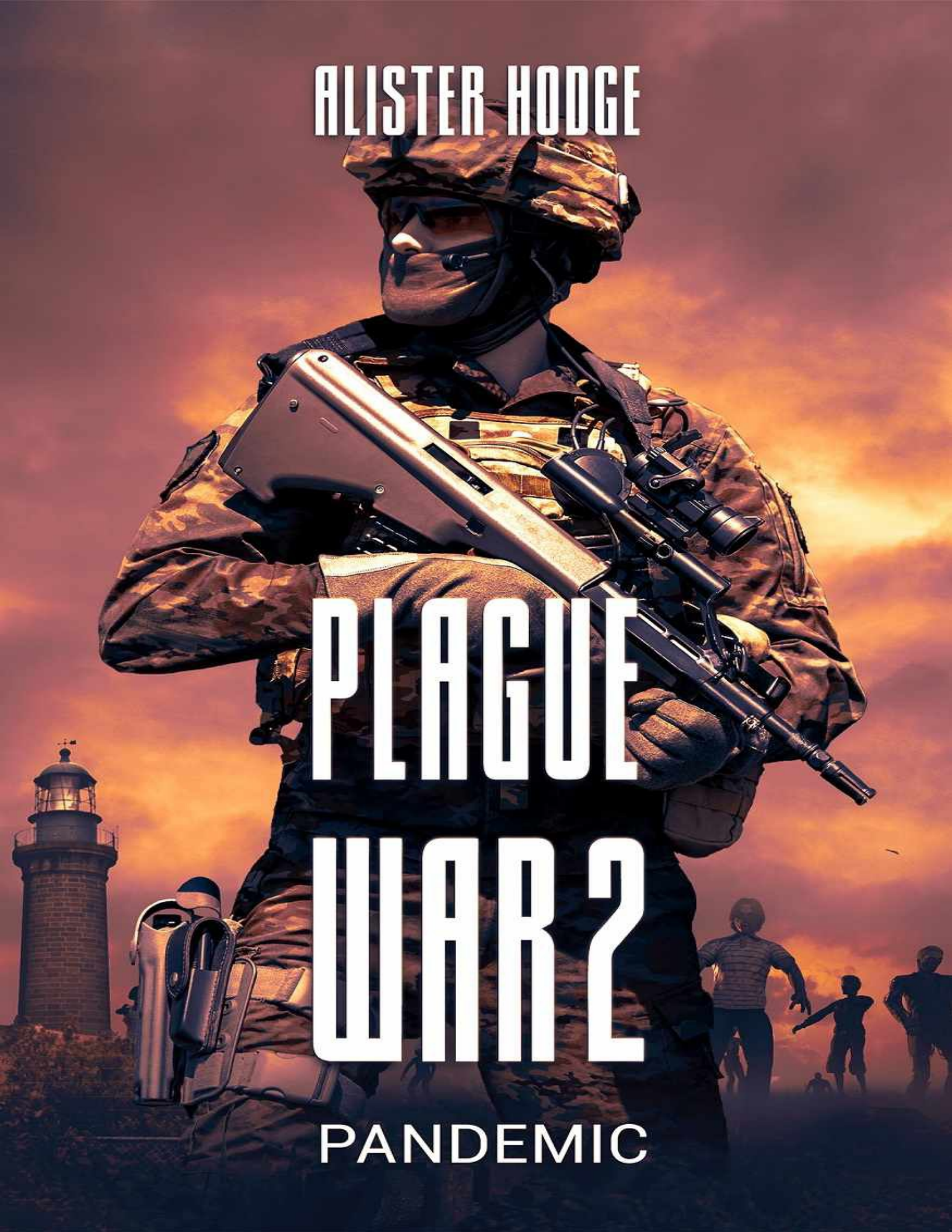




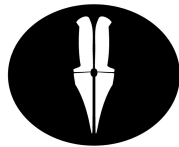
ALISTER HODGE

PLAGUE WAR 2

PANDEMIC

PLAGUE WAR: PANDEMIC

Alister Hodge



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Chapter One

Vinh sprinted across the winter beach and threw himself flat on the first rise of dunes. His breathing was harsh and chest tight as he looked along the foreshore for evidence of Carriers. Aside from his detachment of Marines, the only sign of life was a lone gull searching for food amongst the seaweed. A thick section of waist-high scrub blocked his view ahead of the plague-ridden town of Queenscliff. Thumps sounded to either side as the rest of his squad joined him on the grass-covered dune.

‘Damn that water was cold,’ muttered the soldier to his left, a bloke called Nate. ‘My balls feel like fucking ice cubes.’

Glancing over his shoulder, Vinh saw the boat, a seven-metre Rigid Hulled Inflatable, disappearing offshore to await their retrieval on completion of the mission. The craft had dropped them into chest deep water rather than risk beaching in the rough conditions.

‘Yeah, Command better have the weather forecast right. If we get stranded on shore when that front hits, I’ll be seriously pissed,’ said Vinh.

A heavy bank of grey clouds dominated the horizon above the entrance of Port Phillip Bay. The water had deteriorated in quality during their short transport from the Australian Navy Frigate, and an iron-grey swell was growing in size by the minute, fed by a southerly that whipped spray off the waves and up the beach.

The soldier to Vinh’s right slowly rose up on a knee and peered over the top of the scrub inland. A Sapper called Mark, he’d joined their detachment the previous day on secondment from the Army and was the only man amongst them with prior experience of fighting the Infected.

‘Do you see any?’

Mark just shook his head in a negative and crouched back on the dune.

‘Hey Vinh,’ whispered Nate. ‘I bet your Viet Cong grandpa would be proud of us. Invading an Australian beach with orders of shoot to kill, eh?’ he said with a smirk.

Vinh didn’t get angry, Nate was just a shit-stirrer by nature. They’d both been part of the 2nd Brigade RAR before it was retrained as an amphibious battalion, and the man was like a brother.

‘Piss off. You already know my parents were from the south. My grandfather fought *with* the Australians against the communists. And today hardly counts, the only people we’ll be shooting are technically dead.’

‘Sorry dude, I keep on forgetting that,’ said Nate, an expression of overplayed contriteness on his face.

‘Oi, you two,’ said their officer from behind. ‘Show some professionalism. Unless it’s mission related, shut the fuck up.’

Feeling suitably chastised, Vinh closed his mouth and tried to focus on the job again. His squad was tasked with completing a reconnaissance of Queenscliff prior to the deployment of a larger force. The Frigate to which he was assigned had been offshore when the virus sped across the country. Some pockets of resistance remained, but the vast majority of the population had been decimated in an orgy of violence. A rabies like disease called Lyssavirus had mutated and successfully transferred from bat to man with disastrous effects. In humans, the Lysan Plague as it had become known, rapidly overwhelmed the immune system leading to death. But, as the corpses refused to play by nature’s rules, that was where the trouble truly began. Plague victims reanimated with no human sensibilities remaining; in truth, 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 on their flesh. As the virus was transmitted via saliva in bites, the plague had spread like wildfire down the east coast and across the country. Brain destruction had proved the only method to kill the Infected permanently, as it disabled the virus’s control of the body.

Vinh had listened to the story a thousand times during the Frigate’s return from active service in the Indian Ocean. He’d even viewed footage of various massacres inflicted by Carriers; but still it seemed impossible, like an elaborate April fool’s joke gone wrong.

The officer climbed to a knee after one last look around and gathered his men closer to speak.

‘We stay on plan unless the situation changes; recon the marina, then head into town to estimate numbers in the main swarm. After that, we return here for extraction by boat. Avoid shooting where possible. There are only ten of us and the bastards are attracted to noise of any sort. I don’t want to draw a crowd of those freaks if I can help it.’

The officer made eye contact with each of his men as he talked, and the reality of the mission appeared to be sinking in, as each settled and returned his gaze unwaveringly.

‘Ok, let’s get this done,’ he said, rising to his feet.

The men spread out, each separated by two metres as they entered the scrub. The tough weave of their grey camouflage uniforms protected the men from the worst of the spiny dune grass as they pushed forward. Breath plumed in the dawn air. Spring was due to start within the week, but so far, winter clung greedily onto the land. Within minutes, the coastal scrub gave way to parkland.

Pine trees reared high above the ground, spreading umbrella-like canopies of green needles. The sodden grass underfoot was short, its growth naturally stunted by the winter despite the lack of park maintenance.

Movement caught Vinh’s eye to the north and he saw two shambling figures moving aimlessly with slow steps. He raised a hand and pointed out the threat. The soldier closest to the enemy trotted forward to a tree trunk, took a knee and lifted his rifle. Two suppressed rounds zipped forward, and the figures dropped to the ground, brains obliterated. The group moved on again, rifles lifted to their shoulders, ready for the next encounter.

Vinh passed one of the corpses. Shadows cast by the morning light had prevented a clear view of their bodies until now. He felt the hair rise on the back of his neck and his stomach clench. The Carrier lay face up, opaque eyes staring at the clouds above. The Infected didn’t blink, resulting in ongoing abrasions to the cornea’s surface until it lost transparency. It had been a woman of retirement age. Grey hair was tangled, a dried mess of gore and dirt overhanging the trauma of her face. Her left cheek was gnawed away, broken teeth and mandible open to the air. Vinh’s eyes dropped lower, drawn to the rest of her body. The corpse wore only a t-shirt, the right side torn open exposing a mangled breast, the top half of which had been ripped free to hang like a shelf over her nipple. Fat white thighs dimpled with cellulite emerged from the lower margin of the shirt. Interestingly, there was no sign of rot on the corpse. The virus had been active now for over six weeks and Vinh was surprised to see little sign of decomposition. He’d seen numerous dead combatants before, and within a day of being left in the open, the bodies started to swell and distort.

A short, low whistle forced him to look up. Nate hooked a finger at him to catch up. Allowing himself to become distracted, he’d fallen behind the

advancing line. Vinh quickened his stride and retook his place.

With no other Carriers in sight, the officer increased speed. The line advanced at a jog, eating the ground as they proceeded toward the marina. The group soon arrived at a road in gridlock: cars abandoned with doors open, belongings strewn on the ground. Along the Australian coast, ports and marinas had been overwhelmed with thousands of people desperate to escape the slaughter on land. Unfortunately, such gluts of warm flesh had lured the Infected like sharks to bloody water, turning frightened crowds into orgies of violent death.

The marina's car park started on the far side of the road. It was crammed with haphazardly parked vehicles, abandoned by their owners without a second thought as they sprinted for the boats. The team slowed their rate and began to walk through the maze, wary of Carriers hidden from sight.

A startled grunt came from Vinh's left. His gaze flicked toward the sound in time to see one of his mates jerked down and out of sight. Vinh changed direction, darting around a car to lend support. The soldier lay on his back, frantically trying to extract his foot from under the sedan. A teenage Carrier, pinned to the tarmac under a car wheel, had grabbed the soldier's boot and wrenched him off his feet. Its lips were pulled up, exposing teeth as it snarled like a beast. The soldier kicked out, hammering his heel into the creature's face as he scrambled for his dropped gun. A second wrench from the Carrier drew the soldier's foot to its mouth, teeth clamping onto his leather boot ineffectually. Vinh leant over the marine, jammed the muzzle of his rifle against the Carrier's skull and pulled the trigger. The creature fell away, slumping onto the concrete minus half its skull.

Vinh stretched out a hand to help the soldier stand, an eighteen-year-old who had the dubious honour of being the youngest squad member.

'Thanks Vinnie, I bloody owe you,' he said, grimacing as he stooped to reclaim his weapon, a Browning Hi-Power pistol.

Vinh shrugged it off while eyeing a halo of blood and brain about the pinned corpse. 'There's no training for shit like this.'

The officer waited for Vinh to indicate they were ok before the group continued, making its way through the rest of the car park without further incident. At the end, a long narrow building blocked their view of the marina. Cautiously, they edged around the structure to find the port a gutted carcass of its former glory.

The marina was huge, holding over 200 berths. Short piers extending

from the bank every sixty metres in the shape of a giant wide-toothed comb. Fire had taken hold at some point, spreading along the wooden jetties to the boats, many of which now lay partially submerged at their moorings with only blackened shards of timber stretching above the water like scorched bones. A strip of restaurants along the boardwalk were in ruin, their smashed windows coating the ground in a million glittering shards in the morning sun. Beyond the piers lay a narrow channel providing access to the bay. Three large yachts had come to grief within this passage of water, their sunken hulls blocking all movement in or out of the marina. The wreckage would have to be cleared before the Navy could take advantage of the facilities.

A crash of ceramic plates echoed from the Beach Cafe off to the right. Something was moving in the depths of the restaurant. Their officer indicated for them to pull back; enough had been seen to know the marina was useless to the Navy in its current condition.

They returned to the parkland, jogging along the edge until they came to Hobson St, a narrow road leading to the main thoroughfare of Queenscliff. Avoiding the street itself, the group went down the side of a house before jumping its rear fence. The squad found themselves in the back garden of a magnificent two-storey red brick building. They crouched against the fence line for a moment, listening for movement. Rewarded with silence, the officer climbed onto the back porch to try the door. The handle protested with a light squeak as the catch released. He stood to the side and pointed a finger at Vinh and Nate to come forward.

Vinh grasped the handle in his left hand, his right holding the Browning pistol at the ready. Nate stood at his shoulder, rifle raised. He pushed open the door and the two men entered, each scanning opposite sides of the room for danger. Nothing. Vinh exhaled and waved in the rest of his detachment.

In a jarring change from the colonial era façade of the building, stainless steel bench tops and cabinetry of a commercial kitchen lined the walls of the room in which they stood, giving evidence of the building's most recent use as a large-scale bed and breakfast accommodation. At the far end of the kitchen lay a staircase to the second level, and beside this, a hallway leading to the front door. The building faced the main street of Queenscliff where an air force flyover had sighted a large accumulation of Carriers two weeks previously.

Nate remained with the officer in the kitchen to guard the front entrance, while the rest of the group kept their retreat free outside. Vinh and Mark were

sent up to the second level to observe the street.

Vinh led the way, placing each foot gently to avoid making the steps creak. The staircase was dark, the bulbs above extinguished long ago when the electricity stations went off line. By the time he reached the landing, his eyes had adjusted to the meagre light. A wide hallway with walnut timber floors traversed the entire width of the second floor. Closed doorways faced onto the hall from either side at regular intervals, while thick curtains blocked the windows at either end of the hallway, effectively muting the only sources of light.

Vinh grasped the handle of the bedroom opposite the stairs and twisted the knob; it gave way and the door opened without a sound. Beyond a voluptuous double bed, the room had a tall rectangular window with a street view. The curtains were pulled wide, allowing light to flood the room, harsh after the hallway's darkness. Vinh squinted against the sudden change as he moved forward. A quick inspection proved the room to be empty and he changed his focus back to the window and street outside.

He paced up to the glass and peered down. Breath caught at the back of his throat and stomach muscles clenched. The street was packed, jammed from one side to the other with a slowly milling crowd of the dead. Without target, they shuffled aimlessly, bumping into each other randomly before moving on again. Even at distance, he could see individual traumas committed during the transfer of infection. Many carried significant disfigurement: amputated limbs, disembowelment and de-gloving injuries common amongst the throng.

Vinh made himself swallow gluey spit and refocus on the task at hand. He needed a rough estimate of numbers. The rest of the town had appeared largely deserted until now, so it was likely that the swarm below constituted the vast majority of Carriers inhabiting Queenscliff. The narrow window obstructed much of his view in either direction. He reached to test the latch in the middle of the frame, when a hand grabbed hold of his shoulder from behind, causing Vinh to jump with surprise. He looked back and found Mark shaking his head at him.

'Don't do it. If that crowd hears the window move, they'll surround us in seconds.'

'I don't want to, but we need to know how many of them there are – it's the whole bloody reason we're here. If we get the information wrong, it's not just our lives on the line further down the track.'

Mark ground his teeth together. 'Fine, get it done so we can get the fuck out of here,' he muttered.

Vinh re-holstered his pistol, then took off his helmet and rested it on the bed. He rubbed one hand up his forehead, wiping a slick of sweat into his short black hair. Forcing himself to breathe evenly, he pulled out a small digital camera, turned back to the window and eased the catch open. Gripping the base of the window frame, he slowly inched it upwards. The wood squeaked lightly in protest. Vinh glanced downwards nervously, but the sound went unnoticed. He continued until a reasonable gap existed, then eased his head through the space and looked to the left and right. He could see roughly two blocks in either direction and the view didn't get any better. There were thousands of Carriers blocking the street. Queenscliff's population had doubled with those trying to flee the plague via the town's marina. He took a few quick photos of the street in either direction.

From downstairs came a sudden high-pitched scream. Vinh flinched in surprise, hitting the top of his head against the frame. The Carriers below reacted to the noise. Those closest to the house turned in the direction of the cry. Slack jawed, expressionless faces of moments before, were now transformed into a rictus of anger. The scream issued again, and suddenly the crowd was on the move, lurching and shoving into each other as they sought to enter the property in search of the noise.

Vinh pulled his head back into the room and looked back at his teammate. 'We've got to get out of here, the whole bloody street's coming our way,' he said. 'What the hell's going on downstairs?'

Vinh didn't get an answer, Mark was already running to investigate. He followed, taking the stairs two at a time as he sprinted for the back door.

Nate leant against the doorway of the kitchen, watching Vinh creep up the stairs to the second floor. The sooner they were out of this house, the better. He hated old places, too often there was an invisible stain of emotion left behind by the different lives that had passed through. It was something that he couldn't explain rationally to himself, let alone anyone else. And this house was filthy with it, a cold sensation that made his balls clench like he'd waded into ice water. Something bad had happened here, and whatever remained of it was furious.

A scrabbling sound came from the cupboard beneath the sink, nails against the wood panelling.

‘I fucking hate rats.’

The officer smirked at his comment. ‘I find that hard to believe. I seem to recall photos of you with some massive python about your neck.’

‘Snakes I can handle, but rats just make my skin crawl. They eat fuckin’ babies, Sir.’

‘Ah bullshit, Nate. I’d be more worried about what’s on the street,’ he said as he walked across the kitchen to the cupboard in question.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Nate.

‘Scaring the rodent off, so you can stop pissing your pants,’

‘I didn’t say I was scared, just that I’m no fan of them,’ said Nate, annoyed at the officer’s condescending tone.

The Lieutenant leant down to the handle and gave it a tug. Nothing. A plastic child lock held the door closed. Inside the cupboard, the scrabbling redoubled, causing the panel to tremble.

‘Looks like your rats have made the most of the carrion about town, this bastard must be a monster,’ he said, pulling apart the lock mechanism.

Lock removed, the door suddenly burst open, spilling the body of a small child onto the ground, a girl of no more than three years. The child was frightfully thin, stick like wrists and ankles poking out of its clothes. It sat itself up with shaking arms. Long brown hair was messed over its face, obscuring a clear view of its features. As if noticing the officer for the first time, the head snapped up to look at him. It lifted its arms and reached out like it wanted to be picked up.

‘Jesus... I can’t believe it’s still alive after all this time,’ said the officer as he holstered his pistol and moved toward the child.

‘Sir, I wouldn’t do that. No child survives for a month on air,’ said Nate.

‘It must have had food and water locked in with it. The poor thing’s emaciated.’

The officer leant down and picked the child up, bringing it to his shoulder. He reached up a hand and brushed away the hair from its face.

Suddenly the child darted forward, locking tiny sharp teeth about the officer’s index finger. He cried out in pain, dropping the body to the floor in surprise. The child retained its grip on his finger, madly shaking its head from side to side as the teeth were driven deeper. In desperation, the officer wrenched his hand to the left, sending the child flying into the kitchen wall

with a crash.

He looked down at his hand; the finger was gone, torn away at the first joint. Rhythmic spurts of crimson jetted from the severed digital arteries of his finger. The officer jammed his other hand over the wound, clamping down to stop the haemorrhage.

The child lurched to its feet. Hair still partially covered its face, but no longer in a fuzzed-up bird's nest. The brown locks were plastered to the right cheek with blood, covering one eye. The other remained fixed on the officer while it crunched through his finger which was still sticking out its mouth. The child stretched its neck back, then gagged down the digit like a bird swallowing a large worm. Throat now clear, it opened its mouth and screamed, a cry of pure rage that froze the officer, leaving him rooted to the ground, immobile.

Mark darted from the stairwell, shoved his pistol against the child's head and pulled the trigger. The scream was abruptly cut off as the body crumpled to the ground, inert. Nate and the officer stared at Mark, aghast at his intervention.

'The kid was infected – you know as well as I do a bullet's the only treatment,' said Mark. He pointed to the front of the building. 'We've got to get going. The streets packed out there, and they're heading our way.'

Steps thundered down the staircase. Vinh paused at the doorway as he noticed the small body on the floor. 'What the hell happened?'

'I thought it was an abandoned child,' said the officer. 'I was wrong,' he added, holding up his hand.

Vinh winced as he viewed the ragged stump. Everyone in the room knew what the injury meant. He was dead, it was only a matter of time until he succumbed to the virus and became another recruit to the hordes of Infected.

A crash sounded from the front of the building. Nate spun around, looking toward the front door. The window next to the entrance imploded, a Carrier falling through the frame. It got to its knees, a snarl issuing from its mouth as it looked up at the soldiers in the kitchen.

'Make for the beach at the double. I'll radio for pickup en route. If I turn into one of those bastards – take me out,' said the officer.

As the creature rose to standing in the front hall, the men ran for the back door, jumping off the porch onto the grass in their haste to be gone. A maddening growl of rage emanated from the main street, issued from a thousand mouths as the milling crowd transformed into a swarm of rabid

monstrosities.

Vinh hauled himself over the back fence, the structure shuddering under the bodies of the rest of his squad. Inadvertently, he looked backward before he dropped to the other side. Down either side of the building came a stream of the Infected. Vinh's eye was drawn to the first in line, a Carrier that had been an elderly man, naked except for a filth encrusted pair of underpants. A garden stake poked from his obese gut, wagging obscenely with each step. Vinh dropped to the ground, gladly removing the sight from his vision. Almost immediately, hammer-fisted blows of the Carriers rocked the fence. Boards started to splinter as the soldiers sprinted past the next house for the park.

While the squad had been inside, the storm front had arrived. As they ran through the park, gusting wind transformed the foliage of the trees to thrashing life, branches writhing like the limbs of a tortured animal in the gale. Nate and Vinh crashed through the coastal scrub as they hit the sand dunes at the far side of the park. Rough sand particles thrown by the wind needled their faces as the men emerged onto the shore.

There would be no escape this way. The choppy water of a few hours prior, had been transformed by the oncoming storm into a beach of dangerous surf.

'Looks like they fucked up that weather forecast, Sir,' spat Nate.

The officer ignored him and unclipped his radio from his webbing.

'We need an alternative location for pick up. The beach's a mess, there's no way a boat can get in safely. What's your recommendation?' The officer pressed the receiver up against his ear to listen to the reply from command over the howling wind. He nodded on hearing his order. 'Will do, we'll be ready for extraction on the pier within ten minutes. Out.'

'What's the plan, Sir?' asked Vinh.

The officer was looking rough. His face was red and fat beads of sweat rolled down from his forehead, only to be ripped away by the wind. He lifted his hand and pointed down the beach to the north. 'We make for the pier. They're sending a Seahawk to pick you guys up.'

'All of us, don't you mean, Sir?' Vinh asked.

'I'm bitten. We can't afford the risk of infection aboard the main ship, so I'll be covering the withdrawal. The pier makes sense; we only have to hold a ten-metre span while waiting for the chopper.'

The snarling rage of the approaching swarm could now be heard over the

wind. They were getting close.

‘We need to go before they cut us off. Move!’ shouted the officer.

The men launched into a sprint along the beach. The first Carriers emerged from the scrub above where they had been, tumbling down the dune in their haste to reach the warm flesh of the Marines. Within moments the beach was packed from water’s edge to the scrub line, as the Infected trailed fifty metres behind the small group of soldiers.

Vinh and Nate were in the lead of the small squad. Coming to the base of the pier, they shoved their rifles through the railings onto the wooden slats, then clambered over the top of the low barrier. They reached down to help pull their mates over the edge. Nate glanced to the shore and felt hair rise on the back of his neck. The start of the pier was no longer empty but teeming with pallid ghouls heading their way from the park beyond.

The squad thundered across the springing slats toward the end of the pier. A long weatherboard building covered the pier for roughly thirty metres before opening to the air once more. Spray was lifted off the waves below and flung in their faces as they reached the end of the structure. Turning around once more, they faced the oncoming mob of Infected.

‘Fix bayonets!’ roared the officer. Metal rasped as each soldier pulled a wickedly sharp knife free to fix on the end of their rifle. ‘Make your shots count, remember, nothing but the head will stop these bastards.’

The officer took a knee and aimed at the front-runners of the attacking horde. ‘Shoot at will!’ he shouted.

The squad formed a line behind him, taking side on shooting stances and opened fire. The noise was deafening with so many rifles firing in close confines, stunning eardrums to a high-pitched tinnitus whine. Carriers filled the ten-metre width of the pier, jostling against each other in their eagerness to attack. As rifles fired, the front line of Carriers fell to a person. The Infected directly behind tripped over the bodies, sprawling on the wooden slats. The marksmanship of the soldiers was supreme, shot after bloody shot smashing skull and brains. But still they lost ground. Slowly, the Carriers advanced through sheer weight of numbers, crawling over the carcasses of the fallen, oblivious to the torn and mangled bodies beneath as their hands slipped in entrails and mushed brain.

The sound of chopper blades gained Vinh’s attention. A grey Seahawk was skimming across the foaming waves to their position. They had less than forty metres of the pier free of Carriers and would have to risk advancing

closer to give it room to land. The officer evidently realised the same thing, waving the line forward and advancing to within fifteen metres of the enemy.

The blades of the chopper buffeted their backs as it landed on the end of the pier, the structure groaning under the weight of the huge machine. The officer waved his men back, and two by two they turned and ran for the doors of the helicopter until the Lieutenant was left on his own. With the decrease in opposition, the Infected quickly gained ground, advancing as the chopper lifted off.

The officer fell back while keeping a continuous rate of fire. The Seahawk hovered to the left of the pier, and the pilot now directed the helicopter's machine gun onto the swarm. Wood splintered from the hand railings, exploding as large rounds punched through and onward to the bodies of the Infected, mowing them down like wheat before a blade in an attempt to protect the Lieutenant.

The officer's magazine ran dry, forcing him to change weapons. He let the rifle drop to his side, hanging by its sling as he drew his service pistol. He continued to fire as his back bumped up against the final barrier. He'd run out of room to retreat. Hands reached hungrily for him, chipped and blood-stained teeth snapped as rancid breath gusted into his face from the corpses, now within arm's reach.

His pistol clicked dully on an empty chamber.

The officer pulled back up his rifle, shoving the bayonet forward into the torso of a Carrier. The blade jammed, caught between two ribs, stealing the use of his last weapon. He was engulfed by the Infected. One of the ghouls clamped an iron bracelet of fingers about his wrist, jerking him forward into a savage embrace. His other arm was wrenched out by another Carrier, pulling the wrist into its mouth. He screamed as the pack of mindless dead gouged meat from his body in countless locations.

'You can't let him die like that!' yelled Vinh.

The chopper pilot clenched his jaw and swept the machine gun towards the officer, punching holes of crimson through his chest and blasting the Carriers from his body. The Lieutenant slumped to the ground, dead. Most of the Infected surrounding were only temporarily stopped by the passage of bullets. They now dragged torn bodies back to the officer, intent on continuing their feast.

Seeing that the officer was no longer moving, the pilot turned his craft away and headed back to the Frigate, the pier and Queenscliff receding

behind them as they sped over the waters of Port Phillip Bay.

Vinh slumped backward against the wall of the cabin, looking blankly ahead. He had escaped, but it was only a momentary reprieve. The main invasion force would land within a fortnight, and he'd be counted within its numbers.

Mark nudged his ankle with his foot, distracting him from his depressive thoughts. Vinh looked up, his mind still reeling at what he'd seen.

'That your first contact with the plague?' asked Mark.

Vinh nodded, unable to form any words.

'I know it doesn't seem it, but we did ok back there. Ten men into a town of thousands? I didn't think we'd be coming back,' Mark said, his face weary.

Vinh turned away. He wasn't in any state to start looking for silver linings just yet.

Chapter Two

‘It’s just not fair, Jai,’ said Erin, irritably tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. ‘Why do I have to go all the way to King Island? Surely they can let me stay here?’

Jai and his sister were alone in one of the evacuee dorms at Jindabyne. Six bunks were crammed into the room, leaving barely a shoulder’s width between each set. The two siblings sat on the bottom of one bed, backs against a wall with knees drawn to their chests.

‘It’s a good thing, though isn’t it? I mean you’ll be safe there, and it’s only temporary. You’ll be moved to Tasmania before you know it – and that’s the only state free of the infection. It’s what we have fought for,’ said Jai.

‘Not if only one of us is going! They’re treating me like a kid and not giving me any choice at all. What happened to the cadet program the recruitment lady talked about? She said I’d have the chance to train, that I’d be important for the fight in the future.’

‘I don’t know; they mustn’t have it set up yet.’

‘Well how come they’re letting you stay? You’re not old enough to join the army either,’ said Erin in frustration.

Jai took a slow breath. He was determined not to fight with his sister right before saying goodbye. For all he knew, this might be the last time they’d see each other in person.

‘On the paperwork I’m eighteen. Old enough to fight.’

‘But you’re not, you’re sixteen,’ said Erin, protesting.

‘It doesn’t matter. I’m as tall and strong as half the men enlisting. They don’t care how old I am, as long as I’m willing and able to fight – they’ll take me.’

‘Well, it’s still not fair,’ Erin said, grim resignation setting in finally. ‘I’m nearly thirteen. With everything we’ve had to do so far, I’m not a child anymore.’

‘No, you’re my sister, and I’m going to miss you like all hell,’ said Jai, putting his arm around her shoulders and giving her a hug.

The door to the room grated against the floorboards as it swung open. Steph poked her head around the corner, then spotted them in the far corner.

‘Hey, are you two coming to breakfast? Everyone’s waiting.’

Jai gave his sister another quick squeeze, then shoved forward off the bed.

‘Yeah. I’m bloody starving,’ he answered as he turned back, offering Erin a hand to stand up with. She sighed, then accepted the gesture and allowed herself to be pulled upright. Steph held open the door for them as the two teenagers filed through into the hallway.

Harry was leaning against a wall, waiting for them outside the evacuee cafeteria.

‘Come on guys, the smells coming through that door have been torturing me!’ he said.

Steph just grinned and pushed open the door. ‘Nobody’s stopping you. Feel free to go in and stuff your face.’

Harry just grunted and followed Steph and the kids in. The group joined the line-up to the kitchen. The room was warm, with electric heaters hanging from the walls in various locations above long trestle tables. At the end of the room was a stainless-steel serving area, where kitchen staff ladled food onto waiting plates. The group filed past in turn, mouths watering as scrambled egg, bacon, mushrooms and toast was portioned out.

They found an empty stretch of seats at one of the long tables and sat together. Conversation was abandoned as each filled their mouths, revelling in the taste of the fresh food after the previous month’s rations of canned crap.

Harry finished first, virtually inhaling the food on his plate. He got up and returned with a round of coffees, strong and black. Slouching back in his chair, he cradled his cup in two hands and blew at the surface gently, steam curling away from his lips.

‘Have you heard anything more about where Mark got sent?’ he asked.

The group had been debriefed the day after arriving, their individual stories recorded and examined for information that could help fight against the Infected. Mark had been deployed mere hours after his interview, barely getting a chance to say goodbye to the group.

‘Nothing concrete,’ Steph said. ‘Some sort of frontline operation.’

‘I’ve been given a deployment notice myself, they’re sending me to

Victoria later this morning.'

'What for?' asked Jai.

'Hasn't been a lot of detail thrown my way,' said Harry, 'but, from what I've heard, there's an invasion force entering a town called Queenscliff, trying to get a foothold there before taking on the main target – Geelong.'

'What's so important about Geelong?' asked Steph.

'Makes sense as a location I guess, it's got a deep port and is directly across Bass Strait from Tasmania. There's been large-scale car manufacturing there by Ford until recently. When it shut down, the site owners managed to win a military contract to build armoured personnel carriers. I'd bet that's what the army's after, the production of large numbers of those vehicles will be critical for a land war against the Infected. If they alter the troop-carrying section, they'd be like a moving fortress, allowing soldiers to cull those walking bastards from relative safety,' said Harry.

'How come you're not doing a training camp, Harry?' asked Steph. 'Jai and I are locked into a couple of weeks here under some Full Metal Jacket wannabe.'

'I let slip about my background in emergency medicine during the debrief. Once they heard my work history, they transferred me to the medical corps. They've got bugger all medical backup, so I'll be following behind the troops fixing up what I can. I still haven't heard what they plan to do with soldiers bitten by Carriers though.'

'It's the army, Harry. They'll be ruthless to prevent avoidable attacks behind the line. Kind of changes the dynamic of 'no-one left behind' though, when you're only being returned to be euthanized,' said Steph.

'Ah, well. I guess we'll find out soon enough,' sighed Harry. 'What about you, Erin? I hear you're being evacuated to Tasmania – that's awesome news.'

Erin looked up at the mention of her name, her bottom lip trembling like she was about to cry. 'No, it's not! I don't know anyone there and I'm leaving you all behind where you might still get hurt. And anyway, I got told last night that Tasmania's still too scared that we might bring the plague, so we're getting sent to King Island in Bass Strait for quarantine.'

'Well at least it can't be any colder than here,' said Steph as she gave Erin's shoulder a gentle squeeze. A weak smile flickered on Erin's face. She was a tough kid, and Harry knew she was doing her best to keep it together.

Harry looked at his watch. 'Shit, we've got to get going. Erin - we're due

on a bus in half an hour. How about we all meet out the front in twenty minutes, leave the goodbyes until then?’

Harry walked outside and dumped his duffle bag on the ground against the wall. The air was bitterly cold despite a blue sky and shining sun. Jindabyne was above the snow line in the Australian Alps, a gateway town to the ski fields of New South Wales. Harry was wearing a thick olive-green jacket over the regular field uniform. He pulled his beanie further down to cover his ears, zipped the jacket up to his chin and sat down on his bag to wait for the others.

Dull footsteps sounded on the path. Harry looked to the side, and saw his cousin Steph approach, trailed by Jai and Erin. On the road next to them, a bus pulled up to the curb and eased to a halt.

‘Looks like we’ll be spared any drawn-out goodbyes then,’ said Steph, trying to sound upbeat.

Harry found his mouth dry. When so many other Australians had fallen, the group had watched each other’s back for the past month and survived. ‘Look after yourselves, ok?’ he said as he shook Jai’s hand. ‘Your sister will hang out with me until Avalon airport – I think that’s where you change plane for King Island, isn’t it Erin?’ The girl nodded, looking utterly miserable.

Jai gave his sister a last hug, before letting her go to stand with Harry. Steph gave her and Harry a tight hug. ‘Stay safe. Until next time, yeah?’

Harry nodded, lost for words. Goodbyes always sucked, better to just have it finished with. He leant down to pick up his bag then boarded the bus, followed closely by Erin.

Steph and Jai stood on the curb for a few moments longer, then left to make their own meeting for the onset of recruit training. Jai cuffed at his eyes with the back of one hand.

‘It’s the dry alpine air, bloody irritating my eyes too,’ said Steph with a gravelly voice and forced smile as she gave Jai a reassuring squeeze on his shoulder. ‘Let’s go start this shitty training camp, eh?’

Chapter Three

Jai got out of the army truck and stretched his hands above his head as he yawned. He and Steph had been allocated to the same platoon of recruits after the others had departed. They had left their few belongings, now reduced to army issued gear, in a long barracks filled with simple metal beds and thin mattresses. Their fellow recruits were a mixed bag of men and women ranging in age from sixteen to sixty-five. Most were from south coast towns, but there were a few that had made it from Sydney.

A training Sergeant had completed a brief roll call, then loaded them on two Unimog trucks without explanation. A bench seat ran along both walls of the back tray, with a canvas roof above. It did little to block out the bitter cold as the truck took them on a thirty-minute trip outside of Jindabyne, higher toward the ski fields.

Steph climbed down from the Unimog's tray and stood on the side of the road next to Jai. He rubbed his hands together then leant forward to blow warm air into them, trying to bring back sensation to his fingers. Glancing up, Jai noted a series of long wooden buildings. The Sergeant stood at the entrance to the nearest one, arms crossed, waiting. He was middle aged, with steel peppering his moustache and the visible hair extending from under a beret. There wasn't the slightest suggestion of softness about the man; his body was hard from thirty years of service, and eyes humourless. He finally lost patience with the last few recruits leaving the truck.

'If you're all quite finished wasting the army's time, get your arses over here. Now!'

It had the desired effect, as each recruit bolted towards him. He looked at the group, slowly scanning their faces. Whatever he'd been searching for, the recruits apparently lacked it, as he shook his head in disappointment.

'It's my job to turn you into soldiers worthy of an ADF uniform. Whatever life you previously had, forget it. You're all voluntary conscripts, and as such, the army owns you for the next four years.' He paused, eyes drifting over the group for a moment. 'We have a war ahead of us like no other, and I'm going to teach you all how to fight and survive from one battle to the next. So, that being said, let's meet the enemy.' The Sergeant swung the door wide open and stood to the side, indicating for the group to move

inside.

Jai and Steph stepped through the wooden doorway into a windowless room, the far wall lost in shadow. Hands pressed into their backs from the recruits behind, pushing them deeper into the room until all stood inside. As Jai and Steph's eyes adjusted to the light, rows of chairs emerged from the gloom. The room was hot compared to outside, and within moments Jai felt a prickle of sweat on his forehead.

'Move in and take a seat,' ordered the Sergeant.

The recruits filed forward, using touch as much as sight to find a seat. Once the last person had sat down, the Sergeant closed the door, plunging the room into absolute darkness. Everyone was silent, waiting with vague unease for the training session to begin. From the end of the room, came the sounds of a person slowly walking in uneven, shuffling paces: loose wooden boards groaning under its feet.

'In many ways, the war you're going to fight is simple,' said the Sergeant in a low voice. 'The difficult thing will be making yourself stand when all you want to do is run. The core skill that I will be teaching you, is how to control your fear.'

With a click, the Sergeant switched on the fluorescent lights above, twin tubes flickering into existence to bathe the long room in light. Twenty paces distant to the group, stood a wide metal cage lined with cyclone wire mesh. Inside was a Carrier, facing away from them, head stooped as it bumped into the far side of the cage. It was formidable in size, a man over six foot in height. It had a shaved head, the hypoxic white of its scalp marred only by a spattering of blood, dried to the colour of rust. Part of its right ear was missing, the bottom half removed in a crescent shaped bite. The Sergeant walked towards the cage, his features relaxed. Reaching the wire, he gave it a sharp kick with his foot then stepped back out of reach. The Carrier spun about, seeking out the noise that had disturbed its solitude. Unblinking eyes centred on the Sergeant, and it attacked. Four rapid lurching steps brought it to the edge of the cage. It smashed two fists against the wire, trying to reach the soldier, then opened its mouth and released an incoherent scream of rage. Fingers grasped onto the cage and began to shake the sides violently. Ignoring the creature's efforts, the Sergeant turned his back on it and faced the recruits once more. His face remained passive, although he now gripped his service pistol lightly in his right hand.

'Take a look at our enemy, one of many that we picked up on the

highway for your training purposes. This is but a single example of millions that now swarm our country,’ said the Sergeant.

Behind him the Carrier emitted a deafening snarl, shaking the cage in an attempt to break through. Someone let out a gasp of fear, and chair legs scraped on the floor as several recruits unconsciously pushed backward to increase their distance from the ghoul. Jai looked to his side at Steph. Her face remained calm, however, her lips were parted as her breath rate increased, the only subtle clues that she was experiencing the same fear as him.

He looked back at the cage, scanning the margins of the structure to satisfy himself that the Carrier was unlikely to escape. Happy that the creature was well secure, he redirected his attention to the Sergeant once more.

‘This is what you have joined up to fight, and if you’re anything like me, to exact vengeance for the murders of family that we have all suffered. Take a good look. Although it looks human, it’s not anymore.’ The Sergeant’s voice began to gain volume as the disgust he felt for the creature behind him became evident. ‘It’s dead – whatever made it human is gone. And for us, that’s a good thing. It means it’s dumb as shit and predictable.’ He paused and sighed. ‘But it also means that we’ve had to learn how to fight a different type of war.’

The Sergeant turned back to the Carrier, raised his pistol and shot the creature through the knee. A few recruits jolted in their seats, surprised by the casual violence of their teacher. The Sergeant acknowledged their reaction.

‘This session isn’t about torture, it’s to make a point about how your war will be different to any other we’ve fought, different to any war in human history.’

Behind him the Carrier tried to stand on the damaged knee, however it buckled sideways, sending it to the ground.

‘In any other fight, that injury would have taken the afflicted soldier out of action. It’s what many of our weapons are designed for, to maim and exclude the combatant from future aggression. Every fight is about how much punishment and violence a side is willing to accept before it gives in. And the value of your enemy living through an injury continues for the victor long after the battle is won. The amputee returns to his village, and his family and friends are reminded every time they look upon his crippled body the price to be paid for taking up arms against us. But this bastard virus has

changed the rules,’ said the Sergeant as he turned and shot out the Carrier’s other knee.

The ghoul fell to the ground again but didn’t utter a single noise to indicate pain. It merely pulled itself upright on the edge of the cage and continued its attempt to reach the Sergeant.

‘It doesn’t care about pain, because it doesn’t feel any,’ spat the Sergeant. ‘It doesn’t care about dying because it’s already fucking dead.’ He shot it again, this time in the middle of the chest, the body only twitching at the bullet’s passage. ‘And it doesn’t care about injury, because although trauma may alter its ability to move, nothing short of brain destruction will stop it.’

The Carrier pressed its face against the wire, snarling at the Sergeant.

‘Because of this, no confrontation between our soldiers and the Infected will end until every Carrier on the field of battle is dead, and that’s a sobering thought. But for all mindless rage of the Infected, always remember – they’re dumb, predictable and can still be killed. All it takes is for you to remain calm and take out the brain.’

The lesson needed to come to an end. He pressed the pistol’s end against its forehead and pulled the trigger one last time. The back of the skull blew outwards, coating the ground in dry goblets of brain before the Carrier slumped to the ground, immobile.

Two recruits retched, emptying stomach contents over their own boots. The Sergeant ignored them. He looked down at the corpse and grimaced in disgust at some specks of gore that had splattered onto his boots. He holstered the pistol, then leant down to wipe off the offending gobs of flesh with a tissue. Satisfied, he stood again and looked at his class. Most were sitting still, wearing various shades of green after watching the display.

One of the recruits in the back row spoke up. ‘I get your point, but they used to be like you and me. Surely we should be treating their bodies with a little more respect than that?’

The Sergeant just raised an eyebrow in question. ‘Did you not hear a single word I just said?’

Jai couldn’t help himself, letting out a short laugh as he looked back over his shoulder.

‘What are you laughing at?’

‘Nothing mate, but I guess you’re from above the snow line?’ said Jai.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ muttered the recruit, a pink flush

creeping up his features at the unwanted attention.

‘Because anyone that’s fought these bastards, and lost family and friends under their teeth, wouldn’t care how they’re stopped, just as long as they go back to being dead again. Better them than you, that’s all I can say, mate.’

The Sergeant stopped and regarded Jai thoughtfully. ‘Listen to the kid. If more of you start thinking that way, you might actually survive your first engagement with the enemy.’ The Sergeant walked over to an adjacent wall where a whiteboard hung. ‘You guys are lucky. Most of the shit that recruits used to learn in the past has been ditched. There won’t be any prancing on parade grounds. The course has been stripped back and changed. You’ll learn how to manage your weapons: rifle, pistol, bayonet and something new that I think you’ll grow to love – but more on that later. First, you need to learn about working in team structures, and what we have learnt about the Infected.’ He paused briefly before picking up a whiteboard marker and turning back to the board.

‘Time to learn what sort of shit you’ve got yourselves into.’

Chapter Four

Mark lay on a narrow bunk bed, staring at the ceiling above. He'd tried to gain an hour of sleep during his shift break but couldn't get his mind to shut down. Giving up, he rolled to his side and faced into the room. It was one of the dog boxes that passed as a dorm on the Navy Frigate. Space was at a premium. No-one had their own bed, instead a bunk slot was shared between up to three men as each got a chance to sleep on differing shifts throughout the twenty-four-hour day. Mark hated ships and had no idea how the poor bastards of the Navy survived on them for months at a time.

He'd been on the Frigate now for a fortnight. The short stint in Jindabyne still jabbed at his conscience. Even though he'd been powerless to refuse the deployment, it still felt like he'd abandoned his mates without even the chance to say goodbye. He could only hope they got proper training before being sent anywhere dangerous.

After the reconnaissance mission, the Marine squads had been split up and watered down with new soldiers. Mark felt he'd landed on his feet with his allocation. He'd been put in the same squad as Vinh and Nate. Since the mission, the shared experience had made the three of them firm allies. On a ship like this, there was little to do during down time, and he quickly learnt the background of his new mates. Vinh had a Vietnamese heritage, his parents arriving in Australia after the Vietnamese War as refugees. All Vinh had known however, was Australia. Born and raised in the western suburbs of Sydney, his accent was as broad as any Anglo. Standing at five foot six inches, he was a compact figure without a scrap of fat on him. Nate was a contrast. A country boy from Shepparton, he towered over his mate by a good six inches. He'd left school and enlisted in the army as soon as he was old enough. Nate had light brown hair, buzz-cut close to his scalp. He wasn't so careful with his face, a two-day growth present at most times unless hassled by one of the officers to get it shaved.

Information about how the government and army were planning to tackle the Infected was finally trickling down to the soldiers who'd form the front line. Overall, the news wasn't particularly reassuring. Australia would be solving their own problem. Key allies including America, New Zealand and the UK had denied requests for ground forces. All were reluctant to expose

their soldiers to such an infection, or their government to the political repercussions that such support would likely bring. The USA had offered to attempt eradication of the Infected through aerial bombing, but this had been refused. If Australia was to have any chance in recovering post conflict, it wanted its cities intact, not raised to the ground. In any case, bombing had been largely ineffective, achieving less than 10% success. Unless a direct head strike was achieved, the Carriers continued with whatever remained of their bodies. Immolation was a different story, however, contained high risk for spreading fire uncontrolled to buildings and infrastructure.

This left little other option than a ground force invasion, and men like Mark and his squad would be the ones to make it a reality. Queenscliff had been chosen as a starting point as it lay at the end of a narrow peninsula, less than 200 metres wide at the neck that could be more easily defended in the long term. From there, it would be used as a launch site for reclamation of Geelong and its car manufacturing sector. Military vehicle manufacturing was crucial to troop safety in the long term of the war. Once regional towns had been reclaimed, Geelong would be the next base of close proximity to support a push into Melbourne.

The invasion of Queenscliff would be happening soon, likely within the next two days, dependent on weather. The plan at present was to land on the beach below Queenscliff Fort, and retake the defensive structure dating from pre-federation 1800's, then use this fort as an outpost to begin clearing the town.

Mark just wanted it to begin. He hated waiting, found it the hardest time to control fears and anxieties. It also gave him too much time to think of what he'd already lost, Georgie. She intruded on his thoughts constantly. The self-condemnation that he was largely responsible for her death, hung like a lead weight beneath his chest and blunted his thoughts. Mark needed the distraction of the fight to begin where he could pay back his perceived debt, one Carrier at a time.

Chapter Five

Steph sat on a bench outside, waiting her turn. A light drizzle of freezing rain sifted from the sky above, leaving a sheen of moisture on her clothes. She was lightly dressed for the temperature, only wearing basic combat uniform, webbing and her weapons. Despite this, she felt the first trickle of sweat roll down from her armpit. Not normally a person to fidget, she was finding it hard to suppress her nerves this time around, her knees bouncing while she sat.

Directly in front was a fenced area, solid timber panels rising three metres into the air to prevent escape of its contents. The training course was rapidly upping the tempo. After five days of near constant weapons drills, today would see the introduction of live Carriers. Granted, they would be pinned to a stake and unable to attack, but that wasn't the issue. This next lesson was designed to deliberately unnerve the recruit while they performed a mock house clearance, however, the training Sergeant had been vague as to how this would be achieved. Steph placed her money on an orchestrated weapon malfunction.

A grotesque snarl from behind caused her to jerk around to find the origin of the noise. Two Carriers were being moved to the training field. Each ghoul was attended by a pair of soldiers, holding separate dog-catcher poles with a tightened loop about the Carrier's neck to control its movements. The Carriers thrashed and lunged from the end of the poles, trying to reach their captors. The effort to control their charges showed on the soldiers' faces, cheeks flushed and sweat pouring. As they drew close to the fenced area, the Sergeant rose from his seat and unlocked the gate for entry. He stood outside arms reach as the Infected passed through to the team inside.

Jai walked back out of an adjacent building, spotted Steph and came to park his arse next to her. He looked tired, but ok.

'How did it go?' asked Steph, looking at him expectantly. 'Was it the rifle – did they have it set up to misfire?'

'Nah, mine was ok. It was pretty straightforward, just had to get closer to one of those freaks than I normally like.'

'So, what was the thing that's supposed to make it difficult?'

'Maybe it's just the proximity. But I would have thought most of us

recruits have killed them before anyway – otherwise we wouldn't have made it this far,' Jai said, shrugging his shoulders.

Next to the training area, the Sergeant stood up once more and looked at Steph.

'Recruit Williams, you're up next!' he shouted.

Steph jumped at hearing her surname. She stood, drying the sweat from her hands against the material of her pants.

'Don't worry, Steph,' said Jai. 'They're pinned down; we've handled worse – you'll be fine. I'll catch up with you after, ok?'

Steph nodded, giving Jai a half smile, however, her attention was already switched to the task at hand. She walked across the tarmac to the Sergeant. He stood next to a rack of prepared weapons. The Sergeant laid one rifle and pistol on the bench in front of her.

'Leave yours here; you can collect them again after the training session. Keep your captive-bolt gun though.' The addition of the bolt guns as standard kit was something new. Usually employed by abattoirs to render livestock unconscious by punching a retractable bolt through the front of the animal's skull, the hand gun shaped tool could be used as a final resort to puncture a Carrier's skull and brain at close quarters. He eyed Steph as she ensured her weapons were unloaded and made safe prior to handing them over.

'So, how did you end up in this army?' he asked.

Steph flicked her gaze to his face briefly while she holstered her new pistol. Her trainer's face was empty of ridicule, seeming genuinely intrigued.

'What do you mean?'

'You're English, yeah? I would have thought you'd see this as our own problem to deal with?'

'I got stuck here on holiday when the airports closed. The UK's no different to every other bloody country, they've ruled out any attempts to extract their citizens in fear of spreading this plague to the home country. My country's abandoned me, so I guess it's just as much my fight now as any of you. I've seen these things kill my mates and others, and I'll be damned if I'm going to stand aside and do nothing.'

'Fair enough,' said the Sergeant, apparently satisfied by her explanation. 'Foreign governments won't be able to bury their heads in the sand for much longer though. We're not the only country with an outbreak. Indonesia and Papua New Guinea have admitted to cases. Maybe somebody smuggled themselves across the Torres Strait, or it island hopped through bat

populations. Either way, it's out and on its way to Asia and the world.'

Steph looked up sharply at his words. The Sergeant snorted a laugh at her expression. 'That's right. They might have been happy to shaft us, but now every country will be eagerly looking to us as a test case for how to manage the pandemic.' He cleared his throat, changing focus back to the task at hand.

'Right, once you're in there, you're on your own. You will come up against live Carriers, and it's up to you how you dispose of them. Remember, this has been set up to unnerve you and simulate real battle where things go wrong and weapons malfunction.' The Sergeant paused as he studied her face. 'Stick to the drills we taught you, keep calm and you'll come out the other end fine.'

