

# IN THE DUST

BY TIM LEBBON

We should have known that one day they'd refuse to let us leave.

I'd already seen the fresh smoke rising from the cremation pits, and a sensation of cold dread had settled in my stomach. But I chose not to mention it to the others. Jamie's bluff and bluster would only piss me off, and I feared it would send Bindy over the edge. If in the end events drove her to madness or suicide, I didn't want to be the catalyst.

So it wasn't until we reached the old stone river bridge that the truth began to dawn.

"What the fuck?" Jamie said.

"Toby . . ." Bindy let go of the cart and grabbed my hand. Before the plague, we'd only known each other in passing, and there was nothing sexual here, but contact helped her cope. As for me . . . it only made me think of the past.

"They've blocked the bridge," I said.

"And they're burning something in the pits." Jamie jogged off ahead of us, approaching the barrier of roughly laid concrete block and barbed wire they'd built while we'd been searching.

"Toby . . . ?" Bindy said again, her hand squeezing hard.

"It's okay," I said, squeezing back. Though I knew it was not.

I looked down at the cart we'd been pushing. The body of a small child stared back at me. She had died during the initial outbreak and had been motionless since the Purge three weeks earlier, but her eyes still held a glimmer of something resembling life. That was always the worst thing for me—not that they'd moved when they were dead or were mindless or craved the gristly hearts of the living, but that in their eyes they looked so alive.

The girl stared back at me, unseeing. I looked away.

“Hey!” Jamie shouted. “Come and see!”

“Toby, I don’t want to go up there,” Bindy said.

“Then stay with her,” I said, letting go and walking after Jamie. I heard Bindy’s sharp intake of breath and knew that I could be cruel. But she was weak, and sometimes I lost patience with her.

I reached the block wall and climbed, joining Jamie where he looked through the swirls of razor wire topping it. I could still smell the rich, warm odor of wet cement.

“Something’s happened,” he said. For once, his understatement was surprising.

There had been an army camp on the other side of the bridge. For three weeks, the three of us had been bringing bodies out of Usk, back over the bridge and delivering them into the hands of the scientists. We each had different reasons for doing so, and all of them involved dead people. We had found Jamie’s sister on day one, torn apart in a pond in their garden, her chest opened and heart ripped out. There had been a squirrel feeding on her eyes, and I’d been shocked, because I never knew a squirrel would eat meat. Bindy’s parents were two of the infected killed during the Purge, and we’d brought them both out during the second week. Her mother had been covered with dried blood, and in her father’s hand was the remains of something meaty. They’d had those same staring, glittering eyes, wet and knowing, even in true death.

My own dear Fiona eluded me still.

Now the camp was abandoned. There were still a few of the pre-fab huts they’d used, and a tent flapped in the lonely breeze. The field was churned up, and the old cottage they’d requisitioned as a command post was empty. Its windows and door had been left open, and that just seemed so careless. *The rain will get in*, I thought. I laughed softly.

“What is it?” Jamie asked.

“Nothing.”

“So where the fuck have they gone?”

I shrugged, but my eyes were drawn to the smoke still rising from the pyres, the fires and pits hidden beyond a thick copse of trees. After we brought the bodies out and they’d done their tests, that was

where they disposed of them. Someone was burning now. The smoke was black and greasy, the smell sickly and mouthwatering.

“Moved back,” I said. “Pulled the perimeter out away from the village.”

“Why?” he asked, but I could see him looking at the smoke as well. “Fuckers,” he said softly.

I turned and looked back down the curve of the bridge at Bindy. She’d stepped in front of the trailer so she did not have to look at the little dead girl, and she was staring up at us, eyes wide and hands clasped between her breasts. When she saw my expression, she looked at the road surface.

“They should tell us what they found, shouldn’t they?” Jamie asked.

“So ask them.”

“What do you mean?”

I nodded across at the torn-up field. Birds were flocking across it, exploring for worms where the soil had been recently turned. “You don’t think they’d leave us alone, do you? We could climb the wall, swim the river. Walk out of Usk.” I was scanning the landscape as I spoke, searching for movement, or the telltale glint of sunlight on binoculars or rifle scopes. I could see nothing, but that didn’t mean they were not there. “They’ll be there to make sure we don’t.”

“Well, I’m going to try,” Jamie said.

“Don’t be a fool.”

“Fool?” He turned to me, eyes wide and glaring, and the fear beneath his constant outrage was patent. “You’ve been treating me like a kid ever since we started this, and I’m a lot younger than you, so I can take that. But I’m not a fucking fool.”

“Fair enough.”

He turned back to the view, scanning the hedgerows and hillside beyond, as I had.

“They’ll let us out, Toby, won’t they?” Bindy said behind us.

“No,” I said. It was so quiet that she didn’t hear, but Jamie did. He glanced at me again as he jumped down from the wall.

“Later,” he said. “I’m going to swim the river and get out of this shit-hole later.”

I followed him back down to the street.

“What do we do with that?” he said, pointing at the girl’s body.

For a second, I was at a loss. By discovering the corpse splayed on a tomb slab in the churchyard, we had effectively taken ownership of it, and the thought of simply dumping her somewhere felt terrible. She was somebody’s daughter, someone’s little girl, and she deserved more than that.

“Well, chuck her down a drain somewhere for all I care,” Jamie said, when neither of us answered. He walked off along the street. “I’m going to the Queen’s. I’ll be in the bar.”

