

# **SPIRAL DIAL**

## **by Liza Bec**

### **Episode Two: Hammock**

Jessica rushed down the corridor after Ant, the smell of decaying flesh still so strong she could almost taste it. Tripping over the loose cord of her fluffy towelling robe, she cursed herself for pulling on the least appropriate possible attire. This had to be the first time she had attended a crash call clothed for the spa. Not that she had any objection to the idea of Amy seeing her half dressed. Perhaps she had been imagining the smell. After all, she had been perfectly well a matter of hours ago. She doubted that there was any serious emergency here.

Arriving at a plain white door with a large red cross embossed in velvet on it, Ant stood back. He looked nervous. Jessica felt a twinge of anxiety at what she would find inside.

The first thing which hit her was the smell. Instantly recognisable from her experiences on the front line, the odour of rotting wounds was not something easily forgotten. Momentarily she felt herself back there again, saw the rows of writhing bodies begging for mercy. She staggered, gagging involuntarily before regaining her composure and switching into action mode.

Automatically, using procedure as a delaying tactic, she obeyed the prominently displayed signs instructing all who entered to wash their hands and don gloves, apron and mask. The clinical environment was ubiquitous as always, right down to the snowy white pleated bedside curtain obscuring the patient from her view.

As she started scrubbing up, she realised the sheer impossibility of the task ahead of her while wearing a long sleeved white fluffy robe. A quick rifle through the cupboards produced a pair of dark purple scrubs which she hastily threw on, discarding the robe carelessly to the floor.

She drew back the curtain. The sight which confronted her was no longer recognisably human. Amy sat hunched on the bed, gasping for breath. Her delicate mouth was now swollen and distorted, the surrounding flesh disintegrating in shades of red, black and green. She grasped the sides of the bed to assist her breathing. Jessica could tell that she would not last much longer. Murmuring words of reassurance, she attached the saturation probe to her finger and a blood pressure cuff to her arm. The readings were not pretty.

“Sats eighty per cent, blood pressure ninety over fifty six. We need oxygen. Ant, is there anyone else on board with medical training?”

Ant, who was in a chair in the corner hyperventilating almost as fast as the patient, looked mildly panicked. Jess realised that she was on her own with this one.

“Ant, just do me one small thing, please. It could be life saving.”

Trembling, he nodded.

“Go find me some Vicks. Amy’s not the only one who’s going to need help with her breathing here.”

As he left the room, she felt a rapidly rising surge of panic flood through her and firmly squashed it down. The last thing she needed right now was a flashback. Here at least was something she could do, something which could perhaps redeem her from her past. She set to work.

By the time Ant returned with the strongly scented balm, Jessica had located the crash trolley, oxygen and ventilator, cannulated, sedated and intubated the patient and taken a vast array of pathology and microbiology samples, as well as starting initial treatment with fluids and broad spectrum antibiotics. She had also located the computer, tapped in the logon details which were securely taped to the monitor and accessed Amy’s medical history. As she removed her mask and performed the necessary hand hygiene, she practically ripped the Vicks from Ant’s still shaking hands.

“My mum always told me Vicks was the business, but I didn’t realise it was that good.”

He had always known his mum was a medical genius! He watched Jessica’s face light up as she pried the tin open, inserted her finger and rubbed the strong smelling gel underneath her nose. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Soooo much better. Thanks Ant, you’re a life saver.”

Ant’s face fell. “Well, you certainly know how to make a guy feel redundant!”

“Seriously, this is important. There’s nothing like Vicks to keep you going in a sticky situation. It works for every bad smell you can imagine. Bloody faeces, unwashed heroin addict, anything.”

She tried to stop herself grinning at his horrified expression. Jess could tell that she was going to have to work hard to assuage Ant’s wounded ego. “She’s stable. I need to run these samples, and ideally I need some qualified medical help. Where is the ship’s nurse? I was told there would be at least one other clinician on board.”

