

THE QUEEN OF
SINISTER

Also by Mark Chadbourn

The Kingdom of the Serpent:

Jack of Ravens

The Dark Age:

The Devil in Green

The Queen of Sinister

The Hounds of Avalon

The Age of Misrule:

World's End

Darkest Hour

Always Forever

Underground

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Testimony

Scissorsman

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THE
DARK AGE
2

THE QUEEN OF
SINISTER
MARK CHADBOURN



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For Elizabeth, Betsy, and Joe

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CHRONICLES OF THE FALLEN WORLD

One night, the world we knew slipped quietly away. Humanity awoke to find itself in a place mysteriously changed. Fabulous Beasts soared over the cities, their fiery breath reddening the clouds. Supernatural creatures stalked the countryside—imps and shape-shifters, blood-sucking revenants, men who became wolves, or wolves who became men, sea serpents and strange beasts whose roars filled the night with ice; and more, too many to comprehend. Magic was alive and in everything.

No one had any idea why it happened—by order of some Higher Power, or a random, meaningless result of the shifting seasons of Existence—but the shock was too great for society. All faith was lost in the things people had counted on to keep them safe—the politicians, the law, the old religions. None of it mattered in a world where things beyond reason could sweep out of the night to destroy lives in the blink of an eye.

Above all were the gods—miraculous beings emerging from hazy race memories and the depths of ancient mythologies, so far beyond us we were reduced to the level of beasts, frightened and powerless. They had been here before, long, long ago, responsible for our wildest dreams and darkest nightmares, but now they were back they were determined to stay forever. In the days after their arrival, as the world became a land of myth, these gods battled for supremacy in a terrible conflict that shattered civilisation. Death and destruction lay everywhere.

Blinking and cowed, the survivors emerged from the chaos of this Age of Misrule into a world substantially changed, the familiar patterns of life gone: communications devastated, anarchy raging across the land, society thrown into a new Dark Age where superstition held sway. Existence itself had been transformed: magic and technology now worked side by side. There were new rules to observe, new boundaries to obey, and mankind was no longer at the top of the evolutionary tree.

A time of wonder and terror, miracles and torment, in which man's survival was no longer guaranteed.

chapter one

CROW LIFE

“Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death.”

Edith Wharton

Two storms. Without, the night torn asunder by the kind of jungle-beast weather that always marked the passing between winter and spring. Within, a storm of death and despair.

Bodies were heaped around the village hall with the sickening confusion of a medieval charnel house, on parquet flooring that had felt the celebratory tread of weddings and birthdays and anniversaries, and in the annex, obscuring trestle tables that had served a thousand meals and more. Not even the kitchen’s no longer sterile work surfaces were free of bodies.

At first, they had been placed in reverent rows, a futile attempt to impose order on an incomprehensible chaos. Eventually, when the full magnitude of what was happening became apparent, they were simply tossed in piles in one corner or another. Before the storm had started, the plan had been to dig individual graves, but those efforts had soon been outpaced. Now there was no hope of catching up. Occasionally their minds turned to the practical options—pit or fire, fire or pit—but the horror was too consuming for rational thought. A part of them knew the corpses would have to be disposed of quickly to prevent the spread of disease—the stench already left them breathless and reeling—but that would mean facing up to what lay around them, seeing and knowing and accepting.

It wasn’t just the stink of decomposition that fouled the hall. The corpses leaked a yellowish greasy pus from the suppurating sores where the swellings had blackened and burst like alien fruit. It pooled on the floor and became sticky underfoot, smelling like rotten apples dusted with sulphur. They all had perfume-soaked handkerchiefs tied across their faces, but that did little to protect them. Worse, they felt as if they were becoming inured to it, the stench becoming, through repetition, as irritating and ignorable as exhaust fumes on a foggy morning.

The storm swirled about them, detaching them from their humanity. Only the moans of the nearly dead, lined up on camp-beds against one wall, reminded them that they were still on earth, not in hell.

There were five of them. Caitlin Shepherd was in charge. She was twenty-eight, but felt as if she’d lived for at least seventy years, her body fragile with

weariness, her mind worn by too many nights without sleep, too many days of labour and struggle and heartache from dawn to dusk. The others—the former chairman of the parish council, a teenage boy with a bad case of acne, and two elderly sisters who used to run the post office—were the only ones from the village who were prepared to help. Everyone else still standing had locked themselves in their homes with their families, threatening violence to those stupid enough to come calling.

Caitlin pulled the rubber band from her hair and refastened it. It had become a nervous act, subconsciously distracting her from the futility of what she was doing. The woman on the table in front of her had just expired with a phlegmy rattle. Caitlin had seen her every morning in summer tending her garden, but she couldn't remember her name.

"How many is that tonight?" she asked. It made it easier for her to think in terms of numbers rather than people.

Eileen, one of the sisters, placed a hand on Caitlin's forearm. "Best not to think about it now, dear. You could do with a break."

"How can I take a break?" Sparks flashed across Caitlin's vision and she had to steady herself on the edge of the table.

"You're not going to help anyone by running yourself into the ground," Gideon noted. The council chairman, who no longer had any council members left, had a disgusting smear of dark bodily juices down the front of his shirt that made him look as if he'd been stabbed. "And if we haven't got our doctor, we're nowhere."

In the grim surroundings, Caitlin's laughter sounded even more damning than she had intended. "A doctor's no good if she doesn't know what she's doing. I've never seen this before. It's not in any of the textbooks. As far as I can tell, it's something completely new. I have no idea how to begin treating it . . . antibiotics don't work. All I can do is make people comfortable before they die." And they did die. Always. The initial appearance of the tiny black spots was a death sentence.

She glanced up at the few boxes of medicine left on the shelves. Soon it would all be gone, and with no one manufacturing new drugs in the crisis that had gripped the country since the Fall, they'd be down to bunches of herbs and wishing.

"It's still important to make people comfortable in their last hours," Eileen said gently. "That's a good deed."

"It's not enough." Caitlin tore the useless handkerchief from her mouth and rested her eyes behind her hand. "We'd better get this . . . this lady . . ."

"Mrs. Waid," Eileen prompted.

"Mrs. Waid . . . we'd better get her moved."

"I'll do it," Gideon said. "Timothy, give us a hand!"

The teenager stood shell-shocked, staring out into the rain-lashed night. "There'll be floods along the river," he said, as if it were important.

While Gideon and Timothy carried the blackened, seeping body to the latest pile in the main hall, Eileen gave Caitlin a brief hug. Caitlin was surprised by how comforting it felt.

“You should take a break . . . go back to your husband and son. Family’s even more important at times like this,” Eileen said.

