THE FIRST REPUBLIC

IAN WISBY

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Acknowledge To Country

As the author of this book, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Lutruwita (Tasmania) Aboriginal land, sea, and waterways.

I acknowledge with deep respect the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who read this book.

On 6 November 1999, the Australian government held a referendum.

It was a two-question referendum to amend the Constitution of Australia.

The first question asked whether Australia should be-come a republic, under a bi-partisan appointment model where the president (head of state), would be appointed by the federal parliament with a two-thirds majority.

This was the model endorsed by the Constitutional Convention, held in Canberra in February, 1998.

The second question, which was far less important politically, asked whether Australia should alter the Constitution to insert a preamble.

Since the 1990s, a majority of the electorate favoured a republic.

Nonetheless, the Australian republic referendum was defeated.

It would be twenty-five years before another referendum would be considered.

# ONE

*Canberra, Australian Capital Territory*

*Sunday, 23 November 2025*

Thesoft rattle of the airport terminal’s air conditioning albeit drowned out the nervous whispers of passengers. Among them stood Arthur Williams, a man with the body of a seventy-year-old, but the mind of a man who’d just turned thirty. He stomped with unease along the jetway, frustrated by the crippling arthritic pain in his hips and knees. He snorted at the young couples in front of him, as he overheard them talking about tomorrow’s event. In fact, most of the passengers on the plane wouldn’t stop talking about it. ‘I still don’t know why they elected an Aboriginal President,’ said one of them. ‘I’m not racist, but it was a risky move by the government.’ He’d seen them gorking at a news article about the recent election. Merindah Bradley, the first Indigenous Australian to be elected President of Australia, could be seen on the screen, waving and smiling to an erupting crowd.

‘I agree. But I think it’s “Indigenous” not Ab-original,’ said the woman. Arthur snorted. By the time they’d landed, a headache formed in Arthur’s head; the piercing sting rippled through his temples like a violent maelstrom, migrating to his forehead. His journey to Canberra, the nation’s capital, from Alice Springs had been tiring, doing little to ease his fatigue. He watched with envious eyes as the forty-year-old men who lived on their mobiles and had a suit for every day of the week. He clutched his carry-on bag, eager to leave the terminal and escape the desperation of parents who pried their children off like stubborn maggots. He scoffed at the large group of foreign tourists as they gathered near the hire car booth. He made a slight chuckle at the singular staff member as he walked by. *Bloody foreigners*, Arthur muttered to himself, as he made for the nearest exit. The glass panelled doors slid open as the sensor detected Arthur’s movements. He stepped into the night, the crisp, cool air brushing over his flushed face. Arthur’s arthritis-riddled fingers fumbled for a cigarette. It had been hours since he last indulged in his habit, and the nicotine brought a wave of relief. He leaned against a concrete pillar, taking a minute of reflection, exhaustion taking its toll. He inhaled, allowing the smoke to cloud his senses for a fleeting second. A black Mercedes SUV pulled up beside him, its engine purring like a caged beast. The appearance of the vehicle forced Arthur to take a step back, his legs shuddered by the tinted windows. *Who are these lot then? Gangsters?* What the bloody hell have I got myself into? Those were the thoughts that swirled through Arthur’s mind as the passenger window wound down.

‘Get in,’ a man spoke. Arthur refused to do so at first.

‘Who are you lot, then?’

‘I work for your employer. He’s keen to meet you, so I suggest you get into the car, Mr. Williams,’ said the man, with growing anger. Arthur hesitated. He cleared his throat, before stubbing out the cigarette and tossing it aside. The back door swung open with a gentle ease, and Arthur peered. He spotted a second man in the back; a silent figure, his hands placed flat on both knees. Arthur’s pulse quickened as he slid inside the scent of leather and cologne filling his nose. He attempted to get himself comfortable, buckling up as the car sped off. The two men in the front seats remained silent, their features obscured by shadows punctuated by orange streaks of artificial light. The third figure next to Arthur remained silent.

‘How much further?’

‘We’re almost there,’ one of them spoke. ‘Be quiet, for now.’ Arthur grunted. He understood his objective: get to the undisclosed location and await further instructions. He exhaled, rubbing his calloused hands together. He thought back to the day the referendum results came in, the moment his country abandoned its identity**.** He’d been in his small home in Alice Springs, watching in disgust as the tally confirmed Australia’s fate. *Traitors,* he had muttered, gripping the armrest of his recliner as the newscaster proclaimed a landslide victory for the republicans*. Spineless bastards.* It hadn’t just been politics for Arthur. It was about tradition, about respect. His father, a World War II veteran, had instilled in him the idea that the monarchy wasn’t just a foreign power, it was Australia’s history, its lifeline. When Arthur lost his job in the police force after a scandal involving excessive force, it wasn’t his fault. The government had become weak, soft. Now, they had made an Indigenous woman the head of state. What had this country come to? The journey from the airport came to a swift end. He’d never been to Canberra, and he regretted his decision to come here. He’d seen it on the news a lot, but most of it focused on how terrible the government performed, and continued to dis-appoint its people. Tall eucalyptus trees lined the road, their branches formed eerie silhouettes under the moonlight. The car stopped at a large, metal gate, protected by two private security guards. One held a torch, and shone it into the front. They recognised the occupants, and waved them through. The residence beyond the gate appeared to be nothing short of a mansion, an estate of grand nature. Without delay, the men ushered him into a spacious office adorned with dark mahogany furniture and shelves packed with leather-bound books. The room had an air of power, holding secrets that whispered behind closed doors. Behind the oak desk sat a mysterious man, his face obscured by the low light. He gestured for Arthur to take a seat on the plush leather chair in front of him.

‘Mr. Williams. I trust your journey was un-eventful?’

‘As expected,’ Arthur stated.

‘You are here because we have a mission of utmost importance. One that requires a certain set of skills. Skills you possess.’ Arthur remained silent, allowing the man to continue. ‘Our nation is facing a threat, one that seeks to undermine the foundations of govern-ment, and tradition,’ the man explained, his tone grave. ‘As you know, tomorrow is Republic Day.’ Arthur scoffed. ‘The first President of Australia will be delivering a speech.’

‘I know, it’s disgusting. She deserves to die.’ *This guy seems to share the same anger as I do. They elected a bloody Abo to be president!*

‘And that, Mr. Williams, is where you come in.’ Arthur leaned back in his chair.

‘I’m in. But I have one question: who the bloody hell are you?’ *If I had to guess, he was probably some government official*.

‘Let’s say, I’m someone who shares your distaste for Australia’s decision to become a republic.’

‘I see. That doesn’t tell me much, though.’

‘The less you know, the better, Mr. Williams. It’s for all our safety.’

‘Fine. What about my pay?’ *If I’m gonna shoot the President of Australia, I’d better get a decent payout for this!*

‘That’s the spirit. Your payment will be transferred to the account details inside this envelope. You get half now, then the rest when you finish the job. Are these terms acceptable?’ Arthur nodded. *I guess I don’t have much choice*. *Cigarettes aren’t cheap these days*. ‘Excellent. We have arranged for your lodgings in the city. You will receive further instructions in due course. Remember, our nation’s security depends on your success.’ With a dismissive wave of his hand, the man sank back into his seat and leaned again into the shadows. The security team emerged, and escorted Arthur out of the office, and into the Mercedes once more. In the office, a door opened.

‘Did I tell you he was the right guy, or not?’

‘Now, General, I told you I’m too old for your competitiveness.’ The General chuckled. ‘And yes, he’s bloody perfect. Make sure you deliver the weapon and the uniform first thing tomorrow morning.’

‘Affirmative.’ The General saluted, and about-faced.

Arthur finally reached the hotel, muscles aching, his patience running short. He pushed through the glass doors, ignoring the cold blast of air conditioning as he strode toward the front desk. He just needed sleep. A few hours to clear his head before everything changed.But he was thankful that others shared his way of thinking. Not everyone it seemed agreed with this sham of a republic, nor did they seem to care for the figurehead of a president. The receptionist, a young woman with sleek ginger hair and a forced customer-service smile, barely looked up from her screen as he approached. ‘Good evening, sir. How can I help you?’ she asked, voice clipped and indifferent. His eyes glided to the array of Republic Day decorations scattered about the reception area. Several flags had been put up, and a large banner behind the receptionist displayed the words: “Happy Republic Day”. *What a load of bullshit!* Arthur cursed under his breath.

‘Uh, I’ve got a booking.’ His words came out sharper than he intended, but he didn’t care. She didn’t seem to care either. Probably used to his kind of behaviour.

‘Of course. I just need to see your licence for the booking confirmation.’ Arthur paused. He tried to remember what she’d just said, but then reached for his wallet.

‘S-sorry, it’s been a long day,’ he said.

His hands fumbled for his licence.

‘It’s okay, sir. I understand. It’s been one of those days.’ Arthur placed his licence on the desk. She grabbed it and her eyes scanned over it for a moment. ‘You’ve come a long way from home, Mr. Williams.’ She typed on the keyboard, the mechanical clack of the keys tapping against his skull. Too slow. Everything was moving too damn slow. ‘Are you here for the President’s speech?’ she asked, glancing up as she slid a room card across the counter. Arthur’s entire body stiffened. For a moment, he didn’t move. The air between them seemed to shift, heavy with something unsaid.

‘What?’ His voice was low, and dangerous. The receptionist hesitated, not realising she’d struck a nerve. She gave an awkward laugh, gesturing toward the tele-vision mounted on the wall behind her. A news anchor stood in front of Parliament House, talking about President Bradley’s upcoming address.

‘Half the city’s booked out for it,’ she continued, oblivious to the storm brewing behind his eyes. ‘Hard to get a room anywhere. We’ve been booked out for six months in advance. You must’ve planned ahead.’ Arthur’s fingers twitched as he picked up the keycard. His jaw clenched so tightly his molars ached. He thought about telling her. But then that would be the end of the mission.

‘Something like that,’ he muttered. She smiled, either not noticing or not caring about his sudden change in demeanour.

‘Well, welcome to Canberra, Mr. Williams. Enjoy your stay,’ she said, returning her focus to the computer. Arthur didn’t respond. ‘Oh, and Happy Republic Day!’ That angered him. His fists clenched and the veins in his arms popped. He wanted to scream at her, tell her she was stupid for supporting this republic nonsense. But she was half his age. She wouldn’t understand. Instead, he waddled off, his grip tightening around the keycard as he made his way to the elevator.

# TWO

*Australian Federal Police*

*(AFP) Headquarters, Canberra*

Inspector Paul Duncan stepped off the elevator on the top floor, the doors sliding shut behind him with a soft hum. He glanced at his watch, it was approaching midnight, yet here he was again, summoned to meet Superintendent Anna Mackenzie. *It’s never a good sign when you’re called in at this hour*, he mused, tension already coiling in his stomach. He made his way down a narrow hallway, passing a row of frosted-glass offices. The hush of late-night operations stretched around him, few staff, hushed voices, the rhythmic tapping of a lone typist’s keyboard. Mackenzie’s door stood at the end, a nameplate reading: *Superintendent Anna Mack-enzie.* Paul rapped twice, his knuckles sounding loud in the stillness. ‘Come in,’ called a subdued voice. Paul pushed open the door. Inside, Mackenzie sat behind a broad, uncluttered desk, a laptop off to one side, half-empty coffee cup on the other. She looked up, exhaustion tempered by urgency in her eyes.

