

THE PEELING

Book 1: Jeremy's Choice



An
IAIN ROB WRIGHT
Novella Series

THE PEELING: Book 1

Jeremy's Choice

Iain Rob Wright

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BOOK SUMMARY

TODAY THE WORLD GOT SICK..

The Peeling is a series of novellas set in a world ravaged by a deadly plague. Each book follows the individual story of one of the survivors of this horrible new existence. They can be enjoyed as standalone tales or as part of a larger, overall narrative.

BOOK 1: Jeremy's Choice

Being a security guard at a news station meant Jeremy found out about the peeling before anybody else. But that didn't prevent the deadly, unknown virus from infecting his wife. After years of neglect, unfaithfulness, and lies, is it finally time for Jeremy to do right by the woman he loves? Or is it too late?

BONUS CONTENT - Also includes the following short story:

-- The Peeling Of Samuel Lloyd Collins

This novella was written using the UK dictionary. Certain spellings may vary in other English speaking territories.

THE PEELING: Book 1

Jeremy's Choice

The Never Stop News Studio seemed cramped and small with all the bodies currently occupying it. The typical skeleton crew of six or seven had swelled to at least four times that amount in the last few hours as people crammed in front of the station's news desk while its two young reporters prepared to go live with the evening's story. The overcrowding had made Jeremy's job a lot more difficult.

Jeremy was a security guard for Never Stop News, responsible for keeping out anyone not invited to be there. With the news studio and its roaming reporters providing live content twenty-four hours a day there was always a risk that some anarchic member of the public with a grudge and a message would try to sneak in front of the cameras to interrupt the feed. With current events, and the public being as frightened as they were, the risk of a security breach had skyrocketed. People wanted answers, and when people wanted answers they came after the Government first and the journalists a close second. With so many people filling up the claustrophobic studio, it was extremely difficult for Jeremy to keep his eye on everybody. It was even harder to keep his mind on them with what was happening in the world.

There was just one more hour to go before Jeremy was relieved by the night guard – just one more hour. But he couldn't deny that he dreaded staying even one *minute* longer. Bad things were happening, starting almost a full week ago, and the situation didn't seem to be getting any better. He didn't want to be here anymore; didn't want to hear another bloody thing about *The Peeling*.

The studio was silent and the lights went down as the countdown till live began. The network was currently running a pre-recorded football report on its dedicated satellite channel and on its website, but it would turn back to the two co-anchors in less than seven-seconds.

"Okay, guys," one of the production assistants said. "You're on in three...two..."

Sarah Lane, one of the anchors, cleared her throat and said, "Good evening, guys. My name is Sarah Lane and I'm here to give you all the latest news. Things are still pretty bad in the UK right now, but rest assured me and Tom will be bringing you all of the facts for the next few hours. So get yourself a nice hot cuppa and snuggle up on that sofa as Never Stop News will be looking after you tonight."

Jeremy still struggled to accept such a casual approach to the news. Sarah and Tom were only mid-twenties and were allowed to dress and talk as such. Never Stop News's whole premise was to provide the day's events with a laid-back and youthful approach. Their slogan was: *All the news. None of the old*. Jeremy found it even more surprising that such an approach had been successful.

Never Stop's hip approach to the news had gained them a younger audience unattainable to the traditional networks. It had even started to eat into the more mature demographics as well. It seemed that people were tired of the stuffiness of days gone by and were happy to get the news from a bunch of bubbly youngsters. As a consequence, the Never Stop News Corporation was one of the fastest growing media companies in the world. Jeremy imagined that the lovely Sarah Lane had at least a small part in that success. Her shapely legs and curved figure, always on display beneath the glass news desk, were a constant feature of trashy celeb magazines.

The equally attractive, and immaculately-groomed, Tom Connors, took the lead from Sarah and got started with the programme. "I'm Tom Connors and, as we've been reporting all week, the current crisis in the UK and – we've now been told – many other parts of the world, has

escalated to devastating levels. It has been reported that upwards of four-million people have been affected so far and that number has continued to rise hour-by hour. With no end to the situation in sight, there is a fear that the current number of casualties is just a small percentage of what will turn out to be the final number.”

Sarah Lane took over again. “While both Private and Public sectors are working tirelessly to find both a cause and a solution, it is clear that the world is suffering under what can only be described as – a global plague. Commonly referred to as *The Peeling*, the unknown virus has spread throughout our nation and others with a virulence never before seen, making even the Spanish flu epidemic seem tame. Affecting the young and old alike, there is currently no clear vector for contraction. Government officials admit to knowing nothing about its origin and very little about its pathology. As previously stated, all members of the public are advised to remain inside their homes and avoid all contact with anyone besides their immediate family. The military have been permitted to use force where necessary to ensure the spread of the infection is contained.”

Jeremy swallowed back a mouthful of stomach acid. His reflux had gotten bad the last few days and his pills were at home. If he had a job anyplace else, he would have left by now, but the news reports were a national requirement while the crisis lasted and, as such, so too was the safety of its messengers. Jeremy’s security job, in many ways, was a matter of national security. Pity for England he was just a middle-aged slob with bad acid.

At fifty-two, Jeremy’s limbs were stiffer than they used to be and his arthritic bones ached more often than not. He was certainly willing to take a stand against anyone looking for trouble, but he couldn’t claim truthfully that he was the best man for the job. Most days he just hung around in the doorway, half asleep, from nine in the morning till six at night. Then he went home to his wife – unless he had somewhere else to be. That was why all of these people in the studio right now were such a thorn in his side; they forced him to concentrate and stay focused despite his weary mind’s desire to shut off. Most of the people didn’t even need to be there – they were just clerks and office assistants from other floors and departments – but no one wanted to leave while news was still coming through. Everyone wanted to know more about the disease – in case it got *them*. Their fear and panic was almost palpable and Jeremy could sense it hanging over the dimly-lit room like a soiled blanket of poisonous air.

“As we have little fresh news to report from official sources,” Tom told the audience at home. “We will be turning the air over to you – the public. For the next two hours we want to hear from *you*, Great Britain. We want you to tell us what you’ve seen, and what are your thoughts are about the peeling? Do you have it? Does someone you love have it? Is there any advice you can give to help others out there? We want to hear from you now.”

Jeremy didn’t know what they expected to get from the public that they didn’t know already. It was well-documented that the disease started with a tingling sensation in the hands and feet – sometimes the nose and ears – before moving on to a streaming cold and flu-like symptoms. After a day-or-so of runny nostrils and messy sneezing, the virus really started its magic. Jeremy shuddered to think about what *The Peeling* did to a human body then.

“Okay, we have our first caller,” Sarah reported. “We have Keith on line-1. Hello, Keith.”

“Hiya, Sarah. Hiya, Tom. I just want to say that you’ve been a constant comfort during these last few days. I don’t have any family and not being able to leave the house has been really hard on me.”

“It’s been hard on a lot of people,” Tom said. “But right now the only way to stay safe is to lock yourself away.”

“Do you have the peeling, Keith?” Sarah asked in her typical caring manner. Jeremy couldn’t help but notice that the young girl didn’t seem as calm as she usually did.

There was a pause on the other end of the line, followed by a muffled sound that could only have been sobbing. Eventually, Keith came back on the line. “Yes...I have it. I’ve had it three days...since Wednesday.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that, mate,” Tom said. “It’s truly terrible what this virus is doing to people. Absolutely horrifying.” The reporter took a deep breath and suddenly seemed very tired, as though he’d dropped a mask that had been hiding his true face all along. Jeremy sympathised from over by the studio’s door. Tom wasn’t much more than a lad, really, and he had suddenly found himself responsible for consoling an entire nation.

Sarah sat forward on her chair and clasped her hands together on top of the desk. “Keith? If it’s not too hard for you, could you tell our viewers what it’s been like since you got ill? Could you tell us about your symptoms?”

After another short pause, Keith replied that he would. “I got home from work at about six on the night – I’m a mig-welder. Anyway, Man U were playing Chelsea, and I wanted to see them get their arses hammered by the blues, so I got some beers in and plonked myself down in front of the telly. I was happy, you know?”