“I don’t know . . .”

“Go on. You said yourself you’re not doing anything we can’t. Have a good rest, and when you come back we can arrange some kind of rota system.”

Caitlin looked into the elderly woman’s face, as if seeing her for the first time. “How do you do it?”

“What, dear?”

“Keep going . . . not start wallowing in despair.”

Eileen didn’t seem to comprehend the question. “It’s just what we do, isn’t it? There’s no point in giving in to it . . . that doesn’t do any good at all.”

Caitlin took a long, juddering breath. “I think I will go home. Just for an hour or two.”

“You do that, dear.” Eileen gave her another hug, and this time Caitlin didn’t want to break it.

The moment was disrupted by a thin cry from Daphne, Eileen’s sister. She was staring at her hands with a shattered expression.

Caitlin knew instantly what it was. “Oh God—”

They rushed to Daphne’s side and sure enough the telltale black spots that marked the first appearance of the disease were visible on the wrinkled webbing at the base of her fingers.

Daphne looked up at them both with tearful eyes. “Oh dear . . .”

Eileen wiped away her own tears, but the two of them remained calm. It wasn’t as if the development was unexpected—they all knew the risks of contracting the disease. It didn’t strike everyone; sometimes just one person in a family, sometimes all of them. Caitlin had no idea of the pathology, but it was a reasonable guess that extended exposure increased the chances of contraction.

Caitlin stared impotently at the thin collection of medicines. Eileen sensed her thoughts. “Don’t worry, dear—you go.”

“I can’t leave now!”

“You know there’s nothing you can do, Caitlin.” Daphne gave a weak smile, a tear trickling down her cheek.

Daphne was living, breathing, feeling, talking, but she was already dead. Within hours, the fever would hit. She’d lose all contact with the real world, imprisoned in dreams and memories of frightening intensity while the disease worked its insidious route through her system. The spots made strange patterns across the skin before reaching the glands, which swelled, turned black, and filled

with pus. Death would come three to four days later without the patient regaining consciousness.

Caitlin felt as if she was being torn apart by her inability to do anything worthwhile. All her years at medical school, in the surgery, all worthless.

“I don’t want to leave you to all this,” Daphne said pitifully to Eileen, her frail voice betraying the wealth of emotion behind the simple statement. They’d been together all their lives, never married, supported each other through hard times, enjoyed the best, never even known a day apart for decades. And now it was all coming to an end.

Caitlin gave Daphne’s arm a squeeze, silently cursing the impotence of the gesture to convey all the razor emotions but not knowing any other way to express them.

“I think we’ll have a little time alone, dear,” Eileen said, her eyes brimming. She led Daphne away to a quiet corner where they crumpled into each other.

Caitlin watched them with feelings so raw they made her throat burn. That one symbol summed up everything she had felt over the past year: the suffering and the strength, the heartbreak and the hopelessness. The humanity.

Too exhausted to cry, Caitlin pulled her battered all-weather parka on tightly and forced her way out into the storm. The rain was cold and hard, the roaring wind buffeting her. Yet she felt swaddled in cotton wool, and that the harsh, uncompromising world was just a dream.

The sense of unreality had been growing since the Fall. It had started with the government’s unspecified announcement of some threat on the home front and the subsequent imposition of martial law and a media blackout. Travel had been limited, and with the telephone network down, the only available information was always leavened with an unhealthy dose of rumour, gossip and downright lies. Newcastle had been wiped out. The Royal Family was in exile. Nuclear disaster, a military coup, an attack by some rogue state—never identified—an epidemic of some awful bioengineered disease. She’d always discounted that last one, but the evidence of the past week had made her think it was probably the truth, or part of it. Perhaps the Fall had been caused by some conglomeration of all the rumours.

Whatever the answer, life in the intervening months had been too hard to give it too much consideration—the first weeks of near starvation when the shops and supermarkets stopped being stocked, the slow crawl to set up the distribution of locally supplied food, and even more months on subsistence level while new sources were established. But slowly, slowly, they had got back on their feet . . . until the plague had come.

She didn’t know whether it had swept the country or if it was a localised phenomenon. It had come too fast, too hard, to comprehend.

She bowed her head into the gale and attempted to dodge the puddles, but without streetlights it was a struggle to see. They had some power during the day thanks to a wind turbine erected by a local engineer and solar panels scavenged from a nearby health farm, but it was conserved at night. The national grid hadn't come back online; the nights remained black, friendless, and frightening, filled with all the stories she had heard from the more superstitious residents.

It was just a short walk along the High Street, but then she had to negotiate the winding lane to their barn conversion; she wished they'd bought a place in the centre of the village. When she reached the rutted track, it was even darker than the built-up area, where at least a few candles had glimmered through the window panes. The trees, just coming into bud, pressed tightly on either side, the hedgerows wild and untrimmed.

Before she stepped into the lane, she couldn't help succumbing to the primal desire to glance behind her. It was then that she saw something strange and disturbing. They'd kept the electric lights on at the village hall since they had started using it as an infirmary-cum-mortuary and from her slightly elevated position she could now see the bright windows clearly above the rooftops of the houses at the lower end of the village. Yet when she had turned back, briefly those windows had been obscured. No swaying trees lay in her line of sight; something had passed in front of the hall, but from her perspective she knew it would have to have been something much larger than a person. It was a simple thing, barely worth comment, yet inexplicably it touched a nerve, triggering a ratchet of fear. She hurried along the lane, overhanging branches reaching down to grab at her hood.

The lane was half a mile long, doglegging to the left before rising sharply to the ridge on which the converted barns rested. On the slope it became more exposed to the elements and she had to struggle to make progress against the gale which thrashed the trees on either side. Nothing could be heard above the maelstrom of the storm, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that there had been footsteps, or hoofbeats, on the road behind.

It was irrational, stupid even, but it pulled tingling sparks up from the pit of her belly. She looked back again, and saw nothing but darkness and the movement of shadowy vegetation.

Get off the road! a voice in her head said. The notion was so powerful and so unexpected it was shocking. There was no reason for her to be scared, but then an overwhelming sense of presence came upon her from nowhere, a feeling so frightening that she fought the urge to run. *Someone was behind her.*

She looked back again. The storm rushed all around. Stupid. She was getting as superstitious as some of those villagers who had come to believe there were ghosts and devils and mythical beasts away in the countryside.

When she returned her attention to the path ahead she was startled to see a big black bird standing in the centre of the lane. It was a hooded crow, bigger than any she had ever seen before. That it was there at night, in the middle of a storm, was discomfiting enough, but the way it kept one beady eye fixed on her brought a chill to her spine.

