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Autumn: Aftermath

David Moody

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

Dedicated to The Survivors

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Acknowledgments

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But there are plenty more people I've yet to acknowledge. There are far too many of you to list here individually, and I'm sure to miss someone out and cause offence if I try. So this impersonal blanket "thank you" will have to do.

As I write it's almost ten years to the week since the first *Autumn* novel appeared online, and this book marks the very end of the series. My sincere and heartfelt thanks to everyone who has helped me in any way, shape, or form over the last decade. From those who've read the books and provided feedback, to the thousands who downloaded the first book back in the day, to those who've helped promote each new novel along the way, I appreciate your support more than you can imagine. Thank you.

And as I first said back in 2001, please keep spreading the infection!

PART I

Twenty-Six Days Since Infection

Jessica Lindt died three days short of her thirty-second birthday. That was almost a month ago. Since then she'd spent every second of every day wandering aimlessly, often drifting in herds with other corpses, occasionally gravitating toward the few remaining signs of life in this otherwise dead void of a world. Jessica had no idea who or what she was any longer: she simply existed. She responded to the infrequent movement and noise around her, but didn't know why or how. And yet, somehow, she occasionally *remembered*. In her dull, decaying brain, she sometimes saw things. They were just fleeting recollections, clung on to for the briefest of moments at a time, gone before she'd even realized they were there. Split-second memories of who she used to be.

Her body, of course, had changed beyond all recognition, bulging in places where gravity had dragged her putrefying innards down, becoming brittle and dry elsewhere. Still dressed in what was left of the Lycra running gear she'd died wearing, her feet were badly swollen and her lumpy, bruised ankles were now almost phantime in appearance. Her distended gut sagged, inflated by the gas produced by decay and a substantial insect infestation. Her mottled skin had split several inches below her drooping right breast, allowing all manner of semi-coagulated yellow and brown gunk to escape.

Jessica's unblinking eyes were dry and unfocused, but they saw enough. The movement of the lone survivor standing in the house up ahead of her was sufficient to attract her limited attention. Suddenly moving with more speed and something almost beginning to resemble a purpose, she lumbered toward the small, terrace cottage, then smacked into the window with force and collapsed backward, ending up on her backside in the gutter. She'd been down less than a couple of seconds before others attacked her, attracted by the noise and assuming she was somehow different to them. They tore what remained of Jessica Lindt apart, and soon all that was left of her was an imprint on the glass, a few lumps of greasy flesh and a wide puddle of gore which the others clumsily staggered through.

* * *

The survivor stood on the other side of the window and waited for the brief burst of chaos outside to die down again. His name was Alan Jackson, and his faith in human nature was all but exhausted—not that there were any more than a handful of other humans left alive. He'd been standing in the shadow-filled living room of this otherwise empty house for what felt like hours, staring out at the sprawling crowd of several thousand corpses which stretched out in front of him forever, wondering how the hell he was going to get through them and out the other side. He could see his intended destination in the far distance, his view of the ancient castle distorted by the tens of thousands of swarming flies which buzzed through the air above innumerable rotting heads like a heat haze. He hoped to God—not that he'd believed in God for as long as he could remember, certainly not since the beginning of September—that this was going to be worth the risk.

In the three and a half weeks since the population of the country—most likely the entire planet—had been slashed to less than one percent of its original level, Jackson had thought he'd seen it all. From the moment the rest of the world had simply dropped dead all around him, right up to now, his life had been a ceaseless tumult of death and decay. It was everywhere. It surrounded him constantly whatever he did and whichever way he turned. It was inescapable. And he was fucking sick of it.

Another one of the bodies staggered past the window, a twitching, dried-up stump where its right arm used to be. Christ, how he hated these damn things. He'd watched them change virtually day by

day; gradually regaining a degree of self-control and transforming from lethargic hulks of impossible animated flesh and bone to the vicious creatures they had become. He didn't dare think about the future, because he knew that if the pattern continued—and he'd no reason to think it wouldn't—they'd be even more dangerous tomorrow. He tried to remain focused on the fact that if they continued to deteriorate as they had been, in another few months they'd have probably rotted down to nothing. Jackson was no fool. He knew things would undoubtedly get much worse before they got any better.

Standing alone in this little house, a fragile oasis of normality buried deep in the midst of the madness, it occurred to Jackson that even though he'd outlasted just about everyone else, his life was still little more than a fleeting moment in the overall scheme of things. Mankind had crashed and burned in a day, and he probably wouldn't last that much longer, and yet it would take decades, maybe even hundreds of years before all trace of the human race would be gone forever. His skin and bones would be dust blown on the wind long before the streets he'd walked along to get here today were fully reclaimed by nature.

It made him feel so fucking insignificant.

All the effort he'd put into his life before the apocalypse had counted for nothing. And the worst part? It wouldn't have mattered a damn if he'd tried ten times as hard or if he'd not bothered at all. Everything that had happened was completely out of his control. *A man makes his own chance.* Jackson's old dad used to say when things weren't going well.

Yeah, right. Thanks a lot, Dad. No amount of handed-down wisdom and bullshit is going to help me get past those bodies out there today.

Jackson was dawdling, and it wasn't like him. His reluctance to move only served to increase his unease. It was because the way ahead was no longer clear. Up until recently he'd had a definite plan to keep walking north until he reached those parts of the country where there had been fewer people originally, and where the effects of the disaster might not have been so severe. When it became apparent that things were far worse than he'd thought and the true scale of the chaos had been revealed, he'd been forced to reassess his priorities. His original aim had been too ambitious, and he'd decided instead just to head for the nearest stretch of coastline. Having the ocean on one side would make his position easier to defend, he thought, and also, when he looked out to sea it would be easier to believe that the rest of the world wasn't such a ruin.

