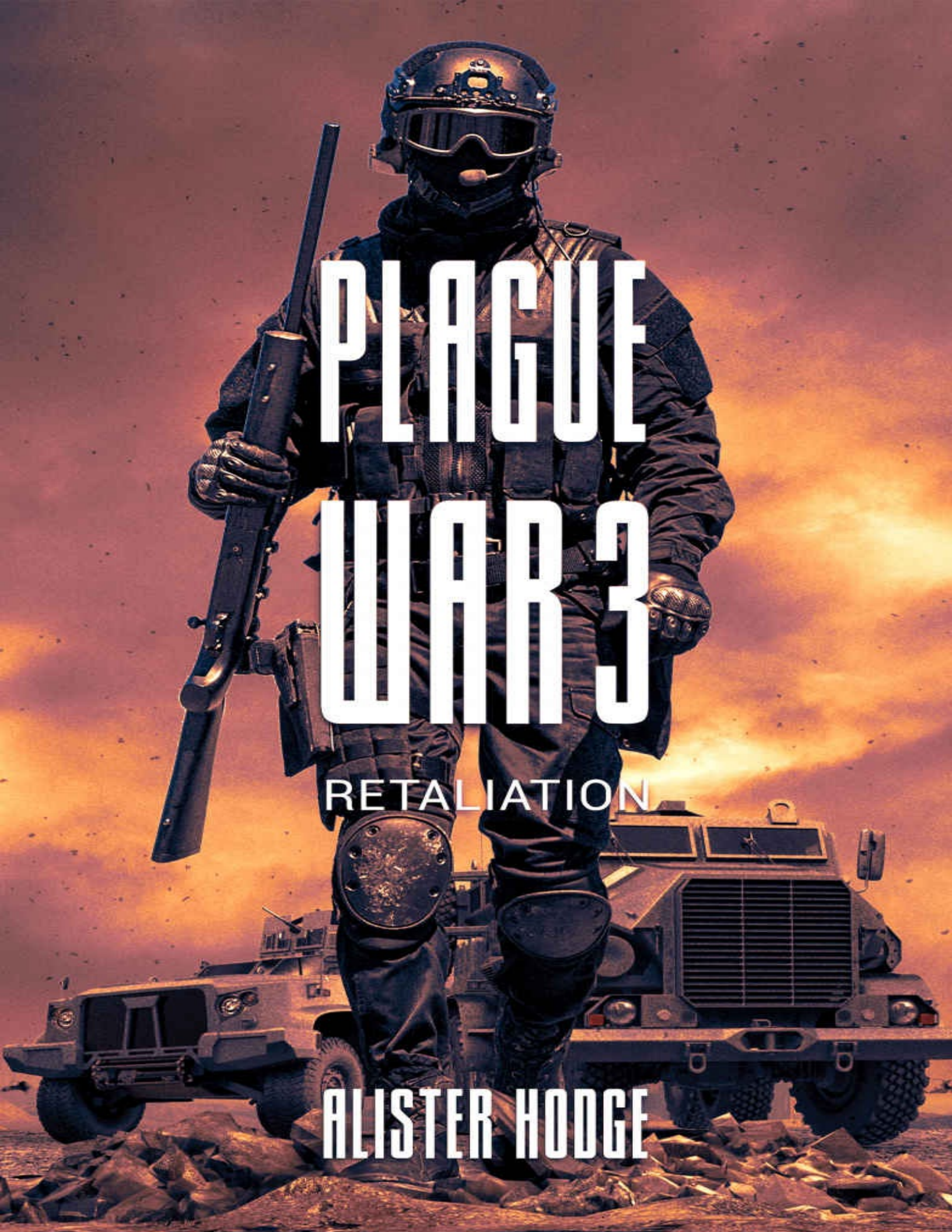




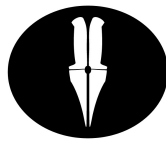
PLAGUE WAR 3

RETALIATION

ALISTER HODGE

PLAGUE WAR: RETALIATION

Alister Hodge



www.severedpress.com

Copyright 2018 by Alister Hodge

Chapter One

Steph turned the key in the ignition again, urging it to work under her breath. An unnatural grinding noise came from the engine briefly before cutting out.

‘Fucking piece of shite!’ she said, thumping the dash in frustration. ‘That’s the third breakdown this month. If we get swarmed because of those bastards in maintenance, I’m going to gut the first mechanic I meet when we get back. *If* we get back.’

Screams of the Infected filled the air outside, gaining in volume as they drew closer to the truck.

Vinh gave her a sharp look. ‘So what? The truck’s dead. Not the first time, won’t be the last either.’

Steph’s face contorted for a moment as she stifled an expletive laden response to her sergeant. She drew a ragged breath and made her features relax. As much as she hated to admit, Vinh was right. Getting mad would only impede her chances of finding a solution, and time was at a premium.

‘Good to have you back, Corporal,’ said Vinh. ‘So, is it something we can fix, or are we looking at a request for assistance?’

Steph leant closer to the dash, examining the illuminated warning light. ‘Engine’s overheated. Probably the radiator like last time.’

‘Somehow, I don’t think those hungry bastards outside are going to let you pop the hood and troubleshoot it in peace,’ said Erin, looking out the back window of the truck. ‘We’ve got five minutes at best until they’re on us.’

Steph glanced over her shoulder at the approaching horde. She was sitting at the wheel of an armoured troop carrier, a new type of vehicle developed and pumped out of a car manufacturing plant in Geelong for the specific task of killing the Infected. Behind the driver was an open area that carried a handful of fighters. Engagement of the enemy outside was through a finger width slit in the cabin wall, just wide enough to accept the barrel of a rifle. Above and below this gap was a thirty-centimetre panel of reinforced Perspex. Clear so that the soldiers within could sight their weapons, but made

so thick for strength that it invariably distorted the visages of those outside like a theme park mirror. From this moving fortress, soldiers could fight from relative safety, out of reach of their enemies on the street. The only problem with driving a prototype, was that the vehicles had been plagued by mechanical issues – some of them proving fatal.

Outside, a swarm of Carriers was closing on their location. Steph had fought countless times against the Infected since the outbreak, and yet they still made her skin crawl. The crowd of men, women and children lurching toward their truck were barely recognisable as human. Any clothes worn at death had rotted and fallen away months before. Muscle and tissue was desiccated, drawn tight over bones and joints. Skin had acquired the yellowish brown of an embalmed corpse. Lips and gums had dried, withdrawing to make the remaining teeth appear unnaturally long and sharp. Unblinking, their eyes were white. The surface dry and damaged by innumerable tiny scratches until corneas became opaque, hiding the colour of the iris and pupil behind. But for all the hideousness of their external features, it was the mindless violence of the creatures that was to be feared.

Steph forced herself to reframe that thought. No, not to be feared, as allowing that sort of undisciplined thinking flirted with despair. *Respect*. Yes, they were an enemy to be respected for their awesome ability to inflict slaughter if given the smallest chance.

A year and a half before, a new plague had ripped across the mainland states of Australia, catching the military on the back foot in a firestorm of violence, blood and terror. A rabies like disease called Lyssavirus had mutated, transferring from bat to man with disastrous effects. In humans, the resultant Lysan Plague rapidly overwhelmed the immune system, leading to death. But at this point the virus had demonstrated an unwillingness to abandon its host, causing the corpse to reanimate. Everything that had made them human was lost, and measured against all established norms - they were still dead. With minds incapable of conscious thought, hearts that lay flaccid and lungs empty of oxygen, they'd become nothing more than vectors for disease transmission. Known as virus 'Carriers' or the 'Infected', the creatures were consumed by a mindless rage, driven to attack any non-infected creature and feed. The virus was transmitted through saliva in bites, effectively recruiting every victim to the feral hordes that advanced across the country. Brain destruction had proven the only method to disable the virus's control of the body and return the body to an inert state.

The rules of war as they'd been known for millennia were re-written. Here was an enemy that could not be beaten into submission, couldn't be terrified or taken out of action through wounds. Remove a Carrier's legs and it just crawled onwards. Cut off its head, and the jaw continued to snap in rage. Once engaged in battle, it was a case of fighting to the last man standing. The Infected did not stop until each and every brain had been destroyed.

The military had learnt this lesson the hard way. Less than 10% of the population remained. Every major mainland city had been lost. Sheltered by Bass Strait, Tasmania was the only Australian state to remain virus free. But the tide was changing. The army had gained a foothold in Victoria at Queenscliff, and subsequently cleared the surrounding towns of plague at significant cost in human life. And now it was on to the first major city: Melbourne.

The advance had commenced weeks before out of Geelong, hitting the first suburbs of Werribee and Hoppers Crossing with relative ease. But as the density of habitation increased the closer they came to the city, so had the numbers of Carriers. The incendiary bombs used to cull the Infected in Geelong were all gone. It was down to fighting from the armoured trucks, but there was only so much ammunition each vehicle could hold before rifles ran dry and a wall of moving flesh enveloped them like a king tide. Not such a huge issue when the trucks were capable of ploughing through a mob of Infected like a harvester through grain – but the damned vehicles had to function to enable such an escape.

Today, their truck had been the last to withdraw from an advance into the suburb of Footscray. After a day of fighting, they were low on rounds. The other trucks of their platoon were in the same boat and would be unable to provide support until they replenished ammunition.

'We're going to get buried again, aren't we?' said Erin. Her face was pale, lips thin as she watched the Carriers advance closer through the strip of Perspex.

Nobody said anything. It wasn't a question that required an answer – they all knew what would happen, and it was the dread of every soldier that fought in the armoured division.

Vinh picked up the radio and called back to base, lodging a request for assistance. Call made, he hung up the radio and climbed out of his passenger seat chair next to Steph to join Erin and the other Privates in the back.

‘You guys know the drill. We get the truck sorted then shoot Carriers until we run out of ammo,’ said the Sergeant, voice controlled despite a nervous tic at one eyelid.

Steph climbed out of the driver’s seat and retrieved her rifle, automatically running through a quick weapons check. Vinh unclipped a metre-long section of steel pipe from an interior wall of the truck. On the roof above, Erin un-latched a circlet of steel, exposing a palm sized hole, just large enough to admit the pipe. Vinh inserted one end of the pipe, then began extending the outer segment, the pipe elongating like a telescope until the end stood proud above the truck by two and a half metres. Beneath it he hooked on a small fan set up, designed to suck in oxygen from above while extracting carbon dioxide from the cabin. Once a truck was buried for any length of time, air quality became the true danger. More than one crew had been found asphyxiated on retrieval, their bodies unharmed by the teeth and fingers of the enemy – but dead all the same.

The first Carriers were now less than thirty metres away. Erin raised her rifle, took quick aim and squeezed off her first shot. The nearest ghoul was smashed to the ground missing a fist-sized chunk of skull, its brain splattered over the face of the Carrier behind. Steph winced at the horrendous noise within the confined metal space, and quickly stuck in a pair of ear plugs. Despite the added protection, a high-pitched whine of tinnitus told her the damage was already done.

Steph took position next to Vinh and picked out her own target. A child of no more than ten years ran toward her with mouth open, emitting an incoherent scream of rage. Its left eye had been popped from the socket and hung by a shrivelled optic nerve against its cheek. Steph saw this, and yet she didn’t. Moving by practice into a battle mindset, she acknowledged the boy as already dead, allowing her to see him as nothing more than a target. Steph squeezed her trigger and the child skidded to a stop, face first on the tarmac.

Steph switched aim and fired. Switched aim and fired again. Each of the five soldiers in the back of the truck did the same. One shot every two seconds with metronomic regularity. Pick a target. Shoot. All single shots. Every bullet needing to count.

Bodies dropped outside at a rapid rate, disappearing under the feet of those that followed. The truck rocked slightly as the crowd of Infected smashed against the outer wall. Monstrous faces pushed up against the Perspex, distorted by the clear barrier, they snarled and tried to reach the

occupants within. Fists hammered at the metal of the truck, turning hands into messes of shattered bone and pulped meat upon the unyielding surface.

The sound of the demonic cries outside was horrendous, matching the volume of the guns in the enclosed space. Fingers reached through the rifle slit, the only part of the body small enough to breach the space. Irritated by the grasping digits, Erin periodically swept her combat knife in a ruthless arc across the space, dropping the fingers to the truck floor.

There was no more need to aim. All that was required, was to press the end of a barrel against a skull and pull the trigger. Quickly, the pile of dead mounted. With the truck out of action, Steph was powerless to drive into clear space and continue the fight. They were going under.

Her next pull of the trigger came with an empty click. Steph reached into her webbing for a replacement magazine and came up empty. She'd run dry. Over the next minutes the gunfire began to lessen as her squad mates also ran out of ammunition.

In a business-like manner, Erin leant down and swept the severed digits from around her feet into a small pile in the corner, then took a seat on the floor, ignoring the screaming faces through the Perspex above. Slowly, the rest of the team followed suit. Vinh flicked on the fan below the pipe in the ceiling, then joined the soldiers sitting on the floor.

Now came the truly horrific time. The period of waiting with no idea of how long it would take for rescue. If they even *could* be rescued. The truck rocked slightly as the mob pushed against it, the walls a constant vibration under raging fists outside. Steph forced herself to take a slow breath to calm her thoughts and began to methodically dismantle her rifle. Servicing the weapon would help to pass time, and they had plenty of it ahead.

As the crowd surged outside and climbed over each other, light entering the cabin began to dim, blocked out by the bodies crammed against the outside wall. Metal creaked above their heads. The first Carrier had climbed on the roof, and within moments, additional noise told them he had new companions on top. They were now surrounded on all sides, buried under a mass of writhing, dead flesh.

Erin awoke abruptly, a scream escaping her lips before she could stifle it. Her heart raced as she re-oriented herself in the gloom, pupils dilated and

fingers jittering with the surge of adrenaline. Tortured faces pressed against the Perspex strip opposite, fingers squirming through the narrow gap to reach her and her mates. Her heart ached as she realised that she was still in the truck. Still buried under a mob of Carriers.

Vinh reached across an arm and squeezed her shoulder in solidarity. 'From one nightmare to another, eh?' he said, having to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of the Carriers.

Erin gave a slight nod and forced her breathing to slow. Beside her, Steph moaned lightly in her sleep, her legs twitching like a dog tortured by a horrible dream.

'You're not the only one having nightmares, although given the environment, I don't think any of us were going to be dreaming of bloody rainbows and unicorns,' he said with a sad smile.

'Did you manage to pass out at all, Vinh? You can't stay on watch the whole time.'

'Nah, but I'm fine. I couldn't sleep with those fingers scrabbling through the slot near my head.'

'It's been over twenty-four hours now, has there been word from Mark?' asked Erin, her eyes hopeful.

'No, just static through the radio – the bastards on top must have snapped the aerial. I wouldn't worry though, the retrieval team will arrive this morning,' he said with a firm nod.

Erin had a suspicious feeling Vinh was trying to convince himself more than her. She grunted non-committedly, unwilling to argue the point. She had more pressing issues at hand – like where was she going to empty her bladder? If she didn't take a leak, she'd wet her pants.

'What are we using as a toilet? I'm bloody busting.'

Vinh cracked his first genuine smile of the mission. He held up an empty coke bottle in the dim light, already half full of yellow fluid. 'Us blokes have less of an issue when it comes to aiming.'

'Fuck off, Vinh. That's not funny.'

'All right, all right,' he said, raising a hand in apology. 'Steph used her helmet earlier on, then poured it in here with the rest. Might as well use it too, no point destroying another piece of kit.'

Erin snapped up Steph's helmet and went into the corner while Vinh turned away to give her a little privacy. He unscrewed his canteen and upended it to take a sip. Nothing. With a grimace he re-capped and dumped it

on the floor, his thirst left unsatisfied. If help didn't come their way soon, latrine options would be the least of their concerns. Out of food and water – it would be only a matter of time until hunger and dehydration outstripped the Carriers as their biggest torture.

Mark drummed his fingers irritably on the dash, his frustration at the delay steadily mounting. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was now seven o'clock in the morning. Mark was deep within plague infested territory on his own, and by the satellite marker of the lame truck, little more than a few blocks away from his stranded crew. He may have been out of sight of the swarm, but he could still hear them as guttural screams carried on the breeze in fluctuating waves.

Over a day and a half – too bloody long to leave a crew stranded. The rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder rose exponentially amongst soldiers the longer they were left behind. The last armoured truck that he'd rescued after two days buried under a swarm held nothing but dead soldiers, the crew turning their guns on themselves after going mad in the hideous conditions.

To make matters worse, this time the truck held people he loved. People he'd happily trade his own life to save, and call the price cheap. Steph, Vinh and Erin were family; the fact there was no blood connection between them was irrelevant. Shared dangers and combat had forged bonds far stronger than any genetic tie.

The report from the reconnaissance helicopter lay crumpled on the floor where he'd tossed it the day before. The fly-over had confirmed his worst fears. His mates were buried under a swarm of plague-ridden corpses that stretched for blocks. Once the numbers had been confirmed, command had refused to commit additional troops for a rescue mission, deeming five soldiers to be an acceptable loss in the circumstances. Mark had promptly told his superior officer to shove his recommendation up his arse and hung up. He knew a reprimand and likely loss of rank would be waiting on his return to base, not that he cared much at this stage.

A rumbling sound of approaching machinery grew in volume from behind. *About bloody time.* Mark climbed out of his vehicle in readiness. The armoured trucks were adequate in most circumstances to push through a swarm, but when Mark had read the reconnaissance report, he'd known that

to have any chance of success, he'd need something with a little more grunt. He'd called in favours owed and stretched professional relationships to breaking point to get this piece of kit.

On wide metal tracks that chewed the underlying tarmac, came the only Bulldozer within 100 kilometres that had been altered for use in plague infested areas. A reinforced lattice of steel mesh covered the entire cabin, protecting the driver from teeth and probing fingers of the Infected. The ground underfoot shuddered as the enormous machine approached, then with a squeal of metal on concrete, it came to a stop beside him.

'What took you so bloody long?' asked Mark as the driver unlocked the bulldozer's cabin door and climbed down.

The man paused and raised an eyebrow at him. 'So, not even a thanks, mate? I just stole this slow piece of shit from military land and drove all the way from Geelong.' He glanced past Mark, eyes roving the surrounding area as he talked. 'If it wasn't for Steph and the kid, I would have told you to piss off. I mean, what the fuck were you thinking, taking your girlfriend and a child into battle against a swarm?'

Mark ground his teeth and forced himself to take a breath before replying. His mate, Victor, was a veteran of the Queenscliff landing and had risked a court-martial to help him out.

'First of all, Erin's nearly fifteen. I couldn't stop her enlisting after they lowered the age last year. And secondly, just because Steph's my partner, it doesn't stop her facing the same risks as every other soldier in the platoon. You think I fucking like having them out there?'

Victor sighed, running a hand through his hair. 'Look, I got here as fast as I could. The bloody thing wouldn't drive faster than 40kmph,' he said, holding out the key. 'Just bring it back in one piece, or they'll throw my arse in jail.'

Mark took the key and climbed up into the cabin, quickly familiarising himself with the controls. Starting out his career in the army as a sapper, he'd spent more than a few hours behind the wheels of similar equipment. 'Don't worry mate, I'm not planning on spending more time in that swarm than I need to. You'll have the 'dozer back in one piece. Can't guarantee how pretty it'll look at the end though.'

'It's not just you heading in, surely?'

'I'm going against a direct order, and besides, there's no point risking more lives. Either this works, or it doesn't.'

His mate stepped out of the way as Mark turned the key in the ignition and started the machine into motion.

Steph's head was pounding, a crippling dehydration migraine that threatened to split her skull with every heartbeat. There hadn't been a drop of water in the truck now for over a day – solving any toileting issues. Each of them was so dry they'd stopped producing any urine.

She raised a hand in front of her face and was barely able to see her trembling fingers in the near darkness. Steph shoved the hand back into her pocket to still the tremor. She felt her mind starting to slowly unhinge the longer they spent buried. Each time she awoke after sleeping, the struggle to gain control of her faculties had increased. In her dreams it was always the same. She was alone in the back of the truck when the Perspex shattered, allowing the Infected to climb through the gap and attack. Each nightmare finished the same; a Carrier's hand ripping a loop of intestines free of her gut while she screamed herself awake.

Erin was faring worse. She lay curled in a foetal position with eyes clamped tight and hands over her ears, refusing to communicate. If they'd had any ammunition left, Steph was starting to think that it'd be the sanest option of escape. But they'd fought until nothing remained – probably a deliberate move by her sergeant, to prevent an easy suicide in the event of a long wait. And by god, they'd had a very long wait.

Suddenly, Steph felt a vibration through the floor of the truck, then the noise of an engine over the snarls of the Infected. She kicked her sergeant's foot to get his attention.

'Do you hear that?'

Vinh cocked his head to the side, listening carefully. There had never been any scrap of excess weight on the compact Vietnamese-Australian, but now his face looked hollowed, eyes sunken and dull.

'Yeah, but it's not one of our trucks,' he said as he pulled himself to standing. 'Everyone up. Fuck knows what Mark's up to, but it looks like our ticket out of this shit hole's just arrived.'

Mark pushed onward through the press, mashing the undead beneath the

bulldozer's tracks as he steered by the satellite image on his phone. As he'd gone deeper into the swarm, Carriers had climbed onto the machine itself, covering the cabin in a layer of dead writhing bodies, their faces screaming impotent rage at Mark through the wire mesh as he tried to ignore them.

The stench in the cabin was gag inducing as he wiped another drop of foul sludge from the screen of his phone. His body was spattered with more of the same from the creatures above. Underfoot lay a carpet of desiccated fingers, shed by Carriers overhead when they wrenched at the steel mesh with such ferocity that digits were neatly severed by the metal.

Mark blocked it all out, concentrating on the target on his screen. He was nearly there, had to be coming in contact any second. Mark brought the vehicle to a stop then drew his pistol, and with business like efficiency culled the Infected swarming his cage, pushing the remaining bodies aside with a short length of broomstick through the steel lattice until he could see ahead once again. He scanned the writhing mass, eyes skittering across the surface looking for the air pipe as a tell-tale. If they hadn't deployed that crucial piece of equipment, then his mission would be for naught.

There it is!

Dull grey metal streaked with dried blood poked above the press. Mark exhaled a ragged breath and lowered the scoop ahead of the bulldozer in preparation. Slotting the bulldozer into first gear, he drove forward once again, unheeding of the Infected that disappeared beneath.

Steph climbed back into the driver's seat, put the truck into neutral and disengaged the brake. Erin had pulled herself together somewhat and now sat in the passenger seat adjacent.

'How are we going to attach a tow cable with those bastards outside? It doesn't make sense – I haven't heard a single gunshot,' said Erin.

'Yeah, I don't think we're getting towed home for some reason. That noise outside isn't tyre on asphalt, they're bleeding tracks of a tank or something...' said Steph trailing off.

'Can't be,' muttered Vinh. 'There aren't any tanks in Victoria at the moment. Some sort of earth-moving equipment maybe, but...'

Suddenly the truck lurched as the something crunched into the back corner of their truck, knocking Vinh to the ground and driving them forward. The breathing pipe tore free with a screech, unable to tolerate the weight of

Infected on the structure. Steph spun the wheel to keep the vehicle going straight, or what she guessed was the right direction with her windscreen still covered by the Infected.

The truck bucked as it climbed over a carpet of Infected bodies, Steph fighting to prevent them sliding side on to the battering ram behind. A beam of light suddenly struck Steph's face from the right upper corner of the windscreen, forcing her to squint. As yet more Carriers fell free of the glass allowing them to see again, Vinh cheered from behind as light flooded the cabin.

The frantic gallop of Mark's heart eased slightly on seeing the truck finally emerge from the mass of corpses. He'd not seen anything like it while fighting the plague to date. For around thirty metres on either end of the truck, Carriers had swarmed to a depth of three metres, thrashing against each other like eels in a tub to access the soldiers inside.

Although the vent pipe had given the location of the truck under the swarm, Mark had no way of knowing the orientation of the vehicle. It had been guesswork to determine from which direction he needed to make contact. The risk of driving into the truck's side had been heavy on Mark's mind, knowing that it could result in their death if he caused it to roll.

Whoever was behind the wheel had met the challenge, controlling the rough ride with a skill that Mark thought he'd struggle to replicate. As the roof and windscreen came free of the press and he knew the driver would be able to steer more easily, Mark slowly increased the speed of the bulldozer to maximum pace. Bodies popped under his tracks like bladders of air, spurting foul liquid to either side, leaving a charnel house of mashed flesh in his wake.

It was working. Although the Infected continued their pursuit, in the cold state of early morning, they were unable to keep pace. After ten minutes, they burst free of the swarm's edge and hit clear road for the first time. Mark heard a ragged cheer erupt from inside the truck ahead, and he joined in himself, relief flooding his body like a warm bath.

Three blocks further on he reached the point where he'd left the other armoured truck. Vic was standing beside the driver's door looking stressed. Mark glanced behind and understood the reason immediately. They may have escaped the swarm, but it was still within yelling distance, trailing less than a hundred metres behind. Mark braked and dismounted from the cabin in a

hurry.

‘Have you got the tow cable ready?’ asked Mark. His mate nodded and ran to attach it to the front of Steph’s truck.

Mark hammered on the side of the truck. ‘Everyone out, we’re riding in the other truck. We’ll ditch the towed vehicle if things get hairy.’

He heard a lock release at the rear of the truck, then a creak as the door swung wide. Mark pulled Erin and Steph into a brief hug as they jumped down to the ground, then ushered them on to the next vehicle. The noise of the approaching Infected was gaining in volume, they didn’t have much time.

Vinh was the last man out. He gave Mark a quick nod in greeting as they ran back to the first vehicle. ‘You were starting to get me a little worried back there,’ he said. ‘What held you up, Boss?’

Mark just grimaced. ‘Just the usual bullshit,’ he said, slamming the door closed after he’d climbed in. Mark pointed out his mate behind the driver’s wheel. ‘That’s Victor – you can thank him for the ‘dozer. If it hadn’t been for him, you’d still be under the swarm.’

Victor waved off Mark’s introduction. ‘Is that everyone?’ he asked. On gaining confirmation, he took off slowly, allowing the tow line to set the following vehicle in motion before accelerating.

Mark finally had a chance to check out the condition of his mates and squad. Each look exhausted, drawn, and on edge. He grabbed two full canteens of water from behind one of the seats and passed them out.

‘Sorry it took so long. I would have come back immediately, but my truck was running on fumes and we were out of ammo. I figured I’d be more successful once we’d restocked. I just didn’t bet on the response from command,’ said Mark.

‘We got written off as expendable, didn’t we?’ said Steph, her voice thick with disgust. ‘So, the bastards sent us into a shit-storm undermanned, and then wouldn’t even try a retrieval?’ She angrily pushed a sweaty strand of blond fringe off her face. ‘That’s pretty fucked up.’

‘Agreed,’ said Mark. ‘For all I know, you’ll be taking up the issue with a new officer once we return. I went against a direct order to retrieve you guys.’

A quiet voice murmured in the back.

‘What was that, Erin?’ asked Mark.

Erin was staring outside through the Perspex strip, gaze unfocused. ‘This has to stop. They need to find a different way to clear Melbourne that doesn’t

see us drowned under a tide of undead every other mission. Why can't they just incinerate them like in Geelong?'

'There's only a limited stock of those MK77 incendiary bombs remaining and they're being held back for some reason. That and our other problem's a lack of soldiers – until they increase our forces and sort out supply lines, I reckon this push into Melbourne's premature,' Mark said.

'What can we do to voice these concerns with Command?' asked Vinh. 'Because if we get buried like that again, knowing that we're probably going to be abandoned... Soldiers will start deserting. Just saying.'

Mark nodded, his mood grim. 'I'll do what I can. You've got my word on that.'

Chapter Two

Chris lurched forward in his seat as the public bus braked heavily into his requested stop. As he disembarked, the female driver wished him a pleasant day. Chris rolled his eyes in disgust and ignored her. He hated it when ugly chicks talked without being spoken to first.

As the bus pulled back onto the road, Chris waited until the footpath around him had emptied, then placed the heavy rucksack he was carrying on the ground. Lifting one corner of the top flap, he inspected the contents to make sure all was still in order and ready to use. Inside was a gerry can full of petrol with a wad of C-4 plastic explosive stuck to its side. Chris lifted the pack carefully to his shoulders. A waft of petrol hung about him, but nothing that would draw too much notice. Happy that his package was in order, Chris pulled his phone out and turned on the camera app to use as a mirror. He fussed briefly, trying to smooth lank blond hair over a growing bald patch before pulling a baseball cap down firmly to hide the lot.

The rain of early morning had cleared from Hobart, leaving a blue sky above and an earthy smell rising from the nature strip. Chris glanced to the left at the Salamanca Markets, a sneer lifting the corner of his mouth as he observed the crowds meandering like sheep amongst the stalls. The weekend market sold a variety of wares beside the water front. Usually an eclectic mix of art, hand-made clothes, artisan jewellery and foods; since the plague it had become more mundane, mainly selling basic items of canned food and second-hand clothes. His gaze hardened as it reached the vegetable stalls run by the Hmong, a community of Laos refugees that had settled in Hobart forty years earlier. Sheep he could tolerate, but not if they were of a foreign breed.

He had more important things to consume his attention than questions of immigration for a change – that had been sorted for him when the borders were closed to Tasmania after the outbreak of plague. No, today was special, because today he was going to be part of something huge. He could feel it in his chest - today was going to be the start of the revolution, a revolution that his Party Leader had dreamed of since the plague tore across the Australian mainland, leaving Tasmania the last infection free stronghold of the country. Anyone stupid enough to not share their vision would be crushed. Millions had died on the mainland, so he saw the loss of a few more lives as

inconsequential in the greater scheme.

Ignoring the mingling crowd at the Salamanca Markets, he headed toward an increasingly rowdy mob of people filling the park before Parliament House, home of the Tasmanian government. At the front was a podium dressed in the state flag, a blue ensign with a red lion over a white disc. Chris's eyes flicked up to the banner hanging above the podium, and for the first time that morning, he smiled. The 'Tasmanian Patriots Party' stood proudly in block white letters upon a blue background, the red lion from the Tasmanian flag roaring beneath the heading.

Two opposing groups were present, neatly divided down political lines. The Patriots were smaller, outnumbered three to one by those that had come to drown out their message for a better Tasmania. Chris still couldn't believe that their opponents had the hide to call them cowards and traitors. He smiled as he felt the weight of his rucksack pulling at his shoulders; he was many things, but a coward was not one of them.

Chris skirted the edge of the park, past the supporters of the Patriots until he was behind the enemy. He shrugged off his rucksack, careful to keep it upright, then pulled his cap down firmly and flipped the hood of his jumper over the lot. Happy that his features were somewhat concealed, he cradled the pack against his chest and began to worm his way deeper into the press. Chris kept his gaze downwards, apologizing to those he pushed past to avoid drawing attention until he was in the centre of his opponents. He lowered the rucksack to the ground, protecting it between his feet as he looked up to the stage and waited.

Up ahead, the leader of the Tasmanian Patriots Party climbed the podium and faced the crowd. The mob around Chris doubled in volume to counter the cheer of Patriot supporters to the far right. The party leader appeared undaunted by the display of opposition. To the contrary, he smiled broadly as he scanned the crowd before him, seeming to revel in the attention. He straightened the lapels of his navy-blue suit and smiled as cameras flashed from the press cordon directly below the podium.

The party leader held up his hands for quiet and waited patiently for a few moments as the volume dulled. Surprisingly, even those within the protestor block largely stopped yelling, curiosity as to what the man could say winning out.

He tapped the microphone twice to check it was on and was rewarded by a loud thud through the speakers. 'I welcome all of the Tasmanians present to

the formal launch of the Tasmanian Patriots Party.’ As a few jeers sounded from the press, his expression altered to that of a disappointed headmaster addressing an unruly assembly of teenagers. ‘All of you present are here for a reason. Whether or not you support our cause, you are obviously interested in hearing what I have to say, or you wouldn’t have come. Now show some courtesy and hold your opinions quietly for five minutes. I have no problem with you *screaming* after I’ve said my piece, but until then - keep your tongues still!’ he said, expression now hard as he scanned the crowd before him.

The jeers died away to a dull murmur of anger, many of his opponents stunned at being addressed like children. But it had worked. He had the direct attention of all present, and silence to convey his message. Satisfied that he’d won, his expression altered again, replaced like a change of mask to that of a benevolent leader before adoring masses.

‘Good. Now that we understand each other, let’s get on with it. The Tasmanian Patriots Party has been formed to achieve our island’s freedom, to make it an independent country.’

‘Free? Australia’s already a free country, you twat!’ shouted somebody near Chris in the crowd. This time the leader didn’t bat an eyelid at the interruption.

‘And that’s where you’re wrong. For over a hundred years since Federation of the Australian colonies in 1901, our fair state has been at the mercy of the mainland. Tasmanians have been forced to send hard earned money in taxes for redistribution to mainlanders who thumb their noses at us. Mainlanders who never get tired of puerile jokes that we’re inbred or have had a second head cut off. It’s pathetic, and from now on it will stop!

‘We’re the only place free of the hideous plague that was born in Queensland. Free of a plague that has decimated every mainland state before island hopping across the Torres Strait to spread disease to Asia and the rest of the world. And why are we safe while others get torn to shreds?’ he asked, pausing to scan the faces in the crowd as if seeking an answer. ‘I’ll tell you why, it’s because we’re smarter and able to make the key decisions to protect our own; demonstrated through the Premier’s closure of our borders at a crucial time when plague could have lurched ashore like rats escaping an ill-fated ship.’

‘If you love the Premier so much, why aren’t you part of his Conservatives Party?’ taunted a woman in the crowd.

‘Because I say he hasn’t gone far enough!’ answered the leader, eyes bright. ‘We’re still supplying food to a failed army when our own citizens are barely putting meals on the table for their own kids. We’re sheltering a defunct federal government that’s as useless as tits on a bull. This needs to stop, and the only way forward is through seceding from the Federation of Australian states and becoming our own country, becoming the Republic of Tasmania!’

Howls of outrage rose from the protestors surrounding Chris.

‘What about those of us with family on the mainland?’ yelled one woman. ‘My daughter’s stuck in Adelaide with plague all around. Are you just going to abandon them to die?’

The speaker’s eyes flicked toward her with disdain. ‘If your kid thought so little of our state that she moved elsewhere, she deserves her fate. And so do the rest of them. The other states can rot for all I care, I’ll not have Tasmanians risking their lives for those of lesser worth.’

A cry of anger rose from his opponents, overwhelming the feeble cheers from his party supporters. The speaker ignored the lot, yelling over the melee, ‘We will achieve a Republic one way or another! Let me make this clear – if you are not with us, you will be treated as an enemy to Tasmanian freedom!’ The speaker grabbed his papers from the podium and descended, disappearing from view.

The volume doubled, men and women in the crowd appalled at his words and callousness. Chris smiled. What a perfect day it was turning into. He leant down, opened the top of his backpack slightly to check the electrical detonator was still sited appropriately in the plastic explosive, before zipping it closed again. He quickly about-faced and drove through the crowd to the edge and away from his pack. Once free of the mob, he dumped his jumper and cap on the ground and ran for the far side of the crowd where the supporters of the Patriots were standing.

He picked out the leader of the party easily in his navy-blue suit and approached his side.

‘So, it’s sorted?’ asked the man quietly.

Chris nodded, his eyes lit with excitement.

‘How much time do we have?’

Chris shrugged. ‘As much as you want.’ He pulled out a cheap mobile phone from his pocket. ‘All I have to do is dial the right number and we’ll have our bonfire.’

‘Get on with it then.’

‘With pleasure.’ Chris punched in a sequence of numbers, then paused for a moment to savour the experience before hitting “call”.

An explosion ripped through the protestors on the far side of the gathering. Those closest to the blast were critically injured, and for a twenty-metre radius, people were on fire, having been sprayed with accelerant as the can exploded. Screams of agony and panic filled the air as skin melted from victims’ bodies in the hideous inferno.

Chris stared, an expression of happy awe on his face at the level of carnage achieved. Disjointedly, he noted that a smell of roasting pork gave the burning petrol an odd tang at the back of his nose.

His father grabbed his arm and tugged him away. ‘Good work, boy. But we need to move. Time to play the victim for the evening news.’

Chris allowed his father, the leader of the Patriots, to drag him away while he looked over his shoulder, drinking in every moment that he could.

Chapter Three

Mark grasped the note tightly in his right fist as he walked at pace. On arrival to Geelong, a nervous looking Private had met him at his barracks. The young soldier had delivered a summons from his Major before bolting without a further word. The note hadn't provided any information as to the nature of the meeting - and that made Mark nervous.

The summons had come a mere ten minutes earlier, leaving barely enough time to change into fresh clothes, and none to shower the Carrier filth off his body. He'd had to make do with scrubbing at his face, neck and hands with a damp cloth to remove the worst of it.

Mark glanced at his watch as he approached the assigned meeting room, scratching a gob of dried blood off the glass face. *Damn it.* The meeting had started two minutes ago, and if it was for providing notice of an upcoming court-martial regarding the direct order he'd ignored, it was not going to do him any favours. He paused at the door, taking a slow breath to settle his nerves. As he raised a hand to the doorknob, it was pulled inwards out of his reach. A harried looking Major looked at him from across the doorway.

'Bloody hell, Lieutenant Collins, you're fucking last again,' the Major muttered under his breath. Mark's mouth fell ajar, confused by the greeting.

'Don't just stand there like an imbecile, get your arse on a chair. The General's already begun.'

Mark clamped his mouth and glanced past the Major into the room. It was packed. Twenty odd rows of silent officers filled the conference room, facing a lectern at the front where General Black held the floor.

Black's eyes flicked up to Mark as he took a seat, narrowing in disapproval. 'Turn up late to a meeting I've called one more time Lieutenant Collins, and I'll bust you back to the enlisted ranks. It'll take more than the evacuation of a few soldiers from behind enemy lines to get you off the hook next time. Now sit down and shut up.'

The General paused, eventually taking his eyes off Mark to scan the faces of the other soldiers in the room.

'The successes we've chalked up in some of the smaller towns appear to have stalled in the face of excessive Carrier numbers. Accordingly, the time has come to re-consider our tactics.'

Mark found himself leaning forward, eagerly. There *had* to be another

way that didn't place his troops in such excessive danger.

'The stalling advancement is due to key factors of which I know you're already keenly aware. Replacements for soldiers killed in action have dried up leading to undermanned units facing the enemy. Our stock of incendiary bombs is empty, leaving the grunts on the ground to face the full brunt of numbers. And then to add insult to injury, our food supply lines from Tasmania may be cut off – and soldiers can't fight on an empty stomach.

'If we carry on as we are, I fear that we won't achieve our aims,' said General Black, the last words alluding to possible defeat were stilted, as if any consideration of failure was foreign to his reasoning.

An angry murmur broke out amongst the officers present at the news, frustration palpable. The General lifted a hand to quell the voices and carry on.

'Therefore, we will pull back from the advance on Melbourne, regroup and wait for a time that we can attack with the odds in our favour. First of all, we need soldiers, and our own source of food to feed...'

An officer in the middle of the press interrupted, his voice thick with anger. 'We all know the source of our issues – it's the bloody Tasmanian government. When are they going to remember they're actually part of our country and start sending soldiers?'

If the question hadn't been on every officer's lips before, then it was now. Black's eyes tightened with irritation, but he chose to answer rather than reprimand.

'Because there is a nationalistic movement happening in their state, where they don't see themselves as Australian anymore, but rather as Tasmanian first and foremost. My sources suggest this movement is only backed by a small number of citizens, however, our problem is that the State Premier is a key proponent and supporter himself.'

'So, why wait for something that might not come?' asked Mark, immediately horrified that he'd drawn attention to himself by speaking out of turn. It was too late to back out now though, so he continued. 'If it's only a minority in power - unsupported by the people, surely we should seek to remove those that oppose us and replace the leadership with politicians sympathetic to our cause?'

An electric tension filled the air as the room waited in silence for Black's response. All present knew that Mark had just proposed something that was unheard of in over a century of Australian history - a military Coup de Etat.

Black met Mark's eye and held it, saying nothing. As the seconds drew on, a Sergeant Major stood up. 'I'd suggest you re-think your wording, Sir. Statements like that can see a man end up in jail.'

The General sighed and waved the Sergeant Major away, dismissing him from taking any action against Mark. Black suddenly looked every year of his age.

'These are difficult times. A few years ago, we'd never contemplated fighting a plague outbreak like this. Methods that were once anathema must now be considered. I will admit, I have already considered such a plan as much as it made my skin crawl. And after exploring the ramifications of such actions, I am not willing to enact a coup when we still have other options on the table. Were we to attempt one, it would have to be bloodless and overwhelmingly supported by the people. What if we sparked a civil war?' said Black, his voice grave. 'Then we'd be turning fathers against sons, and spilling blood within the last Australian region at peace. As it stands, I'm not willing to risk it. But events are changing across Bass Strait – the Premier has stoked a fire that's now out of his hands, and I think will burn him to the ground. I'm gambling that if we wait, we'll be invited with open arms.'

'And if we're not?' asked Mark.

'Then in six months' time we may be forced to remind Tasmania of its allegiance to the Australian people,' said Black.

Satisfied with the answer, Mark nodded acceptance.

'Now, if there's no other interruptions?' said General Black, scowling as he looked about the room. 'Good. We will be changing focus to the country areas of the state and re-establishing food production on the mainland. We already know that farming communities have had the highest levels of success in holding off Carriers. By getting the farms running and safe against attack, we guarantee our own supply lines and prevent famine in resurrected towns, while also gaining access to a new source of troops. Any available men and women of age surplus to minimum staffing on the farms will be conscripted to the army.'

Mark saw a few nodding heads about him as the rationale sunk in. Without the core building blocks beneath them, there was no point continuing a push into the main cities where millions of the Infected awaited them with open mouths.

'And when we are back to strength, how do you plan on attacking Melbourne the next time around?' asked a Major two rows ahead of Mark.

General Black opened his mouth to answer, but then appeared to think better of it. 'As soon as we have a concrete plan ready to action, the troops will be made aware. But as the proposed strategy will require significant preparation, scenario testing is underway to ensure it will prove resilient against a multitude of possible variables before construction of the battlefield commences. Rest assured, we will be unleashing Armageddon against those dead bastards.

'Your assigned missions await you. Good luck,' said Black. Dismissing the officers with a short nod, he exited the room without a further word.

Mark picked up his briefing paper on the way out. Scanning it quickly, he identified where they were headed within moments. Cob Hill, a small town 180 kilometres northwest of Geelong, had surrounding farms that needed to be brought back on line to supply wheat and sheep. His eyes skittered onwards and then to a stop as he re-read one sentence. A member of his platoon had been requested for a new tactical squad. Erin.

'What do you mean I'm not going with the rest of you?' said Erin. 'You better not be shipping me off to catering or some bullshit just to keep me safe, Mark!' She sat straight-backed on a chair with her fists balled in her lap, eyes furious. 'I had a right to enlist, just like everyone else – it's not my fault we got buried under a pile of corpses for two days!'

Mark held up a hand, 'Jesus, just chill for a second will you. I'm not transferring you to catering, and just so we're clear - this was not my idea.'

Erin took a ragged breath, then slumped into the chair back. 'So, what is it then? Why do I have to get separated from you guys? You're the only family I've got now.'

Mark dumped another spoon of sugar into the cups of tea he was making, gave them a stir, then handed one to Erin. Sometimes he forgot just how young she actually was. At nearly fifteen years of age, she'd seen enough combat against the Infected to earn a thousand-mile stare, and yet, for the most part, she held her shit together as well as any of the other soldiers in his unit.

'It's an experimental squad, one that will be used to attract Carriers to where we want them. For better way of explaining, you'll be bait, albeit a bait

that's out of reach of tooth and hand,' said Mark, cringing at his own description.

'You're not making much sense,' said Erin, a slight tremor of worry entering her voice.

'Shit, it's not as bad as I'm making it sound, I swear. You're going to be trained to fly helicopters. There's some sort of plan to move swarms out of Melbourne to a place of the army's choosing – I still don't know the details as yet, but they plan on using small helicopters to herd or tempt Carriers onward. You'll be like a drover in the Northern Territory where the farms are too big for a horse or motorbike,' he said with a half-smile of encouragement.

'Aren't I too young to fly a chopper?'

'As far as I'm concerned, you're too bloody young to be a soldier, and that hasn't stopped you so far. But even before the plague, you could get an independent flying license at fifteen years of age. The more important thing is your height and coordination – and I'm sorry to say, you fulfil both of those requirements.'

'Crap, so this is actually going to happen?' said Erin. What had been worry on her face was turning into excitement. 'I'm going to learn to fly, how friggin' cool is that!'

Mark smiled as he watched her leave to tell Steph of her assignment. Up in the air, she'd be out of reach of the Infected with no way of being trapped. In reality, it was probably a smart move on the army's part to keep some of their younger soldiers out of harm's way.

Then his smile faltered. If there was a crash while guiding a swarm, and god knows small helicopters in the hands of relatively new pilots made it a good possibility, they'd have virtually zero chance of survival.

Chapter Four

Harry stared at the ceiling above his bed in the half-light of early morning. He wanted to sleep, needed it more than oxygen. And yet it still eluded him, teasing like a mirage in the desert. Work had become a constant. With responsibilities both in a new plague research lab and an understaffed hospital, shifts had ceased to exist. He was either asleep or he was working. If sleep was kind enough to actually find him, it was usually with his head on a table in the lab, or passed out on the staffroom couch at work. He couldn't recall how many days it had been since he'd had the privilege of lying on his own bed, and yet now that he was here, it was doing him fuck-all good.

The sole nurse in the Emergency Department had sent him packing when his head bounced off the table for the third time while attempting to write notes. He'd been on the go for 28 hours prior to that, and working through a state of exhaustion comparative to being blind drunk wasn't doing anyone a favour. So, he'd left. He knew the nurse was more capable than most interns he'd worked with, but the worry of leaving him alone to manage the entire department was keeping him awake. Harry rolled over and shut his eyes, trying to clear his mind.

A vibration came from the bedside table, his pager rattling like it was having a seizure. Harry groaned as his eyes flicked open to stare at the wall. *Not again.* He reached blindly for the table and grabbed the device, expecting a call back to the Emergency Department. His adrenaline spiked as he read the brief message.

Bite victim en route. ETA ten minutes.

This wasn't a case for the ED, once bitten the person was good as dead. No, this patient was headed to the research lab as an opportunity to test the next batch of trial plague treatments. Every second counted. He ran a hand over his face, trying to scrub away fatigue. With a grunt of resignation, Harry forced himself to sit and grabbed the closest item of clothing, a stained pair of scrubs.

Harry slammed the door to his house and started off at a run. The house

he'd been allocated was only a block away from the new research facility that he'd set up in the Old Geelong Gaol. After the failure to contain test subjects at Queenscliff, Harry had campaigned to have the public adequately protected from any future facility. The twenty-foot red brick walls surrounding the old prison buildings had fit the bill and seen the complex pass into his hands. Built in the 1860's, the jail had operated until 1991 when the last prisoner was transferred out. In the middle of the grounds, a cruciform building constructed from bluestone rose three storeys into the air. The east and west wings were largely unchanged, still holding the original prisoner cells that had proved so useful to accommodate Carriers during research trials. Harry had set up his lab in the north wing, along with a makeshift bunk for when his eyes couldn't stay open any longer.

Excessive hours at work, little sleep and poor diet were starting to take their toll on Harry's body. Just the short run left him feeling light headed and out of breath. Drops of sweat beaded on the pale skin of his forehead as he slowed to a stop and hammered on the gate of the jail for admission.

Maybe the smokes will get me before a Carrier has the chance. Harry felt a sick sense of satisfaction at the thought as he waited for someone to open the gate.

A palm-sized viewing plate slid aside, revealing a narrow-set pair of eyes on the other side.

'Geez, you look like shit,' said the guard manning the gate. Hair that once had a healthy spattering of salt pepper, was now slate grey and plastered to his forehead. His beard had long ago escaped control, and now hung to his collar bones.

'Thanks for the vote of confidence, Phil, but I've got a mirror at home,' said Harry. 'You want to let me in sometime today?'

'Oh yeah, sorry mate,' said the sentry as he quickly unlocked the gate and let him through.

'Has the bite victim arrived?'

'Yeah, I let them through around ten minutes ago. You'd want to hurry, they headed to the east wing cell block.'

Harry nodded and took off at a jog, ignoring the stitch that burned in his gut. A modified ambulance was parked in front of the east wing's entrance. A steel grill covered the windscreen and side windows to protect against Carrier intrusion, giving a jarring appearance to the old service vehicle. One of the back doors still hung open, creaking in the breeze. Harry glanced in the back

of the ambulance to confirm it was empty, concerned now at the evidence of undue haste. From inside the building, he heard a scream.

He punched the access code into a pad by the entrance, disengaging the electronic lock, then shoved the door aside. The centre of the building was open air, empty cells rising in three levels to either side of the gap. The open area on the ground floor was now a maelstrom of activity. Two emergency department trolleys were parked on the ground, each with a bite victim tied in place. The ambulance crew were finishing the job of securing the limbs of a lifeless man to the trolley. A woman with dark curly hair glanced up at Harry as he entered. She was one of his fellow researchers, a doctor named Veronica. She hastily pushed a pair of glasses back up the bridge of her nose with a gloved hand as she paused to address him.

‘Harry, we’re too late for that guy,’ she said, pointing to a middle-aged man tied to the stretcher on the right. ‘Can you put him in one of the cells then get back here. I need your help with this one – we might still have a chance with her.’

Harry’s eyes flicked about the scene, absorbing details to get a handle on what was going on. The middle-aged man was dead, a chunk of flesh and two fingers missing on one hand and another crescent shaped wound to his upper arm.

Lysan Plague had a varying speed of onset from one victim to another. Some took only minutes to convert, while others could take hours. The determining factor was severity of trauma. More traumatic injuries involved larger blood vessels, giving the virus quick access to the body and transport via the circulatory system to the brain. In these cases, death was due to blood loss. Harry’s research however, focused on victims with minor bite wounds. In these patients, the virus caused an overwhelming infection, eventually killing the victim through septic shock before taking control of the body.

The middle-aged man was covered in congealing blood down one side of his torso. The bite wound to the arm had severed a larger vessel that couldn’t be sewn off in time, leading him to bleed out in transit. Harry closed the distance to the trolley in a few steps, grabbing the end and kicking off the wheel’s brakes. One foot twitched as he shoved the trolley into motion, heading for the closest cell. Suddenly the man’s eyes opened and his head jerked off the bed, rage contorting his face as he screamed. He was no longer human. The personality, thoughts and memories that had made him unique, were gone. He had become one of the Infected, a creature governed only by

rage, violence and a need to feed.

The ghoul locked eyes on Harry, jaws snapping as it lunged against its restraints. Harry controlled his urge to recoil and finished pushing the trolley into a cell. He locked the door and left the Carrier to impotently snarl and thrash. *If only we could shut the bastards up.* Too many of his dreams were disturbed by Carrier screams, but he knew he wasn't alone in this regard. Even the most functional of survivors suffered from recurring night terrors.

He hurried to Veronica's side. Next to her was a young woman, barely into her twenties. Sweat matted the victim's blonde hair, soaking into the bed sheet below. Her eyes were vacant and blood shot, the surrounding skin an unhealthy grey. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, while a pulse barely flickered under Harry's fingers on her wrist. She was on the way out and they had maybe fifteen minutes at best.

Veronica held a syringe filled with a light-yellow liquid clenched in her right hand. 'Shall we administer it intravenously this time, try and speed overall uptake of the drug?'

'I don't think we have a choice, she's not going to be with us much longer,' said Harry, with little hope that the drug would work. They'd already tried hundreds of variations, and none of them had even slowed down the progression of the disease, let alone stopped it.

Veronica found a vein on the inner aspect of her elbow and gently inserted the syringe until she got a flash back of blood. Now certain she was in the vein, she injected ten millilitres of trial medication. Veronica dumped the used needle into a sharps bin and stood back from the girl.

'Ok, that's Lysan Trial number 189 administered,' she said, looking hopefully at a screen displaying her patient's vital signs.

Nothing happened for a few moments. Harry jotted down the serial number of the vial, and the first set of observations. As he glanced toward the monitor, a frown creased his forehead. The woman's heart rate was sky rocketing, quickly approaching 200 beats a minute. As they watched, her heart rhythm deteriorated into ventricular tachycardia. Losing cardiac output, the patient stopped breathing, eyes staring sightlessly beyond the veil.

Harry reached out a hand, feeling for a carotid pulse under the patient's jaw.

'Any output?' asked Veronica.

Harry shook his head. 'Grab the pads, she's in a shockable rhythm.'

Veronica switched on the defibrillator that was stationed near the head of

the bed, and then stopped, her shoulders slumping.

‘What are you waiting for? Pass them over while she still has a chance,’ said Harry as he exposed the woman’s chest, ready to apply the pads.

‘There’s no point, Harry. We should be saving this equipment for uninfected humans that it might actually help.’

Harry bit back a sharp reply and thumped the side of the trolley in frustration. She was right, and he knew it. Didn’t stop the situation from pissing him off though. The chances of success were non-existent and shocking her would only serve to waste a resource that was now severely limited. Just like most of the equipment in the hospital.

Veronica walked to the other side of the bed and looked down at the dead woman. She looked exhausted, skin pale, movements blunted. Harry’s gaze was drawn to her eyes. They conveyed a sadness that he found difficult to witness, as she wore her grief at a lost husband and son freely for any person to see. And yet she worked on somehow, like they all did.

‘We should probably park her in one of the cells before she converts,’ said Harry quietly.

The other Carrier screamed once more from his enclosure, threatening to tip the heavy trolley with his violent movements. Harry turned to the ruckus, distracted for a moment. Abruptly he felt his wrist jerked to the side, clamped in an iron grip. Harry whipped his head back around to find the woman was sitting up, teeth bared. She emitted an animalistic snarl and yanked his wrist toward her mouth.

Harry pulled back, trying in vain to rip his arm out of her grip as a low wail of terror escaped his mouth. Insanely strong, the Carrier was winning the tug of war, teeth snapping as his hand came closer to its mouth.

From the other side of the bed, Veronica grabbed a pair of surgical scissors and stabbed them in a backward swing, deep into the Carrier’s right eye. Still the beast fought on, oblivious to the jelly sliming her cheek from the punctured globe. Veronica followed up with an open palm hit against the handle of the scissors, driving the blades through the bone at the back of the eyes, and deep into the brain. The Carrier flopped back onto the bed, releasing Harry’s wrist.

‘I could have sworn the retrieval team tied her down after moving her onto our trolley,’ she said, voice shaking. ‘Did she get you?’

Harry lifted his hand before his eyes, checking each surface for a breach in the skin. Nothing. He breathed a ragged sigh of relief. ‘No, I’m good,’ he

replied. 'But that was a little close for comfort.'

'No shit,' said Veronica as she got back to her feet. The male Carrier screamed again from his cell, making her flinch. A look of irritation crossed her face at the sound. 'Can you shut him up, I've had about as much as I can take today.'

Harry nodded, and walked to the side of the room where the lab's captive-pin gun was kept for such duties. Whenever possible, they avoided firearms to reduce the danger of ricochets and equipment damage. Harry checked through the cell door that the Carrier hadn't escaped its restraints, then let himself into the room. Wasting no time, he paced to the head of the bed, pressed the barrel against the Carrier's skull and pulled the trigger. A metal rod punched deep into the brain, killing the ghoul outright. The Carrier fell limp, features relaxing into permanent death.

'Even if I do this for the next twenty years, I'll never get used to it,' said Veronica from the cell's doorway.

Harry backed away from the corpse. After the surge of adrenaline, he felt a little wired and shaky.

'None of these medications targeting the virus are having any effect,' he said, forcing himself to move past the near-death experience and get his mind on track. 'Maybe we should attack the problem from a different angle, stop trying to kill the actual virus, and focus on how it gets a dead body up and moving. Once we understand that, it might open up a whole new pathway by which we can block its effect on humans.'

Veronica shook her head tiredly. 'And as I've said to you a million times before, to this exact line of reasoning I might add – we still have not the slightest idea how the virus achieves reanimation. It should be scientifically impossible and yet it happens. What we *can* look at, is disabling the *actual* Lysan plague virus. Until we know how it activates a cell – we're standing dead in the water with nowhere to go for your line of enquiry. We can't afford to waste that much time. Leave that to the bigger labs in Canberra – we should stick to testing the medications they send us and do the job that's been assigned.'

Harry was about to argue further but was interrupted by his pager. He glanced down, sighing as he read the short message.

'They need some help at the Emergency Department, there's been a surge of patients,' he said. 'I better get down there.' There was no chance he'd sleep in the next few hours after what had just happened, so he might as

well keep working for the next while.

Harry stepped past Veronica out of the cell and flicked off the plastic gloves he'd been wearing into a bin. He looked over at the female Carrier's body and felt a shiver of revulsion at the scissors standing proud from her eye socket. 'Anyway, I think me and her need a little distance for a while. Do you want to come? We can clear this mess up later.'

Veronica nodded, following Harry as he left the building.

Harry placed a mug of steaming coffee into Veronica's hand and sat on a nearby seat at the staff station. With all hands on deck, it had taken less than an hour to work through the surge of patients. Since the plague, the patient mix coming to the ED had changed somewhat. Each person that walked through the doors genuinely needed to be there. His time wasn't wasted by common colds or sprained ankles these days – those who had survived the outbreak had learnt to look after the minor stuff themselves. People knew that resources in the hospital were extremely limited and tried to manage what they could on their own.

'I like that patients aren't wasting our time with minor shit, but I kind of think it's gone too far in the other direction,' said Harry as he leaned back in his chair. 'Take that lady you saw with pneumonia, she should have been in here days ago.'

The patient in question emitted a series of hacking coughs before spitting a massive clump of green phlegm into a cup. Exhausted from the effort, she slumped back on the bed, pale and breathless.

'I hear you. She needs a course of intravenous antibiotics, but we're now officially out of stock,' said Veronica.

Harry swore. 'Are you serious?'

'Yep. She just got our last vial of ceftriaxone. Either she turns the corner with oral Amoxicillin, or she kicks the bucket. It's not like we've got an Intensive Care Unit.'

Harry grumbled to himself in irritation although he was far from surprised. 'We'll have to hit up that list of Geelong pharmacies, see which ones we haven't stripped bare. That might get us a few more weeks of stock?'

Veronica shrugged, 'Yeah, give it a try I guess.'

The limited resources of the hospital were not the only thing that had

changed in Geelong since the plague. Much of the city remained empty. Survivors had moved into the town centre, clustering in abandoned houses around the new army barracks. It was easy to tell which houses were occupied these days. You only had to look at the windows – if they still had unprotected glass, there was little chance of the premises holding a live human. Adequate defence trumped all other features of property appeal these days.

Two storey properties were the preferred construction for safety. By replacing stairs with a removable ladder, an occupant could ensure they were unreachable in the advent of a Carrier home invasion. New construction was also in hand, building upon cleared land created by the incendiary bombs that had wiped out key suburbs the previous year. A builder had solved the problem of materials by merely scavenging from uninhabited houses, and provided a simple remedy for safety by raising houses off the ground on high piers with retractable stairs for access.

Harry finished the last of his coffee and yawned. ‘I’m going for a ward round, hopefully there will be someone good enough to send home.’ The only active parts of the hospital were the Emergency Department and a lone general ward for patients too sick for discharge.

‘Shouldn’t take more than half an hour. I’ll meet you afterwards back at the lab? Better shift those bodies before they start stinking up the place, yeah?’

Veronica, who had been a paediatrician in her former life, grimaced as she nodded, clearly unexcited at the prospect.

As he turned to go, she stopped him. ‘Hey Harry, do you think we’re wasting our time with the research? We haven’t had one iota of success,’ said Veronica, eyes downcast.

Harry looked at her, noting the growing despair that had marked his colleague over the previous weeks. ‘It’s not a waste of time, Ronnie. This won’t be any different to the hundreds of other diseases that have been cured in the past. It’ll just take time and perseverance.’

‘Ok, I guess I have to believe that,’ she said. ‘Because if we don’t succeed – this nightmare’s never going to end.’

Chapter Five

Chris zipped up the front of his leather jacket and shivered. Although the sun dominated a blue morning sky, it was still bitterly cold where he stood in a building's shadow on Argyle street. He looked at his watch yet again. 10.30AM. His girlfriend had usually arrived for a coffee by now after finishing her morning rounds in Royal Hobart Hospital. While he waited, he checked his appearance in his phone, getting his hair just right, then inspected his fingernails. Chris frowned as he noted a rough edge on his right little finger. He'd have to sort that out later. Little details mattered to him, even if he knew others were too lazy to care.

Movement across the street caught his gaze. Julie had appeared. She had a half smile on her face as she looked each way on the road, then trotted across the street to the footpath on his side.

