

Chapter One

John Moore hesitated in the doorway. Not for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The hallway behind him was scarcely less dim. And not to make the pre-entry visual investigation as he had been taught: search for signs of danger first, valuables second. He had already finished that. No, he paused because of the room's lone occupant, slumped in the far corner, though a little embarrassed at his trepidation. Said occupant had long ago lost the ability to harm anyone.

At last, he took a deep breath, stepped quietly into the room's palpable silence and strode to its center. He turned about, examining it carefully, except for that corner.

To his left squatted a large desk with a few objects from before the Last Days on it and a chair behind it. Among the objects, the uses of many which often baffled him, he recognized one of the machines people of those days used for reading books, researching information, communicating long distances, making purchases and many other wonderful things. They had called them "commcomps." Dust-shrouded shelves against the wall behind the desk bore cubes that had once held pictures that moved, vases that must have held plants and other objects for uses he couldn't even guess. He asked himself, as he often did, why those people needed all this *stuff*. Among the shelves' jumble though, he immediately recognized treasure of incredible value: pre-Last Days bound paper books.

Summer's lethargic silence permeated the room. Ancient dust blanketed everything, disturbed only where his footprints crossed an intricate rug. The dust and gloom diluted whatever color the room might once have had into a dim despondent sepia. A single beam of light split the darkness from a narrow gap in the only window's draperies, pointing a brilliant finger across the room to the corner he did not yet want to look at.

The dark did nothing to relieve the unrelenting heat, if anything more oppressive here than outdoors. Sweat formed on his face and neck as soon as he wiped it away with his handkerchief. The room smelled of dust and desolation. Perhaps the interiors of graves smelled like that. Dust motes danced in the bone-white shaft of light slicing through the draperies. He remembered, as a little boy, thinking of them as joyful, miniscule dancing fairies. These looked more like gleeful demons. His gaze, at last captured by their mad dance, followed the bright spear of light across the hardwood floor and the rug he stood on. It ended at the corner he had avoided seeing, at about the bottom of a grayish swaddled pile.

He looked up quickly to take in the whole figure at once. The crepuscular light and rotted clothing didn't hide its roughly human form. It huddled in one of those pre-Last Day chairs that adapted perfectly to the sitter's form (according to the older folks of course; neither he nor the other kids had ever sat in one that still worked). Having sat there for nearly thirteen years, it had long ago relinquished the last of its flesh but seeing entire human skeletons unnerved him. The pallid ivory of rib, femur or some other bone poking through the shredded fabric didn't bother him. Finally he looked at the largest exposed bone, the skull. It nestled in a tattered nest that might have been a sleeping robe's collar, leaning slightly forward. The open jaw and large black eye sockets gave it a look of perpetual surprise.

John had seen enough human skeletons to know that the heap of small bones lying in the lap had once been hands. That too few bones remained to form two complete hands suggested that tiny critters, long ago, had sought them for food. At least the house had protected its resident from larger scavengers like dogs or coyotes.

Among the remaining hand bones rested a device John recognized as a "reader" that the user could detach from the commcomp to take to another location. A little sadly, he recreated the scene in the room as it must have been all those years ago. The man – the skeleton's garment was almost certainly a man's

night robe – had been sick with that horrible infection, Chou’s Disease. It had killed nearly everyone on earth, including John’s father. Knowing he drew near death, the man had decided to spend his last hours in the chair reading, or perhaps listening to music. At least until he grew too sick. The skull had stared sightlessly at the blank reader screen with the same quizzical expression for nearly thirteen years.

John turned and stalked over to the covered windows, determined to ease a tightness in his throat that had nothing to do with heat, dust or darkness. He grasped the draperies on each side of the slit that admitted the mad little demons. The room had lain in darkness long enough.

