

# **EVERYTHING AND NOTHING**

**David Moody**

-a prequel story to DOG BLOOD-

St. Martin's Press

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"Everything and Nothing"

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address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth  
Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Griffin Trade Paperbacks are  
published by St. Martin's Press, 175  
Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

**I**  
**DRIFTING**

When this war began, killing was everything. You did what you had to do, when you had to do it. The only thing that mattered was wiping out the Unchanged whenever you could, however you needed to do it. Those first days and week were a constant blur of blood and battles. The enemy was everywhere, and they were easy pickings. You chose your spot, you went in there, and you started killing. And you didn't stop until you were the only one left standing.

Things are changing.

There are fewer of them left now. Just last month I was killing more than ten a day on average, usually more. Even as recently as a couple of weeks ago I was still finding them regularly, and the hunt, the chase and the kill seemed to fill every hour of every day. But now they're getting harder to find. The gap between kills is increasing, and in the spaces between I'm left drifting: frustratingly purposeless and directionless.

My life has changed more than I could have imagined. I'm learning to live off the land now, picking at the flesh which hangs from the bones of what used to be here before and taking whatever I need from wherever I can find it. I see things now that I used to look straight past, taking chances and finding opportunities I would previously have missed. I understand and accept things which never used to make any sense. I'm a thousand times the man I used to be.

Before all of this happened, life was simple and easy. We used to bitch and moan but we had it all on a plate and everything there for you whenever you wanted it. We all took things for granted and expected that

what was there today would still be there tomorrow. You went out to work and you were paid to do your job. You used that money to buy food and to pay for the roof over your head and the clothes on your back and whatever else you thought you needed. Today I hunt and fight for everything. I eat scraps to survive and I stop and find whatever shelter I can when I'm too tired to keep going. There's no certainty about anything anymore - no plan, strategy or routine - but I don't care. I'm free of the shackles of my past. The war has taken everything I ever had, but it's given me so much more. Now all I have is the clothes I'm wearing and the weapons in my hands, and that's all I need. Everything and nothing.

#

It poured with rain earlier this afternoon but the sky cleared a while back and the sun broke through. Now night's coming and the light is fading. Long shadows are stretching across the land all around me. It's been a long, frustrating, and uneventful day with just a single uninspiring kill so far, first thing this morning. I keep telling myself the Unchanged are becoming harder to find because we're winning. I've killed hundreds of the fuckers, and if everyone like me has done the same then there should hardly be any of them left. But there's no way of knowing for sure. Communication between us is virtually non-existent and the uncertainty and lack of information is sometimes hard to handle. All I know for sure is what I see for myself, and I've got no choice but to keep fighting because until every last trace of their kind has been completely and unequivocally wiped from the face of the planet, this bloody war won't end.

Finally now, after hours and hours of nothing, something has happened to relieve the painful tedium and frustration of this long, dragging day. I think I've found a nest. Most people wouldn't have given this place a second glance, but I'm not most people. To me it's obvious. I stumbled across this village by chance. It's little more than a short stretch of road with a handful of large houses scattered haphazardly on either side of the central tarmac strip, but I sensed something as soon as I got here. As this war has dragged on, people like me have become increasingly nomadic, drifting from fight to fight, never staying in any one place for too long. So if there is anyone left here and they're dug in, then they're almost certainly Unchanged.

One of the houses looks different to the rest. There's a car on the sweeping drive that's been clamped to prevent it being taken. The house

itself has been deliberately made to look empty. I've been watching it for a while now from the safety of the branches of a sturdy old oak tree across the road. The ground floor doors and windows have all been blocked and boarded up, but the upstairs windows are still intact. Surely both floors would have been damaged if this place had seen as much violence as the rest of the surrounding area? Credit where credit's due, whoever's here has done well to survive for this long, but it's all been for nothing. They think they're making a stand and protecting what's theirs, but all they've done is back themselves into a corner. They're just delaying the inevitable.

And now I can see one of them, and I know I'm right.

In their old lives, when the Unchanged were teachers and lawyers and doctors and dentists and lovers and parents and children and whatever else, all they had to worry about was what was for dinner or what time the next episode of their favourite reality TV programme or soap opera was on. And when their world began to fall apart around them, most of them just carried on and stuck to what they knew for as long as they could. They never learnt how to run and hide or forage for food and water, or how to cover their tracks. It's the simplest thing that's given the location of these people away. The flat roof on top of the double-garage (which looks bigger than my entire apartment used to be) is covered with buckets and pots and pans to collect rainwater, and one of the Unchanged - a dumb, arrogant, long-haired fucker - has just climbed out of a window and is passing the water back to someone inside the house. Idiot's not even making any attempt to keep out of sight. Thinks he's superior and above it all. It's all I can do not to jump down from this branch and run at the fucker right now, but I force myself not to. It sticks in my gut but I'll bide my time. They're dead whatever happens. Waiting will only make what I'm going to do even easier.

#

Another half-hour and the light levels have faded substantially. How many of them are in there? I'm not concerned about numbers, I just want to plan my attack. The house is huge and there could be as many as ten or twenty of them cowering in its shadows. No matter. I've taught myself to be fast, quiet and hard. I'll get in and keep fighting until I'm the only one left standing.