Julie walked right past him without a second glance.

She was always distracted like that. His eyes followed her as she weaved through the morning foot traffic to her favourite café. He loved watching her move as she walked, short brown pony-tail bobbing with each step like it had a life of its own. He knew she liked his attentiveness, even if they'd had a few hiccups in their relationship. If he was honest to himself, it was more than a hiccup. She'd been outright rude to him the last time they'd talked, and he planned on sorting that out now. After straightening his jacket, he stood up straight and followed her.

Julie had just been served a coffee (he knew she loved her skim latte cool enough to drink straight away) and had taken a seat at one of the long bench tables in the café. Naked brick gave the place an industrial feel that Chris appreciated as he took a seat opposite her. It took a few moments before Julie looked up and noticed him. Her pupils dilated and skin blanched as their eyes met.

Julie had seen Chris from across the street as soon as she'd left the hospital grounds. As per usual, she kept her eyes busy, searching out other things on the street to prevent her from having to make inadvertent eye contact with the man. The freak had been stalking her for weeks. A one-

night-stand followed by a few uncomfortable dates had been enough to make her run for the hills. And yet he still didn't get the point that she had no interest in him, and he was starting to seriously scare her. Julie was certain he'd been on the street outside her home earlier in the week, trying to see through her bedroom window. Since she'd last confronted him, screaming for him to leave her alone, he'd kept his distance somewhat, but she knew he was still following her and keeping tabs.

And now the bastard was sitting right before her, just when Dane was due to join her any minute. She found herself holding her breath, her chest tight - the guy scared the shit out of her. Julie forced herself to take a slow breath, deliberately unclenching a white knuckled hand from about her coffee. The guy fed off fear, and the last thing she wanted to do, was give him what he wanted.

Chris watched her with a wry grin as he saw her expression change and adopt a mask before breaking eye contact. But he'd seen that first look, knew she was frightened that she'd pushed him too far with her rudeness during their last interaction. Chris was feeling magnanimous, he'd let her off this time.

'Hey, babe, how's your day kicking off?' he asked, lounging back in his chair to make himself comfortable.

'What are you doing here, Chris? I thought you said you weren't going to follow me around anymore?'

Chris ignored her comment.

'Any interesting patient cases?' he asked, casually reaching out a finger to stroke the back of her hand on the table. Julie snatched her hand away, chair legs screeching on the floor as she pushed it back from the table. Chris rose an eyebrow, his face subtly hardening.

'Well, that was rude.'

'I don't want to make a scene, but you need to leave,' Julie's eyes had become glassy, tears threatening to spill.

'Don't be fucking stupid. I'm your boyfriend, Julie. That means I can touch your god damned hand if I want to.' Chris sat up as he spoke and began to lean forward over the bench top, jaw muscles clenched.

'My body's my own, and I get to decide who touches it and when, you creep,' said Julie, anger beginning to colour her fear. 'And you are most

decidedly *not* my boyfriend. There is nothing between us other than the biggest mistake of a one-night stand. If I knew the type of man you were, I would never have come within a mile of you.'

'Enough!' shouted Chris, thumping the table so hard that an empty cup bounced and smashed on the ground.

A waiter took two quick steps from the counter, appearing at Julie's shoulder, concern creasing his brow. 'Is there a problem, Miss?'

Chris ignored the man, not breaking eye contact with Julie. 'Piss off and mind your own business,' he said between clenched teeth.

The waiter stood uncertainly for a few moments more, unsure what to do.

Chris now turned to the man, his face murderous. 'Are you deaf as well as stupid. Maybe that's why you're stuck working a pathetic job serving other people. I said *fuck off!*'

The waiter nearly tripped over his own feet as he turned and backed away. Chris smiled at the small victory before returning his attention to Julie. 'You owe me an apology. Get on your knees and apologise now!'

'No,' said Julie, her quiet voice shaking.

'What did you say?' said Chris, utter disbelief on his face.

'You're not allowed to come near me again, I'm taking out an Apprehended Violence Order. You're delusional, I'm not your girlfriend and never was.'

Anger started to cloud Chris's mind, blocking out everything else. How dare she try and control when their relationship was to end. His fingers scooped up a pointed butter knife off the table top and clenched it in his hand.

'You don't get to say when it's over, *I* say when it's over, bitch!'

'Put down the knife,' said a firm voice from the side.

Chris barely heard the man, his rage consuming all rational thought.

Pain suddenly lanced up his wrist, yanking his attention away from Julie. He looked down to see the brown skinned hand of another man crushing his wrist onto the table.

'I said put the knife down, or this will become a police matter.' A dark-haired man in jeans and a shirt pinned his hand in place. Chris looked up at him, unbelieving that someone had the gall to touch him.

'Who the hell are you?' asked Chris.

'I'm a cop, and lucky for you – off duty for the moment. I don't like seeing my friends get harassed by drop kicks like you, so let go of the knife

before I lose my patience and haul you in to the station.'

At his words, Chris released the blade and sat back in his chair sullenly. The cop turned to Julie, helping her to stand. 'Is this the douche bag that's been following you?'

Julie nodded, keeping her eyes averted from Chris as he glared at her in silent fury. 'Do you want me to tell him about us?'

Julie stared at Chris now, her eyes bright as she gripped the cop's hand tightly and nodded.

The cop turned back to Chris. 'Julie's in a relationship. You need to quit following her or you'll find yourself arrested for harassment.'

Chris's eyes widened slightly as he finally understood. 'As if Julie would date someone like you,' he said with a sneer, looking him up and down.

'I can talk for myself,' said Julie, finding her voice at last. 'His name's Dane, he's twice the man you'll ever be. And yes – I am dating him.' She grabbed Dane's hand to leave the café, but then paused turning around once again, her eyes flashing in anger.

'And seeing as you're so fond of peeking through my windows – I'm fucking him as well. Now stay away from me, Chris. Next time I see you, I'm pressing charges.'

She turned on her heel and walked out of the café without a backward glance. Dane gave a short laugh as he looked at the naked fury on Chris's face, then followed Julie, a half-smile on his face.

Confrontation finished, the sounds of quiet speech started again in the café as people turned their attention away. The waiters ignored Chris as he petulantly tore a napkin slowly to shreds. He was oblivious to anyone else around as he focused his fury inward, fuming at his perceived loss of face.

He'd make Julie pay for what she'd done. Her and her bloody foreigner boyfriend were going to suffer for making him look like a fool.

Chapter Six

Chris pushed the last half of a perfectly cooked scotch fillet around his plate, then eased back his chair and stared out the window of his father's place in Howrah, a suburb on the northern bank of the Derwent River. The house had water frontage, and Chris gazed vacantly toward Mount Wellington where it soared above the city of Hobart in the fading light of evening. The magnificence of the vista was lost on Chris, who'd long since taken its beauty for granted after growing up with the view outside his kitchen window. He was still distracted by other thoughts.

Throughout the day, his anger had gradually cooled and returned an ability to think rationally. His desire to hurt both Julie and Dane still held fast – they'd sealed their own fate as far as he was concerned. It was just the 'how' that needed to be confirmed. He shivered at the thought of how close he'd come to stabbing Julie in plain sight of a full café. There would have been no escaping a murder conviction, and he had little desire to spend the next decade or two stuck behind bars just for killing a woman. He planned on exacting a bloody revenge, but would ensure that he couldn't be pinned for the crime.

Noise from the adjacent room had steadily increased over the past hour as core members of the Patriots trickled in for the night's meeting. Their mood was buoyant, lifted by the rally's success earlier in the week. His father had called a gathering to plan their next moves and to watch a live address from the State Premier, Justin Stephens. They'd had reliable indication that his message was likely to be in their favour. His Father and Justin had been friends since high school, a bond strengthened by thirty years working in the same Hobart based law firm until Justin had pursued a career in politics. The two men still met for a round of golf each week, a habit targeted by the press as an extravagance when many of the population couldn't even put food on their kids' plates.

Footsteps across the wooden floorboards of the kitchen gained Chris's attention, and he looked up as a hand thumped onto his shoulder. A thickset man stood beside him, a raw smile displaying teeth in bad need of dental care. Chris recoiled slightly at his presence, stifling a need to gag at the man's breath. Named Francis, or Frank for short; the man was his father's through

and through, someone that he used for jobs that required muscle and 'persuasion'. At six foot four and 130 kilograms, Frank generally didn't take too long to bring a person to his way of thinking. A few 'love taps' as he put it, did wonders to enlighten the average Joe on the street.

'Your father wants you in the living room to watch the interview he gave this morning. The news is kicking off and he reckons you've earned your place at the table after last weekend.'

Chris nodded and stood up, biting down on anger at being addressed like a child invited to the adult's table for dinner. He was twenty-seven years old for god's sake and had worn more risk than any other member of the party during the rally. The only reason he hadn't taken his place in the gathering earlier was he couldn't be arsed making feeble conversation with a bunch of malleable idiots. The only person he wanted on side was the man that controlled the lot of them, his father.

As he entered the living room, his father acknowledged him with a stiff nod from the other side of the room. All seats were already occupied, allowing Chris to take up a position at the back of the room where he could observe everyone and their reactions to the upcoming news. Ten men were present. Gathered from various backgrounds and socio-economic class, they were unified by a common hatred of any person deemed an outsider. Whether this was due to race, religion or post code, their hate ran deep, indifferent to the suffering of anyone not their own. The outbreak of plague on the mainland had fed a climate of fear on the island and created the perfect climate for growth of a party such as theirs. His father hadn't been stupid. He'd read the waters correctly and placed himself at the perfect point to take advantage of the situation.

A sixty-inch flat screen dominated the top of a small TV cabinet at the front of the room. Frank lifted a controller and paced unnecessarily close to un-mute the new broadcast as footage of the Premier appeared.

The gaunt visage of Premier Justin Stephens standing behind a lectern filled the screen. Gone was the usual background of the Australian flag, instead, a stylized map of the island state hung in its place.

'I thank the press for turning out, and I will endeavour to keep the message short. As you are no doubt aware, a state election will take place in three months. Due to recent disagreements in policy between our coalition partner the Country Party, we will no longer approach the upcoming election as a team. Instead, the Conservatives will deliver preferences to the

Tasmanian Patriots Party who we share common policy ground in numerous areas.'

'Excuse me, Mr Stephens,' interrupted a member of the press. 'But the Patriot Party is actively seeking independence from the Australian Federation. How can this possibly compliment the wants of a mainstream party?'

The Premier was undisturbed by the interruption. 'I admit that our two parties will form a broad church of political opinion, however, we have a common aim to protect the Tasmanian population from any outside threats.'

He held up a hand to stop any further questions. 'A formal statement will be released in the morning that will undoubtedly address many of the questions that you have. Good afternoon.'

With that curt dismissal, the Premier descended from the lectern and disappeared off camera. After a few moments, the screen flicked to the ABC's studio for analysis.

The show's host, a veteran Tasmanian journalist named Benjamin Scott, introduced himself.

'Premier Stephens has tonight dropped a bombshell on the Tasmanian public. Although an election preference deal may not seem like much, I think it warrants a closer look as to who our leading party is climbing into bed with.

'For the past eighteen months, our state has lived under fear that Lysan Plague will hit our shores, and bring the mindless violence suffered by mainland Australia and other parts of the world to our beautiful state. Unfortunately, despite remaining plague free, it appears we are not immune to senseless barbarity,' said the reporter, pausing as the screen cut to a video of the petrol bomb detonation. The mobile phone footage was shaky with soundtrack intact, the agonised screams of those burning in the crowd was transmitted in gut twisting clarity.

'Fourteen people burnt to death. Twenty more with hideous injuries that will change their lives forever,' said the reporter gravely, individual photos of the victims marching across the screen behind him.

'After the sadistic killing of thirty-five people at Port Arthur in 1996, I thought that I'd never see the like again in our state. And yet here it is once more, senseless violence perpetrated by one of our own citizens, this time, arguably used as a political tool to create fear.'

'There's no doubt about it,' said another voice, cutting in on the

reporter's introductory monologue. 'Disloyal members of the public are seeking to stop honest discussion regarding the future of our state, and this cannot be tolerated.'

The camera panned outwards to include Chris's father, who sat behind the same desk, looking suitably outraged at the footage. The reporter's lips thinned slightly in irritation at the interruption, before deciding to engage his guest at that point.

'This is Liam Finart, Leader of the newly formed Tasmanian Patriots Party,' he said. 'Mr. Finart, you only announced the formation of the Patriot's less than three months ago, and yet the attention it has gained in the media and public consciousness is nothing short of remarkable.'

Finart smiled broadly at the statement and opened his mouth to speak before being cut off himself.

'However, the attention gained by your party has not been positive,' said the reporter, fixing Finart with an accusatory look. 'Instead, a public that is already smarting under a Conservative leadership that has abandoned their responsibility to the rest of the country, are aghast at the isolationist and racist agenda of your party. Some have even gone so far as to suggest the Patriots may have planted and detonated the petrol bomb.'

'That's utter nonsense. I created the Patriots Party to ensure that our state looks to ensure its own safety and stops wasting resources on a failed mainland.'

'And yet there seems to be evidence that you are not above using violence to get your own way,' said the reporter. 'Let me read out some of your own statements, taken from the very speech you delivered prior to the bombing; *"I have no problem with you **screaming** after I've said my piece, but until then keep your tongues still!"* and, *"We will achieve a Republic one way or another! Let me make this clear – if you are not with us, you will be treated as an enemy to Tasmanian freedom."*

The reporter paused for effect, letting the weight of the quotes sink in before moving on. 'To me, these don't sound like the words of a man seeking to achieve the safety and wellbeing of all Tasmanians, but rather, the words of a want-to-be dictator who'd stop at nothing to achieve his own ends.'

At these words, Chris's father broke into a short laugh. 'Benjamin, stop being ridiculous. I've watched you on TV for decades, and I've never seen you take such an unsupportable stance on an important issue. You have no proof for these assertions, and I think your bosses may be a little worried

regarding a libel court case if they continue,’ said Finart lightly.

A brief look of fury crossed the reporter’s face at the threat before he regained his composure. ‘Free speech of the press is not something up for negotiation, Mr. Finart.’

‘And nor am I suggesting such a thing. Members of my own party suffered that day, were burned as well. I’ve studied the true footage of the bombing, and you can clearly see faces of Patriot party members amidst the crowd surrounding the detonation site.’

‘But that can’t be possible, the supporters of the two parties were kept separate by the police to prevent an outbreak of violence. Therefore, it’s unlikely that any Patriots were in the vicinity of the blast,’ said the reporter, clearly exasperated by his guest.

Finart drew back in his chair as if he’d been slapped. ‘I know there are doctored clips circulating, however the bomb went off in the middle of my own people. It is my party who has been injured here. My party who should be seeking damages for what has happened.’

As the reporter went to argue his point, Finart cut him off once again. ‘It appears I’ve been brought on this show under the false pretence of discussing the welcome announcement of Premier Stephens. As this is obviously not the case, I wish you a good night.’

The Patriot leader unclipped his lapel mike and stalked away from the interview desk, leaving the reporter to hesitantly wrap up the segment on camera.

Frank stood up and turned off the television. The room had gone silent, most in the room looked horrified at the outcome of the interview. But not Liam Finart or his son, the two men locking eyes in triumph – the interview couldn’t have gone better as far as Chris was concerned.

‘Mr. Finart, what’s our next move? Should we be concerned at a police investigation?’ asked one of the men.

Finart just laughed. ‘Don’t be a bloody fool, Tony.’

‘But your statements that reporter guy read out, the footage of the bomb going off in the opposition section of the crowd?’

Finart took a deep breath, staring at the ceiling for a moment, clearly annoyed that he was required to explain himself.

‘The statements were deliberately planned for the speech to sound as a

warning. The fool of a reporter helped me out by repeating them and explaining my message for anyone too stupid to work it out the first time. We *want* people to fear us. All I have to do is deny the intent of the words, say “I’m sorry if you thought they meant that”. But it’ll work nonetheless. Now that people know the price of opposition, I can guarantee there won’t be as many people turning out to protest next time.’

‘And the footage of the rally?’ asked another.

‘Must have been doctored. Fake news,’ said Chris from the back.

‘Yeah, but we know that it wasn’t,’ said Tony.

‘Who cares? All we have to do is introduce doubt. As soon as they have to argue – they’ve lost the debate,’ said Finart. ‘All it takes is for you bastards to keep your mouths shut and we’ll be fine. We’re on the cusp of something great. If we can claw our way into a coalition arrangement with the Conservatives, it’s only a matter of time before we run the show outright.’

‘So how do we make ourselves important enough to be needed in a Coalition?’ asked Finart as a rhetorical question. ‘By sewing terror in the public. We make the people afraid, and then present ourselves as the answer, the only means to restore order and keep the monster from the door.’

Chris’s eyes glinted at his words. He already had a plan, one that would have a happy coincidence of wiping Julie’s boyfriend off the face of the earth.

‘We should kill two birds with one stone,’ Chris said from the back of the room, forcing all to look around and acknowledge his presence.

‘And?’ asked Finart, curtly waving his hand for Chris to hurry up.

‘We need to take out the only people capable of taking us down, the police. They’re a limited force, a few carefully placed bombs and we should be able to sufficiently cull their numbers. And who knows where we go from there to protect the public – maybe we’ll need a carefully managed militia to bolster police numbers on the ground. A militia created and answerable to...’

‘The Tasmanian Patriots,’ finished his father, a wolf like grin covering his face.

Chapter Seven

Dust plumed from around the wheels of the battered Hilux ute as it skidded to a stop. Mac gave a cursory look at the surrounds before kicking open his door and climbing down. The access lane he'd used to approach the back of the store was empty of movement. It was the second last shop operating in town and the ones to either side lay derelict, windows smashed and interiors silent. Mac smiled, safe in the knowledge there'd be no-one to hear any noise made by the shopkeeper. In truth, he knew the small town of Cob Hill was nearly always empty these days, the survivors preferring the safety of their farms in the advent of another Carrier outbreak.

Mac leaned back in the cab and grabbed his leather jacket. A glistening of sweat prickled across the blond stubble of his shaved scalp in the morning sun, but he wasn't wearing the jacket for warmth. This was *his* territory, and he'd be damned if he'd be seen without his club colours. As Mac shrugged on the weathered jacket, an image of a skull wearing a Greek helmet drew tight between his shoulders. The Spartans outlaw motorcycle gang had maintained territory throughout this region of Victoria for over a decade. As President of the local chapter, he'd coordinated a lucrative trade in amphetamines throughout the surrounding towns until the plague had come along and killed most of his customers.

And it had been the best day of Mac's life.

All order had crumbled. He'd finally been allowed to inflict violence upon the world as he'd craved to do his whole adult life. Mac had slaughtered any creature that threatened him without a second thought. No more struggling for impulse control. He'd taken anything he wanted, whether it was property, weapons or women. And there had been no repercussions. Because he was the strong, and in this new world – the strong ruled. Yes, the plague had changed everything, and in his deepest heart, he prayed it would go on forever. The only thing he truly missed from the old world was riding. The unpredictable nature of Carriers in the open made a motorcycle impractical, and he'd made the difficult decision to park the machine that he loved more than his mates. But he knew it had been the right move, because what mattered more than anything else was maintaining his position as top dog.

Cob Hill belonged to him and his men. They controlled access to

stockpiled food and weapons, and ensured that none of the farms could fortify themselves to a point where they could be a threat to his men, or worse – independent.

Mac's Sergeant at Arms and two other club members had preceded his arrival, with their car parked at the front entrance to the store. With any luck they'd have his quarry prepped and ready for him to begin work. Mac checked the handgun at his waist, ensuring there was a round in the chamber and then headed for the ute's tray. In the back was a small wooden chest, its surface burnished from years of use. After a quick check of the padlock fastening the chest, he hauled it out and headed for the shop's back door. The box shivered within his grasp, small taps against the interior of the wood like a fish snapping at bait. Mac smiled, one corner of his mouth pulled down by a scar on his cheek. Today's visit was due to the shopkeeper ignoring Spartan rules, and he was going to learn the hard way that Mac wasn't keen on getting played for a fool.

On crossing the threshold, he paused a moment, his head cocked to one side as he listened. A heavy smack of fist hitting flesh, followed by a pained grunt came from a closed room to the right. Mac smiled at the sound – the boys had evidently decided to soften him up in preparation. He paced through to the shop front, picking up an apple from the bench to munch on before turning the sign on the front door to 'closed'. A Harley Davidson motorcycle was parked beside a Toyota Landcruiser. His Sergeant at Arms was one of the few in the club who'd refused to leave his bike behind, preferring to risk a bite.

Another scream came from the back room, this time from a woman. Mac sighed and headed toward the noise. Time to start work.

Mac shouldered open the door and entered. The room was almost as large as the front shop area, and apparently had served as the couple's living quarters over the past year. A double bed was rammed into one corner, a basic kitchenette in the other while a circular table dominated the middle of the room. To either side of this, a husband and wife were tied to dining chairs. At Mac's entrance, both their eyes flicked to his, pupils dilated with terror. Claret dripped from the man's nose, one eye was bruised and almost closed. The woman hadn't fared any better, a front tooth snapped off at the gum and lips bloodied. His Sergeant at Arms dropped a clenched fist that he'd been readying for another blow. A bull of a man, standing at six foot two with a steroid bulked frame, he had every free bit of skin up to his chin

inked with tattoos. He stood back next to the other two club members in deference at Mac's arrival.

'They're all yours, Prez. Thought I'd break the ice, let them know what they're in for,' he said with a half-smile while he wiped blood off his knuckles with a hand towel.

'Mac, I'm sorry. This has been a whole misunderstanding, I swear I'd never do anything to betray you guys!' blurted the man.

The Spartan's president pulled one of the remaining chairs back, took a seat and placed the wooden chest on the table. Every few seconds the box shuddered lightly of its own accord.

'Now Bill, we both know you're full of shit,' said Mac. 'You knew the rules, and yet I've found you've neglected to charge my fifty percent tax on all goods sold.'

'But that was only a few times! Judy's family has no money left – do you expect me to let them starve?'

Mac raised an eyebrow in silent question. 'You really have no idea, do you? I couldn't give a damn if her whole family starves you idiot – just as long as I get my fucking cut!'

The shopkeeper shrank back in his chair, mouth opening and closing like a fish on land, unable to find the right words of appeasement.

'And then to top it off, I've gained word that you have created your own stockpile of weapons.' Mac stood, his chair smashing backward onto the ground. He placed both hands on the table and leaned forward to the shopkeeper, barely keeping his rage under control.

'Of all my rules, you were stupid enough to break this one. *No one* is allowed more than twenty rounds of ammunition and one rifle per person at a time! If I let you do it, one of those idiot farmers might think they can do the same, and before I know it I'll have some bastard wanting to take on the Spartans! If you need protection – you call *my* men for it. Now, where are the guns?!' he shouted, slamming a fist into the table. The chest shuddered of its own accord, a faint clicking sound emanating from within.

The man's eyes flicked toward his wife and then back to Mac as he nervously swallowed. 'I don't know what you're talking about, I swear.'

Mac looked the man in his remaining eye for a moment and shrugged. 'Your call then,' he said, pulling a key from his pocket to unlock the chest. The other Spartans moved closer to see, their pupils dilating with excitement at what was to come.

Mac grabbed hold of a loop of iron standing proud from the middle of the chest and lifted free the object kept within. The shopkeeper's wife screamed, her chair tipping over backwards as she tried to move away. A hot tang rose in the air, wafting from the man as his bladder loosed in terror, urine soaking his jeans dark and dripping to the floor.

Mac grinned at their reactions to his toy. With the help of his Sergeant at Arms, he had screwed a holding apparatus of metal onto the decapitated head of a Carrier the week before. Two bands of steel were screwed into the bone, one around the forehead to the back of the skull, the other underneath the nose, leaving the mouth free to move. To these circlets of metal at the back of the head, Mac had attached a handle of iron, allowing him to wield the skull as a weapon.

The Spartan President walked around the table calmly with the decapitated head like it was nothing more dangerous than a book in hand until he was at the side of the shopkeeper's wife. He leant down, bringing the skull within a hand's breadth of her face. The eyes of the decapitated head locked onto the woman, lips pulled back in silent snarl as the jaw snapped repeatedly. The shopkeeper's wife screamed in terror, tears and snot running freely as she panicked.

Mac looked over at the husband. 'Do you recognise my little friend here?' he said indicating the skull in hand.

'Please don't hurt her,' begged the shopkeeper. 'She's done nothing wrong.'

'Answer the question, Bill. Do you recognise him?' asked Mac.

The shopkeeper nodded hesitantly. 'It's Reg. I thought he and his family gambled a trip to Geelong the other week.'

'Nope. He was the last idiot to cross my boys. Ended up getting himself and his kids fed to my pet Carriers at the clubhouse. But I thought this time around, I'd make use of his body in a different way and turn him into a tool of persuasion,' said Mac, pausing as he looked at the contraption with pride in his own workmanship.

'I call it my 'Biter'.' He moved the skull back to the woman's face again, the teeth mere centimetres away from her cheek.

'Enough of the niceties, Bill. Where's the stash of guns and ammo? If you don't answer me in the next few seconds, your wife's going to lose half her face, and between you and me, I think she'd look better with her skin intact.'

The shopkeeper's shoulders sagged. 'There's access to a cellar beneath the bed. Everything's in there, please, just don't hurt her.'

Mac stood up and waved his men over to the bed in the corner. The Sergeant at Arms upended the frame roughly, exposing a trapdoor. One of the others grabbed hold of the handle and tugged the door upwards while he shone a torch into the gloom below, his eyes opening wide in surprise at the contents exposed below.

'Prez, this isn't just a couple of rifles. He's got a fucking arsenal down here. Something's up I reckon. There's no way he could have got this shit together on his own.'

Mac walked over and peered down. The cellar was a small room, only a few paces in length and width. Approximately twenty rifles along with crates of ammunition were piled neatly in one corner. Rage started to build in Mac's head at the sight. He stormed back over to the woman and brought the Biter near her neck.

'Where the fuck did you get that many guns from? No-one gets that many rifles without help. Who are you bloody working with?'

'I'm holding them for Joel Tipper. It wasn't my plan, I swear,' said the shopkeeper between sobbing breaths. Any resolve he'd owned earlier had crumbled.

Mac bunched his free hand into a fist at his words. 'Tipper? That fucking bastard who used to be mayor?'

The shopkeeper nodded. 'He wants to convince some of the other farmers in the area to help clear you out of town. Thought if he had the weapons first, they might be more likely to join him. I'm just a holding point but he doesn't even know they're here. Tipper thinks I've put them in one of the empty houses in town.'

'Well they're mine now and I'll be paying him a visit later,' said Mac, expression furious. He shoved the Biter even closer to the wife's throat, teeth snapping a hairs width above her skin. 'Are you telling the truth that he doesn't know the guns are here?'

'Yes! I promise!' pleaded the shopkeeper.

Mac nodded, satisfied he was getting the truth finally. 'Good.' Suddenly he punched the Biter against the woman's neck. The Carrier ripped out a mouthful of tissue, severing her carotid artery. Her eyes bugged open in agony as she screamed, a pulsing jet of arterial blood spraying to the ceiling. Mac allowed the decapitated head to tear further into her face and neck

before pulling away and standing upright.

The shopkeeper was screaming, wrenching at his ties in an attempt to free himself of his chair. The Sergeant at Arms paced forward and punched him violently, knocking him unconscious to slump backward.

Mac stared down at the woman dispassionately. Her mouth moved in slight gasps as her eyes stared blindly above, and then she was still. Mac stepped out of the pool of blood surrounding her and placed the Biter back in its chest.

‘Do you want us to get the rifles out, Prez?’ asked the Sergeant at Arms.

Mac took a breath and made his decision. ‘No. Leave them here. If we are up against a turf war, it might be a good insurance policy to have a store of weapons in a different place. We’ll leave these two locked in here as guards,’ he said, pointing at the shopkeepers. ‘Untie her hands and ankles from the chair so she can move once she comes back. We’ll let Bill wake to a nice love bite from his wife.’

Mac flipped the chest lid over the Biter and locked it as his men closed the trapdoor. ‘Right, let’s get out of here,’ said Mac, keen to get moving before the woman reanimated.

The men piled out after him. Each of the rooms at the back of the store were lockable, designed primarily for use as storage areas when built. Mac pocketed the key after locking the door.

‘Do you hear that, Prez?’ asked one of his men, his head cocked to the side. ‘Sounds like trucks coming our way or something?’

Mac walked to the front of the shop. He peered towards the noise through the window and saw with surprise an envoy of armoured vehicles heading slowly down the street. *What the hell is the army doing in town?*

‘Right, you guys – get the fuck out of here before those army boys get any closer. We’ll find out what those bastards are doing in our town later when we’re in a stronger position,’ he said, waving them through the shop’s door.

Moments later, the Sergeant at Arms roared away on his Harley, the Landcruiser tailing him closely. Mac watched for a moment longer, confirming that the army trucks had decided not to take chase, then headed for his own ute, wooden chest in hand.

Chapter Eight

Mark sat in the back of an armoured truck, studying a map of Cob Hill on his lap. He glanced at his watch, checking how long his convoy had been on the road – they should be nearing the town shortly. The town itself was relatively small, no more than eight blocks in all, however it serviced a large farming community in the surrounding area. When active, the farms had produced a mix of grains and livestock – stuff that the army was in desperate need of back in Geelong. He planned on heading for the town, undertake a clearance of any Infected in the town limits, and then work to recruit farmers to his plans once he'd shown of what they were capable.

The truck swerved slightly on the road, causing Mark to rock in his seat. As he looked up at the distraction, a loud thud sounded from the left corner of the truck, followed by a spray of brown sludge across the windscreen.

'Jesus, Vinh,' muttered Steph from the passenger seat. 'Can't you just drive around one occasionally?'

Vinh smirked as he looked in the side mirror. 'Come on, Steph. It's what these bloody things were designed for.'

'Yeah, until it breaks down again,' she said.

Vinh grimaced slightly, concentrating on the road ahead once more. After leaving the army-controlled area around Geelong and nearby towns that had already been cleared, the convoy had encountered moderate numbers of the Infected. But as they'd neared Cob Hill, the number of Carriers seen had significantly decreased. Now it was just the occasional lurching figure across the highway providing target practice for Vinh behind the wheel.

As Vinh cleared a rise, a sign by the highway notified they had arrived at their destination, "Cob Hill: Population 1,200."

Vinh started to gear down. 'Hey, Boss,' he said over his shoulder. 'We're here, and it looks like there's been some type of organized defence in town.'

Mark moved up behind Vinh to look through the front windscreen as the truck eased to a standstill. A makeshift barricade of wood and barbed wire blocked the highway. To either side of the tarmac, the crude perimeter wall continued around the town, enclosing the few urban blocks of houses and shops in a loop of barbed wire. Enough to entangle the occasional wandering Carrier, but useless to prevent the attack of a swarm. The section blocking the

two-lane highway had been mounted on a moveable base to allow access of vehicles when required.

Mark scanned the street behind the barricade – it was empty of movement, as was the dead ground outside. Whoever had made the structure either didn't have the numbers to guard it, or saw no need to.

Mark pointed a finger at a pair of his soldiers in the back of the truck. 'You two, I need that obstruction moved. Keep your eyes peeled for any danger, human or Carrier.'

The Privates nodded and climbed out the back doors, weapons at the ready. Mark shut the doors behind them and returned to observe through the windscreen. A set of wide farm gates had been hung from a post to either side of the tarmac. One of the soldiers slid under the gate on his belly to access the locking mechanism on the other side. Within moments, the gates swung wide, allowing Vinh to drive through and pick up the soldiers on the other side.

Mark looked at his map for a moment to confirm his location. 'Head for the town's main street, it should run parallel to this road one block to the south. If we're going to find anyone, that's probably our best bet.'

Vinh grunted an affirmative and eased the truck back into gear, a low vibration running through the cabin as it picked up speed once again. Mark kept an eye on the last vehicle in their convoy to ensure the gate was secured behind them once again. Its barrier might be basic, but it was better than nothing.

'Hey Mark, we've got some movement ahead,' said Steph, pointing out a small group of men running toward a motorbike and 4WD as they turned the corner onto the main street. Mark thought he made out some sort of skull/helmet picture on the back of their jackets as they scarpered from the scene.

Mark sighed quietly, feeling mildly deflated at the sight. A bloody outlaw motorcycle gang was the last thing he needed to contend with in the town.

'You want me to go after them, Boss? They might be the only people left here to question,' asked Vinh.

'Nah, let them go. If they wanted to talk, they would have waited. We're probably going to have to tread lightly to avoid an open confrontation – I think I saw Spartan MC colours on the back of those guys. They don't tend to play too well with authority.'

‘What do you mean?’ asked Steph.

‘My dad was a cop when I was a kid. The Spartans had a chapter house located in the catchment area of his station, and they were constant trouble. The cops always struggled to pin much on them, but my father thought they were the devil incarnate. Reckoned they ran drugs and illegal firearms.’

‘You think that’s why there’s few Carriers around? If they can fight, surely that’s to our advantage?’ said Vinh.

Mark shrugged as he switched his attention back to the buildings they passed. ‘I guess we’ll find out soon enough.’

The place was a ghost town, devoid of movement now that the bikies had fled. Grass grew to knee height through cracks in the pavement. Most of the shops were damaged, windows smashed, and stock removed. A few buildings had been reduced to charred timbers, however, compared to other towns that had faced an outbreak of plague, Cob Hill had fared better than most.

Mark saw a curtain twitch from the periphery of his vision, and a man’s face disappear. ‘Pull over, I think we’ve found someone.’

Mark climbed out the back of the vehicle, flanked by Steph and another Private. The five other armoured trucks that made up his platoon pulled to a halt on the street. Mark headed straight for the corner store where he’d seen the movement. A faded sign for ‘The Herald-Sun’ and ‘Streets Ice Cream’ fronted the awning above the footpath. Mark tried the door handle without success, the store was locked.

Mark rapped his knuckles on the window a few times, then stepped back and waited. After a few minutes when it became obvious they weren’t moving on, the man he’d seen earlier reluctantly appeared and unlocked the door.

‘What do you want?’ he asked through a crack, eyes furtively dancing about the street behind them as if he was looking for someone else.

Steph gave Mark a questioning glance at the man’s odd behaviour.

‘We’re from the ADF. My name’s Lieutenant Mark Collins, and I’m the commanding officer of these troops,’ he said, indicating the trucks on the road.

‘No shit,’ the man muttered. ‘You think I don’t know an army vehicle when I see it? I asked *what do you want?* Most of the town’s dead, so if you came to help – you’re too fucking late. We already won back our town from those rotting bastards without any help from the government or army. Within the fence, we’re plague free.’

Mark could hear the Private to his right grumble under his breath at the man's words, and he found himself grinding his own teeth to prevent snapping out a retort. There were few Australians that had fought as many Carriers as his men. He took a breath before replying, trying to keep the annoyance from his voice. 'Times have been tough everywhere, Sir, but the army is starting to turn the tide. We're here to ensure families in the region are safe from roaming Carriers and are able to start getting their farms back on track.'

The man's gaze had stopped roving the street behind Mark, and finally met his eye. 'Better late than never, I guess. Though you might find that some here aren't so keen for a handout from the Army.'

Mark decided to change tact. 'I saw a few men wearing colours of the Spartans outlaw motorcycle club when we entered town. They weren't too keen on speaking to us and fled before we could approach. Is there a surviving chapter of the club in the area?'

The man appeared startled by his question and pulled backwards, attempting to shut the door. Mark kicked his boot forward, wedging the entrance open. 'You can close the door once we've finished talking, mate,' said Mark, his voice starting to betray irritation.

'Look, I don't know about any motorcycle club,' he said, his voice starting to climb in pitch. 'I'm just a shop owner – the last bloody one in town now, I think. Leave me out of any discussions about who's running the show, all right?'

'Ok, so who's in charge? I saw the fence that's been built about the town – it took more than a few people to get that job done. Who's coordinating efforts between survivors? I need a contact who can introduce me to the different farmers in the area, someone that people trust.'

A nervous tic pulled at the corner of the man's eye. 'There's no formal leader. If you must talk to someone, start with Joel Tipper. He used to be the town Mayor,'

'Where can I find him?' asked Mark.

'He's on Westfriar Road, ten kilometres out of town.' The man kicked Mark's boot free from the gap in the door. 'Now fuck off, and don't go telling anyone I spoke to you,' he said, slamming the door shut.

Mark abandoned further attempts at interaction and stepped back onto the street. No matter how frustrating it was, breaking down doors when they'd just arrived in town wasn't going to win his troops any friends or trust.

Vinh swung open the back door to the armoured vehicle as the trio walked back. 'What's the go? Any useful info?'

Mark allowed Steph and the other Private to climb in first. 'Yeah, we got a person to touch base with – the previous mayor who lives out of town. But something's not right here, Vinny. Doesn't make any sense that they've emptied the town of plague and built a defensive perimeter – and yet all the survivors seem to have bugged out.'

'Who gives a shit? As long as we don't have to clear every house – I'm bloody happy,' said Vinh. 'Now which direction are we heading to find this mayor?'

Chapter Nine

Harry glanced at his watch and swore under his breath as he saw the time. He was supposed to be outside ten minutes ago to meet Veronica. She'd called half an hour earlier, excited about a breakthrough she'd had at the lab, but had refused to give any details over the phone. He scribbled a last sentence in his patient's record before dumping the file in a plastic tub. The notes could wait, unlike the recently deceased patient they concerned.

Harry stood up from the desk, walked back over to his latest failure and helped the nurse bag the corpse before rigor mortis kicked in. The nurse bent the patient's leg, then with her other hand on its shoulder, used the flexed knee as a lever and rolled the patient towards herself. Harry stuffed the blue tarp like material of the open bag under the body, trying to ignore the damp, waxy sensation of the corpse's skin under hand.

With bag underneath, the nurse allowed the body to roll back again. Sightless brown eyes of a middle-aged man stared up at the ceiling. A light shiver worked up Harry's back as he helped to pull the edges of the bag around the patient so the zipper could be drawn, hiding the deceased from sight. There was something unsettling about being around a human body devoid of life. Once the soul abandoned the flesh, muscles relaxed, fluids pooled, and features changed. What had once been a human became nothing more than a waxen mask, a mockery of the person's appearance in life. It was probably the reason open coffin funerals helped a family grieve. Once you saw the altered face of your loved one and felt their cold skin under hand, the reality of their departure became inarguable. They were gone, never to return. Well, until recently at least. The plague had fucked up that sweet deal for way too many people.

Harry zipped the bag shut over the deceased's face, and then flicked his plastic gloves in the bin on the way out. 'I'm going to grab some lunch, yeah? Be back in half an hour.'

Harry shielded his eyes from the glare as he stepped outside. Although it was only mid-morning, the sun already had some bite. The sky overhead was vivid blue, a colour that people prior to the industrial revolution probably took for granted, and yet for anyone that had grown up in a city's smog, was something rarely seen. There were few active factories or cars these days, and

despite the trauma destroying the human species, Harry couldn't help but think the planet as a whole was already showing signs of benefit from Homo Sapiens being knocked down a peg or five.

'Geez, you look like you've come from a funeral,' said Veronica, a friendly teasing note to her voice.

Harry looked toward her voice and found her sitting on a bench outside the Emergency Department. Her expression altered as she saw Harry's response to her words.

'Shit. Bit too close to the mark, was I?'

Harry nodded. 'Yeah, another one kicked the bucket an hour ago. The guy was only in his forties; survived the plague only to die from a shitty pyelonephritis. We've got nothing left to treat even the simple stuff. It's like we're doing medicine in the bloody 1800's.'

Veronica said nothing, allowing him to vent. There was no solution to the problem, but that didn't make it any less frustrating.

Harry sighed. 'Sorry, I'll shake it off. That's my bitching for the day done, I swear.'

'No skin off my nose,' she said. 'I find it just as shit as you do when I'm on shift there.' Veronica stood up and grabbed his hand. 'Come on, let's go for a walk and forget the Emergency for a while.'

Harry smiled for the first time that morning, allowing himself to be tugged along. He hadn't seen Veronica like this for a while and couldn't help but think it suited her. A few weeks earlier, she'd turned up at his house with a couple of wine bottles to share that she'd been gifted from a patient's family. Neither had the tolerance for alcohol they once did, and as inhibitions were blunted with every glass, they'd ended up spending the night. But competing demands of the hospital and research load, combined with grief for her lost family had prevented any further developments. It wasn't that he was averse to the idea, Harry just didn't think it was something fair to ask of her when at times she seemed to be only just functioning. But maybe that was a bit harsh. If you were able to function at all these days—surely, you'd proved yourself to be extraordinarily resilient?

Harry shook his head clear of his musing and focused instead on the feel of her warm fingers entwined about his own. So much nicer than the greasy cold skin of his dead patient, or the Carriers they toiled over to discover a cure. So much more... Alive.

The two walked down Swanston St. toward the bay and Eastern Beach.

As he walked in the sun, Harry felt the tired ache in his chest lessen with each step as he created greater space between the hospital and his latest perceived failure. After five minutes, the pair reached the edge of parkland sloping down toward the beach. Cyclone wire fencing had been erected along the foreshore, preventing stray Carriers emerging from the water right into the heart of town.

Harry glanced back over his shoulder at the grand houses on the other side of the street. Despite the view, each lay abandoned and there was little surprise at that. Delivered by vagaries of the tide, the water was the biggest source of Infected to Geelong these days and the occasional one still got past the fencing. No one wanted to wake up to a Carrier munching on their arm, no matter how pretty the view or luxurious the house.

‘So, what’s the big news that couldn’t be discussed over the phone?’ asked Harry, his fingers now hooked through links of the fence as he stared across the bay to the abandoned Shell Refinery on the far shore.

‘I think I may have achieved a breakthrough,’ said Veronica.

Harry’s breath caught and he stared straight at her. ‘What sort?’ he asked, forcing down his excitement. They’d had zero luck so far, it didn’t make any sense for that to change overnight.

‘I think I may have worked out how the virus keeps the body active after death.’

Harry said nothing, waiting for her to elaborate.

‘The other night I was lying awake for hours. I started thinking on what you said about attacking the problem of the virus from a different direction by concentrating on blocking its action, rather than trying to kill the actual virus itself. That made me start to wonder what parts of the cell would be crucial to get it up and working again? And then it hit me – it has to be making energy.’

Harry raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m not following you. We agree that the Carrier’s dead, there’s no heart beating in there. Why would it need energy?’

‘I thought the same thing initially, but then realised something had to be enabling muscles to contract otherwise they wouldn’t be able to stand and attack us. So, I looked into the cell taken from an active Carrier, rather than those that we’ve euthanised already.’

‘And?’ asked Harry.

‘The mitochondria of the cell were working again, albeit abnormally slowly, but they must be producing energy of a sort for the cell. And the other

thing – the infected mitochondria were filled with Lysan Plague virus.’

Harry’s mind reeled at the news. He’d just taken for granted the entire cell was dead, but it made sense when shoved right in his face. Mitochondria were an organelle found within a cell that worked like a factory, converting food and oxygen into a useable fuel for the entire cell. Without them the cell couldn’t produce enough energy to function.

‘My theory is that once the virus penetrates the organelle wall of the mitochondria, it somehow reactivates it to start producing energy again. Maybe if we can find what protein channel the virus uses for gaining access, we could stop the disease in its tracks.’

Harry’s initial excitement started to wane as he thought further on the problem. ‘It might stop them from re-animating, but without an active immune response from the body to the virus itself – the victim will still die from a plague induced sepsis.’

Veronica’s brow furrowed at his dismissal and she pulled back from Harry. ‘For fucks sake, you were the one touting this line of investigation just the other week. Are you cutting me down just because *you* didn’t come up with the goddamn solution?’

‘No, that’s not it at all. I still believe it’s important – but it will be only part of the entire picture. We still need an immune system that recognises the plague virus as soon as it enters the body, so that the body can launch an all-out attack to kill the virus before it multiplies past the point of return. We still need a vaccine of some sort.’

‘Well I think you’re wrong, Harry. If we can block the virus’ access to the parts of a cell that matter – I think that will make the virus null and void. Who gives a shit if you have the virus in you if it can’t do anything? In the current state of the world – that’s a cure that I’d accept,’ she said. ‘Surely it’s at least worth investigating?’ she asked.

‘Of course it is. You’re definitely on to something – we just need to determine how much impact it’ll have on an infected subject.’

‘So, you’ll help me?’ asked Veronica, eyebrows raised in question.

‘Give me a break. As if I was ever going to say no.’

A scream sounded from further down the slope at the beach, freezing the smile on Harry’s face. Both turned to investigate, eyes locking on a shambling figure headed directly at them.

‘It must have come out of the bay while we were talking,’ said Harry as he lifted his scrubs top to expose a holstered pistol. Few people who planned

on remaining alive walked an open street without a weapon at hand, and Harry was no different. He pulled free his Glock, chambered a round and then waited with the pistol hanging at his side.

‘Shouldn’t we just call it in for a formal patrol to deal with?’ suggested Veronica.

‘And what if it manages to find a weak spot in the fence in the meantime?’ said Harry. ‘No, we found it, therefore it’s our responsibility to put the bloody thing down. It won’t take long.’

Veronica nodded, stepping back to give him some room. Harry squared up, concentrating on slowing his breathing as he watched the corpse approach.

The creature looked like it had been in the water for an extended time. A few remnants of rotted cloth were slimed onto its skin. It had been an obese man in his sixties before the Lysan Plague took hold. Where a protruding beer belly had once sat, was now just a flaccid apron of skin that hung down over the shrivelled remains of his groin. Water dripped from matted hair that had a seaweed tinge of green. The skin and eye on the left side of his face had been nibbled away by fish, leaving an empty socket that oozed a pink sludge over the bare cheekbone. The remaining eye was fixed on Harry as its legs started to pump faster in agitation to attack.

Harry waited until it was no more than a few metres away, then placed the tip of the pistol through the fence and lined up the ghoul. A single shot punctured its forehead, flipping the Carrier’s skull back like it had been hit by a cricket bat. Harry watched it slide down the slope in a jumble of limbs until it came to an untidy rest. Knowing it wouldn’t move again, he holstered the Glock and turned back to Veronica.

‘So, where were we again?’ asked Harry, the tight expression on his face failing to match the nonchalance of his voice.

Chapter Ten

Chris bunched his hands into fists and shoved them deep into his pockets as he walked. A sheathed knife was attached to his belt, its presence given away by an unnatural lump beneath his thin jacket. Seeing a stone on the road ahead, he kicked it hard into the back of a parked sedan. The stone sparked on the metal in the dark, leaving an indentation of his anger.

He was fuming from what he'd seen. Chris had tried to stay away from Julie since their fight, wanting to distance himself in the lead up to her murder. But tonight, he hadn't been able to help himself. With barely a conscious thought, he'd found himself hiding in the garden outside her house in the dark, watching as she walked around inside. Julie still hadn't fixed her vertical blinds as yet, so he could see clearly enough between some of the gaps with the lights on behind.

When she'd gone into the bedroom and changed into some lingerie, he'd watched mesmerized with one hand shoved down his pants, the other clutching his knife. And then it had all gone wrong. The fucking police officer, Dane, had turned up. Julie had let him in and taken Dane straight to the bedroom, ripping his clothes off as they went. Naked, they'd hit the bed and Chris had forced himself to leave before rage overcame reason a second time. How he would have loved to smash his way in and kill them both then and there, to answer the calling that begged him to satisfy warped pride and desire through blood and torture. But not here and now when he would be the prime suspect. His current need for violence would have to be met elsewhere.

Chris exited the end of the suburban street and walked into the light of a small strip of shops. Four out of the five shops were empty, victims of the current depression. Most people struggled to put food on the table, turning what had once been a fad diet of two 'fasting days' each week into an unwanted reality. Chris cared little about these struggles, and he saw the slackening skin folds on people that had once been obese as merely amusing. If anything, it was good for the Patriots. A healthy dose of desperation and fear would turn greater numbers toward his father's party and grant them the power he desired.

Chris shoved open the door of the only illuminated shop. A single bulb cast a dull glow over the serving area, the rest had been unscrewed, leaving three short aisles of sparsely stocked shelves in shadow.

‘Good evening, can I help you, sir?’ asked a man behind the counter. The shopkeeper was a gentleman of Indian heritage who observed his new customer with bright eyes. Chris ignored the question as he turned on the spot, looking over the shelves. The shop was much warmer than outside, and Chris unzipped his jacket, the edges moving back to expose the logo on his underlying t-shirt. “Tasmania First” stood in bold white against the navy blue of the shirt, underscored by the Patriots party’s lion.

Irritated that he couldn’t see what he wanted in the gloom, Chris finally turned to the shopkeeper. ‘Why don’t you get some more lights on in here, I can barely see anything.’

‘Sorry, I’m trying to keep costs of electricity down. It’s either the lights or turn off the refrigerators and lose my frozen produce,’ said the man behind the counter with a shrug of his shoulders. ‘What are you after? If we’ve got it, I’ll be happy to find it for you.’

Chris sighed and stepped closer to the counter and into the circle of light cast by the single globe. ‘I want alcohol. Preferably something strong – have you got any?’

From his seated position, the man started to reach under the counter for something, but then paused for a moment before returning to his former seated position. His expression had changed. Gone was the pleasant openness of a few moments prior, replaced by a closed expression of muted anger. ‘No, I don’t have any alcohol in stock. Nor is anything else for sale. If you don’t mind leaving, I’m going to close the store now.’

Chris’s mouth dropped open in surprise. ‘Like fuck you are. I saw you reaching for a bottle of something under the bench. How about you sell it to me, so I can get the hell out of your grimy store.’

The man remained defiant. ‘I don’t sell to people who support *that* party,’ he said, raising a finger to point at Chris’s shirt. ‘That man Finart and his party full of traitors are an embarrassment to our state. Tasmania should be fighting with the rest of Australia, not abandoning them when they need us most!’

Chris felt himself go cold at the man’s words. *How dare he talk about my father like that.* In Chris’s mind, his father was the only other human worth anything, the only other man that saw the world as he did with a clarity unencumbered with sentimentality or empathy.

‘You take that back,’ said Chris quietly, his mouth tight and body still.

‘It’s my store, and I’ll say what I please. Now get out!’ said the

shopkeeper, his face flushed and hand shaking on the bench top.

Chris glanced away from the man, his eyes roaming into the four corners of the store to ensure there were no CCTV cameras, and then out the front window.

There was no-one to see, nothing to record.

A half smile kinked one corner of Chris's mouth as he lifted the back of his jacket and withdrew his knife from its sheath. The shopkeeper froze as he saw the blade appear.

'What? Not so brave now? If I'm the traitor, then that must make you a hero ready to die for Queen and country?' he taunted.

Like a striking snake, Chris whipped his knife up and punched forward over the bench, driving six inches of steel deep into the man's chest. His victim stared down at the knife between his ribs, eyes wide in disbelief. Chris grabbed hold of the man's shirt collar for purchase, twisted the handle to loosen the blade against the suck of flesh and withdrew the knife, only to stab it another four times into chest and neck. Bright red blood from the shopkeeper's lungs bubbled out of his mouth and nose and pulsed from the neck wound.

Chris shoved him backwards, releasing his grip to let the man drop. The shopkeeper twitched on the floor, emitting a wet gurgling noise as he drowned in his own blood. Chris leaned over the counter to watch until the man finally lay still, expiring after a last gout of blood from his mouth.

Chris sighed, a warm satisfaction melting the tension he'd carried from Julie's house. He picked up a chux from the benchtop and wiped his blade clean, then cleaned the blood splattered on his face and arms at a sink in the corner.

As he walked toward the exit, he had a second flash of irritation thinking on what the man had said. If he'd been willing to openly disparage the Patriots, then there must be other people out there doing the same. That had to stop. Chris walked behind the counter, squelching through a pool of congealing blood about the corpse and started a quick search of the cabinets. With a smile he stood up, clutching a can of spray paint.

Ten minutes later, Chris ran from the strip of shops, pausing briefly to admire the sight. Fire bloomed behind him, spreading quickly until the store was a roaring inferno. He grinned, pleased with how he'd turned his night around.

Two shops had been reduced to ashes amongst twisted beams of metal and cracked brick. Smoke still rose in white tendrils but the fire was out, drowned in water by one of the only remaining fire crews in Hobart.

One of the firemen, a bloke named Mitch, swore in frustration. This had been the last functioning store in the local area, run by a man that had helped his neighbours by giving lines of credit that he knew were unlikely to be repaid. And now the store was gone, with the owner dead at the hands of some cowardly thief who had burnt the evidence.

He was tired, worn out and above all, fed up that he hadn't been paid for over four weeks. If the government didn't come through with cash in the next few days, he'd have to find another way to feed his family. And that scared him, because he'd not the faintest idea how he was going to manage.

As he dragged the hose out of the shop, he noted one of the other guys staring dumbly at something on the path.

'Oi, Zac! Wake up and give me a hand with this shit, will you?' he said, annoyed at his colleague's lack of action.

The other guy looked up at him, his face blanched in the harsh glow of their truck's light.

'Mitch, I don't think this was a robbery tonight,' he said, pointing at the ground. 'This was political. I think our state's breeding its own fucking Nazis.'

Mitch was confused for a moment, taken aback by the look of fear on his mate's face, a man he'd seen climb through raging infernos without an ounce of concern. Eventually he followed Zac's direction and looked at the concrete, and realised words had been sprayed on the path.

'Dissent will not be tolerated. Tasmania First!'

Chapter Eleven

Mark left most of his platoon in Cob Hill to begin a rough sweep of buildings to confirm the town was empty of Carriers. He'd identified the town hall, which would do fine as a barracks until more comfortable accommodation in some of the town houses could be negotiated with the residents. There were still a few hours of daylight remaining, so he'd left with Vinh to try and find the old mayor. Mark had thought the directions incredibly vague at the time, 'ten kilometres out of town on Westfriars Rd'. Turned out there weren't more than a handful of properties strung out along the road in question, and only one near the ten km mark.

Where a dirt road cut away from the tarmac of Westfriars, Mark climbed out of the truck to unlatch a wide gate blocking their path. He scoped the surrounding terrain as he opened the gate for Vinh. The dirt road drove straight through a paddock with a low wire fence as the only divider between the two. Mark walked to the edge of the field and stretched out a hand to brush the top of the grain crop. Golden wheat rose above waist height, wind moving the stalks gently like ripples in a pond. Mark tore a head off the top of a stalk and crumbled the grains into the palm of one hand. He was no expert, but the plants looked like they were ready for harvest.

After following the road for a few hundred metres, the wheat fell away behind them at the end of its paddock. Now to either side of the road the earth lay bare, grass poisoned so that the view from the homestead to the surrounding paddocks lay unobstructed. The house was built from a red brick flecked with bluestone and topped with a grey corrugated iron roof. The only indication of defensive measures about the building itself was found at the windows, where boards of treated pine had been hammered onto the wooden frames. The house had around 100 metres of open space to each side, and then the fields of grain continued.

Vinh slowed before drawing to a stop and cutting the engine. A moment later, the front door of the house opened and a man who looked to be in his late forties emerged into the grey afternoon light. His head was topped with unkempt curling blond hair that reached down the nape of his neck, while he cradled a rifle in his arms. His face remained relaxed, but the firm stance he took indicated that he was unlikely to be easily intimidated.

Mark climbed out of the truck, keeping his movements smooth and

deliberate as he had no desire to put the man on edge. Leaving his rifle in the vehicle, he kept only his pistol and short sword at his waist. The smith made sword was sheathed in a plain leather scabbard, a replica of the Ancient Roman tool of war that he had taken from a museum display at the outbreak of the plague. The blade, now scarred and nicked from the numerous times it had saved his life, had become a talisman of sorts for him. Without it he felt naked, like he had been stripped of his luck.

Mark raised a hand to acknowledge the landowner. As he opened his mouth to speak, a high-pitched metal rattle sounded briefly. Mark was reminded of the bell his father had attached to his fishing rod to notify of a fish's bite when he was a kid. Suddenly the bell starting ringing again as if it was being violently shaken. The farmer's eyes switched from Mark to the fence line behind, scanning the perimeter for the source of the noise. He lifted his rifle, aiming straight at Mark.

'Get down!'

Mark dropped, crawling for the cover of his truck as a shot cracked. The bell stopped for a moment, then began in earnest, joined now by the snarl of an Infected.

'Your truck's blocking my shot. This one's yours,' grunted the farmer, clearly annoyed. Vinh had emerged from the truck.

'Twelve o'clock, Boss. Carrier on the fence,' he said pointing.

Mark was back on his feet, pistol in hand. He looked in the direction Vinh had indicated, but saw nothing until he glanced down to ground level. A Carrier was half through the base of the fence, hips trapped as it tried to force its way onward. It focused on Vinh as the soldier stepped away from the vehicle and brought his rifle to bear. He squeezed off a single shot, smacking the ghoul's head backward as the bullet drove home.

The two soldiers walked over to inspect the corpse. Before it caught the plague, the Carrier had been a kid, looking no older than ten or twelve. And it looked not long dead, the wounds on its legs still wet. Along the wires of the fence, little bells were clipped at intervals, like those usually tied to a cat's collar. Other than the warning device, there was little more than a strand of barbed wire at the top to slow a determined Carrier down. Mark heard footsteps approach from behind as the farmer joined them at the fence line. As the man gained sight of the boy, he swore.

'Damn it! That's the Jenkins gone. We'll now bear the full brunt of anything stumbling in from the north,' he muttered.

‘You know this kid?’ asked Mark.

The farmer nodded. ‘Yeah. My wife used to babysit him when he was a toddler. His name’s Noah, youngest of the Jenkins family that lived two kilometres behind us as the crow flies. If he’s dead, the whole lot of them will be too.’

Mark stared back down at the kid. No wonder he hadn’t seen him above the waist high grain. The corpse’s legs were gnawed to the bone under his knees, calf muscles missing, forcing it to crawl through the wheat.

‘Sorry for your loss, mate,’ said Mark, unsure what else to say in the situation.

The farmer gave a brief nod of acknowledgement. ‘I’ll bury him later, least I can do for them I guess,’ he said with a sigh before turning his attention back to Mark and Vinh. ‘My name’s Joel Tipper, I used to be the mayor of this town before it all went to shit.’ He stretched out an arm, shaking both Mark and Vinh’s hand in turn with a firm grip. ‘What’s the army doing here? We could have used you guys last year – barely a third of the local population remaining these days.’

‘Short story, we’re here to get the farms running. If we don’t get a sustainable supply of food coming to the army and other survivors, famine will finish off what the plague started. My name’s Lieutenant Mark Collins, and this here is my Sergeant,’ he said, hooking a thumb back in Vinh’s direction. ‘I’ve been sent to your town to help the locals make this happen, and with your background, I figured you would have the best insight as to the problems we need to solve.’

As Joel soaked in this new information, his eyes widened slightly. ‘So, this means the army’s starting to have some wins? All I’d heard to date was failure after failure until our lines of communication were cut.’

‘Yeah, it’s early days, but we’ve secured a good foothold in Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula. But if we’re to retake Melbourne – we need more soldiers and food.’ Mark cast an eye warily at the wheat field from which the kid had emerged unseen until the last moment. ‘Maybe we should head inside to talk further? If the kid’s family was overrun by Carriers, he’s unlikely to be the only one out there.’

‘Nah, I don’t think there’ll be any others following,’ said the farmer. ‘I could be wrong, but I doubt it was a random attack. It’ll be the Spartans sending me a message.’

Mark looked back at the hideous trauma to the kid’s legs. If this was the

sort of shit the bikies were up to, it was no wonder they'd hightailed it earlier in the day. 'What do you mean exactly?'

Joel started to walk back to his house as if he hadn't heard the question. 'Come inside. My son will keep a watch for any other arrivals.'

A teenager stepped out of the shadows of the front door as he heard himself being mentioned and nodded a greeting at the two soldiers. The kid looked about fifteen and had the same self-assured posture of his father. Mark sheathed his sword, not even recalling drawing the weapon, and stepped through the door to the interior's gloom.

As the kid closed the front door after them, the inside of the house was plunged into darkness. Mark followed Joel down a hallway more by listening to his footfall than sight until they came to a small lounge room where Vinh and himself were asked to have a seat. As Mark's eyes adjusted to the low level of light, more features of the room emerged from the shadows in myriad tones of grey like an artificial twilight. A couch sat opposite their two armchairs, a low coffee table dividing them. To his right lay a barricaded window. The Tippers had been diligent in reinforcing these weak points, with a second layer of boards hammered into the frames from the interior as well, covering any cracks through which an unwanted eye might stare.

Joel lit a candle in the corner, the feeble light blinding after the darkness. He brought it over to rest on a coffee table and sat on the couch opposite. Next to the candle he unfolded a map of the town area and surrounding farms. Mark saw that notations had been made on the paper in red and black, some with crosses, others with ticks or squares.