Caitlin took two steps forward to shoo it away, but it still didn't budge. She had never experienced anything so unnatural. Everything about the bird frightened her. She had the uneasy feeling that it wouldn't let her pass. Hesitating, she gave in to her irrationality despite herself and clambered over a gate into a field before moving into the trees that lined the road.

Peering over the hedge, she saw that the crow was no longer there. *Typical*, she thought, uncomfortable as the wet undergrowth soaked her jeans. *That'll teach me to be childish*. Yet the feeling that something was coming up the lane behind her was still growing; goose pimples ran up and down her arms.

Caught in the wind, the trees, bushes, and grass moved with an eerie life of their own. She forced her way through the dripping vegetation, the wind slowly dropping as the storm finally began to move away, the staccato drip of rain from branches the final percussive reminder.

Caitlin realised she was holding her breath; her instinct was responding to something beyond her senses, but whatever was out there gradually crept into the edge of her perception. At first she thought the wind was picking up again, until she noticed that there was structure to the sound.

Whispering, she realised with a strange chill. People talking in rustling voices, yet making no attempt to remain unheard. The conversation floated amongst the trees, insinuating itself within the *drip-drip-drip* of rain, growing louder as it approached.

It sounded so bizarre. Caitlin wondered who would venture out at that time of night in such a fierce storm. The lane only led to four barn conversions and Caitlin couldn't imagine any of her neighbours talking in such a strange manner.

Yet as the whispering intensified, Caitlin realised it was not becoming any more comprehensible. It seemed to her a foreign language, at times like Russian, something northern and guttural, at others incorporating the florid clicks and glottal stops of an African tribal dialect. The hairs on her neck grew erect.

With a feeling of rising dread, she quickly dropped to her haunches, holding her breath tight in her chest. The road was just about visible through the hedge.

The whispering surrounded her like icy fingers playing along her spine. Although she couldn't understand the words, it carried with it an air of menace, cunning and, floating underneath it, something profoundly despairing. The complex sounds did not appear likely to have been formed in a human throat.

The Whisperers were accompanied by a heavy tread that she at first took to

be horses, but as the ground began to vibrate at each fall, it became clear something much larger was approaching.

Thoom-thoom-thoom. It made her think of some enormous machine as the tremors ran up into the pit of her stomach.

Nearly here now, she thought. The whispering insinuated into her mind, set her teeth on edge, made her think black thoughts. She was surprised at how scared she felt; not the fear of disease or starvation, but something more profound and unfocused.

Her instinct told her to take no risks of being discovered, but she had to look. Steadying herself with one hand on the sodden ground, she peered through the gaps in the hedge just as movement entered her frame of vision.

She could only perceive glimpses of the whole, a jigsaw puzzle of disturbing fragments that her conscious mind put together despite warnings from her subconscious to leave well alone. There were indeed two riders, but their mounts, though like horses in form, were clearly not: they were much larger, hugely powerful, and appeared to have a scaly hide and cloven hooves. Caitlin tried to rationalise what she was seeing, but could find no context.

She saw even less of the Whisperers, yet obliquely the threat increased. Their legs were unpleasantly thin, as if only bones lay beneath the fluttering rags wrapped around them. What she saw of their clothing only added to her impression: broken chain mail, corroded gauntlets, worn, rotten leather. The heavy aroma of loam hung in the air, as if they had scrambled their way, mounts and all, from beneath the earth.

The sibilant whispering floated all around. Caitlin didn't move, didn't swallow, barely breathed, praying they would pass quickly and take the overwhelming atmosphere of dread with them. Yet just as they were about to move on, they stopped. The whispering died away, and somehow the eerie silence was even worse.

They could sense her. She was sure of it in some instinctive way she couldn't comprehend. Her heart thundered.

The heavy hoofbeats sounded again, this time coming toward the hedge behind which she was hiding. Could they see her? Surely it was impossible in the dark.

The horses that were not horses drew close. Soon the first rider would be able to peer over the top of the hedge. And what awful thing would she see when she looked up into that face?

Desperately, her gaze darted around. She could attempt to run through the thick trees that would preclude the mounts pursuing her, but sooner or later she would have to cross open fields.

Just as she prepared to launch herself into the undergrowth, wild activity

erupted further along the lane. It was difficult for Caitlin to comprehend what was occurring: a blood-chilling screaming tore through the night, rapid movement flashed in shadow form, only partially glimpsed through the hedgerow. The Whisperers paused in their advance. It was the crow, Caitlin guessed.

For an agonising moment, Caitlin remained frozen. Then, when she thought she couldn't bear it any longer, the Whisperers guided their grotesque mounts away from the hedgerow into the centre of the lane, and advanced toward the source of the disruption.

Caitlin crouched there shivering for fifteen more minutes before she finally dared move. Keeping low, she followed the hedge for as long as she could and then headed across the dark fields toward the house.

There was no sign of the Whisperers, or of the strange hooded crow.

Caitlin burst through the door as if the Devil were at her heels, locking and bolting it in one fluid movement before hurrying to peer through the curtains into the fading storm. A distant flash of lightning half-illuminated what appeared to be a figure standing amongst the trees just beyond the drive. She had the odd impression that it was a man, yet also that there was something bestial about the figure; in her fleeting glimpse she had seen something that reminded her of a boar's head. Yet as her eyes grew accustomed to the dark after the lightning she could see only a gnarled yew on the spot. An illusion?

"What's going on?" Grant emerged from the kitchen, clutching a tea towel and a dinner plate. He looked tired, the hardship of life since the Fall making him seem older than his thirty years.

She blurted out what she had seen in the lane without taking her eyes off the dark countryside.

"There are nuts all over the place," Grant said with a dismissive weariness before returning to the kitchen. In the midst of her fear, his reaction irritated her, but she understood it: there was only so much energy to go round. What with learning a new trade as a carpenter so that he could contribute to the local economy and earn them food, preparing defences in response to the increasing lawlessness in the countryside and trying to bring up Liam, Grant was almost drained.

Caitlin waited for another couple of minutes and then convinced herself that whatever she had seen out there had moved on. She trailed after Grant, feeling washed out in the come-down from the adrenalin surge. The flickering lanterns gave a dreamlike feeling to the warm kitchen.

"How are things?" Grant replaced the crockery without waiting to hear her response. "I kept some stew for you on the Aga. You know, just in case you ever came home."

The bitterness in his voice sparked a dull flame of anger. Did he think she wanted to be away from her family? Risking her life, under massive stress, getting no rest for days on end? She bit her tongue, knowing nothing good would come from responding.