“ I don’t know where they got that from. It’s like Amy said last night. You’re looking

right at her. She's the one with bugs eating her face and a giant tube down her throat." Ant must be feeling better, as the sarcastic Australian in him had now resurfaced.

Jessica's heart sank. Being the sole medical officer in charge of a critical life threatening emergency was not how she had planned to spend her first evening on board. She hadn't felt this panicked since she had been at medical school. She had to get this situation under control, and fast.

"Well Ant, it looks like you've been promoted. You're now my chief assistant. Congratulations. I'll clear it with the Captain later. Now, we have work to do. Where are the laboratory facilities?"

Ant led her to a corner of the room containing a few very basic looking machines. A couple she recognised. It seemed she would be able to perform the most important tests she needed, as well as a basic culture to identify the bacteria she was dealing with. As she set up the machines, she thought out loud, more out of habit than hope that Ant would have some useful input.

"This organism is like nothing I've ever seen before. It must be a highly aggressive strain. Gangrene. That's what it looks like. Except for gangrene to occur in a young, healthy person.... and progress this fast....it's unheard of." Jessica's deft fingers swiftly finished setting up the cultures while her mind raced through the possibilities, half her mind on her samples, half on her patient. She had set up alerts on the monitoring equipment to sound the alarm at the first sign of trouble. Still, she was concerned that Amy might not last the night. She desperately needed to be evacuated.

"Ant, I'm going to have to leave you in charge. I need to speak to the Captain immediately. Can you help me do that?"

Ant looked nervous, again. "The Captain? Won't want to be disturbed. It's really better if we sort this out ourselves."

"This is an emergency, Ant," Jessica said, bluntly. "You said so yourself. Where is the Captain?"

"Continue round to the left and go up the spiral staircase," Ant reluctantly divulged. "Everyone's in the concert hall. But don't say I didn't warn you."

Jessica rolled her eyes- the on board entertainment must be even worse than she had imagined. "I think I can brave the horrors of the band in our patient's best interests. How can we stay in touch? You'll need to let me know straight away if she deteriorates."

Ant pointed to a piece of string stretched between two drawing pins on a battered looking noticeboard. Clipped onto the string were two battered looking black plastic boxes.

"What the hell is this?" Jessica swore.

"Well," Ant explained in a perfect primary school teacher voice, "you put the batteries in, like this, and then when someone has an emergency it bleeps. Don't worry though, only the crew have the number."

She replied through gritted teeth. "I'm not an idiot, Ant. I know what it is. Is this a state of the art research ship or a time warp?"

"Um, can it be both?"

Pursing her lips, she grabbed the bleep and clipped it onto her scrubs before making a swift exit. Following the corridor round to the left with an ever increasing sense of urgency, she once more felt a sense of complete spatial disorientation, something which was most unusual for her. The corridor seemed to continue for an unfeasible length of time. She broke into a jog, then a run, thanking herself for donning some sensible clothing. All of a sudden it opened out into a large, purple velvet lined chamber with a white wooden spiral staircase at its heart. The entrance to the staircase was framed by a large wrought iron, gold trimmed Gothic archway. The words 'Spiral Dial' formed a striking centrepiece. On either side, the words entwined with two large, iron grandfather clocks which formed the sides of the arch. Panting, Jessica could not help but pause in astonishment at this unexpected sight.

Remembering her purpose, she raced up the staircase, her feet sinking into the thick carpet covering the centre of the wooden treads. As she ascended, she felt an increasing vibration even through the thick carpet, an insistent tapping which soon increased into a hum. At the top of the stairs, a deep purple velvet curtain appeared, with two attendants in smart green uniforms either side of it. They protested and tried to stop her, but it was too late. Jess had already pulled back the curtain and wrenched back the heavy metal door. As the door shut behind her with an echoing crash, she proclaimed to the room at large:

"Can you take me to the Captain? I have a medical emergency."

