FALLING

Part Five, Chapter 21

The pylon loomed before him, the bright colours dulled by night. The walls were lit up by powerful floodlights, but only with half the vibrancy the sunlight brought out in them. During they day they gleamed proudly. Now, they almost looked like they were sleeping.

Dale walked quickly and purposefully along the path down the eastern edge of the highway. He'd hurried from the wreck of the stairway back down George Street into The Rocks and sought the higher roads that led him to Cumberland Street, where another staircase led him to the walking path alongside the road. He wasn't sure what made him think the pylon was where he was supposed to go. It might have been something calling to him, it might have been the idea he could spend all night just walking back and forth at street level just waiting for something to happen.

He passed the edge of the pylon and came to the 15 metre wide, bright red iron gates behind which lay the entry area to the upper levels.

The escalator to the Skyway platform was against the far right hand wall, the information and tourist desk alongside that, and there was a maintenance area extending from the left hand wall to the centre of the room, locked behind mesh gates and containing vehicles, small cranes and all sorts of equipment.

On the opposite wall was the memorial. There were three just like it in the other pylons, like the war memorials you could see in any municipal park. Dale couldn't see it clearly in the dark, but he'd seen them plenty of times over the first few years when the survivors of the disaster used to get together for a small remembrance service. After a few years of never really feeling comfortable, a little like the whole thing was a media circus, he stopped going. He heard a term years later that described the interest in the event perfectly – 'grief porn'.

Sitting there in his wheelchair while a school choir sang and people cried, he stared at the names – dozens of them, hundreds more in the other pylons – and felt like his should be among them, almost believing it had been, but they'd had to erase it when he'd cheated death. They were etched into a brass plaque four by seven feet in size that covered the back wall. In front of the wall were two identical brass cups, a foot high. One carried a soft flame powered by natural gas, the other a pair of lilies that were changed every day.

In front of that was a plexiglass stand about three feet high, encasing a photograph of the old bridge in the prime of its life during the 1988 bicentennial celebrations, the harbour crowded with boats, sunlight streaming over the proud, dynamic city. A knee-high wall ran in a semicircle around it all, enclosing the memorial.

Dale walked along to where the gates joined, secured together by a long metal latch attached to an electronic box with a small LCD. Digging his mobile out of his pocket, Dale opened the file finder and activated the share to Barry's network, looking around furtively to make sure nobody was nearby.

He knew he'd be on camera and his face was probably already being colour corrected for the darkness and routed to biometric software at the nearest police station. He only hoped whatever was going to happen would be underway by the time someone stopped him. The bridge had been reopened for a few days now – he could hear traffic passing on the other side of the pylon – but he didn't want to guess how jittery the relevant authorities were.

Calling up a search function, Dale scrolled through everything he found in Barry's data that contained the text 'password' until he found a message from someone at the city council. The note was telling Barry a skeleton key security code was being issued for his use that unlocked the pylon security gates and bought base lighting and safety systems online.

Dale keyed the code into the hard pad of the electronic lock and it emitted a green light and a beep. With a clank, the latch withdrew and soft lights halfway up each wall inside slowly brightened, illuminating the whole area barely enough to see his way around. Dale slid the gate aside a crack to slip through, closing and locking it behind him. Just activating the lock would have sent an alert to someone, maybe even Barry himself.

The darkness was almost complete, the flame from the memorial casting a dull orange glow only a few feet around it. As he stood watching the dark, Dale decided he should be the one to make the next move. He didn't understand what lived here – and might never – but he felt he had to defy the dark. Be the intruder.

He walked carefully but unhesitatingly to the right hand wall, past the tourist stand and Skyway counter towards the elevator up to the Skyway level. He pressed the call button, realising that if Barry's code didn't activate the lifts he'd be stuck.

When the elevator door opened and a flood of light spilled out Dale still jumped with fright, even though he'd expected it.