“We know,” Sarah confirmed.

“Well, I’d been feeling a bit under-the-weather all day and my nose had been running like a tap. I thought it was just a cold. I mean, no one really knew what was going on then – it was all just rumours.” Keith seemed to lose his voice then to a croaking onslaught of tears.

“Just go on when you’re ready, Keith,” Sarah told the man. “We’re here for you.”

“Right, okay... anyway,” Keith gathered himself. “I was sat watching the game – that mug, Rooney, had just put one in the back of the net – and I couldn’t help but scratch at my feet the whole time. Was a bit like pins and needles, but no matter how much I itched or walked around the living room it just wouldn’t go away. Thankfully it got a little better after a couple beers and I managed to ignore it.”

“What happened next?” asked Tom, filling a brief moment of dead air.

“Then I fell asleep on the sofa. Do most evenings if I have a drink. I woke up later in the middle of the night. I knew it was late because the shopping channel had come on, selling their usual junk – some kind of steam cleaner, I think. So I sit there for a few minutes, trying to wake up a bit so I can get up and go to bed, but, as soon as I lean forward to stand up, I feel this sharp stab of pain.”

Jeremy rubbed at his eyes in the doorway. He’d heard enough reports to know where this was heading.

“I look down at my feet,” said Keith, fighting back sobs, “and I can hardly... I can hardly believe what I’m seeing.”

“Tell us, Keith.”

“My feet, they were... oh God... they were like raw steak. They had no skin. I could see all the gristle and bone and blood. They looked like those anatomical dummy things they have in school, you know? Anyway, like a fool I grab down at them, like I needed to make sure my eyes weren’t still half-asleep and seeing nonsense. When I touched my feet it was bloody agony. I almost passed out it was so bad. Worst pain I’d ever felt... but I would give anything to feel that way now – it was heaven compared to the blinding pain that was to come. The skin from my ankles started peeling away next, blistering up and peppering the floor like dandruff. Then it kept going, moving further and further up my legs. Then it... then it...” Keith finally allowed himself to sob openly after minutes of fighting it back. “My dick is gone! It fell onto the carpet like a goddamn sausage.”

Keith began to wail inhumanly and the phone line went dead. Jeremy didn’t know if it was the caller or the studio that had cut the conversation short. Probably the studio; they had a duty not to cause the public any more distress than they were already in.

Sarah smiled awkwardly into the main camera. “We seem to have lost Keith there, but I’m sure we’re all united in our prayers that his condition gets better.”

“Absolutely,” Tom added. “I think we should just move on and take the next call, Sarah.”

“That would be Angela Thomas on line-4.”

“We’re all going to die. God is punishing us for letting the queers and the-”

The line went dead. This time Jeremy was positive it had been the studio's doing. There was nothing like a crisis to bring out the hate-filled vipers from their pits. England liked to act like all the whackos lived abroad, in less civilised countries, but working in a news studio made it quite clear that there were as many nutjobs here as there were anywhere else. Maybe even more.

Jeremy checked his watch. There was only forty minutes left till he could leave, but it still seemed like an eternity. At home, his wife was sick, too – like so many other people – and it felt like a betrayal not to be with her, looking after her. He'd betrayed her for most of their twenty-years of marriage, with various other women and his hidden gambling habit, but failing her now was enough to make his guilt muscle finally take notice. He was a hypocrite, that much was true, but he knew there were times when a man needed to step up and be selfless for the woman he loved; this was one of them. The entire nation lived in hope that The Peeling would soon be dominated by a cure, that man would triumph over nature once again as it had always done. But Jeremy knew better. He knew that the virus wasn't just bird-flu on steroids. This was the end.

Even if the virus was destroyed, the amount of death it was due to cause would be monumental. Millions, maybe even billions if it hit the third world. Society would never be the same again. Perhaps that meant Jeremy could have one last chance to be a decent man again, to be a good husband – even if it was only for the handful of days his wife had left. She could get better, sure, but something in his gut told him not to hold onto that hope.

He had to get home.

The next call came from line-2. A cantankerous old man, named Bob. "It's them bloody Koreans, I'm tellin' ya. I'd blame the Arabs, too, if I could, but they don't have the smarts for this. North Korea has been closed off to the rest of the world for decades. We don't know what they've been up to, do we? But I tell you one thing for nought: they've obviously been plotting the downfall of the western world this whole time. Kim Jong Il arranged for it to happen before he died and, surprise surprise, a virus the likes of which the world has never seen has come out of a country no one knows anything about. Prime Minister Lloyd-Collins knew about it; tried to do something about it, too, before he died."

Sarah butted in while she had chance. "Now, Bob, it's already been established that North Korea has been affected like everyone else. Early reports that they were the instigators of this pandemic turned out to be false. Prime Minister Lloyd-Collins's directive to bomb their country was just the paranoid actions of a dying man. General Harvey Whitehead was right to do what he did by holding emergency cabinet hustings."

"All so he could get in power," Bob asserted.

"Come on," said Sarah. "Do you really believe that? General Whitehead was only made Acting Prime Minister temporarily because his military background is exactly the skillset needed to help manage the nation through this crisis. His decision to ignore Lloyd Collins – God rest his soul – probably averted nuclear war."

"And also let the bloody Koreans get away scot-free, to boot. You bloody watch what happens now. This time next year we'll all be slaves to a bunch of slitty-eyed-"

The line went dead.

Jeremy had heard enough of this. Holding a public phone-in was just morbid and macabre. There would be no hope gained from talking with people at home, for they were the most hopeless and lost of all. The men and woman of the United Kingdom were floundering helplessly in the dark, rotting away slowly in both body and mind. Their sad stories would do nothing but spread more suffering, infecting people's thoughts in the same way the disease infected their flesh.

The whole thing was pointless.

Jeremy had just made the decision to abandon his post when a ruckus erupted in the corner of the studio. A handful of people had begun to scuffle with one another while others backed away fearfully. Angry voices filled the air and bounced off the narrow walls, interrupting the on-going news report.

“We seem to be having a few problems here in the studio,” Sarah told the audience. “I think we should cut to a commercial break briefly, but don’t go anywhere, guys. We’ll be right back.”

Sarah and Tom stood up from their desk and headed away from the violence, whilst Jeremy shot past them and headed for the centre of the squabbling crowd. As he got nearer, he realised that it was not a fight that had broken out but an attack on a single individual. A pair of men and one woman were kicking hatefully at a downed body.

“Everybody, back away NOW!” Jeremy hollered at the group with great force in his voice. While he may not have been a physically imposing man, he had a voice that commanded attention. The group of people immediately stopped what they were doing and stared at him. Their victim remained huddled and whimpering on the floor. Jeremy saw that it was just a girl – blonde and pretty, perhaps as young as twenty.

“She has it!” cried a woman in a power suit and neck scarf. Her face was dripping with anger. “The bitch has it and tried to hide it.”

Jeremy looked down at the girl shaking on the floor and saw no signs of the disease on her. He looked up at the power-suited woman and raised his eyebrow. “What?”

“It’s true,” said a tall Black man next to her. “She’s been sneezing none-stop for the last hour.”

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “Sneezing? A young girl sneezes and you all think you have the right to attack her? A big strong man like you?”

“She deserves it. We could all be infected because of her. I have a family.”

“Then you should be with them, instead of hanging around here and acting like a thug. Now help her up off the floor.”

The man shook his head. “Fuck no. You pick her up. I’m not touching her.”

Jeremy took a step forwards and stared the man hard in the face. “You just did touch her, with your fists, as I recall. Help her up now. I won’t ask you again.”

The taller, larger man just laughed at Jeremy, then shoved out with both arms. Jeremy acted quickly, grabbing one of the man’s thick, bony wrists and pulling him off balance. Then he kicked out and took the man’s legs clean from under him, sending him down to the floor with a *thump*. Jeremy was just about to follow the man down and deliver a knockout punch when Sarah called out to him.

