

# After the Zombies



Amanda Steel



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by  
Amanda Steel

Dedicated to my zombie loving sister, Helen, one of the few people who would welcome the zombie apocalypse, as long as the zombies are slow.

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## Chapter one

Grace lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, making out the framework of the slanted ceiling above her in the murky bedroom. She closed her eyes and listened for any noises, which would indicate she wasn't alone. The door was locked. Or was it? She was sure she had locked it, but when she tried to replay the memory of locking the door, her certainty began to diminish. That could have been the night before. She had to be careful, she told herself. Despite the fact it had all ended over a year ago, it could happen again at any time. She wasn't prepared before, but she had to be ready, in case it happened again. She opened her eyes and rolled off the bed at the side farthest from the door, out of immediate view if anyone entered the room. She lay on the carpeted floor and reached up, pulling the top blanket off the bed and using it to cover herself. It was only then that she felt safe enough to go to sleep, knowing that she wouldn't be easy to spot before she had chance to hear anyone approaching.

She wasn't sure where she was upon waking, but part of her sensed an element of danger, then she heard a clattering noise — and the memory came back to her. She was in her new home, the one given to her and Mark after their two years of torment. Nobody had explained to either of them or Luke exactly what had happened. It seemed likely to be a failed government experiment undertaken in Manchester, but nobody would ever own up to it. Grace smiled, but it felt out of place. She thought about how it had taken a zombie outbreak in her city for her to finally get somewhere to live. Her thoughts were interrupted by more clattering sounds, which she realised were coming from the kitchen. She threw off the blanket off and stood, while reaching under the mattress and retrieving her knife.

'In the head,' Grace reminded herself as she walked towards the kitchen, forcing her feet to move one after the other, doing the best she could to be quiet in the dark. She fought the desire to switch on the light, knowing it would alert whoever or whatever was there. Grace had gotten used to finding her way around in the dark. Power was lost shortly after the outbreak, but since the infection was brought under control, she worried she might have softened a little. Some people might think of her as unhinged and psychologically affected by all that happened, but she worried that the

past year had weakened her and left her vulnerable. She would be caught off-guard if the infection broke out again. Grace rounded the corner. A screamed escaped from her mouth as she held the knife up in the air, finding herself face to face with someone. A hand gripped her arm and it was only when she tried to break free, she realised it was Mark.

‘What the hell Mark? I could have stabbed you!’

‘I know; that's why I grabbed your arm. I didn't survive the zombie apocalypse to get stabbed by my wife,’ his words were slurred as he let go of Grace's arm.

‘I thought you were one of the...’ she began, not bothering to correct Mark. The outbreak had only occurred in their town and hadn't been an apocalypse. For them, it felt like it was. Life everywhere else had carried on as normal though.

‘The monsters are gone Gracie,’ Mark slurred again, but his voice was gentler this time.

‘They could come back at any time,’ Grace replied, switching on the light and looking down at the broken glass and light brown liquid forming a puddle on the floor. ‘What happened in here?’

‘I dropped a few bottles of whiskey,’ Mark admitted.

Grace began to sweep up the broken glass. ‘I guess we're both dealing with this in our own way.’

Mark sat down at the kitchen table. The silence was overwhelming. He waited until Grace had finished cleaning up before saying, ‘I bet you wish you chose Luke now.’

‘For what?’ Grace asked, sitting down next to him.

‘You never even noticed, did you?’

‘Noticed what?’

‘The guy was clearly infatuated with you, now he's got his old job back at the hospital, and you're stuck here with me; the town drunk and a known thief.’

‘Luke's not infatuated with me. I married you. I'm not stuck.’

‘That's the thing though, we're not married, I said I do and you said you do, but we didn't get a priest or a marriage licence.’

‘Do you want us to not be married?’ Grace asked.

‘I think you can do better, maybe get a job and see if Luke still loves you.’

‘And what if I don’t want to? I love you, I still love you, I didn’t stop.’

‘But with him, you stand a chance of a new life, a normal life. With me, you’re married to a drunk and you’ll spend the rest of your life sleeping on the floor behind the bed and expecting the infection to come back.’

‘I don’t...’ Grace began, but realised it was hopeless to lie. ‘You could stop drinking.’

‘Then what? Let it all just catch up with me? I drink to forget.’

Grace wanted to tell him that she could help — that they could help each other — but she didn’t know if that was true. She knew things couldn’t keep going the way they were.

‘I know someone in Wolverhampton, I’ll go there.’ She stood up and walked back to the bedroom where she began to pack a bag. Mark followed and snatched the bag from her.

‘I’ll leave instead,’ he told her. ‘You should stay. You need the security of this place, after everything before and during the outbreak. I have friends I can stay with, but when you’re ready, you should go to Luke and see if he still loves you.’

Grace opened her mouth to argue, but knew it was useless. She would never go to Luke though. Mark was the man she loved. Luke felt more like family to her, except things had gotten back to normal and he had stayed away. That spoke more about how he felt than anything Mark had to say about Luke’s apparent feelings for her.

### **Day 180 of the outbreak**

*‘Will you marry me?’ Mark asked as Grace looked him in the eye, trying to figure out if he was serious.*

*‘For real?’*

*‘Yeah, I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.’*

*‘That might not be long,’ Grace couldn’t help pointing out.*

*It hadn’t taken much to persuade Grace to say yes and from then on, they had thought of themselves as a married couple. There was no real honeymoon, only more of the infected to fight off. Grace hoped for just one night to enjoy her newly married life, but the house the two of them boarded themselves up in — away from the rest of their group — hadn’t been strong enough to keep out a horde of the infected.*

*As she fell asleep in Mark's arms, it became clear the door wouldn't hold. The banging became louder and the door creaked, signalling that at any minute it would give way. She jolted awake and Mark leapt out of bed. He threw on his clothes while Grace did the same. Shortly afterwards, the door broke off its hinges due to the force of more than a dozen infected barging their bodies against it. Grace and Mark were fighting for their lives once more. By then it was automatic; slam a knife in the head here, slice off another head there. Grace couldn't remember when she started to grow numb to the killing of those who had once been human. It was only when she and Mark came face to face with a former friend and member of their group, Lucy, that Grace stopped and stared, almost in defeat. She was ready to give in and let herself get bitten. She wondered what it would feel like, how much it would hurt and if she would still be aware after becoming one of them. As Lucy's teeth grew closer to Grace's arm, Lucy slumped to the floor and blood splattered everywhere as Mark skewered a knife through the girl's head. The white carpet in the bedroom soon turned to red as Lucy's blood and brain gushed into the fabric.*

*'What the hell?' Mark demanded once they had finished dealing with them all.*

*'What?' Grace asked, despite them both knowing how close she had come to giving up.*

*'You just stood there, do you want to die or something?'*

*'It was...Lucy,' Grace answered.*

*'Was. Not anymore,' he snapped.*

*'Is that all we are now? Friends; only until they turn, then pow, bang, cut, slash and we end them?'*

*'They're not them anymore. When they turn, they're already dead, Gracie. You know that,' his voice began to soften. 'I just don't want that for you. We agreed, for better or worse and so on,' he reasoned.*

*'We never actually said all that,' Grace pointed out.*

*'It was implied.'*

*'I don't know how much longer I can do this. What if we get infected? Or even if we don't, what if they never let us out and we're stuck here forever? They stopped leaving supplies after three months, Mark. What does that tell you? Because to me, that says they've given up on us. They don't want or expect us to survive.'*

*'I don't give a crap what they want or expect. We're going to survive this - Gracie - and we're going to do whatever it takes, but if you just give up, then you won't survive. So you have to fight, for me,' he pleaded.*

*'Okay,' Grace agreed. 'We do whatever it takes, it was just for a moment, I slipped up and I'm sorry.'*

*'Don't be sorry, just don't get dead,' Mark said, before kissing her in a way which made Grace realise how scared he felt about almost losing her. She decided that she had to do whatever it took to stay alive, for him.*

## Chapter two

Grace arrived at the job interview for a call centre advisor in Liverpool. It was the first time since before the outbreak that she had travelled outside of Manchester. It felt unnerving, but she told herself that maybe this was what she needed to do, escape Manchester and the memories of that place. There was nothing keeping her there anymore. The physical obstruction of the army and their tanks, drones and helicopters were gone. Mark was gone too. If she could start afresh somewhere else, maybe she could forget the outbreak and move on, become a normal person and pretend it all never happened.

The interview seemed to be going fine. The government had offered her a multitude of so-called benefits, including somewhere to live in the place of her choosing, false references and any other help she might need. It was their way of keeping under wraps what happened. As far as most people outside of Manchester were aware, it was an unfortunate outbreak of MERS, which killed off most of the city's population leaving only a small handful of survivors. The manager seemed to be impressed at the end of the interview and Grace was pleased with her own acting skills. If she could pull off being a normal person, then maybe she could make a life for herself after all.

'Fake it until you make it,' Grace reminded herself as she made the journey back to Manchester. As the bus drove along the streets, she couldn't help associating each street she passed with a memory of the past, most of which she would rather forget. By the time she walked into the house to be greeted by silence and empty drawers that once contained Mark's belongings, Grace had already decided to take the job in Liverpool if it was offered to her. So, when she received the phone call asking how soon she could start, she arranged to begin the following week. Grace knew it left her little time to find a place and move, but she also knew the government would rehouse her. It was part of the agreement made in return for her lies to the media. She wandered around the four-bedroom house, packing up everything she wanted to take and throwing away anything she wanted to leave behind, finding a T shirt left behind by Mark. She hurled it at the



throw away pile, then quickly changed her mind, retrieved the T-shirt and packed it away with her own belongings as a tear fell down her face.

‘The sooner I get out of here the better,’ she told herself. Her voice seemed to bounce around the oversized house. The idea had been for her and Mark to start a big family, making use of all the extra bedrooms. Grace wondered how she could ever have believed that would happen. They were both too damaged to bring up children.

Two days later, she was driving around Liverpool in the newly acquired second-hand car. Waiting for a new car would have taken longer. Her belongings were in the boot as she searched for a new place to live. The first place she saw would have been most people’s first choice. It was spacious with its three large bedrooms, two bathrooms, an enormous kitchen and a front room, which had a large and immaculately cleaned window looking out onto the main garden containing trees and well-kept plants, in addition to a freshly mown lawn. All Grace could think about was how many places they were for someone or something to hide both inside the house and outside in the garden, and whether she would be able to spot them before it was too late. The second place was a flat. It was smaller, but Grace still felt that she would never be able to relax knowing all the blind spots where the infected could be at night and she might not see them in time. She reminded herself, it might only be a matter of time before the outbreak started again and spread further than the last time. The final viewing of the day was a bedsit. Grace could only see the wardrobe as a potential hiding place for an intruder and no blind spots. She signed up to rent the bedsit for six months with the option to renew the tenancy at the end of the six months.

