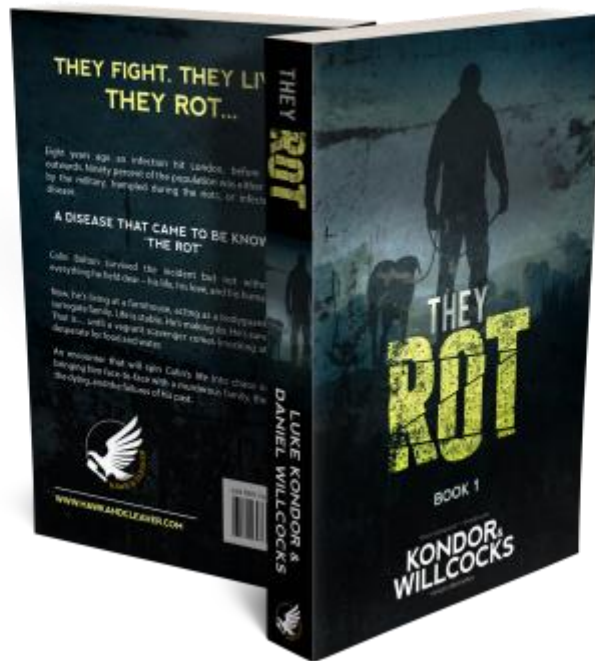




**KEEP
KEEP MY
BONES**

A SHORT STORY

**KONDOR &
WILLCOCKS**



THEY ROT

THE FIRST BOOK IN A BRUTAL NEW SERIES OF POST-APOCALYPTIA, BROUGHT TO YOU BY KONDOR & WILLCOCKS, TWO OF THE MASTERMINDS BEHIND THE WILDLY SUCCESSFUL 'THE OTHER STORIES' PODCAST.

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KEEP MY BONES

The line bobbed and danced on a river long dirtied to the point of darkness. What once was a shimmering surface now an oily black, dotted here and there with the silhouettes of flotsam, jetsam, and corpses as the dead floated on by. Somewhere beneath it all, the food that Carter would catch.

He straightened his back in his chair, heard a click, slumped once more. A shape floated nearby, a small body, the face of a child long lost. The skin fallen away to reveal the sodden biology beneath. It was no more than ten feet away. He watched with a blank curiosity as the body bumped somewhere in the shadows, and the corpse rolled over onto its front, hiding itself from Carter. How long had it been dead for? Floating on a slow journey towards the open ocean? It had a ways to go yet, through the miles of rivers and streams, down to the Thames Estuary, maybe even down into the North Sea. Truth is the body wasn't likely to make it all the way. It would probably find itself lodged in some tunnel or caught in the branches of some upturned tree, forking into the waters, grabbing ahold of what it could.

Trapped. Like they all were. Breaking down over time until the mouldered cells of flesh came away in the water, only to be sucked up by the summer sunshine, and hosed back down onto the hills and mountains. There the boy — or what Carter assumed was a boy, there was no real way to tell anymore — would find new life. In the plants that would grow, in the animals that would lap from the streams and water deposits, and into any foolish humans' stomachs who didn't take the time to filter their water properly. The boy would remain, finding his way into arteries, nestling into the marrow of their bones.

Carter lifted the thick muddied rags of his hood and nodded to the boy, now disappearing around the natural bend of the river, past a clump of reeds and out of sight.

"Farewell, young traveller," he muttered, kneading the back of his neck with a calloused hand, careful not to disturb his line. But he need not worry, the black stainless steel pole remained perfectly still, its base buried a good foot or so into the thick mud of the Thames'

bank. “God speed.”

There came a small splash, and Carter looked up just in time to see the silver tail of a fish disappearing into the water, leaving a small ring of disturbance behind it. He grinned and licked his lips. On the other side of the bank were the great towers of the old city, spiking into the sky where low-hanging dark clouds hovered. Amidst the skyline, he could see The Shard building cutting into the sky like a jagged tooth. An anorexic pyramid that had once been the jewel on the crown of one of the great cities of the world.

I never did get to visit...

Not that he had ever really wanted to. That kind of thing was more Juniper’s cup of tea. She’d had lots of fancy ideas of London and the life that they would lead when they finally made their way from their home on the coast all those years ago.

“It’ll be an adventure,” she’d said.

“It’ll be a memory,” she’d implored.

“It’ll be fun.”

She’d been right in the end, he supposed. At least, until the screams started and the men with the guns came.

Carter looked over his shoulder and checked for signs of movement, the memories sending an all-too-familiar shiver up his spine. Though, really, he need not have worried. The rags that kept him warm day in and day out had served as a great camouflage so far. If anyone were to approach from behind, all they might see is an empty chair, two buckets, and a fishing pole left as a relic from days long gone. Carter looked up the muddied banks towards the derelict housing and the flats behind him. He eyed the windows, looking for any signs of life between the fungal green clinging to the walls and the dirty smoke that darkened the once-pristine, almost utopian, living quarters.

Empty. As per usual. Carter wasn’t sure if that made him happy or not, or even what he would do if he were to encounter civilised humans. His brief encounters with anyone since the rot came and the quarantine formed had been less than savoury. He had long since given up hope in the idea that he’d stumble across good-natured...

City-folk? What else to call them? Bad news back then, and worse now.

Carter’s stomach grumbled. He leant over to a large bucket with ‘*Good*’ written on the side in black marker pen and plucked out a small trout from the shallow water. He inspected the grey-pink gradient of the scales, glistening brilliantly even in the overcast skies. A quick inspection of the eyes — *Looking good* — and a final sniff of the thing before Carter was satisfied.

It wriggled as he brought its head to his dry lips and bit down through flesh and bone, jerking wildly as he gripped it in his teeth and pulled, hearing minuscule organs inside pop. Carter didn't flinch. He was a pro at this. He masticated the eyes, bone, brain, everything into a paste and swallowing it with ease, feeling the clumpy texture work its way into his stomach.

The fish stopped moving.

He threw the headless body back into the bucket where it slapped against the two live ones. At one point it had seemed a cruel thing to do, throwing a headless body back into the presence of the living ones, but not anymore. The world had carved out any and all romantic empathy he may have had. Hell, he used to describe himself as an animal lover. A cat man, to be exact. He grew up around five of the fluffy creatures. He'd talk to them all in funny voices and roll around with them, giving all the kisses and cuddles he could. Had even had fish of his own at one point.

Death becomes death, Carter thought, until death is all you can see.

His stomach rumbled again, unsatisfied by the slimy morsel churning in his guts.

It's Juniper's fault, really. She hadn't bothered to pack him any lunch that morning. A simple task she once loved. Handing him a wrapped-up sandwich, a bag of crisps, and a satsuma, all with a smile and a kiss. But, somewhere, over the years, her smiles had faded. Food stocks depleted, and there was only so much she could prepare for her little fisherman, wiling away the days at the riverbank, catching the proteins that would keep them alive that little bit longer.

She hadn't even said goodbye to him this morning.

He sighed. Jimmied the line.

Maybe it was time to move on? Maybe enough time had passed that they could finally leave the city and make their way to the camps? It was a long trek, and the last time they had tried, they had encountered too many rotters to count, only narrowly avoiding death and finding their way into the safehouse they resided now. Dangers were aplenty, but maybe it would be worth it. If they could venture out into the countryside, perhaps they'd be greeted with a new home, some friends... maybe a cat or two.