“Jeremy, don’t! I’ll help the girl up and we’ll take her somewhere to lie down.”

Jeremy looked up at the young news anchor and was confused. “Sarah, you have the news to be getting on with.”

“We’re on a break. Tom can handle things for ten minutes.” She glared at the nearby crowd and shook her head. “You people should be ashamed of yourselves.”

Sarah went over to the fallen girl and knelt one side of her. Jeremy knelt the other. Together they gathered the woozy young woman to her feet and walked her away from the baying crowd. There were a whole host of angry mutterings that followed after them, but no one had the guts to act out after what had happened to their ring leader.

Jeremy and Sarah took the girl out into the corridor. “We can take her to my dressing room,” Sarah said.

Jeremy nodded. It was a kind offer and that was why he had always liked Sarah. She was as friendly as anybody else, despite being a national sex symbol. Her ego had every right to be much larger than it was.

They half-carried, half-dragged the girl into the dressing room and set her down on a plush sofa that filled one side of the space. She was weak and upset, but seemed to be coherent.

“Are you okay?” Jeremy asked her.

Her eyes had filled with tears, but she nodded. “I don’t think they would have stopped.”

“Goddamn animals,” Sarah said. “They should be arrested.”

The girl waved her hand. “It’s okay. I’m just going to go home and forget about it. Can I just rest here for a while first?”

“Of course you can, sweetheart. Take as long as you need.”

“Is it true what they said,” Jeremy asked the girl. “Do you have The Peeling?”

“I...don’t know. I have the sniffles, but I’ve been sneezing for a few days now and nothing else has happened.”

“You just have a cold,” said Sarah. “If you’ve been sneezing that long and haven’t come down with other symptoms then you’re fine.”

Jeremy nodded and let out a sigh. Despite millions of people being sick, it was still a relief to know that this one young girl was going to be okay – for now.

The girl laughed pitifully. “I think people forget that The Peeling didn’t make all of the other, regular illnesses go away. Not every sneeze means you have the plague.”

“Exactly,” Sarah said. “Now you just relax here until you feel better. There’s water in the fridge and some cookies. Help yourself.”

“Thank you, Miss Lane. You’re really kind – kinder than I would have expected you to be.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy agreed. “A big celebrity like you, mixing with the common people like us.”

Sarah bopped him on the arm playfully. “Don’t be silly. I’m C-List at best. Anyway, I have a feeling that the world will have little need for celebrities soon.”

The girl frowned. “You shouldn’t think the worst. The world will get through this, one way or another. Not everyone is getting sick.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Sarah said, but didn’t seem to believe it. In fact she seemed close to tears. She took Jeremy by the arm and led him back out into the corridor. It seemed like she wanted to tell him something.

“Is everything alright?” Jeremy asked her, noticing the tears that were brimming at her eyelids.

“No, it’s not alright. Things are definitely not alright, Jeremy. You don’t know the half of it.”

“What do you mean?”

Sarah leant back against the wall of the corridor and for a moment it looked like she might collapse completely. “I have the producers in my ear nonstop, telling me facts, figures, things to say – and what *not* to say. We’re not telling the public anything close to the truth.”

“They know the truth. It’s right there in front of their faces.”

Sarah shook her head. “They’re all locked up inside while police and military patrol the roads. All they see is what’s out their windows.”

Jeremy wasn’t following. “So what *is* the truth?”

“That there’s thirty-million dead, not four. The worldwide estimates are over half a billion. The USA and most of Europe are decimated.”

Jeremy’s stomach swelled up against his ribcage. Vomit rose in his throat. “You’re telling me that half of the UK is infected already, in less than a week?”

“The NHS has estimated that the virus affects one-in-two people. Everyone has a fifty-fifty chance. They’ve also put the chance of death at 100%. Anyone who catches the disease will die. No exceptions.”

“But you haven’t been telling people that. You’ve been reporting the infections, but you haven’t said that all people are dying. You’ve even implied that there’s a good chance of recovery for some people.”

“I don’t make the decisions about what to report, Jeremy. The peeling doesn’t just kill people instantly. They suffer for days first. The death toll has only just begun as the first people to catch it have had it for almost a week now and are only now starting to drop. We didn’t know at first that the virus would kill in all cases, but with the data coming through today, it’s clear that no one is surviving. The Government are trying to make the decision on whether to go public with the information or not.”

“The Government? What right do they have to dictate to the news outlets?”

“They can control information in a national crisis. They always have.”

Jeremy stood wearily in the corridor, shocked and sickened. He had known The Peeling was a plague beyond anything ever seen, but he hadn’t thought it powerful enough to wipe out half

of the world – 50/50. There would be no containing it, no cure – just unimaginable death and suffering that would linger in the consciousness of man for centuries. He looked at Sarah and could not imagine the burden she was forced to carry – to have such information, but unable to share it.

“What are you going to do?” he asked her.

“I’m going to finish up tonight and then go home. I’m finished after tonight.”

“You’re quitting?”

“Not exactly.”

“What then?”

Sarah took in a deep breath and let it out slowly through her pointed nose. She stared at Jeremy for a moment, and then put her left hand to her right sleeve. She rolled up her cuff and exposed her wrist.”

Jeremy shook his head in disgust. “No. You can’t have it!”

The wound on her arm was puckered and wet, the skin gone, exposing the flesh of the muscle beneath. A tangy odour filled the room like spoiled bananas.

“I’ve been hiding a cold the last couple days, but I didn’t know I had it for sure until this morning. Noticed it in the shower. It’s already spread twice as much since then.”

Jeremy rubbed both hands down his face and imagined the skin peeling off beneath his fingernails. He was one of the lucky ones, so far; the right side of the 50/50.

“You’re sure there’re absolutely no survivors?” he asked. “There’s nothing the NHS can do? The World Health Organization?”

Sarah shook her head and actually seemed somewhat resigned to her fate. Maybe she felt luckier to be one of the infected than one of the healthy – least for them the nightmare had an end in sight.

“I’m already dead,” she said. “I don’t know if I’m infectious, but I don’t want to take the risk anymore. I’m going straight home tonight and staying there. It’s where I’d rather be, anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” Jeremy told her and he truly meant it. “I...wish there was something I could do or say.”

Sarah rolled her sleeve back down, covering her wound. “I’m just glad you don’t have it as well. As long as some of us get through this then I guess things aren’t completely doomed.”

“My wife has it. She came down with it three days ago now.”

Sarah put her hand on Jeremy’s shoulder and squeezed. “Then I’m sorry, too. You should go home and take care of her.”

Jeremy glanced at his watch. “My shift isn’t-”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t think anything really matters anymore. This is just the calm before the storm. Things are about to fall to pieces and the only thing we can do is look after the people we love. Go home, Jeremy. Look after your wife.”

Jeremy watched Sarah return to the studio and knew that it would be the last time he ever saw her in person again. He hoped her passing would be peaceful, but that was a luxury The Peeling gave to no one. She would feel pain beyond anything she had previously imagined, and then she’d die – adding to the statistics that she’d been reporting for the last week.

It was time to go home. Sarah had been right about nothing mattering anymore. If those people in the studio wanted to start fights then let them. Jeremy wasn’t about to waste another minute watching over a bunch of unruly strangers turn on each other. The news studio was on the second floor so he had to take the stairs downwards to reach the building’s exit. The reception area was empty, its staff all sick and dying at home. Jeremy knew most of them, but not well enough to grieve them. He headed for the heavy glass doors that led outside to the parking lot.

Outside were several vehicles belonging to people inside. Sarah’s Jeep Cherokee was parked next to Tom’s more audacious Jaguar, and beyond them both was Jeremy’s Ford Focus. He

took out his keys as he headed over and pressed the fob. The car's lights flashed twice and the doors were unlocked. He opened the driver's side and slid behind the wheel.

Turning the ignition, Jeremy started the engine. The needle on the fuel gauge headed towards empty and stopped a little ways off. He laughed. Some things would never change, no matter what happened to the world; cars would always run out of fuel, and fuel would always cost a bomb (especially now that the military had commandeered it all).