‘Superintendent. You wanted to see me?’

‘Thanks for coming, Inspector. Please, take a seat.’ She gestured to the chair opposite her. Paul settled into it, already reading the worry lines etched in her brow.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked, an uneasy sense that something grave had happened.

‘The Commissioner has informed me of a situation requiring your task force’s immediate attention.’

‘That sounds ominous,’ he said, leaning forward, trying to keep his voice level.

‘We’ve been advised of a potential security threat to the President.’

‘Merindah Bradley?’ Paul repeated, eyes widening.

‘Correct.’ Paul’s stomach twisted as he considered the implications.

‘What sort of threat are we dealing with?’

‘It’s not clear yet,’ she replied, tapping a pen against a file on her desk. ‘But the AFP is on high alert. We’ve already doubled her security detail. There’s more.’ She paused, letting the tension hang for a moment before continuing, ‘There are elements inside the AFP involved in this threat.’

‘You’re, you’re kidding?’ Paul managed, heart thumping. ‘One of our own?’ Mackenzie gave a tight shake of her head.

‘We don’t know who, but someone with high-level clearance, someone who could access intelligence and systems. It’s a significant breach.’ Paul stood abruptly, nerves on edge.

‘This is unbelievable,’ he muttered, running a hand through his hair. ‘We pride ourselves on integrity, and now there’s a traitor in our ranks.’

‘I get it, Paul. It’s a lot to take in,’ Mackenzie said sympathetically, eyes serious. ‘But it is what it is.’ He exhaled, forcing a measure of composure back.

‘So, what do you want me to do?’

‘The higher-ups want your task force to handle this investigation,’ Mackenzie explained. ‘We need your best people, Inspector. The President is scheduled to deliver a speech tomorrow at midday.’ His mind reeled: less than twelve hours to stop an inside threat from assassinating the country’s first President.

‘That’s not much time, Superintendent,’ he said quietly, eyes flicking to the clock on the wall.

‘I know. But if the President is killed, it would be catastrophic, potentially even destabilise the republic we’ve only just established. So, no pressure.’ A humour-less laugh escaped Paul.

‘Yeah,’ he murmured, letting the gravity settle. ‘Understood.’ Mackenzie’s gaze softened, but her voice remained firm. As he prepared to leave, he was stopped at the last moment.

‘Oh, one last thing.’ He turned, and waited. ‘Be discreet, Inspector. Keep the circle small until you identify the leak. We can’t afford panic.’

‘I’ll do my best, Superintendent,’ he promised. He left the office, stepping into the corridor’s stark glow. *One of our own is plotting to kill the President*. The thought churned his gut. The elevator chimed as he hit the call button, his mind already brimming with the next steps: identifying possible suspects, securing the President’s movements, combing through staff records. As the elevator arrived and the doors slid open, Paul entered, hitting the button for the lower floors. The hum of machinery pulled him downward, and he exhaled a shaky breath. *Tomorrow could make or break the entire republic.* Only a handful of hours remained to unravel this plot and save Merindah Bradley from a traitor’s bullet. The sense of urgency coursed through him like an electric current. No time to lose. He clenched his fists, determined to keep politics and doubt aside and focus on the mission: protecting the President at all costs.

The night had been restless, uncomfortable even, as Arthur stumbled out of bed six minutes before his alarm: a habit adopted during his policing days. His head pounded from the excessive drinking the night before. Empty beer bottles lay scattered all over the hotel room, but he didn’t care about the mess. He cradled one image clear in his mind: Merindah Bradley’s death by his hand, and his future secure. He strolled into the bathroom naked, and stepped into the shower. The water trickled over his flaky skin, adding a cool sting to his aging bones. He took a moment of reflection, as he thought about the day ahead. He knew his part of the mission was necessary, and important, but he had to focus on the objective. Arthur flicked off the tap, and stepped out, dripping wet. Once finished, he wrapped a towel around his waist and made his way back into the bedroom. He grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned on the TV. He shook his head as he saw the new President waving at a large crowd as she emerged from an Australian Air Force plane. ‘Fuckin’ pathetic,’ Arthur snorted. He reached into the cupboard and took out one of the hotel’s dressing gowns. He slipped it on, shielding the world from his wrinkled, old naked body. Arthur glanced at the TV once more. The news anchor’s face was unreadable as she discussed Republic Day, praising Merindah Bradley’s presidency as a *“historic moment for Australia.”* Arthur scoffed. He had seen history before. And he had seen it ruined**.** His mind drifted back to November 6, 1999, the day Australia betrayed itself.He had been a young Northern Territory police officer then, stationed in Darwin. The country was in an uproar over the referendum. Back then, he believed in the system. He believed in Australia**.** That morning, he had stood outside the local polling station, watching as elderly veterans hobbled forward with medals pinned proudly to their jackets. His father was among them. A World War II veteran, a proud monarchist. *"Son,"* his father had said, adjusting his Returned Services League (RSL) cap, *"don’t let these bastards win."* Arthur had nodded. The monarchy was *tradition.* It was *order.* Without it, what was Australia? But then, the results came in**.** The referendum was defeated. For the first time, Arthur saw how close they had come to losing everything**.** He remembered the elation of the monarchists: and the quiet, seething hatred of the republicans. *"One day, they’ll come for the Crown again,"* his father had warned. Arthur hadn’t believed it at the time. He had thought Australia would never turn its back on its heritage. But now, sitting in a Canberra hotel, listening to the media glorify *the woman who had ended it all,* Arthur felt the rage burn through him again. His father had been right. And now, Arthur had a chance to correct history. A sharp knock at the door grabbed Arthur’s attention as he settled back to reality. He tied up the dressing gown to cover his skin. ‘Who is it?’ he called out. No answer. His curiosity got the better of him, so he went over and opened the door. A man stood there holding a suit bag and a small case. ‘Who are you?’ Arthur became curious about the new-comer.

‘Major-General George Stanley, Australian Army.’ Even without a word, Arthur snapped to attention and saluted the senior military officer. ‘At ease.’ The General waved him down, and stepped in.

‘What can I do for you, General?’

‘I’ve brought you a uniform. As requested.’ He placed the suit bag on the bed. ‘And a firearm.’ He unzipped the bag. Inside, he saw the uniform he used to wear, the uniform of a senior constable with the Northern Territory Police Force. ‘This should get you by unnoticed,’ said the General. He opened the case with a gentle creak.

‘Thank you, I appreciate that. I didn’t know how I was going to get close to the President without being stopped. Not to mention a weapon.’

‘I have to admit I’m a little envious of you, Mr. Williams.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you get to shoot the bloody President,’ said the General, pointing to the TV. Arthur chuckled as he looked at the screen. He saw Merindah Bradley waving at a bunch of reporters and other government officials as she stepped onto the tarmac at Canberra Airport, a news segment from the previous day. He turned to face the General.

‘I’ll make sure not to miss.’ Arthur slid the magazine into the Glock, each metallic click sending a shiver along his callused spine as he gripped the weapon.

‘God Save the King of Australia.’

‘God Save the King of Australia,’ echoed Arthur, and the General returned the salute. He watched the General turn to leave, and the fresh, mighty pride of patriotism, and tradition flowed through his body. Arthur stood alone, perplexed by this whole plan. He watched the TV, his resolve pitiless. Previously recorded footage showed the President arriving at Canberra Air-port. ‘Merindah Bradley. Count your days,’ he muttered to himself in a determined tone.

The General marched with precision down the hall, his polished black army boots echoing against the marble floor. As he reached the elevator, he pressed the button and glanced over his shoulder. He was alone. The elevator doors slid open with a gentle whoosh, and he stepped inside, pulling out his mobile phone. He dialled a number, his fingers moving with practiced ease. ‘Yes?’

‘It’s me. I’ve met with Williams.’

‘And?’

‘He’s got the gun and the uniform.’

‘Perfect.’

‘Everything depends on Williams’ success.’

‘I know how to pick ‘em, sir. Williams is a crack shot. He won’t miss.’

‘Then the operation is on schedule. No further contact until after the job is done.’ The elevator dinged, signalling the end of the descent.

‘Affirm.’ Stanley tucked his phone away and step-ped out, his mind planning the next move.

*Sydney, Australia*

Sydney’s shimmering harbour stretched out behind the Channel 7 News reporter, who stood poised on a small promontory near the Opera House. The structure’s iconic white sails glinted under a dazzling November sun, while ferries and private boats plied the sparkling waters. The camera zoomed in, capturing both the reporter and the famous skyline, a picture-perfect back-drop for Australia’s newest national celebration. ‘Good morning. I’m Natalie Chambers, reporting live from the Sydney Opera House, where excitement is building ahead of our first-ever Republic Day. As you can see behind me, crowds are already gathering to enjoy the harbour views and participate in the festivities planned across the city.’ The camera panned briefly, revealing a bustling walkway lined with vendors selling Aussie flags, now updated with a stylised crest symbolising the new republic, and families took selfies beneath make-shift banners reading: *Republic Day 2025*. A gentle breeze fluttered balloons coloured green and gold. ‘Organisers say they expect thousands to converge on the harbour precinct by tonight, culminating in a spectacular fireworks display. I’ve spoken to a few early arrivals here this morning to gauge how Australians feel about this landmark event, marking the transition from a constitutional monarchy to a fully independent re-public.’ The feed cut to Vox Pop segments, a montage of short interviews with everyday Australians standing in front of the Opera House: ‘*It’s such a huge moment in our country’s history. We’re excited to celebrate with friends*.’

‘*Yeah, we love the idea of an Australian head of state, someone truly from here. Feels like we’re stepping forward*.’

‘*I have mixed feelings, to be honest. I believe in the Monarch, but times change, and maybe it’s time we stand on our own. Doesn’t mean we forget our history*.’

‘*My daughter’s generation will grow up in a republic. I’m proud she’ll see a leader who represents the people. It’s a day for everyone to come together. Who knows, she might even become president one day*.’ Back to Natalie in real time, the Opera House looming majestically over her shoulder:

‘Reactions out here are overwhelmingly positive, though some remain apprehensive. Critics worry about the fast pace of the transition, while others lament the end of a monarchical tradition that’s spanned centuries. Still, for many, Republic Day is a chance to celebrate our unique national identity under an Australian head of state.’ A cluster of excited tourists and locals walked by in the background, some waving at the camera. Music from a live band echoed through the harbour, creating a festive undertone. A few children, faces painted in green and gold, raced past, giggling with unabashed glee.

