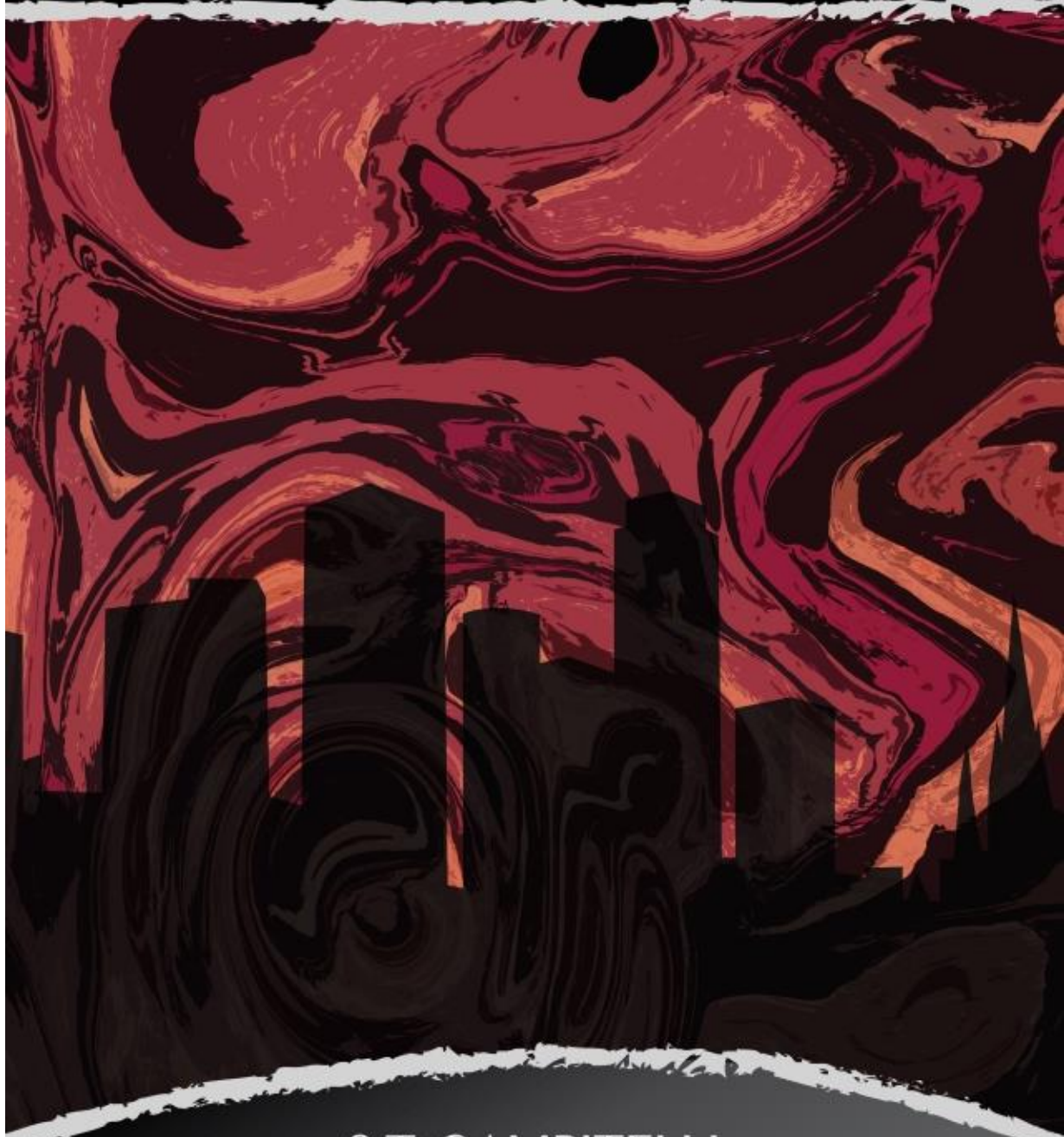


THE FALL

BOOK 2 - REVERSION



S.T. CAMPITELLI

A NOVEL OF POST-APOCALYPTIC AUSTRALIA

Chapter 1 – Dr Riley Jackson

Quarantine Examination Room, Mallee Base Hospital, Mildura, Victoria

476 kilometers north west of Melbourne

12.05am, Australian Eastern Standard Time, Sunday, May 1, 2050

Here, there be dragons.

Ancient mapmakers marked those words on their charts in mysterious areas thought to be dangerous, and as he considered the form on the gurney, Doctor Riley Jackson wondered if indeed, here be a dragon. Unconscious, though panting furiously, something genetically wild was going on with the male in front of him, the body changes more radical than anything he'd ever seen. Everything Riley understood, his training, his experience, his common bloody sense, told him this was physiologically not possible.

Yet, here it was.

The bio-scan revealed the man to be Mackenzie Traynor, a grizzled, old mate farmer from Underbool or Patchewollock or some other unlikely-named place to be found in this ridiculously hot, flat, red-soil corner of the world. He knew Mack, not at all well, but enough to know that what was now in front of him looked and scanned nothing like the man who'd been in for his annual check-up last month.

It looked and scanned nothing like a regular human being, Riley.

They'd brought him in yesterday afternoon the paramedics reporting he'd been picked up in someone's barn in a semi-catatonic condition – 'sleep but not asleep' the bloke who'd found him had said. Now subdued, a couple of hours ago Mack had been anything but, experiencing what they called in clinical terms an intense aggression episode. Putting it in blunt layperson's terms, the man had lost his shit.

Jackson activated his MedStream app and cued the video from yesterday evening. A spider-cam perspective from the top right corner of the Emergency receiving area showed steady, clear though grey-toned vision, time-stamped 8.51PM--30-04-2050 in electric blue. Patient Traynor, mostly bald – had a full head of hair when Riley'd seen him last month – is wheeled into the space, semi-delirious, but putting up a struggle. He's a big guy and it takes four decent-sized orderlies to transfer him from the transport-gurney to the hospital one. Taira Freyasson places the med-bot in sweep proximity and they roll the initial bio-scan. Riley watches himself sharing a joke with her, both of them laughing (her out of courtesy, he can now see), when Mack sits bolt upright breathing rapidly, shallow but rhythmic, not in discomfort. He blinks repeatedly under the glare of the main obs boom-lamp. Riley recalls registering the man's impossibly dilated eyes – glistening, twin black orbs – before Traynor, with a vicious backhand swipe, smashes the heavy metal lamp like a rice-paper pinata. Oblivious to attempts by the Emergency

orderlies to restrain him, this pensioner attacks staff; scratching one viciously across the abdomen, flinging another, the not-easily-thrown Tom Dalhouse, more than *two meters* into the wall, from a sitting position no less, and biting – biting! – a third. Riley watches with awed fascination, he can't help it. It's like trying to restrain a rogue croc. Taira pumps one, two, three adult-dose, heavy duty sedative shots into him, one after another, and he slows, calms enough, just, to restrain him. Then Karen Fung is screaming on the floor, right hand clamped on her left forearm trying to subdue the blood staining her powder-blue nurse's scrubs like splatter from a child's finger painting.