The military were everywhere now, as were the police. It was to be expected, Jeremy supposed, but it was still disconcerting to watch olive green, 3-tonne trucks patrolling every main road. With the UK's history of riots, the Government were taking no chances. There was even a sentry posted at the news station's car park, controlling the bright-red automatic barrier instead of the usual civilians that had done so before.

Jeremy pulled the car into gear and drove towards the barrier. The armed soldier there stepped up beside the car as it approached. Jeremy lowered the electric window and leant out with his security ID. It wasn't his usual station ID, but a new state-issued ID that allowed him to leave his home and travel to work. They called it a Vital Services Identity Card – pronounced V-SIC. It was a privilege to have one in many ways, but a burden too. Being outside was a constant danger for many reasons (number one being exposure to the peeling). Still, if Jeremy was going to come down with the sickness, he surely would have had it by now.

"Everything okay in there?" the soldier asked him, motioning to the building with his head.

"There was a bit of trouble earlier. People are getting scared. Might be a good idea to post a man inside."

"No can do," said the soldier. "Orders are to remain outside at all times unless absolutely necessary."

Jeremy understood and nodded. "Can't have people thinking that the military are controlling the press." *Even though they are*, thought Jeremy.

The soldier gave no reaction, his expression implacable. "Drive safely, sir. Go straight home."

Jeremy nodded and moved the car slowly forward as the metal barrier rose in front of him. Once past it, he pulled into third-gear and increased his speed. It was easy to drive fast, because the roads were empty. Travel was restricted to prevent the spread of infection and only certain vehicles were allowed on the road at all. Jeremy's Ford Focus qualified and had a luminous green circle on both the front and back. It told any passing military that he was allowed to use the roads, and for the most part they left him alone. In fact, a convoy of trucks were heading toward him right now and seemed unconcerned by his presence on the highway. The driver of the lead truck nodded to him as they passed and it was only a few moments before he was the only car on the road again, driving along the withered husk of the nation's once-heaving infrastructure. He lived almost forty-miles away from the news station, but with the roads wide open, he would get there in thirty minutes.

He turned on the radio, but quickly switched to CD mode. The last thing he wanted was more news – or uninformed hypotheses masquerading as news. The sound of Blue Oyster Cult's *Don't Fear The Reaper* came on from a mix-disc he'd filled full of rock songs. It seemed pretty apt for the mood he was in and he let it play to its conclusion.

After taking the dual-carriageway most of the way home, Jeremy took a slip road into Stratford. As he crossed over the bridge into the centre of town he could see that the police were patrolling the River Avon in modified barges. Every single day, the police and military presence seemed to increase and it now seemed that Britain's waterways were just as restricted as its roads.

Much of the routes through town were cordoned off and Jeremy was forced to manoeuvre his car along the riverbank, passing in front of the Globe theatre. The historic, thatched-roofed building lay abandoned and mournful, its function to entertain no longer required. Jeremy

suddenly regretted never having been inside before to experience the lively works of Shakespeare. There would probably be a lot of things he'd never experience now.

Something flew out from behind the theatre and stumbled into the road. Jeremy hit the brakes.

Standing in the centre of the narrow side-street was a *peeler* – a victim of the plague. Whether it was a woman or a man was unclear now, but the long matted hair suggested the former. Jeremy gawped in horror as the figure approached with the shambling gait of a zombie. But this thing – this human being – was worse than a zombie. This thing was living agony and conscious terror, and it walked towards Jeremy like a nightmare made flesh. It was the worst case of the infection that Jeremy had yet seen. The woman had not a single inch of skin left intact, her muscle – and even bone – exposed from head to feet. Eyeballs bulged from her glistening skull like gelatinous orbs of pus. They focused on Jeremy.

The woman staggered towards him, her bleeding arms stretched out pleadingly. She made no sound, perhaps incapable of doing so. Behind her was a trail of viscous fluids and spoiled meat. It was a miracle the woman was even still alive, let alone able to walk.

Jeremy put the car into reverse, preparing to flee. He could not help this person, they were already dead. Even if a cure was found, this woman was beyond the point of salvation. "I'm sorry," he said out loud, then lifted up the clutch. The car began rolling back, away from the woman.

She followed after him for a few more steps, seeming to lose more flesh and blood with every movement. So transfixed was Jeremy on the horrible sight that he almost didn't see what was in his rear view mirror. He slammed on the brakes again.

Behind him a military truck blocked the road where he had come from. A single soldier hopped out from the elevated cabin and landed on the cement with his heavy jackboots. The man had a scruffy beard and his sleeves were rolled up past the elbows. The standards of appearance for the British Army had obviously been forgotten in the last week. It was hardly surprising.

The infected woman was still coming closer, still reaching out her arms. The soldier moved in front of Jeremy's car and faced down the woman. He pulled out his sidearm, a mean-looking pistol, and pointed it forward casually. Then he let off a shot. A single bullet did the job, hitting the woman in her cheek and passing through her skull. Gore and grey matter painted the road, adding to the mess that was already there.

Jeremy's breath caught in his throat and he could actually feel his heart beating against his chest. He was not used to the sight of guns and he'd never before seen one used to kill another human being. Numbness washed over him that was probably the beginnings of shock.

The soldier holstered his weapon and marched over to Jeremy's window. Jeremy unwound it and quickly grabbed his ID card from where it lay on the dashboard. His hands were shaking.

"Thank you, sir. Everything seems to be in order. Are you on your way home?"

Jeremy stared out at the dead woman on the road and found himself unable to blink.

"Sir?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. I'm going straight home now."

The soldier seemed to notice Jeremy's concern and knelt down to match his eyelevel. "It was for the best, sir. Like putting down a sick dog."

"A...a dog?"

"It may seem cruel, but when the infection gets that bad, it's kinder to just end it. A lot of them have started to lose their minds now – who can blame them – but they're becoming dangerous. If you see any more of them I advise you keep on going as fast as you can."

Jeremy swallowed. The soldier spoke about the infected like they were *things*, not people, but was that really so surprising? Anyone with the disease was insane with agony and doomed to die anyway – had any humanity at all still existed inside the woman now dead in the road?

"You go on now, sir? Get moving."

Jeremy pulled the car back into first and headed forward, steering around the mutilated corpse of the woman. The soldier remained standing in the road and watched him until he was out of sight.

Stratford had become a military outpost like many other small towns with multiple open areas. Further downriver the waters teemed with gunboats and the roads led to checkpoints in all directions. Cars and houses lay abandoned, while large fires fumed in many open areas. Jeremy had a morbid realisation that the soldiers were building pyres and stacking them with the bodies of infected. The movement amongst the flames made it clear that not all the bodies were dead.

What the hell was happening? In only the nine or ten hours since Jeremy had travelled *to* work, things had deteriorated to frightening levels. A police state was in effect and sick people were being quarantined or burned alive. Even the healthy were being caged inside their homes without compassion. Jeremy turned a corner, heading away from town, and saw a squad of Royal Fusiliers boarding up a house while frightened people tried to escape through the windows. A small boy actually managed to get free of the house and made a run for it down the road. A moment later the boy was dead, a rifle round between his shoulder blades. Jeremy couldn't even tell if he'd been infected.

Jeremy thought about his wife. Would he return home to find that she had been rounded up, too? Rotted away and thrown on a fire? The thought made his foot stamp down harder on the accelerator. Once he was home he would stay there until the very end, until it was all over. What he would do then, he did not know. His life would go on whilst his wife's would not. In many ways he envied her. The world going on around him was not one he wanted to be a part of anymore. In less than twenty-four hours things had gotten so bad that he dreaded to think about what just one more day would bring.