Steph barely heard the last of his advice as her focus turned inwards, counting her breaths in and out to steady her nerves for the coming fight. She gripped the stock of her rifle, right index finger resting lightly over the trigger guard while standing at the entrance. She felt a hand grip her shoulder briefly and turned her head back to the Sergeant.

'I said, Recruit, are you fit to go?' asked the Sergeant.

Steph nodded her head curtly. The Sergeant stood back from her and indicated to one of the other soldiers to open the gate.

The door was sheet metal. Above it, a light flashed from red to green as the electric lock released. Steph reached out her left hand, pushed the heavy doorway open and stepped inside.

The Sergeant sighed as he turned back to prepare a set of weapons for the next recruit in waiting. The English girl intrigued him. She'd been quiet through most of the course so far, only really talking to the underage kid, Jai.

He pulled the next rifle out of the rack and double checked the magazine. The rifles and pistols had been prepared earlier. Every second rifle and handgun held empty magazines, meaning that each recruit would have only one of their weapons loaded. This meant the recruit might be forced to resort to their secondary weapon, depending on which one they chose to use first. The magazine on the rifle was full, so was the one on the pistol. *Shit*. He looked up at Jai, still sitting across the road waiting for Steph to finish her trial.

'Recruit, get over here!' he yelled at Jai. The boy lurched into motion,

darting across the tarmac to stand before the Sergeant.

‘Sarg?’

‘Were both your rifle and handgun loaded?’ asked the Sergeant, a strained expression on his face.

‘Yes. What’s the problem, Sarg?’ asked Jai.

The Sergeant swore viciously. ‘Looks like your mate’s going to show us what she’s made of.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re getting at.’ Jai’s forehead creased with worry. ‘Is something wrong with Steph’s gear?’

‘There was a muck up with the weapons I gave her. Neither of them has rounds in their magazines. She’s still got her captive-bolt gun though, just means she might end up a little closer to them than any of us would prefer.’

‘That’s bullshit!’ Jai said. ‘Pull her out and give her the loaded weapon she was supposed to have.’

The Sergeant grimaced, staring at the red light above the gate Steph had just disappeared through. ‘I can’t. A ten-minute pre-programmed lock-out is on the gate once it closes for this training exercise. Until that light goes green again, she’s on her own.’

Steph stepped into an enclosed hallway, the far end of which was lost in shadow. The door slammed home behind, banishing the light and leaving her in pitch black. She stood still for a moment, listening. Up ahead, something was moving, but it was impossible to tell her proximity to the Carrier. Steph reached her hand up to the wall beside her, running her fingers over the raw wooden boards used to construct the mocked-up house, looking for a light switch. Her index finger snagged on one, but it failed to spark the bulb above as she flicked it on and off again.

Steph grimaced to herself, she had to move on. She unclipped a pocket on her webbing and pulled free a small torch. In the narrow confines of the house, she let her rifle fall to its sling, choosing her pistol instead. Steph took the hand gun in double grip, torch pointing forward from the bottom hand. The light cut ahead, illuminating another door at the far end of the hallway. She walked up to it with soft footfalls, trying to minimise her noise. Before opening the door, she listened with her ear up to the wood. Nothing. Steph knew the complex was small, she had to be at least one third of the way through.

Steph tried the handle, slowly turning the knob. She swung the door open and stood back. Flashes of light sparked intermittently from a naked bulb in the middle of the ceiling, giving glimpses of stained timber walls. She lifted her torch and panned to the right through the doorway to inspect the recesses of the room. A hand snapped out of the darkness to grip the barrel of her pistol, accompanied by a vicious snarl. Steph let out a startled yelp as she tried to jerk her weapon out of the Carrier's grip without success. She lost the torch in the wrestle, knocked flying to smash against the far wall. The faulty light continued to flash in a disjointed staccato, allowing Steph to view glimpses of her attacker in darkness. The Carrier was handcuffed to the wall by the opposite limb, stopping it from coming any closer to her. It was a young man, a soldier in torn camouflage uniform, probably another recruit that had failed one of the training tests and ended up bitten. A crew cut skull showed unnaturally pale skin above facial features distorted by hunger driven anger. It screamed in rage, lips snarled up to expose teeth as it wrenched at its pinned limb. Skin and underlying tissue was torn backwards under the metal of the handcuff, until bone wedged against the steel, jamming the hand in place.

Steph pulled the trigger, hoping to blow away part of the ghoul's hand and break its grip. The sound of the pin clicking on an empty chamber was drowned out by the raging Carrier. Steph let go of the pistol, it was useless to her if it wouldn't fire. She backed to the far side of the doorway, just out of reach of the scrabbling hand. Her heart hammered at the ribs of her chest, racing as adrenaline surged through her body. Pistol now forgotten, she lifted her rifle and fired.

Nothing again.

Steph felt fear begin to clutch at her throat, choking off her ability to gain air as she realised she'd been given two faulty weapons for the test. She needed to get out. Steph inched past the Carrier, just out of reach of the lunging hand. In lightning flashes from the faulty bulb, she found the other door. As she was about to clutch the handle, the panels of the door jumped as fists beat into them from the other side. Suddenly the door burst inwards, knocking her from her feet. A second Carrier tumbled through the new opening, tripping over her legs. Its right hand was missing, torn free of its restraint.

Steph screamed her own terror back at the ghoul as she scrambled to her knees, rifle in hand. She reversed her grip and drove the stock down on the

back of the Carrier's skull before it could right itself. Hair and skin were stripped from the skull with each blow, before the bone finally gave way, punching inwards to mash the underlying brain tissue.

To her side, the pinned soldier gave a final vicious jerk at its handcuff. The metacarpal bone and thumb ripped free, allowing the hand to slip through the steel ringlet. The creature lunged at Steph, knocking her onto her back and landing on top. Only her rifle lay between their two bodies. Steph pushed upwards with a hand on either end of her weapon, driving the Carrier back as it snapped teeth at her face. She managed to raise her knee between them and kicked out with all the force she could muster. The Carrier was flung backwards momentarily. She reached for her captive-bolt gun, drawing the pistol shaped tool free of her webbing as the creature launched itself back at her. Again, she was driven to her back under the weight of the larger body. Fetid breath made her gag as the Carrier's snarling mouth came within centimetres of her face. She jammed her left forearm up against its neck to prevent it reaching her and brought the bolt gun up to the side of its head. Ramming the barrel against the skull above the Carrier's ear, she pulled the trigger. The tool thumped a rod of steel out of the barrel, puncturing the skull and penetrating the brain beneath.

The ghoul fell limp, a dead weight on her body. A brown sludge seeped from the Carrier's mouth, dripping like sewage. Steph shoved the creature off her and rolled to the side. She got to her knees and vomited, her stomach heaving until nothing was left. In the new silence, she heard an electronic buzz from down the hallway as the external door burst open, and suddenly the room was drenched in light as the bulb above turned on properly for the first time. Clumping footsteps ran towards her. She raised a hand, shielding her eyes from the light as they adjusted.

The training Sergeant stood over her with gun drawn as he scanned the room. He was lost for words as he took in the situation that she'd survived.

'Are you bitten?' he asked finally, reaching out to help her stand.

Steph pointedly ignored his offered hand. Standing on her own, she wiped away the taste of vomit with the back of her hand as she looked at the Sergeant, anger plain on her face.

'No. Not for want of the bastards trying. Why the fuck were both weapons empty?' asked Steph, coldly furious at being put in such a position. 'That wasn't a training session, that was being set up to fail.'

'It was an accident. You were supposed to have a loaded handgun. I'm

sorry, it was my stuff up,' he apologized. 'If it's any consolation, you passed with flying colours.'

Steph said nothing, staring levelly at the Sergeant through narrowed eyes. Finally, she broke eye contact and walked for the exit, not waiting to be dismissed.

The Sergeant slowly exhaled as she left. He'd been steeling himself towards finding her corpse on gaining access to the training rooms, and the relief at her survival was like a dose of Valium to his anxiety. He leant down to examine the hands of each corpse, emitting a low whistle of surprise at the damage they'd inflicted upon themselves to escape their bonds and attack. He still couldn't believe that she had not only survived hand to hand combat with two Carriers without being bitten, but left her attackers dead in her wake. They would have to change the way they secured the Infected in future if he didn't want to lose half his recruits before they made it to the real battlefield, because God knows, it would take a rare soldier to survive such a situation on their own again.

Chapter Six

Erin stared through the wire fence out to Bass Strait with her hands shoved deep in her jeans pockets. Of all the craziness, this was what bugged her the most – why the hell did they have to be enclosed behind a barrier? They were on an island surrounded by unforgiving ocean, so she failed to see who they could threaten. She wasn't the only one annoyed at the containment, having heard angry conversations between some of the adults at being locked up when their only crime was surviving the plague.

A short fifty metre stretch of low dunes and grass separated the quarantine facility from the beach. Her teeth chattered in her mouth as the wind stripped away her body heat. She'd been forced to leave behind her thick winter jacket in Jindabyne, being given only a rain slicker in its stead. Although it didn't snow on the island, she thought the driving winds laced with rain made it colder here than she had been above the snow line. Her father would have called it a 'lazy wind', the type that drove straight through and past your bones instead of going around your body. The sea beyond the fence was sullen and grey beneath an overcast sky. Foam from the surf rolled along a shallow crescent of damp sand, before being whipped into the air and away. Her eyes followed the shoreline to the right where a narrow spike of rock extended as a headland into the water. This sheltered the beach from the worst of the ocean's fury, sending spray metres into the air as waves broke upon the cracked sandstone. Erin pulled a hand from her pocket and wiped away droplets of water that the wind had spattered on her face. She needed to get moving, her shift would be starting soon.

Erin turned around to face back into the camp. Pre-fabricated demountable buildings lay in rows, facing onto narrow gravel roads. They held bunk beds, ten to a building with a small metal chest for each person to keep their belongings. Nobody had much aside from a change of clothes, anything larger being left behind at their different evacuation points. The buildings lacked proper insulation, a problem compounded by temperatures that dropped below freezing overnight. The only times Erin had felt warm since arriving a fortnight prior was when she worked in the kitchens, having been recruited as a dishwasher. Outside these shift times, she found herself stalking about the camp, trying to keep warm through constant movement.

‘Hey Erin! This one’s yours!’ shouted a younger boy.

A soccer ball scooted over the ground towards her. Erin trotted over and dug her right foot into it, sending it flying back to the three boys playing with it. Most of the camp were children of various ages with a surviving parent. There were also numerous women in the camp, but hardly any men. At Jindabyne, Erin had thought the induction process for the army had lacked coercion, but she was beginning to think that was only because every adult in their group had willingly sought recruitment at the first opportunity. There was constant pressure on adults to join the army and return to the mainland. Enlistment posters lined the cafeteria walls and common areas, with a sign-up booth manned during daylight hours for those that decided to join. Pressure was on women to fight, though not to the same extent as the men. Even fathers were constantly hassled and ridiculed by the guards, called cowards and worse for declining to fight.

She ducked under a line of washing strung between two demountables and started to jog. Her mouth watered at the thought of getting something warm to eat. Erin could usually obtain extra scraps to eat out the back in the preparation area. She’d been one of the lucky ones, to get a job in the kitchens. All camp inmates, twelve years and older were employed in some type of work around the place on a daily basis, more to keep people occupied than anything else, she thought. Other kids hadn’t been so lucky. One of her mates, a fourteen-year-old called Ben, had been stuck on clean up duty of the toilet and laundry blocks. His hands had been stripped raw by bleach within a week, but he’d been told to find his own replacement if he wanted to change out. Funnily enough, no-one had been keen to take on the job.

Erin tucked a strand of her long fringe over an ear as she walked. Her short bob of mouse-brown hair had grown out over the past two months. She could now pull most of it back into a short pony-tail, however her fringe still fell free in the absence of any clips to pin it up. She was nearing the entrance to the main building, a double storey structure that had been the island’s largest hotel, an eco-friendly business that led tours of the surrounding coastline and wildlife. The navy had forcibly acquired the property, taking advantage of the commercial kitchen needed to feed an ever-growing refugee community.

Access to the main building, although not controlled, was under constant supervision, with two guards present at the main doors.

‘Hey Erin. You tell Rachael that I want to see her tonight, I’ve got

something that I know she'll love,' said one of the guards with a lewd expression on his face. Erin suppressed a shudder as she kept walking, ignoring him. The guard was from the navy, as were all the men sent to run the camp. His name was Jeremy, a cretin in his twenties that made her skin crawl.

'Hey girl, I was talking to you,' Jeremy said, reaching out and grabbing her arm. 'Don't you know it's rude to ignore people when they're talking to you?'

Erin tried to pull free. 'But you're not just talking, Jeremy, you're *being a creep*. Can you let me go, I'm due to start in a few minutes.'

Jeremy's eyes narrowed in anger at her reply, his grip tightening painfully on her upper arm.

'Let her go. Now!' said a deep voice from behind. Jeremy paused, but still maintained his hold. 'If you don't release that girl, I'll have you on the first boat back to the fucking mainland, soldier. Maybe you can do some real fighting there instead of harassing underage girls.'

Erin looked to see who was talking and found an older officer lounging in a chair against the wall. Jeremy's face went scarlet and his hand shook with poorly concealed anger at the threat as he let go.

'Right. Why don't you go and take a ten-minute break? When you get back, I expect to see that expression gone from your face, or I'll wipe it off for you,' drawled the officer.

Jeremy nodded curtly and stalked away with jaw clenched. Erin stayed where she was for the moment, unsure what to do next. The officer changed his attention to her now that he'd gotten rid of the offending man. He was middle-aged, with short black hair and a weather-lined face.

'You ok?' he asked quietly.

Erin nodded. 'Thanks.'

The officer frowned. 'That's not required, it's a base requirement to keep my soldier's behaviour respectable. And as a man, I'll be damned if I stay silent and allow that sort of stuff to happen. My name's Lieutenant Bourke. If he hassles you again, let me know and I'll sort it out.'

Erin shuffled backwards, wanting to be on her way. She was glad to see someone in authority willing to come down on the small group of guards that were starting to harass some of the women, however, she didn't want a target drawn on her own back. All she wanted was to keep her head down and get through the few short weeks of quarantine before moving to Tasmania. The

officer must have noted her discomfort, his features softening as he regarded her.

‘Go on then, you better hurry if you’re going to make your shift. I’d steer clear of the main common room on your way there. People are gathering for a news broadcast from the Tasmanian Premier, and from the whispers I’ve heard – they’re not going to be happy with what he has to say. It might turn a little ugly.’

Erin mumbled another thanks and took off at a brisk pace. The shift could wait; she wasn’t really needed until people had finished eating and created dishes for her to clean. Large posters were mounted on either wall of the hallway she walked along, Australian soldiers standing in heroic poses as they overwhelmed plague Carriers. The propaganda worked on some, but the manipulation just annoyed Erin. As far as she was concerned, it was a job that was dangerous and likely to get you killed – but one that still needed to be done. When she became old enough to enlist, she’d sign up, but she didn’t need to be lied to by a propaganda campaign, like fighting the undead masses would be some sort of adventure. If it was as easy as they made out, she wouldn’t be stuck in the middle of Bass Strait while the Australian mainland crawled with disease.

She could hear the group of people at a distance. Rounding a corner, the hall opened into a large rectangular room. What had previously been a conference room, had been converted into a communal space to allow the camp inhabitants to escape the outside weather. The room was packed. Erin quietly remonstrated herself at not being aware of the coming announcement. She’d deliberately kept her distance from others in the camp, discouraging friendships that would likely end in a short time. However, it meant she’d missed this piece of information that had sped through the adults rapidly.

A large flat screen TV was mounted on the wall to the right while the couches had been pushed to the back of the room to allow in more people. Most stood in small groups, nervously discussing what they thought would be announced. Erin eased her way through the different groups until she had a clear view of the TV. The screen was displaying a still shot of the Tasmanian parliament building. Abruptly it changed, switching to a live feed from the press gallery. The camera focused on a lectern, a limp Australian flag on the wall behind.

The room fell silent without prompting, as a press secretary stepped into view. He stared impassively at the camera, waiting for something. Abruptly

he nodded at someone off screen.

‘Please let me introduce the new Premier for Tasmania and leader of the Conservative Party, Justin Stephens,’ he said, stepping aside to allow the State’s leader behind the lectern.

Erin didn’t recognise the man. Although she couldn’t name the state’s previous premier, she was sure he’d been a short guy with brown hair. Standing in his place was a gaunt man, towering over the lectern. He reached out and adjusted the angle of the microphone upwards, then looked down the barrel of the camera. Erin felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck as she looked at him. His eyes were expressionless and cold, reminding her of a crow’s heartless gaze as it picked the eyes from a dead spring lamb.

‘It has been an eventful week in Tasmanian politics, most of which has happened behind closed doors. Now comes the time to notify our people what’s been achieved to ensure their ongoing safety,’ he said, pausing to take a sip of water from a glass tumbler.

‘In light of the tragedy that has befallen the mainland states, Tasmania has a foremost duty to protect its own citizens from the Lysan Plague. A private vote within our party has recognised the inability of the previous leader to guarantee the state’s safety. The responsibility to lead our government through the exceptional challenges of the future has been delivered onto my shoulders, a weight that I do not hesitate to take on.’ He spoke without hurry, his tone clearly conveying utter confidence in his right to usurp the Premier’s office.

‘Since being sworn in yesterday, there have been key changes to government policy. From this moment onwards, no person exposed to the virus will be allowed onto Tasmanian soil. There will be absolutely no movement of plague refugees from the mainland for resettlement in our state. The current facility on King Island will be enlarged temporarily, until such time as they can be moved to a secure location on the Victorian coast.’

The room about Erin was engulfed in a wall of noise as the import of the Premier’s words drove home. Members of the crowd reacted in different ways. Some stood quietly, struck dumb by the news, but most were furious at their own countrymen’s abandonment. Erin watched the screen where the premier had started to field questions from the press. She edged closer to hear above the angry crowd.

‘Premier, you stated that no-one who’s been potentially exposed to the virus will be allowed in Tasmania. Surely this has implications for any

Tasmanian soldier enlisted to fight on the mainland?’ asked a reporter out of camera shot.

‘That is true, at present they will be required to stay with their army units until we learn more about the virus and can guarantee against the possibility of air transmission. It may seem harsh, but we are now the last bastion of the Australian way of life. We have no choice,’ answered the premier, a mildly condescending tone entering his voice.

‘There’s always choice, Mr. Stephens,’ said the reporter. ‘Don’t we owe it to our fellow Australians to help them during this critical time of need?’

‘And we will help them. There will be no law preventing Tasmanians from enlisting. If they choose to place their own lives at risk, they have the right to do so.’

‘But you’re making that choice all the harder to execute, if you refuse to allow them back in the state after their service comes to an end,’ said the reporter.

‘Look, I think I’ve made myself abundantly clear on this matter,’ said the Premier, eyes narrowing in annoyance. ‘We are doing everything possible to help the mainland states, whilst ensuring our own state remains plague free,’ he shifted his gaze to another reporter, cancelling any further attempt to pursue the topic.

Erin sat back on her heels, ignoring the next line of questioning. The Premier’s idea of ‘doing everything possible to help the mainland’ sounded more like he had just abandoned the rest of the country to sort out their own fate. ‘*Selfish bastard*,’ she thought. With no way of knowing how long it would take to create a safe camp in Victoria, her stay on the island had just become indefinite.

Looking at her watch, Erin realised she was fifteen minutes late for her shift. Now more than ever, she couldn’t afford to lose her job, especially with an extended stay on the books. Erin quickly edged between the adults, out of the room and broke into a run for the kitchens.

A boot shot out from behind, tripping her foot to send her flying. Her right shoulder dug painfully into the carpet, followed by the side of her head. Feeling dazed, she sat up and looked behind to see what had made her fall. Jeremy sauntered up to where she sat, a smirk of enjoyment on his face.

‘Here’s me thinking you were due at your shift twenty minutes ago, and yet I find you skiving here in the common room, you lazy little shit,’ Jeremy said, standing over her. When Erin went to stand up, he placed a foot on her

thigh to keep her in place. 'You can go when I say, and not before. I wanted to touch base about our little run-in earlier in front of my boss. Let me be perfectly clear on this,' he said, his voice becoming hard as he leant down into her face. 'If you say anything to that dickhead officer, your life here is over. You have no idea the sort of pain I will cause you.' He lifted his foot away, letting her scoot backwards and stand. Erin looked at him with wide eyes, glassy as she tried not to cry.

'But if you play nice, maybe we can be friends after all. You better get going – I'd hate for you to lose your job and end up working the latrines for the next few months,' Jeremy said, chuckling to himself as he turned away.

Erin's fear turned to anger as he left. She took one last look behind her to make sure he'd gone, then bolted for the kitchens, ignoring the burning pain at the tip of her shoulder.

She sent the door swinging in her hurry to enter, narrowly missing one of the other workers carrying a stack of plates.

'Hey, take it easy, Erin,' said one of the cooks, a nineteen-year-old called Rachael. 'You're a bit late, aren't you?'

'It was Jeremy. The bastard was hassling me about you again,' muttered Erin as she tied on an apron.

Rachael walked over, eyes tightening in anger at the mention of the man's name. She was one of the few friends Erin had made during her time in the camp. Rachael had deep chocolate hair pulled up in a bun, fair skin and brown eyes. Due to her looks and nothing more, the nineteen-year-old had become the target of unwanted attention from some of the Navy guards.

'I've lodged complaints with three separate officers about him feeling me up, and each one's told me that he was just doing a security pat down. It's bullshit.'

'A new Lieutenant stopped him outside the building, but Jeremy was by himself when he tripped me in the hall.'

'Forget the chain of command. They're only going to look after their own and cover his tracks.' Rachael paused, taking a brief look around to make sure she was out of earshot before continuing. 'I say it's up to us to ensure our own protection. Go into the back room and help yourself to something on the back wall. If anyone asks, I told you to take it home to sharpen for the next day's cooking.'

Erin didn't need to be told twice. She gave her a brief smile of thanks, then darted into the storeroom. Two long thin magnets were attached to the

rear wall, holding around forty different knives of various uses in food preparation. Erin picked out a blade accompanied by a narrow sheath, a four-inch fruit knife with a wickedly sharp point.

She slipped the implement into the back pocket of her jeans and covered it with her jumper, taking some comfort at the weapon's presence. There was no way she'd let that bastard hurt her.

Chapter Seven

Mark yawned, causing his ears to pop as he strapped himself into the chopper seat.

‘Didn’t you get enough beauty sleep last night?’ asked Nate from the bench opposite, cracking a smile. Mark forced one in return.

‘Could have done with more, but I got a few hours. I’ll be right once we get there.’

It was strange how the body dealt with stress. No matter how well a soldier hid their nervousness or anxiety of impending battle, it invariably found a way to escape. For Mark, it was yawning. The more stressed he got, the higher frequency of yawns. Not his counterpart though, Nate just became more of a smartarse than usual.

‘What’s with the pig-sticker? I wouldn’t have thought they’d allow you to carry something like that,’ said Nate, pointing at the odd bit of kit strapped to Mark’s waist.

Mark looked down, and realised he was asking about his short sword, a modern replica of a Roman Gladius that he’d stolen from a museum exhibit while holed up at the University of Sydney. He’d grown so used to wearing it since then that he forgot how strange it must look to the average person.

‘I didn’t ask. Why give them the chance to say no, eh?’

‘Fair enough. Still doesn’t answer my first question,’ Nate said, holding out his hand to inspect the weapon.

Mark shrugged. ‘Just a little insurance for if we run out of bullets before the job’s done.’

He drew the sword out of its scabbard and passed it across to his teammate. The weapon was 65 centimetres from tip to the base of the grip. The double-edged steel blade tapered to a fine point. Nate tested the sharpness against the ball of his thumb, flinching as he drew blood by accident.

‘It’s seen some action already?’ he asked, pointing out a few nicks gouged into the metal along the length of the blade as he passed it back.

‘Yeah, it’s come in handy a few times,’ said Mark, threading the blade back into its sheath.

‘Well, the next time you come across an ‘insurance policy’ like that

again, send it my way. I wouldn't mind having one myself,' said Nate.

Above the cabin, the chopper's blades began to spin, building to an ear-splitting whine as it lifted from the Navy Frigate's deck. Mark felt his stomach lurch as the Seahawk dropped sharply to skim bare metres above the bay. Ships and aircraft; he bloody hated them both. Give him dry land under his boots any day of the week. He'd get his wish soon enough. Mark looked ahead through the front windscreen of the helicopter. Shortland's Bluff was approaching rapidly, a headland occupied by one of the few military forts built in Australia before Federation.

He and Nate were part of a four-man team to be dropped on the roof of the Queenscliff Fort. The military post had guarded the entrance of Port Phillip Bay between 1883-1946, when its artillery structures became obsolete in the face of air attack and long-range surface to air missiles. Repurposed as an army training facility, the fort still retained high brick walls to all land approaches – vital for repelling any attack by the Infected.

The helicopter decreased speed as it left behind the bay and sped up over the sand dunes. Old artillery redoubts still aimed menacingly out over the bay's entrance in silent guardianship. Mark glanced backwards to the Frigate. Two RIBs were speeding over the waves in their wake, making for the beach with twenty marines in total. His team of four would be landed onto the roof of the Fort Keep, a three-storey castle like structure at the north-west corner of the fort's curtain wall. From there, they would need to snipe as many Carriers from the internal grounds as possible to thin the numbers that the Marines would have to overcome once they left the beach.

They would be facing a hard time of it until the RIBs could return with further Marines in support. Mark looked down as the Seahawk completed a circuit of the fort's grounds. For one of the army's smaller training sites, there were higher numbers of the Infected than he'd expected. Most were clothed in the remnants of military uniform, although there were many in civilian attire, probably the Carriers responsible for introducing the plague into the fort itself. They tracked the helicopter above them, faces contorted with anger as they stumbled in its wake.

Mark leant forward and tapped the pilot on the shoulder. 'Take her down, we've seen enough.' The chopper pilot nodded and veered over to the Fort Keep. Two Carriers were on its roof with arms raised, reaching vainly for the craft above. Mark unslung his rifle. After ensuring his safety clip was in place, he leaned out of the open door and took brief aim, then dropped his

rifle down again.

‘Bring me in closer, just above their heads,’ he yelled to the pilot. The chopper dropped lower. Mark could now hear their screams above the rotor’s whine. From point blank range, he drilled a single bullet through each Carrier’s upturned face, dropping them where they stood.

The chopper landed heavily, jolting the marines against each other. They unclipped their safety harnesses and jumped onto the roof of the building. No sooner had the Marines’ feet left the cabin, and the chopper was rising into the air once more, returning at speed to the Frigate for the next load of soldiers. The roof’s edge was lined by a waist height brick wall. Mark dove in behind this, then popped his head to look over the edge. The area was rapidly filling, as Carriers from all over the military site converged to their location.

‘What are you hiding for?’ asked Nate with a strained smile on his face as he stood next to him, looking down. ‘It’s not like the bastards can shoot at us.’

Mark grimaced. ‘Old habits die hard,’ he muttered, getting to his feet. ‘First thing, let’s secure this roof space, I don’t want to find those rotten bastards attacking us from behind.’

Nate and Mark jogged over to the door to the roof space. It was an ancient panelled structure, each piece of wood dry and warped from half a century’s sun and storm. The door hung open, creaking softly in the breeze. Mark stepped through into the stairwell and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Movement caught his eye below. He squinted, trying to make out further detail before pulling a torch free of his webbing and pointing the light downstairs. Two women’s heads snapped up at the intrusion, faces pallid and eyes opaque in the force of the beam. They both had shoulder length hair in a clotted mess. Spotting their quarry, the Carriers opened their mouths and screamed, lunging up the stairs in uncoordinated haste.

Mark jerked out of the doorway, slamming it shut behind him. The bottom hinge shifted in its place, loose within the dry rotted timber frame. The Carriers would make short work of the barrier. He needed something to reinforce the door to give them more time. He glanced hastily around the flat roof space and spotted a heavy bench seat in the far corner.

‘Nate, give me a hand to move this,’ he shouted, running over to the chair. ‘We’ve got company coming up the stairs, that door better be stronger

than it bloody looks.'

The two of them rammed the high back of the bench seat up under the door handle, wedging it closed. It would have to do.

Turning to the others, he raised his voice. 'We need to clear as many of the Infected from the grounds as possible before the first load of Marines land. There's only going to be twenty odd men hitting the beach, and we can't afford them to be overrun. If they die – we probably won't make it off this roof ourselves. I want single shots, one bullet for each brain.'

Nate and the other two marines gave him a short nod as they took up separate positions around the roof. Mark rested an elbow on the brick ledge and focused through his sights on the first stumbling ghoul and fired. The corpse dropped to the ground, a neat hole drilled through its forehead. He moved the sights to the next Carrier, gritted his teeth and continued, one shot every few seconds.

The bow of the RIB bit deep into an oncoming swell, sending a plume of spray over the ten Marines on board. Vinh let go of his seat to wipe the water from his face, grimacing at the salt sting in his eyes. An icy trickle ran down the back of his neck, making him shiver. Thirty metres to the right, a second RIB churned through the swells with them. That made twenty men in all, a pitiful force to launch an attack on potentially hundreds of the Infected. Command had said their number should be irrelevant as they were an unarmed foe, but in many ways, Vinh would have been happier facing live humans with rifles. In any case, they had no choice. With only two RIBs and one helicopter at the Frigate's disposal, a slow build-up of men on the beach was the only plan available.

The noise of the boat was suddenly drowned out, replaced by a buffeting wind and roar of chopper blades as the Seahawk helicopter swept over them with scant metres to spare. Vinh's head snapped around as he followed its path overhead and onward to the Fort. He tracked the aircraft as it did a brief fly over the fort compound before landing out of sight on one of the roof areas.

Membership within the advance landing parties hadn't been ordered, the men involved were all volunteers. It hadn't surprised Vinh to see Mark's hand raised as the first to self-nominate. From all accounts the bastard had

faced worse, and in any case, he carried his own survival with palpable guilt, like it was something of which to be ashamed. In his experience, men like that tended to get their death wish fulfilled eventually. But he'd been unprepared when Nate's hand had gone up to take the last position on board the chopper, leaving no place for Vinh to join and protect his back. He still fumed over it, anger born from concern for his old mate. Vinh noted that Command hadn't even bothered sending a non-commissioned officer to lead the group of four, as sure a sign as any that they weren't expected to survive. It just made it even more important that his squad infiltrated the site quickly to take on their own weight of the enemy if his mates were going to have a chance.

The surf was minimal compared to his previous trip ashore, allowing the RIB to approach closer in to the beach, dropping them on the sand at the northern end of the compound. Vinh jumped over the side, holding his rifle over his head. As he waded quickly to the beach, the chopper roared back overhead to the Frigate. He ran across the short stretch of sand exposed by the low tide to an outcrop of rock and flattened himself beside another marine named Sean. Vinh could hear steady gunfire from the compound, carried to the beach in fluctuating volume by an offshore breeze. Vinh felt the rest of his Marine squad thump into the sand next to him. He tapped Sean on the shoulder.

'You seen anything?'

The marine shook his head. 'Nah, seems pretty clear. Only those bunkers, then we're into the compound.'

Remnants of coastal defence built during the two World Wars, they were constructed of naked concrete slabs and had long since fallen into disrepair. Each bunker was a squat building with an open fronted room facing the bay. The angle of the sun prevented light entering their interiors, leaving any occupant hidden in shadow. Their orders had been to quickly clear these defences, then move on to the fence line.

'Let's get this shit over with.' Vinh rolled to his side so he could see the rest of his squad. 'The second detachments landed at the southern end of the compound, so these two bunkers are ours. I want four men to clear each one, and two marines to stay on the beach here for...'

'No need, Vinnie,' interrupted one of the Marines. 'The hungry bastards are coming to us.'

Vinh felt his breath catch as he looked back around, just in time to see

the first Carrier face plant into the sand out of the bunker window. It had started. Two more dropped from the same window, while the other divulged three onto the sand. Nothing more needed to be said, half the squad peeled away to the second bunker, leaving Vinh and four marines to deal with the Infected at hand.

Vinh launched from his spot, wanting to attack before the Carriers regained their feet. One lay where it fell, a broken neck severing the brain's control over its body. Eyes still tracked the approaching marines while teeth snapped impotently. The fight was over in mere seconds, each marine smoothly picking off a separate Carrier. Now that the more immediate threats had been eliminated, Vinh returned to the Carrier with the broken neck. Resting the muzzle of his rifle against its temple, he pulled the trigger. The back of its skull mashed into the sand underneath, an expression of anger frozen on the creature's face as Vinh moved on.

He hooked a finger at the other marines to join him. With his shoulder at the bunker's wall, he mounted the sand dune and headed for the main entrance. A rusty sheet metal door greeted him at the top. Not waiting, he kicked it open and stepped inside, rifle to his shoulder. A quick scan came up empty. He backed out and joined the rest of the group.

'Anyone bitten?' he asked, scanning the faces of his men quickly. Each shook their head in denial.

A narrow path was cut into the rocky cliff that protected the back of the fort. Vinh led the way as his section ran up the narrow switchbacks of the track to approach the back of the compound. At the top of the cliff, a cyclone fence was the only barrier to the fort's interior. One of the marines pulled out a set of wire cutters and began to clip through individual strands of wire. Vinh waited impatiently. He could now see Nate and Mark's location a hundred metres distant, atop a castle like structure built into the northern corner of the curtain wall. The ground beneath them was thick with Infected, crawling over their own dead to reach the building. Vinh saw that a hole big enough for a man to squeeze through had been cut in the wire.

'That's enough,' he said, and grabbed hold of one side of the opening, pulling it outwards so his squad could slip through one at a time. Vinh joined his men on the other side. 'If we get overwhelmed, retreat back through the fence line, same again if you're separated from the group and can't re-join us.'

He paused, looking ahead. A few Carriers at the back of the pack had

noticed them and were headed their way. He lifted his rifle to his shoulder at the ready.

‘Let’s go,’ Vinh said as he broke into a half jog.

The ten men ran forward with weapons raised, Vinh in the lead. A brief stretch of knee length grass separated the fence line from the main section of the compound. Within moments the men were across it and onto a bitumen road leading directly to Mark and Nate’s position. They slowed as the road became lined with buildings to either side, wary of attack from their flanks. The sound of smashing glass from behind brought Vinh to a stop. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw a uniformed Carrier launch itself through a shattered window at one of his men, tackling him to the ground. The marine jammed a forearm up against its neck, holding the gnashing teeth away from his face. The Carrier snarled, brown sludge dripping from its mouth as it tried to jam a thumb into the marine’s eye. Vinh shoved the end of his rifle into its ear and pulled the trigger, blasting away the far side of its skull. He kicked the corpse off the marine and pulled him back to his feet. Aside from two deep runnels torn into his cheek by the Carrier’s nails, he appeared unhurt.

Vinh spun around to the main threat once more, picked a target and fired. More Carriers were peeling away from the main pack to join the attack against his squad, lurching forward with eyes fixed on their new targets. Dried blood stained their torn clothes, attesting to the violence of infection transfer. Many had ragged wounds, the trauma highlighted by unnaturally pale skin surrounding.

His men joined him in engaging the enemy. Their rifles coughed bullets, methodically dropping one after another of the Infected. Vinh looked ahead and saw the building was now less than fifty metres away. This close in, the ground was littered with corpses, skulls smashed apart by the high calibre rounds fired from Mark’s crew on the roof. The remaining ghouls mobbed a door at the base of the building. A huge Carrier hammered at the panels, reducing his fists to mangled lumps of bone and flesh in the process. A piece of wood eventually splintered under his fury. The Carrier grasped at the panel beside it and wrenched it free. Other eager hands now tore at the panelling from either side, ripping the door apart. And suddenly they were through. The Infected poured through the opening and onto the stairwell.

Vinh swore to himself and stepped up the pace. Despite his best efforts, he feared he was already too late.

‘You fucking idiot,’ muttered Nate as he saw Vinh and his squad arrive.

Mark caught Nate’s line of sight and noted the arrivals. ‘Why’s there only one squad? There should be forty odd soldiers down there.’

‘Vinh’s been a dickhead and ignored orders to wait for the second wave of marines. That’s what you get for promoting a short-arsed, stubborn prick to Corporal the night before a mission.’

‘I’m not complaining; we need his help. Those bastards just broke through the door,’ said Mark, pointing to ground level.

Nate swore to himself as he saw a massive hulk dressed in overalls lunge through the splintered doorway. They probably had less than five minutes before he reached the top of the stairs and ripped apart their weak barricade.

‘I’m down to my last magazine, how many have each of you got?’ asked Mark. Nate had one spare; the other two soldiers were in a worse state, with less than a handful of rounds each.

Mark swore to himself. ‘That’s going to cut it too close for comfort. Surely there’s another way off this roof,’ he said.

The men quickly skirted the edge of the rooftop, looking for a ledge or handholds that might lead to the wall below. Nothing. Only a spine crushing eight-metre drop.

‘Looks like we’re staying put for the fun. Have you got any grenades?’ asked Mark urgently. ‘They won’t kill many but might slow them down a bit.’

‘Just the one, same as you,’ said Nate, placing it in Mark’s waiting hand.

‘Ok, get your bayonets on, but hold your fire until they’re through the door, every bullet has to count. I’ll sort out the stairwell,’ Mark said.

Nate glanced over the edge to see how Vinh was holding up. He was making steady progress, with under twenty Carriers left between his squad and the building.

Mark stood before the door, waiting. The two female Carriers scrabbled ineffectually at the other side of the barrier. Suddenly an ear-splitting roar sounded from behind the wood. He heard two wet thuds, as the huge Carrier he’d seen earlier smashed the female Infected aside to access the door. One punch was all it took. The dry wood of the panel disintegrated to a mass of kindling. The ghoul pressed its face up against the hole. Its right eye socket was empty, the cheek below ripped free to expose the underlying teeth and

jaw. The remaining eye centred on Mark as it screamed a cry of rage at him.

Mark pulled the pins from the grenades, thrust them through the broken panel and dived to the right. 'Get down!' he yelled.

The other marines hit the ground, hands over their heads as two explosions in rapid succession buffeted their ears. The door was blasted from its hinges, the wood converted to a mass of vicious splinters. Nate felt a burning pain in his thigh and looked down to see a twenty-centimetre spike of wood sticking out of his thigh. He grunted in pain as he ripped it out. Smoke and brick dust billowed from the hole where the door had been.

The men got to their feet, rifles trained on the opening. Out from the dust crawled the first Carrier. Both legs had been amputated by shrapnel below the knees, leaving raw bone to grate upon the concrete for purchase. A gaping hole was torn in the left side of its abdomen, allowing fetid entrails to bulge outward. A loop of intestine snagged on the remnants of the bench seat, pulling the entire abdominal contents free in a tangled mess. Over and around the first corpse emerged other Carriers, clothes torn and burnt by the explosion, chunks of flesh ripped free.

'Open fire!' yelled Mark. The marines centred their aim on the entrance and let loose, punching round after round into the shambling ghouls. For each that dropped, another took its place. The marines retreated to the far corner of the roof. Nate couldn't help but glance behind, grimacing as he looked down. The eight-metre drop might end up being the better way to go.

Vinh blew the head off the last Carrier standing ahead, clearing his way to the keep. His whole squad had survived the attack; bruised maybe, but free of bites. He took a deep breath and waved them onwards. Ten metres distant, the last of the Infected passed through the door of the Keep. If they engaged the Infected from the bottom of the staircase, it would decrease the pressure of numbers for his mates at the top.

Vinh and another marine were about to enter when he heard a faint cry of warning above. Without thought, he shoved his comrade out of the doorway and threw himself backwards in the other direction. Two explosions in rapid succession hammered out of the entrance, knocking one of his men to the ground. Vinh looked back at his fallen man, hearing nothing but a high-pitched whine from his damaged eardrums. He grabbed an arm and leg of the wounded soldier to drag him aside in case of a third blast.

His medic was suddenly at his side, pulling out thick wads of dressing to apply pressure to the shrapnel wounds in the soldier's legs. Vinh pulled on the straps built into the upper thigh of the marine's combat fatigues, tourniquets that were incorporated within the uniforms of Australian soldiers for this very occurrence. He left him in the care of the medic and returned to the doorway.

The whistle in his ears started to lessen and he began to make out other sounds. Snarling echoed from within the dark staircase of the Keep as the dust began to settle. He stepped through the entrance, pulled a flare from his webbing, lit and threw it to the far corner of the room. Crimson light bathed the stairwell, casting the Infected above in harsh definition.

The grenades appeared to have gone off at different locations; one on the top landing, the other having fallen down the middle of the staircase to explode at ground level. Vinh picked out his targets above, firing in quick succession alongside his men, desperate to draw the attention of the Carriers away from the men on the roof.

It was working.

As his squad culled their numbers with ruthless efficiency, part of the rabid mob turned and changed their focus to the soldiers at the base of the stairs. One after another, the Carriers were shot, faces obliterated by the marksmanship of Vinh and his men. The last Carrier hit fell over the railing, landing on top of the burning flare with a wet crunch. Darkness returned to the stairwell as the flare was extinguished by dead flesh.

Vinh left three marines to guard the exit, taking the remaining five with him up the stairs. He could hear the fight continuing on the roof, the rate of fire escalating to a near continuous stream of rounds. He halted his men below the top landing, still out of sight of the doorway to the roof. If they went any further, he'd be placing his men into the line of fire as the marines on the roof shot towards the doorway. Vinh gritted his teeth, desperate to join the fight. The rate of fire suddenly began to reduce, and yet the snarling from the Carriers continued. Suddenly there was an absence of gunfire and he heard a man scream in agony. He couldn't wait any longer. Vinh lunged up the last couple of steps and ran for the doorway. The exit was blocked, piled thigh height with corpses. Beyond the doorway, the ground was covered in bodies, burnt and mangled by shrapnel. At the far side, he could see the backs of three Carriers as they attacked the last of the marines. Vinh hauled himself over the corpses blocking the doorway, rolling down the far side into a mess

of entrails. He shoved himself to standing and bolted over the vile bodies beneath him.

The four marines backed away shoulder to shoulder, slowly giving ground to the ghouls in front. The marine to Mark's right, a bloke called Tanner, swore viciously as he ran out of ammunition.

Mark shoved his rifle into his hands. 'Take mine. When it runs dry, stab for their eyes with the bayonet,' he said, drawing his short sword from the scabbard at his waist.

The back of Nate's thighs hit against the low wall; they were out of space. He let loose a spray of bullets at head height, blasting two Carriers from their feet, then felt the firing pin hit an empty chamber.

'I'm out!' he yelled, changing the grip on his rifle to use the bayonet.

'Fuck! Me too!' said the marine to Nate's left.

There were eight Carriers left. Each of the Infected was dressed in army combat fatigues, previous soldiers of the Fort before having their minds reprogrammed by plague. Tanner stepped forward, rifle switched to auto as he attacked. Two Carriers went down, faces obliterated by the high-powered rounds before a third grabbed hold of the gun barrel, ripping it forward and down. Tanner stubbornly held onto the weapon, his finger snapping in the trigger guard and jamming it on fire. Bullets fired uselessly behind the Carrier then the last magazine was empty. With a second wrench it pulled Tanner forward, clamping teeth into the gap between his shoulder and neck, it ripped out a mouthful of tissue. He screamed, punching at the ghoul to try and break its grip as it drew him down to the ground.

The others were powerless to intervene as the remaining Carriers attacked, each man targeted by two or more. Mark thrust into the closest one, shoving the sword point deep under its chin, up into the brain. The Carrier dropped like a sack of concrete, dragging Mark's arm down. A knee drove into his side and suddenly he was on his back, two pallid faces leaning over him with lips drawn back. He kicked upward, driving a heel into one face, knocking the ghoul off its feet, then wildly slashed with the blade, opening a grotesque smile through the other's neck. His sword had bitten deep, almost to the vertebrae. The head lolled to the side, the neck wound hinging open

and causing the creature to unbalance. It earned Mark enough time to gain his feet. A savage chop finished the job, biting through the spine and cutting the head free. He stabbed down into the other Carrier before it could stand again, driving the point of his sword through its open mouth and into the brain stem.

Mark panted in exertion, turning to help the others. Tanner was a lost cause, immobile with a gaping cavern where his throat had once been. His attacker had moved on to Nate and the last marine, who had both been forced to the ground. They were desperately fending off the snapping jaws and tearing fingers of three Carriers. Mark lunged from where he stood, stabbing his sword into the base of one's spine, causing its legs to buckle and fall to the side. Suddenly one of the Carrier's heads exploded in a mist of tissue and bone, and then Vinh was beside him. Mark drove his sword tip through the thin bone above the Carrier's ear that he had felled, as Vinh shot the last Carrier from above Nate.

Nate shoved the fallen corpse off him, then wiped a slick of brain fragments off his face, flicking the foul ooze from his fingers in disgust. 'Is Tanner ok?'

'He didn't make it,' Vinh said, shaking his head.

Nate squatted next to Tanner, his feet squelching in a congealing pool of blood about his body. He reached out a hand and turned his head towards him, exposing the wound on the far side of the neck. Deep bites had ripped out crescent shaped clumps of tissue, severing his carotid and jugular vessels. He'd bled out in seconds.

'Yeah well, you got here in time to stop this happening to the rest of us,' he said looking up at Vinh. 'I bloody owe you.'

Vinh just shrugged and looked out over the compound. 'There's more of those bastards coming from the south side. We better get going before they corner us.'

As the men entered the stairwell, Mark flicked on his torch to guide their way. The lower half of the staircase was strewn with twenty or more corpses. Mark looked back at Vinh, recognising the significance of the fight his squad had undertaken to reach them.

'How are the rest of your men, did you lose anyone?' he asked.

'One of the guys caught a few pieces of your grenade, nothing life threatening though. We did alright – no bites,' Vinh said as he picked his way around the bodies.

The rest of Vinh's squad were outside the bottom door in a defensive

semi-circle facing outwards. Mark shielded his eyes from the glare of the morning sun. Carriers from the southern end of the compound were approaching, leaving scant minutes until they were under attack again. Mark's eyes flicked back to the east, only to find their path of retreat towards the beach also blocked.

‘Any spare magazines?’ asked Mark, ‘because we’re all out.’

Most of Vinh's squad were running low, the carpet of dead surrounding clear evidence of where they'd spent their rounds. Gun fire sounded from the direction of the beach and Mark cracked a half smile in relief. The main force was finally entering the compound.

Vinh ordered his men back into the building they had fought so hard to reach and clear out. ‘Keep your heads down - I don't want any more ‘friendly fire’ injuries from the marines heading our way. Look around you,’ he said, pointing out the sheer scale of devastation they'd wrought on the Infected. ‘We’ve done our job today – no one can argue that.’

Chapter Eight

Harry drew the last stitch tight and cut the thread before covering the laceration in a white dressing. 'Check on the wound within a day or two, if you see any redness, swelling or pus, come back and I'll chuck you on some antibiotics, otherwise I'll see you in a week to clip out the sutures.'

The marine had sustained a simple laceration on his thigh during the operation. It was typical to most of the injuries he'd treated that day. There had only been two serious traumas, one soldier that had shot himself in the leg while climbing over a fence, and the shrapnel injury. The grenade injury had been relatively lucky, with only simple flesh injuries to one thigh. The gunshot hadn't fared as well. Harry had been forced to give the guy a below knee amputation after finding the ankle joint completely destroyed.

Harry excused himself from his patient, flicking bloodied plastic gloves in a bin as he walked out of the room in search of some fresh air. Harry exited the building, found himself a spot out of the wind and lit a cigarette. He'd slipped into his old addiction, finding it oddly amusing that his smokes were no longer the most likely thing to get him killed.

Leaning back on the outside wall, he exhaled a long plume of smoke as he watched the marines at work. The clean-up had begun. Twenty soldiers were hard at work off to his left, excavating a long trench inside the back fence line. The men digging the hole probably had the better end of the stick, compared to the others stuck lugging corpses to the mass grave. With morbid curiosity, he watched the soldiers stack the bodies with business like efficiency.

Already, the compound looked like a different place compared to what he had walked into. By the time he'd landed with the last group of men, the fight was over. He'd had flashbacks to the farm when he'd viewed the main killing ground below the Fort's Keep. Despite all the violence he'd witnessed over the preceding months, the sight of so many dead bodies still made his mind reel. He'd heard that Mark had been involved in the main battle, but as of yet, had not seen him.

Within his clinic lay the problem that had him stressed - two soldiers with plague infected bite wounds. He'd ensured they were well secured, wrists and ankles manacled to the steel frames of their beds. There had been

other soldiers bitten during the fight, eight in total. Six had taken responsibility for the situation, eating a bullet fired by their own hand. Those men had joined the Carriers in the mass grave already. But the remaining two were Harry's problem.

He was back to square one. After quitting the civilian health service when it mandated a policy of euthanasia, he was being told to do the same thing; although this time around as a member of the armed forces, it was no longer a request, but an order.

A heavy hand dropped on his shoulder, making him jump.

'I see you're still trying to kill yourself with those bloody things?' said Mark.

Harry dropped the stub of his cigarette on the dirt, ground the butt under his heel and grasped Mark's hand in a firm grip of welcome.

'And I hear you're trying to get yourself killed by volunteering for high risk missions,' countered Harry. 'You look like you got through ok?'

'Yeah, I'm fine. It got a little hairy there for a while though.'

Harry just nodded as he looked back at the grave diggers. Nothing more needed to be said. He knew some of Mark's motivation lay in a desire to protect his mates. It wasn't necessarily a death wish, he just knew that it would be dangerous, and would rather it be himself faced with the threat than any of his fellow soldiers.

'How are you holding up?' Mark asked.

'Most of the job's fine, it's just my usual role with an army uniform thrown in. But I have to 'treat' plague bites. They've taken the Health Department's protocol – sedate the patient, then penetrate the skull and destroy the brain with a drill. Except there isn't one in my equipment, so I'll be stuck hammering in something pointy instead. I just can't get my head around deliberately killing my patients,' said Harry.

'I've seen you kill plenty of Carriers. Just think of it as another one of the Infected.'

Harry looked at Mark scathingly. 'It's not that fucking easy, and you know it,' he muttered.

'Ok. Let me put it another way then. Being a doctor, they probably won't court martial you over disobeying an order. But if you won't do it, then it falls back to their commanding officer to carry out the task,' Mark said.

'And, your point is?'

'What the hell do you think that's going to do to every officer? They

already have to live with decisions that sometimes result in the death of their soldiers, but then you'll be asking them to personally end the life of those that get bitten. To end the life of soldiers who are as close to family as you get these days. It'll break even the most resilient eventually. Can you imagine their suicide figures in the long term? And how do you think the rank and file would come to view their leaders? They'd eventually just despise them as executioners.'

'So why are you wishing that fate on me instead?'

'Because you're a doctor, it can be interpreted differently for you.'

'I could have sworn I took a Hippocratic oath "to do no harm". How the hell is it different for me?'

'Well, what if "life itself" becomes harm to the patient and others?' said Mark.

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Mark cut him off before he could start.

'We already know that people don't survive this infection. They'll inevitably die, and then reanimate as another mindless killer. However, *you* have the power to stop this from happening. *You* can give all our soldiers the knowledge that they will have an opportunity to die with dignity, while removing the burden from the officers that already carry their own weight of guilt. Why would you consider refusing our men something so important?'

Harry's face fell. 'Fuck you, Mark.'

'Why?'

'For taking away any option of refusal,' he muttered. 'You better find a bottle of scotch somewhere, because I'm going to need more than a few drinks after this.'

Harry looked broken, shoulders slumped as he turned and walked back into the clinic.

Chapter Nine

Steph walked slowly, her eyes casting ahead to search for any irregularities on the landscape. Although the sun had dominated the ice blue sky for an hour since dawn, it had yet to melt a thin layer of frost covering the ground. Each step gave a light crunch as her foot broke through to the underlying dirt. Steph and Jai's squad of recruits had been elevated to the next phase of training and were expected to contribute to the camp's safety by patrolling the approaching highway. They'd been given the safest shift; this early in the morning, Carriers were still half frozen after a night spent in sub zero temperatures.

