

Last of Them

AARON HAVILAND

The sound of the man's breathing forced her awake. 'God, you even look like her,' he whispered, leaning over her bed. His grey hair was almost blue in the dull moonlight that shone through the open window. He wore a faded brown suit, which was torn in several places and smelled faintly of damp.

It took several seconds before Clementine had realised he was there. Then, eyes widening, she clawed at her bedsheet and pulled it close around her body, suddenly aware of how naked she was.

'Who—'

The man placed a finger over his lips and shook his head. 'Let's not wake the house. I'd hate to make a scene. What's your name?'

She couldn't concentrate. She shuddered to think how long he had been standing there. The man pulled up a chair and sat beside her. His wandering eyes crawled like spiders along her skin.

'Clementine,' she said at last. 'What's yours?'

'George.'

Clementine noticed two men standing guard by the doorway, both of them over six-foot tall and built like stallions. They looked as though they had been in a fight, their suits ripped and patchy with mud.

'Don't mind them,' George said.

'But who are they? Who are *you*? I don't understand. You shouldn't be here.' The words poured from her mouth. 'Please, before my father hears.'

George put a finger to his lips once more. 'Everything will be explained to you in time, I promise. But not here.'

Clementine sunk back into her sheets. This was all a dream, she told herself. Just another nightmare – the same one she'd had many times before. The others didn't know where she was. How could they? They didn't even know she *existed*.

'How would you like to come with us?' George said.

'To where?'

He smiled. 'London. That's where they all are – not out here in the middle of nowhere. You ought to be with people like you. There will be plenty of boys to take your fancy. My grandson is about your age. He turns seventeen this month.' He paused, as if in a trance, and reached out to touch her auburn hair.

'Remarkable,' he muttered to himself.

As Clementine dodged out of the way, George seemed to snap back.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, I think you'll really like it there.'

London. How could she possibly go there after everything that had happened? She remembered very little – fleeting glimpses of yellow and orange against a cloudless night sky – but her father had told her the stories. Of the fires that raged through the city and the plague that had ripped through its heart. The rioting, the panic.

The *bodies*. In their thousands, her father had said. With too many to bury, they were left where they fell. They had only just made it out last time. 'I can't go back there. It's too dangerous.'

'You lost someone, didn't you?' the stranger said.

Clementine remained silent.

'A mother, I'm guessing. Or a sister.'

'Mother.'

'So you've seen it, then. You know what it does to the body.'

She covered her ears and tried her best to block him out as he described the event in detail. But it was no use.

'...so horrible,' he said. 'The way your fingers could simply – *push* – through the skin.' He motioned with his hands, as if forcing them through an invisible wall of butter. He must have seen the horror in Clementine's face because he looked suddenly embarrassed. 'Sorry. I see it so often in my dreams, I sometimes forget not everyone is used to hearing about it.'

'Please, sir,' Clementine said, eager to change the subject. 'This is my home – I can't leave. London is a ruin.'

'And who told you that?'

She hesitated.

'Father.'

'Then he's been lying to you,' George said. 'True, it's not what it once was. But then, everything must change if it is to survive. It must *adapt*. Don't you agree?'

'I suppose.'

There was a shuffle of feet at the door. Her father appeared, dressed in grey striped pyjamas and carrying a shotgun that looked almost as old as him. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

Clementine's heart sunk. 'Leave, daddy. Please, go back to bed.'

'Get the fuck out of my home!' he shouted.

George stood up from his chair. 'The girl's father, I presume.' He went to shake the old man's hand. 'My name is George. I work for... Well, it hardly matters now. As I am sure you're aware, we are—'

'It makes no difference who you are, so long as you leave and forget what you saw,' the old man said.

Though he tried hiding it, Clementine could tell George felt uneasy standing this end of a loaded gun. There was a slight nervousness to his words. 'It's more complicated than that. I have a sworn duty to uphold. For the continuation of the human race.' He pointed at Clementine, still tucked beneath her covers. 'Did you know you were committing a crime by keeping her?'

'Away from *your* lot,' her father added.

'*Ahh*. Yes. Perhaps you need reminding of the situation.'

The old man cocked his gun. 'I know as well as you. We all saw it. The world is already on its way to hell. No point dragging her down too.'

'I do not mean to *drag* her. I mean to make her a queen,' George said. 'How can you not see how important she is? She's the key to undoing all of this!' He stopped, as if expecting applause.

For a moment, it looked as though the old man had had a moment of doubt. He glanced nervously at the guards. The barrel of his shotgun dipped very slightly. 'Please,' he said. 'Please, don't take her. She doesn't need this. Just tell them you didn't find anything.'

'But we *did*, didn't we?'