He took a deep breath and walked forward to stand in the centre of the elevator, turning to face the front as the doors slid closed. There was a small lurch and the lift started to rise.

He rubbed his side, which had started to ache a little after his roll across the grass. But it was definitely muscular, not the brace. The one constant whenever he'd been here over the past few weeks had been that his back had hurt each time, enough to cripple him beyond action more than once. But the demagnetiser Barry had fitted on Friday made him an earth wire, collecting static charge from all over the electronics system of the brace and directing it into the ground.

For the first time in weeks, there was no pain in his back whatsoever.

But his shirt felt sodden with blood from the ruptured dermagel patch and Dale was trying to crane his neck around to see how much damage he'd done when he stopped, turning slowly back to the front of the lift.

As he remembered from his trip here with Tim the previous week, the elevator journey was no more than about five seconds.

Five seconds had passed, then ten, then thirty, then a minute. Dale stared at the buttons on the panel. The light had stopped at **Skyway Platform** long ago and the lift was still rising. He looked back at the crack between the doors, forcing his fear down.

There was a jolt as the lift stopped.

The doors slowly opened and a gale of wind howled in. Dale could see the stars, the lights of a plane far off, and the skyline of the city.

Straight down.

Dale didn't scream, but he threw himself against the back of the lift in terror. The wind whipped his untucked shirt and stung his eyes.

Through the doors, he could just see the southern tip of the bridge and Sydney sprawling beyond that, almost a thousand feet below him.

He was still in the elevator shaft – at least, within the confines of where the elevator shaft would be had it reached so far up. He could hear the wind whipping through heavy cables as they clanked together above and below him, stretching off into infinity. What could they possibly be moored to?

Nothing, that was what.

So it can't be real, he told himself.

Dale slid down the back wall until he was sitting on the grimy floor, feeling the elevator car teeter back and forth in the air from it.

He found himself asking what Tim would say. He'd undoubtedly say the mind is only responsible for what the senses tell it regardless of the

actual world around it. Something could be telling the nerves all over his skin they're feeling the wind a thousand feet in the air, telling his brain his eyes are seeing the night sky around him and city skyline far below. It didn't make it real. It just made it stuff he was seeing and feeling.

For some reason the words 'What would Tim say' inexplicably made Dale think of a phrase he'd heard before everywhere, from religious dogma to funny T-shirts – 'what would Jesus do?'

Despite the fear, maybe because of it, it made him giggle. And the laughter seemed to break the hold over him. He started probing forward with his feet.

Somehow, he got the feeling he'd entered into a game. The lift was the movement of his opponent's piece. Before that, his move had been stepping into it. Now it was his turn again. The alternative was to sit there all night, and if he didn't do something it looked like he might. Or maybe the elevator would simply disappear and let him fall – a lot further this time.

Intruder, he repeated to himself. Be the intruder. Where was the only place this elevator could go, *really?*

The wind tore at his shoes as his feet passed beyond the open doors. He knew he couldn't feel for it or test it. The cable car platform was there, he had to step out onto it.

He dragged himself slowly up to stand, edging around the edge of the car until he was right beside the open door. The tips of the city's skyscrapers were so far down he could see the mist their light caused from the distance. The wind tore at him like hands dragging him forward. He must have been at least half a kilometer up.

'Jesus Christ,' he muttered, blowing out heavy breaths and trying to stay calm. He crept towards the open door, reaching carefully across the gap to grasp the other edge of the opening until he was standing on the very edge of the floor, his hands holding the outside edge of the steel frame for grim death, millimetres from the abyss.

With the knowledge of the height churning in his stomach, lifting one foot off the floor of the car seemed the bravest thing Dale had ever done in his life, but when he inched it forward so it was over empty space and bought it slamming down, it hit the floor of the cable car platform.