The squad walked in a staggered line across the road and into the grass verge. Twenty metres to the rear walked their Sergeant, observing and supervising their progress. Both Jai and Steph were at the end of the line, walking through calf length grass. Each cradled an Austeyr rifle in their arms, comfortably at the ready. During the past weeks, the weapons had become an extension of their bodies, always within hand's reach no matter the time of day. To be without a rifle now was to feel naked.

'Do you see that up ahead?' Steph said quietly. 'There's a hump in the grass at two o'clock. Is it my turn or yours?'

Jai searched the ground ahead until his eyes found the Carrier. Only its back was visible above the grass. Keeping his eyes fixed on the ghoul, he pulled a new weapon from behind his shoulder, a long club with a steel reinforced end. Shaped like a baseball bat, the club had been improvised to assist skull penetration. Jai depressed a button above the handle, and a circlet of five-centimetre-long spikes appeared around the end. The clubs had been issued the day before, as the army sought to preserve ammunition for higher risk confrontations with the Infected.

'I'll sort it out,' he said. 'Might as well give this thing a christening.'

As Jai got closer, the Carrier noted his approach, its head moving slowly to face him. It had been an obese older man before becoming infected. Wearing only jeans, a layer of ice glistened on the pale skin of its back, reflecting sun back at Jai. Without waiting, Jai swung the club underhand with force, burying the spikes deep into the Carrier's forehead to puncture the frontal lobe of the brain. Jai went to jerk the weapon back but found the metal spikes were lodged in the bone.

‘Hit the button again,’ said Steph.

Jai pressed the button on the handle once more, and the spikes recoiled into the bat. The Carrier’s head dropped with a dull thud onto the dirt. He gave the body a nudge with his boot to ensure it was dead, grunted with satisfaction and replaced the club in its holder on his back.

‘I think I have a new favourite weapon,’ he said, while taking back hold of his rifle.

Steph allowed a half smile to kink one side of her mouth. ‘Just don’t use it at the wrong time, yeah? No point saving bullets if it gets you killed.’

Jai rolled his eyes at her motherly advice. ‘I would have thought you’d take that for granted. I don’t plan on dying any time soon.’

The two jogged to catch up with the line that had moved forward another 20 metres in the meantime.

‘I hear our group might be getting deployed soon,’ said Jai.

‘Who’d you hear that from?’ asked Steph, her interest gained.

‘Our Sergeant was on the table behind me in the mess, talking with some of the other trainers,’ Jai said. ‘Your name came up at one time, seems like you’ve impressed a couple of people higher up the chain with how you handled yourself.’

‘I’d take anything you hear with a grain of salt,’ Steph said, dismissing the compliment. ‘What did they say about the deployment? Any specifics on where we’d be sent?’

‘I heard about some town outside of Geelong. We’d just be clean up teams after the main swarm’s wiped out by regular forces. Doesn’t sound too dangerous.’

‘Bet that means house clearances,’ said Steph, her gut clenching at the thought. ‘Give me a Carrier out in the open any day, it’s when those bastard things surprise you that they’re dangerous.’

A low rumble of an engine caught both their attention, silencing the conversation. The whole line stopped, each person’s gaze drawn to where the road disappeared over a blind rise 200 metres distant. The noise grew in volume, something was driving fast, past the point the engine could sustain comfortably. Suddenly the roof of a public bus appeared over the rise. As it cleared the ridge, it began to accelerate toward the squad blocking the road.

The Sergeant’s voice roared behind them. ‘Rifles up! All vehicles must be searched for plague. If that bus doesn’t begin to slow down, move to the right side of the road and take out its wheels!’

As one, the recruits in the line took a side on stance, rifles aimed menacingly at the approaching bus. Steph bit her lip hard as she watched the huge vehicle accelerate toward them. Just as the Sergeant was about to order his squad off the road, the bus began to gear down rapidly, brakes groaning as they slowed the huge weight. The bus stopped less than twenty metres away in the middle of the tarmac, no attempt being made to pull onto the verge.

They waited for the door to open without reward. Through the tinted glass of the windscreen, Jai thought he could make out the driver gesturing at them to come closer.

‘Hey Sarg,’ Jai said, ‘I think he wants to talk.’

The Sergeant squinted at the driver through the glass. ‘Fucking idiot looks like he’s shitting his pants. No prize for guessing what he has on board then,’ he said. ‘Right, you two,’ he added, pointing out Steph and Jai, ‘You’re with me, the rest of you stay put.’

Steph and Jai trailed the Sergeant a step behind, rifles at the ready. They walked to the driver’s side where the man slid back a section of window. The air-conditioned bus was roasting compared to the morning chill, with Steph feeling hot air brush past her face from the open window. Through the gap came the unmistakeable snarling of Carriers. The driver was enclosed within a security box. The Perspex barrier protecting him was smeared with blood where the Infected had smashed their fists in an attempt to break through. A spider web of cracks across the structure showed it wouldn’t hold for much longer.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ demanded the Sergeant, ignoring any effort at civility. ‘You were an inch away from having your tyres shot out!’

The driver looked like he was barely keeping it together. Sweat beaded on his forehead and soaked his armpits and back. His hands were shaking on the steering wheel he gripped for support.

‘Carriers! The bus is full of them!’ he yelled.

‘I’m not blind, you idiot! I want to know why you nearly mowed down my recruits with a busload of the pricks on board,’ said the Sergeant.

‘My group was heading to the evacuation point. We picked up a hitchhiker on the road. The bugger lied, said he was free of bites. My friends told me not to risk it, that we shouldn’t stop, but with what we’d been through over the past months – I couldn’t leave him on his own in the middle of nowhere. He looked exhausted, so I let him sleep down the back. Next

thing I knew he was attacking my group; turned the place into a slaughterhouse. He bloody killed them all.'

'Why didn't you stop and open the doors?' asked the Sergeant.

'I did, but he'd moved to the front of the bus and no-one could get past. And now I'm trapped. Once they reanimated, they wouldn't leave the bus, just ignored the open door and hammered at my enclosure, trying to get in. That's why I've been heading here at full pace, hoping to find the army evacuation point to help me before they break in and finish the job.'

'Can you get through your window?' suggested Jai.

'This is as far as it goes,' said the driver, pointing to the ten-centimetre gap he talked through. 'Are you guys going to help me or not?' he asked, starting to become more agitated.

The Sergeant looked pissed off with the situation. 'If you'd just listened to your mates, I wouldn't have to risk my troops to save you. How did you survive this long only to pull a rookie mistake like that?'

At his words, the bus driver broke down, tears spilling as he started to blub. The Sergeant pulled an uncomfortable face and relented.

'Ah, for fucks sake, get a grip. We'll get you sorted. Give me a second to talk to my squad.'

He returned to the line of recruits, running his gaze over the faces of each and every person he had trained. Behind him, the inside of the bus windscreen was filled with the Infected, hammering on the glass to get at them.

'This situation isn't ideal; however, I think you can handle it. On that bus is twenty-odd Carriers. These ones aren't half frozen like we've encountered outside to date, they're warm from the bus's air-conditioning, and that means they'll be faster than usual. I reckon this situation can be used as a final exam. If you guys do well enough, I'll be recommending each of you for deployment.'

A ripple of nervous tension passed along the line of recruits as his words sunk in.

'I want two lines of ten facing past the bus doorway, first kneeling, second standing behind. Remember the driver is still on board, so no shooting into the bus or he'll end up dead all the same. Get to it!'

The recruits fell into place, lined up twenty metres in front of the bus. Steph and Jai stood in the back line, rifles at the ready. The Sergeant stood to the right of the group with a clear line of sight to the bus. He stood ready to

pick off any Carriers that escaped the bullets of his soldiers.

‘Open her up!’ yelled the Sergeant to the bus driver. The door hinged open, and suddenly they were out. The Carriers moved faster than anything that Steph or Jai had seen to date. Not being used to tracking targets at such speed, the recruits were caught off guard. Within moments the bus had disgorged its contents, the Carriers launching themselves at the army line. Jai flicked to automatic and aimed at head height. Half the Infected were thrown from their feet, heads obliterated within a metre of leaving the bus, others dropped momentarily by the force of the bullet strike. Steph changed her focus to these Carriers, joining her Sergeant in picking them off before they regained their feet. Two of the Infected made it to the group, unscathed by the automatic fire, they smashed into the front line and knocked two recruits onto their backs. Steph and Jai drew their captive-bolt guns, jammed them against the skulls of the attacking Carriers and fired. The Infected slumped to the ground, shoved to the side by the recruits as they gained their feet once again.

‘Check the dead!’ ordered the Sergeant. Captive-bolt guns were drawn by the recruits as they wandered between the corpses, firing twice into each skull to ensure they were permanently out of action. Deaths confirmed, the Sergeant had his recruits clear the road by dragging the bodies into the grass.

Only now did the bus driver finally emerge. His legs gave out after a few steps and he landed with a thump on his arse and started crying. Jai turned away to give the man some privacy. He felt a hand descend onto his shoulder and looked up to find the Sergeant indicating for him and Steph to step aside from the group.

‘You two know what you’re doing and have done since the start of this bloody training camp. I’ve heard what you two achieved on that farm, and I’ll be bugged if I’m going to see such a resource wasted. The rest of the group will graduate, but they’ll stay here to help defend the town. I’m going to suggest the two of you get sent to Victoria; they’re going to need level heads like yours to get through the next few weeks down there.’ The Sergeant gave them a hard smile, then turned away to organise the squad’s return to town.

‘Funny way the army’s got to show its appreciation,’ Steph said to Jai.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Haven’t you noticed? The better we succeed, the more danger they throw at us.’

‘Fine by me. It means we’ll actually be on the front line to push these bastards back into a grave. The Sarge just did me a favour as far as I’m

concerned.'

Steph said nothing, and Jai noted the self-doubt painted on his mate's face. 'You're good at this shit, Steph. We'll be fine,' he said, trying to reassure her.

He looked over his shoulder. 'Look, the rest of the group's on the move, we better get going if we don't want to be left behind. We'll talk about it tonight. You want to help me get this guy moving?'

Steph nodded, and joined him at the side of the bus driver. Taking an arm each, they helped the man to his feet, speaking some quiet words of encouragement as they started back to Jindabyne.

Chapter Ten

Wind hammered at the thin window of the demountable, making the glass shudder. Outside, a range of keening notes fluctuated with the intensity of gusts, as the wind cut around clotheslines and tent stays. Erin lay awake in her bunk, trying to block out the sound of the storm and fall asleep. Her bladder didn't help the situation. She'd broken her usual rule and allowed herself a cup of tea before bed and was paying the price as she desperately needed to pee. Erin would have gone an hour earlier, but the thought of moving through the camp at night still freaked her out. If she didn't go now though, she'd wet the bed.

Erin climbed out from underneath her sleeping bag and pulled her jacket on. She was still fully clothed to keep warm; the temporary building structure barely kept out the rain and wind, so retaining any heat was beyond its capabilities. Pulling a torch from the side pocket of her bag, she stepped carefully between a few sleeping bodies on the floor to reach the doorway. The camp was at capacity, and yet they still delivered more refugees to the island. The small demountable now had every bunk full and the floor crammed with six additional kids. A sleepy head lifted off its pillow next to the doorway and squinted into the torchlight.

'Is that you, Erin? What are you doing?' asked a girl called Tina, no older than eight.

'I'm just going to the toilet, do you need to go as well, I can take you with me if you want?' offered Erin.

'No way! Don't you know there's monsters in the night? It's not safe out there,' she said, eyes widening in fear.

'Tina, that was on the mainland. You're safe here, there's none of those freaks on the island,' said Erin, trying to reassure her. She found herself jiggling back and forth between her feet – she was busting. 'I'll be back in a few minutes, you'll see.'

Tina nodded meekly and shimmied backward, so she could open the door. Erin pulled her beanie down over her ears, took a deep breath and went outside. The wind immediately blasted into her, making her groan as it stripped away body heat and set her teeth chattering.

There were a few lights through the camp, but not enough to see all the trip hazards. Erin turned on her torch, aiming it ahead as she started to jog

toward the toilet block. Tents took up all the remaining space between the original demountable buildings, now also extending in an undulating sea of fabric up to the perimeter fence. Erin's eyes flicked sideways, checking the shadows between the buildings and tents for movement as she went. She may have reassured the younger girl about the absence of monsters on the island, but Erin knew better. They were here all right, just not of the plague variety.

There had been a steadily growing number of assaults against women in the camp. The guards blamed it on the new men but seemed unwilling to investigate or do anything about it. Erin didn't believe a word. She was convinced the attacks were perpetrated by a group of guards, led by that creep, Jeremy.

When she'd talked about this to Rachael, the older girl had shied away from the conversation, unwilling to discuss the topic. Erin was worried about her and the changes that had happened over the past week. Rachael had started out forcefully condemning Jeremy's harassment of her and other women, but that had changed shortly after she had encouraged Erin to start carrying a knife. Now she just looked scared if Erin mentioned Jeremy or his cronies.

Erin finally reached the toilet block, another pre-fabricated building drenched in reassuring light. She bolted into one of the cubicles, slammed the door shut and sat on the loo, releasing a long overdue stream to churn into the toilet bowl. Erin finished and wiped herself, then froze. There was blood on the paper. She felt her eyes begin to fill with tears and blinked them away furiously. She'd be damned if she'd let herself cry about this. A number of her friends at school had already got their period before the plague took hold, and as her own body had begun to change and fill out over the last few months, she'd known hers was likely close. *But now?* She wasn't upset about getting her period as such, but it reinforced how alone she felt. This was the sort of thing you were supposed to have a mum or dad to help with and talk through, wasn't it? Who was she supposed to turn to? She needed to get hold of some pads or tampons, but at this time of night she was stumped for options. She rolled up a wad of toilet paper, shoved it into her undies and pulled up her pants. She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, blew her nose then mentally shook herself. She could deal with this, it was just a bodily function for god's sake, and a sign that her body was catching up with the maturing her mind had been forced into over the past months. Rachael's room was nearby; she'd be able to help.

Erin washed her hands at the sink, then set off again. Within minutes, she found the small building. It was at the perimeter of the camp, scrub bushland starting within a metre of the building's rear. One of the few single roomed structures with an ensuite, the small bungalow pre-dated the camp from when the property had been a hotel. At first Rachael had been glad of the privacy and relative luxury compared to the other camp accommodations, but that had gradually changed. Before she'd become mute on the subject, Rachael said she thought the guards had allocated the room specifically to ensure she was alone at night, and that she'd woken to Jeremy knocking on her door requesting to be let in some nights.

Erin could see a light on behind the curtain. She glanced at her own watch, 01:30AM, what was she doing up at this time? Erin crunched the last few steps to the door on the gravel path and lightly knocked.

'Rachael, are you up? It's me, Erin,' she called softly through the door. She heard movement inside, then the door opened a crack. A solitary eye peered through the gap at her for a moment before opening it wide to allow her through. Once inside, Rachael closed the door once more, and flipped the lock.

The room was warm, courtesy of a small electric heater in one corner. There was a tiny bathroom with a shower and toilet through a door to the right. A double bed extended from the far wall, covered in a thick quilt. Rachael limped to it and perched on a corner, drawing her knees up under her chin. Her face was pale and eyes red, like she'd been crying.

'Are you ok? What happened?' asked Erin, suddenly worried about her friend.

Automatically, Rachael's eyes flicked to the door then window, as if worried she might be overheard. 'It's Jeremy. The bastard's got hold of a key to my room. He's been letting himself in at night over the past week. Tonight, he brought another of the guards to join in...' she whispered, her words trailed off as her bottom lip quivered. 'I don't think I can take much more of this, Erin. Who do I turn to when it's the fucking guards raping me?'

Erin wrapped an arm around her shoulders, giving her a hug. 'What about that officer that helped me the other day? He said to come to him if I got hassled again, surely he can help you too?' said Erin.

Rachael stiffened. 'You can't do that. He said if I told anyone it wouldn't just be me, that he'd start to target some of the younger kids as well.'

'You can't let yourself be hurt just to protect us. He has to be stopped!'

Of all the people killed by the plague, why the hell does a piece of scum like him get to survive? It's not fair,' said Erin.

'That's just the way it is,' said Rachael, the expression around her eyes hardening. 'I'll get him sorted, don't worry about me, ok? Just promise you won't go to the Officer. Let me do it my way.'

Erin looked at Rachael, trying to work out if she could believe her. 'Ok, but nobody has the right to hurt you like this. He needs to pay for what he's done.'

'Deal,' said Rachael. 'Now why are you coming to my place in the middle of the night?'

'It's a bit embarrassing, but I haven't got anyone else to really ask,' Erin took a deep breath then looked Rachael in the eye. 'I got my first period and I don't have anything to deal with it. Have you got any pads or tampons or something, and..' she paused, looking away, 'can you show me how to use them?' Erin looked back warily, scared she might find Rachael smirking at her. She needn't have worried. Rachael's face had softened as she reached out her arms to give her a hug. Erin accepted the gesture, giving her friend a tight squeeze.

'No problem. It sucks not having a mum around, eh? I miss mine too you know,' Rachael said. She got up and went into the bathroom. 'I've got some stuff under the sink, it's pretty straightforward but I'll show you what to do,' she said looking over her shoulder at her. 'You might as well crash here afterwards, it's too late to be walking around this camp by yourself.'

A knot of anxiety slowly uncoiled in Erin's gut at her words. 'Thanks Rachael, I knew I could depend on you.'

Erin was in the kitchen. The dinner service had been completed and washed up, but she'd convinced the head chef to allow her to make a thankyou dessert for Rachael. It was something simple, just pancakes rolled up around frozen berries and caster sugar, but she thought Rachael might like them. With the dessert finished and in a container, she started to wash up the dishes. The chef had stayed with her, having a cup of tea and watching the news while waiting.

'Do you reckon they'll help, or just leave them to get eaten like the rest of the country?' asked the chef. She was a middle-aged woman with thinning

grey hair and a gut that professed a love of her own cooking.

‘What’s the story? I haven’t been listening,’ Erin said.

‘One of the cruise liners used to evacuate civilians from the mainland turned up off the north coast of Tasmania this week. But most of the boat’s overrun with plague, only the crew on the bridge is unaffected at this stage.’

‘If they’re too scared to let our group of refugees in, that boat’s got no chance,’ Erin said.

The chef snorted a laugh at the tone of her young charge. ‘You’re right there. They got turned away quick smart, but now they’re heading in our direction, requesting the navy to cull the Infected on board and allow the crew to join the refugee camp. The news report reckons they’ll be off our coast by morning.’

‘As long as they don’t end up bringing the plague on shore,’ Erin said. She finished drying her utensils and returned them to the cupboard. ‘I’m all done. Thanks for letting me make this stuff, I owe you.’

‘Don’t worry kiddo,’ said the chef, ‘I’ll be getting you in for an extra shift this week to make it up.’

Erin just smiled, any excuse to be in the warm kitchens was ok with her. She grabbed her container of stuffed pancakes, a couple of knives and forks, gave the chef a wave and left.

Erin’s happy mood wavered as soon as she got outside. The camp was pitch black again. She tightened her coat and tried to ignore her own fear as she broke into a jog to arrive at Rachael’s building more quickly. With relief, Erin rounded the last corner of the path but slowed up as she saw Rachael’s bungalow. Something was wrong.

The front door was hanging half open, light spilling onto the path from within. Erin walked up slowly, peering into the surrounding shadows as she approached for signs of danger. She reached the doorway.

‘Rachael? Are you here?’ she said hesitantly. Nothing. Erin put her head around the corner, finding the room empty. Her breath caught in her throat and heart started to race. Something had happened in the room. The bed clothes had been ripped off to lie in a mess on the ground. A bedside table was turned over, one leg smashed. Erin’s eyes were drawn back to the sheet on the bed. A slick of congealing blood soaked into the mattress. Something had happened to Rachael. She moved quickly now, concern for her friend outweighing any fear for her own safety. She quickly checked the bathroom, confirming that the bungalow was empty before returning to the front door.

Erin pulled a small torch from her overcoat and shone it into the surrounding shadows as she stepped off the porch to explore. From the amount of blood soaked into the sheets, Rachael had to be close by if she had moved herself. She moved around the side of the house to search the edge of the scrub and swept the torch in a slow arc over the ankle length grass. A cry of anguish lodged in her throat as the beam of light reflected off pale skin.

Erin sprinted forward, kneeling at the side of her friend's body. Rachael lay on her back, legs splayed. She wore a blue t-shirt but was naked below the waist. Dark blood stained her inner thighs. Eyes stared sightlessly to the stars above a cyanotic face. Erin fumbled at her neck, desperately trying to untie a length of cord still knotted about her friend's neck. Finally, it came free and she felt for a pulse beneath her chin.

Nothing. She was dead, the skin already cold.

Erin rocked back on her heels, tears running warm down both cheeks. Jeremy had moved up the rungs of violence, graduating to murder. She raised shaking hands to her face and cuffed the tears from her eyes. If Rachael was dead, was she the next on his list?

Gravel crunched near her. Erin flinched away, spinning to the side to see who was approaching. Jeremy emerged from the shadows a few metres away and walked up to Rachael's body. Erin's mind screamed for her to run, and yet she found herself unable to leave her friend alone with him, even if all that remained of her was a body.

Jeremy flicked on a torch of his own, scanning it slowly up Rachael's corpse. Obscenely, he let the beam rest on the blood-stained skin beneath her waist.

'Looks like one of the camp men have notched up their first murder,' he said. The tip of his tongue darted out to moisten his lips as he drank in the view before him. 'Typical I guess, too scared to fight the Infected, but brave enough to kill an unarmed woman.'

'That's bullshit, and you know it,' said Erin, her mouth running before her brain could filter the words.

Jeremy's eyes narrowed with anger as they rose to meet hers. 'Is that so? An investigation will find the man responsible any day now. That will prove you wrong.'

Now that she'd started, Erin couldn't stop as her fury mounted. 'All that proves is that you found a scapegoat. Everyone in the camp knows that it's the guards responsible for the attacks. She told me that you raped her.' Erin

took an instinctive step back from him, readying herself to bolt. 'It was you who killed her, and I'm going to make sure you get the blame!'

Jeremy's hand whipped out, grabbing onto Erin's throat. He wrenched her forward so that she leant out over her friend's body, only her toes touching the ground. He brought his face close to hers,

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' he said, voice thick with rage. 'Unless you want to end up just like her, I'd suggest you keep your mouth shut.' Jeremy shoved her backwards. Her feet caught, and Erin fell hard on her backside. She gasped for air, her throat aching from the trauma. Jeremy stood over her, his body now only a black outline in the darkness.

'I'll be watching you. Remember, I have keys to each room in the camp. The slightest hint that you're up to something that doesn't make me happy, and you'll be waking up one night with me tightening that cord about your neck instead. You got it?'

Erin looked up at him, eyes wide as she nodded. Jeremy turned away and spat into the bushes. 'Now that we understand each other, you can fuck off. I've got a murder to call in.'

Erin scooted herself backward, got to her feet, then turned and ran for the main section of camp.

Jeremy chuckled as he watched her bolt. He turned back to the body and pulled out his radio. 'I've found a murder victim. Looks like that slut from the kitchen took the wrong guy home...'

Chapter Eleven

Mark tried to straighten his uniform in an effort to improve his appearance, then gave up. If the commanding officers were more interested in how his uniform looked than the content of his report, he was screwed anyway. He took a deep breath, raised his hand and knocked sharply on the wood panelled door before him. Hearing a muted invitation to enter from the other side, Mark turned the handle and stepped through.

The building and room he stood in was old, one of the first structures built of the Fort in the mid 1800's. In contrast to the wooden floorboards of the hall, thick green carpet lay underfoot, muting his steps as he entered. Before him sat the commanding officers of the Fort around a large circular dining table. The polished surface held the remnants of a simple meal they'd shared prior to his arrival. The Navy officers were joined by two from the Army. Word of the Army's arrival had spread through the camp in the late afternoon as the Marines made ready to hand over responsibility for the Fort. Mark pulled up short and saluted.

'At ease,' ordered one of the Navy officers before turning to his army colleagues. 'This is Sergeant Mark Collins. Since being seconded to the Marines, he's been highly involved in the mission to date, and was a key member of the initial landing force. For his involvement in that operation, he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, and attached to a platoon who trialled one of our proposed battle tactics against the Infected. I thought his experiences during that mission may be of interest to the command group as we confirm our plans to reclaim Queenscliff and the peninsula.'

The men at the table eyed Mark with renewed interest.

'I hear you were one of my Sappers in Afghanistan,' said one of the army officers, a general by the insignia sewn onto his uniformed shoulder. The voice caught Mark's attention, he'd heard it somewhere before - on the initial radio recording while they were on the farm. His eyes flicked to the name on his shirt, General Black, the commander of the entire Australian armed forces. Mark's mouth was suddenly a little dry.

'Yes sir, I did a few tours and was seconded to the Americans for a while to help construct some of their more remote field bases.'

'Which ones?' asked Black.

'The last one was in the Korangal Valley before the Americans finally

gave up on it,' Mark said.

The general's eyebrow raised. 'So, you were in the thick of it. I didn't realise we'd agreed to send any of our men to that hell hole. Korangal had some of the highest fatality rates of the war.'

'Yes sir, forty-two dead amongst the Americans.'

The general took a drink from a schooner on the table, pausing to wipe froth from his top lip. 'I'll be interested to hear your report then, soldier. Take a seat,' he said, and then turned to one of the aids nearby. 'And grab the man a beer, he looks bloody parched.'

Mark accepted a stubbie of Carlton Draught from the aid. Ignoring the glass on the table, he raised the bottle to his lips and took a sip.

'I am particularly keen to hear about the noted changes in Carrier behaviour, but, start from the beginning of the mission. I want your honest opinions on why the mission failed, and what you believe could have been done differently. In your own time,' said Black as he settled back into his chair, crossing his arms as he waited for Mark to begin.

Mark took a second sip, this one longer. He swilled the beer about his mouth as he decided where to begin. The mission had been a clusterfuck from the outset. After everything the army should have learnt from previous losses, that the mission had even been approved galled Mark to his core. If they wanted brutal honesty in his account, he'd bloody well give it to them.

Mark sat with his men in the shade, back resting against the boundary wall of the Fort. An unnaturally hot spell of heat for a Victorian spring had arrived to banish the winter cold from their bones. Sun beat down from a clear sky, raising the temperature enough to break a sweat and burn the skin.

Mark felt his heart sink as he observed his new platoon officer. The man was young and full of misplaced confidence. Only one year out of Royal Duntroon military college, he strutted like a cockerel back and forth behind the gate while waiting for the go ahead to leave the Fort. It wasn't so much his confidence that fired Mark's misgivings, it was that it was misplaced. By the soldiers' morose expressions, it was evident that the officer hadn't prepped his men adequately. All soldiers experienced fear prior to a mission, if they said any different it was pure lies. But there was huge difference between a soldier that knew he was taking on the enemy through a well-

conceived plan, and the poor grunt who thought he was being sent out as an expendable pawn in a battlefield experiment.

Mark had felt a crushing weight of responsibility for his soldiers' safety as they were notified of the planned mission. The platoon had been picked to trial a guerrilla style raid where they would engage the Infected, then retreat to safety before larger numbers could overwhelm them. On the surface it sounded reasonable. As a professionally trained unit, they should be unfazed by a slow-moving enemy that couldn't shoot back. However, a large part of the plan rested upon an assumption that a technique designed for use upon humans, would work with the undead. Mark knew that there would be no period of shock and confusion amongst the Infected, just immediate retaliation and attack.

The front gate began to move, sliding to the right on a poorly greased mechanism. Beyond the wall lay an urban street that would take them along the foreshore parkland. From that road, they would branch off to the centre of town where the main crowd of Infected waited. Mark felt his heart speed up in anticipation as he scanned the street for movement. Empty. He let out his breath, and turned to the Lieutenant.

'We right to move out, Sir?'

The young officer held his rifle tightly, a slightly manic smile gripping his features.

'You're damned right we are. Do you know what an honour we've got Sergeant Collins? We're leading the first platoon of men into the Australian Plague War,' said the Lieutenant.

'I don't recall anything in the briefing about a war, Sir,' said Mark, trying to keep his voice level. 'All we have to do is cull some of the Infected, then withdraw to the Fort.'

'You're not thinking big enough, Collins. This is the start of a war. We're about to reclaim our whole country from a violent enemy – something that hasn't been asked of any Australian military force before. So, it may not be called the 'Plague War' yet, but so what? It doesn't change the fact that we're at the point of the knife sent to carve out those bastards' hearts.'

'Brains, Sir,' said Mark.

'Huh?' the Lieutenant looked at Mark, surprised by his interruption. 'What the fuck's brains got to do with it?'

'They're already dead. We stop them by taking out the brain. Preferably at distance with a bullet would keep me happiest.' Mark ignored the glare of

his officer, staring straight ahead to scan the street for any sign of the enemy. 'You ok with me giving the men a quick recap before we get moving, Sir?'

'Fine, get it done. One thing though, Collins. Mind your fucking tone in future and don't take me for a fool.' The Lieutenant turned away, impatiently drumming his fingers on his rifle.

Mark inwardly groaned. It had taken him less than a morning to alienate his bloody officer. He'd have to keep his tongue in check during future conversations. No-one ever said you had to like all your colleagues, but professionalism demanded civil interactions to get a job done properly. He waved the platoon in to hear him speak.

'Command has seen fit to trial a hit and run style approach with the Infected to slowly cull their numbers without bringing an entire hoard against the Fort. We move into the town, engage the enemy until half our ammunition is gone, then disengage and make a feint to the foreshore. Remember, Carriers are slow. It doesn't take much to outrun the bastards, you just have to keep your head. Once we send them in the wrong direction and have lost them off our tail, we return to the Fort. Job done.' He looked about the men, making eye contact briefly with as many as he could. Seeing their resolve firm, he nodded with satisfaction and stood back. 'Right, let's get this mission over with.'

Mark moved back next to the officer. 'The men are ready, Sir.'

The officer gave a curt nod, not bothering to meet Mark's gaze, then stepped out of the Fort's gate. The platoon fell in behind him, spreading out in a line across the road as they headed toward town. Behind them, the gate squealed as it slowly rolled shut again. Mark felt his stomach tighten; they were on their own.

Mark walked in the front line, away from the officer. He'd give the man space and a chance to simmer down for the next few minutes. Mark's eyes scanned the parkland to the right, finding it empty of movement. A scout sent earlier in the morning had found the swarm had gathered in the town centre, drawn back to the original scene of slaughter in absence of new prey. They'd come roughly 500 metres when a street sign caught his eye.

'That's our mark, Sir. Hobson Street,' he said, pointing towards the road that headed west, away from the park and coast. The street would take them to the town centre, one large block away.

The officer was looking pale, a light sheen of sweat coating his forehead. The earlier bravado had evidently receded. Mark felt a certain sympathy for

the guy. In reality he was little more than a teenager, given the task of leading thirty men into battle for the first time. When no order was forthcoming, Mark risked a prompt.

‘Who do you want left here at the end of the street to ensure we’re not encircled?’ Mark’s main concern was to avoid becoming trapped in the town centre, surrounded by the Infected.

‘I’m not leaving anyone behind, Sergeant. We need to inflict maximum damage on these bastards, that means all weapons will be brought to bear,’ said the officer as he wiped sweat off his forehead.

‘We at least need observers at each corner, Sir. If we’re being flanked, it’s critical we have that information ASAP,’ said Mark, trying to keep the growing agitation out of his voice.

The officer turned to regard him, his lip hooked up in a sneer. ‘As you so kindly pointed out before, our adversary is dead. They don’t consider tactics like ‘out-flanking’ their enemy. Our unit will attack and withdraw together. If you’ve got an issue with it, feel free to fuck off to base and await a court martial on my return.’

Mark could feel his cheeks burning. The young idiot was going to get his men killed. If there weren’t so many lives at risk, he’d have no issue turning on his heel and leaving the officer to his death wish. Taking a deep breath, Mark forced his frustration into a tight ball and pushed it aside.

‘No, Sir,’ he muttered through gritted teeth, ‘I’d prefer to stay with the unit.’

Seeing that he’d won, the young officer smiled in muted triumph. ‘Good,’ he said, and turned into Hobson St. ‘We don’t stop until we meet the enemy, boys! Let’s show those lazy bastards back at camp what a platoon of infantry soldiers can do, eh?’

The soldiers sullenly followed. One caught Mark’s eye, then raised his rifle to point at the back of the officer’s head, his eyebrow raised in question. Mark was gobsmacked by the blatant enquiry. History was filled of anecdotes of officers killed by their own men once they decided their leadership posed more danger than the enemy, but he’d never come across it personally. Mark curtly shook his head, and the soldier dropped his aim with a somewhat disappointed look on his face.

The men began unconsciously to contract together as they walked. They passed a narrow service lane on Mark’s left. Three properties in, a back gate shuddered as something tried to break through to the laneway.

‘Before you ask, Sergeant Collins, I’m not going to investigate that. The gate’s closed; they won’t come up behind us,’ said the officer.

Mark was about to argue the point, when he realised that all time to change their plan had evaporated. Less than fifty metres away at the intersection, the Infected lurched into view. The officer broke into a run, launching without thought to close the distance and engage the enemy. Mark grabbed the shoulder of one of his men.

‘I need you to stay here. Keep an eye on that alley and make sure they don’t break through the gate,’ he said, and shoved him roughly towards the laneway, already transferring his attention back to the main fight.

The platoon had followed the officer, running behind him. Mark broke into a sprint to catch up, his fear buried beneath an anxious need to play his part in the fight. He skidded to a halt behind one of his men. The officer stood on a footpath to the right, while his soldiers formed a thin line of green across the town street, standing side on with rifles raised. Less than thirty metres ahead, the Infected continued to fill the intersection, still oblivious to the proximity of the soldiers. The officer held his arm up, waiting for the street to be filled with Carriers before opening fire. Mark chewed his lip in irritation at the delay, just wanting it to begin. The sun beat down from above onto the necks of the soldiers. Mark’s armpits were sodden, the sweat a mixture of fear and heat as the sun turned the moisture into cloying humidity.

His eyes skittered briefly over the facades of the houses to each side, looking for signs of an imminent attack on their flanks. Finding an absence of movement, Mark shifted his gaze back to the Infected. The condition of the walking corpses was deteriorating over time, however, not as fast as the laws of decomposition should have dictated. The flesh seemed to be almost mummified, shrinking back from the margins of wounds, exposing yellowed teeth as lips dried and contracted above the gum line. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand erect at the sight. Mark forced his feet to stay in place, fighting against the visceral urge to turn and run.

A light breeze flowed over the top of the Infected towards the soldiers, carrying with it a warm smell of decay. Three Carriers turned away from the main group and faced into their street. The creatures advanced three slow steps before noting the soldiers in their path. The aimless, slow gait disappeared as their attention locked onto fresh prey, faces whipping upward to lock eyes.

The officer swept his arm down, ‘Fire at will!’

One Carrier opened its mouth to scream, then abruptly, the top half of its head was blasted away, leaving a bottom jaw hanging lax in mid-air before the body toppled backward. The soldiers picked out targets in the crowd behind, one shot every few seconds mowing a path into the crowd of Infected. Carriers surged towards the soldiers, uncaring of the bullets that splintered bone and flesh, advancing over their own fallen through sheer weight of numbers.

A glass pane exploded from a house to the right of the soldiers, lashing the closest men with razor sharp fragments. Mark's eyes were drawn towards the sound, and he saw five Carriers emerge from the living room window and run at the nearest soldiers. He stepped back from the middle of the line, took aim and fired a short burst, knocking the first two Infected from their feet. The last three smashed into the unsuspecting soldiers in line, teeth and fingers ripping into exposed flesh at neck and face. Mark closed the distance between him and the attacking Carriers in a few steps, sending point blank rounds into their skulls. He pushed the closest corpse off a Private whose legs kicked on the pavement, his life-blood squirting in lessening gouts from his throat. On the path, the officer weakly shoved aside the corpse that had attacked him and rose unsteadily to his feet. A ragged hole had been punched through the top of his abdomen by a Carrier's bony fingers, and a mouthful of flesh ripped away from his cheek exposing bone and teeth in a Joker's half-smile. Suddenly he bent forward and vomited a gout of blood before collapsing in his own mess.

Behind them, small numbers of Carriers were emerging from houses on each side of the street. The man he'd left at the end of the alley was picking them off as quickly as he could, although his single rifle wouldn't hold them back for long. To their front, the Infected had closed half the distance, held back only by the soldiers' precision fire. They were going to be trapped within seconds if they did not retreat to the foreshore immediately. Something was different about the Infected this time compared to every other that he'd fought them – they were faster for some reason. He'd never seen a Carrier run before.

'Retreat!' he shouted in a voice loud enough to cut through the automatic fire and be heard by his men.

They needed no further encouragement and began to edge away from the attacking mob while continuing to shoot. Mark tapped on the shoulders of five men to turn and drop the Infected breaking out of houses to attack them

from behind. With even this small decrease in fire power, the following mass of Infected started to close the distance rapidly. The street was too big an expanse to cover, he needed something narrower.

Mark reached the lane where he'd left the soldier. A quick glance down it demonstrated that the gate he'd been worried about had held. Whatever had been smashing it had given up, likely drawn to the front of the house and the sound of the fight at the intersection. The lane was little wider than an average car, paved with rough slabs of bluestone. Mark waved the majority of his men back into the alley, holding the entrance with four privates. With all inside, they started to back up at walking pace. Mark's trigger clicked on an empty chamber and he stepped back out of the line to reload, quickly replaced by one of the other men. The majority of his platoon was now twenty metres distant, as they scouted for other signs of danger or escape. High walls reared on either side, the backs of sheds that had been built on the rear property lines. At the back of one property hung a heavy steel gate, bolted into a brick wall. Glancing through the opening, he saw a clear route past a house to the foreshore. He made his decision.

'These bastards are moving too fast for us to withdraw like this to the barracks. We need to create some space, so the majority can retreat,' he said, pausing briefly to drag a breath into his chest. 'I need four volunteers to help me block the laneway. Ten minutes should give the rest of the crew enough distance between them and the mob for a sprint back to the fort. Who's with me?' Mark asked, scanning the soldiers nearby.

A few looked away. 'I need an answer now, damn it!' shouted Mark above the gunfire. 'This is our one chance to ensure the majority live!'

'I'll stay, Sarge,' said a Private named Lachlan, not more than eighteen years old. Mark swallowed, dry spit refusing to budge in his throat. Why the fuck did they have to be so bloody young?

'Good,' he said with a brisk nod, 'Who else?'

Two other Privates raised a hand, then the Corporal hocked an angry gob of green phlegm onto the fence and grunted, 'I'm in, but for the record, that officer's gone and got us killed. He better not be celebrated as a fucking war hero after this.'

'Don't worry, we're not dead yet, and I plan on shoving this bullshit plan right down the throat of command when we get back.' Mark broke eye contact with the Corporal and looked back at the other volunteers. 'Everyone make sure they've got a fresh magazine loaded and another ready to go.'

The soldiers switched magazines from their webbing, with another checked and put in easy reach.

‘You all ready?’ asked Mark. The faces in front of him were tense, deep creases cut into foreheads as they concentrated on the task at hand. They nodded. Mark shouted the new plan to the rest of the squad.

With a tap on the shoulder to notify the soldiers holding the laneway that they were being relieved, the five volunteers changed positions and formed a new line standing shoulder to shoulder. Carriers had advanced ten metres into the laneway, scrambling over a barrier made from the corpses of those that had tried before them. Each man in line concentrated their aim on the area directly ahead to avoid doubling up on the same Carrier. The press of Infected outside the laneway was a seething mass of anger, ripping violently at each other to gain access to the soldiers. Mark drew quick beads on each head that appeared at the barrier of dry torn flesh, firing single rounds in rapid succession.

He risked a quick glance back over his shoulder and saw the last of his platoon leaving the laneway a hundred metres distant. They just needed to hold out for a few minutes more to be certain. The flood of diseased flesh coming at them was increasing, outweighing their ability to catch each one as it appeared. Gradually the Infected were making headway, despite growing a tide of corpses toward the men. Less than ten metres separated their rifles from the undead. Mark’s ears were stunned by the proximity of the other rifles, each shot hammering his ear drums painfully; and yet the snarls of rage emitted from the Infected still penetrated.

Unwittingly, the men were forced to edge backward to stay out of reach. Mark’s thigh brushed against the steel gate he’d chosen as their escape point. He’d hoped that they’d be able to hold out longer, but it would have to do. He kicked it open wide enough for a man to pass through.

‘Our job’s done, get through the gate!’ he shouted, and let loose a stream of automatic fire along the width of the laneway to cover his men as they ducked through the gap. Mark followed the last man, rammed the gate closed again and dug his shoulder into it while he desperately tried to drive the locking pin home.

The gate shuddered as Carriers hit the other side, driving his feet backward as it opened enough for two hands to slip through, grasping blindly for anything within reach. The other men added their weight to Mark’s to slam it shut. The Carrier’s fingers were severed, dropping like fat white

worms to the ground. Mark finally managed to slide the bolt home and secure the gate.

‘That won’t hold them for long, let’s get the fuck out of here,’ said Mark between heaving breaths. He felt something wet trickle down the side of his face and found blood oozing from his ears. A few of the other soldiers were the same, their eardrums perforated by the sheer volume of gunfire in the laneway.

The metal panels of the gate began to buckle under the weight of Infected behind. Mark saw the metal pin in the lock begin to bend inwards. He brought up the rear as they ran down the side of the house. On hitting the street at the far side of the property, a glance over his shoulder showed the gate burst free of its hinges to smash onto the ground. Carriers streamed through the new hole after them.

‘Run for the beach!’

He turned and put on a new burst of speed. The five soldiers surged, blocking all thoughts as they cut through the park, the grass reduced to a blur of green underfoot as they stretched their lead from the Infected.

Mark took point as they hit the thick scrub over the sand dunes, ignoring the dry branches that tore at his clothes as he passed. Abruptly he was through, and tumbled down the first three metres of sand, rolling quickly to his feet. The Infected were less than a hundred metres behind them. Mark led the men at a sprint fifty metres down the beach then back up into the scrub where he got them to lie on their bellies and hide.

He forced himself to slow his breathing as he stared at the sand mere centimetres from his face and strained to listen for the approach of Carriers toward their hiding place. The tinnitus whine of his damaged ear drums drowned out almost all other noise, frustrating his sense of hearing. He needed to know if they’d lost their attackers. Gritting his teeth, he carefully dragged himself on his belly to the edge of the scrub and peered back down to the beach.

Mark was just in time to see the first of the Infected emerge onto the sand, breaking out of the scrub at the same point he and his men had been moments earlier. The ghouls tumbled over each other, falling down the short rise of dune to the damp main beach. The creatures regained their feet, heads whipping back and forth as they sought evidence of the soldiers. Some continued straight into the water to thrash in the surf. In the absence of prey, the Carriers began to slow down, the rictus of anger painted upon each face

dissipating, replaced by a vacant stare as they began to mill aimlessly on the foreshore.

Mark eased himself out of sight, taking his time to avoid any sudden noise as he crawled back to the men. Silently, he indicated for the soldiers to withdraw. Taking Mark's lead, the men eased away from the beach, carefully moving below the waist high scrub until they were out of eye and earshot of the Infected. Mark angled south, emerging into the parkland within sight of the Fort. A quick inspection found the area clear of any danger.

'End's in sight, boys,' he said quietly. 'Let's go.' He set off at a jog towards the main gate with his four men close behind. A sharp exclamation from a sentry above the wall noted their arrival and the heavy steel gate began its screeching slide for them to enter. As Mark passed through the shadow of the entrance, he sought out the soldier responsible for the gate.

'Have the rest of the platoon returned?' he asked, his eyes searching the Private's face for an indication.

'They're back, and said you held off the main swarm while they escaped – from how they told it, we thought you guys were unlikely to return. Happy to see you proved them wrong, Sarge,' the Private said with a look of unbridled awe on his face.

Mark ignored the compliment. 'I don't plan on dying any time soon, mate. Where are they?'

The Private looked away, his expression hardening with anger at the news to follow. 'With the medic. They had to fight through a smaller pack of Carriers after leaving you. They did well enough; killed all of them, but not before the bastards managed to rip a few mouthfuls out of our guys.'

Mark didn't bother with a reply, setting off at a run for the makeshift hospital to find Harry. He didn't have far to search; Harry was sitting outside the building, morosely smoking a cigarette.

'How many?' asked Mark bluntly.

Harry slowly looked up. 'Five. There was nothing I could do, mate. I gave them a comfortable exit a few minutes ago.'

Mark sat heavily beside him, an overwhelming exhaustion suddenly crushing him mentally and physically.

'Don't be too hard on yourself,' said Harry, pausing for another drag of his smoke. 'From what I heard, it's a bloody miracle any of you made it back. Focus on the lives you saved.'

Mark found he had no words to answer as he stared out over the parade

ground to the bay. It was only the start, the first of many lives to be lost in the war to come; for that was the only thing his officer had gotten right – the plague wars were just beginning.

Mark put the stubbie gently onto the table and slid it across to stand next to his first. He took a slow breath and looked up at the officers sitting opposite, knowing that he had probably killed his career in the army through such a blunt portrayal of the mission. For much of his report, his attention had been turned inward, ignoring the body language of the General as he relived the traumatic day.

Surprisingly, he did not find anger on their faces. General Black in particular seemed thoughtful, as he stripped a paper drink coaster into pieces while staring at the table. Abruptly he stopped and glanced up to meet Mark's eyes.

'You painted a rather bleak assessment of your commanding officer, Sergeant Collins. In this instance I think you're stating the truth rather than trying to bring down the reputation of a fallen man, however, for troop morale – I'd prefer you kept that part of the story to yourself in future.' General Black stopped, took a small sip from a glass of whiskey and rolled the harsh spirit around his mouth.

'That being said, today's mission outcome leaves us with a significant problem. If we can't enter even a small town on foot, what hope do we have for retaking our larger urban centres? We have to come up with a different strategy that provides our troops with relative safety – loss of life on the scale we had today can't be countenanced. Ethics aside, we just don't have the bloody numbers to sustain such losses and hope to win in the long term,' said Black.

'I thought that was the whole point of taking Geelong, sir?' said Mark. 'Once the car manufacturing plants are actively producing armoured vehicles again, we can cull the Infected from their interiors in relative safety. Can we improvise something that would do the same job in the meantime?'

'Like what?'

'I don't know, maybe convert the tray of a semi-trailer so that it carries an enclosed steel cage we could shoot out of, but that the Infected can't access?' Mark suggested.

General Black scratched his chin in thought. 'If we used a number of them to clear the worst swarms in Geelong, do you think mopping up of the remainders could be done on foot?'

'Small numbers are easily handled. It wasn't the few that came out of the houses that were the trouble, it was the sheer weight of numbers in the main pack that undid us,' Mark said. 'But here in Queenscliff, we have the Fort. Why risk facing the swarm in the open, when we can fight from behind walls. The fort's a rarity in Australia – surely we should take advantage of it until we come up with a safer way to take on Geelong?'

'I'd already come to a similar conclusion. Work's in progress to make it happen,' said General Black. 'The other thing I wanted to confirm from your story was how the Carriers moved. You noted they seemed faster than normal?'

'Yeah. They were almost running, not like the stumbling bastards we've fought to date.'

'Well that backs up news we've had from our research centres regarding their behaviour in heat. It appears we've been lucky that the outbreak happened in the dead of winter. In the cold, they're slow, but as it heats up and their body temperature gets closer to the normal range of a live human, they appear to regain improved muscle coordination and speed,' said General Black.

'Makes sense I guess,' said Mark. 'Just means we target them in the cooler part of the day as we get closer to summer. When do you plan on attracting the Infected to the Fort?'

'Within a fortnight, but we still need greater numbers to defend the walls. I'll be damned if we're going to fail. I want enough soldiers to ensure we can slaughter the bastards without raising a sweat. Reinforcements will be arriving over the next few days, so you'll have about a week to get your new crew into shape and ready for the fight,' said General Black.

Mark was caught off guard by the last sentence. 'What do you men, Sir?'

'Battlefield commission, Collins. You're now an officer,' said General Black with a wry smile on his face. 'The officer training academy at Duntroon's not re-opening any time soon, so I've reinstated the old practice of promoting enlisted men to the commissioned ranks for exceptional battlefield performance. I need experienced soldiers with a proven ability to lead, and I need them now.'

'But five of my men died after I took command on that mission, how the

hell does that qualify me for the role?’ asked Mark.

‘That’s bullshit, Collins. You need to shut down that negative voice in your head. If you hadn’t acted and changed strategy, you and all of your men would have been killed in action. In my book, that counts as lives saved,’ said General Black. ‘Irrespective of that, my decision’s final. You can pick your own Corporals and Sergeant from the current men on base, otherwise, the bulk of your soldiers will come from the reinforcements.’

Mark nodded, resigned to his new role. ‘Is there anything else, Sir?’

General Black shook his head. ‘No. Touch base with my aide in the morning, and he’ll sort you out with the details.’

Mark eased his chair back from the table and stood up, saluted, and left the dining room. In the hallway beyond, he stopped for a moment with the beginning of a tension headache. Mark took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Being stuck with the responsibility for an entire platoon of soldiers was the last thing he had sought, but he’d bloody do his utmost to keep them alive.

Chapter Twelve

With the shore forty metres distant, the rigid-hulled inflatable slowed in speed, down to a crawl as one of the marines responsible for ferrying them to the Fort leaned out over the side to look down into the water. The boat started to do a slow loop in front of their landing site.

‘Is everything ok?’ asked Steph, a little confused regarding the delay to landing.

The marine who was looking down into the water, glanced briefly at her to acknowledge the question, then back down again, continuing his search. ‘A soldier on one of the earlier transports got taken by a Carrier while wading to shore. We’re doing a quick sweep of the area prior to letting you guys out, thought you’d prefer to stay bite free.’

‘Great, so now they’re in the water too,’ muttered Steph, looking down into the depths herself, a sour taste rising up the back of her throat at the thought of being dragged under the surface.

Something caught the marine’s eye, and he called out to his colleague captaining the boat. ‘Double back mate, I think I saw one.’

The boat completed a tight turn, coming back to the same spot again then cut the engine. The water was remarkably clear with only a gentle swell disturbing the surface. Two metres below, light yellow sand showed between green clumps of seaweed and rock.

‘Got him! Off there, to the right,’ said the marine, pointing downwards.

Steph followed his direction and within moments caught sight of it herself. A Carrier was on the bottom, rotted clothes hanging in ribbons that trailed with the current. It walked clumsily on the sandy base toward the beach, less than an arm’s reach under the surface. As it drew closer to the boat, Steph could see small fish darting about the ghoul’s face and neck, gouging out small bites of tissue. The marine lifted his rifle and fired a single shot into the water, compensating for the light’s refraction as he aimed. A thin line of bubbles gave evidence of the bullet’s passage as a small hole appeared in the corpse’s forehead. The back of the skull exploded in a haze of brain tissue and bone fragments, and the Carrier slumped slowly to lie face down on the sand. The tiny fish swarmed through the mess of tissue, snatching up the scraps of flesh, as others burrowed into the easy pickings at the back of the corpse’s skull.

An awful thought suddenly entered Steph's mind. 'The soldier who got attacked this morning, it wasn't a teenage boy was it?' Jai had been loaded onto one of the first transports two hours earlier.

'Nah. It was some older guy,' answered the marine, who was looking pleased with himself after his shot.

Steph breathed a sigh of relief. The training Sergeant had stayed true to his word in Jindabyne by recommending them for deployment away from the alpine town. Within days, the two had found themselves on the Navy Frigate in Port Phillip Bay. At a distance, the small town of Queenscliff looked perfectly harmless, making it hard to believe it was infested with thousands of Carriers. Jai had been in one of the first boatloads at dawn, the two rigid-hulled inflatables speeding back and forth across the bay to transfer 100 new soldiers to reinforce Queenscliff Fort. The helicopter had been left inactive to avoid drawing unwanted attention from the town's Infected earlier than desired. Steph had drawn the short straw, being allocated a position in one of the last two boat trips.