### **Day 1 of the outbreak**

*Grace slept in the shop doorway on Market Street, inside a sleeping bag that had once been light blue. She hadn’t had a bed to sleep in for a few months and felt like she probably wouldn’t last the cold winter. August was fine. It was warm then. September meant upgrading to a warmer sleeping bag using two weeks’ worth of change, that she had managed to get from shoppers and commuters passing by. By November, the rain left Grace almost constantly soaked and with the drop in temperatures, she began to wonder if she would ever feel completely dry again. She woke suddenly,*

*from a half dream about a warm bed and a kettle to make a mug of hot chocolate.*

*A drunk, she told herself as a man who smelt worse than she did, staggered towards a group of women. They looked like they had been to a late business meeting, dressed in their smart skirt suits, modelling immaculate hair and expensive bags, which matched their outfits perfectly. Grace watched as two of them spotted the drunk and swerved out of his way. She couldn't see the expressions on their faces, but imagined it was disgust — similar to how people looked at her since she became homeless. Grace was jolted out of her self-loathing when the drunk grabbed at the other two women. One ran in fear and the other wasn't quick enough. She was out of her sleeping bag by the time the drunk seemed to take a bite out of the woman. Grace found herself slowing her steps as she walked towards the drunk, for no other reason than morbid curiosity — then backed away — almost tripping over as he turned to face her. Half of his face seemed to be hanging off and blood dribbled from his mouth. Some might have been his own, while the rest could have been the woman's, along with what looked like part of her face, which he had bitten off. He was still chewing it when he lunged at Grace. She felt sure that he was going to do the same to her, then a hand grabbed at her arm a male voice said, 'run,' before she was pulled away.*

*She found herself running alongside the stranger, not knowing who he was, but it beat the alternative of staying to deal with the cannibal drunk. Other people who had been out for the night were running in different directions and screaming. Some stumbled and fell, but Grace stayed with the man and followed his one-word instruction. It was only when they reached Oxford Road that he led her into a building and barricaded the door behind them.*

*'What is this?' Grace demanded, temporarily forgetting what she had seen — feeling like she was locked inside the building with a potential rapist or murderer.*

*'That thing you just saw, it's what you would call a zombie,' he replied.*

*'A zombie?' Grace couldn't disguise her disbelief.*

*'I didn't call it that, it's just the best way to explain to you what it is. It eats your flesh and you die and become one of them, so as I said, like a zombie.'*

*'Okay then.'*

*'You don't believe me; I understand. It sounds crazy, but you know what you just saw.'*

*'I don't...I'm not sure what I...'*

*'That man, or the thing that used to be a man; he chewed that woman's face off.'*

*'I'm just a homeless person.'* Grace wrapped her arms protectively around herself. *'Nobody would ever believe...'*

*'Well, I'm a doctor and I've been dealing with these things all night, ten cases, they killed everyone in the hospital where I work and those people all turned. I only just got away.'*

Grace studied his face trying to distinguish whether he was joking, crazy or telling the truth, but he couldn't be, she told herself. He looked deadly serious and he didn't seem crazy, just distressed. She thought that backed up the possibility that he could be telling the truth. What he claimed to have witnessed at his hospital would leave most people distressed.

*'I'm Grace,'* she introduced herself.

*'Luke,'* he said. *'We can't stay here.'*

*'Why not?'*

*'Because it's night now and it's still busy out there and if even half of those people get bit and turn, we'll never get away alive. It's only going to get worse when the morning rush starts. We need to get somewhere less populated as soon as possible.'*

*'Where?'*

*'It doesn't matter, as long as it's away from here.'* Luke took a gun out of his bag. *'The ammo won't last long, but I'll be able to get a few of them if they get in our way.'*

Grace was too overwhelmed to question how a doctor owned a gun and she could only stare as he held out an axe to her.

*'What the hell is that?'* she finally managed to ask.

*'An axe, I cut the handle down, so it's easier to carry and run with. Get them in the head and try not to get too close to their mouths.'*

*'This way.'* Luke grabbed Grace's arm and led her away. *'We don't want to fight them unless we have to.'*

Grace wasn't sure she wanted to fight at all, but decided she didn't want to become like them either. As the two of them ran farther away from the

centre of Manchester, Grace tried not to look at the bodies and the people who shouldn't be capable of walking around in the state they were in.

'Shit,' Luke muttered.

Grace saw what caused him to swear. There must be at least ten of them approaching in a group, she calculated.

'Remember to aim for the head,' Luke said as he fired off a shot, hitting one in the head. The creature fell to the ground.

'I thought you said we shouldn't fight,' Grace reasoned, still clutching her axe.

'Unless we have to and we have to,' Luke insisted as he fired again.

Grace came face to face with one. She had to make a split-second decision to fight or die. She had been ready to accept that she might die from sleeping rough during the winter, but getting eaten seemed so much harsher. She swung the axe. It sliced into the skull of the thing which had once been a man. He fell to the floor with the axe still lodged into his head. Another one approached her. She tried to pull the axe out, so she could use it again. It was stuck and no amount of pulling released it.

'Oh crap,' Grace yelled, hoping those wouldn't be her last words. She heard another gunshot, but it wasn't aimed at the one almost within biting distance of her. 'Luke,' she screamed as she smelt the rotting flesh, reminding her of the bins she sometimes had to scavenge through for food — only worse. She tried to push away the thing trying to bite her. It was no use; his teeth were getting closer to her face. Grace cried out, sure that she was about to die. She watched as blood oozed out of the thing's head and saw her own axe slice through its head. She looked up expecting to see Luke, but instead there was a dark-haired man standing above her.

*‘This yours?’ He held out the axe which Grace accepted, then he helped her to her feet. She nodded dumbly before he told her, ‘slice straight through, it gets stuck otherwise.’*

*‘Okay.’ She nodded again.*

*Her rescuer barely had time to introduce himself as Mark, before another larger group of the creatures approached. Grace, Luke and Mark ran, knowing that they were outnumbered and wouldn’t stand a chance.*

### **Chapter three**

The night before Grace’s first day at work, she decided to get an early night. She managed to push over the wardrobe, alternating between pushing and dragging it the short distance to the door. It wouldn’t keep out a large horde of the infected, but the noise would wake her in time to retrieve the axe from the drawer under her divan bed.

The government insisted the events which occurred in Manchester would never happen again anywhere else. Grace didn’t trust them or anyone. She managed to sleep through the night, although her dreams were filled with nightmares, many of which were memories of the Manchester outbreak. Her alarm woke her at 6am, prompting her to get ready for her first day of work. Before leaving, she dragged the wardrobe away from the door, but didn’t return it to the space where it originally stood — knowing she would only have to drag it back later. She took one last look at the axe in the

drawer, then left it behind — but settled for a kitchen knife —placing it in the bottom of her hand bag.

It was a mostly uneventful first day at work. Although, Grace had to hold her tongue a lot. Many of the calls she took from customers with so-called problems, were about things like their internet cutting out and direct debits coming out of their accounts too early. It all seemed trivial in comparison to the two years of hell she endured. Grace almost lost her temper with one woman, who had been close to tears because it was taking a long time to download some music online. She resisted the temptation to tell the woman that if that was her biggest problem in life, then she had a pretty good life and should be grateful she hadn't had to live through a zombie invasion.

'How was your first day?' Grace's boss asked as she put on her coat to leave at the end of the day.

'Good,' Grace lied.

'The customer queries weren't too much for you?'

Grace shook her head, wondering how her boss and some of the customers would handle what she had been through. 'Nothing I can't handle.'

'Good, if you have any queries that are too difficult, then you can always ask,' he insisted.

'Thanks, but I think I'll be fine.'

'We have a social evening tonight. Most of the staff usually attend, if you'd like to join us? It might be a good way to meet everyone, get to know them all,' he suggested.

'I would, but I made plans,' Grace said. 'If I had known...'

'Of course, sorry to spring it on you, maybe next time.'

Grace arrived home to find Luke sitting outside the door to her bedsit.

'One of your neighbours let me into the building. You left town without even saying goodbye.' His expression conveyed betrayal, as if she was expected Grace to report her every move to him.

'How did you find me?'

'[I threatened a few members of local government if they didn't tell me where you were,' he replied, like it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

‘I couldn’t stay,’ Grace said, as she unlocked the door and Luke followed her inside. He looked dubiously at the wardrobe near the door, but didn’t comment on it.

‘What happened to Mark?’

‘You mean you didn’t threaten anyone to tell you that as well?’

‘I was concerned about you,’ Luke insisted.

‘He left, I guess those who slay zombies together, don’t stay together after all.’

‘But he loves you.’

‘Obviously not enough. How can you...?’ Grace began trying to change the subject.

‘How can I what?’

‘Just go back to your old life and act like none of it ever happened?’ Grace asked, despite knowing that going back to her old life would mean becoming homeless again.

‘You think that’s what I did?’

‘Same town, same hospital, same job. You even had your old house rebuilt,’ Grace pointed out.

‘When you put it like that...but it’s not the same. I’m not the same.’

‘I didn’t know you before, but it sounds like you’re exactly the same.’

‘So what should I be doing? Running away and sleeping with a wardrobe against the door?’ Luke questioned as he began opening the chest of drawers, then the drawer under the bed. ‘Or maybe I should sleep with an axe within easy reaching distance.’

‘That’s not...I kept that as a souvenir, of good times and all that.’

‘Grace, you might be able to fool everyone else, but I know you and I can see straight through your lies, so don’t even try.’

‘Was there a reason you came here? Other than to call me a liar?’

‘I came here to bring you home,’ Luke said, ignoring the coldness in Grace’s voice.

‘I am home,’ Grace retorted.

‘What? This place? You spent months sleeping in a doorway, then you’re offered any place you want to live and you choose this place?’

Grace was silent, not wanting to point out that Luke had omitted the hellish two years in between her homelessness and the offer of anywhere she wanted to live.

### **Day 8 of the outbreak**

*Grace, Luke and Mark came across three sisters, Lucy, Paula and Yasmin - and her partner, Gregg. The seven of them decided to stay together and try to get out of Manchester. Rumours spread that the army had been called in to prevent people leaving. They heard that food and water supplies were regularly dropped off on the outskirts off Manchester. People were free to take them, but not to leave the city. As the seven of them were running low on food and water, after barricading themselves inside an abandoned*



clothes shop on the outskirts of the city centre, they decided to take a look for themselves.

‘I can’t do this,’ Lucy, the youngest said, not wanting to go back outside and face the dangers out there.

‘It’s okay,’ Paula tried to coax her. ‘Just think of it like one of your video games. We’ll get past the zombies and find the food and a way to leave town. The army can’t be guarding every exit.’

‘Can we not call them zombies?’ Luke asked. ‘It’s a very contagious medical condition and if I had the time and resources, I could...’

‘What? Cure them all?’ Mark asked critically. ‘I hate to break this to you, but those things aren’t people anymore and we’re just food to them. You can try to do medical tests on them or whatever, but I’m going to smash their heads in,’ he announced. He held up a hammer, which he’d found in an old tool kit. ‘Who’s with me?’

‘Sorry,’ Grace mumbled feebly to Luke, walking to Mark's side to show her support. ‘I don’t want to die either.’

‘Would a cure work?’ Lucy asked.

‘Not if we all want to get out of here alive?’ Gregg chimed in.

‘Sorry, Luke,’ Yasmin said, ‘I need to look after my sisters. I wish we could cure those people, but my family is my priority.’

Lucy, Paula and Gregg nodded in agreement behind her.

‘I’m going to be sixteen next week. I’m too young to die.’ Lucy bit her lip to hold back tears.

‘If we want to get out of Manchester, we might have to kill uninfected people as well, if they try to stop us,’ Luke pointed out.

‘And I’d rather not do that,’ Grace agreed, ‘but if we stay, we’ll die. If they’re stopping us from leaving, they are trying to indirectly kill us, so anything we have to do to them is their own fault.’

‘What if we get out and everywhere is like this?’ Luke questioned.

‘If everywhere was like this, they wouldn’t be trying to keep us all in Manchester,’ Mark pointed out.

‘He’s got a point,’ Gregg backed up Mark.

They decided to vote on whether to go ahead with the escape plan. Luke was outvoted.

‘We leave in half an hour,’ Mark announced.

Grace used the time to talk to Luke. 'I know it's not ideal. I don't want to kill anyone either. Before all this happened I'd never thought about killing anyone or anything, but since that night when you saved me, I've lost count of how many infected people I've killed. I know you don't like to call them zombies, but I can't bring myself to think of them as people because it's too much, so I can't think of them as human anymore.'

'I get it,' he admitted, 'I just spent so long training to save people, and now I'm killing them. It doesn't sit well with me either.'

Grace felt Mark's eyes on her as she squeezed Luke's hand 'It's not much, but you saved me and I think at some point in the past week, you've saved everyone else here, at least once,' she offered.

'He's got a crush on you,' Mark whispered just before they were all about to leave.

'Don't be silly, he's just a friend,' Grace replied.

'Not with the way he looks at you,' Mark insisted.

'Is that anything like the way you keep looking at me?' Grace asked. 'Did you think I hadn't noticed?'