I'm hungry and tired. No more waiting. Time to move. I climb down from the tree then sprint across the road. I jump up onto the bonnet of

the car on the drive then run along its length and launch myself off the roof and up onto the garage. My body rattles as I smash into the top of the door but I ignore the pain and manage to swing my legs up and over. Now I'm standing on the flat asphalt, surrounded by the recently emptied buckets and pans. I accidentally kick a saucepan over the edge and it drops and hits the block-paved drive below with a bell-like clatter. Damn. They'll know I'm here now. No matter. Their fear and anticipation will make them that much easier to kill.

I press myself against the wall to one side of the frosted-glass window that the Unchanged man disappeared inside through. I glance in but the house is dark and I can't see any movement. Taking my hand axe from its holster on my belt, I smash the glass. I can already hear them panicking inside as I climb through the window and I manage to stand upright just as the long-haired man bursts into the narrow, shadow-filled space. I hit him before he can even focus on me: a single strike of the axe, right between the eyes, so hard that the blade is left wedged deep in a vertical split in his skull. He drops to the ground at my feet, his dead bulk propping the door open and the adrenaline rush I feel is immense. First kill of the day or the hundredth, it doesn't matter. It's like the perfect drug and for a few precious seconds everything feels right.

An ear-piercing scream brings an end to my brief moment of bliss. I look up and see a long haired, pencil-thin woman standing at the other end of a galleried landing, frantically backing away from me then half-running, half-falling down the staircase. I jump the corpse in the bathroom and run after her. The whole house is dark and cluttered, filled with these people's supplies and their accumulated waste, and the place smells foul. The woman manages to make it into another room and slams a door in my face before I can get close enough to catch her. I break it down easily with just a couple of kicks and find her cowering in the corner at the far end of a massive lounge. I move towards her but a figure comes at me from out of nowhere and shoves me away. It's a kid, tall and gangly, mid-teens. He hits me hard but it's a desperate, last-ditch defence and I know he doesn't have the balls to attack. Idiot just stands there, waving a carving knife around in front of him like he's conducting an orchestra, too scared to stab. The end of the blade shakes wildly in the brief pauses between unconvincing swipes, revealing the true extent of his nerves. He hesitates, not knowing what to do next, and in that moment of indecision I rush him, grabbing his wrist with one

hand and his neck with the other and pushing him all the way across the room, slamming him back against a grubby patio window. I smash his wrist hard against the glass so he drops the knife and it lands with a dull thud, point down in the carpet. The woman in the corner screams again and the kid tries to shake me off. Just for a second it seems like he might actually be about to put up a decent fight but I know that no matter how hard he tries, he doesn't have a hope in hell. I dig my fingers into his flesh and tighten my grip around his throat, then pull his head forward and pound the back of his skull against the glass again and again until it cracks, feeling his weak, starved body judder and rock helplessly with each violent impact. He's already unconscious but I slam him into the glass a few more times to make sure he's dead before letting go. He slides down the window like a passed-out drunk, leaving a long smear of blood behind him.

Apart from the howling woman, I don't sense anyone else here. She gets up and launches herself at me but her attacks are insignificant and barely even noticeable. I catch her fists and throw her back across the room. Her legs buckle beneath her.

"You're an animal!" she screams at me, looking up from down on the carpet. "A bloody animal!"

I pick up the knife and run towards her. She shuffles back across the floor until she hits the wall and there's nowhere left for her to go. I crouch down at her level and look deep into her vile, tear-streaked face. These people's hatred of us used to terrify me, now it's empowering. She spits at me and I casually wipe her sticky saliva away, refusing to break eye contact for even a second, refusing to show any emotion.

"What have we done to you?" she sobs, her words barely discernible. I won't lower myself to answer her pointless question, but I do at least think about it as I thump the knife down hard and end her miserable existence. The truth is, I don't have any choice but to do this. The whys and wherefores of our opposing individual situations are unimportant and irrelevant. All that matters now is the end result: their extermination and our survival.

The woman lies dead at my feet, pools and splashes of blood glistening in the last light of the day. Other than my panting and my empty stomach grumbling, the house is now silent. Relieved, I step over the corpses and head for the kitchen. Whoever these people were, they'd been rationing themselves carefully and there's still food left in the

cupboards. I take off my trench coat, wipe enemy blood from my hands and face, then eat. I'll stay here and rest tonight, I decide, then move on in the morning.

I collapse heavily onto a comfortable leather sofa. By torchlight I flick through a couple of uninteresting magazines, remembering how pointless the world and everything in it used to be, then switch off from everything for a few precious minutes with a Su Doku.



**II**  
**ADAM**

It's early - maybe too early - but my sleep pattern's screwed and I'm already wide awake. It takes a few disorientating seconds for me to make sense of my surroundings. I'm in a long, narrow bedroom filled with so much clutter that it looks like a junkyard. The walls are bare, the decoration minimalist save for a huge black and white canvas print of the family I slaughtered hanging on the wall above the bed I've just slept in. I killed three of them but there are four people looking down at me with smug, self-satisfied grins fixed on their now dead faces. There's another boy in the picture, a little older than the one I killed last night.

