whether wrong, whether right, they were all just trying to do right by

*themselves*. Because there was no universal right anymore.

Did that make Riley feel any better about killing people? Hell no. A whole lot worse.

The world was complicated. Nobody knew whether they were good or bad, not anymore.

You could only protect yourself.

“They’ll come over here,” Riley said, keeping his voice low. “They’ll come inside here and they’ll want this place. For themselves.”

Jordanna shook her head. “You don’t know that.”

“Of course I know it. It’s what they want. It’s what everyone always wants. So... so let me do what I have to do. Before it’s too late.”

Jordanna kept her eyes focused on Riley's. She kept on shaking her head, that look of sadness, of *humanity*, so present about her. She'd been through hell. Way more hell than even Riley. And yet, she was still clinging on to herself. She was still holding on to a fragment of what she was before. She still felt love. Compassion.

Riley felt confused.

"Hold up. Think I saw movement over there."

Riley turned around and saw two of the men walking towards the cabin.

He crouched down. Shuffled over to the door.

"Riley—"

"No," he said. He stepped right opposite the door. Crouched there,

pistol in hand, pointed at the door. If that door came down, he knew what he was going to do. The only thing he could do. He was going to kill them. No conversations. No questions asked. Just kill them.

He felt his teeth start to shake as the footsteps outside got closer. He thought he saw two of them heading this way when he'd looked out the window, but now he swore he heard three, or maybe even four. Didn't matter. Three, four, forty-four—he'd do what he had to do.

He didn't like doing it. He didn't *want* to do it. He just *had* to do it.

He heard the footsteps creak up the wooden steps towards the cabin and felt the guilt filling his body again. The guilt for what he was going to do. The

guilt for what he was forced to do by this godforsaken world.

“You don’t have to do this,” Jordanna whispered, somewhere to Riley’s right. “You can lower the gun and just tell them there’s room. Tell them they can join us.”

Riley heard Jordanna’s words. They spoke right to his soul.

But his head was stronger than his soul. And so too was his trigger finger.

He heard the footsteps stop right outside the door.

“You sure you saw someone in this place?” a man’s gruff voice asked.

“Tony, I’m not blind.”

“Then what d’you think we should do? Check it out?”

“There could be weapons. Food.

People.”

It was that last word that did it. The way the guy said “people”.

Riley didn't want to imagine what this guy's plan for any people he came across would be. And he wasn't going to wait around to find out.

He lifted his gun higher as the door handle started to turn.

“Riley, please,” Jordanna whispered, terror and fear on her face.

He pointed his gun. Squeezed the trigger.

And then he heard a shout from outside.

“Shit! Infected!”

He heard a blast of gunfire. Heard crying and groaning, as well as the high-pitched squealing of those weird,

fleshy-headed infected that seemed way faster, way more intelligent. The ones Riley and Jordanna called Hybrids.

Just hearing those noises snapped Riley out of the moment. The door handle swung back into place. The footsteps that had got right up to the cabin door disappeared and ran outside, joining the fight and the chaos. Riley just crouched there, heart racing, gun loose in his sweaty hand, stunned by how close he'd come to doing the god-damn-awful once more.

Jordanna held his hand then. He flinched, then let her rest it there. "Come on," she said. "We need to help them. This is our chance to prove ourselves."

She pulled Riley over to the door. Opened it up.

“I don’t think we should—”

“We should,” Jordanna said, loading a gun of her own. She held her hand out, gestured to the door. “Open it. Do what we have to do.”

Riley looked at the door. Listened to the chaos unfolding outside. Held his breath.

He reached for the axe at the side of the door. Slipped it under his jacket.

Then he turned the handle and pulled open the door.

There were lots of infected out there. More of them than he’d first thought. All of the group, fifteen or so, were being attacked by them. Some of them were lying on their backs, stringy pieces

of flesh being torn from their necks and chests. Others were being ripped apart at both sides, being torn like pulled pork, their insides spewing out in a bloody mess.

Riley looked at the scenes and at the dwindling numbers. He stood there and watched. If he just let this happen, then they wouldn't have more people to think about. If he just let this happen, he could be okay. Jordanna could be okay.

“Riley!” Jordanna shouted. “Quick!”

She fired at the infected. Fired at them, drawing attention from both the creatures and the survivors.

Riley walked down the steps. Walked towards the conflict zone as the infected and the survivors both fought.

He lifted his gun. Held his shaky hand. Pointed it at the fleshy head of one of the hybrids.

Fired.

And then he shot a normal creature. And before he knew it, there were just five survivors left. Then four. Then three. Then the infected were all down, and it was just those three still standing.

He had three bullets left.

Three chances to end all this.

The two men and one woman raised their hands. They smiled, covered in blood and sweat. "You saved us. Both of you. Thank you. You—"

Riley pulled the trigger and fired into the skull of the first man.

"Riley, no!" Jordanna screamed.

He moved on to the next man. Shot him. Put him out of his misery as all the images of the horrors other survivors had caused him and those he loved circled his mind.

One bullet left.

A woman left.

He pointed his gun at the woman. When he pointed it at her, he saw the tears building in her angry, bloodshot eyes.

“Do it,” she spat. “Fucking do it.”

Riley thought she was on about him until he heard the blast of gunfire from his left. He saw bullets slam into the ground, nipping at his ankles.

When he turned around, he saw a larger group running towards him, some of them with guns, firing.

All closing in.

Cody walked away from the village called Cilburn with a familiar feeling of disappointment.

The sun was on its way down, marking the end of another pleasant autumn day. The leaves were starting

to fall from the trees, scraping their way across this abandoned village in the Lake District—another abandoned village they'd searched and found very little in. He couldn't count the number of times he'd searched abandoned villages in the two months since joining Maryam's group. But one thing was for sure. They always seemed to end in relative disappointment. Not for lack of supplies. Supplies were always enough to get them by.

But through lack of people. Through lack of *hope*.

Cody walked alongside the rest of the scouting team, away from the confines of the village. The village was quaint, with grey-bricked houses and little local shops, obviously closed, but

many not boarded up yet, creating the illusion that this was still just a sleepy town that hadn't been struck by the undead. If Cody focused enough, he could imagine the smells of fish and chips, the tastes of freshly-made village ice cream. He could hear the laughter of children as they rode past on their bicycles, tapping the bells. He could imagine his perfect life: village life.

Gav led the way, and by his side, Stu, Emma, Harry. They'd been out since earlier that afternoon. Their mission was as simple as ever—get into the village, find anything that may be of use, then get out. Anything of use did not include people. Survivors to recruit. Recruitment and growth weren't something Cody found common in

Maryam's group. It kind of happened by accident more than anything—someone helps them out on the road and ends up joining, that kind of thing.

But even those kinds of recruitments were thin on the ground these days. And that upset Cody. It upset Cody a lot.

He couldn't accept that he lived in a world where people couldn't trust one another.

“Don't look so fucking glum. We did alright.”

Cody turned. Gav was by his side. He looked at him with those wide, weasel-like eyes. He had a gaunt face with yellowish skin, a look that definitely screamed unhealthiness. His hair was stringy, and even though he

always seemed to get the monopoly on whatever food they found, he never put on any weight.

“Yeah,” Cody said, offering half a smile and a nod. “We did alright.”

“It’s like you’re never fucking satisfied with what we find,” Gav continued, disregarding Cody’s answer. He had a way of always going on. Of droning on and on, even when there wasn’t an argument to be had. “I mean, we found you. That should be enough for you.”

“And I’m still grateful for that to this day,” Cody said. “Really.”

He extended his half-smile into something like a full smile.

Gav didn’t even crack an attempt at a smile.

They kept on their departure from the village. That conversation with Gav summed up Cody's time in Maryam's group so far. Difficult. He was finding it hard to bond and connect with people, mostly because people were finding it hard to bond and connect with each other. He knew it wasn't a perfect world. He knew not everyone could just blindly trust one another.

But surely there had to be more than this. Surely, the world didn't just end with this cynicism. This decay of trust.

Cody walked slowly away from the silent village. They'd be back at camp in around forty-five minutes. They were holed up in the ruins of some old fort just outside the woods. Decent place. Good places to watch out for the

undead and the Ugliers. Easy place to abandon, if they had to. Sure, they had the occasional attack from the undead, but they'd been lowering in number for the last couple of weeks now. Things actually seemed like they were getting in order.

But Cody couldn't just let what he knew drop. What he'd learned.

He remembered following Maryam into the woods. Coming across that wreckage. The plane. The plane, Dubai Express Flight 8040 that had flown over Britain from Dubai to Iceland, then fallen down onto British soil back in June. Maryam told him she was the sole survivor of that plane, which explained her burns and wounds. But not only that—there was a world outside Britain,

a normal, uninfected world, rolling along as normal.