'Just kiss her before we all die, what have you got to lose?' Gregg asked Mark as soon as Grace was out of ear shot.

Mark looked like he was considering it, when Luke interrupted. 'Ready?' he asked, then opened the door before anyone could respond.

Their next moments were spent fighting off a few dozen infected. They had been lurking around outside and flocked together as the smell of living people reached their nostrils. Grace used what Mark had taught her, slamming the axe into their heads and pushing through rather than trying to yank it back out. She heard the multiple squelching noises from her own kills as well as those her friends were killing. She managed get a quick look at Luke —as he fought—but his face gave away how much he wished he didn't have to kill the things that had once been people. She sliced her axe through another head, then Mark was by her side. Neither of them exchanged words, but it seemed like the obvious thing to stand back to back and fight off the stragglers approaching them, as the others fought off the bigger group.

'Everyone okay?' Mark asked when they were all finished.

The others answered, telling him that they were still alive.

'Gracie?' Mark asked, staring at her blood-soaked arm.

*'It's okay, it's not mine, it's one of theirs.'* She looked towards the pile of now permanently dead infected.

*He didn't try to reason with her that they weren't people anymore. They both knew that. Instead, Mark just slipped his arm around Grace as he told the others they should go before more infected came along.*

*'Get back!' a soldier was shouting at a group of people, as Mark, Grace and the others hid watching behind some trees just far enough away not to be easily spotted.*

*Grace almost threw up as the soldier and his friends opened fire on the civilians, shooting them all dead. Gregg covered Lucy's mouth to prevent her from screaming and alerting the soldiers to their presence. They all stayed in their hiding place, in shocked silence. Yasmin wrapped her arms around Lucy who silently sobbed against her shoulder.*

*'I'm going to go for a run in that direction to see where the road blocks end,' Gregg eventually whispered.*

*'I'll go with you,' Luke offered.*

*'Maybe we should all go,' Grace stated.*

*'We'll find an unguarded exit, then come right back to let you know,' Luke assured her.*

*'We should stay here,' Paula urged, 'Gregg's a fast runner.'*

*'I run a lot, I did a marathon,' Luke offered.*

*'See? They'll be quicker without us and then they'll come back,' Yasmin announced, before kissing Gregg and telling him not to take too long.*

*Grace watched the backs of Luke and Gregg running off into the distance.*

*'Do you think they'll come back?' she couldn't help asking.*

*Nobody had time to answer, as the sound of gunfire began again.*

*'What the...?' Mark began.*

*Lucy cried out in fear, before Paula and Yasmin held onto her and covered her mouth to muffle her screams.*

*'They're killing more people,' Grace muttered in disbelief.*

*'I don't think they want us to leave,' Mark announced.*

*'Oh god, oh god, we're going to die,' Lucy sobbed.*

*Grace forgot her own fear for a moment and tried to coax Lucy instead. 'It's okay Luce; we're not going to die. Gregg and Luke will be back soon*

*and they'll have found a way out. We just need to stay out of sight of those soldiers and we'll be fine.'*

*The five of them moved further back, so that they were better hidden behind more of the trees, as they waited for Luke and Gregg to return.*

## Chapter four

'I'm fine Luke, so now you can see that, you can go.' Grace tried to out-stare Luke.

'No, you're not fine. None of us are and running away isn't the way to deal with things.'

'I have a new job, a new home, a whole new life, everything is great.'

'I'm sure we've already established that everything is not great, so I think I'll just stay for a few days.'

'I don't have a spare bed,' Grace reasoned.

'The floor's fine, you know I've slept in worse places.'

Grace couldn't argue with that, so ended up spending most of the night awake, trying to pretend to be asleep, as Luke lay on the floor. She felt exposed if something got in. She hadn't pushed the wardrobe against the door, knowing that this would give Luke another opportunity to point out that she wasn't okay. She also wished that she could sleep on the floor out of view of the door, but didn't want to have that conversation with Luke either.

'I know you're awake,' he interrupted her thoughts. 'I can hear your awake breathing. It's different to your sleep breathing.'

'That's not weird at all,' she mumbled.

'Well, we did sleep in the same room for most of two years.'

Grace sighed and turned over.

'Are you mad at me?' Luke asked.

'What?' Grace sat up. 'You think I'm mad at you because we spent two years fighting a zombie outbreak together and we're practically like family, then it was all over and I didn't hear from you. No, why would that make me mad at you?'

'You know where I work and you have my address,' Luke reasoned.

'I don't have your address. I only heard from Mark that you lived in your old house, but we didn't know where that was. And I wasn't going to turn up at your work, when you obviously didn't want anything to do with either of us.'

'I gave my details to...' Luke began. 'They told me they would be passed onto you and Mark,' he added weakly.

‘Well we didn’t get them, we were told the same thing and I thought...’

Luke stood from his spot on the floor and sat down next to Grace on her bed.

‘I feel so stupid now. I should have tried to track you down myself, not trust them after everything they did.’

‘I believed them too,’ Grace admitted. ‘I guess we’re both stupid.’

Luke hugged Grace and she found herself wrapping her arms around him, realising she had missed the man who had become her closest friend.

‘Come home Grace, this isn’t the life for you here.’

She pulled away abruptly. ‘How can you say that? We spent two years trying to leave. It's not home. It's where I watched people get slaughtered. Have you forgotten how we were contained in Manchester? Almost like we were turkeys, trapped inside a giant cage, waiting for Christmas and what about what they did to me?’ She felt the need to remind him.

‘I haven’t forgotten any of it and I see it all every time I close my eyes, but I can’t leave now or I’ll be letting it beat me, but you, me and Mark are all that’s left of those two years. I have to pretend every day, but you know the truth about what really happened. I don’t have to lie to you.’

‘I don’t know where Mark is,’ Grace said. Her voice gave away the fact that she was close to tears.

‘Then we’ll find him,’ Luke said. Grace couldn’t help noticing sadness in his green eyes as he made the offer.

### **Day nine of the outbreak**

*‘They’re not back yet?’ Lucy asked as she woke up just in time to see the sun rising.*

*Yasmin shook her head and Grace wandered further into the trees. Mark followed.*

*‘We need to leave soon. We shouldn’t stay so close to them,’ Mark reasoned — meaning the soldiers guarding the exits out of Manchester.*

*‘They’ll be back. They’re just...’ Grace faltered, unable to come up with any plausible explanation for what had happened to Luke and Gregg.*

*‘If we stay, we’ll be spotted eventually and you saw what the army guys did to those people?’*

*‘It doesn't make any sense. We found food and bottles of water, left for us, but they shoot dead anyone who tries to leave.’*

*'I think their orders are to feed us, but not let us leave Manchester, that's the only explanation I can come up with. How long before that changes and they give up on us altogether? We need to go, Grace.'*

*'Just a little longer,' she pleaded.*

*Mark looked like he wanted to argue, but instead reached out his hand to Grace's face, brushing away a few stray hairs. 'You're a good person, but that's going to get you killed.'*

*'Aren't you a good person too?'*

*'Sure, but not at the expense of my own life.'* Grace opened her mouth to argue with him, but Mark had moved closer, pressing his lips against hers and gently kissing her, then standing back before Grace had time to decide whether to kiss him back or push him away. *'I like you Grace. I don't want you to die, one hour,'* he said before heading back towards the others, leaving Grace staring after him.

*She took advantage of the few moments of privacy to use a nearby bush as a toilet, then went to re-join Mark and the others.*

*'They're back?' Yasmin questioned as two figures approached in the distance.*

*'Get back,' Mark commanded taking out a hammer from his back pack.*

*'What are you doing?' Lucy squealed.*

*'They might not be them anymore,' Mark pointed out.*

*Yasmin shot Mark an angry stare, but stood protectively in front of Lucy.*

*'Luke,' Grace's voice was full of concern as she realised Luke was bleeding and needed help from Gregg to be able to walk. She tried to run towards him, but Mark wrapped his arms tightly around her to hold her back. 'Let go,' she demanded.*

*'No, he might be...'*

*'Gregg wouldn't be helping Luke if Luke was one of those things,' Grace reasoned and Mark reluctantly let go. Grace ran to Luke and almost fell as she let him lean on her the rest of the way. 'What happened?'*

*'Everything's guarded. Soldiers and tanks everywhere, even drones, we were shot at. Luke took a bullet to the leg, then fell and hurt his side when the infected came after us,' Gregg hurriedly explained.*

*'There's no way out?' Paula questioned.*

*'There's nobody on our side,' Luke mumbled.*

Grace took off her hoodie and used it to try to attempt to stop the bleeding from Luke's leg as blood soaked through his torn trousers. 'Don't we need to get the bullet out?' she questioned.

'Went straight through,' Luke winced as Grace pressed the hoodie harder against his leg.

'Sorry, I don't know what to do here.' She looked up at the rest of her group, who all looked as clueless as she felt. She was grateful when Luke began directing her on what to do to help stop the bleeding. Mark stepped in and cut up the part of the hoodie which wasn't blood soaked, along with one of his own jumpers to make bandages. He helped Grace to tie them around Luke's injured side as well as his leg. 'Thank you,' she told him.

'We need to go,' Mark responded, helping Luke to his feet. 'Grace and I can help you walk, but we need to be quick.'

'I'm fine,' Luke argued, but stumbled before Grace could stop his fall.

'Sure you are,' she retorted, before she and Mark helped him to stand again and supported his weight.

'Get his things,' Grace instructed Yasmin, Paula, Lucy and Gregg. 'We can't leave weapons and supplies behind.'

They had barely walked a mile when one of the infected approached them. Grace and Mark, sat Luke down despite his protests that he was fine and could fight. Mark quickly disposed of the creature, smashing it over the head with his hammer, but two more were approaching.

'It's the blood,' Luke speculated, pointing to the gunshot wound on his leg, which was bleeding again through the home-made bandages. 'Just leave me, I'm attracting them. I'll run the other way, lead them away from you all.'

'Screw that,' Grace replied.

'Come on,' Mark tried to pull her away.

The others all looked unsure, but seemed ready to run rather than fight off more of the infected.

'I'm not leaving him,' Grace insisted, 'so you can either help me get him somewhere safer, or you can leave me too.'

'Gracie, he said...' Mark began.

'I don't care what he said,' Grace carried on trying to help Luke to his feet.



*Mark rolled his eyes and helped her with Luke. 'Hurry up,' he snapped at him.*

*'They're coming,' Lucy cried out.*

*Yasmin ran towards a clearing in the trees, away from where the soldiers and tanks were.*

*'Where are you going?' Gregg demanded, but Yasmin kept on running.*

*Lucy, Gregg and Paula went after her, leaving Grace, Mark and Luke to stumble through the trees together. The creatures were almost upon the three of them as they finally reached the clearing.*

*'Get in the back,' Yasmin instructed from the passenger side of a small white van. Gregg was sat in the drivers seat.*

*Grace didn't have time to question where they had found it. She opened the back door and ushered in Luke and Mark. There wasn't much space and Grace found herself squashed against Mark who didn't seem to mind much.*

## Chapter five

‘That must be the shortest time I’ve lasted in a job,’ Grace commented as Luke helped her load her bags into the back of his car, leaving her second-hand car behind.

‘From what you told me, you’re not giving up much.’

Grace pulled a face. ‘I took a call, from some woman. She was almost in tears because her Internet cut out for an hour.’

Luke snorted in disgust. ‘The silly cow should try surviving a zombie outbreak. We lost internet on day three, not that it mattered. There’s no time to check emails when a horde of the infected trying to eat you.’

‘Exactly. Do you ever think we should have spoken out?’ Grace questioned as they both got into the car.

‘I don’t think we had much choice. Do you really think they would have just let us go, if we were going to tell everyone? It's not like anyone would believe us and I doubt they really let us go anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’ Grace’s forehead creased.

‘They gave us somewhere to live, helped you get your new job, paid for the rust bucket that you drove here in, helped me get my job back and rebuilt my house. Do you think they did that out of the goodness of their hearts?’

‘They felt guilty and they wanted to keep us quiet,’ Grace answered.