“*John! I found one!*”

John jumped and turned toward the sudden shout, still clutching the draperies. The corroded rod supporting them screeched in protest as it parted from the wall. The collapsing drapes rained ancient dust. Only a few deft back-steps saved John from envelopment by the filthy decomposing material and most of the dust. Sudden, blinding light banished the dark just as Rossi’s shout had shattered the quiet. But not the heat. John yanked his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face. The handkerchief came away muddy. He sneezed.

The shout had shocked John especially because Rossi seldom spoke above a murmur. Rossi stepped in from the hallway holding up a story book for beginning readers. *What the hell*, John thought.

Then he remembered and smiled a little despite his irritation. A few weeks before Rossi had asked John to teach him to read. At not quite thirteen years old, he had never taught anyone anything, let alone a kid older than himself how to read. He had no idea how to even begin! To gain time he had told Rossi they didn’t have the right books. They had to wait until the gang’s return to Coleridge Gardens in the fall. There he could look for the simple beginners’ books he had first learned to read. At John’s age, the stretch between the beginning of summer and next fall seemed a long time. He would think of something by then. Rossi might even forget about it.

That wouldn’t work now, though. There Rossi stood with a beginners’ book in his hand!

The usually dour Rossi said with an eager smile, “This book’ll do, won’t it, John?”

John couldn’t disappoint him. “Yeah, that’ll do.” He brushed futilely at the dust on his clothes. That only made them both sneeze.

“For now, though,” said Rossi, “we’d best finish scroungin in this place. It’s gittin late.” Resuming his role of older-kid-in-charge.

John looked back at the immobile figure in the corner. The light had chased the dread from the room. The figure now looked just like what it was: a misshapen bundle of bones.

Rossi, of course, saw the skeleton as nothing unusual, just another object to search for truck, as they called marketable items. He had lived close to death his whole life, first as an orphan in a town that hated orphans, now as a member of a scrounger gang ransacking deserted towns and farms full of corpses. Rossi had been a baby before the Last Days so he, like John, had never known a world full of people.

But John had not been raised in the casual violence that Rossi found normal. He had been born during the pandemic that preceded the Last Days in a small isolated town. The survivors had wept over and buried those lost during his infancy so he had no memory of it.

Rossi followed John’s glance to the figure in the corner and crossed to it. John watched in grisly fascination as the rotten clothing disintegrated in Rossi’s hands. Some of the bones clattered to the floor. The skull toppled forward as Rossi pulled a strand of some kind over it, examined it closely and held it up triumphantly for John to see: a chain with a metal disk hanging from it. The figure of a man carrying a small burden had been etched on the disk.

“What is it?” asked John, unconsciously speaking softly.

“It’s a medal.” Rossi’s spoke quietly too, but he always did. “I think it’s St. Christopher, the guy Stony wears around his neck.”

“Who’s St. Christopher?”

“Some kinda god, I think. Stony says he pertscks travelers. I’m gonna ast Stony if I can keep him to pertsck me.” The gang generally held truck in common and split profits after selling it. One could, however, request to keep a specific object and deduct its value from his share of the profit, or “take”. John would almost certainly keep one or more books as part of his take.

“Jackie has one too,” said Rossi.

“Jack’s is a cross,” said John. “They call it a crucif – something.”

The figure in the chair looked far less human now, just rotting threads clinging to a disarranged collection of bones, many of which now lay scattered about the floor. The skull gazed vacantly at John from approximately where the lap had been. St. Christopher hadn’t done a good job protecting this guy. But then, maybe he hadn’t traveled much.

“Let’s git to it, John. Stony’d have our ass if he saw us fuckin around like this.”

Scroungers considered it bad luck to dawdle after entering a deserted house. They believed some essence of the former occupants still hovered about. The shades, knowing they no longer needed their things, didn’t mind newcomers taking whatever they wanted. Disturbing their final rest longer than necessary though, was a breach of etiquette, like a person overstaying his welcome at a friend’s house.

Once started, under Rossi’s direction, they moved quickly and efficiently. John had little experience but Rossi had worked for three years under the older gang members’ supervision.