‘Despite the controversies, the spirit here is one of unity and forward thinking. Later this evening, crowds are expected to gather for a special ceremony, followed by fireworks over the harbour, an event that could rival New Year’s Eve in scale, organisers claim. In the mean-time, everyone is invited to partake in Republic Day markets, cultural exhibitions, and live performances scattered throughout the city. Some have likened this to a ‘second Australia Day,’ but with a distinctly modern twist, one that celebrates our sovereignty and the newly minted office of the President.’ Natalie paused, listen-ing to an update in her earpiece, then nodded: ‘And we can’t forget the main events in Canberra, where Merindah Bradley, the nation’s first President, will be delivering her Republic Day speech. This event will take place at Commonwealth Park where thousands are set to flock. The President will be arriving at 12p.m., ahead of her official duties at tomorrow’s grand ceremony. We’ll bring you that speech live on Channel 7. For now, this is Natalie Chambers, reporting from Sydney Harbour, and we’ll keep you updated on all the excitement and developments around Republic Day.’ The camera lingered on the Opera House and the lively crowds for a moment before cutting back to the news-room studio, concluding the segment. Off-camera, the hum of voices, music, and celebration continued, an undercurrent of anticipation for the dawning of a new chapter in Australia’s story.

# THREE

*Canberra Airport,*

*Canberra*

The Australian Air Force Dassault Falcon 7X glided with ease onto the runway, its engines spooling as it taxied toward the VIP terminal. Through the cabin window, Jarrah Bradley caught a glimpse of two body-guards in dark suits, standing by a black Holden Caprice WM. The presence of security felt both surreal and stifling, an inescapable symbol of his altered life. *Who would’ve thought a year ago I’d be stepping off a private jet, greeted by bodyguards?* As the plane rolled to a gentle stop, Jarrah paused in the aisle, taking a measured breath. *Calm down*, he told himself. *They’re just there to protect you.* But the idea still felt bizarre. Only months earlier, he was in the routine of university classes and weekend footy with friends. Now, his mother was Australia’s first President, and everything had changed. The flight attendant opened the main cabin door. Outside, a brisk Canberra breeze rustled across the runway. Jarrah grabbed his carry-on, strode toward the exit, and descended the short flight of stairs to the tarmac. A swirl of jet fuel fumes, mingled with the crisp winter air, hit him the moment he stepped onto the ground. One of the bodyguards, tall and impassive, inclined his head in greeting. ‘Mr. Bradley,’ he said, voice respectful but formal. ‘Welcome to Canberra.’ Jarrah forced a tight smile, his heart flutter-ing with conflicting emotions. *Mr. Bradley*, he mused. That formal title still made him uneasy.

‘Thanks. It’s good to be here,’ he managed, though doubt gnawed at him. *Is it really?* Part of him missed the anonymity he’d once taken for granted. He climbed into the waiting Caprice, sinking into the plush leather seat. The car smelled of new upholstery and the faint tang of security gear. One of the bodyguards shut the door behind him, then hopped into the front passenger seat. The driver revved the engine, and Jarrah felt the subtle hum of horsepower beneath him. As the vehicle pulled away from the terminal, Jarrah gazed out the tinted windows. The wide runway and the scattered airport buildings slipped into the distance. He couldn’t stop his thoughts from swirling: *I’m the son of Australia’s first President. My mother is the head of state. My life is no longer fully my own.* A pang of both pride and apprehension rippled through him. *Will I ever be able to walk down the street without security again?* he wondered. *Can I still be just Jarrah, hang out with mates, go clubbing, play footy, while the world labels me the “First Son”?* His phone buzzed in his jacket pocket, a text from a friend back home, asking if he was keen for a weekend catch-up. Jarrah sighed, remembering that no casual meetups would be simple now. He’d have to notify security, run it by the schedule. A flicker of resentment darted through him *He never asked for this life, yet here he was.* But his mother’s achievement was undeniable, a milestone for the entire nation. He loved her and respected her mission. That alone steadied him. One of the bodyguards cleared his throat.

‘We’ll be taking you to Government House first, sir,’ he said. ‘Your mother is expecting you.’ Jarrah offered a tight nod, meeting the guard’s gaze in the rearview mirror.

‘Right. Thanks.’ He forced the tension from his voice, not wanting to sound ungrateful. As the car navigated the outskirts of the airport, he watched Canberra’s tidy roads and manicured landscaping unfurl around them. Government buildings peeked behind tree-lined avenues. *For better or worse*, Jarrah thought, *this was his new normal.* The swirl of pride, worry, and budding curiosity filled his chest. He let his eyes drift shut for a moment, exhaling a breath. *You can do this*, he told himself. *Be there for Mum, stand beside her in this crazy new chapter. After all, it’s history we’re making.* With that, Jarrah tucked away his nerves, focusing instead on the excitement stirring beneath the anxiety.

*Government House,*

*Canberra*

The Bradley’s had spent the last twelve months living in Government House, but Merindah struggled to adjust to the lifestyle of being Australia’s head of state. She loved the fact that staff had replicated the kitchen from her own home in Alice Springs, the same old rustic cupboards with faded blue paint, and floral patterns on the edge; the same paintings of Ayers Rock, as well as Merin and her relatives hung on the walls. She saw the photo of herself standing with the Chief Administrator of the Northern Territory at the opening ceremony of her Aboriginal Youth and Community Learning Centre. With the exception of new appliances, the kitchen had a central countertop, allowing them to sit around and enjoy each other’s company. She loved the addition of a new coffee machine, something she never had back in Alice, but she vowed never to take advantage of such pleasures. Merin didn’t wait for the coffee in her hand to cool before taking a sip. Sweat dotted her forehead as she savoured the sweet, creamy coffee. She glanced at the TV screen sitting above the fridge, another simple touch she remembered from her home. The news carried on, and the talk show hosts discussed the Republic. She recalled the extensive meetings and long days when she signed the new Constitution, and the days leading up to the Australian Republic Referendum. She muted the TV. Feet shuffled into the kitchen, donned in blue bunny slippers. In silk thread, the words: “lover boy” had been monogrammed on the top. The bunny slippers had been a gift from her on Valentine’s Day. They had spent the day together in their bedroom, feeding each other chocolate-covered strawberries and drinking expensive wine. John Bradley, Merin’s true love for close to half a century, went for the loaf of bread. ‘Good morning, lover boy,’ Merin flirted. Every time she saw him, he added a small amount of his energy to hers.

‘Morning, love,’ John responded in kind.

‘You’re up early.’ He went over to Merin and kissed her on the lips.

‘Yeah. Been up since five, turning things over in my mind.’ John headed to the kitchen counter, and reached for a cereal box in the cupboard above. He poured cornflakes into a clean ceramic bowl.

‘It’s going to be a long day for you.’ He grabbed a bottle of milk from the fridge, and poured a heaped amount into the bowl.

‘Don’t remind me.’ She swallowed another gulp of coffee and shuddered. John shoved the first spoonful of his favourite cereal in his mouth. She laughed as she watched him much on the cereal. Milk dripping down his chin, like a ten-year-old would. He wiped his mouth with some paper towel.

‘Don’t worry. It’s you.’ He leaned over the counter and took hold of Merin. His hands brushed her cheek, and his lips found her forehead. ‘You’ve got this.’ Merin took a bite from her toast, avocado layered on it with sprinkles of salt and cayenne pepper.

‘Hopefully,’ she groaned. ‘It’s not every day you become the first President of Australia.’ They fell silent for a couple more seconds, their heads mere inches apart, and basked in each other’s presence. It had been months since they shared a quiet moment together. Their new public life meant seeing millions of eyes peering at them day in, day out. Not to mention the media, their every move caught on camera. ‘What time does Jarrah get in?’ John checked his watch.

‘I spoke with him a couple of hours ago, said he was about to board. It can’t be too long now.’

‘I can’t wait to see him. It’s been a while since we last saw each other.’

‘Yeah, it has,’ said John. A sharp knock on the door distracted them.

‘Come in.’ Bridget Coleman, Merindah’s Executive Assistant, walked into the kitchen with the latest model tablet in hand. Even with high heels, the woman didn’t reach five feet. She spoke with a soft and gentle tone, but carried an authority the decade-older Merin needed. ‘Yes, Bridget. What can I do for you?’

‘Good morning, Madam President. Mr. Bradley,’ Bridget chirped, her heels clacking against the tiles. ‘I wanted to let you know your son has arrived.’ Jarrah stepped in.

‘Hi bub.’

‘Mum.’ He hugged her, pressing his head against her chest. ‘I missed you heaps.’

‘I missed you too.’

‘Hi, son. It’s great to see you again.’

‘Hey, Dad. Great to see you.’ The two embraced, and John patted him on the back.

‘How was your flight?’

‘Yeah, it was great. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get used to this ‘VIP’ treatment.’

‘It’s certainly something.’ The trio talked for a short time, catching up on the good old times. Bridget stepped in again.

‘Madam President, the Official Secretary is here to see you.’

‘Thanks Bridget, send him in.’ Bridget dis-appeared, and seconds later, Joe Pittman entered, look-ing sharp in his black, three-piece suit and round spectacles. He came over to her and gave her a warm hug.

‘Morning, Madam President,’ Joe spoke.

‘Ah, morning, Joe. Nice to see you again,’ John replied.

‘Mr. Bradley.’

‘Joe, please call me John. I’m your brother-in-law.’

‘Force of habit.’ Joe saw his nephew standing behind the counter.

‘Morning, Uncle Joe,’ said Jarrah.

‘G’day Jarrah. It’s been a while, buddy.’ Merin pointed at Joe.

‘You don’t need to call me “Madam President”, Joe. I’m your sister.’

‘Sorry,’ he said. She just shook her head. She proceeded to pour herself another cup of coffee.

‘You want coffee, brother?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘What’s happening? Why the sudden appearance?’

‘I wanted to run through the day’s schedule with you.’ Joe pulled a tablet device from his jacket.

‘Okay, let’s hear it.’

‘Today, you’ll be heading to Commonwealth Park to deliver your Republic Day address.’ She thought about pouring herself her fourth cup of coffee this morning, but hesitated. ‘Then, you’ll be flying over to Sydney to do the same.’

‘Sounds like you’ve got a full-on day, Merin,’ said John.

‘I think I can handle it, Johno,’ she joked. She fell silent for a moment, then glanced at Joe.

‘I wish Ma could see you.’

‘Yeah, me too.’ Joe smiled at his sister, knowing she was hurting from their loss. A shrill noise came from his jacket, and he lifted the phone to his ear. Merin turned to speak with Jarrah, but listened to Joe at the same time.

‘President Bradley’s office.’ He listened to the person on the other line, one hand holding the phone and the other typing into the tablet, rearranging schedules. ‘I’ll let her know.’ Joe hung up, pocketing the phone.

‘Who was that, Joe?’

‘The Prime Minister’s chief-of-staff. The PM is requesting your presence at The Lodge.’ *The Prime Minister summoning the Head of State? That’s a first*, Merin thought.

‘What for?’

‘A security briefing.’

‘And?’

‘That’s all his chief-of-staff said over the phone.’

‘Fine, it better be important.’ Merin went over to Jarrah and kissed him on the forehead. ‘I’ll see you later, boy.’

‘Thanks, Mum.’ Merin turned to John.

‘Wish me luck.’

‘You’ll be fine, love.’ He stole a cheeky peck on the lips. She turned and followed Joe out. The small group arrived at the main entrance, and two bodyguards appeared at Merin’s side as she walked to the car. Tall and buff with slicked-back hair, the bodyguards wore receivers in their ears and dark sunglasses; they kept their arms close to their chest, ready to retrieve their concealed guns at a moment’s notice. She climbed into the backseat of the black Holden Caprice WM, and Joe joined her. The President’s car, along with a second vehicle containing security personnel, moved off with urgency. As they drove, Merin thought back to the day she was officially sworn in as President of Australia.