'He's taken a chunk out of Karen's arm!' Taira turns and shrieks at him, eyes wide. 'What's going on here, Riley?!'

Riley shut down the vid, exhaling in a sudden plosive. He'd been tension-holding his breath watching it. What *was* going on? They'd first suspected a narcotic reaction, possibly the guy'd been drug spiked. But who'd do that to a seventy-nine-year-old bloke? And other than the extreme aggression, he'd shown none of the indicative bio flags and the narc sweep was clear. This was different, viral, transformative, something he hadn't seen before.

And Riley Jackson was extremely interested in things he hadn't seen before.

What was he going to do about it, though?

A little over six months ago he'd screwed up. Badly. He had effed up more times than he'd care to admit to before that, if he were being frank. But the 'incident' was the tipping point. Even Riley had to concede, you couldn't get legless, absolutely liquored to the gills, at the uber-exclusive National Centre for Disease Control Annual Ball and then attempt to douse the flames in the grand fireplace by... well, mistaking it for a plumbing fixture. He closed his eyes and winced inwardly at the memory. God, it didn't get any less reprehensible with time either. Pleading chronic work fatigue and an already widely known weakness for Maker's Mark bourbon simply didn't cut it. Even if you were Australia's premier viral med-researcher. And how do you top that, Riley? How did you seal the deal, as his brother (who considered the whole thing hilarious) liked to say? With a spectacular, public puke on the President of the Republic's 3000 e-coin Gucci's. And that, as far as the people that make decisions go, was it.

For Riley Jackson, the decision maker – God in his world – was Professor Jacqueline Guo, Director of the NCDC. She'd been patient with him, prepared to forgive him his peccadilloes up till then given how good he was at his job, and he was good. But you can publicly shame the Centre only so many times, and so Jacqueline removed him from centre stage, shipped him up here to Mildura to dry out and 'learn a bit of bloody humility' (her words) which came in the form of less – wait, make that no – research, and an endless queue of salt of the earth General Practice patients. So, here he was, stuck out in the boonies on a 'Get your damned shit together' posting at 44 when he should be on top of his game, keynote speaking slots at conferences in Europe, virus-chasing around the world, Presidential dinners. Nope. Six long months of farmers, their families, snot noses and, granted, the occasional medically challenging farm accident. But, most importantly, through a Jacqueline Guo lens, no booze. None. Geez, Riley thought a crate-load of humility came in the form of the ubiquitous '48 Flash', the

every-other-day bio-profile sweeps he had to 360 to her in Melbourne. Clean. Clean. And clean. All the while, hoping for his recall.

Or a big-ticket item that might propel him back.

And this could be it. No, this *was* it.

Riley checked the super-max restraints again, satisfied the pressure clamps were locked in. He re-considered the man's heaving musculature and ratcheted the chest strap twice more. Knowing he concentrated far better when alone, Riley batted away the idea of bringing in an orderly to stand backup. He re-activated the rec-video on MedStream and touched the projection ports mounted on both ears making sure they were secure. Jackson cleared his throat. He wanted to get this down clean, experience telling him he was in the presence of something much more significant than a possible overdose. With earlier events clear in his mind, he figured if anything happened, there'd at least be a clear record.

'Mildura Base Hospital, Doctor Riley Jackson, ID two-six-zero-one-six-five. Examination of patient Mackenzie Traynor, MedStream entry two, May one, 2050, twelve oh eight AM EST.'

He pulled back the sheet covering Mack's torso, exposing his marble-white flesh, its stark relief roadmap of swollen dark veins a Mary Shelley nightmare incarnate. Riley sucked in an involuntary breath. *My god, it's everywhere.* He reminded himself to stay dispassionate, on task. Interestingly for the first time in a long time, energised, mentally challenged, he didn't feel the urge for a drink. A stream of medical data darted across the bottom of the 360 vidscreen, a glimpse telling him what he needed to know. He was picking data out of the stream effortlessly. Like he used to. He was back in the game.

'360 data-matchup gives confirm status positive bio-ID on Mackenzie Traynor, male, 79 years of age, examined last month at this facility in robust, regular health for an individual of his years. He has a biosignature concordant with a male his age, but presents with a muscular profile and complexion of a much younger individual. The patient is now under sedation at levels appropriate for a person more than three times his body mass. He appears to have been exposed to a form of biological infection agent, origin and type undetermined. Time of exposure to unknown agent also, as yet, undetermined.'

He checked his case notes in his MedEval. 'Patient has evidenced autoimmune disruption responses by way of vomiting and diarrhoea, is orally excreting foamy saliva, and has experienced uniform, rapid and extensive hair loss all over the torso, limbs and head.' He picked up a sample of Traynor's head hair from the gurney with a pair of tweezers and placed it onto a profiling tray on the equipment bot. The tray retracted into the squat machine with a soft *whir*. Jackson activated his 360 Headlight and placed his forefinger and thumb on either side of the unconscious man's left eye. He splayed the eyelid, noting the overt flinch-response when the light hit Mack's eye. He didn't just blink, his whole head snapped to the side. He checked the other one. Same result.

'Patient displays intense ocular sensitivity to light, the result of extreme mydriasis. It is symmetrical, both pupils are at maximal dilation and have extended out into and covered the whole of

the sclera. He has also experienced an inordinate depletion of body fats, yet has *gained* weight in muscle mass... six point four kilograms over three hours. Fat is being lost, muscle is being gained... One cannot become the other, so at this point, I have no idea how this is happening.'

At this point, I don't know how any of this is happening.

He observed the pace of the Traynor's chest moving up and down, incessant, rhythmic, hypnotic. 'Patient is tachypneic, with a respiratory rate at... forty two breaths per minute and has a consistently elevated heart rate at 136bpm. Incredibly, at this stage his body is coping with the elevated respiratory levels.'

He moved his gaze to Traynor's shoulders, leaning in closer to the alabaster, muscled upper arm, the deep-red laser-tattoo rose he recalled from last month's exam barely visible. 'The skin has also undergone significant blanching, uniform over the body, with an extremely pale countenance evident in contrast to the darkened and distended blood vessels. I am now taking blood samples for analysis.'

Jackson applied a Holmes blood-taker unit to Mack's forearm, removing it when it flashed green, and placed it onto the bot's analyser port activating a full blood analysis. An antigen profile would give him some initial answers and maybe some solutions if he was lucky. He stepped back and surveyed the body in its entirety. Riley exhaled heavily, trying to make sense of what was in front of him, humble enough to admit he was stumped by what was seeing. Humility indeed.

'As the patient is stable, I intend to monitor him under sedation for any further physiological change and commence blood and tissue sample analysis.'