Part Five, Chapter 22

The wind disappeared in wisps around his hair and clothes and there, in the near-dark was the Skyway souvenir shop and the closed-off back half

of the platform where the huge, silent systems of wheels, chains and pulleys sat. Halfway up the wall in one corner, nestled between two adjacent walls, was the flattish, triangular control room level. He was on the Skyway level.

The elevator doors closed behind him, cutting off the light. Dale looked up, imagining the sky high above, lit up with a misty light from the city. Had he really been hanging in the air way up there?

He felt a surge of triumph. It didn't matter – he'd won. He'd stepped out of its nightmare back into reality.

He walked past the gift shop and through the queueing turnstiles onto the platform. The wheel of the cable drive system was a huge shadow in the dark.

Towards the archway at the end of the platform leading outside was one of the dark Skyway gondolas. He didn't intend on going anywhere near it. They were tools he couldn't control, and whatever he was here to face had already used them against him. He'd probably tempted fate enough just using the elevator.

The thunderous clang from the far corner of the room made Dale yelp in fright. The door that led up to the control room was on the floor below it, and Dale came slowly around the drive wheel of the Skyway just in time to see the door close softly.

Someone – or something – had been in here with him.

Not letting himself think and trying to ignore the skin crawling on his neck and down his back, Dale hurried towards the access door. He skirted the barricades that kept commuters well back from the drive system, reached the control room door and threw it open.

Inside was a thin stairwell that led up to a landing above. He put his foot to the first step and froze when a bellow rang out from above him, sounding about two or three flights up.

It was the roar of an enormous beast, one that couldn't possibly be found in the middle of a big city, let alone up an elevator and a tiny flight of stairs. It sounded the size of a huge wolf, maybe a bear all puffed up with rage or fear.

So it couldn't be real.

Dale blinked his eyes tightly, trying to force the image of what sort of creature it might be from his mind. He took the stairs three at a time to the first landing, around the corner of the Skyway control area to the adjacent flight.

It seemed the stairs were going to run around the inside walls of the pylon to wherever they ended up, and as Dale mounted the next flight he

asked himself if he was dreaming. Was it really him, following ghosts up the Sydney Harbour Bridge at nearly ten o'clock at night? Not following, *chasing*.

The bellow came again – angry, violated, seemingly a last ditch effort to frighten off the less committed. Dale passed the landing where it must have been when he heard it on the Skyway level, breathing a small sigh of relief when he found nothing there. He wasn't following a huge monster, just a harmless disembodied voice. A trick.

He ran up more than 10 flights and must have circled the inside of the pylon three times over when he reached the last landing.

The diameter inside was much smaller now, the walls of the thinner upper reaches of the pylon much closer. The last set of stairs hugged the wall tightly in the near-dark, a small square of light at the top about 10 metres above him – the pale light of the city outside and the uppermost platform that could be found in the small nosecone section of each pylon. Because of the difficulty of access (and to encourage people to pay to ride the Skyway if they wanted views), the nosecone platforms had never been open to the public.

As Dale started up the last stairway the light above him was cut off. The small hatchway swung closed and a tumultuous crash filled the pylon's interior, the sound like thunder right beside his head. His ears hurt and it took long seconds for the crash to fade away. Dale swore quietly and started up again, faster now.

As he climbed he felt a tingling in the air – the smell of fear, maybe the heat of impending battle, maybe the culmination of all the terror. Maybe, as Vicki might contend, his imagination.

Nearer the top, without as many of the small service lights that had led the way further down, it grew even darker. Dale could hardly see, reaching his hand up above him in the darkness as he climbed.

Before long he felt the cold metal hatch. Dale willed all his strength into his arm and pushed with all his might.

As the door crept up an inch he saw something right beside it, the barely-seen shadow of something moving. A vile stench wafted into the long chamber and something massive stamped down on the hatch, slamming it shut and jolting Dale's arm painfully downwards.

He shouted as he felt his feet slip from the steps, bashing his lip and forehead painfully as he scrambled desperately for a grip.