The military presence reduced as he left the town centre and headed into the residential areas. By the time he reached his house, it had been almost ten minutes without seeing another soul other than stray dogs and feral cats. His home was dark, the windows shaded by closed curtains. The light had started to hurt his wife's eyes and the lamps had all been left off since the night before. Her condition had been in the early stages then. He worried what she would be like now. The virus worked fast, a destructive force akin to an invading army. The body's skin and muscle cells got obliterated, one by one, helplessly succumbing to infection until they were nothing more than soup.

Jeremy parked the car up on the curb and turned off the engine. He stepped out and pressed the key fob, locking the car. Then he started up his path and headed for his front door. Before he got there, though, it opened from the other side.

"Hey, honey. I've been waiting for you to get home. It's been lonely without you."

Kara hopped off of the doorstep and took Jeremy by surprise, planting a kiss on his mouth and slipping in her tongue in.

He pushed her away.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Everything," he said, stepping through into the house while she followed. "Have you looked outside the window lately?"

"No. I don't want to know what's going on out there. It's too frightening. Is it bad?"

Jeremy stared at her. "You have no idea."

Kara approached him and put her arms around his shoulder and planted another kiss on his cheek. "Well, as long as we still have each other."

Jeremy pushed her away again and sighed. “Kara, what are you doing here? Where’s your sister?”

“In bed. She wasn’t feeling good, so she went to sleep.”

Jeremy thought about his wife, alone upstairs and suffering. He felt outraged at Kara. Did she not even care? It was her sister, for Christ’s sake. He took a deep breath and fought to remain calm. “How is she?” he asked. “Is it bad?”

“What do you think? Hasn’t that news station of yours found a cure yet?”

Jeremy huffed. “They’re journalists, not doctors. And to answer your question, *no*. There is no cure. It’s killing everyone who has it.”

Kara slumped down on the sofa and finally seemed to get a little more serious as concern etched itself across her face. Perhaps she did care about her sister after all. “There’s really nothing anyone can do?” she asked.

Jeremy shook his head. “That’s why we need to look after your sister – my wife. Carol needs our love and support. We can’t fool around behind her back anymore. I’m done behaving like that.”

Kara did not reply. She stared at the blank television screen as though the glass were a portal to something more interesting. Jeremy didn’t care to console her. He’d had enough of his wife’s younger sister. Once Carol passed on, she could leave, go back to her own place, and they should never speak again. If he was honest with himself, his wife was the only woman he had ever truly loved and, once she was gone, he was giving up women for good.

Jeremy didn’t want to waste any more time. The value of each second had increased exponentially since The Peeling found its first victim – whoever that unlucky person may have been. He placed his foot on the first step of the staircase and looked up. The second floor seemed like a mile away; another world, filled with horrors and regret. He began to climb, dreading what he would find upstairs. What pain would Carol be in? Would she cry out when he entered, or would she remain silent like that woman gunned down in the road? He was about to find out.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Jeremy headed across the landing to the master bedroom. He placed an ear against the door and listened.

Silence.

Without even realising it, his hand had gone to the handle and begun to turn it. A moment later, his legs carried him through into the bedroom.

Carol was asleep in their double bed, the duvet kicked down to the bottom of the mattress. She was hot, the heat of her fever filling the room with a sweaty aroma. Her body was pale and smooth, but still healthy. Her face however...

Jesus Christ!

...her face was little more than a sinewy skull. Her jaw and teeth were utterly exposed, making it seem like she was grinning constantly. Her cheeks had worn away, leaving her eyeballs sunken beneath the thin, translucent scraps of her eyelids. Beautiful brunette hair lay disembodied on the pillow, no longer attached to her head. She looked like a corpse.

Yet she breathed.

“Sweetheart?” Jeremy approached cautiously, not wanting to startle her. If she was in pain, then it was probably cruel of him to bother her at all. But he needed to talk to her. It was time to confess his sins.

Slowly, the tissue-like skin of her eyelids rose. Beneath them, his wife’s eyes were as they’d always been: green and sparkly – full of life.

“J-Jerry?”

“Yes, sweetheart. It’s me. How are you feeling?”

Despite the mess that was her face, Carol managed a weak laugh. “My face felt like it was on fire earlier, but now I can’t feel anything at all. It’s...nice.”

Jeremy placed himself down on the bed. The sheets were damp and bloody. He noticed that a patch of skin, the size of a hockey puck, had begun to rot away on her side. The smell was sweet, intoxicating.

“I’m going to be here for you now, my love. I’m not going back to work.”

“I...I thought you’d been ordered to?”

“Screw their orders. Besides, I don’t think they’ll be any orders left this time tomorrow.”

Carol’s eyelids fluttered and it seemed like she was going back to sleep. Jeremy was prepared to let her, but was surprised when her eyes opened wide again and seemed even more awake.

“My...sister was here.”

“Kara? She’s downstairs. Did you want to speak with her?”

She shook her head gently. “No. No. Just tell her...I forgive the both of you. I don’t want to die angry at anybody.”

Jeremy throat clammed up and for a second he thought he might choke. She knew all along, about him and her sister – and perhaps all the other women, too. Would she know that he had been planning to tell her everything? Had the absolution of confession been taken away from him? Would it have even counted anyway? To tell somebody something on their death bed was not brave. In fact, it was downright cowardly.

“I’m sorry. How did you know?”

“She’s not exactly subtle, my sister – always here, sniffing around you. Doesn’t matter now, though. You can be together.”

“That’s not what I want. I don’t care about her, or anyone else. The only woman I love is you.”

She patted him on the hand. Her skin was soft, mushy. “I know. I know none of those women were anything other than sex to you. You disgusted me for years, but eventually I accepted that it was just your nature to be so...weak. I...I had my own fun in the end.”

Jeremy stood up from the bed. “What?”

Carol smiled. “I’ve probably fucked around...more than you, the last few years.”

“You goddamn whore?”

“I’m not ashamed of it, Jerry. It was fun. You should know.”

Jeremy backed away, towards the door. He could barely believe that the grinning skull on the bed was the woman he’d been married to for twenty years. “W-why are you telling me all this?”

“Because I don’t want to die with secrets, and...and despite everything I always loved you. None of it really matters anymore, other than the fact we loved each other in our own way.”

Jeremy lowered his shoulders and took a few breaths while he digested what he’d just heard. His stomach ached and he felt sick – but Carol was right. None of it mattered. He loved this woman and he wanted to be with her. He sat back down on the bed.

“Can I do anything to help?”

Carol took a long, laboured breath and a sliver of skin fell from her neck, sliding away onto the bed sheets. “I don’t want to die...”

“I know that, sweetheart. I know.”

“...later. I want to die...now.”

Jeremy looked at his wife, deep into her eyes – the only part of her that was still the same as when he’d married her. “What?”

“I don’t want to lie here rotting. I don’t want to feel the pain when my body begins to...bleed. I’ve said all I needed to say. I’m ready.”

“Honey, no. You can’t ask me to-”

“You owe me.” She said the words forcefully, suddenly full of vitality – but it only lasted a minute before she seemed to deflate again.

She was right, Jeremy told himself. He owed her many things. Their whole marriage had been marred by him abusing her integrity and violating her trust. What she was asking for now

was dignity – a simple thing. The dignity of refusing to let the virus defile her body in the same ways that he had defiled their marriage for so many years. But he couldn't kill her. No way.

"I'm sorry. I won't."

Carol stared at him. Jeremy couldn't tell if she was angry or not. The facial muscles that would usually form expressions were all gone from her face. "I understand," she whispered. "Leave me alone."

"What do you mean?"

"If I have to go through this, then I want to do it alone. I don't want anyone watching while I die. If you won't help me, then at least give me some privacy."

The last thing Jeremy wanted was to leave his wife alone. To die with no one around would be a lonely, helpless demise. But it was Carol's choice, not his. He stood up from the bed.

"I'll check on you later."

"No, don't. There's nothing you can do for me."

Jeremy's heart felt like a weight in his chest and it was difficult to drag his body away from his wife's bedside. They may never talk again, he realised. This was probably goodbye.

He left the room without another word. Anything he'd of said wouldn't have been enough.