It feels strange being in a place like this again, wrong almost. These days I sleep rough most nights, catching a few hours rest whenever the opportunity arises. It's oddly unsettling lying in a proper bed in a relatively secure house with a kitchen and bathrooms and walls and doors and windows and . . . and I don't like it. It reminds me of how things used to be before the Change, when everyone lived their lives hidden away from everyone else, locked in private little boxes like this. The idea of allowing myself to be so restricted, inhibited and controlled is unthinkable now.

I'm comfortable but I force myself to move. I head for the bathroom where, with one foot on either side of the greying corpse on the floor, I dunk my head into the half-full tub of water they'd managed to conserve. It's ice-cold and the temperature takes my breath away, numbing and revitalizing in equal measure.

I look down at the long-haired body by my feet and remember the ease with which I killed him last night. I remember how this man and the boy downstairs both held back, almost too afraid to attack. And that, I decide, is one of the crucial differences between them and us, a difference which will help us win this war. The Unchanged are too concerned with what might be, too tangled up worrying about the consequences of their actions to be able to fight freely. In comparison, we're uninhibited. While they're still thinking about it, we've already done it.

I crouch down beside the corpse and go through the ritual of stripping it of anything of value. He has nothing I need and anyway, my definition of value has changed completely over the last few months.

Today I'm looking for food, water and weapons. The chunky gold watch on this foul bastard's wrist, the decorative chains around his neck and the rings on his fingers aren't worth anything to anyone anymore.

Christ, that watch is an ugly thing. I take it off the body and stand over by the broken window to get a better look at it in the light. It's completely over-the-top and damn heavy. It's studded with diamonds and it probably cost more to buy than my last car. And I bet this idiot was damn proud of it too. He probably only wore it as a status symbol, a way of showing everyone he had contact with just how much he had and how much he was worth. Even when it mattered and I used to have a routine to follow I never wore a watch, but if I'd wanted one I'd have got one that was cheap and functional. Where's the sense in spending a fortune more than you need to just to find out it's twenty past five on the morning of June 11<sup>th</sup>? Thing is, I silently tell the corpse lying at my feet, when it came down to it, what good did all of this do you? You had the expensive house, a flashy car, lots of jewellery . . . but how did any of it actually benefit you? No amount of cash could have helped you survive. Look at us both now, pal. I know who I'd rather be.

June 11<sup>th</sup>. That date rings a bell.

I stand on the landing looking down over the banister, and try to work out why. I spend so little time thinking about what's gone now that I almost have to force myself to remember who I used to be. Then it starts coming back to me. June 11<sup>th</sup> last year was the day I started work at the PFP - the dead-end council department I was transferred to after being shoved and shunted out of various other equally dull and pointless offices. And then, once I've managed to lock on to one shred of detail, the rest of what happened a year ago begins flooding back. I sit down at the top of the stairs and remember.

I was late. First day in the new job and I was late. But it wasn't my fault. Any rational person would have understood that, but five minutes in the company of Tina Murray, my new supervisor, left me in no doubt that the PFP was not staffed by rational people. Some dick had left a shopping trolley in the middle of the train line into town and, with all the bullshit bureaucracy and health and safety red tape which used to slow everything down in the pre-war world, it had taken a ridiculous length of time to get it shifted. Tina Murray seemed to enjoy the bollocking she gave me. She delivered this cliché-filled lecture about how 'my reputation had preceded me' and how I'd just used up my 'one and only chance.' I'd already been disciplined by the council

because of problems I'd had with my previous supervisor and I knew I was living on borrowed time, but I couldn't help myself. Once I started arguing I knew I was digging myself into a deeper and deeper hole but I couldn't stop. I started getting sarcastic, and that was when I knew I was really in trouble. I asked her if she'd thought I'd put the trolley on the line myself, or whether she thought I was late because I was keen to make an impression? The bitch reported me to her boss, Barry Penny. She said I needed to take a long hard look at myself and change my attitude. I remember wanting to tell her to go fuck herself, but I didn't. Like an Unchanged coward I said nothing.

I get up and go downstairs, mooching through the wreckage of the house and still daydreaming about what happened this time last year. I remember standing in the toilet at the end of my first day at the PFP when Barry Penny walked in and started taking a piss next to me. I did all I could to ignore him but he made a point of talking to me, telling me how disappointed he was and that I needed to think carefully about how I conducted myself at work. All I remember thinking at the time was that I wasn't about to take any advice from a man who had his dick in his hand. I remember wanting to hit him, wanting to smash his face into the wall and leave him lying bleeding on the piss-stained floor. But I didn't. I couldn't. I held the anger and frustration inside and let it eat at me and fester. Things would be different if I'd had that conversation today. Today I'd rip the fucker's head off and kill him in a heartbeat and not think anything of it.