'I've marked on here which farms still have survivors in place,' said Joel as he sat back on the couch. 'There's a bit of a mix in produce from our area. If you're able to get the majority of these places up and running, you'll get a supply of beef, grain and poultry.'

'What's with the ticks and crosses?' asked Mark.

Joel paused before answering, watching both Mark and Vinh through hooded eyes as if he was weighing them up. 'How long's your unit going to be stationed in town?'

'As long as it takes to get the job done,' said Mark, starting to become exasperated by the man's evasiveness.

'And if the main dangers to your mission end up being human rather than the Infected, what then?'

'I'll ensure the law of Australia's upheld,' said Mark. 'Can you get to

your point and stop skating around the edges. I can only give a concrete answer if you speak plainly.'

Joel sighed, evidently making his decision. 'The farms I've marked on the map are those that survived the first two months. It was about then that the Spartan outlaw motorcycle club decided they would treat the town and surrounding areas as their own private kingdom. They've had a chapter house outside Cob Hill for going on a decade, and the vast majority of the community saw them for the scum they are. So, as you can expect, once they started acting like they owned the place, taking what they wanted and stopping people from fortifying their homes appropriately, it didn't go down too well. They responded by killing anyone that openly defied the club.' He pointed at one of the small black crosses drawn over one of the properties on the map. 'Those with crosses or squares on them have since been killed, the crosses indicating the ones that I suspect have been killed by the Spartans, whereas the squares show the farms that have succumbed to a Carrier attack.'

'What about the ones with a tick beside them?' asked Vinh.

'They indicate the families that would likely support efforts to expel the club, while the rest I don't particularly trust anymore.'

'You said something about them stopping families from fortifying their own properties? That doesn't make sense,' said Mark.

'It does from their point of view. In the beginning of the plague, the Spartans openly fought the Infected hand in hand with other citizens, clearing the town and fortifying the margins of the city centre. But then their actions became more like a 'protection' racket. They began pressuring families to avoid adding defences to their own houses, saying that they could depend on the Spartans to give aid. But most of us saw their motives for what they were – they just wanted to ensure no one could defend themselves against the club itself.'

'Is that why no-one seems to live in the town despite the barricade?' asked Vinh, his brow creased in concern. 'Because they're scared of the Spartans?'

'Yep. They treat women like objects, taking what they wanted from those in town. Most people fled to outlying farms where it was less easy for the club to visit. But they still do from time to time,' said Joel, looking like he had a foul taste in his mouth. 'It's also why I'm stuck with nothing more than a set of bells to warn of Carrier attack.'

'You said the Spartans were sending you a message via that kid with the

chewed legs?’ asked Mark. ‘If they wanted you dead, surely there’s more direct options than that?’

‘I’ve openly opposed their club president too many times for them to let it lie, but I’ve still got a little influence in the area, so they’ve avoided targeting me so far.’ Joel paused. Although his eyes were open, his focus was inward. ‘That kid’s death was my fault. His father, a man named Reg, backed my calls for the Spartans to stay off the farms, and I reckon they wanted to show what would happen to people if they took my side.’

‘But using a Carrier to kill the kid?’ asked Mark.

‘They use fear as a deterrent. Can you imagine watching your kid getting torn apart by one of those things?’ said Joel. ‘And they know I’ve managed to lay down a crop. If they were going to have a chance for the boy to get close enough to potentially do some damage, they needed him to stay out of sight. Chew out his legs – problem solved.’

Mark glanced at his watch. Time was getting on, he had less than an hour of daylight. Joel had given him some things to consider, but he wasn’t keen to form a judgment based on one man’s opinion. He needed more evidence before he was willing to decide. He glanced across at Vinh, tapping his leg to get his attention.

‘We need to get going. Thanks for the information today, Mr Tipper. I’ll take your advice into consideration as we move forward,’ said Mark, as he rose to standing.

Joel looked concerned as he stared up at him. ‘What do you mean “into consideration”? You’re kidding yourself if you think the Spartans are going to take interference lying down. They’ve already forcibly recruited young men from the area. If you don’t strike first and hit them hard, you’ll be putting not only your soldiers at risk – but more importantly, the lives of anyone who decides to support your efforts.’

‘If they’re stupid enough to attack my soldiers, they’ll pay for it in blood,’ said Mark, unmoved by Joel’s words. The farmer’s jaw bunched with frustration, but he let the topic drop and walked them back to the front door.

‘I’ll be calling a town meeting shortly, and I’d appreciate if you could notify anyone likely to aid us in getting the town off its knees and functioning,’ said Mark, as he shook Joel’s hand in farewell.

‘I’ll do what I can, but don’t expect a big turnout. Until the Spartans are gone, few will volunteer to place their neck on a chopping block.’

Joel watched the two soldiers drive away. He'd done what he could to warn them, but knew it hadn't been enough to convince the officer to launch a proactive campaign against the Spartans. He felt old in his skin, more tired than he'd been for years. Not only would his family be facing the constant danger of Carrier attack, they'd now be a target of the Spartans.

Joel looked down at the corpse by his feet, his eyes drawn to the mutilated lower limbs. By fighting back, it wasn't just himself he was risking, he was past the point of caring for his own life. But that of his kids was a different matter. Joel forced himself into action, driving his spade into the earth with more force than necessary. He wanted the grave dug and Carrier gone from his sight, because as the light faded around him, all he could imagine was his own son's face staring up at him from the corpse below.

Mark did a last walk around the perimeter of the hall to satisfy himself that all weaknesses in the external structure had been negated. There were only two external doors and the windows along each side were well above head height, however, he was determined not to overlook a subfloor entry point. Despite the town's barricade, he had no plans on letting down his guard, and until he knew more about the Spartans, he considered them an additional threat.

He finished his loop at the front entrance of the hall and turned on the spot, shining the torch in a slow circle to confirm that he was still alone. Mark was about to knock on the door to gain entry when he had a sudden thought. He stretched up one hand and brushed it along the lintel above the entrance. A smile kinked the corner of his mouth as his fingers knocked something cool and metallic to jingle on the ground. A set of keys. Mark leant down to collect his find and tried the first one in the lock. With a light click, the mechanism opened, allowing the door to swing inward a few centimetres.

He looked straight into the end of a rifle barrel, a little black eye that held a promise of death.

'Sorry Boss,' said the Private on guard duty, dipping the rifle as he recognized his officer. 'You gave me a surprise. I didn't think we'd found any keys for the hall?'

‘Well, we have now,’ said Mark, tossing him the set. ‘Might as well deadlock it from inside.’

Leaving the sentry to his job, he walked into the town hall where the men were camped. Built in the 1930’s, the building had seen little maintenance in the subsequent years. Paint bubbled and curled off the exterior weatherboard like flakes of psoriasis, littering the ground beneath with small particles of white. A large room where country debutants had once danced the night away on wooden floors consumed the interior. The same floorboards were now warped and bounced underfoot, much of the underlying structure probably eaten by termites long before. His soldiers had laid out sleep mats on the floor along the walls, their gear kept contained in packs for prompt evacuation at the smallest notice. Several of the men had already passed out, snoring softly in preparation for the next watch duty. A waist height stage was centred on the back wall with a door exiting to either side. One to the left gave access to a rudimentary kitchen, while the other led to a backstage room that Mark had claimed for himself.

He stifled a yawn as he made for his room, more than ready to pass out for a few hours sleep. After closing the door to the hall, he found Steph had placed her bedroll next to his. With the necessities of command and time in the field, the opportunities for them to spend the night in each other’s company had been far too few. She’d left on a gas lantern, parked a few feet to the side of their bedding that cast a warm yellow light. If Steph had been waiting up for him, she’d obviously failed in her attempt. Her eyes were closed and breathing deep, the bottom half of her body buried under an army issue sleeping bag. A light snore escaped her mouth, making Mark chuckle softly as he sat down and pulled his boots off. Blond hair that she usually kept in a functional ponytail was out for a change, pooled about her shoulders. She wore only a singlet top, and small goose bumps were raised along her arms in the cool evening.

Their relationship had been accepted by the platoon long ago, neither of them providing any reason for others to complain. Steph fought as hard as any of the men and faced no fewer dangers because of her partner. Rather, Mark worried that she saw more than her share of action just to ensure that no mouths whispered behind their back.

Mark eased himself into his own bag quietly to try and avoid waking her, then rolled over resting his head on an arm for sleep. A light jab from a finger in his back made him turn around.

‘Oi, that’s a bit rude isn’t it? I’ve been waiting up half an hour for you,’ said Steph, smile lines at the corner of her eyes taking any sting from her words.

‘Give me a break, you were snoring your head off when I came in,’ said Mark, leaning over to give her a kiss. ‘I thought I was going to have to roll you on your side so you didn’t attract any Carriers onto us, the noise was so loud,’ he said, with mock seriousness.

‘You really know how to chat up a lady, Mark Collins. I guess I wasted my time, shaving my legs under that bloody cold tap then, eh?’ she said, one eyebrow raised. Steph reached one hand down to her shin and winced. ‘The razor was a piece of shit too; I swear I took off more skin than hair.’

‘How did you find time to do it?’ said Mark, looking a little bemused.

‘Well I won’t be doing it again, that’s for god damn sure. Some stupid rituals are better left in the old world I reckon,’ she said, unzipping the side of her bag. ‘Now, are you coming in or not?’

He didn’t need much encouragement, unzipping his own bag and throwing it over the two of them like a blanket. Steph snuggled in under his arm, resting her head on his shoulder. Mark pulled her in tight, relishing the feeling of her skin on his. His relationship with Steph was one of the few things he was grateful had occurred since the outbreak of the plague. In battle, she became a true warrior, a shield maiden suited for a Viking battlefield. And yet, when the danger subsided for a while, her wicked sense of humour and warmth helped to keep him sane.

‘Vinh said you found the mayor?’ she asked. ‘Does he reckon there’s enough survivors to get any farms working again?’

‘The area got hit hard, but around a third of the farming families are still on their land. Should be enough to get some produce heading to Geelong if we can get them on side.’

‘If?’ Steph pulled back a little so she could see Mark’s face. ‘Why would anyone refuse?’

‘Remember those Bikies we saw? Turns out they’ve set themselves up as local warlords. Joel Tipper - the mayor, reckons most people will be afraid of helping us unless we can wipe out the club.’

‘That fits with another account I heard today. During the town sweep, we found a tough old bird living alone. Once she realised we were here to stay, she was happy to talk.’

‘And she backed up Joel’s story?’

‘Yep. Called them animals, and that she’d rather have a Carrier enter her home than one of the Spartans. Apparently, most people abandoned the town centre once the Spartans started abducting and assaulting any woman that took their fancy,’ Steph said with a grimace. ‘The woman had only stayed in town because she was too old for their taste, so got left alone.’

‘That’s two corroborating sources now, kind of makes it hard to ignore,’ muttered Mark.

‘So, hit them hard. They’re a risk to the mission, not to mention the platoon. Surely we should take the initiative and strike first, wipe them out before they have an opportunity to draw blood,’ said Steph.

Mark chewed on his lip for a moment. ‘Yeah, but we don’t have artillery or air support to bomb the shit out of them. If the club’s barricaded, the chance of sustaining casualties during a direct assault will be high.’

‘Our armoured trucks would smash through any gate if we hit it hard enough.’

‘It’d still be one hell of a gamble. Plus, there’s more to consider in the equation.’

‘Like what?’ Steph was up on one elbow, cheeks pink as her rate of speech increased. ‘We’re here to get farms off the ground, Mark. If we get to wipe out a few degenerate rapists – it’s an added bonus. I don’t see why you’re stalling.’

‘The army needs more soldiers, and if they’ve got prior experience killing Infected, that’s even better. From Joel’s account, the Spartans have nearly thirty men in their ranks, and half those numbers were forcibly conscripted from the surrounding farms. If we bring the club to heel peacefully – that’s thirty experienced fighters we can gain for the army.’

‘Your logic’s flawed,’ said Steph. ‘Even if you could bring them on board, who’d trust them? As soon as they had wriggle room, they’d either mutiny or desert.’

‘The army presents an offer they can’t refuse, either transfer their loyalty or accept a much shorter lifespan,’ said Mark with a shrug. ‘You know how discipline is meted out in the troops; any bullshit will be kicked out of them quick smart, and besides, they’d be completely split up, no two men would be put into the same platoon.’

Steph sighed as she lay back down. ‘Fine. I see your point, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it. Then again, I’d rather send those bastards out to fight than the kids we’ve been getting of late.’

‘Agreed,’ said Mark, hugging her in closer, ‘Now can we forget Cob Hill for a moment?’

‘Only a moment?’ said Steph with a cheeky smile. ‘You’ve got to stop selling yourself short, babe.’

Chapter Twelve

Harry stared out the window of the ute as it sped along the Princes Highway. It was the fastest he'd been in a vehicle for months, the army having cleared all car wrecks from this section of road during the previous months. His presence had been requested to provide design input toward a new field hospital. Other than knowing it was for a future battlefield, Harry had little information about the task. It hadn't been a request he could refuse. In reality, he was still a member of the armed forces and was only on secondment at the General's discretion.

Harry would have preferred to be in the lab, continuing work on Veronica's latest plague breakthrough. As soon as she'd contacted the Council for Disease Containment (CDC), the government body responsible for coordinating national research efforts against the plague, they had instantly recognised the value of her finding. Within a day, the CDC flew her to Canberra where the necessary equipment and technology existed to make her theory into something tangible. This had left an increased load on Harry's hands, not only in the lab, but also in his Emergency Department that now had to cope with one less doctor.

Veronica had called him the day before, her excitement palpable as she announced a significant breakthrough. Her team had discovered a protein channel used by the virus to access the mitochondria. If they could only work out how to block this path into the cell organelle, it could stop the plague in its tracks, or at the least prevent it from reanimating a corpse. A possible cure was now painfully close, and here he was, stuck doing the bidding of the army for some project they would tell him nothing about.

Movement off the road caught Harry's eye. A pallid figure lurched slowly through waist high grass, destination unknown. Unconsciously, Harry brushed his fingers over the butt of his sidearm, checking that a means of self-defence was close at hand. Harry saw it register the noise of the ute, head flicking up to track their vehicle. What had been slack, aimless movement changed in an instant, became a frenzied motion toward them, rage and hunger writ large over its face.

'I thought we'd cleared this area of plague?' said Harry. His escort in the driver's seat grunted. The man was grey around the temples, a career soldier that looked like he'd seen his fair share of combat.

‘We did,’ he said. ‘Killed everything that moved between Geelong and Footscray where the first advance was halted. Unfortunately, that doesn’t stop the occasional roaming Carrier from turning up, but at least there haven’t been any migrating swarms. The main body of Infected are still packed into the Melbourne CBD, stuck behind a purpose-built barricade on the Westgate Bridge.’

Harry’s eyes tracked the flailing creature until it fell behind them and out of sight.

‘Do you know anything about this battlefield under construction?’ asked Harry. ‘I hadn’t heard a thing about it before today.’

‘And that’s the way General Black wants it for the moment. It’s a change in tactic, so until he can achieve a proof of concept, I don’t think he wants to risk a publicized failure. That’s my take on it anyway,’ said the soldier, with a small shrug of his shoulders. ‘And when you see the sheer size of the project, you’ll understand why Black’s hedging his bets.’

Harry’s interest was properly engaged. ‘So, what’s he doing?’

‘You can see firsthand when we arrive, it’s not much further down the road. Saves me the job of explaining.’ The soldier wasn’t forthcoming with any more information. Harry bit back the urge to question his escort further and forced himself to wait.

The driver began to slow, gearing down as he pulled off the highway and onto a dirt road heading west. Low hills of the You Yangs National Park reared above the flat plains to the immediate south of the road.

‘Right, we’re here,’ said his driver. Stamping heavily on the brake, gravel skidded under the tyres as the ute came to a halt.

Out of habit, Harry inspected the surrounds for any signs of Carrier before opening his door. They had stopped in a rough car park, the dirt underfoot churned into mud in many places by heavy vehicles. To the left was a massive holding bay for earth moving equipment, protected by a high chain-link fence. Harry climbed out of the ute and turned on the spot, taking in an earthen wall that soared above the north margin of the car park. About thirty feet in height, it continued to the west in a slight curve for a few hundred metres.

On the Geelong side of the wall, a series of metal towers constructed from steel scaffolding sprouted from the ground, spaced at one hundred metre intervals. Atop each one at a height of fifty feet was a simple roofed enclosure.

The soldier saw Harry's inspection of the towers. 'Snipers. They're the true heroes of this operation to date.' A barrel protruded from the hut on top of the nearest tower. Two sharp cracks rang out as the rifle fired at something over the wall, before the barrel was pulled back out of sight.

'The machinery attracts any Carrier within earshot. If it wasn't for the snipers, there's no way construction could have continued at the current rate.' The soldier marched off toward a rudimentary staircase in the wall's shadow, waving a hand for Harry to follow. 'Come on, we'll climb the bastard. Once you get a view from the top of the wall, you'll finally understand what we're creating here.'

Harry nodded quietly, trailing in the older soldier's wake as he climbed a set of scaffold stairs to the top. He emerged onto the top of the wall and stopped dead, taken aback as the sheer scale of the construction site finally hit home.

The soldier grinned at his response. 'It's no playground that we're building, eh?'

The top of the wall was around four metres wide, easily allowing the movement of soldiers without impeding fighters at the edge. On the side facing Melbourne, lay a deep trench from which the soil for the wall had been excavated. The wide trench effectively doubled the height of the wall on the defensive side, creating a formidable barrier. Both sides of the earthen wall were buttressed with timber to keep the soil in place.

The wall curved slightly toward Melbourne on each flank, creating the atmosphere of a giant amphitheatre. The plains ahead were barren, any properties that had lain in the way were flattened and trees removed, enabling a clear line of sight.

Harry took a deep breath as he imagined the plain before him filled with a massive horde of Infected. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as his mind's eye saw the swarm stretch to the horizon, a city's worth of Carriers heading toward a barrier made insignificant before their hunger and rage.

He stepped back from the wall's edge, his skin a tone paler than two minutes before. 'Surely this isn't how Black's going to empty Melbourne?'

The older soldier misread his expression for excitement. 'You're damn right it is,' he said, slapping Harry on the shoulder with enthusiasm. 'Can you imagine it? This wall will extend from Port Phillip Bay, across the Princes Highway and west for a couple of kilometres in one massive arc, all ready to corral the Melbourne swarms for extermination. We'll be like bloody

warriors in ancient times, defending civilisation from savages bent on our destruction. It'll be battle the way it should be, you know - before drones and surface to air missiles took the killing out real soldier's hands. A tide of plague-ridden corpses will break on this wall, and we'll pick the bastards off until none are left moving.'

Harry frowned at the man's words. Nothing ever went to plan, even when it seemed fool proof. In his experience, there was always some bastard quirk of fate that wanted to cock things up. Empires had built walls throughout history to keep out the enemy, and as far as Harry knew, none had been particularly successful, only ever being as strong as the men defending them.

'How long until it's finished?' asked Harry.

'Probably another six months,' said the soldier. 'Hopefully time enough to recruit and train the troops needed to man the bloody thing.'

A rumble of an engine interrupted their discussion as a huge earth-mover seemed to appear from the very dirt of the wall below Harry's feet. Steadying himself, he peered over the edge, noting for the first time that a tunnel through the wall allowed movement of trucks and equipment between either side.

'Apparently, I'm here to give advice about constructing a field hospital or something?' asked Harry, changing topic.

'Yeah. We need to know location and how big you think it should be.'

Harry shrugged. 'Location's straight forward – keep it close to the Princes Highway to aid transport of high risk cases back to Geelong Hospital. As for the size, I don't think it'll need to be all that big. Maybe enough beds for twenty – fifty wounded?'

The soldier looked dubious. 'You *have* seen the extent of the wall? I brought you out here so that you could fully understand the scale of what we're attempting. There's going to be thousands of soldiers on site.'

'So? If it holds, there should only be a handful of accidental injuries. We'll be all on one side shooting outwards, I mean, how many 'friendly-fire' incidents can there possibly be in a situation like that?'

The soldier's forehead creased in concern, trying to understand Harry's line of thought.

'It's the only outcome worth preparing for,' said Harry, realising he'd have to explain his reasoning. 'If you attract a swarm of that size onto the wall, and somehow they break through – there'll be no need for doctors or a

hospital.'

'Yeah, why's that?'

Harry sighed, wanting to get back to Geelong and his work. 'Because if they break through, it's game over. We'll all be dead.'

Chapter Thirteen

‘Do you want to kick off proceedings, Boss?’ asked Vinh. ‘If we leave it much longer, you’re going to start losing people.’

Mark sighed with frustration as he looked around the sparsely populated seats of the Town Hall. He knew Vinh was right, but he’d hoped for a much bigger turnout than the handful of nervous men sitting before him. Joel had warned that many would be scared of openly supporting the army, fearful that any such cooperation would invite retaliation from the Spartans. Mark hadn’t believed so many would be deterred until he’d viewed it with his own eyes.

Mark stood up and introduced himself to the group. ‘I’d like to personally thank each of you for taking the risk to attend. I am sadly aware that these risks are not limited to the Infected, however, I give my word that the Spartans will no longer have an opportunity to terrorize your town,’ said Mark, deciding that the elephant in the room should be shot quickly. Most of the men appeared to take some heart at his words, and he noted more than one set of shoulders square. He smiled inwardly at their response – maybe he would have some success yet.

‘The situation across the country is dire. The latest figures estimate that over seventy percent of the population has succumbed to the plague. This loss of life is unprecedented in Australian history. All of us have lost friends and family to the Lysan abomination, and if we don’t act quickly, more will die from hunger alone. When Carriers tore across our states in a bloody path of violence, the food industry was also torn apart. Stocks are nearing exhaustion, and if Tasmania abandons the mainland, our last access to a food supply will be lost. Famine is but months away, and unless we act – it will finish off what the plague started.

‘The army has achieved its first key wins in a war against the Infected, but it can’t run on an empty stomach, or without reinforcements to plug holes ripped by the Carriers’ teeth. This town, along with many others throughout rural Australia, has the unique position of being able to turn the tide against the plague, by re-establishing the growth of basic foods and supplying men and women to the ranks.’

‘And how the hell do you think that’s going to happen?’ asked one of the men in the audience. ‘You talk big ideas, but the realities of planting, let alone *harvesting* crops while simultaneously being hunted by the Infected...’

the man paused, shaking his head at the thought. 'It's madness. All we'd achieve is our own deaths.'

Mark held up his hand to forestall the meeting degenerating into fear. 'I acknowledge it won't be easy, and some farming methods may need altering. But don't forget,' he said, 'you'll have the resources of the army at hand to kill any Carrier that seek to interrupt your work.'

The same man opened his mouth to speak again, but was cut off by Joel before he could air further negativity. 'My farm has wheat ready for harvest, along with a few head of cattle. If I volunteer my land as a test case and we come up with strategies that work, will you join us?'

Several of the men nodded, a few more were non-committal – but it was enough to make a start.

'Thanks, Joel,' said Mark, walking over to shake the man's hand before turning back to the rest of the group. 'There's one more thing I want you all to consider. This isn't going to be a one-way street where you're expected to act for nothing more than love of county. In return for your support, we will help to improve the level of security about the properties of those involved. Think on that – I'm offering help to ensure your loved ones make it to the other side of the war.'

At the back of the hall, one of the soldiers lowered a radio from his ear and broke ranks. 'Boss, we've got some movement at the town border. Two utes carrying men have come through the northern gate and they're wearing Spartan insignia.'

'Good. Let them approach unimpeded, I want a meeting with their president.' Mark turned back to the farmers in the room. 'We have some unexpected guests arriving shortly. Until we've dealt with them – it may be in your interest to remain unseen. If you follow Private Horitch here,' he said indicating the soldier that had brought him the update, 'he'll take you into a back room.'

Most of the farmers needed little encouragement, filing out of the hall quickly, but Joel stood his ground, refusing to budge. 'I'm not going anywhere, Lieutenant Collins. It's a free country, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let common criminals push me around any longer.'

Mark considered arguing, then let it drop. The man had a spine that wouldn't be bent, something that needed fostering in the town. 'Ok, but I'd request that you avoid drawing attention. If this negotiation becomes a little,' he paused trying to find a diplomatic phrase, '*strained* shall I say, I'd prefer

you don't catch any lead souvenirs.'

Mark positioned several soldiers along the left side of the room. If it did come down to a fight, he had no desire for any of his men to get hit by friendly fire. A low rumble of car engines approached, growing in volume until the Spartans pulled up outside.

Mark walked calmly to the centre of the room and waited, his face impassive as he ignored the desire to hold a weapon. Mark had won the first psychological battle by forcing the Spartan President to seek a meeting, and he'd be damned if he let them think he was even mildly concerned by their presence.

Heavy footsteps stomped up to the door before it was smashed aside. The Spartan President, Mac, strode into the room, followed closely by his huge Sergeant at Arms and two other members. Behind the bikies, the two soldiers that had been on guard outside, stepped through the entrance with rifles in hand, and took up a new site of duty inside the doorway.

Mac ignored the soldiers stationed down the side of the hall, heading straight for Mark in the centre.

'That's far enough,' said Mark, his voice cutting clear across the room.

Mac pulled up four metres away from the officer. The man was red in the face, sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool afternoon. He glowered at Mark, then looked around the room at the soldiers lining the side, his movements slightly unsteady, until his gaze fell on Joel. On recognizing the farmer, Mac spat in his direction. A gust of air through the open door swept over Mac, carrying a sour smell of alcohol and unwashed skin. His right arm hung at his side, the fist gripping the stock of a sawn-off shotgun.

'I take it you're Mac, the President of the local Spartan MC chapter?' Mark said.

Mac gave a stiff nod, opening his mouth to speak. Mark cut him off before he could get a word out.

'Good. Lay your weapon on the ground.' The tone of his voice gave no room for compromise.

'This is my town, soldier boy,' growled Mac, ignoring him. 'You can take your order and shove it up your arse.'

At an almost imperceptible flick of Mark's wrist, his soldiers raised their weapons as one, sights trained on the Spartan leader and his men.

'The order was simple, drop your gun, or you'll be disarmed by force,' Mark said, voice impassive. As Mac's stubbornness continued, Mark sighed

and waved Vinh forward. 'Your choice.'

Vinh took two steps from the side of the hall, reversed his rifle and smashed the stock into the side of Mac's head, driving the man to his knees. Blood sheeted the side of his face from a deep tear in his scalp. As the Sergeant drew his arm back for a second blow, the Spartan finally dropped his weapon on the floorboards. Vinh sent the shotgun skittering out of reach with a flick of his toe, then roughly patted down the bikie for other weapons. Satisfied that he no longer presented a risk, Vinh returned to his former position, leaving the bikie to regain his feet.

Mac had not uttered a sound after the strike and showed no sign that the wound caused him pain, maintaining eye contact with Mark throughout. 'This town belongs to the Spartans,' he said, 'and the army's not wanted or needed. We provide protection and security here, *not* you. I want you and your men out by tomorrow.'

Mark's composure finally broke, a short bark of laughter escaping his lips. 'Cut the bullshit. You have no power to order anyone around, let alone an officer of the ADF. You're a common bloody criminal that belongs in a jail cell.'

Mac clenched his fists, cheeks flushing in anger. 'You're making a mistake taking us on. Anyone who insults the Spartans is as good as dead.'

'Whatever,' said Mark, looking like he'd become bored by the conversation. 'The only reason you're still standing is that I want your members. No point wasting men with fighting capability on some wannabee gangster. You have a week to dissolve the club and turn your men and weapons over to me. If that happens, I'll ensure each of them obtains a pardon for past crimes and a new slate.'

'And if I don't?'

'I'll grind your pathetic club into the dust.'

It was Mac's turn to laugh. 'Your platoon's alone, outnumbered, and you've just signed their death warrants,' he said, turning now to look at individual soldiers around the room. 'And you know what? I'm going to enjoy feeding each of you to my pet Carriers. They love a good feed, especially when it's a pretty body like yours darlin,' said Mac, blowing a grotesque kiss at Steph.

Mac spat blood on the floor and headed for the exit, his men falling in behind like trained hounds.

'You seem to be forgetting something,' said Mark.

‘Yeah, and what’s that?’ asked Mac.

‘My soldiers aren’t the women and children your club’s used to bullying. They’re trained and seasoned killers. If you send men against us, they’ll be cut down in a heartbeat.’

Mark moved his gaze to the bikies standing behind Mac. ‘You boys should think on that. Do you want to be gut shot for *this* fucking degenerate?’ he said, pointing at Mac. ‘Or do you want to re-join the nation and help us claw it back from the Infected like real men? Your choice.’

The Sergeant at Arms flipped him the bird and shoved the two other men out the door after Mac. Shortly, the sound of engines revved outside as the Spartans drove away.

Mark exhaled slowly, letting the tension seep from his chest. Now that the bikies had left, his soldiers returned to former duties. The sound of steps on the floorboards made him glance sideways at Joel as he approached.

‘Jesus, I don’t think you could have antagonized the man any further if you tried. You realise he’s going to throw everything he’s got at you now?’ said the ex-mayor.

Mark gave the man a withering look. ‘That was just a pissing contest. There’s no negotiating with a man like that, if I’d backed down an inch, it would have only boosted his ego and image.’

Joel raised an eyebrow, ‘So all that was targeted at his men, rather than convincing Mac to stop?’

‘He won’t lay down arms, the man’s a petty tyrant. I want him to bleed men, weaken his base with deserters who haven’t the stomach for taking on trained soldiers. I want him angry and irrational. If he were smart, he’d wait inside his armed compound where I will wear the higher risk during an attack. My bet is he won’t be able to maintain control of his men for long enough – he’ll be forced to emerge and take us on before all his men disappear. In the open field, I have every confidence my soldiers will wipe them out with minimal losses.’

Joel looked unconvinced.

‘Don’t worry, mate,’ said Mark, hitting a rough hand onto the man’s shoulder. ‘You get the farming side sorted and leave the Spartans to me. I’ll make sure Mac’s kept on a tight leash. I want his men, but not at any price. If it turns out the club has some bite to it after all, I’ll put them down like dogs.’

Chapter Fourteen

A pair of glowing red eyes reflected in the dark from the edge of the road. Chris gave a slight turn of the wheel toward the wallaby, and was rewarded by a dull thud as the fender of the truck cleaned up the small animal. In Tasmania, the native animals seemed to become suicidal around bush roads, drawn to the lights of cars like moths to a flame. Usually Chris tried to avoid hitting such wayward creatures, hesitant to dint the metalwork of his car. But tonight was different. He wasn't driving his own car, but a van his father had borrowed from that dim-witted idiot, Frank. If it got dented or smeared with the guts of a fluffy little beast – all the better. He sure as hell wouldn't be cleaning it off.

'Your destination is on the right in fifty metres,' said a British voice on his Satnav. Chris peered ahead into the meagre light cast by the truck's lights, and made out a road branching from his own not far ahead.

'You have arrived,' said the lady's voice.

Chris geared down rapidly to make the turn, and punched the screen of his phone to turn off the directions. Thick eucalypts soared to either side of the narrow road, turning it into a tunnel of sorts as the branches arched overhead, smothering any light provided by the moon. The van he drove bucked over potholes in the dirt. Designed to carry heavy weights, the empty vehicle bounced unnaturally when it hit any defect in the road. The van was empty behind the driver and passenger seats, providing enough room for two loaded pallets, and if all went to plan, soon the suspension would be near bottomed out with his cargo.

The dirt road took a gentle right, finishing before a small pre-fabricated house. The setting was beautiful in the daytime, with trees close on all sides, a soft hum of insects and gentle movement of leaves in the breeze. But at night, that same bush transformed. Shadows grew, animal noises seemed to magnify and morph, playing with the mind until dreams became nightmares. It was one of the reasons that Chris hated camping – he couldn't understand why anyone would want to give up a perfectly good bed to sleep like a homeless loser.

Chris braked and cut the engine. As the car became quiet, the front door to the small home opened, throwing an arc of light on the dirt track. In the entrance stood a man that Chris hadn't met before. Wearing a bomber jacket

with a thick beanie pulled down to his eyes, he was almost broad enough to fill the doorway. Chris leant over and extracted a hand gun from the glove compartment, checked the safety and shoved it down the back of his jeans before climbing out of the van. He zipped up his jacket against the biting cold and approached the house, breath pluming ahead of him as he walked.

‘Are you Tom Burrell?’

‘Yeah, that’s me. I take it you’re Chris?’ he asked, before enveloping his hand in a bone crushing handshake.

Chris’s fingers throbbed as he extracted them from Tom’s pathetic attempt to establish dominance. Anger could wait, first he wanted what he’d come for.

‘Frank said you’ve finally gathered enough fertilizer to fill our order?’ If he’d driven this far out of Hobart in the dark for nothing, he’d be bloody furious.

‘Don’t worry, I’ve got your stuff. It just took a while to source enough of it without drawing the cops’ attention. I swear I must have driven around this bloody island five times to find this shit,’ he said, brushing past Chris to walk down the side of his house. ‘It’s in a shed at the side. If you back up your van, I’ll help you load.’

Chris followed the man, leaving a pace or two between them. Tom had the smell of a man who didn’t place a high value on body hygiene, and he had no desire to be closer than necessary. In the lee of the house stood a single car garage built from fibro sheeting. Tom clicked open a padlock at the door’s base and lifted the metal entrance, exposing a pitch-black interior. He pulled a torch from his pocket and flicked it on, bathing the garage in harsh white light. Chris felt his heart rate surge as he saw what he needed on the floor. A pallet’s worth of fertilizer lay on the ground in twenty litre bags.

Chris reversed his van, and with Tom’s help, loaded the fertilizer on board. Chris heaved the last bag into the van and stood up. His back emitted a dull thud as he stretched, pushing hands into the base where a deep-seated ache gnawed at the muscles. It had been worth it though. He’d sourced the electronics needed to construct the bombs the previous week, and now that he had the fuel, all he had to do was put the masterpiece together.

Tom let out a low whistle as he looked at the bags. ‘I knew it was a lot, but it didn’t really register just how much until now,’ he said. ‘I don’t usually ask questions about a job, but this one’s got me a little worried. Your group’s got nothing to do with farming as far as I can work out, so it kind of only

leaves one other use for such an amount of fertilizer...'

Chris copped a waft of Tom's body odour and grimaced. The man was starting to get on his nerves. 'I think you already know the answer to the question you're hinting at. *Yes, Tom.* It's going to fuel a bomb – if you've got a problem with that, I'm happy to ease your conscience by not paying.'

'Nah, man,' said Tom backing away. 'It's cool, as long as I get my cash it's no business of mine. Speaking of payment, I wouldn't mind wrapping this up and getting out of the cold, yeah?'

Chris opened the van door and pulled a bag out from under the driver's seat. 'In cash as requested,' he said, holding out the money.

Tom smiled as he took the package, finding rolls of yellow fifty dollar notes carefully bundled inside. 'Nice doing business with you,' he said.

Chris's eyes hardened as the man walked away from him. He liked a job with few loose ends, and a man that asked too many questions was a liability. He pulled the revolver from his jeans and aimed at the back of Tom's head.

'One last thing, Tom.'

The man turned back to Chris, a half smile fading as he saw the gun.

'As much as I appreciate your service, I won't be needing it again.' Chris fired, grinning as the bullet smashed through his victim's teeth, exiting the base of his skull in a spray of tissue, bone and blood. Tom hit the dirt with a meaty thud, his eyes staring sightlessly into the bush.

Chris collected the money from where it had fallen and returned to the van, a look of contentment on his face. He knew his father would be proud, and outside a growing urge for violence, there was little else that mattered.

He had a few weeks grace to create the bombs. Chris had secured a contact within the police force, a simple cleaner employed by a Hobart Police Station whose far-right political views perfectly matched The Patriots. Ignored by the police while he worked, he'd been free to read notice boards and papers left on desks. The day before, he'd hit pay dirt and contacted Chris with a perfect scenario to inflict maximum damage. The Hobart Police station on Liverpool St. would be hosting an education day in three weeks' time, where all non-essential police officers from across the state would be crammed into the one location. The education day was to outline changes in policy toward disaster management. Chris couldn't help but smile at the irony, it was just too good an opportunity to miss. He'd be happy to add a little realism to their disaster exercise, and with the Royal Hobart Hospital across the road, if the stars aligned for him – maybe he'd even get to involve

Julie in the fun.

Chapter Fifteen

The doors at the end of the prison wing smashed open, banging loudly off the brick wall as the army extraction team pushed two trolleys into Harry's lab. The four-man team looked on edge, dust and blood-spattered faces streaked with sweat as they jogged forward.

Harry ditched the paperwork before him and ran to help transfer the patients onto laboratory beds. After a few close calls where thrashing Carriers had nearly tipped their trolleys, Harry had taken the step of bolting the bed frames to the ground and making permanent steel restraints that fastened around upper and lower arms of the patient to prevent movement.

The leader of the extraction group, a Corporal Helmad by his uniform badge, spoke up as they fastened the last of the clips about the second patient. 'These two have been bitten for a while, so I don't know how much use they'll be to your trial, Doc.'

The first patient, a middle-aged man, had fallen unconscious during the transfer. The other was a young woman. Sweat beaded her pale forehead as she watched Harry and the paramedics with sad eyes.

'How long since they were bitten?' asked Harry, while he burrowed a wide bore cannula into the woman's forearm.

'Around an hour. We had a hell of a time getting them out after it fucking turned to shit. What had been reported as a single Carrier over the radio, recruited ten others by the time we got on site.'

'Where were they?' asked Harry.

'The wharf again, those poor bastards keep getting the worst of it. One of the fishermen got bit by a Carrier pulled up in a net, but kept it hidden from the rest of the crew. When they got back to shore, he died in a back room, then came back and wreaked hell.'

Harry grunted in disgust at the man's cowardice. If there was one universally accepted rule since the plague outbreak, it was that once you got bitten, you ensured that you did not become a risk to family and friends. Most achieved this with a self-administered bullet to the brain, otherwise the job fell to a family member or a doctor like Harry when no-one else was willing. But all those scenarios required the victim to notify others of their bite, so that they could be restrained appropriately before death.

As food supplies ran out, dependence on fishing as a source of protein

had grown rapidly. Unfortunately for those delegated the task of operating the trawlers, it also came with moderate risk of plague exposure. At least once a week, a Carrier was pulled from the ocean floor in a drag net. Hidden amongst slippery, squirming fish, it often wasn't until the contents of the net were dumped in the boat that the Carrier was found. These water-logged specimens were usually slow from cold, but their teeth were still sharp, fastening onto unwary fingers as fish were unloaded from above.

Harry felt for a carotid pulse on the side of the man's neck. Nothing. The man was dead. Harry double checked the man's restraints, then injected the trial medication into his shoulder deltoid muscle, having little hope for success. If either of the subjects had a chance today, it would be the woman.

With another syringe of trial medication tight in his fist, Harry turned his attention to the second bite victim. He felt his gut clench as he looked at the young woman. Red lines tracked up the inside of her arm, emanating along lymphatic drainage pathways from the bite at her forearm. She looked young, owning features of a teenager. But her eyes were old, reflecting a mind prematurely aged by violence and loss.

'Is this medication going to work, Doc?' she asked, voice barely more than a whisper. Just the effort of speaking spiked her heart rate on the monitor.

Harry paused for a moment as he framed his reply. He held little to no hope that the medication would achieve any change, let alone stop the disease entirely – but that wasn't what gave him pause. In times like this, his greatest aim was to ease the suffering of his patients. For some, this meant lessening their anxiety by bolstering unfounded hope. Whereas others became angry at such meaningless reassurances, preferring to have stripped back facts as they faced their final moments with grim stoicism. Harry met her eyes and decided the young lady before him was one such person.

'Probably not,' he said, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder in apology. 'But I hope to God I'm wrong.'

The woman's eyes became glassy at his pronouncement, a lone tear falling from the corner of her eye. 'But it's not a waste of time, right? This trial might help some other person survive in the future?'

Harry felt a weight descend on his chest at her words, his heart aching that a kid had accepted her own death sentence with mute bravery, choosing to focus instead on how it might help others.

'Every failed trial leads us closer to a cure – that's what we've got to

believe,' he said.

Harry uncapped the syringe, forcing himself to concentrate on job specifics to distract his mind. Behind him, the first patient screamed and began to wrench against his restraints, the sound echoing about the cells so that it came from multiple places at once. Harry didn't need to look around to know the man had reanimated as a Carrier. He gritted his teeth and jabbed the needle into the woman's shoulder, administering the dose in a hurry. He could only hope that giving the medication prior to death would produce a different outcome than the thrashing Carrier behind him.

Medication delivered, he retrieved the captive-bolt gun and silenced the first patient with a single shot. Blood leaked from a neat hole above the Carrier's ear onto the sheet as quiet was restored to the lab, broken only by the laboured breathing of the young woman. The army retrieval team had withdrawn to the far end of the jail wing, giving Harry space while they too waited on the outcome.

Harry moved to the side of the woman. As she deteriorated, she grabbed onto Harry's fingers, seeking some human contact. She was now looking her age, a frightened girl who didn't want to die. Harry squeezed her fingers back, knowing there were no words that could make it any better, all he could do was just be there for her.

Suddenly her limbs started jerking against the restraints as a seizure took hold. Harry extracted his hand from her fingers and stood back from the bed, helpless to change the outcome. Saliva began to pour from her mouth, bubbling in frothy masses. Her eyes were open but vacant as the seizure eased, leaving her limbs still. The saliva continued to froth from her mouth, something that Harry hadn't seen in any other of the Lysan Plague victims, striking him as odd until his mind finally clicked. She was experiencing symptoms of end-stage Lyssavirus, rather than that of the mutated Lysan plague.

The woman's chest rattled with every breath as she struggled to move air past aspirated saliva, slowly drowning in her own secretions. Gradually her respiration rate fell. The cardiac tracing on the screen became erratic, deteriorating as her heart ceased to function properly, then at all.

It was a few moments before Harry realised she was gone, that the room was now completely silent. He leant forward and closed her eyes. At Harry's movement, the soldiers watching quietly from the end of the wing got up and exited, shoulders stooped and faces grim.

Harry felt washed out and so very tired as he looked down at the girl. With leaden feet, he went to retrieve the captive-bolt gun and placed the barrel end against her temple. In a few short minutes of acquaintance, Harry had gained respect for the woman's bravery, and had no desire to see her transformed by the plague. Harry started to squeeze the trigger, and then froze. His heart raced with a new thought. *She had displayed signs of Lyssavirus, not Lysan Plague as she died!* If this was the case, it could prove crucial in whether or not the virus progressed to the next stage of re-animating the body.

Harry's hand shook as he backed away and dumped the gun on the bench. If the medication could make a victim remain on the right side of the grave, it could represent a game-changing win against the plague. Harry rooted around the desk until he found a timer that he set to counting. He moved a stool to the foot of his patient's bed and began a nervous watch.

A sound woke Harry. He jerked his head off the bench and looked over at the woman's body, silently swearing at himself for falling asleep. His heart rate began to ease again as he saw she remained still. The noise that had woken Harry sounded again and he looked in its direction, toward the first plague victim. Harry felt his gorge rise as he saw a large grey rat sitting on the man's face, chewing hungrily at the corpse's upper lip. Somehow, he'd slept through much of the rat's feast, with an eye and much of the nose already gnawed away. Harry picked up the first thing that came to hand, a heavy textbook, and flung it at the beast. The rat squealed with indignation, landing on the tiles in a sprawling mess before scurrying for the nearest cover.

Harry grimaced at the gruesome mess. Rodents seemed to be one of the few mammals to have benefited from the plague, exploding in numbers as they fed on the dead and grew increasingly defiant and unafraid of humans. Harry felt an uncomfortable squirm as he realised the creatures probably viewed humans as a food source now, rather than a predator to be avoided. He'd kept a rat as a pet when he was a kid, but now when he looked upon a wild specimen, he felt nothing but revulsion.

As Harry turned back to the body of his female patient, his eye caught the time on his watch. All thoughts of the rat were banished as he picked up

his phone and dialled Veronica in Canberra. She picked up on the fifth ring.

‘I think you’re on to something with the last batch of medication, Ronnie,’ he said, barely able to catch his breath as he looked from his watch and back to the immobile corpse. ‘It’s eight hours post death – and the victim hasn’t reanimated.’

Chapter Sixteen

Mark squinted against the morning sun. A dew-covered field of grain reflected light like a million diamonds, exacerbating his headache painfully. Vinh had somehow found a bottle of Jack Daniel's the night before, and Mark had joined his Sergeant in a glass of bourbon after they'd finished preparing for today's operation. Compared to the moonshine his platoon occasionally brewed at the barracks in Geelong, it had tasted like nectar. One drink had turned into a few more, and suddenly the two men had been staring at an empty bottle. It had seemed amusing the night before, but now that he was standing in a wet paddock with the snarl of approaching Carriers on the wind, he was less than impressed by his own actions. Vinh didn't look much better, his Sergeant's hangover voiced through a foul mood as he ordered soldiers into the desired formation.

Steph walked up to him, disgust clear on her face. 'How's your head?'

Mark grunted a non-committal reply, refusing to admit a headache that was gradually building to migraine. Steph had given them both a mouthful of abuse last night when she'd walked into their room and seen the empty bottle, furious that either man would compromise their fighting ability for the sake of a few drinks.

'Are you up to leading today?' she asked in a low voice, ensuring it didn't carry to any other soldier. Steph looked behind them at the contingent of locals who eyed their preparations with interest from the other side of the fence. Joel had invited them to watch Mark trial a new method for clearing a field of Carriers, hoping that they would subsequently join the program. 'We can't afford this to go wrong if we want to build their trust.'

'I'm fine,' he muttered. The last thing Mark wanted was a lecture. 'How about you stick to your job, and I'll hold my end of the bargain. There seems to be a hole in the line with your name on it, Corporal, how about you fill it.'

Steph's mouth tightened in anger at the dismissal, but she kept her lips closed and returned to her allocated position. Mark took a deep breath and let it out slowly, cursing himself for biting. He knew he'd pay for that later, but hell, that'd be karma for his stupidity the night before.

Mark turned around to Joel who was holding a speaker set and gave him a nod to start the recording. The mayor hit play and turned up the volume, emitting a recording of rabbits screaming. Mark winced slightly, the awful

noise piercing his brain like a hot needle. Out in the paddock, he could see movement in the waist high grain as several Carriers responded, zeroing in on their location.

Mark and his soldiers had changed the paddock's fence at one corner. Inspired by a cattle yard design where animals are funnelled into a narrow area for loading onto trucks, the fence at the corner of the paddock had been altered. Instead of meeting in a right angle, one fence stopped just short of the corner, turning to run parallel with the neighbouring paddock, producing a one by twenty-metre-long enclosure. The plan was to attract Carriers into the funnel for culling. After much deliberation, Mark had chosen this method to give farmers the option of conserving ammunition by dispatching the Infected without a firearm. If it worked, farmers could put speaker sets on timers in the morning to gather any Carriers that had wandered onto the land overnight for easy culling before starting the day's work.

Mark had ten of his men with him near the enclosure, five to each side of the corner. The rest stood outside the paddock around the enclosure, their rifles tipped with bayonets ready to begin the cull. They also had a duty to watch for Carriers drawn by the screaming from the surrounding area.

Ahead of the soldiers, Mark could see five shambling figures heading their way. As they came closer, he started to make out facial details of the Infected. One had already picked him as its target, a man in rotting overalls had lips pulled back in a grimace as he lurched through the waist-high grain. Unblinking eyes locked onto Mark with the intensity of a predator closing in for the kill. The Carrier was missing its left arm from the elbow down, two short spikes of radius and ulna all that was left of the forearm. Mark watched it impassively. He'd seen too many Carriers before to be intimidated by the paltry handful coming their way. The danger from the Infected came when you got caught by surprise, or they swarmed; neither of which applied to the scenario before him. Today's exercise was all about using their predictable behaviour to advantage, and prove to the farmers that they could learn to manage the small numbers of Carriers moving through the local area.

Off to his right, he saw Steph tracking a movement in the grain. Nothing could be seen above the top of the grain, and yet the stalks could be seen moving, bending to the side before springing back into place as something passed through them at ground level. Steph grimaced as a rotten head emerged from the edge of the grain. It was a female Carrier, dragging itself on outstretched hands. Half a scalp of gore-soaked hair had been ripped free,

like someone had drawn a knife from between her eyes to the back of her skull, then torn one side down to the ear. It must have not happened that long ago, as the slab of clotted hair still dripped blood, coating one side of her face in a nightmare of gore. The Carrier's legs were reduced to bone and sinew from mid-thigh down, except for the two feet that were in perfect condition below the ankle.

Steph grimaced at the sight, lifted her rifle and drilled a bullet through one of the Carrier's eyes. As Mark saw others start to raise their weapons as well, he raised his hand angrily.

'Hold your fire!' he shouted. As much as he wanted the morning finished so he could nurse his hangover in peace, if they killed each of the Infected where they stood, the whole exercise would be a failure. 'Fall back behind the fence, we need these bastards in the trap!'

Mark kept an eye on the Carriers in his peripheral vision as he watched his men climb the barrier and move toward the holding pen in readiness. Now that he was the lone man in the paddock, each of the Infected zeroed in on him. Their anger was like a palpable entity that washed over him, soaking into his whiskey-blunted mind and paralysing his thoughts as he locked eyes with one of the creatures. He stood dumbly as he watched the approaching Carrier, the man in overalls coming closer with every lurching step, batting aside the grain until he was only a few paces away.

'Mark!'

He heard Steph shout as if from a great distance.

'Mark, fucking snap out of it you stupid bastard!' she screamed.

Mark shook his head at the words, breaking eye contact with the Carrier that had pinned his mind like a cobra hunting a mouse. The Carrier closed the last pace and stabbed its severed forearm at him, the fork of exposed bones like twin spears towards his eyes. Mark flicked up his rifle, catching the forearm on his bayonet, the two spears of bone mere inches from his face. With a grunt, he shoved the corpse away. The Carrier's foot caught in the grass and it tumbled backward giving him some space.

Mark glanced about the field, noting the location of the other Carriers as he moved toward the enclosure. Mindful of the farmers watching, he forced himself to walk calmly, staying outside lunging distance of the ghouls as he drew them into the trap. The Carriers followed him into the narrow confines of the pen, their faces contorted in a rictus of anger as they snarled and tried to hook his body into an embrace of teeth and agony. Mark now backed

between his soldiers on either side of the pen, their bayonets at the ready. His spine bumped against the end of the enclosure, catching him off guard for a second before he realised his location. He turned and climbed the metal rungs of the fence at speed, swinging his body over the top as an outstretched Carrier's hand missed his foot by a hair's breadth.

Mark hunched over for a moment, head banging in time with his pulse, and hands on knees as his stomach threatened to empty itself over his boots. He forced himself to stand, spitting a sour taste from his mouth. The job still needed to be finished.

Six Carriers lashed out between the wire of the fence, trying to reach the soldiers on the other side. Mark looked back out into the paddock, finding it empty of movement. Everything that had been out there was now within arm's reach.

'Kill 'em!' he ordered, his voice harsh.

Mark's men stabbed forward with bayonet tipped rifles. They demonstrated ruthless expertise, destroying brain tissue by puncturing weak bone at the temple, driving through the mouth into the brain stem, or skewering soft tissue beneath the chin, stabbing upwards until the steel point of the bayonet penetrated the brain.

Steph braced her boot against the fence and wrenched her rifle backward. With an audible squeak, the blade of her bayonet loosened from where it had lodged in an eye socket, and she was able to jerk it free of the Carrier's skull. The ghoulish figure flopped to the ground, joining the other five, dead again in the grass.

A smattering of applause brought Mark back to his senses, and he looked behind to where the group of local farmers stood. Joel walked up to him, clapping a hand to his shoulder in congratulations.

'I reckon we're onto a winning method here,' he said. 'It wouldn't take long to construct enclosures like this within each paddock under cultivation – although we'd need one on both sides of the fence. Those screaming rabbits will draw anything within ear shot, not just the enclosed land we want cleared.'

Mark just nodded, wanting the morning over. Joel paused, his expression thoughtful for a moment as he regarded the officer before him who looked somewhat paler than usual.

'What was with the display in the paddock before? Surely there wasn't any need to let the beast get that near to you?'

‘I wanted the farmers here to see my squad isn’t fazed by Carriers, but the bastard thing wasn’t meant to get that close,’ said Mark reluctantly. ‘Let’s just say I’m not thinking as clearly as usual this morning and leave it at that.’

‘I thought as much. Maybe next time try doing the job without having a skin full of drink the night before,’ said Joel, without a trace of sympathy in his voice.

Mark’s head jerked up with surprise at his words. ‘Who said I’ve been on the bottle?’

‘Oh, give me a break, Lieutenant,’ said the ex-mayor. ‘The stale fumes wafting off you and your Sergeant are enough to make eyes water at ten paces. The people of my town will be risking everything they’ve got if they follow you in defiance of the Spartans. The least you could do in return is have some goddamned self-discipline and keep yourself in a shape to fight.’

Joel left him where he stood, his politicians face already wiped clear of the disgust that had painted it just moments earlier, as he turned to the task of recruiting the other farmers to their cause. Out the corner of Mark’s eye he saw his girlfriend, Steph, smirking at him.

‘What are you laughing at?’ Mark grumbled as his headache redoubled its assault on the interior of his skull.

‘Ah, nothing, Boss,’ she said with a smile. ‘Just enjoying hearing the truth spoken by another mouth than my own for a change.’

Mark grunted in annoyed capitulation, unwilling to get into another argument with her. He turned away, doing his best to ignore his headache as he called his soldiers in. ‘Good work out there, men! We’ve proved it works; now we have the pleasure of building a shitload more of them. I hope your backs are feeling better than mine, because we’ve got a long day in front of us.’

Hangover or none, the work would continue.

Chapter Seventeen

Harry stood up, pressing fists into the small of his back to ease a dull ache that gnawed with every movement. He'd escaped the confines of the lab for an hour, spending the time in their new garden instead. Two thirds of the asphalt within the walls of the old gaol had been ripped up to make way for vegetable cultivation. It was the same outside every dwelling in Geelong now as survivors sought to replace a dwindling food supply from Tasmania. Many had started their own veggie patches earlier, however General Black had recently issued a mandate requiring all citizens to plant market gardens in useable soil around their dwellings.

Harry didn't mind the work. He'd found it somewhat calming to kneel in the dirt, outside thoughts pushed aside for a short time while he planted seedlings or weeded. Spotting a green leaf pushing up from the ground, Harry leant down and brushed a few bits of soil aside to allow the seedling to emerge. Focusing on the sensation of dirt about his fingers as he helped create new life, even if it was only in the form of a plant, had helped provide some balance to the death he witnessed daily.

A small Willy Wag-tail hopped along the ground nearby, the dainty black and white bird taking advantage of the newly turned earth to catch exposed bugs and worms. Harry watched the tiny creature hop along the ground with a bemused expression on his face, and then stood again with a sigh. He brushed off a few clumps of soil from the knees of his jeans and walked over to a tap to wash his hands. As much as he would love to avoid the lab for a while longer, he knew there was still work that he had to do.

Veronica had returned from Canberra the previous week. Excited by Harry's case report, she had requested a transfer back to the Geelong lab so that she could be directly involved with testing the new drug. Unfortunately, the early success that Harry had experienced had only been reproduced once. All other candidates had progressed in the usual fashion, dying only to return as an abomination of nature. The setback had thrown his colleague into a dark place. Harry knew the symptoms of depression, from personal experience as well as his professional role as a doctor, and Veronica had him deeply worried. She was having trouble sleeping, her ability to concentrate was slipping and she was becoming increasingly obsessive on certain aspects of the study without evidence to back her assertions.

Veronica had become convinced that the medicine would work if administered before the person was bitten. Their successes in preventing conversion to a Carrier had been achieved in patients where they had the medication administered quickly after a bite, so Harry saw merit in her reasoning, however, believed that injecting uninfected people with the medication presented too much risk to the test subject at this stage. After all, the medication targeted activity of mitochondria – if they altered functioning of this critical cellular component in a healthy individual, it had a high probability of killing them. The ethics committee in Canberra had agreed with Harry, refusing Veronica's request until testing had first occurred on primate subjects – which were unsurprisingly in short supply. She hadn't taken it well, blaming Harry for the failed ethics application despite him having no power over the outcome.

Keeping in mind that her reaction was more due to her mental health than anything else, Harry had kept his irritation at her behaviour in check and pursued the only line of enquiry open to them – gaining earlier access to bite victims. He had pulled in some favours and acquired a position on Geelong's early response squad. Instead of waiting for the team to bring survivors to the lab, Harry would join them in the field, administering the medication to bite victims at the scene. The thought of taking on a semi-combat role again had weighed lighter on his mind than expected. There was something about actively seeking confrontation with the predator that lessened his anxiety; moving his role from potential victim, to that of the hunter, felt like it placed a degree of control back in his hands.

Harry smiled at that thought. *Control*. He was sensible enough to know that any sense of control was an illusion. The only thing he had power over was his own actions in response to whatever was thrown at him. And he was damned if he would give an inch in his pursuit to find a treatment for the plague. Harry brushed his right hand past the pager on his belt that the Rapid Response Team had supplied. It had lain silent for the two days he'd worn it so far, but he knew that wouldn't last. He'd have contact with the Infected soon, of that he was certain.

Harry picked up his spade and garden fork and dumped them with the other gardening implements in an old guard house against the curtain wall. A small table and bookcase in the room was littered with gardening stakes, pots of fertilizer and a few types of pesticide. He kicked a bag of manure aside so he could shut the door, and trudged to the main cellblock and lab.

Harry fumbled a clean set of clothes on in the gloom of the toilets, moving more by touch and memory than sight. A tiny square of glass high on the wall provided the only light in the unisex staff toilets, casting a narrow beam upon a cracked wall tile. With a petrol generator providing the only source of power, Harry had long since unscrewed globes in non-work areas to conserve electricity, although, every time he used the bathroom he cursed himself that he had removed these particular light globes. On more than one occasion while sitting on a toilet in the dark, he'd heard sounds in the adjacent cubicle that were hard to place; footsteps and mumblings that shouldn't be possible when he was the only person in the building. Over one hundred years of continuous habitation as a gaol had stained the site with death and depression long before Harry had filled the cells with Infected corpses.

Harry did up the last of his shirt buttons at speed, leaving the door to slam shut as he returned to the open lab area between the cells. He was unsurprised to find Veronica slumped at one of the desks, her eyes fixed on a computer. Her work output had fallen significantly of late, much of her time spent watching and re-watching old video files of her dead husband and child. Not this time though. As Harry came closer, he saw a news reporter on the screen.

At the sound of Harry's approach, Veronica glanced over her shoulder. Grey bags under her eyes were a mute testament of exhaustion, her clothes unchanged for days. Despite this, she seemed more alive than recently, something she'd seen had sparked a flare of interest in her eyes. Harry pulled back a chair beside her and eased himself down, back and thigh muscles aching after his work in the vegetable plot.

'I thought that channel folded a few months back,' he said, pointing at the screen before her. A female news reporter from Southern Cross News stood on a street in Hobart, facing the camera with brow creased as she presented her story.

'Yeah, it did, but their News show still posts segments online each week,' she said. 'With the state government becoming more fascist every day, it's the only show brave enough to tell it like it is. I heard the reporter on screen, Maryanne Clayton, has even been getting death threats. Pretty fucked up, eh?'

Harry was unsurprised by her words, and felt the usual anger blossom in his chest whenever he listened to the state of affairs in Tasmania.

‘Let me get this straight,’ he said. ‘The bastards have the only virus free real estate in the Southern Hemisphere, and they respond by not only abandoning their countrymen on the mainland, but now they’re turning Tasmania into a police state?’

Veronica’s eyes were fixed back on the screen as they talked. ‘And that’s not the half of it. People look bloody scared - Maryanne’s been trying for the past half hour to get people in the street to voice their own opinions about the Tasmanian Patriots Party, and no one’s willing to talk on camera.’

Harry watched the screen with interest as the reporter turned to address the camera as another person ducked away from her questions, hiding their face with a raised magazine. He reached out a hand and turned up the volume.

‘And there you have it,’ said Maryanne Clayton, her features tight as she addressed her viewers. ‘Fear in the general community of violent reprisal from the Tasmanian Patriots has now grown to such a point that public dissent has been stifled. I have detailed evidence linking the party with several killings in the greater Hobart area – all involving people that have openly opposed the Patriots, and yet the government does nothing to control this metastasizing cancer.’

‘Starting with the incineration of opposition protesters at a rally, the violence has progressed, taking on sickening likeness to Hitler’s Brown Shirts, as thugs attached to Mr. Finart’s party move against opponents, seemingly without fear of investigation. Opinion polls completed with the protection of anonymity, demonstrate a clear majority of citizens are opposed to the increasingly violent, far-right party. Our police force are hamstrung, with leaders within their ranks stating off the record that they have been instructed not to investigate leads on multiple occasions.’

