

Prologue

31 DECEMBER

New Year's Eve

Flood Street, Richmond

11:23 am

It was the wild, billowing black cloak, streaming behind the menacing figure, that first caught my eye. I was walking home from the park when the sight of it stopped me in my tracks. Something or someone was staggering up my street. *The grim reaper?*

I'd been out with Boges, kicking around a football, and was heading back home to help pack the car for what Mum was calling 'the usual family New Year's shenanigans' up the coast at Treachery Bay. Poor Boges was staying at home with his mum and his gran. They'd probably struggle to stay awake watching the nine o'clock fireworks on TV. My night was going to be tough, but at least we'd be away from it, out on the boat.

The commotion down the road came closer.

As the swooping shape neared, I saw that it was a muttering, grey-looking man. He was wearing a dark dressing gown and had a weird, lopsided run, as if he was off-balance and dizzy. I was just about to cross the road to avoid him when I made out what he was saying. With a rush of fear, I realised it was me he was coming after! 'Cal!' he screamed. 'Callum Ormond!'

He stumbled towards me, his wild eyes almost bursting from their sockets. He half-limped, half-ran, his flailing arms reaching out in front of him.

A siren wailed in the distance and within seconds an ambulance with flashing lights appeared at the other end of my street. It was driving towards us, fast.

The crazy man was almost on top of me. I could smell his foul, musty breath.

'Keep away from it, Callum!' he spluttered as drool fell from his gaping mouth. 'They killed your father. They're killing me!'

My heart froze in my chest. Who was this guy? Did he mean the virus? The mention of my dad carried a wave of pain so huge, it sent my mind spinning. The man lunged at me.

'Who are you?!' I shouted, pushing him off. 'What are you talking about?! How did you know my dad?'

The ambulance screeched to a halt next to us, and before the man could grab me again, two paramedics jumped out. The first tackled him down while the second pulled something out of his bag. The madman on the ground clawed desperately at my feet.

‘Who are you?’ I shouted again. ‘Nobody killed my dad—he was sick!’

‘Leave this to us, young man,’ said the first paramedic, who was gruff and built like a wrestler. ‘He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. You need to get out of the way.’

Pinned down, the man was trapped, but as the second paramedic forced an injection into his wasted arm, he managed to twist over to me. His face was contorted, the veins in his neck pulsed and protruded.

He stared into my eyes, ‘The Ormond Singularity,’ he said between gasps of breath. ‘Don’t let it be the death of you too, boy! Get out! Get away! Hide and lie low until midnight December 31st of next year. You don’t know what you’re up against. Listen to me! Please! 365 days, Cal. You have 365 days!’

‘Until what? What am I up against?’ The demented man’s menacing words had rocked me to my soul.

‘What are you talking about?’ I demanded.

‘And what’s the Ormond Singularity? How do you know who I am? Tell me who *you* are!’

The wrestler-medic sidled up beside me with a stretcher, and with a quick movement towards the man, he pushed me out of the way. ‘Our patient is very sick and his mind is affected. Please leave this to us and get on your way!’

With superhuman strength, the sick man tore himself away from the medics’ hold. His eyes were wide with terror. ‘If you don’t disappear, you’re going to have to survive them for a whole year! Do you realise what that means? They’re going to be after you for 365 days! Week after week! Day after day!’

My confusion and fear deepened. *Them?* Who was ‘them’? ‘What are you talking about?’ I asked again. ‘*Who’s* after me?’

The sick man’s sudden surge of strength collapsed. The medics quickly strapped him down on the stretcher. His head fell to one side and his eyelids blinked, furiously fighting the sedative taking over his bloodstream. His voice continued in a haunting and harsh whisper: ‘Callum, the Ormond Singularity. The others already know. They know your father contacted you. They will *kill* you. You must go into hiding until December 31st next year. Get your family to leave. Until midnight on the last day of the

year . . . that's when the Singularity runs out. You're not safe until then. Somehow you must survive.'

His eyes rolled back and his body fell limp. The paramedics carried him away.

'Don't take any notice,' called out the second medic. 'Poor guy's been delusional for days. It's just getting worse. Don't let him worry you.'

As the man was pushed into the back of the ambulance, he lifted his head one last time. 'Cal,' he moaned, '365 days. Once they . . . the angel . . . you must . . . for Tom . . .'

The doors slammed and the ambulance sped off.

In a few moments, silence closed in. I stood there alone and bewildered. It was like nothing had happened. The only sounds now were the distant barking of a dog, and the rustling of leaves in the trees that lined the street.