A world Cody wanted to be in more than anything else. A world that he wanted to call out to for help. A normality.

But a world that was so, so far away.

He looked back on the village. Looked at the abandoned houses. The half-open doors. The shops with the "Open" signs still dangling down in the windows like this place hadn't gone away at all.

Time to say goodbye to another village. To another former bastion of life. To...

He saw the boy standing in the window of the cottage and staring at

him.

It made goose pimples creep up his skin. He blinked. Rubbed his eyes.

The boy was still there. In the upstairs of a cottage. Looking out with darkened eyes. Emaciated. Staring.

“Hold up,” Cody said.

Gav tutted, as did a couple of the others. “What the fuck now?”

“There’s a boy,” Cody said.

“A boy?”

“Up there. Up there in that cottage. A boy. I think we... I think we should help him out.”

Gav walked up to Cody’s side. He scratched the back of his head, which was balding in patches where alopecia had taken its grip. “Fucking creepy, that’s what it is. Nah. I don’t like it.

Doesn't seem right."

Cody tasted bitterness. "We can't just walk away."

"We can," Gav said, raising his voice. "And we fucking will. If you wanna stay here gallivanting around the village, you fucking do that. But if you get bit, at least have the decency to cut your arm off or something. Leave us with some fresh meat to cook."

A few of the others chuckled. Cody just kept his focus on that cottage.

He looked up at the boy. Part of him heard Gav. It was risky. Especially weird seeing a boy up there all on his own. He knew the undead had gone through a stage where they'd taken on a startlingly human form after the blood moon, but that had passed. There

was nothing undead looking about this boy. He needed help.

“Don’t wait for me,” Cody said.

He took a deep breath and walked towards the cottage.

“Jesus. He’s actually fucking doing this. Don’t you worry. We won’t wait for you.”

Cody kept on walking, disregarding Gav’s words. He wasn’t giving up on people anymore. He wasn’t leaving them behind. He wasn’t letting all hope in this world fade. Not after what happened to his daughter, Kelly. Not after watching her turn into one of those *things*, killing his wife, Sasha, back at the Manchester Living Zone.

He pushed open the cottage door. It creaked and echoed. It was dark and

dusty downstairs, but the whole place seemed in order. A television set. Family photographs. Cutlery out on the dinner table.

Cody held his breath and climbed up the staircase. He listened to the stairs creak under his feet. The further he got upstairs, towards the room where he'd seen the boy, the more cautious he became, the more wary.

He became especially wary when he caught a smell of rotting fish.

He stopped at the top of the hallway upstairs. Turned and looked across the hall towards that boy.

He was standing by the window. He was still staring out of it, not looking at Cody, as if he didn't even know Cody was there.

Cody crept closer towards the room, towards the boy. "Kid?" he said.

The kid didn't even flinch.

Cody walked into the room where the boy was. He looked around and felt those shivers up his arms again. There were cots. Lots of cots. Cots with mobiles dangling above them, some of them still spinning.

Inside the cots, there was movement.

Movement, and blood.

Cody smelled that rotting fish tang even stronger than ever before. He felt his body shaking as he walked over to the cots, looked inside.

When he saw, he almost puked.

The cots were filled with babies. Only they weren't just normal babies.

They were bitten. Some of them were wriggling around, snarling, their intestines dangling from their stomachs. Others were squeezing their little hands so much that they were bleeding from the palms.

When he backed away, Cody saw the young boy was looking at him.

He was holding a knife.

"I'm sorry," the boy said. "They need feeding. Mummy said not to let them starve and they can't chew so they need feeding."

Cody felt stuff under his feet. Stuff squelching. Blood and muscle.

He saw a machete at the other side of the room. Then a fly-surrounded pile of remains.

On the mouths of some of the

babies, he saw blood.

He looked back at the boy. Lifted his hands. “Kid, you don’t have to—”

A blast cracked through the silence.

Cody shuffled back. Braced himself for the contact.

But the bullet didn’t hit him.

The kid had a knife, not a gun.

Which meant...

He watched the boy fall to the ground as the window behind him smashed. He watched him land, face first, the knife still between his bony little fingers.

He looked at the boy, listened to the snarls of the babies, and there was stillness.

Outside, he saw Gav. He looked up at Cody, his rifle raised. Shook his head.

“Thank me later,” he called.

Gav walked away. And as he walked, Cody knew he should go, too. He knew he should get the hell out of here.

But as he crouched over the fallen boy and listened to the sounds of the hungry babies, he saw horror. Total horror.

He couldn't accept he lived in a world so devoid of hope.

He couldn't accept that this was the world he lived in. That this was all there was left.

He just couldn't.

“I'll be a minute,” he called out to Gav, although his voice was so croaky that he knew Gav wouldn't hear it from here.

He lifted the machete from the side of the room.

Held his breath.

Walked over to the cots.

HE TRIED NOT to throw up as he walked out of the cottage and into the fresh air.

Inside the cottage, there was total silence.

Cody stared out at the glistening stars and cleared his mind of the horrors of the day.

Or at least attempted to.

The night had arrived fast. It must've been around nine p.m., now,

and Cody still hadn't eaten since he got back. The air had a coolness to it, which was a relief because Cody felt completely stuffy after what he'd seen back in Cilburn. After what he'd had to do to silence those poor kids in that room, hungry for nothing but flesh.

After he'd watched Gav shoot the young boy through the head.

He looked at the trees below the stars. Looked at the ruins of the fort all around him. There was total silence to the night, aside from the branches blowing in the breeze. His teeth chattered. He tried to stop them chattering, but it was no use, not really. There was no way he was getting the nerves and the fear out of his system after the things he'd witnessed, the

things he'd done, today. He might be able to convince himself that his mind was clear. That there was a blue sky above the clouds, no matter what.

But his body wasn't believing it. Not anytime soon.

He took in some deep breaths of the cool air. He used to love that smell. The smell of freshness in the countryside and the woodlands. The times Sasha, Kelly and him would go camping, cooking marshmallows over an open fire in the middle of the darkness. He wanted that. He wanted nothing more than to go back to that.

But the blue sky above the clouds. The blue sky that was always there, no matter what. Sasha had told him about that—told him that no matter how

stormy it was, there was always calm above. No matter how bad things got, there was always stillness available to find out there.

He wanted to believe that. He needed to believe that.

But he wasn't seeing much to suggest it was true.

His blue sky was falling.

"You always come up here when you're fucking sulking?"

Cody turned around. Gav was standing in the glow of the moonlight, staring at him.

Cody rubbed the back of his head. "How long you been here?"

Gary sat by his side. "Doesn't matter. You felt alone, right?"

Cody looked out into the vast

emptiness of darkness beyond. "It's a feeling I'm used to."

Gav didn't say anything at first. But from the way he was sighing, Cody could tell he was getting ready for a bit of a groan.

"You shouldn't've fucking gone back to that cottage," Gav said. "You didn't fucking need to do any of that."

There it was. Cody felt his stomach sink. "I couldn't just leave that boy without knowing—"

"And because you went up there, you almost got yourself killed. Hell, you made *me* kill the boy to save your life."

"It wasn't like that. You didn't have to do that."

"Of course I fucking did," Gav said.

“You might think you have your shit under control. You might think you can talk your way out of any situation. But seriously, mate. Seriously. You need to get a grip and have a real look at the world around you. You can’t go making stupid risks like that.”

Cody rubbed his tired eyes. He stood. He wasn’t in the mood to argue.

“Everyone in this place is vital,” Gav said, standing too, joining Cody as he descended the slippery stone steps down to the ground level of the old fort. “We’re all a fucking cog in a machine. If one of us dies, we’re a whole lot weaker for it.”

“Then maybe that’s why we should think about letting some more cogs in,” Cody snapped.

It wasn't like him to snap. But he couldn't hold it in any longer. He was tired. Exhausted. He needed to let off a little steam. If it meant a war of words with Gav, which he really didn't want, then so be it.

But Gav didn't bite the bait, which pissed Cody off even more. They walked together through the grounds, past some of the old ruins that'd been converted into sleeping areas. On the walls, which were rebuilt in some areas, several guards took watch out into the darkness. There was nothing. Nothing but silence. But it was nice, in a way. Nice to just be at one with nature, with the darkness.

"I was like you once," Gav said.

"Here we go."

“No, for fucking real. Don’t do that. Don’t fucking dismiss me.”

Cody raised his hands as they kept on walking towards the sleeping area.