Three days ago, Jackson had had another change of heart.

It began after a chance encounter with another survivor. The kid had been the first person he'd found alive in several days. He was an archetypal angry teen, all long hair, leather and denim, piercings and a patchwork of bad tattoos he'd inevitably end up regretting if he lived long enough. Adrenaline, fear and untold levels of pent-up sexual frustration surged through the kid's veins, and a cocktail of drink and drugs had clearly added to his volatility. Jackson had found him in the gymnasium of what he presumed was the school the kid had previously attended, rounding up corpses in an improvised corral. The sick fucker clearly had some deep-rooted issues, and had been trying to settle a vendetta or ten with some old and very dead friends. He'd been flagellating the bodies he'd captured, mutilating them beyond recognition as if he had a serious point to make. Sick bastard.

After a halfhearted attempt to try and deal with him, Jackson had left the kid to fester, deciding there was nothing to be gained from trying to reason with the clearly unreasonable, and knowing that neither of them would gain anything from being with the other. To him, the unpredictable kid presented an unnecessary risk, and to the kid, Jackson was just another authority figure to despise and kick back against. As he'd walked away from the school, Jackson had wondered if useless, broken people like the kid were all that was left. That night, the enormity of what had happened to the rest of the world weighed heavier on his shoulders than ever before, heavier even than the backpack full of survival equipment he'd been lugging around since the first day.

The encounter with the kid had made him stop and think, and after that he'd begun to realize the futility of walking endlessly. With the dead becoming increasingly animated, just being out in the open felt like it was becoming more dangerous by the hour, and Jackson knew it was time now to stop and think again. It wasn't as if he had anyone else to worry about but himself. There had been someone who'd mattered once, but she was long gone and best forgotten. He didn't want anyone else now, didn't need them in the same way they needed him. He'd come across several groups of survivors before the kid in the gym, and they'd all, without exception, asked *him* to stay with *them*. *We should stick together*, they'd inevitably say to him, *we could do with having someone like you around*. And that was the problem: they needed him, never the other way around. He'd realized he didn't actually need anyone. More to the point, having other people around seemed to actually make things *more* dangerous. All it needed was for one person to panic and make a mistake, and untold numbers of dead bodies would be swarming around them in seconds.

Another surge of movement outside the unimposing little house made Jackson focus again. Up ahead on the other side of the road, one corpse had attempted to fight its way deeper into the vast crowd. All around it, others reacted to the unexpected movement. They tore into each other, vicious fingers stripping decaying flesh from bone, creating a sudden firestorm of sickening violence. And as the first few reacted and began to fight, so did more and more of them until huge numbers of the damned things were scrapping vehemently over nothing. As the bizarre swell of activity gradually petered out, Jackson wondered whether he'd actually been running away from the rest of the world, or at the very least trying to hide from it.

Yesterday morning he'd stopped at a prison. His first instinct had been to avoid it, but common sense said he should stop and investigate. *You have to think about things differently these days*, he told himself as he cut his way in through a no-longer-electrified chain-link fence. *After all, places like this were designed to keep people away from each other, and that's what I want*.

The prison proved to be a damn good place to shelter for a while. The kitchens were well stocked to cope with feeding hundreds of hungry inmates, and the vast majority of the dead prison population remained conveniently incarcerated in their cells. Jackson spent a couple of hours walking along numerous empty landings which all looked the same, swigging from a bottle of wine as lifeless prisoners threw themselves against the bars on either side of him, straining their arms to try and reach him. It had been like visiting a zoo and intentionally goading the animals.

He broke out onto a section of flat roof where he sat cross-legged and watched the sun sink. Another day ended. Unperturbed by the cold, he lay back and looked up into a dark sky filled with more stars than he could ever remember seeing before, their individual brightness intensified by the lack of any ambient light down at ground level. And yet again, his personal insignificance became painfully apparent. He felt like a piece of gum that had been spat out on a pavement, like the last chunk of meat and dribble of jelly in a discarded tin of dog food. He might have mattered once, but not anymore.

Half drunk and completely depressed, Jackson had slept intermittently. It was when the sun had finally started to rise on yet another day, that he looked up and saw the castle.

* * *

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but Cheetham Castle (as it had been signposted for miles around) was surrounded by vast numbers of the dead, many more than he'd expected to find. He could see the gray stone tower of the castle gatehouse through the living room window, towering proudly above the heads of the writhing crowd, still visible in spite of the smog-like swarms of insects. He had checked out the full scale of the crowd from an upstairs window earlier, and the size of the humongous

gathering both terrified and intrigued him. Whenever the dead amassed anywhere in these kinds of numbers, he'd long since discovered, there was *always* a reason. He hadn't wasted much time trying to work out what that reason was, primarily because it was impossible to do anything but guess from a distance, and also because the castle looked like an ideal place to spend the next few days while he worked out what the hell it was he was going to do with what was left of his life.

From upstairs he'd seen that the castle was between half a mile and a mile away from this row of houses. Between here and there was a road, a gravel car park—and several acres of grassland which contained several thousand corpses. Interestingly, they had all stopped short of the building's walls. Prevented from getting any closer, he presumed, by the steady slope of the large hill upon which the castle had been built. It was simply too steep for their weak legs to climb.