Next Rossi went to the desk. Ignoring the commcomp, worthless since its power source disappeared during the Last Days, he ransacked the desktop and drawers for once-trivial items, from paper clips to letter openers, and for the more valuable metal objects that clever smiths could turn into tools. His most valuable discovery lay in a bottom drawer, a full ream of paper. Instead of just dumping it into the bag with the rest, he set it aside. He would pack it among the last objects to go into the cart, wrapped and placed in the safest place. The irreplaceable and fragile nature of paper made this ream as valuable as everything else in the desk combined.

From the shelves, John dumped everything but the books into his bag, even stuff he didn’t recognize – the older guys could throw away anything unsalable. As Rossi emptied the desk drawers, John filled them with books, stacked atop each other or, if space did not permit, on their spines (never the other direction as that, according to his mentor Matt Pringle, caused their rotting spines to deteriorate further). Bound paper books had been rare even before the Last Days; most books had been recorded on electronic devices like computers, commcomps, or small thin wafers reputedly containing thousands of books each, all unreadable since the death of the commcomps.

No experienced scrounger worked randomly so, after finishing the desk and shelves they searched the rest of the room in an orderly fashion: end tables, wall niches and around the skeleton, and found little else of value. The humid climate had mostly consumed the fabrics, including the draperies. That left the ungainly furniture and the lamps, made of the so-called “composite” materials, that could not be shaped into anything useful by tinkers or smiths.

Thanks to Rossi’s expertise they stripped this last room of the house in short order. They carried the truck to the cart out front. After filling it they could afford to sit for a moment on the front stoop in the shade, exhausted more from the mid-afternoon heat than their labor.

After a time, Rossi said, “Time to dump this shit and head for the crick.”

They stood, grabbed the bar on the front of the truck, as Stony called his carts, and pulled it down broken, overgrown streets to the stash hole, a partially collapsed house in the northeast corner of town. It only took a few minutes but in such a small town no place lay more than a few minutes from any other.

They rolled it through the back door, across a landing and down a set of rickety steps to the basement. They took longer unloading than they should have because of the basement's coolth but finally returned up to the heat and light.

They went to the gang's hole-up on the west side of town, the second floor of a house that had been old even before the Last Days. They had found other houses in better condition but their boss Mitch hadn't liked them for either hole-ups or stash holes. Rival gangs would check them first as they themselves had done. Finding none of the guys there, they went out, crossed the back yard and the meadow where their mules grazed, and down sloping overgrown fields to the creek, a mile or so west of town.

The other two young guys already lay there in the shallow brown water of a bend shaded by willows, naked. Big Miller, strong and loyal if a bit slow in wit, sprawled against the bank, half asleep. His size had earned him his nickname. Little Jack Kincaid, seldom still for long, splashed around, whistling tunelessly. The string of cheap red glass beads holding the crucifix around his neck glittered in vagrant shafts of sunlight. Neither saw Rossi, approaching wraith-like through the willows. As an orphan Rossi had learned that the least-noticed kids lived the longest.

When, to the always skittish Jack Kincaid, Rossi seemed to suddenly materialize before him, he yelped in terror. Then he laughed and splashed water at Rossi and then at John when he broke through the willows. Miller woke up with a startled grunt.

"You assholes!" Jack laughed. You scairt the shit out a me."

"Then I don't wanta share the water with you, Jackie," said Rossi. But he stripped, as did John. They waded into the water and squatted in the marginally cooler mud where they would spend the day's hottest hours.

"Where's Stony?" asked John.

"Checkin his snares," said Big Miller. "Don't know where that old fart gits his energy."