“I used to believe, and all that bullshit. I used to think people were good, deep down. That no matter what they’d done, there was a way back for them. For every damned one of them.”

“And what happened to screw your worldview up so radically?”

“Two people killed my boy, that’s what,” Gav said. It wasn’t something Gav had ever told Cody in the two months since they’d known each other, but he could hear the pain in Gav’s voice. “They—they were supposed to be my friends. Friends I was surviving with. But they... We got hungry and we

got scared. They drew straws on who had to do it. Last damned thing I saw was my boy's eyes staring at me as they held down his mouth and cut open his damned belly. Then they ate him. Did what they had to do. They weren't the monsters, Cody. They were the people. And that's when things changed."

Cody stopped by the entrance to the stone sleeping area. "What did you do to them?"

"I cut one of them up. Forced the other to eat 'em. And when they'd done, I made 'em puke the other guy up and eat 'em all over again. Kept on going and going until I got bored. Found Maryam not long after. Or she found me."

"Nice story," Cody said. "I was

starting to wonder how many more bullshit lies you were gonna come up with to win me round to your way of thinking.”

Gav shrugged. “Might be bullshit. Might not be. You’ll never know. But does it matter? Does it really fucking matter?”

Cody smiled. “I think it does. Night, Gav.”

He went to walk inside the fort when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

He spun round, instinctively more than anything. “Meant to say. Maryam wants a word with you. A little chat. About the future.”

Cody’s stomach sank. He was sure Gav would’ve mentioned the events earlier to her, but after their

conversation, he'd grown less sure.  
"You told her?"

"Hey," Gav said. "I'm just trying to keep my people safe."

Cody gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to lash out at Gav. Because he knew what a chat "about the future" meant in Maryam's camp.

A chat about the future was a chat about the end of the road.

Banishment.

He walked into Maryam's fort and saw her sitting there, staring, waiting for him by the embers of a fire as if she knew he was coming all along.

Half of her face was beautiful, with soft features and perky red lips, as well as intoxicating green eyes.

The other half was burned

completely, like the skin was hanging on to the remains of a skeleton.

“Hello, Cody,” she said. She held out a hand, which was also burned. Gestured to the rock opposite her. “Sit down. I think it’s about time we spoke about the future. About *your* future.”

Cody sat on the rock opposite Maryam and waited for the news of his banishment.

Even though it wasn't all that late—nine-fifteenish—Cody was exhausted. Usually, he felt wide awake right into

the night, unable to put his mind to rest with the many thoughts spinning around. Thoughts of the outside world. Of how amazing it would be to get back into society. Thoughts of hope, of promise, of starting humanity all over again.

Sometimes, the thoughts were bad. He was sure they would be tonight, and for the next few nights, after what he'd been forced to do in the village earlier. That smell of rotting flesh. The look of fear and madness in the skinny boy's wide, darkened eyes, tainted by the horrors of this world.

He'd be staying awake a long time tonight if he wasn't so exhausted.

But he wouldn't be sleeping at all if he faced what he expected: banishment

from Maryam's group.

Maryam's room was the only solo one in the whole fortress, which made sense considering she was the leader. She slept on an elevated stone under a sleeping bag she'd found from some campsite a few miles north. There was a pair of rocks down here in the middle of the fort, which made up something of a sitting area. In between the rocks, crackling embers, which gave off a much-needed warmth. Warmth that would be even more needed when winter finally came around, not long off at all.

"I heard about what happened back in Cilburn village."

Maryam's words broke the silence and made Cody's stomach sink. There

was no point hiding the truth. Not anymore. "I thought you might've."

"You almost killed yourself. I wouldn't be so annoyed if it was the first time. But it isn't. It's happening often. Far too often."

"Then banish me, I guess. You'll be a man down either way."

Maryam narrowed her eyes. Well, one of her eyes. The burned side of her face, skeletal, didn't move a muscle. "No. I'll be a man down, sure. But if you keep putting yourself in dangerous situations, I'll be more than one person down. Our people. They help you. They try to save you and they hurt themselves."

Cody waved off Maryam's words. "I had it under control."

“That’s not what Gav told me.”

“And you believe Gav? Wouldn’t take it as gospel. He’s had it in for me since day one.”

Maryam tilted her head and looked at the embers below. “True. But I still think you’re foolish. And Gav was right to tell me what happened.”

“I’m sure he was,” Cody said.

“It seems to me like you have a problem. With the way we do things. Like you have... how do I say... something on your chest?” Her accent wavered from time to time, but right now it was in full flow.

Cody thought about holding off his true thoughts. But what the hell did he have to lose? Maryam was going to kick him out of this place anyway. Might as

well be honest while he had the chance.

“I’m fed up. Fed up of... of how cold we are with people. How unforgiving. How we just can’t bring ourselves to give other people a chance. It’s like wherever we go, whoever we see, we always go in with the mindset that they have to be bad. That they *must* be bad because we’re the only goodness left in this world. But I don’t believe that. I really don’t believe that. I don’t want to believe that’s true. Never.”

Maryam didn’t say anything. Not at first. As she stared at Cody, he got the sense that she was looking at him like he was ridiculous.

Then, she broke her silence. “The things that happened to you in the past. Your old group, with the man called

Riley. The one that abandoned you.”

“They didn’t exactly abandon me —”

“And the people who buried you alive. They are good people? They are the people who make you believe the world is a better place?”

Cody didn’t want to accept her words or agree with them in any way. But he couldn’t deny the truth. He’d faced some nasty sons of bitches in the last few months. He’d encountered bad people. People that went beyond his worst nightmares.

But he’d seen goodness, too. He’d seen goodness in the group at the Manchester Living Zone. He’d seen hope in the darkest of moments.

He’d seen the potential for a future

even when it seemed all but gone.

“Most people are dangerous,” Maryam said. “It’s how you have to be if you want to survive. You can’t just believe in other people. Belief plays people. Manipulates people. Kills people.”

“I’ve believed in you,” Cody said. “And what you showed me. The plane. The story of the outside world. How it’s all good out there.”

Maryam’s eyes narrowed. Her focus seemed to soften, like she was recalling a past that Cody didn’t know existed. “Yes. Well. There’s nothing we can do about it. We’re here. We must survive here.”

“I don’t believe we have to settle like that,” Cody said. “We shouldn’t

just give up. We know the truth. You've seen the world outside. We should be spreading the word. Trying to do *something* about it."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Just... just something. Anything. We can't just give up like this. We can't just accept that this world, these horrors, are all there is."

Another silence followed between them. Another long stare.

Eventually, Maryam broke the silence again. "We're here. We're safe. That's all that matters."

"No," Cody said. He wanted to give up his argument but wasn't in the mood to. Not now. "It isn't what matters. It can't be. So if it means

banishing me, then you'd better get it done with."

Maryam snorted. Half of her face broke out into a smile.

"What?"

"Banish you?" she said. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

Cody felt his face blushing. "Then why did you..."

She leaned closer to Cody. So close that he felt her warmth in the air, smelled the sweetness of her breath.

"I just like talking with you late at night," she said.

Cody looked into the beautiful side of her face and he felt his body tingling all over.

He looked at the beautiful side and he could block the burned side out. He

could fill in the gaps, and see this woman for who she was.

The woman he believed in.

The woman he trusted.

The woman who'd saved his life.

"Then maybe I'll stay and chat a little longer?" Cody said.

Maryam's smile widened. She moved closer to Cody. Put a cold hand on his arm.

"Maybe you—"

Maryam didn't finish what she was saying.

A deafening cry ripped through the fortress.

"Help!"

Riley watched the armed group surround him and he knew his luck was up.

The oncoming group moved through the trees with serious pace. Most of them were armed, by the looks

of things. Armed with pistols, some with knives. There were plenty of them, and possibly more that Riley didn't know about yet. He could handle them one to one. Could probably stand a damned good shot at taking them down alone, too.

But he only had one bullet left. One bullet, and he was far away from the cabin.

He looked over at the cabin as the shouts of the group got nearer. As their eyes all looked at him, faces awash with anger and disgust. He saw Jordanna crouched right where they'd both been earlier, peeking through the glass. He wanted her to help him. But another part of him wanted her to stay there. To keep a low profile.

One thing was for sure: their home wasn't safe anymore. And he couldn't be doing with an unsafe home.

He felt something smack the back of his head. Something hard and metal that he recognised as a barrel of a gun.

"You're gonna stay down there," a quivery voice said, as the collective smell of human stench interfering with his perfect home grew more pungent by the second. The woman who he hadn't shot. "You're gonna stay down there on your knees and you're gonna fucking beg."

Riley looked ahead at the people heading his way. There were eight of them. He watched them walk through the trees. Men. Women. All of them looking at him like he was some kind of

monster.