Bindy turned to me.

“Let’s put her back where we found her,” I said, and she seemed to find that acceptable. She almost smiled.

Jamie was on the way to drunk by the time Bindy and I arrived at the Queen’s Hotel. He was sitting at a table in the bar, and we arrived in time to see him stagger across, lift the bar flap, pour himself a single whiskey, and then sway back to his seat. By the time he sat down again, he’d almost finished his drink, but perhaps there was something comforting in the process.

“Whadidya do with her?” he asked.

“Back in the churchyard,” Bindy said.

Jamie snorted, but I wasn’t sure what that meant.

“I’ll get food,” I said. “Then we should talk about what to do.”

“Talk?” Jamie shouted. He looked ready to rage, and I tensed. Then the glass slipped from his hand and dropped to the table, landing upright without spilling a drop, and he put one hand to his forehead. He sobbed, once, then looked up at us again, putting on his hard face again.

“Jamie—” Bindy began.

“Fuck it!” he said. “There’s nothing to do but get out. I’ve done nothing . . . nothing wrong. Nor you.” He pointed at us, and I wondered how many people he saw. “It’s wrong, them keepin’ us in, and . . . I’ll get out.”

“I’m getting food,” I said. I sensed Jamie about to break—it had been coming for days—and I had no wish to see that. I went through behind the bar and into the big kitchen, glancing at the huge walk-in freezer door we hadn’t dared open since the power had gone off. There was still enough food in the larder—tinned stuff, packets, de-

hydrated fruit and vegetables. At lunchtimes over the past few days, we'd almost laughed about how disgusting it was, but knowing we were now trapped here with no chance of escape, laughter was distant.

I knocked together something quick to eat, because there were more important things to do. I carried it back through to the bar and was amazed to see that Jamie had calmed down. He was still drinking steadily, and Bindy sat at the table opposite him with an open bottle of wine and two glasses in front of her. As I sat down she poured me a glass. Jamie stayed on the whiskey.

"That fire," she said. "We haven't taken a body out for two days. Could it be that one?"

I remembered the body she meant—a huge, fat woman, naked, her breasts pawed and scratched and teeth clotted with rotting meat. And those eyes, so falsely alive.

"They burnt that one the day we took her out," I said.

"Right," Jamie agreed.

"So there's been another outbreak," Bindy said. She was staring into the deep violet depths of her glass. The drink had already stained her lips, an effect that I had always found unbearably sexy in women drinking red wine. Not in Bindy, though.

"Not necessarily," I said. "If there had been, why trap us in here?"

"It's in the dust," Jamie said. "I've told you, haven't I? I've been saying it all along." He ran one finger around the inside of his glass, smearing whiskey and touching his finger to his tongue. From day one, Jamie had been suggesting that the plague—virus, bacteria, nobody yet seemed to know exactly what caused it—could be alive in the dust of the deserted town. He'd seen dust settled on the eyes of the bodies we'd found, filtering the light that entered their dead eyes, and I think perhaps it had driven him slightly mad. We were all allowed our own madness.

We drank some more but didn't really come up with anything like a plan. Jamie was drunk and bitter and scared; Bindy was too distant; and I really had no need of a plan at all. My aim had always been to find Fiona's corpse, wherever it might be, and only one thing really kept me going—the hope that she had been killed and eaten by what people had started to call zombies.

The alternative was that she had become one herself, and the

thought of looking into her dead eyes knowing that was just too terrible to bear.

We took three en-suite rooms next to each other. Bindy and I carried Jamie to bed, trying to ignore his rantings and tears, and then back in the corridor I bid her goodnight.

“Toby,” she said, and her voice sounded different. “I know what you think of me, but I’m trying. I’m really trying.” She slurred slightly, but she was more in control than I had ever seen her. She’d once served me breakfast at a café in town—maybe four years ago—and I’d flirted with her. “I keep thinking tomorrow will be another day, but it won’t. It’ll always be today.” She turned to go to bed, and I reached out and held her arm. She touched my hand and smiled sadly.

“Maybe they’ve just upped and left.” It was fucking stupid, and I knew that, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“They built a wall,” she said. “And Jamie’s right: None of us has done anything wrong.” She went to bed then, and so did I.

I lay there for some time trying to sleep. The town lay around me, its geography altered completely by what had happened. The town square, its attractive clock tower bedecked with flower troughs, its cobble paving slippery in light summer rain, was now the place where I had found six dead zombies with the remains of several small children they had been fighting over when the Purge came. Where the old castle once stood, I could now only recall seeing the family that had fled there to die—father, mother, and two children, surrounded by their mingled blood vented by the knife in the man’s hand. Streets where I had walked with Fiona, pubs we had drunk in, restaurants where we had eaten and laughed and talked quietly of the possibility of children, all now tainted in some way by what had happened. Some taints were simply the silence; others, blood and rot and death.

I was trapped in my hometown, but I had never been in a place so strange.

As I drifted to sleep I wondered yet again what had happened to the rest of Usk’s residents. Most of them had fled after the first few attacks, but they were soon rounded up and kept in confinement in the old military base in Glascoed. The majority of those who stayed behind were killed or infected, and then came the Purge, where the

whole town was sprayed hourly for three days with what the military had called an “antoidote” when Bindy, Jamie, and I walked out of town across the stone river bridge, the only reason we weren’t shot is that their solution hadn’t killed us.