He snapped out of his daydreaming when his line suddenly danced on the water again. He gripped the rod in his hands and saw a sturgeon caught on the hook — a large one at that. It looked lively and strong. *Big enough to feed Juniper for a week alone.*

He was now thankful for the trout's head he'd swallowed, feeling the energy boost it gave. The nutrients filtering down into his body. He angled the pole skywards and began to reel it in. The spooked sturgeon thrashed left and right.

“Oh, no yer don’t, yer lil bastard!”

Another yank and the tail splashed out of the water. It hovered in the air a moment, before slapping back down, spraying his exposed toes that poked out of his worn boots in cold water. Carter stood, dropping the tattered deck chair behind him to the floor. He planted his feet firmly on the ground for extra leverage and pulled at the fish. Its gormless face breached the oily surface as it erupted out of the water, flapping violently in the open air. Carter flicked the pole once more and swung the fish towards his makeshift jetty. It landed on the pallet-wood and fought hard to move back to the water.

Carter grinned stupidly, already licking his lips at the sight. It was a goddamn giant! He reached for the steel pipe tucked down into the rags around his legs — what must’ve once been a small cross-section of scaffolding bars — and slammed it against the sturgeon’s head. Once, twice, and again for good luck. Blood pooled on the jetty. The sturgeon gave up. Carter laughed victoriously.

“Yer lucky nob, Carter. Yer lucky nobber!”

Drawing his muddied sleeves upwards, he reached towards the tenderised fish, his bare hands chill in the river breeze. He stopped just an inch away. His fool’s grin turned to disgust, then horror as he saw the fine white strands that had punctured through the sturgeon’s torso and gills. He prodded the fish with his pole to get a better look at the eyes. *Ah, you son-of-a-bitch...* The eyes were hollow. More threads slithered out though the pink holes and wormed towards his hand.

Was there anything the rot hadn’t touched?

He yanked his hand away and shook his head in disgust. It was the same every time. In the excitement of the catch, he’d forget the increasing reality that even the fish weren’t immune. Though some (those lucky buggers in bucket number one) had somehow managed to avoid the spores, each day more and more fish were succumbing to the rot. Taken over and playing host to the myelin strands that spread like wildfire to survive...

Dropping the steel pipe, he turned and grabbed the giant mitt (he assumed it was used for welding or some such back in the day) from beneath his chair. He quickly scooped the fish up and dropped it into the second bucket — steel, with a lid. This one half-full of spore-ridden fish.

He placed the steel lid back over the bucket as threads slithered and grasped at the rush of cool air. He fastened a couple clips on the side. It wasn’t a permanent solution (those strands could find their way through almost anything), but it would keep them quiet and secure until he burned them later. Maybe he couldn’t eat these ones, but he could sure as hell stop them

from infecting his waters.

A quick check of the darkening sky told him it was getting late. He sighed as he looked into the 'Good' bucket. It wasn't a great haul, but he felt it would have to do. He began to wind in his line. The last thing he wanted was to be out here at night. Night time was a great time for things to creep up on you, and there was no way he was ever going to leave Juniper by herself at night.

At least, not anymore.

He looked once more at the towers of the old city. The great epitaphs that reached for the heavens themselves, symbolising nothing more than wasted time and false promises of a world that would always turn. At least, that's what the television hosts and the newspaper honchos had said. Never could anyone have imagined this. Never would anyone have believed-

Something caught Carter's eye. Along the bank to his left. Far enough away that it was no more than an inch tall to his vision. He pinched at his eyes, shook his head, and looked again. Maybe he was seeing things.

His heart stopped. A whimper escaped his lips. It was a man, that much was clear. His beard, similar to Carter's own, reached down to his chest. He had younger eyes, though. Blues that pierced even from this distance. His legs disappeared behind the overgrowth. But even here, Carter could see the man's hands. He saw the something sharp. The little light there was, glinting off its edge.

Carter did the only thing he could think of. He waved to the man. Hoping maybe he would take it as a sign of peace. He slowly began to assemble his fishing equipment, wrapping it in the blue tarp, never taking his eyes off the man. He grabbed the handle of bucket number one and slowly climbed the muddy banks, leaving bucket number two behind. He didn't have time for that now. He'd have to burn it tomorrow. Not ideal but it would have to do.

His lungs burned and his calves ached as he reached the top of the bank and found the gravel path. His foot slipped, and he threw his hands down to catch himself, losing sight of the man for half a second.

There was a noise. Not quite a scream, but enough for Carter to snap his head back up and look down the river towards the man...

But he was gone. A short distance from where he stood, water rippled outwards in rings. Had the man dived in? Was he making his way through the waves, downstream, towards Carter right now?

Time to go, Carter thought, quickening in his step. There would be no sense in waiting for a stranger to re-emerge.

The path home was automatic to Carter by now. He passed under a steel bridge that smelled of damp rust and worked his way through a century-old industrial estate. The same path he always took. Piles of steel on either side. A rusty crane towering over, reaching into the water. Open garage doors full of pallets stacked with unused construction materials. A couple of dead bodies, little more than bone now.

Yet, still, as he tried to keep his ears open for any potential dangers, the man's eyes burned in his mind. He felt an unfounded paranoia take over. What if there were more of them? What if that man was a scout, and he was tailing Carter right now? Studying his moves to inform the rest of the gang of where there were survivors. He could've been a scavvie... or worse...

Carter doubled his speed. Heart pounding. Pulse blasting. He ran past the corner shop with smashed windows, emptied of rations and goods. Through the alleyway that led out into the football and basketball park. An unused children's climbing frame singing as the wind blew against it.

It's okay, Juney, Carter thought. Nothing to worry about... Carter's got it all under control. 'Til death do us part

Pictures of her face flashed into his mind. Pictures of pain. Of monsters hidden in shadows with blades thrust into her stomach. Of toothless grins and stale breath. He slapped himself across the face, leaping over a small fence, forcing the memories to shift and morph. *Happy thoughts... just think of happy...* An afternoon sat in a café in the city, traffic roaring outside, sharing stories of work over frappuccinos and muffins, the blistering summer heat blinding them through the windows. Their wedding day. Juniper's auburn locks tied up in a decorative jumble of knots, white dress pooled around her feet. Her face smiling so much she complained her cheeks hurt. Her tear-filled "I do" as her father, Gary, walked her down the aisle. Friends sat out in the sunshine as Carter and Juniper were married in a beautiful painted-white gazebo out in the gardens of a century-old country house. Their vows they'd written for one another. Hers humorous and loving, all promises of unending love and cooked meals.

"You'll never have to make the bed again," she said with a tearful chuckle.

And Carter's vows? His were much simpler than that. Inspired by old folk songs they'd listened to together on a bunched-up rug in their first apartment.

"Keep me, dear," he said as he held onto her delicate hands. "When I'm tired and grumpy, old and fat, bald and angry. Just promise me that you'll keep me, and I'll keep you." Her blue eyes on his. Her head tilting to the side. Full of love. Full of gratitude to be in the moment. "Our bodies, our love, our bones, forever together. Just please, please, dear, no matter what happens, keep my bones."

Carter turned onto Tudor Close, past the festering overgrown gardens, and the broken down cars, long since looted for parts, and past the same yellow and red plastic kids' toy car. He reached his own garden and dropped the blue tarp with his fishing equipment and the 'Good' bucket.