After bitching to each other about the heat they lay quietly in the shallows, except for high-strung little Jack Kincaid. He described every item of that day's take, then speculated on its original use, a favorite topic among the young guys. They couldn't understand the pre-Last Days peoples' habit of cluttering their homes with so much stuff. Then he talked about the hunting trip he planned when they next took a day off to hunt. Boss Mitchell wouldn't let them use precious ammunition for hunting so Jack, starting the previous summer about the time John joined the gang, practiced with a clumsy homemade bow and arrows. Last winter he had used part of his take to buy a real bow and arrows. He had practiced all winter and continued now as time allowed. Despite the others' good-natured ragging and though he had failed to bag even a rabbit – which John occasionally did with his powerful slingshot – he vowed to bring down a deer before the summer ended.

Then they heard a slight movement in the willows. Stony appeared, a small wiry man with white hair and beard and a patch over one eye.

"Hey, boys," he said, "got room for a old man?"

They greeted him. Miller moved over to make room, then said, "Hottest day yet, ain't it, Stony?"

"Yeah, only the middle a May and it's already hotter'n the hubs a hell."

Jack laughed. "The hubs a hell! It don't git no hotter 'n *that*, Stony."

"Any luck with the snares?" asked Miller.

"Not this time. Got a vole and a field mouse. Don't reckon we're hungry enough to eat critters like that yet. We'll finish off the smoked fish tonight. I'll fix some corn bread. I found some nice mushrooms to go with 'm. Oyster mushrooms."

The boys made appreciative noises; they liked the way Stony prepared mushrooms, battered lightly in cornmeal and fried.

“Found us another stash hole too,” Stony said. “I’ll show you when we git back to work.”

“Why so many stash holes, Stony?” griped Miller. “The one we got ain’t nigh full.”

“I tolja. If another gang finds one a our stash holes they ain’t likely to look for more. The more stash holes you got the safer your truck is.”

That didn’t satisfy Jack Kincaid. “But Mitch hisself said they ain’t been nobody here since the Last Days.”

“That don’t mean somebody *won’t* find the town. *We* found it just a couple weeks ago.”

“That ain’t like you, Stony,” Jack persisted. “You always tell us to look on the bright side a things.”

Stony grinned his nearly toothless grin. “You got it half right, Jackie. Look on the bright side, sure, but expec the worst.” He looked like he would have winked if he’d had another eye.

Stony stayed unaccountably cheerful for one with such bad luck. Though only forty when the pandemic struck, his hair had turned white nearly overnight. In subsequent years he had lost most of his teeth, leaving one cheek caved in. An infection had cost him an eye and he had lost an ear lobe in a bar fight. Unusually susceptible to colds and other types of sickness, no one, himself included, expected a long life for him. The devastating pandemic of 2072, Chou’s Disease, had killed 80 to 90 percent of the earth’s population. Civilization had crumbled so quickly no one knew the number for sure. Most of those who recovered succumbed to starvation, pestilence or violence. Stony therefore considered himself and all the other survivors, the ten percent, the luckiest people who had ever drawn breath.

“Wonder how the other guys is doin,” mused Rossi. John wondered the same thing.

Jack laughed. “They’s partyin in Nellie’s Fair while we bust our balls. “They made a bunch a money off ’n the church truck and ain’t even thinkin a us.”

“They only been gone a week,” said Stony. “They ain’t even got to Nellie’s Fair yet.”

They talked in a desultory fashion, speculating about the other guys, discussing the heat and the upcoming evening’s work. The shadows finally grew longer. Stony stood up and stretched.

“It’s a mite cooler, boys,” he said. “Let’s go git some more truck. Big, I b’lieve it’s your turn to see to the mules.”

They would work until dark and return to the hole-up where Stony would prepare supper.