‘You’re right about that, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they weren’t keeping a much closer eye on us than that.’

‘You think they’ve bugged us somehow?’

‘Just in case, can’t have people running around shouting about the Manchester zombie apocalypse.’

‘No, they wouldn’t,’ Grace shook her head, but she knew the government had done much worse to avoid the outbreak spreading and to cover up the whole mess.

The rest of the journey was spent in silence until they were almost back in Manchester.

‘I don’t like this place,’ Luke glanced at Grace, ‘but I’m trying to reclaim this city. It was my home before and I only want things to go back to how they were.’

'I'm just here because I want to find out where Mark went, then I'm gone again.'

'You think he left Manchester?'

'That's not so far fetched. He's not as optimistic as you. I doubt he believes things can go back to normal.'

'I never said I believed that, just that it's what I want. I've got to try.'

Grace wanted to tell Luke that Mark wasn't the 'stay and try to make things better' type. He had left her rather than staying to work on their relationship. Instead, she remained quiet and tried to suppress a shiver when they drove through Manchester. She wondered why she agreed to come back. Mark wouldn't be there.

'We'll speak to the guy who told me where you were. If Mark's left Manchester, we'll find out where he went and go there.'

### **Day 373 of the outbreak**

*Grace woke up feeling groggy and cold, realising she was naked. For a moment, she wondered if she was dead, but then common sense told her she wouldn't feel or be aware of anything if she was dead. That didn't shut up the voice of fear nagging away inside her head. There were zombies, so why not ghosts? She looked around her, but it was dark and she could only make out the outlines of what seemed to be a hospital trolley which she was laid on. And a door. That's good, she told herself, a door meant a way out. Her head hurt more than the time she had run into a brick wall, because she hadn't been looking where she was going. Grace was pleased at remembering something from her childhood and who she was, as she tried to recall how she had ended up there. She summoned up a memory of running with Mark and the others, but that's all she ever seemed to do. Grace decided the best thing to do was try to escape, then attempt to retrieve her memories later. It was only as she tried to sit up when she felt the restraints on her wrists and ankles, digging into her skin and pulling her back down.*

*'No, no, no,' she panicked. If she was tied down, she was vulnerable. The infected could find her at any time and she wouldn't be able to fight or protect herself. She wanted to scream out, but knew that could alert any infected who happened to be nearby. It would be as good as ringing the dinner bell. She lay still, listening. There were noises — maybe in the next*

room — but definitely no further than a few rooms away. Grace heard a door slam shut and footsteps echoing slightly. It could be a corridor that the owner of the footsteps were walking along. They were getting closer to the room she was in. Grace was almost certain this was a hospital, but they weren't known for restraining patients, unless it was a psychiatric hospital. That could explain a lot. She wondered if maybe she had imagined the past year and was insane. The lack of clothes didn't back up that theory though. Grace questioned whether psychiatric patients would be left naked in their room.

'Maybe I'm being mistreated, that happens doesn't it?' she asked herself, but didn't have time to come up with an answer before the door to her room opened.

'Good, you're awake,' a woman's voice said, as the light came on, flickering at first until it became a glare above her.

Grace squinted and looked up at a tall blonde woman dressed in a white coat and holding a clip board.

'Where am I?'

'At North Manchester General Hospital.'

'And?'

'And what?'

What am I doing here? And why am I naked?' Grace snapped, not liking the abruptness of the woman, or the fact that she was on display to this stranger.

'You tore off your clothes, then you tried to hurt yourself and the doctors, don't you remember?'

'What? No!'

'These episodes of yours are getting more and more out of control, Grace. We may have to section you again.'

Grace shook her head, but couldn't help wondering if she had been right the first time and she really was mad. 'Where's Luke and Mark?'

'Not this again, we already established that Luke and Mark are just figments of your imagination, along with this zombie invasion you keep talking about.'

'They are...we were...,' Grace was flustered, unable to come up with a reasonable argument.

*'Just lie still,' the woman insisted as she jabbed a needle into Grace's right arm.*

*Grace winced. 'What are you doing?'*

*'Just taking a blood sample.'*

*Grace watched helplessly as the woman took sample after sample, looking to be at least a full pint of blood in total.*

*'Why do you need so much?' Something told Grace that she wasn't in the position to show her suspicions while tied down to a hospital trolley, but she couldn't help herself.*

*'You wouldn't understand, just tests that we need to do,' her answer was patronising. Then she took out a bigger needle and inserted it into Grace's hip.*

*Grace tried to suppress a scream as she demanded to know what the woman was doing.*

*'Just a simple bone marrow extraction,' the woman calmly replied, as though it was a normal thing to do. 'Genetic tests, to see what's causing these hallucinations.'*

*'What? Bone marrow won't help with that,' Grace insisted through clenched teeth.*

*'I'm the doctor here. Don't you think I know what I'm doing?'*

*'I'm sure you do. I only wish I did,' Grace said before the needle was inserted further, causing her to cry out again.*

*'Aren't you supposed to give me something to numb the pain before you do that?' she asked through her tears of pain.*

*'I just did, dear. Don't you remember? Oh, of course you don't. It's part of your psychosis, short-term memory and hallucinations. Don't worry, the pain is all in your head.'*

*Grace didn't respond, but she felt almost sure that the pain was real and not in her head. However, she could feel a small part of herself doubting her own sanity.*

*'No,' she told herself, 'this is all some kind of trick.' She tried to make sense of what was happening and why this woman would want to make her think she was crazy, but the pain was too much for her to be able to think straight. She thought if Luke was there, he would know if anything this woman was saying was based on medical fact, but if she had only imagined*

*Luke and everything else that was going on, it was pointless to wish he was there.*

## Chapter six

‘We’ll just talk to Terry, he’ll tell us where Mark went and then we’ll go after him,’ Luke assured Grace as they walked towards the town hall entrance.

‘I really hope it’s far away from this city, I don’t want to be here, Luke.’ She locked eyes with him, knowing he was only one of two living people who could come close to understanding how she felt.

‘I know,’ he responded, taking her hand in his as the two of them entered the building.

Grace didn’t pull her hand away. It was comforting and didn’t mean anything more than a bond they shared — from surviving two years of horrendous experiences together, experiences they couldn’t share with the rest of the world. She pushed Mark's idea to the back of her mind, about Luke having feelings for her.

‘I can’t tell you anything,’ Terry said after Luke asked him where Mark had gone.

‘You mean you won’t?’ Grace questioned.

‘No, I mean I can’t, because I don’t know.’

‘Are you trying to tell us, Mark left and you guys don’t know where he went?’ Luke was unconvinced.

‘I’m sure someone does, but it’s not me,’ Terry insisted.

‘Then who?’ Grace asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Terry shrugged. ‘You know, I only took this job because it pays more than any other council in the UK, but they don’t tell me everything.’

‘Then find out,’ Luke suggested.

‘I’ve already done more than I should and you two should just be happy to be alive after...’

‘After what?’ Grace demanded, stepping closer to Terry and in spite of been six inches shorter than him, she managed to come across as intimidating enough to make Terry take a step backwards. ‘Do you mean

after the people you work for, or more precisely the people who use you to hide behind, let out a deadly infection and not only left everyone to die, but tried to cover the whole thing up by killing off anyone not infected by the outbreak to cover their own backs?’

‘You know that... it wasn’t me who did those things and...I’m just a...’ Terry started.

‘Do you know the things I had to do in those two years? Do you know what I could do now? To you, if you don’t find out where Mark went? Or at the very least the name of someone who can tell me,’ Grace threatened.

‘I’ll try to find out.’

‘Good, that’s all I ask,’ Grace replied calmly, almost as though her previous outburst hadn’t happened.

‘You know that wasn’t completely necessary, don’t you?’ Luke asked as the pair of them left the town hall. ‘You were full on terrifying in there.’

‘I did what I had to. Now he’s motivated.’

‘Yeah, sure, motivated to shit his pants maybe,’ Luke pointed out.

‘Whatever works,’ Grace retorted.

Luke grabbed Grace’s arm, forcing her to stop walking. ‘Grace, what we went through and maybe you most of all, it was horrible. That doesn’t even cover it, but it’s over now and even though we did some awful things and had more awful things done to us, we have to go back now.’

‘Go back to what?’ Grace found herself snapping at Luke.

‘To behaving like human beings.’

‘And how’s that working out for you?’

‘Better than the alternative.’

### **Days 191 and 192 of the outbreak**

*‘Grace has been bitten,’ Mark’s panicked voice called out to Luke as the horde of infected continued to pursue them.*

*Blood seeped from Grace’s arm. Gregg, Yasmin and Paula headed towards a cottage. Luke fell back, helping Mark with Grace.*

*‘Just hold on,’ Luke pleaded as though that could somehow stop the change that was about to happen.*

*Once they were inside the cottage, Mark tried to convince Grace that she was going to be fine, while everyone else got to work securing the doors and windows.*



*‘Should she be in here with us?’ Paula questioned, ‘and should we really have locked ourselves in here with her? She is going to turn.’*

*‘I saw something similar on a TV show once. Maybe we could just chop the arm off?’ Mark asked.*

*‘Unless that TV show was a documentary on how to survive a zombie attack, then that’s not going to work,’ Luke retorted.*

*Grace could tell he was worried and tried to force a small smile as she said, ‘it’s okay, just open a door and send me out. Paula’s right; I am going to turn and you lot shouldn’t be trapped in here with me when it happens.’*

*‘Gracie,’ Mark whispered softly. ‘It’s okay. I’ll stay awake, until you turn, then I’ll deal with it.’ He spoke the last few words loud enough for the others to hear, as he turned his head to glare at Paula.*

*‘I know she’s your sort of wife now, but what if you fall asleep and she turns and kills us all?’ Gregg demanded.*

*‘I’ll keep watch too, if Mark falls asleep and Grace turns, I’ll do the right thing,’ Luke offered.*

*Grace couldn’t help but laugh despite the inappropriateness and lack of humour in the situation. ‘That’s so sweet that you two are willing to kill me.’*

*‘Not you,’ Luke corrected her. ‘The thing you’ll become. Paula, if you kill her now you’ll be killing Grace, not the monster she’ll turn into.’*

*‘Fine,’ Paula snapped, ‘but just for the record, this is a terrible idea.’*

*‘Noted.’ Mark said, while glaring at her again.*

*Luke and Mark kept their word and alternated between keeping watch over Grace.*

*‘Maybe it wasn’t a bite?’ Mark asked hopefully as the sun began to rise following what seemed like a long night.*

*‘That thing bit me, I know that. Are you really prepared to use that knife on me? Maybe Paula could...’*

*‘If you turn and it has to be done, then it’s going to be me,’ Mark insisted.*

*‘Or Luke if it happens on his watch.’*

*‘I told him to wake me if that happens. I need it to be me.’*

*‘And they say romance is dead,’ Grace tried to joke.*

*‘I’m not complaining, but if you were going to turn, wouldn’t it have happened by now?’*

Grace opened her mouth to reply that they might not be a set time limit, when she began to shake as though having a seizure. Mark held onto her tightly, trying to prevent her from hurting herself. Luke woke up and was next to them within seconds.

'Is this it? Is it happening?' His voice gave away his confusion and concern.

'I don't know, something's wrong. You've seen more people turn than any of us, that first night in the hospital. Did any of them appear to have a seizure before they turned?'

'No.' Luke shook his head adamantly. 'Not a single one of them.'

Grace groaned, as her apparent seizure continued.

'Do it,' Paula ordered.

'Do it now,' Yasmin spoke up and Gregg stepped forward holding his own knife.

Luke stood and pushed him backwards. 'Not yet, she hasn't turned, not yet. We don't know what this is.'

'She was bit,' Gregg retorted while trying to push Luke out of the way. 'There's three of us against you and Mark, so either you kill her now or between us we will, along with anyone who gets in our way.'

Luke backed away, knelt down and held onto Grace. 'When she turns, not before,' he insisted as tears filled his eyes.

'Now back the hell off.' Mark's hand tightened around his knife.