"Juniper!" he shouted, closing the door behind him and turning the lock. "Juniper!"

He scanned the living room.

"Juniper," he said with a smile as he doubled over, hacking up phlegm and spitting it into the carpet. "Thank goodness... Thank..." He knew he had been silly to let his mind panic like that. She always did say that he had an overactive imagination.

"Too creative to be pushing carpets and rugs all day. Don't worry baby, you'll get your shot soon," she had once said after Carter's manager had been particularly prickly one day at work. "Things'll change, you'll see."

Carter stroked Juniper's hair and kissed her forehead. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. She just looked at him with those big gorgeous eyes of hers, her stacks of books and photos piled either side, watching as Carter smiled and fetched in the catches of the day.

He soon forgot about the man on the riverbank, the sturgeon and its myelin strands, and it didn't even cross his mind to let Juniper know what he had seen. There really was no point in worrying her. Instead, he snacked on the remaining body of the fish he'd bitten into earlier, mashing it into a paste before swallowing, and then tended to his evening duties.

Starting with the water butt fixed to the gutter pipes. He emptied the collection of rainwater out into three empty plastic bottles and took them inside, adding them to the collection, all ready to be filtered. Ideally, they'd have some sort of ultra-violet lighting system to clean the water but all they had was fire and cooking pans.

Next, he grabbed one of the many pieces of furniture from the bedroom. A collection of wood he'd looted from around the neighbourhood. He took one of the fine dining chairs, broke it down, and placed it on the hearth. He sat in front of the fire and rubbed his hands together.

The whole time Carter busied himself with his chores, Juniper never said a word.

Perhaps she was still angry with him.

Perhaps the depression was taking its toll.

Or maybe it was because she hadn't said a word since their visitor had arrived all that time ago...

Before the daylight was fully gone, Carter checked himself in the bathroom mirror. He wiped a layer of dust and grime from its surface to reveal the stranger before him. The wiry beard. The gaunt face, almost skeletal. His front teeth now rotten and blackened. Greying eyes

with lightning strikes of red against the once perfect whites.

He sighed.

Where did the time go?

Where did his youth go?

When the sun finally sunk, he laid down on the tattered rug on the hardwood floor. Juniper watched him from her chair. As he drifted off, he felt her staring at the back of his head.

He wondered if she would she even sleep at all that night.

*

Carter lifted his face from the carpet, peeling his lips where the saliva had dried. It didn't seem longer than twenty seconds since he drifted asleep, and judging by the light outside it was already early afternoon.

Juniper was snoozing away in the chair. The poor girl. His eyes lingered on her sleeping face. So perfect. A smile crept up on him as he bathed in his love for her, but faded quickly when he saw the dark patch on her dress. It hadn't been her fault. None of it had. This wasn't the house she'd dreamed of when she'd begged Carter to move. This wasn't the life she'd asked for, living day by day in fear that some scavvie scum or a rotter would suddenly appear and have you fleeing for your life. And this city... this wasn't the London she'd wanted to move to. This place... this place was something else. This was hell. No doubt about it.

He climbed to his feet and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He tiptoed into the kitchen (doing his best not to wake Juniper), grabbed a bottle of water from the side and drank greedily. He rinsed his mouth and spat into the sink. Strings of red accompanied his spit, clinging to the porcelain surface. His eyes lingered on the blood. His stomach turned.

A noise from the living room.

"Juniper?" he called, wandering back into the living room. He checked around, saw no movement, then crossed to Juniper and stroked her head. "I know, I know, darling. Times is rough and we can't stay here forever." She snuggled into his hand. Clumps of hair fell into his palm and floated to the floor, shedding from the lack of real nutrition in their diet. "I've had an idea, and I think it could help us now. I think it's time we leave. Make our way out of here and look for some place safer, eh? How does that sound? We can't stay in this cesspit any longer, June. It's killing me. You. It's killing us." Tears streamed from his eyes now. "I can't bear to lose you, Juniper. I love you."

He left before she could reply. He hated crying in front of her.

The fog was worse today. The sun did its best to burst through, but the mist was thick and close. He could barely see further than twenty feet ahead.

This thick, throat-closing fog was once known as the London Particular, Carter remembered reading one day on Wikipedia before work. Way back in the Victorian days, they used to fear it. They said that in the fog hid demons, who used it to obscure their presence, so they could sneak up on some poor unsuspecting chap and drag them away and into their domain. As he followed his own footprints back to the water, he felt them all staring at him. Watching from just beyond the reaches of his vision. Mocking. Laughing. Waiting for him to trip so they could pounce as one and devour him in a single sitting.

He heard the river before he saw it. It even took him a few minutes to find his pallet and deck chair. His daily fishing stoop. He dropped the tarp to the floor and picked up the pole, mentally preparing himself for another day of sitting and waiting. He was about to tie a palomar knot in the line when he noticed that bucket number two was missing.

Carter looked as far as the fog would allow, seeing no sign of where the bucket may have gone. In his head came a vision of the thin white strands, growing and tangling inside each other beneath the steel lid of the bucket. Filling all the available space until the pressure was great enough to pop the lid off, and climb out into the air, seeking new hosts. He could see the bucket falling to its side, the strands acting like paddles to roll back into the water, where the fish could latch to the bottom of the riverbed and wait for unsuspecting prey to infect.

The idea of it made him shudder. He scolded himself for letting himself get spooked and losing a good bucket. He sat himself back in his chair, cast his line, and stared at the Thames.

The water was particularly choppy today, the London skyline obscured from view by the Particular. *This is a bad day to be fishing*, Carter thought. He could still feel the demons about him. A thousand eyes watching him, waiting for him to lower his guard. But what was a man to do? He only had two good trout back at the house and that wasn't nearly enough to sustain himself and Juniper. He could already feel the pang of hunger echoing through his body.

Carter patted his stomach and waited for the fish to bite.

It was some time later that Carter rolled his neck, pinched at his tender muscles, and saw something that made him sit up and squint through the fog. Not too far to his right. The circular base of the missing bucket, caught in the water in an overgrown patch of weeds.

He scratched at his beard and lips, peeling at the already dry skin.

His first instinct was to get up and grab it. In a world where good, sturdy resources don't come along too easily, it was worth holding on to the things that you knew did their job. The bucket had done just that. A sturdy thing that had not only been a great place to store his rot-

infested fish (*cleaning London's river, one fish at a time*), but he had used it as a suitcase, a bonfire guard, and plenty more things since Juniper had spotted it one late evening on their way home.

On the other hand... what if the fish were still inside?

Carter shook his head, turned his attention back to the spot where the fishing line disappeared into the fog. The thin wire looking as though it was suspended in the air. Its counterparts lost in the fog.

It's just a bucket, Carter tried to convince himself. *Plenty more buckets out there.*

And yet still the temptation was there. Just wade out and grab it. It was solid. A good tool. It'd take seconds.

No, no, no.

Too risky to go in the murky water where the dead things lay. His boots were full of holes, his thick trousers would grow heavy. If any rotter-fish caught his bare skin it would be game over, he'd seen it for himself. Had lost close friends to the serpentine strands of the rot. A fleeting image of several strands winding around his legs. Gripping. Burrowing.

What good would a dead Carter be for Juniper?

June...