They’d let us stay, suggesting that we help appropriate zombie corpses for the scientists to study. Every day they let us out to sleep in comfortable quarantine, and each morning, I expected it to be the day they no longer let us out. I didn’t care, because Fiona had remained behind and had not yet been found.

Faces of old friends and people I knew from the town appeared to me as I dropped into an uneasy slumber. Some of them smiled, some were slack in death.

Some of them raged.

The sound of helicopters woke me up. I went to the window and saw a military chopper buzzing the town. At first I thought they were spraying again, but then I noticed the cameras mounted under its nose.

“Please come out into the street where we can see you,” an electronic voice said. “Stand at the road junction, and make yourselves known.”

*Make yourselves known!* I thought. We’d been dragging corpses from the dead town for three weeks for these bastards, and they couldn’t even use our names.

I met Bindy out in the corridor, and we knocked on Jamie’s door. *He’s dead*, I thought, *veins slashed, heart given up, brain popped with the pressure*. But then he opened the door, squinting in the dawn light. He had a hangover. I chuckled.

“Fuck’s wrong with you?” he growled.

“Nothing. Come on, let’s find out what’s going on.”

Bindy and I waited at the road junction outside the hotel for several minutes before Jamie joined us. In that time the chopper swept past three times, the cameras seeming to turn slightly as it went. It was warm already this morning, but the rotors caused a storm in the street that blew waves of dust against smashed shop windows.

Jamie coughed and spluttered, washing dust from his mouth with a swig from the whiskey bottle he carried.

“You’re kidding me,” I said.

“Hey, it’s a free country!” He giggled maniacally and took another drink.

The chopper came in again and hovered a hundred feet along the street. We could barely see against the dust and grit, and the sound was tremendous. The speakers were even louder.

“For your own safety, you will remain in quarantine within the town limits for the next forty-eight hours.”

*This is unfair*, I thought. *We can’t ask them anything.*

“During that time, certain work will be undertaken. You must not attempt to impede or interfere in any way. You must not attempt to escape.”

“Try and fuckin’ stop me, you bastards!” Jamie shouted. I realized that he was still drunk.

“Any escape attempt will result in the use of deadly force.”

The sound seemed to decrease, and the three of us were trapped in a surreal bubble of shock. *They’ll shoot us*, I thought, and their military-speak suddenly annoyed the hell out of me. Why couldn’t they just say what they meant?

I glanced past Bindy at Jamie. He caught my eye, smiled, and shrugged. Bravado.

“Toby Parsons, please proceed alone to the road crossing outside the primary school. There you’ll be given more instructions, and any questions will be answered.”

I hated the sound of that voice, distorted by technology. The speaker could have been laughing or crying, and we’d never know.

The chopper lifted away quickly and disappeared over the rooftops, and Jamie gave it the finger.

“What does all that mean?” Bindy said. “What work are they going to do?”

“Hopefully I’ll find out,” I said.

“Why just you?” Jamie said. “Why the hell is it you who—”

“Jamie,” I said softly, quietly, and he listened. Maybe I’d never spoken to him in this tone of voice before, but it was about fucking time. “Stay here. Drink coffee. Have a wash. I’ll go and find out what’s happening.”

I glanced at Bindy, and though she was frowning, I could see that she seemed comforted somehow with me taking charge. Not that I wanted to. Last thing I wanted was these two hanging on my back.

The only thing I wanted . . .

But we'd been looking for three weeks, and if Fiona had been a victim rather than a zombie, I was sure I'd have found her by then. I knew all the places she knew. I'd checked all the places we'd been together. And if I really thought about it, I didn't really want to keep looking at all.

I started along the street. It took me five minutes to reach the school, and all the while I could hear that chopper somewhere in the distance. It was the first time I'd been alone out on the streets since the Purge: Every other time, one or both of the others had been with me. I thought I'd be scared, or at least nervous, but I found it quite settling. Most things had changed, but liking my own company was not one of them.

As I reached the zebra crossing by the school, I looked along the curving road at the roadblock. It had been there since the first plague outbreak in the town, and I'd seen it a couple of times in the past few days when we went looking for bodies in the school. But now it looked different—larger, for a start, and it had also been added to. Whereas before it had been constructed of a couple of cars turned on their sides and piles of sandbags, now there were several heavy, dark metallic structures behind that. Tall fences stretched away on either side, the one on the left disappearing behind a house and heading uphill, the one leading right forming a straight line across the school's playing field, merging with the woodland beyond.

On either side of the road stood tall posts topped with cameras. They both turned slightly, and I imagined them as eyes observing my approach. Fifty feet away, an amplified voice said, "Remain where you are."

I stopped, sighed. Everyone was shouting at me today.

A man appeared atop the roadblock, obviously standing on a raised section on the other side. He looked across the town behind me before focusing on my face. He appeared nervous.

"Toby Parson?"

"That's me."

"I'm Peter O'Driscoll. I'm a doctor assigned to the research team looking into—"

"You're one of the scientists that have been cutting up the bodies I've been hauling out of here."

“Yes, if you like.” He did not seem at all perturbed by my comment.

“So what have you found out?”

He paused, but only for a second. “I’m afraid that’s classified.”

I laughed. It was the first real laughter I’d uttered since the plague and since losing touch with Fiona. We’d been half a mile apart when the first attacks came, by my reckoning. Close enough to hear each other screaming.

“You’re joking!” I said. “What movie are you trying to be?” I laughed some more.