'I reckon that's the area clear for the moment,' said the marine. The marine driving the boat nodded and pulled on the throttle. The engine growled underneath as the craft scooted the last distance into the beach. On the headland above, Steph could make out part of the Fort's brick wall, but her eyes were drawn to a tall black lighthouse that reared up out of the north end of the Fort complex.

As the boat crunched into the sand, she gave the surrounding water a quick inspection for danger, then jumped overboard holding her rifle tightly in both hands. Steph waded out of the knee-deep water until she reached dry sand, then stopped and looked back offshore. The Navy Frigate blended into the grey water of the bay. Her boots squelched damply underfoot as she turned back to the beach and trudged up to join the others.

A corporal was waiting for them with a small contingent of soldiers to guard the path up to the Fort. He did a headcount, confirming all were present.

'Good to see you guys all made it out of the water this time,' he said, hooking his finger for them to follow behind. 'The rest of the reinforcements are beyond the fence line inside the Fort. You'll be allocated to platoons once your whole contingent is together.'

A five-minute walk brought them to the back fence of the Fort, a high barrier constructed of cyclone wire. A gate was swung open, giving access to

the grassed area beyond.

‘Hey Steph! Over here!’ called out Jai, holding up his hand to get her attention.

Steph smiled as she recognised her young friend. He was sitting on his pack, rifle resting on his knees as he waited. They’d done a lot of that since being informed of their redeployment the previous week. It turned out that the army even had its own saying – ‘hurry up and wait’. Wait for transport. Wait for gear and weapons to be issued. The boredom during these times gave Steph too much time to think, and she’d found herself at times hard pressed to shut down the anxious whispers in her mind and keep her thoughts positive. After all, she was still alive and fighting – more than could be said for much of the country – and other countries for that matter. Word had come that the plague was ripping through Southeast Asia in an irrepressible tide of violence. Once a foothold had been gained in Indonesia, its spread had been horrendously quick.

‘Were you on the last boat?’ asked Jai.

Steph grunted with effort as she shrugged off her backpack to thump on the grass. ‘Yep. I don’t know how I managed to get left to the end, just lucky I guess.’ She rubbed at her right shoulder where the strap had dug into the muscle painfully as she turned to look at the original brick buildings of the Fort. ‘Do you think we’ll find Harry and Mark here?’

‘Well it’s where Harry said he was being posted, but your guess is as good as mine about Mark,’ said Jai with a slight shrug of his shoulders. ‘I hope so.’

A shout from behind drew Jai’s attention. ‘Looks like we’re being moved somewhere,’ he said.

‘For Pete’s sake, I just got my bloody pack off,’ said Steph, her face screwed up in annoyance.

Jai chuckled at her expression. ‘You need a mirror to see yourself. That’s quite the pout you’ve got going there.’

‘Fuck off, squirt. You need to learn some respect for your elders,’ she replied, a wry smile defusing any anger from her own words. Steph grabbed a strap of her pack, hoisted it onto one shoulder and turned to follow the group towards one of the larger buildings. ‘Are you coming, or what?’ she said as she walked away.

Jai just smiled, yanked his stuff off the ground and joined his mate at the back of the line.

Three officers were standing beside the entrance of the building as the reinforcements walked inside. As Steph and Jai drew close, a gruff voice called them aside.

‘Oi, you two.’

Steph and Jai looked up, surprised to have been singled out.

‘That’s right, the last two in line, I want a quick word with you before you go in,’ the officer said before turning to the other lieutenants. ‘I’ll be inside in a moment; I just have a message to pass on to these soldiers first.’

The two officers gave him a puzzled look, then shrugged and walked through the door, leaving him alone with Steph and Jai.

A large grin cracked open on Mark’s face as he gave Steph a tight hug and shook Jai’s hand. ‘Now what the hell are you two doing here?’ he said, still smiling.

‘The recruitment camp couldn’t last forever,’ said Jai. ‘They’ve sent us back into the real world.’

Mark pushed Steph back to arm’s length, his eyes now creased with concern as he glanced between his two friends. ‘How did training go? I’ve heard about some stupid shit going on that’s already having to be phased out.’

‘Let’s just say, I’m glad it’s over and done with,’ said Steph. ‘Now, what’s with the officer’s pips on your shoulder?’

Mark glanced down at the Lieutenant insignia on his uniform then back at them both. ‘Not my choice, obviously. I think they just threw the commission at me for managing to stay alive.’

‘I take it you’ve got some stories to tell then,’ said Jai, his eyebrow raised in question.

Mark’s face became grim as he nodded. ‘Yeah, but they can wait until later. We better get inside before things kick off. The reinforcements here will be seeded into new platoons, half and half with the existing soldiers in the Fort. I know how you guys fight, and I couldn’t think of any other soldiers I’d rather have by my side when we fight those bastards. I know I fucked up at the farm, but are you willing to give me another chance if I can get you into my platoon?’

‘Don’t be stupid, Mark,’ said Steph with a smile on her face. ‘You

already know the answer to that question.'

'Damn right,' echoed Jai. 'Count me in.'

Mark grinned, 'Good stuff. Let's get in there and sort this shit out.'

Chapter Thirteen

Erin opened the door of her demountable and poked her head outside, furtively looking back and forth to ensure none of the camp guards were nearby. She'd noticed a continual movement of people past her window, all heading towards the beach. It could only mean one thing, something was happening with the cruise liner that had anchored off the coast.

It had turned up the morning following Rachael's murder. Unsurprisingly, the navy had refused to board the ship, claiming the risk was too high and chances of success miniscule. Even at distance, the despair of the crew had been palpable, as a plea for help had been painted on bedsheets and hung from the ship's bridge within sight of the camp.

Few people on the island had much sympathy for the ship's crew. Most were plain furious that they had escaped the terror of the mainland, only to have plague brought straight to their new doorstep. Erin could understand the crew's desperation, but she too looked at the massive floating coffin with trepidation.

Last night had brought a huge storm to the island, battering the small demountables with sudden gusts that had threatened to tear the simple structures apart. The ferocity of the previous night had lessened with the coming of dawn, however, a prevailing wind still drove white capped surf against their slim strip of beach.

Erin joined a crowd of people at the fence line, hooking gloved fingers through the wire. She looked over to where the cruise ship had been anchored. Her heart skipped a beat. It was gone. Erin's gaze now followed to where many of the people around her were pointing, north to the rocky headland at the end of their beach. The storm had dragged the ship's anchor, driving it up against the rocks. It listed heavily to the side, exposing stained hull that never usually saw the light of day. Even from her viewpoint, a hundred metres away, tortured groans could be heard from the metal hull as it threatened to tear apart.

Erin felt a ball of anxiety build in her chest as her heart rate jumped. If the cruise liner broke apart, it would empty thousands of Carriers into the surf. She'd be stuck on a tiny island with nowhere to escape the Infected. Unconsciously, she gripped the handle of the knife within her pocket. Since her confrontation with Jeremy, it hadn't left her side for a minute.

‘Is there any news on what the Navy’s planning to do?’ asked Erin of the woman standing next to her.

‘Nothing I’ve heard, and there’s no way our useless guards would be able to save us, not the grots they’ve sent so far anyway. Unless they land proper marines to protect the camp, that shipwreck is making me very nervous.’

‘What do you think we should do if it starts to break apart?’ asked Erin.

‘Same as we did on the mainland, darling,’ said the woman, her words slow and features slack, as if she was resigned to inevitability.

‘So, we stand and fight?’

The woman looked at Erin abruptly, eyes widening in surprise, ‘You’ve fought them before?’ then her eyes darted away again. ‘No, we run as far away as possible and hide.’

A flare of anger sparked within Erin at her words. *Who the hell was going to protect the many small children within the camp if the adults weren’t even willing to fight?*

‘Fine. But when you eventually run out of ground on this tiny island, that choice isn’t going to help you,’ said Erin, bitterness clear in her voice. She turned away from the woman and walked further along the fence to get a closer look at the ship.

Erin was forced to stop at the far corner of the camp’s enclosure. From this point, the ship was less than 200 metres away. A room on the third deck was on fire, black smoke pouring from a smashed window. A deafening screech of tearing metal assaulted her ears as the hull shifted on the rocks, and a ten-metre split appeared.

Something small and hard shoved painfully into the back of her left shoulder. Erin flinched to the side and turned around. Jeremy held a long nightstick in his hand, the end of which pointed at her chest. Behind him was a group of five guards.

‘I haven’t seen you around over the last few days. I almost thought someone had made you *disappear*,’ he said with a smirk on his face. ‘Not that anyone would miss such an annoyance as you.’

Erin scowled, but she stayed quiet, biting back a smart arse reply on the tip of her tongue. Jeremy moved forward, bringing his face down close to hers. With the fence at her back, Erin had nowhere to go.

‘What, nothing to say? Good. That’s the way I like the bitches on this island – quiet and compliant,’ he said under his breath.

Erin saw red. She brought her knee up savagely into his groin, crushing his testicles. Jeremy's eyes bulged with agony, a sharp intake of breath the only sound escaping his mouth.

Erin brought her mouth next to his ear and muttered, 'I'm not a bitch. And I'm not going to stay quiet – you're going to pay for what you did to Rachael.'

She suddenly remembered the other guards and looked up to see if they were coming for her. She needn't have worried. They were laughing at their mate, barely standing as tears rolled down their faces.

Jeremy's face went scarlet at the sound. 'You're fucked, do you hear me?' he rasped. 'I'm going to kill you like your stupid slut friend!'

Erin froze at his words, but he failed to follow through, slumping to the ground with his knees drawn up to his belly. She took her chance before the other guards finally decided to help out, and darted away, her right hand tucked into her coat as she ran.

Once she was certain she'd lost the guards and was alone, she ran to one of the numerous hiding places she had discovered around the grounds of the camp. After another look back and forth to ensure she was by herself, she quickly ducked down and through a space between the branches of a tall hedge. Within the plant wall was a dry layer of leaves, protected from the worst of the rain and wind. She shimmied back away from the entrance, cocooned in a room of green leaves and twiggy branches. Her limbs shook at the enormity of what she had just done as she pulled her right hand out of her coat and looked at the Glock pistol in her hand. She still couldn't believe that she'd succeeded, that Jeremy hadn't noticed her remove it as she whispered in his ear.

Erin slowed her breathing and focused on relaxing. She didn't want to be mucking around with a weapon like this with shaking hands. Five minutes later she felt ready to run through a check. She had been included in the weapon drills back on the farm, and Penny had once run through how to use her police issue Glock a few times. First, she checked the chamber was empty, then popped the magazine out; she was in luck, it was fully loaded. Erin clicked it back home again, then wrapped the pistol in a t-shirt. She placed the package against the trunk of the plant and brushed a pile of dead leaves over it.

The true storm was yet to break, and she was determined to be ready for when it hit. Jeremy was dangerous, but if the ship split open on the rocks, he

was going to be the least of her worries. Erin brushed the leaves and dirt from her clothes, trying to make herself look relatively presentable before she left the hiding spot. She couldn't afford to be alone and wanted other people to be around when Jeremy eventually found her. After a quick check that no-one was within sight, she climbed out of the hedge and ran towards the kitchens, hoping that the head cook would allow her to pick up a random shift.

Erin was clearing dirty plates when Jeremy walked through the door followed closely by his posse of guards. The dining hall was still relatively full after lunch, with people happy to remain inside for the warmth. Jeremy spotted Erin almost immediately and headed straight for her. She couldn't help but smile as she saw the way he walked. Jeremy still looked in pain, his gait wider than usual as he moved gingerly.

'I've been looking for you. Where the fuck is my gun, you little thief!' he shouted.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Erin said, keeping her face blank of expression as she avoided eye contact and continued clearing the next table.

Jeremy grabbed her shoulder, and roughly forced her to turn and face him. 'Don't fucking walk away when I'm speaking, you rude little bitch! Hand it over, I know you took it back at the fence line after you...'

Erin met his eye for the first time, the slightest smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, 'After I what, Jeremy? Oh, that's right, after I pancaked your balls with my knee. And yet here you go, calling me a bitch again. For an adult, you don't learn very fast, do you?'

Jeremy went red in the face, his mouth forming soundless words as rage overcame him. Erin was suddenly worried that she'd pushed him too far and backed away a step, then realised she was trapped against the wall. She reached into her pocket, slipping the sheath off her knife with her thumb before holding it ready within her jumper's pocket. Jeremy was oblivious to the crowd watching as he closed the distance between them, reaching his hands up to Erin's neck.

'Stop right there!' shouted an enormous voice. Jeremy froze, consciousness coming back to his eyes as his hands dropped to his side. All noise in the room ceased as a large hand dropped heavily onto Jeremy's

shoulder, forcibly moving him backwards. It was Lieutenant Bourke.

‘What’s going on here?’ he asked.

Jeremy stared at Erin, his jaw clenched in fury.

‘I’m waiting for an answer, soldier,’ said Bourke.

‘This girl stole my pistol earlier in the day. I’m here to get it back again.’

‘Bullshit,’ said Bourke, looking over to Erin. ‘How old are you?’

‘Thirteen.’

Bourke looked back at Jeremy, pure scorn showing on his face. ‘So, you’re telling me, a thirteen-year-old civilian, with no military training somehow managed to disarm you. I’d be careful how you answer that, because in my books, that would demonstrate gross incompetence on your part.’

Jeremy said nothing.

‘I take by your silence you’ve decided you were mistaken?’

Jeremy’s neck gave a stiff nod.

‘Good. That’s sorted. Go find your weapon – the other men have made you look like a fool, one of them will have it.’

Jeremy stalked away leaving Erin with the Lieutenant.

‘The rest of you,’ he said to the room, ‘go back to your own business, the show’s over.’ Noise from a hundred conversations filled the air as people present turned their attention away from them.

Bourke looked back to her once more and pulled out two seats at a table away from the main crowd and motioned for her to sit with him, a questioning expression now on his face.

‘Did you really knee him in the balls like I heard you say?’ When Erin nodded, he let out a brief laugh. ‘I would have paid money to see that. I guess you didn’t get this far through the plague without having some steel in your spine.’ His expression became stern once more. ‘Do you have his pistol?’

‘No.’

‘Let me rephrase that. Have you had his weapon in your possession at all?’

Erin said nothing, her face blank. Bourke regarded her for a moment, before letting out a sigh. ‘If you do have the weapon, and I don’t really want to know - keep it out of sight. If the ship breaks apart, or Jeremy tries to shut you up permanently - you’ll need it. In return, I want your help. You were friends with the girl that was murdered?’

Erin nodded and relaxed a little, sheathing her knife again inside her

pocket.

‘I’m not convinced that her killer was one of the camp’s men, but I can’t prove it as yet. Do you know anything that might be able to help me?’

‘I can tell you who did it.’

‘Is it Jeremy?’

‘Yes.’

‘I knew that dirty bastard was escalating, but I didn’t expect him to kill anyone. I’ll start pulling the levers to get him court marshalled, but in the meantime, I want you to stay safe. Don’t go anywhere by yourself. I’ll try and keep him busy, but I won’t be able to watch him every minute of the day. With the way that ship’s likely to break apart – he’ll be stationed on the beach at pretty much all times.’

Erin was stunned. ‘You actually believe me?’

‘Why wouldn’t I? I’d take the word of a tough kid over that of a bully any day of the week.’

At his words, Erin felt tears of relief threaten, and blinked furiously to keep them at bay. ‘What do you need to charge him? He admitted to me that he did it, but will that be enough, surely it’s just my word against his?’

‘From what I understand, he’s orchestrating a group of easily led cretins. If I can turn one of the others against him, get them to talk to lessen their own punishment, I should be able to corroborate your testimony. All I have to do is threaten the bastards with a transfer to the mainland. Let’s face it, they’ve already proved themselves to be cowards – shouldn’t be too hard to unnerve them.’

Bourke stood up, straightening his uniform. ‘You were smart in seeking a crowd here. See if you can get yourself a bunch of extra shifts in the kitchen to fill the daylight hours. You got any questions for me?’

‘Yeah. What happens when that cruise ship finally dumps its cargo of Infected on our doorstep? Will the navy stay and fight?’

‘We’ll take them on. You have my word on that. How successful we’ll be – well, that’s a whole different matter. If it was my choice, I’d burn that fucking ship to the water before it happens. Just don’t get stuck in that maze of bloody tents. Fall back to the main buildings, find a place to hide and lay low. The Navy can’t afford to lose too many soldiers in a defence, so I wouldn’t put it past them using fairly crude methods to wipe out the main body of Carriers before risking a landing party.’

Erin vainly tried to swallow in a throat suddenly dry. It was down to a

waiting game then, whether it was Jeremy, the Infected, or both – she had one hell of a fight on her hands.

Chapter Fourteen

Jai finished setting up the last of a series of mortars, situated twenty metres inside the Fort's defensive wall. He folded out a bipod leg setup that propped the barrel at a steep angle skywards and secured the bottom to a circular baseplate. In the fight to come, the mortars would lob explosive bombs in an arc over the wall to explode amongst the attacking Carriers, ripping apart limbs and hopefully slowing their approach in the process.

Now finished, he stood up and stretched his aching back while checking out the progress along the Fort's wall in quiet amazement. Things had moved fast; the army didn't waste any time when it came to preparation for a fight. A bulldozer had been found less than a stone's throw from the army base. It had been used to push a mound of soil against the inside of the Fort's curtain wall, forming a walkway that allowed the soldiers to stand with the top of the bricks at waist height. The surface had been compacted, and a wooden retaining structure built at the base to stop the dirt from sliding out beneath the defenders' feet.

High points with lines of fire above the wall were all utilised. Behind him stood a tall black lighthouse, used in normal times to guide ships through the narrow entrance of the bay. Encircling the lantern at the apex was a steel walkway, now home to a trio of sharp shooters around the clock.

'Jai! Stop gawking like an idiot and get your bony arse over here,' shouted Mark. 'I've got some people to introduce.'

Jai turned at the sound of his name to see Mark with two soldiers he hadn't met; re-deployed marines by the look of their uniforms.

'This is the kid I told you about. The little bastard took on a paddock full of Carriers back at the farm. Fixed a broken bit of defensive kit that drew the swarm away from the house – if not for him, we wouldn't have seen the morning.'

'It wasn't just me, Mark,' said Jai with a furrowed brow. 'If Penny hadn't come for me, I wouldn't be here.'

Mark frowned. 'Too true. I wish she made it out the other side as well, mate. Jai, I want to introduce you to the Sergeant and Corporal I've managed to score for our platoon.'

Jai discreetly looked the two men over, both as different from each other as water and oil.

‘This is Sergeant Vinh Tran, and Corporal Nate Turner. I’ve fought with both of them earlier in this campaign, and their skills are second to none,’ said Mark.

Jai extended his arm, firmly shaking hands with both men. Vinh met his gaze, coal black eyes giving nothing away of his thoughts, whereas Nate was clearly more interested in appraising the changes in the wall than his newest colleague.

‘Have any of you heard what the plans are for the fight?’ asked Jai. ‘Anything fancy or are we just doing a straight defence of the walls?’

‘The strategy’s simple,’ said Mark. ‘Nothing worse than trying to follow some complicated bullshit; always ends up as a bloody mess. The major part of the job will still come down to accurate shooting from the wall, but a key challenge will involve keeping the numbers of attacking Infected manageable. I’ve seen the swarm in town, and although the walls are high, those buggers could crawl over each other and straight over the top if we’re not careful. A series of Improvised Explosives have been buried along the front wall to clear out the piles of bodies if they get too high. Our platoon will have a section of wall facing the road toward town, so we’ll have plenty of action.’

Steph had spotted the group talking and was coming over to join them. Jai saw the Corporal’s expression change as he watched her and glanced to see if Mark had registered Nate’s interest. Mark was oblivious as he pointed out key features of the defensive setup to the group.

As Steph arrived, Nate didn’t bother waiting for an introduction, sticking his hand out, ‘I’m Nate, the new Corporal attached to Mark’s platoon, and this here is Sergeant Vinh. Don’t let his midget size put you off – he’s a tough bastard to kill. What’s your name, Private?’

‘Steph,’ she said, accepting his handshake and nodding a greeting to the Sergeant. Vinh grimaced at his mate’s pitiful joke, one it seemed he’d heard before.

‘So, what have I missed out on?’ Steph said, turning her attention to Mark and ignoring Nate. Mark flashed her a brief smile of welcome and began to fill her in on the plans as they stood. Jai inwardly smirked as he saw the disappointment plain on Nate’s face at her dismissal.

As Mark finished off describing the key parts they would play in the defence, he looked at his watch. ‘We better get moving with the next job. Our crew has been told to establish an ammunition dump here for access by those

on the wall.'

'How long until the fight kicks off?' asked Jai.

'We have until tomorrow evening to complete our preparations, then the following morning will show if the defences are good enough.'

Jai felt the now familiar mixture of excitement and fear squirm in his gut at the thought of the fight to come. But hell, he was in a professional army this time and behind the walls of a fort. With such secure defences, surely it would only be a matter of time until the Infected were culled from the field of battle.

Chapter Fifteen

Erin stood at the window of her demountable, staring out into the storm. The weather had deteriorated once more that morning, slowly building into gale force winds that lashed the temporary camp with heavy drops of rain and howled between the flimsy buildings. Many of the tents had been ripped free of their pegs, canvas walls torn and frayed. Her building had taken in another half dozen children that slept head to toe in the bunks and lined the floor like sardines in a can.

Erin looked toward the beach, and although it was blocked from sight, she still feared what would eventually come from that direction. Word had spread that the cruise liner was not faring well in the storm, continuing to break apart on the rocky headland. A Navy Frigate stood out to sea, waiting to send reinforcements if Carriers managed to reach land from the ship. The whole detachment of navy guards had been redeployed along the beach as a thin line of defence. Although she held no confidence in the guards' ability to hold back the Infected, it had been some comfort to know that Jeremy's attention was held by different matters than her. Lieutenant Bourke's words had also reassured her that at least one adult in the camp had her back. After his veiled advice, she had retrieved the pistol from its hiding place and now carried it everywhere in conjunction with her knife, hiding the lumps of metal in her waistband with heavy winter clothes.

Erin locked the door and wedged a piece of hardwood under its bottom edge to stop it shuddering in the wind. She sat down and began to shimmy into her sleeping bag as quietly as she could to avoid waking the kids. Knowing that she was the eldest in the room, Erin had given up her bed to three little ones and taken a position as sentry behind the front door, sleeping on a thin camping mat. If Jeremy or anything else tried to get in, she was damned if they were going to get past her. Erin was still fully clothed with boots on, and she'd made all the other kids in the room do the same: ready to bolt at a moment's notice. She checked once more that the pistol was on safe, then placed it next to her head alongside her knife.

Erin rolled onto her back, and looked up at the ceiling, her eyes unfocused as she listened to the violence of the storm outside. Around her, the children had fallen asleep, the sound of their slow breathing lost beneath the howls of wind. It pulled at something within her that they trusted her

unquestioningly, believing that she could keep them safe when in reality she couldn't even guarantee her own safety. Erin closed her eyes and focused on her own breathing, concentrating on the feeling of her belly rise and fall, determined to block out the incessant yapping of anxiety that gnawed at her resolve. Eventually it worked, her thoughts stopped as her body relaxed in sleep.

A surge of adrenaline and her mind was instantly awake, heart racing and eyes open. Everything was silent. The storm had blown itself out while she slept, leaving an absence of noise that was more jarring to her senses than the previous onslaught of wind and rain.

There it was again.

A key moved slowly in the door above her head until the latch opened with a muted click. None of the other kids had woken to the sound. Erin pulled her knife free of its sheath and clenched it in her teeth while she unzipped the sleeping bag rapidly. Free of the bag's confines, she drew her feet under herself to crouch by the entrance, waiting. The top of the door bowed inwards as pressure was applied from outside, but the base remained jammed in place by the wedge Erin had shoved under prior to sleep.

'Erin – I know you're in there. Open up, we need to have a little chat,' said Jeremy, his voice muted by the door.

'Go away, Jeremy. It's the middle of the night and there are little kids in here,' said Erin, managing to keep her voice steady.

'You think I give a damn if you've surrounded yourself with children? That's your problem, not mine. If you don't open this door, it won't just be you that gets hurt!'

Erin looked back at the kids in the room. Most were now awake, looking at her with wide fearful eyes. 'It'll be ok,' she mouthed to them, not really believing her own words.

The door smashed inwards, narrowly missing Erin's face. Jeremy stood outside the entrance, lowering his foot after his violent kick at the door. His frame was backlit by the waning moon, leaving his face hidden in shadow. A loop of blue nylon rope hung from his right hand, the same type he had used so effectively to snuff out Rachael's life. A glint of white teeth showed as he grinned menacingly and began to step forward. Erin gripped the handle of the

pistol and slipped off the safety mechanism. She *was not* going to become his next victim.

Suddenly an explosion echoed from the beach, the floor beneath her feet vibrating slightly as her ears were buffeted by the sound. Jeremy stepped back out of the entrance down onto the path and looked in the direction of the noise. Clear of the building's shadow, Erin could now make out the expression on his face – excitement had been replaced with fear and uncertainty.

A second, then third explosion rocked the night, followed by small arms fire. Finally, the realisation hit home – *they were under attack*.

Another guard ran past, sprinting for the beach. He hit Jeremy on the shoulder on the way through, 'Come on! We're needed at the rally point! Fucking plague's hit the shore!' The guard kept going, not waiting to see if he followed.

Jeremy turned back to Erin, anger twisting his features as he looked at her. 'You'll be fucking dead by the end of the night anyway,' he snarled, then ran in the previous guard's wake.

The silence of a few moments prior was dissolved in a wall of terrified noise as people emerged from their tents and buildings, unsure what to do. Erin took a deep breath and stifled the scream that wanted to burst from her lungs. She looked at the kids and forced a tight smile.

'Right guys, it's time to get going. Everyone grab the hand of your friend, just like we talked about yesterday. We're going to jog over to the main building where we should be safe, ok?'

A few white faces nodded back at her, while silent tears began to roll down the face of a four-year-old boy. In a back corner of her brain, Erin marvelled at the lack of noise in the room, before realising that every kid here had survived the mainland – they already knew that silence and hiding was the only defence their little bodies could muster against the unfeeling violence of the Infected; to cry out loud was to invite a monster's attention.

She picked up a little boy, propping him on her left hip to leave her dominant hand free. Erin had sheathed her knife but held the pistol openly in her right hand as she ushered the children out of the small building onto the path. Running bodies shoved past her in the darkness.

'Everyone grab onto the back of the person's shirt in front of you and don't let go! If you get separated, make for the main entrance to the big building and I'll find you there,' she yelled. 'Let's go!'

Erin took off at a slow jog to ensure all the kids could keep up. The boy she carried bumped painfully on her hip and within a hundred metres her arm ached dreadfully at his weight. She gritted her teeth, ignored the pain and kept going. The closer she got to the building, the thicker the crowd became. Seeing the young children that she led, most people moved aside to give her access to the front of the line.

Finally, the front doors came into view, and the reason for the crowd's stagnation became apparent. They were closed and locked, with no-one in sight to open them. Due to the attack, all guards had been pulled from other duties through the camp to assist. Men and women hammered on the glass, screaming for the attention of anyone inside.

The crowd behind Erin was growing as more of the camp descended upon the main building, pushing her and the kids painfully against the locked doors. Gunfire was creeping closer to them through the camp, and between the sharp cracks of rifles, Erin heard a familiar noise that made the hair on her neck rise: the snarls of the Infected. Panic filled the crowd as others recognised the sound and surged forward. Many of the kids screamed in the press as some were stood on. Erin pulled one child off the ground who was about to be trampled.

'Pick up the little kids!' she pleaded with the adults around. 'They're going to get crushed!' Her pleas worked, with each kid small enough soon finding themselves hoisted onto shoulders, safe for the next few moments.

An approaching shape caught Erin's eye inside the building. Someone was coming! It was the older chef who had taken up permanent residency in an office behind the kitchen. The woman ran up the hallway to them and hit an emergency release button unlocking the doors. Erin nearly fell as the doors gave way before her and had to run forward to avoid being knocked to the ground. She moved to the side of the hallway and collected the kids to her again from the adults as they passed. Most people continued onwards, deeper into the building. Soon it was only the chef and her left standing near the entrance.

The snarls and gunfire were closer, but the guards were still out of view. The people that had entered the building were only a portion of those housed by the camp. Others must have decided to lock themselves inside their demountables or scaled the fences to escape. They had made their choice, and there was little more that could be done.

'We need to lock the doors and get out of sight before the Infected

arrive,' said Erin.

The chef looked grim as she nodded her agreement. Erin closed the door and turned the lock to secure it, then ran back to where she had left the group of kids around a corner of the hallway. After a quick head count, she breathed a sigh of relief that all the children were present.

'Everyone follow me, we're heading to the...' said Erin before being cut off.

'Shit, someone's at the front door again!' said the chef. 'If there are any Carriers with them, they'll smash through the glass – then the whole building's compromised. We need to prioritise the kids, whoever's there will have to take their own chances on the outside.'

Lieutenant Bourke stamped his feet in the sand dunes, trying to bring back some sensation to his frozen toes. The storm had blown itself out two hours prior, but not before it had sunk the cruise liner. The split in the hull had extended past the water line earlier in the night, and within the space of ten minutes the ship had dropped below the surface. Now only the smoke stacks and captain's bridge peaked above the waves next to the headland.

Bourke looked inland to the east for any sign of dawn and was rewarded with the barest lightening of the horizon. His gut told him it was only a matter of time until the Infected started to arrive on shore from the wreck. The only question was the numbers they arrived in. If they held off for another hour, he'd at least be able to coordinate a defence in the daylight. Fighting humans at night was confusing and nightmarish enough, let alone taking on soulless ghouls that refused to acknowledge their own deaths.

He'd laid a series of Claymores above the tide line two days prior. Once detonated, the mines would spray a vicious hail of steel balls towards the enemy. He knew the mines would be virtually useless in killing any of the lifeless ghouls, the chance of a head shot from an un-aimed blast was small, but it would serve to slow a few down with traumatic amputations. On seeing the ship sink, he'd consolidated a defensive line along the front of the camp. As far as he saw it, their only chance was to take out the Infected as they emerged from the water. If they were forced back into the camp, the haphazard layout of tents and buildings would make it near impossible to enforce a cohesive defence.

One of his men approached, a tense expression on his face. 'Sir, they're coming.'

Bourke gave a curt nod of acknowledgement, part of him glad that the wait was over. He turned to his aide, 'Call back the last skeleton crew at the main building. I want everyone here ASAP.'

Bourke followed the soldier back to his initial position. His men were spread out along the top of the sand dunes, most lying prone with rifles aimed at the shoreline. He took a knee to decrease his profile and looked into the waves where the soldier pointed. His eyes flicked about the whitewash for a few moments, then his heart stuttered. A black figure rose above the water, clumsily regaining its feet after being knocked over by a wave and staggered out onto the sand. Movement further out in the water now caught Bourke's eyes, and looking past the Carrier, he found it was the first of a swarm emerging from the depths. Dark figures rose on lurching steps out of the surf, water streaming from sodden hair and torn clothes.

'Send up a flare, let's get a proper look at these bastards,' commanded Bourke.

The soldier loaded a wide barrelled gun, aimed upwards and fired. The flare arced high into the air and burst into brilliant white. For a few moments, the beach and water were illuminated in harsh light, exposing the sheer enormity of terror descending on the camp. Carriers that had reached the shore further along the coast were staggering along the beach, and hundreds more were emerging from the water to their front. In Bourke's heart, he knew the fight was lost already. There were just too many for his small force to overcome.

Within the last few moments, the beach directly in front had filled with a milling crowd of mangled limbs and torn flesh. Bourke picked up the firing mechanism for the Claymores, took a breath and depressed its button. The front of the mine exploded outwards in a burst of flame, a hail of steel balls punching through dead flesh, smacking down Carriers like an invisible battering ram. Bourke's ears rang from the blast as he surveyed the damage achieved. A few corpses remained where they lay, but all too many clawed their way back upright. Some crawled forward, legs torn free or shredded beyond the point of carrying weight. Globes of tissue littered the damp sand, but most surreal of all, was the lack of blood. The beach should have been awash, dripping with carmine fluid, and yet the wounds remained dry.

A focus provided for their hatred, all Infected on the beach now turned in

his direction, faces contorted with rage. Mouths opening as one, they emitted an animalistic scream and attacked. Bourke's mouth had dried of spit, his hands unsteady as he snatched up the firing mechanisms for the other two Claymores and set them off in rapid succession, cutting down two more swathes of mindless killers.

'Open fire!' screamed Bourke, as he raised his rifle, picked out a target and fired. All along the line at the top of the dunes, the guards opened up, spitting a lethal stream of bullets at the Carriers. Bullets whined through the air, punching through tissue and bone, tearing skulls apart to spatter brains in a vile rain on the sand.

And still they came. Bourke took a split second to observe the distance between his men and the closing enemy. His soldiers' aim was reasonable; many head shots were hitting home, but far too many were missing. Habit was hard to break, and most of his men had trained years to aim for centre of mass, the chest where any shot could achieve death via trauma to heart, lungs or major vessels. Against the Carrier, these shots were useless, merely twitching the body as the round passed through or at best, momentarily knocking them off their feet.

There was less than fifteen metres separating them now, he had no choice but to retreat into the camp. He'd already seen three men abandon their mates and run, while many of those remaining were inching backwards. If he left it any longer he wouldn't have anyone left to lead.

'Get back behind the fence line and re-group!' ordered Bourke, his voice hoarse as he yelled.

The remaining men didn't need to be asked twice. They retreated backwards, maintaining a steady rate of fire on the Infected that surged after them. The guards sprinted through the one small gate in the fence line, then slammed it closed. Bourke jammed the simple steel locking mechanism home then jerked backward out of reach as the first Carrier threw itself against the fence's wire lattice.

He joined his men twenty metres back where they had formed a simple line, firing upon the ghouls on the other side. Sparks flew from the steel wire as occasional bullets ricocheted off the fence and onward into the dead flesh beyond.

Behind him the camp was in turmoil as terrified people left their tents and buildings and ran for their lives. The fence began to bow inwards under sheer weight of numbers, too many for Bourke's small force to keep at bay.

Individual strands of wire began to snap, destroying the structural integrity of the entire barrier. Suddenly a twenty-metre section of steel wire burst free from its upper margin, spilling a mass of Carriers into the campgrounds.

Bourke swore violently to himself. He'd lost, and now was left with a decision that he knew would condemn any civilian to death that had chosen to stay hidden in their tent or demountable. Bourke waved his men back to begin a fighting retreat toward the main building as he picked up his radio and called to the Navy Frigate off shore.

'I need artillery support on my current location,' he requested, voice hoarse.

'Your satellite position is within the camp. Please confirm you are requesting a direct strike on your current location,' answered a stressed sounding voice on the other end of the line.

'The fence line is breached. My current location will be overrun by the Carriers in moments. Our only hope is to stop them here. Give me five minutes to get my men to the other side of the main building, then raise the campsite to the ground.'

There was a brief pause as the communications soldier gained authorisation. 'Affirmative. You have five minutes until launch.'

Bourke's heart raced as he clipped his radio handset back to his chest, still not quite believing what he had just requested. As the following Infected reached the tents, some broke off their chase of the soldiers, instead ripping through fabric walls to find the source of crying within. Soon agonised screams of victims mingled with the harsh snarls of feeding Infected, an orgy of violence amongst the maze of temporary structures. One tent had caught fire, spiralling inky smoke before the moon and backlighting feeding ghouls before it, uncaring of their own clothes that smoked from the intense heat nearby.

'Follow me, we have only a couple of minutes to reach the main building,' said Bourke, making sure his men followed as he set off at a jog down one of the few sealed roads through the complex. Carriers had progressed through the camp, their rate of movement increasing as they thawed away from the icy waters of Bass Strait and were sent into frenzy at the availability of fresh meat.

Bourke raised his gun, blasting half a skull free of a ghoul crouching over a young boy. He was too late to be of help, the child's throat was already torn free, a cavernous hole where the boy's trachea should have been.

Bourke averted his eyes from the child, not wanting to see the drum beat of his feet in the dirt as life faded.

The main building was now in sight, deserted of life. His men formed a quick defensive semi-circle, firing into the camp as he tried the handle. Locked. He fumbled automatically in his pocket for his master set of keys before remembering they'd gone missing the week before. Bourke hammered on the glass.

'Open the door!' he yelled, searching for movement down the hallway ahead. Nothing. He looked back over his shoulder and past the guards behind, his pulse racing at the sight of the Infected closing in, drawn by the tight knot of men.

Erin looked at the chef, aghast at the thought of abandoning anyone to such a death if there was a possibility of it being prevented.

'You take the kids and run. I'll meet you at the kitchen,' she said while checking that a round was chambered in her pistol. The chef gave her a hard look for a moment, then turned away.

'All right children, you're with me now. It's a race to the kitchen, let's go!' said the older woman, taking off after the kids with an arthritic shamble. Erin took a shuddering breath and ran back down the hallway and up to the front door and saw with relief that it was Lieutenant Bourke behind the glass. She punched the emergency release button for the electronic lock and the doors sprang open, allowing the soldiers in. Two remained at the door, firing rapidly at the approaching circle of ghouls.

Bourke immediately grabbed her by the arm, pulling her closer so he could talk quickly. 'We need to get away from this side of the building; the navy will be bombing the camp any minute. Where's the majority of people, did anyone seek shelter here?'

Erin nodded, 'Most have run to the dining room at the back.'

Bourke let her go and turned back to his men, 'Lock the doors again, time to get moving.'

Something to the right of the entrance caught Erin's eye. The Carriers to that side collapsed, heads destroyed from behind. Suddenly Jeremy and another guard ran over the top of their bodies, sprinting for the entrance before it was locked.

One of Bourke's soldiers held the door open a crack, drew them inside and slammed it shut behind, twisting the lock home. Jeremy doubled over, heaving as he tried to recover his breath. Carriers smacked up against the thickened glass panels behind, wretched faces screaming as they hammered at the obstruction.

'Where the hell were you?' demanded Bourke, only now realising that he hadn't seen him throughout the whole length of the fight.

'We got separated,' started Jeremy between breaths, 'as we fell back into the camp from the dunes.'

Bourke grimaced, clearly not believing a word. 'We have to move. Follow me,' he said, turning away from him and dismissing the topic for the moment.

As Erin watched, she saw a corner of Jeremy's mouth hook sideways in a sneer. Then he caught sight of her, and his face broke into a wide grin.

'I haven't forgotten about you, Princess,' he said, sidling past her after his Lieutenant. 'Don't you worry, I'll make sure you're dead and cold before those filthy plague carriers start ripping you apart. After all, I wouldn't want to miss out on the fun!' he said, giving a short hard laugh as he ran onwards, leaving her behind.

White knuckles showed as Erin gripped her pistol, furiously wanting to raise it and fire into the centre of the coward's back. She bit her tongue, using the pain to break her thoughts and draw her back to reality. Jeremy was a peripheral problem for the minute, she still needed to get back to the kids and make sure they were safe. It wouldn't take long for the Carriers outside to break through and follow them. She clenched her jaw and joined the soldiers in a sprint to join the other survivors.

Outside, the sun was just starting to crack over the horizon as the first artillery shell launched from the Frigate, arching into the sky with a harsh whistle before it smashed down amongst the tents and Infected to explode with shocking devastation. The shells fell in rapid succession, blasts making the earth shudder. The glass along the building front shattered from the concussion waves, and those Carriers left moving, dragged themselves into the building to continue their chase.

Chapter Sixteen

At the combat briefing, Mark had drawn the short straw amongst a huddle of officers. As such, his platoon was assigned the task of drawing the swarm from the town's centre. He'd returned to his squad after the briefing at 4.00 AM to deliver the news.

'Unfortunately, we're stuck playing the role of a juicy steak to entice the Infected onto our walls,' he said, deepened creases about his eyes the only sign of stress as he spoke. 'It should be low risk enough, a crew of three needs to drive a ute into town, get the attention of the swarm and lead them back here for slaughter. Your Corporals, Nate and Vinh have already both volunteered, but I can only let one NCO go on this job – Nate won the coin toss. That means I need two more volunteers to join them.'

Steph saw Jai subtly shaking his head in her peripheral vision but chose to ignore him.

'I'll go,' she said, hoisting herself off the ground.

Jai grunted and stood up, his face wiped clean of emotion as he walked to the front to join her. Mark looked furious as he accepted their self-nominations. She knew he had no choice; to refuse their help could only be interpreted negatively; favouritism in protecting his close friends from overt danger, or a humiliating lack of confidence in their abilities.

Steph deliberately avoided any conversation with him afterwards, acutely aware of his eyes tracking her preparations, concern plain on his features after his initial anger cooled. After gaining a few short words of encouragement from different members of the platoon, she left the group behind and walked outside into a pre-dawn greyness with Jai, Nate and Mark to finish preparation of the ute. A 4WD Hilux twin-cab was parked directly behind the high main gate. She and Jai dumped a crate each of pre-loaded Austeyr magazines into the tray. Nate reached in the driver's door, flicked a latch to release the hood, then started to run through a quick check of oil and brake fluids.

Mark, now alone with his two friends, asked the question that Steph knew had been on his lips since the meeting.

'Why the hell did you volunteer?'

'If I'm going to survive in this army, I need to be taken seriously, Mark,' she said.

‘Don’t be stupid, I know what both of you can do – you’re better fighters than half the men in there,’ he said, pointing back to where they’d left the rest of the platoon. ‘There’s no need to prove yourselves to me.’

‘No, not you, Mark, but I need to convince the rest of the squad. They see me as a chick that’s just making up the numbers. All I’ve had so far is creepy attempts at flirting and offers to keep me warm at night. Half of them are marines that haven’t seen a woman in months.’

‘Has anyone hurt you?’ asked Mark.

‘No, it’s just banter at this stage, but in this sort of place, how do I know that’s not going to change? They need to see me as a soldier, as an equal that’s as tough as they are. They wouldn’t try that sort of shit on with someone they respected, and if I’m not seen as a mate, they need to know that I’m violent enough to cut their balls off if they try something I don’t want.’

Mark looked at her uncertainly, like he didn’t know how to respond.

‘Look, I joined to fight. I want my only concern to be the Infected, not some dickhead behind me.’

Mark sighed, ‘Ok, I had no idea. Promise you’ll tell me if things start to get out of hand from the men and I’ll stamp it out bloody quick.’

Steph gave him a small smile and squeezed his hand in thanks. ‘You’re a good man, Mark. If you weren’t so distracted with keeping us all alive, you’d see what’s standing right in front of you a little more easily.’

Mark turned to Jai who was trying to look like he wasn’t listening to their conversation. ‘So, what’s your excuse?’

Jai just gave him a quizzical look. ‘Isn’t it obvious? If Steph’s out there, I need to be there to protect her back. Don’t worry, we’ll be fine.’

‘Just don’t take any major risks,’ said Mark.

Nate finished up under the hood and slammed it down hard before joining the trio. ‘We ready then?’

Around them, soldiers were beginning to crunch past on the gravel path, heading to the walls in readiness for the battle to come.

‘If all your kit’s checked, then you’re fit to go,’ said Mark.

Jai jumped up onto the ute’s tray and ran through the speaker set up. A large amp had been rigged up to the vehicle’s power and attached to an iPod. He flicked on the power, cranked the volume and hit play. Music blasted for a split second before Jai turned it off again. ‘All good here,’ he said.

‘Ok, make it a quick trip. Don’t go too deep into town. The one thing you can’t afford is to be surrounded; make them come to you,’ said Mark.

‘Once you’re back, join us on the wall, we’ll be stationed to the right of the main gate,’ he said, pointing out the thirty metre stretch for which their squad would be responsible. ‘Good luck.’

Steph climbed up onto the ute’s tray, stood behind the cabin’s roof and ran through a last check of her weapons. Nate had taken residence behind the wheel and brought the engine roaring to life. Ahead, the steel-plated gate began a slow roll to the right, its pulley system squealing painfully at the movement. Once the gap hit a minimum width to allow passage of the car, Nate released the clutch and took off.

Mark watched the car for a few moments through the closing gate before sending a silent prayer for their safety to any bastard god that would listen. It was out of his hands now, and with a determined effort, he shut down the circling anxious thoughts. He could see Vinh hovering nearby waiting for him. Mark spat a sour taste from his mouth then headed toward his Sergeant. He owed the rest of his men his attention now, and last preparations still needed to be finalised before the swarm hit.

Nate drove slowly along the street extending from the Fort, keeping the engine noise to a minimum to avoid excess attention until they were ready. Empty parkland slipped by to the right and old weatherboard housing to the left, everything bathed in a soft light as the sun breached the eastern horizon. The battle had been intentionally planned for early morning, aiming to take advantage of the coolest hours of daylight when the Infected were cold and slow, and still yet to increase their body temperature in the sun.

Jai had his rifle propped against his shoulder as he knelt alongside the huge amp, fiddling with the iPod while Steph watched with curiosity.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

‘Just picking a new song list to play. Some idiot had a bloody pop selection lined up, and I’ll be fucked if I’m shooting bloody Carriers with Taylor Swift whining behind me,’ said Jai as he placed the iPod back on top of the amp, happy with his new choices.

Nate hit the cabin roof lightly from inside the cabin to gain their attention. Both looked forward and saw what had him concerned as the ute slowed to a stop. On a street to the left, the swarm could be seen two blocks

distant. Shuffling figures moved slowly, oblivious to their position so far.

Steph hung her head down the driver's side of the cabin. 'Take us further in. What do you reckon, get within a block of the crowd, then turn on the music?'

'I'll go a bit closer, but I don't want to get flanked. If the houses spill a bunch of Carriers, it could make it difficult getting back out,' he answered. Nate swung the front out and then started to reverse down the street. When the shit finally hit the fan, he didn't want to be wasting time on a three-point turn before high tailing it back to the Fort.

'Right, that's close enough,' said Nate as he brought the vehicle to a standstill and cocked his pistol.

Steph picked up the iPod and a smile kinked the corner of her mouth as she saw Jai's first selection. 'Isn't "Rage Against the Machine" a little before your time?'

'What can I say, my dad had a good CD collection,' said Jai, unperturbed by her sisterly teasing. 'Just hit the fucking play button already, time to get this show on the road,' he said raising his weapon. Some of the Infected had already noted the vehicle and were breaking away from the main body to head their way.

Steph turned the volume on the amp to max, then hit play on the iPod. The opening chords pounded out of the speaker followed by an iconic bass riff. Steph could feel the music vibrate through every muscle of her body, drawing out adrenaline to course through her veins, dilating her pupils as fear dropped away, replaced with a surreal exhilaration.

The swarm turned toward the noise. Enraged by the disturbance, they stumbled forth. Closer at hand, Infected were emerging from houses to either side of the ute. Nate opened the driver's door and aimed over the engine, firing a handful of carefully aimed shots to take out three Carriers.

The music rose to a crescendo, drums hammering as Steph lifted her own rifle and took aim. '*Killing in the name of!*' roared from the speaker behind her as she squeezed off her first round, blowing the right half of a Carrier's skull away.

Nate hammered on the inside of the roof to indicate he was going to start driving. Jai and Steph both dropped to one knee for stability as the ute slowly took off at the pace of the following swarm, each taking a side to clear the way forward for Nate. What had been empty street minutes before, was now coming to life as Carriers stumbled from open doorways and crashed through

windows to pursue the noise.

Steph took in the bared teeth of the Infected, their snarls of rage drowned out by the music and rifles. She and Jai kept up a steady rate of fire, smacking Carriers from their feet with every trigger's depression until the road ahead was clear once more. As Nate rounded the corner back onto the home stretch, they slowed further, allowing the swarm to come closer now that there was little fear of being surrounded.

Steph and Jai turned their attention to the crowd at their rear, now trailing only twenty metres behind the ute. Steph gripped the back of the cabin as she stood briefly over the swarm. The road behind them was packed, jammed from gutter to gutter with walking corpses for as far as she could see. The entire swarm from the centre of town had been successfully lured toward the Fort. They'd done their job properly, now they'd see if the gamble would pay off, if the walls would be enough to fend away the tide of rabid, dead flesh.

She squatted back down and continued to fire alongside Jai, their stock of magazines rapidly dwindling. Although the majority of their shots drilled home to perfection, their efforts were akin to a child trying to empty a lake with nothing but a cup. The undead lurched onward, uncaring for the corpses that dropped to disappear under the feet of the swarm.

Jai's trigger clicked silently under his finger. He ejected the magazine and fished blindly in the crate for another refill. They were out of ammo.

'That's us done, Nate!' he called over the blaring music, banging on the roof. Nate looked over his shoulder and out the back window, and finally understood as he saw Jai holding an empty magazine up to him. The Fort was less than a hundred metres distant anyway. As Steph emptied the last of her rounds, Nate picked up speed and pulled away from the mob, gunning the engine for the Fort's gate that was rolling open slowly. Behind, the swarm spilled off the confines of the road into the adjacent parkland. Angry whines passed through the air above Steph's head, belying the passage of the first shots from the Fort. Snipers with long-range rifles were starting to fire into the swarm behind the ute. Nate kept the accelerator down as he sped through the narrow gap, the gate bare centimetres from either side of the vehicle.

Mark was standing on the makeshift battlement walk as his mates

returned, the red bricks of the wall reaching to the height of his ribcage. The men of his platoon spread out on either side along the thirty-metre stretch for which he was responsible. Mark winced as they sped toward the gap, certain he was about to hear an impact of metal on metal, then they were mercifully through. Nate slammed on the brakes bringing the vehicle to a shuddering stop. He saw Steph and Jai jump from the back of the ute, landing on the gravel road as the main gate trundled shut again.

Jai reached back over the edge of the tray, turned off the amp, and suddenly the demonic cries of the following Carriers washed over the soldiers on the wall, no longer drowned out by music. Mark looked back out at the swarm his friends had led home. Stunned faces lined either side of him as the sheer enormity of the task ahead sank home to his troops. Even at this distance, the Carriers looked hellish. Half-naked bodies, dry ripped flesh and exposed bones lurched relentlessly to their position.

Mark raised his arm to get the trio's attention. Steph spotted him, and the three soldiers ran toward his position, taking the steps two at a time to reach the battlement. Steph arrived on the walkway, strands of blond hair broken free of her ponytail, whipping behind in the stiff breeze. Her cheeks were pink from the morning cold, pupils dilated by adrenaline and battle lust, giving her face a fierce type of beauty that Mark couldn't help but notice. The nearest soldiers made room for them on the wall. Steph slotted in next to one of the older men, a retired veteran that had re-joined after the breakout of plague.

'You and the kid did good this morning,' he said somewhat grudgingly.

Steph nodded, accepting the compliment as a statement of fact. She glanced up at the gathering clouds that had become ominously grey; it would rain soon, and hard.

With his platoon back to full strength, a hard smile broke across Mark's face. The ground outside the walls had been marked for distance; orange flags topped stakes set at 50, 75 and 100 metres. He raised his hand and pointed at the middle marker, 'Once those dead bastards reach the second flag, we open fire. Single shots. One round drilled through each skull without wastage. Lieutenant Murphy's platoon has the job of restocking during this battle. When you're down to your last magazine raise your right hand and a runner will deliver fresh packed ammo to you. We're aiming for a constant rate of accurate fire and calm nerves. The only thing that can beat us here is if we fuck it up for ourselves. The maths is simple, we have enough bullets to

kill every Carrier in that swarm twice over – we only have to slot a round home in each one of their rotting heads and the day is ours!’

Faces along the wall hardened at his words, fear tempered with resolve. Bullets ripped through the air overhead like angry wasps, fired from the roofs of taller buildings behind, and from the high walkway around the black lighthouse. The swarm of Carriers had spread off the road, filling the open grassed space before the walls as they moved forward. The front line of Infected passed the second flag.