'With pleasure,' Gregg replied. 'When she bites you both, we'll just take you all out.' He switched his knife for his gun, while Yasmin and Paul took out their own guns.

Grace appeared to have passed out. Her face was pale and her body felt cold to Luke's touch as he kept his hold on her. Mark held the knife above her head. Grace's eyes opened, and he prepared to slam the knife into her head.

'Wait!' Grace managed to call out hoarsely, as the lack of water during the previous twelve hours had caused her throat to feel sore and dry. 'It's me. I'm still me. I'm alive.'

## Chapter seven

‘Mark is being held in Strangeways, awaiting trial,’ Luke told Grace when he woke her the following day.

She had stayed the night at Luke’s house, after giving up her own house before she had left Manchester. Luke had given up his room for her and moved his things into the spare bedroom.

‘What?’ Grace questioned and noticed Luke’s bloodshot eyes. ‘Did you get any sleep at all last night?’

‘Some, a little, maybe. I pulled some strings though, threatened a few people, verbally I mean. Not with physical violence,’ he felt the need to point out.

‘And?’

‘Strangeways, like I said.’

‘But why? What are they saying he did?’

‘Murder.’

‘But Mark would never...he didn’t...’

‘Technically he did, but they’re twisting the whole thing obviously and they have CCTV footage, which they’ve cut and edited. It makes it look like Mark murdered a bunch of soldiers and doctors, who were apparently trying to stop the outbreak and prevent Mark from destroying a potential cure.’

‘Don’t make me laugh,’ Grace retorted. ‘Nobody was trying to stop the outbreak, at least not until it was too late and their methods were...they’re the ones who should be on trial, not Mark.’

‘We know that, but with the falsified evidence and fake witnesses, it’s not looking good for Mark.’

‘Well, we’ve got to help him. We can’t let him go to prison.’

‘He’s already in prison.’

‘You know what I mean. We can’t let him stay there.’

‘Whatever we do; I think we’re going to have to go down the legal route this time. Things aren’t like they were before,’ Luke reminded her.

‘I never thought I would say this, but I almost miss the zombie outbreak.’

‘No you don’t,’ Luke insisted.

#### **Day 401 of the outbreak**

*‘Where is she?’ Mark demanded, grabbing the soldier by the neck, before he could aim his gun at Mark.*

*Luke prised the weapon away from their new captive, added it to the growing collection in his rucksack, then pointed his favourite rifle at the soldier’s head as though he needed any more motivation to answer Luke’s question.*

*‘The immune woman?’ the soldier asked as he choked from the pressure Mark was applying to his neck.*

*‘Yeah, the immune woman,’ Mark snapped.*

*‘She’s...,’ he began, failing to get the words out.*

*‘Mark, a little less pressure please, he can’t tell us if he can’t breathe,’ Luke informed him.*

*‘Right, sorry about that.’ Mark let go. ‘I get a little pissed off when my wife is taken away to God knows where for God knows what.’*

*‘They’re trying to find a cure. That’s why they took her.’*

*‘A cure?’ Luke asked. ‘Why? There’s nobody left to cure, except us and they sure as hell don’t give a shit about us.’*

*‘The cure’s not for you. It’s for a wealthy family. I don’t know who, but they have a lot of influence and they were in the city when all this started. They think it’s only a matter of time before...you know,’ the soldier pulled a face.*

*'Was that meant to be an impression of one of the infected?' Mark asked in disgust. 'Luke, you should shoot him just for that.'*

*Luke moved closer towards the soldier, pressing the rifle against his head.*

*'No, wait! I can tell you where they're keeping the immune woman.'*

*'I'm listening,' Luke said.*

*'At North Manchester Hospital. They're running tests.'*

*Mark took a gun out of his bag and shot the soldier in the head.*

*'What did you do that for? I think he was telling us the truth,' Luke argued.*

*'I'm sure he was, but we need to rescue Grace. We can't have him warning whoever is in there with her that we're coming,' he explained.*

*Grace closed her eyes as another needle was inserted into her. The doctor had said the reason for so many tests was so they could find out what was causing her 'episodes' and once she was better; she would be able to go home. At first, she had insisted she had no home. She was told that she had a family who loved her, who wanted her to get better, so that she could come home to them. Grace was shown pictures of a man and a woman with two girls, who the doctors told her were her parents, herself and younger sister. They all looked so happy together. Grace wanted to believe they were her family and that she had a zombie free home and a loving family waiting for her. Grace still had unwanted doubts, about her apparent home and family. It all seemed so far-fetched, that she could forget them all and instead imagine a city full of zombies and all the soldiers trying to stop anyone from leaving. Although, after having time to think about things, she wondered which was more implausible; the zombies or her losing her mind and imagining the whole thing. Maybe the doctor was telling the truth, she thought to herself. She had brought Grace some clothes, three meals a day and even unstrapped her from the trolley and provided her with a real bed. The door to Grace's room was still locked, but if she was on a psychiatric ward, that might make sense. She was jolted out of her chaotic thought process by what sounded like gunshots. They were screams and someone yelling.*

*'Grace, where are you?' a male voice shouted somewhere in the distance.*

*'Grace, hold on, wherever you are, we'll find you,' a different male voice called out.*

*She wondered if she should call back and let them follow the sound of her voice, but what if they were there to hurt her? That didn't make any sense. Why would someone break into a hospital to hurt her? They were probably the ones shooting though. So she remained quiet until the door was kicked open and two men who looked familiar rushed to her side.*

*'Grace, it's okay we're here.' Mark said, kneeling next to Grace's bed.*

*'Mark? Luke? But you're not real. You can't be. The zombies...they're not...'*

*'What the hell did they do to her?' Mark questioned, looking up at Luke.*

*The two of them helped Grace to put on a pair of shoes that Luke took from the female doctor who lay just outside the room with a gunshot wound in her head. The shoes were a size too big, but they couldn't be choosy.*

*'Not real, not real,' Grace kept repeating as the two men guided her out of the hospital.*

*'Those bastards really did a number on her,' Mark snapped. 'If I hadn't already killed them, I'd fucking kill them.'*

*'Let's concentrate on getting as far away from here as possible. We can get angry about those bastards later. Even the unarmed ones you shot on the way in here,' Luke added in an accusing tone.*

*'What did you expect me to do? They weren't exactly going to just let us walk out of here with Grace and I didn't know who was armed and who wasn't.'*

*'Fair point, but you didn't have to look like you were enjoying it so much.'*

## Chapter eight

'Mark,' Grace gasped at the sight of him. He had lost weight and looked like he hadn't been sleeping much. He barely looked like the Mark she knew. Even when they had been fighting the infected together and fleeing from the soldiers, he always seemed so strong and in control. It felt like an insult that something as normal as prison might be the one thing to break him.

'Grace,' he said unable to look her in the eye, as he sat down opposite her.

'I know you didn't do this. Not like the way they're...'

'It doesn't matter. I did it and I'm going to die in here,' he cut her off.

'Stop talking like that, we've been through worse.'

'Maybe, but I'm done, Grace. I thought things would go back to normal, but too much has happened. I did too much, went too far to...'

'No; we all did what we had to,' Grace said, but she didn't entirely believe the words as she said them.

'Then maybe you and Luke should be locked up too,' Mark pointed out.

'You don't believe that.'

'I don't know what I believe anymore, but if you and Luke don't leave this alone, you will be locked up. Or maybe you'll just die in mysterious circumstances. You didn't think they would really let us walk free and live happily ever after? Even if we could live with ourselves, they were never going to let us go, Gracie.'

'I'm not letting this go.' Grace stood and turned to leave.

'Then they won't either,' Mark warned.

'He just seemed so..., ' Grace tried to explain to Luke.

They were sat in the kitchen at the dining table.

'He's given up, I guess it makes sense,' he reasoned.

'Well explain it to me then.'

'You of all people should understand. You gave up and moved away.'

'But I came back and I didn't start believing that getting locked away in prison was a good thing.'

'You feel guilty though, right? Because I know I do,' Luke admitted.

‘I didn’t enjoy what we had to do Luke, but I know we had to do it.’

‘I’m sure Mark knows that too, but just rescuing you; he must have killed a few dozen uninfected humans. Now add that to the body count of infected and uninfected over two years and of course he’s feeling it.’

‘We’re all feeling it and I get it. He’s got more on his conscience, but dying in prison isn’t the answer,’ Grace argued.

‘He has a point though. Not that he deserves to die in prison or anywhere else, but we were stupid. It’s obvious now. They were never going to let us go.’

‘They gave us their word,’ Grace replied weakly.

Luke stifled a laugh. ‘Sorry, but these are the people responsible for giving the orders that left us to die. I don’t think their word ever counted all that much. We need to be careful and watch our backs.’

### **Day 683 of the outbreak**

*‘It’s okay, don’t shoot!’ a voice called out, but Mark continued to aim the gun in his direction.*

*Luke and Grace looked to Mark for confirmation, while only lowering their guns slightly.*

*‘Give us one good reason not to,’ Luke called back.*

*‘Because it’s over, the cure worked and there’s nobody left infected. You’re free to leave or stay, whichever, but it’s over,’ the soldier insisted as he stepped out into the clearing.*

*‘Why should we believe you?’ Mark demanded.*

*‘We just need to take you in to administer the immunisation, then it’s over,’ another soldier appeared from behind a nearby wall. ‘Except Grace of course, because she’s already immune. We finally managed to make a vaccine from her samples.’*

*Luke put his gun down and walked towards them.*

*‘What the hell are you doing?’ Mark hissed. ‘Don’t tell me you believe this crap.’*

*‘Whatever. If they’re telling the truth, it’s over and if they’re lying, then what’s the point? What are we fighting for anyway?’*

*Grace ran after Luke, ‘I’m not letting you go alone.’*

*‘Oh for fuck sake,’ Mark snapped, dropping his own gun and joining them.*



*More soldiers appeared from their various hiding places, including nearby trees and walls and they all aimed their weapons at Grace, Mark and Luke.*

*'We've got them. Shall we shoot them now?' one soldier asked into his radio.*

*'Told you so,' Mark couldn't help saying.*

*'Yes, helpful,' Luke retorted.*

*'Wait,' Grace stepped forward — ignoring the worried stares from Mark and Luke as they tried to hold her back. 'You need us, if you were telling the truth about the infection being under control.'*

*'We don't need you, but we were telling the truth. The infection is over,' the soldier retorted. 'Awaiting orders sir,' he spoke into the radio again.*

*'Hear her out,' the voice replied.*

*Grace didn't waste any time. 'Well if everyone else, except this rich family is dead; you're going to need witnesses to what happened here, or at least whatever you say happened here. The whole city has been on lock down for two years now. The media are going to be all over this.'*

*Mark stepped forward and said, 'you know she's right. How long before they start coming up with conspiracy theories and how long before some of those theories come too close for comfort to the actual truth?'*

*'Hide what?' the soldier questioned arrogantly. 'Everyone knows why Manchester was cordoned off. It was a citywide outbreak of MERS.'*

*'Do you need a little help convincing everyone of that?' Grace asked.*

*'What are you suggesting?' The soldier looked at Grace dubiously.*

*Grace couldn't help noticing all the weapons still aimed at herself, Mark and Luke. 'Give us the full official story. We'll tell it to the media and anyone else who asks. They can look into our backgrounds and see we're real people who were born and have lived our lives in Manchester.'*

*'In return for?'*

*'Our lives, obviously' Grace offered.*

*'And never having to worry about where to live, money or jobs again. Whatever we need, you guys pull some strings and get it for us,' Mark bargained.*

*'Don't push it,' Luke whispered.*

*'Who's going to take the word of a homeless person and a thief?' the soldier asked.*

*‘And a doctor,’ Luke chimed in, ‘quite a mix of people from different walks of life. Or you could just hope and prayer that the word of a rich and over-privileged family carries enough weight with the press and the average doubting person out there. This had better work,’ Luke added in a whisper to Mark and Grace.*

*‘Did you hear all that?’ the soldier asked.*

*‘Bring them in, alive and we’ll talk,’ the voice responded.*

*Grace, Mark and Luke exchanged glances, daring to hope that their hell might finally be over.*

## Chapter nine

‘What do we do now?’ Grace questioned, her eyes staring at Luke as she waited for him to provide a solution.