Shutting down the recorder app, he puffed his cheeks and blew out, hard. This was something big... he knew he'd have to go to Jacqueline with it and soon. She'd have his balls for clackers if he kept this under wraps and it got... Well, it wouldn't. He'd flash her the vids and report via the closed, secure NCDC line, then call her after the blood work was in. But he'd do it all when he was ready. If he was going to call the head of the NCDC, if he wanted his recall, he'd need to have his shit together.

So, Riley Jackson shut the door of the lab, put his favourite music on through his internal 360. It was how he preferred to work. His world. No external noise, no distractions.

1.52am

'Mildura Base Hospital, Doctor Riley Jackson, ID two-six-zero-one-six-five. Examination of patient Mackenzie Traynor, MedStream entry three, May one, 2050, one fifty-two AM EST.'

He inhaled through his nostrils and started.

'Initial blood and tissue sampling have been carried out and results are compelling. The antigen is being recognised and accepted as self by the glycoproteins in the cell membrane and, as such, is not being destroyed by the antibodies despite the significant physiological changes resulting. The

receptors on the viral envelope of the antigen bodies are neatly complementing receptor proteins on the membrane of the target cell, the binding is... perfect.' He wiped his brow and continued. 'Furin enzyme triggering occurs almost immediately facilitating cell penetration. Complete membrane fusion is taking place by which the viral strands are replacing the phospholipid bilayer in the target cells. Interestingly, the host cells are not dying, they are changing completely to the form of the virus, which in turn, presents as a copy of the original host, then replicates by budding to its neighbour. It appears to be, for all intents, a perfect copy... a viral host-parasite replicant.'

Then the implications hit him.

'Good god, the blood.'

2.22am

He paced the hallway, trying to keep his voice down. The last thing anyone wanted in these situations was panic fed by the expert source.

'I checked five times, Jacqueline, it doesn't show.'

'What sort of virus doesn't show up in the blood work, Riley?'

'I don't know, I haven't seen anything like it. What I do know is that's it's replicating faster and causing more extreme physical changes than anything I've seen before. It's a chameleon, hiding itself, and it's super contagious, really aggressive.'

'What it did to that man is simply unheard of, Riley. This has to be contained and I mean now.'

'No argument there. But it's not just him. It's what it's doing as a contagion agent.'

She frowned through the 360 vidfeed. 'How many others have presented symptomatic?'

'None arriving here, none we're aware of outside, yet. I've put out a quiet alert to our paramedics and got nothing so far. But he... ahh, as you've seen on the vid, he bit one of our nurses and scratched another. The incubation period is unprecedented. Within an *hour* they were both displaying the same suite of symptoms, rapid hair and weight loss, *extreme* dilation of pupils, tachypnea, tachycardia, skin blanching, aggression, complete lack of communication skills.'

'Good god. Are they restrained? Isolated?'

'Yep, here under iso with close obs.'

Jacqueline thought for a moment. 'OK. He's got it from something or someone. Any ideas on the alpha vector?'

‘Not yet. Given the lack of incoming and absolutely nothing buzzing on med-comms, my thinking is that we could be lucky on this. It feels real early in the game. I’m tipping Traynor’s at least the beta level, but nothing else has popped up yet. Jacqueline, let me stay on this, I’ve got it.’ He paused letting the not-entirely-comfortable silence play out. ‘I’m... I’m OK, I’m good. Clean.’

She gave him a long, hard stare. Riley caught the flicker of anger and hurt on her face before she regained her professional visage. He couldn’t blame her. She nodded. ‘I’m sending Chiara to help you out,’ – she held up a hand – ‘before you say anything, you’re site leader, she’s assisting. And given the speed of the transmission, the aggression factor and the lockdown need, I’m also sending an ops team on site security for you both. They’re leaving Laverton shortly. They’ll be there in... a bit over an hour.’

Chiara Soren. Blast it. Of all people. Of course, it had to be her. Chiara was good, damn good, Riley couldn’t deny that. But she’ll wanna take it over. And an ops team? It wasn’t a publicly broadcast truth, but the NCDC did send in seconded military units when sites were somewhat remote (security issue) or threatened to get out of hand (personnel issue). This qualified geographically on the first front, and Jacqueline clearly felt it might on the second. Because of Riley. He didn’t care for it, but he understood.

Reading his feelings, Jacqueline continued, ‘It is *your* site, Riley, but stay right on it, lock it down. Give this your complete attention, and I mean *complete*. This could be big and we do not want it to be. I’ve got your back here, but don’t get distracted.’

Riley clenched his teeth, biting down on a retort, his mental filter attuned enough to know he was still ten goals behind on the cred scoreboard with his boss. ‘Got it. I’ve just now left the other two, they’re heavily sedated, ready for full bio work-up.’

‘And Traynor?’

Riley Jackson put his hand to the door of observation room two and pushed it open.

The colour drained from his face. His stomach did a chemical dump.

The gurney was empty.

Chapter 2 – Thomas Dalhouse

Mallee Base Hospital

2.25am

Tom's head still pounded despite the pain relief. And his back, shit, felt like his kidneys'd been pulped. He winced at the memory, giving his lower back a rub. Guy must've been whacked, for sure. That was it. He'd heard Doctor Jackson talking with Taira and they'd said it wasn't drugs, but it must've been something coz that old bastard was fuckin' supercharged. Well, let it be that coz when old mate gets out, Big Tommy D be waitin'. Hells yeh.

He grinned as he walked down the corridor to the obs room where they'd placed Karen and Spence. He'd got scratched across his precious six-pack. That'd piss Spence off more'n anything, man loved his abs. Tom wanted to check them both out, make sure they were good, especially Karen. They were going to their regular Thai joint tomorrow night, half price Tuesday, couldn't miss out on the best Pad Thai in Mildura. Thinking about Karen got him angry all over again: the old bastard bit 'er! Bit, for fucksake! Friggin' smackheads, sorry as shit when they come down, but abso-fuckin-lutely anything goes when they're on the gear. Probably never brushed his teeth either, who knew what shit was in his mouth and now in her arm. He grunted in pain as he pushed open the double doors to the room.

'Hey! What the fu...'

There were three people in here, the old bastard and two more. None of them on gurneys, none of them sedated, none of them strapped down. The scene laid out before him made visual sense, but he couldn't impose any sort of logic on it. Tom Dalhouse couldn't process it. It looked like someone had placed a stick of dynamite in a person's guts. The crazy bastards were tearing into a ward attendant on the floor and Tom could only work that out cos he could see part of the powder-blue scrubs with the dark blue MBH logo. This vision was played out in full 1.3 seconds after opening the door, more than double the amount of time it took for the man formerly known as Mack Traynor to leap the three-meter gap to where Tom was standing. The reason Tom could not compute what he thought was happening before his eyes was because it actually wasn't. It was a sensory illusion, already in the past, had happened more than half a second ago.