But as Carter turned himself away from the weeds, he found he couldn't just let it go. The idea had germinated well and truly in his head. He could see himself running to the bucket, yanking it out the water, and sitting down. *Easy peasy, lemon squeezy*. And, besides, any day now he and Juniper would finally settle on leaving this dump and looking for less-brown pastures. They'd been in this place, in this life for too long. Perhaps moving away would raise her spirits, pull her out of this dark well she'd found herself in.

For a journey like that, Carter's inner voice whispered, *you'll need some kind of storage device, some kind of...*

His feet were already moving. One foot hovered over the water. He pulled it back and looked down at the rippling browns of the marshland leading deep into the water.

Step. The mud squished into the holes in his boots and clumped between his toes. Whether he it was his imagination or not, he could already feel things clawing at him. Binding around his feet. Sowing themselves between his toes. Another careful step, sliding further into the marsh. The mud was soft, sinking beneath him. All things pulling Carter into the water. His heart pounded. His breathing heavy. He grunted, pushed the reeds out of his way and felt his foot disappear under five inches of mud.

Still too far away.

“Dammit,” he said to himself, “in for a penny...” He took another step, then another, the water up to his waist. The cold water seeped through his trousers and chilled his skin. Another step...

And it was enough.

His fingertips grasped the handle of the bucket. He tugged. It came free.

“Yes!” he celebrated through chattering teeth, turning with speed to get out of the water. “You son-of-a-bitch. Yes!-”

Something moved through his toes. He squealed and jumped.

A worm, he told himself. *Or an eel or some such*. But that’s not what he could really see in his mind. The thought that it was one of the spores of a rot-fish had him crawling and spasming up the bank, splashing wildly as his hands tried to paddle the water and increase his speed. For a step or two it worked, until one foot slipped and Carter fell face-first into the water. The thing wriggled in his boot, sliding and playing inside the moist leather. He kicked hard at the floor, burst forward a couple feet, then gripped the muddy surface of the bank. His fingers gouged lines into the mud as he pulled himself along, trying to crawl up the bank on his belly.

Almost there...

Something grabbed hold of his ankle and yanked him back down and into the mud. His face submerged and he cried out for breath, lifting his face over the dirty water just enough to gasp at the air before being pulled again further into the water.

This was no worm.

His hand waved for anything to grab ahold of, finding the rough edge of the wooden pallet he’d sat on so many times prior. He pulled himself back, kicking with his free foot against the hand that held him. Out the corner of his eye, the bucket floated lazily away towards the centre of the current. With a final effort, Carter filled his lungs with air, roared, and booted the hand away. He felt the thing release him, and scrambled to shore, holding himself back from kissing the mud when he finally exited the water.

For a moment, all Carter could do was lie there and gasp, until he heard the disturbance of water behind him. He pushed himself to his feet and let out a breathless cry.

There was a face beneath the water, staring at Carter with curiosity. White tendrils, much thicker than those from the fish, crept from its flesh and were now above the water. Reaching into the air as though they were sniffing for Carter. There was a clicking, a horrid rattle click that had become the soundtrack to their infestation. There were no pupils. No irises. Just white marbles in the centre of a face draped in loose-hanging flesh. The head breached the surface of the water to join its tendrils, and it became obvious just how loose the flesh had become as it

slicked off bone like wet wallpaper.

“Please, no, please leave me be,” was all that could escape Carter’s lips. The rotter showed no desire to communicate.

Carter crept backwards up the bank, as the thing started to pick up its speed, walking through the marshland and towards him, the tendrils snaking out of the corners of its eyes and mouth. The flesh falling away as if the only thing holding it together was the water itself.

The thing clicked and hissed as it moved.

“No. I have a wife... she needs me... she needs me, please.”

It leapt towards him, unnaturally crawling over the marshland with ease. All four limbs working to help the thing navigate along the floor as a clumsy spider might move. Carter slipped once more but felt something beneath his trouser leg — the pole he used so often to beat the fish. He quickly pulled it out, just as the rotter’s tendrils reached for him, and slammed it across its face. Its jaw instantly hung loose.

And then the thing convulsed.

Not the host body itself but whatever spores lay within it. Each of its tendrils shuddered and withdrew. One even dropped away and scurried back into the water. The rotter dropped to its front, clutching at its throat as if suffocating, and slowly made its way back to the Thames. Its dead face watching Carter with each convulsing shift of its body.

Carter wasted no time in climbing out of the water and running home. The mud made each step harder, adding almost a stone in weight as he ran through the docklands, through the estates, and back to his house on Tudor Close.

He burst back inside, clicked the lock on the door, and dropped to the floor by the fireplace, feverishly shedding his heavy wet rags like they were extra layers of skin he no longer needed. He vomited on the floor. Then again. Lumps of bloodied flesh flecked amongst the unsavoury mess but then as he pulled off his old boot did he see it.

He rolled onto his back and took several deep breaths. Juniper sat in her chair watching Carter with a blank face. He sat up and drew his knees to his chest. “Oh, Juniper. Don’t look at me like that. If you only knew the day I’ve had-”

Something in Carter’s boot. Only small. Barely thicker than dental floss, the white, undulating, trail of a rot spore. Sucking on his toes like a leech.

Not a leech. Leeches don’t bury into your skin, multiply in your body... Take over... But... When?

It must’ve been something in the mud. In one of the fishes. Or maybe when the thing had touched him it had shed a piece of itself into Carter, and the rest, the chase up the bank, the

clicking, it had all been some cruel pantomime. It knew what it had done. It had won before Carter was out of the water.

For a while, he sobbed there on the floor, looking up at Juniper, thinking that maybe, after all they'd been through, at least she was lucky enough to have never experienced the change the rot would bring. The knife still gleamed in her gut.

"I'm sorry Juniper," he cried. "I messed up. I'm so sorry."

A searing pain shot through his nerves. Even as he cried he felt the change already taking him. His fingers pulsing and clenching into fists against his will.

"I'll fix it," he said. "Don't worry, dear, I'll fix it."

He jumped to his feet and walked to the kitchen and to the back door. Struggling to breathe, he wheezed and coughed up more of the blood as he found the deadbolt in the door.

"I'll fix it," he said, hot tears burning his eyes. Firework flashes of black, red, and white pulsing in his vision. "No one will come now."

The pain was almost too much as he felt the rot take his legs, forcing him to the floor.

"*Talk to me!*" he roared. "I need to hear your voice again, just once... before..."

"Keep me, dear," Juniper's said, the flesh restoring itself on the mouldy frame of her skeleton. The lustre returning to her cheeks as time wound backwards and brought her life with it.

"Yes, dear... Keep going." The room around faded to darkness, leaving only Juniper behind. She tilted her head and smiled.

"Keep me, dear. When I'm tired and grumpy..."

"...old and fat, bald and angry." Carter grinned goofily. White threads burst from his stomach, his ear, thigh... but he didn't care anymore. His love was home. All traces of the tattooed visitor that had snuck in whilst Carter was fishing in the river, vanished.

"Just promise me that you'll keep me, and I'll keep you."

Oh, that smile... that voice...

"Yes..." his voice grew weak. "Go on..."

"Our bodies, our love, our bones, forever together."

Carter had thought about burying her. Removing her and leaving London. She hadn't made it through the night. But how could he take her away from this place, this utopia she'd dreamt of living in for so long. The big city. How could he move her from that? He had been foolish to even consider it. And now with the door locked, them both inside, this is where they will stay. This house — their final resting place.