The two of them hadn’t slept much. When Grace had come downstairs to make a coffee just before 6am, Luke was already there slumped at the dining table with his head in his hands. Or maybe he had been all night, Grace thought.

‘Get a good lawyer,’ Luke suggested.

‘What with? They can take away your job and our money. Not like we had enough for a decent lawyer anyway.’

‘Mark said to leave him, maybe...,’ Luke began.

‘No, we’re not leaving him. We don’t do that. The three of us stick together, remember?’

‘That was when people were trying to either eat us or shoot us. We could still...’

‘No, we couldn’t still anything. We both know that letting Mark rot in prison won’t solve anything. They’ll come after us next. The press aren’t paying much attention to us anymore. We’re old news. Nobody cares and that means we can just disappear inexplicably.’

‘No, it wouldn’t be inexplicably.’ Luke shook his head. ‘They would most likely dirty my name, saying I did something negligent to get me struck off, then you would lose your home for whatever reason and end up back on the streets. After that, it would all be set up to make it look like I’ve killed myself and that you’ve accidentally overdosed on illegal drugs.’

‘That’s not really helpful right now,’ Grace snapped.

‘I wasn’t trying to be helpful. I just think maybe we should let this happen,’ Luke suggested.

‘No, not after everything that we did to survive, this can’t be how it all ends. It won’t be how it all ends,’ Grace announced before standing up and heading towards the door.

‘Grace, where are you going?’ Luke asked.

Grace ignored his question and flung open the front door, standing face to face with Yasmin and Gregg.

‘What the hell? I thought you were dead,’ Grace said and took a few steps back — almost falling into Luke, because he had gone after her. Yasmin and Gregg looked like themselves, but much paler, almost like the infected — but not quite and somehow human at the same time.

‘We...’ Yasmin began in a raspy voice and her face showed pain, as though it was a big effort to try to speak. ‘We heard you were here.’

‘And about Mark,’ Gregg stated, also sounding like he was struggling with his speech.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Luke asked, holding onto Grace's arm and pulling her away from them.

‘We were captured,’ Yasmin said.

‘But we escaped,’ Gregg informed them.

‘And what exactly did they do to you?’ Luke accused.

‘They gave us the cure,’ Yasmin and Gregg said in unison.

‘No offence, but you don’t look very cured to me,’ Luke stated. ‘Let me take a look at you.’

‘We’re fine,’ they both spoke in unison again as they took a step forward.

‘I’m a doctor, remember?’

‘We’re fine,’ they repeated. ‘We took the cure.’

‘Luke, what’s wrong with them?’ Grace asked as she stepped back, pulling at Luke’s arm to draw him away from Gregg and Yasmin.

‘I think the government have taken the definition of brainwashed mindless zombies to a whole new level,’ Luke replied as he ran towards telephone table in the hallway and pulled out a gun from the drawer, then aimed it at Gregg and Yasmin. ‘Leave now, or I will shoot you in the head.’

Gregg and Yasmin stayed where they were. Luke prepared himself to pull the trigger, but the door opened, then five soldiers rushed into the room. Luke misfired and hit the wall. Before he or Grace had time to react, they were taken away by the soldiers.

## **Day 195**

*‘Are you sure we’re doing the right thing?’ Paula asked.*

*‘They killed Lucy,’ Yasmin reminded her.*

*Paula wasn't convinced. 'But did they really? Grace said she was one of those things.'*

*'Grace could have turned her back. She's immune, she probably knew that all along. Luke's a doctor; between them, they could have figured out a way to cure Lucy.'*

*'Yasmin's right,' Gregg agreed. 'At least this way, there will be a cure. We all know Mark would never agree to this and neither would Luke. They'd risk us all to save their precious Grace, but getting a cure is more important than any one person. We have to look out for ourselves now, before we die too.'*

*'Who's there?' a female voice demanded from behind the hospital door before the three of them reached it.*

*'Survivors, and friends of someone who might be immune. We heard there were army doctors in here, so we figured you might be able to do something with her to make a cure,' Gregg explained.*

*'How do I know you're telling the truth?' the woman questioned.*

*'She was bitten, but didn't turn. We have her blood on this rag. Maybe you can test it, to see how it's different and immune to whatever this outbreak is, then we can tell you where to find her to get more,' Gregg offered.*

*'And what do you want in return?' she questioned.*

*'We want to live and we want the cure, so that we won't turn into those things, then we want to leave Manchester.'*

*'You would sell your friend out?' a soldier questioned, startling Gregg, Yasmin and Paula. They hadn't seen him approaching.*

*'It's every man or woman for themselves now, right?' Gregg questioned nervously.*

*'Right, wait there, we'll see what we can do,' the soldier ordered, then went inside with the woman.*

*Ten minutes later, the woman returned alone and stepped outside. Gregg, Yasmin and Paula could see that she was wearing a long white coat and looked like a doctor.*

*'Okay, you can come in; I'll take you to the lab. If this blood sample checks out, someone will be sent to fetch this immune woman. I'll also need one of you to volunteer to be a test subject, once I've made a potential cure.'*

*'We never said anything about being test subjects,' Gregg objected.*

*'It's okay, I'll do it,' Paula volunteered herself.*

### **Day 381 of the outbreak**

*'If only we could get hold of one of those soldiers to tell us where Grace is,' Luke suggested.*

*'You think they did something to her?'* Mark questioned as he used his knife to sharpen some wooden chair legs, so that he could use them as weapons against the infected. He figured anything that could pierce their skulls would do.

*'Either that, or she got bit again, but we know she's immune to becoming one of those things,' Luke pointed out.*

*'Doesn't mean they can't tear her to pieces. She's not immune to dying.'*

*'That's not helpful,' Luke mumbled.*

*'It's not meant to be helpful, I'm only saying what we're both thinking, it's just that you don't want to admit it.'*

*'Whatever happened, we need to know. We're running short on people here in case you haven't noticed,' Luke stated.*

*'I noticed and I don't think Paula, Yasmin and Gregg disappearing before we started getting hunted by soldiers, even when we weren't near the borders and then Grace disappearing and suddenly we're not being hunted as much, is a coincidence.'*

*'I agree with you there. I think they did something.'*

*'They blamed me and Grace for what happened to Lucy, but she was infected. We did what we had to.'*

*'Too bad they don't see it that way,' Luke reasoned.*

*Paula lay on the hospital trolley as the doctor prepared the first batch of what could be a cure for the outbreak.*

*'You don't have to do this,' Yasmin told her for what felt like the hundredth time.*

*'Someone has to. Why not me?'* she questioned as she forced herself to smile for Yasmin's benefit.

*The doctor injected Paula, then ordered Gregg and Yasmin to stand back.*

*'Why? What's going to happen?'* Gregg questioned.

*'We don't know; it's the first test. That's why you should stand back, just in case...of anything unexpected,' the doctor replied.*

*Nothing happened for a few minutes, then Paula began to convulse in a similar way to how Grace had after she was bitten.*

*'This is it. That's how Grace reacted, afterwards she was fine,' Yasmin announced as she stepped forward.*

*Paula's eyes opened and before anyone could react, she pulled Yasmin towards her, sinking her teeth into her sister's arm. Yasmin yelped in pain and surprise. Gregg stepped forward and tried to push Paula away, but Paula withdrew her teeth from Yasmin and bore them into his arm, as Yasmin fell to the floor. A shot was fired, from a soldier who was standing in the doorway. It hit Paula in the forehead, causing her to slump back onto the trolley, with a piece of Gregg's flesh still hanging from her mouth.*

## Chapter ten

‘I bet you wish we’d never come back now,’ Grace couldn’t resist saying, as she and Luke sat together in a cell.

‘They would have come for us anyway. I think this was always going to happen.’

‘What did they do to Yasmin and Gregg?’

‘I think it’s what they were originally trying to do, when the outbreak first started,’ Luke replied.

‘I don’t understand. Are you saying the government made the zombies on purpose?’

‘I don’t think they intended for Manchester to become an all you can eat buffet for the infected, but I’ve been thinking about this a lot. Gregg and Yasmin showing up and being the way they are. It makes some kind of sense.’

‘I’m glad you think so,’ Grace said. ‘Do you think they’re going to do the same thing to us?’

‘No, they’re probably going to kill us,’ Luke said dejectedly.

‘Oh, well I suppose that’s better in some ways, I don’t want to become one of those things, but I don’t want to die either, so we need to do something,’ Grace insisted.

‘Gracie, I’ve always loved this optimistic side of you, but you need to know when to give up.’

‘Snap out of it,’ Grace ordered, catching Luke off-guard, who was not used to seeing her get so mad — even when they had been fighting off the infected and the soldiers together. ‘I get that you’ve been through a lot of



shit, I have too and I won't remind you of everything we've had to do to survive, because neither of us need a recap. But we did survive and it wasn't so that we could just die to cover up the governments mess, or for us to become mindless brainwashed zombies. So for fuck sake, snap the hell out of it, because I'm not ready to give up yet and I won't let you give up either.'

Luke could only stare, open mouthed, at Grace.

'What?' she questioned.

'That was a pretty amazing outburst. I hope you can back it up with actions.'

Grace didn't have time to respond, before two soldiers and a middle-aged man dressed in an expensive looking suit, approached them. Grace vaguely recognised him and wondered if he might be one of the politicians she had seen on television.

'You might have noticed; this isn't like your normal prison or police station holding cell,' the suited man informed them. 'This city has many forgotten underground places; this is just one of them.'

'Thanks for the history lesson, but that was never my favourite subject at school,' Grace retorted.

'My point is, nobody will ever find you down here, friends, family, journalists, NOBODY,' he emphasised.

'That could be a problem,' Grace said.

'You finally understand.'

'Oh yes, but I think you misunderstand me. What I meant is, that could be a problem for you.'

'How did you arrive at that conclusion?'

'You may have noticed how we kept your secrets so well and told our fake stories to the world's media. I mean, they were really keen to find out what happened here.'

'Yes and now your job is done. Thanks for all your help, but we don't need you anymore,' he answered abruptly.

'I'm afraid that's not entirely true. Those fake stories, they were everywhere in pretty much every newspaper, on all the radio stations and television news channels. The only problem is, they all had the same stories.'

'So?'

‘So, some of them would love an exclusive, something different from what everyone else has. I promised them that. I told some of them the truth and if anything happens to us, that just backs up my story. You’re going to have a lot to explain, when they start believing and printing it, aren’t you? I’m just saying.’ Grace walked back to Luke and sat down beside him on the metal bench.

‘Who did you tell?’ the suited man demanded, as his face turned red with anger and his features twisted — making him look like he had just eaten a whole lemon in one go.

‘We could just shoot them, right here and now, Sir’ one of the soldiers offered.

‘Are you insane?’ the man bellowed at him, then strode away, leaving the soldiers to look at each other before following him.

‘I hope you know what you’re doing,’ Luke whispered to her.

Grace nodded, but didn’t reply, knowing that they were most likely been watched and listened to in their captivity. She hoped Luke knew her well enough to know she was bluffing, without her having to say it out loud. She also hoped he knew she would have told him if she leaked the truth to a few journalists. She wasn’t sure why it seemed so important for Luke to realise she hadn’t lied or kept the truth from him. Grace found herself resting her head on Luke’s shoulder for comfort. He wrapped his arm around her, then kissed her softly on the forehead. As she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine things were okay and they weren’t facing a possible mysterious accident or disappearance.

‘I’m sorry,’ Luke broke the silence.

‘What for?’ Grace questioned.

‘Giving up.’

‘That’s okay,’ Grace pulled away, so that she could look him in the eye. ‘After everything that’s happened, it’s understandable, but promise me...’ she began, interrupted by the suited man returning with five soldiers in tow. They unlocked the cell door and two of them grabbed hold of Grace, while another two tackled Luke to the ground. The fifth soldier kicked Luke in the stomach, as Grace struggled to get free from the hands forcing her down and twisting both her arms behind her back.