He didn't speak. Not at first. A sour taste filled his mouth as he tried to keep his focus on them, hoping that in turn, it kept their focus off the cabin, off Jordanna. All around him, he saw the bodies of those he'd shot. The bodies that the creatures had ripped apart. He smelled the coppery stench of blood thick in the air.

A man stepped forward ahead of the other seven people. He walked right over to Riley, slowly. He was big. Well built, with a bald head and dressed all in khaki. He was holding a long rifle.

He stopped right opposite Riley. Stared down at him.

Riley kept his focus right back up at the man, never once turning from his

steely grey eyes.

“You got a problem with my people?” the man asked, his booming voice breaking the silence.

Riley looked up past the man’s head to the tree above. He looked up at the branches, up at the darkening sky beyond.

He felt a crack on the back of his head. Then his mouth filled with the taste of blood.

“I asked you a question,” the man said, pulling his rifle back. “And when I ask a question, you answer. Okay? You get that?”

Riley didn’t nod. He didn’t shake his head. He just looked back up into that man’s eyes and held his stare.

“You got a problem with my

people?"

Riley took a deep breath of the cool September air. "Not your people."

"Then why did you kill two of my —"

"Not your people," Riley continued. "Just... people in general."

The man smiled. Nodded. He started chuckling as he walked side to side, wavering in and out of the radius of the tree above. "Those heads on stakes. They people you didn't like too? That what you do with people you don't like?"

"It doesn't matter whether I like them or not," Riley said, trying his best to keep his composure. "People are dangerous."

"Usually, the people who say people

are dangerous are the most dangerous people.”

“Maybe so.”

The man stopped. He looked down at Riley. Smiled.

And then he pulled back his rifle and smacked it right across Riley’s forehead.

A burning, splitting sensation cracked through his skull. All sounds went muffled. His nose blocked up with the thinning flow of blood, which trickled down the back of his throat.

“You see, you can’t go around just murdering whoever the hell you want. It ain’t good for humanity. It ain’t polite.”

“What’s good for humanity stopped mattering a year ago,” Riley said.

“You see, I don’t believe that. None of us believe that. We believe in good manners. We believe in sticking together. And then there’s loners like you trying to set the rules.”

He grabbed Riley’s cheeks, squeezed his tender face, hard.

“I’ll bet you were just a normal guy before all this. ‘Cause all the rulebooks of the end of the world says it’s the serial killers who go nutty. The prisoners. The ex-cons and the rapists. But no. The real bad guys are the ones who’ve been repressed in the old world. Who’ve been holding their fantasies in. This is their world. I’ll bet you’re one of those people, ain’t you?”

For the first time, Riley looked over at the cabin. He looked Jordanna in her

eyes as she crouched there, unknown to the surviving people here. She was shaking her head. Riley kept on nodding back at her. Nodding at her to do what she had to do.

The man looked around. Looked over at the cabin. "What? What you nodding at? Got someone watching me, loner? Fucking spirit animal or something?"

When he turned, Riley nodded at Jordanna again. Gestured at her to go ahead. To do it. Before they lost this place. Before they lost their lives.

"Anyway," the man said, scratching his stubbly chin. "I don't have time for this. You killed my people. Now I do what I have to do."

He lifted his gun. Pointed it at

Riley's throat.

“Any last words?”

Riley glanced over at Jordanna. Smiled, and nodded. Then he looked back at the man. “Watch your head.”

The man's eyes narrowed.

Riley held his breath as the silence grew stronger, building up until...

A crack of a blade against wood.

A snap of rope.

Then, above, Riley saw the wooden trap of sharp spears fall down from the trees.

The man looked up when he heard the branches snapping. Riley punched him in the stomach, then elbowed the gun from the hand of the woman behind him before using his final bullet to fire at her.

She fell to the ground, the bullet piercing her leg.

When Riley looked back around, he saw a look of delayed fear in the main man's eyes.

And then the trap of sharpened wooden spears crashed down onto his body, stabbing him all over.

Riley heard the bullets then. The gunfire from the cabin as Jordanna shot down a few more of the people. He knew she wouldn't like doing this. It wasn't her *thing*. But survival was his thing, so sometimes sacrifices had to be made.

He went to head back to the cabin when he felt bullets whooshing past him. Two of the armed people were running his way, heading towards him.

He reached down and grabbed the pistol from the woman he'd shot, who was bleeding out on the ground.

He thought about putting her out of her misery. But he figured he'd need the ammo.

He ran away. Ran into the trees. The branches lashed against his face. Above, he felt the darkness growing more intense.

"Come the fuck back here!" a voice shouted.

He could hear their footsteps approaching. As he ran further into the woods, he thought he saw people watching him. Creatures watching him. But no. He knew they weren't. He knew this place better than any other. He knew what he had to do.

He ran over to the manhole cover in front of the cave. Pulled the cover aside. Fitted the loose one on there.

And then he ran past it.

Perched in the grass.

Waited.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been waiting when he saw the two men appear. They looked around, panting. He saw the fear on their faces and wanted to put them out of their misery, but he had ammo to conserve.

"Where the fuck's he got to?" one of them asked.

Riley watched as the first man, who had dark, curly hair and a bit of extra weight, led the way towards the cave. He saw him squinting inside it. He could feel his heart racing from all the

way over here; sense the fear inside him.

He watched him walk closer towards that cave, his friend just behind.

Watched him push his face right up to the cave entrance.

And then the ground gave way beneath his feet.

He fell down, just the one leg. And then he let out a scream as a creature bit down onto his thigh, ripping the flesh away, then another creature joined in, and another, until there was barely anything left of the man's leg in the space of a few seconds.

His companion stood there, stunned. Stood there, tears rolling down his face.

Riley lifted the pistol.

Pointed at the man.

Fired.

But before the bullet could make contact, the man moved. He dropped everything he was carrying and he ran.

Riley gritted his teeth. He didn't want to let this man get away.

So as much as he wanted to conserve ammo, he fired another shot at the man.

He waited. Waited for the man to shout out. For him to cry with pain.

He heard a thump.

A thump, then a sudden stop in movement.

He waited a few seconds as the man in front of him was ripped apart by the creatures, then he went over there and

slammed a boot between his eyes. Hard.

Then he went off in pursuit of the man who'd got away.

He ran in his direction. Powered through the silent trees. He wasn't sure how long he'd been searching. He put his hands on his knees, gasped for air. He had to go back to the cabin. Had to make sure Jordanna was okay. The man could be a threat, but he'd heard him fall. He must've taken a bullet. He wouldn't live long—

He heard something.

A shuffling in the undergrowth behind him.

Riley crouched, lifted his knife in one hand and the gun in the other. He crept over through the thick bushes,

over towards where he'd heard the sound.

Then he heard it again.

Like someone shuffling their feet.

He pulled his knife back as he focused on the source of the sound. Got ready to swing it at whoever was there.

He held his breath as the shuffling continued. As he heard a... a voice. Only it sounded higher pitched. Less like a man and more like a...

He pulled the branches aside.

When he saw what was there—who was there—he didn't understand. He thought this must be some kind of nightmare—as if he'd woken up in the middle of some weird dream.

But then he saw the way she looked him in the eyes with her malnourished,

emaciated little face.

He saw that flicker of recognition.

“Riley?” she said.

Riley dropped his gun. Dropped his knife.

“Riley?”

It wasn't the man sitting there. It wasn't any of that armed group at all.

It was Chloë.

And she had a baby in her skinny arms...

No, wait.

In her skinny *arm*.

Kane ran away from the zombies as fast as he could.

Just a pity “as fast as he could” wasn’t fast enough in this damned world.

The night was rapidly approaching.

Another dark, horrible night that he had to look ahead to. The nights were the worst. When he slept, he had horrifying nightmares of zombies ripping the people he loved apart. When he was awake, he saw them everywhere, even when they weren't really there. He saw them closing in on him. Heard their throaty cries as their lust for blood grew ever stronger by the day. He smelled them, in that way that always made sick rise up into his mouth, ruining his taste buds.

Right now though, he had to run, because they were coming for him.

He wasn't sure how much further he could keep on running. The black shoes he'd salvaged a few weeks back were way too small for his feet, the

leather rubbing against them and blistering them with every movement. He couldn't stop shaking and shivering, and constant heaviness hung over him. He'd barely eaten in days, and the last time he'd eaten, it'd been nothing more than a cereal bar he'd found in an abandoned tent right in the middle of the woods. He'd savoured that cereal bar. Savoured every single bite.

He wished he had a cereal bar to savour right now.