“This is lovely,” she said, dipping into the saucepan with a wooden spoon to taste the stew. “Thanks for making it. I’ll get to it once I’ve seen Liam. He’s still up, isn’t he?”

“He’s in his room.” Grant continued putting the crockery away until a restrained thought slipped its leash. “He’s missing having you around, you know.”

On the surface, it appeared to be such a throwaway comment, but it brought tears to her eyes and a burning to the back of her throat. “I’ll see to him.” She hurried away before any more turbulent emotions tipped out.

Liam lay in bed in his *SK8board* pyjamas, flicking through an old Digimon annual. With popular culture effectively dead, at least in the short term, old favourites had taken on a new resonance. They’d attempted to keep his bedroom as *normal* as it had been before things had gone so spectacularly wrong: posters on the wall, PS2 on the side, now dormant like some antique radio set.

He jumped up with an energy that made her feel old and weary. “Mummy!” With the overstated passion of the young, he threw his arms around her, and she held him tight, feeling his hair against her cheek, and his warmth and smallness and hardness, blinking back tears, desperately trying to hold in all the things she needed to do to remain a grown-up.

“You’re working too hard!” he said. “Daddy says you’re going to wear yourself out.” He moved over so she could get in bed next to him. “Under the quilt, Mummy. It’s all snuggly then.” He burrowed in beside her.

“There are a lot of people who need me to help them,” she began. “It’s Mummy’s job and they’d be very sad if she wasn’t there to make them better.” The hollowness of her words rang in her ears.

“But we need you too, Mummy—Daddy and me.”

“I know you do. And I’m here for you, too. Look, I’m here now.” She gave him a mock-crushing hug and then let him fight his way free. “Do you want me to read to you?” She picked up the dog-eared copy of *The Hobbit* they’d slowly been making their way through. Caitlin thought she enjoyed it more than Liam; the escapism was even more poignant compared to the world beyond their home.

“No, not tonight,” he said, to her disappointment. “Tell me a story.”

The rain had started again, pattering insistently against the window. It gave her a false sense of security as she huddled in the warmth beneath the quilt with Liam pressed close beside her, his innocence heady and hopeful. She closed her eyes and dreamed.

“OK,” she began, “once upon a time, there was a great and powerful kingdom, where people worked hard and enjoyed themselves when they weren’t working, and believed they were the masters of everything. They had great scientists who could see deep into the universe and right down to the smallest atom, and businessmen who could make millions of pounds for the kingdom’s coffers, and soldiers with terrible weapons that could destroy any enemy. Or so they thought. And the people were sure that things would keep getting better and better.”

“But they didn’t, did they?”

“No. One day they woke up and found everything had changed. They weren’t the masters of everything anymore. More powerful people had turned up in the night and changed all the rules. The scientists weren’t important anymore because suddenly there were things they couldn’t explain. And the soldiers discovered that their weapons weren’t so powerful after all.”

“Who were they? Aliens?” Liam’s voice was growing sleepy.

“I suppose you could call them that. Nobody knew what they were really, but they’d been around for a long, long time. They’d been to this . . . this kingdom . . . before, many hundreds . . . thousands . . . of years ago . . . and then everyone thought they were gods. You know, like in Hercules.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And they brought with them all the magical creatures that children heard about in fairy tales. Everyone had thought those things were made up, but they weren’t, they were real . . . only they weren’t quite like the stories said. The simple folk of the kingdom had written stories and told tales to try to understand these creatures all those years ago, but the stories had got changed in the telling, with made-up stuff and real stuff getting all mixed up.”

Liam’s breathing was regular, but Caitlin could feel the faint movement of his facial muscles against her arm as his eyes flickered in response to her words.

“It looked as if the kingdom was going to be destroyed. The government fell apart, and the soldiers were beaten in battle after battle, and nobody knew what to do at all, and nobody even knew how things worked anymore because there was all this . . . magic . . . flying around that they didn’t understand. But in times like that—you know, disasters, crises . . .” She was talking to herself now, lost to the images that flashed like jarring lightning strikes across her mind. “. . . it’s not the big, important people who save the day—the kings and queens and politicians and generals—it’s the normal people. The people who believe in themselves, who believe in good things so much that they’ll fight against any danger. And so, five men and women came from nowhere to attack the . . . the . . . gods. Their names were . . .” She struggled to recall the details of the wild story that had been told to her by those superstitious villagers she used to tease. “. . . Church and Ruth and Laura and Ryan and Shavi. And some say they won.

At least, the kingdom wasn't destroyed completely and those gods went off into hiding, but the heroes . . . no one knows what happened to them.

"But things could never be the same again. People still hadn't learned all the new rules, and everything they believed in had been thrown up in the air. They had to start from the beginning once more, trying to make a new . . . a better kingdom for themselves. But it was very, very hard and many hoped—and prayed—that those five heroes . . . if they really existed . . . would come back from wherever they had gone to help again."

A gust of wind against the panes shook her out of her reverie. "That's how the story goes, anyway. Some of it might be true, some of it might be made up, but that's the way with stories." She looked down at Liam and saw that he was fast asleep. *Stories to make the world better*, she thought. *To make us understand the truth behind what's going on.*

Suddenly her thoughts rushed back to the moment of his birth, in St. James's Hospital in Leeds, with Grant there and the sun streaming through the windows. It had been the last time she recalled truly living in the moment, when the experience of what was happening wiped out all conscious thought. The concentrated hope of those few hours, the unshakeable belief that things could only get better, was still so profoundly affecting that she could feel the burn of nascent tears.

Liam had come at a difficult time. She had barely started out on her medical studies, the long road of late nights, dull books, and no spare time stretching out ahead of her. The soul searching and intense debate had overwhelmed them from the moment the home pregnancy test kit had dropped into the waste bin: should Grant's studies as an architect take precedence over her ambitions? Who would give up their dreams to look after Liam? The thought that Liam wouldn't be there was not an option. The length of studies for both their chosen careers meant there would be no going back on the decision; it was a once-only life-defining choice, a sacrifice and a commitment that would have to be forever or lead to a shattering bitterness in later years.

Caitlin had already decided that she was going to give up her path when Grant had called her on her mobile and asked her to meet him in Roundhay Park, where they had gone for their first date, away from the stink of Leeds city centre and the incestuous gossip of the university campus. She had found him sitting in the summery morning sun on the same blanket he had brought to that first picnic, with a basket of bread, cheese, cold meat, and mineral water.

There was something about that moment—the quality of light, the smell of warm vegetation, the enigmatic turn of his smile and the openness in his eyes—that had crystallised her feelings, and she knew that she loved him and there would be no need for anyone else, ever. It would be just the two of them, just the three of them, and it wasn't frightening at all; it felt right.