I step over the bodies in the living room and seeing the corpses again makes me think about my family last June 11<sup>th</sup>. I got home that night thinking Lizzie would understand my frustration and tell me they were all out of order, but she didn't. In some ways she was even worse than them. Kept banging on at me about how I needed to face up to my responsibilities and start looking after the kids instead of acting like one of them. Then she offloaded with the usual spiel about us needing to get out of the flat and get a bigger place to live and how everything depended on me working hard and being promoted, not demoted. We ended up having a massive row in front of the kids, and she didn't talk to me for days. All the pressure was unfairly heaped onto my shoulders.

None of that matters now. Today I feel no pressure at all. Today I'm free and the contrast between this year and last is incredible. Tina Murray, Barry Penny, Lizzie . . . where are you all with your advice now? Probably hiding in some desolate shit-hole, if any of you are still

alive, that is. You're sitting there, quaking in your boots, waiting for someone like me to track you down, flush you out and kill you. Wish you could all see me now . . .

Wait.

What was that?

Thought I heard a noise. Cursing myself for allowing myself to get distracted, I grab a knife and walk through to the kitchen and stand in the middle of the cluttered floor, listening. Then I hear it again, little more than a distant, muffled thump coming from another part of the building. At the far end of the room I notice a narrow utility area I didn't see in the darkness last night. There's another door at the end of it, secured by three thick wooden crossbeams and a heavy duty padlock and chain. Why would this particular door be so important? Supplies? No other part of the house has been barricaded like this, and it isn't even an external door. My curiosity aroused, I remove the wooden beams and check the three corpses for the keys to the locks. I find them on a bunch attached to a belt around the dead man in the bathroom's waist. I carefully open the unlocked door and take a cautious step forward into the gloom, my knife held ready.

I'm in a wide, stale-smelling garage space. There's an expensive-looking, pale metallic blue sports car parked directly in front of me, and I can hear something moving on the other side of it, just out of sight. I creep around the back of the car, ready to fight. I relax when I see a shape lying on an untidy nest of dirty bedding. The family pet? I walk closer, expecting to see a malnourished dog (and trying to understand why anyone would waste food on animals at a time like this?) but I stop when I'm near enough to see that it's a kid. Male, late teens or early twenties, half-dressed in grubby clothes that look several sizes too big, a curtain of long, knotted, straw-like hair covering his face like a veil. He lies almost completely still, barely even breathing. I use the tip of my knife to tease his hair away from his eyes and I immediately see that he's like me. Poor bastard stinks. I reach down, gagging at the stench, and try to move him. Both his right hand and left ankle are badly injured - the bones broken and the flesh lumpy and deformed - and he's shackled. He has a chain around his neck like a dog collar, and other chains around his good foot and wrist. His face has a vacant expression, his eyes open and staring but unfocussed. I think he's been drugged.

"You okay, mate?" I ask, not sure what kind of reaction (if any)

I'm going to get. His eyes slowly lift towards me, then droop shut. I gently shake his shoulder and he looks up again before trying to move. I help him up, trying not to over-react at the god-awful stench. He's been lying in a pool of his own waste for days. It takes him several minutes to sit up straight. The light from a small, square window illuminates his weary, hollowed face. I recognise him. His is the fourth face in the picture on the bedroom wall.

"You killed them . . . ?" he starts to ask but he doesn't have the energy to finish his question. He slumps to one side and drifts back into unconsciousness.

#

It's taken more than an hour for the kid to fully come around. I managed to undo his chains and move him into the living room and lay him on the sofa. His eyes are wide open and bright now. He's staring at the bodies.

"Your family?" I ask. He nods and his head drops, more through a lack of energy than any emotion. He looks at his right hand, examining his injuries with curious fascination. His broken fingers stick out at sickening, unnatural angles.

"Did they do this to you?"

He looks up and nods again.

"Dad did it. Said it was for my own good. Said he wanted to stop me fighting, but I know he only did it 'cause he was scared of what I'd do to him. He couldn't let me go 'cause he knew I'd kill them all, and he didn't have the balls to kill me himself. So he smashed up my hand and foot with a lump hammer to stop me getting away and stop me attacking them. Mum made him chain me up. She even had me eating out of a bowl."

"You must have been going out of your mind stuck in there with them so close."

He shakes his head.

"Didn't know a lot about it, to be honest. Mum was a vet," he says, nodding at her corpse. "She put stuff in the food to knock me out. Thing was, I had to keep eating it, didn't I? I knew what they were doing, but I had to try and stay strong so I could fight when I had to."

I watch him as he tries to straighten a smashed finger. The pain's too severe and he winces but he doesn't complain. He stares around the room then looks back over his shoulder to try and see out of the boarded up window behind him.

"What's your name?"

"Adam," he answers. "You?"

"I'm Danny."

"So what's happening in the world, Danny?"

"What do you know?"

"Not a lot. The view's pretty limited when you're chained to the garage wall."

Where do I start? It's hard to know what to tell him. Over the last few weeks I've come to realise how much we used to rely on the TV, radio and Internet. Other than what I've actually witnessed for myself, I know surprisingly little.

"I can only tell you what I've seen," I explain.

"So tell me."

"More violence and killing than I ever thought possible. I've spent my time fighting, hunting down those evil bastards."

"How many have you killed?"