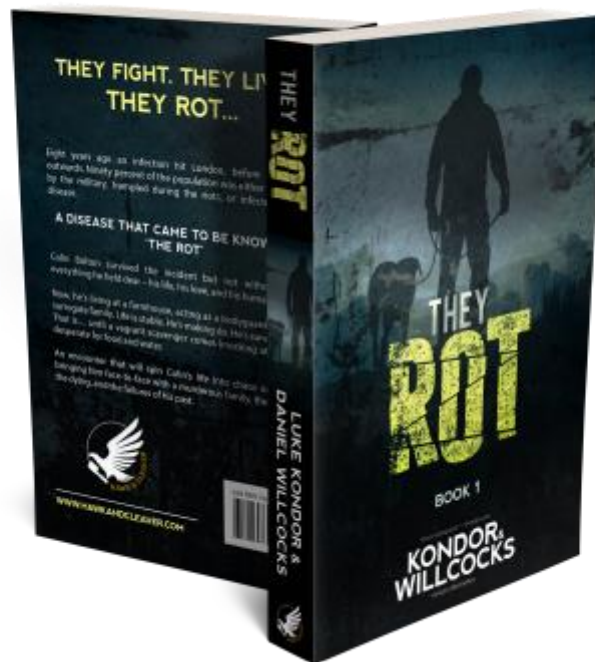
"Yes, gooahaaah!" It was coming through his throat now, but he continued as best he could.

Juniper peeled herself off the chair, knelt beside Carter, stroked his hair. “Please, Juniper. Pleaasshh!”

“Just please, please, dear,” she said, her voice a remedy to his pain, bringing with it memories of better days, of kisses, smiles, hopes. “No matter what happens, keep my bones.”

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~ PROLOGUE ~

Overgrown greenery lashed at their legs as she held tightly to the boy's arms, dragging him along as fast as his legs would allow. All around was nothing but yellow as they fled across another acre of farmland.

“Come on, come on, *come on...*”

The engines roared. They were getting closer now.

“I can't...” the boy protested. “I can't...” His breaths were shallow and his eyes were wide. Those terrifying green eyes of his that could see the things that she couldn't. The eyes that had gotten them into this mess in the first place.

“They went this way!” called a voice from across the field. An engine revved as a vehicle stomped down the neglected crops, left years ago by farmers to grow wild and reach for the sky.

She pulled him sharply left, hoping the change in direction might throw them off their scent. Who knows? Maybe they'd be able to escape this one. Maybe God, in all his infinite wisdom, might cut them some slack and leave them to their devices.

The roaring of the vehicle reached fever pitch as she dove to the ground, dragging the poor boy with her and waited. The vehicle now only several feet away. The tops of the yellow plants disappeared under its weight, then, a moment later, the sounds began to quiet.

Just hold on, Joanna thought. Just wait your time, and we'll be fine. We'll make it through this.

The vehicle disappeared into the distance. Joanna waited until all was quiet, then helped the boy up again. She bent low and allowed him to climb onto her back. In the sky above a V of geese flew over, honking loudly as they made their way towards the afternoon sun.

They followed their direction in the hopes of finding the roads again and getting her bearings. It was tough enough trying to find somewhere based off a child's directions, let alone finding yourself waylaid by bastards with working motors.

It was a tough world out there, for sure.

When the crops finished, and they found the road, she tentatively stepped out and felt the packed earth beneath her worn Nike trainers. She looked as far left and right as she could, studying the small gatherings of trees, the dips and rolls in the rural countryside for any sign of the vehicle. The coast was clear.

“Come on, Sunny. We're good—”

She turned around and just managed to hold in her scream. A boy, not much into double figures, had Sunny's head locked in the crook of his arm, a wide bat decorated with nails hanging from the hand on his side. There was a shuffling in the crops as an old man with a wicked grin stepped out and patted Sunny's back.

“Gotcha.”

~ 1 ~

The morning dew was fresh on the grass and glistened all around him. With each breath, a fine mist billowed out from his mouth and separated into strings of nothing against the morning light. The sun was brimming its face over the horizon now and lighting up the trampled path leaving golden streamers of light striping the ground ahead.

Colin clicked off the wind-up flashlight and threw it into his canvas duffle bag where it cosied up and clinked against the other tools and tat that Colin had built up over the years. No need for that now. He needed to conserve power wherever he could. Even the toys you'd buy for kids – wind-up torches for camping and the like – were like gold dust now.

He blew into the holes in his gloves to try and warm his hands. Sure, the sun was out, but it was still icy cold. As it always seemed to be. Colin could hardly even remember summer anymore. Not a true summer like before. He'd lived through what felt like eight years of continuous autumns and winters. Rain most days and overcast on the others. As if the world itself had lost the will to smile.

Maybe on some level, it had.

But yet, still, the grass and the leaves and the greenery of the world grew and flowered, so maybe he just hadn't been paying attention. Too distracted by his own thoughts to notice. After all, what exactly would he do with a summer now? A two-week trip to Ibiza was off the cards. A weekend around Europe drinking German ales was nothing but a pipe dream, and hell if he was ever going to climb Kilimanjaro. The last time he'd seen a plane he'd rubbed his cleanly shaven face and cried.

He idly stroked his ragged beard as Wheat streaked past his legs, disappearing between the trunks of trees.

In a flash of memory he remembered what it was like. Sitting on the beach, digging his toes into the warm sand, letting it fill the crevices between, as he closed his eyes and aimed his face at the sun. A cold fruity ice lolly in his hand. The sticky melting juice of it dripping down the wooden stick and onto his fingers.

For a second he could almost taste it, his tongue teasing his dry lips. But then he opened his eyes and it was all so distant again. A world from another life. Half-remembered from some other man's dreams. He stepped onward, off the grass, and onto an old dirt path that led up through a tunnel of trees. This was the furthest he'd ever get from the farm. The furthest point of his patrol. The last of his duties for that morning.

Planting boot after boot, he walked through the thicket of trees. The sunlight cut into the tunnel, blinding his eyes, trapping him inside a zoetrope. He held his free hands up to block the worst of it, allowing the rifle and the duffle bag to hang loosely behind him.

When he saw the movement ahead, he stopped. It was a little brown creature alternating its legs as it burrowed into the ground.

Colin didn't lift his rifle. He didn't need to. Instead, he whipped off his glove, popped two fingers into his mouth, and whistled two quick bursts.

The creature lifted its head and looked to Colin. Its eyes were wide and excited. Its tail flapped from left to right. The thing barked.

"Dammit, Wheat. Shush!"

Colin had almost been excited at the prospect of a companion when he'd begun his patrols for the LeShards. Maybe even figured that a golden retriever would make for a pretty decent working dog. But boy was he wrong. What Wheat had done for the LeShards as a family pet, he had failed to do as a guard dog. He was made for gentle companionship. Built for fetching toys and making cute faces. He was a dog that only understood the most basic of commands. And that was only when he wasn't barking with excitement and rolling around in fox crap. But still, regardless of breed or temperament, dogs did make for great rot-detectors. Even Wheat.

Still, Colin wondered, when was the last time they'd even seen a rotter?

Wheat approached and brushed his snout into Colin's calloused palm. It was cold and wet and dirtied from the hole he'd been digging. His big brown eyes looked up at him lovingly as his tail wagged left to right.

"Come on," Colin sighed, "we're nearly there."

As they reached the end of the woods they came to a clearing on a small hillock. He looked out at the view, taking a deep breath of clean country air.