‘Our Premier, Mr. Stephens refuses to condemn the Patriots, and as much as I wish this to be born of pure stupidity, I must confess to a growing fear that there is outright collusion between the Conservatives Party and this abomination.’

Harry’s eyes were drawn to the right of the frame where an unmarked car had pulled to the curb. A thickset man spilled from the passenger door, his face concealed beneath a grey balaclava as he sprinted up from behind. Harry’s fingers tightened on the chair’s armrest, his breath catching as he noted a pistol in the man’s hand.

‘Fuck... no,’ Harry said beneath his breath.

The cameraman and reporter were oblivious until it was too late. The man skidded to a stop and shoved the gun into the side of her head. Maryanne's eyes widened in terror, her mouth forming a soundless 'O' as her head smashed to the side as the pistol fired, a bloody passage torn from one ear to the other. The reporter collapsed, falling into the mess of her own brains on the pavement. As the assailant raised his gun again, this time aimed at the cameraman, the footage abruptly stopped.

With a shaking hand, Veronica slammed down the screen of her laptop, as if by turning it off, she could prevent any further violence from happening. Veronica and Harry looked at each other, stunned by what they'd witnessed. Neither had any words, both rendered speechless for a few moments.

Harry pushed back his chair as he stood. 'Those poor bastards. Maybe we've got it better over here – at least we know who's trying to kill us.'

Veronica hooked a small plastic bottle from her jeans pocket and shook free a pair of tablets. Her pale hand had a coarse tremor as she tipped the drug into her mouth. Ignoring Harry's worried expression on seeing her knock back the Valium, she walked to a sink and cupped a handful of water to wash the tablets down.

Looking up, she finally met her colleague's eyes and scowled. 'Oh, fuck off, Harry. As if you haven't done a little self-medicating every now and then; and with shit like that happening on a live news broadcast, it's not like I don't have a good reason.'

She turned away and walked towards one of the desks, not giving him a chance of reply. 'We should get back to work. Every day we don't have a cure, is another day that those bastards can ruin what's left of our country.'

Harry stalled, caught between worry for his friend and horror at the developments in Tasmania. If the Conservatives and Patriots Party had gathered such power, then surely it would only be a matter of time before their isolationist policies cut off the last supply ships crossing Bass Strait. Famine wouldn't be far behind such an event.

A buzzing on his hip interrupted his line of thought. Harry reached down and extracted the pager, his heart rate surging at the notification. The Rapid Response Team was en route to pick him up. His chance to trial their drug at the scene had come.

The ambulance swerved to the side of the road and skidded to a halt, throwing Harry forward against his seatbelt. Although house clearances had been conducted throughout Geelong, they had been imperfect. As survivors reclaimed new houses, occasionally Carriers were found in missed basement spaces, closets, or locked sheds. Today's case was unforgivable. That the Carrier had been allowed to survive in the garden shed was a clear case of negligence by the clearing squad, and it pissed Harry off no end that a family of survivors had worn the violent consequences. When the father had knocked the shed lock off to access tools within, he'd unwittingly released two Carriers. Caught off guard, he'd gone down under their teeth. His wife had managed to get her kid inside and a call off to the army for support while she mounted a defence on the back foot.

A scream sounded from nearby, agony tearing a hideous sound through vocal cords before being abruptly cut off. Soldiers erupted from the jeep ahead, their rifles up as they scanned the street for movement before homing in on the two-storey brick house to the right. From his seat, Harry could see congealing blood on pavers leading from the street to the front door. A mutilated hand lay on the street path. Severed at the wrist, its one remaining finger pointed at the house in question as if directing the Rapid Response Team. The front door of the property hung slack on its hinges, swaying slightly in free space as Sergeant Larkin led his group of four soldiers toward it at pace. The group paused at the threshold, breathing hard as adrenaline surged. Then with rifles swapped for handguns in the close confines of the house, the men entered and disappeared from sight.

Harry checked his own side arm, ensuring a round was in the chamber before climbing out of the ambulance to prepare for any survivors. A cry of rage emanated from somewhere in the back of the house - the squad had made contact. A smattering of gunshots cracked the air, driving Harry to quicken his movements as he pulled a stretcher from the back of the ambulance with the aid of a paramedic. Harry attempted to block out what was happening in the house, trusting the army squad to take care of the Infected, leaving him to prepare for whatever human life they could salvage. He stabbed an intra-venous giving set into a bag of Normal Saline and primed the line, ready to go for a fluid resuscitation.

Harry felt something warm spray across the back of his neck as the paramedic behind him emitted a shriek. He spun on the spot, drawing his pistol and racking the slide. A Carrier held the paramedic in a vicious

embrace from behind, worrying a mouthful of flesh from the young man's neck like a dog. The ghoul's skin was the colour of tanned leather, features desiccated and retracted, dirty hair clumped and matted over its face. Harry knew the creature before him must be one of the two original Infected released. With a sound of tearing fabric, the Carrier ripped a wad of skin and muscle, blood spraying in an arc from the paramedic's wound as the monster gagged down the mouthful of tissue and went back for more. Harry lunged forward, driving the end of his pistol against the Carrier's skull before pulling the trigger.

The paramedic fell to his knees, one hand gripping his neck wound in futile effort, arterial blood squirting from between his fingers in lessening strength with every heartbeat. The Carrier lay beside him on the asphalt minus half its head. Harry ignored the paramedic for a brief moment, checking his surrounds once more to ensure there was no more danger closing in. Screaming continued inside, but there was nothing more on the street.

Harry grimaced as he holstered his pistol and pulled free one of three syringes of trial medication from his sleeve pocket. There was no point attempting a resuscitation, the paramedic had maybe thirty seconds of life remaining as he pumped his life-blood onto the street. The man was no longer kneeling, had slumped forward onto his face as he gasped for breath. All he could do was to try and prevent him coming back. Harry took the cap from the needle and buried it through the paramedic's pants, deep into a thigh muscle and depressed the plunger, all the while knowing it was a waste of medication.

Stepping back, Harry wiped the blood on his hands down his pants as he watched the paramedic draw two ragged breaths, and die. Harry swore in frustration, knowing the medication wouldn't have had time to work, the location of the wound likely taking the virus straight to the man's brain. He drew his pistol once more, watching for the first signs of reanimation from the paramedic. Sure enough, within thirty seconds, Harry saw the man's foot twitch and fingers clench into a fist. It was enough to confirm diagnosis. Harry shot two rounds into the paramedic's skull.

A shout pulled Harry's attention away from the horror splattered across the ground. Turning, he saw Sergeant Larkin waving him up to the house. Harry took one last look at what was left of the paramedic's face after his two bullets had entered, took a deep breath and grabbed one of the first aid

backpacks from the ambulance. Hoisting it onto one shoulder, he ran to meet the Sergeant, keeping his pistol in hand as he went.

Sergeant Larkin's eyes took in the carnage at the rear of the ambulance, his jaw clenched. 'Jamie's dead?' was all he asked.

Harry gave a rough nod. 'One second we were prepping, the next it had him. There wasn't much I could do.'

The Sergeant just nodded, accepting the situation without further question. He turned away from Harry and back into the house, indicating for him to follow with a flick of his fingers. 'I've got two victims inside. Mother and daughter,' he said over his shoulder. 'The old lady put up a brave effort before she went down. Locked her kid in the main bedroom, then took the Carrier on with nothing more than a kitchen knife.'

'Is she still alive?'

'She was when I left, but with the amount of blood she'd already lost, I don't think she had much time left,' he said, speech emptied of emotion as he relayed the facts.

Harry knew that just because the Sergeant wasn't all choked up over the woman, it didn't mean he was unmoved. He'd been in the same situation many a time himself while managing medical emergencies in the ED – when the shit was hitting the fan, if you let emotion cloud your thoughts, all it did was impair your ability to think and act. The soldiers would cope later in the only way they knew, by honouring the fallen with a bottle or ten of home brew back at the mess. It mightn't be the healthiest solution, but for many, it was the easiest.

Harry turned his thoughts back to the child. 'What about the kid?'

'The girl looks about five. Poor thing's hiding under the bed and won't come out. She's holding onto a bloodied wrist, so chances are she's nursing a bite. I was hoping you might have experience with kids? Didn't want to freak her out further after she heard her mum get butchered.'

'I'll do my best,' said Harry, privately thinking no amount of gentle talking would make it right for the child.

Harry trailed the Sergeant up a set of stairs to the second storey. Blood spray trickled down the wallpaper in two spots. Another section had a smear of claret where a bloody torso had been shoved against the wall as the mother and Carrier fought each other. A smell of rot assaulted his nose as he saw the Carrier, sprawled on its back halfway up the second flight. Shot from behind by Larkin's squad as they mounted the stairs, the bullet had blown a palm

sized exit wound through its face, taking eyes, nose and upper teeth.

Harry stepped over the corpse, arriving at the top of the stairs to see one of the soldiers leaning over the mother. With foot braced against her forehead, the Private pulled on the handle of a bayonet. The blade was buried to the hilt above her ear and squeaked softly against the bone as he wrenched it from her skull. The soldier leaned down and gently brushed dirt off her skin, trying to remove the mark he'd made with his boot on her forehead. He looked up as Harry and the Sergeant arrived.

'Sorry, Doc,' he said with a frown. 'She stopped breathing a minute ago, I didn't want her getting up again to make the situation worse.'

The mother was in awful shape, flesh bitten from arms, face and chest as she'd fought to protect her child. Harry ground his teeth together, feeling the familiar weight in his chest at the senseless loss. Forcing himself to continue, he looked up and noted the bedroom door was ajar.

'The kid better not have seen you do that,' he muttered, stepping past to enter the bedroom.

On the far side of the bed, another soldier knelt on the floor. At Harry's footsteps, he poked his head up. 'Thanks for coming in, mate. My little friend under the bed is named Ruby, and she's five years old,' he said in a gentle voice, talking more to the child than he was to Harry. 'I told her that an excellent doctor friend of mine was coming up that could help fix her wrist, and all that she had to do was come out from under the bed.'

Harry gave a tight smile of gratitude at the soldier's kindness, and lay down on the carpet to make eye contact with the girl. Out of arms reach, under the middle of the bed was a wide eyed little girl. She looked at Harry, tears and snot streaking her face, visibly shaking with fear.

'Hi, Ruby. My name's Harry, I'm the doctor that's come to help you,' he said in a slow calm voice. 'I'm here to help keep you safe and take away the pain in your wrist. Can you come out from under the bed so I can fix your arm?'

The girl ignored his question, staying put. 'Is my mummy ok?' she asked in a tiny voice.

Harry forced his face to remain unchanged, giving an open smile as he began to lie. 'She sure is, darling. But she got a little bit hurt, so she's already gone to the hospital. She asked me to help you be brave until you could join her. Ruby, do you think you can be brave just like mummy, and come out from under there?'

The little girl gave a nod, and crawled toward the edge of the bed, stretching out her arms so that Harry could draw her out. He sat her on top of the mattress, where she cradled the left wrist against her chest.

Harry knelt down so that he was at eye level with the child. 'Can I have a look at that?' he asked, pointing at the wound. When the girl didn't refuse, he gently took her hand and drew the limb toward him. Ruby gasped as air hit the wound, a crescent of puncture marks to the inner aspect of her forearm. A minor bite, but fatal nonetheless. Unless... Harry refused to follow that line of thought. Opening up hope would only make it hurt more when he failed yet another of his patients.

His voice reflected none of the darkness of his inner thoughts as he continued to talk gently with the child, trying to build her trust so that she'd feel safe and allow him to administer the medication without fighting.

'Ruby, I have a special medicine that you need to stop you getting sick from the bite on your arm. It's really important that you have it now, or it might not work. Can I give it to you?'

'No! I want my mummy,' she said, her bottom lip beginning to tremble.

'If you're brave and have this medicine, I'll take you straight to her, ok?'

'NO!' screamed Ruby. She began crying again and tried to scoot backwards from Harry over the mattress.

Harry sighed, realising he had no more time to waste and would have to restrain the poor thing. He looked over at the soldier on the other side of the bed. 'You're going to have to hold her while I give the needle. She needs to have it ASAP.'

The soldier grimaced, but leant down and scooped the girl off the bed nonetheless, cradling her head into his neck and holding onto her tight. Harry, wanting it over and finished, quickly removed a syringe of the drug from his sleeve pocket and uncapped the needle.

'Hold her leg tight, ok?' he instructed, lifting the leg of her shorts to expose her little thigh muscle. Without further delay, he inserted the needle into Ruby's leg, depressing the plunger as quickly as he dared while the soldier restrained the screaming child. Harry ditched the spent needle, apologizing to his small patient as he stepped away. Ruby buried her face into the soldier as she cried, refusing to look at Harry again.

'We need to get her to the lab as soon as possible,' he said, heading for the stairs. 'I just want to make sure they've, ah... cleared the hallway before we take her out.'

Harry woke with a start, mouth open in a silent scream, eyes wide after another nightmare. He forced his breathing to slow as he tried to clear the last image of his dream, a Carrier pulling a handful of intestines out of his abdomen. Although there was no injury to his gut, he could still feel pain on the lower right side where the ghoul had driven its fingers through skin and muscle, until its forearm had been buried to the wrist in his nightmare.

Harry sat up, the side of his head aching from where it had rested on the hard desktop. A clock beside one of the cell doors told him it was three o'clock in the morning. He stood abruptly, accidentally knocking his chair back, the clatter of wood on concrete explosive in the silence of the lab. He should have relieved Veronica over an hour earlier from her watch of the corpse. The trial drug had failed to prevent the child dying; however, it had stopped the usual progression of the plague. When he'd fallen asleep, the child had been two hours post death without signs of reanimation. With any luck, it would be the same now.

He dodged between the empty trolleys and desks that made up the lab, down to the end space where Veronica had waited next to the five-year-old, Ruby. After death, the girl had looked so tiny on the expanse of the adult sized trolley, her little legs and arms like pale, fragile twigs. As he got closer, Harry realised the trolley where Ruby had lain held nothing but an empty sheet. He felt his heart drop, if the bed was empty, then the child had likely re-animated earlier. Checking the cells immediately to the side, however, revealed these to be empty as well.

'I'm over here, Harry,' said Veronica in a quiet voice.

Harry turned around, eyes skittering about the shadows until he saw her, sitting on a chair with something cradled in her arms. He walked toward her, a little confused at the situation.

'I'm sorry I slept late, Ronnie, you should have woken me,' he said.

'It's all right. I wouldn't have slept anyway,' she said, stroking the object in her arms gently.

With a start, Harry finally realised she was holding the dead child, wrapped in a blanket. 'Jesus Christ, Veronica! It's too dangerous, let me help you place her back on the trolley where she can be restrained,' he said, reaching down to remove the small bundle from his colleague's arms.

Veronica withdrew from him. 'No. It's been eight hours; there's no chance of her coming back as a Carrier now.'

Harry stood back, unsure how to proceed. There was something off about his colleague. Veronica pulled back the blanket from around the girl's head. Ruby's eyes were closed, the muscles on her face had softened in death, the skin pale as snow in the half light. She stroked the girl's cheek, silent tears trickling down her own face.

'She looks just like my little girl, Isabelle,' she said, her voice cracking. 'She was about the same age when she was killed, but I didn't get to hold her like this afterwards. There was barely anything left of her by the time...' she stopped, unable to continue the line of thought. Harry rested his hand on her shoulder in silent support. Nothing he could say would make it any better.

Veronica stood up, carrying the tiny bundle back to the trolley. She arranged the blanket over the girl like she was tucking her in to sleep. 'We have to try something different, Harry,' she said, still looking down at the child. 'What we've achieved so far isn't enough, not when a beautiful little girl like this still dies from such a minor wound. We need to give the drug prior to plague exposure...'

'We've already been down this path,' interrupted Harry. 'We can't do it, the proposal got rejected from the head office at Canberra. It's too much risk to the test subject.'

'I won't be placing anyone else at risk, because I'll be the one to take the drug. Once injected with the medication, I'll introduce saliva from a Carrier's mouth into a wound.'

'You can't be fucking serious?' said Harry, absolutely horrified at her proposal.

'Why not? Other researchers have done similar things in the past. What about when Barry Marshall drank a beaker of *Helicobacter pylori* to prove the bacteria caused stomach ulcers? No one believed him until he proved his theory with his own body.'

'The idiot wasn't *risking his life*, Veronica. You can't compare gastric ulcers to what you're proposing!'

Veronica scowled at him. 'It'll work, Harry. I know it will, it just needs someone brave enough to trial it.'

'No, not *brave* enough, Veronica. This isn't bravery, it's just plain reckless, that or...'

'Or what?' she said, eyes hard.

Harry took a breath, hesitant to say the truth that needed to be spoken.

‘You’re clinically depressed. We both know it. I think this kid’s just a trigger, because what you’re proposing sounds like a suicide attempt.’

Veronica took a step forward and slapped Harry across the face. ‘How dare you?’ She looked like she’d say something more, then closed her mouth and walked quickly across the room to a fridge on the far wall.

It only took Harry a moment to catch onto what she was planning to do. ‘Don’t do it, Ronnie. If you want to help people, keep researching. Treat patients in the hospital – but don’t do this, please.’

Veronica ignored him, pulling one of the syringes pre-filled with the trial drug from the fridge. She uncapped the needle and jammed it into her own thigh before Harry could close the distance to stop her.

‘I’m not a coward like you, Harry, and I won’t run from what needs to be done,’ she spat.

Harry felt a growing anger in his chest at her actions. ‘This isn’t bravery. It’s a fucking cop out, and I’ll be damned if I’ll help you kill yourself.’

‘Good. I’ll do it on my own,’ she said, and stalked away, leaving Harry alone in the lab.

Harry clenched his fists, his emotions a mix of anger and sadness at what she was throwing away. He looked back at the little girl on the bed, feeling his heart drop further at the next task before him. Given the situation, an autopsy needed to be completed, and better he do it with Veronica out of the lab. With leaden feet, he picked up a tray holding an array of scalpels and tools needed for the procedure and walked over to begin.

Chapter Eighteen

Mac dismissed one of the younger members after listening to his reconnaissance report upon movements of the platoon. Once he was alone again, Mac reached a hand up to his scalp, his eyes closed as he fingered the new scar. He winced as his fingertips traced the lumpy, red wound. It had healed imperfectly, part of it still weeping a slurry of serous fluid and pus. Since the soldier had smashed his head with the rifle, he'd been struggling to maintain control. His skull had been fractured, he was sure of it. A constant source of agony, it felt like a rat was gnawing from the inside out. Nausea followed him everywhere, and he'd been lucky to keep down more than a few bits of toast a day. A temper that had always been labile, was now out of control. Rage constantly lurked a hair's breadth away, needing nothing but an imagined insult to make it explode.

He was convinced that his men were starting to talk behind his back and question his leadership. Mac needed a win. He needed to make the soldiers that had invaded his town bleed, needed to show his men that the Spartans were still in control. Up until now, it had taken everything he had just to get out of bed each day, let alone to organize an attack. But that would change today.

What he would have done for some smack or even a few tablets of Endone, anything to take the edge off his migraine, or at least make him care less about it. Drugs were one of the few things he truly missed of the pre-apocalypse world. The Spartans had run through their own stock within weeks of the plague hitting, forcing Mac and his boys to go cold turkey, an agonizing time of cold sweats, abdominal pain and hideous muscle cramps. He put on a pair of sunglasses and walked outside, determined to keep any sign of weakness hidden from the other men.

The eight-foot walls surrounding the chapter quarters were constructed of brick. Along the top, shattered glass had been stuck in a layer of cement as it set, providing an unforgiving obstacle to any person stupid enough to try and break in. This early in the morning, the angle of the sun caught the glass, sending needles of light across the yard in a thousand different directions. Behind the wall, he'd had a battlement walkway constructed out of scaffolding, allowing his men to dispatch Carriers drawn to the noise within. The complex of buildings stood five kilometres out of town, in easy striking

distance of Joel Tipper's farm. Mac ground his teeth together as he thought of the man. Joel had been a constant pain in his arse, the only farmer since the outbreak of plague willing to defy him openly.

He spotted his Sergeant at Arms leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette.

'Get ten of the men ready to leave. I want them armed to the hilt and ready to fight,' said Mac. 'Load what we've got from the holding pen as well, they'll provide a bit of cover for our boys during the assault.'

A predatory grin spread across the face of his Sergeant at Arms as he dropped the butt of his cigarette and ground it under foot. 'Good to have you back, Prez,' he said. 'Are we hitting those soldier-boy pussies at last?' As his chapter president gave confirmation, the Sergeant at Arms pumped his fist in excitement. 'Fuck, yeah! I've been wanting to smash the look off that officer's face for weeks.'

'We're not after him,' said Mac. 'I want to make him hurt in a different way. I heard he's screwing that pretty blonde in his squad. She's the target. If he wants to get her back, he'll have to leave town. If not, she's not going to be beautiful for much longer.'

Chapter Nineteen

Dust motes danced in a spear of light over Harry's shoulder as he zipped the blue plastic of the body bag over Ruby's face. He signed off the last of the papers documenting his autopsy of the girl and looked toward the eastern side of the cell block at the morning sun, now penetrating through the tiny windows high on the wall. He felt exhausted and hungry, realising that hours had passed since his argument with Veronica. Harry had blocked out their discussion while he worked, having convinced himself that she would see sense with the light of day. He needed to touch base to ensure that the medication hadn't caused any serious adverse effects.

Harry picked up and dialled Veronica's number, praying that she'd calmed down after leaving and not done anything stupid. It rang out, going to voicemail. He tried twice more before giving up. Starting to become more concerned, he grabbed his stuff to go and find her. He paused at the threshold, debating with himself for a moment before running back in and grabbing a syringe of the trial medication from the fridge, just in case. She lived in a building only a block away from his, and he set off at a jog for her house, hoping like hell that he'd find her in a deep sleep or something to account for her lack of answer.

He pulled up, slowing to a walk as he approached her house, eyes darting about the scene out of habit. The front garden was overgrown, and weed-filled lawn knee-length. Despite the threat of fines and decreased rations for those who didn't grow food staples around their properties, Veronica had made no effort. This didn't surprise Harry, who knew she'd been struggling with the basics of self-hygiene and getting to work, let alone the extra workload of tilling a garden.

Harry's breath quickened as he saw the front door slightly ajar. He drew his revolver, holding it at the ready as he pushed the door wide. The hallway was empty, lights off. He waited for a second, listening for any movement.

'Veronica?' he called out. 'It's Harry, I just want to talk for a minute.'

Silence.

Harry stepped over the threshold, checking the rooms to each side as he walked. It was the first time he'd been in her house since before she'd left for Canberra, and the place was a mess. Dishes covered in rotting food scraps lay in the sink, while clothes littered the floor about her bed. On the plus side,

there was no sign of a struggle, no blood to suggest a Carrier attack. But the front door had been left open, so for whatever reason, she'd left in a hurry. That, or her mind was continuing to deteriorate and starting to miss the basic necessities of safety.

Harry grabbed a scrap of paper from his pocket and sat at the kitchen table, clearing a space for himself to brain storm a list of possible places she might be. With phone in hand, he started calling, apprehension growing with every minute. The Emergency Department hadn't seen her, the guard at the gaol/lab complex confirmed that she hadn't returned there, and the few friends that Harry knew she held in town had not touched base with her in days.

Harry looked at the last idea on his list – the Rapid Response Team. Veronica had stated she wanted to inoculate herself with Carrier saliva, and the soldiers of the Response Team would be her best bet to acquire such a thing. He dialled their headquarters and had the fortune to get Sergeant Larkin on the line.

'Yeah, Doc, she called through about thirty minutes ago. To tell the truth, she sounded a bit scattered, not quite making sense.'

'Did she ask for access to a Carrier by any chance?' asked Harry, his knee starting to bounce in agitation under the table.

'She wanted to join the squad on its next call out instead of you.'

'And?'

'I declined her request,' said Larkin off hand. 'I'm happy to support your research efforts where I can, but until she's completed basic training, I'm not taking responsibility for her in the field.'

'Thank Christ for that,' muttered Harry under his breath, but his relief was short lived.

'She didn't take the news too well, Harry. Tried to tear me a new one over the phone, then said some shit about finding a Carrier on her own if I wouldn't help out. I'd have to say, she worried me a bit, I was actually about to give you a call to see if she was all right, but you beat me to it.'

Harry thanked the Sergeant for his time and hung up, more concerned than ever. Even if Veronica had decided to do something as crazy as let a Carrier bite her, surely she'd wait a few days for the medication to properly take hold before seeking out the plague? But she wasn't thinking rationally and was very likely suicidal. Harry wracked his brains, thinking of where she might have gone before it hit him.

The fence line at Eastern Beach.

It was at Eastern Beach that she'd first told him about her idea for the new drug, and also where he'd killed a Carrier that had emerged from the water right in front of her eyes. There was no other place in walking distance that provided as high a chance of plague exposure.

Harry kicked back from the table, his heart hammering against his ribs. Taking off down the hallway at a run, he slammed the front door aside and took the steps onto the street at a leap. He lengthened his stride and ignored the fire of a stitch in his side, praying to whatever uncaring God was above that he had it all wrong.

Chapter Twenty

Steph tucked a wayward strand of blond hair behind her ear. Within moments, it pulled free again, whipped out by a stiff breeze cold enough to make her bones ache. Even if the day had been warm, she knew her joints and back would be hurting after the past week's labour. Every soldier in the platoon had worked from dawn to dusk, replicating the Carrier trap in each field of Joel Tipper's farm. They all knew the constructions would be useless against a swarm, however, for the usual handful of roaming Infected, they should be effective enough to let the farmers start tilling their land again.

Today they moved to the next part of the plan. Steph led a detachment of ten to begin harvesting the paddock of wheat at the front of Joel's property, but first they needed to cull the Infected. She took a double handed grip on her Austeyr rifle and stabbed forward, driving the point of her bayonet deep into the screaming mouth of a Carrier. Brain stem severed, it dropped like a sack of dirt. Steph braced her foot against the side of the fenced pen and extracted her weapon. The recording of screaming rabbits had only attracted two Carriers after playing for twenty minutes. With any luck, the harvester's noise would pull little more attention their way. Steph depressed a button on her radio and notified the rest of the squad that the front paddocks were cleared and ready.

Behind Steph, a rumble grew in volume as Heath approached, driving a combine harvester down the gravel road from the storage sheds. Joel's son had taken an active role in all components of the project to date, and reminded Steph of Jai to such an extent that she had nearly used the dead teenager's name when talking to him. Leaving the culling pen behind, she waved the rest of the detachment forward to the edge of the driveway that exited the main road, dividing the grain paddock in two and leading to the main house and sheds. Morning dew on the long grain soaked her camouflage uniform as she walked, sticking the heavy cotton to her thighs. She cradled her rifle across her chest, eyes scanning the field for movement despite the clearance measures already taken. The recording would only gather in those Carriers still capable of movement, and last thing she wanted was to trip over an incapacitated ghoul with a working mouth.

On reaching the edge of the paddock, Steph opened the double set of

gates ready for Heath to drive through. The combine harvester was a massive piece of machinery, able to complete the whole job of reaping, threshing and winnowing to isolate the only edible part of the plant – the grain. Steph moved to the side of the opening, giving a respectful distance as Heath drove off the dirt road and into the paddock. It didn't take much imagination to picture what it would do to a body caught in the wrong place. A spinning pick-up reel at the front of the machine was responsible for pushing the grain down onto cutters at the base, hundreds of teeth-like blades opening and closing at dizzying speed. With a shudder, she forced the thought aside and locked the paddock gate again.

Heath brought the huge machine to a stop, letting it idle while he swung the cabin door open. The glass of the windscreen and doors had been removed and replaced with a steel lattice. The holes in the lattice were large enough to poke a barrel through, but too small to admit anything wider than a Carrier's finger. Heath had his 0.22 rifle propped in the rear corner of the cabin, ready for use if the situation changed.

'You guys all ready?' he asked, cheeks pink with excitement at the morning's work.

Steph climbed up to the cabin so she could talk without yelling over the engine. 'All good from our side. We've cleared everything that could walk or crawl from the paddock. If there's a stumpy one out that's missing legs or arms, it might still cause some issues if it gets jammed in the machinery.'

'We'll deal with that when and if we have to,' said the kid with a shrug, apparently unconcerned at the prospect of extracting a rotting corpse from the harvester's complex workings. 'Worst case, we'd have to ditch the grain in the catcher – I don't think anyone's going to eat grain seasoned with mulched Carrier.'

Heath gave the dash an almost affectionate rub as he dismissed the problem of the Infected out of hand. 'I've been hanging out for this since Dad said we were getting the farm up and running again. I haven't had a chance to drive this old beauty for months.'

Steph couldn't help but grin at the young man. Only a sixteen-year-old had such a belief in their own immortality that they could ignore the dangers of a situation to focus on the fun side. 'All right then,' she said, jumping back down onto the ground. 'We'll be following on foot, about twenty paces behind. If you see any Carriers, just bring it to a halt and we'll clear them from the field.'

Heath gave a thumbs up and slammed the cabin door shut, his focus already turned to the business of running the harvester. The engine roared as the kid revved the accelerator in neutral and set the reel to spinning. With a jerk, the machine started into the field, mowing a four-metre swathe. Where a sea of wheat had impeded passage until moments before, all that was left after the harvester passed was ankle length yellow stalks to scuff at their boot heels.

Steph led her detachment forward in a staggered line, keeping an eye also to their rear and flanks for any other sign of danger. Her concern didn't lie with an attack by the Infected; with the small numbers in the local area, they could be dealt with easily enough. No, it was the Spartans that had her a little uneasy today. They'd been unexpectedly quiet since the confrontation at the town hall. An attack would most likely come, it was just unclear when. The platoon knew they were being watched, and just this morning one of her detachment had seen a club member on the main road. Her trigger finger had itched to take the spy out, but Mark had given clear orders not to initiate armed confrontation. He was hoping that Mac's men would desert their leader. Steph couldn't help but think he was wasting time in that regard, handing the initiative back to the Spartans while leaving his own soldiers on the back foot.

She buried her thoughts, forcing her focus back onto her surrounds. It was too easy to fall into autopilot while distracted, and find you'd walked fifty metres with no clear recollection of the intervening space. That sort of poor discipline was what got soldiers killed, and she'd be damned if it would happen while she was running the show.

The kid had cleared a third of the paddock, and was nearing the bottom end close to the road when a noise of an approaching engine caused Steph to pause. She looked to her left, her heart rate jumping as she saw a small goods carrying truck coming their way at speed. It was closely followed by a pair of twin-cab utes, each holding a few men in the tray. Even from this distance, Steph could see the morning light reflect off rifles in their hands.

The waiting had finished.

Steph grabbed her radio from where it was clipped to her webbing. 'Contact with Spartans made. Request immediate back-up. Over,' she said, voice tight as adrenaline surged.

The truck veered off the road toward the fence, engine screaming as it accelerated further. Wire snapped like rifle shots on impact, the truck

flattening two fence posts as it burst through the meagre barrier. Its front tyres dug into the softer dirt of the paddock, slewing the vehicle to the right and threatening to flip it as it braked with the rear of the truck now facing toward Steph's detachment. The utes followed, parking behind the truck and using it as cover. A man jumped down from the truck's cabin, running bent over to the rear, he unlocked the back doors and swung them wide. Steph swore hard as she saw the truck's contents exposed.

Carriers.

Mark's gut dropped as he heard Steph's urgent call for assistance over the radio. He immediately confirmed that he was en-route to her location and began sprinting, knowing his detachment was hard on his heels. Steph was only a few hundred metres away, and he took the gamble that it would be quicker on foot as the crow flies than negotiating gates in the trucks. His radio crackled again as Vinh confirmed he would also provide support.

Mark's heart hammered as he vaulted a low fence and ran on. The first shots cracked out in the distance, Austeyrs by the sound. He was still stunned that the Spartans had attacked, part of him having never believed that a bikie would wager their life against a professional soldier's skill. He gritted his teeth and pushed harder, refusing to consider defeat. Soldiers of the Australian Defence Force were up against a bunch of untrained thugs for fucks sake. Steph would be ok. She had to be.

Heating coils installed along the ceiling of the compartment glowed dull orange, radiating heat down upon the Infected to raise their body temperatures and increase speed of movement. These Carriers wouldn't be slow and uncoordinated in the morning cold, with core temperatures now close to that of a live human, they'd descend on the soldiers with the speed of a ravenous wolf pack. The bikie fired a flare gun past the open doors of the truck toward the soldiers, the burning light drawing the attention of the Infected onto their intended victims. Eyes locked onto the soldiers, faces contorting into a manic rictus of anger and hunger at the sight. Ragged bodies careered out of the truck, falling in an uncoordinated mess in the wheat, thrashing on the ground until they righted themselves and attacked. The Carriers were of mixed age. Some were fresh with wounds still red and

weeping, others looked months or years old, flesh and skin dried to tough, leathery sinew over bones and joints. The bikies hung back, shielded by the truck, waiting for their manufactured pack of Infected to gouge their share of flesh before they joined the attack.

Steph stood in the middle of a staggered line behind the harvester. She forced her mind into action, ordering the soldiers on either side of her to flank the harvester to establish a line of fire. She ran to the left, shots cracking out beside her as she skirted the edge of the harvester. Steph took a handhold and climbed the side of the machine until she had a footing next to the cabin. Heath looked out at her, eyes wide and face pale. He gripped his rifle, ready to join the fight.

‘What do you need me to do?’ he asked, voice drawn tight.

Steph glanced out at the field of battle. There was less than seventy metres between the Spartans and her soldiers. The Infected swarmed forward in a ragged pack. Some had already started to spread out, zoning in on soldiers to either side, while others sprinted directly for the harvester, oblivious to the danger of the spinning reel. The Spartans had emerged from cover now that the Infected were away, targeting her soldiers while they were forced to engage the Carriers. Steph needed the sprinting ghouls wiped out quickly to enable her detachment to take on the real enemy.

‘Put the rifle down, I need you to drive the harvester into the pack of Infected,’ she said. The kid just nodded. Wasting no time on speech, he propped his 0.22 in the corner again and stamped on the accelerator.

Steph dropped her rifle to hang by its sling, drawing her pistol to shoot one handed while still gripping the side of the cabin. The harvester lurched into action, Heath accelerating as fast as the machine would allow. The spinning reel bit into the pack of Carriers, catching two thirds of the group. Their bodies were caught by the machine and mashed down onto the cutters. The shear-like blades chewed into the corpses, cutting through muscle, tendon and bone; turning the Infected into a mangled abattoir of gore. The spinning reel caught on the tangle of limbs and bodies, grinding to a halt and trapping the Infected in place.

A bullet sparked off the metal beside Steph’s shoulder, ricocheting past her face like an angry wasp. The harvester had carried her and the kid well past her men, and close to the group of Spartans who now directed their fire at them. Steph yelled at Heath to stop. The kid stamped down on the brake in vain, but it was too late. The harvester careered into the back of the truck, the

reel bending about the back of the truck like a metal embrace as the harvester smashed both vehicles forward before finally coming to a halt.

Steph was thrown clear by the force of the crash, striking feet first, then crashing onto her right side with the momentum. She lay on the ground for a moment, winded, her mouth gasping like a fish for air. Although the long grass absorbed some of the force, her head had smacked hard on the dirt. Dazed, she tried to bring her handgun to bear, but her left hand refused to obey. She glanced down in confusion at her arm, the gun had disappeared in the fall, and her wrist was bent at an unnatural angle. Suddenly the agony of broken bones in her wrist hit home, joined by a burning pain in her right ankle and knee. Behind her, she could hear her detachment fighting the Infected, snarls of rage matched by the soldier's gunfire, while Heath lay doubled over the steering wheel in the cabin, knocked unconscious after his head had smashed into the metal grill on impact.

A group of Spartans ran towards her, Mac in the lead. A shark's smile covered his face, devoid of sympathy. Steph clumsily tried to draw her combat knife with her one working hand. Mac stamped down hard before the blade left its sheath, crushing her fingers under his heel. Steph screamed in agony, the added pain overwhelming the last of her reserve.

Mac pulled the knife out of her sheath and threw it out of reach. With deliberate callousness, he wrenched her to standing by her injured arm, causing Steph to dry retch in pain. Mac shoved his face close up to hers, gross satisfaction at his victory plain to see.

'You're mine now,' he said between short, fetid breaths of excitement. 'Either your boyfriend does as I say, or you won't be living for much longer.' Mac turned to his men as he dragged Steph to one of the utes. 'Get the boy from the harvester. It's Joel Tipper's kid – I want to make that bastard hurt as well.'

The torn ligaments in Steph's ankle burned as she was forced to take weight on it. She wrenched back against Mac, refusing to be meekly led to slaughter.

'Do you really think Mark's going to just let you go?' she spat. 'You're nothing but a piece of dog shit compared to him.'

Mac's Sergeant at Arms whipped the back of his hand across her face, breaking her nose with a sickening crunch. Blood sheeted from her nostrils, flowing across her lips and down her chin in a crimson mess. Steph glowered at him, refusing to be silenced, she hocked blood from the back of her nose

and spat it on the ground. 'You've got no idea what you're bringing on yourself. My platoon will come for us.'

Mac wrenched her forward with her broken wrist, drawing his face close to hers. 'Good. That's what I fucking planned for. They're going to do as I say, or die outside the walls of our compound. Now shut the fuck up, or your face won't be pretty for much longer.'

He jerked a thumb at his Sergeant in Arms, 'Get her in the back of my ute, we need to get moving before their backup arrives.'

Without question, the hulk grabbed her in one arm, ignoring Steph's protest and hoisted her over the back of the ute's tray where another two club members pinned her arms. The engine of the ute revved into life, wheels spinning in the dirt as it made for the road.

Tears of frustration cut lines through the grime on Steph's face as she saw Mark's detachment join the fight against the Carriers and remaining bikies. He was less than a hundred metres away, but unless they realised her capture within the next few seconds, it would be too late.

As Mark's detachment finally joined the battle, chests heaving from their sprint, they found the fight almost won. He sent half of his men to finish off the last of the Carriers, and took the rest to complete a rout of the Spartans. He could see one of the two utes already fleeing the scene like cowards. The remaining five men were using the truck as cover, and remained oblivious to Mark's simple flanking manoeuvre until their bodies jerked haphazardly with the passage of bullets.

The last rifle fell silent with the death of the Spartans. Mark jogged back to the main body of his troops to confirm losses, praying that Steph would not be among them. Vinh was waiting for his return, having arrived shortly after his officer. His face was grim.

'We've two MIA, one bite and a gunshot wound,' said Vinh.

Mark looked over to where the injured men lay. The medic worked on the gunshot wound, applying a tourniquet and clotting factors into the thigh wound while the Private stifled a scream of agony.

The bite victim sat quietly a short distance from the rest of the squad, her face ashen as she regarded the crescent of tissue ripped from her calf. Mark watched with blunted horror as the young woman drew her side arm, placed it under her chin and pulled the trigger. Few of his soldiers shirked the duty

of suicide post a bite, stoically refusing to demand euthanasia from their mates.

Mark wrenched his eyes back to Vinh, realising that he hadn't spotted Steph yet. 'Where's Corporal Williams, Vinny. She should be the one giving report for her detachment,' said Mark, hiding his worry behind professionalism.

Vinh winced. 'I said there were two MIA, Boss. She was on the harvester. Apparently saved her men's lives when she directed Joel's kid to drive it into the swarm of Carriers, wiping out two thirds of them in one go. The bastards were running hot – if she hadn't done it, I reckon the detachment would have been overrun.'

Mark looked back down to where the wreck of the harvester lay, wrapped around the truck, horror growing as realisation dawned.

Vinh continued as Mark balled his fists in futile rage. 'One of the Privates saw her and Joel's kid get bundled into the back of a ute. She's not dead though, Boss. We can get her back...'

Mark lost grip of his Sergeant's words as guilt and rage threatened to blank out all reason. He'd not seen Steph in the back of the fleeing ute, and it might have just cost his girlfriend's life. Mark battled with himself, enforcing discipline in his own mind. If he was going to get her back, he needed all his faculties.

Mark cut Vinh off mid-sentence. 'Sergeant, I want the men ready to leave in twenty minutes. I'm going to burn that bastard to the ground.'

Chapter Twenty-One

Harry reached the corner of Swanston and Eastern Beach Rd. and came to an abrupt stop, leaning forward with hands on knees as he struggled to regain his breath. A cyclone wire fence reared eight feet in the air on the other side of the street, marking the furthest safe boundary in Geelong. An overgrown grass slope descended on the far side to an abandoned public car park and then a narrow strip of beach. Wind gusted across Corio Bay, driving whitecaps over iron grey water. The sweat on Harry's forehead cooled within moments, leaving an icy slick that matched the sense of foreboding in his chest.

The footpath adjacent to the fence was empty of movement in both directions, and Harry felt a momentary surge in hope that he was wrong. A movement in his peripheral vision made him look to the right. The footpath and road climbed a gentle slope before flattening out once again. At this point, a simple bench seat provided a rest point for any person to sit and enjoy the view across the park and bay. A figure sat wearing nothing but a dirty t-shirt and jeans, seemingly oblivious to the cold wind that whipped a mass of curly hair about her head.

Veronica.

A faint animalistic noise carried on the wind from her direction, and as Harry changed his focus to the fence, he saw a figure opposite Veronica, fingers reaching through the wire lattice toward her.

'Veronica! Wait!' he yelled out. Fatigue forgotten, Harry set off at a run up the slope to his colleague.

Veronica's head turned at his call, her features impassive as she stood and walked closer to the fence, a handgun gripped in her right hand.

'Get back from the barrier, Veronica. You don't have to go through with this!' shouted Harry. 'We have no proof it'll stop the virus, please don't do this!'

Veronica stopped him dead in his tracks with less than ten metres separating them. Harry eyed the weapon that now aimed straight at his face, struggling to reconcile the woman he'd been growing to love with the tortured soul before him. Tears streaked her cheeks and snot dribbled in a clear line from her nostrils to her quivering lip.

'You don't understand, Harry. You can't, not unless you've lost a child

and family like me,' she said, gun beginning to waver as she continued to hold her arm out straight. 'I know this might not work, but if there's a chance I can stop another child like my own or Ruby dying in the future, it'll be worth it.'

'But what if it doesn't?' pleaded Harry.

'Then I get to be reunited with my child and husband,' she said with a sad smile.

'Bullshit! There is no fucking afterlife, Veronica. You're not going to see your kid again, all you'll be is dead. This isn't heroic, it's just giving up.'

Fresh tears fell from her eyes at his words. 'Then I give up, Harry.'

Veronica shoved the fingers of her left hand through the steel lattice toward the Carrier. Needing no further invitation, the ghoul latched onto her index finger. Veronica loosed a hideous scream as the creature gripped the remaining fingers and wrenched savagely to bring more of her arm through the fence. The skin de-gloved from her hand, stripped by the small diamond of wire as it was forced into the small space. Her middle finger tore free with the next tug as it drew her wrist through the gap, shearing the bone and dislocating the joint. Skin and fat cells bunched at the near end of the hole, torn backwards like sausage skin by the wire.

The Carrier buried its teeth into the exposed arm muscles, worrying at the meat like a terrier with a rat in its jaws. Harry forced himself into action and stuck the end of his pistol through the fence and squeezed the trigger, punching a hole in the forehead of the beast. A spray of gore exited the rear of the Carrier's skull and it slumped to the ground. Veronica's arm was dragged down by the ghoul, until the teeth of the predator ripped free. Her arm flicked upward, spraying both her and Harry with crimson droplets.

Veronica stared at her limb in mute horror, her whole body trembling in agony. Harry quickly undid his belt and fastened it around her upper arm as a rudimentary tourniquet, murmuring quiet words of support to his friend as he worked. Blood supply temporarily cut off from the wound, the hosing wound tapered off. Harry withdrew the syringe of trial medication from his breast pocket, giving Veronica a brief warning before injecting the medication through her jeans into her thigh, not bothering to waste time in exposing skin. In comparison to the torturous pain at her forearm, the needle didn't even register on her face.

The next movement was not going to be fun. Her arm needed to be withdrawn from the fence, and with no wire cutters to hand, the only passage

would be in reverse. Harry placed one foot up against the fence and took a double armed hold around her upper torso.

‘How do you want it done, Ronnie? Fast or slow?’ he asked his friend, silent apology for what he was about to do written plain in his eyes.

‘Just fucking get it out,’ she groaned, swaying on her feet. She was starting to go into hypovolaemic shock from blood loss.

Harry took a steadying breath and took up the slack about her chest while he pushed away with his foot against the fence. Her arm emerged barely a centimetre. Veronica screamed, a raw sound of pure agony that tore at Harry’s eardrums. The strength of the Carrier must have been enormous to draw her limb so deeply through. There was nothing left for it. Harry kicked out with all his strength while wrenching back under her shoulders at the same time. Her arm stuck for an instant more, then came free with a sickening slurp of congealed blood. Her hand was mangled, the wrist joint so badly fractured that it slipped through the small hole without protest, leaving her to fall back in his arms.

Harry eased her to the ground, his mind reeling at what he’d just witnessed. He cursed his lack of foresight in not bringing a car. Harry needed to get her to the gaol and his research lab for treatment as soon as possible. Veronica’s arm was unrecoverable, suitable only for amputation.

He pulled out his mobile phone, tacky blood smearing over the screen as he opened his directory to seek a number for the Rapid Response Team. They held the only functioning ambulances in town.

‘Larkin, is that you?’ asked Harry as his call was answered. ‘I found her down at Eastern Beach,’ he said, looking back down at Veronica, who was curled about the mangled remains of her arm. ‘I need transport ASAP, she’s not in a good way.’

Sergeant Larkin placed a steaming mug of coffee into Harry’s hands, forcing him to acknowledge his surroundings. Harry nodded his thanks to the soldier and took a tentative sip of the brew. He raised an eyebrow as he registered the taste of an additive to the black coffee.

Larkin was unapologetic. ‘It’s got a couple of fingers from our own moonshine in there, thought you could do with an Irish coffee, all things considered.’

Harry wasn't going to complain. He'd happily consume anything to dull the edge of his loss. The Sergeant and his Rapid Response Team had stayed to help at the lab after collecting the pair from Eastern Beach. Once back to an adequate treatment facility, Harry had tied off active bleeders in Veronica's arm and started a fluid resuscitation. What she had needed was whole blood, but it was a health resource that no longer existed. With two litres of normal saline to bulk her circulating volume, she had rallied for a while, giving Harry some meagre hope. But it had proved a short-lived improvement. Features of overwhelming infection had taken hold, a massive inflammatory response to the presence of the virus that inevitably led to death like so many before her.

Larkin dragged a chair over to join the doctor at Veronica's bedside. After her death, the watch had begun for signs of reanimation. It was now over four hours since a last tortured breath had left her chest, leaving behind a husk of cold flesh on the clinical trolley. She wasn't coming back.

'I guess it wasn't a complete waste,' said the Sergeant hesitantly. Harry glanced up at him from the corner of his eye, irritation flickering at the man's words. Larkin stumbled on before he could be cut off. 'We know that the drug works to an extent. I mean, it's stopped a handful of people from becoming a Carrier after they kicked the bucket, right? Although it's not a cure, it's still a massive development that could slow down the spread of plague through a community. And it didn't kill her straight off – maybe it could be given prophylactically?'

Harry gripped onto the Sergeant's words, turning them over in his traumatized brain. The man was right, Veronica had possibly achieved something great. If he could prove through trials that inoculation with the drug prior to plague exposure did not have hideous consequences – a widespread vaccination program could stop the creation of new Carriers. Veronica had survived for multiple hours after injecting herself with the drug – maybe the heads of the research efforts in Canberra would now take notice and provide the resources to pursue this lead?

Twenty-Two

Mark was oblivious to bodily discomfort as he leopard crawled through the undergrowth, each movement smooth, causing a minimum of sound. He wanted to see the compound with his own eyes, wanted to see the site where the most important person remaining in his life was held. Friend, comrade, lover; Steph was unique and he'd rather gouge out his right eye than allow her to die. The rage that had burned white hot after her abduction had cooled, tempered to a cold anger that left his mind rational and able to think. And he needed his wits about him to ensure that any action of his did not cause Steph greater risk, or unneeded deaths amongst his men.

Thick bush lay on three sides of the Spartan compound, extending to within twenty metres of the walls. On the fourth, a dirt road cut through the un-cleared land, terminating at a pair of steel gates. As Mark came closer to the tree line, the red brick of their defensive barrier became visible. Keeping his profile low, Mark scanned the visible wall and surrounding area, looking for weaknesses to exploit. Eight feet of brick topped with broken glass stood between him and his objective. The wall looked poorly constructed. Mark guessed whoever had built the structure hadn't prepared the base adequately, evidenced by a web of cracks extending through the render in three different places. Mark spotted a three-metre section of wall bowing inwards not far from the main set of gates. He wagered that if enough pressure was applied to that point, it would collapse. If the gates didn't buckle under the force of one of the armoured vehicles, that section of wall would be his next bet.

A slight movement to the left caught his attention. Mark turned his head, watching as one of his soldiers took up a position in the bush, rifle sight trained on the wall ahead. Position of fire obtained, the soldier became perfectly still, his camouflage uniform blending his frame into the surrounding undergrowth. There would be another nine like him taking up residence all around the compound, ready to pick off any Spartan stupid enough to peek above the wall. The rest of his soldiers waited fifty metres back, hidden from sight where the approaching track curled to the west.

Mark eased backward through the scrub until he was sure the surrounding bush would conceal his movement, before standing and making his way back to the troops. Vinh caught his eye as he emerged onto the road and waved him over. Three of their armoured trucks were parked behind each

other on the track, drivers at the ready. The soldiers however were to either side of the dirt track, attention turned outward in case of attack. Vinh knelt on the dirt behind the last truck, finishing a check of a small drone before him. The compact machine was no bigger than a case of beer, with four small rotor blades emerging from the top to provide lift. A monitor to display what the drone camera viewed sat in the back of the truck. Happy everything was in order, Vinh grabbed the remote in one hand and stood up.

‘Perfect timing, Boss,’ said Vinh. ‘Let’s see what those bastards have behind the walls, eh?’

The drone’s rotor blades spun into life, fast becoming a blur as the craft lifted into the air. Vinh guided the drone at first by sight, up and over the trees toward the compound. With the craft now out of sight, he turned to the small screen in the truck to pilot it. It displayed a dense green eucalypt canopy, scrolling down the screen as the craft moved forward at walking pace. Soon the brick wall came into view, and then the compound’s interior. Mark drank in the details greedily, leaning forward to get a better view. Fifteen men sat on top of a battlement made of scaffolding, their heads kept safely below the line of the wall while they held hunting rifles in hand. As Mark watched, he saw one of them sneak a peek over the edge, the top of his head lifting no more than half a hand above the edge. Suddenly his head jerked backward, the rear of the skull blown out in a welter of bone, blood and tissue. One of Mark’s snipers had made the Spartan pay heavily for his curiosity. With grim satisfaction, Mark saw the nearby men scoot away from their mate and cower beneath the walls, leaving him to kick a staccato of death on the boards in isolation. He needed them to be scared and indecisive, otherwise they had enough numbers to take a toll in blood when Mark’s men forced their way inside.

Beyond the scaffolding was a large open area where vehicles and motorbikes were parked haphazardly, and behind this, a series of buildings that backed onto the rear wall. Milling about in the open area were a few older men, each wearing Spartan colours on their jackets or vests, the skull capped with an ancient Greek helmet. Mark glanced back over to the men on the wall and noted a key difference in how they were dressed.

‘Hey Joel, can you get over here for a second?’ said Mark.

Joel Tipper had joined the platoon, acting as a guide to the club compound. Mark drew him closer to the drone’s screen and pointed out the differences between the men on the ground and those manning the wall.

‘The men on the wall seem much younger than those behind them on the ground, and none of them are wearing the club colours. Almost looks like they’re being kept under guard or something,’ said Mark.

Joel studied the screen for a moment, then pointed at one of the men on the wall. ‘That’s Brent Kilpatrick - he was coerced into the club six months ago. I think I recognise a few of the other faces, but it’s hard to be sure with this footage, the drone’s too far away. Can you get it closer?’

‘No one’s noticed it yet, Boss,’ said Vinh. ‘If I bring it much lower, one of the Spartans are going to pick up on it and start taking pot shots. If they succeed in hitting it, we’ll lose our eyes into the compound.’

‘Drop it closer for the moment, just until Joel can identify a few more,’ said Mark. ‘If there’s a clear separation between original club members on the ground, and only new recruits on the wall, it might change how we approach things.’

Vinh bit back further complaint and did as he was ordered. Joel leaned down toward the screen, resting a hand on either side as he stared at the men in the display.

‘I think you’re right, Mark. Each one of the men on the scaffolding only joined the club since the plague hit,’ said Joel. ‘But I don’t get where you’re going with this?’

Mark pointed at the Spartans on the ground. ‘I reckon they’re worried about the loyalty of their newest members. If we play this right, maybe we can push them into revolt?’

Fresh movement on the screen drew the men’s gaze. A door of a building to the rear opened, spewing forth a group of people. Two had their hands restrained, and one looked in such bad state that they were being dragged through the dirt. Mark’s heart rate doubled at the sight. It was Steph and Heath.

Steph bit her lip hard to stifle her scream, determined not to give Mac the satisfaction. The taste of copper filled her mouth from where a tooth punctured her lip. The Sergeant at Arms gave one last wrench on her injured arm, roughly handcuffing her wrists behind the chair. Agony lanced from her forearm, a white-hot pain as the shattered bones grated against each other, making her want to vomit. Everything hurt, from her damaged ankle to the

gash on her head that seeped blood across the left of her face, gumming up that eye and sticking it shut.

Steph forced herself to ignore the pain and look around the room with her one good eye. If there was any possibility of escape, she needed to be prepared to exploit anything that might aid her. Heath sat on a chair opposite, a heavy wooden table separating the two prisoners. He was conscious, but only barely, his head lolling down to his chest intermittently like a ragdoll. Clotted blood covered his upper lip, extending in a glutinous sheet over his chin and neck, courtesy of a smashed nose that bent sideways like deformed clay. They were sat in the middle of the Spartan's crude bar. A pool table stood a few metres away, balls spread haphazardly on its surface around a small wooden chest. A few faded centre-fold spreads were taped to the walls, while a tarnished bar stretched along the right wall, stocked with homemade spirits. The room was dim, a single window providing the only light.

Aside from the Sergeant at Arms, the only other person in the room was Mac. Even if she couldn't have seen the club president, she would have known he was there by smell. A gangrenous stink of rotting flesh followed the man, emanating from his fetid scalp wound. Any sane person could tell that he was walking on borrowed time. In an era where antibiotics and medical help were unobtainable, it was only a matter of time before he succumbed to the infection. He watched Steph through fever-maddened eyes, his rage an almost palpable force. A dribble of spit oozed from one corner of his mouth, and Steph noticed for the first time that the left side of his face wasn't moving properly. She realised Vinh had caused more than just a flesh wound when he smashed him with the butt of his rifle.

'What the fuck are you smiling at?' muttered the Sergeant at Arms from behind his leader.

'Nothing,' said Steph, her voice thick as it emerged from swollen lips. 'Just happy to see karma served. You two started something that can't be finished. Let us go, or I swear Mark won't let you see the light of a new day.'

Mac laughed at her words before wincing as he raised a hand to his forehead. He glared at her again, his hand displaying a coarse tremor as it dropped to his side. 'You're in no position to make threats, *Corporal Williams*,' grated Mac, reading her name off her uniform. 'If you and the boy want a chance of survival, you're going to make your officer boyfriend leave my town.'

Steph glanced across at Heath who was following the conversation

behind heavily lidded eyes. 'Let the boy go, and then we'll talk. He's a civilian - my officer won't enter any negotiations until he's returned to his father,' she said.

'Not a chance,' said Mac. He wandered over to the pool table and picked up one of the billiard balls. 'For one thing, I owe his dad some pain for causing me problems over the years, and secondly, he's my leverage against you.'

Mac looked at his henchman. 'Get his hand out,' he grunted. The Sergeant in Arms undid the restraint about Heath's wrists and forced one hand onto the table. Mac slammed the billiard ball down onto the teenager's little finger, smashing the bone and tearing the nail free. Heath screamed in agony while Steph stared in open-mouthed horror. Mac raised his hand again, then paused and looked at Steph with the ball hovering over the kid's ring finger.

'It's up to you, Corporal,' he said, a vicious smile on his face.

Steph's mind raced, trying to think of an option. She needed to stall and give Mark time to mount some sort of attack without interaction with her. If she talked to him, and he came to know for certain that she or the boy were being tortured, she worried that he'd attack whether ready or not, and she couldn't allow him or her other mates in the platoon to be risked in that way.

'You're a fucking sadist and a coward,' she muttered. 'If you want to play that game, leave the kid out of it.' Steph forced a dry swallow down. 'I've got plenty of fingers that aren't important, why don't you start with them first.'

'Steph, don't you fucking dare,' moaned Heath between gritted teeth. 'It doesn't even hurt, I swear.'

Mac looked back and forth between the two of them, his eyebrow raised. 'So, you both want to play hero? Well I've got an answer to that - lets up the stakes a little.' He walked back to the pool table, this time dumping the billiard ball in favour of the wooden chest. Steph eyed the container with trepidation as he placed it down in front of her. 'I'm willing to bet my little friend in the box will get you to say whatever I want,' said Mac, unlocking the lid.

Steph's gut roiled as she saw the contents of the chest, pupils dilating and heart racing with a fresh surge of adrenaline. Mac lifted the live Carrier head free, holding it by the handle that he'd screwed into the back of its skull. The eyes of the ghoul locked onto Steph, lips rose in a snarl and teeth

snapped toward her. Steph instinctively pressed back in her chair, trying to gain as much distance from the decapitated head.

Mac stood between them, a smile on his face as he slowly waved the head between them. 'Which one will it be first? The boy or the girl?' He turned back to Heath and leant in closer. 'You know what, I think we'll start with you. Your dad was always a stuck-up bastard. I can't wait to watch him cry when he sees you carrying the plague to his front door. Maybe you could kill him for me, wouldn't that be sweet?'

Heath tried to move backwards, out of reach of the skull as it snapped, closer and closer towards his face, but the Sergeant in Arms held him fixed in the chair. Steph suddenly kicked out with her right foot, driving her heel into the side of Mac's knee. The Spartan cried out in surprise and pain, losing grip of the skull and dropping it on the floor. Steph tried to stand, ignoring the agony in her wrist as her restraints pulled at the broken bones. Her violent movements caused the table to flip, one corner of the heavy table top falling like a sledge hammer onto the Carrier's head, bursting the skull like a rotten melon over the floor boards. Steph's seat also tipped over, and she was trapped, hands still tied behind the tall back of the wooden chair. She whimpered as the ends of bone grated in her wrist.

'You fucking bitch!' raged Mac as he surveyed the damage she'd caused. He dropped to his knees beside the smashed head, picking up part of the skull that was still attached to the handle. On the inside of the bone, a clump of brain was still attached to the putrid lining. He looked over at Steph, rage written plain over his features, erasing all reason. 'My men think the infection takes root in the brain of a Carrier. This one mightn't be able to bite you anymore, but I'm going to make damn sure you don't walk out of this compound alive.'

He crawled over to Steph and forced her head back with one hand. With the other he jammed the rim of skull between her teeth, levering her jaw open. Steph's eyes bulged with terror as a clump of brain slid into her mouth. Before she could spit it out, Mac dropped the piece of skull, clamped her mouth shut and blocked her nose.

'Swallow it, or I'll make sure you suffocate,' said Mac, his mad eyes mere inches above her own.

Steph fought for as long as she could, but then convulsively swallowed as her vision started to dim. Mac released his grip and rocked back on his heels, a look of triumph on his face. Steph dry retched, a taste of rotten offal

coating her tongue.

Somewhere behind them, a door smashed open, followed by the sound of hurried footsteps over the boards. One of the other Spartans loomed into her view.

‘Prez, they’re outside the perimeter. One of the recruits just got his head blown to bits when he looked over the wall. They’re fuckin’ good, I swear, he only glanced for a split second – and it was enough for them to pick him off.’

Mac looked up at the man with a bored expression. ‘So what? We’ve got an eight-foot wall all around us. Unless they’re giants, they’re hardly going to step over it now, are they.’

‘Well they’re planning something. There’s a drone up in the sky spying on us – what if they decide to start lobbing bombs over the wall or something?’

Mac’s interest finally sparked. ‘A drone? That’ll work well enough. This bitch won’t talk. Maybe once they see what’s become of the hostages I’ll get a response from that fucking officer.’ He staggered to his feet, reeling to one side briefly before finding his balance and snarling at his men. ‘Get them up, I want them outside where that flying camera can see them.’