*The Inauguration Ceremony,*

*Wednesday, 20 November 2024*

Merindah Bradley prepared to take the oath of allegiance in front of Terrence McCarthy, the Chief Justice of Australia. Twenty other people stood in the room, each one a senior cabinet minister from the Prime Minister’s government. She cleared her throat to speak. ‘I, Merindah Bradley, do swear that I will well and truly serve the People of the Republic of Australia…’ Cameras recorded the President reciting her pledge to the nation. With Australia becoming a republic, changes had to be made to the Oath of Allegiance. Instead of pledging allegiance to King Charles the Third, the President now swore allegiance to the Australian People; ‘and I will do right to all manner of people according to the laws and usages of the Republic of Australia, without fear or favour, affection, or ill will. So help me God.’ Mick watched as the President signed the written declaration before her. The President and the Chief Justice of Australia, shook hands and grinned at the cameras. When the photographers finished, the president stood. Now that Merin had become President of Australia, she needed to make a statement to the press, to the nation. Merindah Bradley faced the story-hungry reporters. ‘Today marks a turning point in our great nation’s history.’ Merin measured her delivery. ‘We have taken an important first step towards becoming an independent nation, standing on our own two feet.’ About five minutes on, the swearing in ceremony ended and the new President became overwhelmed by everything, as she followed the Prime Minister around Government House. The impromptu guided tour of the residence lasted ten minutes. The Prime Minister stopped outside an office door.

‘And this, Madam President, is where you’ll work,’ he said. He opened the door and showed her into a large, spacious office.

‘Thank you for the guided tour, Prime Minister.’

‘It’s my pleasure, Madam President.’ The Prime Minister held out his hand, and the two shook one last time. She watched him as he left, leaving Merin alone. She stepped in and absorbed the nostalgia. She could smell the history in the room as it seeped through the tiny cracks of the walls. The distinct aroma of old, muddled books infiltrated her large nostrils. She tried to imagine what it would’ve been like for John Hope, the first Governor-General of Australia; but she held onto so much anger because of the dark history between white man and the Indigenous community. She hated what happened, and the mistreatment of the First Nations’ people. She cried a little, but hoped by becoming president, she would close the divide. She turned as a gentle breeze wafted in through the open window, the curtains fluttered against the cool air.

‘I didn’t think this is what you had in mind, kid,’ a familiar voice said.

‘Ma, you scared the hell out of me,’ said Merin.

‘That’s exactly where you’re going, kid.’

‘What do you mean, Ma?’

‘Don’t Ma me, I thought Joe came to you with an opportunity to make real change?’

‘He did, Ma, and this is what he meant. I’m the President of Australia now.’

‘That’s not what I thought you meant. Why the bloody hell would you do such a thing, kid?’

‘Ma, the nation’s become a republic, and they wanted me to be their head of state.’

‘What a load of crock,’ said Ma, as she continued knitting. ‘Why on earth would you take up such a sham of a job?’

‘Because, Ma, I wanted to represent Australia as the first Indigenous President. Think about it: a First Nations’ person is now the most powerful person in Australia,’ she said. Ma stopped knitting, her face turn-ing sour.

‘I’m disappointed in you, kid. I never wanted you to give in to White Man.’

‘This is why I didn’t want to ask for your approval, because I know how you would’ve reacted.’

‘Well, I don’t know how to respond to that. You’ve tarnished the Pittman family name, kid. I’ll never forgive you for this.’

‘If that’s how you’re going to act, I don’t want to see you again.’ Merin turned, folding her arms. Ma stood and put away her knitting. She stepped closer to Merin.

‘You’ve cursed us, Merin. You made a deal with the devil, and you’ll live with that for the rest of your life,’ she said. She turned to the window, but at the last minute, she looked back at Merin. ‘Tell your brother he’s just as bad.’ She turned to say something, but the room emptied. Her mother’s words angered her, she didn’t care though. She went to the window and closed it. She returned to her rightful place and made herself comfortable on the leather chair, trying to forget about what her mother said. A knock at the door drew her attention. Joe entered.

‘Ah, Joe. Come in.’  Joe closed the door behind him. He approached the desk, proud to see Merin behind it.

‘Are you all right, sis?’

‘Yeah, brother. I’m fine. I was thinking about Ma,’ she said.

‘I know. I wish she could see you now,’ he said. Merin didn’t say anything, she didn’t want to tell him about her encounter with Ma.

‘Me too. What’s happening?’

‘I wanted to let you know, the PM is expecting you first thing tomorrow morning.’

‘What for?’

‘He wants to go through the protocols for the signing of the new Constitution.’

‘I see. Is everything set up for it?’

‘Yes, it will be. The ceremony kicks off in four days.’ Merin nodded.

‘Very well. In the meantime, I’d like to go over my speech.’

‘I thought you had that locked in?’ asked Joe.

‘I do, Joe. But this is one of the most important speeches I’ll be giving, Joe. I want it to be one that resonates with the Australian people, to be remembered for years to come,’ she said.

‘No problem, I’ll take a look.’ Joe unbuttoned his blazer and sat on the chair opposite his sister, ready to get to work.

# FOUR

*Australian Federal Police*

*(AFP) National Headquarters,*

*Canberra*

*Republic Day*

Darrin O’Connor coaxed his Holden Commodore into the usual parking spot and remained seated with the engine running. The engine hummed, keeping him company. He sat listening to the news broadcast providing live commentary on Republic Day. He switched off the radio. A white Toyota Camry pulled up into the space next to him. Even without peering into the other car’s window, Darrin knew Nicole Bailey had arrived. Each opened their windows. At the same time, Darrin reduced the volume of the radio. ‘Hey.’ Nicole fluttered her eyes at him. ‘Paul called you too?’

‘Yeah. I’m supposed to be on leave.’

‘I was having breakfast with Amber. Nice of Paul to interrupt that.’ They climbed out of their cars at the same time. Together, they strolled across the parking lot and into the lower level of the building. ‘Do you know what this is about?’

‘Nope.’ They stepped off the elevator, and walked in tandem.

A few moments on, they arrived at the AFP’s Counter-Terrorism Command, the nerve centre of operations. Fingernails danced across keyboards and analysts spoke into headsets. They stepped into the briefing room, filled with at least twenty other officers. Inspector Paul Duncan stood at the far end of the briefing room, his hands folded. He checked his watch, disappointed by their lateness.

‘Thanks, Boss, for making us come into work on our day off.’ She grabbed a seat beside Federal Agent Felicity Meyers.

‘Crime and terrorism do not take days off, Miss Bailey.’ Nicole folded her arms and leant into her chair. Paul liked the usual, pleasant bickering among the group, but today he needed professionalism. Instead, he opened a folder placed on the centre console and got straight to business. ‘Right, moving on. We’ve received intelligence that someone is planning an assassination attempt on Merindah Bradley.’

‘Bloody oath, the President?’

‘Yes. She will be delivering her presidential speech at Commonwealth Park. She will be exposed and vulnerable.’

‘How good is her security?’ asked Darrin.

‘Solid, but maybe not for what’s coming at her today. Our Specialist Protective Command will be in charge of her security throughout the day, and we need to do everything we can to support them.’ Darrin couldn’t believe it.

‘Do we know who’s behind the threat?’ Paul squinted at the documents in front of him.

‘Forgot your glasses again, Boss?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my vision.’ Defeated, he looked away from the documents and recited from memory. ‘We suspect the Royal Vanguard, led by Perry Haynes, is involved.’ Paul passed a photograph around. ‘Perry Haynes is the chairman of the organisation.’

‘Who exactly are these people?’

‘They’re a political activist group who promote and protect the British Monarch in Australia. They’re against this country becoming a republic,’ said Simon.

‘Do you think they’re capable of violence?’

‘That’s what we are going to find out. Sir Perry Haynes here has been the pioneer for them and has given half a dozen public speeches both here in Sydney and Melbourne. One speech almost led to a violent riot from his people. This is what he had to say when the referendum passed.’ He clicked a remote on the projector in front of him. A video appeared on the screen. Haynes stood dressed in a black turtleneck and khaki trousers, standing on the steps of Parliament House in Perth. He held a megaphone, the veins in his neck popping as he screamed: *This country has chosen to end its ties with the British Crown. But it’s not yet ready to become a republic. We cannot allow this government to become weak with this so-called President of Australia! With great power comes great responsibility. I know you’re all against this country becoming a republic; I want to make it our mission to stand against this change. With your support, we can, and we will move forward together, but not as one. The people of Western Australia deserve better. Let us move forward as an independent nation and secede from this Republic of Australia!* Paul paused the video. Haynes froze, his arms stretched out with his fists clenched high, his mouth gaping wide in a violent O. ‘Since this speech, the Royal Vanguard has gained traction, calling for an independent Western Australia.’

‘Sounds like a real charmer.’

‘If Haynes isn’t behind this threat on the President’s life, he suggested it to someone?’

‘Correct.’

‘Have we questioned him yet?’

‘I’ve spoken with Mackenzie. A warrant has been issued, but because Haynes is a political activist, and he’s connected to the Royal Family, so we have to tread carefully,’ said Paul. He saw them fidgeting in their seats. ‘Right, I want O’Connor and Bailey to head over to Haynes’ office and interview him. Find out what he knows. Nathan will send you the address.’ Paul turned from Nathan and addressed the group. ‘We’ve got until 12pm before the President delivers her Republic Day speech. Let’s go.’ They stood at once, packing their belongings. As the others piled out, Paul signalled to Darrin to remain behind. Darrin closed the door. ‘Listen, Darrin. The reason I wanted to speak with you in private is because you’re the only person I can trust right now.’

‘Oh, sounds ominous, but I appreciate the confidence.’

‘What I’m about to tell you is confidential.’

‘What is it?’

‘This assassination threat, it’s been suggested to me there’s a mole inside the agency.’

‘Are, are you serious?’

‘I’m serious. Mackenzie warned me there are elements within the agency working against us. I want you to find out who it is.’

‘There’s thousands of people working in this agency boss, I don’t know if I’ll be able to find one traitor,’ he said.

‘Well, you’ll have to, Darrin. Because right now, you’re the one person I can trust with this.’ Darrin could see the fear in his superior’s eyes. ‘Merindah Bradley is the first Indigenous Australian to become President. If she dies, it’ll tear this country apart.’

‘Fine. I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Thanks, Darrin. Report to me if you have any theories or evidence of a potential suspect.’

‘No problem.’ Darrin stood and headed to the door. As he left, Paul tried to decide if the AFP should put such a heavy burden on a grieving, depressed widower, but their relationship went way back, and he’d become a valuable asset to the team. Paul looked up, and Sergeant Simon Harper stepped in.

‘Excuse me, Inspector, I’m heading out. Following up on a lead myself.’

‘A promising lead, I would hope?’

‘You could say that. I’ll be back in an hour.’

‘Let me know how it goes.’ Simon turned to leave. On his way out, Simon spotted Darrin and Nicole as they stepped into the elevator. Nicole gave Darrin a gentle nudge.

‘Hey. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘Hm?’

‘What’s up?’

‘Oh, nothing. A bit shell-shocked from what the Boss told us. About the assassination threat.’

‘I know. Let’s hope we can catch the bastards.’

‘Yeah.’ Darrin stood in silence. His stomach clenched at the thought of lying to his close friend. He wanted to tell her, but knew the risks. What was worse was the fact that there was someone inside the AFP working against them.

*Melbourne, Australia*

Channel Nine reporter Stuart Parker stood on a raised platform at Federation Square in central Melbourne. The city’s unmistakable skyline formed a dramatic backdrop, and the iconic Flinders Street Station’s clock tower could be seen off to one side. ‘G’day Melbourne. I’m Stuart Parker reporting live for *Channel Nine* from Fed Square, where excitement is building ahead of Australia’s first-ever *Republic Day*. While celebrations in Sydney are already well underway, you can feel the energy here in Melbourne, too. Let’s take a look.’ The camera swept across the bustling square, capturing families, groups of teenagers, and older citizens milling about. Some wave miniature new flags of Australia, now featuring symbols representative of the republic. Make-shift stalls dot the square, selling snacks, flags, and commemorative Republic Day T-shirts. ‘Festivities in Melbourne are set to peak tonight with fireworks along the Yarra River and a cultural showcase celebrating the diversity of our nation under its new republican system. But how do Victorians really feel about this historic day? I caught up with a few people here to find out.’

‘*I think it’s amazing. Finally, an Australian head of state. It just makes sense in this day and age. My grandparents might disagree, but hey, the world changes*.’

‘*I grew up believing in the Monarch, so I’m admittedly torn. But it’s good to see the country standing on its own two feet*.’ The camera shot to another interview.

‘*I respect tradition, but if this is what most Australians want, I’m willing to support it. We can still honour our heritage, just in a new framework*.’

‘*It’s time we show the world we’re independent. It’s about national pride. No offense to the monarchy, but we can run our own ship, yeah?*’ Back to Stuart in front of the camera, a lively band playing a spirited tune in the background:

‘As you can see, reactions are mostly positive. Some remain nostalgic for the old ties to the Crown, but the atmosphere is undeniably festive. One of the day’s highlights will be a concert featuring local artists right here in Federation Square. Organisers expect record crowds, possibly as many as last year’s Moomba Festival. ‘The real question on everyone’s mind is how this new system will impact our sense of identity, and whether Australia’s first President will command the same respect that the Crown once did. For many here, that’s a challenge they’re ready to embrace.’ The camera panned to showcase a group of children clapping along with the band’s beat, parents watching with proud smiles. A few people wave at the camera, cheering.

‘As you all know, Australia’s first President, Merin-dah Bradley, will be delivering her Republic Day speech at Commonwealth Park. This speech will be broadcast nationwide, where she’s expected to reflect on our shared past and outline a vision for Australia’s future under the republic. We’ll bring you coverage of that speech right here on *Channel Nine*. Until then, this is Stuart Parker, live from Federation Square in Melbourne, where the spirit is high, and the crowds are ready to celebrate our new chapter. Stay tuned for more on Republic Day,Australia’s next step forward.’ The shot lingered for a moment on the crowd’s enthusiasm, two teenagers dancing to the live music, an older man doffing his hat as he passes by, and a group of tourists snapping photos of the grand old station and modern square. The screen then faded back to the studio, completing the segment. Meanwhile, the buzz of Melbourne continued, a vibrant array of opinions, hopes, and cautious excitement for the nation’s bold stride into republican identity.

# FIVE

*Government House,*

*Canberra*

Jarrah Bradley was bundle of nerves; he paced the room, his face reflecting a stern maturity that stretched far beyond his years. He replayed the speech over and over in his head as he circled the private dining area of the residence.  John observed him from the corner, a swell of pride welling up inside him as he watched his son step into the world of adult responsibility. John cleared his throat, drawing Jarrah’s attention. ‘How are you holding up, son?’ he asked, watching as Jarrah paced.

‘I’m, I’m okay. I think.’

‘Remember, being a VIP isn’t just about enjoying the privileges. It’s about carrying the burden of expectations.’ He moved towards his son, his eyes reflecting his deep trust in him.

‘Yeah. It’s just gonna take a bit of time to get used to.’ A knock at the door interrupted them. Jarrah’s security detail appeared.

‘Mr. Bradley, the car is ready out front, sir,’ said an officer. John turned to Jarrah.

‘You’ve got this, son. We’re all proud of you.’

‘What’s happening with Mum?’ John checked his watch.

‘She’s not back from her meeting. She’ll see you later. Behave yourself, son.’ Jarrah welcomed the peck on the forehead from John. John’s pep talk made him think of his mother, the strong, determined woman who was now the leader of their nation. He held a steady face, his acceptance followed the security officers to the main entrance. As he made his way to the car, he thought back to the day he found out his world was about to change.

*Alice Springs, Northern Territory*

*2022*

Jarrah Bradley, liberated from the day’s classes, trotted down the dusty street in Alice Springs. Sunlight angled across the houses, and the AFL football he dribbled against the ground cast a long shadow on the red earth. Beside him walked his friend, Ashleigh, exchanging playful banter. ‘All right, see you tomorrow, man,’ Ash-leigh said as they reached Jarrah’s driveway. Jarrah bounced the footy one last time before tucking it under his arm.

‘Catch ya, white boy!' Jarrah replied with an easy grin. He watched Ashleigh disappear down the street, then slipped inside the front door. A comforting aroma of simmering stew met him, alongside the faint hum of a laptop’s fan. He kicked off his sneakers, aiming for the family’s dedicated bag rack, but missed, leaving them in a messy heap on the floor. *Ah, well*, he thought, shrugging off the day’s fatigue. His mother, Merindah, whom he affectionately called “Ma” or “Merin”, was at the stovetop, stirring something that smelled like a blend of native herbs and spices, while his dad, John, hunched over a laptop at the kitchen table. ‘Smells good. What’s cookin’, Ma?’ Jarrah asked, dropping his school bag to the floor and wandering closer. Merindah turned, offering him a warm smile.

'Your favourite: Wallaby stew,' said John. *Have I done something wrong? Ma only cooks this if there’s news to share*, Jarrah said to himself.

‘Jarrah. Welcome home, boy. How was school?’ she asked, voice gentle but carrying an undercurrent of excitement he couldn’t quite place. Jarrah lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug.

‘It was so, so.’ John looked up from the screen, arching a brow.

‘So, so?’ he echoed with mock seriousness. ‘Is that some new language you kids invented?’ Jarrah gave a playful eye roll.

‘Yeah, something like that, old man.’ Merindah paused, her stirring forgotten.

‘Listen, Jarrah. We need to have a chat,’ she began, exchanging a brief, significant look with John. Jarrah’s defences rose.

‘Ugh, what have I done now?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Merindah, gesturing for him to sit. ‘It’s nothing you’ve done, but it does involve you.’ He dropped onto a chair, tension flickering in his eyes.

‘You’re scaring me, Ma.’ John closed his laptop with a gentle click.

‘There’s nothing to be afraid of, son. You’ve heard all the talk about Australia becoming a republic on the news, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Jarrah replied, confusion mixing with a spark of curiosity. ‘Everyone at school is talking about it. So, what’s that got to do with me?’ Merindah drew in a breath.

‘Your father and I have something to tell you.’ She glanced at John, who gave an encouraging nod. ‘I’ve been chosen as a potential candidate for the President of Australia.’ For a split second, Jarrah just blinked.

‘Wait, *seriously*? Mum, that’s amazing!’ Merindah’s shoulders eased in relief at his enthusiasm.

‘I’m glad you feel that way, but I was worried. This is going to be huge. The referendum is in November, and if it goes through, they’ll be selecting candidates from each state and territory. It won’t be an easy ride.’ Jarrah’s grin stretched ear to ear.

‘Why wouldn’t I be okay with it? You’d be the first Indigenous Australian President: my own mother, head of state.’ He leaned forward, excited energy radiating off him. ‘That’s epic.’ Merindah exchanged a brief, emotional glance with John. She could hardly believe how open-minded her son was.

‘I’m so glad, boy. But you need to understand how it’ll change our lives: reporters everywhere, cameras chasing you, and plenty of people who oppose the re-public. They can get nasty.’

‘I know,’ Jarrah said. ‘But I can handle it. I’ve been going to kickboxing classes, remember?’ He flexed a bicep in jest, trying to inject some levity into the gravity of the situation. Merindah chuckled, but her eyes shone with a mixture of pride and apprehension. *Is this the right path for us?* she wondered. *Am I risking Jarrah’s peace?* Yet seeing him so supportive bolstered her resolve. John cleared his throat gently.

‘We just wanted you to hear it from us first. Things will move quickly once the referendum date approaches. It might mean a lot of late nights, travel, and public scrutiny.’ Jarrah’s expression turned serious, but he nodded with resolve.

‘I’m all in, Mum. If you want to do this, if you believe it’s right for the country, then I’m behind you one hundred percent.’ Merindah reached over and squeezed his hand.

‘Thank you, Jarrah. That means more to me than you know.’ The stew on the stovetop began to bubble, prompting Merindah to leap up and stir it again. Jarrah and John shared a small laugh.

*Canberra, Australian Capital*

*Republic Day*

Sir Perry Haynes stood at the kitchen counter, preparing his morning espresso. His eyes, sharp and blue, scanned the room with the precision of an athlete, taking in every detail as the espresso machine hissed and steamed. The strong aroma of Robusta coffee beans consumed the air around him as he poured the coffee into a small porcelain cup. As he sipped the bitter brew, Perry’s eyes shifted to the flatscreen TV mounted on the wall. His chapped lips pierced into a thin line, his fingers tightening around the delicate cup. He shook his head, a mix of disappointment and determination etched on his face. Setting the empty cup in the sink, he moved with a sense purpose to his private study, a large corner office with windows on both sides of the room. It gave him a picturesque view of the nation’s capital. A sleek, modern corner desk filled the space, allowing him to catch a glimpse of passersby, or check to see if the neighbour’s dog did its business on his immaculate gardens. Though he didn’t spend much time here, it became his home office, and he could still conduct business from the comfort of his own home. He gathered his belongings, his blazer resting on the head of his plush leather chair, and his ready to go briefcase sat on the edge of his desk. As he turned to leave, he paused before a large oil painting of Queen Elizabeth II. His eyes lingered on the monarch’s serene expression, drawing strength from the image. He relished the moment he’d met Her Majesty many years ago now, and her passing crushed him. As a Knight Bachelor, he attended the Queen’s funeral, and gave a eulogy. *God Save the Queen*, he murmured to himself. With a nod of reverence, he turned away, picking up his leather briefcase from the antique desk below. The sound of tyres on gravel caught Perry’s attention to the window. A sleek, black Mercedes SUV had pulled up in front of his house.  He watched as a woman in her mid-forties, dressed in a sharp navy suit, step out of the car. Two men in dark suits and sunglasses emerged from a second vehicle. Perry straightened his tie and smoothed down his jacket before stepping out onto the front veranda. The cool morning air carried the scent of eucalyptus from the nearby trees, a fragrance at odds with the British flags adorning Perry’s home.  ‘Good morning, Mr. Haynes,’ said the woman.