Kane put his hands on his knees. A crippling stitch ran right through his body, more intense than any stitches he used to get in the old world. Not that he used to get many—he avoided running where he could. Although, his body wouldn't tell that tale. He'd always

been tall at six foot five right now, and incredibly skinny. People used to say he looked creepy, with his dark hair and gaunt cheekbones. At least that was one positive in this world. He wasn't the creepiest thing out there anymore.

He looked around at the woods. Listened to the total silence other than the trees creaking in the wind. He had no idea where he was. He was used to feeling totally lost since the world went to pot. In a way, everyone was. The era of the smartphone was over. Google Maps couldn't help anymore. Humanity had lost a limb, and those who were the most attached to that old world were the ones who suffered the strongest.

Kane was one of those people. A

bona fide thirty-nine-year-old nerd. Single, eternally. No friends. No pets. Nothing. Just himself. Himself, just trying to survive in a strange world, like he'd always been.

Himself and his thoughts.

His lovely thoughts.

He put his hands back on his knees and gathered his breath. He looked over his shoulder. He couldn't hear anything anymore. Couldn't hear anything coming for him from back there. Must've lost the infected. But you never truly lost them, not really. Even when you thought you'd lost them, there were always more of them, waiting to creep up on you, waiting to...

He heard a groan to his left. Heard

the heavy footsteps crunching through the fallen autumn leaves.

His body turned to mush.

He took a few deep breaths, braced himself to run again.

Then he felt two icy hands on his back and fell down to the ground.

He felt the cold drool fall onto his neck. Smelled the rot and heard the last of summer's flies buzzing around this messy concoction of rotting flesh.

"Help!" he shouted, as the zombie pinned him down. He saw her long, stringy dark hair, full of grease and grime. He saw the sores on her skin, then realised there were maggots chewing at them. He saw the rotting bite mark on her bare neck and heard the snapping of her jagged teeth.

“Help!”

He waited for the teeth to clamp around his throat.

Then he heard something. A thump, right above him. He felt cold blood cover him, the taste of sour rot fill his mouth.

He wiped his eyes. Pushed the zombie away, which had gone completely still.

There was a man standing above him. He had a pickaxe in his hand.

“You shouldn’t be out here,” he said.

Then, he turned around and walked off into the trees.

Kane gathered his composure. His heart started to race. This man was muscular and strong-looking. He

looked like he knew how to handle himself. He looked like the kind of guy who had a family, too. A family to look after.

He was perfect.

He was just what Kane needed.

“Wait!” Kane called, brushing some of the rotting flesh from his khaki bomber jacket.

The man kept on walking. Then when he realised Kane wasn't going to stop following him, he stood still. Turned around. “You should find someplace else to stay. Someplace safe.”

“I just wanted to thank you. For what you did back there. I—I'm so clumsy. You saved my life.”

The man narrowed his eyes. Grunted.

Then he turned and kept on walking.

Kane wasn't expecting the man to be quite so steely to break down. But it didn't matter. He liked a challenge. He was in the mood for one. It'd been a long time since he'd had a challenge like this. He was going to make the most of it.

"I don't have any place to go," Kane said, stumbling as he tried to keep up with the man's long strides. "My—my wife. She got taken back there. And I was in a bigger group, but they all got ripped apart. But the ones with the long, sharp teeth. You know. The demons."

The man stopped again. He stared at the grass below. "You can find

someplace safe. There are places over to the west. Log cabins, unoccupied. But you can't follow me."

"Please," Kane said. He reached out to touch the man's arm.

The man swung around, knocked Kane's hand back.

"You don't follow me. You don't follow my family."

Family. Kane felt tingling inside.

"I need food," Kane said. "And my—my feet. They're blistered. Blistered bad. I just need some place to stay."

"It's not happening—"

"Just for the night. Please. I'll be gone before sunrise. I promise."

The man narrowed his eyes. Kane felt him scanning him like he was looking for some kind of crack in his

story.

“Okay,” the man said. “But you’re gone by sunrise. Or I’ll get rid of you myself.”

Kane smiled. Laughed. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I’ll make it up to you somehow. I promise I will.”

The man nodded. “Your name?”

Kane smiled. “Anthony. Anthony Williamson.”

“Nice to meet you, Anthony. I’m Bret.”

Bret. Good name. Good, strong name. He was going to enjoy Bret.

He followed Bret back to his home. It was a little log cabin, much like those you find at Centre Parcs, places like that. He followed Bret inside, wiping his shoes on the mat as he entered.

When he walked in, he took a deep breath, and could smell the remnants of someone's perfume, past or present.

"My wife, Nora, she's through there. Grab some food, but not too much." Bret threw down some of his supplies, his weapons. He tossed his jacket aside, revealing his muscular frame under a skinny fit T-shirt. "You'll sleep on our bedroom floor, where we can see you."

"Thank you," Kane said, nodding. "Thank you so much."

Bret tilted his bald head to one side. He still didn't look totally impressed. "It's not fine 'til I've run it past Nora. But I have a feeling she'll open her arms to you, just like she does to everyone."

Pity. Kane preferred a challenge, like Bret. A toughie, who like a hard

nut, wasn't easy to crack.

But he'd take whatever he could get right now.

"Do you have a bathroom?" Kane asked.

Bret nodded. Pointed to the left. "Up the stairs, first door ahead of you."

Kane smiled. Nodded. "Thank you, Bret. Thank you so much."

Again, Bret did that thing with his face. Scanned Kane like he didn't know what to make of him.

And then he walked through into the dining area, where he went to chat with Nora.

Kane didn't go up to the bathroom. He just stood there in the hallway, taking in the smells and the sounds of Bret and Nora chatting together. Then

he walked over to the wooden cabinet to his right. He crouched down. Brushed the dust off the surface.

When he opened it, he found the long blade he'd stashed inside two nights ago, and he smiled.

See, he hadn't done any running away from zombies. He hadn't been with another group before now. He'd been watching Bret and Nora for days, and he could tell you right now that they weren't called Bret and Nora—they were called Peter and Mandy, so he'd make sure they paid for that little inconsistency in trust. That's why he'd told them he was called Anthony fucking Williamson. A lie told is a lie returned.

He pulled out the blade that he'd

managed to sneak into this house so easily and wiped it against his jacket. He felt a tingling sensation creep up his arms. He'd done this so many times already, used it on so many. But Peter and Mandy were his first in a long time. His first with any real worth, anyway.

He walked slowly over to the kitchen door. Stood outside it, smelled the food cooking inside there—some kind of stew. He listened to Peter and Mandy chatting to one another, and if he closed his eyes, he could convince himself that he was part of a family. That he was just one of them.

But that thought brought a bitter taste. Because he wasn't part of a family. He never had been part of a family.

And that's why families had to pay.

Peter opened the door and walked out into the hallway. He was still chatting to Mandy.

He stopped, suddenly. Looked wide-eyed at Kane. "Anthony? What —"

Kane pressed the blade right into Peter's stomach and he felt an instant release.

He dragged the blade across Peter's belly. Dragged it across so it opened him up. He heard Mandy scream. Watched her lunge for her pistol as her husband's innards dribbled out of the sack of his gut, as his crimson blood and wormlike intestines covered the perfect white tiles of the kitchen floor.

"I wouldn't bother shooting,

Mandy,” Kane said. Regardless, he heard the pistol clicking anyway. “I’ve taken care of that gun already. Should always check it’s loaded. Careless. Very careless.”

He saw the horror on Mandy’s face as she lowered the gun, then ran over to the back door.

He saw the life drifting from Peter’s face. The horror covering him as he tried to scoop his own innards back inside.

Kane smiled. “I’ll leave you to it, Peter,” he said, his body buzzing with electricity; with an unmatched adrenaline rush. “I have other things to deal with.”

He watched Mandy try to open the back door.

Watched her scrap and bang and try to get out, try to escape.

He stood there and listened to her screams, listened to Peter's pained groans, and he felt perfection. He felt alive.

"Now," he said, licking Peter's blood from the blade. He stepped closer to Mandy. "Where was I?"

Kane walked away from the log cabin with a spring in his step and a beaming smile.

The morning was beautiful and clear, more beautiful and clear than the mornings usually were. He knew why,

of course. Killing brought a kind of meditative clarity to his state of mind. A peacefulness to his thoughts that could only be described as euphoria. He knew this was what people must feel like when they'd just won football tournaments or had sex with the girl they'd been lusting over for years. Only to him, the feeling of adrenaline was much sweeter. Much, much sweeter.

