

**THE  
SILENT  
SOCIETY**

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# CHAPTER 1

Light filtered through cracks in the blinds, letting piercing rays of early morning glow through the bedroom window. It cast a beam directly onto the face of Jenson, who reluctantly opened the one eye that wasn't submerged in the pillow. He blinked a few times to gain focus of his surroundings and brushed away the loose strands of sandy hair caught in his eyelashes. His mouth was dry and his body ached but that was nothing unusual. The youthful days of springing out of bed each morning had long passed. He wiped his eyes and gradually spread his hands across the roughness of his unshaven cheeks. He felt twice the forty-two years he supposedly was. Years of field work and travel around the globe had taken its toll. It was a privileged position to be in, he had to remind himself. To wear yourself down with something you love whilst being surrounded by the wonder and beauty of the natural world. Something he never got tired of was the peaceful feeling of waking to the sounds of forest birdsong, rain on a tin roof and water eddying over river rock. The feeling of being at home in beautiful bushland would always be the fuel to his fire and the reason he woke up each day. His travels had taken him all over the world but there was nothing quite like the familiarity of his local mountain range. He knew every twist and turn of the river that jutted its way through the valley, every nook and cranny where fish liked to hide and the best time of day to catch them.

Despite his rough appearance, sometimes blunt attitude and remote living quarters, Dr Jenson Ryder was an intelligent and thoughtful

man. His research across the preceding decades had led him to become a senior research fellow at a leading university that was renowned for their work in epidemiology and biological anthropology. Despite his success, he never pushed for status within the scientific community and instead longed for knowledge and understanding of the unknown. His passions really remained out of the lab and in the natural wilderness where there was still so much to be explored. In a way, he had two lives. A professional life that contained him to a stale white laboratory and office space, illuminated by the harsh frosted light of fluorescent globes. It was a good job and one that he enjoyed but in the end, it was a means for him to live the life he always dreamed of as a boy. A life connected closely to his natural environment by hiking, fishing and exploring. This was the element of his life that fuelled him and gave him purpose and meaning. Without it, he was lost, lonely and depressed. He had firsthand experience of what occurred when you isolate a human being to the confines of a concreted world. The echoes of foreign, intrusive sounds, smells and sights day after day drained on his psyche and eventually led to full-blown depression. There was a time when he tried to convince himself that it was the life that everyone had to live, or perhaps that's what his ex-wife had tried to convince him of.

Jenson dragged himself to the bathroom where he turned the faucets of the shower and soaked himself in steaming warm water. Silky pure liquid ran through his hair and across his skin, quelling the goosebumps brought on by the early autumn air. Jenson's time in the outdoors gave his skin a weathered appearance that aged him further than his forty-two years. Despite this, his face retained a youthful healthiness. His academic life was yet to sterilise his semblance. He insisted on wearing his hair long, the sandy strands hanging over his forehead and ears, framing his deep blue eyes. His body was thin and wiry, yet strong and durable, trained by the ebbs and flows of life. Were it not for the woollen dress coat he often wore to work, he could easily be mistaken for someone at home in Hawaii chasing waves.

He lived in a wooden cottage that rested on the banks of the Capertree

River, a couple of hours west of the main city and on the border of a vast and dense National Park. At this stage of the morning, a gentle stream of wood smoke spiralled from the chimney, which floated gently across the valley and down the river. The early glow of sunlight that had previously woken him had yet to melt a thin layer of frost that blanketed the grounds surrounding the house. Droplets of dew clung to eucalyptus trees and the sound of whip birds echoed out through the bushland. For Jenson, it was a piece of paradise where he could escape the noise of the modern world. When he wasn't at the office or his laboratory, he could be found fly-fishing and canoeing the local rivers and hiking through the National Park. It was like being transported back into another era, to a place where time was irrelevant and the trivialities of the world seemed so opaque and insignificant. It was a place where you could think deeper about the things that mattered or not think at all; it was up to you where you let your mind wander.

The whistle of the kettle broke Jenson from his daydream, his blue eyes peacefully staring out the window of the kitchen. He loved the way the early morning fog lingered in the troughs of the land and across the riverbeds, hiding all but the tips of surrounding trees. He poured the boiling water to brew a mug of tea and watched as the steam swirled mesmerisingly up into the room. He stood in the front doorway, feeling the warmth of the house on his back and the brisk touch of dawn air on his face. The hot tea melted down his throat and warmed him from the inside out.

There was a time when Jenson was able to share such moments with his wife. However, the strain of constant travel by chasing research opportunities in far-flung corners of the globe had placed immeasurable strain on his relationship. Her constant disdain for anything outside of the city had been the breaking point in the end. They simply wanted other things out of life. They had different priorities and couldn't find the compromise to make them stay together. It had been a difficult few years following his divorce but Jenson finally felt as though he was getting his life back to a peaceful place where he could move on

with the things he loved. He was a man that valued time alone with merely the presence of the natural world. Sasha, his ex-wife, on the other hand, had found the idea of isolation almost repulsive. In the post-mortem following the divorce, he wondered how he had not seen that trait in her from the beginning. Hindsight is a wonderful thing though, and in hindsight, his divorce was probably the best thing that could've happened. He'd been able to move permanently into the place at Capertree and set up a life had always wanted, not the way 'it was supposed to be'. Conformity was never one of Jenson's strong suits. Although he missed Sasha, his life now was much simpler and far more relaxed. As he soaked in the rising warmth of the morning sun finishing his cup of tea, he finally realised that he was reversing the damage. He felt whole again, almost new.