“Your help has been appreciated,” O’Driscoll said.

“Got a medal for me?”

“No, no medal.”

“So what do you want? Is there another infection? Has it spread?”

“It’s still contained,” O’Driscoll said. “But there’s been a recurrence, yes.”

*A recurrence.* My blood ran cold. The Purge was supposed to have been the end solution, the final cleansing of what had happened in Usk. Blame went everywhere from the moment it struck, the media filling the channels with political and religious pundits, ex-military personnel and any C-list celebrity who had a fucking opinion. When the military had issued assurances that the Purge would end the slaughter, such assurances were taken as an admission of guilt. How could they know how to stop it if they claimed not to know how it began?

“Where?” I asked. And then a greater chill ran through me, and I couldn’t prevent myself from spinning around. The chopper, the cameras . . . “In the town?”

“No, Mr. Parsons. Usk is clear . . . or so we believe. The recurrence was in one of the corpses you brought out.”

“So the infection is still here.”

“We hope not. We hope it was an isolated case, and we’re looking into it. But . . .” He glanced down at something in his hand.

“Okay,” I said. “So you’re watching us, just in case.”

O’Driscoll nodded, lips pursed. “Just in case.”

“And if we’re still fine a week from now? Two weeks?”

He went to leave.

“Hey!” I called. “You can’t just go!”

He paused, squatting down ready to jump away from the roadblock. He seemed to have nothing else to say.

“You can’t just leave us in here like this. We’ve haven’t done anything wrong!”

“But you might,” he said, and dropped back into his world.

I was left staring at the roadblock while the cameras stared back. I gave them the finger. It felt childish, but it made me feel better.

Turning to walk back into town, I felt watched every step of the way. As I passed the school, I looked at the low brick building, infant-class windows splashed with colorful drawings. Self-portraits with big round pink faces, bright blue eyes, and smears of yellow or brown hair. If I went closer I’d probably see the names, but I had no wish to do that. I might end up seeing the cartoon face of the little girl we’d left back in the churchyard.

The chopper drifted in again, skimming low over the trees beyond the school and disappearing from view. I jogged along the street, eager to see what they were doing, and as I passed the burned-out fire station, I saw through a gap between buildings. The chopper was hovering above the four-story block of flats—one of the tallest buildings in Usk—and two men were rappelling down a rope to the rooftop.

“What the hell . . .” I muttered.

Maybe they wanted us. They’d confine us somewhere, send in their teams of doctors and scientists like O’Driscoll with their syringes and knives, and slice us open one by one to see if they could find out what was happening. Because even if they’d known at the beginning, I had the feeling that they were lost now. The plague had progressed—evolved, perhaps—and with a recurrence somewhere beyond the town’s perimeter, their understanding of whatever caused the plague had lessened considerably. Desperate times called for desperate measures, I knew that. But suddenly I was very, very afraid.

*We’re expendable*, I thought. *At least we know the town, the streets, know the places to hide. . . .* But that was just foolish. If they sent in forces to find us, we would be found.

But the two men on the roof did not look like they had been here for long. They were setting up a large tripod topped with a box, weighing down the feet, clipping some sort of cover over the box. The chopper had drifted away, but it was merely performing a circuit of the town.

More cameras.

Even as I realized that, the helicopter came in low and lowered a rope ladder, and the two men climbed back up.

I could just see the smooth movement as the camera turned this way and that. Someone back at control was testing it. I waved.

Walking back to the Queen's Hotel, I heard and saw several more choppers coming in. They chose the tallest buildings.

"What are they doing?" Bindy asked as I arrived back. She was sitting on one of the hotel's wide stone windowsills, waiting for me. For a moment I was irritated at her question, but then I sighed softly and sat beside her.

"Setting up cameras to try and keep track of us," I said.

"Why?"

"There's been a recurrence in one of the bodies we took out. I guess they want to watch in case we're infected too."

Bindy nodded grimly. "So that's it then," she said, and I couldn't bring myself to answer. I didn't want to admit the end of anything.

"Where's Jamie?"

"Went inside. I expect he's in the bar."

"Right. I need to tell him what's going on."

Bindy stayed where she was, which surprised me a little. I thought she'd latch on to me again like a lost puppy, her eyes wide and expectant. Maybe somewhere she'd found her own strength.

"Bindy," I said from the main doorway. She glanced at me. "We'll get out. When they've sorted it all, when they know exactly what's happening."

"Thanks, Toby," she said. Then she looked away again.

I went inside to find Jamie.

The first plague victim I had seen was an old man who used to run an optician's office on the main street. He was in the early, raging phase, and he stalked the street, smashing shopwindows with his own hands and head, picking up big shards of glass, and slashing at passersby. This was still early on, and though most people knew that *something* was wrong with Usk, few knew exactly what. People screamed, the old man shouted and growled, and then he pinned a woman down and started cutting her up. He was completely insane.

A teenager smashed him over the head with a golf club, five times.

He fell on the bleeding woman and died in the street, and seconds later he hauled himself slowly upright again. The rage was gone now, and he started digging into the woman beneath him for her heart.

When I entered the bar, Jamie was raging.

My heart stuttered; my balls tingled with fear. I stood back against the wall and watched.

Jamie was overturning tables and chairs, smashing bottles, kicking out at the bar, spitting and shouting. *This is it*, I thought; *it's all over for us now*. And suddenly, facing that, I found my purpose again: I could not die here, because I had to find Fiona.