The old man looked over to his daughter and she knew in an

instant. She wanted to go to him, to tell him to stop, to insist on going. Whatever they wanted with her, it wasn't worth his life.

The old man aimed his gun at George.

But the guards were faster. Within seconds, one of them had grabbed him from behind and hit him with the butt of their gun. Blood began to pour from his temple before he had even hit the ground.

The great hall was filled with near a hundred men of every age. Some looked as if they had just fought a war. Ties torn at the edges. Shirts stained with sweat. One man, sunburnt to the point of concern, had elected not to wear a shirt at all and was babbling nonsense about how this was all a waste of his time.

But there was one in particular Clementine had noticed – a boy, roughly the same age as she was. He had bright green eyes like emeralds and scruffy brown hair that, compared to the others', was only moderately greasy. He had been staring at her intently. But every time she caught him, his eyes darted away.

George sat quietly beside her. If he felt any remorse at all, he refused to let it show on his face. Clementine clenched her fists as hard as she could until they started to go numb. It was the only thing that would stop her from strangling him. She could do it. He had no guards to protect him now. It wouldn't take much to overpower him. The man was over seventy. She didn't care if they shot her for it. Then, at least, all of this would be over, and she would get to see her father again.

There was a dull pain in her chest as she pictured him lying there. They'd had to pull her from the body. The blood still lingered beneath her fingernails, no matter how hard she had scrubbed. Her clothes had been ruined too, though they had since found her something new to wear. A silk cream dress, as soft as moonlight. It wouldn't hurt to look pretty, George had told her.

The room fell silent as George stood up and made his way to the top of a high podium. He had swapped his brown suit for long, flowing black robes that made it appear as though he were floating. He took a seat in what looked like a small wooden throne.

'Thank you for coming,' he began. 'Today is rather special. After

all, how often is it we come across something as unique as this?' He pointed to Clementine. 'Stand for us, my dear.'

Clementine rose to her feet, feeling every pair of eyes watching her like a thousand hungry vultures. The knot in her stomach tightened. She saw George mouth a few words of encouragement, as if she were a baby learning to walk.

'My name is Clementine,' she said, trying desperately to smooth over the cracks in her voice.

'Sweet girl. Frightened, no doubt, to be so far from your home,' George said. 'I am truly sorry for what happened to your father. It wasn't what I wanted.'

What did you expect to happen? Clementine wanted to say, but the words fell apart in her throat.

Then, as if reading her mind, the old man laughed. 'You must think we're monsters. And perhaps that isn't so far from the truth. But you're too young to know what it was really like in those first few days.' He let out a heavy sigh. 'It took my granddaughter. She couldn't have been much older than you when the virus claimed her. Heavens, you even look alike. I knew it the moment I saw you. It's the hair. Sweet as summer, she was. She deserved better.'

Clementine thought back to the night before. A shiver ran down her spine as she remembered the stranger's moonlit face standing like a statue above her bed. Was this some sick fantasy? To bring his granddaughter back from the dead?

'What was her name?' Clementine asked.

'Beth.' George smiled, and for once she believed it. 'Part of me still thinks she's alive somehow. I know it sounds crazy. I see her almost every night. But it's never more than a mirage. I see the torment in her face. I watch as the skin slowly melts away until she can no longer even manage to scream. Every night, it's the same.'

Clementine shut her eyes and thought of her home so many miles away.

'But losing someone close doesn't make me special,' he continued. 'I would bet every man here has lost someone. But the dreams of her, they aren't for nothing. They're a reminder. A reminder not to give up hope.'

As George said his final words, the room buzzed with excitement,

a hundred voiced squabbling for their chance to speak. The debate had begun.

She needs a good husband! shouted one man.

Burn her, suggested another. It was the shirtless man, red-faced like a tomato, and almost as hairless. *She's obviously a witch. How else did she survive?*

The idea was so ridiculous. The knot in her stomach clenched so tight she thought she might collapse. Desperately, she looked up to George sitting atop his speaker's chair. What would Beth have thought? What would any of them? Why should they have a say at all?

Peering through the row of windows that dotted the upper balcony, Clementine watched as the day slowly faded into night. Hours went by. And still they talked.

I'll put a baby in her, sure enough, one man said.

But that was all she could handle.

Clementine jumped to her feet. 'Stop!' she shouted. 'Am I nothing to you? You act as if I can't understand! You've talked for *hours*, and in all that time you've treated me as nothing but cattle.'

George sat up in his chair. 'My dear, this is an important matter. It must be taken seriously.'

She wanted to explode. 'And *I* can't take this seriously? This is *my* own life! What makes a child more worthy to speak than me?' she said, pointing at the boy. Though, she quickly realised he had been one of the few not to speak. 'I think I would rather die than listen for one more second to you. So what if I'm the last woman alive? It wouldn't matter if there were ten. Humanity has lost. We've lost. And I would sooner put a bullet through my head than bring a child into this world.'