It was for this view that Colin found the motivation to make his patrols each day. With the clearing of the woods behind he was given a perfect landscape view of the patchwork of fields, bathed in the glow of sunrise. In the distance, he could see where the hill sloped down towards the Redhill estates. The abandoned construction site that looked set to become some kind of idyllic suburban paradise.

Colin could picture it now. Neat little tarmac roads connecting squared-off gardens and freshly constructed houses. The sun beating down as kids played and laughed, their mothers watching and shaking their heads as their dads squirted them with the hose, ruining their Sunday bests.

Gone now. Forever abandoned.

The property developers must have only gotten halfway through construction when the rot struck, leaving the estates to stand as nothing but excavated soil and bare inner walls of houses. The structures were there, sure, but the roads were yet to be laid, the windows yet to be fitted, and the gardens yet to be planted. It looked to Colin like a promise never kept, a dirty graveyard with blank limestone gravestones and blank epitaphs.

He reached into his duffel bag and pulled out the binoculars as Wheat took a seat on top of his toes, panting loudly.

Running his finger over the red lens to wipe away the build-up of dust he put them up to his eyes and looked down at the empty construction site. Though they weren't professional by any measure, they were good enough to get him a closer view. Out of his entire patrol route, this was the area that gave him the most concern. The

Redhill estates were a perfect place for a camp of nomads or scavvies to set themselves up – high walls and a place to lay their heads. That was about all they required. And with the farm so close it wouldn't take long for potential squatters to discover the farm and come for their rations.

Colin felt himself grow angry at the thought. The idea of another chance encounter with scavvies was enough to bring back a bubble of memories – dark ink etched onto faces, hungry looks in cold eyes, a knife to his throat.

Wheat whined as he lay down next to Colin, propping his paw on his boot.

Colin ignored him and continued to scout the construction site. There was no evidence of camping fires or bunks. Same as always. Same shit, different day.

He scanned once more, when Wheat leapt to his feet and barked.

Instinctively, Colin turned and scuffled to get his rifle up, pointing in the direction Wheat was yapping – down the long corridor of the trees, out towards the south-east of the farm. There wasn't much to see that way but more fields and dirt roads. Keeping his gun steady with his right hand he tucked his head beneath the strap of the duffle bag and dropped it to the floor. He steadied the gun with his second hand and walked forwards, towards where Wheat's eye-line was trained.

Wheat barked again and a small flock of birds burst from the trees, peppering the sky with black dots. Colin huffed, lowered his gun and studied Wheat as the birds flew low over the fields, out towards the estate. Wheat's eyes followed the flock until they were far out of sight.

Half a smile crept onto Colin's face.

“When was the last time you saw birds out here, Wheat?” Colin dropped the rifle and picked up the bag. “Perhaps they're right. Perhaps the tide is turning...”

Suddenly something caught his eye. Movement. The smallest speck amongst the grey walls.

“Huh?” Colin rifled through the bag and withdrew the binoculars. He peered down and, for a half a second, saw someone. A very young someone with blond hair. Without thinking, he lowered the binoculars and automatically reached for the little gold ring on the chain he wore around his neck. He wiped his eyes, looked again and the child was gone. He frantically searched for several minutes before giving up. Perhaps he was seeing things. It sure couldn't have been who he thought it was.

Colin threw the binoculars back into the bag and patted Wheat's head. “Come on, mutt. Let's get you some food.”

Wheat raced ahead, wagging his tail excitedly.

~ 2 ~

Jerry LeShard met them at the door.

“You know what you need, kid?” Jerry asked, watching as Colin slipped off his boots and dropped them to the floor. Each one *thumping* the wooden walkway.

“Beer?” Colin grunted. Wheat padded eagerly out of sight into the kitchen.

Jerry shook his head and chuckled.

“We all need beer, kid. What I’d give for a Newkie Brown right now. My kingdom for a goddamn Newkie Brown.” Jerry draped an arm across Colin’s shoulder and guided him inside. “No, what you really need is a triple S. You know what a triple S is?”

“Here we go,” Kitty said as the steaming kettle whistled away on the flaming hob. The smell of the porridge filled the air and his stomach grunted with hunger.

Colin rolled his eyes and spoke at the same time as Jerry, knowing it off by heart by now. “Shit... Shower... and a Shave.”

They were all in fits. Jerry doubled over, Kitty wiped a tear away as she gestured for Colin’s coat, and Colin couldn’t help but chuckle through the thickness of his wiry beard.

“Shave? That’s a luxury I’d like to afford. Are you holding out on me, Jerry? You got a beard trimmer, Gandalf?”

“Do I look like I’ve got a beard trimmer?” Jerry said, pointing to the giant white wizard beard on his chin, crossing his eyes and doing his best impression of a goon.

Wheat barked loudly from his bed in the corner.

“Oh give it a rest you mangy mutt,” Jerry grinned, knocking a newspaper across Wheat’s nose.

“Hey, less of that. He’s family,” Kitty said as she slopped the sticky white porridge into the bowls on the table.

Colin sat at the small round table with Jerry across from him. He grabbed his spoon and dug into the steaming mush. Kitty pulled up her own chair and placed her morning tea on the table in front of her. She sniffed at the rising steam and took a deep breath as Wheat left his bed and laid down beneath the table with a hungry whine.

They sat in silence whilst they ate. Occasionally Jerry would load a spoon, reach under the table and let Wheat lick the metal clean. Kitty rolled her eyes affectionately as he brought it back up and to his mouth. Colin shook

his head with disapproval. After they were all done, Kitty jumped up and took the bowls to the sink. While she clanked away, Jerry sat back in his chair, let out a satisfied burp, and picked stubborn bits of oat from his teeth.

“Don’t you want to know about the patrol?” Colin said as he sat back and patted his own stomach.

“I’d have known if you’d seen something.”

“How?”

“You think you’d wait this long to tell me if you had? C’mon, Colin. We know you better than that.” He turned to Kitty. “Remember that first week he came to stay with us? He was breathless at the door all because he saw a rotter approaching in the distance over by the old pumpkin patches.”

Colin felt himself blushing.

“Oh that’s right,” Kitty said, laughing into the dishes.

“But it wasn’t a rotter, was it, Col?”

“No.”

“What was it?”

Colin lowered his head. “A scarecrow.”

The room exploded with laughter. Wheat jumped on and off Jerry’s lap. Colin felt his cheeks flush and his spirits lift. It was true. When he’d first come to stay with the LeShards everything had seemed like a hazard. It all seemed too good to be true. A solitary farm in the middle of nowhere, offering a safe zone in the hands of two amazingly generous citizens. On some level, he almost assumed that it would be ripped out from beneath him. That someone would come and take it all away. That was the theme of Colin’s life. At least since...

His mind jumped back to Redhill estates. The brief flash of the blond child from afar. A face that haunted him in dreaming nights and waking days.

Colin didn’t notice the room go quiet.

“What’s wrong, kid?”

He looked into Jerry’s concerned face. Beard dipping into his glass of water on the table. For a second he thought about telling them. Just letting the demons out. Instead, he said, “I guess I’m just wondering whether it’s time to move on.”

There was a brief moment as Kitty turned around and caught Jerry’s eyes. He shot her a look that brought her back to the dishes.