“I’m doing the baby stuff,” he had said before she could sit down.

“No.” She had tried to wave him silent. “I’ve already decided—”

“I knew you’d try to talk me out of it, which is why I’ve already sold all my books and drawing equipment and officially quit. No going back.”

“Grant!” she had said, horrified.

“Let’s face it, Caitlin, the most I’ll ever be is average. You’re brilliant. It has to be me.”

She had looked him in the eyes, dumbfounded. “You wanted it more than me. You know you did.”

“Then you owe me big time.” He had smiled, opening the mineral water, which fizzed loudly, sparkling in the sun. She’d shed a few tears, which she’d hidden away from him to avoid his merciless teasing, but for the first time she had been convinced that everything was going to be just right.

When Caitlin slipped out of Liam’s bedroom, Grant was sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of homemade beer, looking exhausted. She felt drained herself, but after the brief respite with Liam, the harsh reality of the plague crowded her thoughts once more. Since the Fall, the local community had come to rely on her more than she had ever dreamed when she was a simple GP. In a world suddenly chaotic, she was a symbol of stability, a wise woman who could offer advice while curing all their ills. They demanded more of her than she could possibly give—as the only doctor working the area she was on call 24/7—but her sense of responsibility overrode every desire she had to escape from the position.

In the lounge, she plucked a pile of medical textbooks from the bookshelf and took them to the table where the lantern flickered. Over the last few months she’d amassed quite a library to fill the gaps in her education, but nowhere had she managed to find any reference to an illness that resembled the symptoms of the plague. Some aspects reminded her of what she had read about the bubonic plague, yet the speed and the black discoloration were more reminiscent of the septicaemic plague, which had been much rarer during the Middle Ages but was transmitted by the same *Yersinia pestis* bacterium. Like the current outbreak, it had a near one hundred percent fatality rate and, worryingly, no treatment had ever been found.

Yet the septicaemic plague’s discoloration, which gave the Black Death its name, was caused by disseminated intravascular coagulation, visible over wide areas of the skin and certainly not in the remarkably regular lines of this disease. Caitlin could find no evidence for the cause of that symptom in any of her autopsies.

She wondered if it was some obscure tropical illness—certainly, the ferocity of its assault on the human system matched that of the Ebola virus—but even if she could identify it, there was little she could do without access to a lab or scientific expertise and the minimal medication she had at hand.

It had appeared in the village as if from nowhere. She had been called out in the early hours of one morning to treat a farmer who had gone down with the warning-sign black dots and raging fever. The farmer had been away at a market in Fordingbridge trying to organise another branch of the food-distribution system, but had not mentioned anything to his family about illness on his return.

Within a day, incidences of the disease cropped up rapidly throughout the village. Caitlin had attempted to track the spread, but it was soon apparent that it was striking down people who had had no contact. The only explanation was that it was airborne—a worst-case scenario that was devastating in its implications. With no national communication system available since the Fall, outside information was thin, but by that time she was knee-deep in the dead and the dying and she had no time for anything but disposal.

“What are you doing?”

She started. Grant was at the door, holding his glass of beer. She couldn’t see his face in the shadows. “Just some research. If I could pin down the genotype of the plague it might point—”

“We haven’t seen you in days. Can’t you give it a rest just for tonight?”

She recognised the tone in his voice and knew what was to come. “Grant—”

“No. Don’t give me all the excuses again. You’re barely a part of this family—”

“I’ve got responsibilities!” Her voice snapped and tears of frustration sprang to her eyes. She’d told herself she’d remain calm and she’d barely lasted a few seconds; the unbearable stress she was under forced everything up against her skin, trying to break out of her.

“You’ve got responsibilities to us.” Grant was cold and distant, but anger bubbled just beneath the surface.

Caitlin stared at the textbook illustration of a virus, something so deadly stripped down to a cartoon. She’d heard the argument so many times recently in so many different tones, from despairing to furious, that she really didn’t have the energy for such a futile exercise.

“Yes, people need their doctor,” Grant continued. “But we need you, too. You’re never here anymore. You never even think about us when you’re out—”

“How do you know what I think?” She winced; too combative—it would only notch the argument up to another level.

“I know. I can see it in every part of you . . . in everything you do. We’re just here in the background. You don’t give us any time, you don’t give us any thought. We’re not important. Why can’t you forget about your job for a while?”

“Because people are dying out there!”

“People are dying in here . . . getting older . . . time running away . . .” Resentment rose up in him, old arguments running round and round in a Möbius strip, never answered or explained.

“You know what I mean,” she replied sullenly.

“We never even have sex anymore—”

“Oh, God, if I hear that one more time—”

“I’m not just talking about the sex! It’s symptomatic of everything else. It’s about intimacy, being close to someone you love . . .” He slammed the glass down on a table, slopping beer everywhere.

“I’m too tired to have sex!” The emotion burst out in a tidal wave. “I’m worn out by everything . . . too frightened . . . too . . . oh, it doesn’t matter!”

The brief silence that followed her outburst was filled with her guilt, and then anger that she’d given in to her emotions.

“What’s happened to us, Caitlin?” Grant’s voice was like glass. “We never celebrate what we’ve got . . . we just exist. Before, we used to celebrate all the time—”

“Before, before, before, that’s all you ever talk about!”

“Listen to me!” he snapped. “We’ve got to do something to put this right, or—”

“Or what?” She slammed out of her chair and stormed across the room. “Or what? You’ll leave me? Go on, then!”

She pushed past him, snatched up her coat, and marched out into the night.

Distant flashes of lightning burst intermittently across the sky. There was no rain, but the wild wind still made the trees around the barns sway and moan as if they were alive. Caitlin threw herself into the gale, lost to emotions that felt as if they were tearing her apart. She didn’t even think about what she had glimpsed in the lane earlier, or the plague and the suffering.

Ten minutes later she realised where her subconscious was driving her. The windows of Mary Holden’s house were aglow with the ruddy light of a fire. The white cottage stood on the edge of the village, camouflaged by several years’ growth of clematis and surrounded by a garden so wild it clamoured on every side as if it was trying to break into the warmth.

Caitlin felt bad about calling at so late an hour, but Mary had proved a good friend throughout the difficult months since the Fall and would understand.

Mary answered Caitlin’s knock quickly and ushered her in. “What are you doing out in weather like this?” she said. Mary was in her early sixties but looked much younger: her long grey hair had a lustre and was tied into a ponytail with a black ribbon; she wore faded blue jeans and a too-large white T-shirt that looked as if it had been in the wash with the colours. “Have you run out of supplies?” she continued. “I’ve got a new batch of herbs in. Haven’t had a chance to dry them yet, though.”