‘Stop it, please,’ she pleaded for Luke’s benefit more than her own even though she felt like her shoulders might pop out of their sockets if they

twist any harder.

‘Not so tough now. Are you, sweetheart?’ the suited man asked in a patronising tone. ‘You can make them stop anytime.’

Luke received a solid punch in the jaw, but his eyes remained fixed on Grace.

‘Just tell us the truth, did you tell any journalists, or anyone else the truth about what happened?’ suit man demanded.

‘Tell them the truth,’ Luke spluttered.

Grace opened her mouth to respond, but Luke was kicked in the stomach again. Grace caught the look in his eyes, which everyone else in the cell seemed to be oblivious to. Maybe it was because of how close they had become while sharing an ordeal that most people wouldn’t understand, but Grace sensed he didn’t mean the real truth. He meant for her to lie and elaborate on what she had already said.

‘I told four people, but I’ll never tell you who. You can kill Luke and me and even Mark if you want to, if that’s what it takes to get you hard. Just know this, if any one of us dies or vanishes, then those four people will release the full story. I wouldn’t want to be you when that happens.’

The suited man nodded to the soldiers who released their grip on Luke and Grace, then left the cell, locking it behind them.

‘Luke,’ Grace scrambled to his side, fighting back tears. ‘I am so sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ he said lifting his hand to her face. ‘You did the right thing. You told the truth.’

Grace nodded to show her understanding. She understood that Luke had taken a beating in order to make their captors believe Grace really was telling them the truth.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered before kissing him on the lips.

He looked at her in surprise, but didn’t have chance to respond before they were interrupted again.

‘You’re free to go, for now’ a different suited man announced. ‘There will be a court case though and in the interest of fairness, it will be covered in great detail by the media, who you seem to love so much. I wouldn’t want to be either of you when they see you as the leeches you really are.’

‘What about Mark?’ Grace asked.

‘He’s outside waiting for you, see you in court,’ he added in a tone which made shivers run down Grace’s spine.

Luke and Grace were led through a series of dirty looking tunnels and corridors then up a flight of stairs — which led into a shut-down shop. Mark was waiting there for them. Grace ran towards him, throwing her arms around him.

Mark returned the embrace as he said, ‘Gracie, sweetheart, I’m really sorry, I was a jerk and I never should have left you, or acted like a moron when you came to see me at the prison.’

‘Good to have you back. Shall we get out of here?’ Luke tried to hide his disappointment at seeing Grace and Mark together again, as though nothing had ever happened between himself and Grace.

‘Yes, let’s enjoy our freedom while it lasts,’ Grace agreed. ‘I don’t think this court case is going to go in our favour.’

It felt unreal, as the three of them walked down Market Street amidst the crowds of shoppers, who were either visiting or had moved to Manchester after the outbreak — when houses were offered to rent or buy cheaply and wages were increased to entice people to the city, to get things back to normal.

‘It’s hard to believe that this place was overrun with zombies once,’ Grace pointed out.

‘I don’t know,’ Mark looked around as a couple of men walked past, obviously high on some kind of illegal substance, ‘some of them still look like zombies to me.’

‘I can’t believe you’re making jokes about this,’ Luke spoke up.

‘Let’s just go home,’ Mark suggested.

‘I give up our house, when I went to Liverpool,’ Grace told him.

‘You went to Liverpool?’

‘Long story.’

‘There’s room at my place,’ Luke offered.

## Chapter eleven

It was late when the three of them arrived at Luke's house. Luke could only watch as Mark and Grace went upstairs together. He had been so close to getting Grace to feeling anything for him, then Mark returned and it was gone again. He felt bad about his jealousy of Mark. The three of them shared something that nobody else did, after all they had been through together, but Luke still couldn't help feeling envious, knowing Mark would be sharing a bed with Grace that night.

Grace could only watch as Mark undressed, then put on a pair of Luke's old Pyjamas that he let him have, as he didn't have any of his own with him. Mark climbed into bed, closed his eyes, but opened them again just moments later.

'Aren't you joining me?'

'I...don't know,' Grace replied, feeling awkward.

Mark sat up and beckoned for Grace to sit down on the space next to him. She did, but not as close as Mark would have liked.

'What's wrong?' Mark asked.

'What's wrong? You left me. That's what's wrong?' Grace snapped.

'Sorry. I don't mean to yell, but it really hurt and...'

'I know, Gracie and I'm sorry. I thought you would be better without me and maybe you would have been.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Don't think I didn't notice Luke's expression earlier, he was disappointed and I guess I always knew how he felt about you, but it seems like more now. I know you two, maybe better than I know myself. Is there something you're not telling me?'

'We kissed,' Grace found herself admitting, 'in the cell, he was beaten and hurt and I felt...I don't know what I felt, but I kissed him, then we were released and you were waiting there for us and I don't know what to think anymore.'

'Grace, it's okay,' Mark said seriously. 'This isn't exactly a normal situation. We've survived things most people would never believe happened, let alone understand. Most men would want to punch the guy

their wife just kissed, but Luke is like family to me. I don't care about one stupid kiss. If that's all it was?'

Grace stood up and took a step away from the bed. 'You know we are being watched, listened to, wherever we go now. That's all weird enough, but I can't sort out our dirty laundry for them to get their kicks. I just can't.' She left the room.

'Is everything okay?' Luke asked, as Grace entered the kitchen. 'I thought you and Mark would be making up for lost time.'

'I just wanted to make some hot chocolate, if that's okay?'

'Of course, my home is your home...and Mark's, obviously.'

'Is this going to get weird?'

'Get?' Luke tried to joke. 'Grace, none of this is normal. why should our relationship be any different?'

'We have a relationship?'

'No, I mean, I thought we had something, but Mark's back now and...'

'I'll tell you what I told him, I can't sort this out right now, not while we're probably under surveillance, it's just another thing for them to get off on.'

'Sorry. I never really thought of that, I guess I'm not used to my every move being watched and my every word being listened to.'

'It's only another thing we need to get used to,' Grace replied.

'I don't know how you do it,' Luke said. 'I know we all had to adapt to what was happening, but you seemed to adapt quicker.'

'I was homeless before all this and I had to adapt to survive. Everything that happened after that was just another thing I had to survive through.'

Luke walked over to Grace and hugged her. 'I love you, just know that. It doesn't have to mean anything right now, but I need you to know,' he whispered.

'I love Mark,' Grace whispered back, 'but I also love you.'

'I'll sleep on the sofa tonight. You can take my room,' Luke offered as Grace turned around to pour the boiling water into her mug.

'Thanks, but it's fine. I can take the sofa. Believe me, I've slept in worse places.' She smiled at Luke and he found himself smiling back as he wished her goodnight, then he went upstairs — leaving Grace to take her hot chocolate into the front room and settle down for the rest of the night.

It was late morning when she finally woke. Mark and Luke brought her breakfast and seemed keen to point out which parts of the breakfast they had each made.

'I'm sure it's all great and you both worked hard to make all this. So thank you, but shouldn't you be more concerned about getting a lawyer and finding out what we're being charged with and what we're going to say in court, rather than who put most effort into making breakfast?'

#### **Day 404 of the outbreak**

*'How is she?'* Mark questioned as he woke to find Luke watching over Grace.

*'Getting better, she was calling out for you.'*

*Mark stood and almost ran to Grace's side — kneeling before her and feeling her forehead, then gently moving the stray strands of hair from her face. 'It's all right, Gracie. I'm here.' He planted a soft kiss on her cheek. 'We found you and saved you, remember? You're okay now.'*

*She murmured in response, but didn't open her eyes.*

*'Luke, what are we going to do? They'll come looking, especially because, not only did we take away their main cure ingredient, but you had to take those too.'* Mark pointed to two containers of needles and samples of blood.

*'It was labelled Grace,' Luke stated as though that explained his motives for taking the blood, 'and Grace isn't an ingredient, she's a person.'*

*'Yes, she is to us, but to them she's an ingredient for their cure and I don't think she needs that blood back. So why did you take it?'* Mark asked.

*'Better we have it, than they do. I was hoping, maybe they didn't have any more, plus it looks pure,' Luke pointed out.*

*'Great,' Mark said, still not understanding.*

*'That means they didn't mix it with anything. My guess is, if they're trying to make a cure, they would probably try to mix it with something else.'*

*'So now they have more reasons to want Grace back, because you took her pure blood samples, which may or may not have been all they had. Good work there,' Mark retorted.*

*'They would have tried to take her back anyway, but I have a suggestion.'*

*'I'm listening.'*

*'One of us should inject ourselves with it,' Luke said.*

*'Are you kidding? It's still infected blood. She was bitten, remember? I know I'm not the doctor here, but doesn't that mean we could get infected, even if she can't?'*

*'It's a valid theory, but I have my own theory. I don't know how exactly, but I think Grace's blood, just by itself could be the cure and I don't think anyone else has figured that out yet.'*

*'Just say it is. How can you be sure they haven't figured it out too?'*  
Mark asked.

*'They would have injected this into that moneybags family, not left it in the lab at the hospital.'*

*'Well I'm not injecting myself with that,' Mark objected.*

*'Fine, I'll do it. Just be ready,' Luke ordered.*

*'Ready for what?'*

*'In case I get infected and turn into one of those things. Whatever you do, don't let me hurt Grace.'*

*'You know I wouldn't, if you turn I'll kill you before you could get near her.'*

*'Good,' Luke said as he injected himself.*

*The two men waited for ten minutes while nothing seemed to happen, then Luke thought he heard Grace say something.*

*'What?'*

*'I didn't say anything,' Mark answered — throwing a cautious look at Luke and wondering if he was really going to have to kill him as promised.*

*'No you didn't, but she did. "No zombies," she keeps saying over and over,' Luke insisted.*

*'No, she's really not,' Mark looked at Luke with concern, then they both looked at Grace and understood. 'Okay, now do me.'*



## Chapter twelve

Grace sat down on the sofa, in the space between Luke and Mark. She couldn't believe it never occurred to her before. She just hoped she was right about how well the three of them knew and understood each other and that they would both get the hint. She also hoped nobody watching, somehow knew about what happened the day Mark and Luke injected her blood into themselves.

She sighed, then tried to sound casual as she asked, 'don't you just wish we could talk to each other without them listening? I barely even remember what that feels like.'

Mark began to agree, then Grace noticed the sudden understanding flash across his eyes, but he quickly managed to act normal and she was sure nobody watching could have noticed it. She turned to Luke as she felt him rest his hand on her shoulder and gently squeeze. Grace was sure this was his way of letting her know he understood too.

'Well, we won't have to worry about that much longer,' Luke said, then added, 'once they've tried us in court; we'll be found guilty for sure, of

whatever it is they've decided to try us for and then we'll all be discredited and have nasty accidents.'

After been unable to find a lawyer in time, the government appointed lawyer arrived and discussed their case with them. He said they would be tried for murder and he promised — in his words — to help them prepare their defence. When he left for the day, Grace entered the kitchen and decided enough time had passed since her comment earlier that morning.

'I was thinking,' she began, 'maybe they still have those creatures and they could set them onto us.'

'They're listening, don't give them ideas,' Mark played along and Grace was impressed at his acting ability.

'I just think...' she chewed on her lip and looked around uncertainly.

'What?' Luke joined in.

'It would be one less thing for me to worry about if you guys were injected with my blood, so I could be sure you wouldn't turn.'

'I don't think it works like that, Gracie,' Luke said.

'Maybe or maybe not, but we don't have a lab, just me and I know you have what we need here, to take my blood and inject it into yourself and Mark.'

Mark and Luke kept up the pretence as Luke took blood from Grace's arm, then injected himself and Mark. They both commented on how they were being watched and that even if the government planned on trying to turn them, they would only come up with another plan instead.

'It's one less thing for us to worry about from those bastards,' Grace pointed out again.