As his perception was rammed into the present by Mack's 83 kilograms of pure muscle meeting Tom's 110, the concussive force jolted his brain backwards against his skull. Tom did not even realise he had slammed the palm of his hand on to the panic button by the door. It was a purely instinctive reaction, a last gift from his synaptic pathways before they shut down for good.

Chapter 3 – Riley Jackson

Observation room 2, Mallee Base Hospital

2.26am

Oh, shit! Oh, dear god.

You simply could *not* lose a patient in a hospital! Not this one anyway. Riley's eyes darted around the observation room registering everything that should have been there except Mackenzie Goddamned Traynor. He took a calming breath and carried out a closer, more deliberate assessment, checking each corner of the room, each shadow, though he realised it was pointless before he got halfway. The room was clearly empty. Of patients at least.

Life-changing patients, Riley. Career re-making patients.

He spun on his heels and barged through the door out into the corridor. He scoped the space left and right, desperately hoping to have an '*Oh, thank god!*' moment as he caught sight of Traynor's retreating form shambling along the corridor, lost in a daze of whatever the heck plagued him. But the corridor was infuriatingly empty. Both ways. Which was unusual, even for this hour. Where were th—

WAA! WAA! WAA! WAA! –

The piercing wail of an alarm in his internal 360 audio cut across his rising panic, jarring him back to his more familiar problem-solution headspace. He checked his vis display for the source. Obs room 3, Level Four North, three floors up, the one where they had Karen Fung and Spencer Talarico...

He took off down the corridor at a sprint, jouncing around the corner to the stairwell. Riley hit the stairs running, taking three at a time he bounded up the levels at a cracking pace, now grateful for the hated alcohol-detox exercise regime he'd been on for the past six months. He emerged into another deserted corridor on Level Four North turning right. On the floor fifteen meters away the upper half of a body protruded out of the obs room. His stomach did its second flip in two minutes. Close to the body lay an overturned med-bot, instruments and containers scattered around it, lending another layer of sub-text to events that Riley felt were spiralling beyond his control. He tried to regain a measure of it by deactivating the alarm through his 360, one of the benefits of seniority being access to some hospital-wide remote systems (at least he'd retained *that*). Riley approached the still form registering from a distance that it was the Tom Dalhouse. He rushed forward, the brutal injuries to the Tom's forehead and chest telling him the man was clearly dead even as Riley made a necessary but futile check of his carotid pulse.

'Good god! What on earth's happening here?'

As if in response, footsteps slapped on the linoleum floor close by. Riley spun around. A distorted version of Spencer Talarico emerged from the room next door, his eyes black orbs fully dilated, quickened breathing, hair already fallen out, the remaining wisps making him some weightlifter-Gollum-

come-alive. Blood ran down his chin, the red stark counterpoint to the ivory skin, dripping on to his exposed white chest already rising and falling way faster than normal.

'Spencer? Hey, Spence... It's me, Doctor Jackson. Riley. Mate, you OK?'

Riley intentionally hadn't made many friends in his planned short stint up here, but he counted the gentle bodybuilder among the small circle. He tried to leverage off that relationship now, but Talarico didn't react, mind and body preoccupied by his internal biological mutiny. The viral transformation appeared to be in its final stages, but it was giving Riley a window for action. Battling intense twin urges to flee and to have a drink, Riley inched his way in a semi-crouch towards the med-bot, his eyes flicking between Spencer and something suitable to grab. If the condition made Spencer anywhere near as aggressive as it had made Traynor, he needed something to defend himself with. Spencer shook his head, groggy, his eyelids heavy. He grasped at his blue hospital tunic ripping it off as if the very idea of clothing enraged him, spat out a white foamy substance then bared his teeth at Riley the veins in his neck standing out like spokes.

Oh, shit.

Spencer sprang the same instant Riley lunged at the med-bot, the air-syringe he grasped for neatly finding the palm of his hand. He whipped it at Spencer's left shoulder. The tip of the contact-injector met skin, the two audible beeps signalling a double-shot of tranquiliser rammed through flesh. The smile in his mind's eye vanished as Spencer's right fist slammed into the side of Riley's head smashing him against the wall with an *OOOF!*

Winded, ear ringing, Riley dropped to the floor shuffling backwards out of range desperately sucking in air. He tracked the struggle playing out on Spencer's face, the vestiges of the man he had been trying to fight what he was becoming. The orderly pounded at the sides of his head with both hands as if physically trying to rid his mind of its demons.

'C'mon Spencer, fight it! Fight it!'

As if in defiant response, Spencer stopped struggling, calming in poetic juxtaposition to his manic breathing. He slumped with an expression, Jackson could have sworn, of genuine sadness, replaced instantly with primal rage. He again roared and lunged for Riley. The two tranq shots had evidently done enough to slow Spencer up, his sluggish thrust giving Riley time to snatch a scalpel from the floor near the med-bot. Holding the instrument overhead, he brought it down in an arc, targeting Talarico's upper chest, the short blade striking home with a thud in the soft flesh next to his shoulder, a debilitating but non-lethal strike he hoped would shock the man to reason. Spencer shrieked as he made to grab at Riley's arm, finding only air, his movements slowed. He swayed then dropped to his knees, arms flailing.

Riley made to swing the blade once more, but stopped, scalpel held high, heart racing, the stark realisation of what was happening rushed over him like ice-water, stopping him cold. This was his

workplace, for crying out loud; he a doctor, Spencer a colleague, a friend, needing medical care not assault by a senior member of staff! Riley panicked realising what had just occurred.

Christ, what have I—

Spencer swept Riley's self-recrimination away springing back to action with a vicious haymaker aimed at his head. He barely managed to duck under the path of Spencer's fist, hard knuckle grazing his scalp. Out of desperation, uncaring where it struck home this time, Riley blindly swiped the scalpel high in a horizontal sweep, the blade meeting soft resistance as it sliced through, spongy flesh. He twisted his body with the stroke, shielding his head with his arms bracing for an onslaught. Hearing a gurgle, Riley looked up. Spencer swayed unsteadily, blood spraying from the hideous wound to his neck, a jetting red arc pulsating in rhythm with his severed carotid artery. Desperately wanting to avoid the man's tainted blood, Riley furiously scrabbled backwards on all fours, still unable to grasp this was occurring.

Spencer slumped to the floor, deep-red blood pooling under his neck. He convulsed, his virus-plagued body putting up a last-ditch struggle. Riley dropped the killing tool, his hands shaking. *What the holy heck is going on?!* he raged silently, instincts telling him to stay quiet. He checked the still-deserted corridor, both ways, expecting someone to show up and enquire as to why Doctor Jackson-with-blood-on-your-hands-and-all-over-your-scrubs there were two dead men on the floor? There should have been people around, shouldn't there? At the very least, a charge nurse should've come running when all this commotion started. There'd been a goddamned hospital-wide alarm on! Why hadn't security and other doctors been here? Nurses? Orderlies? Patients even! It all had a sense of unreality.