‘Fire at will!’ ordered Mark.

His soldiers opened up, shooting well aimed rounds into the swarm, dropping body after body, creating a floor of torn flesh for the Infected to climb over. Their rate of advance slowed, but still continued through sheer weight of numbers.

Heavy drops of water began to patter on the heads of the defenders, rapidly escalating into a torrential downpour. Visibility dropped, hiding anything past 100 metres from sight. Popping noises issued from behind them, and Mark looked back to see that the mortar crews had stepped into action. The shells arced steeply into the air, falling to earth amongst the Carriers beyond to explode. In the dense crowd, the small bombs worked to devastating effect, mincing legs and throwing bodies and mud skyward. Few Carriers sustained head trauma sufficient to remove them from the fight permanently, but hideous injuries to lower limbs served a purpose to slow the attack. Those Infected reduced to crawling or dragging themselves were trampled by the Carriers coming from behind, driven into the developing quagmire where open parkland had stood but an hour before.

The wave of tortured corpses broke against the wall, crushed against the bricks in the press. Their faces were turned to the soldiers above, screaming in fury, impotently reaching up at the uninfected humans above. Most soldiers were now shooting into the mob directly below, putting down Carrier after Carrier with workman like efficiency. Slowly, the pile of dead grew in height, lifting those Infected that crawled onto the bodies ever closer to the defenders on the wall.

Mark ordered his squad to start firing further out into the crowd in an attempt to stop his soldiers inadvertently creating a ramp of human flesh for the Infected to climb. The platoon delivering ammunition to the soldiers on the wall laboured up and down the embankment, taking away spent magazines and replacing them with fresh packed rounds.

Time ground on slowly, and Mark began to notice the growing toll on some of his soldiers. Next to Jai, a younger man dropped a magazine twice as he tried unsuccessfully to load with hands shaking from fatigue. If the guy couldn't load his rifle, he had no hope of shooting straight. Missed shots would feed insecurity and destroy confidence that they could defeat the hellish creatures below. Mark took three quick paces over and tapped him on the shoulder.

'Step back!' he said, shouting to be heard over the hideous noise around them. 'I'm going to start rotating people in and out of the firing line for rest breaks. You've got ten minutes to get some water and food into you, then drop back in to keep going.'

The soldier accepted the order with obvious relief. Slumping with his legs dangling over the edge of the walkway, he pulled out his water bottle and chugged down its contents.

Mark walked along the line and extracted a further two men and a woman who were each showing signs of stress or fatigue. He needed his squad to retain control of their thoughts and actions and had to avoid at all cost stress levels rising to the point that they broke and ran.

Despite his change in tactic of shooting further into the press, a move that was promptly replicated on other areas of the wall, the bodies continued to mount higher, bringing Carriers ever closer. In some sections, the bloodied fingers of the Infected were almost within arm's reach. Mark looked along the wall with growing concern. It was too much like the fight at the farm, where the Infected had almost breached the top of his shipping container battlement.

Mark tried his radio, but something was wrong with the equipment and he failed to get an answer. Swearing his frustration, he pulled a Private back from the wall, 'Go to the command centre, say that I'm requesting permission to clear my section of wall,' said Mark. The soldier looked at him with a confused expression on his face. 'Don't worry, they'll understand. I need that answer quick, so bloody run!'

The soldier took off at a sprint. Mark leaned out over the edge, pistol in hand, staring into the writhing mass of flesh below, picked out targets and began shooting. He just bloody hoped Command hadn't left their decision too late. Within minutes, the Private returned, a fresh headset in his hands to replace Mark's broken radio.

'Sir, your request has been granted, they said an order has been sent out

to the other platoon positions to fire their Improvised Explosive Devices as well,' said the Private. 'But that doesn't make sense, where are they, Sir?'

Mark pointed downwards, 'Buried under two metres of bodies,' he answered, picking up the detonator. He turned to the rest of his platoon, 'Cease fire and take cover!' he shouted. Abruptly, his soldiers stopped shooting and ducked low, Mark followed suit and depressed the button.

Three succinct explosions thundered on the outside of the wall, causing the dirt to shift under their feet. A fine crack appeared in the brickwork at his shoulder, snaking upwards to the top lip. A section of the makeshift walkway that was already sodden from the storm slid out, forcing Mark to shove his back up against the wall to avoid falling off the edge. All along the wall, the IEDs began to explode, buffeting his eardrums painfully.

Mark turned around and looked over the edge to survey the damage he'd wrought. The IEDs had been placed for this specific purpose, the explosive created to form a directional blast out from the wall. The mound of corpses that had blanketed the base had been largely blown clear, reduced to featureless scraps of tissue and bone. Each blast had formed its own crater, with bodies between these pits sliding down to the base of the holes. The force of the blast had knocked many Carriers further out in the crowd to the ground as well, but the urge to feed was overwhelming, and ghouls regained their feet to attack yet again.

A short cry of excitement from many of the soldiers made Mark smile as they saw that the explosives had worked. The wall was still intact, with the Infected largely cleared to ground level once again. He raised a hand to roughly wipe the hair stuck to his forehead aside and noticed that the rain had finally stopped. The clouds still looked primed to release a second drenching, but for the first time in an hour, he could see to the back of the swarm.

The extent of the slaughter was truly awe-inspiring. Fallen plague carriers littered the open area in front of the Fort and the streets beyond to waist depth. In some areas the height of the corpses rose higher, like sand swept in a gale. Across the top of these bodies moved the last of the Infected, crawling due to the unsteady footing of ripped and torn human flesh.

Steph yelled out, gaining Mark's attention as she pointed to the bay side of the Fort. He followed her direction and looked over to the fence at the rear perimeter. His heart stuttered briefly as he saw that this weaker barrier was now also under attack. Carriers had begun to skirt the main field of action, walking where there was solid ground underfoot. A sizeable group had

formed at the other side of the wire, shaking the mesh in rage at the soldiers they could see behind. With the main attack successfully drawn to the more easily defensible brick walls, and a lack of soldiers being available to protect the entire perimeter, there were less than a handful of men there to repel the growing numbers. As Mark watched, he saw the steel poles holding up the wire begin to bend inwards under the combined weight of the Infected.

If they didn't gain support soon, the fence was going to collapse, and the Fort would be routed from behind. There wasn't time to gain approval from the upper chains of command; someone needed to act immediately. Mark quickly chose five men to leave behind.

'The rest of you follow me!' he shouted and dropped off the edge of the walkway to the ground. Checking briefly that his squad was with him, he sprinted for the fence line, his rifle in a white knuckled grip.

Chapter Seventeen

Erin ran down the corridor after Bourke and his remaining guards, heading for the dining room at the back of the building. As the first shells from the Navy Frigate hit home, she stumbled slightly as the ground shook beneath her feet from the blast. The sound of smashing glass followed, windows destroyed by the concussion wave and shrapnel.

Lieutenant Bourke had stopped at the dining room's main door, counting off his guards as they entered. As Erin passed him, he drew it closed, shoving home the security bolt into the top of the frame. It wouldn't hold for long, the panels of the door being made of glass.

Bourke turned around, his eyes flicking over the people present in a quick appraisal. The back half of the room was filled with men, women and children, although it was a pitifully small contingent of the total numbers that the camp originally held. A few held improvised weapons, lengths of wood or metal; some had clearly been created prior to tonight in readiness for such an event. Others gripped large cooking knives that had been liberated from the kitchens behind. Next to the kitchen was another doorway into a different corridor that held a set of stairs to the second floor. A few people were already edging out this exit to avoid the coming fight. He ignored those leaving, better that the room only contained people directly involved in holding the choke point against the Infected.

'As you already know, we are under attack. Plague carriers from the sunken cruise liner have arrived on shore and breached the fences surrounding our camp,' said Bourke. A woman started crying in the back of the room, the sound carrying abnormally in the otherwise quiet room. From behind the locked dining room door, a guttural snarl echoed up the corridor.

A harsh whistling sound was followed by a series of violent explosions that set the light fittings to sway as another artillery strike fell. Bourke's expression hardened at the sounds. 'This fight isn't over. Everyone here has made it through nightmares on the mainland; and we will again. Once the artillery has cleared out the worst of their numbers, the Frigate will land marines to support. We just have to survive the next few hours,' he said.

One of the children screamed, pointing behind him at the door. Bourke swore violently as he spun around; he'd been hoping for more time to create a defence. A group of Carriers had rounded a corner further down the

hallway and were headed toward the dining room. The creatures were in awful shape. Clothes torn and blackened by the falling shells, their bodies pierced by fragments of shrapnel. Bourke's eyes were drawn to the leading ghoul, one of his own fallen guards returned to fight against him. The man looked like he'd suffered horribly in death, the right side of his face had been ripped off by unforgiving teeth and his eye punctured. A loop of entrails dragged behind him, pulled free of a fist-sized hole in his abdomen. One of the following Carriers stepped on the length of intestine, tearing it to leave an ooze of faecal waste as he lurched onward. Another had a two-foot shard of metal transfixing his chest front to back, stuck through like a pinned bug.

Bourke shook his head, forcing himself to create a plan of attack. He turned back to the crowd that was rapidly thinning as people broke and ran.

'I only want those who are armed to remain, everyone else get up to the second floor,' Bourke said. 'Rifles to the front, other weapons behind our line to clean up anything that breaks through!'

While Bourke's guards formed a line either side of him across the dining room, Erin had located the chef who was still with her group of children. She hustled them out of the back doorway.

'Are you ok to take them upstairs?' she asked. The older woman's face was grey, with sweat beading on her forehead.

'Of course, but you need to come as well. The kids were starting to panic with you out of sight,' she said.

'I'll follow, but I have a gun. I need to do my part here.'

'Stop being a fool, child! Let the adults sort it out. You need to look after your own neck and these kids,' said the chef.

Her words only made Erin more determined to stay. 'Why the hell do you think I'm doing this?' she said with anger mounting. 'I'm damn well making sure that those kids stay safe by helping to block the room!'

The older woman looked at her like she'd grown a second head, then turned back to the kids, clearly giving up on Erin as she muttered to herself, 'It's on your own bloody head then.' Then with fake joviality, 'Right kids – we're off to the second floor. Jake, you take the lead, let's make it a race!'

Glass smashed behind her. She turned around to see the first of the Carriers enter the room. The door hung free to the side, the bottom hinge ripped free of the arch. Bullets hammered out from the defensive line. Their

aim was poor, with only half of the shots finding a home within a Carrier's brain. Erin saw some of them begin to edge backwards nervously as they fired, Jeremy the first to slip out of position and hang behind the line. As fast as they fired, the stream of ghouls escaping the corridor continued, and finally met the line of guards. The camp members with hand weapons swung over the heads of the guards, bludgeoning skulls with lengths of wood and metal. Others stabbed upward, seeking out the soft flesh beneath the chin before driving their sharp knives into the base of the brain.

Erin paced forward, her heart hammering as she saw one of the camp men get shoved to the ground under the weight of a heavy Carrier. She ground the end of her pistol into the ghoul's head and pulled the trigger, blasting skull and brain fragments into a rotten haze. She extended a hand and helped the man back to his feet.

Jeremy caught sight of her with the gun in hand, a look of pure fury overcoming his features as he recognised his stolen weapon.

'I fucking knew you took it, you little thief!' he cried, ignoring the fight as he started to make for her. Erin backed away, not wanting to get stuck between the line of fighters and Jeremy.

'Soldier! Get back in line, or I'll shoot you myself!' shouted Bourke, grabbing Jeremy by his shoulder and swinging him away from Erin. Bourke looked up at Erin, his face lined with stress, 'Get upstairs and away from here, now!'

Erin turned and ran for the door, pausing to look back once more. Jeremy had slipped back from the line and was now standing behind Bourke, his handgun raised at his back.

'No!' shouted Erin, but it was too late. Jeremy's gun fired, and she saw Bourke jerk forward with the force of the bullet strike. Half the line was overwhelmed by Carriers as the fight turned into a melee of hand-to-hand struggles. Unable to see Bourke as the fighting surrounded him, Erin couldn't tell if the bullet had been fatal or not. Some of the Carriers broke past the group and started to head towards her.

Finally, her resolve broke, and she fled. She turned into the hallway and ran for the back stairwell. Abruptly she realised if any Carriers saw her go up the stairs she'd lead them directly to the kids. She slid to a halt, wrenched open the closest door and darted inside, pulling it closed behind. Her chest heaved as she sought out a light switch in the dark. Locating it, she switched it on to find herself alone in a cleaner's storeroom. A simple lock was

incorporated into the handle that she was able to engage. With the knowledge she was the sole occupant of the room, Erin turned off the light and plunged the room into darkness.

She slowed her breathing with effort, opening her mouth so that the air movement would be as silent as possible. Outside her room, she heard the sounds of gunfire come closer as survivors of the battle retreated. Instead of heading for the stairwell, they went in the opposite direction, drawing the Infected away from where the main body of survivors were hiding. As the footfalls of the defenders receded down the hall, she now heard Carriers emerge from the dining hall in pursuit. Guttural snarls echoed outside her door as lurching irregular steps belied their movement away from her to pursue the remaining guards.

Eventually it was silent again outside her door. The only sounds she could hear were from other sections of the building, muted screams and popping of gunfire. She forced herself to count to one hundred before carefully unlocking the door. Peeking around the corner, Erin found the hallway empty of movement.

A moan of pain emanated from the dining hall. It wasn't the sound of a Carrier, she was sure of that. Erin was about to make her way upstairs when the thought hit her that it might be Bourke. If his only injury was the bullet wound, he could still live, or if he'd been bitten, the least she could do was give him a quick ending. Against her better judgement, Erin crept back to the dining hall doorway.

She took a deep breath to steady herself and peeked around the edge. The room was a slaughterhouse. Crimson coated the floor and dripped from the ceiling where arterial spray had reached. In the far corner, two Carriers ripped mouthfuls from an inanimate body. She felt her heart drop with disappointment; there was nothing left alive in the room.

Suddenly she was yanked off her feet backwards, a burning loop of fire about her neck. Erin managed to get two fingers of one hand behind the thin cord wrapped about her throat as she fought for breath. A vicious laugh sounded over her shoulder as she was dragged backwards, feet kicking with effort to escape and panic overcoming her thoughts. A door banged open behind, and she was jerked out of the hallway into a darkened side room and out of sight.

Chapter Eighteen

Mark skidded to a halt next to one of the defenders, twenty metres back from the fence. He ignored the screams of the Infected as they hit a new level of frenzied action in response to the greater number of soldiers. Mark scanned the ground before the wire. There was supposed to be a series of mines set up to compensate for poor coverage of this area, but the ground was empty.

‘Where the hell are the Claymores?’ shouted Mark over the din of the Infected. The soldier looked like he was barely keeping it together.

‘I don’t know, Sir. They mustn’t have been set up. There’s a whole pile of stuff over there, but we haven’t had time to get to it with only five of us here,’ he said, breaking away from Mark to fire again. ‘We were told the area was sorted, but some bastard’s not done his job and left us in the shit!’

Mark grimaced fatalistically. He directed his squad forward into a line where they opened fire while Mark ran over to the boxes of packed equipment. Sure enough, it contained a series of Claymores, along with small arms ammunition. He pulled out three of the rectangular containers. Small enough to be carried in one hand, they were about thirty centimetres wide, twelve centimetres high. The Claymores held several hundred ball bearings that when exploded, sent a lethal spray against the enemy. At the base were two sets of pronged legs that could be dug into the ground, and peep sight at the top to aim the blast.

Mark ran back with the mines and quickly set them up behind the line of his troops so that the arcs of fire from the mines would overlap heavily through the crowd of Infected. He dug the legs of the boxes in at the back, angling the forward face upwards to aim the ball bearings at head height. Once he had inserted the fuses, he ordered his squad to retreat behind the mines.

‘Take cover, firing!’ he shouted, then depressed the charges. Three successive blasts rang out, spitting steel at 1350 metres per second into the face of the Carriers, not twenty metres away. The balls punctured through the faces and skulls of those against the fence, ploughing onwards to dismember the Carriers wedged in behind them with devastating effect. Sparks lit off the wire where ball bearings ricocheted onward. The fence line was wiped virtually clear, and Mark’s crew quickly moved forward to kill any Carrier

still moving with systematic precision.

The bent poles were pushed upright, and star pickets hammered in behind them to lend support to the damaged structure. Immediate crisis averted, Mark left five of his men to support the original defenders at the fence, and then jogged back with his squad to their original position on the wall.

The dirt walkway that had been created behind the wall had not fared well. In numerous places, the wooden hoarding that held the dirt in place had split or collapsed, allowing the dirt to wash away in the rain. Where the path was now missing, soldiers were reduced to sitting on the actual wall, a leg dangling either side while they shot at the Infected below.

Mark climbed back up to their previous position to find the battle nearly at an end. Little was moving; the last crawling Infected across the field of dead were being cut down, each moving figure drawing the attention of multiple marksmen. The streets behind the slaughtered swarm were deserted.

Mark felt tiredness ache through his limbs, the tight knot held in his chest slowly easing as he understood; they had survived. As a last gunshot rang out, a ragged cheer rose up along the wall from a thousand throats. After four hours of systematic destruction, the army had pulled through and achieved a permanent foothold back on the mainland.

Chapter Nineteen

The room plunged into total darkness as the door slammed behind her. Erin redoubled her struggle, wrenching against the cord with the fingers she had managed to get behind it.

‘Fight all you like – you’re still going to die,’ said Jeremy, grunting as he tried to control her body movements.

Erin had known it was him as soon as the cord had wrapped around her neck, but the confirmation of his voice drove her panic even further. The man had killed her friend and executed Bourke during the fight. It was only a matter of minutes before she was the next mark on his record.

‘I’ve been looking forward to this moment. Ever since you started sticking your nose into my business you’ve had this coming, and no fucking hero officer to save you this time!’ he said laughing to himself.

Erin drew a ragged breath, desperately trying to fill her lungs. The cord burnt like a ringlet of fire about her neck as the rough nylon tore the surface layer of skin. With her free hand she reached into her waistband for the pistol. As she yanked it free, Jeremy’s hand grabbed hold of the weapon and wrenched it aside as Erin pulled the trigger. The bullet ricocheted off the floor before lodging in the far wall. He viciously twisted the pistol out of her grasp and she felt her index finger snap as it caught in the trigger guard.

Erin’s vision was starting to grey. The blood supply to her brain was slowly being cut off as the cord tightened over carotid arteries. She ignored her broken finger and pulled free the short blade she’d been carrying for weeks. Holding the handle in her fist, she rammed the point back blindly.

Jeremy screamed out in pain, releasing the cord about Erin’s throat. The blade was buried to the hilt within his thigh, and as he frantically tried to wrench it free, he tripped and fell backwards. The back of his head crunched against the concrete floor as he hit the ground, knocking him unconscious.

Erin was on her knees, a hand rubbing at her neck as she gasped for air like a fish out of water. A crimson ring extended about the front of her neck where the cord had pressed. With the return of air to her chest, she scrambled to reclaim the pistol from where it had fallen and picked it up in her left hand. The index finger of her right hand was bent at an unnatural angle and wouldn’t fit through the trigger guard any longer. Tears ran down her face as she stood over Jeremy and aimed the weapon at his chest. She was

determined to finish the job, only with him dead would she know for certain that he could never hurt her again. With gritted teeth she began to squeeze the trigger.

The door burst open behind her, catching her off guard. Erin yelped in surprise and backed away, changing her aim to the doorway. It was Bourke. Blood seeped from a ragged wound at his left shoulder, the arm hanging limp and useless below. In his right was his service pistol, which he lowered as he saw Erin. His face was pale from blood loss. Bourke glanced around the room and took in the sight of Jeremy's motionless body, then back up to Erin, his eyes focusing immediately upon the red line about her neck.

'Are you ok?' he asked, voice thick.

Erin angrily wiped tears off her face with the back of her arm. 'I will be once he's dead,' she muttered and walked back to Jeremy, aiming the pistol once more at his chest.

Bourke pushed the aim of her weapon away from the unconscious man. 'That would be a kindness he doesn't deserve; leave him for a Carrier,' he said, eyes narrowed in disgust as he regarded the unconscious man. 'We need to get upstairs to the other survivors; are you coming?'

Erin took a steadying breath, then nodded and stepped over Jeremy's inert body, taking great care to crunch his fingers underfoot as she passed. At the door she paused.

'Wait a sec,' said Erin, as she darted back to Jeremy's side. She leant down, grabbed hold of the knife's handle, and gave it a sharp twist as she wrenched the blade free of his thigh. Fresh blood oozed from the wound as Erin wiped the knife clean on his pants leg then sheathed it once more. 'If I have to let him live, I'll be damned if he gets my knife as well,' she said, turning away.

They checked the hallway to ensure it was still empty, then briskly jogged to the stairwell, climbing the steps two at a time. The third door they opened on the landing displayed a room full of terrified young faces under the care of the old chef. Erin held a finger to her lips for them to be quiet as she gently closed the door behind Bourke. The officer's face was grey as he slumped against the adjacent wall. Erin knelt down beside him, concerned that he was losing too much blood.

'Can I check out the wound for you?' she asked. Bourke gave a stiff nod.

'There's a dressing pack here you can use,' he said, laying his rifle on the floor. Hand now free, he fished out a small sealed pack from the left

shoulder strap of his webbing and gave it to her. Erin helped him undo a few buttons of his shirt and slip the sodden material off his left shoulder, exposing the wound. A small hole was present at the back where the bullet had entered and smashed his shoulder blade, but the exit wound was nasty. A clump of flesh had been torn out at the front exposing bone and muscle at the top of his arm. She quickly unpacked the dressing; a pad of absorbent cloth attached to the middle of a bandage, and pressed it firmly into the cavity for a few minutes to stop the bleeding with direct pressure. Bourke stifled a moan of pain, teeth clamped against the agony in his shoulder. Satisfied she had the worst of the haemorrhage under control, Erin tightly bound the cloth into place with the attached bandage.

‘I saw him shoot you in the middle of the fight,’ said Erin as she finished the bandage. ‘It wasn’t an accident, the bastard lined you up deliberately.’

‘Well at least the prick had pathetic aim,’ grunted Bourke. ‘If he lives through this, I’ll make sure his life is as good as over. If there’s one thing the hierarchy fucking hate in the military, it’s officers being shot in the back.’

Erin cocked her head to the side, listening. ‘Do you hear that?’ she said. Automatic gunfire could be heard coming from the beach’s direction. ‘Reinforcements must have landed.’

‘There’s not much left for them to rescue though, is there?’ said the chef, bitterness clear in her voice.

Erin stayed silent, knowing the older woman was right. For all she knew, their small room of survivors was the last remaining.

Erin stood on the beach, a blanket tight around her shoulders while she stood amongst a pitifully small collection of people to be transported onto the Navy Frigate. The camp was being abandoned and all survivors moved to another location. Privately, Erin couldn’t shake the thought that reinforcements were held back in an attempt to cull the numbers of refugees that had to be managed by the Navy. If that had in fact been their plan, they’d been extraordinarily successful.

There was little left of the camp that had been her temporary home. Eddies of smoke carried out over the beach, a reminder to the survivors of the destruction behind. The artillery strike had reduced the simple demountable buildings to blackened shards of metal. The tents were gone, burnt to a crisp

as fire sparked from the blasts torched all that remained.

Muffled footsteps in the sand approached from behind. Erin turned to watch and saw four seamen carrying a lone stretcher tailed by Bourke. There had been few wounded arrive on the beach, as anyone with bite injuries was euthanized on the spot. She felt her heart skip a beat as she recognised Jeremy's crop of hair, then noted his wrist had been shackled to the stretcher. Bourke stopped next to her, leaving the medical team to walk onwards.

'Bastard got lucky; he was bite free when the medics found him,' said Bourke, his eyes still tracking Jeremy's inert form to where the medics placed his stretcher on the sand. 'I've declared formal charges against him already, but with any luck he won't regain consciousness.'

'And what happens if he does?' asked Erin, her eyes wide at the thought of him being possibly released.

'Then he faces a court marshal and gets put away. Although with the lack of jail facilities, there has been talk of re-introducing capital punishment to solve that problem,' he said. 'But the cynic in me thinks that's the military seeking precedent for shooting deserters who run away from the battles to come.'

Erin said nothing. Seeing the death penalty enter Australia again after decades of absence paled to insignificance compared to every other change over the past months.

'Where are they going to take us next?' asked Erin.

'Tasmania still refuses to open their borders, so we're heading back to the mainland. Word's come of a victory across Bass Strait at Queenscliff. The army's managed to reclaim an old military base there and cleared out the town. If I was a betting man, that's where I'd put my money,' said Bourke.

Queenscliff. The name sounded familiar, she'd heard it somewhere before. And if it was empty of plague, it would do her fine.

Chapter Twenty

Mark awoke and opened his eyes, wincing at a dull headache that throbbed in time with his heartbeat. Despite the pain of his burgeoning hangover, he felt the first smile in what felt like months tug at the corner of his mouth as he looked down at the girl at his side. Steph moved sleepily against him, before settling again with her head on his shoulder.

After the previous morning's battle, an armoured car had driven into town, confirming by sight that no further groups of Infected walked the streets of Queenscliff. Aside from those ghouls trapped within houses, the town was clear. General Black had been keen to reward his troops and had acquired a supply of beer kegs from the deserted Esplanade Hotel. A simple bar was created in the main hall, a sound system rigged up and the party had kicked off in the early evening. A skeleton crew of unlucky soldiers were left to patrol the circumference of the Fort, consoled by a small hip flask of whiskey each. The beer had been warm, but as most people hadn't touched a drink since the plague broke out, there was little complaint.

A combination of relief at their own survival, and elation at delivering the first significant victory against the Infected fuelled a huge thirst amongst the soldiers. It hadn't taken long for the first soldiers to fall, collapsed drunk and comatose in various positions around the hall. The party had continued, more raucous and louder than ever into the early hours of the morning.

Mark had been infected by the atmosphere, his mood lifted by having Steph and Jai close by again, and the knowledge that all his men had survived the fight intact. Steph had dragged him up to dance, and before he could think what he was doing he'd found himself kissing her. It didn't go unnoticed, and the soldiers of his platoon had brought Mark back to reality as he registered the cheers and ribbing aimed their way. His ears had burned red, while a slight flush of pink coloured Steph's cheeks as she'd taken his hand and led him away from the dance floor.

The rest had been somewhat of a blur, but as he felt her naked body, warm and smooth against his, he figured it had gone fairly well. Mark felt a stab of guilt as a thought of his ex-girlfriend, Georgie, came unbidden to mind. Despite helping her escape Sydney during the outbreak of the plague, their relationship had been largely over until shortly before her death.

With this first lift in mood since Georgie had died came a degree of

clarity. Mark realised how low he had been since that time, and if he was honest with himself, he'd been almost seeking an end by volunteering for each mission available.

Over the past week as an officer, he'd been forced to accept that leadership required decisions that were often no more than calculated gambles. Whether or not he was in command, someone would still be risking the lives of his mates. And with the poor choices he'd seen other officers make, he was now of the opinion that the men under his leadership were as likely to survive as any other platoon.

He could lead soldiers, but he couldn't control how they individually acted. As much as he had not wanted to admit it, Georgie had contributed to her own death during the fight by reaching outside of the defensive wall he had constructed to keep them safe. In his grief, it had been much easier to heap the blame on his own shoulders and ignore this key fact.

'For a man with a naked girl draped over his body, you're looking very serious,' said Steph, a half-smile on her face.

At the sound of her voice, he glanced down to find her gazing intently at him from where her head rested on his shoulder. He couldn't help but return her smile and began to relax unconsciously tensed muscles.

'I'm ok, was just thinking about something else. Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you.'

'Glad to see I'm already struggling to keep your attention,' she teased. 'Just kidding, I've been half-awake for the past hour anyway. But seriously – is everything all right?'

Mark tightened his arm around her, drawing her in more closely.

'You know what, I think I'm better than I've been for a long time,' he said, and as the words left his mouth, he realised that they were true. 'If I could just kick this hangover, all would be pretty damn good,' said Mark, wincing slightly at another stab of pain behind his eyes.

'Well, guys are always banging on about a shag being the best cure for a headache...' said Steph with a mock serious face.

Mark let out a short bark of laughter. 'I never thought I'd hear those words leave a girl's mouth.'

'Well I'm not the one with the headache this time around, am I?' she said, her face breaking into a cheeky smile. 'Up to you, but the offer's about to expire any second now.'

Mark leant down and kissed her. 'Don't worry, babe. There's some

things I don't need to be asked twice.'

Jai spat in the mud, trying to clear a sour taste from his mouth. The clean-up of the battlefield outside of the Fort's walls had commenced, and he was walking behind a bulldozer along with four other soldiers of his platoon. A few aspirin had cleared the worst of his headache, but not before he'd heaved his guts shortly after waking. Although he'd narrowly avoided spraying vomit across his bed, his shoes had been in direct line of fire when he'd hung his head over the edge of the mattress. At sixteen years of age, he'd had a few nights out with mates, drinking beer or spirits nicked from parents before the world turned to shit, but last night had taken it to a whole new level. The beer had flowed fast, and before he'd known it, double vision had deteriorated to an inability to form words. After waking with his head resting in a puddle of beer on one of the tables, he'd somehow stumbled to bed for a few hours of blackout sleep.

Sergeant Vinh had woken the platoon with the unwelcome news that they'd been allocated clean up duty. As hungover men rose, Jai hadn't been the only one to empty sour guts of beer onto the floor. No one had argued though; Vinh's bloodshot eyes and thunderous expression showed he was carrying the same penalty as everyone else for the previous night's festivities. After pulling on a crumpled uniform, Jai had briefly hosed out his boots in the latrine. The smell had only mildly improved and running out of time, he'd given up and shoved his feet into the slimy interior with a grimace.

Jai yanked his mind away from his spiralling self-pity to the job at hand. A long deep trench had been scraped from the earth at the start of the park, and now the bulldozer was starting to push the heaped mounds of dead into the mass grave. It had quickly become apparent that not all bodies within the mounds of corpses were inanimate. Those Carriers that had been trampled underfoot, tumbled from the mess of limbs as the bulldozer freed them, still angry as hell. That was where Jai and his fellow soldier's temporary role had become necessary, to shoot anything still moving and let the bulldozer continue without threat of plague carriers climbing aboard for the ride.

Of Jai's four companions, only one was in a happy mood. Unsurprisingly, it was the singular man not carrying a hangover. Neville, a

reformed alcoholic turned sobriety champion, had been variously laughing at his mates' misery or lecturing them upon the dangers of excess. Jai for one was about ready to punch the guy in his smart mouth.

'Neville, will you just shut the fuck up?' muttered Jai.

'Not my fault your head's hurting, kid,' said Neville, unperturbed. 'Serves you right as far as I'm concerned. You were drinking illegally anyway; everyone knows you're not eighteen.'

'Who gives a shit? They're happy enough to turn a blind eye on my age to let me fight, so as if Command's going to care if I have a few beers. The only person to mention my age so far is you and seeing as I can't see any bloody pips on your shoulder, you can take your opinion and fuck off.'

'Whoa, settle petal,' said Neville holding his hands up in mock submission. He seemed to take the hint though, as he was quiet for a few minutes before changing subject. 'Check out the watch on that one,' he said, pointing out a gold timepiece on a wrist sticking out of the press of bodies to their right. 'I think that's a bloody Rolex!'

Neville dropped his rifle to hang by its sling and walked closer for a better look. 'Fuck yeah! I knew it,' he said, and started to pry the gold linked band off the grey emaciated wrist it occupied.

'Just leave it, Nev,' said Jai. 'Why would you want to wear something that's been on one of those things? You'll never get the stink off.'

'I'll have a better chance of getting plague stench off the watch than you'll have removing the smell of vomit from your boots, kid. Why don't you take your own advice, and keep your nose out of my business?'

'Whatever,' said Jai, starting to turn away.

Suddenly the hand attached to the watch clamped upon Neville's fingers, yanking him off balance and toward an open mouth in the wall of bodies. He screamed in terror, desperately trying to pull free, but the Carrier held fast. Jai shoved the end of his rifle against the ghoul's head and fired, blasting half the creature's skull free. Neville fell back to the ground, cradling his arm against his chest. Blood spurted rhythmically from a bite wound on his wrist, soaking his camouflage uniform in bright scarlet.

Jai grabbed the tourniquet built into the army combat uniform's upper arm and wrenched it tight, cutting off the blood supply to Neville's wrist.

'For fucks sake, Nev; I told you to leave it alone!' said Jai as he pulled him to his feet. 'We need to get you to the medics, can you run?'

Neville nodded mutely, his face pale as he risked a glance at the wound.

Jai grabbed hold of his squad mate's uninjured arm and started running him back to the Fort.

Jai swung the door open to the medical clinic, the handle bouncing off the wall behind with a dull thud. Harry looked up from where he crouched over another of his patients. His time spent as a doctor in the army wasn't agreeing with him; the few streaks of salt and pepper in his hair had become its dominant feature, matching a face perpetually drawn and pale.

'Not another one, surely?' he said on sight of Jai. 'What the fuck's wrong with you guys? The battle's won yesterday, and yet *now* everyone's getting bitten.'

'Have there been others?' asked Jai as he helped Neville across to a stretcher.

'Take a look around,' Harry said, leaning down to inspect Neville's wound. 'Your friend here makes five this morning.'

Jai's gaze skipped about the room, noticing for the first time that the patients occupying the other beds were manacled to their frames by leg and arm. None were moving, and Jai noted each had blood leaking from a neat hole above their ear. 'Shit, are they all...' Jai stopped abruptly as he saw Harry scowling at him from behind Neville's back. Once he'd stopped speaking, Harry directed his attention back to his newest patient.

'Right mate, I'm going to give you an injection to help with the pain, then I'll give that bite a wash out, yeah?'

Neville nodded, his eyes wide as he watched Harry draw a viscous white drug into a syringe and screw on a needle.

'Don't worry, you'll like this stuff. You ever hear of the drug that Michael Jackson loved so much, Propofol? Well this is going to give you the best dreams you've had, mate, you'll wake up with your wrist good as gold.'

Neville's features relaxed slightly at Harry's words and he turned his arm over willingly. The veins on the inside of his elbow were obvious enough for Harry to access without a tourniquet. He stuck the syringe's needle into the vein and injected the medication. Neville's head slumped back on the mattress, his eyes open but sightless.

'Is that true? About cleaning the wound up and him being all right?' asked Jai, a faint note of hope entering his voice.

Harry sighed as he moved back across the room and picked up a cordless drill flecked with old blood. 'No, it's just bullshit I say to help calm them down. Seems a bit mean to have them scared during their last minutes. He'll die from his wound, just like every other soldier in this room; nothing I can do to change that outcome.'

Jai unconsciously backed away as he approached, drill in hand toward the unconscious soldier's body. Harry's face dropped at Jai's look of horror as he realised what was about to happen.

'You can step outside if you want. The next part isn't pleasant,' Harry said quietly.

'Nah, mate, I'll stay,' said Jai. 'Wouldn't be much of a friend to throw a job like this at you and walk out again.'

Harry gave him a sad smile of appreciation, then pulled on a clear face shield and continued. He placed the end of a centimetre-wide drill bit against the thin section of skull above Neville's ear, took a deep breath and depressed the drill's 'on' button. The drill bit shredded through the thin layer of soft tissue, biting into the bone below. Droplets of blood flicked outwards in a fine spray, appearing on Harry's face shield in tiny crimson droplets. The drill changed tempo as the skull was breached and the bit dived into the enclosed brain. Harry changed direction with the drill a few times, mashing the delicate neural tissue like he was using a cocktail mixer before switching it off and pulling the murderous implement free.

Harry rested the tool on the bed and gently closed Neville's eyelids. His own eyes were glassy as he came and sat in a chair next to Jai at the edge of the room.

'I don't know how much more of this shit I can take,' Harry said. 'This isn't medicine. I feel like I'm working in an abattoir, slaughtering men in my care like sheep.'

Jai compulsively swallowed, his mouth dry of spit. Since he'd viewed what Harry had been ordered to do, he couldn't see the job as anything but that of an executioner. Even his clothes seemed to fit the bill now; his white smock turned into a Jackson Pollack of blood spray from the different soldiers he'd euthanized.

'If I keep on doing this job much longer, I'll wind up adding my own body to the butcher's bill.'

'Don't say shit like that, Harry. We've just got to find a way for you to get off this duty. Is there anything in the medical field that you could request

transfer to?’

‘Maybe. Once the town’s cleared out, a research lab’s getting set up to continue work on finding a cure. I did an undergrad degree in science before transferring into medicine ages ago, so they might let me work there. All depends on the availability of another doctor to take over my current position.’

‘I’ll speak to Mark, maybe he can put in a word for you at Command?’ suggested Jai. The last thing he wanted to see was another of his mates dead, especially by their own hand if he could do anything to prevent it. ‘I’ve got to get back to the squad, but make sure you find Steph, me and Mark tonight ok? You need to spend some time with friends and away from this clinic I reckon.’

Harry nodded wearily in agreement as Jai reluctantly walked back out the door.

Chapter Twenty-One

‘This is the last one on our list. Once we’ve cleared it, we’ll join up with the squad and head back to base,’ said Nate, folding up a map of the town with their search zone marked out on it.

Steph rolled her shoulders to loosen the muscles as she looked at the house in question from the street. It looked deserted, although they’d found that a poor indicator of Carrier presence on numerous occasions. The past two weeks had seen a systematic clearance of all properties on the peninsula. The army had constructed a temporary fence across the neck that joined Queenscliff to the mainland while eradicating the plague behind it.

For clearance work, each platoon had been split into three detachments of ten soldiers led by a Corporal. To avoid accusations of favouritism or conflict of interest, Mark had placed Steph in a detachment separate to the one he oversaw during the clearance work. Although their relationship had quickly become common knowledge amongst the troops, it surprisingly hadn’t drawn the ire of Command. Relationships were usually strictly frowned upon between officers and those under their leadership, but as in many areas since the plague had altered the country, enforcement of this rule had slipped as well. Mark had however, been quietly warned that if the slightest issue was noted in performance or morale within his platoon, that Steph would be transferred into a different squad.

Nate glanced around the soldiers in his detachment. ‘Everyone ready? Let’s get this shit over and done with.’ There was no need to cover each exit, as the bloodthirsty freaks were guaranteed to move toward any noise they heard. The soldiers fell in behind him as he approached the front door.

Nate tried the handle. Locked. He waved forward one of the men holding a heavy door breaker, the modern equivalent of a small battering ram commonly used by police. The soldier swung the flat end of the pole against the edge of the door. The lock smashed free of the frame allowing the door to crash open.

‘If anyone’s home, they certainly know we’re here now,’ thought Steph as she moved inside. The group split off into pairs to check each room systematically. Steph’s rifle was at her shoulder, ready for any movement while her partner checked each cupboard in the bedroom they entered. Nothing more interesting than a nest of mice was located by any of the pairs.

Nate did a brief recon about the house and yard to ensure they hadn't missed a small gardening shed or any other place that could hold a Carrier. 'We're all done,' he said, a broad smile cracking his face as he rounded the corner again. 'Nothing else here. We might as well join one of the other detachments and help them finish off.'

Nate's radio buzzed to indicate an incoming call. As he listened, Steph saw the colour drop from his face and felt her own pulse jump as she waited to hear if it was bad news. 'Ok, we'll head back to base ASAP. Look after him, yeah? Out,' said Nate, signing off from the communication.

Steph touched his elbow, 'What's going on? Anybody we know hurt?'

Nate eventually met her gaze, clearly uncomfortable at the information he was about to deliver. 'It's Mark; he got bitten. They're rushing him to base as we speak.'

Steph felt the ground tilt at the news, and threw out a hand against the house's wall to steady herself. It couldn't be real, surely? The spark that had so recently caught between them was the only joy she'd had since the plague had broken. No. She wouldn't believe it until she'd seen him with her own eyes.

'It must be some sort of mix up. Mark's not stupid enough to let himself get bitten on a bloody house clearance,' she said as she stood straight once more. Nate opened his mouth to say something, but stopped, evidently choosing to alter his words.

'Yeah, you're probably right. He's harder to kill than that. Either way, we should get back to base,' he said, a sad expression conveying a lack of belief in his own words as he watched Steph make for their transport.

As Steph approached the medical clinic, she dug fingernails into the palm of her hand, trying to distract her thoughts with pain. Despite her earlier words, she knew it was delusional to think the message had been a mistake, but she wasn't ready to face the reality. Jai was waiting outside for her.

'Is it true?' she asked, words tumbling out in a rush.

Jai's face was pale and drawn, a nervous tic twitched at a lower eyelid. 'He got bitten, but Harry reckons there might be a slim chance.'

Steph left Jai outside and entered the clinic, shoving the door roughly aside in her haste to enter. Harry was inside talking quietly with Vinh who

looked as anxious at his officer's injury as Jai.

'Harry, Jai said he might have a chance? Is it really possible?' she asked, brusquely interrupting their conversation.

Harry eyed her warily, obviously uneasy to give weight to such an unlikely event. 'Maybe,' he said. 'But time's the only thing that will give us a clear answer.'

'What happened? No one's survived a bite before, why should Mark be any different?'

'If he does make it though, the credit will sit firmly on his own shoulders. All I've done is give him a place to lie down while we wait on the outcome. Mark's awake in the next room. It's probably best to hear the story from him – he's been asking for you,' Harry said, pointing to a doorway in the far wall.

Steph followed his direction and walked toward the room. Pausing at the doorway for a moment, she took a deep breath and forced herself to enter. Steph felt tears well up as she saw him on the hospital trolley. He was lying on his back spread-eagled, each limb manacled to the bedframe. The handcuffs bit deeply into each ankle and wrist, eliminating any chance of movement.

'Jesus, Mark. Do the restraints need to be so tight? They must be hurting like hell,' she said softly as she sat on the edge of his bed, before leaning forward and kissing his lips.

'It's alright. I'd rather be a little uncomfortable for a few hours than put Harry's life at risk if the virus takes hold.'

'What happened? Where did you get bitten?' she asked.

Mark glanced towards his left hand. 'My little finger, it...'

'No,' interrupted Steph, 'tell me from the start, I need to understand properly how it happened.'

Mark met her gaze, saw her tears and nodded.

'All right, I'll walk you through.'

Mark pulled on a set of leather gloves as he walked up to the doorway, it was the second last house on their list and he was eager to get the search completed. Most units had been issued with reinforced clothing during the previous days to lessen the chance of a bite penetration, and although he was

glad of the added protection, he hated his trigger finger not having skin contact with the weapon.

The soldier he'd sent to check in each window for Carriers had returned without a sighting. Mark reached out a hand and pushed the front door open. A musty smell of damp and mould seeped outwards. A leak had allowed water into the roof space, and the ceiling of the hallway ahead was covered in a thick speckling of green and black mould. Mark stepped through the doorway and felt the carpet squelch wetly underfoot. He grimaced at the smell, almost tasting it at the back of his throat and turned to his team.

'Pair up. Mitchell, you're with me,' Mark said, hooking his finger at an eighteen-year-old. 'Same as usual, guys; take your time and stay safe. No prizes for coming out the other end first.'

Mark waited at the front door as his team peeled off and entered the property. On hearing no immediate issues from the rooms the different pairs had entered, he commenced clearing a room with Mitchell, throwing open the door to the adjacent master bedroom.

Silence.

Under Mark's cover, Mitchell walked into the room with his rifle up, scanning left and right. Most of the space was taken up by an ensemble king bed. Its covers were fouled with animal droppings and Mark's nostrils flared at a strong tang of stale urine emanating from a possum nest amongst the pillows. Built in wardrobes filled the entire length of wall opposite the bed, two doors partially open.

'Check the cupboards, then we're done,' Mark said.

Mitchell nodded curtly then stepped forward to give the doors of the wardrobe a brief rap with his knuckles to focus the attention of any Carrier hidden within. A scrabbling sound caused him to jump slightly. He looked over his shoulder at Mark to ensure he was prepared, then opened the door and stepped backward, quickly raising his rifle.

Long dresses filled the space, stretching from the hangers to a series of shoes at the base of the cupboard. Something caused one of the dresses to move, and Mitchell let loose a spray of bullets in fright. A terrified possum leapt from the cupboard, bolting past both of them and out the bedroom door. Mitchell turned his back on the closet door, his face holding a sheepish grin.

'Sorry Boss, thought for a sec it was something bigger,' he said.

'No matter, let's move to the next...Shit! Get down!' shouted Mark.

A Carrier erupted from behind the clothes, latching onto Mitchell before

he could follow Mark's instructions. A woman with lank, dirty hair grabbed hold of his shoulders, driving him down to his knees and then face first onto the ground. Mark followed her movement with his rifle but was hamstrung. Every shot at the ghoul's head risked killing or seriously injuring his own soldier at the same time. Mitchell flailed on the ground, trying to escape the corpse that pinned his body. As the Carrier leant forward, teeth bared to rip a chunk of flesh from his young charge's neck, Mark dropped his rifle to hang from its sling and dove forward.

'Back up needed!' yelled Mark as he grabbed hold of the ghoul's head from behind. He could hear steps thundering in their direction as the rest of the detachment zeroed in on the noise coming from their room.

The flesh on the Carrier's head tore under his fingers as it jerked forward in his grip, snapping at the warm skin so close to its mouth. Mark's right hand slipped forward, gaining purchase by driving his index and middle finger deep into an eye socket, puncturing the globe. His left hand slipped as he changed grip on the frenzied beast beneath him, his little finger accidentally entering the corner of the Carrier's mouth. Its teeth immediately clamped down hard, crushing his finger.

'Arrgh!!' screamed Mark, trying to wrench his hand free. The Carrier whipped its head back and forth, and Mark felt a tooth penetrate the leather to the skin beneath.

Finally, someone arrived; a captive-pin gun was rammed into the side of the Carrier's skull and fired. The ghoul went limp, releasing Mark's finger. Mitchell shoved aside the corpse and got to his feet.

'Fuck, that was a close one,' he said, the stupid grin of death avoided fading at the expression on his officer's face.

Mark ripped off his glove to check his little finger. A slight defect was torn through the skin below the nail, and a small drop of blood welled as he inspected the wound. Without another thought he drew his combat knife, extended his little finger and rested it on the window ledge, then chopped down hard, severing the digit cleanly at the base. Mark sheathed the knife, allowing the stump to bleed freely for a few moments before finally stopping the haemorrhage with direct pressure. Unable to think of anything more he could do to decrease the chance of infection, he looked back to Mitchell to check his condition. His stump burned fiercely, but for some reason it didn't distress him, as the amputation gave him the faintest hope that he might survive.

‘Any bites?’ his voice strangely matter of fact, considering he’d just sliced off his own finger without a word. Mitchell stared at him, mouth open like a stunned fish before he finally generated some words.

‘No, I think I’m good,’ he said as his hands ran over his neck and shoulders, checking for wounds that he may have missed.

‘I’ve got to head back to base. Vinh,’ he said, looking up at his Sergeant that had entered the room to see Mark’s finger lying on the damp carpet. ‘You’ve got command for the rest of the search.’

‘Nah, we’re done here. Place is clear – our priority’s getting you back to the clinic to get that injury washed out,’ he answered, pointing to his officer’s finger stump.

Mark’s eyes focused on Steph as he finished recounting the bite injury.

‘Vinh applied a field dressing, and then raced me here. Harry’s given it a good clean, removed the last of the bone at the base of the finger and sewn up the stump. He reckons that as the wound didn’t involve any larger vessels and was removed so quickly, there’s a small chance I may have stopped the virus entering the rest of my body.’

Steph picked up his injured hand and gently touched the dressing where his finger used to be. ‘I still can’t believe you had to chop your own finger off,’ she said quietly.

‘I’d say the cure was cheaply bought if it works,’ said Mark with a short hard laugh before his face dropped once more, all humour removed. ‘I feel like I’ve been walking in a daze since Milton. For much of it I didn’t give two damns whether I lived; but not anymore. I’ll be fucked if some dead shit’s going to take me out before I’m ready.’ Mark clasped her fingers in his own as he spoke. ‘I’ve only just got hold of you, and I’m not letting go just yet, ok?’

Steph nodded, not trusting herself to speak as tears ran unashamedly down her cheeks.

‘Sorry to interrupt, guys,’ said Harry from the doorway. ‘But I reckon it might be time to move out, Steph. We’ll know the outcome by morning.’

Anger flashed in Steph’s eyes as she rounded on the doctor. ‘I’m not going anywhere,’ she said, her voice shaking.

Mark gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze. ‘It might be for the best.

Whenever I think of Georgie, all I can picture is what she looked like after the virus took hold. If it comes to pass – I don't want you stuck with such a memory.'

'Geez you're a difficult bastard to love, Mark,' she said, giving in. 'You better fight this thing and win, ok? Because I won't forgive you if you've taken away the last few hours we could have had.' She leant down, gave Mark a kiss, and then walked out of the room without a backward glance.

Steph woke with a start, her heart hammering. A weak shaft of morning light fell on her bunk from one of the dorm windows. She checked her watch and was horrified to see she'd made a mistake when setting her alarm, sleeping later than she'd planned. Her head ached from the shots of whiskey she'd downed to make herself sleep the night before. Steph climbed out of bed, hurriedly ditching the tracksuit she'd slept in for a clean uniform, then darted over to Jai's bunk and gave him a shove.

'We've bloody overslept! Are you coming to the clinic with me?'

Jai squinted up at her, still half asleep. 'What? Oh shit, yeah, of course I'm coming. Just give me a sec,' he said, clumsily dressing in the clothes he'd ditched on his bed the night before. 'What time is it?'

'Six o'clock, we should have been there half an hour ago. You can catch up, I'm going,' she said, losing patience and leaving the dorm. Jai pulled on his boots and with the laces flapping undone, ran after her.

As the clinic came within sight, Steph found her pace slowing. Her gut was in turmoil, the sour feeling of last night's whiskey compounded by the fear of what she'd find. She paused at the door, her hand resting on the handle without turning it.

'Come on, Steph. It'll be all right,' said Jai, resting a hand on her shoulder.

She took a deep breath, turned the handle and walked inside. Harry was there, holding a few vials of blood as he turned around. As their eyes met, Harry cracked a smile, and for the first time since she'd walked out the night before, Steph dared to hope.

'Is he still himself?' she asked, finding it difficult to get enough air in her chest to speak.

Harry gave a small nod as his smile broadened. 'I've taken some blood

off him to culture for the virus, but that's really just to keep Command happy before they allow him back around other troops. The ruthless bastard must have got the finger off in time.'

Steph gave him a quick hug before darting into the next room. Mark was sitting up in bed without restraints, munching on a bit of toast. Seeing his girlfriend enter, he ditched the food, stood up and gave her a bone cracking hug and kiss.

'All right, save it for later!' Jai said. 'It's not like you're running out of time now, eh?'

Mark broke away from the kiss, a broad smile on his face as he freed one arm to shake Jai's hand. 'Good to be back, mate,' he said while still holding Steph against his chest with the other arm.

'So how do you like Harry's handiwork?' Mark said, holding up his left hand. The dressing was off, exposing a neat suture line over the knuckle of his little finger. The margins of the surgical wound were clean and free of any inflammation or pus. 'Never thought I'd have been so happy to lose a part of my body,' he said smiling ruefully.

'You did the main work, mate, I just tidied it up a little,' said Harry. 'The culture report should be back by mid-morning, so you can clear out after that. Good thing really, because I'm going to be busy as hell processing the refugees landing from King Island.'

'That's where Erin went,' said Jai. 'Why are they moving them all here?'

'I've only found out this morning that the camp was overrun two weeks ago. The survivors have been on board a Navy Frigate awaiting the town to be cleared of Carriers before relocating the camp to here.' At the look of worry on Jai's face, he continued quickly. 'There's no list of names yet, mate, but as soon as I find Erin, I'll send word. She's a tough kid, she'll have made it though.'