The whole room fell silent.

A bright spotlight fell upon her. Dazzled, she could no longer see. The light seemed to pulsate as the music started once more.

"I said, I have an emergency. I need to see the Captain right away." Her voice seemed lost in the cavernous chamber, and she could feel her will ebbing away as the sound of the music grew in intensity. The attendants took her by either arm, ushering her into an alcove containing a soft silken hammock. As she looked around woozily, she could see that the whole room was filled with these hammocks. Hers was on the top layer, the furthest from the central stage, on which three musicians were making what could

only be described as very strange, and very hypnotic, sounds. She tried to resist, but could not help sinking back into the soft hammock, which curled itself around her.

“After the concert,” the attendants whispered to her. “Everything can wait until after the concert is over.”

A strange melange of sensations overtook her. She could feel every strand of the hammock against her skin, her awareness heightened by the vibrations emanating from the stage below. While the hammock surrounded her completely and at first partly obscured her vision, it seemed to adjust after a while so that she had an unusually vivid perception of events happening below her. She was alone with the music, and together they occupied an entirely separate place in time. Initially it seemed that it was the hammock which swayed, but now the hammock seemed entirely still and it was the stage which moved, enlarging and contracting in time with the music.

A hooded shadow caught her eye. At first she had the impression of some otherworldly being, something both completely beyond her experience and at the same time inexplicably familiar. The silhouette came into focus. It evolved from a two dimensional being into something solid, giving the distinct impression of flesh and blood beneath the mysterious exterior. The sounds themselves were cold and crystalline. She could not quite grasp their meaning, and knew that there was something else she should be doing, but as the sounds continued it was not that she did not remember her purpose (she knew, objectively, that she was a doctor, and that she was the ship’s doctor, the only doctor on board, and that there was a medical emergency which required her urgent attention) but she could not grasp the urgency of it. She no longer felt that anything so prosaic as keeping one human breathing could possibly matter more than this moment, which may never come again. With every second she seemed to lose part of herself to the vibration and to become part of an undefined whole.

The sound rose and fell, and still Jessica occupied that small space somewhere between sleep and a waking dream, a state where time has no meaning, and yet a state which feels precarious, as if it could be ripped away at any moment. She continued to gaze at the silhouette, whose long, quick delicate fingers cast shadows which danced across the stage. As the music slowly died away the fingers’ movement slowed, although an almost imperceptible tremor remained, a physical echo of the absent sound. The lack of the music caused a silence so dense that the shadow cast by the hooded robe seemed to fall into its depths, and in this silence she found herself looking into the brightest blue eyes she had ever seen. Immediately those eyes slotted into a vacant part of her soul which she had not previously known existed. Something clicked together and allowed her to feel once again. Tears of joy welled up in her eyes, tears of joy and disbelief. It was a struggle to imagine that someone like this could exist, and that such a miraculous evening could ever come to pass even once in her miserable existence, must surely be a gift from the gods. She knew instantly that this was why she had come here.

As suddenly as the eyes appeared, so they disappeared, and she was left blinking as the lights came up. Just like that, the stage was empty. She was already sitting up on her hammock, although she had no memory of doing so. Those around her were talking in soft voices, all of them showing signs of mild disorientation. She took a deep breath in, as if to check that her lungs still functioned, and flexed and extended her fingers, marvelling at the contrast between her own stocky, callused hands and those delicate fingers she had seen at work only moments ago. Still, she took in every fine detail of the thickened skin on her palms, feeling the contrast between the toughened areas and the sensation on the parts which had not yet been exposed to the friction of her life. She had not realised that any such delicacy remained in her. Already she could feel it receding, as she grasped for the purpose behind her visit. Suddenly the memory of the smell of decaying flesh reached her, which brought her back to her senses. Amy needed her help. She must find the Captain.