“Move on?” Jerry laughed, less convincing this time. “We’ve spoken about this, Col. What do you think is out there? You think you’re going to find a town full of rations? Maybe even a group of people that have remembered how to live like human beings and get along without stabbing each other five minutes later? C’mon, we know better than that. It’s all well and good to hope, but things have changed. You should know that better than anybody.”

“Jerry...” Kitty warned, leaving the dishes now and addressing the room.

Though there was still a small smile on Jerry’s face, slowly slipping. Colin saw an offended look in his eye. The atmosphere turned a shade tenser with every word Jerry uttered. “I just mean that...”

“Let me tell you something. That, out there?” Jerry pointed a bony finger toward the window. “The world is one big death trap. Full of scavvies, rotters, and who knows what else? The world’s changed and that’s that. You

want to go and find out, fine. But me and Kitty have done pretty well here so far, so just leave us here where it's safe."

"No, I mean all of us," Colin said, feeling himself becoming heated. He stood up, feeling his presence as a black cloud looming over Jerry. Sure Jerry's tongue was sharp, and he certainly had a hold on Colin, but that was nothing to the great beast that Colin became when he was angry. With beard bristling and eyes blazing he was a terrifying force to behold. "I've been walking these fields for years now and I've seen no hide nor hair of any rotters at all. All I see are ways for scavvies to break in. There're no defences, there's nothing at all to stop a group of scavvies trotting over the fields and taking this place while we sleep. And with all of these supplies you got lying around, it's a damn paradise for travellers. We're lucky we've even made it this far. Not to mention that car—"

"—What about the car?—"

"—You realise that thing is rarer than a sushi roll, right? I mean... you're just asking for trouble. If we can just look at expanding our patrol, maybe even taking a trip out for a few miles..."

"Colin," Jerry said, hands shaking, doing his best to calm the tone a little. "We've lived in this farm for over thirty years. We were here long before the rot came, and we plan to stay long after. We're not going anywhere."

"So we just sit and wait until we're raided?"

Jerry stood up, walked across to Kitty and put his arm around her. She leant her head against his chest and flashed a half smile at Colin before her eyes quickly moved away.

Jerry spoke, softer now. "We ain't worried about no retard with a spear he's made out of some stick he found in the woods."

"Why the hell not?" Colin said, slumping back into his seat.

"Because we got you, kid" Jerry smiled. "And I don't think no scavs would come messing around here, because we got you and... well... have you ever met you? You're as scary as a taxman on payday, Col." He walked closer to Colin. "You're one scary son-of-a-bitch!"

Jerry patted Colin's shoulder, that winning smile appearing and erasing any memory that only minutes before had been a face of anger. Colin idly stroked his beard, watching Kitty out the corner of his eyes as she shuffled awkwardly, apparently not sure whether to become a part of the moment or to finish cleaning.

"I wouldn't speak too soon," Colin grumbled, eyes trained on Kitty. "I'm not quite sure what side I'm settling on."

"Well, I know you'll make the right decision," Jerry winked, bending down and planting a wet kiss on Colin's face. He grunted in disgust and wiped away the moisture. "Now, unless I'm very much mistaken, breakfast is finished, and that means it's car tinkering time. You coming to help an old man, Col?"

Colin told Jerry he'd be through in a second. That he wanted to finish his drink. When Jerry left the room fell in silence, with Kitty shuffling about the kitchen collecting the last remnants of their meal. Occasionally she'd catch Colin's eye, but that would only be for half a second before she found something else to busy herself with. After a couple of minutes, Colin was about to leave the room when she spoke.

"He's a good guy, you know. He trusts people. He puts a lot of trust in you. I hope you can see that."

"I do."

"You know you can trust me too?"

Without a word, Colin nodded, signalled for Wheat to follow, and headed to the barn.

~ 3 ~

The car was a Saab 9-5. A vehicle that had once been something grand to behold. The kind of car that wasn't too ostentatious but was smart enough to pull into a supermarket carpark and step out with pride. Jeremiah LeShard had purchased the thing a few months before the first quarantines. A back-alley deal that had him shaking calloused hands and handing over a fat envelope stuffed with cash. For the first six months, the thing worked beautifully, gliding across tarmac with ease, the smell of fresh pine satisfying his nostrils. But Sod's law dictated that it had to conk out and die six months into the new world. When mechanics were a rare breed, and looters were drawn to cars like moths to a flame.

Through the overcast skies, Colin looked up to see the washed-out sphere of the sun in the sky. Another grey day with potential rain. Without a phone or digital watch to tell the time with, the sun was about all they had. And as far as he could tell from the position of the sun... it was coming on lunchtime.

Jerry pulled his head out of the car bonnet and wiped the greasy build-up from his forehead. An oily smudge marked his arm, catching in the long white hairs. He tutted at himself. "Spanner".

He heard Colin leave the driver's seat and rifle through the toolbox. "Size?"

"13mm?"

Colin passed the spanner to Jerry's hands and waited patiently. After a couple of minutes of grunts and metallic clinks, Jerry withdrew, tongue poking out the side of his mouth. "Try again now?"

Colin popped back into the car's cab and turned the key in the ignition. For a few seconds, the Saab vibrated violently, emitting a sporadic choking before black smoke puffed out the exhaust.

"Damn it," Jerry muttered, scratching his head and leaving a dark streak of grease in his snow white hair.

Colin relaxed in the seat and rolled his eyes. It would be a simple enough fix, he thought, if Jerry would at least let him look at the damn engine. No matter how many times Colin had suggested that he, as a formerly trained engineer of sorts, should be the one to diagnose and fix the problem, Jerry stuck his nose high in the air and made it clear that it was his own burden to bear.

"We've all got our parts to play. You patrol, Kitty cleans and cooks, I fix the house."

Colin thought it cute at first that Jerry had enough pride to want to make himself appear useful. But after several months of the same routine, it grew tiresome. Even with the regular interruptions from Kitty offering

refreshments and a reminder of the time, there was only so much that Colin could do to play dumb and pretend that it wasn't as simple as cleaning the catalytic converter and de-rusting a couple of the pipes beneath the car's frame.

Not that Kitty came out half as much since their last verbal bust-up. That had been four days ago now. Where before Colin had been greeted in the morning by Kitty's smiling face, lately she had taken to keeping herself busy. Finding excuses to tend to chores in the other room to wherever Colin chose to be. He wondered if perhaps there was more to their conversation, or if perhaps Jerry and Kitty had had some kind of row, themselves. Jerry had certainly been keeping within a closer reach of Colin, even offering to accompany him on his patrols in the morning – to which Colin kindly declined, liking the freedom of his morning and evening walks.

Jerry threw his hands in the air, sending the spanner crashing to the far wall. "Ah, screw it. Let's grab some grub."

After lunch (in which Kitty was once again absent) Jerry and Colin returned to the garage. Only instead of the usual 'Hop in the cab, I'll have a tinker' that prologued the beginning of Jerry's tinkering, he crossed the room, picked up the spanner and handed it to Colin.

"I think it's about time I let the pros take a look", he smiled.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, get on with it."

When Colin was beneath the car Jerry paced the small barn, prodding and playing with tools and equipment that had been left to hang without purpose for close to three years. Through the gap beneath the car's belly Colin occasionally peeked out to see a nostalgic expression across the old man's face.

"It's not as easy as you thought it'd be, huh?" Jerry said, twisting a length of exhaust pipe between his hands. "Thought you'd twist a few nuts and the thing would start ticking again?"