Downstairs, Kara was still sitting on the living room sofa. She had switched on the television and was watching it intently. She showed no interest in his presence and did not ask about the state of her sister.

"Carol is in a bad way, in case you were wondering."

Kara turned her head away from the television and looked at him. "Should I go see her?"

Jeremy sat down on the sofa beside her, making sure to stay as far away on the cushions as possible. "She wants to be left alone."

"Okay." Kara went back to watching the television.

"Do you even care?"

"Of course I do. She's my sister. But there's nothing I can do. I don't want to watch while she rots away."

"Then why are you even here?"

She stared at him again and this time seemed very sad. "To be with you. I thought you cared about me."

Jeremy sighed. "I...I do. You know I do. But Carol is dying and it's not right anymore. I'm sick of hating myself."

"Exactly. She's dying. We can be together."

"I'm sorry, but I don't want that. The world is a mess. The last thing I can concentrate on right now is a relationship."

Kara stood up from the sofa and shook her head. She'd suddenly become very emotional. "You really want to be alone while the world dies around you? We need to look after each other. You need to look after me."

"What do you mean? You can look after yourself?"

Kara wouldn't look at him then. She averted her eyes and stared at the wall.

"Kara? What is it?"

"What do you care? You've made your feelings clear enough."

Jeremy sighed and lifted himself off the coach. He went over and put his palm against her back. "Tell me what's really wrong. You're not this upset because of me."

She broke down in tears and buried her head against his chest. It was then that he smelt the same sweet odour that had come from Carol's rotting flesh. He eased her away so that he could look at her. "You have it, don't you?"

It looked as though Kara wanted to speak but was unable to. Instead she nodded solemnly and reached a hand up to her long, brown hair. She scooped it away from her neck and exposed the skin. Beneath her right ear was a blistering patch of skin.

Jeremy bit at his bottom lip and almost drew blood. "How long?"

“I noticed this morning. I came straight here to wait for you. I was hoping you’d know how to help me, that you would have gotten answers at the news station.”

“How did you even get here? The military have the roads blocked up.”

“I walked. I kept away from the main roads.”

“You walked four miles through that hell out there?”

“It was better than being alone. I thought if I came here, you’d look after me.”

“I will,” Jeremy said. “Of course I will.”

“You’ve changed your tune.”

Jeremy huffed. It suddenly felt like he hadn’t slept in weeks. “I care about you, Kara. You’re Carol’s sister.”

“*Carol’s sister.* Is that all I am to you now? A fucking obligation?”

Jeremy sat back down on the sofa and rubbed at his face. “Kara, if you want me to look after you, I will, but that’s all. I’m not going to argue with you, not now.”

“You mean *now that I’m dying?*”

Jeremy wasn’t going to lie, so he nodded.

“There’s really not going to be a cure?” she asked.

“No. No, I don’t think so. The Government haven’t even worked out how it spreads, let alone how to beat it.”

Kara slumped down on the sofa beside him and seemed defeated, all the energy gone from her voice. “How did I get it? When you came over last week and warned me that people were getting sick, I stayed away, kept indoors. I never went near anyone infected, but I still got it. How does that make sense?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t. Truth is nobody really knows anything about the peeling – where it came from or how it works.”

“But it’s bad, isn’t it? I mean, really really bad.”

Jeremy nodded. “At the rate it’s going, half the world is going to die. Half the people get it while the other half don’t.”

“Guess you’re one of the lucky ones.”

Jeremy laughed, but didn’t find anything funny. “Doesn’t feel that way.”

Kara pulled her legs onto the sofa and laid herself across his lap. He let her. Together they watched the television in silence, trying to clear their minds of horror. Ironically, *Never Stop News* was on. Sarah and Tom were continuing to give the news with as much pluck as they could muster, but Jeremy could tell the toll was becoming too much for them. Sarah’s face was pasty, and wiry strands of hair clumped against her damp forehead.

“They look as lost as everyone else is,” Kara said.

Jeremy stroked her hair and was shocked by the heat coming off her head. “That’s because they are. They’re as frightened and as lost as we are. They’re just trying to help by making us think that things are still normal. They’re brave. The news makes people feel like there’s still someone in charge.”

“And is there?”

“I guess so. The military are everywhere, ever since that General took over after Lloyd Collins.”

“Jerry?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m scared.”

“I know you are.”

Six hours later and *The Peeling* had taken all of the skin from Kara’s neck; so much that her windpipe was now exposed. Jeremy wasn’t repulsed, though. The sight of rotting flesh had become commonplace.

On the television, Sarah and Tom were still reporting about the disease. They would both have usually left the station by now and Jeremy was confused to see them still on air. By the weary looks on their faces, Jeremy had a grim feeling that, behind the cameras, the military had become the directors. Their promises of staying out of the station had obviously been overridden as things continued to deteriorate.

“While we are yet to receive full confirmation, rumours have begun to circulate that researchers at the National Institute for Medical Research in London have made a breakthrough concerning the transmission method of the virus. We are persistent in our attempts to get more information on this matter, so please bear with us.”

“What difference doessss it make?” Kara’s voice had taken on a serpentine hiss as her throat rotted away. “Unlessssss it’sssss a cure, it’sssss no good to anyone.”

Jeremy sucked in a breath and listened to it whistle between his teeth. His stomach felt empty and nauseous. While Kara was correct in her pessimism, it was still welcome news to hear that someone had possibly discovered something about the nature of The Peeling. Knowledge made the virus seem more natural and less like the flesh-consuming monster that it currently was. If people knew how it was passed on then the fight to contain it could finally begin. Not that Jeremy would have anything left in his life to fight *for*, even if mankind succeeded in destroying the beast.

“How do you feel?” he asked Kara.

She tried to laugh, but her tattered vocal chords seemed to lack the ability now. “I feel like my head’s going to fall off into my lap any minute. My neck feels numb, like it’s not even there anymore.”

Jeremy was about to tell her he was sorry, but then decided it would be a pointless gesture. Apologies would provide her no solace. Besides, she seemed to be getting more angry than brooding.

“This is probably what I deserve, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve been fucking my sister’s husband – among my many other sins – and this is probably my punishment.”

Jeremy shook his head. “She forgives us.”

“What? She knows?”

“Yes. She told me earlier. She loves us both and forgives us.”

Kara hitched forward and tears were instant in their arrival. As they fell down her face, they gathered flakes of skin and a film of blood from her cheeks; so fragile was her flesh. “I’ll go to hell for what I’ve done. Carol can forgive – she’s a better person than us – but I doubt God will be so compassionate.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Kara. We all do things we regret. Carol isn’t holding it against you, so you shouldn’t hold it against yourself, either.”

“Fuck you!” The outburst was sudden and vicious. “You’re the one that should be melting away, not my sister. You’re the one that’s spent your whole marriage fucking around. What did you ever do for her? Nothing! Yet she’s the one dying while you’re perfectly fine.”

Jeremy sighed and tried to keep his focus on the television. He had a feeling that she would strike at him if he made eye contact. “If I could take her place, I would.”

“You’re a liar. They have a cure at that news station. Look at them. They’re fine, just like you.”

Jeremy looked at Sarah’s tired face on the screen and shook his head. “Actually, one of the reporters has the disease. She showed me earlier.”

“Bullshit!” Kara sprang up from the couch. You have a cure, but you won’t share it. With me and Carol out of the way, you can carry on screwing around. Probably already got a new fancy-woman.”

Jeremy stood up and backed away. He could sense violence coming off of Kara and he wasn't interested in stoking that particular fire. Nonetheless, she came at him, withered fingers outstretched like talons.

He stepped aside and shoved out, sending her sprawling back onto the couch. As she fell, her legs shot forward and upended the coffee table. Immediately her ankle began to bleed. She clutched at it and sobbed.

"I'm fucking melting!" she screamed. "What did I do to deserve this? I'm not a bad woman, not really. I don't deserve this. I don't. I don't."

Jeremy left while she was distracted. A madness seemed to have overtaken her and his presence seemed to make it worse. He felt endangered; an enemy inside his own home. He wanted to see Carol. He wanted to be with his wife.