‘Morning, Vanessa,’ Perry replied, descending the steps. ‘Any updates?’ Vanessa fell into step beside him as they walked to the car, the bodyguards taking up positions around them.

‘Several, sir. I’ve compiled a brief for you to review on the way to the office. The most pressing matter is the meeting with potential investors at ten o’clock. They’re interested in our cause.’

‘Excellent. We’ll need all the support we can get, especially today.’ As they settled into the back of the Mercedes, Vanessa handed Perry a tablet. The screen displayed a series of news articles and social media posts, all centred around the day’s main event: President Bradley’s speech. Perry’s eyes narrowed as he scrolled through the feed. Images of crowds gathering at Commonwealth Park, waving the new flag and holding signs supporting the new republic, filled the screen. He saw the enthusiasm in everyone’s faces, even though the digital medium. ‘It’s a shame,’ Perry murmured, more to himself than to Vanessa.

‘They don’t understand what they’re throwing away.’

‘The investors we’re meeting today seem to share your sentiment, sir. They’re keen to help spread the message of maintaining the monarchy.’ Perry’s mood lightened somewhat at this news.

‘I’m glad. We need to make a strong impression. The Royal Vanguard must stand firm in these turbulent times.’ As the car wound its way through Canberra’s streets, Perry continued to browse the news feed. The armoured Mercedes SUV pulled up in front of a modern office building in Belconnen. The Royal Van-guard’s headquarters occupied the top three floors, its presence marked by a discreet plaque beside the main entrance.

Perry stepped out of the car, flanked by his bodyguards. Vanessa walked ahead, her heels clicking on the pavement as she led the way into the building. The floors of the foyer had been laid with marble tiles and wood-panelled walls decorated with portraits of British monarchs, and notable politicians. As they approached the elevators, Perry’s phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He frowned, not recognising the number on the screen. After a moment’s hesitation, he answered. ‘Haynes speaking.’

‘Mr. Haynes, listen carefully. The AFP is onto you. They’re sending two agents to question you.’ Perry’s blood ran cold. He glanced around the foyer, hyper-aware of his surroundings.

‘Who is this? Question me about what?’

‘Your role in the plot against Merindah Bradley.’

‘I’ve got nothing to do with that. I told the General I wasn’t interested.’

‘They’re onto you, Perry.’

‘How much time do I have?’

‘Not much. Stay the course, Perry. They will find out what you know.’

‘I don’t know anything—’ He lowered the phone. The call ended. Vanessa turned.

‘Are you okay, sir?’

‘Yes. Fine,’ he replied, stepping into the elevator. As the doors closed, a bead of sweat formed on his brow.

‘Mr. Haynes.’ The receptionist greeted him. ‘Your ten o’clock appointment has arrived early. They’re waiting in the conference room.’

‘Thank you, Susan. Vanessa, would you take care of them? I’ll be there momentarily.’ As Vanessa headed towards the conference room, Perry turned to one of his bodyguards. ‘James, I need you to do something for me. Discreetly monitor the entrance. If you see anyone who looks like they might be AFP, let me know immediately.’

‘Of course, sir. Anything in particular I should be looking for?’

‘Just keep an eye out.’ With a curt nod, James headed back to the elevators, leaving Perry alone with his thoughts. He made his way to his office, a spacious room with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of Canberra. Perry spotted the photo on his desk. It showed him shaking hands with a man in military dress, both of them smiling for the camera. The gold name-plate beneath the photo read: Major General George Stanley. He picked up the frame, studying the image with a keen eye. A knock at the door startled Perry from his reverie. He set the photo down, composing himself as Vanessa entered the room.

‘The investors are ready for you, sir,’ she said. ‘And there’s something else you should know: a reporter from The Canberra Times has been calling all morning. They’re asking for a comment on President Bradley’s speech and the Royal Vanguard’s position on the new republic.’ Perry’s jaw clenched.

‘Tell them we have no comment at this time. We’ll issue a statement after the speech, once we’ve had time to analyse its content.’ Vanessa made a note on her tablet.

‘Understood, sir. Will you be watching the speech here or at Commonwealth Park?’

‘Here,’ Perry replied without hesitation. ‘I have no desire to be part of that spectacle.’ As they walked towards the conference room, Perry’s mind raced with possibilities. An oval-shaped, mahogany table dominated the space, and portraits of British royalty clung to the walls. As Perry entered, three men in expensive suits rose to greet him.

‘Gentlemen. Welcome to the Royal Vanguard. I understand you share our commitment to preserving Australia’s ties to the Crown.’ The oldest of the three men, a distinguished-looking gentleman with silver hair, stepped forward to shake Perry’s hand.

‘Indeed we do, Sir Haynes. I’m Charles Curtis. My colleagues and I believe the move towards a republic is a grave mistake, one that threatens the very fabric of our nation.’

# SIX

*The Lodge,*

*Prime Minister’s Residence,*

*Canberra*

Thedrive to The Lodge took less time than Merin anticipated; one of the many perks of being the nation’s head of state. On the way in, Merin shook her head as she saw a group of protesters. They held signs in the air with slogans against the republic. One of them read: *Not My President, Not My Republic*. The car stopped on the gravel courtyard adjacent to the main entrance of The Lodge. Merin climbed out, followed by Joe. Flanked by her security detail, Merin and Joe stepped forward. Together, the group headed to the main entrance. Hurried footsteps crunched across the gravel drive. A partitioned roof sheltered the main entrance. Under it stood a woman with a firm stance, her red hair pulled back in a tight bun that glistened under the harsh November sun. ‘Madam President, I’m Alyssa Crawford, the Prime Minister’s chief-of-staff.’ They shook hands. ‘The Prime Minister’s ready to see you.’ Alyssa and the group climbed a set of stairs to the second floor and made their way along a corridor lined with plush, maroon carpet. The group attempted to keep up with the fast-walking chief-of-staff, but they struggled.

Alyssa stopped at a large, heavy door. She knocked twice and entered. Merin entered next, followed by Joe. As Joe closed the door, two bodyguards positioned themselves by the door. Inside the office, Stephen Archer, the Prime Minister, sat at his desk against the far wall. Stephen, a man in his mid-fifties, carries him-self with the dignified poise of a statesman. His distinguished silver hair, combed back, added an air of wisdom to his presence. His expressive, piercing blue eyes reflected both intelligence and a deep well of experience. Dressed in a royal blue tailored suit, Stephen stood as Merindah entered. They shook hands.

‘Madam President,’ said Stephen.

‘Prime Minister.’ Stephen eyed Joe, who stood by the door. Merin spotted the chair opposite Stephen’s desk. He encouraged her to take a seat.

‘I appreciate you coming, Madam President. This was far too important to be discussed over the phone.’

‘Fair enough. I’ve been told this is a matter of national security?’

‘Yes, it’s related to your speech at Commonwealth Park.’ Joe watched the Prime Minister. As he did so, he took a seat next to Merin, and waited.

‘I see. Is there a problem with it?’ Stephen pressed a button on his phone.

‘Send in the Commissioner, please.’ They waited a few moments.

The door snapped open.

Another man entered the office, dressed in a navy-blue uniform with a broach of police medals on his upper right chest. ‘Madam President, Shaun Buckley is the Commissioner of the AFP. Shaun, would you care to brief the President?’

‘Madam President, I’ve been informed there’s a security threat against your life.’

‘Tell me you’re joking?’ asked Joe, trying not to fall off the chair.

‘No, I’m not Mr. Pittman. My agency received intelligence to suggest that the President is the target of an assassination plot.’

‘Does this have something to do with the attack when you announced the referendum?’ asked Joe, recalling the bomb attack that killed six people, and injuring dozens more. Merin watched Stephen as he reflected on that horrific event.

‘We’re not certain, but it’s possible. There is an ongoing investigation,’ said the Commissioner.

‘Do we know who’s involved with the attempt on my life?’ asked Merin.

‘We’re working alongside ASIO, as well as ACT Police. Your security is our primary objective, and we will do everything in our power to keep you safe,’ said the Commissioner. Merin gulped. Her throat seized under the anxiety of knowing someone wanted her dead.

‘The President has been getting death threats ever since the referendum. What makes this one special?’ Joe queried, taking notes on his iPad.

‘We take every threat seriously, Mr. Pittman,’ said the Commissioner.

‘Madam President: today’s Republic Day. Your speech at Commonwealth Park commences at midday. The Commissioner and I recommend postponing the event.’ Stephen’s suggestion surprised Merin, despite having braced herself for whatever the Prime Minister threw at her.

‘Prime Minister. You’re hilarious. Postpone Re-public Day? Postpone a major event in this nation’s history? And postpone it hours before?’

‘Madam Pres—’

‘Oh, I know what’s happening here. I read the world headlines. The first president, no, the first Indigenous female president, decides to cancel Re-public Day because she’s scared of a few cowards.’ Merin stood and buttoned her jacket. ‘Trying to get the people against me?’

‘Merindah—’

‘You’ve said I’m safe in the hands of my security detail. Now, you’ve told me there’s an issue, and we need to cancel. Make up your mind!’ Merin marched to the office door. ‘I need to go and prepare for my speech.’ Joe opened the door as Merin approached. She paused on the threshold and turned to face Stephen. ‘See you at the festival, Prime Minister.’ Stephen remained standing as she left the room, gobsmacked by her response. Out in the hall, Merin scoffed. ‘Can you believe this?’ She walked next to Joe as they headed out. ‘Someone wants me dead, and the PM wants to postpone Republic Day?’

‘I know, but maybe he’s right. If there’s someone trying to kill you, heaven forbid, we should be pro-active and think about an alternative.’

‘No. This day’s too important, Joe. We’ve been preparing for this day for the last twelve months. I’m not going to hide in the shadows. I always knew there’d be haters and death threats, but I will not cower to their level.’

‘I’m glad you didn’t back out.’

‘Me too. My security detail will have to deal with this.’ Merin and Joe made their way out of the residence and climbed into the car. As the Holden Caprice sped away, Merin leaned against the window. She thought back to the day Joe asked her to become President of Australia.

*Alice Springs, Northern Territory*

*8 May 2022*

Joe Pittman remembered why he loved Alice Springs. The scent of eucalyptus, and the lingering embers of extinguished bushfires infiltrated his nostrils, as he climbed out of the silver Hilux. It’d been too long for Joe, too long a time to have been away from his home-town. He’d gotten used to the comforts of Canberra and its air-conditioned apartments, cooler nights, and refreshing mornings. After a short drive from the airport, he found himself outside the front of the Alice Springs Community Learning Centre. He stood at the main entrance, and noticed a plaque near the front doors. A cheeky grin appeared on his face as he read the name-plate: *“This organisation was founded by Merin-dah Bradley. Officially opened in 2017 by the Lord Mayor of Alice Springs David Moresby.”*He buttoned his blazer, and locked the car before heading inside. Joe, a tower-ing giant, had to duck as he almost knocked his head against the doorway, one of the many downsides of being six foot tall. He saw the paintings on the wall in front of him that were done by some of the kids; most of them Indigenous works, depicting ancient Ab-original creatures, or traditional Aboriginal patterns. A ceiling fan hung low and spun at a slow speed, but provided little relief from the stuffy atmosphere. ‘Can I help you?’ shrieked an irritated voice from Joe’s right. The woman eyed him from behind the front desk, a stranger from out of town. Joe ignored the woman’s crude response and leaned against the desk. *Sounds like someone’s having a bad day*, he thought. He removed his sunglasses.