"Something like that. I guess I sort of had a vision in my head."

Jerry told Colin about a dream he'd had. The first real dream that had given him hope that one day things might return back to normal. It was the thing that forced him onwards, kept him tinkering, again and again, every day, without any sign or hope that the thing might one day run again. He pictured himself driving through empty roads, the sun glaring above as he twisted the volume knob and blasted out some *Led Zeppelin* or some *Pink Floyd* from the speakers, singing along and sipping from an icy cold can of coke.

He wasn't sure why the can of coke was involved in the vision. He never liked the stuff all that much even before the rot, but there it was, in his mind's eye, and maybe one day, he hoped it would be a reality.

When he finished his story Colin realised that he had put down his tools and was staring at Jerry. They looked at each other for a moment, Jerry's eyes sparkling from the memory.

"Sounds silly, I know. But a man's got to have something to keep him going after the world has fallen to shit."

Colin picked up a file, returning his attention to the pipe. "Yeah. I guess he does."

Jerry opened his mouth and closed it again. Colin knew what he was going to ask. A question that occurred every few months and would meet the same stony response. A question like: *What're your dreams, Colin?* To which Colin would reply with nothing more than a simple: *To survive*. Something that never quite seemed to satisfy the LeShards, but something that was, in part, true.

Though hardly the whole truth, so help him God.

With a loud bang, small specs of rust fell into Colin's mouth. He spat, then called, "How's that?" A moment later he watched Jerry's feet skirt the car. The keys clicked into the ignition. He held his breath.

The engine churned.

The sound of a cat caught in a washing machine.

Jerry kept the key strong, kept it held tight.

The cat kept yowling, the washing machine kept spinning, but nothing happened.

"Argh." Jerry took the keys out, caught his breath, and looked through the large, open barn door and out at the horizon. He let out a sigh of exasperation and climbed out of the car. The old man gripped hold of the jeans and lifted his leg, doing his best to shake the aches out the end of his shoe before placing it back on the ground and limping towards the front door of the house.

"Where're you going?" Colin called after him.

"Checking up on Kitty," Jerry replied, rubbing his hands on a mucky old rag.

*

Things went a bit faster without Jerry distracting him. As the sun began to work its way towards the horizon, changing the sky from blue to a pale orange, Colin worked away at the various pieces of the giant jigsaw. As he methodically worked his way around the car, he couldn't help but feel that the poor bastard had, in some places, done more damage than good. Maybe nothing unfixable, but still, he'd need an extra pair of hands on this crusty old go-kart and he hardly thought Jerry and Kitty would have what it would take.

Still, gotta work with what you got. The way of the modern world.

It was when Colin's stomach rumbled that he decided to hang up the tools for the evening, cross the weed-flecked stones that made up the path to the farmhouse's door and made his way inside. Instantly he felt the warmth, smelled the scent of roast vegetables and corned beef – the king of the salvaged tins that made up their pantry cupboard. He thought he would've been sick of the taste by now, maybe even repulsed by it. But damn it, after an afternoon of labour he couldn't wait to sink his teeth in.

Colin was just taking off his boots when he heard them in the kitchen.

"He's a young lad, Jerry. We can't keep him cooped up forever, trapped without a clue that there may be something else out in the world."

"Dammit Kitty, this is the last time we're going to have this conversation. He's here. He's safe. We're safer *with* him. You really want to give all that up for a shard of hope that Henry made it?" At the sound of the name he didn't recognise, Colin pushed his ear closer to the crack in the door. Jerry and Kitty's shadows were against the far wall. Jerry significantly more animated than Kitty. "You know the kid will head out there and look. He's got an adventurer's spirit. All he needs is an excuse to go wandering."

Somewhere in the kitchen Wheat whined.

"Well isn't that the point? He's not built for this life, Jerry. Sure, he's done us a great favour being here. But we're just a couple old has-beens who are soon enough going to kick the bucket. And what'll happen then? Maybe he's right. Maybe we *all* need to move on."

There was silence for a moment. Colin did his best to hold his breath and keep from making noise. From what he could guess, Jerry had seen something in Kitty's expression then.

"There's something you're not telling me," Jerry declared. His voice monotonous.

From the faint shadows, Colin saw Kitty hand something to Jerry. The rustling of paper. "Came through this morning."

Colin pushed his nose closer to the gap, trying his best to see.

"But... how?"

Colin lost balance, nudging the door ever so slightly that it squeaked. Wheat's ears pricked up as he barked and ran over to the door, wedging his nose through and jumping at Colin's waist.

Colin looked up just as Jerry shoved whatever the thing had been into his back pocket. In a second Jerry's smile was painted back on his face, now clean from grease. Kitty turned and made herself busy with her pots.

"Colin!" Jerry said, clapping his hands together. "Just in time for tea." He walked forward and scooped Colin under his arm, "Any luck with the Saab?"

*

Dinner was a quiet affair, despite Jerry's attempts to lift their spirits. He even brought out his guitar at one point. It was no use. Colin was in no mood to talk, and the most they got from Kitty was a half-arsed attempt at a smile. Colin was relieved when it was over and he could excuse himself, head upstairs and to his room, Wheat running up and passing him on the old stairs, tail slapping the walls as he went.

The floorboards of the house creaked something rotten as he stepped over them and into the bedroom. He couldn't rightly call it a bedroom. It was some sort of office for the farm at one point. Boxes of papers with words and nonsense on them that only highlighted the ridiculousness of the world left behind. A stinky Black Sabbath t-shirt pinned to the wall, torn at the edges, a few ornamental bears on the windowsill. An old computer that hadn't been turned on in years, some old radio equipment, and a trophy for bowls. Not the ten-pin kind. The one where the old folks used to get together in uniforms of white and roll little black balls and try to get them as close to the little white ball as possible. Apparently, Kitty used to be pretty good. She would've shown him if they still had any of the balls lying around. They tried it at one point with some stones but it didn't seem all that fun. And then there was Colin's bed, sort of. There was no mattress. They had one but Colin refused. He was happy with the frilly pink covers and the white duck feather pillow.

He slipped off his woolly jumper first, folded it, and draped it over the computer chair. He then did the same with his Manchester United football shirt, and then his ragged chino trousers and then kicked his socks off against the cold radiator on the back wall. He shivered before taking off the chain link necklace, holding it up to see the wedding band still secure, before placing it on the computer desk next to the yellow-white plastic computer keyboard. He stretched his arms into the air, feeling the tightness of the skin of his scarred chest and back, before falling to the floor and into the pink covers.

He lay staring into the dark for some time, mind busy with thoughts. He thought back to Kitty and Jerry's conversation. To the name, Henry.

There was something that they weren't telling him, though he couldn't place it. It sounded like they knew of safer places, of colonies that may have set up across England and found safety together, as he had with the LeShards. But the thought seemed impossible. If only he could have leant around enough to see what it was Kitty had passed Jerry. The paper thing that could have been a letter or a document of sorts.

But then, who would be delivering letters nowadays?

Tiredness began to take him. He was awake long enough to see Wheat climb over him and curl up next to him. The dog's smelly brown back pressed against his beard and his face. He didn't mind, though. He appreciated the warmth. He lifted his hand out of the covers and patted Wheat on the back, whispered "There's a good boy" before the feeling of sleep caught up. His last thoughts of Henry, and what he meant to the LeShards.

END OF PREVIEW

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