The sun was bright, another fine autumn day in full tow. Peter's jacket, way too big for him, hung heavily on his shoulders. All around him, he saw trees, and in the distance, a long, winding road that he would follow as long as he could. As much as many people tried to stay protected, it was amazing how many people stuck to the

roads for their places of refuge. It was as if staying by the roads created an illusion of normality, somehow. Like it kept people at one with the world how it used to be.

Not that Kane was complaining. People sticking nearer to the roads meant people were easier to find.

Which meant people were easier to kill.

He licked his lips. He could taste the sweetness of blood against them, a taste that always ignited in his body an unmatched pleasure, as the birds sang all around him. His feet weren't blistered like he'd convinced himself they were. Well, a little rubbed, but nothing too intense. Plus, it wouldn't matter if he'd just taken a knife to the

gut. He was in euphoria state right now. Nothing could break through that.

He knew he'd have to make the taste of blood and the buzz of the kill last. After all, it'd be a long time before his next one. Sure, he could kill a few people on the road. Take them down and get a temporary release, much like masturbation. But the beauty was in the real deal—the sex. Watching someone. Watching them for days, for weeks. Getting so used to watching them that you feel a part of their family; that you feel *bonded* with them.

And then, making them trust you.

And then, killing them.

He kept on trotting down the road, whistling with delight. There was something bothering him, though, but

he was trying not to let it break his euphoria. He'd killed Peter. He'd had a lot of fun killing perfect fucking muscular fucking cunt fuck fuck Peter with his fuck cunt face.

But Mandy.

He'd gone to kill her. But as he'd looked down on her, begging away in that pitiful fucking way they always do, he'd felt something. A weird kind of attachment. He'd felt sorry for her. An emotion he wasn't sure he was comfortable with.

He'd stabbed Mandy in the hands. Got a bit of fun out of her. But then he'd let her crawl away from the log cabin. To probable death? Sure. But he hadn't killed her directly. For the first time in his career, he'd let a victim go.

He wasn't sure why. He wasn't sure what it was he'd felt when he'd held off killing Mandy when she'd looked up at him with her doe eyes.

But he'd let her go. Which meant he'd have to more than make up for it with the next people he came across.

After walking a few more miles down the road, he stopped. Looked out at the vast landscape ahead. The fields. The buildings. The roads. All of them so quiet. All of them standing there like they didn't house any life at all. But they did, of course. Life was all around him, even if it was in its dead form.

And where there was life, there was Kane to snuff it out.

He hadn't always been like this. Well. There was a spell between the age

of one and like, eight, where he felt like a pretty normal kid. He got beaten by his parents, sure. Got abused by his stepfather, right. Even got his head flushed down the toilet a bazillion times at school. Granted, the casual serial killer setup.

He'd never tortured any animals, though. God, who'd do such an awful thing? Animals were beautiful. They were innocent and wonderful, not like humans. He'd never wet the bed either. He'd shat it, just the once, but he didn't remember seeing anything about shitting the bed in the serial killer handbook, so he figured he was quite the anomaly.

Oh. Wait. He might've burned an ant with a magnifying glass once. But

come on. Hasn't everybody?

He took a sip from the flask of water he'd taken from Peter's house. Ahh, Peter and Mandy. He missed them already. Missed watching them sit together in the kitchen. Missed them clearing the area of zombies, looking like they enjoyed it. He missed the little moan she made when Peter made her climax, which, credit to the guy, was pretty regularly.

But now it was time to move on. Now, it was time to find someone else.

This time, he wasn't going to hold back.

He looked down at the village in the distance. Imagined all the life within. All the people he could kill. All the lives he could ruin. Usually, after a kill,

he was like a lion. He'd take some time off. Bask in the joy of his actions, his hunger satiated.

But this time, he wanted to build on what he'd achieved. Especially after letting Mandy go. He wanted to make up for that error. What even was it? Had he *bonded* with her? Had he felt *sorry* for her?

Or had he seen a flash of a life that he really, deep down, wanted to live, in Peter and Mandy?

He laughed. Shook his head. Then he put the cap back on the flask and stood up, whistling away.

He looked down at the village once more. Smiled.

And he walked down towards it, blade in hand.

He had work to do.

Spud never trusted anyone, not even before the monsters started walking the world and ripping people to pieces.

It was warm, way warmer than Spud's summer holidays used to be, even though it was later in the year

than that. He wished he'd got to enjoy proper warm summer holidays. The last few had been rubbish. He'd spent all his time inside playing FIFA, which sure, he probably would've done anyway even if it was sunny, but that wasn't the point. It was just typical that the sun was here now when there wasn't the world around to enjoy it. When all his friends were dead. When his home was gone.

The place he lived now with his mum and dad was nice, though. It was a little farm just outside a village in the Lake District. They were surrounded by hills on one side, with a long road leading down from it so they could always see what was coming. On the other side, there was Lake Windermere,

which Spud liked to swim in to cool off after a day. He didn't have a bad life considering the rest of the world was falling. He had it okay.

He just wanted something... more.

He listened to the sounds of the birds singing as he walked over from the farmhouse to the greenhouses. The farmhouse was more of an old barn that'd been turned into a proper luxury home. He liked it in there. There was an Xbox and lots of games, but obviously there wasn't any electricity, and they had to save the generator for more important stuff so he didn't get to play on it much. He didn't mind. He liked reading the manuals, really studying the covers and the cases. Sure, he used to get bored, but not so much now. He

was okay now. He was just happy to be here.

He walked past the outhouse, where he saw three people playing some kind of board game. Shelley, Bill, and Paulo. They all looked around at Spud and waved as he passed. He forced a smile, waved back, his heart rising to his throat. He tried to like them. Pretended to like them. But truth be told, he didn't. He just didn't.

“Beautiful day, Spud,” Paulo said.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

He carried on walking, eager to get away from them. The closer he got to the greenhouses, the more the beautiful smell of fresh tomatoes grew. He could almost taste the juiciness of them from right over here. He was going to miss

them when winter came around.

He pulled the soft tomatoes from the branches and threw them down into a basket, resisting the urge to eat one right away. He heard laughter from the three people he'd just walked past. The three people he didn't like. He *couldn't* like.

It wasn't that they'd done anything wrong. It's just Spud had always been funny about new people. He preferred it when it was just him, Mum, and Dad. Or just him. More people meant more mouths to feed. More mouths to feed meant more problems when there was nothing to feed them with.

He'd thought about ways of getting rid of them when he lay in his bed and closed his eyes at night. He'd thought

of strangling them in their sleep. Of poisoning their food. Of letting the monsters in to tear them to bits, then locking the room and throwing away the key.

But it was all just imagination. He was a kid. A kid who felt older than fourteen, sure. But a kid all the same.

He went to pluck the final tomato when he heard a scream from up the hill.

He looked around. Stepped out of the greenhouse, outside, so he could see where the scream came from.

There was a man running down the road. Behind him, five, ten monsters, a few of them the old, slow kind, but a couple of the faster ones with fleshy heads leading the way.

“Please!” the man shouted. Spud couldn’t see him properly from here, but he could tell he was quite tall, skinny, with dark curly hair like his. “Please! Someone help!”

Spud stood there, basket in hand. Part of him wanted to watch this man fall. He didn’t want to have to invite him into his home. He didn’t want any of that.

“Help! Someone help me!”

Spud stood still and watched as the monsters closed in on him. He found himself rooting for them. He didn’t want to have to give up more tomatoes. He didn’t want to have to open the gates for someone else. He didn’t want to—

A bang. Then another bang.

Spud saw the monsters behind the man fall to the road, one by one. Then, when there was just one left, Mum and Dad went running out up the road, after the man.

“Good people, your parents,” a voice to Spud’s left said. Shelley. “Always looking out for others.”

Spud tried to hold that smile as his parents helped take down the final monster. Then, they put the arms of the survivor over their shoulders, helped carry him down towards the farm, and Spud knew right then they were going to have another guest staying with them.

Solemnly, he joined the welcome crowd. Got to the gates just in time for his parents to bring the man inside.

The man *was* tall. Really tall. He was skinny, with bright blue eyes. He was wearing a black jacket that looked too big to fit him. He was limping along. Something didn't seem right about him. Something seemed... off.

"You were lucky back there," Dad said, in that way he always did when he'd just saved someone's life and wanted them to know about it. "Anyway, I'm Ralph. This is my wife, Kerry. This here's my son, Samuel. But everyone calls him Spud."

The man's eyes turned to Spud. He was covered in sweat, still entranced in the throes of fear.

But when he looked at Spud, when he looked into his eyes, Spud saw a spark of something. Something he

couldn't recognise, but at the same time, something that was so familiar, something he couldn't figure out, like a tough maths problem in class.

"Spud," the man said. "Spud."

Spud felt his cheeks heating up. "Yeah."