The castle walls themselves appeared relatively strong from a distance. It was difficult to gauge their height from the house, but they looked to be reassuringly unscalable. For a while, though Jackson had given serious consideration to trying to improvise a grappling hook and rope so he could drag himself up and over like some bizarre Robin Hood pastiche. As it was, his best option would clearly be the gatehouse, over to the far right of the castle from where he was currently standing. Judging from the numerous signposts he'd seen on his way here, this place had probably been a reasonably popular tourist attraction up until a month ago. The castle owners would surely have done everything in their power to make it easy for the public to get inside and part with their hard-earned cash. At the very least, getting to the castle would afford him a little much-needed breathing space before moving on again. The steep climb gave him an obvious advantage over the dead, and the view from the top of the rise would no doubt be spectacular.

Jackson packed up his few belongings, finished eating the last of a packet of cereal bars he found in the kitchen, and readied himself to fight.

* * *

He stepped out into the open and pressed himself back against the wall of the cottage. The cool air outside stank, and he was acutely aware that every move he made seemed disproportionately loud. Every footstep thundered, and his every breath seemed to echo endlessly. He remained frozen to the spot as he assessed his limited options, moving only his eyes as he scanned the wall of dead flesh up ahead of him, virtually all of the corpses now standing with their backs to him. It made sense (as much as any of this made sense) to try and work his way around closer to the gatehouse and look for a place where the crowds were thinner. Whether he'd find such a place or not was academic; whatever he did and wherever he did it, his success today boiled down to being able to charge his way through the decay and come out the other side.

He began to shuffle slowly along the lane, mimicking the slothful movements of the dead as he tried to blend in with those which, even now, were still dragging themselves closer to the castle and joining the back of the pack. One of them sprung out at him from a hitherto unseen gap between two buildings. Whether it was an intentional attack or an unfortunate coincidence, it didn't matter. It took him by surprise and he swung it around and slammed it against the wall he'd been following, then clubbed its brains out with a short length of heavy metal tubing he'd taken to carrying with him as a bludgeon. He dropped what was left of the bloody corpse in the gutter, then looked up as another one began moving toward him, alerted by the noise of his violent attack. This creature had a badly damaged right leg, and its unsteady gait made its approach appear more aggressive than it actually was. Jackson angrily shoved it away—reacting before he'd fully thought things through—and clattered back against a wheelie bin which thudded into several others. The noise echoed through the air.

Shit.

~~He knew before he looked around again that he was in trouble. Many of them had noticed him now, and their reactions had, by turn, attracted even more. He might as well have fired a starting pistol into the air because, up ahead and behind and all around him, huge numbers of the dead were reacting to his presence. They began to peel away from the edge of the immense crowd like a layer of dead skin, and he knew he had to move fast. Fortunately, several of the pitiful monsters lost their footing in the confusion and were trampled by their desperate brethren. He glanced up at the castle in the distance, visible intermittently through the crisscrossing chaos. Could he still make it? It had been a long while since he'd taken a chance like this. Christ, he hoped so.~~

Jackson swung his heavy rucksack off his shoulders, using it to smack the closest few corpses out of the way as he did so. He ran, kicking out as a foul, bald-headed creature with a hole eaten through its face where its nose used to be lifted its arm and lashed at him. He jumped up onto the bonnet of a Vauxhall Astra—his sudden change of direction causing temporary mass confusion—then climbed up onto its roof. He stashed his metal pipe, then opened one of the backpack's side pockets and dug deep inside, finding what he needed almost immediately. As more of the dead tried to grab at him with hands drawn into spiteful claws by decay, he took out a packet of fireworks wrapped in a clear plastic bag. Ignoring the creatures as best he could, and occasionally stamping on fingers which got too close, he unwrapped a rocket and fumbled in his trouser pocket for his lighter. Distracted trying to light the blue touch paper, he didn't notice when one of the bodies managed somehow to grab ahold of the bottom of his right trouser leg. The crowd around the car surged unexpectedly as more of the dead arrived, and the body holding onto Jackson was pushed back. When it appeared to tug at him, he tried to pull away and overcompensated. The heel of his boot slipped down onto the curved surface of the windscreen and he lost his balance, crashing down onto his backside and leaving a deep dent in the hood. He screamed out in pain—the noise attracted another sudden surge of dead flesh—and almost dropped the rocket he was trying to light. He spat in the face of another wretched carcase (because he didn't have hands free to do anything else) then scrambled up onto the roof, straightening his legs and sliding his backside up the glass. The touch paper caught suddenly. Jackson ignored the intense heat and the shower of sparks spitting out over his hand, and aimed the rocket down into the center of the pocket of seething corpses a safe distance away. The firework whooshed away before coming to a sudden stop, embedded in the chest of a dead car mechanic who reeled back on its heels and looked down at the jet of flames sticking out of its belly—just before the rocket exploded.

The noise and flames had exactly the effect Jackson had hoped. Almost immediately the focus of attention shifted away from him and toward the mechanic, who was still staggering around despite the fact he was burning up. Jackson lit a second rocket and aimed it up into the air. The piercing scream let out as it raced up toward the gray clouds was enough to distract an enormous number of corpses, and as they lifted their tired heads skyward he jumped down from the car and ran for all he was worth. He crossed the road and the gravel car park, then tripped over what was left of a barbed-wire fence which lay flat on the ground, already trampled down by the crowds. He lit a third rocket as he picked himself up, and shoved it into the gut of something which looked like the kind of kid he'd have done his level best to avoid. It looked down at itself, bewildered, jets of blue and green flame suddenly spitting out through various holes in its chest. Stupid thing still had a baseball cap on, glued to its head by a month's worth of dry decay. And it was the wrong way around, peak at the back. Jackson bloodied his hands when they wore their caps back-to-front like that.