"Hundreds I imagine. The numbers aren't important. All that matters is that you kill and keep killing until every last one of the Unchanged is dead."

"So what are you doing here?"

"Just passing through."

"And where you going next?"

"Wherever the next fight is."

"Take me with you, Danny? Come on, you can't leave me here like this."

He's wrong. Without my help this poor bastard's going nowhere. The last thing I want is to be slowed down by a cripple, but I have to admit the idea of company is welcome. If he can kill a few Unchanged along the way, then the effort required to take him will have been worthwhile, and having someone to talk to will fill the ever-increasing gaps between kills.

"Get yourself cleaned up," I tell him. "Start slowing me down and you're on your own."

### III

#### EVACUATION

The world feels huge out here today. It's a bright, warm and dry morning and as I follow the curve of the road up and around a steady incline, the landscape opens up on either side making me feel small and insignificant. Can't help feeling uncomfortably exposed too, out here in Adam's dead dad's sports car.

Up above us, everything's as it always was. The sky is deep blue, dappled with bulbous white clouds. The tops of trees sway in the gentle breeze and birds flutter through the air without a care. Down at ground level, however, the scars of war are everywhere. The road stretches away in front of us and, even out here in the middle of nowhere, it's littered with human debris. Jutting out into the centre of the road is the wreck of a burned-out car, complete with the roasted remains of a long-dead family still trapped inside. I slow down as we approach it, conscious that Adam is staring, his eyes wide and unblinking. I don't think he expected the scale of the devastation he's seen since we left the house. It's sobering to think how quickly this has become the norm to me and everyone else.

"Unbelievable . . ." he mumbles.

I force the car up the kerb and around the back of the wreck. Just ahead is another corpse. As we near it I see that it's only half a body - a pelvis and a pair of broken legs lying on a grass verge. The rest of it - everything from the waist up, complete with a stunted and bloody spinal cord tail - has been dumped a little further down the road. The vacant eyes of a deservedly butchered Unchanged face stare back at me as we drive nearer. I'm impressed with the brutality of what we're seeing. Whoever was here before us did good work.

"Have you actually killed anyone yet?" I ask him. My question is bizarre but he doesn't bat an eyelid.

"The people next door," Adam explains, still staring out of the window at the carnage. "They were loading up their car, trying to get away. I killed the lot of them."

"So how come your dad managed to get to you?"

"He was an arrogant fucker," he explains. "When all this started he said there was no way anything was going to happen to him. Said if anyone tried anything, he'd kill them before they got anywhere near him. But when it came down to it and he realised it was me he was going to

have to kill, he couldn't do it. Lost his nerve. Bastard caught me off guard while I was trying to get back into the house to look for him and Mum though. Came up from behind and smacked me round the back of the head. Next thing I knew I woke up in the garage with him standing over me with his fucking sledgehammer."

He looks down at his broken hand and shakes his head.

"They're dead, you're still fighting," I tell him. "Just remember that."

"It's not that," he says, suddenly sounding despondent. "How am I supposed to fight like this? Makes me feel like a fucking failure before I've even started. Fighting's all I've got left now."

I put my foot down and accelerate. I sympathise, but there's nothing I can do or say to help. Kid should just be thankful he's still alive.

#

There are little more than fumes left in the tank. This expensive, fuel-guzzling car wasn't designed for this kind of stop-start driving. The twisting roads are littered with rubbish and wreckage and it's virtually impossible to build up any speed.

"You know where you're going?" he asks.

"No," I answer honestly. Navigation is proving frustratingly difficult these days. I never was that good at map reading and most of the road signs we pass are either obscured or unhelpful. Anyway, what good are place names when you don't know where those places are?

"So are we just going to keep driving indefinitely?"

"Looks that way," I snap, getting annoyed with his constant questions.

"Great."

"Well if you've got a better idea, let's hear it."

I take a sharp corner too fast and have to brake hard to avoid hitting the back of an abandoned silver car which straddles the width of the road immediately ahead. We screech to a halt, leaving black rubber skid marks on the tarmac. I lock my arms and push myself back into my seat, heart thumping, amazed I didn't crash. I can't see any way through.

"Can you move it?" Adam asks.

"I'll have a look."

I get out and climb up onto the bonnet of the silver car, denting the metal with my heavy boots. This is strange. Up ahead the narrow road



has been completely blocked by several more abandoned vehicles.

"Problem?"

I turn around and see Adam struggling to get out. He stops, half-in and half-out of the car, propping himself up on a long metal walking stick he brought with him from home. It looks like a ski-pole or something a hiker might use. It had a rubber protector on one end which he threw away, and now it's sharp enough to skewer and kill.

"Road's been blocked," I eventually answer as I climb up onto the roof of the silver car and look around, "but I can't see why."

Other than a couple of low buildings a short distance away, there's nothing obvious here. There's no way of telling how recently these cars were dumped. Might have been here for weeks or . . .

"Hear that?" Adam says.

"What?"

I listen carefully but can't hear anything at first. I gradually become aware of muffled noises up ahead. Someone yelling orders . . . engines being revved . . . a panicked scream . . . The crack of a single gunshot startles me, and the windscreen of the car I'm standing on shatters beneath my feet. I throw myself back down onto the road and scramble towards Adam.