A sudden, onset of intense nausea rippled through his stomach. He slumped against the wall, ears feeling as though wrapped in cotton wool, head throbbing, skin tingling, lights dancing before his eyes. *Infection?* Before he could follow the thought through, Riley's gut rebelled and he vomited on the floor. The pounding in his head began to subside immediately as his vision cleared; this was no viral onset but a stress reaction to having violently taken a life. Oh, geezus, how he hated the smell of vomit. Trying to catch his breath, he made to wipe his mouth but jerked his bloody hand away before it made contact.

Active site. Infected blood.

He grabbed a clean towel from a cleaning trolley close by and wiped the rubbery loop of stubborn saliva from the corner of his mouth and the blood from his hands. Riley righted the med-bot and activated the dispenser on its surface, a squirt of disinfectant on both hands easing his mind a little. He closed his eyes, pushed his hair back, forced himself to settle, breathe evenly, take what Jacqueline called a purposeful pause. Physically stop and take stock of the situation, one that currently had him, Doctor Riley Jackson, a murderer. Self-defence, it will be video-proven, yes, but a man was dead at his hand nonetheless, another lay lifeless meters away, a second victim of fatal violence. On his watch. His site. Christ, forget a Melbourne recall, he'd have his work cut out avoiding an extended jail term on fucking manslaughter. He forced those thoughts to the side.

You're a world-renowned field expert in precisely these situations! Pull it together, man!

Situation analysis, Riley. As it stood, there were currently people in this hospital infected with an unknown pathogen, a frightening agent transforming people both physically and psychologically, some of them incredibly, ridiculously, fast. And it was tied to Mack Traynor. He didn't know where they were, because he'd damn well lost the prime vector host and secondaries, and others had now been attacked and infected.

Don't know where they are... Don't know...

He could find out.

Riley went into his 360 and brought up the video link. He flicked the Level 4 icon bringing up an eight-tile grid vidfeed... Oh, good god, there were ten, twelve... fifteen of them... *wait*, more! A switch to the other levels revealed less of them, but tellingly, more bodies. A lot of them. Riley zoomed in, some of the dead clearly victims of violence, though others, a number of others, weren't. They had died of whatever this virus was... within the last hour or so. Their bodies littered the halls, blood and vomit-splattered clothes testament to their agonising last moments. It was either mind-bogglingly transformative or swiftly lethal – some choice. He switched back to Level 4 and watched their erratic, frenetic movements as they clustered together, like a pack. Why were there this many so soon? The progression on this thing was impossibly fast. Digital tags told him some of them were doctors, nurses, patients, but many others didn't have any identifiers.

Which meant...

He tried to focus, to think. Traynor. He had to have infected some of them outside. That implied something else again then. They had *followed* him here. And they were... *moving through the place infecting and killing people!* his subconscious hissed. Riley blinked hard and pursed his lips, trying to keep the pieces of information floating in his head in a manageable whole. He had to get a hold of Jacqueline, she'd be expecting contact – *And say what exactly?!* – the devil perched on his shoulder stuck his pitchfork in again. *It's your site, you're fucking it up!*

'Ahhhhggggghh!!' He thumped the side of his head once, twice, trying to get himself focused. Come back to your thinking space... *Now!* Prioritise, man, prioritise. OK, first rule in the field: maintain site integrity. Logistics, secure the site. He couldn't do that from his 360, unfortunately... The Grid! That's it, the hospital control room, the place housing central comms, vid bank and the systems that governed the facility. Hospitals were security zones, they had lockdown protocols. He could get in there, enter the system (Jessie Quan in Tech had shown him a system hack) and make the place secure. Yes, the Grid, that's where he needed to be. Problem was it was on the other side of the facility, which right now felt a long way away. And Riley Jackson had to navigate an ocean with the likes of Spencer Talarico and Mack Traynor swimming in it.

Here there be dragons.

Footsteps, movement from further down the corridor. More than one. Quick footsteps, jerky movements. Objects being thrown around violently, smashed. There were people close by, but he

needed to stay well clear of everybody and avoid confrontation. These people could not be negotiated with in this state and Riley was no hero.

‘OK, let’s see where they are, Riley, old cock.’ As he moved his leg clipped the edge of the med-bot. It teetered then toppled over, metal meeting floor, clanging in the silent space like church bells in a bathroom.

The footsteps stopped in unison.

Chapter 4 – Alpha Traynor

The colours.

He could see colours around himself and others. He didn't always understand their meaning, but it was becoming clearer. Many of his people glowed orange turning to deep, dark red; anger to rage. The Other in the corner glowed bright red – fear – and places she touched also glowed red before losing colour. He ran his fingernails across her neck enough to draw blood, to send her his gift.

The Alpha turned to his people; could see his own desires coloured in his vision, reflected in theirs. The anger was overwhelming, the rage all consuming, coloured deep, lust-red. He knew what he had to do. A small part of him – growing smaller – was repelled by his actions and those of the ones he led. A larger, much larger and hungrier part, increasingly so, was insatiable. It compelled him to act. That part of him whispered, hissed at him. And it was powerful, it made him strong. He roared at the night, smashed things he no longer knew the names of and killed. If he didn't kill, he directed others to. Or they made more of their kind. They had now gathered these together. And had killed as many others. These were his choices now – not his choices, his compulsions.

Kill or make.

He realised that to be strong was to be many. And to be many they had to make more. Must keep moving to make more. His people would gather here, all of them, then they would move, he would send them out.

He moved his head indicating where they were to go.

A noise.

He snapped his head towards it.

He ran and the pack followed.

Chapter 5 – Riley Jackson

He'd bought himself a minute at most by bolting into room further down the corridor. His eyes darted around for hiding place options as the footsteps grew closer. The bathroom? No, bathroom doors in hospitals were made to be easily broken and, if they got him in there, he'd have no space to defend himself. He looked up to the ceiling. The vent. He grabbed a nearby gurney locked the wheels and placed it under the grille. He jumped on to it and slammed the palm of his hand into the grille to shove into the roof space, silently thanking a god he didn't believe in that the thing wasn't screwed down. Pushing the vent cover aside, he grabbed the sides of the opening and hauled himself upwards and into the gap his head slamming into the top of the narrow aluminium airway– *unnnnngh!* Stifling the scream in his throat, he bit his lip and dropped on to the gurney. Dammit! Where can–

The window.

He raced over to it trying to ignore his throbbing head. All patient room windows were locked so he activated the security app to access the enable code for this floor shuffling through so fast he nearly missed it – *there!* He whipped back through to 'Windows-L4', swiped 'Enable' – *geezwhatroomwhatroom??* Obs 6! – expelling a sigh of relief as the glass gave way to a sideways push. He looked out. Bracing wind swept his face prompting a shudder, not just from the cold. Dimly lit, unforgiving concrete beckoned below, a good ten-meter-drop. Out 'n' upwards, then.