As the corpse exploded behind him, he dropped his shoulder and charged deeper into the heaving throng. Many of them were now trying to move away from the castle, heading back in his direction to get closer to the flames. He felt like a derailed bullet train, smashing bodies away on either side, not entirely sure where the hell he was going or where he was going to stop. He just kept moving, knowing

that every step took him closer to the castle in the distance.

~~Deeper into the dead hordes now, and here they had no idea he was close until he made contact.~~ Some were still trying to fight their way toward the fireworks, but most were looking the other way, facing the castle. He simply pushed them aside and clambered over them when they fell. And then, unexpectedly, the ground dropped away in front of him. Within a few steps he found himself suddenly having to wade through a mass of tangled, fallen bodies rather than running between and around those still standing. A few steps more and he was knee deep in churned remains. He looked back and saw that he'd stumbled into a wide ditch—the overgrown remnants of an ancient moat, perhaps. It was filled with bodies, trodden down and compacted into a repugnant gloop beneath his boots. Despite being trapped, some of them tried to keep moving, and Jackson ducked as a dripping, virtual fleshless hand swung past his face, sharp, bony fingertips just missing the end of his nose by a few millimetres. He was struggling to keep moving, the decay sucking him down, and then the reason for its depth became clear. The deep furrow here had acted like a valve: the dead had been able to get in as easy enough, but none of them could get out again.

Jackson kept moving and eventually found himself on level ground again. The corpses on the other side of the ditch were fewer in number. Despite being soaked through with gore and desperately needing to stop and catch his breath, he kept on running, sidestepping one cadaver which came at him, then handing off the next as if he was a rugby player weaving around the opposition to score a try between the posts. And then he realized he was finally beginning to climb, and he looked ahead and saw the castle looming, the imposing wall of old stone stretching up toward the rapidly darkening sky. His thighs burned with the effort but he kept on pushing until he passed the last of the bodies, then slowed as the ground became steeper and exhaustion got the better of him. He moved at a walking pace now, struggling to keep climbing. He looked back over his shoulder at the crowds gathered at the bottom of the incline and on the other side of the trench, waiting impatiently to pounce should he slip and fall.

Once he'd reached the castle walls, Jackson followed a roughly meter-wide pathway around the edge of the decrepit fortress toward the front entrance, but it was obvious there was no chance of his getting inside that way. As well as the fact that the huge wooden gate was shut, there were more bodies here, all crammed onto a narrow wooden bridge. He pressed himself back against the stonework and looked down toward the house he'd been sheltering in, trying to assess the situation. A gently curving track wound its way up here from the car park below, and its relatively smooth surface and steady incline had enabled a stream of bodies to make the climb. Over time the main gate had become blocked by an impassable, clogged mass of rotting flesh. Jackson shuffled back the other way, only moderately concerned. Despite the inconvenience of still not having found a way into the castle, he realized it was also a good thing. *If I'm having trouble getting in,* he thought, *then the dead have no chance.*

He'd worked his way back around half the perimeter of the immense ruin, looking for another entrance or a place where the wall was lower, when he stopped to look down at an engraved brass tourist map set into stone. Obviously a popular viewpoint, as well as affording him a clear view for miles around, it also gave him a clear appreciation of the true size of the vast crowd waiting for him at the foot of the hill. Thousands of blank faces looked in his direction, an almost incalculable number of them stretching away to the right and left, wrapping around the base of the hill and sealing the castle off.

The brass map had accumulated a light layer of filth which Jackson wiped away with his sleeve. He tried to make out some of the local features it had been designed to highlight: the port of Chadwick, some thirty miles east (he was closer to the coast than he'd realized), the smaller town of Halecroft to the south. A reservoir, the ruins of an abbey, a wealth of other beauty spots and landmarks—none were of any obvious use to him. He was on the verge of giving up for the day, wondering if he should ju

finish walking around the castle then find enough level ground up here to pitch his tent for the night before moving on in the morning, when something caught his eye. Another entrance. A secret entrance? This was the stuff of bullshit and legend, but it appeared to be real: a smaller, far less obvious way into the castle through a passage carved into the hillside. There was a brief explanation on the map—something about smugglers getting in and tyrants getting out in times past—but none of it mattered. He orientated himself, worked out roughly where the hidden entrance was, then headed straight for it.

* * *

A padlocked gate, a cage of green-painted iron railings set into the hillside, and an unexpected gaggle of more than a hundred corpses were all that stood between Jackson and the entrance to the tunnel. He stood several meters above the dead and composed himself, watching as several of them tried unsuccessfully to scramble up the wet grass to reach him. Hands shaking with nerves, he lit his last firework and aimed it at the back of the ragged gathering. It shot away from him, and before it had even hit the bodies, he was sprinting directly at them. The rocket exploded and they turned and moved toward the light and noise *en masse*, giving him a few seconds of space to fight his way through to the gate, metal cutters held ready. With the dead already turning back and beginning to grab at him, he struggled to get through. The padlock clasp was too thick and too strong, but he managed to cut through a link in the chain it secured. Knowing that the firework had burned out and he had again become the sole focus of attention, he wrapped one end of the chain around his hand several times then began swinging it around wildly like a whip. Its effects were remarkable, slicing through rotting flesh whenever it made contact. With the arc of the chain providing him with an unexpectedly large bubble of empty space, Jackson threw the gate open and disappeared down into the tunnel. The dead followed, but they were no match for his speed. He started back to shut the gate, but there were already too many of them pouring through after him.