Jenson looked down at his wristwatch and realised he would be running late again if he didn't get a move on. He downed the meagre remnants of what was in his mug, brushed his teeth and dashed for the car. The satisfying crunch of gravel under the wheels soon subsided to a smooth sound of tarmac and before long the bushland gave way to open farmland and transitioned further to urban sprawl. The drive to the office was never his favourite. Coming home was the highlight. Whether it be a beautiful clear sunset or a thundery day with pouring rain, there was never a moment when the drive out of the city didn't leave a satisfied feeling deep in Jenson's gut.

## CHAPTER 2

Jenson was climbing the several flights of stairs on the way up to his office when he was stopped by his administrative assistant. Her face was flushed and a concerned furrowed brow immediately raised his suspicions, as she was generally a calm and controlled person. She informed Jenson that he had multiple messages from a place called the Centre for Intelligence and National Security (CINS) and required him to call urgently. Jenson had to think twice about what he had just heard. The words national security echoed in his head as he was handed their contact information on a small piece of white office paper.

‘Did they say what they wanted?’ Jenson asked, looking slightly confused.

‘No. They just said it was a matter of national security so they had to speak directly to you on a secure line.’

‘National security. They used the words *national security*?’

‘Yes. And to call them urgently,’ she reiterated.

‘Thank you,’ Jenson replied, still holding the square piece of paper in his hand. ‘Can you block my schedule for the morning then? No calls. No meetings.’

Jenson stood in the hallway outside his office for a moment. The fluorescent lights humming above him mirrored the static he felt in his brain. Why on Earth would CINS want him to call them... urgently? *National security*; the words rang through his head again. He broke the thought and hurriedly placed his briefcase on his desk and dialled the number scribbled on the piece of paper he held in a slightly sweaty

hand. A low raspy voice answered.

‘Dr Ryder, thank you for calling me back so soon.’

Jenson stuttered for a second at the rapid acknowledgement of his phone call. How did he know who was on the other end of the line?

‘Uh, not a problem. Sorry, who am I speaking with?’

‘My apologies, Dr Ryder. My name is Hiram Nebu. I am the director of CINS. I assume your assistant filled you in on why we’re speaking today?’

‘Well, no. Not exactly. I was informed there was an issue of national security that you needed my help with. That’s all I know. And before you start, I have no idea what issue of such a scale I could help you with. You do realise I am just a human ecologist who works at a university?’ Jenson’s voice became unexpectedly hurried and he found himself suddenly flustered.

‘I’ll stop you right there, Dr Ryder.’

‘Please, call me Jenson.’

‘Very well. I’ll get straight to the point, Jenson. Our data are showing an acute rise in the number cases of a disease that has severe morbidities associated with it. We do not yet know the pathophysiology of this disease. The first reported case was a little over six months ago but has been exponentially rising ever since. We were alerted to the situation when we received notification from hospitals and mental health clinicians across the country that they were being inundated with patients at an unprecedented rate. We are yet to determine the exact cause and have not found a medical professional who has come across such an illness before.’

‘What sort of symptoms are we talking about here?’ Jenson asked, suddenly feeling slightly more intrigued and less worried he’d been the subject of an elaborate hoax.

‘The symptoms are wide-ranging and vary in severity. However, we are predominantly seeing a massive spike in the number of patients accessing help for feelings of depression and suicide coupled with extreme lethargy, pain and an inability to speak.’

‘They’re mute?’ Jenson quickly interjected.

‘In some cases, yes. In most, all we are seeing is a few words here and there and nothing remotely coherent.’

‘And the depression? Are there any similarities in cases that you’ve observed so far?’

‘It’s difficult to tell due to the incoherence and uncommunicativeness of patients. This is where we need your assistance. Further analysis of these patients is desperately needed from the ecological level; from the ground up. We need to get into the field and see what’s going on. We need to understand how this illness is manifesting and what can be done to prevent it and ideally cure it as well.’

A silent pause in the conversation left Jenson with the realisation of what this man was asking him. The enormity of it suddenly struck him. His heart raced and his mind flickered through scenarios like the reel of an old movie.

‘And this is what you want my help with?’

‘That is right, Jenson. We have done our research and clearly see that you are the premier researcher in this field. We want you to head the research into this crisis.’

Jenson slowly sat down in his office chair and contemplated the scenario for a while. It was a lot to take in first thing on a Monday morning. Could he just drop everything and start working for some strange organisation? How did he even know the person on the other end of this line was telling the truth? He wanted to be back at the house, in the forest without a care in the world. His mind searched for an easy option. He wanted someone to walk through the door and tell him it was a false alarm and he could get back to his day. It had started so peacefully, yet here he sat.

‘Are you still there, Jenson?’ Hiram asked, breaking the silence Jenson had left hanging while taking it all in.

‘Uh, yes, I’m still here. Sorry. I’m just... just... I’m...’

‘I know it’s a strange situation I’ve put you in here. But you must understand that this is something we need to get on top of as soon



as possible. If we're going to do that, I firmly believe you are the best person for the job.'

'I'd like to set up a preliminary meeting to go through the basics in person and gain a better understanding of what's going on here. I need to assure myself of that before I commit to anything more.'

'Of course, I understand. I'll have a helicopter pick you up within the hour. Just bring the bare essentials. We'll take care of the rest.'

'Did you say a helicopter?' Jenson replied in a slightly bemused tone.

'That's right, Dr Ryder. Be ready in thirty minutes. Someone will collect you.'

Jenson slowly placed the phone down on the receiver and rested his hands on the desk. He stood motionless for some time, his face depicting the epitome of confusion. He then snapped into action, packing some items into his briefcase and frantically scurrying about his office, wondering how best to prepare for the meeting, and being summoned by a helicopter.