Shaking her head, she attempted to rise from the hammock. A little unsteady, it took her several attempts before she managed it. She was the only one standing. An elderly lady in white next to her was engaged in small talk which she had no compunction in interrupting. As she did so she felt the trance dissipating.

“I need to find the Captain. It is an emergency. Do you know where I might find them?”

The gentle looking old lady turned to her, but said nothing, and her eyes and face remained chillingly blank, so much so that Jessica took a step back in horror. The lady returned to her conversation as if nothing had been said. Jessica stumbled to her right. She was not sure exactly where she was. The theatre was constructed with many rows but they seemed to run into each other, and the lighting was so bright that it was hard to see. She realised that the hammocks were reflecting the light back onto a giant circular mirror which formed the external edge of the room. She continued to the right, asking each occupant for the Captain, and receiving exactly the same response each time. Quickening her pace, she rushed from person to person, raising her voice as she went, and yet received no answer.

Finally she screamed, “Will no one help me? Someone is dying! For pity’s sake.”

Every occupant of every hammock fell silent, turned to her with that ominously blank expression, and then turned back to their conversation as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Jessica could not understand it. She needed to get out of this strange place and get back to Amy. No matter how far she had run, she seemed to be no closer to the stage, so she took the approach of reversing her footsteps and soon found herself back at the entrance to the theatre. Relieved, she rushed through and was met immediately by an even more relieved looking Ant.

“Thank goodness. I thought you might not make it out in time.”

Jessica looked at him in disbelief. “Ant, you need to tell me what’s going on, right now. Amy needs treatment and she needs it tonight. There are seven levels of weird going on here which I don’t need to understand right now. I need to talk to the Captain and get her evacuated somewhere they can treat her properly.”

“Jessica, sit down.” She protested weakly, but Ant ushered her over to a quiet corner of the foyer and sat close to her. “Look at me. Not down at the floor, look at me. I have to know you understand.”

Lifting her eyes to his, Jessica did as he asked.

“I know it all seems a little strange right now,” Ant continued. “You’re going to have to trust me. We are really on our own until morning. You saw them in there. We aren’t going to get any answers tonight. We just need to keep her stable for now, that’s all. That’s your job. That’s what they’re paying you for. But you need to stay with me. You can’t rush off like that.”

All the fight had gone out of Jessica now. “Okay. I understand. But you’re going to have to give me some answers. I need to know the truth.”

“Ok, I’ll answer your questions when we get back to the lab. One of those machines you set up earlier is making a really irritating beeping noise, it reminds me of dinner time.”

Jessica looked at him in disgust, wondering how he could even contemplate dinner while in proximity to that smell. She felt more herself again. She could feel the sensations from the hammock fading, and wasn’t quite clear exactly what she had been so anxious about before. Of course she could take care of Amy. That was her job, after all.

On returning to the medical centre, it was evident that Ant was right. The readouts were done. The results showed that the infection was severe, no surprises there, although there was no sign of a problem in any other organ systems. Oxygen levels and blood pressure were stable and the girl seemed to have stabilised with the antibiotics. Ant watched intently as Jessica carefully operated the machines. The final result was the culture, to grow the bacteria. Jess doubted it was worth checking so early, but given the frequency of unexpected events so far on this voyage she decided to have a peek just to satisfy her curiosity.

“Well the gram stain is positive. Looks like *Clostridium perfringens*. Except....”

Looking up into Ant’s blank face, she realised he likely had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

“Are you talking to me?”, he retorted.

“More talking to myself, sorry. It’s Latin. I don’t suppose it’s something you engineers would have come across Down Under.”

“Actually, I have, now you mention it. Perfringo, perfringere, perfregi, perfractus. Doesn’t it mean bursting out?”

Jessica looked impressed. Ant was glad despite himself: he’d finally risen in her opinion somewhat above the level of the microbes.

“Nearly. It means bursting through. It’s a nasty bug that causes something called gas gangrene. It would explain why her face is so swollen, and why it’s spread so fast. But there’s something very odd about this strain.”