The pitch-black and close confines of the damp tunnel walls combined to make him feel uncomfortably claustrophobic, but he had no option other than to keep moving. He ran with arms outstretched, climbing upward and bracing himself, knowing that at any second he might reach a dead end. *Christ*, he realized, far too late to be able to do anything about it, *this bloody tunnel might not even go anywhere*. The passage was several hundred years old at least—it could have collapsed, been shut for safety reasons, been rerouted back outside to the bottom of the hill ... And all the time he could hear the dead behind him, chasing him down with an almost arrogant lack of speed and absolutely no fear whatsoever.

The lighter. He dug his hand into his pocket and felt for the reassuring metal outline of his lighter. He was running low on fluid, but what the hell. He flicked it on and the unsteady yellow light illuminated the rough carved sides of the passageway immediately around him. Moving with increased speed now that he could see something, he burst into a large, low-ceilinged chamber with various displays mounted on the uneven walls. Something about smugglers, gruesome pictures of starving prisoners ... it looked like this had been some kind of dungeon. That'd be about right, he thought as the lighter began to burn his fingers. He swapped hands—not that that made much difference—and desperately searched for another way out. Another short sloping passageway now leading away at about ten o'clock from where he'd entered the dungeon, then another large open space beyond. He let the flame go out again, conserving lighter fluid as he ran across the width of the second space. He slowed down to walking pace again and felt for the wall with outstretched hands, increasingly aware of the sounds of the clumsy dead following close behind, their shuffling and scrambling noises amplified by their confines. His fingertips made contact with cold stone and

worked his way around to the left until he reached another doorway cut into the rock. He carried on along ~~yet another tunnel, feeling his way forward with his left hand, trying to flick the lighter into light~~ again with the right, the dead sounding closer than ever now. The lighter flame caught, and Jackson saw there was a wooden door directly ahead. It looked relatively modern, and reassuringly solid, and yet he felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to prick up and stand on end. *If I can't get through* he realized, the sounds of the dead continuing to increase in volume, *then I'm fucked.*

He hit the door at speed, slamming his hand down on the latch, and it opened immediately. He fell into another space as it swung shut behind him. Up ahead was a body hanging from the wall, its arms shackled, and he screamed out in fright before realizing it was a plastic dummy, dressed in rags and strung up for effect. He stumbled back with surprise and tripped over his own feet, hitting the deck hard and dropping his lighter, which he heard skittle across the floor. The sudden pitch black was suffocating, all consuming. He crawled slowly forward, running his hands along the ground from side to side, desperate to feel the warm metal of the lighter. He found boxes and packaging and what felt like the plastic feet of another executed dummy, but no lighter. He kept crawling until his head hit the wall. He yelped with pain and rocked back. In the distance he thought he could hear the dead advancing with renewed speed now, almost as if they were feeding off his pain.

Head throbbing, Jackson felt along the wall until he found the edge of a door. Was it the same one he'd come through or a different one? Had he somehow turned a full circle in the darkness, and if he went through this door, would he be running headfirst toward the dead? He stood up and tried to turn the handle but it wouldn't open. He shook it, pulled at it, then shoulder-charged it. It gave way and he flew through, landing on his hands and knees in the middle of a small shop. There were shutters down over most of the windows, but he could see enough. *Exit through the gift shop*, he thought as he picked himself up, then shut the door and blocked it. He jogged down to the other end of the cluttered room, weaving around displays of key rings, mugs, stuffed toys and other equally useless things, then shoved another door open and burst out into daylight.

He was standing on the farthest edge of a large courtyard inside the castle walls, looking down the business end of a rifle barrel.

"Nice fireworks," the man aiming at him said. "Now who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Alan Jackson," he answered, breathless, "and I've had a hell of a day. Mind if I come in?"

The castle's walls were virtually impenetrable, and its proud, elevated position at the top of the natural rise was ideal. The dead were unable to get anywhere close, save for an unsteady stream—bizarre slow-motion parade—which dragged themselves tirelessly along the road from the car park, up to the bridge and the impassable wooden gate where they formed an unmoving clot of increasingly decayed flesh. The inconvenience of having a few hundred of them nearby like this was nothing compared to the constant nightmare of thousands which Jackson had become used to.

Inside, the once-magnificent ancient fortress was far less impressive. The outer wall and the gatehouse were the oldest parts of the site still standing. Some inner walls had been reduced to little more than crumbled piles of stone, battle-worn and weather-beaten into submission over the centuries. Along the full length of the eastern side of the outer wall, several hundred years newer but in no better state, were the remains of a series of inner buildings. What had once been stables, a bakery, a greengrocer's hall, living quarters and various other rooms were now all open, roofless spaces alike. Some had been repurposed by the most recent owners of the estate; a few areas either strengthened or replaced completely with out-of-character prefabrications to make a series of interconnecting rooms: an L-shaped display area and museum with a small onsite classroom in one corner, a café with a small but reasonably well-equipped kitchen leading off it, and at the end stood the gift shop through which Jackson had made his dramatic, unannounced entrance.

Jackson spent a lot of time up on the roof of the gatehouse tower, looking out over the battlements like a medieval lord of the manor. He felt as if he was under siege. The dead continued to amass all around them, waiting on the horizon like a germ-choked army of old, poised to charge. Except he knew they couldn't. For now.