* * *

The gang had left its winter hole-up in Coleridge Gardens the first week of April to “go truckin.” The two five-member factions consisted of men in their forties and fifties, the original gang members, and youths in their teens. They avoided the few farmsteads of one to a few families they saw. Farmers disliked scroungers because they found articles among the ruins that the farmers themselves might need some day. And no one trusted armed wanderers of any kind. They had followed the Sheridan River north and east for nearly three weeks to the Green Hills, a beautiful country of tree-clad ridges separated by flat creek bottoms, quite different from the gently rolling prairies around Coleridge Gardens. Matt Pringle, John’s friend and mentor, told him that even before the Last Days fewer people had lived there than in the Coleridge Gardens area. Poor soils and new means of non-agricultural food production had gradually driven the farmers and businesses depending on agriculture away, except for a few stubborn hold-out farmers who cultivated the creek bottoms.

“A paradox of the late twenty-first century,” Matt Pringle had said, “was that, even though the world population had doubled in less than a hundred years, population dwindled in lots of rural places. Most people lived in the cities. It’s just the opposite since the Last Days. The cities are empty. Survival is easier in the country.”

“The Green Hills are good scroungin grounds though,” had boomed the deep voice of Lou Travis, Matt’s best friend in the gang. “Got a lot a truck last time we came here. Hardly anyone’s left here to use it and the Green Hills are off the beaten track for most scroungers.”

But others had beat them to the first town they checked. From there they followed an unpaved road, thickly choked by tall grass, brush and saplings, to the east. The few isolated pre-Last Day houses and farm buildings they saw had either burned or nearly collapsed. On the second morning they crested a ridge and started down a wooded slope toward one of the flat creek bottoms. Red Leighton, the young faction's leader, suddenly raced back from where he had been walking point, to where Boss Mitchell led the column.

"There's a town over there, Mitch!" He grabbed the leader's sleeve. He was a tall skinny kid with orange hair and a thin, straggly, red-gold beard. When excited or angered, which happened easily with him, his Adam's apple bobbed up and down in his scrawny throat. "See? On the hill on t' other side a the crick."

Mitch's strained to see what Leighton had seen. His thick black brows nearly met over his nose in concentration. He stroked a beard the color and texture of steel wool. He finally said, "I do b'lieve you're right. I swear you got the eyes of a hawk."

They found the town relatively intact. Nearly every house contained the undisturbed remains of the former inhabitants, a good sign according to the older guys. It meant that no one had visited the town since the Last Days.

John didn't like to think of all those skeletons swaddled in rotting garments as a good sign of anything, particularly the small ones of children.

That afternoon, after a quick exploration of the town they set up camp in an old house at the northwest edge of town. Behind it a convenient meadow provided grazing for the mules. The ground floor of the house next door would protect the mules from wild dogs at night. The next day they started scrounging. The town's only two businesses had been a tavern and an automated convenience store, both undisturbed and full of truck. Deteriorating motor vehicles and the remarkably intact houses yielded hard-to-find tools and other valuable truck.

"Hey, Perfessor," Leighton asked Matt during a break, "Whatcha reckon they called this town?"

Leighton had nicknamed Matt "Perfessor" because of his previous career as a college professor.

"Well, from the names of businesses on the store windows I'd guess they called it Dumfrey." Heavy with sarcasm. He left unsaid, "as anyone who could read would see."

"Dumbfuck, hunh?" Leighton cackled. "What a great name for this dump." Unashamedly as illiterate as the other orphans, he took pleasure in baiting Matt.

The second day they found two churches, Pentecostal and Catholic, well-preserved with intact windows that had kept out the elements. The Catholic church contained the most valuable artifacts. The youths couldn't know their significance or value or even their names, the crucifixes, chalices, candlesticks and other things, the most valuable made of gold and silver. They pulled the pews aside. In the space thus cleared they heaped truck from both churches, even the hymnals, prayer books, vestments and such. Then Mitch said they should have a confab, a gang's more or less casual meeting.

Stony stood next to the gang's curmudgeon and self-appointed medic, Doc Garson.

"Now that we got it," said Stony, "where we gonna sell it? Coleridge Gardens' market's too small and they only got one church."