The Sergeant at Arms shared a nervous look with the other Spartan, then pulled the two hostages to their feet. Steph took a step and collapsed. Not only were her ankles too badly damaged to walk, but she felt like ice as her whole body started to shiver and rigor with fever. The Spartan gripping onto her shoulder ignored her change in condition and started to drag her outside.

Heath stumbled briefly as one of the Spartans shoved him in the back to hurry. He only just regained his footing in time, struggling to balance with his hands tied behind his back. The Sergeant at Arms dragged Steph beside him with one hand, uncaring for the listless woman who’d become limp in his grip. Heath looked about, squinting against the blinding sun after being indoors. They’d become the centre of attention. Spartan recruits watched him from the scaffolding below the wall with worried looks on their faces, while the original club members stared at their President and his changed demeanour with trepidation.

A rough hand on his shoulder stopped him in the middle of the courtyard and shoved him to the ground. Steph was dropped by his side, dumped like a

discarded doll. She was still alive, but her breathing was shallow and rapid. Heath tried to get her attention without success. Whether infected with the plague or not, she was past the point of communication.

Pain exploded in his lower back, caused by a steel capped boot into his kidney. Mac leaned over him, 'That got your attention, boy?' Drool hung in a line from one corner of his mouth, the left side of his face hanging like a wax mask. His left limbs were also now affected, the arm hanging limp, while the leg dragged like a dead piece of wood over the dirt. The man's stroke was extending, but all too slowly for his two captors.

'I bet your daddy's watching through that drone's camera. Time to put on a show,' he slurred.

Mac looked up at the drone hovering twenty metres above and extended his middle finger up at the camera. He then looked back down at Heath and grinned lopsidedly as he drew a revolver and pointed it straight at his face. Heath looked into the black eye, seeing the pistol barrel from end on. He saw Mac's finger tighten on the trigger, unable to believe what was happening to him. The gun kicked as it fired, the noise overwhelming at less than a metre distance. Everything went black.

The Sergeant at Arms looked at his President aghast. 'What the fuck are you doing, Mac? If they think the hostages are dead, what's to stop them killing us all?'

Mac barely seemed to hear his words and just grinned down at his handy work, saliva hanging in a long thread from his chin. He'd passed the point of reason, leading them to disaster only to retreat into the damaged recesses of his own mind.

The Sergeant at Arms swore bitterly, realising the command was his. He aimed his rifle up at the drone and fired. Sparks flew from one of the rotors, destroyed by the bullet's passage. The machine veered wildly to the right, starting an irretrievable dive. Removing the watching eye from above gave him scant comfort. They'd already seen everything he had at his disposal, and knew the layout and locations of the men under his command.

He took a deep breath, his face hardening as he accepted the situation. He'd always expected to die a violent death at some point; under the guns of the police or a rival club before the world fell apart, or from the teeth of the Infected in the present day. If it was to be at the hands of a soldier instead, he wouldn't complain. He'd just take as many with him to hell as possible.

He turned back to the walls, his face grim. 'They'll attack soon!' he shouted up to the men on the scaffolding. 'It's time for you farm-boys to finally earn your keep. Get your fucking heads above that wall so you can see them come and start shooting!'

'NO!' shouted Joel. 'Not my boy!' Tears welled in the farmer's eyes as he watched his son get shot on the drone's relay.

Mark was shocked at how fast the situation had escalated. Before the screen went black, he still hadn't seen his girlfriend move, for all he knew, it was already too late for both hostages.

'Get in the trucks!' he shouted to his soldiers. 'We're ramming the main gate!'

Mark and Vinh sprinted for the first armoured vehicle. Vinh took the wheel and revved the engine to life. Within moments, the back of each truck filled with troops from the side of the road. Wheels spun in the dirt as Vinh accelerated along the narrow dirt road.

Mark ordered his Sergeant to halt once the walls of the compound were in view. He picked up the radio control and flicked on the outside speaker to address the compound.

'I am an officer of the ADF. You will surrender immediately, or be killed on sight. You have ten seconds to comply!' said Mark, his voice booming from the speaker mounted to the top of his truck. A rattle of rifle fire sounded to his right.

Mark turned to Vinh. 'Fuck 'em. They had their chance, ram the gate, Sergeant.'

Vinh gritted his teeth and stamped his foot on the accelerator.

Brent Kilpatrick sat on the scaffolding, his back against the brick wall, knowing that his death was probably no more than a few moments away. He watched the contorted face of the Sergeant at Arms screaming at him and the other young men on the wall to stand up and fight. Two of his mates complied, men he'd known most of his life, gone to school with, chased girls with even as they grew up in and around Cob Hill. They didn't last a heartbeat, hit by snipers in the bush surrounding as the Army officer

announced his conditions. Their bodies collapsed to the decking, blood pooling from bullet-punctured skulls.

He gripped his rifle, anger overcoming his fear. He hadn't joined the Spartans by choice. When given the ultimatum to join or see his sister get made the club whore instead, he'd seen no option. Brent turned to the men nearest, speaking up loudly.

'If I'm going to die today, it won't be fighting for those pricks down there,' he shouted, lining his sights on the nearest Spartan in the courtyard. 'Let's take back our town from these bastards!'

The Sergeant at Arms glared up at the recruits on the wall. 'Don't you fucking do it, Brent. I'm warning you!' he roared.

Brent ignored him and fired, drilling a bullet through the chest of the Spartan. The other recruits took his lead, turning their rifles on the original club members below. The Sergeant at Arms looked at his dying comrade, swore bitterly before lifting his rifle and returning the favour. His other mates weren't so willing to die, dropping their rifles and lifting hands in submission.

To his right, the gate smashed free of its hinges, an ear rending scream of tearing metal as an armoured truck crashed through into the compound, collecting two Spartans like nine-pins. Up on the scaffold, Brent curled into a foetal position, gut shot and dying while his mates shouted victory.

Vinh skidded to a halt. Soldiers poured from the back of the truck with weapons raised and shoulders hunched, emerging to a battle won. The surviving Spartans on the ground stood with arms already raised in surrender, while the men on the scaffold quickly dumped their rifles.

With the Spartans under guard of his soldiers' weapons, Mark ignored them and ran toward the hostages. Mac sat some distance away with vacant eyes, his good leg bleeding profusely from a bullet wound. The Sergeant at Arms was next to him, staring balefully at the soldiers as he nursed a through-and-through wound to his right shoulder.

Mark knelt beside Steph and cut the ties between her wrists. She was still breathing, although the pulse at her wrist was thready beneath Mark's fingers and her skin burning to the touch. He searched her for a wound serious enough to account for her condition. Sweat soaked her shirt and ran in

rivulets from her face.

‘She busted her wrist and feet at the farm,’ said a quiet voice. Mark looked at Heath in surprise and found the boy’s eyes open. He raised a hand, touching where Mac’s bullet had grazed the side of his skull, furrowing a laceration down to the bone. He’d been knocked unconscious by the passage of the bullet, but had survived. Heath sat up groggily and vomited.

‘What did they do to her?’ asked Mark, his voice urgent.

‘Carrier,’ said Heath between retches.

‘Fuck,’ muttered Mark, as he started searching desperately for a bite wound. ‘Where did it get her?’

‘No not a bite, he forced her to eat part of its brain.’

Mark was floored. He’d taken for granted that she’d been bitten at the farm. He looked at Heath, his mind failing to process the information. ‘What?’

‘She saved my life, Mark. They had a Carrier’s head in a box and were going to make it bite me. She managed to smash the skull before they could, and as punishment, Mac forced part of its brain down her throat.’

As he finally understood what had happened, rage flared in Mark’s mind, blocking out all other thoughts than a need for retribution. He stood and drew his pistol, raised it and lined up the nearest Spartan, shooting the man at point blank.

‘Line ‘em all up, Sergeant. I want them dead!’ shouted Mark, his voice thick with rage. ‘Every. Single. One!’

Vinh looked rattled. ‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘That’s an order I can’t follow. They’ve already surrendered, if we kill the men that were forcibly recruited from the farms – we’ll lose support of the town and the real mission will fail.’

‘Like I give a fuck! Look what they did to her, are you fucking blind, Vinh?’ shouted Mark.

His Sergeant stood firm, unwilling to cave. ‘You’ll regret it, Boss. You’re not that type of man.’

Mark turned away from him, searching the yard for the Spartan president, determined to have some part of his need sated. Spotting the degenerate, he had a target again. ‘You’re bloody mine,’ he said, raising his gun at Mac.

‘Stop.’

Mark paused, stunned to hear a voice he’d thought lost. He looked down, saw Steph propped on one elbow. Fever glazed her eyes, but she was

conscious. She pushed herself upright.

‘Not you,’ she said, each word a visible effort. ‘I need to do this.’

Mark passed his gun to her without a word. Mac stared straight at Steph, unrepentant as she lined him up, and fired.

Mark paced nervously, unable to keep still. The other soldiers of the platoon sat in clumps along the walls of the town hall, watching their commanding officer in respectful silence. After gaining her revenge on the Spartan president, Steph had collapsed once again. The platoon medic had worked on her, gaining intravenous access and pumping a bag of saline in to bump up her failing blood pressure. Her vitals had rallied somewhat, enough to transport her back to the temporary base in Cob Hill.

And now Mark waited for her to die, like every other person exposed to the virus. He glanced at an old clock high on the wall, seeing it was now four hours since he’d broken into the bikie compound. The thought of losing her paralysed his thoughts, rendering him unable to think of anything else. A door by the hall’s stage squeaked on opening. Mark walked over to intercept the medic, impatient for news of her progress. The medic put up his hand, cutting off his Lieutenant before he had a chance to speak.

‘She’s still hanging in there, Boss. I don’t know what’s going on, but she’s not progressing like a usual plague bite.’

Mark tried to ignore a stubborn flicker of hope at the medic’s words. ‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s sick – no doubt, but her blood pressure’s stabilised, and heart rate fallen. I don’t think there’s anything else I can do for her. She needs proper medical staff, a hospital. We just haven’t got enough supplies here to waste... I mean, to use up on only one soldier.’

Mark excused the slip up in words, but the medic was right. He couldn’t use up all medical supplies on what might still be a hopeless case, when he had the remainder of his platoon to think of.

‘Would she survive a transfer to Geelong?’ asked Mark, thinking if he could get her there, that maybe Harry could help in some way.

The medic shrugged uncertainly. ‘Maybe, I don’t think there’s any other option but to try though, Boss.’

Mark nodded, decision made. ‘Get her ready to move, Sergeant Vinh

will use one of the trucks to transport you both to Geelong Base Hospital.’ The medic went to return to Steph to begin preparations when Mark pulled him up one last time. ‘One last thing, no matter what happens, thanks for what you’ve done for her. She... means a lot to me.’

‘Don’t worry, Boss. We know how it is between you two,’ he said, meeting his officer’s eyes for the first time. ‘And not one of us has a problem with it. She’s one hell of a soldier, she means a lot to *all* of us.’

Chapter Twenty-Three

Harry cupped his hands around his mouth, warming them with his breath in the cold of the evening. Leaning back on the tarnished steel of the gaol's main gate, he looked up at the multitude of stars that filled the night sky in the absence of light pollution. Under such an open sky, he felt some of the tension in his chest subside. Inside the lab, where the old prison cells reared high above his head to either side, he'd begun to feel claustrophobic. Each door seemed a vacant eye, feeding off the death that his research bred with each failure, exuding a coldness that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. Unable to shake the feeling that he was not alone in the lab, but rather being watched and judged, he had escaped to the cool of night to wait his friend's arrival. Now that he stood outside with a light breeze ruffling his shirt, his earlier feelings within the lab seemed ridiculous. Still, he had no desire to re-enter the building for the moment. As much as the rational side of his mind laughed at the concept of supernatural phenomena, his gut told him another story.

Harry looked down the street, searching for headlights to tell of Vinh's approach. He'd felt merely numb on hearing the news that his cousin was to be delivered into his care, and requested that she be transported to the gaol research facility rather than the hospital where she might end up placing other patients and staff at risk. After presiding over so much death of late, watching the young and old die, helpless to change the ultimate outcome; Veronica had been the last straw. Sometimes he pictured his sanity as a boat, weighed down in the water by each successive death, until water lapped at the gunwales threatening to sink his mind into abject despair. He was tired, but not yet completely broken. Harry continued to fight, focusing on one thing at a time, using the strict procedures of his research to push out negative thoughts until his metaphorical boat rose above the water line again.

During his autopsy of Veronica, he had stumbled upon a key finding. As in the autopsy of the child, the "Mito1" medication had succeeded in keeping the virus out of Veronica's mitochondria. Both the kid and his colleague had shared a similarity of dying from a seizure, prompting Harry to further investigate neural tissue. It was here that he discovered the brain along with other nerve cells through the body still teemed with the virus, while other cell structures seemed relatively ignored.

Harry heard the vehicle long before it appeared. A low growl of changing gears gradually built in volume until headlights swung around a corner two blocks distant, bringing the armoured truck into view. Harry unchained the gate and heaved it to the side, ready for Vinh to enter the walled area surrounding the gaol. The truck barely slowed, tyres squealing as it swung off the tarmac and through the gap, skidding to a halt at the entrance to the lab. Harry slammed the gate shut again, securing the compound before running to join the crew emerging from the truck.

A sensor light cast the vehicle in harsh detail against the surrounding gloom. Smears of blood darkened the vehicle's camouflage paint job, bits of human flesh still stuck amongst the gore where the truck had smashed Carriers from its path. Vinh ignored the approaching doctor, dropping to the ground and shining a small torch under the truck up at the axel.

'I fucking knew it,' he muttered. Vinh turned his head to one of his soldiers. 'Get me the dog pole, it's still bloody moving.'

While his Private extracted a long dog-catcher's pole with a noose at the end from the truck's cabin, Vinh acknowledged Harry for the first time. 'Sorry mate, I hit a Carrier on the way into town and didn't see the body emerge in the rear-view mirror. What's left of it's jammed up above the rear axle.'

Vinh stuck the pole under the truck out of sight from Harry. Suddenly the pole came alive in his hands, jerking hard as he managed to secure the loop around the Carrier's neck. A garbled snarl sounded from the shadows beneath the truck, like a Rottweiler with a throat full of blood. Vinh drew himself to his feet and leant his weight backwards.

'Come on guys,' he grunted. 'This'll need a few of us, the bastard's jammed hard.'

Harry took a grip alongside the Sergeant on the dog pole.

'On three, heave!' said Vinh.

The two men dug their heels in, every muscle taught as they jerked backwards. On the third wrench, something gave, and they stumbled away, the dog pole suddenly light in hand. Vinh stared at the decapitated head stuck in the noose, face still contorted with rage. 'Ah, for fucks sake,' he muttered.

The Private that had got the pole from the car, rammed his rifle butt into the side of the skull, crushing the bone inwards to finish the job. 'You want to get the rest of it out now, Sarg?' he asked, unfazed by the procedure that was common place after driving in plague infected areas.

‘Nah, it can wait. I just didn’t want it grabbing at legs while we unloaded Steph,’ said Vinh.

Hearing that his exit was clear, the medic swung open the door at the rear of the truck and jumped down. Harry joined him, keen to see the condition of his cousin. Steph lay on a low stretcher, body covered in a blanket with only head and right arm exposed. Harry grimaced as he studied her face, hoping that it was only the yellow light of the truck cabin responsible for her jaundiced complexion. The medic that readied her IV lines and monitoring equipment for transfer looked almost as ill as his patient, exhaustion smudging dark marks under bloodshot eyes. He glanced up briefly at Harry as he worked.

‘You the doc I’m handing over to?’

Harry nodded. ‘How’s she doing?’

‘You mean after getting brains from a fucking Carrier jammed down her throat?’ Anger at the mistreatment of his Corporal leant the medic’s voice a harsh quality. ‘Not well, but that’s still a damn sight better than I could have hoped for. She’s still alive and fighting, but for how much longer – your guess is as good as mine.’

The medic grabbed the handles at one end of the stretcher ready to move. ‘Can I finish off the story inside? I’d be happier with her on a real bed and out of this metal box.’

Harry read through the notes he’d taken, quietly stunned at the undeniable information on the page as he looked back up at his cousin. Steph was sleeping – not unconscious, and that was a stark improvement on how she had arrived on his lab’s doorstep. The medic had done amazingly well with his resources at hand, however, in some cases of severe sepsis, there was only so much difference a fluid challenge could achieve. What Steph had required was inotropes. Harry had started an infusion of Noradrenaline, a drug that constricted the arteries, and gave the heart something to beat against. Steph’s blood pressure had responded in kind, improving enough to perfuse her brain. It would be a matter of time to see if the extended time with low blood pressure had resulted in any hypoxic brain damage, but for the moment, Harry was content to let her sleep.

Her heart rate was another matter altogether. It was slow. At thirty beats

a minute, it chugged along at a pace Harry had not seen in anything other than elite sportsmen. And he thought he now knew the reason why.

Shaking his head in wonder, he moved quietly away from his cousin to look for the twentieth time at the same slide. Ten feet away, an electron microscope was loaded with a slide of Steph's cells. Smearred with cells aspirated from a leg muscle, Lysan virus was present in the cell and mitochondria. However, when a second slide containing neural tissue taken from her ulna nerve was viewed, he found something extraordinary. *The nerve cells were empty of Lysan plague virus.*

Something had altered the virus, stopping it from hijacking a ride along the nerves of her body or to penetrate the cells of her brain if transported by her blood stream. And the only rationale that Harry could come up with was that the Hydrochloric Acid of her stomach had slightly altered the virus she had been force fed, damaging a particular protein in the shell of the virus.

Steph's physiology still struggled due to the alterations to general cellular function that slowed metabolism and vitals, but she had survived this far due to the protection of her brain from the virus.

The page of findings in Harry's hand began to tremble as his pulse quickened and adrenaline surged at the ramifications. Steph could be the missing link, the factor that could provide the answer of keeping Lysan Plague out of the brain of bite victims, stopping them from progressing down the path of seizure and death. If this was combined with the successes of Mito1 in blocking movement of the virus into general cells, they would have... Harry was tentative to even voice the words in the privacy of his own head. They would have *a cure*.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chris drummed his fingers on the steering wheel impatiently, ignoring the dirty looks he gained from pedestrians as he blocked a disabled parking space with his van, motor idling. Half a block ahead was the entrance to the station where half of the state's police men and women were holed up completing a tabletop disaster exercise.

He wanted the game to start. Wanted to hear the screams, see the smoke and terror unleashed that he'd been dreaming about for weeks. On the dashboard of his van, the digital clock showed 5.30PM. Surely the bastards must be getting hungry inside?

The cleaner mopped a prickling of sweat off his forehead and grimaced. Nervous sweat soaked his armpits and a tremor had kicked off in his hands that he couldn't still. He was cursing himself for getting involved with the Patriots, but it was too late to back out.

'Hey, Rat-Face.'

The cleaner bristled at the nickname bestowed upon him by the police officers. It hurt even more because he knew the name stuck because of how aptly it described his features. Nature had seen fit to allocate him a long nose and rodent-like narrow face that would make even a mother wince. The cleaner turned around to see who had called him, his movements furtive like he was afraid of being hit.

'We're hungry. Stop stealing the pizza and bring it out to the people that it was bought for,' said a middle-aged cop with greying hair. The cleaner nodded, not trusting his voice. The cop gave him a look of poorly hidden disgust and walked away, leaving him alone once again in the kitchenette.

On the bench in front of the cleaner were two stacks of pizza boxes. He took one more slice of pepperoni and scoffed it down, sticking his middle finger up in mute defiance at the empty doorway where the cop had stood. His gut roiled with nerves, but with a fridge bare of food at home - if he didn't eat now, he wouldn't eat at all today. Finished, he cuffed away the crumbs from around his mouth, picked up one stack of pizza boxes and dumped them into the waste bin. From beneath the bench he pulled out a

different stack of boxes and heaved them up onto the table. It was heavy, much heavier than merely ten pizzas should be. But that was because it didn't hold food. The outside of the package had been made to look like a stack of pizzas, but really, it held ten kilos of explosives surrounded by nails and ball bearings. It would be the first of three bombs to decimate the interior of the police station. The others were packed into dummy computer hard drives that he had placed innocuously under two different desks, hiding them in plain sight the day before. These bombs were positioned at the rear of the building, and would block any escape routes other than onto Liverpool Street at the front.

The cleaner carried out the first stack of real pizza boxes, allowing the crowd to get stuck into their free meal until he knew they were properly distracted. With the room's attention drawn elsewhere he returned for the second stack. This box he placed near the rear of the room, then he quickly scurried for the front of the room and exit. Keeping his head down and eyes forward, he struggled not to break into a run. As soon as the lid was raised from the box, it would trigger the bomb. And when that happened - he had no desire to be around.

A young police officer, down from a Launceston station for the day swore mildly on seeing the last pizza box was empty. He looked around, then smiled as he noted an untouched stack sitting on a table at the back of the room. Keen to continue filling his gut, he eased through the milling cops in the conference room until he was in reach. As he lifted the lid on the first box in the stack, his brow creased in mild confusion. Instead of pizza, there was only a note of paper with handwriting. A message was scrawled in narrow letters, the police officer pulled out the paper, reading:

'You pigs are gonna squeal'

He looked back from the paper in his hand to the box, where a digital display flashed from one to zero. His breath caught in his throat and balls clenched up hard to his gut.

'What the f...'

Chris's attention perked up as he saw his contact exit the front door of the police station. Once outside, the cleaner took off at a sprint in the opposite direction. He'd got no more than ten metres when the first bomb exploded. Even at his distance, Chris felt a tremor through the ground, and smiled as he saw the cleaner fall flat on his face. The man stumbled to his feet and ran once more, blood streaming from a newly smashed nose. Chris picked up a mobile phone from the dash and dialled the other two bombs, setting them off in quick succession to block the rear exits. Dual explosions pleased his ears and he ditched the phone into the passenger footwell. He stamped his foot on the accelerator, spinning the wheel to pull out onto the street. With few people able to afford petrol to run their vehicles in recent months, the road was empty. Chris accelerated as fast as the van would allow before squealing to a stop, a smear of rubber left on the asphalt as he parked directly in front of the police station. Dust drifted from the front doors, billowing outwards as the first survivors exited through Chris's chosen route. Blood mixed with grime on some faces. The survivors looked stunned, not yet fully comprehending that they were on the receiving end of a terrorist attack. No one paid Chris's stolen van a second glance. He grabbed the phone off the floor again, exited the driver's door and took off back in the direction he'd come from at a brisk walk. With cap pulled down and jumper hood up to block his features from any CCTV cameras, he walked a block before risking a glance behind him again.

The street before the police station was now packed with survivors. Bodies lay on the road where mates and colleagues had dragged them. Screams of agony caused by ragged wounds and bellies full of metal reached Chris as music to his ears. He saw one police officer holding his own amputated arm in his remaining hand. The first responders were now arriving, sirens of approaching ambulances deafening as they screamed past Chris toward the scene of devastation. Staff had also emerged from the Royal Hobart Hospital opposite, pushing trolleys to scoop patients onto, lugging disaster emergency packs onto the street.

Atop a black set of clinical scrubs, Chris recognized the bob of Julie's ponytail as she ran onto the street to help alongside her colleagues. She went from one huddle of survivors to the next, and Chris felt a pang of guilt at the next stage of his plan. He watched as Julie continued through the thickening crowd, a mix of police, paramedics and emergency department doctors and nurses.

And then his anger bloomed, resolve hardened. He saw Julie embracing a police officer. Dane held her in his arms, comforting her as she sobbed tears of relief at the survival of her boyfriend. He drew the phone from his pocket, and dialled the number of his last bomb, the one that inhabited the entire hold of the van he'd parked before the police department. The van that was now in the centre of a crowd made up of his own countrymen and women.

Chris ducked back around the corner of the building and pressed call. The blast was horrendous, making the first three seem no more than a child's cap gun. A vast cloud of dust billowed up the street. For a time, there was no sound other than tinnitus whine in his ears. Chris realised that he was on the ground, although he could not recall falling. He pushed himself upright, stunned by the ferocity of the bomb he had created.

On hands and knees, Chris crawled back to the corner to see what was left. His mouth dropped as he stared toward the police station. There was nothing left of the van, or of the crowd surrounding it other than a smear of crimson amongst the rubble. Chris flinched as a huge section of the police building broke free, smashing onto the street to add to the devastation. The buildings to either side of the road looked like something out of war-torn Aleppo before the global outbreak of the plague had taken precedence over civil war.

Chris coughed, spitting brick dust from his mouth. He drew his shirt up to cover his mouth and nose as he backed away from the corner and regained his feet. A smile kinked the corner of his mouth as he started a slow jog toward the get-away car he'd parked a few blocks distant, satisfaction starting to overwhelm all other emotions. Surely his dad would now elevate him amongst the party and make him the deputy leader; father and son leading side by side. And then there was the icing on the cake – never again would Julie look at him with contempt. She'd be rotting in hell along with her arrogant cop boyfriend.

Yes, it was one hell of a fine day.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mark sat in his room behind the town hall, checking through a list of topics to cover during the upcoming town meeting. Mark had buried himself in work after sending Steph to Geelong for treatment. Knowing he was powerless to further influence any outcome for his girlfriend, he had sought to block thoughts of worry through constant activity. Now that he had pulled the teeth of the Spartans, support for his platoon had increased, with buy-in obtained from farms that had previously shunned their presence. He knew it could have gone either way. Every man and woman in the yard that day had heard the order he'd given his soldiers. If Vinh hadn't blocked him, he would be a marked man, an officer responsible for a modern-day war crime. That the released men had not sought to dissuade their families from supporting his platoon was a piece of luck he was not willing to examine any further. He was just grateful that it had occurred.

In reality, an axe still hung over his neck, however unlikely it was to fall. He had executed an unarmed man before his rage had burnt out, and it would only take one complaint to launch an examination into the episode. If any such complaint was launched, he thought it unlikely to originate from any of his squad. Since the re-introduction of capital punishment, military justice was meted out with cold brutality to civilians and soldiers alike. In a country stripped of any other form of law enforcement, there was no other option. The original surviving members of the Spartans had found that out the hard way, Mark having received an order from Geelong to oversee their execution the prior day. Many residents of Cob Hill had wanted to see the men dance below a noose in public for damages wrought during their time in power, but Mark had refused their demands. Execution for a crime committed was one thing, but turning the activity into public entertainment denigrated all involved and was something he wouldn't countenance.

He had questioned himself about his own actions that day. Searching for any kernel of guilt, he'd come away clean. Considering every other Spartan had received a death sentence, he rationalized that he'd only lessened the man's life by a few days. Mark knew it did not excuse what he'd done, but nor would it keep him awake at night. In a world where good people died every day, the death of a mongrel did not stir any remorse in a heart necessarily hardened to survive.

Mark's head turned to the side, his attention pulled by a knock at the door. His new Corporal opened the door and stuck his head through. On losing Steph, he'd elevated Victor into the role. After risking his neck to bring Mark the bulldozer back in Melbourne, he'd taken his offer for a transfer into his platoon.

'The room's full; are you ready to kick things off?' Victor asked.

Mark glanced down at the list once more, then folded it and shoved the paper into his pocket and stood. 'Yeah, I'll be right out. Did many show up?'

A half-smile kinked one corner of Victor's mouth. 'I reckon there's enough to make it worthwhile.'

Mark raised one eyebrow in mute question as he stood and walked to the door. Looking out into the hall, he found there was standing room only. 'Jesus, you're not wrong about that,' muttered Mark. He figured the hall must hold representation from not only each surviving farm about the town, but also the greater area.

'Word's got around, Boss. People are starting to believe that the tide's about to turn. Positivity's growing, to the point that they're thinking the army might be able to eliminate the Infected. At minimum, they want to learn how to take back control of their own properties and stop living in fear each day. You've won them over, Mark. I reckon they'll consider pretty much anything you ask.'

'Good. Because once their farms are up and running, I'll be asking a damn sight more of them.'

'What, are we going to start enforcing conscription?'

'Damn right we are,' Mark said, his tone blunt. 'Food was only ever half the equation. We need men and women to fill the army's ranks if we're to win back the state capitals.'

'Do you want me to start a recruitment drive tonight as well?' asked the Corporal.

'Fuck, no,' said Mark. 'Baby steps, Victor. I don't want to scare them off just yet, but I'll be damned if I'm leaving town without a truck full of new soldiers. We get their farms running, they fill my quota of recruits. That's the deal as far as I see it.' Mark squared his shoulders and walked out to address the crowd.

Mark stood to the side, taking a swig of water from a glass as the last of the people filed out of the hall. His sign-up sheets were filled with signatures of those farmers committing to the program of 'farm modification' and food supply. Each contracted person had left the hall with plans on how to build Carrier holding pens in each paddock, along with step-by-step methods for field clearance and the subsequent surveillance techniques to protect workers during planting and harvesting.

Now that Mark had fitted out Joel Tipper's farm and proved it could function again, his platoon's role would shift to a more consultative model to support the farms make their own changes. They would still contribute labour, however, with the sheer weight of work needed, much would fall to the farms themselves to complete. And that was how it needed to be if they were to become self-sufficient and capable of providing their own security.

'Hey, Boss!'

Mark put down his glass and looked over to Vinh who was standing beside their communications set up in one corner of the hall. He held up an earphone set for him to take. 'We've got new orders. Major Barry wants you on the line.'

Mark walked over to his Sergeant, took the offered earphone and mike set and put it on, unsure what to expect. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the Major's words to ensure he missed nothing, however he needn't have bothered. The order was short and to the point. With a distracted flick, he tossed the earphone set back onto the table.

'Well?' asked Vinh. 'What's going on?'

'We've been recalled to Geelong for redeployment,' Mark said after a pause, the ramification of the Major's words still sinking in.

'Redeployment?' asked Vinh, looking mildly confused. 'To where? Our job here's nowhere near finished.'

'We won't be fighting Carriers, Vinh,' Mark said. 'We're headed to Tasmania.'

Vinh's face paled at his officer's words. 'You mean...'

'Yeah. General Black's got tired of waiting. Either they join the effort to clear the mainland of plague, or... it's civil war.'

Mark took one last glance backwards at the town as they drove onto the

highway, headed for Geelong. The sun, yet to breach the horizon when his soldiers had filled the trucks thirty minutes prior, now bathed the landscape in an orange glow as it banished the night. Mark sat in the last vehicle of the convoy, armoured trucks at front and rear protecting a small bus filled with recruits in the centre. Word of their departure had spread rapidly the night before, and a delegation of men had arrived at the hall past midnight. Almost every surviving man that had been pardoned for involvement with the Spartans had decided to enlist rather than stay. Despite common knowledge that the men had been given little choice in joining the outlaw bikie group, they'd nevertheless found themselves virtual pariahs after the club's destruction. Some of them saw a chance of redemption by joining a legitimate fight against the Infected, others just wanted to reach a place where none would know of their history. Mark didn't give two shits for their rationale. As long as they could hold a rifle and shoot straight, they would serve the army's need.

He had left behind a single detachment of men under the leadership of his new Corporal, Victor. They would ensure the town held to their new supply contracts, and help provide protection from roaming Carriers as the farms implemented their defence plans. In the coming months, once the farms were running and self-sufficient, Victor would re-join the platoon in Geelong.

As Cob Hill receded in the distance, Mark's thoughts leapt ahead to what he might find on return to Geelong. He'd heard nothing about Steph's condition, didn't even know if she was still alive. And now, stuck in the truck with no further activities to distract his mind, he could think of nothing else.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mark punched his finger into the call bell for the fifth time outside the main gates of the Old Geelong Gaol. He swore in frustration to himself, his worry growing at the lack of response. The lab complex appeared to be deserted, leaving him with no way of finding out Steph's fate.

'Harry works at the Emergency Department, doesn't he?' said Vinh from the truck parked behind him. 'It's only down the road, let's try there. If nothing else, they should at least be able to tell us where to find him.'

Mark grunted an affirmative as he climbed back into the vehicle. He looked at his watch and swore as he realised he was due to attend General Black's briefing within the hour.

A young Private stood with clipboard in hand at the entry to the hall, marking off each officer from an attendance list of required personnel as they took a seat. Her eyes widened with recognition, a smile cracking wide across her face.

'Lieutenant Collins, good to see you, Sir,' she said, holding out a hand to shake in greeting.

Mark pulled up short, not expecting to be waylaid. His mind was still running in circles, trying to digest the information he'd gained at the Emergency Department, and he'd barely taken in his surrounds as he hurried to meet the General's summons. At the very least, Mark had found out that his girlfriend still lived. The doctor providing the news had seemed less than impressed at the situation. *'He accompanied the patient to the main research labs in Canberra. The bastards better get something worthwhile out of it is all I can say – they just left me as the last damned doctor to run this ED.'* The doctor had then excused herself to attend the next patient on her growing list, leaving Mark with more questions than answers. For the moment, he'd have to be satisfied with the knowledge that Steph fought on, and truth be told, it was more than he'd dared hope.

He forced his concentration back to the Private who stood before him, smile starting to falter at the puzzled expression on Mark's face. He accepted her handshake, making a non-committal greeting in return.

‘You don’t remember me, do you?’ said the Private, not letting him off the hook.

Mark glanced down at her name badge, hoping it would jog his memory, but came up blank.

‘Queenscliff. We’d only just re-taken the fort. You were newly assigned to my platoon as a Sergeant before the first sortie against the Infected. It went to shit after that officer took us all the way to the town centre without a plan of retreat – surely you remember, Sir?’ she asked, one eyebrow raised.

Mark felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck at the memory. It had been a close-run thing, one that had very nearly seen every man and woman sacrificed for a trial of combat technique that had been doomed from the outset. ‘Yeah, I remember clear enough. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more that day to get all your mates out. It shouldn’t have taken six deaths for command to realise that guerrilla tactics wouldn’t work against an enemy who doesn’t feel fear.’

‘If it hadn’t of been for you taking charge, I don’t think anyone would have made it back. We were gutted when you got transferred after your field commission.’

She looked past Mark at a huddle of officers coming up the hallway. ‘Anyway, I just wanted to say thanks. I won’t keep you any longer – that’s the General coming now, Sir.’

Mark glanced back at her words. The General looked to be in a foul mood as he strode onwards. A frown creasing his forehead, he marched down the hall with a handful of papers clutched in one fist like he was itching to pick a fight. Mark gave a nod of thanks to the Private and sought a seat inside before he became an unwitting target for General Black’s anger. Spotting an empty seat toward the back of the hall, he parked his arse and took the chance to briefly inspect the men and women present, quickly realising that the speed at which his own squad had been recalled was not unique. Few of the officers wore clean uniforms. Most were patched and dirty, some still splattered with dried blood and gore over the cotton weave. Faces were drawn, fatigue leaving skin pale and smudging grey marks beneath eyes. But to a person, those same eyes glinted with an intensity rarely seen off the battlefield, sparked by rumours of the news to come.

A low murmur of conversation between the seated officers died within a heartbeat, silenced by the arrival of their leader. All eyes fixed upon the General as he took residence behind a rostrum at the front.

General Black ignored the soldiers seated before him, grey eyebrows drawn together in concentration as he scanned his notes one last time. Abruptly he looked up and swept his eyes over the room slowly, leaving each officer with the uncanny feeling they'd received a silent acknowledgement.

'Thank you for the efforts made to answer my summons at short notice,' said Black, his voice low and even. 'I acknowledge the frustration of some at being forced to leave missions at a time of critical importance, however, developments across Bass Strait have forced my hand.' The General's mouth narrowed and eyes hardened at his last sentence.

'No doubt, most here are aware that the Premier of Tasmania and his party of Conservatives have actively opposed all entreaties to lend support to the mainland states. Over the past months their disdain for the greater Australian community has extended to their own people, who they have allowed to be bullied into submission by their coalition partner, a new right-wing party that employs violence, terror and fear as core methods of control,' Black paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. 'The media has been hamstrung, any vocal opposition silenced, and our supply lines now severed. Protectionist policies have degraded to overt fascism that has no place in our country.'

A low grumble of anger sounded amongst the soldiers. Black tolerated the interruption for a few moments before lifting his hand for silence.

'Not three days ago, the last place in Australia where people could live in relative safety was rocked by an event that I *cannot* leave unanswered. Over eighty percent of the state's police force were slaughtered in a callous act of brutality that also claimed the lives of many health workers.

'Police. Doctors. Nurses. Paramedics. That's years of training and experience – gone. We desperately need their like over here, and yet the bastards killed the lot of them without a second thought, all in a bid to consolidate their own power,' said Black, a raw quality entering his voice. 'Not twenty-four hours after the bombing, and how did Premier Stephens respond to this outrage? By announcing that the Patriots Party would prop-up police numbers through creation of an armed militia as an 'interim measure'. They created a vacuum that needed to be filled, and the bastards had the audacity to do it with a straight face,' said General Black, one corner of his mouth lifting in contempt.

The rumbling of anger that had sounded earlier grew in volume. Officers muttered to colleagues at their side, unable to maintain silence any longer.

Movement to the side of Mark drew his eyes. The Regimental Sergeant Major that had taken him to task during their last meeting, stood ram-rod straight, fists clenched at his side, face red with fury. Unable to restrain himself any longer, the Sergeant Major spoke above the noise of the room, a voice used to cutting above the roar of battle drawing the attention of all present.

‘This can’t be tolerated! It’s time for them to learn the army has teeth. Surely, we’re here to not only protect the country against outside threats, but also from those home grown? General, when will we be given the chance to grind these bastards into the dirt?’

Instead of anger at the audacity of his soldier, General Black became hawkish. Leaning forward, he gripped the rostrum with claw like hands, satisfied at the resolve displayed by the soldiers before him.

‘I agree whole-heartedly with you Sergeant Major, and can guarantee you’ll have your wish. We sail in six hours for Hobart.’

Mark heard more than one in-drawn breath at his words as the General ploughed onwards.

‘I have come to this meeting today, directly out of a phone conference with the Governor General and Prime Minister who currently reside like toothless relics safe in Hobart. I have advised them in explicit terms to expel the Premier and his party from power, call a state of emergency, and invite the army in to restore order.’

‘And if they don’t?’ asked the Sergeant Major.

‘Then they’ll face an armed coup,’ said Black without flinching. ‘We will be landing on Tasmanian shores in fourteen hours time. Whether or not we’ll have a fight once we get there is up to them, but either way, this situation will end within the next twenty-four hours.’

‘Two Navy Frigates anchored in Corio Bay are already loaded with supplies, with the last component needed being your platoons. The Infected can wait for their next meal while we turn our attention elsewhere, because now is the time to restore order to the running of our country.’ He stood back from the rostrum, leaving his notes discarded on the surface.

As a group, the officers seemed stunned at the rapidity of action laid out.

‘What the fuck are you waiting for?’ roared Black, his eyes wide at their inaction. ‘Any soldier not boarded within the next six hours will be left on the dock, so. Get. Fucking. Moving!’

The spell was broken, chairs overturning as soldiers sprang upwards and

made for the exit.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chris took a swallow of scotch, focusing on the burn in his throat as the neat spirit travelled to his stomach. He raised the glass again, bringing it to his lips before he realised it was empty - just like the bottle of single malt he'd been working his way through since seeing his father earlier in the afternoon. Finart had been odd, like he was truly rattled by something. He'd spent his whole life unconsciously imitating his father's mannerisms, watching his reactions to different situations and absorbing his opinions on politics, women and society. Chris had rarely scored higher than indifference on his father's radar for much of his life (more often in the ranges of contempt). Despite this, he knew his father better than any person, better than he knew himself. For the first time that he could recall, today he'd seen his father unable to make a decision with his confidence badly shaken. And that had made Chris very nervous. His father was like granite in his mind, an unmovable stone that the hopes and dreams of opponents smashed upon like balsa wood. So, if he was floundering for a course of action, it meant something was severely wrong.

Just the day before he'd been riding a wave of elation, basking in the respect of the central party members for his role in destroying the police force. But more importantly, his father had for the first time looked at him with something like... pride. Everything had fallen in place after the bombing like his father had predicted. Premier Stephens had read aloud the speech that his father had prepared to announce the formation of a Patriots militia, and the party had moved onto an even footing of power within the Coalition. Once their militia was grounded within all facets of the police, the Patriots would own the entire force. As a senior party member, Chris knew that he would become almost untouchable, free at last to sample any depravity that took his fancy.

But now... His father had answered a call from the Premier late in the morning. Chris hadn't heard a word of the conversation, but he'd seen the colour drop from his father's face as he listened to the leader of the Conservatives. Finart had slammed the phone back onto the cradle, then picked up the closest item of weight - a heavy crystal tumbler - and thrown it at the living room wall. The glass had exploded against the plaster, showering the carpet in ice-like shards. Finart had slumped into an armchair with his

head in his hands, a picture of abject hopelessness. Rocking slowly, he'd stayed that way. For thirty minutes.

Chris had watched in stunned silence from the next room. Violence was nothing new. There were few walls in the house or bones in his face that hadn't borne his father's anger over the years, but seeing the great man rocking back and forth like a fucking loser – that was unsettling.

Eventually Finart had gathered himself back together, his face almost succeeding to reassert his usual facade of control as he ordered his son to call a meeting of the Patriot's core leaders. That had been three hours earlier. Now Chris had a living room full of men, all instinctively on edge at the unusual call up. He had neglected to join the group, preferring to sit and wait on his own in the adjacent dining room.

A heavy hand fell onto Chris's shoulder from behind, startling him enough that he would have spilled his drink if there had been any left. He glanced down at his shoulder, and saw coarse black hair coving the knuckles of the hand. Anger surged through Chris's brain that the man had dared to touch him.

'Get your fat, fucking hand off me, Frank, or I swear the next time you turn the ignition of your car, it'll go up in flames with you inside.'

Chris noted with satisfaction how the hand whipped backward as if burnt, and he turned around and glared up at the huge man. Despite Frank's size and strength, he looked nervous in Chris's presence. Frank was one of the few people aside from his father that knew of his other kills, and had started to treat Chris like he was mentally unstable.

'What's going on?' The big man's gaze wavered about Chris's face, refusing to meet his eyes. 'We've all been here for over an hour now, and still no word from you or Finart as to why.'

'I called you all here because my father requested it. Is that not enough for you?' said Chris. 'Maybe he'd like to know that you're starting to question his tactics?' Chris smiled inwardly as Frank backed away a step, one hand raised in mute submission.

'Nah, don't do that. The other men just asked me to enquire. We thought we might be able to brainstorm some solutions if there's a problem facing the party, that's all, I swear.'

Chris opened his mouth to reply, when suddenly the front door opened, cutting their conversation dead. Finart slammed the door behind himself and strode into the living room where the eight men he'd requested to attend

waited. His argument with Frank already forgotten, Chris stood and walked out of the dining room to join the group. That he nearly lost his footing due to the effects of the scotch was not lost on his father, who raised one corner of his mouth in disgust before turning back to the others.

‘We are about to experience somewhat of a setback to our cause, however, not one that is insurmountable,’ said Finart, his voice calm as he took a seat in his usual corner armchair. Not a person spoke, each waiting for their leader to elaborate.

‘I always knew that the removal of the police force would likely prompt a response from our pathetic excuse of a Prime Minister and his lackey the Governor General. Well, it turns out they’ve decided to see how much power they still have,’ said Finart. ‘They just issued an edict to State Parliament, dissolving the government, and declaring our Patriot’s Party an enemy of the state.’

‘I’m not going to jail,’ muttered Frank, cracking his knuckles where he stood, taking up the majority of the doorway into the dining room.

‘Nor do I intend any of us to end up there,’ said Finart. ‘We are the only Party with a true vision for the future of our state, a vision that is free of the shackles of the mainland.’ Finart stood again, his body becoming animated as his voice rose in volume. ‘I have no intention of laying down our cause for some limp wristed bastard hiding in government house. If they want to treat me and mine as criminals in our own state, they will soon find that I don’t give in so easily. I’ll be waiting with gun loaded and a spine of iron that will not yield to an authority I no longer recognise!’

Chris’s heart raced at his father’s words, hammering against the ribs of his chest like a battering ram. He looked at the other men in the room and saw that his reaction was not alone. All looked like they were ready to fight, muscles twitching and eyes bright with fundamentalist fervour.

Finart rode the wave he’d created. ‘I’m putting it to a party vote. All in favour of resisting this imposition with any force necessary, say aye!’

To a man, the room roared its approval. Finart nodded in satisfaction of the outcome and sat once again. ‘Good. Now it just comes to details of how we carry forward.’ His eyes flicked up to his son. ‘Chris, get me some paper. By the end of this meeting, I want the outlines of our resistance created.’

By the time the last party member left, night was falling. Chris was sober again, the buzz of scotch replaced with a gnawing headache. The pounding at his temples a product of not only a hangover, but stress at the changes due to occur within the next 24 hours.

Not one of the party members had left for their own home. Finart had been adamant that they immediately go underground, with the group splitting to be housed at two properties out of the city. The properties had been acquired by his father long before, however, all paper links to Finart had been erased. If placed in the hands of an adequate detective, it wouldn't take more than a few days to track them down – but it was a start that could be built from. Each property had a cache of weapons. If they were found, they'd go down fighting.

Chris went into one of the spare bedrooms, grabbed a chair and dragged it over to the built-in wardrobe. He needed the extra height to pull down a couple of big duffle bags from where they were stored at the top of the cupboards. Each bag held seventy litres, more than enough for what he and his father would need in the short term. A bag hanging in each hand, he walked back to the living room and his father and dumped them on the coffee table.

'Anything in particular you want packed, or is it just clothes at this stage?' asked Chris.

Finart stood and grabbed one of the bags for himself, not bothering to look his son in the face. 'You won't be coming.'

Chris stopped dead, his gut dropping at the thought his father was shutting him out once again. 'What do you mean? Haven't I done enough to prove myself?'

Finart looked his son in the eye finally. 'You've been adequate so far, I'll give you that. And that's why I'm going to ask even more from you.'

A flurry of questions hammered at the inside of his skull alongside his migraine, but Chris forced his mouth to stay closed. If he pushed his father for information, he'd only shut down.

Finart eyed his son for a moment before nodding in satisfaction. 'Maybe you are finally learning some self-control after all. Take a seat boy, I need to fill you in on the real situation facing the Patriots.'

Chris sat down heavily on the couch behind, his eyes never leaving his father's face.

'The basics of what I said tonight holds true. The Governor General's

dissolved the government and declared our party as traitors to the state. But it goes further. The true masters behind the move are the armed forces, or more accurately, General Black. Stephens warned me that there are now two Navy Frigates, packed with hardened veterans sailing across Bass Strait as we speak. We have only a handful of hours until they moor in the Derwent River and come ashore – and it's a fight that we cannot hope to win at present.'

Chris was horrified at his father's capitulation. 'So, you're just going to give in like that? Not even fight back?'

Anger flared in Finart's eyes, his mouth opening in a snarl as he smacked a vicious backhand across his son's face. A jet of blood squirted from Chris's left nostril as his nose broke, and he gasped in surprise, not even considering retaliation.

'Watch your fucking manners, boy! Of course I'm going to fight back, you imbecile. But I'm here for the long game, and becoming a martyr isn't part of the plan.'

Chris grabbed a handful of tissues from a box on the coffee table, pressing them under his nostrils with one hand to soak up the trickle of blood, while the other pinched firmly beneath the bridge of his nose. He could taste copper at the back of his throat, and suppressed a gag as he swallowed a glutinous mass of clot. 'So how do we win?' he asked, voice thick from his blocked nose.

At his son's immediate retreat, Finart dropped his hand from where it had hung in the air ready for a second blow. He walked to the side of the living room where a decanter of amber scotch sat beside two crystal tumblers. Picking up the decanter, he poured himself a finger of whiskey and took a sip, rolling the liquid about his mouth.

'We let them think they've won. Black obviously wants his pound of flesh, and I need to find a way to satisfy his need without getting executed in the process. That's where you come in.'

Chris sat up a little straighter, ready to listen.

'You're to defect and give up the location of both safe houses,' said Finart. 'Wait another hour, enough time for me to join the men at the northern property, and then you present to police headquarters and hand yourself in.'

'And the rest of the men, will you tell them what's happening?' asked Chris.

'God no. Use your brains, Chris,' muttered Finart. 'I want them to fight,

and for a few of them to get killed in the process. Black will need to sate the media and his own soldiers' desire for blood, so they might as well cull some fools I've been planning on shedding anyway. I'll surrender, blame the bombing on one of the men killed, and hopefully get away with a short custodial sentence.'

Chris was still confused, not understanding how this solved their problems.

'You on the other hand,' said his father. 'You need to become one of them and make them think you were manipulated into the party structure. I don't care how you do it or what you say. Hell - tell them how I sodomised you as a boy and tied you to a bar heater as punishment for all I care, but make it fucking happen.'

'The army is only here to reopen supply lines and gain soldiers to fill their ranks. Once that's achieved, they'll leave to continue the war on the mainland. I've gained word that General Black's about to gamble everything on a massive battle outside Melbourne. He's built a huge amphitheatre, high walls from which he can fight the millions of undead that fill their state capital. I need him to fail, for his army to be torn to shreds under the teeth of the Infected. And for that to happen – I need a saboteur in his ranks. I need you.'

Chris felt a swelling in his chest, an odd burning of pride that his father needed him to play such a crucial role. It drowned out the small voice in the back of his head that questioned how he could possibly survive the success of his own mission.

'Once the army is destroyed on the mainland, there's no way I'll be left in jail,' said Finart, a manic gleam in his eye. 'Without a martial force to maintain order, the people will beg us to protect them from the Infected hordes across Bass Strait.' Finart gripped Chris's shoulder tightly in one hand, leaning forward so that his face was mere inches from his son's. 'Once you return victorious, we'll take this state as our own – that I swear to you.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mark pulled his coat tight about him before stepping through a door and out onto the deck of the Navy Frigate. Rank came with some privileges of which he was happy to take advantage, one being a certain degree of freedom to move about the ship. The men and women under his leadership weren't so lucky, being restricted to their allocated space on one of the lower decks, hemmed in like sardines in a can.

The Frigate had left the rolling swell of the Tasman Sea and entered the mouth of the Derwent river not long before, and Mark was keen to gain his first view of Hobart. Tasmania was the one Australian state that he'd never visited prior to the outbreak of the plague, and it felt surreal that his first steps on land here would be at the tip of an occupying force.

A faint, acrid smell of smoke irritated his nose. He turned on the spot, quickly identifying the origin, a spiral of black drifting into the sky from a house on fire near the western shore of the river. As the ship drew closer to Hobart city, the spire of smoke was joined by a handful of others, each reaching upward until it was whipped aside by the wind above, leaving a grey haze in the late afternoon sky.

To the south of the river, Mount Wellington was dusted with snow at its peak, giving a postcard backdrop to the city. A shape entered Mark's peripheral vision, and he turned his head to see who had joined him at the handrail. A Navy officer grunted an acknowledgment to him as he leant on the rail to take in the city view.

'Any more word on what we'll be facing?' asked Mark.

The officer nodded. 'There's unlikely to be any overt hostility. Apparently, the Patriots bolted for hiding shortly after being declared an enemy of the state. And I reckon the general citizens will be happy to see us.' The Navy officer pointed out one of the plumes of smoke rising in the distance. 'I'd bet a month's wage that's a house of a Patriot Party sympathizer who's finally getting a taste of his own medicine.'

A hard smile creased Mark's face at the thought.

The Navy officer stood back from the rail and sighed. 'We'll be docking shortly, probably best to head down to your platoon. Now that we know we're being welcomed, the formal brief has been delayed until the troops have disembarked.'

Mark thanked the man for the information and left to ready his soldiers.

Vinh dumped his pack on the concrete of the dock. The grey Frigate towered above the soldiers nearby, casting a shadow across the troops who sat waiting for further orders. Although Vinh had gained his sea-legs whilst serving upon a similar ship before the outbreak of plague, some of the other soldiers in their platoon had not handled the swell of Bass Strait quite so well. By the time they'd escaped their lodgings deep within the Frigate, the sweet cloying smell of vomit had filled the air. He looked down at the two soldiers who had suffered the most, Privates by the name of Stan and Betty. Vinh couldn't help but smile at their miserably pale faces, knowing it would only take an hour or so of steady land under foot to cure their illness. The smell of vomit on their clothing, however, would be hanging around a little longer.

'Hey Sarg, I think the Boss is trying to get your attention,' said one of his soldiers, pointing toward a large building at the end of the open concreted area of the dock. Vinh followed the Private's direction and saw Mark waving him over.

'Clint!' shouted Vinh, rousing his Corporal who was dozing against a pack. At his sergeant's voice, the man opened his eyes and sat up. 'The squad's yours until I get back. Looks like we're about to get our orders.'

Vinh left his own gear with the rest of the platoon, carrying only webbing and small arms that never left his side. He skirted the crowd of waiting soldiers that crammed the dock area until he reached his Lieutenant. Mark gave him a nod of welcome, then turned to head back inside the building, indicating for Vinh to follow.

'Black's given a briefing already to the officers,' said Mark in a low voice as they walked. 'It looks like we've managed to avoid any real conflict for the moment. The government has capitulated to our demands, while the local population thinks we've been invited on shore in lieu of an active police force. All that waits is a clean-up of the Patriot's Party. There's no SWAT police left since the poor bastards got cleaned up in that bomb blast, so it falls to ADF to take down the handful of Patriots refusing to surrender.'

'And let me guess,' muttered Vinh. 'Our squad just got pulled out of the hat for the duty?'

Mark grunted a humourless laugh. 'Was it ever going to be anyone else?'

‘C’mon Boss, was a short holiday in the Apple Isle too much to ask for? I was kind of hoping to sink a few beers in a pub while scaring the locals with war stories from the mainland,’ said Vinh in a dry voice.

‘Plenty of time for that later. Anyway, we only have to take out a few bullies who can barely shoot a rifle, and if they get shot – these bastards stay down. Walk in the bloody park.’ Mark broke off the line of conversation and pointed out a doorway exiting from the hallway to their right. ‘That’s where the briefing’s supposed to happen, hopefully we’re not the last ones here.’

Vinh grasped the knob and pushed the door open. After the cold of the dock and hallway, the air-conditioned room seemed oppressively warm. There was a mix of uniformed cops and ADF soldiers waiting for the briefing. Mark nodded a silent greeting to the Lieutenant and Sergeant of the other platoon who’d scored the same duty, taking a seat behind them. At the front left corner of the room, a man in plain clothes sat on a table. He looked annoyed at being there, one hand unconsciously combing a long fringe backwards to cover a bald spot at the top of his head, while he avoided eye contact and stared fixedly at the back wall.

Another few soldiers entered to fill the last remaining seats. Taking it as his cue, an older policeman with salt and pepper hair stood up at the front of the room. His right hand grasped a small remote, which he used to bring up a photo on the smart board at his back. In the photo, a suited man in his late fifties stared back at the camera with a severe expression. Mark glanced at the younger man in plain clothes at the room’s side and then back at the photo again, noticing the distinct resemblance between the two. It was a similarity that went beyond facial features, to even mirror expression.

‘You may recognise the man on the screen before you, Liam Finart of the now defunct Patriot’s Party of Tasmania,’ said the policeman, his eyes narrowing in anger as he briefly regarded the picture before turning back to the assembled group. ‘This man controls a political party held responsible for the single greatest act of terrorism ever inflicted upon our state. A heinous act that murdered 150 police, paramedics, doctors and nurses - men and women who were doing nothing more than their job.’

The policeman paused, his eyes seeking out the different armed service men and women in the room as if silently paying respect. ‘There are few Tasmanians that are proud of the line taken by our previous state leaders. The abandonment of our northern neighbours during such a time of need is a stain that we will do our best to expunge. Let our first effort in that process be the

elimination of Liam Finart and his vile political party.'

A murmur of approval rippled through the audience, policemen and soldiers alike.

'Like true cowards, the party leaders have run and hidden themselves, while leaving their rank and file members unsupported and without direction. The few Patriot members that were openly known have already been detained – well the ones that were still alive when we found them. You may have seen the smoke above our city this morning?' said the policeman. 'I'm not one to condone vigilantism, but I won't be wasting time to locate those citizens who took the law into their own hands on this occasion.'

'Unfortunately, paperwork and electronic records of existing party members were destroyed by Finart before running, so we may never track down all of them. However, thanks to a key defection,' said the policeman, nodding toward the balding civilian in the corner, 'we *do* know where to find the core leaders. This is Chris Finart, Liam's son. On condition that he gets to witness the arrest of his former colleagues, he has volunteered their location.'

'Seriously, you're going to let his son lead us into a bloody trap?' asked Mark, his voice incredulous. 'Why the hell are we trusting this guy, a man who's proved a traitor to his own goddamned father?'

Chris dropped his gaze from the back wall for the first time, dead eyes meeting Mark's line of sight. 'Why? Because no man that inflicts horror on a child of the type that I endured while growing up, deserves any compassion or loyalty. This was my first chance to escape him. I took it.'

Something in the man's lack of expression gave Mark pause. He'd seen the damage wrought on many a comrade's mental health by PTSD result in similar detachment, but then again, there was something about his eyes that didn't sit well with his gut. Mark bit his tongue, holding back further dissent, but it wouldn't change the fact that he'd be watching the backs of his men carefully throughout this mission.

The policeman changed slides on the smart screen, bringing up a map of the greater Hobart area. Two red dots highlighted the separate locations that they would target. 'We'll hit both locations simultaneously in two hours time. They are known to be armed and likely resistive to arrest. If a party member surrenders, they will be taken into custody and given a fair trial, but,' said the policeman with a hawk like smile, 'at any hint of violent resistance, a full armed response has been authorised.'

The police van went over a pot-hole in the road at speed, jostling the detachment of soldiers against each other that Mark had chosen for the mission. Despite the cramped room in the back of the vehicle, Chris still had space to either side, Mark's men and women unwilling to even brush a thigh against him.

Chris ground his teeth together. He was going to have to try harder, force himself to control his facial expressions and begin to act. It didn't take a genius to work out that not one of the squad around him had extended an ounce of trust in his direction. He tried to suppress a rack of shivers that convulsed his chest and legs in the cold of the van. The only person to be denied body armour, Chris sat with nothing more than a shirt to protect his chest from the bitter cold of a dying afternoon, but more importantly, nothing to absorb or deflect the impact of bullets that would surely come his way once uninformed party members saw his presence and named him traitor. The Lieutenant had even held out a vest to him before pulling it out of reach, *'If you've got a bomb planned, I'd prefer you get your share of shrapnel in the chest. If not... I guess you don't need one.'* There hadn't been a flicker of pity in the man's eyes, and Chris had realised for the first time that his father had been right all along.

In the Patriot's current form, they didn't have a snowflake's chance in hell of defeating the ADF. Absolute professionalism and ruthless pragmatism had typified his contact with men and women in the armed ranks so far. All were veterans of a hundred battles against an undead enemy that knew no retreat. As much as he hated to express the sentiment even in the privacy of his own head, they deserved respect as a worthy adversary.

If the Patriots were to have a chance to take full control of the state, they needed the army destroyed, or weakened to such an extent that they could not spare troops to bring the wayward state back under control. Given enough time, the Patriots could form their own defence force to repel any future impositions. Chris marvelled at the calculating genius of his father, a man that had broken him so many times over the years, both mentally and physically, until his scars had finally deformed him into the type of adult that desired to be at Finart's side. Chris allowed himself a slight smile. He would do as bidden. Convince the enemy he could be trusted, and then rip their heart out from the inside.

Chris casually rested his hands over his lap to prevent anyone seeing the hard-on that had risen at the thought.

Mark slowly lifted his head above the top edge of a waist-high brick fence and checked out the property behind. The Patriots had done them a minor favour in choosing a semi-rural outer suburb with one-acre blocks to seat their hideout; the chance of civilians becoming collateral damage in a gun battle at least diminished by the stretches of open space. He'd ditched the police van 500 metres down the road, proceeding on foot to avoid the car engine declaring their presence. The ten soldiers making up his detachment took positions along the length of the fence line in preparation, their eyes all locked on Mark awaiting his next order. The house was at the front of the block, less than forty metres back from Mark and his men. A long window lined a living room at the front, with much of the interior hidden by a blind which was pulled down to knee height. Visible through this gap was at least five military rifles, each propped against the couch between a pair of men's legs. It seemed too easy and had the stink of a set up.

Mark dropped below the top of the wall, grabbed Chris by the neck of his shirt and yanked him close. 'What the fuck is this shit?' he whispered. 'That's not a stronghold, it's a fucking holiday retreat. If we're about to be ambushed, I swear to god I'll cut your balls off with a blunt knife.'

Chris opened his eyes wide and held a palm up in submission. 'It's not my fault they've got no eye for defence. You got to remember, they're politicians and rednecks, not bloody soldiers.'