Dale lay against the stairs, panting, his arm singing in pain and tasting blood in his mouth. He felt for the scar on his back and came away with a

hand slick with blood from the split dermagel. He wiped his face, looked up through the darkness to where the hatch was and started up again.

"Leave me alone," he whispered, mumbling, "leave everybody else alone..."

He reached up and felt for the hatch again, bracing his shoulder against it and putting all his force behind it. The air became electric.

"... and don't... fucking... *threaten* me!"

Dale burst through the floor, thrusting the hatch aside before him to clang loudly against the red metal floor.

He looked around the upper platform, 30 feet across with a waist-high wall around the outside. Supports around the wall's edge held the nosecone aloft, like the pyramid-shaped roof of a shack from an island paradise.

He was alone.

Part Five, Chapter 23

Dale climbed out through the hatch and hooked his foot under it, pulling the heavy door over and letting it drop back into the iron floor as quietly as he could, a square of yellow and black warning stripes with **WARNING – OPENS OUTWARDS** printed in bright white letters in the centre.

He crossed to the wall and looked over the city and harbour. It was beautiful from so high up, higher than some of the buildings, as if he was flying through them.

He turned back in to face the platform. There was no higher he could go, no higher anyone could. He had chased... whatever was haunting him... all the way to the top, to the pinnacle, the castle parapet of its domain, and it had fled. Dale was filled with such excitement, such a sense of victory and strength he fancied he could throw himself over the edge and fly.

Looking over the edge again, it was the first time in 20 years he hadn't been afraid of heights. He'd won. But had he done what he'd come here to do?

Dale fished his phone out of his pocket, wondering what to do next. If Barry's scientist was recovering, how would he find out? He couldn't just call the hospital and ask, and it certainly wouldn't be in any news report – people waking up in hospitals feeling better wasn't usually a hot lead.

And what could he tell Barry if he called him? 'Hi, I'm on the top platform of one of the pylons bleeding like a stuck pig, can you ring the hospital and check your scientist guy is okay?'

Still, he felt so full of power he had to talk to someone, and there was only one person who'd understand and be glad to hear from him anyway. As he dialled Vicki's number he decided he probably shouldn't say exactly where he was just yet, but he just wanted to hear her voice, share the sense of triumph.

"Hi, I'm not able to get to the phone, please try me at work-"

Disquiet started to bubble way down in his stomach. Okay, he said to himself, she's in the toilet or shower, that's all.

For some reason Dale's eyes fell on the hatch that led back down into the innards of the arch. Was it stupid, what he was doing up here? If that scientist could contract some killer stomach bug just by parking nearby, who knew what else could happen here? What could it do to Dale himself, standing right in the middle of it?

He'd felt himself repel it when he and Vicki had walked along the path, but when he was in her car it was a different matter. That wasn't like now. When he had control, he could get away any time he wanted.

Or could he? All it had to do was seal the hatch he was staring at shut and keep him here – it had done much worse – and it could do whatever it wanted with him.

Suddenly Dale didn't feel so triumphant. He felt like he was standing on top of the Harbour Bridge, bleeding badly and facing a difficult climb back down. And he suddenly couldn't remember what he was doing there.

His heart started to pound, a thin sheen of sweat sprang out across his forehead and his throat tightened in fear...

Maybe she's not answering because she's driving, on the way here because she decided to come after all, a voice said. Dale felt his heartbeat ratchet up another notch.

She couldn't be anywhere near here.

Ah, but this was a trick, the voice continued, it was a ruse to get you here, knowing she'd follow like a sacrificial lamb.

"No," he muttered, hanging up the phone and starting to dial the surgery number that would divert to her mobile with more urgency – she'd told him after their first meeting if he had a particularly bad day or night to ring the office number and she'd hear it no matter where she was.

His hands shaking now, he missed a digit and had to start again. And again.