She had their attention then, and for a moment, she thought she had convinced them. A feeling of relief swept over her. There was an uneasy silence, as if no one knew quite what to say. She saw it in their faces. Then, a snigger. And another, and another, spreading like a virus until the entire room was consumed in mocking laughter. She could still hear the sounds echo in her mind, long after they put her away for the night.

The bedroom door locked from the outside. She knew there was no hope of escape. The white sheets on her bed made her think of

home. Thoughts of her father drifted into her mind. She had managed to convince George and his guards to bury him in a patch of the garden where the poppies grew strongest. He would have liked it there.

Clementine opened the window as far as it would allow and looked out over the lifeless city skyline. What few dots of light that existed weren't enough to dull the brightness of the stars. The moon reflected in the Thames like a giant blue eye.

For the first time since they found her, Clementine felt helpless. Her only hope had been to persuade them to let her go. But they had only laughed. She walked over to her bed and buried herself in her sheets, not even bothering to undress.

She had barely managed more than an hour of sleep before she was woken suddenly by a sound outside her bedroom door. Keys jingled in the lock. Then, slowly, the door crept open.

'Hello?' Clementine said. 'George?'

'No,' the voice whispered. The figure stepped through the doorway into the moonlight. Clementine recognised him immediately.

'What are you doing here?' she said.

The boy's emerald eyes bounced between hers and the floor.

'Well,' she said. 'What do you want?'

He looked almost frightened of her. 'It was sad,' he said tentatively, 'what... what happened to your father. He must have been a good man to have kept you safe for so long.'

'He was.'

'And I'm sorry for how they treat you. My granddad wasn't always like this. He's not been the same since having to bury my sister. She was the world to him.'

'You mean,' Clementine said, 'you mean that man is your grandfather?'

The boy nodded. 'Ever since that day, he's been obsessed with finding some way to bring her back. He thinks he can undo all of this somehow. He won't accept that the world has ended. And I'm worried what he might do before that happens.'

Clementine wasn't sure what to say. Her mind was spinning. Had someone sent him as some kind of test? 'Tell me,' she said. 'Why bother even coming here? Why risk it? He'd probably have you killed just for talking to me.'

‘I know, and I don’t care. I want to help you escape,’ he said, and handed her what looked to be a thick woollen coat. She noticed that he had one for himself as well.

‘But—’ She struggled to find the words. ‘You don’t even know me.’

The boy stared into her eyes, as if trying to study her soul. Then, he said, ‘you really do look like her.’

Clementine gripped the fabric tightly and thought again of her father, all cold and alone. She nodded and slid the coat on.

The boy led the way along the corridor, through a labyrinth of rooms and stairs and out into the street. Broken vehicles marked their path. Hidden beneath their hoods, they made their way through the city, stopping every mile to check that no one had followed. After several hours, they reached what looked to be an old park.

‘I’ll have to leave you here,’ he said. ‘Keep off the main roads. Stay hidden, and you’ll be fine. Travel only at night.’

He handed her a rucksack. Inside were various tins, bottled water and a blanket. There was enough food to last a week. Perhaps longer if she rationed.

‘Thank you, Sam.’

Then, rather suddenly, he put his arms around her and left without another word.

The journey home was a long one. Luckily, the people living on the outskirts were sparse and paid her little attention. They had likely seen her as just another wanderer, cloaked in black to keep the midges from biting his neck.

When at last she saw the house, she nearly collapsed from exhaustion. But she knew she couldn’t enter just yet. There were eyes everywhere, and they would have been expecting her to return.

So, she waited until nightfall. Then, as the sun dipped below the horizon, she climbed from her hiding spot in a nearby tree and walked the final steps up to the house.

It was empty inside. The air felt still, so quiet that Clementine could hear the beating of her heart. She found her old bedroom, with the window still wide open. Her father’s shotgun lay on the floor where it had fallen. A patch of black marked the place where he had fallen beside it.

She gathered a few of her possessions and made her way outside. Her feet carried her to the far end of the garden where George and his men had buried her father. The rough mound of earth had already begun to sprout weeds, surrounded from every angle by dozens of yellow poppies. She knelt beside it and burst into tears.

'I'm sorry, daddy,' she said. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

Not far off, Clementine heard the sound of a car door closing, followed by a series of voices. She didn't have much time. She pulled the shotgun from her side and placed it beneath her chin. The voices grew nearer; they were shouting now, calling her name. But they had already begun to fade, drifting away into nothing.

'Clementine, don't!' George shouted. 'Clementine!'

But it was too late for her. Too late for everyone. The world had had its moment, she thought. It was time for it to end.