Mark shoved Chris away and looked back over the wall at the target again while considering his words. Politicians they may be, but at heart they were callous bastards that thought nothing of murdering anyone who stood against them. Men that had no compunction about using violence, combined with the military grade rifles on view, could place his soldiers in more risk than he cared for. If he had to choose who lived and died, he'd lose no sleep over the loss of a Patriot's life. With a subtle hand gesture, he called Vinh over.

'We've been authorised to use a full armed response at the slightest hint of violent resistance, yeah?' whispered Mark.

Vinh nodded at him in confirmation.

‘Take a look at the fire power at their disposal, there’s at least five assault rifles that I can see.’

Vinh squatted back down after taking a look himself. ‘AK-47’s. I haven’t seen one of those in years.’

‘I reckon those fire-arms convey a ‘hint’ of violent resistance, don’t you?’ asked Mark.

Vinh looked at his officer, face tight as he obviously understood the dubious ethics of the question posed.

‘We’re here to get a supply of soldiers and food to continue the war back on the mainland, not to risk the lives of our men against a megalomaniac and his henchmen,’ said Mark. He pulled Chris back over again. ‘Are there any women or children in the property, innocents that might end up collateral damage?’

Chris shook his head in a negative. The slightest hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth going unnoticed by Mark.

‘Ok, that settles it. We ambush the group at the front, a few grenades should do it. Whoever’s left moving, we’ll take as prisoners,’ said Mark, heart beating hard at the grim finality of his own decision.

Mark waved up the three soldiers whose rifles had ML40AUS GLA grenade launchers fixed below their barrels. ‘I want one grenade each through the living room window, then we all follow in hard. If you see a hand on a weapon, shoot to kill. Ready?’ he asked, eyeing his detachment briefly. Thumbs up received, he turned forward once again.

‘Fire.’

Hollow pops sounded as the grenades left the barrels, followed almost instantaneously with triple explosions in the living room of the house, glass smashed outward as a hail of ice-like shards.

‘Go, go, go!’ shouted Mark. He vaulted the brick wall and sprinted forward with his men, rifle raised to shoulder and both eyes open, scanning for movement. Within seconds they had reached the front wall of the home, slapping their backs flat against the brick to either side of the empty window frame. An interior light reflected off shards of glass in the lawn, some already spattered wet in crimson. Hearing movement inside, Mark spun around the corner of the window frame and squeezed his trigger, burying a round in the shoulder of a man entering from the hall. His rifle fell from his hands and he dropped to the ground screaming. Mark stepped over the bottom margin of the window and into the room, joined at either side by another two soldiers.

Vinh had taken the others, spreading out around the house to prevent escape from any other egress.

The grenades had done their job well. Two men still sat on the main couch, dead. Legs missing from the lower thigh down, and chests punctured with shrapnel, they wouldn't have lasted more than a few seconds. Mark followed a set of bloody drag marks to the corner of the room, to where the survivors had retreated. One man was prostrate in the doorway unmoving, two more held up their hands in surrender.

'Secure them,' ordered Mark. 'I'll take that one,' he said, referring to the man he had shot moments before. Mark pulled a heavy zip-tie from his webbing and roughly secured the man's hands behind his back, ignoring his sobs of pain.

He left one man to guard the prisoners and entered the hallway, rifle wedged firmly against his shoulder. Two sharp cracks echoed from the rear of the house followed by a scream of agony. Mark increased his pace and emerged into a kitchen area already subdued. One man lay on the ground beside an island bench clutching a ruined knee, another crouched against the wall with both hands raised.

Vinh stood tall, framed by the back doorway through which he'd entered. The sergeant pointed toward a closed door in the far wall of the kitchen with the tip of his rifle. 'Someone's gone in that room, I think it was Finart.'

Mark stood to the side of the door, stretched out a hand and tried the handle gently, expecting a spray of bullets to come through the panels at any moment. Nothing. The door swung open with a slight push. Mark took a breath and turned abruptly around the edge of the doorway with weapon raised. The room was sparsely furnished, holding nothing but a single bed tucked in the far corner beneath a window.

'I surrender!' On the floor, spread-eagled with his hands on the back of his head was Liam Finart.

Mark dropped his rifle to hang by its sling and pulled another set of cable ties from his webbing. He knelt heavily onto Finart's lower back, grinding his knee into a kidney to keep him compliant. Liam grunted and swore as Mark ripped down one hand at a time to secure them behind his back.

'I'll have your fucking job for this, I've already surrendered!' said Finart, face down into the carpet. 'This is police brutality!'

Mark ignored the threat, instead calling out to his sergeant as he roughly pulled his prisoner to standing and shoved him back into the kitchen.

‘Update! Are we clear yet?’

Vinh re-entered the kitchen at his summons, the tension that had been on his face moments earlier, now softened. ‘We’re done, Boss. All rooms cleared, and perimeter covered. Three fatalities, another three wounded; all subdued and under control.’

‘And our men?’ asked Mark, shoving down on Finart’s shoulder to make him sit against a kitchen wall next to the other prisoner. Finart stared balefully up at his captors.

‘No casualties.’

Mark nodded. ‘Good, get these pricks out to the road. I want us ready to leave ASAP.’

Vinh and a Private hauled the two prisoners to their feet and pushed them in the direction of the hallway, a barrel in the small of their backs giving impetus to move quickly.

Chris watched the three grenades explode, flames reflecting off his eyes in the dark, pupils dilated with excitement and adrenaline. Men screamed as shrapnel wedged into their bodies, tearing flesh and limbs apart. Their cries of terror and agony a backing track as the ADF soldiers beside him vaulted the low fence and ran to finish the job. Chris revelled in the sound his former colleagues made. He felt nothing for their suffering, and cared not at all if they lived or died. His father would be at the back of the property as planned, lying low and ready to surrender. The chances of him catching a bullet were minimal, so all that was left for Chris to do was enjoy the moment and reinforce his position as a defector.

As the soldiers stepped through the shattered remains of the window, Chris climbed over the fence and followed in their footsteps, running half bent over. He waited for Mark to move further into the house before entering the living room himself. Blood dripped slowly from above, an arterial spray in stark contrast against the ceiling white. An AK-47 lay on the carpet next to a severed lower limb that absurdly stood upright with foot still in shoe. He’d arranged the purchase of the assault rifles from a Chinese contact three years prior, and his finger itched to pick one up and feel the kick in his shoulder as he fired the weapon. But not today. If he was seen with a rifle, he’d be shot on sight by one of the soldiers, a risk he couldn’t afford. He’d have to find

something else for the job at hand. Chris picked up a short length of broken timber from the window frame and found himself pleased by the unexpected weight of hardwood.

‘Oi! What the fuck are you doing here?’ said the grunt left behind to watch the two prisoners. ‘You’re supposed to be on the street.’

Chris ignored the implied instruction and walked over to the soldier who stood above a wounded prisoner, his thigh muscle laid open by shrapnel. It was Frank. The bull of a man stared up at him through eyes hooded with pain. As recognition dawned on the man’s face, Chris smiled.

‘You brought them here, didn’t you?’ panted Frank. ‘Fucking traitor.’ The big man tried to spit at Chris, but only succeeded in coating his own chin in a string of saliva.

‘At least I’m not a traitor to my own country,’ said Chris loudly, ensuring the soldier could hear him clearly. Chris swung the short piece of timber like a nightstick, straight into Frank’s mouth. With hands tied behind his back, the man was unable to defend himself. Upper and lower teeth snapped off at the gum, his lips torn to a bloody mess and jaw broken. Frank tried to scream a further insult at his abuser, but the sound emerged as a garbled mess punctuated by blood-frothed sputum.

‘What the fuck is going on here?’ bellowed Mark, emerging from the hallway behind Vinh and their prisoners. ‘Get your hands off my prisoner and drop that weapon, now!’

Chris dumped the piece of wood, but maintained a defiant posture next to the huge man. He pointed down at the prisoner. ‘This man was personally responsible for setting off the bomb outside the police station. When I begged him to reconsider, he just fucking laughed at me. The bastard doesn’t deserve to live another minute!’

Frank stared at the men above him, trying to form words through mangled lips as he shook his head in denial. Chris met his father’s eyes for a brief second and saw the man give a slight nod.

‘If you lay another hand on that man, I’ll see you charged,’ growled Mark.

‘What? After you attacked this place without a single opportunity for surrender? Don’t be a fucking hypocrite. I’m just here to get some justice for the cops he killed.’ Chris looked down at Frank, drew his foot back then kicked the man viciously in the front of his neck, crushing his trachea. Frank convulsed on the floor, unable to draw breath through his destroyed

windpipe. His face became flushed, turning purple, then blue. His kicks became increasingly feeble, until he eventually lay still. Eyes wide open in surprise at his own death.

Chris felt his hands get savagely pulled behind his back and cable tied together by the Sergeant. He didn't fight, waiting to see what would happen next. Mark loomed into his field of vision, fist clenched in rage.

'Get this bastard out of here,' he growled. 'Whatever's left of the police force can deal with him.'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mark sat behind a trestle table next to Vinh on the edge of St. David's Park. Beautifully manicured lawns covered the ground, and between the occasional tree, Mark could make out the sandstone facade of the Hobart Supreme Court. The two men sat in basic field uniform, both feeling somewhat naked without their usual weapons at hand. A banner shivered in the winter breeze above them, inviting the men and women of Hobart to enlist. Today would see a sentence handed down to Liam Finart for his role in the police station bombing and other crimes against the state's citizens, and the army had decided to make use of the expected crowds for a recruitment drive.

Predictions of a large attendance had been accurate. The lawns of the park, along with the surrounding roads were jam packed with people who came to see the end of a disturbing era for their state. Large screens were set up outside the courts to televise the judge's address. The mood was quiet, yet grim. Some carried signs and chanted demands for capital punishment. Most, however, waited in silence for the screens to turn on and proceedings begin.

Mark's booth was one of twenty set up around the perimeter of the park. Interspersed between them was military propaganda. Pictures of soldiers in heroic poses called the Tasmanian population to do their bit in the Lysan Plague war. Vinh smirked as he pointed out one particularly laughable depiction of a Carrier, made to look so weak a mere puff of wind could knock it over. But then again, if they depicted the horrific reality, they wouldn't fill a single line of their recruitment page and business was slow enough as it was. Mark had come with a detachment of men, but with so few taking up the opportunity to die under the teeth of the Infected, there had been little work to keep them occupied.

With nothing to do, Mark was unable to distract his mind from thoughts of Steph. Lines of communication were heavily restricted, and for some reason her status had been altered to "restricted access" since arriving in Canberra. The only people with knowledge of her condition and what was happening were the top brass and research division. Mark drew some comfort from the fact it meant she was likely still alive, but the rest of the secrecy was somewhat unnerving. It would be a cruel fate to survive the plague, only to become a test rat for study and dissection.

Abruptly, the screens flickered to life. People quietly jostled in the crowd, trying to obtain a better view of the judge on display. Knowing there was scant chance of a signup while the sentences were pronounced, Mark stood and left the recruitment table to gain a view of the proceedings. The judge silently turned a few pages on his table, his face calm and dignified. Eventually he looked directly into the camera, ensuring that he was addressing not only the members of the courtroom before him, but also the population of Tasmania that watched with intense interest. Over the preceding days, sentences handed down to other members of the Patriots had ranged in lengths of five years to life for those found guilty of murder. And now came the moment that the man responsible for launching the party would learn his personal fate.

‘For the intimidation and murder of political opponents, the fire-bombing of demonstrators, and the recent bombing of the police headquarters; as leader of the Patriot’s Party, Liam Finart carries a heavy burden of responsibility. No direct evidence has been produced to directly link him with any distinct act of violence, nevertheless, it is this court’s opinion that Mr. Finart owns a burden of guilt for their occurrence. Through nurturing discontent, fear and divisiveness in our state’s population, he created an environment where such repulsive acts of violence could flourish. For that he must be punished.’

A low murmur of conversation that had continued across the park as the judge spoke now hushed as each person awaited the penalty. The judge paused as he lifted a different page to the top of his notes.

‘I pronounce a custodial sentence to be served by Mr. Liam Finart within the state’s penitentiary system of no less than eight years.’

A roar of discontent erupted around the park at the lenience of the sentence, one that by the expression of the judge must have been heard through the walls of the Supreme Court. He waited for the noise to lessen before addressing the camera once again.

‘This case today brings an end to a troubling time in our state’s history. The loss of loved ones to recent acts of violence will not be forgotten, however, this should not preclude us from looking forward. Recent political policies have stopped Tasmania from taking her rightful place alongside the other states of our country as they fight the evil of Lysan Plague. We are now the last infection free bastion of hope within our great nation, protected by virtue of distance and sea-locked borders. In the past we have sent our sons

and daughters to die in foreign lands for the sake of another nation's freedom – why would we not do the same for our own country?

'On the other side of Bass Strait; Australian men, women and children are in the fight of their lives, staring down a danger that threatens to wipe us from the face of the earth. Have they given up? No, they have not,' said the judge, his cheeks pink with energy, eyes glassy with passion as he stared directly into the camera.

'We owe them our support,' he said. 'For what it's worth, as a man past the best days of his youth, today I resign my post in the judiciary to enlist in our nation's army.' The judge pulled off his wig of white curls and dumped it on the desk before him, exposing a close shaved head of grey stubble. 'And I call on all men and women of ability to consider doing the same. Many of us have friends and family on the mainland, and it is now that we must come to their aid. There is hope yet, all that is needed is men and women brave enough to hold a rifle, stand their ground and be counted.' The judge pushed back his chair and left the view of the camera, leaving nothing but an empty chair on screen.

The crowd started to murmur, volume steadily growing as people started to process the judge's words. A few pointed past the screens to the cordoned off steps of the Supreme Court. A lone figure had exited the front of the building, and with mild surprise, Mark realised it was the same judge that had been on the screen not moments before. He'd taken the man's earlier words with a grain of salt, not really expecting him to follow through. The judge paused at the top of the steps where he removed the red robes of his position, exposing a simple navy business suit. With every eye drawn to his passage, silence fell like a heavy curtain as he eased his way through the crowd, heading straight towards Mark's table.

Vinh shoved the relevant paperwork into his officer's hand as the judge arrived and took a seat opposite. Mark placed the form before him.

'This is an enlistment form for the Australian Army, sir. On signing, you are committed to no less than five years service,' said Mark, his voice low but clear. The judge nodded briskly at his words and reached for a pen, like he wanted to get the task completed before his mind changed.

Mark gently put a hand on top of the page just as the judge was about to sign. 'Sir, I'm happy to accept your signature. But before you do, can I ask why?'

The judge sat up straighter and met Mark's eye for the first time, his jaw

clenching with irritation at the question. 'Don't skirt around the edges, Lieutenant. You mean to ask why would a person coming from my background of privilege give it all away for a high chance of death? After all, no one's going to force me to enlist and I could leave it to others, yes?'

Mark did not look away, merely shrugged at his words. 'I guess that nails it. But it still doesn't give me an answer.'

'As an officer, you no doubt already know it,' said the judge. 'Would you ask your soldiers to face a danger you wouldn't be willing to risk yourself?'

Mark shook his head. 'Of course not. How could I expect my men to follow me if that was the case?'

'Well you have your answer right there. The leaders of this state have projected a willingness to depend on others to secure their freedom. That has to change. Australia needs Tasmanians to join the struggle, and I'll be damned if I ask them to risk something that I wouldn't,' said the judge. He glanced over his shoulder, seeming to realise for the first time that he had a crowd straining for every word. He looked back at Mark and picked up the pen again. 'As it seems I've managed to draw attention to the recruitment tables, Lieutenant, I'd appreciate if you'd let me sign before my nerve falters.'

Mark withdrew his hand, allowing the judge to sign his name without further hassle. 'Welcome to the army, Sir. You have a few hours at your disposal, but will be expected at the Hobart barracks by 3PM. Any questions?'

The judge shook his head in the negative, silently excusing himself. After giving the man a few moments to leave, Mark picked up his signed sheet and stood holding it above his head for all to see. The judge had provided him with an opportunity that he wasn't about to waste.

'Have a look at this paper,' shouted Mark, his voice easily reaching all parts of the assembled crowd as he punched the form into the air. 'Here is proof that times have changed. You heard his reasons for enlisting, and saw him follow through on his word. Who is willing to join that brave man to defend the safety of your family and the rest of the country?'

For a few moments, not a person moved. Suddenly a young woman stepped forward, taking the seat recently emptied by the judge.

'I'll do it,' she said in a quiet voice, her hand shaking as she reached for a pen. Mark sat back down and passed her a form to sign. The woman's

action broke the spell upon the crowd. Volunteers started to take up seats at each of the recruitment tables, lines forming and snaking back into the crowd.

The rest of Mark's detachment took up positions at the trestle table, helping all those willing to sign their lives over to the armed forces. Vinh caught his officer's eye. He didn't need to say a word, Mark knew exactly what he was thinking. With an army back to full strength and an active supply line to feed them, came something that money couldn't buy. It brought hope.

Mark stood up and pushed his hands into the small of his back, trying to ease the ache that had settled in like an unwanted houseguest. Hours had passed, and they were finally getting to the end of the line-up of volunteers. After the judge's closing speech had aired on the radio, people had continued to arrive and join the queue. The resulting crowd had been solemn in nature. With so much of the devastation abroad broadcast in high definition to living rooms across the state, there was no doubt regarding the type of danger they would face as soldiers in the ADF.

Mark found himself affording a grudging respect to the people who signed up. On the mainland there was no choice about fighting. If you wanted to stay alive, you fought. Simple. Joining the army made sense for anyone without a kid depending on them for protection. Rather than fighting on your own with whatever shit weapon you could scrounge, it at least meant having a military grade rifle in your hands and trained soldiers at your back. Here in Tasmania, the equation wasn't quite so simple. Here people had to consciously turn their back on a safe environment, choosing instead a situation that would in all probability lead to a premature death. And a painful one at that.

'Lieutenant Collins?'

Mark turned around at his name, tracking the voice back to a court official talking to his Sergeant. Vinh pointed the man toward Mark.

'How can I help?' asked Mark.

The man turned toward Mark, holding out a hand for a business-like shake. 'Lieutenant Collins, I'm from the Office of Public Prosecution. I have an unusual request for you to consider.'

Mark's attention was now properly tweaked. 'And?'

‘You had personal contact with one of the Patriot Party members who was sentenced to fifteen years jail earlier today, Chris Finart?’

Mark’s mouth tightened at the man’s name. ‘Yeah. That prick should have gotten longer for killing an unarmed prisoner.’

‘Yes, there was an amount that happened in that raid that, how should I say... was not typically played by the rule book?’ said the Public Prosecutor, with a raised eyebrow. ‘At this point, there has been no formal decision to investigate whether or not there was appropriate opportunity given for surrender before the use of deadly force, but that may change at any time. Also, there are some rumours that your own record may not be squeaky clean in regard to killing an unarmed prisoner of war?’

Mark felt his stomach squirm uncomfortably at the unsubtle threat.

‘I myself have no desire to see such a trial come to light, but that will be dependent on a number of other factors. The Office of Public Prosecution has an opportunity to gain further information regarding members of parliament who colluded with The Patriots. Liam Finart has agreed to disclose this information if his son has the nature of his sentence altered. It seems he didn’t take the news of his son’s defection too well and wants to see him suffer for it.’

‘With all due respect I fail to see what that has to do with me,’ said Mark.

‘He wants him conscripted to the army, to serve his sentence on the front lines.’

‘There’s plenty of people volunteering to do just that. Why should he escape a jail sentence for what others are doing by choice?’ asked Mark.

‘You have to understand Finart’s psychology a little better. He doesn’t think this is a favour, he thinks he’s organising a fitting death for his son’s betrayal. My bosses tend to think the outcome will be the same, so aren’t fussed if they avoid the cost of housing and feeding him for the next fifteen years. They’re also of a mind that Chris did the state a favour by killing the mastermind behind the Police headquarters bombing.

‘So far, your commander has also agreed in principle, keen for any extra pair of hands to hold a rifle. His agreement however, comes with a proviso stating that any officer tasked with leading him, must know the type of man under their watch. Hence, the logical choice to take on Chris Finart as a Private, is you.’

‘I wouldn’t trust that prick to protect my back in a fight. What if I don’t

want him in my ranks?’

‘Then I think the likelihood of a formal investigation may eventuate into your handling of the raid on Patriot Party members, not to mention the Spartan outlaw motorcycle gang. The choice is yours, Lieutenant.’

‘Like fuck it’s a choice,’ muttered Mark, turning away with his fists clenched.

Vinh stepped close to speak. ‘Don’t fight it, Boss. Let the bastard have a chance to die on the mainland. He won’t be given an opportunity to hurt anyone in the platoon.’

Mark sighed and gave a stiff nod, knowing he had no other choice. He turned back to the public prosecutor, anger plain on his face at being entrapped. ‘Fine. I’ll play my part, but that bastard won’t be getting any bloody holiday under my command. He’ll experience the same risk as every other soldier.’

‘Good,’ said the public prosecutor with a mild smile on his face. ‘I’d expect no less, Lieutenant.’

Chapter Thirty

Steph rolled over, changing position on her uncomfortable hospital mattress for the twentieth time. Sleep wouldn't come. It rarely did these days, not since Cob Hill. Steph didn't know why she wanted to sleep so badly, because when she did, it was not restful or regenerative. Sleep only brought nightmares, incoherent images of gore and feelings of rage, an anger that burned so hot it could only be sated by violence and blood.

Steph supposed she wanted to sleep because that was what normal humans did for part of every day. And these days, she didn't feel normal, or even human for that matter. Ever since she had awoken in the Canberra research facility, monitoring leads stuck over her chest and a myriad of intravenous lines protruding from her arms and neck, she had felt nothing. No fear, no resentment or anger, but more importantly – she could no longer feel humour, joy or love. It was as if she'd been scoured, pulled apart and put back together again minus that one crucial ingredient that made her feel she was a unique human being. She knew her name was Stephanie, knew her history, and could recall her memories and life experiences. But they felt alien, like they belonged to someone else. So, despite the horror that sleep brought, she found herself seeking it out like a self-harmer drawing blood with a knife, wanting to only distract herself from the new reality and to feel something. Anything. Even if it was a feeling so base as rage.

Giving up, Steph swung her legs over the edge of the bed and pushed herself to sitting. She still slept in a hospital room with a camera in one corner recording her movements twenty-four hours a day, but the intravenous lines and electrodes had been removed for some time now. Well, all except one. She lifted her hand and itched at the dressing that covered the central line sprouting from the right side of her neck. It was still used on a daily basis to draw yet more blood away from her circulating volume; blood for the scientists to test in new ways, to prove or disprove yet another hypothesis. She shrugged at the thought. Better it be a daily blood sample rather than other tissue samples. Her pelvis still ached at the sites where they had taken bone marrow, and she knew from other scars on her body that the scientists' needles had probed and stolen tissue. Neural tissue and cerebrospinal fluid from her brain, muscle from her thigh, and nerve from her arm. The lack of sensation in her left little finger belying the biopsy damage wrought on her

ulnar nerve.

Standing now in the tracksuit she'd not bothered to remove for bed, Steph commenced a routine of stretches and basic exercises that could be done in the small room. Boredom made days devoid of sleep last an eternity, and the burn of taxed muscles at least distracted her thoughts.

A pneumatic hiss sounded as the one door to her room slid open. Steph stopped mid set of push-ups, and stood, a prickling of sweat on her forehead the only sign of her exertion as she greeted her visitor. It was Harry.

'You here for more blood?' she asked in a steady voice. Despite the exercise, her breath rate had not increased, nor her pulse that still plodded along at thirty beats a minute. The alteration to her base metabolism and vitals had become permanent.

Harry winced at her question and dull tone. 'No, not this time. After the stocks acquired from you over the past weeks, I think they have enough stored now to support a year's worth of trials. I'm here to remove that line in your neck, but more importantly, I just wanted to touch base and say hi.'

Steph's face didn't change at his words, remaining robotically blank. She took a seat on the edge of the bed, angling her head to the side to expose the central line for her cousin. Harry pulled on a pair of blue disposable gloves and gently peeled off the clear, occlusive dressing. After clipping out a suture holding the device in place, he got Steph to take a deep breath, then pulled out the line with a firm, continuous motion. A fifteen-centimetre length of tube pulled out of her jugular vein, removing the tube from where it had sat just above her heart in the superior vena cava.

Harry dumped the line in a yellow clinical waste bin near the bed, applying direct pressure to the remaining wound with his other hand. After a few minutes, he applied an occlusive dressing over the site, ditched his gloves and took a seat next to Steph on the bed.

'I bet you're ready to escape this place, eh?'

'What, and miss out on the stimulating scenery? You must be kidding,' said Steph with a sigh.

Other than the camera mounted in one corner and bed at the centre, the room was devoid of window or feature. For sensory deprivation, few solitary confinement cells would succeed in outdoing what the Centre for Infectious Disease Research had seen fit to house Steph within.

Harry unconsciously tore a strip of nail off with his teeth, wincing as he ripped into the quick. He pressed the fingertip into his pants leg to stop it

bleeding. ‘You know I’ve been arguing to have you moved for a while, yeah?’

‘So?’

‘Well, I think I’ve had a win in that regard, and convinced them that they no longer need to keep you here. The team has made huge gains in the research project. It’s now at the stage where testing can begin on primates with the drug, and besides, as I said – they’ve got more than enough of your samples stored in cryo to launch a dozen new trials.’

Steph saw her cousin looking at her expectantly, evidently hoping for some sort of excitement on her part at his news.

‘Come on, Steph, this means you’ll be able to head back to Geelong! Mark’s been hammering the department with information requests about you since you got here. Aren’t you excited at the prospect of seeing him and the others from the squad?’

‘I know I should be, but that’s the problem. I still don’t feel a god damned thing,’ said Steph in a quiet voice. ‘I’m grateful that the plague’s been neutralised in my body, but I still feel...’ Steph paused, not wanting to distress her cousin with information about how she really felt inside her own head, or the dreams that she had on the occasions she actually achieved sleep. ‘I don’t know, I just feel different.’

Harry reached up and squeezed her shoulder in an attempt to comfort her. ‘Maybe it’ll be different when you see Mark in person again?’

‘Yeah, maybe.’ Steph had no desire to talk on the topic any further. ‘So, you said primate trials are beginning? Does that mean they think this thing will work as a cure?’ she asked, trying to inject some degree of interest into her voice. She might feel nothing, but it didn’t take away her ability to put on a facade when she thought necessary.

Harry’s face seemed to relax a little at her effort. ‘I don’t want to jinx them, but early signs are promising. Thanks to the tissue samples and blood you supplied, we’ve identified the way the virus moves along neural pathways and enters nerve cells – and how to block it. We did find one nerve cell with virus in it on one of your samples, but the consensus thought is that it was contaminated on the microscope plate, because the finding hasn’t been replicated on any of your other samples. Nothing ever goes to plan, but if there’s no major hiccup, we may have a medication ready to trial within a few months. There’s a major push from the ADF hierarchy to have something ready for use before the assaults begin against the state capitals.’

‘Do you think it will be? Knowing that you won’t end up dead from a minor Carrier bite would be a huge morale boost for the troops,’ Steph said.

‘Not to mention the bigger picture implications,’ said Harry. ‘But the army’s rushed out vaccinations and medications to soldiers in the past and it hasn’t worked out so well – remember the poor bastards exposed to a cocktail of drugs before Desert Storm?’

‘That was decades ago, surely it wouldn’t happen now?’ said Steph, suddenly wondering for the first time whether others might experience her own changes in the future. She shut the thought down. Her current state was still better than being dead or a Carrier. People dealt with disabilities all the time, this would just be her particular one with which to cope.

‘Probably not, but that’s only because researchers take the job seriously and refuse release of a drug until it’s proven safe.’

‘But surely in this climate it’ll end up a risk decision? Is it more risk to give the drug than to not? When the choice is guaranteed death versus possible side effects, I know which one I’d take,’ Steph said.

‘Yeah, but Lysan Plague’s only a death sentence if you get bitten,’ Harry countered.

‘Tell that to the soldier holding the line, Harry,’ said Steph, her face hard. ‘You tell them that, and see what fucking answer you get.’

Chapter Thirty-One

‘Anything else, Boss?’

Mark flinched slightly at the honorific. She’d been the one soldier of the platoon to not commonly use it, always calling him by his name unless protocol demanded otherwise. But not anymore.

‘No, Sarg, that’s it,’ he said, handing over a list of names detailing the recruits that had been allocated to his platoon. ‘Bring them back here, and we’ll see if they’ve learnt which end of a rifle points at the enemy.’

Mark watched his ex-girlfriend walk away for a moment, then forced himself to turn and occupy his eyes with something else. He’d taken it hard initially. The harsh spirits his men brewed had been his answer until Vinh had forced him to sober up and accept the situation. Now that the better part of a month had passed, time was making it easier. Somewhat.

Training of the Tasmanian recruits had been well underway when Steph had returned to Geelong unannounced. Mark had been overjoyed to see her looking fit and hale, but it hadn’t taken long for him to work out that some key part of her had changed. Her speech fit the bill well enough, but the body language didn’t match. The spark that used to light her eye when she met his gaze was gone, leaving him to feel like a laboratory specimen under study. They’d tried for a couple of weeks, until Steph had finally called it off. Mark had thought to dissuade her, but when he met her eyes and saw how utterly cold they’d become, he’d let go without argument. PTSD did strange things to soldiers, and he knew he’d have to settle for being happy that she’d survived.

The existing platoons had been halved the week prior, in preparation for seeding with the new recruits. Vinh had secured a well-deserved commission, and would now lead a platoon as a Lieutenant in his own right. Steph as one of his existing Corporals, had been the logical choice to fill Vinh’s vacancy by virtue of ability alone. Now that there was no possible claim of favouritism due to the absence of a relationship, Mark had no compunction in handing her the duty. Steph’s feelings toward him might have changed, but she fought better than ever in the face of the Infected. Any soldier that could maintain cool detachment and clinical reasoning in the heat of battle was needed at the peak of the command structure. His feelings be damned, Mark was happy to have them trodden over if it meant his squad had the best

leaders possible to keep them safe.

Mark picked up his other copy of the recruits coming to fill gaps created by the reshuffle. A few names stood out from the rest. Heath Tipper was joining his platoon. Ignoring his father's wishes to remain on the farm, he'd voluntarily enlisted after recovering from his wounds. From all reports, the kid had excelled during training and would make an excellent fighter. Further down the list, his eyes stopped at another name, Chris Finart. On top of what he already knew about the man, he'd heard a number of new rumours circulating. Still angry at placing himself in a position where he could be manipulated into accepting the man under his leadership, Mark had avoided making any overt enquiries himself to date. But now he didn't have a choice, the man would be under his command within the hour. He grunted in irritation, then got up to search for a man who might have some answers.

‘Hey Vinh, you got a second, mate?’

Vinh glanced up from his makeshift desk, appearing somewhat flustered as he shuffled through a bunch of paperwork. ‘Um... yeah, I guess. I didn't realise there was so much bloody paperwork that came with the job. How the hell did you make it look so easy?’

‘Most of it's useless shit,’ said Mark, taking a seat opposite. ‘Just find the bits of information that matter or can't be ignored, and bin the rest. And then hand the stuff that has to be done to your Sergeant. Easy,’ he said with a wry smile as Vinh looked up at the last words.

‘You son of a bitch – I should have known!’ muttered Vinh. ‘So, what is it that can't wait?’

‘Chris Finart. You were seconded as a training sergeant until scoring your commission - I hear he was in your squad for part of that?’

Vinh sat back in his chair, crossed his arms and nodded. ‘I was wondering how long it would take you to finally ask a question about him.’

Mark scowled. ‘Well I couldn't leave it any longer. What's your opinion of him after spending six weeks kicking his arse into shape? Can't say I was a fan of the prick the last time we met, and I want to know if I was wrong. So, is he a racist little psycho like his father, or just a pathetic creep? Not that I'm happy about taking on either of those options.’

‘On the surface, he did all right. Accurate shot with a rifle, good tactical

mind and appeared to remain cool enough once Carriers were added to the training scenarios.'

'But?'

'My gut says something's off about the guy. Remember when we were doing the house clearances in Queenscliff and Geelong, and you'd come across the occasional Carrier that had its throat torn out and couldn't make noise?'

Mark nodded, waiting for Vinh to continue.

'If one was near, I'd always feel the hairs rise on the back of my neck before I'd even seen the thing, like I could sense I was about to be attacked.' Vinh put down the papers in his hand and looked at Mark, his expression serious. 'I've had the same feeling with Chris a few times, generally when I'm alone with the man. I know it sounds stupid, but hell, listening to my gut has saved my arse more than once.'

'So, you trust him with a gun in his hands?'

'Fuck no, but I've got nothing I can hang on him aside from instinct, and the last time I heard – that's worth jack shit in a court martial. The guy's a predator, it just waits to be seen whether or not he's happy to channel that part of his mind against the Infected.'

Mark sighed, resigned to the situation. 'Thanks for the heads up,' he said, standing again.

'I want him in my platoon, Mark. I'll swap you one of my recruits as a replacement.'

Mark snapped a look at Vinh, caught by surprise. 'Why the fuck would you want to do that? And besides, the deal I made back in Tasmania saw him placed under my command.'

'No, he just had to lead by an officer who knew what the bastard had done in the past, and I fit that bill as well as you. Anyway, after kicking his arse into shape throughout recruit training, I think I have a handle on him. If he steps out of line, I'll see that he gets fed a bullet.'

'You sure?'

Vinh nodded. 'Yep. Don't worry, mate, I'll call in the favour sometime soon,' he said with a wry smile.

Chris stood in line with other recruits allocated to the platoon. His

expression was calm and attentive as his new officer acknowledged their arrival, but on the inside, he seethed, furious at his allocation to Lieutenant Nguyen's squad. Chris thought he'd escaped the man when his training had finally ended, and yet here he was again, and promoted to a commissioned officer to top it all off. Vinh had ridden him hard during the previous six weeks, wearing his act of compliance paper-thin. How many times he'd stared at the back of the man's head, fantasizing about how it would feel to bury his knife hilt-deep into his neck. And yet somehow, he'd maintained his composure, allowing his anger to fester and wait for release at a later date.

Glancing out the corner of his eye, he observed the recruits around him. All fools. Sheep that followed orders without thought, that had fallen for the indoctrination of mateship and sacrifice without question. It made him sick how they looked at the veterans who made up the other half of the platoon, showing deference to the soldiers just because they'd survived a few run-ins with shambling corpses.

Chris's hand dropped to his side, fingering the sheath of his new sword, the only acquisition of the day to bring him any satisfaction. Lieutenant Nguyen had adopted the peculiarity of his former boss to carry a short sword into battle. The officer had presented each recruit with their own custom-made weapon to match those worn by the other veterans, a long-bladed machete ground into a double-edged blade. It had a satisfying weight in hand, and Chris looked forward to burying it in the neck of his officer.

'Private Finart!'

Chris was ripped from his thoughts by the sound of his name. His eyes flicked forward, body stiffening. 'Yes, sir?'

'Do you find something funny at the prospect of fighting a city-sized swarm of Carriers?' Vinh said, voice low, dangerous.

Chris stared straight ahead, refusing to take the bait. 'No, Sir.'

'Then wipe that fucking smirk off your face and listen. This isn't your daddy's playgroup anymore. If you want to survive the coming fight, you bloody do as I say, when I say it.'

Vinh glared at him for a moment longer before flicking his eyes away, his lip curled upward in obvious contempt. Chris tracked the Lieutenant as he walked toward a whiteboard in the room's corner, distracting his mind with his usual game of picking out where he'd like to stab his knife in the future. Carotid artery, neck. Femoral artery, groin. Puncture an eye, just for fun.

Vinh stabbed a finger at the board. 'This is where some of you will gain

your first true exposure to the enemy. And you better believe, it's going to be one hell of a spectacle.'

For the first time that meeting, Chris's attention was finally secured. He looked at the whiteboard, noting a wide arc at the base to which Vinh pointed. The noise of a helicopter suddenly filled the room as one passed low overhead and landed in the adjacent field. Vinh waited for the blades to slow and noise lessen before he carried on.

'This wall has been carefully constructed over the last six months, all to ensure that we can fight from a position of safety. It's thirty feet high, four metres wide at the top with a deep moat to the enemy side. In one fortnight, this will be an obstacle that the swarms of Melbourne will break upon like a king tide. All we'll need to do is cull the bastards from our position on the wall.'

The map was drawn roughly to scale, and Chris scanned the features, seeking out any weakness that he could exploit. In three different locations, he noted tunnels through the wall and tucked the information into the back of his mind to consider later.

One of the new recruits raised an arm in question.

'I don't understand, Sir. I thought this battle was to clear the Infected from Melbourne. Why is the wall nowhere near the city?'

'Ever heard the saying "choose your battles wisely"? Well in this case, the General has chosen a site that will play to the advantage of our relatively small numbers. All we have to do, is bring the enemy to our killing field to join the party.'

The same recruit began to raise his arm again before Vinh cut him off.

'Let me guess, you want to know how that's going to happen?'

The recruit nodded, a touch of red hitting her cheeks.

'Over the past week, sound attractants have already massed the Infected of greater Melbourne on the northern side of the Westgate Bridge. At this time the bridge span is blocked, however come the day of battle, that will be removed, and the swarm brought to the plain.' Vinh paused and looked out the window of the barracks to a close-cropped field of grass outside where the landed helicopter sat. It was a small two-seated craft, not something usually seen on an army base.

'During the last weeks of training here in Geelong, you would have no doubt seen our fleet of small helicopters in action, performing drills. Well they're our version of a cattle dog. Those little bastards will be like a floating

steak in the air before the starved masses of Infected, drawing them to our field of battle.'

Chapter Thirty-Two

Erin glanced down and felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. She hovered not far above Southern Cross Station in Melbourne, taking part in the last sections of her helicopter training. Carriers filled the inner-city streets of Melbourne in a heaving, writhing mass of butchered flesh. Ever since the noise attractants had been dropped in sequence, starting from outer suburbs, then leading into the middle of the city, the number of Carriers had become ever more dense. Now the Infected swarmed over every free piece of ground. Bodies crawled over each other, rising in mounds past second storey windows of buildings and skyscrapers.

Directly beneath her, Carriers almost reached the heights of the train station's roof. Hands reached up, mouths open, screeching rage and hunger at her helicopter that taunted and drove them to distraction. One face in the mob drew her attention. What was left of a woman dragged herself over the mosh pit of arms and bodies until she was near the skids of the chopper. She levered herself to standing atop the pile, one hand gripped a skull of another Carrier for balance, claw-like fingers puncturing the eyes like she was gripping a bowling ball.

Concentration disturbed, the helicopter drifted a metre to the right.

'For fucks sake, Private,' muttered her flight instructor. 'If you can't hover for at least thirty seconds, you can kiss your licence goodbye.' The instructor took over control, raising the craft back up in the air.

Erin bit her lip in annoyance. 'I can, I just got distracted that's all. You've seen me do it before, why can't you sign me off on the basis of that?'

'You're doing your tests here to replicate of the stress you'll be under *if* you pass. Have a look about you, Erin. You'll be by yourself in the future, flying over endless masses of these rabid bastards. You need to have perfect control of your bird, be able to move her like she was just another part of your body with nothing more than a thought. You need to be good enough to react to any unexpected event. If you have to 'think' about how to react and move your craft – you'll end up crashing in a sea of arms.' He reached up and rapped a glove-covered knuckle against the bubble of glass surrounding the cockpit. 'It'd take mere seconds for those beasts to smash the glass, and then it's lights out.'

Erin ground her teeth together. There was no way she was going to be

sent back to Mark's platoon as a failure. Not after spending the last months in study and preparation. The journey to her current position above the swarm of Melbourne had been a long time coming. Starting out in fixed wing aircraft before moving into helicopters, she'd been forced to overcome a fear of heights that she'd admitted to no one.

'I can do this. Give me another chance and I'll prove it.'

Erin's instructor gave her a hard look, then nodded an acceptance. 'OK. Your common fault is drifting to the right during a hover. Let's provide some added motivation to correct that mistake.'

Erin raised an eyebrow in question, unsure exactly what he meant. The instructor changed course, descending toward the building on the opposite side of Spencer St. until it stood no more than ten metres to the right of the helicopter rotor blades. Carriers on the third floor of the building hammered at the windows, anger boiling at the craft that hovered within spitting distance. Glass smashed outward, shards falling in a deadly rain to the crowd below as the first Infected broke the meagre barrier. Erin tore her eyes away from the scene after watching the first Carrier leap from the window toward the helicopter in vain.

'OK Private, take the controls.'

Erin nodded and took hold of the cyclic stick while resting both feet on the anti-torque pedals on the floor. The stick controlled the main rotor and the direction in which the craft moved, while the pedals controlled in which direction the nose of the helicopter faced. It was a balancing act that made her feel she was performing a dance, feet and hands moving independently like she was pulling the strings of a marionette to keep the craft stable. The tip of Erin's tongue poked from one corner of her mouth as she concentrated. In her peripheral vision, she saw another Carrier fall from the building's window, outstretched arms missing the rotor tips by a hand's breadth. The added incentive kept her from drifting to the right, but inadvertently the helicopter started to move to the left instead.

'Bloody hell, Private, I can't believe you're going to make me do this,' muttered her instructor, taking the controls off her once again. He climbed the helicopter above the level of the buildings, his eyes searching the buildings and streets below for something. Finding what he sought, he swerved the helicopter over to a quadrangle framed by three buildings and a tree on the last side. Erin's gut squirmed as the instructor descended into the space between the four structures.

‘This time you hold her steady. I mean it, Erin. You let her budge more than a metre in any direction and you’ll be smashing into brick or branch. Controls are yours.’

Erin’s heart raced, hammering against the inside of her ribs like it wanted to escape. She forced herself to breathe slowly and tried to ignore the insistent voice of self-doubt that told her she was going to die. A self-doubt that screamed she was about to fall from the sky in a twisted monstrosity of metal, into the arms of the swarm to be ripped apart and eaten alive. Erin focused on her controls, the feel of the metal beneath her hands and feet, and by extension of that, the rotors of the craft.

She was in control. The helicopter remained steady in the air while the down draft of the blades whipped the thin branches of the tree into a frenzy. The seconds dragged onward, each seeming an hour as she ignored the Infected reaching upward from the ground below, and those that screamed their rage at her from the surrounding buildings.

‘That’ll do,’ said her instructor, taking back over control and lifting the helicopter back above the city.

Now that she was safe again, Erin’s muscles felt like jelly. A fine tremor shook her fingers and her breath quickened with the aftermath of her adrenaline surge. Erin looked over at her instructor, still shocked at the danger in which he’d placed both of them for the sake of a test.

The instructor glanced at her quickly and snorted. ‘Give it a break. You were always going to do fine – you just needed a little motivation, that’s all.’

‘That’s one hell of a gamble, what if I’d stuffed up?’

‘I reckon it was a safe bet. If you couldn’t perform under pressure, you wouldn’t have survived this far against the plague. So, quit looking like you want to gut me, we’ve still got a few items to check off the list before we can head back to Geelong.’

Erin took a deep breath and let it out slowly between clenched teeth as she looked back out to the city skyline. ‘OK. Let’s get this shit over and done with.’

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mark gripped the edge of the parapet and stared out over the future field of battle, quietly stunned at the sheer scale of defences created. The wall was now finished, and in the last stages of stocking in preparation for the battle. On the Melbourne side, the wall soared thirty vertical feet from the base of a wide ditch. The front was panelled in hardwood timber, the joins perfectly flush to prevent any finger hold. The top of the wall was four metres wide, allowing for easy troop movement to support any areas along the front that came under heavy attack. To his right, the wall extended over the Princes Highway in an unbroken line to the edge of Port Phillip Bay, while to his left it continued in an arc for another few kilometres. If he hadn't held a rifle in his arms, he could almost fool himself that he'd stepped back in time and taken on the role of a border soldier atop Hadrian's Wall. Ahead, the grass plain was stripped of all habitation. Farms and trees were cleared, providing a clear line of sight as far as the eye could see. Two hundred metres out from the wall, a series of shoulder deep trenches spread across the plain in parallel lines. In other locations he could also make out constructions that he guessed held pre-prepared incendiary bombs waiting for use.

'What's with the trenches? They better not be thinking of putting soldiers out in front of the wall,' said Steph.

Mark glanced to his right and saw the Sergeant performing her own assessment of the battlefield. 'Yeah I had the same thought myself. I'm hoping they're only for creating a further obstacle to slow the swarm's approach, but time will tell.' He lifted his arm, by habit reaching out a hand to rest on her waist in greeting. Mark caught himself mid action, and pulled back his hand sharply before making contact, inwardly reprimanding himself at the lack of discipline. Their time had passed, and he owed his troops to occupy his mind with preparation for the coming fight.

Mark turned away from the plain and walked back to the Geelong side of the wall. On this side, the ground was a hive of activity. What had been little more than a car park for earth moving equipment until the prior month, was now a series of buildings and roads. Barracks, storage sheds and a field hospital were housed within a series of huge steel-panelled buildings that looked like overgrown farm sheds. Uniformed men and women scurried around these buildings like worker ants, each moving with urgency to

complete a myriad of tasks.

‘The platoon’s all settled in?’ Mark asked.

‘As good as you can be on a bed of cement,’ Steph said, knuckles whitened as she gripped the top of the waist-high barrier.

Mark allowed a short grunt of a chuckle escape. The sheds might provide shelter from the weather, but no effort had been made to soften the enclosures any further after laying the cement slab. He’d secured an area near the front of one of the buildings where he’d left the soldiers to throw down their packs and sleep mats a few minutes earlier. No-one was fussed about the accommodation. Sleep was unlikely to be a high priority in the coming days compared to the need to stay alive.

‘Good. I want our ammunition dumps set up by day’s end. Our section of the wall stretches from this point toward the highway.’ Mark looked back at Steph, his eyes narrowing in concern at what he saw. His Sergeant’s face looked blank, eyes unfocused as if she hadn’t heard a word said. ‘Steph, are you ok?’ he asked, reaching out a hand to her shoulder in concern.

Steph abruptly stepped out of hand’s reach, eyes focusing back on him as she re-joined the previous line of conversation as if nothing had happened.

‘So, that gives us around fifty metres of wall to defend. Not bad I guess, around one soldier ever metre and a half. Pity we’re stuck manning one of the key weak points,’ she said.

Mark continued to look at her for a moment, debating whether to push the episode of absence any further, but then decided to let it drop. With the biggest battle of the war mere days away, everyone had plenty on their mind.

Mark followed Steph’s finger to where it was pointed down at the entrance of a tunnel that burrowed into the wall not far away. A necessary evil to enable construction of the defensive structure in the first place, the tunnel was large enough to fit the huge earth-movers. On the Melbourne side of the wall, two huge steel doors closed the space, blocking any movement of the Infected through the tunnel. Although the wall was now complete, the tunnel would still be required one last time for the passage of those involved in the attraction of Carriers from the city centre. After that, the doors would be locked in place until the battle had run its course for better or worse.

Mark shrugged. ‘Once those doors are closed, it’ll be no different to any other section of the wall. And it makes sense to have us near to it – we’re committing one detachment to support the helicopters as they herd the swarm. If we end up cutting it fine, I’d prefer not struggling to find our

position on the wall to re-join our men.'

Steph watched Mark descend a set of metal stairs on the rear side of the wall, leaving her alone at the top. She felt relieved at his departure and the chance to gain a few minutes by herself. Since returning to Geelong, the feelings of rage that she had experienced only during dreams had started to kindle inexplicably on occasions while awake. Moments before, when she'd seen Mark's hand reaching toward her waist, she could have sworn something spoke to her from within her own brain. A command hallucination had screamed, '*Kill him!*' It had taken every ounce of her strength to resist the sudden rage that had pulsed into her brain with the words. She had gripped the railing with all her strength, just to stop unsheathing her knife and obeying the command. The anger had left almost as quickly as it arrived, dissipating over no more than three breaths, leaving her confused and struggling to maintain her conversation without Mark noticing that something was wrong.

Steph placed two fingers on her radial pulse and counted. Twenty beats a minute. It didn't make sense, it should be racing after such an experience, and yet her heart rate was slower than ever.

'Hey, Sarg!'

Steph looked down at the voice and saw one of her Privates seeking her attention. She started down the stairs and off the wall to take up her duties once again. Whatever was going on would have to wait until after the fight.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Harry climbed down from the back of the Unimog truck along with the fifteen other soldiers it had ferried from Avalon airport to the wall. Moving off the side of the road, he dumped his duffle bag on the gravel and turned slowly in a circle to get his bearings. Things had progressed remarkably during the intervening months to his last visit. The wall now stretched for as far as he could see in either direction. The rear side was buttressed with steel mesh cages filled with stone, making the lower half of the wall over fifteen metres thick. Wide stairways zigzagged up the face at intervals of fifty metres.

He unconsciously touched a hand to his chest, feeling for the doses of medication that he'd stolen from Canberra. Early trials on their small group of chimpanzees had shown promise, with only one creature demonstrating side effects. The animal had been euthanized after unpredictable behaviour had made it unsafe to work with and placed the other primates at risk. Human trials were not due to start for another few months. That the medication would be unavailable for the start of the Melbourne campaign, was news that General Black had not received well. He'd been in two minds about grabbing the vials when the opportunity had presented itself, as he knew that the medication had not been proven safe for human use, but Steph's own words had been the deciding factor. Determining risk always changed dependent on the situation, and he'd allow his mates to make the decision themselves about whether to take the medication.

A red cross on white background stood out amongst the sea of green and brown camouflage, showing Harry where the field hospital now stood. The imminent campaign for Melbourne had seen Harry recalled to the army for service within the Medical core. He felt a familiar anxiety build in his chest at the thought of managing plague victims once again. He managed the anxiety these days with Propranolol, a sympathetic nervous system blocker, that did little to dull the feeling in his chest, but left his hand steady and voice calm. The next weeks would see a return to the role he had named 'the kind executioner'; holding hands and soothing panic while simultaneously preparing to kill his charge before they could succumb to the mutated Lyssavirus.

He picked up his bag and headed for the hospital building, working his

way through the crowd and around two 155mm Howitzer gun emplacements. The guns had their barrels raised at a steep angle to lob huge shells over the wall, capable of firing a projectile up to 18,000 metres. Harry inwardly shrugged at the decision to use artillery. The weapons would kill few Carriers, but damage done to legs would serve to slow and mediate the overall flow of the swarm.

Harry paused at the edge of a tarmac road that passed in front of the hospital, waiting for a Unimog truck loaded with soldiers to drive by before jogging across to the other side. The four-lane road travelled the length of the wall to enable fast movement of troops, resources, and in the medical core's concern – the wounded. Six parking bays sat before the front doors, enabling rapid offload into the premises. Harry eased his way past two field ambulances that took up a pair of spots, their rear doors reversed in to face the hospital. Harry grimaced as he saw the floor of one already splashed with crimson. At this early stage, he hoped it was due to an accident or misfire. If it was a self-inflicted gunshot, the soldier was about to learn the draconian measures recently adopted by the Australian Army to discourage troops from using this avenue to avoid facing the enemy.

A military police vehicle pulled into the bay adjacent to the ambulance and screeched to a halt. Four stony-faced MPs emerged and headed for the entrance, one already with gun drawn. Harry tailed the group through the entrance, automatic doors sliding open and closed with an electronic buzz that made him feel he was entering a bizarre factory where wounded soldiers arrived for sorting. The fixable for patching up and return to the front; conversely, those broken beyond repair or diseased hit the true conveyor belt. Sedation and euthanasia followed by stripping of reusable uniform and items. Naked bodies were then neatly stacked in cold storage like nameless slabs of meat for future disposal. It was an environment where the staff had to leave their humanity at the door to function. Harry envied the soldiers on the wall, preferring to kill the enemy while fuelled with fear, adrenaline and the need to protect the man standing at your shoulder. Instead he got to kill, not the enemy, but rather his comrades while stone cold sober.

The field hospital was housed under one large open metal shell building. To the right were two basic operating theatres that stood empty and waiting for use. Rows of beds took up the majority of the open space, each set up ready to receive plague bite victims. Four steel manacles hung from the sides of each frame to secure limbs. The mattresses were bare of sheets, waterproof

rubber left exposed for ease of wiping down between occupants. For mass casualty influxes, a euthanasia kit hung from every bedhead. Each kit held a syringe of Propofol to render the victim unconscious, paired with a hammer and a steel spike to puncture the skull and destroy the brain. To Harry, the package exemplified everything that made the army so effective, being simple, quick and ruthless.

Harry stopped at the edge of the room, leaving the MPs to walk past the first few rows of empty beds to the only one filled. An injured soldier lay in his uniform with one boot removed, a crimson field dressing wrapped around his foot. The man was pale and sweating from pain, his hands gripping the edges of the bedframe like it could somehow keep his agony at bay. The group of MPs stopped at the edge of his bed, and Harry watched as a doctor he recognised from the Geelong Hospital walked over to meet them.

‘Can I help you?’ asked the doctor. ‘This man is injured and needs to be prepped for emergency surgery on his wound.’

The MPs ignored the doctor; instead the one with his gun drawn talked to the only other soldier present, a sergeant that stood behind the bed. ‘We were notified of a deserter?’

The sergeant winced at the MPs words. ‘Not exactly. It was a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the foot, but Private Wilson states it was an accident while servicing his weapon.’

The MP’s gaze flicked down to the young soldier who looked barely out of his teens. A frown creased his forehead, and jaw was clenched so tightly it looked like his teeth would shatter any second. ‘Then you’re a fucking idiot for forcing me to complete this task,’ he said as he lifted his pistol and chambered a round. ‘Every person in this army knows what General Black has ordered, there’s no way it can be avoided. Any deserter, or soldier suspected of deliberately self-inflicting a wound that would remove them from the line of battle, has signed their own death warrant. I am mandated to carry out this sentence at the earliest possible time or wear the same penalty myself.’ He aimed at the man’s heart, the barrel no more than a hands breadth away from his chest wall.

‘But it was an accident! I swear!’ spluttered the soldier, his eyes wide as reality hit home.

The MP squeezed the trigger. The soldier’s torso thumped downward against the mattress with the force of the bullet, a small rose of blood spreading from the wound. The victim’s eyes remained open, his mouth an

‘o’ of surprise at his own death.

Harry turned away from the scene, his gut sick at the sanctioned murder. He could understand why the General had issued such an order. Harry had viewed the swarm attack the walls of Queenscliff, knew the mind-numbing terror it had inspired, and yet that had been only a few thousand Carriers. The fight coming within mere days would bring *millions* against a force half made up of green soldiers; Tasmanian men and women who had never faced a Carrier outside the controlled environment of a training camp. And yet they would be asked to hold the line with their comrades against a legion of walking horrors, or go down fighting. They needed to know there was no option of retreat. Only death and ignominy would meet those who turned away from their duty.

But it didn’t make it any easier to witness.

Harry walked back through the automatic doors to get some fresh air. They could wait a few more minutes for him to check in and start work.

‘Oi! Old man! What the hell did you do with my mate Harry?’

Harry started at the voice, caught off guard. He turned and saw Mark walking his way, tailed by a severe looking Steph. Harry forced a smile onto his face, as he reached a hand up to his new buzz cut. What had been salt and pepper, was now matte grey.

‘It’s all a master plan, mate. If I look old, the Carriers will leave me alone to go for the juicier young ones,’ Harry said, deadpanning.

Mark grabbed his hand and shook it in a bone-cracking grip. ‘First chance I’ve had to say thanks for saving Steph’s life. The squad would’ve missed out on their best Sergeant yet if not for you and the brainiacs in Canberra.’

Harry smiled, accepting his gratitude quietly. He glanced over at Steph to see her expression at Mark’s words, knowing that she’d ended their relationship a few weeks prior. His cousin met his eye with a lack of expression that bordered on psychopathic, a flatness that made his skin crawl a little. Mental health options for soldiers suffering from PTSD had been lacking in the armed forces prior to the plague, and were now non-existent. He’d have to try and make contact again in private to gauge how she was holding up since returning to her squad.

‘Victor said he’d seen you walking to the hospital, so we thought we’d take the chance to touch base before the shit hits the fan,’ Mark said.

‘I thought you left Vic back in Cob Hill to finish off with the farms?’

Harry said.

‘Yeah, but he’s back again - all troops from the different rural towns were recalled within the last few weeks. Black’s gambling everything on this one - it’s all or nothing,’ Mark said, the smile leaving his eyes for the first time during their conversation. He looked over his shoulder at the wall, eyes sweeping up from the wide base to the troops that walked the battlement at its peak. ‘The wall’s an impressive structure, that’s for sure.’

‘Impressive or not, it’s the Infected staying on the other side of it that matters,’ said Harry.

Mark shrugged. ‘It’ll hold, or it won’t. We’ll have our answer in two days from what I hear, so worrying in the meantime won’t change a damn thing.’

Harry looked back at Mark sharply. ‘Seriously? Black’s moved the battle forward? That’s a week ahead of schedule.’

‘Yeah, well battles don’t usually run to plan in my experience. I kind of agree with the man. If the shit’s ready to go, get the fight happening. The last thing we want is idle soldiers over thinking things and getting scared,’ said Mark.

Steph interjected, nodding toward the hospital. ‘Are you guys ready to go with the change in time frames?’

‘I’ve barely walked in the door, but it looks like it should do the job. They were just dealing with an unsavoury case when I walked in, so figured I’d leave them to it for a few minutes until they actually know I’m here.’ As Harry finished speaking, the automatic doors of the hospital opened, and the Military Police officers walked out. Mark and Steph watched the men walk past in silence, their eyes accusing nonetheless.

‘I see why you mean it was a dodgy case,’ said Steph as the MPs drove away from the curb. ‘Did they just execute a deserter?’

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak on the topic.

‘Those MP pricks are going to be majorly on the nose with the rest of the ADF,’ said Steph, her lip curling up in distaste.

‘I agree,’ Mark said. ‘It hasn’t gone down well with the average grunt holding a rifle. Black’s taking a major risk with that order.’

‘If only us researchers in Canberra had managed to get a medication up in time that could’ve been given to bite victims – maybe he wouldn’t have felt the need.’

‘That’s not your fault, Harry. You’ve said it before; medications take

years to develop,' Steph said.

'Well we mightn't have a product for mass release, but I have managed to get my hands on the most successful variant under testing in Canberra,' said Harry. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and withdrew a packaged syringe containing a sunset orange liquid. 'We've had pretty good success with primates so far, and if no further anomalies arise, it should move into human trials within a couple of months.'

'What was the anomaly?' asked Steph as she took the syringe from Harry's hand and held it up in the air to examine. Sun shone through the liquid, casting a burnt orange over her face.

'A few episodes of aggression from a chimp, although inconclusive as to whether it was from the drug,' said Harry, with a slight shrug. 'But either way, none of them have progressed to full-blown plague symptoms, and I guess that should be viewed as a win. There's four syringes; one each for you two, and Erin and Vinh. In the event that one of you got bitten, I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I knew I'd had access to a potential cure.'

Steph passed the syringe to Mark who turned it over in his hands, inspecting the mixture with some trepidation. He looked up at Harry, 'So you think we should inject ourselves before the fight, just in case?'

'Fuck, no!' blurted Harry. 'I think it'll probably be safe, but can't guarantee it yet. Only take it if you actually sustain a bite. In that case, inject the whole syringe in a muscle close to the bite site as soon as practical. As long as it's taken close to the time of infection, it should still have an effect,' Harry said.

'You're not exactly inspiring confidence in the drug, mate,' said Mark, tucking the syringe into a shirt pocket.

Steph handed hers back. 'Thanks, but keep it for yourself, Harry. I'm immune anyway, I hope.'

Harry shrugged, and slipped it back in his jacket. 'It was your words the other week that convinced me, Steph. I figured you would have thought it the right thing to do.'

The automatic door slid open behind the group once again and the doctor from Geelong hospital stepped through. 'Hey, Harry – I thought I saw you pop your head in before. I'd appreciate your help inside, we've still got a fair bunch of stuff to get sorted.'

'No worries, mate – I'm on my way,' said Harry.

Harry looked back at his mates, and after ensuring they were alone again,

passed off the packages to Mark. 'If I don't manage to touch base with you guys before the fight – good luck. Give the other two syringes to Erin and Vinh for me, ok?'

Mark slipped the syringes into an inside pocket of his jacket as Harry disappeared back into the hospital building. He turned on the spot, searching for his men on the wall, his mind already moving onto the next task requiring attention. A hand on his arm caught his attention, and he looked down to see with some surprise that it belonged to Steph.

'What?' he asked more bluntly than he had planned. So many times over the weeks since she'd dumped him, he'd wanted to reach out to just feel her body under his hand, and yet he'd restrained himself in the knowledge that it was something she no longer wanted.

'I don't think you should use the medication, Mark.'

Mark paused for a moment, feeling irritation start to mount. 'Why not? If I get bitten, I'll be happy to take my chances with the drug. Anyway, why the fuck would you care? You made your thoughts abundantly clear the other week.'