Kieran Cope, the man who'd shoved a rifle in Jackson's face when he'd first arrived, became his man-at-arms. Kieran was tall and slim, and his manner of dress was very different to Jackson's. Rather than the practical, hardwearing clothing which Jackson almost always wore, Kieran favored jeans, T-shirts, hoodies and jackets. He'd been here since the beginning, and had so far been spared the rigors Jackson had endured out in the field. Kieran looked less like one of the few remaining survivors of a global apocalypse, and more like a student who'd just wandered in from a night at the pub.

Jackson's arrival had revitalized the flagging fortunes of the handful of people who'd already made Cheetham Castle their home. Apart from Kieran there were two others, though there had originally been three. Before the apocalypse, Melanie Hopper had juggled three jobs—one cleaning the other two in local bars, mostly undeclared and paid in cash to keep her below the benefit threshold so she didn't lose her council flat but could still go out drinking most nights. She'd been vacuuming in the museum when everyone else had died, and had barely noticed anything until half an hour after the event when she switched off her music, took out her headphones, and found Shirley Brinksford sitting in the middle of the courtyard, sobbing.

Shirley, by contrast, had been a reluctant sightseer. She had just pulled up in the car park with her unbearably dull husband Raymond for another excruciating day touring local relics. She'd been looking for a way out of the relationship for a while, but not like this. Dropping dead at the wheel and driving the car into a ditch had been the most exciting thing Raymond had done in almost thirty years of marriage.

No one spoke much about Jerry—originally the fourth person at the castle. Stricken with some kind of god-awful muscle-wasting disease, Jerry had been spotted trundling along the road outside the castle very early on, steering his electric wheelchair with his right hand, which proved to be just about

the only part of his body he still had any control over. No one dared say as much to any of the others, but they all wished they'd never found Jerry, because it had been abundantly clear that there was nothing they could do for him. He needed round-the-clock help, and constant physical and medicinal treatment, and Kieran and the others hadn't been in a position to provide for any of their own requirements, let alone Jerry's. They did what they could—tried to feed him, tried to communicate with him, tried to keep him clean and safe and warm—but it was hopeless. It was a relief to all of them when Jerry died in his sleep.

The decision of whether or not to stay at the castle had been a simple one for Jackson. To his surprise, he found himself thriving on the sudden responsibility of trying to coordinate the small group of people and make their castle hideout as strong, secure, and comfortable as possible.

Getting out and gathering supplies had been a priority. When Jackson had first found them, they'd been desperately ill-equipped for survival. All they'd had was a little food, the flatbed truck which Kieran had arrived, Raymond Brinksford's car, and Melanie's (presumably) dead boyfriend's souped-up and clapped-out Ford Fiesta. Kieran's rifle (which he'd found in a house nearby) and half a box of ammo were the extent of their defenses.

Leaving the safety of the castle was a necessity, and they did all they could to reduce the risk. Kieran, Jackson, and Mel headed out for the nearest village, bulldozing their way out through the castle gate and over the bridge in Kieran's truck, and returning several hours later with a full load and two more vehicles. Although being down among the dead was always fraught with danger, the strength of their castle hideout was such that they could afford to make as much noise coming and going as they damn well pleased, safe in the knowledge that only a fraction of the dead could reach them.

"We get out," Jackson said, "we get what we need, then we get back. It's as simple as that."

And for a time it was.

In spite of the differences in their relative ages and backgrounds, Kieran and Jackson worked well together and their joint expeditions into the dead world became more audacious, bound by their shared desire to survive. They took diggers from never-to-be-completed roadworks and building sites nearby and used them to keep the gate and the wooden bridge relatively clear. From a holiday camp by the side of a river which they spied from the gatehouse, they towed up six large caravans. Warmer and considerably more comfortable than any part of the castle including the prefabs, the caravans were used to provide additional accommodation. And that accommodation was soon needed, because as well as attracting the attention of almost every corpse for miles around, the activity in and around the castle also attracted the attention of several other pockets of survivors who'd been hiding nearby. Although not in any great numbers, people began to creep through the shadows to get to Cheetham Castle. Some broke through the lines of the dead like Jackson had on his arrival here; others waited until they were close and then threw themselves at Jackson's feet (or, more accurately, in front of his vehicle) when he and Kieran were out gathering supplies.

The number of bodies beyond the castle walls seemed not to matter so much as long as the number within the walls continued to grow too. Five people became ten, then more still. Jackson spent hours watching from the gatehouse battlements, scanning the dead world for signs of life and hoping even more people would arrive. But after a while, no more came, and the population of Cheetham Castle settled at seventeen.

It had been almost a month since Jackson first arrived at the castle, and weeks since anyone else had made it through the hordes of bodies still gathered outside. Jackson and a handful of others sat on deckchairs around a large bonfire burning in the middle of the courtyard. Behind them, other people busied themselves in their caravans, doing all they could to keep themselves occupied, still struggling to find any semblance of normality within the bizarre surroundings of the castle walls.

“Well, I’m with you, Steve,” said Bob Wilkins, swigging from a bottle of lager. The drink made the cold night feel even colder still, but he was past caring.

“Me too,” Sue Preston, sitting next to him, said. A short woman, the amount of extra clothing she had on tonight made her appear round, almost double her normal size.

Steve Morecombe—a tax inspector until his job had been added to the apparently endless list of now completely redundant vocations last September—looked at each of the others in turn. He zipped up his anorak as high as it would go, then turned back to face Jackson. “You’re the boss. It’s your call.”

“This is bullshit,” Kieran protested. Jackson silenced him with a glance, then knocked back another slug of whiskey-tinged coffee and winced at the bitter aftertaste.