At the top of the stairs, the noise of the television faded away and Jeremy was again met with the eerie silence of the landing. There was every chance that Carol was already dead; part of him wanted that peace for her. If she had passed on then he would just sit with her awhile and hope that, somewhere, someplace, she was still with him. But when he opened the door, he saw that the mercy of death had not yet visited his wife.

Carol lay on the bed, looking more like a puddle than a human being. Her skin clung to her now only in patches and in many places her bones were showing clearly. But her eyes...her eyes were still flawless. Beautiful.

He sat down on the bed and went to touch her, but then realised there was nowhere he could do so without causing her pain. "I love you, Carol. I wanted to tell you that one more time."

It was an obvious effort for Carol to form words, but she seemed eager to do so all the same. "I...love...you...too."

"I wish I had more time with you. I wish there was time to make it all okay. I'm going to miss you every minute till the time I join you. I just hope that when I get there, you'll be waiting for me. If not, though...I'd understand."

Carol's eyes flickered as if fighting away sleep – or death. Jeremy wasn't sure if she'd heard the words he'd just spoken, but he hoped so. Eventually she came back to him and managed to speak again. "Please, Jerry...please..."

"What, sweetheart? What do you want?" But she didn't need to answer. He knew what she was asking for. *Release*. He nodded, felt tears well up behind his eyes. "Okay," he finally said.

Jeremy leant forward and kissed his wife's forehead. His lips came away moist and sticky, but he did not care. Trying to be as gentle as possible, he pulled loose one of the pillows beneath his wife's head. Her eyes stared at him intently and he knew that if she could, she would have been smiling. By doing what he was about to do, Jeremy could show his wife the kindness in death that he could not give her in life.

Jeremy put the pillow to his wife's face and pressed down. It took only a minute for her to die.

Jeremy sat with Carol for almost a full hour before he left her. He knew that once he exited the bedroom, she would truly be gone forever. Part of him had also been curious to see whether her body would continue to rot away after death. It had not. If he'd obeyed her requests earlier then her body would have been more intact as it was lying here now. It was just one more regret to add to his list.

Downstairs, Kara had gone missing. The television was still switched on and, if he wasn't mistaken, the volume had been increased. Sarah and Tom were still reporting and there was an urgency about them now that he'd never seen before. He looked around the living room, but found only shadows.

“It has now been categorically proven,” Sarah said on the television, “that the virus is passed on through carriers. While only fifty-percent of those exposed to the infection become symptomatic, it has been discovered that the other fifty-percent are not immune as originally thought. The seemingly unaffected are in fact passing on the virus by becoming highly-infectious carriers. While half of the population is dying, it is the other half that is infecting them. It is for this reason that a nationwide quarantine is now in effect. Healthy or infected – all will be restrained if found outside their homes at any times. Lethal force will be used if necessary. Through isolation, it is hoped that the infection will reach a saturation point and that none-symptomatic sufferers will remain healthy. There is still hope for us, Great Britain, but we must stay calm, and we must stay indoors. Never Stop News is now the official channel for the British Government alongside the BBC, so please leave your television on at all times for further updates. We will be interspersing our regular newsfeed with episodes of *Friends*, *The Simpsons*, and *Only Fools and Horses*, so sit back and enjoy as that’s coming up next.”

“You did this.”

Jeremy turned his head away from the television and saw Kara moving out from one of the room’s shadowy corners. Her face had peeled away from her skull and her snarling mouth made her look like a vengeful demon.

“I did what?” Jeremy asked her.

“You infected Carol and you infected me. You are the one that should be dead.”

“You don’t know that I have it. You don’t know anything.”

“Yes, I do. I haven’t been around anyone since the whole thing started – no one, except for you.”

Jeremy thought about earlier in the week when he’d popped round to see Kara at her home – popped round for his weekly shag. “I’m sorry,” he said, worrying that she could be right; that he could be responsible for his wife’s death, and others.

“Quiet!” Kara stepped further out of the shadows. She was holding a large chef’s knife from the kitchen. “I don’t want to hear you anymore.”

Jeremy nodded. “Okay.” He made no move to get away, unsure whether Kara even had it in her to do him harm. In normal circumstances, he thought not, but these were not normal circumstances and she was most certainly not her usual self.

“You’ve been fucking us both for a long time, but now it seems like you really got the job done. You’re a murderer, Jerry. If Carol and I had never let you near us then we would be okay, we would be healthy.”

“Half the world has the disease, Kara. You would have gotten it anyway, one way or another. Carol is my wife; you really think I would infect her purposefully?”

Kara came closer with the knife. Still he did not move. She growled at him, blood falling from her lips and covering the exposed bone of her lower jaw. “Men like you have been a sickness on women since time began. Women have always suffered because of misogynistic perverts like you.”

“You’re talking nonsense. The Peeling is killing as many men as women. It’s just luck of the draw who gets infected.”

Kara came at him with the knife. “Lies! You did this. You killed us!”

Jeremy was about to dodge the knife attack, but at the last second he decided to remain in place. What was the point?

He thought about seeing Carol again as the knife entered his chest and forced him backwards as though he’d been punched. He fell backwards onto the sofa, blade jutting out from between his ribs, and ended up facing the television. Delboy and Rodney were flogging Sikh crash-helmets in a world that knew not of such horrors as The Peeling. Jeremy thought it was a nice way to go and, by the time he bled out, he almost managed to kid himself that the world still had a chance.

Almost.

THE PEELING OF SAMUEL LLOYD COLLINS

Thursday

My big toenail fell off today. That leaves three on my right foot and two on my left. It stung at first, but now my toe just feels...hot. I'm keeping the nail in an ashtray in the kitchen.

My name is Samuel Lloyd Collins and I suppose, in a way, this is my last will and testament, except I don't have anybody to leave anything to, so I guess this is really just my last testament. Or maybe writing this is merely the closest thing I have to company.

I don't have to be alone. I could go next door and take part in one of their endless political debates that echo through the walls and keep me awake at night. Sometimes I think about yelling at them to 'keep it down', but what would be the use? Politics are high on everybody's agenda right now. One would expect them to be.

Everyone has their own theory on how 'The Peeling' started, but I personally think it was the Arabs. It's always the Arabs, isn't it? Saddam is dead and the Yanks finally got Osama. So what choice did they have left but to go for broke? Everyone assumed their master plan would culminate with a nuclear attack on a major city, but in many ways this virus is worse. We may have snuffed out the leaders, but their passion for killing, it seems, will never die. You cut the head off a chicken and it runs around like a maniac, spraying anyone nearby with blood. That's what 'The Peeling' is: arterial chicken blood spraying us all with its infectious filth. I guess the Arabs won in the end...

I came down with the sickness on Tuesday. Two days ago. I've already lost a bit of hair and some skin off my testicles, and you already know about the toenails. Funnily enough, my fingernails are currently unaffected, probably the only reason I'm able to write this. I thought about typing this on the computer, but somehow it felt like a man's final words should be in ink, don't you think? Maybe when it comes right down to it, paper is more permanent than a collection of cheap circuits.

My future is laid out for me now. I'll be dead within a week, give or take a day. The beauty of the Peeling is that it leaves no room for hypothesising. No room for hope. It kills every time, no exceptions. In a way that certainty has allowed me to come to terms and accept my fate. This time next week I will be a bubbling oil-slick of rancid, dissolving flesh. Somehow I'm fine with that.

But I need to know who is responsible for the pain I'm in. I already told you I think it's the Arabs, but unless I know for sure...Well let's just say that knowing for definite would bring a certain degree of closure to the situation. Of course, the honourable men and women of the Government's various agencies are urgently investigating the origin of this disease and those responsible, but as each second passes, Great Britain withers and dies beneath its second great plague. I just hope to be alive when they determine the guilty party.

Already know it was the Arabs, just need to know for sure...