‘Yes. My name is Joe Pittman. I’m here to see Merindah Bradley.’ He gave the woman a business card. She examined it with a keen eye, and then looked back at Joe with some annoyance before returning it.

‘She’s in a meeting now. I can get a message to her if you’d like to wait here.’

‘Tell her it’s important.’ The woman glared at him again before picking up the phone. He grabbed a seat near the reception area.

Ten minutes passed.

A door opened, and Merindah Bradley tottered towards him.

‘Joe, this is a surprise.’ Her younger brother had come home after all these years. Seeing him made her all flustered, and she leaned against the wall. She couldn’t believe it.

‘Hey, sis. Long time, no see.’ He smiled at her.

‘You can say that again, brother,’ she said. ‘What brings you out to the bush?’

‘You know I can’t resist the outback. Looks like you haven’t changed a bit since I last saw you.’

‘I see you have.’

‘Yeah, been going to the gym a bit more. Gotta keep up with those pollies, eh.’

‘I take it this isn’t a social visit?’

‘I wish. I’d like a sec to chat. It’s important.’

‘Sure. I’ve got a couple of minutes. Let’s grab a coffee.’ They made their way to the outdoor seating area next to the school canteen, and Merin ordered two coffees. ‘You still have two sugars, brother?’

‘Nah. Tryin’ to cut back.’ Joe watched her stir the coffee.

‘How’s this all going?’

‘It has its moments. We’re having some trouble with funding. We had to make some cuts last year.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear. You should’ve reached out, I could’ve helped.’

‘I don’t want handouts, Joe. I wanted to do this the right way. Not cutting corners like those corrupt pollies in Canberra.’

‘You’re right. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound condescending.’

‘It’s okay. How’s that cushy government job going?’

‘It’s a job, but it’s a step in the right direction.’

‘Well, it’s about bloody time people from our Mob stirred things up,’ Joe chuckled. ‘So, what’s the real reason you’re here?’

‘You been watching the news about this republic referendum business?’

‘Sort of. Haven’t paid much attention. Why?’

‘Well, as you know, the Minister is part of the Australian Republic Committee.’ Merin listened to his brother as he explained everything. ‘They’re in the process of selecting candidates for the position of president.’

‘You mean, the President of Australia? They reckon this referendum will pass?’

‘Yep. Early polls show a positive swing of 56 percent for a republic. If the referendum is successful, Australia will become a republic.’ *About bloody time, Merin thought*, as she sipped her coffee.

‘What does this have to do with me?’

‘When I spoke with the Minister about selecting a candidate, I threw a name in the hat. He didn’t react well to the suggestion, but he warmed to it.’

‘Oh, who is it?’

‘It’s you.’ Merin almost choked on her coffee.

‘Me? You can’t be bloody serious, Joe?’

‘We ran some preliminary polling, and the numbers show you’d be the perfect match.’

‘You think I’d be the perfect candidate to be the first President of Australia?’

‘Think about it. You’d be the first Indigenous Australian to represent Australia as its head of state.’

‘It’s, it’s outrageous. The public wouldn’t go for it.’

‘I figured you’d say that, but honestly, I think you underestimate yourself. I think you’ve got a real shot at this.’

‘Surely there are other candidates fit for the job?’

‘There are, but to be honest, they aren’t as accomplished as you are. I mean, you’re the Principal of a Community Learning Centre Not to mention, you have an Order of Australia, and voted Australian of the Year. You’d be the voice for the Indigenous community. A chance to make a real difference.’

‘I’d be a target.’

‘I’m not going to deny it’s a possibility. There’s going to be a lot of haters out there, but there’s also a lot of people who will stand by you and see you as an idol.’

‘This, this is a lot to take in, and I can’t leave the school.’

‘I understand, but we can make it work. The Education Minister wants to ensure this centre gets the necessary funding to keep going. He’s also working with the Minister for Education to roll out a new bill to assist those in regional areas.’

‘I need to talk to John about this, and Jarrah. It’s going to affect them, too.’

‘I know, and they’ll be given whatever support they need.’

‘Have you been to see Ma?’

‘No, I haven’t. I’m not sure if I’ll have time.’ Merin lowered her head. The last time they both saw their mother was when she was in the hospital, but that was two years ago. Merin was referring to their mother’s grave, a dedicated spot only family members or elders were allowed to visit. ‘I’m heading out first thing in the morning,’ he said. ‘I’ll try and go see her. Can’t promise anything.’

‘Okay. How much time do I have to think?’

‘The sooner we lock in a candidate, the better. We’ve got eleven other candidates in the running, but the Minister is confident you stand a solid chance. The PM’s already made the announcement. A referendum will go public in November next year.’

‘Yeah. I saw that bomb attack on the news. Were you there?’

‘No, I wasn’t. But the AFP is looking into it.’ Joe checked his watch. ‘I’d better get back to the hotel. I’ve got a Zoom meeting with the boss.’ He buttoned his blazer. He didn’t want to say goodbye, but he knew they’d see each other soon. ‘At least, sleep on it tonight. Talk to John, and Jarrah, but get back to me ASAP.’ He leaned forward and pecked Merin on the cheek. ‘So glad to see you again.’

‘Yeah. You too, brother.’ He patted her on the shoulder. Merin rested her head against Joe’s arm. Later in the afternoon, Merin drove to her home on the outskirts of Alice Springs. The Bradley’s humble abode rose from the heart of the timeless terrain, a steadfast symbol of their resilient spirit. She fought to hide a yawn, the sign of a tough day. She grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge. She didn’t often drink, but today she needed one: the idea of potentially becoming Australia’s first president wasn’t something to be taken lightly. John hadn’t come home yet, but he worked late sometimes. She stood by the window above the kitchen sink, the conversation with Joe a constant reminder of the possibilities in her mind. *Could I be the President of Australia?* As Merin attempted to process everything, her attention drew to the flyscreen door as it clapped shut. She put the bottle on the counter and scurried along the corridor to investigate. She stepped onto the veranda. A cool breeze rolled through; bits of straw danced in the air like ballerinas. Merin heard the floorboards creak under the gentle pressure of foot-steps. The armchair on the veranda rocked, its structure correcting itself as a figure sat. ‘Bout time you showed, Ma. I’ve been waiting for you.’ Merin saw her mother’s spirit appear on the chair. Ma’s spirit appeared almost human, her features vivid and raw as Merin remembered her before she died. Her same old wrinkled face with yellow cigarette-stained teeth.

‘Sorry, kid. Had trouble finding my way back,’ said Ma. ‘What’s the word, kid?’

‘I miss you, Ma. More and more each day,’ said Merin.

‘You know I’ll always be here for you. How’s our Johno?’

‘He’s fine. He’s at work.’

‘Goodo.’

‘I saw Joe today.’

‘Sight for sore eyes. Is he still slaving away for white fellas in Ngunnawal Country?’ Merin chuckled.

‘Yes, Ma, he is. But he came to offer me some-thing. A chance to make a difference for us. I don’t know what to do.’

‘What does your heart tell you?’

‘It’s telling me I should do it.’

‘There’s your answer.’ Another gust of wind rolled through. ‘Well, better get back. Be well, kid.’ She glanced back at the empty chair, once occupied by her mother’s spirit, before slumping into it herself. She rocked back and forth, the load of the wood balancing underneath her as it rippled over the floorboards. *John should be home soon*. *It’s getting late*, she thought to herself. Another hour went by. A car pulled up on the drive.

It was John.

The vehicle’s headlights beaming forward. Merin heard a car door shut. She turned to see her husband, John Bradley, walk in. John, a tall, lanky man with short-cropped hair and a stern expression, waved.

‘Hey, sweetheart,’ he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. ‘How was your day?’

‘It was fine. But we need to talk,’ said Merin.

‘Uh-oh, sounds ominous.’

‘No, it’s nothing bad. If anything, it’s bloody brilliant.’

‘I see. What’s going on?’

‘You’re going to want to sit down first.’ Merin explained the situation to him. She told him about Joe’s offer and what it would mean for them if she accepted. She talked about the challenges and the opportunities, and how this could be a turning point in their lives. John listened, his face impassive. He had always been a practical man, someone who thought things through before making a decision.

‘Sweetheart, you know I support you no matter what. But you also know that this is a big decision, one that will affect our lives for years to come.’

‘I know, Johno,’ she said. ‘But this is something I have to do. I have a chance to change the course of history. And I can’t let that opportunity slip away.’

‘I understand. And I will stand by you, no matter what.’ John continued. ‘Do you remember the time we went camping out bush?’ She remembered the trip like it happened yesterday.

‘Yep. I remember,’ she said. ‘It was one of the best times of my life. Apart from my wedding day, of course.’

‘Me too. And you know what I remember most about that trip?’

‘I remember looking up at the stars, and anything was possible. It was the two of us, out there in the middle of nowhere, and we had nothing but the stars to guide us.’

‘I remember that too. It was like we were the only two people in the world.’

‘And that’s why I know you can do this, Merin. You’ve always been a fighter, and you’ve always believed that anything is possible. I believe in you too.’

‘Thanks, Johno. I can’t do this without you.’

‘You don’t have to thank me, Merin. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.’ John stood and collected his work bag. ‘I’m heading inside for a cuppa. Don’t be too long, Merin. The dingoes will get ya.’ Merin chuckled as he rose to leave.

‘I’ll be in soon.’ Merin heard the flyscreen door clap shut.

‘All right, Australia. I hope you’re ready for Merin-dah Bradley.’

# SEVEN

*Monday, 24 November 2025*

*Republic Day*

Darrinand Nicole didn’t have much to say to each other as they arrived at Haynes’ office. Each churned through the possibilities. Who would gain the most from the president’s death and who would lose the most if the President remained alive? Having worked together for a few years, they adapted to the solitude. They knew the other would be working the case in their own way. Nicole drove the black BMW X5 Series. Darrin sat in the passenger seat, going over the briefing.  He saw her drumming on her steering wheel to an imaginary beat. He stretched his arm as far as he could on the dashboard, his shoulder straining against the seat belt. ‘Pinched nerve?’ asked Nicole, as she concentrated on her driving.

‘Ah, yeah, just didn’t sleep well last night,’ said Darrin.

‘I know, I didn’t either.’ Darrin read through the file. Most of it was paperwork on Perry Haynes. ‘I still can’t get over the fact that someone wants to kill the President.’

‘Me either. There’s always someone who wants to ruin a good thing.’

‘I just hope we’re getting paid overtime.’ Darrin chuckled. He loved her dry, sarcastic humour, one of her many quirks. Five minutes on, the BMW X5 came to a stop. They climbed out and they made their way across the street, entering the building at the same time. Inside, they scanned the foyer for a receptionist. She stood a couple of metres away from her desk, filling a disposable cup from a water dispenser.

‘Morning. I’m Federal Agent O’Connor, this is my colleague, Federal Agent Bailey. We’re with the AFP.’ Darrin and Nicole flashed their AFP badges. ‘We’re looking for Perry Haynes. What floor is he on?’