Riley lifted his foot to the window frame grunting as he pulled himself up into the opening. He found himself kneeling on a ledge two handspans' breadth, just wide enough to shuffle along providing there was something at head height to grab on to. He looked up and thanked that same there-when-it-suits-me god – a continuous cement ornamentation rail jutted out above the window offering a decent hand grip. Further to the left, two meters beyond the window, a vertical brick support pylon projected a body-width out from the wall offering something to hide behind if he could get around to the other side of it. Riley also understood there were a couple of access-ladders to the roof around this part of the hospital. With a bit of luck one of them would be just beyond the pylon.

He stood and shuffled around the narrow space to face the wall figuring he'd do better without the distraction of the ground looming like a siren song. Gripping the rail, he took a first step when a movement inside pulled his attention back to the room his thoughts already turning to how he could defend himself without falling off.

'Shitshitshitshit!'

A voice, frantic, female, inside the room. He risked a glimpse... a nurse... Taira... Taira Freyasson, panting, blood on her tunic, tears tracking the shock on her flushed-red cheeks. Red, not white. Pupils not dilated. Not infected. She caught sight of his face in the window.

'AGH! ... Doctor Jackson? Riley? Oh, thank god! Please help me!' she spluttered between sobs. 'These ... these things, they're everywhere!'

'Taira, c'mon, get up here, quick.'

She hurried to the window, but the sound of objects violently being tossed aside from the room next door gave her pause, terror ratcheting up in her eyes. Suppressing his own anxiety, Riley smiled, forcing himself to speak with an assurance and calm he didn't feel.

'We're going to be OK, Taira. I'll get you to safety, I promise.' *Why, how could he promise that?* He held out a hand. 'Come on.'

Surrendering to his lead, her muscles visibly relaxed. He edged to his right to make room for her. Keeping one hand clasped on to the rail above the window the other in a steady grip on Taira's hand, he hefted her up on to the windowsill. 'That's it. You're OK.'

Finding her balance on the ledge, chest against the wall, she turned her head fearfully over her shoulder. 'No, no Taira, don't worry about that.' He gently but firmly brought her head back around with his free hand. 'Focus on me, here. Now, we're going to move this way, OK?' He gestured with his head towards the pylon. 'I want you to grab on to this rail here, you can do it.'

'I can't!'

'You can!'

He guided one hand to the rail, she managed to get the other up herself. Clinging to the wall like limpets on a rock, the cold night wind whipped at them. Riley noted Taira was wearing her short-sleeved scrub top. Her arm sported a galaxy of goosebumps.

'You OK?'

Taira offered a shivered nod in response. Good enough. He indicated right with his chin. 'We're going around that pylon there.' She squeezed her eyes shut in fear but nodded again, a stray lock of wet hair plastered to her face making her look incredibly vulnerable. Shuffling sideways, Riley made it to the pylon. It jutted out half a foot by about two across; awkward but surmountable. They just had to get around it. As he visualised himself swinging around it out into the night air, the door in the room smashed open. A roar followed.

'Oh, god, no!' Taira hissed. 'It's them, Riley!'

Move!

Blocking out the noise from the room and Taira's panicked whimpering, Riley gripped the rail in the corner where the pylon met the wall with his left hand and reached around to the other side with his right, face pushed hard against brick, straining desperately to grab on to anything he could. His hand brushed something metallic. He grabbed at it – a ladder!

Yes!

Clutching at the rail of the ladder he shifted his weight so he could hook his leg around the pylon when Taira screamed, grabbing at his elbow with a suddenness that nearly jerked both of them off the

ledge. Riley whipped his right hand back around barely regaining hold of the concrete rail as she pulled him to his left in a half-spin. An infected woman – who might've been Karen Fung – was on the ledge, one hand around Taira's waist the other flailing at her face.

'YAAAAAGHH!!' Taira screamed as the infected woman's fingernails drew blood. 'Get away from me, you bitch!'

Taira threw her other hand at Riley eyes wide in mind-scrambled terror. The impetus of the infected woman and the shift in Taira's balance pushed them to the edge where they teetered together, poised on a tethered gossamer thread. With now-bleeding fingertips Riley desperately held on to the rail, a position that would last seconds at most his grip beginning to slip. Taira squeezed Riley's arm grabbing his sleeve, panicked voice beseeching him, '*No-no-no! Don't let me go, Riley! DON'T LE--*'

And then they were gone. The sickening sound of flesh meeting concrete told him all he needed to know. Riley's stretched sleeve fluttered in the wind, an impotent flag. He closed his eyes, panting, and let his head fall back to the wall with a guilty thud. The hiatus lasted all of five seconds, the sound of hurried footsteps – bare feet slapping on linoleum – preceded another infected person appearing on the ledge. Squatting, hands splayed on the concrete, comfortably balanced as though the ledge was a meter wide, a male – Riley couldn't make out who – feverishly sniffed at the ledge where the women had been. He leaned out and gazed down at the dead pair.

Riley could do nothing but push himself into the corner, willing himself to invisibility. Ragged patient gown, bloodied chin, ivory-white muscled skin gleaming in the night air, chest heaving, the male seemed inhuman. Just as he dared hope the monster would totally miss him, Riley's 360 mute-buzzed with an incoming call from Chiara. He desperately swiped at her avatar unintentionally activating the call with his fingertip actuators, at the same time flipping the view at the horror in front of him. The male pivoted to face Riley and Chiara – mouthing silently in the vis – black soulless eyes taking both of them in like a shark regarding a pair of seal pups. Acting on instinct, Riley lashed out with his foot, luck more than aim landing the hit directly on the male's right knee buckling his leg inwards with a *CRACK!* It sent him over the edge. With inhuman agility and speed, the male managed to grab the ledge and spring off the wall below it, oblivious to his smashed knee, trampolining himself back up towards the ledge. Clutching the rail, Riley again lashed out with his foot striking the male awkwardly on the shoulder enough to prevent him from landing. The creature flailed at empty space as he spun away in the night air. The unforgiving concrete added to its haul, embracing more flesh with a meaty thud.

Riley pressed his eyes together and swiped his comms shut, trusting that the ten-second snapshot Chiara had witnessed would give her an inkling of what they were facing. He'd call her when he got to safety – right now he felt a damned long way from it. He took in gulps of bracing, cold air catching a few seconds' respite in the stillness.

And in the silence, the sound of heavy, fast breathing reached his ears.

Chapter 6 – Alpha Traynor

Fear was thick in this room, marked everywhere. Overpowering, intense, swirling red in the air, a thick, heavy mist, marked on the walls... and the window. Strongest, brightest, most intense at the window, glowing. Alpha Traynor strode to the opening. He examined the ledge, could read what had happened here as clearly as if it were happening in front of him, now. He didn't even need to look to know that there were two of his kind on the ground with an unmade one, an Other. The markings on the ledge told him this clearly. Understanding was building quickly.