As Jessica watched the bacteria multiply underneath the magnification, she could have sworn that she saw them vibrate and shimmer oh so slightly. Each long, thin cell seemed to flicker between straight and curved. She blinked and looked again. They appeared entirely normal.

“Ant, would you mind having a look at these? What shape would you say they are?”

Ant wasn’t at all surprised that she would ask for his opinion now that he had demonstrated his knowledge of the Classics. Typical English snobbery, he thought. Of course there was only one answer to her question. “Look like rods to me, still as a statue. Not much bursting through going on in there.”

“Well, I suppose we need to give it some time. While we’re waiting, I need a proper handover, from someone with some medical experience. Never mind the Captain. Can we get hold of my predecessor?”

Ant shifted slightly in his seat.

"Yes, my predecessor," she repeated. "You know, the doctor who was here before me. Did you know her?"

Was it her imagination or was Ant getting visibly flustered now?

"Oh right, I see what you mean. Well, she did an excellent job of fixing my gammy toenail a few weeks ago. That was the last I saw of her. "

"She didn't mention she would be leaving, then?"

"Not to me, but then I don't know why she would." Ant sounded completely disinterested.

"I thought you were the welcome party? Don't you offboard people too?"

Ant shrugged.

"Okay, well it would be extremely helpful if I could speak to her. You know, see if she had come across anything similar while she was on board." She planned to keep asking until she got some answers.

"You didn't read the contract, did you?" Ant looked at her pityingly.

Not this again, Jess thought. "Actually I did. Last night."

"Well, you'll have seen then that there's no contact allowed with anyone off board. It's a strict rule. No exceptions."

Now that he mentioned it, Jessica did recall something of the kind in the advertisement. A vision of the email she had received from the agency danced before her eyes.

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At the time it had seemed the perfect opportunity to escape the fast converging maelstrom of her own making on dry land. After only a few short hours on board, Jessica was already starting to have second thoughts. As she sat contemplating recent events, trying to grasp the implications of what had happened, she felt the deck begin to vibrate once more beneath her, and she was hit immediately by a wave of disorientation, interrupting her chain of thought.

Ant's voice grabbed her attention, rambling on about contracts and contacts and some such bureaucratic nonsense which no longer seemed important. She surfaced from her reverie, remembering a battery of routine tests which she had forgotten to run earlier.

Jessica busied her mind with the task at hand, thoughts of the Captain and her predecessor receding as the urgency of the situation diminished.

"Don't worry about all the details, Ant," she said. "Things seem to be looking up. She's stable right now. I just need to check her over, run a few more routine tests. Then we should be good for a few hours' rest."

"Anything I can help with, Doc?" Ant chipped in.

"Actually, there is one thing I could really use."

"What's that?" He had perked up at the thought of doing something useful for a change.

"I would die for a hot chocolate." All that music had given her an appetite for some reason.

Ant huffed and retired reluctantly in search of the beverage. In his absence, Jess checked Amy over from top to toe, turning her and taking samples of her urine. The infected area around her mouth appeared to be subsiding somewhat. Dipping an array of colourful sticks into the urine, Jessica sat back and awaited the results. Glancing down, an unexpected yet familiar pattern caught her eye.

At that exact moment, Ant returned with her drink with a touch of attitude. "I don't see why you need butler service, Doc. After all, you've only got one patient."

Jessica was still staring at the results, double checking. Without lifting her gaze, she said, "Well, that's where you're wrong."

He chuckled. "I think you'll find I'm absolutely within my rights not to wait on you Doc! But I'll let you get away with ordering me around this once."

"No, I mean you're wrong. There's two patients."

Ant looked round pointedly. "Right. I can see they've been multiplying in my absence."

"Actually that's exactly what they've been doing." Jessica held up a short white strip displaying two horizontal blue lines.

"Did you realise that Amy is pregnant?"

TO BE CONTINUED.....