Doc Garson shrugged. "Melt down the gold and silver. Then we can sell it anywheres." A tall, slightly stooped black man with a long lugubrious face, a pessimist suspicious even of good fortune, yet he and the optimistic Stony shared a close friendship, despite their continual bickering.

Stony grabbed up a jewel-encrusted crucifix and shook it in Doc's face. "You'd take the jewels out a *this* and melt it down!? The hell you will!" He had retained his religious views though he seldom spoke of them.

John also thought it a shame to destroy such beautiful objects but his opinion counted for little so he kept quiet. The other young guys, led by the vociferous Red Leighton, agreed with Doc. As usual Mitch didn't say anything. He would let everyone else speak first.

To John's surprise, since Matt had little use for religion, he said, "Stony's right. These beautiful artifacts should be saved for future generations. Let's make a deal. Spare these few pieces, this crucifix" (Jewels decorated its post and crosspiece. A large ruby gleamed where they crossed.) "and the chalice and candlesticks to sell to a church or some other religious collector, and melt down the rest."

"We don't know nothin bout sellin to churches," insisted Leighton. "But we sure know guys that pay good for metals to melt down, don't we, boys?" He grinned at the younger guys. Except for John, the others had belonged to Leighton's gang of orphans in Nellie's Fair which made their living chiefly by theft.

"Mitch could sell to the churches easy," said Stony. "He could sell ice cubes to Eskimos."

"What's a Eskynoe?" asked Big Miller.

"What good's all these books?" asked Jack Kincaid.

"Churches pay plenty for hymnals and such," said Stony. "Ain't many of 'm left."

All agreed to sell the objects of lesser value to churches but heatedly debated disposition of those made of precious metals. Mitch occasionally added a comment, such as, "Keep in mind how many churches are in Nellie's Fair. Lots of 'm are prob'ly short of crosses and cups and shit." "Yeah," grumbled Doc. "More churches than taverns." Gradually they edged toward Stony's and Matt's point of view. Under Mitch's subtle guidance, the gang finally reached a consensus: they would sell the major gold and silver artifacts intact. The rest would go to smiths who worked with precious metals.

"Maybe we can start a biddin war between the richest churches!" said Leighton, forgetting how hard he had fought for melting the precious metals down.

They unanimously chose the much larger Nellie's Fair over their usual market town, Coleridge Gardens. Their usual truck sold well enough to the rural folk at the Coleridge Gardens harvest market but they couldn't afford and had no use for expensive religious artifacts. The larger, wealthier town's many churches would bid their price up. Half the gang would take the goods there while the others finished scrounging Dumfrey. Mitch said he and Matt would go because of their negotiating skills and Lou Travis because of his stamina and intimidating size. Garson and Leighton would also go, leaving Stony to supervise the other boys, John, Miller, Rossi and Kincaid.

After the confab John asked Matt why he fought only for the more elaborate gold pieces and not all of them.

Matt said, "Those lesser gold and silver objects were cast cheaply and by the thousands. They don't have any great artistic merit and they're only plated with gold and silver or some lesser material that looks like them. When Doc sees how little the smiths offer for that stuff he'll take it to the churches. I couldn't see wasting my time arguing with him about it."

They spent that night in the church with the treasure even though, as Garson grumbled, no one had bothered it where it was for almost thirteen years. The Nellie's Fair contingent left early the next morning.

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Note to the Reader:

Thank you for reading the first chapter of *A Shadow over the Afterworld*, book 2 of the Shadow World series. You need not have read the first book of the series, *The Shadow of Armageddon*, before reading this one. Though some characters appear in both novels each book tells its own story.

If you *do* want to read the whole series though, I highly encourage it.

You can order a copy of *A Shadow Over the Afterworld* [here](#).

Other books in the Shadow World series include:

[*The Shadow of Armageddon*](#) (The Shadow World Book 1)

[*Shadow Jack*](#) (The Shadow World Book 3)

[*Shadowspawn*](#) (The Shadow World Book 4)