His words didn't seem to make Jai look any more confident. 'How the fuck did an island in the middle of Bass Strait get hit by the plague? Here's me thinking I was getting her somewhere safe when she would have been better off with us.' Jai stood up and started pacing. 'Sorry guys, I've got to go and find something to distract myself. Harry – as soon as you hear, ok?'

'You have my word, mate.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

Erin breathed deeply, savouring the clean air and warm sun on her face. She was standing on the deck of a yacht in transit to Queenscliff wharf from the Frigate. While on the Navy ship with the rest of the survivors, she'd been confined to crowded sleeping quarters outside of meal times. She accepted that their movement had been restricted to prevent interference in the safe running of the vessel, but having so little access to natural light had been tough on everyone.

The channel to access Queenscliff wharf had been cleared of sunken debris allowing smooth entry from the bay. Those boats at dock which were still above the waterline, were used by the Navy to speed up the transfer of passengers to shore. At any other time in her past she would have been in awe at the sleek lines and wooden deck of the yacht underfoot as it motored smoothly across Port Phillip Bay; but not today. This morning, all she wanted was to have firm land under foot again. She'd decided that the ocean was definitely not for her, and although the seasickness that had made her first three days a misery had passed, a constant unease remained in her gut.

The side of the yacht thudded dully against the rubber edging of the wharf causing Erin to stumble briefly. Two sailors jumped off to secure the bow and stern before fitting a short ramp to the edge of the boat. The passengers on deck shuffled forward, each keen to dismount. While she waited her turn, Erin scanned the shore for danger out of habit. Near constant vigilance against the plague was one of the key factors that had kept her and Jai alive until they'd joined Mark and Harry's group. The wharf showed signs of earlier trauma. Fire damaged piers stood out from the shore like long black pencils balanced on end. On shore, army personnel awaited the arrivals, directing them toward the ferry terminal for processing.

Erin followed the rest from her boat into the ferry terminal where each arrival's name was checked off a list before being corralled into the next holding room. Her heart jumped with excitement as she spotted Harry off to the side, stethoscope hung about his neck as he examined those arrivals experiencing injury or illness. His current patient was Lieutenant Bourke, who had submitted to having his bullet wound assessed, his navy shirt shrugged free of his left shoulder to expose the area. Every minute or two, Harry's gaze would distractedly break away from his work to scout the line

of arrivals. As Erin moved forward, his eyes skittered over her and down the line, then suddenly back to her again. A broad grin cracked across his face as he recognised her and raised an arm in greeting.

Harry waited until her name had been checked off at the front of the line, then called her over.

‘I didn’t recognise you for a second there, you must have put on half a foot of height since I last saw you!’ he said.

Erin returned his smile as she glanced down at herself, realising that she probably did look a little different. The clothes that she’d been issued at Jindabyne had gone from being large and baggy, to a snug fit as her body had stretched in height and filled out at hips and chest over the intervening months.

‘Your brother is going to be one relieved guy once he hears of your arrival,’ Harry added.

Erin’s heart skipped a beat at the news of her brother. ‘You mean Jai’s here as well?’

‘Yeah, the whole crew’s here. Everyone’s doing ok as well,’ he added. ‘We only got wind of what happened on King Island in the last few days, and without a list of survivors to know what happened to you... well let’s just say – it’s been an anxious wait.’

‘You two know each other then,’ interrupted Bourke as he buttoned up his shirt awkwardly with one hand.

‘Yep, Harry was part of the group that my brother and I joined after the plague broke,’ said Erin. ‘He fixed up my leg after some psycho farmer shot me, and then we just stayed on.’

‘Well, from the short time I’ve known her, she’s a tough kid,’ Bourke said. ‘Doesn’t surprise me that she bounced back quick enough from that injury.’

‘It wasn’t as bad as it sounded, the bullet had ricocheted, so it was only a shallow wound,’ Erin said, deflecting the compliment. ‘Lieutenant Bourke helped me out with some trouble I had in the camp.’

Harry’s expression immediately became concerned as he searched her face for more information. ‘Are you alright, did anything happen to you?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine, I’ll fill you in later.’

Harry nodded and turned back to Bourke.

‘Whatever you did, thanks for helping her out.’

‘I didn’t do much; Erin won her own battle. The bastard in question

won't be causing any further trouble though,' said Bourke, indicating with a brief turn of his head a man being walked past. 'My shoulder wound was courtesy of him as well.'

The three watched as Jeremy was led to the back of an army vehicle. His wrists were manacled as he limped heavily, staring resolutely ahead to avoid eye contact as the people surrounding muttered obscenities at him. He'd regained consciousness not long after being loaded onto the Frigate at King Island to find himself under arrest. The terminal head injury that Erin had prayed for, had unfortunately turned out to be little more than a concussion.

'What'll they do with him now?' asked Harry.

'He's already been found guilty on one count of murder, and another of attempted murder. No sentence has been pronounced, but the Navy want to see him made an example. Personally, I want to see the fucker shot,' Bourke said, anger clouding his features as he watched Jeremy get shoved into the back of the waiting vehicle. 'The Fort's cells will house him in the meantime until a decision's made.'

'Sounds like you've got one hell of a story to tell us later,' said Harry with one eyebrow raised as he looked at Erin. 'Look, I better get back to work. You're headed to one of the larger hotel complexes in town to await housing allocation. I've promised Jai I'd call as soon as I found you, so I'll let him know to go there, ok?'

Before he could move away, Erin gave him a big hug that Harry returned with one arm about her shoulders. 'It's so good to see you again, Harry. I can't wait to see everyone. Make sure Jai doesn't take too long to come and find me.'

Harry just chuckled. 'No fear of that I reckon.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jai changed the bag he was carrying to his other hand as he looked sideways at his sister.

‘I still can’t believe how different you look, Sis. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with hair that long before.’

‘Yeah good one, Jai, because my hair’s the main thing that’s changed!’ Erin said, rolling her eyes at her brother with a grin.

‘Well you don’t look like my “kid” sister anymore; I’ll give you that. I just can’t get over how good it is to see you again and know you’re all right.’

Erin stopped her brother and gave him a hug. ‘I missed you heaps when I was over there. As much as that bloody camp sucked, the worst thing was not knowing if you were safe or not. If you died, that would be all my family gone. I don’t know what I’d do if that was the case,’ she said.

Jai gave her shoulder a squeeze. ‘You’d keep fighting, that’s what; but that’s not happening any time soon.’ Jai stepped away and slung the bag over his left shoulder with a grunt. ‘What the hell’s in this bag? I wouldn’t have thought you’d have much stuff after bolting from that camp. Weighs like a ton of bricks.’

‘Come on army boy, it’s not that heavy. I thought you’d be tougher than that now,’ she answered. Jai gave her a withering look that only made his sister’s smile broader. ‘It’s mostly cans. I got handed my food rations for the next two weeks seeing as they’re letting me move in with you guys.’

‘No wonder it’s so bloody lumpy then,’ muttered Jai under his breath. ‘Not far to go at least. We’re up around the next corner.’

Erin felt a tiny spurt of excitement at the thought of seeing everyone again. She looked about them as they walked, her pace quickening with desire to reach their destination. A park was on the left of the road and ahead she could see a tall, red brick wall of the Fort. The ground before it still showed scars from the battle fought, and although the corpses had been buried and ground levelled once more, not a blade of grass sprouted from the diseased earth. Noticeable cracks branched through the brickwork, extending like webs from where the IEDs had been detonated.

‘Is that the army base?’ she asked, suppressing a shudder at the thought of a battle capable of causing such changes to the landscape.

‘Yep, but we won’t be staying there tonight. Most of the platoons have

been allowed off site now that Queenscliff's been cleared, although we're all still clustered up this end of town. Our platoon is housed along this block,' said Jai turning the street corner. 'Each house has four or five people from the squad, and I can tell you, it is so much better than being in the shitty dorms of the fort.'

Jai nudged open a waist high gate to a simple weatherboard house nestled behind an overgrown front garden. 'This is our place. I've already sorted out a room for you, so you won't have to do much other than dump your bag and settle in.'

As they stepped onto the porch, the front door swung open. 'What took you so bloody long, Jai? I've been waiting an hour for both of you to arrive!' said Steph as she gave Erin a welcoming hug. 'So good to see you honey,' she said quietly into her ear before stepping back again. 'Come on in. Lunch is nearly ready, so I hope you're hungry!'

Erin's nose wrinkled in pleasure at a waft of cooking food. 'I can't wait, that smells awesome!' she said.

The three moved through the doorway inside. Just as the door was about closed, a hand gripped the edge. 'Wait up, guys,' Harry said, slipping through the crack behind them.

Jai dumped her bag into her new bedroom off one side of the hallway, then Erin followed the smell of cooking meat to the back of the house. The hallway terminated at a large open planned kitchen and family room. Floor to ceiling windows on the far wall showed a garden which had reverted to wildness. Mark was standing at the bench mashing some potatoes when he looked up and saw Erin. He flashed a smile and welcomed her before declaring the meal nearly ready to serve.

Erin found herself slightly overwhelmed, feeling truly safe and being surrounded by people that obviously loved her for the first time in months left her strangely emotional, and as she pulled back a chair from the table to sit, she found she had to blink away tears for a moment.

A warm hand clasped her shoulder gently. 'You ok?' asked Steph in a soft voice that didn't carry to the others who were joking loudly in the kitchen.

Erin smiled as she wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. 'Yeah, I'm really happy. I don't know why I'm crying. Just standing here and seeing everyone, it's just got me... I don't know, Steph,' she said, giving up trying to explain herself with a shrug of her shoulders.

‘Relief’s a funny thing, eh? When Jai and I found Mark here after being deployed, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry,’ Steph said.

Oblivious to their conversation, Mark placed a bottle of red wine on the table along with a few glasses. ‘Is this a jackpot or what?’ he said indicating the bottle. ‘I found two-dozen of them in our bedroom cupboard. You want a glass, Erin?’ he asked.

Erin looked uncertain. ‘I don’t know. I’m only thirteen, I don’t think I’m supposed to.’

‘Sorry, I keep forgetting; but you’re a thirteen-year-old that’s survived more than most adults. As a one off, I’ll give you a half glass seeing as it’s a special occasion. No need to drink it if you don’t want though, ok?’ he said.

Erin accepted with a small smile, taking the stemmed glass from Mark and placing it carefully on the table. Jai came and handed her a plate.

‘It’s ready to go, come over and load your plate up,’ he said.

The spread of food on the island bench of the kitchen was better than she’d seen since before the plague. Mashed potato, green beans, carrots and broccoli had steam rising from them. A joint of canned meat had been broken apart and stewed in homemade gravy until it fell apart at the touch of a fork. Erin felt her mouth flood with saliva at the sight and smell.

‘The garden had a raised bed full of veggies on the back fence. We’ve been working our way through them over the past week - I never thought I would enjoy fresh greens so much!’ said Jai as he heaped his plate with food.

Before long, everyone was seated at the table. With such a meal before them, little was said until plates were cleared, and hunger sated. Harry emitted an enormous belch from the end of the table that reverberated back off the walls.

‘My compliments to the chef,’ he said somewhat sheepishly.

‘Wouldn’t expect anything less from someone of your significant class and style, mate,’ Mark said, grinning at Harry’s embarrassment. ‘I hear you may have some good news to share?’ he said next, looking expectantly at the doctor.

Harry smiled, his discomfort instantly forgotten. ‘Damn right. My transfer’s been approved to start working at the research facility next week. I think I have you to thank for that if I’m not wrong?’ he said to Mark. ‘I seriously owe you, I don’t know how much longer I could have kept going in the clinic.’

‘Nah mate, I only supported your request. The opinion of a bottom

ranked officer wouldn't have swayed any decision. I reckon you were just lucky that the Navy was able to supply one of their doctors for a rotation onto land.'

'Well either way, I'm just glad to be out for a while.'

Mark turned his focus to Erin, watching her quietly for a moment as she finished her meal, oblivious to the attention. She took a tentative first sip from the wine, pulling a face at the taste before setting her glass down.

'You'll like it one day, although probably better you think it tastes like vinegar for a while yet,' Mark said with a half-smile. His smile failed as he looked like he was debating how to continue. 'Some stories have started to leak out about what happened leading up to and during the attack on the camp. Sounded pretty shit to say the least. I still can't help but think we're not getting the whole truth yet; too many people trying to cover their own arses.' He paused for a moment, waiting for Erin to meet his gaze. 'What really happened?'

Erin looked down and stared at her plate for a few moments while she pushed the last few morsels of food around in the gravy, acutely aware she was now the focus of everyone's attention. Abruptly she stopped and pushed her plate further into the table.

'We got screwed by the Tasmanian government, by the Navy guards and in the end by the bloody Carriers that walked ashore. So yeah, it kind of sucked,' she said, looking at no one in particular as she started. Everyone remained quiet, waiting. Erin continued, recapping her experiences at the hands of the guards and then the wretched debacle once the plague landed in the camp, deliberately keeping her emotions under wraps by describing what had happened as if it involved an entirely different person. And strangely, that was how it felt to her. Surrounded by her surrogate family, Erin found herself wanting to just be a kid again, no matter that it was nothing but an illusion in the current world where death didn't give two shits if you were a child, woman or baby – it would tear your throat out and lap up the blood just the same.

As Erin finished describing Jeremy's attempt on her life and the closing moments before marine support had arrived, she looked up at her friends and brother, her eyes dry. She felt lighter after the telling, like she had shrugged off a heavy weight that had been grasping at her core and was surprised to see silent tears falling from Steph's eyes, while her brother looked equally distressed. He stood up and came around to her, resting both hands on her

shoulders.

‘I’m so sorry that happened to you, if I could somehow take it away, I would in a heartbeat,’ he said, voice rough as he sought to keep it under control. ‘I thought I was getting you away from danger, not sending you to a different type of bloody animal, Sis.’

Erin looked up at her brother. ‘It’s not your fault. Just like it wasn’t my fault, or something that my friend Rachael caused. The only person that’s responsible for what Jeremy did is the sick bastard himself – and the prick’s going to rot in jail or eat a bullet; hopefully the latter. As far as I’m concerned, it’s over.’

She gave her brother’s hand a quick squeeze to reassure him that she was ok, then pushed back from the table. The telling of her story had left her feeling relieved but tired, and combined with a stomach full of good food, all she wanted to do now was sleep. She excused herself and went to find her room. Her brother had already made up the bed, stuffing her sleeping back into a doona cover ready for use. She slipped off her shoes and jacket, then crawled underneath. Within moments, her breathing slowed, and she fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The sun peeked over the horizon, making dew sparkle upon overgrown lawns as Harry walked to his first shift in the new research facility. The site had been up and running now for over a week, given priority status by the army and government to the point that equipment had arrived even before the town was cleared of the plague.

The noise of barking dogs grew louder as Harry turned a street corner and approached the local pound. Live subjects were required to study the virus, and the pre-existing pens and cages of the council premises was the most suitable place to contain the animals. An electric whirring noise gained Harry's attention, and he glanced up to find an automated camera tracking his movement toward the entrance. High cyclone fencing surrounded the complex, topped with coils of razor wire – a recent addition courtesy of the army. A squat building of dun coloured brick interrupted the fence, providing access to the facility through a reinforced door.

'Stop there.'

Harry pulled up abruptly at the command, noticing for the first time a security panel on the wall made up of a speaker, camera and keypad.

'Show your ID card and state name and purpose,' said a disinterested voice.

Harry fished his army ID card from his pocket and held it up for the small camera and announced his details.

There was a pause of a few seconds, 'You're late.'

Harry looked at the speaker incredulously as a buzzer sounded and an electric lock opened, allowing the door to swing back.

'I'd be less bloody late if you'd just let me in,' said Harry under his breath as he walked into a deserted reception area. Whitewashed walls dirtied by three-decade's worth of scuffs and marks reared over a scratched linoleum floor. After a few moments, a distracted looking man emerged from a room to the right. Wire rimmed glasses perched on a thin nose. His shirt was crumpled, like a man who made a habit of sleeping in his clothes.

'Harry is it?' he asked. Not waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel and said over his shoulder, 'Come with me, we've got work to do.'

Harry bit his tongue as he followed, not wanting to get off on the wrong foot with his new colleague. On entering the room, Harry felt his jaw slacken

in surprise at the sheer weight of technology on the premises. Consciously, he closed his mouth to avoid looking like an imbecile.

‘We’re primarily a testing site for vaccines developed in Sydney,’ said the man as he stood at a high bench, filling tiny test tubes from a pipette of blood. He picked up the completed rack of tubes and gently placed them in a centrifuge before setting the machine into action. ‘OK, while that’s on, let’s knock over a quick tour of the place. My name’s Doug,’ he said, extending a limp hand to shake.

Harry accepted the weak gesture as he continued to take in the different machines about the room. Some he recognised from the university laboratory, but that had been nearly a decade ago and most of the technology from that time had been superseded.

‘You’re a doctor I hear,’ Doug said, a slight sneer of contempt lifting the corner of his mouth. ‘My parents wanted me to go into medicine when I was in high school, but I chose science instead. Why aren’t you off *saving lives*, or whatever it is that doctors do?’

‘I’m taking a secondment for a while. Not much I can do for people once they’re bitten at the moment,’ said Harry, determined to ignore Doug’s condescending tone.

‘Have you got any sort of experience? We aren’t cooking up chocolate brownies, you know. This is hard-core stuff. The fate of Australia and the rest of the world rests on the shoulders of scientists like me.’

Harry struggled not to openly laugh. ‘Ah, yeah. I know one end of a microscope from the other if that’s what you mean.’

‘No, it’s not. You’re no use to me if you’re only here to take up space, maybe you should head back up to the meatheads at the Fort,’ said Doug turning away from him as if dismissed.

Harry finally lost patience. ‘Before going into medicine, I completed a science degree with first class honours. So, to answer your question; yes, I know enough to help run the research program here, but that doesn’t involve putting up with self-important bullshit from you. How about you finish showing me around, so I can get to work?’

Doug backed away from him as if he’d been physically attacked, and Harry took some satisfaction from the astonished look on his colleague’s face.

‘F-f-fine,’ stuttered Doug, straightening his shirt and looking anywhere but at Harry. ‘Since you obviously know everything about the equipment in

here from your *Science Degree*, we'll move right along,' he said, recovering his haughty attitude rapidly. 'Follow me, I'll show you to where the test subjects are kept.'

Doug swept out of the room without a backward glance. Harry clenched his jaw in annoyance as he trailed after the man. Just his luck to score a douche for a work mate.

The noise of agitated barking grew in volume as the two men approached the rear of the building. Next to the back door was a single green button that Doug punched with a fingertip, unlocking the latch. He shouldered the door aside and stepped through into a wide shallow room. On the far side of the space was a series of long narrow enclosures, each holding a single dog. The barking escalated to greater ferocity as the canines sighted the men, jumping against the front of their cages with saliva frothing at their jaws. Each of the dogs was large. Harry spotted a few Rottweilers and Alsations, however, the vast majority looked like crossbreeds with a heavy dose of mastiff in their heritage.

'Couldn't you find a few Foxies or Chihuahuas to test?' Harry said, eyeing the sizeable teeth of the Rottweiler opposite.

'Not many dogs that size left, unfortunately,' answered Doug. 'With no owners left to feed them, pets had to hunt to survive. Most little dogs just became a bigger one's lunch. Hence why the canines we've managed to catch have tended to be on the large size. They're the survivors of shit circumstances, and therefore the biggest and meanest by default. I would have preferred primates for the vaccine trials, but a great scientist can make do I suppose.'

'What's with all the excessive salivation? They look bloody rabid.'

Doug gave him a withering look. 'This is a *research site*, you know, for the *Lysan Plague*? They've all been infected with the virus. In dogs it just works a little different to humans. It doesn't kill them; but it does send them mad,' he said, flinching as an Alsatian launched at its cage front, teeth snapping.

'That wire mesh along their pens seems a little fragile, don't you think?' said Harry.

'It was strong enough to hold the pound dogs for the last twenty years, I'm sure it'll be fine for us,' Doug said, picking up a rifle and loading it with a dart. 'I need a sample from subject three,' he said, walking over to stand in front of a huge male Doberman. 'I injected him with a new version of vaccine

yesterday. Let's see how it's performing, shall we?'

Doug raised the rifle and shot a dart into the dog's chest. The sedative worked fast, and within minutes, the animal collapsed. Doug picked up a long wooden broom handle and poked the dog through the wire of the cage. Nothing.

'Looks like it should be safe enough,' he said, a touch of nervousness entering his demeanour as he walked over to a control panel. A sequence of buttons, each labelled with a corresponding cage number was on the panel.

'Now I shouldn't need to warn you, but double check which cage you want to open before touching this panel. If you hit the wrong number, you'll let loose a rabid beast. A single bite from one of these bastards means your death – they may not be dead, but they'll transfer the virus to you just the same.'

Harry nodded, thinking that maybe it would have been safer to install the control panel in a different room to prevent such accidents. Doug activated the release for the Doberman's cage, causing the door to spring open. The dog was still unconscious, tongue lolling from the corner of its mouth. With a practiced hand, he located a vein on the animal's neck, and pierced it with a needle. Dark blood filled the syringe as he drew back on the plunger. Sample gained, Doug withdrew and locked the cage front again.

'And that's how it's done!' he said, holding up the syringe of blood like a prize trophy. A movement from behind Doug drew Harry's attention. The dog had just lurched upward onto unsteady limbs, lips already pulled back in a snarl despite its eyes being barely open.

'Jesus, you cut that fine!' said Harry. 'What if it had taken you a few minutes to find a vein?'

Doug's face had lost all colour at the animal's premature recovery. 'It's not possible,' he said. 'That dose should have laid him out unconscious for an hour or more.'

'Time to shoot them with a bigger dart from here on in then?' said Harry. Doug nodded in mute agreement.

'Anyway, we've got the blood this time at least. Shall we crack on and get the test started?' Harry said.

'Of course, times a-wasting,' said Doug distractedly, his hand holding the blood sample displaying a coarse tremor. 'Oh, there's one last thing. See that break glass fire alarm?'

Harry followed Doug's pointing finger and identified a red alarm button

on the wall next to the room's entrance.

'If you press that we're *all* dead. It's a relic from when the facility was still a pound. Some bleeding heart put in a control that opens all doors in the building along with the dog cages in the case of fire so that the animals wouldn't burn alive. I've been hassling to get it removed since we moved in, but I'm still waiting. So, if this place catches on fire – make a phone call or get a bucket yourself. Just don't press that button. I'd rather this place burn to the ground than let those beasts out.'

Chapter Twenty-Five

‘My dad used to want one of these so badly,’ Jai said, dumping an armful of equipment in the back of the 4WD. ‘Who would have thought six months ago, that all you had to do was live a little longer, and you’d get to pick any car off the street?’

He closed the door and stood back to look at the Land Rover Defender that Mark had acquired for their mission. It was in good condition with five doors, a matt black paint job, and equipment cage on the roof accessible by a step ladder running up the back of the car.

Mark only grunted in reply, barely following Jai’s words as he ran through a last check of his own gear. The monetary value of a car had become irrelevant, the only thing that mattered now was whether or not the vehicle could do the job at hand.

‘Everyone ready?’ he asked, looking up at his two-man crew. Jai and Vinh gave a brief thumbs up. ‘Right, let’s get this over and done with.’

‘Vinh, you can do the honours, mate,’ Mark said, throwing him the car keys as he walked around to the passenger seat and climbed in. Jai swung open the door at the back of the 4WD and sat on one of the small bench seats that folded down from the sidewalls. If there were Carriers at the extraction site, the car would be reversed up to the door and refugees loaded straight into the back to minimise danger.

Vinh twisted the key in the ignition and brought the car to life, the engine launching a deep throated purr despite months of inactivity. He’d spent the previous afternoon servicing the vehicle until he was confident it was in peak condition, as a breakdown in plague-infested areas represented a virtual death sentence these days.

Within minutes they approached the barrier separating Queenscliff’s little peninsula from the rest of the mainland. The army had built a fence across the neck of land where it narrowed to a width of little more than 250 metres. Troops had sunk timber posts deep into the sand, running lines of barbed wire run between them up to shoulder height. The defensive structure was now patrolled twenty-four hours a day, and Mark’s platoon had found themselves frequently assigned to that very duty. The simple barrier had proved effective in stopping Carriers from entering as they invariably got snagged on the wire and trapped. This made killing them relatively easy for

the patrols but disengaging the corpses from the wicked steel barbs was a different matter, tearing deep rents in many a soldier's skin.

Vinh geared down as they neared the barrier, slowing to a crawl. The rest of their platoon was on the fence line for yet another stretch of sentry duty. At their approach, Nate unlocked the padlock holding a tall gate closed across the tarmac and swung it open.

Vinh pulled up as Mark lowered his window to speak. 'How many teams have gone through so far?'

'At least fifteen. They were all off to Ocean Grove and Torquay, so you're the only one headed close to the drop zone,' said Nate, one hand resting on the windowsill of the car. 'Steph's been on edge since she realised where you guys were going this morning. She took off on a patrol with some of the others five minutes ago; probably just pissed that you didn't invite her along for the fun.'

Mark ignored the veiled reference to his relationship. When it came to work – he had to make sure it was a non-event. 'We'll be back soon enough, plenty of time left to make it in and out. See you in a couple of hours, yeah?' said Mark.

'No worries, Boss,' said Nate, stepping back from the car and snapping out a stiff salute. Mark winced at the mark of respect. He still couldn't get used to other soldiers saluting him and he self-consciously returned it as Vinh hit the accelerator, driving them into plague territory.

The road ran ahead, empty of movement under a blue sky. Despite the danger awaiting them, Mark couldn't help but feel his mood lift as Vinh pushed the 4WD toward 100kph. He'd always loved a road trip with mates, eating up the highway with a window down and music blaring. If he didn't have an Austeyr rifle sitting on his lap instead of a beer, he could have almost fooled himself for a few minutes.

The communications team in the Fort had made radio contact with numerous survivors within driving distance over the past month. Up until now, those that were secure behind their own defences had been left alone until extraction posed less risk to all involved. However, a slow ramp up to the inevitable attack on Geelong had necessitated the retrieval of survivors in danger from the army's next explosive move. The numbers of Infected walking the streets of the various small towns in the area needed to be culled before the General would countenance risking any more of his soldiers. Shrapnel producing bombs were largely ineffective, with only small

percentages of Carriers suffering direct brain trauma to kill them for a second time. Incendiary devices were a whole other matter. Set the bastards on fire and they all eventually burnt to dust. Unfortunately, the military had been told to minimise damage to infrastructure within each town, and a fire raging out of control didn't meet that brief. As such, work had begun to lure crowds of the Infected into areas of open pasture where there was less chance of fire spreading to houses.

Leopold was a suburb on the Bellarine peninsula where one such mass immolation was planned. A scout team had left in the small hours of the morning to set up a speaker attractant at the northern end of the suburb, seeking to draw all Carriers in the open to the one location. It was also why Mark had left his trip to the last minute; the longer he waited, the more likely that he'd find empty streets that he could speed through unimpeded, make the pick-up and bolt for home before the air force dropped the first bomb.

Mark tried to block from his imagination what would happen if he got delayed for any reason. He'd seen a MK77 bomb dropped on a stubborn Taliban mountain stronghold in Afghanistan, and it had chilled him to his core. On detonation, fire had exploded a hundred feet in the air before rolling down the slopes like a flood, engulfing everything in searing heat until there was nothing left. He could think of many ways that he didn't want to die, and it still sat up there in his top five. He cracked a private smile at the thought. That he'd seen enough gruesome deaths to form a personal list of which particular ones he didn't want to experience was probably not a healthy thing, and that being burnt alive didn't even make his top three was... not worth thinking about. He was still alive, and that was reason enough for him to feel fortunate compared to the crowds of brain dead scum that now wandered the country.

'I hear this guy we're picking up is some survivalist freak,' said Jai from the back of the 4WD. 'High walls, ammunition store and military rifles or something. Don't see how the guy didn't get done for being a potential terrorist before all this shit happened. I bet the douche creamed himself when the dead rose up and gave his paranoia grounding.'

'And here I was thinking conspiracy theory crackpots were just an American specialty,' said Vinh.

'He'll only be our problem for an hour or so. Whatever weaponry he owns is being left behind. I got told at the briefing that he was pissed off at being extracted. Reckoned he had everything he needed right there and

initially told the radio operator to take his offer and fuck off,' Mark said.

Jai emitted a short bark of laughter. 'I bet his opinion changed pretty quickly when he heard a bomb was about to drop on his doorstep.'

'Fuck, here we go,' muttered Vinh.

Up ahead, Leopold had pulled into view. Mundane blocks of suburbia appeared on either side of the highway. Carriers were on the move, ignoring their car as they stumbled in a southerly direction. A gut roiling scream built in volume the closer they came to town. Mark rolled his window part way down to hear it better. Although Carriers would eventually move toward any large noise to investigate, nothing had proved more effective at pulling a swarm than the noise of a human in agony. A soundtrack of torture was playing at massive volume, undulating screams filling the air over the entire suburb.

'That noise is definitely coming from the south,' said Mark as he closed the window again, wincing at the hideous noise. 'The scout's fucked up bad. They were supposed to leave the speaker at the other end of town.'

'What's the big deal?' said Vinh, shrugging.

'Means we'll be that much closer to the drop site for the bomb. Here's hoping most of the Infected have already made their way to the bait,' said Mark.

'Don't worry about it, Boss. If there's anything less than a swarm, we'll drive straight over them in this car anyway.'

'How much time have we got before the bomb goes off?' asked Jai.

Mark glanced down at his wristwatch. 'We'll be right. There's still a thirty-minute window to get in and out again.' He pulled a digital timer from his shirt pocket and tossed it back to Jai. 'Set it to twenty minutes and keep an eye on it for me. We need to be on our way by the time that goes off or we won't have enough distance between us and the bomb.'

'They're not going to detonate it while we're in the vicinity,' said Vinh. 'What's five minutes' difference going to make?'

'Probably nothing, but seeing as it's not my finger on the switch, I'm not willing to risk them holding off. Life's become a little cheaper of late, I don't think too many people would lose sleep over three more deaths,' Mark said.

He had a paper map unfolded on his lap, tracing their route as Vinh drove. 'Take the next left, then left again. The house should be at the end of the court.'

Vinh followed his instructions, mounting the curb to avoid a cluster of

Infected huddled over a dog's corpse. On taking the second corner, the survivalist's property came into view, appearing more like a compound than a house. Two-metre-high brick walls topped with coils of barbed wire lined his perimeter, broken only by a reinforced sheet metal gate for vehicle access.

'Check out the dogs,' said Jai. 'Looks like they're watching the same house we're after.'

His words broke Mark's concentration on the house to take in the rest of the street. Sure enough, Jai was right. There were at least twenty dogs spread out in a rough semi-circle about thirty metres back from the survivalist's walls. Some lay on the ground, heads resting on paws, while others paced restlessly back and forth. All however, had eyes pinned on his gate, waiting. Each of the animals were strongly built, with the kind of jaws that could rip a body to shreds. Vinh pulled up, completed a three-point turn and reversed up to the gate. The dogs trotted out of the car's way, their attention now split between the gate and extraction crew.

'Somehow I don't think those mutts are pets anymore,' said Vinh as he eyed one particularly large Rottweiler edging toward his door with lips snarled up to expose sharp canines.

'Time for them to learn a little respect, I think,' said Mark.

Vinh nodded, 'I was never much of a dog person anyway,' he said, flicking the safety off on his revolver. He rolled down his window and aimed at the animal.

'Don't kill it!' yelled Jai from the back. 'It's not the animal's fault that his owner's up and died.'

Vinh relented and changed aim slightly, firing a bullet at the concrete to the side of the animal instead. The dog bolted back to the path, tail between its legs in fright. The other animals drew back as well, giving a respectful arc about the car now that they knew the occupants were capable of defending themselves.

'Here's our man,' said Jai, pointing up at the wall. A head had popped over the edge of the brick fence. Strands of sweaty hair clung to a mostly bald scalp, over compensated for with an unkempt beard which covered the man's face from cheek to throat. Fevered eyes scanned the street about them before the head disappeared from view once again.

'Give me a time check, Jai,' called Mark.

'We've got ten minutes.'

'Come on then, what's holding the bastard up?' muttered Mark to

himself.

The gate opened a crack behind the car. 'Here we go,' said Jai as he opened the back of the 4WD in readiness, jumping down onto the street.

The same man they'd seen moments before above the fence emerged onto the street, his clothes a mash up of camouflaged army gear and flannelette. A young woman edged out behind him, fretful eyes skittering about the street before meeting Jai's. The survivalist went to grab hold of her hand as she moved to step around him to the back of the car. The woman snatched her fingers out of his reach as if burned, and then spat full in his face.

'Don't *ever* touch me again, you fucking creep!' she said, her voice shaking with anger as she backed away from him and climbed into the back of the 4WD. The man wiped the spittle from his mouth and flicked it onto the ground.

'Ungrateful bitch!' he shouted back, then ignoring Jai's direction to get in the back with him, he strode forward and let himself into a rear passenger seat.

Mark turned around in his seat to face him. 'You're Calvin Sokolov, right? I didn't know we were picking up a woman as well. Is she your wife?'

Calvin's demeanour had changed now that he was sitting in the car. Despite his grotty clothes and matted beard, he affected a self-important stance, looking down his nose at Mark as he replied.

'Not at all. I wouldn't lower myself to marry a woman like her. She's just what I call a *plague wife*,' he said.

'A what?' asked Mark, clearly confused.

Calvin let out a short chuckle. 'People like you always thought I was mad, the neighbours would complain I was ruining their property prices by setting my place up to survive Armageddon. But look who's laughing in their dead, rotted faces now, eh?' He flicked his eyes briefly towards the woman in the back seat, 'She's just some slut I rescued a few months back. We have a deal going. She services my needs, and I let her stay behind my walls and out of the zombies' reach. But for all the thanks she's shown today, I should have kicked her out long ago.'

Mark recoiled in his seat as he began to understand. 'So, you've threatened to turn her out unless she submits to you?' he said, voice sour with disgust.

'That's a rough way of describing our mutually beneficial arrangement,'

said Calvin, unable to suppress a slight smirk. 'She's always been free to try her luck amongst the Infected, or with the dog pack. But since she chose to stay, she knew what her payment was.'

Mark turned back around, quiet for a moment as he seethed at the man's words. 'Time check, Jai!'

'Five minutes, we need to get going.'

'Not with this sick bastard on board, we're not,' he muttered, stepping out of the vehicle. He opened the rear passenger door, grabbed Calvin by the shirt and ripped him from the car. With a hard shove, he sent him stumbling back to land on his arse.

Calvin scrambled back to his feet before stopping dead as he saw Mark's rifle aimed dead centre of his forehead. 'You can't do this to me!' he screamed. 'It's murder!'

Mark ignored him, climbed back into the front seat and shut his door. The dogs that had maintained a respectful distance while a rifle was present now began to contract inwards on the survivalist, sensing a meal was close at hand.

'Give me a gun at least, these dogs are dangerous!' Calvin's voice cracked. 'The pack's had us trapped for a week!' Deep growls rumbled from a dozen throats as the dogs crept closer.

'Mark, just shoot him if you're not bringing him back. Sort your shit out, we've got to leave now!' snapped Vinh.

'Time's up!' shouted Jai. 'We've got ten minutes until that bomb goes off.'

Mark thumped the dashboard in frustration. 'Fine, the courts can deal with him back at the base, but I'll be damned if he sits in this car with the rest of us.'

Mark opened his door again. 'Get on the roof, you can sit in the carry cage. Might want to hold on tight though, it'd be a *real pity* if you fell off,' he said.

The survivalist scrambled up the ladder on the back of the 4WD as the dogs sprinted in for the kill. A thumping on the roof indicated that the dogs had missed their lunch.

Vinh floored the accelerator, the rear tyres spinning momentarily before the car lurched forward. The streets were empty now of Carriers, allowing him to negotiate the corners at speed. As they reached the main road, he accelerated heavily. To the south of the small town, an ear-splitting explosion

ripped upward to the sky, flame billowing outwards in an all-consuming cloud of death. The car rocked slightly as it was pummelled by a concussion wave before Vinh wrestled it back under control.

Mark stared back at Leopold, eyes wide in naked awe at the sheer destruction achieved by the one blast. The southern end of the suburb from where they had just bolted was lost underneath a wall of flame. He put one hand up onto the car's window and winced at the temperature of the glass, hot at even this distance from the inferno. A muffled scream penetrated the cabin from the survivalist on the roof.

Mark turned around to Jai and the woman in the back. 'Should we let him back in? His hands are probably roasting as he holds onto the metal cage.'

'No, leave him there,' said the woman, a glint of satisfaction in her eye at the sound of the man's terror. 'Those hands used to hold me down. Let them burn until his fingers can't hold anything else again.'

Mark shrugged as he turned forward again, conscience salved. 'Fair enough.'

Chapter Twenty-Six

Vinh slowed to a stop, wheels crunching in the gravel before the Fort's main gate. A young soldier stood to the right of the entrance, his rifle hanging informally at his side. The soldier's gaze moved from Vinh up to the roof, his mouth opening slightly in surprise at the man sitting in the carry cage. As the soldier looked back at Vinh once more, Mark leaned across in front of his Sergeant to head off the sentry's inevitable questions.

'We're back from an extraction at Leopold. We've got a woman in the car – that loser up there was offered a seat as well, but he told me he wanted to feel the wind in his hair while we drove.'

The soldier looked back up at the man on the roof who was now whimpering softly, cradling his hands against his chest. 'Bullshit,' he whispered.

'Yeah, I know, right?' Mark said, shaking his head in mock incredulity. 'Surviving the plague does some weird shit to people, eh? Now can we get in, I've got to sign this pair over for someone else to babysit.'

The sentry nodded, his face still sceptical as he set the gate in motion. Vinh stared straight ahead as if nothing unusual was sitting on his roof and drove into the Fort's interior.

They parked in front of a small building from where the civilian extractions were coordinated. Jai showed the woman inside before returning to his squad mates.

'Is he coming down or what?' he asked, staring at Calvin who was still sitting on the roof of the 4WD.

'He's having a cry that his hands are too sore,' Vinh said before turning his attention back to Calvin. 'Look I don't care how the fuck you get down, but you've got less than three seconds before I drag you off head first! Now fucking move, asshole!'

Calvin shot a look of hatred at the three of them before inching his way to the rear of the car. Instead of climbing, he elected to jump to the ground, landing in a sprawling mess. Mark hooked one hand under an armpit, hauled him to his feet and marched him inside.

Sitting behind an old-fashioned timber desk was a Major who looked up at their interruption. As he took in the state of the survivalist, he put down the piece of paper in his hand and pushed his chair back.

‘What the hell happened to him, Lieutenant Collins? Did you hang him over a fire pit or something?’

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about, Sir,’ said Mark, staring straight over the Major’s shoulder at the wall.

‘Look at his face and scalp, they’re bright red and blistering; and check this out,’ he said, walking around the desk and grabbing onto one of the man’s hands. ‘For god’s sake, Collins, his hands have third degree burns!’

Mark glanced down, feeling a guilty pang at the condition of his charge’s hands. Angry blisters covered the surface of his palm and fingers where he’d gripped the heated metal, oozing yellow serous fluid where the skin had torn.

‘Well, it tends to get a little hot when you ignite a fire bomb with your troops still in the vicinity,’ said Mark, a touch of frustration entering his voice.

‘They tried to kill me, they did!’ interjected the survivalist.

‘We did no such thing,’ drawled Mark. ‘My soldiers, along with the woman we rescued, will all vouch that nothing of the sort happened. Do you see any bruises or wounds on him to suggest assault? Of course not, because *it didn’t* happen. But that doesn’t change the fact that the man’s still scum. I want him charged with rape and false imprisonment of the woman Jai brought in here not two minutes ago.’

The Major’s expression hardened at the accusation. ‘Wait here, I want to confirm that she’ll testify against him.’ He disappeared out a back door.

‘You bastards won’t get away with this,’ spat the survivalist.

Mark just raised an eyebrow. ‘I reckon you’ll find your ‘plague wife’ isn’t so scared of you anymore. You’re fucked, buddy. And with capital punishment back on the cards – you’ll probably be hanging by your neck before the week’s out.’

The Major walked back in the room ten minutes later, a pair of steel handcuffs in his grip.

‘Your story checks out,’ he grumbled to Mark, throwing him the restraints. ‘Now on top of everything else, I’m stuck organising a civilian trial, Collins. Get him to the medical clinic. He’ll need those burns seen to before we can place him in the cells.’

Mark applied the cuffs about each wrist, tightening each loop until there was no room left to move. Leaving Vinh and Jai to sort out the car, he took hold of the chain links between his prisoner’s hands and pulled him from the office. The survivalist said nothing; mute and pale after the Major’s

pronouncement, he followed meekly in Mark's wake. The sky above threatened to dump rain, the clouds grey and heavy as they walked to the clinic.

To the right of the road was a bustling hive of activity. The open grassed area at the back of the Fort had become a massive construction yard, as thirty semi-trailers were converted into mobile fortresses in preparation for the coming invasion of Geelong. Work looked like it was nearing completion, with the finishing touches being completed to the last two trucks as Mark and his prisoner walked by.

On reaching the medical clinic, Mark was surprised to find the door locked. He jiggled the handle a few more times to make sure, then gave three sharp raps on the wood. From the other side, a set of footsteps could be heard approaching, before a sharp click sounded as the lock was disengaged. The door swung open to reveal a man wearing a navy uniform, a red stethoscope hung around his neck giving away his profession.

Mark stuck his hand out in greeting and introduced himself. 'I take it you're Harry's replacement?'

The doctor accepted his handshake before disengaging to push a thick pair of glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. 'That's right. I'm Captain Buckmire, but feel free to call me Jim,' he said with an easy smile. 'Quite glad to have a break from the ship myself, although I didn't think I'd be playing prison guard.'

'Geez, word travels quick. Did the Major already ring you?'

Jim looked mildly confused for a moment before his eyes fell to the cuffs about the survivalist's wrists. 'Surely not another one?' He hooked a thumb over his shoulder back inside the clinic, 'I've already got that rogue who caused all the trouble at the King Island camp in here.'

Mark recalled the stab wound that Erin had inflicted on the man. 'Has his leg wound gone bad or something?'

'Nope. I was the medic on board who managed that injury when he was first retrieved. Just quietly between you and me,' he said, dropping the volume of his voice, 'if the girl had gone a little closer to the groin and got his femoral artery – she would have done us all a favour. Bloody disgrace to the Navy! No, this time around, he reckons he broke up a razor blade, buried it in a chunk of meat and swallowed the lot. I call bullshit, but with no x-ray facilities, I can't prove him wrong. So now I'm stuck with him in my clinic for a week to watch for any sudden abdominal haemorrhage. I reckon he just

wanted a break from the cells.'

'I apologise in advance, Jim, but unfortunately I'm delivering another piece of excrement into your care. He's sustained a few burns on the trip back from Leopold. Nothing serious enough to stop him going to trial in a couple of days though.'

Calvin listened quietly, his eyes tracking back and forth between Mark and the doctor during the conversation before settling on Mark's face with venomous fury at his summary.

'Well, come inside and let's see what's wrong with you,' said the doctor, stepping out of the doorway and motioning for them both to enter. 'Where's the injury?' he said abruptly once the survivalist was parked on a bed.

Mark undid the prisoner's handcuffs to allow the doctor access for treatment, then re-attached one restraint to an ankle, the other to the metal bedframe. As the doctor settled in to work, de-roofing the blisters on the survivalist's palms, Mark quietly excused himself and left.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Mark paused in the hallway for a moment, straightening his uniform before opening the door. Although he was now comfortable as a Lieutenant in the presence of his own men, he still felt out of place when in the company of other officers. None had made his life particularly difficult, and yet he felt like a man apart, being the only one not to have completed an officer cadetship at Duntroon. Mark reprimanded himself for allowing the negative line of thought. He'd crawled through the mud at Kapooka as a general recruit, surviving the bastardisation process to become an enlisted soldier with subsequent deployment to the front lines of Iraq and Afghanistan. He squared his shoulders, taking pride in his own history. He may not have entered the army as an officer-cadet, but he'd earned his position at the table by proving time and again that he could fight and win.

Mark padded forward, thick green carpet soaking up all noise of his heavy boots as he took his place at the table with the other officers. He was back in the same room where he'd been notified of his field commission weeks earlier. This time around, the wood panelled walls of the room were somewhat darker, with shadows cloaking each corner due to the late hour. As a Major filled the last spot at the table, General Black shoved his chair back and stood, drawing every eye in the room. The General surveyed the faces before him, his expression hard, leaving no doubt at the man's iron clad determination. With a slight downward tilt of his chin, he broke eye contact and turned to a large map of greater Geelong.

'That's where we need to be, men,' he said, stabbing his finger at the location of the car factory on the far side of Corio bay, 'Where we can start full scale production of the armoured vehicles needed to eradicate the plague from our country. Those vehicles will house our troops in cocoons of reinforced steel while they cull the Infected on the streets. And all that separates us from our goal is one wretched town. Geelong.'

Mark looked past the General to the map pinned on the wall. The task before them was no small exercise. Although Geelong may have been termed a town, it had become a city in its own right, housing over 230,000 people. Queenscliff's Carriers had come close to overwhelming the Fort's walls, and they had been but a fraction of the numbers involved in the coming battle. He couldn't help but feel the fortified trucks would fall pitifully short. General

Black cleared his throat, breaking Mark's morbid appraisal.

'I'm pleased to report that we've been relatively successful in clearing the small towns between here and Geelong of the plague. But, I can see from each of your faces, you've come to the same conclusion as me. The numbers we're up against once we hit the main town are just too large for our forces,' said Black. 'As such, I have pointedly refused the federal government's request to commit my troops until we have a battle that can be won. And I'm here tonight, to say that day has come!'

What had been a sombre mood until moments before, now felt electric. Mark leant forward in his seat. They were going into battle despite the odds? Mark felt his muscles tense, his hands resting on his lap were curled into tight fists as he awaited Black's next words.

'The Prime Minister has finally seen reason and is allowing certain suburbs to be sacrificed. The technique we've applied so successfully in the smaller towns will now be used against Geelong. We will be dropping sound attractants in different locations to draw in swarms of the Infected, and then burn them to the ground with American MK77 incendiary bombs. If all goes to plan, our troops should be only mopping up the dregs.'

'But sir, what if the fires spread? We could lose half the city to flames!' said a Major.

General Black looked at the man with disgust. 'You think I give two shits about destroying empty houses if it means our mission will be a success? As long as I have the manufacturing plant up and running at the end, the rest of the damned city can burn to the ground for all I care.'

The Major looked away, ears burning red at the public reprimand.

'But unfortunately, the government thinks like you, Major. So, to minimise the loss of property, we have acquired two helicopters with fire-fighting capability. The Prime Minister thinks they'll be used to control the spread of fire outside the nominated kill zones, however, my number one priority for them will be to ensure the routes chosen for soldiers to enter the town are kept clear of flames.' The General paused, as if considering how to frame his next words.

'The first part of the plan will commence tomorrow morning with the dropping of the noise attractants, then the sites will be bombed in the afternoon. I'll give it a day and a half to burn out, then we move the trucks in.' Black turned to the side and waved his aide forward to the table. Mark had failed to notice the General's man standing quietly in the shadows of the

room. The aide stepped forward and began handing a map to each of the Lieutenants who commanded a platoon. Mark glanced down at the paper in his hand. A red line was marked along a main road, leading straight to the town's centre.

'Each of you will find on the map in your hands, the route your troops will take through the city,' said Black. 'Unfortunately, some of the trucks may end up facing higher numbers than others. Those soldiers heading to the shopping precinct of Ryrie and Moorabool St. in the town centre will no doubt have plenty of targets to keep them occupied,' he said with the stone dry humour of a veteran.

Mark glanced at the street name under his highlighted route and winced. He'd scored Ryrie Street for his platoon, a road heading straight to the rabid heart of the town.

'Start your preparations. There will be fifteen soldiers to a truck, so make your choices wisely as to who you combine as a team,' said Black by way of ending the meeting.

'Lieutenant Collins,' said Black, making Mark look up sharply at his name. The General waited until the other officers had left the room. 'I need a path carved from dead flesh through this city, and your road's going to be deeper than most. Efforts will be made to draw the worst of the numbers to the bay side where they'll be bombed, but I dare say more than a few will be left behind to keep you busy. I've also gained word of a possible group of survivors holed up in the Westfield shopping mall. Active communication was maintained until last fortnight when their radio went dead. If you feel it's safe to leave the trucks, I want you to investigate and retrieve anyone you find – but it is not a high priority, common sense says they stopped talking due to being overrun.'

'Is there anything else, Sir?' said Mark, thinking that he was being dismissed.

'Yeah. Try and avoid getting bitten on this operation, next time you might find the area more difficult to cut off,' said Black. 'I need live officers. Dead ones just give me more bastards to fight.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jeremy lay on his back staring at the ceiling in the medical clinic, visually tracing small cracks in the plaster to distract himself from his new companion's moaning. The wound in his thigh had healed well, and aside from some residual weakness in the muscle, it felt back to normal. The lack of permanent injury had done nothing, however, to dissipate his rage at being jailed. His anger burnt white hot, and was focused upon just two people: Lieutenant Bourke and the girl, Erin. He would no longer be happy with just ending their lives. No, not only did he want them to suffer, he needed them to feel terror and pure helplessness in their final moments before he snuffed out their lives. He was determined to regain the control he once had and was willing to wait until his opportunity came.

The doctor's chair leg screeched on the concrete as he shoved it back to stand. In Jeremy's peripheral vision, he watched him check the lock on the clinic door before walking down a short corridor towards the toilet. For the first time since the other prisoner's arrival, they were alone in the room. Jeremy turned his head to appraise the usefulness of his cellmate. His lip raised in a sneer as he watched the other man snivel and mumble to himself. The survivalist's bald scalp was raw, scattered with small blisters, taut with serous fluid.

'If we're going to share a room, you better grow a set and stop your fucking crying. I've never heard a grown man complain so much about a smidge of sunburn,' muttered Jeremy.

Calvin shut up like he'd been slapped. He looked defeated; any bravado he'd asserted earlier in the day had leaked away with the fluid from his burns.

'What am I supposed to do? You heard them earlier, for all I know I'll be hanging from a rafter come week's end,' he said. 'And it sounds like you've done worse; so, if I'm executed, you'll be strung up next to me, eyes bulging and shit filling your pants as you strangle.'

'Oh please, give it a break, Drama Queen. The difference between me and you, is that I have no intention of letting that happen.'

'But you've swallowed razor blades, that sounds like you're just doing their job for them.'

'The razor blade was a big fat lie,' said Jeremy, as if explaining the real world to a child. 'Even the doctor was smart enough to work that one out. He

knows I'm not suicidal, I just needed to get out of the cells. Much easier to escape from a medical clinic than a barred cage.'

Calvin's eyes opened wider in realisation.

'The light bulb finally switched on did it?' said Jeremy, chuckling at his expression. 'That's right, I'm breaking out of this shit hole. All I'm waiting for is a time when the guards are distracted. The army has to branch out of this backwater eventually, and when they do, I'll make the most of their diverted attention.'

'You seem to be forgetting we're hand cuffed to a bedframe,' said the survivalist. 'If I had my bolt cutters from back home, it'd be no problem, but I don't see any lying around here begging to be used.'

'And they were calling you a 'survivalist'? Have you even looked at what the cuff's attached to?' said Jeremy, sitting up and swinging his legs to hang over the edge. He lifted up the mattress to expose the metal frame. 'These are the same snap assembly construction used in most army barracks. We don't need bolt cutters, just common sense.' With that, Jeremy undid the join in the bedframe, allowing the attached side of the handcuff to fall into free air.

Calvin jerked to sitting and fumbled at the side of his own bed, searching for the join in the metal. When he went to free his own cuff, Jeremy pulled him up short.