Steph pulled her hand away like she'd been burnt. 'It hasn't been tested properly. We don't know if the person who has taken it might still present a danger to those around them down the track. You heard him, Harry said there's been aggression issues during the primate testing. If that happens in humans, we could end up in a situation where a soldier turns on his comrades.'

Mark gave her a hard stare. 'Steph, are you sure this isn't more about your experience than the drug?'

Steph met his eyes levelly, her expression dead as always. But she said nothing.

Mark sighed, feeling his anger seep away as quickly as it had fired, replaced with tiredness. 'I don't know what's going on in your head, Steph. As much as it turns a knife in my chest every time I see you, I'm forcing myself to accept that you don't want me anymore. But give yourself a break. You're not some diseased freak, you're just like every other damaged soldier out there with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.'

Steph shook her head. 'It's not as simple as that.'

'Well I think it is. You've got to stop pushing everyone away and start

talking. It doesn't have to be me, but maybe speak to Erin or Vinh.'

'Talking won't fix what's wrong.'

'So, there's some hideous symptom making you a danger that you're not telling me about?' asked Mark, his face now serious. 'Because we've got a battle coming up, and if there's something going on that might compromise your ability to function – I need to know.'

Steph looked like she was about to say something, but then stopped and shook her head in denial.

'Look, go take ten minutes for yourself. We've just got to make it through the next week, then things will ease off again for a while – and I'll make sure you get the help you need, ok?'

'I don't need *ten minutes*, Mark. Look, use the drug, or don't; it's your decision at the end of the day. Just don't fucking complain to me if you come out different on the other side.'

Mark stared after her as she walked off on him, shaking his head slightly in frustration.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Standing in the back of a truck, the low canvas roof forced Chris to stay hunched as he threw a tarp over the remaining crates of 155mm Howitzer shells. As far as anyone else knew, he'd unloaded all the ammunition, and was willing to take a gamble that no one would go looking for a few missing crates. He'd pulled in a favour to get the duty of creating the ammunition dump for the huge gun emplacement below their section of the wall, although 'favour' was probably the wrong word. Blackmail was more accurate, and as far as Chris was concerned, a far more satisfying method of getting what he wanted. Lieutenant Vinh had given him tasks with zero autonomy, and with time to the battle rapidly running down, he'd been forced to create his own opportunities.

Chris hooked a key from his pocket and climbed down from the back of the truck where he'd parked it alongside two others, a stone's throw from where his platoon would be stationed tomorrow. His platoon had been allocated a stretch of wall to defend alongside Lieutenant Collins's soldiers. Both squads would straddle each side of the service tunnel through the wall.

He gave a quick glance about to make sure no one was watching, then ducked into the entrance of the tunnel. Penetrating the base of the wall, it stretched fifteen metres from end to end. Chris raised a hand in the gloom of the unlit space, and brushed his fingers across the rough-hewn timber planks that lined the tunnel as he walked forward. Coming to the end, harsh sunlight forced him to squint as he stepped out of the shadows. To either side, huge steel doors were opened flat against the outside wall, while the road descended from the tunnel entrance at a steep angle into the wide ditch below.

It would have to be here. It was a weak spot that Chris could exploit and still possibly escape with his life intact at the end. One good explosion within the tunnel and he'd create a breach that couldn't be filled, while he'd be in a car heading for the coast. He was still awed by the foresight of his father's plan. Once he succeeded in letting the swarm through the wall, the army would suffer a defeat from which it would not recover in years, if ever.

'This is a restricted area, haven't you got a job to do or something, Private?' said a deep voice.

Chris started at the sound and looked up to see a sentry step around the outside corner from the down ramp.

‘Nah mate, all good,’ said Chris, with a forced smile on his face. ‘Just wanted to see what the wall looked like from down here where the Carriers will be.’

‘Well, you’ve seen it. There’s not a whole lot of room in that tunnel, so unless you want to get squashed by a truck before the fight even starts, I’d suggest you move on.’ The look on the soldier’s face brooked no argument and Chris complied, walking back under the wall. The last thing he wanted was to draw undue attention at this stage.

A rumble of an engine sounded from behind, and he stepped to the side, pressing himself against the wall of the tunnel just in time to avoid the front wheel of an armoured vehicle returning from the Melbourne side of the wall. A waft of aircraft fuel followed the truck, evidence of the cargo it had delivered to one of the forward re-fuelling stations for the helicopters tasked with herding the swarms of Carriers from Melbourne to the field of slaughter.

Chris smiled at the arrogance of the army and its leaders - thinking that they could possibly wipe an entire city free of Infection with one battle. Instead of victory, he’d ensure they experienced an apocalyptic slaughter. Chris jogged back through the tunnel, emerging into the organized chaos of a military force in its last throes of preparation. For a moment, he allowed himself to fantasize about what this area would look like in a couple of days. In his mind’s eye, he saw a chaos of torn bodies and blood mixed with excrement. Men and women dying with terror distorted features and screams fuelled by agony. It would be a day that would make the magnificence of his police station bombing pale in comparison.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Erin stared in the darkness at the metal roof above. The night had dragged interminably, each minute feeling like an hour as she lay awake. She wasn't the only one struggling to sleep, mutterings and movement in the dark alluding to others who would be bleary eyed and running on adrenaline come the morning battle.

She tried to picture positive images, of herself leading the swarm of Carriers, controlling her helicopter with a skill that returned her behind the wall in safety, mission complete. But the "what ifs" kept intervening with images of horror.

Crashing.

Running out of fuel.

Mechanical fault with the helicopter.

Becoming trapped in front of the wall.

Unless she was fortunate enough to die immediately from the crash, all scenarios would end with Carriers eating her alive. Broken teeth tearing strips of flesh from her limbs, fingers puncturing her abdomen to rip out lengths of entrails. Limbs wrenched and torn free of their sockets. These images weren't drawn from imagination. No, they were very real, witnessed firsthand during a year of fighting demonic abominations that spat at the laws of nature.

Erin considered each of these scenarios with an odd type of revolted curiosity. They frightened her, but she'd lived with the same possibilities for too long for it to reduce her to a quivering mass of terror. An early, violent death was expected in her world. Ever since her older brother Jai had died at the hands of a Carrier, she knew that the same would happen to her eventually. It was only a question of timing. And more importantly, a question of how many Carriers she could kill before it happened. If Erin really drilled down to what kept her awake, it was a fear of failure. A fear of a mistake on her part that might lead to the death of her friends or other soldiers, and she was determined for that scenario to never eventuate.

Her wrist watch gave a double beep. Erin raised it before her eyes in the dark and pressed a button on the side to illuminate the face. 0300 Reveille. Any chance of sleep was over. Within moments, fluorescent tubes blinked on overhead, flooding the temporary barracks in white light. Erin rubbed at her eyes and sat up in her sleeping bag. Her back was stiff and muscles aching

from sleeping on the concrete floor. Around her, the other members of her helicopter squadron were doing the same, easing themselves to upright and shedding sleeping bags like cocoons. Most were already in their flight suits, and Erin had taken it one step further by wearing her boots to bed. If there was one lesson she'd learnt, it was that it paid to be ready at a moment's notice. No-one bothered to pack away their stuff this morning. For once, tidiness would be the last thing on their officer's minds – there would be plenty of time for that after the mission was completed. *If* they survived.

Erin's squad leader stood by the door of the building, waiting for her pilots to assemble. The fingers of one hand tapped on her paper briefings in a running drumbeat, a sign that she was about to lose her patience. In the time Erin had known the woman, she'd never seen her smile or give an inch to a single person. She expected as much from her pilots as she did from herself, and that meant success was the only option that would be tolerated.

'Move your fucking arses, or the sun will be up before we leave the bloody ground!' snapped the officer finally.

The last of the helicopter pilots hurried over, gear in hand. Erin glanced about the group, and not for the first time thought how young each of them were. At fifteen, Erin was the youngest, but not by much. The army had chosen to create the squadron of helicopter pilots from its youngest ranks, teenagers with whip fast reflexes and eyes undimmed by age. Kids that had demonstrated resilience and an iron will to survive had been handpicked for the opportunity to fly, and would play a key role in the coming battle.

'I want you all to treat today like any other training mission. The only difference with this one, is that instead of doing complex manoeuvres above the Melbourne swarms, all you have to do is lead them to the wall like an apple before a horse,' said the officer.

'More like a steak before a wolf pack,' thought Erin.

'We have to move the swarm twenty-nine kilometres from the Westgate Bridge to the plains before Little River, so if we're to have any chance of achieving this by mid-morning, I need you in the air ASAP. You each have your designated flight paths and I can confirm there has been no alteration to those orders, we are proceeding as planned.'

The officer looked over the small group before her. Any remnants of sleep had burnt away. Pupils were dilated, breathing mildly raised and muscles wired. Erin could feel the mood of those present, an electric buzz of excitement tempered with seriousness at the task on which they were to

embark.

For the first time, Erin saw her commanding officer show a wolf like smile in pride of her troop's resolve. 'I know that none of you need any further incentive to excel, but General Black has sent a message he wanted read out before you took to the air.'

The officer lifted a typed page and began to read.

'Today, you represent the young of our country. For too many years, the youth of our nation have been treated with disdain by politicians and society at large. Called lazy, narcissistic or freeloaders that expect life to be handed on a plate. You and I know this to be a falsehood. A country is only as strong as its youth, its future only as bright as those that will light the way in the times to come. And with young men and women like yourselves at the wheel, Australia is far from finished.'

'You have the honour of being the first into battle, and thousands along the wall will watch you in the air. They will watch with pride at the bravery present in our youngest, and this will temper their resolve to match and repay your willingness to serve by not giving an inch until the job is done. This day will be long, and you will be tested. But know this - you will succeed.'

General Black.'

The officer folded the page and tucked it into a pocket of her flight suit. Something had softened on the older warrior's face as she regarded her charges for a moment, and then it was gone.

'Right, enough of the inspirational shit. We've got a job to do, so get your arses in the air. I'll be in contact on the radio. Good luck.'

Erin followed her colleagues out of the barracks shed. Expecting darkness, she surprisingly had to shield her eyes from the intensity of light outside. Flood lamps bathed the road in harsh definition as troops spilled forth to prepare for the day's battle, casting shadows on the ground to stalk their owners. Erin ducked into a latrine to empty her nervous bladder, then bolted after her squad mates, catching up to them as they reached the landing field.

The teenagers paired off to their own helicopters, each running forward with backs slightly bent out of habit beneath the rotors above. Ten helicopters were spread out across the close-cropped grass of the paddock. All were former civilian models, repurposed by the army now that their former owners were more interested in feeding on their fellow human than flying.

Erin reached her helicopter, a black Robinson R44 Raven II. The small

craft usually held two pairs of seats for the pilot and three passengers, however the rear row had been removed, leaving space for a small arsenal of hand-held weapons in case of a crash landing in Infected terrain. Although the helicopters weren't fitted for rescue operations, room had been left behind the pilot's seats for three adults to kneel, or one to lie. Erin ran a hand along the metal of the cabin as she approached the cockpit door, her fingers sliding over jet-black paint that felt like it had been freshly waxed.

'No more hiccups my darling,' she murmured to the machine, 'we have a job that can't afford your mechanical moodiness today.'

With pride at being in charge of such a beautiful aircraft, Erin swung open her door and climbed into the pilot's seat. Her navigator and back-up pilot for the flight, another teenager named Crash, was already running through a pre-flight checklist. He'd earned his nickname during the flight course after one too many close calls on landing. Despite getting his wings by the skin of his teeth, he'd proved one hell of a navigator, even if he acted like he was still in secondary school half the time.

'How are we looking?' asked Erin, as she slammed the cockpit door shut and started to fasten her seat harness.

'We're right to go as soon as we have clearance,' said Crash. He dumped the checklist back in its holder, clapped his hands and let out a war cry of excitement. 'Let's fucking do this!'

Erin looked at her flight mate with one eyebrow raised and the corner of her mouth hooking upward in a half smile. 'Some days I swear you're a beer short of a six-pack.'

'Ah, who you kidding, Erin? You bloody love it!'

Erin just snorted. 'Give me a break.' She could see that Crash was forcing the act a little today as his tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip, and knees bounced incessantly. But she appreciated the effort to keep the mood light. No one needed a crewmate that focused on unavoidable dangers. Better to get the adrenaline pumping and then ride that beast until it dropped.

Around them a few helicopters were starting to lift off.

Erin pulled on her helmet and adjusted her microphone to address flight control.

'Raven II ready for take-off, over,' said Erin.

'Permission granted, Raven II. Good hunting,' answered her officer's voice over her headphones.

Erin felt her heart rate give a fresh surge as she set the twin blades above

spinning. The whole body of the helicopter began to thrum as the rotor picked up speed and within moments it was ready. After double-checking that it was safe and the airspace above clear, Erin lifted off the ground and guided the helicopter straight up, until at an altitude of fifty metres she began to ease forward while still gaining height.

Below them, the wall became a ribbon of light in a sea of darkness, a single bastion of hope that must hold against the ferocity of the tide she would help to bring crashing onto it. She turned her gaze away and out to the Infected land beyond.

‘You ready for this, Crash?’

‘Nope, but who gives a fuck, right?’

A hard smile hit Erin’s face as she began to accelerate towards their target location at the far side of the Westgate Bridge.

Mark drummed his fingers on his knee as he waited for the doors to open under the wall. The oiled hinges barely made a sound as the slabs of steel swung outwards to hang against the wood panelled exterior.

‘I’ll give them that – those doors look bloody solid, but they’re only as strong as the lock or hinges. If we’ve got millions of those bastards about to hit the outside – I’d like it to hold if it’s all the same,’ said Victor from behind the wheel of the armoured truck.

The comment drew Mark’s eyes to the base plate beneath the entrance, a wide slab of concrete with drilled holes that huge drop bolts would slot down into to keep the doors in place. He didn’t bother checking the hinges, already irritated at himself listening to Victor’s anxieties. The last thing he needed was for one of his Corporals to make his soldiers even more nervous.

‘They’re strong enough to hold a bulldozer, you twat. Once they’re closed, nothing’s coming through until we want it to,’ said Mark, with more confidence than he felt. He looked behind and saw a few of the recruits nodding at his words, obviously wanting to believe him with all their hearts. Good. As long as he had their confidence, they’d do what was required to keep themselves and the rest of the platoon alive.

The only problem was, they were about to abandon the safety of the steel doors and the wall surrounding them, to enter land owned by the Infected. For the next five or six hours, they were to be a ground support for the

helicopters sent to herd the swarm. Although each of the helicopters in use this morning could hold enough fuel for a 500-kilometre flight, there had been some mechanical issues within the fleet that the engineers had struggled to eradicate due to limited parts and materials. That meant if one of the birds was to fall from the sky, they needed support close at hand if the kids manning them were to have a hope in hell.

A thunderous roar of a helicopter swept over them. A spotlight cut down from the aircraft to the ground as it passed forward like a wraith against the clouds. Mark tracked it across the sky, wondering if it was Erin inside its fragile casing. Within moments, it disappeared over the horizon.

‘Vic, time to get a move on,’ said Mark.

His Corporal set the truck into motion, descending the steep road to the bottom of the ditch then climbing out onto the plain. Ten minutes of cross-country brought them to the Princes Highway, where the truck bucked over the verge and onto the tarmac. The road had been cleared of car wrecks, the derelict bodies moved to funnel the Carriers onto the plains before the wall.

Victor accelerated along the deserted highway, twin headlights illuminating a small patch of road before the truck. They were headed for the near side of the Westgate Bridge. Their brief was to stay within sight of the helicopter assigned to the Westgate Freeway, and around 500 metres in front of the moving swarm. Dawn was still a few hours distant, but the summer night was unusually warm for Melbourne. And as the coming day was forecast to be hot, it wouldn’t be long before the ghouls heated up and started to run. Planning the battle for the middle of summer had been a hot topic of discussion amongst the troops. Many had wished the fight to be conducted in the winter when movement of the Infected would be slower. But others had argued moving such large numbers to one location while they were grinding along at base speed could turn the battle into a month-long affair. And with supply lines until recently a tenuous factor, General Black had decided to gamble and start congregating the swarms in central Melbourne for a summer battle. When Tasmania had finally come to heel, it was already too late. The swarm had to be taken on as soon as the recruits were ready, to prevent an accidental breakout of the swarm towards Geelong catching the armed forces on the back foot.

Mark turned around to address the detachment of soldiers in the back of the truck.

‘Everyone do a last weapons and ammunition check. Although I’m

hoping for a boring couple of hours, I want us ready for action at a moment's notice.'

Erin's gut clenched as the sound of an agonized scream breached the helicopter cabin. It didn't matter that she knew it to be nothing more than a recording used to concentrate the numbers of Infected at the far side of the Westgate Bridge. The terror and pain within the sound was unmistakable, and it drove the swarm around the powerful speaker to frenzy. Few of the Carriers wore any clothes, the fabric having degraded and torn or rotted away long before. From her height, it was difficult to discern individual faces, but those within the mob had lost any resemblance to the men and women they had once been. Skin had taken on a tobacco coloured tinge as it dried and retracted from orifices and eyes. Teeth were permanently exposed, made unnaturally long by shrunken gums, they gnashed together repeatedly in anticipation of their next meal in futile rage. All wore the trauma of their deaths plain to see. Missing limbs. Chewed faces. Eviscerated abdominal cavities. Bones that were stripped clean of meat, coated in nothing but brown, dried blood. Flaps of skin and tissue hung like macabre aprons on some, flapping with each uncoordinated step. All were walking horrors torn straight from Dante's Hell to grace the streets of Melbourne.

A number of carefully placed shipping containers blocked the path over the bridge. Positioned months ago, to prevent migration of the main swarm before the army was ready, each had a large steel ring standing proud from the top, allowing the whole container to be lifted into the air and moved. And that time had come. A massive Chinook dual rotor helicopter hovered over the first container, buffeting the Carriers on the far side with a down blast of air. A large hook swung from a thick steel cable in the cross breeze until it finally threaded the ring above the container. Erin let out a breath in relief that part of the road blockage would finally shift. Slowly the helicopter lifted until all slack disappeared from the cable, and then with a sound of groaning metal, the container lifted into the air. The Carriers began to stream through the new gap and onto the bridge. Already carrying some body heat from a warm pre-dawn breeze, the Infected were moving faster than expected. The Chinook carried the container until it was free of the road, then activated a release mechanism, dropping its cargo to smash onto the ground far below. It

returned to the bridge and repeated the exercise another few times until the path across the bridge was completely free. The swarm now ran on unimpeded, drawn onward by Erin's small helicopter that hovered metres above the leading edge of the swarm like an angry mosquito.

Satisfied that the swarm was on the move, Erin abandoned her precarious position so close to the ground where light poles and cable-work of the bridge threatened to ensnare her rotor and bring her crashing down. She gained altitude until they were above bridge structures and radioed back to base.

'Raven II to control. I can confirm the Westgate Bridge is cleared of obstruction and the swarm is on the move,' said Erin.

'Thank you Raven II, we will set off the noise attractant at the far end of the bridge. Can you give an estimate of numbers in your immediate vicinity?' asked her squadron leader.

Erin pressed her foot down on the left yaw pedal, turning the helicopter to look back over the bridge toward the city. The Infected were crammed shoulder to shoulder, a moving mass on the Westgate Freeway as far as she could see to the city, spilling out onto the verge at either side and filling all possible standing room between the factories and buildings that lined the road.

She muted her mike and turned to Crash, 'How many do you think?' she yelled over the noise of the rotor.

'Your guess is as good as mine. I don't know, tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands? I've never seen that many bodies in one place at a time to be able to gauge,' he said, one corner of his upper lip rising unconsciously in revulsion at the undead mass below.

Erin unmuted her mike to answer her squadron leader. 'It's hard to tell, Ma'am. We've never seen a swarm this big,' she started, hesitant to give a poor estimation. 'There's probably at least one hundred thousand crammed onto the Westgate Freeway as it extends back toward the city, and that's only those that we can see from our present location.'

'Good. Keep them moving. Inform me of your position once the different swarms coming down the highway from Flemington, and the Western Ring Road from the northern suburbs join yours on the Princes Freeway. I don't want any of you in the vicinity when the next stage of the plan comes into action.'

'Yes, Ma'am. Raven II out,' said Erin, happy to break off the conversation so she could place all her attention back on the swarm below.

Mark tapped the fingers of one hand in a running drum roll against his knee as he watched the swarm in the distance. He could feel his right upper eyelid start to twitch as he tried to maintain an outward appearance of calm despite their precarious situation.

The sun had breached the eastern horizon before the first Carriers crossed the bridge, chasing the little helicopter that hovered and dived at the leading edge to draw them onwards. But dawn breaking before they'd even left the bridge showed just how far behind schedule they were. Mark had listened in silence to the radio chatter from the Chinook pilots as they struggled to hook the first container, battling an unexpectedly strong cross breeze and a faulty hook mechanism. Every extra minute they took to get the show started meant the other swarms got closer along their respective routes. If his detachment was on the wrong side when the other swarms spilled onto the Princes Freeway for the home stretch to Little River, their truck would become buried under the swarm.

'Our Erin seems to be doing ok up there, Boss,' said Victor. 'How about we move the truck to the other side of the Western Ring Road? With the speed those bastards are moving at now, it won't take them long to catch us up.'

Mark glanced over at his Corporal, ready to cut him down with a sharp tongue for suggesting he leave Erin exposed. The look on Victor's face pulled him up short. He looked embarrassed at his own words and wouldn't even meet Mark's eye as he spoke.

'I don't want to do it anymore than you, mate, but we've got to think of the numbers,' Victor said in a quiet voice so that only Mark could hear him. 'We've got eight soldiers behind us, versus two in the sky. We've stayed as long as we can, considering their fuck-up clearing the bridge.'

Mark looked back at the swarm, anger contorted faces now becoming distinct the closer they came. His hand squeezed into a fist on his lap in frustration.

'Do it,' Mark muttered. 'Pull back behind the Ring Road while we can. I'll inform Raven II of the change in plan.'

‘Are you friggin’ kidding me?’ said Crash, after signing off from Mark’s radio communication. ‘Isn’t he your old platoon officer - why the hell is he leaving us unsupported?’

Erin initially felt the same sense of betrayal at the notification. If there was anyone she’d thought she could trust, she would have named Mark as that man. He was as close to family as she had these days...

‘Because he’s doing his job, Crash,’ Erin muttered as she climbed steeply into the sky to gain an aerial view. Her heart dropped and she felt a spurt of shame at her earlier thoughts. While concentrating on her own swarm, she’d neglected to keep an eye on the surrounding area for dangers to the support crew on the ground.

‘And he still might have left his call too late,’ she said.

From up high she could now see the other swarm approaching along the Ring Road. A tide of ragged corpses ran along the raised motorway that arced over their own road and then curled downwards to join. As Mark’s truck approached the overpass, the leading edge of the swarm was already above them.

She felt utterly helpless up in the sky. ‘*Come on, Mark. Fucking accelerate!*’ said Erin under her breath, urging him onwards.

A corpse thumped onto the road ahead of the truck, head smashing on impact like a rotten watermelon.

‘What the fuck?’ muttered Mark as he leant forward in his seat and looked upwards at the overpass. His heart stuttered briefly as he saw the horde of Infected lining the sides of the roadway above. More Carriers launched themselves at his truck from above, becoming a waterfall of falling bodies.

‘Jesus, Vic, you were right. Stamp on it, mate, we’re going to have to punch on through,’ said Mark. He turned around to the soldiers in the back of the truck. ‘Get ready to brace!’

Another Carrier landed directly in front of them, feet first. Both tibias snapped on impact, a spike of one shin-bone bursting forth from the skin to impale the torso of its owner as it crumpled. Victor swerved to the side to miss it and planted his foot on the accelerator.

On the far side of the freeway Mark could see the swarm already spilling off the other access ramp. Faces screamed as they ran towards his vehicle.

Two loud thuds sounded as bodies hit their roof, making Victor swerve slightly out of surprise. Mark looked backwards and saw the two Carriers cartwheel along the tarmac in their wake after falling free of their vehicle. They were now in the shadow of the overpass. Ahead was a thin line of Carriers, some immobile with skulls destroyed by the fall, others dragging smashed lower limbs with their arms. The armoured truck shuddered on impact, wheels bouncing over the corpses, and then they were through.

Mark looked behind again to see the freeway rapidly fill with Carriers. What had been clear road only seconds earlier was now crowded with the undead. If they'd been thirty seconds later...

'Woo hoo!' shouted one of the recruits in the back, pumping his fist in excitement. 'That was FUCKING AWESOME!'

Mark couldn't help a wry grin at the kid's reaction. Fear mixed with adrenaline and stress. It did funny things to different people. Mark raised a hand to his mouth and stifled a yawn. Like some other veterans, he could blunt most outward signs of stress, but yawning was out of his control. *'Ah well, better to yawn than piss yourself with fear,'* thought Mark.

'Raven II, we're heading back to base. Take care up there. Out.'

'No worries. Thanks for the ground support, Lieutenant Collins, we'll see you behind the wall shortly,' said Erin. As she looked down, Mark's armoured truck left the highway in the distance to cut across the plain, making a beeline for the closest entry point through the wall.

Erin and Crash weren't the only ones in the sky now. The other helicopter crews who'd led their own swarms forward had joined them, and it was time to move the Infected off the tarmac en masse.

The southern most parts of Werribee had been sacrificed, raised to the ground months earlier to extend the open killing ground of the plains beyond. The four helicopters worked in tandem, each taking position a hundred metres apart off the edge of the highway. Erin held her craft at a hover metres above the heads of the Infected below, watching with mute fascination as they reached upward, gnashing brown teeth at her in futile rage. She edged her craft backwards, out over blackened and scarred soil. The proximity of the helicopter was too much to resist, and the Carriers surged after her and off

the highway. Those behind followed the changed direction of the swarm, moving onto the plain.

Within twenty minutes, Erin and the other helicopters from her squadron had turned the clear land where houses had once stood into a sea of writhing flesh. Crimson streaked the pallid flesh of sections of the swarm where they'd found pits of butchered carcasses. The army wanted as many Infected to congregate in this location as possible. Where the blood pits lay, Carriers climbed over each other, viciously tearing at those around them to access the fresh meat underneath. Sound attractants blared shrieks of torture until the speakers were buried so deeply under bodies their hellish chorus became muted.

A recall to base came over the radio; the job of Erin and her comrades had come to a close. The four helicopters rose high into the air before flying south to decrease the chance that any part of the swarm would follow their movement.

'Mission complete!' said Crash. 'Time to go take some pot shots from the wall, Erin. It'll be all gravy from here, chickadee!'

A hot wind started to blow in from the north as they flew for the wall, causing the helicopter to bounce in the turbulence, and it was with some relief that Erin landed the craft and gained solid ground under foot. She reached behind her pilot's seat and retrieved her rifle from the rack at the back of the cabin.

Weapons in hand, both teenagers jumped down from the helicopter cabin while the rotors had yet to reach a standstill. The downdraft of the slowing blades flattened hair and clothes against their bodies as the pair ran for the wall to take their allocated position as auxiliaries to Mark's platoon. For the coming fight, every hand capable of holding a rifle was expected to play its part.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Mark stood on the battlement atop the wall, looking toward Werribee. On the horizon, the edge of the swarm could be seen as a smear that danced deceptively in the heat. He was about to pull out a field telescope when a clatter of ascending feet on metal drew Mark's attention for a moment, and he turned to see Erin and Crash emerge from the staircase behind. Both their faces were pink cheeked from the run and excitement at completing their mission.

'Welcome back,' Mark said, a half smile on his face. 'It's good to have some veterans to bolster our strength. Sergeant Williams will allocate you a position,' he said.

At hearing her name, Steph stood up and waved the two kids over to take up a position alongside her. Having Erin back under his command and care was one thing Mark was happy about. The whole time she'd been away over the past months had been a time of suppressed worry about her safety, as if she was his own child. He took his vow to her brother that he'd keep her safe seriously and couldn't help but feel that allowing her to be seconded to the helicopter squadron had represented an abdication of that responsibility.

Mark turned back to the plain again and raised a small telescope to his eye, training it on the far horizon in an attempt to view the enemy. The weak power of the little green tube did little to improve sight at this distance though, and he shoved it back into his webbing with a dissatisfied grunt. The swarm was growing in size, swelling forward onto the plain – that was for sure, but any more than that was guesswork.

For once, he needed to take a leaf out of his troops' book, and rest while still possible. With nothing to fight as yet, most soldiers had sat down on the battlement with their backs parked against the waist high barrier. He was about to take a seat when a gust of wind carried the noise of jet engines. Mark looked in the direction of Avalon airport, sited little more than a few kilometres behind the wall toward Geelong, and saw a 747-jumbo climbing steeply into the air.

Not the only one to notice the development, soldiers all along the wall were climbing to their feet to watch the huge jet. The Boeing 747 Supertanker had been brought to Australia prior to the breakout of Lysan Plague, hired by the Victorian government from the United States to combat predicted summer

bush fires that had never eventuated. The Supertanker could hold over 90,000 litres of fire retardant, and dump its liquid cargo in segmented drops over 7,000 metres. The huge aircraft was crucial to the General's plans, and numerous lives had been sacrificed to secure it from a Tullamarine Airport over run with plague. The loss of life had been seen as a fair swap, because on this flight, the plane's cargo would not be one of retardant, but rather accelerant. Holding over 90,000 litres of fuel obtained from the Geelong oil refinery, it had enough petrol on board to roast every Carrier in Melbourne.

'For a barbeque this big, kind of feels wrong not to have a beer in hand,' said Victor, with a nervous laugh.

'Don't count the chickens yet, mate,' Mark said. 'But I'll be happy to join you in a drink once it's splashed its cargo where it's supposed to go.'

Mark watched the plane circle out over Port Phillip Bay, its flight path deliberately avoiding any flyover of the wall and military installation, before it banked around and flew in low over the swarm. From a height of only 150 metres, it began to dump fuel. A wide plume of pink liquid tumbled from behind the 747, descending to bathe the Infected in a torrent of petrol. The dump of fuel from the plane cut off as it started to bank for another fly past when an ear cracking roar buffeted the soldiers on the wall. An Air Force F/A 18F Super Hornet had buzzed them.

'Fuck, it's too early,' muttered Mark. 'Surely they want to do a few more fuel drops first?'

The Super Hornet deployed an air-to-surface missile before climbing in an almost vertical curve up into the atmosphere. Mark watched open mouthed as the missile streaked to the ground and exploded, igniting the entire two kilometre drop zone in one massive fireball.

The pilots of the Supertanker had realised their danger and were attempting to climb higher and away from the mushrooming cloud of fire below, but it was too late. Fire streaked upward at horrendous speed, igniting the aerosolized fuel that still rained and whipped away from the tanker holding until it reached the aircraft itself.

The Supertanker exploded mid-air. With over two thirds of its fuel cargo still on board, the force of the explosion was horrific, converting the whole aircraft into shrapnel in a split second as fire burst outwards in a giant sphere of flame. Mark was forced to cover his eyes from the light's intensity, his mouth open in horror at the monumental screw up.

As fire continued to rain from the sky across half the horizon, there was

stunned silence along the wall. Soldiers stared in collective disbelief, others rubbed at their eyes as if trying to wipe away what they'd just witnessed. Mark forced himself to turn away from the firestorm that raged in the distance. Hot wind buffeted his face and clothes, drawn in by the inferno, as he took a swig of water from his canteen to unglue a mouth suddenly dry.

'Don't jump to conclusions,' he warned his platoon when he saw a few starting to get a little twitchy. 'The Supertanker still got a full pass in before that. Anything within that storm won't be walking again, and while it still burns, anything trying to come on through will get incinerated as well. As far as I'm concerned, the fuel drop was a success for everyone but the poor bastards within the 747.'

Mark pointedly ignored the fire and sat down, moving his hat forward until it was over his eyes. 'Do what you were doing before. Take the chance to have a snooze now, and we'll deal with whatever happens next when we have to.'

Mark wasn't the least bit tired as he yawned and feigned nonchalance before his squad.

Steph watched the fire on the horizon, mesmerized by the shifting hues of orange and red, colours that matched the growing rage inside her brain that had blossomed inexplicably with the explosion. It was like she was living with an intruder in her own skull, one that knew nothing but voiceless hate and anger. Her consciousness danced around the 'other' within, keeping it locked down for the moment. She could still think and interact with those around her, but it was beginning to become harder. Steph needed the fight to begin, needed somewhere to direct the rage before it erupted and destroyed those she loved.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The coming hours passed slowly, each minute an eternity of suppressed anxiety where soldiers tried to ignore their own fears and play the part of the brave. Black humoured jokes were thrown about and the more heartless they were, the harder the laughs earned. Those who coped better had already given themselves up as dead. Having come to peace with the certainty of eventual death at some point during the plague wars, they were able to meet the coming danger with a straight spine, their only fear left being of failing their friends by dying too early in the battle.

On the horizon, the fire burned itself out. Flames that had reached toward the heavens were reduced to ground level, creating a heat haze in the distance that danced like a mirage. White smoke sifted up into the atmosphere creating a curtain that obscured any view of the killing ground.

Eventually, Mark's act at sleeping had turned into the real deal and gifted him a short period of respite. A sharp toe in his thigh drew him back to reality. In a split second he recalled where he was, and a spurt of adrenaline had him reach full alertness within a few heartbeats.

'You should check this out,' said Steph, looming over him, expressionless as a mannequin. 'Something's changing out there.'

Mark cracked his neck as he hauled himself to standing, attempting to ease an ache caused by his sleep position. Steph pointed to the horizon and he followed her direction. Immediately he recognized the change, the white smoke that had earlier been a uniform thick blanket, was now sporadic, rising in tendrils from the ground before mixing into a haze higher in the air. Mark pulled his telescope from his pocket and trained it on the closest margin of the burned area.

Movement. A blackened shape, reduced to an indistinct stick figure by distance, took three uncoordinated steps out of the smoke before falling face down.

'Shit. They've made it through the flame zone,' Mark said, collapsing the green tube down and slotting it back in his webbing. 'Looks like we'll get a fight after all.'

All along the wall people were noticing the development as soldiers retook their positions at the front of the battlement and checked weapons for the hundredth time. A few sharp-eyed soldiers pointed outwards, and a

nervous chatter increased as the blackened smudge at the edge of the incinerated suburb seemed to bulge forward.

‘Sir?’

Mark felt a tap on his shoulder in conjunction with the word. He turned to see Heath standing behind him, holding a radio set. ‘I have a message from squadron leader of the helicopter division. She’s requested the return of Privates Erin and Crash, Sir. They’ve been ordered to conduct a reconnaissance flight and provide an estimation of Infected numbers remaining.’

Mark swore. ‘You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,’ he muttered. Just when he thought he had her back under his care again, she was being ripped away. ‘I take it I have no right of refusal?’

Heath shrugged, looking uncomfortable. ‘That’s above my pay grade, Boss. I didn’t think we could refuse an order.’

‘The army can’t remove free will. The sooner you learn that, the better soldier you’ll become.’ Mark’s tone was brutal. ‘Some orders might get you killed, and that’s fine as long as there was no other option and your death buys something of worth – like the lives of your mates. But if it asks you to put life at risk when it could be avoided, I’d say it’s your duty to disobey that order and find a better way to get the job done.’

Heath looked down, refusing to meet Mark’s hard gaze. ‘Then this is an order that should be followed. The information Erin gains from the air may influence tactics and keep the soldiers on this wall alive.’

The muscles at Mark’s jaw clenched in frustration, as he knew the kid was right. ‘Erin! Crash! Get your arses over here. Now!’

Crash slammed the other door of the Robinson 44’s cabin shut and started pulling on his harness. Erin already had hers on and was tightening the strap of her helmet. There was a tremor to her fingers as she started to flick switches and start the rotor above spinning. She’d been caught off guard by the order, thinking that she’d finished with flying for the day, and now found herself mentally unprepared for taking to the sky again. Any forced joviality from earlier in the day was gone. Both wanted the job completed so that they could re-join their mates on the wall.

‘For fucks sake,’ muttered Crash, tapping on one of the gauges angrily. ‘The bastards haven’t refuelled her.’

Erin glanced at the fuel gauge, seeing only a quarter tank remaining. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said forcing a slow breath. ‘We don’t need long in the air for what they’ve asked. As far as the ground crew knew – we’d completed our mission. They would have been sent to the wall once we hit the ground, just like us.’

Crash mumbled something unintelligible, but his anger was palpable. The rotor blades above had become an almost invisible blur, and Erin could feel the skids wanting to lift off the ground. Out the corner of her eye, she could see the windsock at the edge of the field. Strong gusts buffeted the material, holding it horizontal. The breeze that had strengthened after the incineration of the swarm had become a gale, and she could feel the cabin of the Robinson 44 shiver under its force. Erin bit her lip, knowing that the conditions were at the limit of her abilities.

Erin closed her eyes for a second and forced a slow breath. *Don’t think, just do it.* She took the controls and lifted the craft into the air. With such a strong wind, Erin ascended rapidly, wanting to be well away from any physical obstructions on the ground. Within moments the pair were out over the wall, flying toward the smoke plumes.

‘Bloody hell...’ said Crash.

His words echoed Erin’s own thoughts. As they got closer the true extent of devastation wrought by the fuel drop became apparent. The Supertanker had covered more ground than they’d thought, with the swathe of burnt hell stretching well over two kilometres.

Below them, the area of land where the main swarm had congregated was a blackened ruin. Gusting wind tore smoke away, sweeping it off the field towards the city. Small areas were still on fire, crimson flickering as desiccated flesh turned to charcoal under its caress. Beyond the devastation, untouched hordes of Infected continued their movement south towards the plain, stepping without thought from untouched tarmac onto burning coals. Once started, they had continued, mindlessly following the path provided in the absence of other prey to distract. The head of this swarm moved directly into the torched area, and for the first time, Erin realised that the burnt areas *were moving*. Covered in soot, blackened by cinders, the Infected staggered through like wraiths until they burnt and fell.

Carriers walked into the flames en masse. Initially, they burnt like their predecessors, until weight of numbers began to smother the flames. Those at the front walked until feet and legs were burnt past the point of structural

integrity, causing them to fall and provide a carpet of bodies to move over. Now the swarm was stumbling their way over half cooked bodies. The leading edge was still damaged, emerging onto the plains with lower limbs that were mostly charred flesh. But that would soon change as the last of the flames were smothered with bodies of the fallen, creating a protective layer from the coals beneath.

The helicopter dipped suddenly with a gust of wind, giving Erin a weightless sensation. Her stomach lurched at the rollercoaster drop as she managed to regain control and level off once again. From the corner of her eye, she saw Crash's knuckles showing white where he gripped the edge of his seat. In such a little helicopter, the weather conditions were turning from challenging to downright dangerous.

'Raven II, do you have an estimate of numbers? Over,' asked her Squadron leader on the radio.

Erin flew to the side to gain a clear view of the approaching horde unobstructed by smoke haze. Infected packed the Freeway corridor for kilometres, although an end to the swarm was now visible for the first time.

'It's hard to tell, Ma'am. The swarm still stretches for a few K, but I think the Supertanker's accounted for roughly half their numbers.'

A man's voice came over her headset. 'General Black here, Private.' Erin was startled by the unexpected intrusion of the army's overall commander. 'Give me a basic estimate, will the length of the wall likely contain the remaining numbers heading our way?' His voice was matter of fact, like he was discussing the likelihood of rain as opposed to the possible annihilation of his entire force.

'I... I,' stuttered Erin.

'I just want an opinion, pilot,' said the General, his voice smooth as if talking to an anxious pet. 'We've made our stand, we'll be fighting on regardless of the situation.'

Erin turned back to the swarm, eyeing its length once again as she fought against the wind buffeting her helicopter. There had to be over a million Carriers yet to hit the plain, and yet when she transplanted the mass to the area before the wall in her mind's eye, she thought the man-made arena should contain their numbers. The Infected were beginning to move more quickly as the heat of the day increased, compounded by the warmth radiating upward from the burnt field. It wouldn't be long before the swarm hit the walls.

‘If the wall holds, Sir, I think it should be easily long enough to corral what’s coming.’

‘No bloody corpse is going to tear my wall down. Now get your arse back here so you can hold a rifle.’

Erin released her breath, glad that she could now...

The Robinson 44 helicopter suddenly yawed hard, starting an uncontrolled spin to the right. Erin screamed, caught off guard as her mind raced to find the cause of the malfunction. Distracted by the questioning of her superiors over the radio, she had stopped paying attention to the high wind while maintaining a hover, and unwittingly created a perfect situation for LTE - loss of tail-rotor effectiveness. A gust of wind had hit the tail rotor, stopping its ability to carry out its main function of cancelling the torque of the engine and maintain a direction. The horizon spun around them as the helicopter rotated like a top.

‘It’s fucking LTE, Erin!’ yelled Crash, close to hysterics beside her.

Erin ignored her co-pilot, her mind racing as she tried to regain control of the helicopter and stop it spinning before it was too late. She’d been taught theory of how to correct against such a situation, but she had no experience of putting it into practice. She gritted her teeth, feeling completely disoriented by the spinning, losing all sense of direction except for altitude. Erin knew they were losing it rapidly, and as they’d been less than a hundred metres in the air, the ground would reach for a permanent embrace within seconds.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Mark watched in horror from the wall as the helicopter started to spin out over the plain, the tail boom rotating at an increasing speed as the craft began to lose height. She wasn't going to be able to pull out of this one. They were fucked, and when they crashed, Erin would be stuck in no-man's land before an approaching swarm of the undead. Alone.

'Sergeant!'

Steph's head jerked in his direction from her position twenty odd metres away. She nodded before he could speak again, clearly understanding his line of thought before he could even vocalise.

'Command is yours,' he said, bolting for the stairway.

'Mark, wait!' she shouted, making him pause for a moment. 'If she's not... salvageable, don't let her suffer.'

Mark gave a brief nod and ran. His spit had turned to glue as he tried to swallow. He was terrified, but not at the thought of running into the face of a cannibalistic swarm, but rather of what he'd find at the crash site. Mark tried to push aside the image of Erin's body, broken and bloody amongst the wreckage to focus on tasks at hand. He descended the metal staircase, taking the steps two a time until he hit the gravel at the base of the wall with a crunch, his right knee threatening to buckle with the force of impact.

Heart thumping against his ribs, Mark looked up. The armoured trucks of his platoon were parked on the edge of the road skirting the length of the wall. Three armoured trucks and two Unimogs were parked at 90 degrees, nose to curb. He ran for the first one and pulled open the driver's door. The keys were in the ignition as mandated to avoid them becoming lost in the event of evacuation. Mark dumped his rifle on the passenger seat and brought the engine to life, revving the accelerator heavily before placing the truck into gear and mounting the curb, heading for the tunnel entrance.

As he neared the entrance for the tunnel, a guard blocked his way. Mark was forced to brake to avoid running the man down.

'This area's restricted access, Sir,' said the guard, eyeing the pips on Mark's shoulder.

'I need those doors opened. I've got a soldier in that downed helicopter.'

The guard's expression faltered for a moment as he realised Mark's

intent. No soldier wanted to think they'd be given up for dead one day, it was situations like this that called for rules to be broken. 'We've been informed attack by the enemy is imminent. If I let you out, I may not be authorised to open them again, Sir. You might become marooned on the other side.'

'I'll take my chances, just open the fucking door before it's too late!' Mark revved the engine, inching the truck toward the guard in impatience.

The guard gave a brisk nod, then turned and ran deeper into the tunnel, yelling out to the other guards at the far side of the wall to open the doors. Mark followed close on his heels into the darkness. Ahead, a slit of light opened, growing into a wide square of brilliance as the doors swung wide and hit against the outside. Mark winced for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the light again, then he stamped on the accelerator, speeding down the ramp into the ditch and up the far side. Once he hit the plain, he slowed for a moment, scanning for signs of the wreckage. In the distance, he saw a broken rotor blade standing perpendicular to the sky. Target identified, he accelerated once again, pedal rammed all the way to the floor as he willed every last inch of speed from the truck.

On the horizon, Carriers were now in easy view, spreading across the plain like a dam burst.

The ground rushed up at a huge speed. Erin screamed, adding her terror filled voice to Crash's. There was nothing she could do, she let go of the cyclic control and stretched her arms out in front of her face as if she could stop the approach of the ground.

The force of impact was horrendous, the teenagers thrown against their restraints like ragdolls. The left skid hit the ground first and the craft tipped over towards it. Steel-skinned rotor blades bit into the dirt and snapped, flicking lengths of metal outward like massive swords. One cut through the tail boom in a cloud of sparks and screaming metal, another puncturing the cabin with the force of a missile. Erin's helmet smacked against the cabin wall and she knew no more.

Something warm ran across her face in a glutinous line from above one ear, following the path of gravity along her cheekbone and over her nose to

drip into space. Erin tried to open her eyes, but something held one of them shut. Pain speared through her skull as she lifted a hand to her face and used fingernails to scrape away a clot of blood sticking her right eyelids together. She stared at the claret mess in confusion for a moment before flicking it away in disgust. Burning agony radiated from her right calf, but in her current position, she had no way of determining its cause.

Erin remembered losing control and falling, but memory of the impact was gone, stolen by a concussion that gifted her a pounding headache and gut churning nausea. She took a shuddering breath and looked around, knowing that she had to get out as soon as possible. This particular type of helicopter had been prone to fires after impact due to an easily punctured fuel tank, and Erin had no idea whether or not hers had undergone the industry mandated refit.

She hung from her chair, held in place by her flight harness, the straps biting severely into her chest and hips. Her breath caught as she saw Crash. Blood hung in a thin string from his mouth while his eyes stared sightlessly ahead. A length of rotor blade the width of her hand had burst through the windscreen to puncture his torso and chair behind, transfixing him like a fly on a pin. Erin reached out a hand and shook his shoulder, but she knew it was hopeless. His head lolled to the side and stayed still.

A cloying scent of burnt petrol mixed with charred pork filled her nose. Erin's heart rate surged with adrenaline as the smell told her she couldn't be far away from the burnt field. The Infected would be here soon. She fumbled with her harness for a moment before pulling a pocketknife from the leg of her flight suit. There wasn't time to waste undoing buckles. She flicked open the blade and started sawing through one strap at a time until the last one gave way with a snap.

Erin's body dropped, her shoulder thumping against Crash's head before something pulled her up short. She screamed as agony lanced from her right lower leg. Erin looked upward, hands desperately trying to find purchase to relieve the weight from her leg. A spike of metal from the cabin wall had punctured the base of her calf from one side to the other, hanging her by the Achilles tendon. With a sickening noise of tearing fabric, the fibres of her Achilles tendon parted on the sharp metal. Her body dropped, crunching onto broken glass on the ground.

Movement through the dirt-smeared glass caught her peripheral vision. Erin's head whipped about as her right hand fumbled for a side arm. She

pulled her Browning Hi-Power Mk 3 pistol out and levelled it at head height of her attacker, gritting her teeth against the agony in her leg. Erin didn't care that she was wounded and on her own, her survival instinct mastered all other needs as she racked the slide and began to squeeze the trigger.

Mark stomped hard on the brake, bringing the armoured truck to a skidding halt amongst yellowed grass. Twenty metres ahead lay the mangled remains of the Robinson 44 helicopter. The twin rotor blades were trimmed at unequal lengths and tail boom severed at mid-way like a toddler had grown angry with his toy and snapped parts away. The cabin was on its left side, with a broken piece of blade puncturing the windscreen. Nothing moved in the immediate area that Mark could see. He grabbed his rifle from the passenger seat and clambered from the truck, breath tight in his chest as he glanced about, trying to see in all directions at once.

The Infected were no longer a blur on the horizon. They were close enough to see individual figures, so near that eddies of wind carried their demonic battle cry in fluctuating volume to his ears. They were probably no more than eight hundred metres away and closing rapidly, giving him only minutes to extract his friend.

Mark jogged forward, angling around to the front of the cabin. With eyes searching the smeared glass for movement inside, he failed to see a piece of metal in the grass and it turned under his foot causing him to stumble briefly.

An angry wasp buzzed his right ear, followed by the deafening crack of a pistol at close range. Mark hit the ground as a second shot sounded, puncturing another perfect circle in the glass of the windscreen.

'Erin! It's me, stop bloody shooting!' yelled Mark.

A short yelp of distress sounded from the cabin as Erin realised at who she'd just fired. 'Mark, tell me you're ok? I'm so sorry, I thought you were a Carrier.'

Mark was on his feet again and closing the last few metres to stare down at Erin through the smeared glass. He touched a hand to his right ear, feeling a sting as his fingers found where Erin's bullet had grazed the ear lobe. He wiped the blood on his pants and looked back at his friend. 'Don't worry, you missed.'

Mark could see that her co-pilot was dead, making it a single person extraction. With the helicopter lying on its left door, the only opening was

facing the sky. 'Can you make it to the top door, Erin?'

Erin tried, whimpering as her injured leg refused to carry any weight. 'I can't get one of my ankles to work, Mark. I ripped my Achilles tendon through.'

Mark's mind worked in overdrive. If she couldn't make it out the door, the windscreen was the only other option, but he needed it to be weakened further before having a chance of smashing through.

'Don't worry, I'll pull you out through the glass.' He stood to the side and reversed his rifle, so the stock was facing forward at the ready. 'I'm clear - empty the rest of your mag through the windscreen. I'll smash out whatever's left.'

Erin fired a further five times before a series of large cracks spread across the screen to where it had been punctured by the piece of rotor blade.

'That'll do, cover your face, Erin,' shouted Mark as he stepped forward again and smashed the butt of his rifle into the glass. The cracks increased, but held. He hit again, using every ounce of strength behind the swing. Sweat trickled down his face as he started to worry it wasn't going to give. The sound of the approaching swarm was no longer intermittent on the hot wind, but now a constant roar, growing in ferocity at the sound of Erin's pistol. He refused to look up to check the distance between them.

Again, he smashed the stock of his Austeyr, and finally the glass started to give. A spider web of cracks joined between the other existing ones, and the panel deformed inwards. Three more sharp punches with the rifle butt completed the job. Mark reached through the gap, grasped Erin beneath her armpits and dragged her over the bottom edge. Erin gasped as a protruding jag of glass cut a shallow slice along her thigh.

Behind Mark, a claw like grip reached out.

'Mark, watch out!' A Carrier was almost within lunging distance, eyes fixed on her rescuer's neck. Erin raised her Browning again and shot past Mark's waist. Her first shot entered the ghoul's neck without effect, the next punched a fist sized piece of skull and brain from the side of its forehead, spraying grey neural matter on the dry grass.

The Carrier had been the first of the swarm, and as Erin's eyes moved away from her first kill of the day, she saw hundreds more within thirty or forty metres. The leading edge was staggered, with the swarm increasing in density every metre behind. Mark ignored the closing Infected and pulled Erin to standing on her one functioning leg. He wrapped an arm around her

back and under her other armpit.

‘Let’s go!’ said Mark.

Mark carried her weight between hops as they abandoned the chopper and Crash’s body for the armoured vehicle. He opened the driver’s door and sat Erin onto the chair. While she scooted herself across to the passenger seat he looked back at the approaching swarm for the first time. Less than a dozen paces separated them from the first Carriers. He lifted his rifle from where it hung on its sling and lined up the closest Infected. One second per shot, he systematically punched a round through ten skulls before climbing into the cabin of the truck after Erin and slammed the door shut.

Hands slapped up against the metal work of the truck, fingernails tearing off as Carriers wrenched in futile rage at the door panels. A wraith like woman crawled onto the short bonnet of the truck, open mouth emitting a scream of rage as she dragged herself up to the windscreen. Singed hair hung matted, one orbit grotesquely empty while the skin had been chewed from the side of her face, laying bone and teeth open to the air.

Mark revved the engine once before shifting into gear and stomping heavily on the accelerator. Dirt and grass spurted behind the rear wheels and then the truck shot forward. The Carrier smashed up against the windscreen with the force of movement, then slid off the side as Mark spun the wheel back towards the wall. Thumps reverberated through the cabin as body after body was cleaned up by the steel fender and chewed under the front wheels, the truck carving a wide arc through the leading edge of the swarm until once again they faced south and were clear.

Silent tears ran down Erin’s face now that they were free and heading for base. The aftermath of adrenaline left Mark’s muscles quivering as it hit home just how close the rescue mission had come to failure. The wall grew in their view from a tiny line in the distance to its full magnificence the closer they came.

When they were no more than a few hundred metres out, Mark allowed the truck to slow, his jaw dropping open in stunned surprise at the scene unfolding before them at the wall.

‘No, that can’t be happening,’ said Erin, her voice small and confused.

Chapter Forty

Although Chris stood beside the other men and women of Vinh's platoon, it was only a physical proximity. In every other sense, he stood alone. As he rejected the soldiers about him as inferior, they ostracised him in return. One crime that was unforgiveable amongst the grunts was that of hubris - any man who placed himself on a pedestal merely invited those around to take an axe to his platform.

Chris drummed his fingers against his thigh as he stared out from the wall. He could see a distant plume of dust rising from behind the officer's truck and snorted derisively to himself at the man's actions. As far as Chris was concerned, only a fool would attempt such a thing. The pilot was as good as dead and had only herself to blame. Surely it couldn't be that difficult, people had been flying helicopters for decades and yet she'd still crashed in nothing more than a bit of wind. Pathetic. Still, it had provided a little comedic relief and distraction from his mounting anxiety.

After nothing had emerged from the flames for a few hours, Chris had become worried that the inferno might have obliterated the swarm. Without a swarm to attack the wall, his plan would have been useless. But he needn't have worried, with Infected now on the horizon it was time to make his move. Chris wanted to be in a truck heading for Queenscliff marina long before the Carriers wandered in to enjoy the buffet.

Chris winced as a deafening 'beep' sounded from speakers placed evenly along the length of the wall to announce a coming broadcast.

'Stand to arms. Contact with the enemy estimated in thirty minutes.' The announcement repeated once again, male voice sounding calm, even disinterested in his instruction as if it were no more than a training exercise.

Chris saw the postures of his fellow soldiers subtly change as muscles tightened and heart rates increased at the thought of imminent battle. With all eyes to the front, no one would notice him go. He eased back from the wall, dropping down as if to recheck the laces on his boot while he looked either way. Happy there was no one to obstruct his path to the Unimog, he casually began a walk to the stairway to descend from the battlement. A sharp word sounded from behind, instructing him to halt.

Chris ran.

Vinh turned slightly side on from the front wall to observe his squad as the announcement blared for the second time, wanting to see how they took the news. A bloom of pride lit as he saw most stand a little straighter, ready to take the voiced threat head on. If anyone was going to run, it would happen either now, on first engagement, or when they were threatened with defeat. He could not let that occur. Once one person showed cowardice, it infected those surrounding more quickly than Lysan Plague.

Vinh saw Chris shuffle back from the line to feign interest in his boot ties. Anger flared.

'Don't you fuckin' dare,' he thought.

After months of the man lording it over the others, acting like he was better than all present, here he was about to run before the first waft of decay hit the wall. Vinh watched Chris look each way, eyes furtive as he stood and made for the stairs like he was taking a morning stroll.

If it had been any other man or woman in his squad, Vinh would try and talk them down. But not Chris. Vinh suspected there was much more to his involvement with the Patriots than had been proved in court. The prick didn't deserve a second chance and his squad would be safer without him in its ranks. Having evidently just made his choice, he could wear the damn consequences.

Vinh lifted his radio to his mouth and spoke quietly to avoid his squad from hearing. 'Deserting soldier at wall location 46. MP intervention requested.'

'Received. MP en route,' crackled the reply. Vinh clipped the radio back to his chest and stepped back from the battlement front wall.

'Private Finart, don't move!' said Vinh.

Chris paused for a split second – then bolted.

'Fuck!' muttered Vinh. Other soldiers from his squad were now looking at him to see how he'd react to Chris's desertion. He darted over to the rear side of the wall to check for proximity of the MPs he'd requested, but couldn't see any nearby. Chris was nearly at the base of the stairwell.

'Come on, Boss, you're not going to let that prick run, are you?' said a rough looking female veteran. 'When you catch him, punch in his teeth for me, will ya. He's had it coming for weeks.'

Vinh spat on the ground in anger at being forced away from his troops when battle was imminent, but he felt there was no choice. Vinh gripped his

rifle in one hand and took off after Chris, promising himself he'd be back on the wall before the first wave of Carriers hit.

Chris hit the gravel running, angling straight toward the Unimog holding the pallet of 155mm Howitzer munitions. There were numerous soldiers on the ground, but none paid attention to him, intent on their task at hand while finishing ammunition dumps or running from dorm rooms to take their position on the wall. Chris skidded to a halt at the rear of the truck and ripped aside the canvas to check his stash. A pallet of shells was sited right where he left them, directly above the fuel tank, while a gerry can of petrol stood at the tailgate. Chris vaulted onto the tray and grabbed hold of a few charge bags. He carried the charge bags over to the shells and ripped open the fabric liner with his combat knife, sifting the highly flammable propellant and powder amongst the shells. Chris shoved a few intact bags in amongst the shells then jumped back off the tray. He tried to draw back down the canvas, but the zip jammed, holding the back open to the air. Chris fussed with the opening for a few moments then swore and left it to flap in the breeze.

At the sound of thundering feet on metal steps, he looked over to the stairwell and saw Vinh descending the last flight at pace. The Lieutenant's face was severe, his eyes murderous as they locked on him.

Chris briefly considered putting a bullet through his officer, but then discarded the thought as he darted toward the driver's cabin. He couldn't afford the time. On first turn of the key, the Unimog's engine sputtered into life. Chris shoved the stick into reverse and backed out onto the main road, wanting to appear legitimate until he had no other choice. He looked away from his officer and over to the tunnel beneath the wall, seeing that the near entrance was unguarded. Chris smiled as he accelerated toward his target, knowing that he'd truly inherited his father's luck. This was almost too easy.

Vinh's finger itched to pull his rifle trigger, but he restrained the urge to draw a bead on his Private. Such a scene would only cause more problems than a simple desertion. He'd almost resigned himself to allowing Chris to bolt and be dealt with by the MPs at a later stage when he saw something that gave him pause. The Unimog began to drive away from him and he saw the contents of the truck, the burst charge bags stuffed amongst the stacked shells standing out like tits on a bull.

'Surely not?' muttered Vinh to himself, not wanting to believe what he

was seeing. But it all suddenly made sense. Explosions had been the M.O. of the Patriots, and here it was again, another improvised explosive ready for ignition right before his eyes. His eyes skirted forward looking for a potential target of the truck. If the truck took the next left turn off the main road, it would be heading toward the tunnel entrance. Even if that wasn't Chris's intended target, he couldn't take the risk, the stakes were just too high.

Vinh lifted his rifle and fired two rounds through the back of the truck, hoping for a lucky hit. The vehicle kept onwards, but now started to accelerate quickly. *'Damn it!'*

Vinh's back heel slid outwards in the gravel as he went from stationary to a flat-out sprint in the space of two steps. Vinh gripped his rifle in a white knuckled fist, blood trickling from his mouth where he bit his lip in fierce determination as he ran.

'Get out of the way!'

Bits of gravel spit out from behind each heel as Vinh cut between soldiers and artillery emplacements. The only chance he had now was to cut across ground and get in front of Chris as he turned toward the tunnel.

Chris ducked his head sharply and smashed the bridge of his nose into the steering wheel by accident. He swore viciously as blood gushed from his nose and stamped his foot down on the accelerator. Two bullets had missed him by mere inches, their angry whine passing his head and punching twin holes through the windscreen. The time for blending into the crowd was gone, his cover blown. Now to see whether or not his luck would hold. He spun the wheel hard to the left, mounting the curb as he turned early into the tunnel's access road.

To the left of the road, he saw his officer streaking cross-country to intercept. Chris hunkered down in his seat as Vinh stepped onto the road before him and raised his weapon. He jammed his foot down harder on the accelerator and steered directly at his opponent.

Vinh looked over his rifle sights, chest heaving from the sprint. He stood firm, resolve and determination making him formidable as a Greek warrior before the Hot Gates. Revving engine noise filled his ears as the Unimog bore down on him. He swallowed, held his breath for a split second and fired. He saw Chris's body twitch from the bullet's passage through his shoulder,

then pulled his trigger to full auto. The hood of the truck now filled his entire field of vision. Vinh flung himself to the left.

Chris screamed as the bullet passed clean through his left shoulder, smashing his scapula into bony fragments of shrapnel. His left hand fell from the wheel, the nerve branch for the arm destroyed by the wound. He gripped the wheel more tightly with his right hand to compensate as bullets sparked from the metal hood and roof.

Thump.

A flicker of satisfaction twitched the corner of his mouth as he caught the officer with the front corner of the truck, throwing his body onto the road. The front and then back wheel bounced over Vinh, 3,000kg of truck turning the officer into a mess of blood and entrails, rib cage and pelvis mashed into road.