“Not bullshit, Kieran,” he said. “Common sense.”

“It’s got nothing to do with common sense,” Kieran argued. “It’s because this lot are too damn scared to—”

Jackson glared at him again, and he immediately became quiet.

“First things first,” Jackson said, returning his attention to everyone else, sniffing back the coffee and wiping his nose on the back of one of his fingerless gloves. “I’m not the boss. I don’t want any of you turning around and pointing fingers at me if this all goes belly-up. We’re all in this together, okay?” A few quiet mumbles. No dissention, not even from Kieran. “I think Steve and Bob are right.”

“It makes sense,” Bob said. “The way I see it, we’ve done all the hard work we need to for now. We’ve stockpiled enough to get us through the winter, and no one new has turned up here for weeks. We need to start focusing more on those that are already here, and forget about everything that’s going on on the other side of the wall until it’s safe. If we think we can batten down the hatches and survive the winter with what we’ve already got here, then I think that’s what we should do.”

“Agreed,” said Steve, rubbing his hands in front of the fire.

“I think you’re wrong,” Kieran said. “You’re making a mistake. Things are going to start getting easier out there, not harder.”

“Maybe in another couple of months,” Bob argued, “but not yet. I think there’s worse to come before things get any better, and if we don’t have to take any risks, then we shouldn’t be taking any.”

Jackson looked at Bob, then over at Kieran on the other side of the fire, trying to gauge his reaction. The arguments continued, and he stared into the flames, concentrating on the glowing embers and hoping to shut out the noise by focusing on the crackle and pop of burning wood.

“The risks are minimal, the potential gains are huge,” Kieran said.

“A risk’s a risk,” Bob replied, “no two ways about it.”

“We should put it to a vote.”

“You know you’d lose. Face it, Kieran, you’re the only one who wants to keep going out there.”

“Bull. Mel said she’d go if—”

“Way I see it is this,” Jackson said, cutting across all of them, tired of the bickering. “What Bob

and Steve are saying makes sense, and Kieran, I think you're wrong. But the thing is, if we do this then ~~everyone~~ has to buy in and we ~~all~~ have to follow the same rules. Food and drink will need to be carefully controlled so we don't run short. Folks have to be free to leave here if they're not happy, but they need to know that if they willingly walk away, we'll not be chasing after them. Agreed?"

He looked around at the people sitting with him.

"Fair enough," said Sue, sinking deeper into her seat, her face disappearing into her padded jacket.

"Kieran? You know you can't go out on your own."

At first Kieran didn't react. Jackson stared at him until he grudgingly mumbled, "Okay."

"I'm in," Steve said. "I'd rather bloody starve myself for a couple of months than go out there again unnecessarily."

"Probably do you good, you fat bastard!" Bob joked, relieved that the conversation had gone his way.

"So let's do it," Jackson announced, "and we'll see how things go. I say we should keep the gates locked until those fuckers out there have rotted down to nothing. You reckon that's going to be six months maximum, Sue?"

"Give or take," she replied. "But don't forget, I was a sister on a children's ward, not a mortuary nurse. It was my job to try and keep people alive, not watch them after they'd died."

"The only exception," Jackson continued, ignoring her negativity, "the *only* exception, mind, is if we get wind of there being other people like us nearby. I don't much fancy sticking my arse out there and risking getting bit, but by the same token, we can't just turn our backs on people we might be able to help. The more of us there are here, the better. That sound fair?"

A few more mumbles and nods. No one answered properly, but no one argued either, not even Kieran. Apart from Aiden Parker, who was just a kid of twelve, most of the people at Cheetham Castle were older than Kieran, and none of them shared his energy or his apparent (and untested) fearlessness. His confidence had been steadily increasing, theirs reducing.

"Just one more thing," Jackson said, stopping those people who were already halfway out of the seats and heading for their caravans and beds. "This is important. Just remember that we're safer here than anywhere else any of us has come across, but nowhere is completely safe anymore. If anyone does anything that puts the rest of us at any risk, I'll personally drag them to the top of the gatehouse and throw them over the battlements. If we're patient and sensible then we'll all get through this mess and come out the other side in one piece."

Fifty-Eight Days Since Infection

THE BROMWELL HOTEL—TOP FLOOR, EAST WING

He'd seen this coming long before the rest of them. Driver had suspected this place was too good to be true the first moment he'd driven his beaten-up old bus along the twisting road which led up to the front of the hotel. *Way I see it*, he thought at the time (though he didn't waste his energy trying to explain to any of the others), *there's plenty of different ways to survive, you just have to make sure you're all pulling in the same direction*. And that was the problem they'd had here—too many chiefs—and that was why he'd planned to take evasive action long before the shit had actually hit the fan. He'd already seen the cracks starting to appear.

Ask any of the others, and they'd all have said Driver was incapable of showing any emotion. What would they have thought if they could see him now, perched on the end of his bed, head in his hands, sobbing like a frightened child. They thought he left his beard to grow wild because he was lazy; the truth was, he grew it to hide behind. But they were silly, foolish people, more concerned with one-upmanship and scoring points over each other than anything else. They'd all been so preoccupied with their bickering that they hadn't questioned him when he'd feigned sickness and hidden himself away in this room, as far from everyone else as he could get. In fact, they'd positively encouraged him to do it, figuring it would be best for all concerned to put maximum distance between him and themselves. And so, armed with little more than a stash of food he'd been steadily siphoning off for himself on the quiet and very little else, he sat alone in his room on the top floor of the east wing of the hotel and watched as the rest of the idiots threw away everything that they'd worked for.