"Fuck me," he says, head ducked down, "that was close."

I don't answer, my mouth dry and my pulse racing at a hundred times its normal rate.

Another car swerves around the corner and smashes into the back of Adam's dad's car. I manage to get out of the way, yanking Adam back with me. He yelps with sudden pain as his broken foot drags along the ground. The driver of the second car scrambles out and I know immediately that he's not like us. Before I have time to think I snatch my knife from my belt, throw myself at him and shove the blade up hard into his throat. I pull it out again and leave him on the ground at my feet, gurgling blood, his life spilling out over my boots.

"What's happening?" Adam asks, staring at the twitching corpse.

"Not sure," I answer as I look around for a way out. Adam grabs my arm and points up into the sky. A huge military helicopter is approaching, moving at an incredible speed. It thunders overhead and begins circling. There's a gap in the hedge just before the first car in the road block and I pull Adam towards it. We slip and slide down into a boggy, waterlogged field. There are several other people here scattered across the wide expanse - people like us - and they're all heading in

the same general direction, converging on the buildings I saw. And then it dawns on me what's happening.

"What?" Adam asks again, sensing that I know something he doesn't.

"It's an evacuation," I tell him. "Someone told me they'd seen something like this."

"Evacuating who?"

"Unchanged. Who d'you think?"

"But how . . .?"

Before he's even finished asking his question I drag him away. I put my arm around his shoulder and start moving him forward in the same direction as the ten or so other fighters I can now see nearby. The temptation to leave him behind is great but I keep helping him, telling myself that the closer I'm able to get him to the enemy, the more of them he'll kill.

"Over there," he says, pointing with his broken hand in the direction of the grey buildings. I can see Unchanged soldiers out in the open now, taking up positions on the low roof to try and hold us off. I glance across at Adam and see that his face is suddenly ghostly white. He's soaked with sweat.

'You okay?'

'Just keep moving,' he gasps, grunting with effort.

A sudden staccato burst of gunfire rings out, and a woman drops heavily to the ground a few metres away from where we are. With the final burst of energy she can muster, she tries to get up and run on but the effort quickly overtakes her and she collapses dead into the mud.

Adam's still trying to move but he's slowing. I drag him closer to the hedge at the side of the field to give us some cover but he's having none of it. The ground is becoming increasingly wet and uneven.

"Go on," he shouts at me as he slips and almost falls. He tries to steady himself with his walking stick but its sharp metal point just sinks deeper into the mud. I help him yank it out then leave him leaning up against the trunk of a tree. "I'll catch you up," he says optimistically.

I sprint up a low embankment, my mouth watering at the prospect of killing again. The mud beneath my feet turns to gravel and I barge and shove my way through the ever-growing crowd of fighters arriving from all directions. What the hell is this place? Beyond the large, single storey, grey concrete building I can see the smashed remains of row upon row of metal-framed glasshouses. Some kind of nursery or garden

suppliers perhaps? Above us the helicopter drifts away then lazily turns back around.

I use the people around me as cover as, directly ahead, armed Unchanged militia fighters burst out through double-doors on one side of the building and start shooting indiscriminately into the crowds like the clumsy, panicking, barely-trained dumb fuckers they are. Above them soldiers continue to prowl along the edge of the flat roof, picking people out of the advancing masses with single sniper shots. I change direction and take cover, pressing myself up against the back of a huge steel waste bin. I peer around the edge and watch as our assault continues. A huge hulk of a man charges towards the enemy, seemingly oblivious to the barrage of bullets which tear through the air all around him. He takes several hits to the chest but the impacts barely register. His momentum carries him forward until he drops just short of the door. There are already more fighters swarming close behind, following in his substantial wake. By the time his dead bulk has hit the deck, they've jumped his corpse and have attacked the gunmen. I watch in awe as one of them is dragged out then thrown back again, smashing into a wide, plate-glass window with such force that he's almost thrown completely through. His broken legs dangle uselessly through the shattered glass.

Now that the shooting from the doorway has been momentarily silenced, I follow the lead of several others and leave the cover of the waste-bin, sprinting over to the building and pressing myself flat against the wall. As the furthest forward fighters disappear inside, I follow them in through the now unguarded door. It's dark in comparison to the early morning brightness outside, and for a few disorientating seconds I can't see anything. I trip over upturned tables and chairs and trample fallen bodies as we charge *en masse* through a wide, open-plan café and seating area. There's more gunfire up ahead as a handful of enemy soldiers attempt to herd a panicking wave of Unchanged civilians out into the open.

I drop down behind an upturned table as another hail of bullets thuds along the wall behind me, smashing through plaster, bricks and tiles and filling the air with deafening noise and choking dust. Many other people are doing the same, desperately ducking down and waiting for a break in the firing, but still more continue to charge towards the enemy, refusing to stop until either they've killed or they've died trying. Outside, the helicopter swoops low again, its muffled roar

filling the building until it's all I can hear.