Dale took a deep breath and blew it out slowly as it started ringing, trying to quell the rising tightness. What if she was parking her car opposite the Hyatt in Hickson Road and walking towards him right now? Closer than

Barry's scientist had been when it had attacked and put him in hospital. It might take her and he'd never know. Would he spend years, decades, wondering if he could have saved her all over again?

He felt like he was leaning on the lid of a heavy box while something pressed upwards from within, trying to get out. The box contained his fear, and he was losing the battle to hold it in. If he panicked up here, Vicki's fear that he might hurt himself was not only possible, it was likely.

Keep her in your mind, he said, remember the promise you made. Imagine how she'll feel if something happens to you.

'You've reached the practice of Dr Victoria Holt," came the voice of her secretary, Felicity, *"It's out of office hours right now so please leave a message after the tone or call back between the hours of-"*

Dale felt a hammerblow in his chest and the fear broke. She'd said that when it diverted to her number from the office it rang louder, or for longer, or something, so she never missed a call from what might be a panicked patient. Either way, she'd been so freaked out he couldn't believe she wouldn't have the phone with her. If she was in the toilet she'd probably have it with her and treat him to the most unwittingly intimate of rituals between lovers when she answered...

Unless something had happened to her.

Without even thinking of the possible ramifications, Dale dialled the police information number, still staring at the hatch that would lead him out and home, or so he thought.

"I want to enquire about a missing person," he said quietly when the operator answered.

"Do you have a name and address?" the female voice answered. Dale could hear the typing of keys and the general cacophony of a call centre in the background.

"Vicki... Victoria Holt. Wallaroy Crescent, Woollahra. I'm not sure of the number."

Just a moment, sir."

Dale turned away to look out at the buildings of the CBD, trying to remind himself he was in a big, modern city and things like whatever he could feel reaching for him didn't happen here...

"Are you a relative?"

"A patient. She's my psychiatrist."

"Can I get your name please, sir?"

Dale's heart started beating faster. He'd been expecting to hear no such report had been filed.

"Have you been contacted about her being missing?" he asked.

"Sir I'm going to have to ask you to give me your name please," the voice continued, accompanied by even more frenzied clacking of keys. She was looking at something serious, he realised, and this anonymous phone call was the only lead so far.

"I need you to tell me if you know anything about her whereabouts," he said, trying to give his voice an air of commanding force but not feeling a word of it.

"I understand that sir, but in order to continue I need some information from you. There has been a report and if you're related to Ms Holt I can tell you the circumstances, but I need you to tell me-"

"I know where she is," he said, not sure where the words were coming from. "Tell me what you have in front of you right now or I'll hang up and you'll never find her."

There was a pause. *"Sir, I promise I'll give you all the details, but-"*

"Right now. I'm your only chance."

There was a heavy sigh, pregnant with conflict, the operator making a very difficult decision – tell this wacko the truth and keep the trail while they tried to triangulate his signal and find him, or follow the script and lose a lead, maybe her job.

"Triple oh received a report of screams from her neighbours. The attending officers got no answer so they forced entry. Ms Holt wasn't at home, but they found evidence of a struggle and probable assault inside the house near the front door. There was dried blood and apparently the clothes she'd been wearing. We're making enquiries about a possible sex-related abduction offence."

The whole time she'd been reading from her screen, Dale had heard clicks and beeps over the line – no doubt more senior people and maybe hostage negotiators pushing buttons to listen in at her signal.

But he hadn't paid any of it any mind. The sudden roaring whirl in his head drowned awareness of everything else out. The sense of power from only a minute before was gone and he was desperately clutching for the last few threads of control. He turned back towards the middle of the platform, thinking that he should probably try and climb back down with what little mindfulness he had left.

When Dale saw what lay against the wall across the opposite side of the platform those last threads were cut.

The very breath was knocked out of him as he hitched in a lungful of air and heard himself scream and scream...