From the hallway came the sound of his kind. None of them came into the room, they remained where they were. Waited for him to come out and lead them further, to take them through this place to make more and... feed. He closed his eyes, allowing his senses to drink in the night, the comfortable darkness. Listening, he tasted the air and smelt, inhaling the history of his surroundings. He sensed something else beyond, something from outside the room. A heart beating. Fast. He moved to the window and leaped on to the ledge. Red-black fear-anger was marked all over this area, strong, sharp. He sniffed at the blood on the wall, licked it. The liquid was heavy-scented and he *knew* its origin... knew him. An Other. One who he was with recently. He was here, close by. He took a step... and stopped. His people were excited, telling him something. Their bodies gave off an intense scent, an odour of anticipation. Excitement. Orange colour swirled into the room.

Something... *someone* else was coming.

A roar from the darkness rent the night air.

'AAAAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!'

More of their kind were now coming, led by one that he recognised. The one he had made first. He could smell him.

Alpha Traynor lifted his head to the night air and answered.

'AAAAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!'

He called them to him. They were coming. They would all be here soon.

And before he left, the Alpha Traynor marked the scent of this Other. He would find him.

He would make him. Or he would kill him.

Chapter 7 – Riley Jackson

3.19am

Oh, Mary, sweet mother of god!

Riley took his hands from his face where they'd been attempting to rub the nightmare out of existence and looked out across the flat roof with its matrix of pipes and boxes. As soon as Traynor had left the ledge, he'd clambered on to the roof and collapsed on to the cold concrete catching his breath and gathering his scattered wits. Riley Jackson had never been this terrified in his life, and in his line of work he'd been very intimate with a shitload of gut-clenching moments. Clinging to the ladder, he'd heard that thing approaching, getting closer, sensing somehow that Riley was here on the other side of the pylon. This impossible virus changed these people into mindless beasts, but that one was something different again. He gave off a vibe, a scent of absolute malevolence that radiated off his being like a heatwave. And Riley knew it was Traynor. He couldn't explain it – he couldn't explain a lot of things right now – but he knew it to be true.

An animal roar had erupted in the night. And when Traynor roared in reply, Riley had nearly fallen from the ladder from sheer shock. He didn't know a person could generate that sort of promise-of-violence by sound alone. Directly after Traynor's outburst, he'd heard movement from below. Chiara's team? He risked a glance over his shoulder at the ground where the bodies of Taira and the two infected lay splayed on the dimly lit concrete like discarded mannequins, the starburst of blood radiating out from under Taira's head a glaring guilt-exclamation mark of Riley's inability to protect her, to keep his ill-made promise. An infected person had then emerged out of the darkness as if in response to Traynor's call. This one carried himself as a leader as well, an alpha male out of the wild, walking upright, massive chest muscles heaving. He stepped over the bodies.

Behind him, more came ... at least twenty – Christ! – some of them children, clothes torn, utterly oblivious to the cold, moving in that hunched-over manic way sniffing the air, movements more animal than human. Riley held on to the ladder for dear life staying stock still as he watched them stream into the hospital below following this other leader. The Alpha vector? For some reason Riley couldn't fathom, they were gathering here at the hospital. It was as though these two leaders, Traynor and this other one, were marshalling their troops. No longer a medical situation, this was now well into uncharted waters.

Here there clearly be godamn, freaking dragons.

This was now a matter of survival. What with the infection and conversion rates on this, these things must be contained here. More than contained, Riley. He now simply had to get to the Grid, secure the place and wait for Chiara Soren and the now very-appropriately-deployed-and-extremely-welcome ops team to arrive. He hoped there were fifty of them, at least. A hundred. Chiara's avatar hummed in his VWAS. He swiped the image, her real face replacing it in the screen, well-armed military figures all in black behind her. What did they call those get-ups? BACC suits?

'Riley, was that one of the things on the vid you sent Jacqueline?'

'Yes. That is what we are dealing with here, Chiara. Oh, god. Where do I start? This is nothing, *nothing*, like you've encountered before. It's viral and it's goddamned whack! If it doesn't kill them, this thing turns people into mindless killing machines.'

'The virus does that?'

'Yes. And before you ask, I'm sure. It's incredibly fast and transformative. Almost... alien.' Sounded stupid saying it but, to her credit, Chiara didn't even blink.

'Fatalities?'

'My 360 bio-sweeps of this level tell me there's thirty-eight dead on the fourth floor alone. How many spec guys have you got with you and when are you getting here?' He started a fast jog as he talked, she was about to ask if the site was secure.

'Strike team of six, our TTD is seven minutes.' All business. 'Are you locked down?'

'Six? Chiara, I'm telling you, we have a real situation—'

'Riley, I know there's a damn situation! That's why we're here. Now, zero in please. Are you secure?'

'Not yet.'

'Christ, Riley!'

'Chiara! I've been somewhat pre-fucking-occupied trying to keep myself alive here!' He paused to hurdle a clutch of gas pipes, mindful of also lowering his voice. 'I'm on my way to the central control room. If there's none of these things around, I can be there in minutes.'

'Alright. I'm putting on the Ops team leader, Lieutenant Carter. He's in charge of site sec.'

The video image flicked to a helmeted late-30s-something male with black camo face paint. His eyes glowed white in contrast.

'Doctor Jackson, I am Lieutenant Evan Carter.' The man spoke calmly, US accent. Midwest, if Riley had to guess.

'Straight up, Lieutenant, I'll tell you these things are very violent and I'm wondering if six of you is gonna be enough, with all due. Are there more of you on the way?'

'I assure you, doctor, we are more than capable.'

'Fuckin' A!' Riley saw two of the soldiers, women, bumping fists in the background.

Carter glanced behind him before continuing. 'I caught what you relayed to Doctor Soren, but is there anything else you can tell us about the IP, sir?'

Well, the man had a confident tone, sure of himself and his team. Riley drew a measure of confidence from that. 'Infection results in either death or severe psycho-physical changes and cognitive degradation at an extreme rate.'

'Have you been able to talk to any of the infected people?'

'No. They're completely non-communicative, at least from what I've encountered. They're either infecting or killing other people inside the facility.'

'Are there any other IP in the vicinity?'

'I can't say for sure, but I don't think so. Our comms hadn't picked up any others in the area. But a little while ago, a cluster of them came into the hospital. They ahh... have congregated around a couple of bigger, stronger, more aggressive individuals. Alpha males, if you will. I believe most infected in the vicinity are now inside this complex.'

'I see. Numbers, IP and total fatalities?'

'I estimate between forty and fifty infected persons at this site and a minimum sixty fatalities. That's being conservative. We have... *had* more than one hundred and fifty patients here and fifty-five staff.'

Carter's expression betrayed neither surprise nor fear, all business. 'To the best of your knowledge, Doctor, can you attribute fatalities to the infection itself or to actions of the infected?'