The Unchanged soldiers funnel the civilians towards another exit. All around me people begin to sprint after the disappearing crowd and I do the same, tripping through an unending mass of fallen bodies, some still groaning, others still trying to get up and fight. There are countless casualties from both sides here but who and what they were is unimportant now.

The incredible noise around us continues to increase, so loud that the building itself seems to be rattling and shaking like it's about to collapse. I'm trapped, stuck in a bottleneck, trying to get out. Can't, forward or backwards. Can hardly move. With a sudden hard shove the person in front of me finally shifts and we spill out. I barely manage to stay on my feet, but then I have to throw myself down as the enemy begins firing on us again. I crawl for cover on my hands and knees behind an abandoned car, feeling it rocking and shaking as it's peppered with bullets. I lie flat and look under the chassis and can see that the Unchanged are being led across the road now in a single mass, a ring of soldiers surrounding and protecting them like dogs herding sheep. Christ, there must be more than fifty civilians. I haven't seen them together in these kinds of numbers for days, weeks even.

Still hovering overhead, the helicopter banks away then drops down out of view. I get up and, along with huge numbers of fighters, run after it. The enemy soldiers have given up trying to fight us and are instead concentrating on reaching the helicopter which is landing at the far end of a field on the other side of the road. Before the helicopter has even touched down, a heavy door at the tapering rear end of its matt, khaki-brown fuselage drops open and more troopers appear from inside. They fan out and begin firing, concentrating on the attackers moving towards them from either side. The refugees stranded between them and us prevent the soldiers from aiming directly at the rest of the chasing pack.

My lungs are empty, the muscles in my legs and arms burning with the effort of the run, but I can't slow down. I don't want to slow down. We're gaining on the Unchanged, our fastest runners already pouncing on their slowest and dragging them to the ground. Unnecessarily large numbers of fighters join in the attack on each individual Unchanged that falls, their adrenaline-fuelled desire to kill too strong to be ignored now that we can see enemy blood being spilled. I keep moving, jumping fallen corpses and dodging other fighters, determined to get to the

fresh enemy targets who've almost reached the helicopter.

A huge explosion in the field just ahead of me knocks me off my feet. I'm suddenly flat on my back and I cover my face as dirt rains down all around me. More fighters run past, one of them unknowingly planting a boot in my balls as they sprint over me, filling my body with nauseating pain. I curl myself up and protect my head with my arms as more of them power past. There's another explosion over to my left and I look up through the chaos to see a soldier armed with a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher, trying to reload. Our people are onto him before he can fire again.

Some of the enemy have reached the back of the helicopter now, and those that have survived their frantic escape across the field are being brutally shoved, dragged, hauled and thrown onboard. Still more of our fighters continue to attack, many of them now being picked off by controlled gunfire and by more violent grenade and rocket explosions. The surface of the land - green and relatively clear just minutes ago - is now a churned quagmire, covered with bodies and riddled with bullet holes and impact craters. The cargo bay door at the back of the helicopter begins to slowly close and I will myself to move even faster, desperate to get there before it shuts completely, desperate to get closer to the foul creatures I see stowed inside. The aircraft starts to lift, the wind from its rotor blades battering me and everyone else like a strangely swirling gale. One of the Unchanged dives for the back of the powerful machine, reaching for it with fingers outstretched. He misses and I catch him as he falls, stamping hard on those same fingers with a muddy boot. As the helicopter starts to climb higher, the wiry-framed, scrawny little bastard rolls away from me and manages to scramble back to his feet. He takes a few slipping, sliding steps before falling face-first into the dirt. I accelerate, adrenaline coursing through my veins. This one's mine. I reach down, grab his shoulder and flip him over onto his back.

"Don't," he pleads pathetically, looking up at me with tears streaming down his face. "Please don't . . ."

I wrap one hand around his throat, then clench my other hand into a fist and smash it into his face, so hard it hurts. His nose is broken and blood starts gushing out of a deep gash. He's out cold but he's still alive. Eight more increasingly fast and increasingly hard punches finish the job and I relax and drop him down. Killing like this feels so good and so right.

The noise from the helicopter increases yet again, its impossibly loud engine suddenly sounding even louder, but it still hasn't lifted more than a couple of metres off the ground. Do they have a problem? Too many refugees and soldiers on board? With the fighting on the ground now beginning to slow down and dissipate as the last of the stranded Unchanged are massacred, I stand back and watch as the helicopter struggles to climb. Some of our people are hanging off its wheels like they're trying to pull it back down.

I quickly kill another straggler who'd been trying to get away. She was crawling through the fallen bodies, keeping low, thinking no-one had spotted her amongst the dead. As I dump the corpse I turn around and see the helicopter drop back down and bounce up off the grass, crushing several fighters who refuse to let go. The cargo door begins to open again. What the hell? As soon as the gap is wide enough, desperate Unchanged begin forcing themselves out and throwing themselves down, falling the short distance to the ground where people like me immediately pounce and kill. The door opens further and I can finally see why they're panicking. Some of our people have got on board. I can't see how many there are or how they got inside. The door hangs fully open now, and people from both sides tumble out as the pilot attempts to take off again. Others are still trying to climb in through the cargo door, clinging on and hauling themselves up as the helicopter finally begins to ascend. It climbs at an unnatural, awkward-looking angle, its tail sagging down, more bodies falling out of the open hold, hitting the ground with thud after sickening thud. But the fighting inside continues. I catch a momentary glimpse of several of our people who are onboard, holding onto anything they can, climbing along the walls to get closer to the pilots and kill them.