As I was backing away, Jamie saw me. He stopped and fell to his knees, crying.

"It's not fair," he said. "None of it's fair."

I let out a breath, sagging against the wall. *Just drunk. Christ.*

"You heard what I told Bindy."

"Through the window." He lay down among smashed glass on the whiskey-stained carpet, and I left him there. There was little I could do, and for a moment he'd scared the hell out of me. I wondered what they'd do if they saw him raging like that.

I went back outside, but Bindy had gone. So I went to look for Fiona.

We'd lived in one of eight flats in an old renovated church in the town square, and the building had been gutted the day of the outbreak. Fiona was gone by then, and since the Purge I'd been back into the church three times looking for her body. So I went there again, climbing the warped metal staircase. However hard I tried to avoid touching any surfaces, by the time I reached the first floor, my hands were black with soot. It was as if the air itself was stained.

Our flat was at the rear of the church, and I had to pass two others to get there. They were both ruins, and were empty of bodies or bones.

I reached the place we had shared and loved, and I was thankful that it looked nothing like home. That would have been hard to take. I felt no hint of nostalgia, because the place was black and burnt and there was little to recognize. The layout was familiar, but even that had changed where walls had burned through and ceilings had fallen. In what had been our bathroom, the floor was gone, and I could see

the shattered remains of our bathroom suite in the flat below. In the bedroom, the bed was a charred mound, and none of the wardrobes had survived.

I'd done it before, but I sifted again, moving ash and blackened wood around with my feet. Clouds of dust rose up, and soon I knew my vision would be blurred, so I worked quickly. Bedroom, living room, kitchen—there was nothing to suggest that Fiona had been here when the fire broke out.

I loved her, but right then I so wanted to find her bones.

Leaving the church, I realized that I would never go home again. There was no need, because it was no longer there. So I walked the town once more, looking in places where I had already searched, glancing into gardens which were already becoming overgrown, amazed at the silence of this place. That was something I could not grow used to. Never a particularly busy town, nevertheless there had always been an atmosphere of bustle. The main street was where most of the shops were, and it was forever frequented by the town's retired contingent going for coffee or their morning papers, and at lunchtime office workers would visit the several restaurants and pubs. In the evenings too it was a lively place, though rarely any more than that. Now, even though the place was not completely silent, it was devoid of the chatter of people.

Birds seemed to have taken over. Perhaps their songs had always been there, subsumed beneath the constant rattle of traffic, but now they were given free rein. They lined the rooftops and windowsills, pecked around on the roads, and flitted overhead in manic celebration.

It wouldn't be long, I knew, before Usk began to take on a wild appearance. Always proud of their town, most of the residents had gone to great lengths to make sure their gardens were well planted. Those plants would no longer have to fear the shears or clippers of artifice.

"Toby!" The shout came from far away, the direction confused by echoes.

"Bindy?"

"Toby, the river!"

I ran. Past the old law courts, across the parking lot, through an

alleyway, and out onto the main street. I was gasping already and cursing the middle-aged spread that I'd willingly let settle. *Something for me to hold on to*, Fiona had said once as we made love. As I pelted along the road, the river bridge came into view around a curve in the main street. Bindy was standing on it, not far from the block wall, leaning over the stone parapet and looking down.

"What is it?" I called as I ran.

She glanced up and pointed. "Jamie!"

I heard his voice then, more drunken shouting and rambling, and if he'd been close to me, I'd have gleefully punched him. He was a tiresome idiot. *Am I really trapped here with him for however long?*

I ran up beside her and looked over the stone parapet. Jamie was down at the river's edge, and he had something slung over his shoulder. His things?

"Don't be an asshole!" I shouted. "You get over, they'll shoot you before—"

"Fuck off," he said wearily.

"He won't listen," Bindy said. "And he's not going to swim."

I realized what he had over his shoulder then—the little dead girl from the churchyard.

I climbed onto the parapet and judged the drop. Maybe twelve feet. *And if I break my leg?* I thought. *I'm stuck in Usk with a waitress and a loser, and I'll end up dying in bed.*

"Jamie, what are you doing?" It was a stupid question, because I could already guess. As ever, he was trying to be defiant, because that was the only way he could hide his fear.

"Helping her escape," he said, giggling. "See how far she'll get."

"They're trying to keep this thing contained," I said, and I blinked, confused. Did I *agree* with what they were doing? I hadn't really given myself time to consider that, not yet.

"You're a pompous shit, Toby. Y'know that? You should listen to yourself sometimes, look at yourself." Jamie stepped down the riverbank onto some mud flats. The river rushed by several feet from him.

I almost jumped. If I had, perhaps I would have stopped him. But the real reason that kept me up on the bridge was the idea that the trees across the river could be home to snipers. I didn't want to be close to Jamie when they started shooting.

But there was no gunfire as he approached the river, and none as he shrugged the girl off his shoulder and into the mud. Her limbs were still loose, eyes clear. *There's been a recurrence.*

"Jamie, do you want other people to go through what you're going through?" Bindy asked.

"Yes," Jamie said. He pushed the child into the water. I winced, expecting gunfire, and as we watched her float away, I realized that I had failed. I was a coward. A jump, a punch, and I could have stopped him.

"Fuck," I said.

"Yes, 'cause if I have to go through it, why shouldn't other people?" There wasn't an ounce of regret in his voice. In fact, I thought I heard an element of glee as he giggled again, took a half bottle of whiskey from a pocket in his cargo pants, and started drinking.