Good question, perceptive. Riley had seen people dead who'd clearly been infected, but the video feeds had also revealed some violent activity from the IPs. 'Both.'

Carter glanced off screen, Riley guessed it was at Chiara, then turned to Riley. 'Doctor Jackson, given the severity and urgency of the situation, we have to arrest the contagion at this point. I am authorised to initiate an Executive Order, activation level one, Erase Site Protocol. We require your compliance as site leader.'

Hearing weapons being made ready, Riley hesitated. An exec order was a lock-down protocol; level one allowed terminal force to be used, *if necessary*, a site erase order meant that they thought it was. And that likely meant damning whoever was in this hospital to death, some of them people he knew, colleagues.

'Doctor Jackson, please confirm and comply with ESP activation.'

Riley exhaled. Christ, these things were—

'Doctor Jackson, sir, we don't ha—'

'Yes! Yes, Lieutenant!' Riley barked. 'I confirm sitrep and comply with the executive order.' He paused. A part of him felt he was betraying his profession. 'Request one live sample for ongoing research.'

'I second that request,' Chiara piped up in the background.

Carter pursed his lips and tilted his head slightly. 'We'll do our best, doctors, but cadavers may be the best we can give you.'

Riley was in no position to push it. He just hoped the cadavers weren't Carter's squad.

The Lieutenant swiped his VVAS a couple of times and addressed Chiara. 'Site erase executive order one-zero-one-zero-oh-two affirmed with site authority compliance. We are go.' He faced Riley. 'Doctor Jackson, our TTD is... six minutes. We need covert access, what is best entry at site?'

'I will lock down every entrance. Get to the doorway at the end of the Ontario Avenue diagonal. Flash me when you're near it and I'll open the door, that'll get you in to Ground floor. OK, I've got you on comms and I'm flashing a schematic to you... now... you should have it.'

'Got it,' Carter replied.

'OK, head for C2 on the grid. It's there, glowing blue. See it?'

'Affirm. On my flash, get it open, give us ten seconds to inbound then lock it behind us.'

'Be outside of it in six, that's 3.32. I'll have it open. And Lieutenant Carter? Be careful, these things are incredibly dangerous and very aggressive.'

Carter grinned. 'So are we, doctor.'

Riley arrived at the door on the roof which led back to the other, east, side of level 4. The side the Grid was on. He placed the palm of his hand on the square, dark glass sensor pad next to the door. It flashed green. The door opened to a short flight of stairs descending to a landing facing another door. He tiptoed down the stairs, stopping in front of the palm-scan his hand pausing in front of the sensor. Those things might be on the other side. He pulled the video app around and flicked the L4 icon. No life sign at all. He checked again... wait. There they were. A large cluster of them on the west side. If he was quick.

OK, Riles, old son, let's do this.

Riley took three quick breaths and placed his palm on the sensor pad. The instant it flashed green he yanked the door open emerging into the corridor at the opposite end of the hospital to where he encountered Spencer. The place was a mess, broken glass, overturned trolleys, punched-out plaster walls – it looked like they'd done a running of the Mallee bulls through here. At least it was clear of infected. The Grid was located on the other side of a non-descript, unsigned doorway fifteen metres

further along the corridor. Seconds later he found himself in front of the dark, inactive glass pad next to the door. He waved his palm in front of it bringing it to life, centered in its screen a luminescent electric blue SafeSec logo glowing in the dim twilight of the night-lit corridor. He thumbed the panel bringing up the alphanumerical touchpad. Unlike the gen staff access external door sensors in most of the hospital that Riley had green code for, this sensor pad was exclusively Req-access; those required to have it had a code. Now, the hack that Jessie told him... wait, was that... movement from the west side? *Shit!* He wracked his brain now trying to recall the code that was at the front of his bloody mind seconds ago!

Footsteps echoed long the passageway. *Oh, god!* Riley steepled his fingers over the bridge of his nose, forcing himself to calm... breathe, clear and think, breathe, clear and think. Geez, what was the entry code? Numbers and letters and... a whiff came to him, Jessie's initials... JK... JK... *that was it! JK3500!* He fingered the touchpad then hit Enter.

A red light appeared in the top right corner of the pad. *NO!* He must've mis-entered it though he knew he hadn't. He keyed the code once more with deliberate force on each individual entry as if to convince the machine by physical pressure.

A second red. A three-strike system, it would lock him out if he got it wrong another time.

The footsteps grew louder echoing in the night.

Oh, dear god. I have to be on the other side of this door. Right now.

Stop. Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. Think.

Jessie's voice came to him as clearly as if she were standing there. 'Hey, Riley, easy, remember JK at Mildura, yeh?'

Footsteps.

He put his forefinger to the screen and pressed seven times.

J K @ 3 5 0 0

His finger hovered for a half-second.

Footsteps.

He pressed Enter.

The two red lights winked out replaced by a clear green circle and a beautiful loud clear *bleep* which emanated from the touchpad.

YES!

The slap of bare feet sounded horribly close. Riley turned to the noise, a group of infected people thirty meters away raced at him faster than he would have believed possible led by a female that

looked a lot like Jessie (though he could've been projecting). Riley panic-shoved the door open, dashed inside and slammed it behind him, thumping the lock icon on the pad as the infected hit the door where he'd been seconds prior, the reverberation suggesting more force than it could handle for very long. He had to act fast to get Chiara and Carter's squad inside and to work.

Riley tried to block out the frenetic banging on the door. He focused on the room to get his bearings. Apart from the bank of plain gun-metal grey hardware cabinets on the right-side wall that housed the home circuits and the massive hologram grid image showing the whole hospital in thirty-two screen shots on the left, the room was surprisingly Spartan, thank god. Simple was good.

He strode to the main console in front of the video bank and assessed the infected spread. They were gathering, a lot of them – not all, there were at least five outside the door – on the Ground Floor, thankfully away from the proposed entrance point for Chiara and the ops team. The console had the two touchscreens and he knew from Jessie they essentially did the same thing in order to accommodate two operators simultaneously. He randomly chose the right one and swiped its black glass surface, entering Jessie's security code at the prompt. He flicked the haptic option, preferring the tactile holographics. A set of icons came to life and hovered above the screen, blue phantoms in the demi-light. He swiped the old-fashioned padlock logo, correctly identifying it as Security, and pushed the door icon. Among ten total options, the most obvious stood out – Secure All: Entry points. He swiped it. A set of five red lights, one for each level of the hospital, winked on above the image of the door. The hospital was secure. Job one done. He then splayed the ground level light, the image spread revealing a floor schematic with eighteen red doors. Riley's eye went to the designated entry point at the Ontario Avenue diagonal. Entry G18.

'Gotcha.'

He checked his vis: thirty seconds to go. Timing is everything.

And then a massive wooden crash reverberated through the room. The door splintered.