I stumble back across the field as the helicopter continues to rise. Still flying at a bizarre angle, it skims the tops of a mass of tangled trees, occasional bodies still dropping. Then it tips over to one side seems to hang for the briefest of moments before and plummeting from the sky like a stone. Noise fills the air, but then everything becomes silent and I watch as a twisting column of dirty black smoke begins to rise up through the trees. For a while I just stand there, breathless, and survey the carnage all around. The Unchanged are dead and the only people left moving now are people like me. The world immediately feels strangely calm; the chaos ended abruptly as if someone just flicked a switch.

"Oi, Danny," a voice shouts at me as I head back towards the road. I look around and see that it's Adam. He's sitting on the back of a fresh Unchanged corpse, panting with effort, soaked with blood and grinning like a madman.

"You all right?"

"Fucking brilliant," he answers quickly. "Fucking brilliant, mate."

"Great."

"Now that," he says, nodding in the general direction of the battlefield, "was awesome."

#

Saddled with Adam again, I head back to the buildings where the enemy were hiding, moving infuriatingly slowly. Most of the other fighters have already left in search of the next fight, but Adam's in no state to go anywhere for a while. I take advantage of the break to check the place over for food but I barely find anything. Almost everything has already been taken. Even the still-warm bodies here have already been fleeced.

"Still reckon they were trying to evacuate?" he asks me as I search through the contents of a small, windowless storeroom.

"I guess."

"But where were they taking them?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"So what do we do now?"

"You do what you like, mate. I'm going to get moving."

"Sounds good. Where you going to go?"

'Wherever I need to,' I tell him. "Wherever the next fight is."

"Why not stay here?'

"What?"

"Think about it, if they were holing up here before being evacuated, still more of them might come. This might be some kind of rendezvous point. We could just sit here and wait for them and get some rest, then take them out as soon as they arrive."

He might be right. I doubt he is, but I'll give it a couple of hours and see what happens.

#

A few hours turns into half a day and this place remains silent and dead. No-one's coming back here now and even if they did, the carnage all around the building would put them off long before they got close enough for us to attack. Time to go.

"What's up?" Adam asks as I get ready to move.

"We need to get out of here," I answer, suddenly aware that I'm assuming I'm taking him with me. Not wanting to prolong the conversation, I leave the room where we've been resting and head for the main entrance, picking my way through the chaos. I stand outside and listen. Everything remains still and deceptively calm. Apart from the muffled grunts and crashes of Adam trying to follow me, there's nothing. Absolute silence. Using the bullet-ridden wreck of a car as a step-up, I climb onto the low roof of the building to look around and try and get my bearings. I can't see anything remarkable. There are trees and fields on all sides, and the smoke from the downed helicopter continues to drift up from the crash site over the way.

Wait.

What's that?

I see something over to my right that makes me catch my breath. At first it's nothing - just more trees amongst many - but as I stare out into the distance, my eyes focus on something I never expected to see. It's The Beeches, a distinctively shaped clump of years-old trees which stand exposed on the top of an otherwise barren hill. My legs weaken unexpectedly with nerves as I continue to stare, ignoring the fact that I'm vulnerable and exposed up here. Adam staggers out into the open, still using his metal walking stick for support. He looks around then spots me up on the roof.

"What you doing?"

I don't answer. I can't answer. I climb back down then jump off the car and run back inside to the small office I quickly turfed through earlier. I was looking for weapons and supplies then, now I'm just trying to find an address, something to confirm our location. I snatch up a piece of paper and stare at the letter heading. The disorientation of these last few months has been extreme with days and battles and locations merging into each other in a blur. Place names and road signs lose their importance when you're drifting and I genuinely had no idea where I was or how far I'd travelled. I must have covered hundreds of miles but now I've come full circle, almost all the way back to the start again. I'm almost home.

Adam appears in the doorway, breathless and looking pissed off.

"Will you tell me what's going on?"

"This is Burcot."

"And?"



"Up on the roof . . . I saw some trees I recognised . . . I know this road . . ."

"Trees? You're not making any sense, mate. What are you on about?"

I don't bother answering him. I wouldn't expect him to understand so I don't even try to explain.

*I'm almost home.*

My head is suddenly filled with vivid memories of the family I thought I'd lost, that I'd forced myself to forget. They might be close. More importantly, Ellis might be close. I need to know what happened to my little girl. She's like me and we need to be together. I thought she was gone forever.

How could I have been so close and not realised? This world had become so unfamiliar and strange, but knowing where I am seems suddenly to have changed all of that. Now a couple of day's travel might be all that separates me from Ellis.

Whether she's there or not, I know I have to go back home. I might find nothing when I get there, but if there's the slightest chance of finding her then I have to take it. She's everything to me. Apart from the war, she's all I have left.

-END-

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