"You're a fucking idiot, Jamie," Bindy said, "and you'll get us all killed." She was watching the little girl carried out by the river.

The water flow was quite fast here after being channeled through the bridge's three arches, and the body started to turn as it moved downriver, spinning clockwise with arms and legs splayed, hair billowing out around it. *The dust will be washed from her eyes now*, I thought. A tree overhanging the river snagged her clothing for a beat, but then she moved on, and soon she was out of sight around a bend.

I realized that Jamie had already walked back up the bank and skirted around the old tollhouse at the bridge's end. He was heading back along the main street, bottle clasped loose in one hand, and he swayed slightly as he walked. Still drunk. Jamie would always be drunk, and I wondered how much worse he'd be sober.

"What do we do now?" Bindy asked. She had moved closer to me, and she reached out as she spoke. I took her hand.

"Just carry on," I said. "I'm still looking."

"But if you *do* find her—"

"I'm still looking." I let go of Bindy and started following Jamie.

"You're not, in case you were wondering," she said, as she followed on behind.

"Not what?"

"A pompous shit."

I shrugged as if I didn't care.

Jamie was sitting on the curb close to the post office, a stupid grin on his face. Waiting for us. Waiting to gloat.

“What?” Bindy said. I cursed her silently for encouraging him.

“Showed them,” he said. He laughed, but I detected an uncertainty in him. The laughter was there to cover that, perhaps for himself.

“Yes, you really showed them, Jamie,” I said. “They’re sure to buck up their ideas and let us leave now. Prick.”

He went to stand, swayed, and I saw violence cloud his face. I didn’t want to fight him, because I’d never been a fighter. But I realized it was something else that would come between him and his uncertainty, and he was set on the course now.

He threw his empty bottle away and took a step toward me, and then the chopper came.

“What do they want now?” Jamie said. He sounded scared.

“Stay where you are,” that mechanical voice instructed.

“Lecture,” I said. “We’re their pets, and they’re going to give us a good talking-to.”

I was right. But they didn’t say another word. Instead, as the chopper hovered just above the buildings fifty yards along the street from us, a man leaned out with something in his hand. *Camera and microphone*, I thought, and then Jamie flipped back onto the pavement, blood spewing from his throat just below his Adam’s apple. His eyes were wide, hands waving like separate animals as they tried to find the wound, and before they could, a second shot rang out. This one was right on target, and the top and back of his head splashed across the post office’s front steps.

The helicopter left. Bindy had turned away, but I couldn’t help but look. I’d seen a lot of death, but there was something worse about this one. For a few seconds, as blood dripped, his left foot twitched, and his eyes slowly turned up in his head. I couldn’t work out what it was.

“And then there were two!” Bindy said, verging on hysteria.

And that was it. Because inside I knew we’d be in here for a very long time, and prick though he was, Jamie was company. And prick though I was, distant and aloof, I knew I could never hope to survive this on my own.

I went to Bindy and held her, and this time it was me taking

comfort from the contact as well. She felt warm and alive, and I held on to that with everything I had.

That night, Bindy moved into my room at the hotel. I did not object, and she didn't ask. She simply dropped her small bag of belongings next to mine, stripped to her underwear, and climbed into bed. I put my arm around her shoulders, and she rested her head on my chest, and soon she was asleep. There was nothing sexual at all. I smelled her, felt her heat, felt her heavy breasts pressed against my side, but I didn't stir. This was pure survival instinct, and though we didn't need each other's bodily warmth, there was so much more to share.

The next day we went about burying Jamie. I tied a bag around his head so that we didn't have to look at where wildlife had been picking at him. Bindy broke into a hardware and DIY store to find a shovel and pick. We carried him together across the main street and through a small alley that led to a pub garden. There were rose beds here, so the ground was still quite soft even in the summer heat, and I saw no reason to carry him all the way to the church.

We took turns digging. While Bindy dug, I squatted and watched her. There had never been any attraction—and the thought of betraying Fiona's memory was terrible to me—but for the first time I realized what a striking young woman she was. Perhaps fear took this away from her, but now, digging in shorts and a vest top, sweating in the morning sun, mud streaked up her legs, she was quite beautiful. I enjoyed watching her, and that enjoyment ceased only when I saw movement from Jamie's body.

I gasped, stood upright, and saw sparrows flutter away from his bloodied chest. *Only them*, I thought; *it was only them*. But when it was my turn to dig again, I used the pick and made sure we planted him deep.

It took a couple of hours, and halfway through, Bindy went to the shop and came back with a couple of bottles of water. The shop stank now—so much stuff in there had rotted, its stink was rank and stale—but there was enough canned and bottled goods to see us through for a long time.

“Are we going to be here forever?” she asked, as I shoveled dirt in on top of Jamie.

I paused, panting and sweating hard, and leaned on the shovel.

*She doesn't seem so scared now*, I thought. And there *was* something changed about her. Maybe it was because Jamie had gone, or perhaps it was the simple fact that we'd slept comforting each other, holding the nightmares at bay.

"Maybe," I said. "Or at least until they know exactly what happened here." Past her head I could see one of the camera tripods on a building's rooftop. Soon, it wouldn't be long before they could watch us almost anywhere if we were outside.

Bindy nodded, then looked down at Jamie's grave. "We'll be okay," she said, and she sounded so certain that I wondered if she'd been stronger than me all along.