Friday

I woke up this morning stuck to my pillow. Not because I had been drooling in my sleep, but because the skin below my left eye had rotted and fused with the cotton. I had to rip the pillow away and half of my face with it. The resulting meld of infected flesh and sickly white cotton reminded me of a surrealist painting, beautiful in a way. Maybe I'll have it framed before I die.

What an odd thing to muse upon! It would not surprise me if I have gone quite mad. I'm already starting to feel delightfully delirious (or maybe that's just the throbbing and burning where my face used to be).

Such good bone structure I was blessed with, but did not know of, until I was today faced with it in the mirror. The bone of my cheek now shows right through, covered only by several, thin slivers of sinewy gristle. I look like the Phantom of the Opera (albeit a grizzlier version). I wonder what part of me will dissolve tomorrow. That's the fun part of this sickness, I suppose, not knowing which chunk of skin will decompose next. It isn't like typical flesh-eating diseases; they have a point of infection and usually spread systematically. But The Peeling strikes the body at random, necrotising a man's feet before popping up a day later and doing the same to his ears. I've seen hundreds of case photographs and no two victims follow the same path of infection. The only non-variable: it's always fatal. No one understands this disease at all...

...and no one can stop it.

I think it's starting on my chest...

Saturday

I can see my ribs. Two of them, glistening at me like curved piano keys. It's amusing, in some morbidly fascinating way, to see one's inner workings. The pain is starting to subside, and thankfully only throbbed for a few hours in the morning, but the cloying odour inside the house is repugnant. Ideally, I would open the curtains and windows, but I don't wish to be disturbed by the outside world. I would only become resentful of those who still have all of their skin. Besides, it was being around other people that infected me in the first place, sealing my fate, and I hate them for that! But retaining my humanity is all I have left to focus on for now and resentment will only make that task harder. I have decisions ahead of me that should not be made in temper...

I have been corresponding all day with a trusted associate that is supplying me with up-to-date information on the current pandemic, along with the progress of the on-going Government investigations into the crisis. So far it seems clear that this was a premeditated and focused attack on the western world. The Peeling has, so far, hit 90% of Europe and is seeping its way into the East. USA and South America are also stricken, worse than we are in fact, but it is unsurprising to me that, as yet, the Arab world is unaffected. I am eager to see just how far into the East the disease spreads before ceasing its journey of human pestilence. I'm guessing that it will be shortly after it runs out of Christian nations to infect.

Sunday

I lost a hand today. Thank God it was my left and that I can still continue writing this. I now have a withered stump that drips periodically with a viscous yellow discharge. It looks similar to the contents of a Cadbury Cream Egg but smells worse than anything I could ever hope to describe to you now. I suppose it's the aroma of lingering death.

Next door are still at it. Talking incessantly at all hours. I need peace and quiet right now. Time to think. I already informed my colleagues that I would be working from home for the next week and am not to be disturbed under any circumstances. They were not happy, but I'm the Boss, so they'll have to cope. They don't know that I have the sickness, of course, probably too wrapped up in their own fear of it to even consider the possibility. People only worry about themselves nowadays.

My associate emailed today and told me that the infection was definitely engineered – *Wow. What a revelation!* – and that it was unleashed upon the world at strategic locations: Major cities, along coastal areas so that the disease would work inwards from all directions, eating around the edges of England as though it were a Jaffa Cake with a chewy orange centre...

God what I would do for a box of Jaffa Cakes right now! The stump of my wrist is itching just thinking about it. Perhaps it's excitement?

Anyway, I have sent a reply email asking what is currently known about WHO engineered the disease. That is what I have to know.

Then maybe I can do something about it.

Monday

I have lost an eye today. It is indeed unfortunate, but in a way I am blessed to have persevered this long anyway. Many do not, and at least I have the other eye. My left one just dribbled out of its socket today like an under-boiled egg with its top sliced off: all foamy white and custardy-yellow. I almost laughed when I looked in the mirror. I look like a zombie-pirate.

At least it doesn't hurt. Not physically.

I suspect I have little time left now and I am anxiously awaiting news from my associate. I can feel the illness seizing my internal organs in its corrosive grip and it's only a matter of time before they start to decay completely. I have already taken to soiling myself involuntarily, so I assume that my intestines are already rotten. I would take a shower to get clean, but the pressure would only shred what remaining skin I have left. For now I will sit and wait for my associate to provide me the information I so desire...

Who is responsible? Who turned me, and most of the free world, into a quivering mass of mutilated flesh?

I wonder if there's any Jaffa Cakes in the pantry.

Tuesday

It has now been one week since I first noticed the skin under my armpit was peeling away in pus-filled chunks. One week since I realised I was a dead man walking.

Dead man peeling! Ha!

But I am still alive, devoid of nearly all my skin, granted, but alive nonetheless. Moist splatters of pungent flesh litter my home now, whilst foul scabs fall from my body constantly. The only merciful thing about this disease is that I feel nothing.

Nothing except for the soft scraping of insanity inside my fleshless skull.

Wednesday

Today will be my last. I can feel it. My lower legs snapped today when I got out of bed, too rotten and malformed to bear what little weight my frail body has left. It is of no importance however, as I awakened to something wonderful: *You have mail.*

I am about to drag my withered limbs over to the computer right now, to see what my trusted associate has for me. I will record the email, and my response, for you right here, as I feel it will be important.

Dear Prime Minister.

I sincerely hope that you are keeping well in this time of dire need. Great Britain is within the talons of great turmoil and despair, but I trust that your inspired leadership will see us through as ever. This shall not be the end of our endless empire and the good people of this nation will go on stronger than before. That is our way and always will be. May Angels sit on our shoulders as God guides our souls through the times ahead. Long live Great Britain.

But without further ado, Prime Minister, I will provide you with the Intel you require. It was discovered at 0300 GMT today that the disease is not contained to western nations as first assumed. In fact we now have reliable information that the infection, commonly referred to as 'The Peeling', was contracted in Turkey and has quickly spread as far east as Japan. I'm sure you can appreciate, that with the USA also affected, it effectively means the disease has travelled the entire circumference of the world... Yet there is one country that has shown no effects of the illness, despite being surrounded by it on all borders. We have tried to contact that nation's Government but

they have declined all opportunities to reply. It now seems a reasonable assumption that the country in question is responsible for this worldwide plague.

That country is North Korea.

As always, I await your orders on how to proceed, but I implore you to act wisely.

Yours,

General Harvey Whitehead

Dear Harvey

I was certain it was the Arabs! Guess we can all be wrong sometimes...

Regardless, since my dear Martha and the children were taken from me by this wretched sickness, I have had no time to mourn them, so I regret to inform you that this will be my final act as leader of this nation. I hope that you and your family are well, and remain so. I wish the same for Great Britain.

Without continued procrastination, my orders, in regards to the Godless entity of North Korea, are as follows:

Send the Nukes.

Send them all...

They will not take this world as their own.

Yours regretfully,

Prime Minister Samuel Lloyd Collins

PLEA FROM THE AUTHOR

Hey, Reader. So you got to the end of my book. I hope that means that you enjoyed it. Whether or not you did, I would just like to thank you for giving me your valuable time to try and entertain you. I am truly blessed to have such a fulfilling job, but I only have that job because of people like you; people kind enough to give my books a chance and spend their hard-earned money buying them. For that I am eternally grateful, my friend.

If you would like to find out more about my other books then please visit my website for full details. You can find it at: www.jainrobwright.com. Also feel free to contact me on Facebook, Twitter, or email (all details on the website) as I would love to hear from you.

If you enjoyed this book and would like to help, then you could think about leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere else that readers visit. The most important part of how well a book sells is how many positive reviews it has, so if you leave me one then you are directly helping me to continue on this journey as a fulltime writer. Thank you in advance to anyone who does.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Published author, Iain Rob Wright, was born in 1984 and lives in Redditch, a small town in the West Midlands, UK, with his loopy cocker spaniel, Oscar, his fat old cat, Jess, his many tropical fish, and the love of his life, Sally. Writing is the passion that fills his life during the small periods of time when he isn't cleaning up after his pets.

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