“No, it’s just . . .” Caitlin suddenly couldn’t stop the tears from streaming down her cheeks.

“What is it, love?” Mary put an arm round Caitlin’s shoulders and led her

toward the pleasant heat of the wood fire. The house had an exotic spicy aroma from the herbs and wild plants Mary collected to turn into potpourri or incense, her dining room packed to the brim with jars of the dried produce. Mary knew everything there was to know about their medicinal uses and regularly supplied Caitlin with mysterious bunches of crispy vegetation to boost the surgery's dwindling medicinal stocks. The remarkable success rate of remedies made up from her scrawled notes had led Caitlin to come to trust her judgment.

At first Caitlin couldn't get her words out—the tears wouldn't stop, her throat appeared to have closed up—so she sat on the old, comfy sofa in front of the hearth while Mary went into the kitchen to make her an herbal tea.

"Here you are." Mary offered a cracked mug. "Probably tastes like shit, but you won't get much better anywhere else these days."

"Sometimes I wonder why I carry on," Caitlin said. "There's no point. To anything."

"Now you know that's not true." Mary stretched out next to her like a cat. "There's a point to everything, even if you can't see it. But that's not what you want to hear, is it? What's wrong?"

Mary radiated an atmosphere of peace that Caitlin found eminently comforting. In a way, Mary was her equal in the eyes of the community. Most of the villagers had found their way to Mary's door at some time or other, and with increasing regularity, seeking wisdom or herbal remedies that they couldn't get from Caitlin. Finally, it was Caitlin's turn; and so she spoke about the plague, and her fears that it could wipe out the population, and her guilt that she couldn't do anything about it. And against her better judgment, she talked of Grant and the growing gulf between them, and how their relationship appeared to be sliding away, though neither of them wanted that to happen.

Mary listened intently, nodding at the right points. When Caitlin had finished, Mary smiled a little sadly and said, "You've got it all on your plate, haven't you? Stronger women than you would buckle under that kind of pressure. You mustn't feel bad about taking a few knocks."

"Well, I do. People are relying on me."

"You're not Supergirl, you know." Mary's black cat startled them both, leaping onto her lap from the shadows beside the sofa. Mary had named him Arthur Lee after some sixties singer she admired.

"What am I going to do?" Caitlin asked.

"I hate to say this, but I agree with Grant."

Caitlin eyed her suspiciously.

"This life is all about maintaining a balance. You're completely out of whack at the moment. Too much yin, not enough yang. You're not going to do anybody any good by running yourself into the ground."

“I feel too worn out—”

“Then you’d better unwear yourself. These are hard times, Caitlin, but they’ve been worse . . . not for us, but in the past. It’s easy to give in to all the misery, when what we really should be doing is enjoying life. Because we still can.” Mary chewed her lip in thought for a moment before adding, “And if you don’t mind me sticking my nose in, you should start sleeping with Grant again.”

Caitlin looked up sharply; she hadn’t mentioned that aspect to Mary.

“Come on. It’s obvious.” She cracked her knuckles like a docker. “Sometimes it’s hard to find the energy, but it rewards you if you can. Sex is the glue of relationships, Caitlin, and it’s what life is all about. It’s the opposite of death, of giving up, of getting swamped by . . .” She waved a hand toward the window. “. . . what’s out there. See it as symbolic.”

“That’s one line the boys never used.”

They laughed together, wrapped in the firelight and the warmth, the wind bucking with irritation at the panes.

“I appreciate this, Mary. At this time of night—”

“You know you’re the daughter I never had,” Mary said sardonically.

“No, really.”

“I’m a sucker for waifs and strays.” Arthur Lee settled in her lap so Mary could scratch behind his ears. “We have to pull together, in a way we never did before.”

Mary was serious and thoughtful, and Caitlin felt calmer simply being around her. Mary was one of those people who felt so much bigger than the actual space they filled. “You really think it’s worth it?”

“The clock’s been set back. We’ve got a big opportunity to put things right this time.”

“You’re saying all the death and the suffering are worthwhile?”

“That’s the wrong word. But we can’t see the big picture—we’re too close to it. I know this: the world we had before wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. People just . . . existed. They weren’t really happy. They worked, and got more possessions than their parents had, and lived a few years longer, but they weren’t really happy. Everything in society was just geared toward maintaining that system . . . keeping the *status quo* . . . because there were a lot of people who *really* benefited from it. Everybody else just drifted along. Is that living?”

“Tell that to the bodies stacked up in the village hall. I bet they’d prefer a touch of the old life, however dull it was.”

Mary smiled, but not in agreement. She pushed Arthur Lee off her lap and went to a cupboard containing a row of dog-eared vinyl records. “They’re all useless now,” she said, “but I keep them for what they mean . . . good mojo.” She laughed as she flicked through the rack and selected one, which she handed to

Caitlin. It was called *Forever Changes* by some band called Love and the cover featured a collection of psychedelically coloured heads against a white background.

“Never heard of them,” Caitlin said, not quite understanding the point. “The last music I remember hearing was *doves*.”

“They were around in the midsixties,” Mary said. “They had an underground following but never really broke through into the big time because they refused to get involved in all the corporate bullshit. They were quite brilliant. Anyway, there was a quote about them that’s always stuck in my mind. It said something like, ‘Love perfectly captured the combination of beauty and dread that was around in the sixties.’ That’s what we’ve got now, beauty and dread.”

“Not so much of the beauty.”

“It’s there, if you can see past the mud and the shit and the dying. In a way, this time is a lot like the sixties.” Caitlin’s disbelieving expression made Mary laugh. “It was a crucial time . . . when everything was poised. Young people, for once, were on the brink of shaping society. Not old farts like me. Young people— younger than you. There was a move away from repression toward freedom . . . hope and optimism. The occult—magic, if you like—was back in the mainstream, and a real honest-to-goodness spirituality came with it. For a moment it seemed as if that was the way things were going to go . . . toward a new Golden Age.”

“Then human nature kicked in.”

“Oh, you are a cynic,” Mary chided. “No, it wasn’t that. Human nature is basically what I’ve just told you—good stuff . . . hope . . . freedom . . . people looking for magic in their lives. But there’s a tiny group who always manage to worm their way to the top. You wouldn’t look twice at them in the street—they’re boring, fade into the background. But they’re cursed with having no imagination, and that’s a terrible thing. If you’ve got imagination, you worry about people’s feelings because you can put yourself in their shoes, you worry about your place in the world . . . in history. These people somehow know they’re lacking because they’ve got no imagination, so they try to fill in what’s missing with power—and because they’ve got no imagination, they’ll do anything to get to the top. No scruples.”