The helicopter overflew the town all day, turning a tight circle several times if it saw us in the street. It dropped those two men down a few times, letting them set up other cameras before lifting them away again. I supposed we could have gone to those buildings and smashed up the cameras, but maybe there would be a punishment for that. These people seemed keen to keep their own special lab rats under control.

Bindy helped me look for Fiona. I couldn't find it in me to say I wanted to do it on my own. Then after we stopped for lunch, I realized that I *wanted* her with me. She was good company; she seemed to have taken her fear under control; and I found myself stealing more glances at her as we walked. *I really am a pompous shit*, I thought, because I'd never given myself a chance to know this woman at all.

We started going into houses we hadn't had a chance to explore before, and we found the remains of eight people. None of them were zombies, that we could tell: Rot had taken them all, and some of them were badly mauled and chewed, their bones and remains strewn around. None of them were Fiona. I went to great pains to sift through the remains, gagging, puking several times when the smell became too much, and I never found anything of her I recognized. No jewelery, no hair, no clothing. It was a continuation of the most terrible thing I had ever done—we'd been shifting and hauling bodies for three weeks—but I had to make sure.

Bindy came with me every time, but she always stayed outside those rooms. I could not blame her at all, though as time went on that day, I found myself missing her company more and more, as I moved splintered bones and stinking things aside.

By early evening we were exhausted, and we went back to the hotel. They'd been there while we were away and installed cameras in the upper corners of the hallway, bar, kitchen, pantry, and the corridor upstairs outside our room. Greasy footprints marked their route up and down the stair carpet, and I was outraged at them for not removing their boots.

"They're really interested in what happens to us," she said, as if truly realizing our predicament for the first time.

I nodded, not wanting to speak. *They're watching us right now. Maybe O'Driscoll is with them, drinking good coffee, eating a doughnut, and they'll be looking for signs of infection or madness or rage.* I had no wish to say anything to them, so I motioned for Bindy to come into our room.

I spent some time looking around for cameras and microphones. Would they really have any respect for our privacy? There were no bootprints on our light room carpet, but maybe that was just them being sly. I could find nothing—no cameras, whose presence would have been obvious, and no microphones either. I actually caught Bindy smiling as I looked inside the lamp shades and behind the mirror, and I smiled back, remembering what I'd said to O'Driscoll. *What movie do you think you're in?*

We ate downstairs in the bar, sharing a bottle of wine, and it was the most relaxed meal we'd had since being thrown together by this. Jamie's agitated presence had always been a pressure, but something about Bindy had changed. I thought that Jamie being gone perhaps allowed her to assess her panics and fears without his own stoking them.

We slept in the same bed again that night, sharing comfort, relishing contact. Though I was aware of the heat of her more than before, and the feel of her molded to me, still there was no tension at all. I appreciated that, and I fell asleep dreaming of Fiona planting roses in our garden, laughing, and scooping dust out of her eyes with delicate thumbs.

The helicopter didn't come the next day. As we continued our search through the deserted town and the sun reached its zenith, I saw a column of smoke rising far in the distance.

"Is that another cremation pit?" Bindy asked.

"I don't think so. Something about it's different."

"How do you mean?" She came closer and held my hand.

"It's a long way away."

She squeezed. The implications of that did not need stating. It was a wide column, and high, and if it was several miles distant, the fire must be huge.

When I said that I was going to the edge of town to see what I could see, she shook her head and backed away from me.

"I don't want to see," she said. "I don't want to know."

"Bindy, the chopper hasn't been around this morning."

She nodded, looking away from me.

"And you've noticed the cameras?"

"Yeah." They weren't turning to follow our progress. I'd been keeping a wary eye on them since I noticed that, first thing in the morning, but I hadn't wanted to mention it to her.

"We have to know."

She was shaking her head, but there were no tears. She was far from the Bindy she'd been just a couple of days before. Now I saw calculation and consideration in her eyes, not blind panic.

"I have to know." I went to her and held her, and she was hot, her skin already tacky with sweat. It was the hottest day I could remember, and I felt a rush of affection for her then. I kissed the side of her head, she kissed my shoulder, and we both hugged tighter.

"I'm going to keep looking," she said, nodding toward the street we'd been searching. They were big houses, and there were five left on this row.

"You're sure?"

She touched the claw hammer she carried in her belt. We'd both agreed that it would be handy for breaking the locks out of doors, but it didn't need saying that it was also a weapon.

"I won't be long," I said, but that turned out to be a lie. It would be evening before I saw Bindy again, and by then our whole world had changed once more.

I went back toward the roadblock by the school. I stood there shouting for a while, waving at the cameras, trying to get their attention. Stepping left and right across the road, the cameras did not follow my progress.

“I need to speak with O’Driscoll!” I shouted. Silence was my answer.

In the distance to the south, beyond a range of hills, the column of smoke still rose. It could have been Cwmbran several miles away, or maybe Newport, several miles farther. Whichever it was, I judged its fiery base to be miles wide.

Waving at the cameras was stupid. There was no one there to see.

So I climbed the roadblock and started walking along the road. To begin with, I cursed myself with every step, knowing how foolish I was being, wincing at the expectation of a high-powered rifle shot. *I’ll be hit before I even hear the shot*, I thought, and that was no comfort at all. But there was no gunfire, no helicopters, and no loud mechanical voices exhorting me to “Please don’t attempt escape.” Right then there was nothing I wanted to hear more.