The three of them settled down to watch some pointless soap opera — while they waited for Grace's blood to have the desired effect.

'Can you hear me?' Grace asked the question in her mind.

She felt Mark and Luke shift slightly from where they were sat beside her and took that as a yes. She would have preferred if the mind reading worked both ways, but she had to do the best with what she had. That left her to try to come up with a plan and relay it to Mark and Luke.

'We need to escape. I think that's the only way to come out of this alive,' she began to think.

Luke continued to look straight ahead at the television, while Mark turned to look at her questioningly.

'I don't know how,' she thought as she rested her head on Mark's shoulder, before she looked up at him and planted a quick kiss on his lips — hoping that made the way they were both looking at each other appear less suspicious to anyone watching them.

'Let me think for a minute,' she mused, knowing time was another thing not on their side. The court case was set for three days later. That was around the same amount of time her blood had an effect on Mark and Luke the previous time they had her blood in their system. She wished they could help her, but knew anything they said would be heard. She leant against Mark, closed her eyes and tried to think. She could feel Luke's eyes staring at her. It was distracting.

Grace opened her eyes and Luke looked embarrassed that she had caught him looking. He quickly turned his attention back towards the television screen.

'Sorry,' she thought, 'I'm just trying to act normal here, so they won't suspect and it's really difficult knowing that coming up with a plan is all down to me.'

'Remember when we were hiding in that house, the one in Didsbury?' Mark asked.

Grace nodded.

'The night we left...' he began.

'Left? You mean when we were chased out by the horde?' Luke corrected.

'Yes, but we lost our weapons and we thought that was it,' Mark replied.

'Until Grace came up with the bright idea of making our own, from the furniture and everything else around us,' Luke recalled.

Grace remembered how she killed one of the infected with two tins of beans wrapped up inside an old tea towel. She used the home-made weapon to smash his head like it was a coconut.

She understood what Luke and Mark were trying to say to her. She could be resourceful when she needed to be. They were both counting on her to be just as resourceful in coming up with an escape plan.

'Yeah, the good old days, right,' Grace said out loud for the benefit of anyone who wasn't Mark or Luke.

The three of them spent the rest of the night in silence while they pretended to be absorbed by the television, but Grace had begun to come up with a plan and she relayed each step of it to Mark and Luke with her thoughts. She knew it wasn't high tech or elaborate, but it might just work.

By bedtime, the three of them had a fully formed plot, which they would put into action the night before the trial. Grace telepathically told Mark and Luke to act as normal until then. She knew it wouldn't be easy. She felt nervous and scared that something could go wrong, but she didn't want to die. She hoped that would be enough to help overcome her doubts and survive. They all said goodnight — Luke and Mark turning to go to their bedrooms.

'Can I join you?' Grace asked taking hold of Mark's hand, to his surprise and to Luke's obvious annoyance as she felt him staring at her again.

Mark nodded and Grace spoke loud enough for both of them to hear. 'I just don't want to be alone.'

Mark and Luke both looked at each other in understanding.

'Goodnight, Gracie,' Luke told her as though giving them his blessing.

'Goodnight,' she replied and thought 'thank you,' to him.

Grace snuggled closer to Mark as they lay in the single bed and he wrapped his arms tightly around her. He wanted to keep her close for as long as possible, but because of the thoughts which Grace kept accidentally leaking; he knew how she really felt. She still loved him, but loved Luke too, more than she loved him. When it was over, she would choose Luke. Grace choosing to share a bed with him was just her way of saying goodbye. It didn't mean they were getting back together. Mark watched Grace fall asleep in his arms. He started to doze off too when a noise startled him from downstairs.

'Gracie,' he whispered, nudging her.

'What...' she began.

Mark gently pressed his hand against Grace's mouth, as he whispered, 'there's something downstairs.'

'Something?' Grace understood what he meant, but didn't want to believe it.

'Sounds like one of them, with the breathing and the clumsiness when they first turn,' Mark insisted.

Grace's mind flooded with images of the first few times she had witnessed people turning and what seemed like disorientation in their faces and movements — grabbing at anything, trying to feed their new-found bloodlust. She hoped she hadn't given the government ideas about sending the infected after them. If the one (or ones) downstairs were newly turned, that suggested they might have been sent.

'No time to try to figure that one out right now,' Mark said.

'Sorry,' Grace said out loud, realising how easy it was for her thoughts to spill into his when her blood was in his system. 'We need to get to Luke and get out of here; the plan's still the same,' she thought to him.

## Chapter thirteen

'Luke, WAKE UP!' Grace tried to project her thoughts as loudly as possible into Luke's mind, where he slept in the next room. She wasn't sure whether he was awake, until she heard a quiet tapping sound against the wall.

'There's at least one infected downstairs, probably more though. We need to go, NOW.'

There was another quiet tap against the wall and Grace was already throwing on the nearest pair of jeans and a t shirt, while Mark quickly dressed in the previous day's clothes and the two of them met up with Luke outside the bedroom door. He handed them both a gun. Grace didn't question how he still had so many weapons, but felt glad he did. All that mattered was the three of them making an escape. They headed to the bathroom, opened the window and heard the familiar sound of soldiers talking on their radios, entering through the front door downstairs. Mark was the first to jump, then helped Grace and the two of them waited until Luke joined them on the grass in the back garden. They raced down the road to the nearest car. Grace couldn't help wondering if maybe they should have taken a walk around the local area earlier in the day, to get an idea of what cars might be available for them to steal. The first one they found was a rust bucket and didn't look like it would get them very far.

'Sorry, but we need to settle for this one,' Mark told her before he hurriedly smashed the glass with a brick. He winced in pain as the broken glass scraped his hand and arm. He hadn't meant to put so much physical force into it, he had just wanted to get away quickly. He managed to get the car started, trying to ignore the warm sticky sensation of blood trickling down his arm. Grace noticed that he was bleeding as she sat in the front passenger seat next to him as Luke leaned forward from the back seat.

'You're bleeding,' he pointed out unnecessarily.

'When we switch cars, I'll drive. Luke can see to that cut on your arm.' Grace thought her words, instead of speaking, knowing that they couldn't be too careful about listening devices that might be implanted on them. Mark didn't argue, but instead concentrated on getting them away as fast as possible. After fifteen miles they stopped to switch cars when the rust bucket threatened to give up on them. Luke broke into the second car—a

newer model — making sure to be more careful than Mark had been. He launched a brick through the window. so that he didn't get cut up too. This time the glass shattered into much smaller pieces than the other car window had. Luke covered his hand with his sleeve, then quickly brushed it off the seats. Mark let Luke look at the cut on his arm, while Grace drove.

'It's not great,' Luke admitted as he did his best with what was in the car's first-aid kit. There's a piece of glass stuck in your wrist, you could bleed to death if we don't get you to a hospital.'

'You know we can't do that,' Grace thought, but out loud she said, 'we'll keep going until morning, if he can hold on until then, then double back and go to A&E in Liverpool, they might not expect us to go somewhere so close to Manchester. It could buy us some time while Mark gets that cut seen to.'

'If you think that's a good idea,' Luke said, but threw her a questioning look, as if to ask what the real plan was.

She caught his gaze in the mirror and thought, 'we'll go to a hospital, but one far away from here.'

It was just starting to get light when they arrived in Wolverhampton.

'How's he doing? Grace asked Luke, turning slightly, staring at Mark passed out on the back seat.

'He's lost a lot of blood. I don't think he's going to last much longer. Do you think it's safe to go to a hospital here?'

Grace shook her head. 'No, but we're going to have to. We can't lose him.

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'Okay,' Luke agreed.

'The guy I told you about lives ten miles from here,' Grace thought to Luke, 'if something happens to me, go to him, tell him I sent you and he'll get you a fake passport if you've bought the money with you?'

She looked in the mirror to see Luke give a quick nod, repeating the address in her mind until she was sure Luke could remember it if something happened.

'We're all going to get through this,' Luke said.

'I hope you're right,' was all Grace could say, trying to ignore the horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach.

They were almost at the hospital when the traffic came to a standstill.

'What's the hold up?' Luke questioned.

'I don't know. I can't see where this starts. It could be miles, but the hospital isn't far. Do you think Mark can wake up and walk?'

'We could carry him, between us, maybe.'

'We might have to...' Grace began, but stopped when she heard a helicopter above them and saw the flashing lights of police cars ahead. She was about to question whether they had been found, when the sound of screams filled the air.

'I'm going to see what it is, wait here,' Grace told Luke.

'Alone? You shouldn't...'

Grace was already out of the car and running towards the direction of the screams. More shrieks began from people nearby, then she saw what had haunted her nightmares since the last day of the outbreak in Manchester.

'No, it can't be...' but she was already running back towards the car.

'What was it?' Luke questioned as Grace sat down in the passenger seat, gasping for air and trying to make sense of what was happening. The image of what she had just seen was projected into Luke's mind.

'Oh God, really? Does that mean...'

'I don't think they sent those things after us and I don't think they bought them here for us. It's happening again. The hospital isn't going to be safe, but without it, Mark will die. What do we do?' Grace asked.

'I think it's too late for the hospital,' Luke said softly.

'What?' Grace asked, but she knew what he meant before turning around to see Mark's lifeless body on the back seat next to Luke, who was covered in his blood from trying to save him.

'No,' Grace said, trying to think through the wave of distress that she was feeling — threatening to overwhelm her and effectively leave her useless and unable to function. She shook her head, as if to dispel it. She had to mourn Mark later, if she wanted to have any chance of survival.

'I'm sorry Gracie,' Luke said, 'I know you loved him, but we have to go now,' he insisted.

Grace wiped the tears from her face as she locked eyes with Luke. 'You're right and I know he would want us to go,' she thought as she got out of the car and Luke followed.

'This way,' he suggested taking her hand and leading her away from the busy road and towards a quieter side street.



Grace and Luke kept running, trying to ignore the screams and scenes of the infected eating anyone unlucky enough to get close enough to them. They eventually reached Adam's house hours later. Grace banged frantically on the door, ignoring the pain in her hands as her knuckles clashed against the metal enforced door. Luke pushed, surprising them both when it opened.

'He never...' Grace began, knowing that Adam was the type of person who would never leave his door unlocked, not with the lifestyle he led and the kind of people that attracted.

'Is that Adam? Luke asked as a dark-haired man with a blood covered face staggered hungrily towards them. He grabbed at Luke and Grace, as though he saw them as a couple of cheeseburgers dangled in front of him.

'Not anymore,' Grace retorted, picking up a lamp and hitting the creature over the head, until he stumbled and fell onto the floor unmoving.

'We should check the rest of the house,' Luke suggested.

They secured the front door which had ten locks in total. Grace ignored the look on Luke's face. She was grateful to Adam for been paranoid enough to make his house so secure. He had even bricked up all the windows a long time ago. His fear was of the living back then, but it would work against keeping out the dead too.

'What do we do about him?' Luke asked.

'He has a basement. He burns...incriminating evidence down there, we could...'

'Burn him?'

'It sounds a lot harsher when you put it like that, but if we're going to stay here...'

'You want to stay here?'

'It's a good a place as any and it's more secure than some places, there's probably food too. Adam was always prepared like that and there's a few good hiding places specially built for...well...never mind. We can hide though if someone or something does manage to get in.'

'I'm beginning to question some of the company you used to keep,' Luke stated.

'We weren't exactly best friends, but I met a lot of different people on the streets. Adam was just one of them.'

'Okay, so we're not going to leave the country like we planned?'

'I doubt it. If this is happening here, it could be happening everywhere. I don't think this is what they intended in Manchester, but it's out of control now and we just have to wait it out and hope we're still standing when it's all over.'

## About the author

Amanda Steel is a multi-genre author.

Amanda also co-hosts the podcast “Reading in Bed” and sometimes she writes under the pen name “Aleesha Black”.

Her website is [www.amandasteelwriter.com](http://www.amandasteelwriter.com)

This is also where you can find the sign-up page to be informed when “Not Human” is re-released. This is the full-length novel which this novella is the prequel to.