The man looked around at everyone. "Thank you, so much. I owe you. You saved my life. All of you."

"It was nothing," Mum said. "Really."

There was a long, drawn out silence between everyone.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Kane. And I'm very, very appreciative of your... hospitality."

Kane looked Spud in the eye again.

Something twinkled in his eyes. That half-unrecognisable, half-familiar *something*.

“I’ll do everything I can to make it up to you,” Kane said.

He looked into Spud’s eyes and, as he walked on to grab some food, some rest, whatever Mum and Dad offered him, Spud swore Kane smiled.

Cody rushed outside of Maryam's room when he heard the terrified scream outside their camp.

The night sky was dark and the air was cool. As Cody ran in the direction of the wall, he saw his breath frosting in

front of him. He climbed the ladder to the fort wall and saw more people doing the same, curious as to what was going on. It wasn't uncommon to hear the groans of the undead outside. But the screams of a man? Out here in the woods, they weren't as common these days.

He felt goosebumps creep up his arms as he climbed the ladder. He knew half of what he was going to be facing—he could smell the undead already, so he knew there must be plenty of them out there. But it was those screams of that man that left the bitterest taste in his mouth. He sounded so helpless. So defenceless.

He sounded like he needed help.

When he got to the top of the wall

and looked down into the glow of the moonlight, he saw a scene almost exactly like he'd imagined.

There were undead. Lots of undead. Fortunately, they all looked the slower, more decomposed kinds. Not the Ugliers, as his group had taken to calling them. And definitely not the Orions, thank the Lord, because there were still a few stray ones out in the wild, living their morbid lives.

But all of the undead were surrounding a rock formation in the middle of the grass. Two rocks, stacked up against one another, just the way they'd found them when they first got to this place.

Except there was something in the middle of those two rocks. *Someone* in

the middle.

The screaming man.

And the undead were getting closer and closer to squeezing their way between those rocks, tearing the man apart.

Cody turned back to the ladder.

“We have to go out there.”

A hand grabbed his arm. Gav. “No.”

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘no’?”

We can’t just leave that guy to die out there.”

“You know what the rules are around here.”

“Fuck the rules.”

“Those rules are in place for a reason, Cody. Don’t fucking mess with them, or you mess with every single person here.”

Cody saw Gav's point, as the man kept on screaming. They didn't like letting new people in because new people should always be viewed as a risk, viewed with suspicion. He'd seen enough reasons to suspect people. Just earlier today, a little boy had tried to kill him to feed to his zombie-baby friends.

But he couldn't accept that everyone was bad. That everyone had some kind of ulterior motive. It couldn't be true. It couldn't be the way the world worked.

"Then banish me if you have to," Cody said, pushing past Gav. "I'm going out there myself."

"Cody, wait!"

Cody rushed down the ladder. He pushed open the gate and forced his

way outside, grabbing a pistol and a pickaxe from one of the gawping younger wall guards just before he left. He slammed the gates shut, then he walked in the direction of the undead, gun in one hand, pickaxe in the other.

He felt vulnerable out here. He felt alone. He felt like he might fall at any time.

But he wasn't giving up on this man. He wasn't leaving him to die. He wasn't leaving anyone else to die.

He slammed the pickaxe into the skull of the closest undead to him. It only took that one hit for the rest of the undead to notice him; to turn around and move on to him, easier, more open prey.

"Come on then." He swung the

pickaxe into the face of the next undead. Then into the face of the next, taking them on one by one, drawing them away from that rock.

The more undead he took down, the more confident he grew that he could help this man. That whoever he was, he didn't have to die here. That life didn't have to end.

And then he felt a hand grab his arm—the one holding the pickaxe—and saw a mouth closing in.

He braced himself. Braced himself for the teeth to pierce his flesh. At least he'd go down fighting. At least he'd go down doing what he had to do—

A blast.

A splatter of blood all over his arm.

The hand loosened, the mouth

closed, and the undead fell to the ground.

“That’s your last fucking chance, Cody,” Gav shouted, pointing a gun at the fallen undead beside Cody. “You come back here right now. Don’t make me do this.”

Cody looked up at Gav. He’d saved his life. He owed him for that.

But he had other things on his mind right now.

He took down a few more undead. Cracked skulls, split temples, and then he reached the rock formation where the man was stuck.

“Please,” the man muttered. “Please help. Please.”

Cody lowered his pickaxe. Held out his hand as Gav and the others on the

wall shouted at him to get back there. "It's okay now. You're safe. I've got you."

"I don't wanna come out. I don't— Please. Please."

Cody extended his hand even further. "I need you to give me your hand. I need you to trust me. Please."

The man hesitated. Whimpered some more.

Then he took Cody's hand.

Cody eased the man out from between the rock formation. He felt proud of himself. Like a light had sparked in his life. He turned back to the wall and saw Gav was pointing his rifle right at the man's chest.

"Don't do this," Gav shouted. "You know what the rules are."

“I told you what I think of the shitting r...”

Cody didn't finish. All around him, in the trees, he heard footsteps. Groans. Cries. He heard a slight humming noise. Smelled sweetness.

His stomach turned.

The Ugliers.

The Ugliers were coming.

He ran towards the wall, towards the gate, the man's hand in his.

“Let us in!”

Gav held his rifle. The rest of the wall guards held their rifles, focused down on Cody and the man he'd rescued as those Ugliers got closer and closer.

Cody banged on the gate, which could only be opened from inside. “Let

us in! Let us the fuck in!”

It was then that Cody saw them. Saw them in the corner of his eyes. Their pulpy heads. Teeth stretching right down their necks. Inhuman, almost alien.

The Ugliers.

They took a moment. Studied their prey.

Then they hurtled in Cody and the man's direction.

Cody kept on banging at the gate. The man whimpered, cried.

“Your name,” Cody said.

“What?”

“Your name. What's your fucking name?”

“Steve,” the man said. “I'm—I'm Steve. Please. I need—”

“Steve. I’m Cody. And you’re going to just have to trust me here, okay?”

Steve didn’t look too thrilled with the idea. But he stayed put. Held his ground.

Cody looked up at Gav. The man who’d saved his life just moments ago was leaving him to die all for some bullshit rules.

“Please, Gav,” Cody said.

Gav’s focus didn’t waver. His attention didn’t waver.

“Open this—”

The gate opened up.

Cody and Steve fell through it.

They rushed inside. The Ugliers weren’t far behind, nipping at their heels.

Then someone pulled the gate shut

—

But an Ugly stuffed its face through the gap, snarled.

“Fuck!” Aiden, the guy at the gate, cried. He fell back. The gate started opening up again. The Ugliers were pushing through.

Cody ran over to it. Swung his pickaxe at the Ugly’s head. Kept on going until the yellowy mass of tumour-like flesh burst.

Then he kicked the body out of the gate before its arms and legs could sprout back to life.

He stepped back. Stepped back as gunfire from the walls and the screams of the Ugliers sparked the night to life. When he turned, he saw Maryam standing there. So she’d given the order

to let them in. She'd given the damned order.

"I couldn't let him die."

Maryam's face didn't even twitch on either side.

Two guards ran over to Steve. They kicked the back of his legs, knocked him to the ground.

"Who are you? What the fuck do you want?"

"Wait, wait," Cody said, raising his hands. "He's called Steve."

"What the fuck do you want?" the guards barked.

"Please," Steve said. There was fear in his voice, but there was calmness to it now, too. Like he was at ease in this kind of situation. Like he'd been in situations like this before.

He looked up. Looked at Maryam, at the guards around him, blood dribbling down his face from his nostrils.

“Tell us who you are,” Gav shouted, joining the inquisition. “Tell us what you want.”

Steve lifted his shaking hands. He looked at Cody and he smiled. “Friends, I’m Steve. And I bring good news. Very good news.”

A few mumbles. A few whispers of confusion. This guy seemed too calm. Too happy.

“What news?” Maryam asked, breaking her silence.

Steve looked right across the dirty ground at her. Looked right into her eyes, that smile still on his face. “News

of an extraction point. News of a way out of Britain and into the wider world. News of a way out of hell and into a new world. Just fifty miles from here.”

Kane tucked into his roast pigeon and imagined the taste of human blood dripping down into his throat.

The day had gone fast since he'd found his way to this farm. The people here—Ralph, Kerry, and the extended

family they surrounded themselves with—seemed nice and welcoming. Exactly what he wanted.

Outside, Kane heard the wind rattling against the window, as what sounded like the first storm of the autumn brewed up. He looked around the dinner table. Looked at Ralph, tucking into his pigeon, which he boasted of catching as if it was some fucking major life achievement. He looked at Kerry too, cutting smaller portions of it, then at Paulo, Shelley, Bill. All of them looked happy. All of them chatted like comfortable people chatted in the old world. Not *his* old world, but the old world he knew of.