“Is this your conspiracy theory?” Caitlin said with a wry smile.

“No conspiracy. They stand there in plain sight, but you never think badly of them because they’re so boring. They were the ones who killed Kennedy—both of them—Martin Luther King, John Lennon, gave Charlie Manson the wrong direction, blew apart all the protests against the Vietnam War, ruined the hippie movement. They’re the ones who killed the sixties.”

Caitlin waved her away with a chuckle.

“You can laugh, my girl, but it’s true. Those people don’t like all the positive things, all that light and freedom and hope, because in that sort of atmos-

where they can't exist. They're shown up for what they really are. With the country upside down . . . the government nowhere to be seen . . . we're at a point where we can go in that right direction again, if a few good people lead the way. But those shadow-people are only lying low, and I'm betting you they'll soon rear up their ugly, boring heads and try to stop us getting some good out of all this shit."

Caitlin looked into the heart of the fire, smiling. The more she learned about Mary, the more she liked her. Mary was an odd mixture of hardness from her days as a psychiatric nurse, and optimism, which she often hid in order to maintain her tough image. Caitlin could listen to her talk all day. But when Caitlin looked up to see Mary watching her with concern, it was clear that Mary had only set off on her impassioned discourse to take Caitlin's mind off her problems.

"I saw something earlier." Caitlin struggled to find the words to describe her chilling experience in the lane. "There were two men on horses. I got the impression they were hunting." She eyed Mary cautiously. "Only I'm not so sure they were men. Or horses for that matter. I know it sounds stupid . . ."

"The world's gone crazy in a lot of different ways, Caitlin." Mary went over to the window to peer out into the turbulent night. "Some of the things out there . . ."

"You believe all that stuff—all the superstitious rubbish people keep going on about in the village?"

Mary turned back to her; for the first time her face was impossible to read. "Don't you?"

"No." Caitlin broke her gaze and returned her attention to the fire, unable to accept what she saw in Mary's eyes. "It's just a human reaction to all the upheaval. When you're trapped in chaos that makes no sense, it's easy to return to childish ways, believing it's all the result of some supernatural power . . . God, gods, angels, ghosts—"

"What did you see tonight?" Mary asked pointedly.

"I don't know."

"You do, Caitlin. It's not rational to deny the evidence of your eyes."

"Really, I don't know what I saw. It was dark, stormy . . . It just didn't feel right . . ."

Mary fished a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the sideboard. "Gary Smedley offered it to me in return for dispensing something to help him sleep. So who am I to say no," she said wryly. She poured two shots and handed one to Caitlin before joining her on the sofa. "Look," she began, "I know you're a down-to-earth sort, so there's no point me testing your credulity with all the wild and woolly theories as to what caused this whole mess. But you can't deny that people have been seeing things—"

"I don't deny that people *think* they've been seeing things."

"You really do have a poker up your arse, don't you?" Mary knocked back the shot. "At the risk of souring our friendship, then, let me tell you that my family always believed they were gifted with what they called the *sight* . . . second sight."

"Oh, they could see the future." Caitlin smiled superciliously. "Did they win the lottery?"

"Not just the future, missy. Ooh, you really are asking for a clip round the ear." She poured herself another drink. "They . . . *believed* . . . they could see things happening at a distance, too, and the past . . . Anyway—"

"And you've got it." Caitlin laughed. "Do you want to read *my* palm, too?"

There was silence for a few seconds, and when Caitlin looked up Mary was deathly serious. "I can do a lot of things you'd be surprised about."

"Go on, then." Caitlin shrugged. "I could do with some entertainment."

Mary shook her head, thought for a moment, and then recanted. She disappeared toward the kitchen and returned with a large glass bowl half filled with water that shimmered in the firelight. Despite herself, Caitlin was growing intrigued.

"Have you heard of scrying?" Mary asked.

"What's that? A new sport?" Caitlin poured herself another drink, enjoying the fuzzy edge of detachment that the Jack Daniel's gave her.

"It's a trick to contact the subconscious. You stare into a bright, mirrored surface—in this case, water—and try to reach a trance state. And then spout whatever rubbish comes to mind."

"How will I tell when you're under?" Caitlin teased.

Mary waved her silent with mock-weariness, then placed the bowl on a coffee table in front of the fire. "I use it sometimes to try to . . . understand what's going on with this world." Caitlin was puzzled to see a shadow cross Mary's face. "We might find something that would comfort you." She winced. "That's probably not the right word . . . something that might give you a bit of perspective, perhaps."

"You're serious?"

"No talking now." Mary gave a smile, but there was a weight behind it that made Caitlin obey instantly.

Silence descended on the room beyond the crackling of the fire; even the gale at the window seemed to abate. Mary leaned over the bowl and stared into the depths of the water. Caitlin watched her for a while until her attention drifted to the fire and then to the patterns made by the occasional raindrops trickling down the panes. She thought of Liam, snuggled up in his bed, and then of Grant. The lucidity surprised her; she saw past the last few years and was overcome with a surprising rush of warm memories, all the reasons why she had fallen in love, the

gentleness, the humour, the way she always felt secure around him. It left her with a deep regret that she had run out in such a temper. She'd make it up to him when she got back; perhaps they'd even have sex. If he was asleep, she could wake him . . .

"I see something." Mary's voice was dreamy. Her eyes flickered in the depths of a trance. "I see . . ." Her words floated languidly.

Caitlin leaned in closer, curious to hear what she had to say.

"I see . . ."

At first Caitlin wondered if Mary was playing a joke to distract her; it was the kind of thing she would do. But there was a strange cast to her face, muscles held in an unnatural position, that suggested it was real.

"I see a dragon," Mary said dreamily. "Lying in the land. It stirs . . . a trail . . . blue . . . so blue."

Her words brought a tingle to Caitlin's skin. Though she couldn't explain why, she felt a strange connection.

"It's rising . . . on powerful wings . . . above the land now . . . changing . . . changing . . . becoming . . . Caitlin . . ."

Caitlin shivered. Instinctively, she was sure there was some meaning hidden in it.

"And now changing again . . . Caitlin becoming the dragon once more . . . and flying . . . flying over the land . . ."

A spasm crossed Mary's face. After the stillness it was like a bolt, jerking Caitlin out of her intense concentration.

Mary's voice dropped to the barest whisper. "Something is watching . . . in the night sky . . . like a hole in everything . . . so deep . . . it goes on forever . . . it's sending out . . . things . . . to hunt . . . the dragon . . . Caitlin . . . to destroy her . . ."