The road ran for a mile before splitting and filtering down onto a dual highway heading north and south. It was deserted and quiet, save for the wildlife that was becoming braver day by day: I saw a fox watching me from a large house’s garden, and a buzzard sat on the road eating something it had just caught, not even glancing up at me as I passed within fifteen feet of it. I tried to identify what it was eating, but I could not. There was no fur.

I saw them from far away. I knew what they were. And I gave thanks to gods I had never believed in that the military had seen fit to erect a second line of protection.

The fence spanned the road just before it split to curve down to the highway. It was high, heavy-duty, and I could track its route across fields and in front of a distant copse of trees, curving around the north end of the town. In the other direction it was soon lost to view, but I hoped it was just as long, and just as strong.

I sat down in the road and watched them pressing against it.

Most of them wore army uniforms, those who weren’t in underwear or naked. Many bore terrible wounds, and the blood still flowed. Dead blood must have been different, though, because its stench did not attract their brethren. A zombie’s heart, it seemed, did not taste so sweet.

There were maybe fifty of them. Most were clumped against the section of fence built across the road, but I saw a few down in the fields as well. One of those still seemed to be carrying a rifle across

his back, though now I hoped he no longer remembered how to use it.

They were making very little noise. A few moans and groans, but none of the raging growls that had marked the first phase of infection. All these were past that now. They'd gone mad and killed and died, and now they were back again, and all they saw when they looked at me was my succulent still-beating heart.

*There's been a recurrence*, O'Driscoll had said. Smug prick. I looked for him but didn't see him. I hoped he'd been killed and torn apart, found true death, because however much I hated him, I'd had contact with him, and he was a human being like me. He was only doing what he thought was right, and this was no way to end up.

I tried to make out exactly what this meant. The Purge had worked in Usk, for a while at least, and now that there had been an outbreak beyond the town, surely the military would launch another Purge . . . ? But there was no sound of vehicles anywhere, neither ground nor air, and I could see no plane trails in the sky.

And there was that burning city.

I sat and watched them for a while, trying not to appreciate the stark truth of things—that this plague had gone farther, and perhaps was still traveling.

Then I knew what I had to do before returning to Bindy, because I couldn't go back to her with half-truths and suppositions. I had to make sure that we were safe and that our prison had become our refuge.

I walked north first of all, following the fence all around the town until it reached the river. I looked into the town at the stone bridge, and from here I could just see the clumsy block barrier that they'd built at its center. The fence extended right across the river and continued on the other side, obviously encompassing what had been their encampment.

I followed the fence back around the town, crossing the road where most of them were still gathered. They pushed and shoved, but the fence was solid, and they had no real strength.

A mile to the south of town I saw O'Driscoll. He was naked, and his entire front was a mass of dried blood. I couldn't make out whether or not it was his own, and I gave him a wide berth. He

leaned against the metal upright, banging his head rhythmically against it as he watched me pass.

The fence reached the river on that side too and crossed over, and I knew I had to swim over to make sure. I half-swam, half-walked, and on the other side, where their encampment had been, I found that the fence only enclosed a small part of it. Gates were built in at two points, both of them padlocked and chained. I'd found no breaches and no areas where any of them could climb over. The military had been very thorough and determined to keep us in, and as I forded the river again and walked back into town, I thanked them for that. It was a good thing they'd realized how dangerous we could be.

Bindy was in the hotel bar, sipping nervously from a glass of wine. When I entered she jumped up and ran to me, cursing and crying and wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Where the fucking hell have you been?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm sorry."

"You're all I've got, Toby; you're all that's left. Don't you dare scare me like that again, *ever!*" She pulled back and held my face, staring into my eyes, and I realized something both striking and comforting then: In her own quiet way, Bindy was in charge.

"I won't," I said. She held me tightly again, and I hugged her back. "You're all I've got too, Bindy."

She pulled away, stalked back to the bar, poured some drinks. She wouldn't catch my eye.

"It's spread outside," I said.

"I know. I guessed. I walked and saw the fence, and some of . . . them."

"That big fire's still burning."

"Yeah."

"Maybe they'll starve."

We sat down together and drank, shoulder to shoulder on a leather sofa, the contact so important. There was so much more that needed to be said, but I knew it could wait. We both realized the truth—that our entrapment had become the only freedom left.

Later, just before midnight, I asked her what she'd found as she continued searching the big houses on that street. Her hesitation was

## IN THE DUST

just too long for me to ignore, and she would not meet my eyes. But when she said “Nothing,” I nodded and let it stand. For then, at least.

That night in bed, we began our future together. It was beautiful and intense, and I think the passion came more from our continuing freedom than anything else. I should have felt guilt, but there was none, because the past was now so far away and obscure that it felt like someone else’s memories. Maybe in the daylight things would be different, but then it felt so right.

Afterward, lying in the dark listening to a silence that would become the norm, she told me.

“I found her,” she said.

“I know.”

“In the last house. I nailed the doors shut.”

“Good.”

“So . . . ?”

“Tomorrow, yes. We’ll go and set a fire.”

I did not sleep at all that night. The fear was there that we had left it too late, and I listened every second for sounds that did not come—the creaking of footsteps on the stairs, the low grumbling of my wife come to berate me and regain my heart.

Even though she said nothing, I knew that Bindy remained awake as well. She was looking after me.

Dawn brought the smell of burning from afar, and we went out together to finish cleansing our town.

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