The air was rich with the smell of the cooked bird, but Kane smelled

something else. He smelled imminent death. He tasted the metallic rust of blood, which would soon follow. It was all going to be so easy. It was all going so well.

But there was a spanner in the works, once again.

The spanner came in the form of Spud, Ralph and Kerry's son. He looked at Kane in a strange way, with his narrow eyes, his chubby face. There was a look as if Spud knew what Kane was. As if he knew what Kane was capable of and he was curious.

Well, "Spud," you horrible named little shit. You're gonna find out what old Kane's capable of real soon.

But the way he scowled at him, knowing and inquisitive, across the

table. Kane couldn't help but admire it, in a way.

"So where were you before this place, Kane?" Paulo asked.

Kane took a sip of his wine and smiled. "I was just west of here. The log cabins over at Centre Parcs."

"Damn," Shelley said. "That place is still standing?"

"Just about," Kane said.

"And you've been... alone all this time?"

"I've been with groups along the way. But you know how it is. Groups don't last. Not in this world."

Bill coughed, out of necessity or craving for attention, Kane wasn't sure. "Speak for yourself. We've been doing pretty well."

Good for you, arrogant cunt. Good for fucking you. Let's see how pretty well you're doing when I shove a skewer up your tight little ass.

"You've been fortunate, clearly," Kane said, raising his glass and looking at each and every one of the diners. The wind howled on outside. "Fortunate to be surrounded by a family like this."

"I'll drink to that," Paulo said.

Everyone else followed.

Everyone except Spud, who kept on scowling across the table at Kane.

Kane reached for his pocket. He had a smaller knife in there. He thought about leaning to his left right now and slitting Bill's throat. Watching his blood spray across the table, snapping this perfect little family out of their moment

of happiness; their moment of invincibility.

But he felt like he needed Spud on board before he did anything. He wanted them all to believe in him. To *trust* him.

Then, he'd tear them apart, one by one, the delicious one.

"So, Spud. What do you get up to on a farm like this? Any girls you like?"

A few of the diners laughed. Paulo nudged Spud in his side as Shelley ruffled his hair.

"He's quiet at first," Kerry said. "But you'll get on a blast once you get to know one another, I'm sure."

"Oh, I'm sure we will," Kane said, rubbing his tongue against the red wine as it crystallised on his teeth.

Spud kept on looking at him, scowling at him, like a dog staring and growling at someone they instinctively knew wasn't an animal person.

"Anyway," Kane said, flicking the knife back into his pocket. "If you'll excuse me a moment, I need the bathroom."

"You know where it is?" Ralph asked.

"I'll find my way."

Kane walked out of the dining room, across the hallway, and locked himself in the bathroom. He stood in front of the mirror. Looked into his eyes. That little scar on his chin. The specks of stubble. He didn't recognise himself. He'd not recognised himself for years. That man in the mirror was

just an illusion. A face. The real Kane?  
The real Kane was underneath.

Underneath the toilet tank cover.

He opened the cover and smiled when he saw his weapons were still in there.

His machete. His prized killing device.

And a pistol with just six bullets. One he'd taken from Peter and Mandy's place. Backup, in case he needed it. Whatever he used, he was going to have some fun. A lot of fun.

He reached in. Lifted his weapons out. Dumb bastards hadn't even checked him on arrival. They were so understanding. So trusting.

It was going to be the death of them.  
Kane turned around and walked out

of the bathroom door, braced himself to go back into that dining room, to slam the machete across Shelley's perfect, soft neck.

But when he stepped out, he saw Spud standing in the hallway.

Kane moved the weapons behind his back. Tucked them under his jacket. "Spud. You gave me quite a fright."

"Need the bathroom," Spud said.

Spud walked towards Kane, who had to shuffle to make sure the weapons were out of sight. "See you back in there," he said.

He swore Spud had seen the weapons. He swore he'd looked right at them.

Kane headed back into the dining room. He walked past Paulo, Bill,

Shelley, Kerry, and Ralph, walked past all of them and examined their heads like they were eggs, debating which shell to crack first.

And then he sat down. He sat down and was met with a cold bowl of rice pudding before him.

“Hey, it’s not the Ritz,” Ralph said, grinning. “But it’s something, right?”

“The small pleasures in life,” Kane said.

Kane waited for Spud to return to the dining room, which he did, without issue. He waited for Spud to take his seat. For Ralph to lift his spoon and go to tuck into his rice pudding.

“I’d like to raise a toast if you don’t mind,” Kane said.

Ralph stopped as if he was

disappointed about Kane's rice pudding interruption.

Kane stood. "A toast. To all of you. To all of *us*."

Ralph nodded. Paulo smiled. Both reached for their wines, and the rest of the table followed. Spud was last to stand, holding on to his Coca-Cola, still glaring at Kane.

"A thank you. A sincere thank you for your hospitality. All of you."

"Amen!" Paulo shouted.

Kane stood there. Stood and watched as the guests chinked their glasses against one another.

He looked to his left and saw Ralph smiling.

"Why aren't you joining in our toast, huh?" he asked.

Kane smiled. "Because my hands are full as it is."

He saw a momentary flicker of concern on Ralph's face.

But it was already too late.

He pulled the machete out of his coat and slammed it into Ralph's skull.

He heard the crack. The split of bone. He watched dark blood trickle at first, then flood out, the light drifting from Ralph's eyes as he stumbled from left to right.

He dropped his red wine to the floor.

And then he fell and cracked his split head on the edge of the table.

It was only then that Kerry saw what was happening. That she registered what'd just happened to her

husband.

She screamed.

Kane pulled out the pistol and fired two shots into her neck. Then he leaned across the table, pulled Paulo towards him, hacked and hacked away at the top of his spine until his head barely hung on by a thread.

He tasted it in the air. Tasted the freshness of a kill as he moved on to Shelley, as he moved on to Bill. He smelled the freshness of death and he felt whole. Because this was what he enjoyed. This was who he was. And the new world? It let him be who he wanted to be. It let him dance to his own beautiful, blood-soaked tune.

Thirty seconds later, the room was silent.

Kane stood there. Stood and looked at the bodies. He saw the cream carpet was stained with red wine and blood. He saw the twitching fingers of the dead. If he listened close enough, he could hear Kerry struggling to breathe as she battled the bullets in her neck.

“It’ll be over soon, sweet. You just keep as cool as you can.”

Kane whistled. He whistled as the euphoria of the kill infected his body. As the taste of pigeon mixed with the taste of blood. As he crunched over fallen wine glasses, brushed past wasted food.

He stopped when he reached Spud.

Spud was lying on the floor, completely still. His white and blue striped polo shirt was completely

covered in blood. He was still. His eyes were closed.

Kane reached down to his side. Felt Spud's warmth rising up into the air.

"See, I know you aren't dead, Spud. I know you aren't dead because I didn't shoot you. I didn't hit you. So we can both stop pretending now, okay?"

The longer the seconds drew on, the more Spud's fakery started to reveal itself. Kane heard him gasping for breath. Saw tears rolling from his eyes. He heard his teeth clicking together as he lay there, shaking.

Kane rolled Spud onto his back, a move that made Spud's eyes bolt open right away.

He wasn't looking at Kane with the fear that the usual victims did. He

wasn't even looking at him with hate.

He was looking at him like he'd looked at him all along.

Like he knew exactly what he was.

Kane held out a hand. "Come on. Up you get. We've got other plans for you. There's a whole world out there waiting for you to explore."

Spud and Kane held eye contact. There was no movement, not for a while.

Then Spud finally reached up and took Kane's hand.

"Good boy," Kane said, wiping some of the blood from Spud's face as he walked the shocked boy out of the dining room, outside the door of the farm and into the storm outside. "No, no. Don't look back. The past is done.

No good moping about it. No good worrying about how it was, what might be. Just think about the now. Think about all the freedom you have. The world outside this door is yours. Are you ready?"

Spud looked back at the farm. He looked back, tears and blood on his shocked face.

Then he looked up at Kane.

"Good," Kane said, tightening his grip around Spud's hand. "Because there's a lot of learning for you to do."

The pair of them walked away from Spud's farm, both coated in blood, into the total darkness.

For the first time in his life, Kane felt a bond.

He felt like he had a friend.

A friend that was going to be like him.

*Just* like him.

Kane licked the tasty blood from his lips and whistled as he walked hand-in-hand into the mouth of the storm.

He was going to have so much fun with this one.

## TO BE CONTINUED

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