'Now's not the time though,' he said, slipping his cuff back into place and re-joining the bedframe. From down the hallway, the sound of a toilet flushing heralded the imminent return of the doctor. Jeremy fixed the other man with a hard glare. 'Are you wanting to join me when I go, because if you are – you have to agree to do as I say, when I say it?'

Calvin nodded avidly, like a dog ecstatic at finding a new master. Jeremy grinned, white teeth flashing in a shark's smile.

'Good, because once we get out of here, I think you're going to love the game I'm waiting to play.'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Doug was in a foul mood as he typed his code into the research centre's security panel.

'Feeding bloody dogs, what a frigging joke. If only the government would come through on the primates we need,' he muttered under his breath.

The light above the door flashed green as the electronic lock released. Doug pressed the heel of his palm into the barrier, shoving it wide enough to admit his weedy frame. Excited barking met his ears, partially muted by the intervening door to the caged area. He tried to ignore the sound along with the knowledge it was he who drove them to distraction, a violent excitement at the proximity of live flesh, as they attacked their cage walls in an attempt to break free and eat him alive. He knew he wasn't special in any way, the dogs did it when any human came within sniffing distance.

First Doug went into the laboratory to check on the batch of samples from earlier in the day. He swore silently on noting an error signal flashing on the machine. On pulling out the samples to check what had gone wrong, he found the blood had turned into a glutinous mass of clot despite the anti-coagulant he'd added. Something had changed recently. Each sample he'd taken from the dogs over the past week had turned out the same way, alluding to a new mutation in the disease that he was yet to pin down.

He began emptying each of the vials into a clinical waste container, clots breaking free of the test tubes with each frustrated flick of his wrist against the yellow plastic. Finally empty, he placed the used tubes into the sink for washing later, deciding it would be a good job for his new assistant, Harry, in the morning. The thought brought the first smile of the day to his sour facade as he closed the door to the lab and walked to the dog cages.

On the way, he stepped into the kitchen and pulled a plastic bag filled with dead rabbits from the fridge. Doug placed one hand under the bag to support its weight, his nose wrinkling in disgust at the feeling of the animals, stiff with rigor mortis against his hand. He walked carefully, determined to avoid getting any of the blood from the carcasses on his clothes. With his elbow, Doug hit the button to release the door's lock, stepped through and let it slam behind him as he took two paces toward the cages.

Doug froze. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck as he realised

something was different – the dogs were silent. Rabbits now forgotten, he let the bag fall from his hand as he quickly scanned the cages before him. Each dog was at the front of their pen, eyes focused on him, lips pulled back in a silent snarl as they crouched on the ground. It didn't make sense – *they were never quiet when anyone was near*. As his eyes made it to the last pen, his heart stuttered. The steel wire at the base of this cage was bent upwards, a fifty-centimetre hole big enough for a dog to squeeze through.

A deep growl sounded from behind him. Doug spun around looking for the source of the noise, and locked eyes with a huge male Rottweiler. Blood ran from long rents in the fur over its head, carved from its hide as it had forced the sharp wire up off its cage. The blood had mixed with frothed saliva, and now hung in glutinous carmine strings from its jaws. Lips were pulled up in a vicious snarl, exposing inch long canines. Warmth flooded Doug's thigh as his bladder released, his balls shrivelled and clenched to his gut in terror. He edged backward, one small step at a time while the animal watched him. The dog remained still, body stiff as it watched him, and Doug had a fleeting hope that he might make the exit. He took another slow step and suddenly the spell was broken. The dog lunged forward as the rest of the animals started barking madly and jumping at their cage fronts.

Doug turned and reached for the door release, a low wail of terror on his lips. Thirty kilos of pure muscle smashed into his back as the dog leaped, jaws driving needle sharp teeth into either side of his neck. His body was driven forward against the wall beside the door, head smashing the break-glass fire alarm. White-hot pain arced into his brain as a glass shard punctured his eye, mixing with the agony from his neck. On activation of the fire alarm, all doors in the building sprung open, including those to each dog cage.

Freed of their captivity, the beasts launched an attack, descending as a pack on Doug. The Rottweiler dragged his body back into the middle of the floor where it released its grip on his neck. With his one remaining eye, Doug looked up at the massive animal standing over him. The dog snarled once more then lunged down, ripping at his face as the other animals joined their pack leader, burying fangs to take their share of flesh.

Chapter Thirty

Jai slowly walked in the grey light of dawn, then stopped to blow warmth into his cupped hands. The days were improving as summer took hold, but the nights were still cold enough to chill his bones. He'd scored yet another night of sentry duty along the fence line protecting Queenscliff. Up ahead, a few men from his detachment had broken protocol to build a small fire, preferring to warm their hands in lieu of patrolling the barrier. Their laziness pissed him off, but as Corporal Nate was one of the men at the fire's edge, he'd been powerless to act.

Jai turned away from the fire and started walking in the other direction. Although day was fast approaching, he didn't want the fire's light to rob him of his night vision in the pre-dawn haze. He stopped and cocked his head to the side for a moment. He could have sworn he'd heard something in the undergrowth. There it was again – but it was coming from his side of the barrier. There was no fear of Infected coming from the town, the peninsula having been scoured of the plague. He let out a sigh and walked onwards thinking one of the guys must have walked into the scrub to take a dump.

'Hey Jai, do you want a hot brew? Kev's managed to rig up a billy of coffee,' said Nate in a hushed voice from behind. Jai turned at the offer, seeing one of the guys place a blackened can onto the fire's coals. A hot drink at this time of morning was hard to resist. The battle of conscience only took a second before he gave in and started toward the fire to claim one of the tin mugs on offer.

Out of the scrub behind the men streaked a shadow, a low growl the only noise as it launched itself into the middle of the group. Harsh barking sounded, drawing Jai's eye in time to see the rest of the dog pack emerge from the dark. The soldier holding the billycan was knocked backwards into the fire, screaming as his bare neck hit the glowing coals, smashing embers in all directions. The huge dog on his chest lunged down and ripped out his throat with one savage bite, swallowing the cartilage of his trachea. The soldier's heels kicked a staccato in the dust as his breath bubbled obscenely from the gaping hole of his neck, blood spurting to sizzle in the fire beneath.

Jai lifted his rifle and fired off a quick shot into the animal, catching it through the belly. The dog howled in pain and bolted. The fence provided little obstacle to the canine who merely squeezed under the bottom length of

wire, leaving tufts of fur behind on the sharp barbs. Nate had drawn his handgun, firing multiple rounds into the pack swarming around them. The other dogs followed the first, straight under the fence and into the scrub on the far side.

Three men were down. Kevin, the soldier that had fallen in the fire, lay still, eyes empty of life as his uniform began to smoke and catch light. Jai grabbed one foot and dragged him free of the embers. Nate leant over one of the men on the ground, a ragged gouge ripped from his thigh. Another soldier cradled a mangled hand, three fingers torn away, his jaw clamped tight against the pain.

Nate turned to Jai, face tense with shock at the unexpected attack. 'Get the rest of the crew and guard the line in case they come back for a second go.' He then unclipped the communications radio from his shirt and contacted the Fort. 'I need urgent medical assistance. We have three men down; one fatal,' he said with a grimace, looking at the smoking body to his left.

A hammering on the door of the medical clinic woke the three men inside. Grey light filtered through the windows of the clinic as the doctor stumbled from his bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he opened the door. An agitated Private was standing on the step outside.

'Doc, we need you to grab your stuff. There's been an attack with two soldiers wounded,' he said.

The last vestiges of sleep evaporated from the doctor's face at the news, replaced by a grim expression. 'Plague related?' he asked.

'I don't think so, there was something mentioned about a dog attack. These injuries might actually be survivable for a change, Sir.'

The doctor nodded and left the man at the step while he quickly retrieved a medic backpack from the rear of the clinic. As he returned to the door, he looked at the two prisoners on their beds.

'What about those two, who's supposed to guard them?'

'They're handcuffed to the bed frames, Doc. I don't see them getting far dragging those things.'

The doctor shrugged. 'Being a bloody prison warden wasn't part of the job description anyway.' The door slammed behind them, then a key jingled in the mechanism to lock the clinic.

As the footsteps receded behind the door, Jeremy sat bolt upright in bed.

‘Time to get the fuck out of here, survivor boy!’ he said, swinging his legs over the edge before disengaging the bedframe to release his handcuff. Jeremy stood straight and pushed his hands into the base of his back to stretch his aching muscles.

‘Damn it feels good to be upright again,’ he said, before walking over to the doctor’s desk and opening the second drawer. He fished around inside for a moment then lifted a set of keys free with a triumphant grin.

‘That doctor’s no bloody warden. He’s left these on the desktop half the week. I bet he thought he was being all crafty when he hid them in the drawer instead last night,’ he said, chuckling to himself.

A crash of metal on flooring came from the other side of the room as Calvin finally managed to disengage his own bedframe to release his handcuffs.

‘Are we going to leave, or what,’ muttered Calvin as he stalked up to a window and peeked through the blind. ‘Looks clear out there for the moment.’

Jeremy’s eyes narrowed. ‘Just remember what I said last night. I’m in charge. You do as I say, when I fucking say it. Understand?’ he said, voice cold with anger.

‘Yeah I remember. Calm down will you. I just want to leave, all right?’ said Calvin, looking unnerved by his partner’s rapid change in mood.

‘Good,’ said Jeremy, happy once more as the other man accepted his dominance. ‘Let’s go then.’

Jeremy unlocked the clinic’s door and stepped outside. He was still wearing the same navy uniform he’d had on when transferred from the ship and had a good chance of avoiding attention if he kept his handcuffs out of view. He tucked the loose ring attached to his wrist into a pocket, then instructed his fellow inmate to come outside.

‘Stay right next to me. You stick out like dog’s balls in that flannelette shirt, so we’re going to use that to our advantage. If anyone hassles us, I’m transporting you as a prisoner to the lock up, ok?’

The survivalist didn’t look convinced by the plan, but agreed nonetheless. Greater activity was starting to happen near the main gates of the Fort, so the two men headed for the back fence. Walking at normal speed, they didn’t gain any attention from the few soldiers they passed. Within a few minutes, they’d reached the cyclone fence at the back of the fort.

The wire at the fence's base wasn't attached to a bar, allowing it to be lifted from the ground. Jeremy grasped the wire and strained upward with it, creating a thirty-centimetre gap at the bottom for the survivalist to squeeze through. His partner returned the favour and within seconds both were outside the Fort's perimeter. The two men were about to run for cover when a shout froze them.

'Declare yourself! Rank and number, now!' shouted a Private. Jeremy glanced back at him, finding that the soldier had his rifle aimed straight at his chest.

'He's an escaping prisoner!' shouted Jeremy, pointing at the survivalist. 'The sick bastard's wanted for raping a girl!'

Calvin looked at Jeremy, mouth wide in shock at the betrayal before he turned and ran.

'He's getting away! Shoot him you frigging idiot!' commanded Jeremy. The soldier's eyes left Jeremy and tracked the survivalist.

'Halt or I'll shoot!' shouted the soldier. Calvin kept going, sprinting for the scrub. The soldier fired his rifle, dropping the running man with a single shot before scanning back the other way.

'Now where the fuck did that other one go?' muttered the soldier.

Fifty metres distant lay Jeremy on his belly in the scrub, smiling at the confusion on the face of the sentry. He inched backwards, deeper into cover, a free man once more.

Chapter Thirty-One

Harry's eyes opened in the dark, instantly wide-awake. He picked up his watch from the bedside table and looked at the time: 05:00 AM, too bloody early to be up. He rolled over, closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use. Whatever had woken him had banished sleep for the night. Resigned to starting the day, he swung his feet out of bed and stood up in the cool air. Harry thought of the jobs ahead of him, knowing there was a long list of tests that needed to be run at the lab. Figuring that he might as well make an early start, he pulled on some clothes and made ready to leave for work.

The sun was just starting to peak over the horizon as Harry neared the research facility. He heard barking in the distance, which didn't seem odd initially, until he realised the noise wasn't coming from the direction of the lab. If a pack of dogs had moved into the area, they'd need to be put down quickly. After seeing what the plague had wrought on their test subjects, he had no desire of meeting an infected dog outside a cage.

As he rounded the last corner and approached his work, a rotating red light outside the main door caught his eye. No audible alarm was sounding, but the front door stood propped open on its mechanical arm. Harry swallowed as he felt adrenal surge. If the fire alarm had been activated, that meant.... *shit*. He patted the side of his hip, feeling for the holstered revolver. Unclipping the tether, he pulled it free, gaining some comfort from the weapon.

He took a steadying breath at the front entrance, willing his nerves to subside and let him act. The place was silent. Usually by now, the barking of caged dogs would be excluding all other noise as they fought to escape their enclosures. A splash of red on the linoleum flooring caught his eye – a red paw print. Once one was noted, it was impossible to miss the rest. The floor was covered in faint bloody prints, extending in a track down the hallway between the enclosure room and the front door of the premises.

Harry inched his way down the corridor, checking each side room as he went until he reached the back where his worst fears were confirmed. Each

cage was open and empty. In the middle of the floor was a ragged mess of bloody meat. The corpse had been torn apart as the dogs fed, the pelvis and legs three metres distant to the torso. There was no way to visually identify the body as there just wasn't enough left of any feature, but Harry knew it must be his colleague, as there was no one else with unfettered access to the premises.

What the hell had he been doing here so early in the morning when it was Harry's shift today? His eye caught sight of a rabbit on the floor, ignored by the dogs in preference of warm prey, and realised that it must have happened during the nightly feeding routine. Harry swore viciously as he turned and sprinted for the lab, he needed to raise the alarm. Finding a phone, he dialled the Fort. In the distance, automatic gunfire began to stutter.

The car pulled to a stop, wheels sliding in the gravel as the Private stamped down on the brake. The doctor leapt from the passenger door, bag filled with emergency equipment over his right shoulder. Nate waved him over to where he knelt beside his injured soldiers. A shirt had been placed over the face and neck of the deceased man. The other two wounded now lay on the ground, having taken a turn for the worse.

'Thanks for coming so quick, Doc,' said Nate. 'They're not looking good. I thought they only had minor trauma, but they must have lost more blood than I realised. What do you want us to do?'

The doctor already had his bag open, kneeling beside the patient with the hand injury. 'Let me check them out first and work out the priorities. It was dog bites you said?'

'Yeah, a pack of them attacked us out of nowhere, then escaped under the wire. We haven't seen or heard anything from them since,' Nate said.

Both injured men were quiet and listless on the ground. Their skin was pale and clammy, breathing rapid and shallow. The doctor unwrapped the hand wound, quickly noting the missing fingers, then bit his lip in concern as he saw the skin above the wound was a virulent shade of red, with inflammation tracking up the inside of the arm. He quickly moved onto the next man, cutting up the material of his pants to expose the wound at his thigh. Brown pus was oozing from the bite and the surrounding tissue was swollen, the edges spread like a burst piece of fruit. A stench from the

uncovered wound assaulted the noses of all those present. Both soldiers had become unresponsive during the assessment. The doctor rocked back on his heels and looked up at Nate.

‘They were just normal dogs you reckon? Because these wounds look hideously infected. Dogs can introduce some nasty bugs, but it usually takes a few days to get this bad. The only bites I’ve seen progress at this rate are from Carriers.’

‘I don’t know what to say, doc. They had four legs and were covered in fur – they were bloody dogs,’ said Nate.

The doctor frowned at the agitated tone of the Corporal’s voice. ‘I’m not trying to be difficult, but if there’s a chance these guys have the plague, it changes management completely. We’ll need to euthanize them before they change and place more lives at risk.’

‘Bullshit. They’re under my command, and I’ll be damned if you’re going to shove a drill bit into their brains under my watch. Just treat the fucking wounds and give them an antibiotic or something. They need to be in a hospital, not lying in the dirt by the road,’ he said, anger mounting.

‘Nate, I just remembered something, can I speak to you for a sec?’ said Jai. Nate looked none too happy for the interruption, but acquiesced and moved off a few metres to talk.

‘Didn’t Harry say something about working on infected dogs as part of his research into a cure?’

Nate’s eyes widened. ‘Shit! But they’re all carefully locked up behind steel. We’d know if any of them had escaped!’

The doctor leant over the deceased soldier, the shirt pulled back to expose the gaping hole in his neck. The dog had ripped a fist-sized chunk of flesh away, tearing out a section of trachea along with jugular and carotid artery.

As Nate cleared his throat to update him, the Private that had driven the doctor to their location yelled out from his seat in the car. He was holding a radio receiver in one hand, his face deathly pale. ‘Doc, we have a problem. I just got news from the Fort, there’s been a breakout from the research facility. Around twenty plague infected dogs have escaped.’

The doctor looked up from where he knelt over the dead man, ‘I bloody knew it...’

A hand took a fist full of his hair and dragged his face violently to the corpse’s mouth beneath him. The doctor screamed as the dead soldier ripped

away his nose and upper lip, spraying warm blood over the Carrier's pale face as it gagged down its first meal. Jai grabbed hold of the Doc's leg and tried to drag him out of the creature's grasp, but the Carrier held on with a grip of unyielding iron. The next bite tore a mouthful from the side of the doctor's throat. A thick spurt of arterial blood jetted from his carotid, pumping his blood onto the ground in rapid squirts of crimson.

Nate dragged himself from his torpor and lifted his rifle to assist, drilling a bullet through the skull of the Carrier. The doctor fell out the corpse's now lax grip, landing on his side. His eyes were wide in shock above a ruined face, one hand pushing in futile effort against his neck wound. Within moments, he too fell silent as life-sustaining blood drained into the dirt.

Beside the doctor, the other two wounded soldiers were beginning to stir. Jai stepped forward and without seeking permission from his Corporal, shot a round through each man's skull. He turned back to the doctor, letting his rifle drop for a moment, distress clearly showing on his face at the needless loss of life. Jai took a steadying breath as his features once more hardened with resolve and fired a bullet to obliterate the doctor's brains and grant him an uninterrupted sleep.

After a few moments, Jai looked up from the doctor's corpse and rounded on his Corporal.

'You and that bloody fire! If you weren't such a lazy bastard who was more concerned with comfort than doing your job, maybe we would have been ready when that pack came through. *Four men*, Nate. Four fucking men are now dead because half the detachment was off guard and staring into a fire pit that *you* sanctioned.'

Nate said nothing, his mouth open as he failed to reply. Jai waited a moment more, and when he found his Corporal still didn't have an answer, spat on the ground and walked away in disgust.

Chapter Thirty-Two

‘Bloody hell, it looks like half the horizon is on fire,’ said Steph, peering in Geelong’s direction. Thick streams of smoke rose in the distance from more than a dozen separate infernos, muting the sun behind a grey haze.

Mark, Erin and Steph stood on the footpath outside their house in the late afternoon. Time had run down quickly, with final preparations for the coming morning’s offensive drawing to a close. Systematic firebombing of Geelong had commenced the day before. The resultant infernos had raged through the night, turning the horizon to a dull shade of red. Now though, it seemed most of the fires had burnt themselves out, as most of the smoke streams had altered from the dirty black of an active fire, to grey/white. The distant blazes had left an acrid tang in Mark’s mouth and nose, prompting him to hack a gob of spit onto the street to clear the taste.

‘That’s so gross,’ said Erin, her nose wrinkled in disgust. ‘Hasn’t anyone told you that spitting spreads disease?’

‘Yeah, just not the ones I’m worried about.’

Steph punched him lightly on his shoulder. ‘The girl’s got a point, Mark, no-one needs to see your phlegm on the pavement.’

He conceded defeat, clearly outnumbered. ‘Ah, ok. Sorry Erin, I’ll make sure to keep my germs to myself in future. Now can we get back to more important matters?’ he said, moving the topic along. ‘What do you reckon about these alterations?’

Parked on the street before them were the two semi-trailers allocated to Mark’s platoon. The trucks looked vastly different from their original appearance. A steel cage had been constructed on the flat bed tray to enclose and protect Mark’s squad while they fought, reaching two and a half metres in height. Entrance into the cage was via a flip down manhole at either end. The walls of the cage itself were constructed out of a cross-hatched steel wire with square openings of five centimetres diameter; wide enough to stick through a gun barrel, but too small to admit a Carrier’s hand. Below the tray, sheet metal dropped to within thirty centimetres of the ground to prevent easy handholds. In the middle of the cage was neatly piled boxes of ammunition, replacement rifles, captive pin guns and broom handles to push free any pile up of carcasses on the roof or walls of the cage.

The cabin of the truck had not escaped renovation, the windscreen being

ditched for the same steel wire as the rear cage. In front of the cabin, a reinforced iron wedge had been welded in place to allow the truck to push aside obstacles from its path such as abandoned cars on the road that could not be driven around. Mark leant down and ran a hand over a section of welding, grimacing at what he found.

‘I like the overall design, but geez, some of the welding could be better,’ he said mildly, keen to keep out of his voice the true extent of his concern at the poor workmanship. The weld attaching the iron wedge to the front of the cabin was lumpy with scattered gaps, and when combined with the massive weight of the attachment, created a high risk that the weld might fracture when placed under stress.

‘I guess it should do the job, but might be better to leave it for emergency use only.’

He stood back from the truck and sighed, the bitter smell of smoke irritating him again. Mark was about to spit once more, but caught sight of Erin’s face and pulled himself up.

‘I’ve assigned the crews for the two trucks,’ he said to Steph. ‘You, Jai and I will be in a truck driven by Nate; Vinh will have command of the other.’

‘I heard Harry’s been pulled back into the medic role again?’ said Steph.

‘Yeah, he’s not super happy about it, but with the only other doctor on site now dead and the research facility shut down, there’s no real option. To be honest, with what’s happening tomorrow, it’s kind of reassuring to know he’ll be close at hand if things go tits up.’

‘Surely he’s not fighting with us?’

‘God no, they wouldn’t risk their last medic like that. He’ll be behind the front line, trailing in a support vehicle in case of a friendly fire injury or something happens which he can actually fix. Plague bites will fall down to individual squads to euthanize tomorrow,’ said Mark, his voice betraying distaste at a job that would likely become his responsibility.

‘The General informed me the other night about some possible survivors in town,’ he said.

‘Do they have a confirmed location?’

‘Yeah, but the bastards couldn’t have picked a worse place. They’re somewhere in the Westfield’s mall, right where the highest concentrations of Carriers are expected in the centre of town. At least the General spoke some common sense – he’s left the call to me as to whether or not we attempt the

extraction. If there's too many corpses trying to kill us, we let them stay put until a later date.'

Steph's eyes widened a little in surprise at his cold reasoning. 'You really think you'd be able to sleep knowing we left people behind?'

'I'd sleep like a baby. To me it's a no-brainer - I'd swap your lives for a thousand others any day of the week. Besides, if they've made it this far, they'll survive a few more days.'

Steph still looked unconvinced.

'Look, I'm not committing now. I'll make a decision once we've had a chance to see the extent of opposition in town,' said Mark, killing conversation on the topic.

Erin was standing to the side, only half listening to them argue. With the danger facing her friends tomorrow, she'd been trying her hardest to pretend the whole event wasn't happening. Erin kicked at a pebble on the footpath absently, sending it bouncing down the street toward the park. As she followed it with her eyes, she saw something that made her heart lurch.

Jeremy.

Leaning casually against a fence at the street corner stood the man who had tried to kill her. He stared back, a smile kinking his lips at her recognition. Erin raised a shaking hand to rub at her eyes. Surely she must be imagining things. The man was locked up, secure in the Fort's cells. When she opened her eyes again, she breathed a sigh of relief – the street corner was empty once more.

'Hey Erin, are you ok?' asked Steph. 'You look like you've seen a ghost or something.'

'Nah, I must be overtired. I could have sworn I just saw Jeremy standing at the end of the street,' a slight tremble in her voice betraying how unnerved she was. 'But that's impossible, I mean the guy's in jail.'

Mark passed a guilty look to his girlfriend. 'There's no way he'd hang around, surely the bastard would have run?'

Erin's gaze flicked between the two adults, her concern rapidly increasing at their expressions. 'What are you talking about? Who should have run by now?' she asked.

'Mark, you're going to have to tell her, she has a right to know,' said Steph.

Mark ran a hand through his hair as he cleared his throat. 'I didn't want to upset you when the risk was minimal,' he started.

'And?' said Erin. 'Get to the point.'

'Jeremy managed to escape the other night,' he said. 'But as you live in a street surrounded by soldiers that are itching for an excuse to kill the traitor, we thought you're safe,' he said, putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Erin knocked his hand aside. 'Who are you to make decisions for me? You're not my fucking father, Mark. You don't know the bastard like I do. He's not going to let it rest after I stabbed him. How the hell did he even get out?'

Mark winced. 'He took advantage of confusion during the dog attack,' he started, before filling her in about the escape from the medical clinic.

'You do realise that your 'street full of soldiers' is gone tomorrow,' said Erin scathingly. 'But that's fine. I've seen to my own safety before, and I'll bloody well do it again,' she said, chin jutting out in defiance.

Mark looked like he was starting to lose patience at her tone. 'I didn't let the man out, Erin. All I can do is deal with the situation thrown at us, so cut me some slack, ok?'

Erin stepped back, deflating a little. 'I know. But this wasn't supposed to happen,' she said. Steph leaned in, placing an arm around her shoulders in support.

Mark's face softened again. 'I've talked to Lieutenant Bourke, as it sounded like you trusted him back on King Island. He's still off active service because of his damaged shoulder, and I thought maybe he could hang out at the house while we're away,' he suggested. 'If you're not keen on that, I'm open to other ideas.'

Erin nodded mutely. Her hand dropped to her waist, unconsciously seeking to brush past her weapons for reassurance, but came away empty. She'd stopped carrying them a fortnight earlier when she'd finally begun to feel safe again.

Erin stepped away from her friends and headed for the house. 'I need to get my gun. If he does turn up, the bastard's going to find I'm not keen on unannounced visitors.'

Chapter thirty-Three

A spare strand of hair broke free of Steph's ponytail and whipped to the side in the wind. She distractedly tucked it behind an ear, then started chewing on a fingernail. Nate drove the truck at no more than sixty kph, and yet to the squad sitting in the open air of the cage, it felt much faster. Of the twelve soldiers sitting on ammunition crates, most were quiet, lost in their own thoughts as they headed for Geelong.

Mark looked over his crew from where he leaned into the front corner behind the cab, keenly feeling the responsibility for bringing them out the other end of the coming battle alive. In the short time that he'd fought beside the men and women, he'd formed a tough bond, earned through shared dangers and spilt blood. He felt exhausted, stifling a yawn that he knew originated from suppressed stress rather than any true desire to sleep. In a detached sense, he realised that for one of the first times preceding a battle, he felt barely any fear for his own welfare. This brought him little comfort, as he knew it had been usurped by a greater worry that he'd make a tactical error leading to the death of soldiers under his command. With difficulty, he pushed aside these morose thoughts, knowing that to dwell on uncertainties would paralyse his ability to think, guaranteeing a blood bath.

A leather wrapped steel handle poked out above his right shoulder from where Steph had helped him strap in place the scabbard for his Gladius sword. For a while he had left it behind, until the loss of his finger had prompted him to carry it again, a good luck charm that doubled as a brutal killing tool. His men had taken a perverse pride in their officer's choice of weapon. He hadn't realised just how much, until Steph had pointed out that nearly every soldier in his platoon now carried some sort of heavy machete, blades sharpened and fashioned into modern day swords of their own. It wasn't something that he was upset about. Rifles jammed at inopportune moments, and it paid to have a backup that could be trusted to perform when the enemy was close enough to rip the skin from your face.

Looking back, he noted Vinh's truck had dropped further behind to escape the cloud of grey ash flicked up into the air by his own vehicle. As they neared town, the colours had become dull, muted by a wafer-thin layer of ash over the landscape, a gift from the recent fires. Smoke still rose from a dozen locations in town, lazy white plumes that drifted slowly up into the

sky.

Mark jolted backwards into the wire as the truck suddenly started to gear down, dropping speed. Regaining his feet, he looked out the side to see what had prompted the change and felt his jaw slacken. It was one of the bombing sites. To the left of the highway lay a field of black ash. Nothing stood for at least a kilometre where the accelerant had burnt until no fuel remained. Houses were gutted and flattened; even steel had melted in the inferno. No wonder the General had showed little faith in the ability of the fire-fighting helicopters to limit the scale of destruction once the flames were unleashed.

Before them lay a hundred-metre-wide swath of distorted asphalt where the blaze had leapt the road, melting the bitumen in the process. The fire's path continued toward the bay; burnt out houses telling of its progress. Nate jumped from the cab, testing the surface with the toe of his boot before looking back over his shoulder.

'Still tacky, but should be ok. You happy to drive over it, Boss?'

'Don't see any option,' said Mark. 'As long as it's not hot enough to melt our tyres, we keep on going.'

Nate nodded, climbed back into the cab and stamped on the accelerator. The truck left sunken wheel tracks upon the softened road as they progressed, but came out the other side none the worse for wear.

Until now they'd seen a bare handful of Carriers. The soldiers, surprised at how few they'd found, had picked these off at will. The technique employed appeared to have been incredibly successful. The Navy's Seahawk helicopter had been used to transport specially made speaker sets to chosen locations about the town. Massive amplifiers powered by a battery unit and housed in a steel mesh cage had been lowered by cable to the ground. Mark and Jai could already attest to the gut wrenching soundtrack played on repeat from their trip to Leopold, and yet again, the Infected had been drawn to the sound like flies to shit, obliging the General by gathering into tight swarms for their subsequent incineration.

'I didn't really believe the bombs would be so successful,' Steph said as a warm breeze whipped up a cloud of ash near the road. 'Good thing, because in this heat today, the Infected are going to be moving faster than usual.'

A few of the other soldiers shot her a dark glare. 'Thanks for tempting fate, Steph,' said one of them, an older woman named Ruth.

'Oh, whatever,' said Steph. 'It's not like my words are going to change what we face today. It's true though, about the Carriers being faster. I mean,

it feels warm already and it's only early morning. You've seen those bastards when they get hot – they start fucking sprinting. Give me a cold, slow one any day.'

'None of that matters,' said Mark, cutting off Ruth before she could further the argument. 'When they're less than a metre from the cage, I don't care if they're slow or fast – we won't be missing those shots. If you can pull a trigger, and I know all of you can do a shit load better than just that, you'll be able to splatter their brains on the pavement. All we have to do is keep our minds on the task, and we'll be home before evening. Easy.' His simple words calmed the unit, and both women let the topic drop.

The radio clipped to Mark's vest crackled into life. 'It's time to part ways, Boss. We'll see you in the centre of town,' said Vinh from the truck behind.

'No worries, remember – stay on MacKillop St, then a right into Moorabool. We'll try and leave a few Carriers for you, wouldn't want you boys to miss out on all the fun,' said Mark.

'OK, call if back-up's needed.'

'Likewise, Sergeant.' Mark re-clipped the radio to his webbing and watched as Vinh's truck veered off the Bellarine Highway with a vague sense of unease. For better or worse, the General's plans had just split his men into two groups, just far enough apart to be of little use to each other if the shit truly hit the fan.

Nothing more happened until their truck approached Ryrie St, where the Bellarine highway turned onto the main street of the town centre. Nate pulled to a stop and Jai opened the door on the passenger side of the truck cabin, hanging out to talk to Mark.

'Enemy sighted ahead. Looks like some of them did survive after all.'

Mark stood on his tiptoes so he could see over the top of the cabin and whistled through his teeth at the sight. 'Yeah, enough to keep us busy that's for sure.' One block ahead the street was crammed with bodies, a writhing flesh wall from one side to the other. The Carriers fought against each other, desperately trying to reach something further down the block. Mark's truck had so far been completely ignored.

A tortured wail pierced the air, undulating in agony before being smothered. Mark's head flicked around, trying to see where the sound had come from. It had been unnaturally loud, cutting over the Infected's snarls of anger with ease. The sound drove the Carriers to new heights of frenzy,

climbing over others in their desire to reach the origin of the noise.

‘Surely they wouldn’t have dropped one here,’ muttered Mark to himself.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Steph.

‘Did you hear that scream a moment before? It’s the recording from one of the sound attractants. No wonder there’s so many of them.’ He unclipped his radio and called back to the Fort. ‘I can hear a recording from one of the speaker sets in town. I’ve a got a wall of bloody Infected ripping each other to shreds to reach it, but it makes no sense – what the hell’s it doing there?’

There was unbroken static for a few moments before a voice broke through the background. ‘There were no planned drops for your location. Are you sure that’s what you’re hearing?’

‘I’m not fucking deaf; I know what I heard. What I want to know is why it’s there,’ said Mark, struggling to not lose his temper with the operator.

‘The Seahawk crew noted one lost speaker set, there was an accident with the cable resulting in the cargo falling to the ground. The exact location was not recorded, however the crew assured Command that the speakers would have been destroyed on impact.’

‘Well, if that’s what we’ve found, it seems that the speakers are working just fine. I want reconfirmation that the General wants us to engage, or if he wants to take advantage of their density and drop a MK77 on them and incinerate the lot.’

A gravelly voice replaced the communications clerk on the radio. ‘This is General Black. I want you to proceed as planned. The centre of town will not be bombed.’

Mark was lost for words, stunned at what he was being asked to do.

‘Did you hear my order, Lieutenant? Or am I about to regret giving you the first field commission in decades?’

Mark shook himself out of his stupor. ‘Yes, Sir, we are to proceed and engage the enemy.’

‘Good. Report once you’ve eliminated the swarm. Out.’ The line went dead. In the meantime, Nate had inched the truck further towards the Infected mob. The sound of frenzied Carriers now filled their ears, animalistic aggression smashing their eardrums in a wall of snarling noise.

Mark called through to Vinh and updated him on the Seahawk’s fuck up. ‘We’ve had a direct order to continue despite the swarm. What’s your situation?’

‘The same as you, Sir. We were clear until we turned into Moorabool St, but I think we’ve run up against the other end of your swarm. Time to find out how well these trucks are constructed I guess.’

‘Good luck Sergeant, we’ll see you at the other side. Out.’

Mark turned his focus back to the soldiers standing with him in the cage. Each man and woman was watching, their eyes fixed on his, expressions tense as they waited for him to speak.

‘It’s time to earn our pay. Just concentrate on one target at a time and block out the rest. Remember – we’re safe inside the cage, the only thing that can hurt us in here is friendly fire, so make sure the ends of your barrels are poking outside the wire before you shoot. I don’t want ricochets taking someone out or weakening the cage.’

The tray beneath their feet rumbled as the truck drove closer to the enemy. ‘Take your positions. Let’s send these bastards back to the grave!’

Nate plunged the wedge in front of the cabin deep into the swarm. Those that weren’t pushed to the side disappeared under the truck’s wheels, mashed to a pulp, skulls bursting like rotten watermelons. They finally had the attention of the mob. The Infected surged about the sides of the tray, desperately trying to access the warm, uninfected flesh that was so tantalisingly close.

Nate hit the brakes, bringing the truck to a stop to provide the squad with sure footing as they engaged the Carriers. Snarling faces enclosed the soldiers from all sides, fingers reaching through the wire impotently. The Infected here weren’t new. Skin and tissue on their faces had become desiccated, the lips and gums withdrawn from the teeth as the tissue dried and contracted over time. Their eyes were demonic, the corneas dry and scratched to the point of being opaque and white. Slabs of skin were missing from most, tissue ripped free by unforgiving teeth. Many displayed hideous injuries. Ribs showed clearly on some, white bone stained brown with old blood. Others had abdomens torn, a lung dangling absurdly into the void where its intestines should have been drawing Mark’s gaze. The stench was awful, the smell of an abattoir left to rot.

Steph gagged, then forced herself to swallow the sour bile. She picked out a target and fired, the bullet entering the face of an old man at point blank range, splattering the back of his skull and brain onto the Carriers behind. The corpse dropped from view, replaced immediately by another screaming face. The whole squad now engaged the Infected, the noise of the rifles a

constant rippling of fire as shot after shot rang out.

Sweat began to drip down Mark's face, cutting rivulets through the smoke grime that covered each of them. The morning sun beat down on the truck, heating not only the soldiers, but also the surrounding Carriers, lending them greater speed and dexterity as their body temperatures came closer to that of the living. The Infected climbed over each other and up the sides of the cage. Soon the roof was covered, rotten sludge dripping from their mouths as they screamed in rage and frustration.

The light within the cage dimmed, all but blocked out by the Infected that swarmed over each side. Carriers wrenched at the protecting walls with such ferocity that the wire severed their fingers, falling to the floor like fat white slugs.

Mark wiped a foul-smelling sludge off his face that had dripped from above with disgust. They needed to get the roof clear and find some way to stop the whole truck from being constantly overrun.

'Focus on the roof. I want those bastards off us!' he shouted over the din.

Steph and four others climbed up on the ammunition boxes to get closer. Steph shoved the end of her rifle barrel deep into the open mouth of a screaming Carrier and pulled the trigger. The corpse jerked upwards with the passage of the bullet before falling back down on the top of the cage, splattering her face with mushed brain and clotted blood. She pushed aside her revulsion and picked out her next target, repeating the process again and again.

Mark let his rifle hang from its sling and picked up one of the long broom handles. Pushing one end through a gap in the cage roof, he began levering off the corpses that had been killed. Light filtered through the gaps, letting them see properly again. Finally, the roof was largely free of the dead. Mark thumped on the cabin wall for Nate to move. The truck edged forward and away from the piles of corpses that had surrounded the cage, giving them space to start again.

The next hours blurred into an endless stream of rage filled faces, gore and barely contained terror as the squad systematically culled the Infected outside their cage walls. The recorded screams from the dumped speaker set slowly gained in volume as they made progress down the block. On either side of them now were the remnants of retail stores on either side of the road, where wide solid awnings jutted over the footpath. Behind the truck lay a thick layer of corpses, each with its head smashed apart by high velocity

ammunition.

So far, Nate had been able to drive the truck around any blockages on the road, easing between burnt out car wrecks and the detritus of apocalyptic carnage that had befallen the town. But no longer. The street was blocked from side to side by a massive pile-up. Picking the far left as the easiest point to break through, Nate eased the wedge into the side of a half-crushed Corolla, the point pushing into the rear wheel and panel. The car screeched as broken metal was pushed across the tarmac. Suddenly there was a series of sharp cracking noises as half the weld joining the wedge to the truck snapped. The point of the wedge rode upwards, piercing deep into the metal panel like it was no more than parchment, and then onwards into the fuel tank. Suddenly the car exploded in flame as a spark ignited the spilt petrol.

Nate tried to reverse the truck, but the wedge stuck fast in the car, dragging the wreckage along with them. Flames licked up and over the engine and into the truck's cabin, blistering Nate's fingers as he held the steering wheel. It would only be a matter of minutes before the truck caught fire as well. Realising he was losing the battle, he changed tact and accelerated to the left, driving the truck hard up against the footpath so that the shop awnings came within leaping distance of the truck's roof.

'Jai, we need to get back to the cage. I'll go first and then cover you once I get to the roof.'

Jai nodded and edged over ready to support his escape. Nate shoved open the door, heaving against the crowd of reaching hands below. Jai leant forward, shooting rapidly into the nearest faces to make some room. Nate grabbed hold of the roof above the cabin and hauled himself upwards. From the press, a thick arm shot upwards and gripped his ankle. Nate's eyes bulged in panic as he scrabbled on the smooth metal of the roof for purchase. With one savage tug, Nate was ripped free, falling backwards, limbs splayed onto the Infected below. For a brief moment, he crowd-surfed above the demonic press, his mouth open in voiceless terror, before vicious hands ripped him down to the ground, punching through fragile skin to spill his life in a welter of blood and gore.

Jai tore his eyes away from his Corporal's demise, panting in horror. He slammed the door shut and scrunched his face in pain at the fire licking into the cabin. He opened the passenger door a crack, firing rapidly into the crowd to open a space. After a deep breath, he launched himself up and outward, praying he would find a good grip immediately.

In the cage behind, Mark felt like someone had just punched him in the guts. As flames overran the truck cabin and Nate was torn to shreds amongst the Infected, he knew the vehicle was lost. But his Corporal had just given them half a chance of escaping the mob by driving the truck within jumping distance of the awning. Mark climbed the ammunition crates and undid the locking mechanism to exit the cage, allowing the square manhole to swing down on its hinges.

‘Everyone out!’ he shouted. The rest of his squad looked at their officer scrambling through the roof with stunned expressions before they too realised the mounting danger and followed suit. Within moments the other manhole was opened at the rear of the truck, soldiers hauling each other up through the small gaps to stand unprotected on the roof.

Mark ran to the front of the roof, his footing unstable on the springy wire surface. Jai was half onto the cabin roof, his left hand madly sweeping about for a hold as his feet kicked at the grasping hands below. Mark sprayed the Infected underneath Jai with automatic fire, punching rounds into faces, chests and arms; anything to knock them away from his young friend. It was enough of a reprieve for Jai to pull his whole body up and onto the cabin roof. He wasted little time in jumping over to join Mark on top of the cage.

Mark placed a quick hand on his shoulder, worry plain on his face. ‘Did they get a bite out of you?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t think so, but it’ll have to wait – we need to get off this thing.’

The kid was right. Mark briefly looked about the truck, his balls clenching in fear at the sight. Carriers were starting to climb the cage walls again, driven mad by soldiers that were now reachable. He lifted his rifle to his shoulder, taking quick aim and fired at the back of the truck. The first Carrier to reach the roof fell back, half its head blown away. However, there were more to replace it, too many.

‘I want everyone onto the awning, time to go,’ Mark commanded.

Jai was the first to jump, clearing the one and a half metre distance with ease. The awning was three metres wide, a stiff platform overhanging the footpath to protect the shoppers of past years from rain and sun. It extended in an unbroken surface for the length of the block. Mark pulled Steph out of the cage with one hand then watched with concern as she launched herself across the gap. Jai was ready on the other side, steadying her as she landed and regained her footing. Satisfied his friends were safe for the moment,

Mark turned his mind back to the rest of his squad, continuing to help pull people up from inside the cage.

At the back of the truck, the rear opening was abandoned as Carriers were now within a metre of it, held back only by the constant fire of two soldiers bravely firing at all comers. One of the men stepped back as he changed a magazine and his foot turned on the uneven surface, falling onto the wire surface. The attention of his colleague was pulled for a fraction of a second, and it was enough to turn the tide. The Infected swarmed forward, briefly unchecked, diving through the manhole to the interior of the cage and remaining soldiers. Mark lost his grip of Ruth's hand as a Carrier knocked the ammunition boxes from beneath her feet. Their access to the roof now out of arm's reach, the four remaining soldiers backed up to the front corner of the cage as the rear end filled with Infected, dropping through the rear manhole unchecked.

Ruth looked up once at Mark, grim horror filling her eyes. 'Run! Get going while there's still a chance!' she cried. She turned away, raking the Infected before her with automatic fire before reversing a pistol and ending her own life. Mark couldn't leave, firing down into the cage at the approaching Carriers in support of the last three men until they too were overcome. With bile rising at the back of his throat, Mark shot each of his men rather than leave them to be eaten alive.

'Mark, you need to jump! We can't hold them back much longer!' shouted Steph.

He tore his eyes away from his men that were being ripped apart in the cage beneath his feet. Infected were crawling across the roof toward him, now only a few metres away; broken teeth exposed, snapping convulsively in anticipation of the feast he would provide. Their bodies twitched as bullets fired by his surviving squad hit home. He backed up a step, and then launched himself across the gap. His right foot hit the corner of the awning and for a second his arms windmilled, his body arching as he desperately tried to gain balance. Steph and another soldier grabbed hold of his shirt and wrenched him forward to safety. Carriers immediately tried to copy, lurching forward in an attempt to clear the gap, only to fall harmlessly into the mosh pit of reaching arms beneath.

The whole front of the truck was ablaze, fed by a hot breeze that gusted the flames up against the awning that had now also caught alight. The fire moved like metastasizing cancer, tendrils creeping across the paintwork to

seed destruction in the building adjacent.

‘Is that the speaker set you talked about earlier, Mark?’ said Steph, grabbing his arm and pointing to a smashed steel box forty metres distant. With the focus on the truck, the sound attractant had been left by the Infected, exposed for the first time. The equipment was clearly damaged, the amps stuttering into life intermittently to release a scream. The Carriers had almost managed to reach the equipment enclosed within the mesh cage, one side torn open.

‘I think so. We need to shut it up for good,’ said Mark. He lifted his rifle, ignoring the blaze for a moment as he sighted and shot through the gap in the cage. The bullets ripped into the speaker, destroying the electrical workings. The recording cut out, destroyed.

Mark led the remainder of his squad, jogging away from the fire and back in the direction from where they’d come. The mob of Carriers neglected to follow, turning their attention to the bodies that were being slowly barbecued in the back of the truck. After eighty metres, they ran out of awning. They were clear of Infected but had no way to reach the ground. The concrete was three metres below; far enough to guarantee someone would smash an ankle on impact. Exit through the adjacent building was also out of the question. The only windows opening onto the street were tantalisingly out of arm’s reach.

Mark looked back, thinking of retreat in the other direction but the fire from the truck had taken hold, blocking any movement that way. The breeze was feeding the blaze, sweeping it up the walls of the shops and now towards their current location. It wouldn’t be long before they’d be forced to risk a bone-crushing jump to the ground.

Mark unclipped his radio, his mind racing for options. He called Vinh first, but Carriers still swamped his Sergeant, giving no chance of him aiding an extraction in the time frame required. With little hope, Mark called the Fort and held a tense conversation with Command, before signing off and kicking the shop wall in frustration.

‘They haven’t got any backup to send, have they?’ asked Steph, her eyes searching Mark’s face.

Mark gave a short barking laugh, his eyes lacking any humour. ‘Nah. The bastards aren’t sending us jack shit. We’re on our own, although I shouldn’t be fucking surprised. Resources on this job are spread razor thin.’

‘So, we get ourselves out,’ said Steph, her voice matter of fact. ‘Same as

we've done since the plague broke.'

Mark took a deep breath, drawing strength from her determination. He looked back towards the Carriers and the approaching fire. Their window of opportunity was rapidly closing; they needed to act now. 'Ok, let's make a rope. I want everyone's rifle slings. Now!'

Chapter Thirty-Four

Dappled light fell across Erin's knees in the rear lounge. Despite the sun's warmth on her legs, she'd felt brittle and cold since her friends had left early in the morning. She leant forward from her perch on the couch and picked up her pistol from the coffee table, turning it slowly around to inspect the weapon as if it was new to her. A gun sitting on the table amongst other items of daily life had become the norm, but occasionally it still yanked at something deep within, making her feel terribly sad that violence and the means to inflict it had become ordinary. A noise from the back garden pulled her attention, and her eyes scouted the margins of the yard through the window. Empty. She mentally dismissed the sound as unimportant, and yet at a deeper level it appeared to have unnerved her, as Erin's fingers started to run over the Glock methodically, checking the weapon with practiced ease for the tenth time that morning before placing it down on the table within hand's reach.

A heavy knock on the front door made her jump. A burst of adrenaline at the noise set her heart racing as she scooped up the pistol again and slipped off the safety. She darted into the hallway, her breathing shallow and rapid as she quietly padded up to the front door. Under the door's base, she could see twin shadows of someone's legs. Erin leant into the middle of the door to look through the spy hole. She felt a flood of relief as she recognised Bourke standing on the doorstep. Erin stood back from the entrance and took a few deep slow breaths, deliberately calming her expression before opening the door.

'Lieutenant Bourke, I wasn't sure if you were still planning on coming,' she said, standing in the shadow of the entranceway.

Bourke looked down at his watch and grimaced. 'I was always sticking to my word, I just didn't realise how quickly time had moved. With the attack today, I was doing whatever I could at the Fort to help before coming over. But with this useless bloody arm,' he said glancing at his injured shoulder with disgust, 'I don't really think I was of much use.'

'Don't worry, I was only messing with you,' said Erin. 'Come on in, it'll be good to have some company until they all make it back.'

Bourke smiled as he accepted her extended hand to shake. 'Company I can provide,' he said before pointing out the pistol in her hand, 'but I think

you've got the security part of my role already covered.'

'Yeah, but it never hurts to have a second pair of eyes and gun at hand,' Erin said, closing the door behind him.

They walked down the hallway to the open planned living area at the rear of the house. Erin inspected the back garden through the windows once more before shrugging and heading to the kitchen.

'Do you want a cup of tea or coffee?' she asked, flicking the switch on the kettle to start it boiling.

'Whatever you're making is fine with me.'

Erin put aside her pistol on the kitchen bench to grab a pair of coffee mugs from a cupboard. After the water boiled, she picked up the kettle and poured it over the teabags she'd placed earlier, and then carried them to the long wooden table where Bourke was sitting. He was on the far side, back to the garden.

Bourke heaped three spoons of sugar into his cup, stirring it in before blowing at the surface and taking a small sip. 'It's funny how the small things still irk me, eh?' he said. 'Like not having milk to put in tea or coffee.'

'If that's the worst thing you can come up with, you're not trying hard enough,' said Erin, one eyebrow raised. 'I'd spare a thought for the thousands of cows that must have been in agony with no-one there to milk them after their owners caught the plague. Half of them probably died from blood poisoning and mastitis.'

'Geez, you can pick the farm girl in the room without a problem,' said Bourke, raising his hand in defeat.

Erin let the topic drop. 'Have you heard any news about how they're going in Geelong?'

Bourke's smile faded. 'On the whole, most of the crews were doing ok when I left. Early reports were that the firebombs had been relatively effective in culling most Carriers, with the trucks just having to mop up the stragglers that didn't reach the noise attractants in time for the bonfire. I just feel like shit that I'm not there taking the same risk as the other men. I've got mates out there today, and because of that freak who shot me, I'm not there to help keep them alive.'

'I hear you,' said Erin quietly. 'Everyone I have left is fighting today. This waiting is eating at me like cancer; I wish I were there myself as well. At least then I'd know if Jai was ok.'

'That's your brother?'

‘Yeah. He’s on the crew with Mark Collins. They got allocated the route through the town centre.’

Bourke’s face stiffened slightly at her words and he picked up his cup again, suddenly interested in the floral design on the outside.

‘What? Do you know something about them?’ asked Erin leaning forward from the other side of the table to grab his wrist. ‘If you do, I have a right to...’

Bourke’s head smashed forward into the table, his face obliterated as the bullet exited, narrowly missing Erin. For a split second, she sat in shock, her face spattered in Lieutenant Bourke’s blood and neural matter. Her brain finally kicked in, and she threw herself to the side as a second bullet punctured the back window to bury itself in the kitchen island behind her seat. The fractured glass pane crashed free, splintering into a thousand pieces on the carpet.

Erin’s hands were shaking as she sneaked a look over the edge of the table. Jeremy was walking across the back lawn toward the house, casually holding a pistol at his side like he was out on a morning stroll. Erin swore, realising her own gun was still on the kitchen bench. On hands and knees, she scuttled around the island bench into the kitchen, panting in short desperate breaths as fear gripped her rib cage like a vice. She stuck her hand over the bench top, madly grasping around for the Glock. Finally, her hand hit on the cold metal of the handle, and she pulled it down. Erin flicked the safety off and held the gun out before her in a two-hand grip aiming above the island bench, her back against the cupboard door.

Footsteps crunched on glass as she heard Jeremy step through the broken window.

‘Erin?’ called out Jeremy in a singsong voice. ‘I’ve come to visit. I hope you don’t mind me dropping by unannounced.’

She heard him move closer to the table, and clenched the handle of her pistol tighter, grinding her teeth in an effort to control the shake of her hands.

‘I see our friend Lieutenant Bourke has decided to take a nap on the table. What poor form, looks like he can’t handle his drink!’ said Jeremy, chuckling at his own humour. ‘Now Erin, let’s see what your face looks like with a bullet hole to improve its features. You fell behind the table I think...’ he said, looming into view for the first time, his eyes fixed on the floor. ‘Now where the fuck did you get to?’ he said, eyes widening in surprise at finding her missing.