Ahead, the tunnel entrance drew close, obstructed by no more than a boom gate on this side of the wall. The simple barrier snapped like kindling as the truck careered through the opening. Chris hit the brakes, skidding to a halt no more than a few metres from the far side. The two guards standing on the inner surface of the thick steel doors waiting for Mark's return, stared at Chris in astonishment. He elbowed open the driver's door and dropped to the ground. His left hand was a useless lump of meat hanging by his waist, while the right pointed a handgun at the guards.

'What the fuck, man?' said one of the guards, staring at the pistol. 'This is a restricted zone...'

Chris fired. Two bullets into each man's chest knocked them to the ground. One fared better with a lucky shot to the heart. The other lay convulsing, eyes wide in surprise as he drowned in his own blood, a red froth of bubbles spilling from his throat.

Chris climbed awkwardly into the back of the Unimog with his one functional arm and picked up the Gerry Can of petrol. Gripping the container between his knees and feet for purchase, Chris unscrewed the cap and tossed it aside. Pouring petrol was going to be difficult with only one hand while the container was near full. He hoisted it on top of the shell crates and tipped it forward. Petrol splashed over the munitions and charge bags in uncontrolled glugs that splattered the area, soaking the lot in accelerant. Chris swore at himself as he felt petrol soak into the front of his clothes, and hauled the

Gerry can back down to ground level. He jumped down from the back, gripped the can under his one good arm and splashed further petrol underneath the fuel tank. Chris pulled a length of cotton fabric from his pocket, stuffing one end into the fuel tank, while leaving the other to hang down to the puddle on the ground. He then walked backward, leaving a trickle of petrol in the gravel as he made for the rear entrance.

The smell of fuel was strong in his nostrils, rising from the soaked fabric of his chest. His heart beat like a jackhammer, anxiety beginning to churn at the danger of lighting the fuel trail while having so much on him at the same time. Blood oozed from his shoulder wound in an energy-sapping stream, soaking his left arm and chest. He was beginning to feel light headed from the loss and finding it difficult to concentrate. A plan that had seemed so easy twenty minutes before was slipping from his fingers and he scrambled about his mind for a solution to the changed circumstances. If he didn't get it sorted, his father would have yet another reason to call him a failure.

Warmth touched the balding patch on his scalp as he emerged back into the late morning sun. He dropped the can on the ground and stepped away from it while pulling out a zippo. Chris looked around for a water source, faintly knowing that he should wash his hands first before using the lighter.

'Don't move!'

Chris spun unsteadily on his heel toward the order and found a Military Policeman advancing, rifle trained on his chest. Chris held up the lighter, furious at the added obstacle.

'Come any closer, and I'll fucking light it!'

The MP kept his rifle aimed at Chris, but his eyes flicked away, following the trail of petrol into the tunnel and truck. Realisation dawned as he took in the scene, face blanching and eyes widening in horror. Unconsciously, the MP took half a step backward.

'If you set off those shells, you'll blow a hole in the wall.' The MP talked slowly and calmly, as if addressing a dangerous animal. 'If that happens, every man and woman here is dead.'

A manic grin cracked over Chris's face. 'No shit, that's kind of the point.'

'But why the fuck would you do that?' The MP seemed truly puzzled.

Chris was starting to struggle to follow the man's questions. Colours were fading to grey, and he could feel his knees threatening to unhinge.

'For the Patriots and my father,' he mumbled, his voice sounding distant

in his own head. 'I promised my dad I'd bring down the wall.'

'Bullshit. It'll be suicide for you as well as us. No father would ask that of their kid.'

The MP's words hit harder than an upper cut, the truth smashing aside the lie of a future at his father's side. His father had sacrificed him, used him as a pawn without a second thought. Tears welled as Chris realised he didn't have the energy to fight anymore. A great wail of hopelessness, a pain worse than the physical hole in his torn shoulder consumed his mind. He looked down at the zippo in his hand and flicked open the lid.

'Don't...'

Chris ignored the MP, flicked the lighter and watched as flame from the wick spread along his hand to body like shimmering water. Bullets smacked into his chest, but the MP was too late. Chris dropped the zippo to the ground, igniting the trail of petrol. Flame leapt forth, speeding down the line of accelerant to the truck, up onto the tray and into the fuel tank. Within seconds, the Unimog turned into a blazing inferno, white heat burning the paint over the shells away in an instant and making the metal casings glow a dull orange.

Chris collapsed to the ground, his world reduced to a small sphere of pure agony. He screamed as flames engulfed his body, melting skin like wax and charring fat, muscle and sinew.

In the tunnel, twin shells exploded simultaneously.

Chapter Forty-One

Ahead of Mark and Erin, the wall above the tunnel exploded in a geyser of dirt and splintered wooden panels. The twin steel doors were smashed off their hinges. Flung twenty metres forward, they slid to a stop at the base of the moat. The soil fell back down in a hard deluge to reveal the true extent of damage. The front face of the wall seemed to have sustained the greater amount of damage, a once sheer face changed to a scree slope either side of the tunnel that a man could crawl up. The battlement above the tunnel had dropped in height, filling in the space of the tunnel while also thankfully smothering the fire before other shells reached a temperature to trigger ignition. Limbs and body parts littered the surface, some moving as the survivors tried to extricate themselves from the soil.

Mark glanced in the rear-view mirror. The approaching swarm was no more than 1,500 metres behind. There wasn't time to waste on questions of how or why. If they were to survive, there was only time for reaction. The new reality was plain to see; either they managed to repair the wall before the swarm of Infected broke upon it in a wave of plague-riven violence, or they died. And if the army succumbed here, the fragile hopes of any survivor across the country would be snuffed out like a match in a gale.

Mark accelerated once more, skidding to a stop at the edge of the moat. The pair abandoned the truck, sliding on their backsides to the base of the wide ditch. With one of Erin's ankles still useless, she mounted Mark's back and gripped his shoulders like an overgrown child being piggybacked while he ran to the other side and climbed the scree slope.

Steph awaited them at the top of the wall, face blank as an empty canvas, she helped Erin off Mark's back to sit on the path. The battlement was a maelstrom of activity as soldiers crammed forward, some already carrying shovels to begin an attempted fix. Seeing the torn section of Achilles behind Erin's ankle, Steph pulled out a field dressing and started to roughly bandage the wound without question of how it happened. Erin clamped her jaw against the pain.

'What were our casualties in the blast?' asked Mark, while taking in the damage from his new vantage point.

'Ten from our platoon, and another fifteen from Vinh's,' said Steph. She looked up and met Mark's eye for a moment. 'Vinh's in that number as well,

Mark, so I've already taken the liberty of seconding his force into our own.'

Mark nodded, unwilling to think of another friend dead just yet.

'How are they going to fix the wall?' asked Erin from between clenched teeth.

'A crew's on its way to try and weld the doors back in place – if they're not warped out of all use that is. Otherwise it's spade work,' grunted Steph, as she tightened a knot in the end of the dressing to hold it in place and stood up again. 'We've got to clear that slope you guys just crawled up. If you could do it, so can the bloody Carriers.'

'And the defence of the workers? That job won't be completed before the swarm hits,' said Mark. 'They'll be fully exposed down there and slaughtered to a man.'

'Not with our platoon in front of them, they won't,' said Steph.

'It'll take more than our squad, but I agree. We need to form a cordon at the base of the wall until the job's done.' Mark stepped back onto the steep dirt slope, his boots sinking to the ankle in the loose soil. 'I want our combined platoon at the base ASAP. Everyone's to carry as much ammunition as possible – and make sure they've got their swords. Re-supply might become impossible.'

As Mark turned to descend the slope once again, Steph held her rifle above her head to gain their enlarged platoon's attention. 'You heard the Boss!' she yelled, voice cutting clear above the chaos. 'Fill your ammo pouches and make sure your pig-sticker's sharp. It's time to fight!'

Behind them and up the slope, blue sparks showered as the arc welders fixed the doors permanently to the steel frame. The slope appeared as a mass of movement, every square metre holding men and women, shovelling with frantic energy born from terror at what approached. They were making progress, with some sections already cleared to a stage where new wooden slats could be drilled into place again.

A shriek of rage emitted from a hundred thousand mouths battered the ears of Mark's platoon. He'd climbed the far side of the moat to look on the approaching enemy, wanting to see them before the battle joined. Mark's gaze danced along the front of the advance, looking at individuals and reminding himself that his enemy was no more than flesh and bone. Mark deliberately kept his breathing slow and deep, preventing the spike of

adrenaline becoming a flood. There was no flight here, only fight in Mark's response. The Infected were less than a hundred metres distant, approaching in a ragged line of hellish monstrosity. A waft of rotten pork preceded the swarm, emanating from half charred limbs and singed hair. Even from this far, Mark fancied he could see expressions of rage mixed with hunger on Carrier faces as they lurched forward at a drunken jog. They were moving fast, heated to a point of rabid activity by summer winds and crossing of the burnt plain. Once they hit the edge of the wide moat, he'd give the order to commence firing. All within his squad were capable of hitting well past that distance, but the lie of the land prevented him joining the engagement any sooner.

Mark turned his back on the enemy, slid back down the steep edge of the moat and jogged back toward his troops to re-take his position in the line. At this point, the base of the moat was around fifty feet wide. Very soon, the space was about to become cramped, viciously so.

'Where the fuck are my reinforcements?' muttered Mark under his breath. The men and women of his platoon stood in a thin arc about the base of the work site. Each stood at arms distance from the next – far too few to provide any more than a momentary pause in the advance of the swarm. Sheer numbers would overwhelm his squad in minutes unless he had back up.

'Boss! We've got company!' shouted out one of the Privates.

Mark looked around, and saw more soldiers descending the wall to join his platoon on the floor. A female lieutenant he didn't recognise jogged over.

'My squad's the first of the reinforcements you've requested. I've been told to reassure you – the General expects this line to hold. He'll be feeding troops into any gap until the job's done. You won't stand alone.' The woman wore a tight expression, but the hand on her rifle was steady.

Mark reached out his hand and the Lieutenant accepted the gesture with a firm handshake. 'Glad to have you on board for the ride, Lieutenant. Let's make the bastards pay for every step, yeah?'

The new soldiers filled in the gaps and formed a second line behind Mark's squad. With additional troops, the front line took a kneeling position, the back line a side on stance so they could shoot from above. The sound of the Carriers was deafening. Ear splitting shrieks mixed with demonic howls and carnivorous snarls. A head appeared above the edge of the dry moat. A pus-filled hole marred the centre of its face, the entire nose ripped away by a previous bite. As its lips pulled back to snarl, Mark plugged a round through

the cavern where its nose should have been. The head flicked backward, spattering grey brains over the Carriers pushing up behind.

‘Make your bullets count! One round per head!’ shouted Mark as he changed his aim to the next arrival. There was no time for inspiring speeches. The swarm had arrived.

All along the edge of the dry moat, Carriers came into view. Uncaring for the obstacle, they tumbled down the slope in their haste to access the warm meat on offer. At the base, the Infected pushed themselves to standing, broken or dislocated limbs ignored as they attacked. Rifles hammered along the line, taking out Carriers like a scythe through wheat.

Brain-shot Carriers dropped like rags, joints unhinging in unison. Fallen corpses were mashed into the dirt by those coming from behind, frenzied legs pumping up and down as they drove forward. The forerunners of the swarm came up against an invisible wall, stopped in their tracks by a hail of bullets. Flesh ripped from bodies, bullets punching out fist-sized clumps of bone and tissue with their passage. Where the brain was missed, corpses were smashed backward with the force of a sledgehammer blow, knocked to the ground where they thrashed in an attempt to regain their feet. When the need to change a magazine arose, the soldier would step backward, allowing the second behind to take their place and maintain a maximum rate of fire.

Gradually the swarm began to thicken. The pile of corpses at the base of the moat increased in depth, stretching up the far slope. Mark was forced to move the line back a few paces to maintain space between his soldiers and the attacking horde. He glanced behind and found more time had passed than he realised. Work had finished on the doors, their circumference now fastened with a thick, bubbled layer of weld. The face of the wall to either side was a sheer face once again. Engineers worked frantically to install new panels along the dirt face to prevent the Infected from tearing into the soft surface and creating their own ramp. They needed more time.

A human scream ripped Mark’s attention back to the attacking Infected. The main body of the horde had arrived, ghouls crammed together shoulder to shoulder spilled over the edge of the moat, clambering over the fallen corpses like cockroaches. The gap between his force and the Infected disappeared in five heartbeats, and suddenly he was haemorrhaging soldiers.

Along the line, soldiers went to automatic, forced to spray rounds at head height in an effort to cope with the numbers attacking. Claw like hands ripped unlucky soldiers out of the line into the press. Agonised screams and

jets of blood told of their fate. Fingertips of the Infected were used as knives, puncturing abdomens and eyes, tearing handfuls of steaming entrails and meat to shove into ravenous mouths. These unfortunate soldiers earned only the briefest of reprieves for their colleagues, before the Carriers turned the attentions back to the line, ripping the next soldier into a murderous embrace.

Steph gave herself over to the hell of battle, allowing the demonic voices in her mind to sate their need for violence and blood on the bodies of the Infected. She had lost her rifle long before, and now fought on with her short sword. Steph's sanity danced at the edge, just barely managing to direct her blade against the enemy rather than the soldiers at her side. She could feel a hunger growing, a need for blood to fill her throat and stomach that would soon overpower all reason.

Soldiers were running dry of ammunition, the last of their magazines empty. Rifles were repurposed as short stabbing spears. Razor sharp bayonets sought eyes and open mouths, sliding forward to puncture brains stems and skewer neural tissue. The arc contracted sharply, now less than forty metres in diameter and rapidly shrinking.

Behind them, the work was complete, fresh timber panels providing a seamless barrier for the swarm to break upon. It was time for Mark to evacuate his men. Knotted ropes hung down from the battlement, soldiers screamed from the top for his soldiers to grab them and retreat. Mark looked for the other Lieutenant to send her and her soldiers home first, but she was missing. He stepped back from the line and began ripping soldiers out, shoving them to the ropes and retreat. Seeing Heath, Mark grabbed the kid by the shoulder and yanked him out of the front line, forcing him to evacuate. The reduction in numbers accelerated the crush. There would be no way to evacuate everyone, he needed a group to hold a gap for the others to climb to safety.

He grabbed Steph by the shoulder. 'Get yourself and half the soldiers up those ropes while we still have a chance!'

She shrugged free of his hand. Her eyes were manic, blood-soaked tendrils of hair stuck to her face as she breathed heavily. 'I'm not leaving. I won't be able to control myself up there. You go, the squad's your responsibility – not mine.'

She stabbed her sword back into the press, re-joining the fight and

abandoning him to decide on his own. Mark felt his gut torn, despair screaming in his mind as he knew that Steph had decided to die here beneath the wall.

Mark took a deep breath to shout over the hideous cacophony of battle. 'Retreat!'

Chapter Forty-Two

Erin watched from above with growing horror as the small arc of soldiers contracted in under the weight of the Infected. Steph fought like a beast of hell, her sword working as a blur as she cleaved any Carrier within arm's reach. At Mark's order, a few men and women managed to extract themselves from the fight to climb the offered ropes to safety. She grabbed Heath's hand as he neared the top of the rope and heaved him over the side, shoving a fresh rifle into his hand so he could turn and shoot again. Tears streamed down Erin's face as she saw Mark and Steph ignore the option of retreat, knowing that she was doomed to watch both her friends die. One by one, the remaining soldiers fell, wrenched into the press and ripped apart in a welter of gore.

Abruptly, Steph stumbled backwards, collapsing to the dirt in the last metre of free ground held. She seemed to ignore the maelstrom around her, hammering at her own skull with closed fists, eyes tight shut as if she battled a foe within her own mind. Suddenly, her arms dropped, and she stood again. Emotion showed on her face for the first time in months, her features contorted with rage as she ignored her dropped sword and leapt onto Mark's back.

'No!' screamed Erin, her vocal cords raw with horror, gut sick as she stared from above.

Mark ignored his own order of retreat and re-entered the fight at Steph's shoulder. Empty of ammunition, he ditched his rifle and drew his sword, his fingers feeling at home around the coarse leather grip of the weapon. He wouldn't let her fight alone, if Steph had chosen this fate, then he'd share it and carve a heavy price with his death.

A Carrier screamed in his face, ribs bare and standing proud. Mark took a grip about the corpse's sternum and stabbed his Gladius sword up under the chin into its brain. Instead of allowing the body to drop, he retained his hold and used the body as a shield, shoving back at the press while stabbing with his sword.

Time disappeared. He had no idea if any of his soldiers had followed his

order and taken the chance to escape. Screaming ghouls pressed in from all sides, hands ripping at his clothes. And still he fought, unaware that his own screams joined that of the Infected.

A heavy weight smashed into his back, and then a burning ring of pain clamped onto the base of his neck from behind, teeth worrying at the muscle like a terrier with a rat. Mark couldn't see the Carrier that had him in its grip. He stabbed blindly over his shoulder, feeling the blade enter meat again and again without effect until it fell from numbing fingers. Teeth ripped a third mouthful from his neck and Mark gasped at the agony, a pulsating jet of blood spraying his life blood across the Carriers before him. Grey crept in at the edge of his vision. His punches became weaker, and suddenly he was on the ground. A visage framed by clotted, blond hair leaned over him, crimson teeth bared as the monster descended to feed.

Erin watched in horror as Steph ripped mouthful after another from Mark's throat, oblivious to the blade he stabbed blindly over his shoulder as she fed.

Erin lined her rifle sights onto the rear of Steph's head, but before she could pull the trigger, her friends were gone. Buried beneath the heaving mass of Infected that surged over the last of the soldiers. Silent tears ran down Erin's face as she forced her attention away from the death of her friends and picked out her next target. Erin fired, beginning a rate of fire with metronomic regularity.

One bullet per head. One shot each second.

Mark had taught her well and turned her into a soldier that knew her duty. She buried her pain deep and fought on. Mourning the lost would have to wait until the battle was over. Now was the time to fight for the living.

Chapter Forty-Three

Her whole body ached. A bruise where the stock of her rifle had rested through countless hours of battle, stained Erin's right shoulder in shades of purple, green and yellow. Eventually, an officer had noted the wound at her ankle and forced her off the wall to seek medical care. She had argued and lost, and so ended up in Harry's care.

Harry had infiltrated the deep laceration behind her ankle with local anaesthetic, before washing it out with a litre of saline and stitching the wound closed. Erin had numbly listened as he confirmed what she already knew – the helicopter had completely severed her Achilles tendon. Her ankle was shot for the moment, but the tendon would heal slowly over the coming months if she managed to avoid a wound infection.

Exhausted, a couple of pain-killers had been enough to send her into a tortured sleep. Erin's eyes had eventually opened much later, forcing wakefulness to escape another nightmare. Something was odd, and she finally realised it was the relative silence. The artillery had fallen quiet. The constant rattle of small arms fire was now no more than an occasional crack in the distance.

Erin sat up, swinging her legs to the side of the stretcher. Her pants leg was cut away at the knee, but otherwise she lay in the same uniform she'd worn for the previous two days. Her lower leg was splinted in a back-slab of plaster, keeping her ankle in extension to help the tendon re-join. A tingling burn prickled beneath her dressings from the wound.

'How's your leg feeling?'

Erin turned around to the voice and saw Harry walking over. He looked as tired as she felt. Eyelids hung heavy over sad eyes, skin an unhealthy shade of grey.

She ignored his question, pointing a finger upwards as she cocked an ear to the side. 'The guns have stopped,' she said. 'Does that mean...'

'Yeah. It's over,' said Harry, not volunteering any further information.

Erin looked around, spotting her boots, she snatched one up and started putting it on her remaining good foot.

'What are you doing?' asked Harry. 'I'd prefer if you don't rip open those stitches just yet. You've done more than your fair share, Erin. Let

someone else deal with the clean-up.'

'I want to see, Harry. If you don't want to re-sew the wound, maybe you could help me up onto the wall?'

The doctor looked at his patient, and seeing a stubborn line form between her eyes, obviously decided it wasn't a fight he was going to win. Harry sighed and nodded assent. 'Just give me a few minutes to find some crutches.'

Erin took her hand off Harry's shoulder and gripped the front of the battlement. Her foot felt warm and wet below her wound. Despite Harry's help up the stairs to the top of the wall, she'd still ripped through a few of her stitches in the process.

'Bloody hell,' muttered Harry from beside her.

Erin just nodded, having no words for what she saw in front. The plain before the wall was covered in an undulating mass of bodies. It was a field of slaughter like no other. Corpses lay in drifts, head trauma their one unifying commonality. Most had faces obliterated, as the soldiers aimed for the nose to take out the brainstem behind. The surface of the plain was pockmarked where artillery shells had landed, exploding in showers of macerated body parts. At some point fire had been re-deployed, with much of the field a blackened, smoking mess.

The piles of corpses reached highest up against the wall, the thirty-foot height on the battlement reaching less than a few metres above the nearest Carrier. Erin looked down the edge of the wall, and watched with morbid interest as a fat blowfly crawled into an empty eye-socket to lay its eggs.

'It must have been getting grim for them to risk fire so close to the wall. If it had reached the structure, the wood panels on the face would have gone up like kindling.'

Harry nodded. 'Yeah, for a few hours, hope was starting to stretch a little thin. But the gamble worked. We made it through, that's all that matters I guess,' he said with a shrug.

Erin pointed a finger off to the right. 'They're buried somewhere under that pile.'

Harry winced as he followed her direction with his eyes. 'Are you sure about what you saw?'

'Fuck off, Harry,' said Erin in a voice drained of energy. 'They were like

family, as if I'd make up a story like that.'

'So, Steph really killed him?'

'I saw her collapse for a moment, and when she got up again, she'd become one of them. Steph ripped his throat out and gagged down the meat...'

'Alright, I don't want to know every detail.'

'Well maybe you should. I didn't see her get bitten during the fight, and I watched them both from right here. She's been odd ever since she returned from Canberra. The infected brain tissue she was forced to swallow back in Cob Hill finally turned her into a Carrier – there's no other answer.'

Erin pulled out the syringe of vaccine Harry had smuggled out of the lab for her. 'You helped create this vaccine with samples obtained from Steph. If I injected this – would I end up like her?' Erin's voice was beginning to rise, anger taking hold. 'Would I become a monster and end up killing my mates like she did?'

Harry deflated before her. 'I took for granted her mood changes were due to post traumatic stress disorder after surviving the Spartans. I should have listened closer...'

Erin didn't let him off the hook, pinning him with a hard gaze. 'Then stop it from happening a second time, Harry. Make sure that vaccine never gets released.'

Epilogue

‘Are you sure you want to go through with this?’ asked Harry, as he stood with a vaccine filled syringe beside a male volunteer.

‘I know what happened in the last study, and I’ve signed the disclaimer.’ The soldier licked his bottom lip nervously. ‘Someone’s got to do it, might as well be me. This trial will be different, I’m sure of it.’

Harry couldn’t help but feel awe at the man’s bravery. He screwed the syringe into the luer-lock of the intravenous line and slowly injected ten millilitres of clear liquid. Standing back, he hit a button on the monitor to take the man’s blood pressure.

‘You feel ok?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine. You’ll be the first to know if anything changes, don’t worry Doc,’ said the patient.

Harry nodded and exited the room, locking the door behind him. He stopped and stared at the patient for a few moments through the reinforced observation window before sitting down at his desk to take some notes.

At Erin’s prompting, he’d lobbied to have the first vaccine trial ceased. General Black had been keen for full scale inoculation of his troops, but after two more primates began showing signs of instability, Harry had succeeded in convincing the establishment to downgrade the trial to a small group of volunteers.

None had survived longer than a month before going insane. Autopsy had found that the virus had eventually found another route into the nervous system, prompting a review of the tissue samples taken from Steph, where tiny numbers of virus were found to have penetrated nerve cells harvested during her last week in the research station.

The vaccine was subsequently scrapped, and work started again. In the meantime, the war effort had continued. Adelaide and Perth were back in the hands of the living, and now the General had turned his eye to Sydney. Harry only hoped that Erin was seconded to somewhere else for that campaign. In the subsequent months after the Battle of Little River, she’d formed a close bond with the other farm kid, Heath, so he knew there would be at least one person watching her back at all times.

Harry ditched his pen, sat back in his chair and looked up at his patient’s monitor, willing the heart and breath rate to remain steady. After a few

minutes he got up and went to the adjacent room for his next subject.

It had taken a further year of work to get to the point of a second trial, and unsurprisingly, volunteers had been thin on the ground. To fill the quota of test subjects, the judicial system had leapt at the chance of emptying a few jail cells. His next candidate was one such person, transferred against his will to Canberra to exchange incarceration for the gamble of a needle's contents.

The subject glared as Harry entered, eyes furious. Steel manacles were clamped about each wrist and ankle, holding him spread-eagled and helpless on the hospital mattress.

'You can't do this, I won't allow it,' said the man, speaking to Harry like he was a servant despite lying restrained in prison fatigues on the bed.

Harry ignored him while he drew up the vaccine into a syringe. He hadn't the slightest ounce of compassion for this particular man, and if not for the ramifications of another failed study, would have been happy to see him die as an outcome.

'How can you do this? As a doctor, this is hideously unethical!' sputtered the man, starting to lose his cool as Harry approached with the needle in his hand. Harry paused, looking at the man's face for the first time since entering.

'Unethical? What, like blowing up a police station? Or maybe like sending your son to sabotage an army installation for your own political gains? Two of my closest friends were killed that day because of you and your boy.'

The patient squirmed against his restraints, trying in vain to get away from Harry. 'None of that's been proven, it's all lies!'

'Bullshit. A military policeman heard it from the mouth of your own son before he burnt to death. If anyone deserves to die today, it's you.'

Liam Finart screamed as Harry screwed the syringe into his intravenous line and injected the medication.

THE END

Read on for a free sample of ZPOC: The Beginning.



Chapter One

The skies showed signs of clearing; the heavy, low-level cloud finally looking to be on the verge of retreat.

After six straight days of grey, the cracks started to appear. Sunline breaking through reminding them all that, while the world had gone to shit, the sun still existed. The reality they knew was dead—much like those who hunted them now—but the world itself remained.

The dead may have risen, but that does not mean all hope is lost.

Henry Graham repeated this line to himself over and over as he lay in the self-constructed shelter.

It had been several weeks since the shit hit the fan and the first real cases broke the national media. He could not say for sure, because, well, time no longer had any meaning. There was day and night, survival or death. He knew which one he wanted; for him, and his family.

Henry gave a grunt, rubbing his calf in an attempt to force away the cramp that threatened to eat through the lower half of his leg. He checked his watch just as the silent alarm sent a pulse through his wrist.

Unable to ignore it any longer, he placed his weapon, a Remington 700 .308, to one side, and stretched his burning limb. While not a professional by any stretch of the imagination, Henry knew

what he was doing. He understood what it took to survive. His entire adult life and a good portion of his adolescence were spent preparing for days like this.

Sure, he never truly believed it would be the undead who decided to rise up and end the world, but he always knew, deep down, that civilization was fragile.

It cost him two wives, but they just did not understand. His obsession was not dangerous; it was life-saving. That they couldn't see it was neither here nor there. Those relationships were things of the past, a past that was not only long since gone but belonged to a different world entirely. Henry wished the women no ill-will. He loved them both very much, to that day he still loved them. He strongly doubted either of them would have survived, especially Cheryl. The levels of naivety she managed to achieve never failed to astound Henry. Her good heart and simple, trusting view of the world, planted her firmly in the first-wave group of the dead.

Henry took a long sip of water. They had strict rations, but his shift was almost over, and he had plenty of water left in his canteen. Only mildly cool, it refreshed his spirit and brought his mind back to the present. Lingering on memories was a surefire way to get them killed.

He stared at his watch again. It was getting late; the others should have been back by now. Henry slid back into position and picked up his rifle, settling back down with his focus set on the tree line. He would give them as much time as they needed.

Taron and Hector left earlier that morning on a scouting mission through the woods. While the group invested their time and energy in creating their safe haven in the time before the world ended, they could never have factored in the power the undead could yield, or the overwhelming strength a moving group generated.

As a result, they agreed to run a daily check on their perimeter. The precautions they had taken were good but not designed to withstand the impact of a large group. Their daily sweeps ensured anything that got close enough was taken care of before it could form a congregation.

Even though it was still early days, the patterns had become clear. The dead showed no inclination to work together, but yet congregations of them formed without any rhyme or reason.

Henry spotted a group of fifty the week before while he was on the edge of town. They were just standing there in the street, gathered around a crossing like lost tourists. He remembered it because the power was still on, and the traffic light above their heads was stuck on red. Just blinking. He wondered if that had been what attracted them, but none showed any interest in it, so he quickly dismissed the notion.

The group had not lasted long, after a bunch of survivors tried to make a break for freedom. The scent of a fresh meal reignited their individual desires, and well, the kids never stood a chance. The stumbling, shuffling creatures were just like the monsters in the movies of old. They always caught up with you.

"That's the problem with the dead," Henry had told his son, James, who had joined him for the scouting trip. "They might be slow, but they don't stop. They just keep moving. Like one of those tsunamis, they just push and destroy."

Once again, he shook the image away. He needed to focus. They weren't playing games anymore.

With his sight set down the scope of his rifle, Henry waited. They would be back soon, then he could get back to his wife, his son. Despite the fact they were both hyper aware and well prepared for the new world, he did not like being separated from them. True strength was found in numbers, and between them, they each brought something to the table that kept them a fully functioning group.

Henry sensed the movement before he pinpointed its location. Only a slight rustle, but it was clear. Henry watched the spot, his eyes keen, his finger ready to squeeze the trigger the instant one of them came into view.

Killing the dead was a strange thing to experience. Those not too badly torn apart had not yet had the chance to rot. They still looked human, and while it was easy to distinguish between them, pulling the trigger still took an effort, a conscious moment of thought. Henry knew that needed to change.

When the dead rose, killing became a much simpler act. To hesitate, even for a moment, could be the difference between their living or dying.

The bushes rustled again, parting as the deer entered the cleared space around their shelter. The young doe was small, but she would provide enough meat to see them through for a while, not forgetting the rest of the body.

Nothing goes to waste in the apocalypse. They had that phrase posted on the wall of the shelter. A basic rule, besides rationing, was taking every safe opportunity to bolster your supplies.

Henry watched the animal. She stood perfectly still, studying the land, no doubt thankful to have found a patch not filled with the hungry jaws of the swarming dead. Henry knew he could take her out. A single pull of the trigger, a slight movement, given the sensitivity of the weapon, and it would be over. He also knew that it was not his prerogative right now. He had to watch for the others.

He adjusted his focus once more, directing his eyes back toward the area where he expected Hector and Taron to appear, but not before the arrow pierced the doe's upper thigh. The animal gave a shriek as it sank to the floor. The arrow had torn through the muscle, leaving the leg useless.

A second arrow followed; a hurried and loose shot, it gouged open the creature's flank before nestling into the trunk of a tree. The shot only served to heighten the pitch of the beast's screams.

"Goddammit," Henry cursed under his breath. Turning his rifle, he fired a quick shot, the weapon issuing a quiet whooshing sound as it launched the projectile. The doe's head exploded with a puff of red mist, silencing the agonized screams.

Henry was only distracted for a moment, but in that time their two shelter mates returned, bursting into the clearing at a run.

The first zombie came behind them, stumbling through the trees, a coil of razor wire wrapped around its leg. The wire was embedded in the former human's limb, and with each lumbering step it took, more and more skin was gouged away.

If the thing felt pain, it gave no outward sign of it. The creature just kept moving. Until the rifle round blew its rotting head apart. Puncturing it between the eyes, the round tore a grapefruit-sized hole in the creature's skull.

The dead man collapsed to his knees, arms outstretched as if somehow in his final moments, he beat the disease and was looking to give thanks for freeing him from his burden.

Inside the familiar territory of the compound, Hector and Taron stopped, looking back behind them. Taron held his crossbow up, and stared into the woods, while Hector pulled a hunting knife from the sheath on his belt, the ten-inch serrated blade glinting in the sun.

Inside the hide, Henry kept his focus on the trees, knowing that something else was coming.

The first head bobbed into view and Henry fired. The spray of mist was enough to tell him the zed was gone. Outside, Hector turned and moved away toward the deer where another dead man appeared, crawling through the bushes, his face a mess of blood from where he had been bitten. His left cheek had been removed, causing his eye to dangle from its socket like a ball on a piece of string.

It clawed at the carcass, tearing a deep gouge in the doe's flank. It lowered its mouth to the blood that flowed from the wound, lapping at it like a man emerging from the desert. Hector was fast and slid the blade through the zed's head, using his foot to push the creature away as he withdrew the blade.

With the immediate danger taken care of, the two men gave the signal, and Henry left the hide. While he wanted to understand what had happened, he had other business to take care of first.

With his gun slung over his back and his supply pack in one hand, he strode toward their main shelter and rapped on the door. Three heavy knocks and the door opened.

"Go easy on him. He was just trying to help," Vanessa Graham said to her husband, placing her hand on his chest.

"Honey, I'm not mad, but he needs to understand that we are not playing games anymore," Henry answered, his voice stern but calm.

"He's just a kid," she said for good measure.

"I know that, but the world has moved on, and there isn't a place for kids anymore. If he is going

to take a shot at a deer, then he needs to make sure he doesn't miss, for a start, and to know when it's safe to take it." Henry hugged his wife, kissing the top of her head.

"He's in his bed," she said, hugging him back.

The shelter they had made was predominantly underground, buried within the hilltop. It had taken them years to get it designed and installed, let alone stocked. The shelter was tailor-made for the five of them, with enough room for two more if the two single men were willing to share their beds. While there were no individual rooms, the beds were separated into their own recesses in the wall, with a curtain that could be drawn, giving the illusion of privacy at least.

James lay on his belly on his bed, a comic open on his pillow. He flicked aimlessly through the pages, certainly not reading, or even recognizing the images crafted onto the page.

Henry knocked on the wall. "Hey, kiddo," he said, taking a deep breath.

"I thought I could take the shot, but ... but it moved just before I fired," James said without turning around.

"I know you meant well, but you need to realize there's a time and a place for hunting. That deer was not the priority, and now we wasted a bullet and lost the meat. One of the zeds came through the trees and took it," Henry explained, keeping his voice as calm and cool as ever.

A patient man, Henry had enjoyed a career as a psychologist before the world ended. He wrote a column for a national newspaper, not the agony aunt columns, but something far more substantial, both in terms of content and pay. His work regularly appeared in numerous magazines and scientific journals across the globe.

"I'm sorry, I won't do it again," James said, rolling over to face his dad. At eleven years old, James hovered on the edges of puberty and had already started showing signs of the battle that was to come. His moods could change, and his morose back-chat fueled style of interaction with his parents only showed signs of worsening. But, he was a good kid and understood the world around him. As good as anybody could be expected to, at least.

"No, don't say that. This world doesn't allow you to be apologetic, James. You make a decision and you move onward. It might be right, it might be wrong, but we do what we do, and the consequences are ours to bear. If you see a deer, I want you to think about taking the shot, and if it is safe, or if circumstances give you no choice, then I expect you to take it. Hunting, killing to survive is key now. Never forget that, all right?" Henry asked, holding out his hand for a high five.

James obliged, but when the others began to scream, their usual ritual was cut short before they could bump fists.

"Grab your bow, but stay back with your mother," Henry ordered as they ran toward the entrance.

A group of six zeds had made it through the perimeter and had infiltrated their camp. One already lay dead on the ground by the time Henry arrived at the fight. Its head had been split open by Hector's machete. The man had a range of bladed weapons he was immensely proud of and knew how to use with deadly effect.

Taron had engaged another, firing a crossbow shot that buried itself neatly between the post-human's eyes. A doctor in his previous life, Taron was quick, accurate, and deadly.

With two down, Henry made short work of the distracted zed he took out, evening the playing field. The post-human wore a suit, the expensive material tattered and torn, stained to a hardened crisp with blood. He was missing an arm, which certainly reduced its advantage in a fight, but Henry did not take any chances, stabbing with a quick striking motion. The blade went in and out of the creature's head, making a sharp, almost crisp sound.

Henry was away and after another one before the body hit the floor.

Out of the three remaining, two were women, a fact they had all learned was important. The females, as in a great many species, were by far the more aggressive. There was a strength and ferocity to them that the male post-humans just could not quite reach. Not that any of them would be complacent with the males, they were just as likely to rip an arm off or tear open a body, it was just that the women had that extra edge when it came down to it.

Taron had reasoned that biology supported the apparent fact. Women were predisposed to have access to inner strength reserves that men did not own. A pool touched on in life when giving birth or protecting the young.

It made sense to Henry also, but the discussion on the matter was kept short, for at the end of the day, male or female, all post-humans needed to be put down.

The first woman—a younger girl, who, judging by the way her figure still held a certain pertness, could not have been long out of her teens before she died—charged at Henry. She stumbled as she swung her arms in his direction, the large chunk of flesh torn from her inner thigh sending her wide on her approach. She swiped at him, her long fingers ending in nails that still had a nicely manicured finish to them. They had been sharpened down to a fine point. Henry had seen it before. In the final days of society, salons were offering the service, turning their clients' nails into deadly weapons. It didn't help worth a damn.

Henry took a step back, allowing the creature to come at him again. He studied her walk and struck just as she put weight on her mangled leg. She as good as fell onto his knife, her eyes going wide in perceived shock. She fell away, black blood oozing from the neat hole in her temple.

Henry turned and saw Taron and Hector each dispatch their zeds in hand-to-hand combat. One on one, the post-humans were manageable, providing you had room to work and kept your cool. They became truly dangerous in a group.

"Are you guys all right?" Henry asked, his body tingling with adrenaline. Part of him felt guilty for the rush he felt, but he also understood it was a natural reaction to the skirmish. From time to time, he still needed to remind himself that dead was dead, and zeds were what came next. There was no getting people back from it.

"All good here," Taron replied, checking himself quickly.

"Not a scratch on me," Hector answered, holding his arms out for all to see.

"Of course not, I keep telling you, not even the zeds would eat a lawyer. Your meat must taste like feet," Taron answered, smiling at Hector.

Hector rolled his eyes. "I can't help that I'm an expert at this shit. I've put in way more time in building up my skills than the rest of you," he answered.

To many, Hector was an asshole. To the group living in the shelter, he was still an asshole, but one they had known so long, that his cockiness and arrogance no longer really registered with them. If anything, they turned it around on him.

"Yeah, the rest of us were busy building this place up and stocking it with supplies. Remember that when rations start running low," Henry added, smiling at the pair.

"Whatever," Hector snarled. Turning, he stomped back toward the shelter.

"Oh, come on, man. Don't be like that," Taron called after him, trying to suppress the laugh building in his throat.

"Leave him be. It's probably his time of the month," Henry said, just loud enough for Hector to hear.

There had been a time when his attitude had caused friction among the group, but they had found the best way to deal with him was with humor. It would often darken his mood even more, but the overall impact seemed to expedite the entire process and bring him back around sooner.

"I don't think so. His lips weren't bleeding," Taron answered.

Both men opened their mouths and drew breath with the intention of laughing, but a frantic scream for help soon had them looking back toward the trees.

It turned out that danger was an even more effective tool than humor to bring Hector around.

"It came from the south," he said, pointing through the trees beyond the deer carcass and the dead zed that lay slumped over it.

"We need to check it out," Taron said, sheathing his knife and grabbing his crossbow. The M4 Tactical bow was a work of art. They had all been jealous when Taron revealed the weapon during one of their last monthly meetings before things went south. The red dot sight alone made it a very popular

toy.

“Nah, wait it out. They’re dead now, whoever they were,” Hector said, squinting into the trees. He tensed as if he saw something but relaxed a moment later.

“You can’t be sure of that,” Henry said, looking over at Taron, hoping he would back him up.

“That wasn’t the scream of a health hiker spotting a fucking bumblebee. That was the sound of imminent death,” the lawyer answered, his no-nonsense attitude shining through. “Why waste our time chasing a dead girl when there are enough of the posties out here to keep us on our toes.”

“Because they are people. There could be more of them out there. We can save people,” Taron said.

“You’re not in the OR now, Doc. You can’t save people out here. It’s every man for themselves. Besides, we’ve got it good here. We have supplies and space to live in semi-comfort.” Hector turned to face Taron. The pair argued like an old married couple yet were always the first to pair up when it came time to patrol. Even back when they were still just building up for the possibility of a disaster, they worked best together.

“You can’t be serious. We are talking about people. Survivors, like us. What right do we have to turn our back simply because we were prepared? I mean, good god, man, we were just playing until all of this came along,” Taron said, dumbfounded at the cold, calculating way with which Hector spoke.

Another scream rang out. “Help me,” the voice cried, the words distinguishable enough from the pain that surrounded them.

“We’re going to check it out,” Henry said, deciding for the group.

They left at a pace close to a jog, with Hector bringing up the rear. He was naturally slower than the others, given his short legs and stocky build. Far from fat, he would be described by most as simply being solid. A benefit of his Puerto Rican-Samoan heritage.

Once again, Vanessa and James stayed behind. Not because they were woman and child, but because it was their turn to guard the camp. Plus, they acted as a standby reserve should things go south, and they need a cavalry charge.

They had not moved far through the trees before they spotted the area of their perimeter defenses where the zed had pushed through the razor wire. The recent rainfall had softened the ground and its persistence had seen it work the foundations of the makeshift fence free from the mud.

They heard the steady, and now all-too-familiar slurping growls that told them a group of post-humans was ahead of them, feeding on a fresh kill.

The trees were dense in that part of the forest but not so much that you could not make a path through. The cool autumn saw the trees drop their leaves unseasonably early, and while the weather had stabilized since, the nudity of the forest increased their visibility considerably.

The forest floor sloped upward, forming as a gentle hill that gave way to a long, shallow incline into a small basin below. The higher ground served to their aid, as it hid them from the zeds’ baseline view.

Once the feeding started, there was little that could distract them, other than the scent of another meal.

“I count four,” Henry whispered, looking through the scope of his rifle.

“I only see one victim. You suppose the other got away?” Taron asked.

“Only one way to find out,” Henry replied.

“You fools are out of your mind. We don’t know these people from Adam,” Hector protested but to no avail.

Taron raised his crossbow and took aim. The red sight setting on the back of the nearest zed’s head. “This should get their attention,” he said, moments before firing.

The arrow shot forward with a quiet whoosh, covering the ground between them in mere seconds, embedding itself in the skull of its target. The post-human died without making a sound, collapsing on top of the meal, much to the perceived annoyance of its hungry brothers.

Henry and Hector advanced down the hill, with Taron keeping back to cover them from a

distance.

The three remaining posties turned at the first sound of their approach. Their pale skin, painted with the deep red of fresh blood, made them look more like a troupe of murderous clowns than the living dead.

Snarling and gargling, they announced their attack. Henry met his first one with a heavy swiping blow. Less skilled with a melee weapon than Hector, he relied on his strength and the simplicity of their opponents. His blade sliced open the zed's distended belly, expelling a belched rush of gaseous rot. The blast rushed over Henry's face and made him gag.

He reacted to the dead man's fetid release by burying the knife hilt-deep in the side of the post-human's head. It dropped to its knees, landing in the pile of cold, black offal that had spilled from its gaping belly.

Hector made short work of his post-human. The kid could not have been very far into his teens, certainly not old enough to drink in its previous life. Not that age was a factor anymore. Once they woke up, all posties had a strength that bordered on superhuman.

Still, the kid's skinny build and baggy pants, which Henry assumed were dropped close to its knees before it died, made its movements clumsy and predictable. Armed with a knife in each hand, Hector jabbed the creature once on each side, kidney shots, and that pushed it to its knees where it continued to snap and snarl like a crack whore desperate to suck a cock and earn her next rock.

Hector put the post-human kid out of its misery by slamming a blade through the top of its head. The creature fell away, and Hector immediately turned to advance on the third.

The woman, oversized in the gut and even more so in the bust, was a messy sight indeed. The right-hand side of her face was missing, stripped down to the bone. They could even see gouges in them, from where her whatever claimed her life had clearly gotten over-zealous with their bites. She also had deep wounds in her sides and across her chest.

Henry paused for a moment as he wondered about her final moments. It was clear she did not die peacefully; she knew exactly what was happening to her. He gave a sigh and drove his blade through her face and out the back of her head.

"She was mine," Hector said, sounding disappointed.

"We're not keeping score," Henry said, shocked.

"We've got to do something to pass the time," Hector said, smiling. It was a strange expression and reminded Henry that there was something not quite right with that man.

In all of their days prepping and preparing, the simulations they would run, and the supply checks they ran through, none of their scenarios involved the rising of the dead. Well, apart from one of their very first meetings. But that had been for shits and giggles. Yet, in all of them, Hector was the first to raise the issue of combat and taking lives. He hid it behind his role as weapons officer for their shelter, and always had an answer thought out and ready to use. A lawyer through and through.

"Guys, look," Taron said as he moved his way down the slope to meet the others.

He pointed to the side where a clear trail of blood could be seen leading up and over the other side of the depression.

"Let's take a look," Henry said before Hector had a chance to complain.

They heard Hector grumble, but he followed along with them.

The three men crested the rise and did not need to look hard to see the injured person. He was on his back, reverse crawling through the woods. His leg was broken, a fact made clear by the way the foot was twisted over ninety degrees to the position of the other leg. The long shard of bone poking through the man's mid-thigh merely served to accentuate the injury.

"Help me," the man screamed.

"Quiet, you fool," Hector snarled, scanning the trees. "He's going to be like a fucking flare for those things."

"He's scared and hurt. What do you expect?" Taron asked, moving off toward the man.

"I expect you to have some common fucking sense," Hector replied, once again following the

two men, in spite of his protestations.

"Guys, watch for any zeds. I need to take a look at this. We can't move him without a stretcher or some kind of splint," Taron said, dropping to his knees.

"We can't help him, period," Hector growled, but took his blades and turned to watch the trees.

"Ignore him, he's a lawyer. They're all assholes," Taron said, eliciting a strained smile from the injured man. "Bite down on this. I need to clean your leg, and well, I won't lie to you, it's going to hurt."

Taron grabbed a leather strap out of his pack, folded it double and placed it in the man's mouth before he had a chance to say anything else.

Taron grabbed his water bottle and washed the bleeding limb. The man cried into the belt, his face turning a deep shade of red. Sweat poured from his face.

"Easy, easy," Taron whispered, as he poured more and more water onto the wound.

The man offered no response, but his face paled visibly, and his eyes rolled back into his head momentarily.

"Hurry up, I think we've got company coming," Henry said, switching from his knives to his rifle.

"I'm going as fast as I can. This is nasty," Taron said, understating the task he knew faced them. "Even if I clean this up, we need to make a splint and get him back to the shelter. I have more supplies out there." Taron swapped his water bottle for a pack of bandages.

"We've got company," Henry called, taking two quick shots to put down the first two zeds that emerged through the trees.

"Oh crap," Taron said.

"Let us worry about them, you just work on him," Henry said.

"No, I mean oh crap, look at this," Taron said, looking up at the others, and then beyond them at the approaching group of zeds.

Taron pulled up the man's shirt and showed them the bite mark on his side. The wound was not deep but did not change the fact that the man was going to die, or that Hector was right. They needed to leave him behind.

"Shit, we wasted time on a dead man," Hector snapped. "I told you."

"Hey, we tried. We did the right thing. We have bigger problems now," Henry said, pointing at the encroaching zeds. They easily numbered into the double digits, and moved like a flood, fleeing, rather than hunting. Their growls hung in the air like the rumble of a propeller aircraft flying low overhead.

"What are we going to do with him?" Taron asked, looking at the man who was staring at him with wide-eyed horror.

"This," Hector said, stabbing the man through the temple without as much as a pause for final words.

"Jesus Christ," Taron cried out in surprise.

He shot to his feet, realizing his mistake immediately when the post-human flood turned and headed their way.

"Shit, we need to get back to the shelter," Henry said, turning to retreat.

While they had been busy tending to the wounded man, the zed flood had surrounded them; closing like a spreading fire, they inadvertently encircled their newly discovered prey.

There was no room for them to head back the way they came. Instead, they needed to move through the forest and the open areas that lay beyond. The other option being to engage the group, which none of the trio felt any inclination to do. Being vastly outnumbered by a horde of the undead did not promote an optimistic feeling of survival.

Taron set off toward the closing gap, knowing that not only did they need to make it through, but do so without drawing any more unwanted attention to themselves. Henry followed, with Hector bringing up the rear, dragging the dead body with him.

"What are you doing?" Henry asked, watching as Taron increased the distance between them.

"Saving our asses," Hector said, his accent coming through stronger when he was stressed.

He dropped the body and pulled out his knife. With a quick, sure motion, he slit open the man's belly, spreading the incision until everything that belonged on the inside leaked through to the outside. The rush of warm blood and innards tainted the air with a heavy, coppery aroma.

"We need to talk about this later on," Henry said, worried by the ease with which Hector did what he did.

"Sure thing, but don't tell me it didn't work. Look," he answered, pointing to the zombie group that was closing in on them, the tantalizing aroma of fresh meat drawing them in.

"Just run," Henry said, unwilling to admit that Hector was right.

They hurried off in the direction Taron had moved. He was no longer in their direct line of sight.

They broke away from the main group of the undead and soon found themselves following a hiking trail. The forest was filled with them, each one conveniently marked with colored placards.

They caught up with Taron, who, having noticed their lack of presence, turned and set up a watch, taking out three post-humans that had been stumbling away from the rest of the group.

"What happened? We had a clear run!" Taron asked when the pair finally appeared from one of the trails.

"We baited them," Hector said. "Let's get back to the shelter."

"We can't go back that way. There are too many of them," Taron said. "I've never seen a group this size before. It's like a goddamned herd."

They pushed on, following one of the trails, away from the group. Even with the main body behind them, the number of strays they came across was more than they had seen in the previous weeks combined. More than they had seen since leaving the city.

"Do you guys smell that?" Taron asked as he pulled an arrow out of the head of a heavy built zed. He had carried on walking a few paces even after the arrow had penetrated its skull.

"Fire," Hector and Henry answered in un-choreographed unison.

They broke into a run, sprinting past the lone posties, the fear of an inferno overriding the danger of a few lone zeds.

"Honey, get inside, lock the place down and whatever you do, don't go outside," Henry spoke into the walkie-talkie as they stopped to rest just on the edge of the trees.

"They are already in the camp," Vanessa answered, her voice hushed. "Everything is secure, but you can't come back, not yet, there are too many of them."

"I know, we skirted around them. We're on the edge of the woods. There is a fire or something driving them this way. Just stay put, and stay safe," Henry answered, replacing the walkie-talkie as they moved off once more.

The smell of the fire grew stronger, carried on the light wind that picked up as the day drew on. Yet the complete absence of smoke or ash told them the fire was some distance away, for now, at least.

They emerged from the forest and into the sprawling farmland that dominated the landscape between the big cities and the mountains that lay behind them. In the distance, a billowing cloud of black smoke obscured the city skyline. It plumed into the air, its mass so great and heavy the orange flames at its base seemed almost inconsequential.

"That must be what is driving them away," Henry said as he stood staring at the blaze.

"Just imagine how many there could be if that blaze reaches the city limits," Taron said. "It would drive millions of them out, scattering them into the wind."

"That's why we left. The city is a dangerous place. Letting it burn would be for the best if you think about it. They are mindless and slow. The fire would get a good bunch of 'em," Hector answered, watching through a pair of binoculars he pulled from his pack.

"Not enough of them," Taron answered, his words cold.

"Ain't that the truth," Hector said, turning to face the doctor.

"It looks like it's the power station," Henry said, peering through Hector's binoculars.

"I wonder what sent it up?" Taron asked, squinting, his eyes as keen as his skills with a knife.

"Probably just a surge. There's nobody left to man them places. They'll start to pop like corn in a pan before long," Hector said, turning just as a zed stumbled through the trees. He sliced its face clean off with a single blow, stomping on the brain that fell from the open-faced cranium, grinding the jellied mass into the ground like a cigarette butt.

"Dude," Taron said, watching as Hector scraped his shoe clean on a downed branch nearby.

"Come on, we need to circle back and try to make it back to the camp," Henry said, holding his rifle before him. "Let's keep clear of the trees and head up the old Blackthorn trail. It'll take a few hours, but that will bring us to the side of camp, and behind this flowing herd."

"Lord willing," Taron added, casting a quick glance up to the heavens.

Hector gave an impatient tisk but said nothing. As far as he was concerned his faith died with the rest of the world.

The walk back to the camp took them along the edge of the forest until they reached the river. The tide was strong, and it didn't take long before the first zed appeared, bobbing in the water like a tin can. It snapped and snarled, only staying afloat because of the gasses building up in its gut.

The men crossed the river, using the covered footbridge, and moved into the woods on the far side. The trees consumed them once again, and with the sun setting, a sense of urgency settled in. Not quite fear; that would be reserved for full darkness.

"Keep quiet, and keep your eyes open," Taron said. "We don't want them to come crashing down on us."

The sound of the rushing river had a soothing effect, but also served as a distraction, the rush of its tide masking the growls of the undead, potentially until it was too late.

One bunch passed close by but showed no inclination to attack. They stumbled along in the direction they happened to be facing. The herd appeared to have broken up, which resulted in numerous splinter factions forming. The post-humans showed no visible signs of bonding or being linked, yet there could be no denying their communal spirit.

Hector raised his machete and moved to strike at a stumbling zed. Its body was bent at an unnatural angle, the spine broken. From what they could see in the dim light, it was missing an arm.

Taron reached out and put a hand on Hector's shoulder. He squeezed hard and shook his head. Hector resisted, but as the zed shuffled away, Hector relented and turned back to them. "He was an easy kill," Hector whispered.

"Maybe, but what about them?" Taron said, pointing ahead of them where a group of half a dozen snarling, leather-clad, heavily bearded post-humans clumsily ambled their way. Both their numbers and their bulk promised to provide an interesting engagement. The blood caked into their beards proof that the group were more than capable of winning a skirmish.

"Get down," Henry said as the zeds' directionless stumbles brought them too close for comfort.

The group scrambled behind some trees, and for the first time, each of them was completely alone. While they knew the others were close by, the realization that they were not physically there, was a sobering one.

Henry pressed his back against the tree, holding his hunting knife, a simple Cold Steel Leatherneck six-inch blade. His hand was pressed against his chest, ready for a quick strike if needed. He felt exposed and alone. Even though his friends were only a tree trunk away, he could have been the last man on Earth in that moment and not felt any lonelier.

Henry's heart hammered in his chest as he heard them shuffling closer and closer, their growls a continual static-like noise that would surely drive anybody mad should they be caught among it long enough.

He heard a twig snap as the shuffling reached the trees. He held his breath, resisting the nearly overwhelming urge to close his eyes. He had to move. Once they reached the other side of his tree, one look back, for whatever reason, and they would see him.

Henry looked up. The sky grew darker and darker. Before long, they would be traveling blind. He

swallowed that portion of his fear away. *One problem at a time.*

Moving slowly, he circled around the trunk of his tree, taking small steps, careful not to lift his foot too far off the floor for fear of snapping a twig or creating some other sound that would alert them to his presence.

He felt a wave of relief wash over him when he realized not only had they walked by his location but also the trees that hid Hector and Taron.

They were not safe yet, however.

As the day robbed them of their sight, their other senses became keener. The rumble of the post-human masses grew around them. The woods were full, teeming with the undead.

"We need to get back to the shelter. We don't have the gear with us to camp, and I don't fancy our chances of just strolling around all night," Taron said as the three men stood together once more.

"Which way?" Hector asked, his voice showing the strains of the day.

While they had been working on the shelter for years, having found each other via online survivalist forums, they had not spent enough time mapping out the forest. They knew the trails and knew which way would lead them to what the fastest, but that was a different skill than finding your way through the trees under the cover of darkness.

"Well, we followed the trail to the river that's now to the southwest of us. The camp should be to the east or thereabouts. I guess about thirty or forty minutes if we keep a good pace and don't come across any more posties," Taron answered, almost without pausing for thought.

"Why am I not surprised you know all that," Hector said, his gruff exterior cracking in the prolonged company of his two friends.

"I just have a natural sense of direction," Taron answered. "You know, the same way you have a natural sense of justice and ... oh, wait, you don't."

The joke helped to relieve their stress levels a little, but silence soon fell among the group again as they set off through the trees.

When they first decided to set up a shelter, in the event of a world-ending crisis, they chose the spot in the forest for several reasons. One was the way the trees kept everything neatly secluded. Going off the trails would easily get someone lost unless they knew the area well enough.

The patch they had found was a natural clearing, which over the years they had thinned a little bit more. The shelter's primary entrance was on higher ground. They had the river within reach, which could be filtered and used for water, meaning their stores could be stretched even longer.

It took them several years to get it to the point where they first tried it out, spending a few days there, trapped with each other for company. The first couple of runs were awkward experiences, but they soon got into a rhythm and bonded with each other in ways regular friends in the world at that time rarely did.

Vanessa did not always join them, for James was a sickly child, and it was agreed by all that for the sake of the trials, it was not worth the risk of furthering whatever illness he had at the time.

While the main bulk of the initial post-human herd had moved through, there were enough hanging around to make their journey home a longer one than any had anticipated.

Hector all but walked into the arms of an overly affectionate older woman, her lipless face intent on kissing the inside of Hector's throat. She appeared from behind a tree, nearly jumping out like a child looking to scare her friends.

Henry reacted the quickest, not risking a strike with the knife, for fear of injuring his friend, but rather he shoved the amorous woman backward hard enough to create the distance needed for Taron to end her second attempt at life.

The blade silenced her growls with a slick wet sound, and while the darkness consumed her the moment she fell silent, they all heard the liquefied contents of her skull spill through the wound; dripping on the leaves like a leaking faucet.

The trio reached and crossed their perimeter defenses and felt a surge of relief at making it home in one piece. This was quashed the instant they saw the zeds milling around what equated to their front

yard.

The remains of the doe had been spread around, the carcass stripped bare of the meat, while thick congealed lumps of its innards lay scattered in various stages of consumption.

The group did not hear the men approach, but the scent of fresh meat alerted them before any attack could happen.

"Today just isn't our day, is it?" Hector said as he pulled out two knives from his weapons belt.

"I'm fucking tired of this. I want some food and a good night of sleep," Henry snapped in a rare burst of temper.

Grabbing his rifle, he fired four times. The soft plop of the gun and the muted bursting of the heads he targeted provided little in the way of stress relief, but he could not deny feeling better. Taron disposed of the other two zeds, his crossbow an even quieter weapon than Henry's suppressed rifle.

"Hey, no fair." Hector jabbed Taron with his elbow.

"Quit it, man, not tonight. Jesus Christ," Henry said, storming off toward the shelter.

"What got him so wound up?" Hector asked, kicking the closest downed zed in the head with his boot.

"Well, I can think of a few things, but why don't we save that for the morning," Taron answered, slapping his buddy on the shoulder.

Hector held back for a while, watching as the others reached the shelter and hammered on the door. Looking around, he stared at the bodies on the floor. Crouching down, he pulled the two arrows out of the skulls of Taron's victims. "They still don't get it," he said to the corpse, whose lifeless eyes stared at him, the mouth pulled back into a snarl as if even in true death, the hunger still lingered.

With the arrows clutched in one hand, Hector rose and followed after the others. The woods were still alive with the growl of post-humans. In the distance, the fire still raged, and the city that lay beyond it was plunged into darkness.

Vanessa opened the door on her husband's signal, wiping her eyes dry on her shirt. She knew it would not help. Terror consumed her the moment the zeds swept into the camp. She understood why they had not gotten in contact; it was not safe. That did not stop her from being afraid. She spent the day weeping through fear of what would happen if Henry died. She imagined James growing up without a father, her without a husband. The grief had been paralyzing.

Taking a deep breath, gathering herself, she opened the door. The moment her eyes met her husband's, her resolve broke and the tears came back with a vengeance.

"I thought you were dead," she wept, embracing her husband, melting into his embrace.

"It was close at times," he answered, kissing his wife on the cheek. "Where's James, is he safe? Are you?"

"He's asleep. He was worried about you," Vanessa answered, looking down toward the bedroom area.

"I'll go wake up him and let him know I'm safe," Henry answered, giving his wife a final kiss before he walked away into the shelter.

Vanessa, watching him go, turned just as Taron appeared in the doorway. They smiled at each other. "Come here, you," Vanessa said, pulling the doctor into a deep hug. "Where's Hector?"

"Oh, he's alive, but just dragging behind. He enjoyed himself a little too much out there," Taron said, detecting a slight trace of disappointment on Vanessa's face.

It was no secret that Vanessa was not overly fond of Hector, but she understood the need to have him around. His callous approach to life completed their group. From the homesteader, the brains, and the surgeon, they had everything covered to live. Having the cold-hearted way of the lawyer meant they had what it took to survive.