He'd expected the end to come soon, but never with such speed. Within a couple of days they'd lost everything. It had begun with the usual fights over food, then some chaotic stupidity as some of them had tried to attract the attention of a helicopter they all knew full well was never going to save them, then someone—he wasn't sure who—had cracked under the pressure and the floodgates had well truly been opened.

It was time for him to move.

His gear packed, he crept back downstairs and waited outside at the farthest edge of the hotel grounds until he was sure that this really was it and there was no turning back. Carrying the remainder of his food and water, a few items of clothing, his well-read newspaper and little else, he watched from a distance as those cracks he'd seen widened to chasms with incredible speed. He'd heard several explosions out on the golf course, and some idiot had then taken his precious bus and managed to crash it, blocking the full width of their only escape route. He cursed the fools he'd wound up with. They'd written him off long ago, but he didn't care. He was used to it. *Just because I don't talk all the time or get involved in their pointless bloody arguments, it doesn't mean I don't care*. They'd grossly underestimated him, assuming that he wasn't interested in their ongoing fight for survival when, in fact, nothing could have been further from the truth. They presumed he was a selfish, uncaring bastard. Bloody hypocrites!

Driver stood by the boundary fence and watched the unstoppable descent into chaos begin. *When it comes to the crunch*, he said to himself, *I'll be the one who gets them out of this mess*. He felt like he knew all of them intimately—their strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes—and yet none of them knew a single damn thing about him other than the fact he used to drive buses for a living. They'd assumed that was all he was good for, but the reality was it was what he'd *wanted* to do. He'd had his fair share of different vocations—ten years in the Royal Navy, a spell working as a tour guide across Europe, a first-class honors degree in Greek history and art ... they knew *nothing* about him.

Up ahead, a considerable distance away from him but still far too close for comfort, he saw the bodies beginning to surge through the gap in the fence he'd seen Martin Priest use previously. Contrary to what Martin had said, however, that gap wasn't the only way through. Taking care not to be seen—there'd only be another bloody argument if they saw him trying to leave, then no one would get out of here alive—he ran across the wet grass over to a section of fence where he'd found a couple of loose railings two days previous. He was able to lift the railings, squeeze through the gap, then replace them without anyone noticing.

One last, long look at the immense tidal wave of rot rolling his way—a moment's final hesitation, both to make sure beyond all doubt that the hotel was lost, and to again consider if he really was doing the right thing—and then he was gone.

Several hours passed, but it felt like it had been much longer. Driver remained sitting in the cab of one of the trucks blocking the junction at the end of the road leading up to the hotel, no more than a half mile away from the building and the people he'd left behind. He was still struggling with his conscience, unable to get past the fact that, just a short distance from where he was sitting, the people he'd left behind in the hotel were suffering. How many of them were still alive back there? He sat up in his already elevated seat and tried to look for them again, but it was no use. He could barely see anything, just a little of the angular outline of the roof of the building through the tops of the trees.

He'd had no choice, he kept telling himself, he'd had to do it. Even if he'd shown the rest of the team the escape route he'd discovered, it wouldn't have done any of them any good. By the time they finished bickering about who was going and who should stay, the unstoppable avalanche of corpses would most likely have settled the matter for them. And even if, somehow, they'd still managed to get away, Driver knew exactly what they'd be doing right now. He could picture the lot of them, either standing in the middle of this junction or crammed into the back of one of the trucks, all arguing about whose fault it was the hotel had been lost. None of them would have accepted any responsibility; they'd all have been too busy pointing the finger at everyone else to take the blame.

No, as harsh as it seemed and as wrong as it felt, this was the best option for all concerned. He'd go back for what was left of the rest of them when he could.

Arming himself with a golf club he'd found stashed in the cab of the truck, Driver psyches himself up to move. He knew the disturbance around the hotel and the fires on the golf course would inevitably provide him with a brief pocket of freedom in which he could try to make his escape.

Short, sharp hops.

The key to getting away from here in one piece, he'd decided, was to move fast and stay exposed for brief periods at a time. And with so many thousands of corpses in the immediate vicinity, he had to stay on foot to remain quiet until he was more confident about his surroundings. He peered out through the truck window and surveyed the little of the landscape he could make out through the steadily increasing late-evening gloom. About fifty meters ahead was the outline of a lone house, and before the light had all but disappeared he'd seen that the front door had been left open invitingly. There were only two bodies that he could see between him and the house, and as far as he could tell, neither of them yet knew he was there.

Driver took a deep breath and carefully eased his unfit bulk down onto the road. He reached back up to grab his duffel bag and the golf club, then ran like hell. In his navy days he wouldn't even have broken a sweat covering a distance as short as this, but he was no longer in such good shape and the rigors of life since the end of the world—a poor diet and next to no exercise—definitely hadn't helped. Already panting, and barely halfway there, he swung the golf putter around and caved in the side of the first corpse's skull, leaving a neat rectangular indentation which perfectly matched the head of the club. The corpse immediately collapsed at his feet as if he'd flicked an off switch, barely managing an untidy half-pirouette before it hit the deck, all arms and legs. Desperately wishing he was in better condition, Driver half-ducked, half-fell out of the way of the second creature as it made an uncoordinated grab for him. Picking himself up, he scrambled into the house and kicked the door shut. The remaining body was outside almost immediately, banging on the door. He knew he had to move fast before the noise brought countless others to the house.

There's something in here with me.

Before he'd even realized it was there, Driver caught the pint-sized cadaver of a small boy as

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