Erin squeezed the trigger, aiming for the centre of his chest. Jeremy spun backwards, the bullet hitting him with the force of a sledgehammer. The noise of her gun was enormous in the kitchen nook, reverberating back upon her painfully. Erin paused, trying to listen for sound of his movement.

Shakily, she drew feet underneath and forced herself to stand. Erin sucked in a ragged breath, the sound of her blood pounding above the angry whine in her ears. She forced one step closer to the table, then another, until she could see past. A brief yelp of frustrated terror escaped her mouth as she realised he was gone. Erin looked madly about for signs of him. The carpet was a mess of blood, spatter reaching in numerous directions from the inflicted wounds. She identified a streak of drops making for the hallway.

Erin was torn between the visceral urge to run, and a need to see it through. She couldn't let him get away, not this time. Not after he'd invaded her house and killed another of her friends. She forced herself to walk toward the hallway. Peeking around the corner, her heart dropped – the hall was empty.

From behind her head, came the unmistakable noise of a bullet being chambered. Erin froze.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Harry sat in the driver's seat, his hands gripping the steering wheel in fury as he heard Mark's request for support be denied over the radio. He was in the Defender 4WD used earlier in the Leopold evacuation, now repurposed as a medical support vehicle. Sitting on the Bellarine highway, two kilometres back from the fight, Harry had been frustrated by his allocated role. Ordered not to place the Fort's only remaining medical resource at risk by approaching any active battlefield, Harry had been told that he could only provide medical support to those able to self-evacuate to his location behind the lines. He felt worse than useless. Close enough to almost see his mates die, too far away to be of any help.

Harry picked up the radio. 'This is Medic one. I am within distance to reach Lieutenant Collins' location in time. Request permission to evacuate his team.' He listened to the speaker, not realising he was holding his breath for the response.

'Medic one – your request is denied. Remain at your current location until you have further orders,' said a curt voice, dismissing him out of hand.

Harry swore, punching the dashboard in frustration. He reached behind the steering wheel and turned the keys in the ignition, launching the engine.

'What are you doing, Sir?' until now, the Private assigned to assist Harry had remained quiet.

'I'm going to get my friends, what the fuck does it look like?'

'That would be against a direct order. It's a chargeable offence, Sir.'

Harry looked at the Private incredulously. 'Like I give two damns. If I live, it's not like they're going to jail their only doctor. Are you coming or getting out? Make your choice and quick.'

The Private shut his mouth and answered by fastening his seatbelt.

'Good. Another rifle will come in handy.' Harry rammed the accelerator to the floor, spinning the wheels as he sped toward the town centre.

'Jesus Christ,' muttered the Private as they approached Mark's location scant minutes later. For over two blocks, the street was carpeted in bodies and gore.

'You were on the wall during the fight at the Fort, weren't you?'

The Private shook his head slightly, his eyes wide as he took in the scene to either side of the car.

‘Well don’t worry about them. They’re dead. It’s only the walking ones that need concern you. Like those bastards there,’ Harry said.

Two stray Carriers were lurching into the path of their car. Harry had by default fallen in on the route taken by Nate, the only path on the street relatively free of corpses. He sped up, hoping to mow them down with the bull bar. The Defender shuddered as it smacked into the plague carriers, one disappearing underneath immediately. The car bucked over its body on the road, the abdomen bursting with a wet pop. The other Carrier had been flipped onto the bonnet by the force of impact, its legs smashed to a pulp. One hand gripped a windscreen wiper while the other formed a fist and smashed repeatedly at the glass, screaming rage at the two occupants. On the third punch, a spider web of cracks splintered outwards, and with the fourth, it was through. Skin was peeled back from its knuckles, the bones mashed into a misshapen lump by the force expended to break through the reinforced windscreen. Harry recoiled in his seat, stamping on the brake pedal as he drew his service pistol. The Carrier reached forward and grabbed the front of the Private’s shirt, wrenching him closer. Harry chambered a round and fired point-blank, blasting half of the creature’s face away. The Private fell back in his chair, skin pale with terror.

‘Well that’s fucked us if we need to push through a swarm,’ muttered Harry. The windscreen was unusable, turned opaque by the damage, he had no choice but to kick out the remaining glass, so he could see. In the rear-view mirror, he saw the Carrier he’d driven over starting to crawl towards them, trailing intestines and useless legs in its wake. Time to move again.

‘There they are, Sir,’ said the Private, pointing to a shop awning on the left side of the street. Harry followed his direction and spotted them a moment later. Two soldiers were standing on the footpath below, firing at an approaching mob of Infected, while a third was being lowered from the awning on what appeared to be a rope made of rifle slings. Four people remained on the awning, and with less than forty metres separating the approaching Carriers and his squad, Mark was running out of time fast. Further down the block, the truck was a roaring inferno that had ceased to hold any interest for the surrounding mob.

‘Hold on, it’s going to get a little bumpy for a second.’ Harry switched

the car into 4WD and climbed out of the truck's wake. The vehicle's wheels spun in loose flesh intermittently on either side before biting against tarmac or bone enough to propel them forward over the blanket of dead, straight towards his friends' location.

He hit the brakes as he mounted the footpath underneath the awning, sliding to a stop across the bodies underneath and jumped out of the car to join the other soldiers shooting at the Infected. Heavy thumps echoed as Mark and the remaining three soldiers lowered themselves off the awning before dropping onto the car's roof.

Harry turned as he felt someone grip his shoulder and found his mate grinning widely at him. 'Disobeying orders again I see, mate,' said Mark. 'I heard the radio exchange.'

'So, charge me,' said Harry, returning his smile.

'No bloody chance of that, mate.'

'You can thank me later, but how about we get the fuck out of here?' said Harry looking over his shoulder at the approaching corpses.

'Ah, guys?' said Steph pointing back in the direction from where Harry had come. 'Our retreat's just been blocked, and I don't think we can push through without a windscreen. We'll end up a canned dinner.'

Mark looked back and found fifty odd Carriers lurching toward the intersection, blocking their path back toward the Bellarine Highway and Queenscliff. 'Shit. Get in the car, we'll find a different way around.'

Once the last door had closed, Harry put the car in gear and hung a tight U-turn. They were fast running out of options. Harry accelerated for the only route left, north onto Yarra St, a road that would take them towards the bay. The car bucked and skidded forward over the flesh-covered asphalt, barely under control. Harry mounted the footpath at the corner, avoiding the reaching arms of the Infected mob that sought to cut off their escape, and suddenly they were on empty road. The 4WD's tyres hit solid tarmac and the vehicle leapt forward like a greyhound released.

Mark got on the radio to Vinh who was still fighting his way through the end of a swarm three blocks away. There was still no chance of joining the soldiers in the back of his truck. Mark bit his lip in frustration, weighing his options before making his decision.

'Vinh, we'll execute the evacuation of the Westfield's mall in the meantime and aim to rendezvous with you on the mall's north side in two hours. Will that be enough time for you to break through and meet us?' he

asked.

‘We’ll be there, Sir. Out,’ came Vinh’s crackled reply over the radio.

Mark hooked the radio back onto his webbing. ‘Harry, take the second left. We’re ditching the car and breaking into the Westfields.’

‘Why the hell would you want to do that,’ asked Harry, ‘when we can just find some clear streets and hightail it back to base?’

‘The General said there’s a group holed up somewhere in that shopping centre that I was supposed to locate if possible. Might as well make the best of this clusterfuck and get part of the mission right. With the condition of this car, we need to find a safer place anyway – might as well achieve both at the same time. If there is anyone still alive, it must mean the place is secure from Infected. We can take cover there, then join up with Vinh as soon as possible.’

Harry still looked unconvinced.

‘I’m not leaving half my platoon behind while I run back to base!’ Mark said, losing patience. ‘And after what you risked for us just now, I thought you’d understand.’

Stung by his words, Harry stared straight ahead, silent. At the second corner he swung left, the tyres screeching in complaint as the back end slid out briefly before regaining grip. The street in front of the mall was empty of Carriers, however, a block distant, a handful of dogs could be seen on one footpath. On seeing the car, they started to lope forward to investigate.

Harry mounted the curb, sliding to a stop before the main entrance. Looking through the heavy glass doors into the gloomy interior, Mark failed to note any movement. A heavy padlock was fastened between the doors, too solid for them to break quickly.

‘There’s a pinch bar in the back, if someone can grab it,’ said Harry. ‘It might be enough to break through the side entrance.’

Jai fished under his seat blindly before grinning as he pulled free the metal bar. The remaining members of the squad piled out of the car and jogged over to a normal sized door adjacent to the larger entrance, usually used by shop owners as an after-hours exit. Jai wedged one end of the pointed tool into the locking mechanism, then put his weight on the bar. The bar bulged slightly, but the door held. Mark leant his strength to his efforts, and with a metallic groan, the lock tore free of its housing. The door crashed open, banging loudly off an adjacent shop front.

‘All right, everyone in,’ said Mark quietly, waving the group through.

Inside the entrance, the seven created a defensive arc pointing inwards while Jai attempted to close the door again.

‘We screwed the lock, Mark. Best we can do is block it with something heavy I reckon,’ he said after a brief inspection.

One of the other soldiers helped Jai drag a heavy stone bench seat up to the door.

‘That’ll have to do. Doesn’t have to hold long,’ said Mark, pacing forward into the unlit gloom of the mall.

Jai frowned as he gave the poorly blocked door one last look, then jogged after his squad to catch up.

Five minutes later, a furred snout poked through the crack of the broken door, sniffing the air vigorously. Catching the scent of human, lips snarled back to expose sharp canines. The animal shoved its face heavily into the gap, claws scrabbling for purchase. Slowly, the bench seat began to slide on the tiled floor, the gap becoming wider. Suddenly its head was through, showing that partially healed rents ran backwards over the scalp of the huge Rottweiler. Saliva frothed at the edge of its mouth, dripping to the ground in glutinous threads. It withdrew slightly, then rammed hard into the gap again until the seat moved far enough to allow its shoulders room, and then it was through. The rest of the plague-ridden dog pack followed their leader, easily passing through the gap created by the bigger canine and padded softly into the complex in wake of the soldiers.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Behind her head, Erin heard the pistol's slide release, drawing the bullet into the chamber as it slid forward, ready for use. She dropped to a crouch, spinning on one heel to face the man trying to kill her. The gun fired with explosive noise in the confines of the hallway, the bullet shooting open air where her head had been a split second before.

Jeremy loomed over her, one hand clutched at his stomach where blood and gastric juices dribbled between his fingers. He looked mildly bewildered, not understanding why she was still alive. Erin screamed, her fear and rage transforming the sound to a primeval war cry, and stamped her foot outward in an ungainly kick, her heel connecting with his kneecap. The joint buckled sideways, ligaments audibly snapping as he fell to the ground.

Erin stood and crunched her foot viciously upon his hand to release his gun from shattered fingers. She kicked the weapon free, skittering along the floorboards well out of reach. Erin's breathing was rapid, adrenaline swamping her system and heightening every sense as she gripped her own pistol. Jeremy cowered on the ground beneath her, whimpering as he cradled deformed fingers against his bloody abdomen.

'Don't do it,' he begged between convulsive breaths.

Erin said nothing for a moment, staring over the sights of her gun directly into his eyes as she considered his request, thinking of her friend Rachael, defiled and murdered by this same creep. She thought also of the honourable man lying faceless in a puddle of his own blood not ten metres away.

'Maybe I should ask Lieutenant Bourke for his opinion on what I should do?' she said, her voice thick with anger. 'Would he advise mercy a second time?'

Jeremy stared back at her, his face hardening again as he saw the girl's resolve. 'No? How about Rachael then? I don't think she'd be telling me to hold off either.'

Jeremy's face contorted in rage as he spat a bloody clump of sputum at her feet. 'Fucking get it over with then. Just know, every night you go to bed, you'll see my face when you close your eyes. You'll never sleep again.'

Erin squeezed the trigger.

‘That’s where you’re wrong. Your place in my fears just ended,’ she said quietly, staring down at the crimson blossoming from Jeremy’s forehead. ‘Corpses of your sort don’t generate much terror anymore.’

She felt oddly numb, not really sure anymore how to react to a scene like this. Relief that she was alive? Terror at how close she had come to dying? Anger that another of her friends had been stolen from her?

Maybe it would come later. Right now, she needed to find out what was happening to her brother, and numb detachment would help her do that. Emotion and the pain it brought in tow could wait for a later date. She knew something had gone wrong with her brother’s platoon. Bourke’s face had said it all before he’d been shot.

She left Jeremy where he lay, a spattering of flies already hovering over the grot of his abdominal wound. Erin went to her room, gathered a few necessities into her rucksack before walking out the door without a backward glance. With any luck, the soldiers at the Fort would have found out some information of what was happening on the front line.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Mark swung his torch in a slow arc across the tiled passage between the shops. All were secured, roller doors preventing any access to the wares inside. The mall had the silence of a tomb, not a sound penetrated the complex from the outside world making every footstep seem unnaturally loud. As they progressed deeper, the light provided through the glass entrance dimmed, then disappeared altogether.

‘Hey Mark, check this out,’ said Steph. She was standing to one side of the walkway, shining her torch through the roller door of a store. Behind the security barrier, three corpses were neatly arranged on the floor. Each showed unmistakable features of plague infection prior to being put out of action. On the roll-down barrier itself, a black tick had been painted.

‘Looks like whoever’s living here has been conducting a systematic cleanout of the plague,’ she said. ‘I didn’t notice until then, but each store we’ve passed has a black tick plastered over it, like they’re noting that it’s been cleared.’

Mark glanced along the shops, and sure enough, each one had been marked. ‘Fine by me, less work for us to do,’ he said. ‘However, if we do run into some live ones, how much ammo does everyone have? I’ve got less than a mag left.’

While in the truck, each soldier had been reloading from pre-packed magazines stacked inside the crates in the middle of the tray. This meant that few of them had been able to stock their webbing adequately prior to their forced evacuation.

‘Not much,’ said Steph, ejecting her magazine to check. ‘I reckon I’m down to my last ten shots,’ she said, shoving it home again. Few of the others were in much better a situation.

A little further on, the hallway opened up into a large open ring, the roof soaring high above. On the far side, a travelator to the second floor lay dormant.

‘Where do we try first?’ asked Mark to himself. ‘If I was hiding out in a mall, which shop would I chose as a home-base?’

‘That’s pretty obvious,’ said Jai.

‘Yeah, a supermarket,’ interjected Steph. ‘You’d want the essentials

within hand's reach. If you've got food and water – there's little need to leave and place yourself at risk.'

Jai nodded. 'My thoughts exactly.' He turned on the spot, searching for something. 'There!' he said, pointing at a sign hanging from the ceiling. 'A Coles supermarket is down that hallway to the right. Why don't we go there first?'

Mark shrugged. 'Fair enough, can't say I have a better idea.'

A loud crash echoed to their right. The group spun as one, rifles pulled to shoulders. A Carrier had appeared behind a shop's security door, now hammering at the barrier as it sought to reach them. The creature's rasping cry was somewhat muted by the Perspex, but the assault on the shop front echoed loudly through the open space above them.

'Looks like they didn't manage to finish the cull, eh?' said Harry. 'You want me to kill it?'

'Nah, leave it, anything else here already knows about us now. We're too low on ammo, save your bullets for when we don't have a choice,' Mark said.

The group walked onward with weapons at the ready, making for the supermarket. The shops changed to a mix of cafes and fast-food stalls, their displays a technicolour of mould and rot under the torch light. Shortly, the hallway became blocked. Jai and Steph's instincts must have been right, as someone had constructed barriers to prevent Carrier access. Lengths of dowel had been pulled from clothes racks, their ends sharpened to spikes. These rudimentary spears were fixed at forty-centimetre intervals, nailed to the top of benches so that the points faced outwards at waist height, ready to transfix unwary Carriers like flies on a pin. Some of the spears looked like they'd seen some action, their wooden lengths stained with dried blood.

Mark carefully eased between two points and climbed onto the top of one of the tables. From the additional height, he cut a beam of light through the darkness with his torch ahead, spotting the entrance to the supermarket. Like the other stores, the security doors had been rolled down, and there was no sign of movement or light within to suggest the people remained. Eyes still ahead checking for any other dangers, he crouched slightly, making ready to jump to the ground.

'Wait!' Harry said urgently. 'Check below your feet.'

Mark swayed slightly, regaining his balance as the table shifted under him. Mark looked down and felt his gut turn. The defenders hadn't stopped with the table-top spears. On the ground behind the bench was a series of

Punji sticks ready to catch anything that made it over the first obstacle. Long nails the length of his palm had been hammered through planks of wood and left facing upwards. Mark's feet ached just looking at them. One of his mates had lost a foot to a similar booby trap laced with human faeces in Afghanistan. The wounds had been hideous on their own, but once the subsequent gangrene took hold, amputation had been the only option left.

'Thanks mate, I bloody owe you.'

'I'll add it to the list,' said Harry.

Mark carefully jumped to free ground then moved the boards aside for the others. The last twenty metres before the supermarket was clear of obstacles. Mark jogged forward, angling toward a body sized door within the larger security sliding panel. He tried the handle, giving a brief rattle back and forth. Locked.

'Stand clear guys,' he said over his shoulder, then stood to the side and aimed his rifle at the lock. Sparks flew as a bullet smashed through the aluminium, breaking the simple locking mechanism apart. He shouldered the door aside, and they were in.

Harry tried a set of light switches beside the entrance but was unrewarded. A brief scan via torch light showed they were in the right place though. At the far left of the store, the shelves had been moved aside to create an open space. Where they stood at the entrance, the aisles remained, however were picked clean of edible food. To the far right lay a midden heap of empty wrappers and cans. A cloying smell of rot filled Steph's nostrils, but disturbingly, it seemed to come from the cleared area as opposed to the rubbish heap.

'Hello?' called out Steph. 'Is there anyone here?' The only reaction to her voice was the skittering of tiny feet as a large rodent bolted into the trash pile.

'You reckon those rats carry the new plague as well?' asked Jai, his eyes staring at the point where the animal had disappeared.

'As long as the bloody thing runs in the opposite direction, it probably doesn't matter,' Harry said.

They walked forward, checking each aisle for movement as they went until they reached the cleared area. A trio of gas camping lanterns sat on a table at the start of the open space. Steph lit all three and passed them around, providing a yellow light within the oppressive gloom. The spot had housed thirty odd people at a guess, the ground along one side of the space covered

in evenly spaced mattresses topped with sleeping bags.

Two large tables were covered in a neat arrangement of weapons: kitchen knives, homemade spears like they'd found in the outside defences, and two hunting rifles.

'If that's all they had to clear this whole complex, it's nothing short of amazing,' whispered one of the soldiers as he fingered one of the blades. 'There's got to be a hundred shops in here, and god knows how many Infected there were to begin with.'

The smell of rot was now overwhelming. Mark walked closer to one of the beds, nudging the sleeping bag with his foot. The top of the bag fell away, exposing a body lying within. The features were swollen and unrecognisable, marbled with greenish-blue. Its flesh was bloated, abdomen bulging upward with gas like a mother carrying twins. The slight movement from Mark's foot was more than the corpse's tissue integrity could handle at its advanced stage of decomposition, and the abdominal wall burst, releasing a fetid cloud of gas and fluids.

Jai gagged and emptied his guts on the floor. Steph placed one hand on his shoulder as his stomach heaved, the other was over her own mouth as she struggled against the smell. Mark left them and moved down the line of beds. Every bag was the same. A dead occupant strangled with a length of cord. He stood up from the last bed, sadness filling his chest with dead weight at what he'd found. The last four sleeping bags had held children, none of them older than six years of age.

To the left of the mattresses was what looked like a communal area where carpets had been arranged in a large square. In the middle was a slumped figure. Mark walked over and joined Harry who was kneeling next to this corpse.

'Do you reckon he killed them all?' asked Mark.

The dead man sat with legs crossed, held up only by the barrel of the rifle that was still buried deep in his mouth. The back of his skull was missing.

Harry looked up at him with sad eyes. 'One hell of a murder-suicide, eh?'

'It must have been a consensus decision amongst the group, there's no way one guy could have killed so many without help. For all we know, this poor bastard drew the short straw and got left with the dirty work. Why the hell did they do it when they knew the army base was only thirty kilometres

away in Queenscliff?’

‘Might as well have been the moon for all the obstacles that were between the two places. The General told you it’d been a few weeks since they’d made contact, didn’t he? At that time there was tens of thousands of Infected roaming the streets outside, and no approval to bomb the swarms. You saw their weapons when we entered – useless as toothpicks against a mob of those bastards,’ Harry said.

‘Knowing the army, they wouldn’t have committed to a deadline for extraction either. There’s no food left here. Maybe this type of death was seen as a kinder option to that of watching the children starve. Either way, it’s fucked up,’ said Mark, straightening slowly from where he’d squatted. ‘There’s nothing we can do here; we should probably get moving to be ready for Vinh when he breaks through.’

Mark gathered his small squad together, taking the opportunity to evenly share out the remaining ammunition. He emptied his two magazines, giving a handful of rounds to replenish those that had less than a full mag remaining. Steph accepted the extra rounds, slotting them into her magazine with practiced efficiency, while Mark moved onto the others in the group to spread the meagre supply around. He was now down to a handgun and sword, preferring to ensure his soldiers had fully primed rifles for the engagement to come. He reached behind his head, grasping hold of his sword’s handle and loosened the blade within its scabbard.

A low growl rumbled from the darkness, the contours of the shop bouncing the sound so that it seemed to come from more than one direction. Harry felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. That had been no ordinary dog. He’d heard that growl before, back at the research facility. The rest of the squad had frozen at the sound, any sparse conversation as they reloaded and prepared, abruptly silenced. A clicking of overgrown claws issued from beyond the meagre glow of the lanterns as the heavy animal paced forward, the faint noise seeming to mesmerise the soldiers.

From the inky gloom two slitted eyes reflected against the lamp as a broad head and body emerged. The Rottweiler was huge, eighty kilograms of lean muscle driven to violent insanity by the Lysan plague. It stopped for a moment, tail stiff as the square head slowly turned to inspect and choose its first victim. To either side of the dog emerged the rest of the pack. The Rottweiler’s lips drew upward in a quivering snarl, exposing needle sharp canines.

Jai rammed a magazine home into his rifle, and the spell was broken. The dogs launched, flowing forward to attack with practiced efficiency. Half the pack centred on the closest three soldiers who'd been squatting on the ground while they serviced their rifles. Only one managed to get off a shot before they went down under a hail of teeth and claws, the beasts tearing chunks of flesh with every vicious snap, eating their victims while they still fought and screamed beneath them.

Other dogs swerved around the melee, bounding forward to attack Jai who fired a burst of ill aimed rounds as a German Shepard leapt for his throat, the bullets punching through the chest of the animal. Mark was knocked from his feet, landing on his arse as he tried to un-holster his pistol. He kicked out with both feet, fending away a Pit Bull that tried to dodge around and reach his face. Finally, he cleared his pistol and brought it to bear, firing three rapid shots into the dog.

Mark kicked the carcass off his leg and rolled to his feet, scanning about for the state of his squad. Both Jai and Harry were standing, their attention gripped as they shot at three dogs trying to reach them. A scream of terror jerked Mark's gaze to the right. Steph had lost her rifle and was being dragged out of the ring of light by the Rottweiler, its massive jaws clamped about one heel. Mark raised his pistol but couldn't get off a shot safely as Steph blocked his target with her struggles. He swore in frustration and ran forward, drawing the sword from over his shoulder. As Mark approached, the dog released her foot and turned to face him. With a snarl it launched forward, jaw wide, teeth ready to clamp about his leg. Mark punched ahead with his sword, the point burying into its neck. The force of the dog's leap drove the sword deep, onward into the chest cavity to puncture the heart. He placed a foot on the now inert dog's shoulder and wrenched his sword free.

Harry and Jai had successfully killed their attackers. Steph picked up her rifle and now the four friends turned to fight off the last of the pack, still feeding on the downed soldiers. The dogs were oblivious to their approach, attention held rapt by the bloody mess under their jaws as they were shot to death. Mark picked up a torch and scanned the darkness surrounding for any further sign of movement.

'I think that's all of them,' Mark said, breathing heavily as he turned back to the three soldiers lying on the ground. Their injuries were horrific. One man had borne the brunt of the dogs' attention, disembowelled and throat torn free. The other two still drew shuddering breaths, but it was only a

matter of time before they joined their comrade in death, such was the degree of injuries sustained. Every moment of life was now but another minute of torture.

One of the injured soldiers looked up at Mark, eyes wide in agony. He coughed, mouth crimson with blood. 'Just hurry and do it,' he groaned.

Two gunshots rang out then Mark turned away from the scene, blocking out the mercy killing to focus on Steph. 'Sit down, we need to check your ankle.'

Steph looked back, her face drained of colour as she obeyed and allowed Mark to roughly undo the laces of her boot.

'They were infected with the plague, weren't they?' she asked quietly. 'Harry, you were doing your research on these dogs. Are they like human Carriers, can they transmit the virus when they bite?' Her eyes pleaded the doctor for a negative answer.

Harry refused to meet her gaze, mutely nodding an affirmative. Laces now undone, Mark ripped off her boot and sock, shoving her trouser leg up to her knee to expose the skin.

'Bring that light closer, will you?' he muttered as he searched her foot and ankle for signs of trauma. Harry sat the lantern on the ground as Mark ran his fingers over her skin once again. Next, he picked up her boot, fingering the puncture marks left in the leather ankle guard.

'I think you're in the clear, babe,' he said, finally allowing himself to sigh in relief. 'I can't find even a graze on you, and to back that up, the teeth didn't get all the way through,' he said, showing her that the inner side of the boot was still intact.

Steph blinked rapidly as she stifled a sob, tears coming unbidden as relief flooded her system. 'I thought that bite had killed me,' she said, her voice thick as she hugged Mark. 'If you hadn't come when you did, it would have...'

'But it didn't, ok?' Mark said, cutting her off gently. 'You're safe now.'

'Guys?' Jai said urgently. 'I think we need to clear out.'

Mark looked around quickly, 'Is there another one in here?'

'Nope, but I think the bastards are starting to come back for a second round,' he said, a slight catch in his voice as he looked wide-eyed at something. The other three friends followed his gaze to where the first dog to be killed lay. Its back leg twitched once, then abruptly the dog lurched upwards, pushing the front half of its body off the ground.

‘Harry, can plague infected dogs reanimate?’ asked Mark.

‘We never tested to find out, but I think you’ve got an answer.’

The dog had now pulled its back legs underneath and stood drunkenly as if the nervous system was relearning how to control its body. The limbs on a second dog started to twitch.

Steph grabbed her boot, stamped her foot back into it and started doing up the laces at speed. ‘Somebody kill the fucking thing already,’ she said.

The dog turned its head at the sound and its eyes locked onto her. One side of the beast’s mouth curled upward in a stroke-like snarl and it started to lurch toward her.

Harry lifted his rifle and fired a short burst. Two of the rounds connected, hitting the animal in the gut and chest. The force of impact knocked the animal to the ground for a moment, but showing no signs of pain, it immediately sought to stand once more. Boot now on, Steph sighted along her rifle and fired a bullet deep into its brain. This time, the corpse stayed down.

‘I don’t think we have enough bullets left to take them out a second time. Let’s get the hell out of here,’ Mark said.

Steph and Harry had already started jogging toward the supermarket entrance. Mark waited for Jai to follow suit then he closed in behind, bringing up the rear. As he reached the doorway, he turned and shone his torch back to the gore of the battle. The light flashed back off the eyes of the Rottweiler who had just regained its feet. The animal snarled and started forward in an ungainly trot. Mark had no intention of waiting; he turned again and took off after his mates.

Mark thanked his foresight to push aside the Punji stick boards as he dived flat under the tables holding the spears and rolled back to his feet. Jai had a ten-metre lead on the group as he took point, his rifle raised while he ran. More Carriers had emerged from the depths of the shops on either side, hammering at the roll down barriers and screaming anger as they sprinted past.

Jai passed into the open area where they’d found the signage for the Coles store, turned the corner to head back to their original entrance, and ran straight into the arms of a Carrier. The creature clamped onto his left hand and yanked him forward to its exposed teeth. Jai screamed as fractured teeth bit down, puncturing deep into his wrist. Blood spurted from his radial artery as Mark finally closed the intervening distance and stabbed through the thin

temporal bone, obliterating the Carrier's brain.

Jai clamped down on the wound with his free hand, blocking the haemorrhaging artery with his thumb. Mark ratcheted the tourniquet within his uniform sleeve tight to help stem the blood flow. 'With any luck that will slow down the virus as well,' he said, pulling the young man to his feet.

'Bullshit,' said Jai. 'You know as good as me – I'm fucked. That was a major blood vessel.'

A moan issued from behind them, cutting the conversation short. Both men looked around to see more Infected stumbling along the hallway toward them. The doorway forced open by the dog pack had been found by Carriers.

'Vinh's supposed to be meeting us at the north entrance anyway,' Mark said, turning away from the approaching mob as if it was nothing more than an inconvenience. 'We'll get you to the truck, and then sort the wound. Don't give up while you've still got breath in your lungs, Jai.'

The group cut across the open area, angling toward a hallway signposted as an exit. Light at the end of the corridor beckoned as the mingled cacophony of barks and snarls drove them to greater speeds. Two glass paned doors blocked the exit. Harry wasted no time, smashing the glass from one panel with the butt of his rifle. Fresh air hit the sweat on Mark's face as he ducked through the gap, bringing up the rear.

The street was empty. No Carriers or dogs, but more importantly – no bloody truck. Mark swore to himself. 'We'll have to move to him...' he started to say before a noise caught his attention. The sound of a truck gearing down made his heart leap, and he looked up to find Vinh's semi-trailer rounding the corner, not forty metres distant. They ran to meet him. Behind, a dog careered through the gap in the window, catching a foot on the bottom rim of the doorframe and flipping forward to smash its face into the ground. The other door's window smashed in a shower of glass, punched free by a Carrier.

The truck braked heavily, wheels screaming as they skidded the last two feet on the tarmac. The four survivors clambered up the outside of the cage, Jai awkwardly climbing with only one functioning hand, biting his lip in determination as he scaled to the roof. Vinh was in the cage, and unlocked the manholes in the roof, allowing them inside before fastening it once more.

Without a word of greeting, each had a loaded rifle shoved in their hands.

'We managed to push through,' said Vinh, 'but the rest of the swarm's

not far behind.'

On cue, the first of the Infected trailing the truck lurched into view around the corner. The soldiers took up positions, aiming through the cage, ready to engage the enemy. The radio clipped to the Sergeant's chest crackled into life, and he lifted it to his ear. A broad smile cut across Vinh's features as he listened intently.

'Best news I've heard all day, it'll be a pleasure fighting with you, Sir. Out,' he said, hooking the radio back onto his shirt.

'Well?' asked Mark, one eyebrow raised.

'Some other trucks have broken through. We'll have support shortly, Boss,' Vinh said. 'Have to say, it almost pisses me off. After what we've been put through, seems a shame to share the credit for clearing the centre of town.'

'Fuck the credit,' grated Mark, daring to hope for the first time. 'If the rest of my squad can make it home, they can own the whole damn day for all I care.'

The snarls of the approaching Infected grew in volume, they were now less than twenty metres distant. Mark fastened his mind back to the job at hand and took a deep breath.

'Fire at will!'

Mark clipped the radio back to his chest. Word had just come through that another truck had reached the car manufacturing plant, securing the location. The operation as a whole had therefore been a success, and yet the taste of this victory made him want to spit.

Mark mopped sweat from his forehead, leaving a smear of dirty ash beneath the hairline. Exhaustion sat in his chest like a ton weight as he surveyed the street. What had been an empty road, now lay as a feast for crows. Inert corpses, returned to death, lay knee deep for blocks. His remaining soldiers, half of what he'd left Queenscliff with that morning, sat slumped amongst the spent ammunition boxes on the floor. At the end of the block stood two other trucks, teams that had joined them in culling the swarm from both ends, stamping out the plague abomination until nothing moved.

Mark sighed, knowing that he couldn't delay his next duty any longer. He walked to the back of the cage, where Jai sat propped with his back

against the wire. His eyes were closed, breathing laboured as sweat dripped in heavy beads from his face. Harry and Steph were both with him, one on either side. As Mark squatted down at the young man's feet, Jai's eyes opened a crack.

'How are you holding up?' he asked, resting one hand on his leg in concern. Jai's gaze shifted to the hand, looking at the little finger's stump.

'I've been better,' he said with a half-smile. His eyes slowly moved up from Mark's amputation to lock a feverish gaze on his Lieutenant. 'I wish I had your guts, Mark. If I'd been brave enough, I could have chopped the arm off straight away. Maybe that would have stopped the infection?'

Mark's gut twisted at his friend's words, carving yet another unseen wound upon his heart and mind. 'Nah, that's not the case, mate. We both knew from the moment it happened – that wound couldn't be fixed, the vessels affected were just too big.' Mark swallowed, feeling a lump in his throat that wouldn't budge. There was only one job left to do, but he'd wait until the kid passed on.

Mark felt a hand lightly grip his, the skin burning with fever. 'I'm not letting you do that,' said Jai. 'You're a good mate, Mark, but I'll be damned if I'll let any of you carry this on your conscience. Get me a gun and I'll finish it myself.'

Mark stared at him, lost for words. Slowly, he unclipped the holster at his waist and removed the weapon. Jai reached out with his uninjured hand and took the pistol from his friend's grip.

'Tell Erin I love her, yeah?'

Jai reversed the gun, placing the end of the short barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

Epilogue

A damp breeze tugged at a strand of hair that had broken free of her ponytail. Erin reached up absently and tucked it behind her ear. She glanced at the clouds above, dark and pregnant with a promise of rain. Winter had come early this year, bringing grey days that reflected her mood. She felt like she should probably be crying, and yet her eyes remained dry. Her grief at her brother's death had run long and hard until the tears finally stopped coming, but the pain at his absence had never changed; like a wound that refused to heal, it bled unseen to the present day.

A rumbling noise pulled her from her thoughts, making her glance behind. With a few quick steps, she jumped off the road, safe to the sidewalk and out of the path of the approaching vehicles. Erin stopped and watched as they passed, the products created within the Geelong car factories that would help win the ongoing war against the plague. Each of the armoured vehicles was a moving fortress, purpose built to protect soldiers as they culled the Infected. Slits within the steel plate armoured sides allowed the warriors inside to shoot from safety, further evolving the design that had proved effective the previous summer. Erin's eyes narrowed - there were no shoddy welds on these vehicles to place crews at risk.

The stream of vehicles continued for a good ten minutes until it finally came to an end. Shivering, she drew her coat tightly about her, and took off again at a brisk pace, a plastic bag hanging from one hand. Before long, the military cemetery came into view, and she entered the complex that had grown exponentially throughout the course of the summer campaign. Beautifully manicured lawns studded with plaques to commemorate the buried soldiers were intersected by simple paved walkways. Erin walked along one of these, her eyes reading the names of soldiers killed in action to either side. So many of them were teenagers. As the population existing to feed the ranks dwindled, the army had been forced to open its arms to ever younger recruits. It had been many decades since Australian soldiers had died in such numbers, and yet they were making consistent gains, pushing back the enemy and claiming towns where people could live in relative safety again. But the price had been costly, paid in blood and lives.

She had arrived at his grave.

Private Jai Richards
KIA

‘Hi Erin, we would have waited to walk with you, but I saw your note asking us to meet you here,’ Steph said.

Erin smiled sadly at her friends. Mark, Harry and Steph were all there, waiting patiently for her. ‘I just wanted to get this for him,’ she said, gently lifting a small package from the bag. She opened the top of the little box and extracted a single cupcake. In frosting had been written, ‘Happy B’day big brother’. Erin placed it at the base of the plaque. ‘It’s silly I know, but...’ she shrugged and stood up.

‘He would have been eighteen today,’ Erin said softly. The group stood quietly for a few moments, each lost in their own thoughts as a soft pattering of rain commenced.

‘Do you want to say anything, or for one of us to speak a few words about him?’ asked Harry gently.

‘Thanks, but I don’t think there’s any point if he can’t hear them,’ she said. After a few minutes, Erin turned and started to walk away. The rest of the group took her lead and followed, each of them quiet until they were back on the main street again.

The drizzle let up and sun poked through the clouds, causing the newly fallen rain to sparkle in the grass. Erin allowed her jacket to fall open, exposing a combat uniform underneath.

‘What time do we drive out tomorrow morning, Mark?’

Mark looked at her and scowled for the first time since she’d arrived. ‘You know I’m still not happy about this? It’s just not bloody right, I mean how old are you now?’

‘Fourteen. We’ve been through this a hundred times, do we really need to argue about it today of all days?’ Erin said, her voice weary. Mark looked away, jaw clenched.

‘There’s so few left to fight. Why else do you think the army lowered the age of recruitment to thirteen? Besides, I’ve been bloody well fighting to survive since the plague broke. This only formally recognises the fact!’

‘But your brother wanted me to keep you safe,’ said Mark, grasping at straws.

‘And you are. I hardly think it was a fluke that I got posted to your platoon after basic training.’

‘Give her a break,’ said Steph, putting a hand on Mark’s shoulder. ‘She made a legal choice to enlist, just like the other teenagers swelling our ranks. Erin’s got as much of a right to fight as the next person.’

Mark sighed. ‘Fine. We leave at dawn, so the roll call’s at 4AM in preparation. Be ready for a long day, we’re heading for the western districts to start town clearances.’

Erin trailed two steps behind her friends, now also her comrades, as they walked back to the house. It was with a grim satisfaction that she acknowledged she was actually going to fight as a soldier, and that Mark had finally recognised her place in his squad. She looked about her, glad to be viewing the streets of Queenscliff for the last time.

End of Book 2

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Chapter One

He released a long moan and put his head back, staring into the darkness. His daughter had finally fallen asleep, and as soon as Simon Washington could hear the eight-year-old girl snoring gently as she laid her head on his lap, he leaned over and blew the candle out. He had no idea what time it was. Ten? Eleven?

She wasn't a big fan of the dark. She was not exactly terrified of it, which was a near-miracle considering what they had been through, but if the candlelight helped her go to sleep then her father was happy to use up some of the wax.

He ran his fingers from his right hand through his bushy beard whilst stroking his daughter's head with his left, and closed his eyes. He was sleepy,

his eyes were stinging, but the adrenaline coursing through his veins was making sleep a hard task to achieve.

He was getting that feeling again.

He hadn't experienced it in days, but it was happening. He sat up, straightened his back, and tried to ride it out. He stopped stroking his daughter's head and put the two fingers of his left hand on his neck, feeling for the carotid artery.

His pulse felt normal, kind of, so where was the surge of adrenaline coming from? And why was he finding it difficult to breathe? Was it all in his mind?

He tried a few breathing exercises, like he normally did in this situation. He took in a deep breath and held it for eight seconds, then slowly released for another eight. He continued to do this, and after a few minutes the episode had come to a close, like it normally did. He had no idea why this was happening. Yes, he and his daughter, Imelda, were in a dire situation, but these panic attacks had only started a couple of months ago.

Why didn't it start straight away? Why didn't it start a year ago when the country, and possibly the world, went into chaos? He didn't know what it really was. Was it really a panic attack? Did he have high blood pressure? Something else?

When it first happened he thought he was having a heart attack. Just the thought of dying frightened him, so his panic grew and it seemed to make the situation worse. The fear of leaving his daughter alone was petrifying for Simon. Leaving his daughter to fend for herself was what frightened him the most. He had taught her things. He had shown her how to catch game by setting traps, how to skin rabbits, filtering water, but being eight years old with no parents, walking these barren lands alone, was something that broke his heart just thinking about it.

He closed his eyes and felt tiredness creep up on him. He nodded off for no longer than ten seconds and suddenly gasped, getting a fright, the hairs on the back of his neck standing to attention. Was there something outside?

He unzipped his blue fleece jacket, careful not to wake his daughter, and left the jacket opened; it wasn't so cold. He was sure that it was around springtime; maybe April or May, he wasn't exactly sure.

The winter seemed like a lifetime ago now, and he and his daughter had been on the road for a few months; he guessed three. They had stayed in their house for nearly nine months before they had to leave. When they were at

their house and had run out of food, they had to spend their time raiding neighbours' houses. Most of the houses were empty, because in the beginning, when the Canavars were in their droves and most people fled to a different place, going elsewhere seemed a better option for most folk. Since the bombs had fallen, people, as well as the Canavars, had been depleted. Simon hadn't seen one in months, and his daughter hadn't seen any since *that* day. The day she lost her mummy and her brother; the day Simon lost his wife and his son.

He had no idea where to go next once morning had arrived, and knew that staying in the wooden hut for another night was not an option.

For months the pair of them roamed from one house to the next, picking up scraps here and there, and he knew that this couldn't go on forever. Food was going to dry up eventually. Water was fine, for the time being. He knew how to filter water, although the process wasn't entirely perfect. They had a few jars with them that also had lids, and a couple of old soda bottles that Simon kept in his rucksack. The soda bottles were cut in half, and had, at the top of the bottle, small pebbles. Underneath the pebbles was sand. A cloth was below the sand, tied with an elastic band.

Once the water had been filtered Simon would filter it again, boil it for a minute, and then let it cool down. The water had to be filtered to remove waterborne cysts that could harbour and protect bacteria from chemical treatment or even boiling, but he was aware that the cysts were capable of withstanding high temperatures.

The filtering process would remove some cysts along with pesticides, herbicides, sediment, insects and other debris. It was a lengthy process, and was quite frustrating that it took up a lot of their time.

In the beginning, the Canavars were the problem, but after the bombs fell, other humans were now a danger. He knew that not *every* individual was a danger to him and his daughter, but he had to be wary of any stranger, male or female. Times were different, and people were resorting to any methods in order to survive. He had seen it with his own eyes.

He felt a throbbing in the back of his mouth and placed his fingers in and touched one of his back teeth. He winced when his fingers made contact and knew it had to come out eventually.

He had no tools to deal with the situation, but was sure he could wait a while. He had only felt the discomfort a few weeks ago, and although it was painful, he was certain he could hold on for another few days or so. It wasn't

exactly keeping him awake at night. Not yet.

He stroked his daughter's head once more, leaned over and kissed her. Her hair needed washing. The last time she had washed her hair was a couple of weeks ago when they came across an abandoned house that had no food available, but had bottles of lemonade and bars of soap.

The days of old seemed like a lifetime ago now. His daughter went to gymnastics on a Friday evening, and back then all she worried about was her technique for her one handed cartwheel and what the new move was going to be. Now, she worried about other things. She worried about where the next meal was going to come from and if they were going to run into any trouble.

They had been very careful.

They had remained in the countryside since they had escaped from their house, after her brother and mother were attacked, but Simon had told her that they needed to head to somewhere more residential—a place that was reasonably populated in the old world. He was hoping to come across more houses, shops, maybe even a friendly community that had been created by some locals, but he was aware that a place with numbers could also mean danger for him and his daughter.

Most of the houses that they had checked recently had nothing left. The food had either been taken when the owners had packed up and left, when the Canavars had exploded on the scene, or other people had raided the house during that period, maybe even after.

The arrival of the Canavars was bad enough and had depleted the nation severely, but when the country was attacked from the skies, mainly the cities, there didn't seem to be anyone around. That, of course, wasn't the case, but that's what it felt like for Simon Washington and his eight-year-old daughter.

Simon and Imelda felt like they were the last people left on this earth.

How wrong they were.

Chapter Two

Next Day

He woke up with a start, and at first was unsure where he was. He was still sitting up and his eyes scanned around the dusky area and immediately placed his hand on his daughter's head. He smiled. She was still there, still with her head on his lap. He tried to sit up without disturbing his daughter. He had no idea how long they had both slept. Maybe they had had plenty of hours or maybe not enough, he wasn't sure.

He could see that it was light outside because there was light shining through the tiny cracks of the shed that they were in.

He and his daughter had weeks of monotony, walking from one place to the next. To relieve the boredom they talked about how their lives were when things were normal. He openly talked about his wife and son, his daughter's mother and brother, as he thought it was healthy to do this, rather than forgetting they ever existed.

He had no idea how long it had been since their passing. A couple of months? Longer? It felt like years. He was sure they had died in January.

Sometimes it felt like it had always been just him and his little girl, and the flashbacks that consisted of his wife and son were just his imagination. It sounded silly, but that's how Simon felt sometimes. He had no photographs of his family, no video footage to remind him what life used to be like ... nothing! Everything he could remember about his past was in his head. He couldn't remember it all, but a lot of the memories would come flooding back if his daughter would say or do something. Sometimes, however, the memories would sneak up on him like an assassin, without warning, and twang his heartstrings, forcing his throat to harden.

His daughter began to moan and stir and this made him smile. He waited a minute and allowed his little girl to sit up in her own time. Eight-year-old Imelda Washington sat up and stretched her arms. Still sitting, she released a yawn and then looked at the outline of her dad who was sitting next to her.

"Morning, babe," said Simon in a soft voice.

She never responded verbally and looked around, almost as if she was unsure where she was.

"Sleep well?" He looked at the little scar that was on the right side of her

forehead, just below her hairline.

“Uh-huh.” She nodded and gazed around once more before adding, “Had a weird dream.”

“Oh yeah?” Simon smirked and could hardly see his beautiful girl. The dusky shed hid her blonde hair, blue eyes and perfect skin. “What was it about?”

“Erm...”

She seemed reluctant to tell him and Simon decided not to push her. The dream could have been too silly to describe, or it could have been one about her mum and older brother.

“You know what?” Simon gently touched Imelda’s cheek and said, “Why don’t you tell me once we’re on the road.”

She nodded and groaned, “So we’re moving again?”

Simon smiled and nodded. “We need to go where the food is.”

“Nowhere then.”

Simon decided to ignore her moaning, stood to his feet and stretched his arms. He then put his arms out straight in front of him and stretched his back. He smiled as he remembered that this was the type of stretch, as well as others, he used when he went to the gym.

The gym, he thought. That seemed like a lifetime ago now.

‘You hungry, babe?’ he asked her.

“Not really.”

Simon cupped his right hand, brought it up to his mouth and breathed into it, immediately sniffing his breath. He twisted his nose. He needed to brush his teeth. He hadn’t brushed them in days and his teeth were beginning to hurt. They had two worn toothbrushes in the bag that he had, but had little toothpaste. They had managed to acquire some toothpaste from the last house they were in, and it had also been days since Imelda had brushed her teeth.

They had no plan. They simply wandered from one place to the next, from one town to the other. He just wanted the pair of them to survive. That was what his wife would have wanted. If he had lost his whole family on that terrible day he would have killed himself, but he had Imelda. She was the only thing that was keeping him going, keeping him sane. He had responsibilities, and the thought of him dying and leaving his little girl, alone, upset him. He saw what it did to her when she lost her mum and Tyler, her older brother.

“Ready to go?” he asked her.

She stood and straightened her back and nodded in the dim shed. He picked up the rucksack and went over to the door and pushed the door open. The pair of them squinted as the sun flooded the inside of the wooden hut, stinging their eyes. Both raised their hands to shield their eyes, and slowly stepped outside to a beautiful day, with Simon leading the way. He hadn't eaten for a day and decided to rummage through his bag.

Because of his daughter, he didn't want to use the supplies, but he was no good to her dead. He looked around at the garden they were in and could see the long grass. The houses that stretched along were in ruins. Some were unrecognisable as houses anymore, and yet, bizarrely, the shed that they had stayed in stood untouched. Maybe the houses in front had shielded it from the bombs that had been dropped months ago. He wanted to keep away from the ruins, the areas that had been affected, but last night they had no choice.

Noises from the previous night, coming from males, had forced father and daughter to flee, and the shed was the first thing they saw whilst their bodies were engulfed in panic.

Simon put the bag on the floor, unzipped the rucksack and began to rummage through. Inside the bag he had:

Two steak knives.

One claw hammer.

3 tins of beans.

A tin of sardines.

A packet of Frosties (out of date).

3 bars of soap.

3 carrier bags.

Two jars and soda bottles to purify water.

One empty plastic bottle.

A hairbrush.

An assortment of candles.

A shaving mirror.

Peter Benchley's *Jaws* paperback (This book was in the bottom of his bag. It was his favourite film, and had read the book when he was a child).

One pair of spare trainers for his daughter.

Two pairs of knickers.

An *OMG* black T-shirt. *OMG* was in pink lettering.

One black V-neck T-shirt.

Two worn yellow toothbrushes.
Green disposable lighter.
An adult blue T-shirt.

He pulled out a tin of beans and shook it in front of Imelda. “You sure you’re not hungry?”

“I’m sure.” She nodded, and scanned around where they were with fear scrawled on her face.

“Okay. Maybe I’ll have a tin later.” Simon could see the concern on her face and pointed up ahead. “Let’s go this way.”

Simon put the tin in his pocket, threw the bag over his shoulder and moved away from the ruins that was once a street full of life. He took a quick scan around the broken street and imagined brand new cars parked on the drives, children playing, and people out walking their dogs. He had hardly seen any animals since he had been on the road. He didn’t know why. There must have been a lot of domestic pets, mainly cats and dogs that had lost their owners and had to fend for themselves.

He placed his arm around his daughter’s shoulder and his mind went back to that day—not when they announced the first crisis, but weeks after, when the bombs fell.

Before the bombs had fallen, Simon and his family had been hiding in their attic, away from those things, living off scraps, and occasionally going out and taking supplies from abandoned houses that had been left when the country was in stage one of this crisis.

He hated going out. It frightened the life out of him when going out for the first time, but he couldn’t let his family starve. Thankfully, the neighbours to his left had decided to chance their luck elsewhere and had fled, but hadn’t taken all the food with them. He didn’t know why. His elderly neighbours to the right had decided to commit suicide. When he broke into the house, he found them on their bed, on their backs and holding hands. They had taken an overdose of painkillers. The positives from this was that they had left a house with cupboards full of food, and this told Simon that they must have killed themselves in the first week.

Stage One was what Simon and Imelda called it. Stage One was when the dead began to attack. Stage Two was when the bombs fell.

When Stage Two began, Simon had a feeling what was happening and relocated his family to the basement, to lower ground, to be safer. Getting to

higher ground was better for Stage One, when the dead were out in their numbers, but going to lower ground was more beneficial when Stage Two began to happen, getting his family away from potential falling debris and shattered glass from the windows.

When the bombs had stopped and he was brave enough to get to the roof of his house, a couple of weeks after, he could see that the area he was in looked unscathed. There was the usual smashed up cars from the Stage One era, as well as bodies and blood, but after the explosions had stopped, he could see that the streets near him looked untouched. He could see from afar that certain buildings like high-rise flats and churches, as well as a shopping centre, weren't there anymore, but his area was fine. Whoever dropped the bombs, it appeared that there were specific targets, but his street, as well as dozens around him, hadn't been damaged.

"Dad!"

Imelda had brought Simon out of his daydreaming of yesteryear, and he turned to his daughter to see what she wanted. They were walking side by side and it looked like they were heading towards a small cluster of trees.

"What is it, babe?" he finally spoke up.

"How come those trees look okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Remember the last time we tried to go to the woods and all the trees were bare and burnt?"

"I think they were affected by Stage Two," Simon said. "And anyway, that's not exactly the woods, is it?" He pointed over to the trees. "We need to walk through and see what's on the other side. We're running out of water, so we need to fill up our jars once we find a pond or a stream ... or something."

"Oh, okay."

"Hold onto my hand." He held out his hand and his daughter took it.

"We haven't seen people for days," Imelda sighed and moaned further, "And when we do, we run or hide from them."

Simon never responded and it only took them a minute to get out of the trees. He looked down at his worn boots and Imelda's dirty white trainers. Thankfully there was another pair for her in his rucksack.

In front of them were miles of fields, nothing else apart from a farmhouse in the distance.

"Now what, daddy?" she asked with a little attitude in her tone.

Simon pointed ahead of him and said, "We're going to that farmhouse,

but first...” He sat down, placed the bag on the floor and pulled out the tin from his pocket. “I’m gonna have something to eat.”

Ghostland: A Zombie Apocalypse Novel is available from Amazon [here](#)