Mary threw her head back as if someone had grabbed her shoulders and hurled her against the sofa. Her mouth sagged, her eyes wide and staring, fixed on some spot on the ceiling. She didn't look like Mary at all.

Caitlin jumped in shock. "Mary . . . ?"

Before she could act, Mary began to speak. At first it was just a mumble, barely audible. But as Caitlin leaned in to hear, the words came out loud and clear. Yet it wasn't Mary's voice. A deep masculine rumble reverberated through it, distorted as though it came from the depths of a well. Caitlin's blood ran cold. It was no trick.

"You have been noticed." There was a long pause as phlegm rattled in Mary's throat. "It is coming."

Caitlin shivered at the growling old-man voice. *Who had been noticed?* Her second question made a cold shadow move in her heart: *And what was coming?*

Mary turned her head slightly so that her staring, unseeing-yet-seeing eyes were fixed firmly on Caitlin. “The Lament-Brood is stalking. They smell your soul.” Another phlegm-rattle. “They will have you, Sister of Dragons. There is no running.”

Drool ran from the corner of Mary’s mouth as tiny tremors rippled through the muscles of her face. Caitlin grabbed Mary’s shoulders, afraid that she was on the brink of a fit.

There was an instant when Mary’s body went rigid, but then she relaxed, her head sagged, and a cloudy, frightened consciousness surfaced in her glassy eyes. She tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat.

“Just take it easy,” Caitlin said, not really understanding what had happened.

Mary shoved her aside with one flapping arm and reached for the Jack Daniel’s bottle. She poured herself a shot with shaking hands and downed it in one go.

“What was that?” Caitlin asked once Mary had calmed a little.

“It’s never been that strong before,” Mary said weakly. “Things have been more focused since the Fall, but that . . .” She took Caitlin’s hand firmly. “I think there’s trouble coming.”

“You mentioned my name.” Caitlin’s thoughts were too jumbled under the geological layers of stress of numerous tensions. She collapsed back into the sofa, trying not to cry. “I can’t take any more. Really.” The pity she saw in Mary’s face made it even worse.

“Have another drink.”

Caitlin shook her head. “What just happened?”

“Nothing. Just . . . silliness.” Her expression gave the lie to her words.

“Nothing makes sense anymore.” Caitlin dried her eyes with the back of her hand and stood up. “I’d better be going. I have to call in at the . . . the village hall.” She’d wanted to say surgery, but had almost said morgue. “They need my help.”

“I need to . . . think about what just happened, Caitlin,” Mary said gravely. “But I’ll come looking for you when I’ve worked out what it all meant.”

Caitlin forced a smile. “It’ll wait till morning, I’m sure. I’m not going to stay at the hall for long. I want to get back home.”

Mary saw her to the door, but just as she was stepping out into the gale, Mary gave her a fierce hug in an unprecedented show of physical affection. “Look after yourself,” she said. Then, “Be careful.”

It sounded like a warning.

As Caitlin entered the foul atmosphere of the village hall, Gideon greeted her with a sad expression and nodded to one of the side rooms. Through the gap in

the door, Caitlin could see Eileen sitting hunched beside her sister, holding her hand loosely. Daphne was lying on a table, already comatose and sleek with sweat. The black mottling was visible in contours on her face and forearms like some Maori tattoo. Caitlin couldn't believe the speed with which the plague attacked the body.

Was this the end of the world? she wondered. Humanity wiped out in a matter of weeks, nature clearing the decks ready for the next phase? It seemed so unfair after all they'd endured during the last few months: they had escaped the bang, only to be done for by the whimper.

There was nothing she could say to Eileen, so she left her to her grief. No more new patients were being brought in, so she retired to the office, grateful for a moment of privacy to try to make some sense of the illness. Frantically scrawled notes on sickeningly stained paper were scattered all over the desks, while charts and graphs were pinned to the cork board next to a yellowing announcement of some pre-Fall Best-Kept Village contest.

Caitlin still nurtured a desperate hope that if she kept turning over all the details, sooner or later she'd hit upon some startling insight that would reveal the plague's true nature. But the mechanics of transmission escaped her; the whole epidemiological nature of the disease was a complete mystery. Were some people genetically predisposed to contracting it? Perhaps even for those like herself who appeared immune, it was just a matter of time.

She tried to focus on the positive, but everything pointed toward the unthinkable: at best, humanity stripped back to a handful of survivors. At worst: the end. She stared at the mass of notations and scribbblings and felt the waves of despair break against her. It was all chaos. All too much, with no time to make sense of it.

Liam was still in his bed. Grant was fast asleep, too. Relieved, she went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of beer. She hated the taste of it, but at least it anaesthetised her. Finally, she had calmed enough to go to bed. She would wake Grant, she thought, and they would make love, and the world and all its hideous threats would be forgotten.

Her desperation for something life affirming made Caitlin as drunk as the alcohol. She slipped into the dark bedroom and pulled off her clothes, her awkwardness dissipating in the heat of her rapid arousal. Grant was dead to the world, but she knew how to wake him. She found his chest and moved her hand toward his groin.

It took a second or two before the sensations told her something was wrong. Grant's skin felt waxy and feverish, and there was a puddle of sweat near his belly button. For the first time, she listened to his breathing: it was shallow and laboured.

“Grant?”

Her mind became a mad jumble of thoughts: flashes of worst-case scenarios, quickly suppressed, prayers, memories, oddly settling on the time when he had proposed to her, when everything had been perfect. Deep in her heart, she knew the truth, and she thought the rush of brutal emotion would drive her mad.

She jumped from the bed, cursing the lack of electricity, and raced to fetch the candle from the hall. Shielding it with her hand, she closed her eyes briefly before she dared take that first look. The pain was as sharp as if she'd been physically struck. In the candlelight, Grant's skin looked hoarfrost-white, only emphasising the black mottling running in lines all over him. Pretending she was doing something worthwhile, she checked his pulse and then opened his eyelids.

He wouldn't regain consciousness. She'd already felt his final kiss, shared her last words with him—and what had they been? The bitterness and anger of their parting brought another stab of pain. Amidst the cold depths of her despair, she felt a burst of self-loathing, but it only had a second of life before another thought struck her, just as terrible. And then she had the candle and was into the hall, hovering outside Liam's door, whispering, “Please, God, please, God, please, God,” not daring to go in, thinking she might actually go mad there and then from the sight she was projecting.

But the reality was much, much worse. Liam lay in his bed, the sheets tucked up, just as she had left him, just before the goodnight kiss. His skin was white. And black.

The storm outside had broken, but the one within would rage forever.