‘AFP? What did Haynes do?’

‘We’re here to ask questions. That’s all. We have a warrant to speak with Haynes.’

‘Oh. I see.’ Rose walked to her desk, cup in hand. ‘I’ll call his office. See if he’s available.’ *If he’s available? Like he has any other choice*! Darrin watched Rose. The receptionist lifted a desk phone to her ear. ‘Sir, there are people here to see you.’ She nodded into the phone. ‘From the AFP.’ Rose listened to Perry Haynes and responded with ‘mhm.’ Darrin cracked a stiff finger, impatient. He noticed a tall man standing near the elevators. He wore a sharp, black suit with a thin tie stretching to his belt. He also noticed the earpiece radio nestled in his right ear. Darrin figured him to be a bodyguard of some description. Rose replaced the phone on the hook. ‘Mr. Haynes is in a meeting, but you can go up to the eleventh floor and wait for him.’ Darrin and Nicole went to the set of elevators. She pressed the ‘UP’ button and they waited. Darrin eyed the tall man as he patrolled the seating area. He kept his hands in front, trying not to draw attention to himself. Nicole leaned closer to Darrin.

‘This place gives me the creeps,’ she said. Darrin chuckled, but didn’t respond. The elevator arrived and its doors slid open. Darrin focused on the bodyguard one last time as they stepped onto the elevator. Its doors closed and commenced a slow crawl to the upper floors. The music droned on as it ascended. Nicole paced through the small space in two steps, becoming im-patient. It took a matter of minutes to arrive at the eleventh floor. A desk occupied the space in the hall near the elevators. Here, a man sat, elbows on the flat table, watching as they stepped out.

‘Mr. Haynes is in a meeting. Once he’s done, I’ll let him know you’re here, and he’ll decide if he wants to see you.’

‘No, you don’t understand. This is a matter of national security. We need to see him now.’ The man produced two clipboards from a storage cupboard under his desk.

‘Fill these out.’

‘Oh, fuck it!’ Darrin marched right past the man’s desk and towards the office to the right.

‘No, no, no, you can’t go in there.’ Darrin forced the door open. Nicole ran after him. At the far end of the room, Haynes sat across from two men, each sporting slicked-back hair. The men in the room jerked at the sudden noise and intrusion.

‘Federal Agents O’Connor and Bailey. AFP.’ The men stood, stunned, forgetting their briefcases and phones.

‘Sir, I tried to stop them.’ Haynes sneered and flicked his hands, sending him away. Perry remained standing.

‘So, what can I do for you feds?’ Perry poured himself a glass of sparkling mineral water from a side table. ‘And it better be important, or else I’ll sue the AFP for breaking and entering on private property.’ *Good luck with that, mate*, Darrin thought, raising an eyebrow. Darrin and Nicole stood in front of the desk, their eyes pinned at Haynes.

‘Mr. Haynes. Our agency is investigating a security threat against the President of Australia. We have evidence to suggest you’re connected to this threat.’ Darrin took a heavy step towards Haynes, and he scowled.

‘What?’ Darrin took another determined step towards the leader of the Royal Vanguard. His intimidating stare washed over Perry. *Something tells me this isn’t the first time Haynes’ had been visited by the government*, Nicole thought, as she watched Haynes.

‘We ask the questions, Mr. Haynes!’ Nicole blurted. ‘We know you’ve been calling for the disbandment of the republic. There’s an assassination threat against the President.’

‘What? I know nothing about that.’

‘Of course, you do. Tell us who the shooter is, or I’ll push you out this window.’ Nicole grew concerned by the devious threat he made. ‘At the Republic Referendum in Sydney, you encouraged the protesters to support an independent Western Australia.’ Haynes stood, red hot anger rising to his face and neck. He pointed to the door, his arm trembling as he spoke.

‘Get out of my office, both of you.’

‘We have a warrant, Mr. Haynes. This is a serious matter of national security, and our investigation has led to you.’

‘I don’t think you know who I am. I’m an activist, not a terrorist. Why would you suspect me of killing the president?’ Nicole saw Perry shift in his seat. She knew their probing questions got him squirming.

‘We know you’re against the republic, we know you’re pro-monarchy. Why don’t you quit playing games and cooperate with us, Mr. Haynes?’

‘I can’t tell you anymore than what I’ve said. I’m not part of this assassination plot.’ Darrin clenched his fist together.

‘Answer our questions, Mr. Haynes and if we’re satisfied, we’ll leave, and you’ll continue your meeting.’

‘I’m not answering any questions. My lawyers will sue you.’

‘Your lawyer can kiss my arse. Tell us who’s involved in this assassination plot.’ Darrin grabbed hold of Haynes by the throat. He withdrew his Glock 19 service pistol and pressed the nozzle against Haynes’ neck.

‘Darrin, you can’t do this. We need him alive.’ Darrin let go of Haynes and he gasped for air.

‘I’m, I’m going to sue you both.’ Haynes rubbed his bruised neck.

‘I better call this in.’ Nicole moved away and took out her phone to make a call.

‘Paul Duncan.’

‘It’s Bailey. We’re at Haynes’ office.’

‘Is he cooperating?’

‘No. He’s giving us excuses about not being involved in this conspiracy. I think we need to change things up.’

‘You want to bring him back here?’

‘Yeah, I think it’s the right move. We’re running short of time,’ said Darrin.

‘If he’s involved and knows something, we need to get it out of him.’

‘It’s your call. He won’t come without making a scene.’

‘Copy that, Boss.’ Nicole ended the call and returned to Darrin’s side. ‘The Boss authorised us to bring Haynes back to headquarters.’ Darrin faced Haynes. His face red with anger.

‘Perry Haynes, we are detaining you. We have the right to hold you for six hours.’

‘My lawyers will hear about this.’ Darrin grabbed hold of Perry’s arm. Together, they escorted him out of the building. As they went to put Haynes in their car, the suspected domestic terrorist halted. ‘Wait, there is something I know.’

‘What do you know about this assassination plot?’

‘I know a name. It’s Arthur Williams.’

‘Who is he?’ Haynes hesitated, crushed under a burden that he neither wanted nor could relinquish. But before he could respond, his head exploded across the side of the car. ‘Shit. Take cover.’ They withdrew their Glock 19 handguns. At the same time, they dropped behind the car, out of sight of the unknown sniper. Darrin ripped out his phone and made a desperate call. ‘This is Agent O’Connor, we have an active shooter. Request backup, now.’

‘We’re here, Mr. Bradley,’ said one of the protection officers, as he unbuckled his seatbelt.

‘Thanks.’ Jarrah’s stomach dropped. ‘I, I wasn’t prepared for such a large gathering,’ he said.

‘Try and stay with us, sir. You’ll be fine,’ said the second officer, as they climbed out. Jarrah’s skin clammed under the blazing heat as the car door opened. The blast of hot air washed over his face as he stepped out. Cheers infiltrated his senses as he emerged. He posed for selfies, signed autographs, his supporters’ admiration a comforting buffer against the looming speech. He made his way towards the high school, the crowd parting in a wave of hushed whispers and admiring glances. His confident strides held the promise of a well-delivered speech and further consolidated his emerging identity as a public figure.

A dark coloured van lurked in the shadows nearby. Inside, two masked men watched as Jarrah disappeared into the school building. Their eyes, unblinking, held a glint of cold, calculated intent. ‘Is that him?’ one of them asked.

‘Yep. That’s him alright. That’s the little pretty boy,’ said the other.

‘Let’s grab him!’ The other, more superior than his comrade, stopped him.

‘Not so fast. We have to wait for the right moment. There’s too much security around now. Plus, a hell of a lot more witnesses.’ The other, disappointed, closed his door and went back to glaring at the school’s main entrance.

Merin returned to the safety of Government House. She knew getting into this job meant she’d be a target, but she never expected to be at the centre of an assassination threat. John stepped in, carrying two cups of coffee. ‘Welcome back, Love.’ John placed the cup on the desk in front of her. He gave Joe an army salute.

‘How’d it go with the Prime Minister?’

‘Well, interesting. He warned me about a security threat.’

‘Oh? What kind of security threat?’ asked John. ‘He said someone wants to kill me.’

‘You’re kidding?’ Merin shook her head. ‘Someone wants you dead?’

‘Yes. He said someone is plotting an assassination attempt.’

‘Do they know who’s behind it?’

‘The PM said the AFP is conducting a thorough investigation.’

‘Merin, I don’t want you going ahead with the speech,’ said John. ‘I’ve had this discussion with the Prime Minister, Johno. This day is too important to be hiding in the shadows.’

‘If someone wants to kill you, it’s highly likely they will try and do it at Commonwealth Park.’

‘I’m not going to surrender, Johno. Not today. The Australian people voted for this to happen, and I’m not going to let some mad man dictate my decisions.’

‘I’m worried about you, Merin. I can’t bear the thought of losing you.’

‘It’s okay, Johno. I have highly trained bodyguards who know what they’re doing. They’re trained for things like this.’ A knock at the door drew her attention. Joe entered. ‘Ah, Joe. Come in. Is everything set up for the ceremony?’

‘Yes, everything is ready. You’ll be giving your speech around 12:15pm. It’s customary for the Prime Minister to speak first.’

‘That’s fine.’ Merin lifted a piece of paper in front of her. A distant memory popped into her mind.

*2023 Australian Republic Convention*

The large TV screen cast a soft, flickering glow across the living room, tracing the lines of John Bradley’s weathered features. He sat close to Merindah, their hands linked, a quiet show of support as the broadcast of the 2023 Australian Republic Convention replayed on screen. Joe Pittman, Merindah’s brother, leaned against the back of the couch, arms crossed casually but eyes intent on the footage. Outside, the city lights of Canberra glimmered, yet inside, all was still, the world seemed to shrink to just the three of them and the images rolling across the screen. The broadcast cut between shots of the Convention’s main hall at the Old Parliament House, delegates wearing lanyards, rows of flags showcasing a blend of old Commonwealth symbolism and proposed republican insignia. A panel of experts debated at a long table, microphones capturing every passionate argument about designing a new Australian head of state. Journalists scurried be-tween breakout sessions, snapping quotes from prominent figures. For Merindah and her family, this was more than a policy forum; it was Australia forging its future. Merindah took a sip of a cool drink, her mind swirling with thoughts of the day’s events. They’d spent hours navigating the bustling city, attending side-meetings, and fielding the media’s questions about how a republic might function in practice. Now, her gaze latched onto the TV as a speaker stepped to the podium, an academic from Western Australia, delivering a rousing address about balancing states’ interests in the new constitution. Cheers erupted from a portion of the audience; some delegates clapped politely, while skeptics jotted down notes or whispered among them-selves. Seated beside her, John offered a comforting squeeze of her hand. She caught a glimpse of his reflection in the TV’s glossy screen: anxious creases around his eyes, lips pressed in a thin line. Their calm living room contrasted the Convention’s intensity. Here, it was only subdued lighting, the hum of the air conditioner, and the tension brewing in their hearts. Joe cleared his throat, settling onto the couch. ‘So, we’re officially part of history, hey?’ he said, his voice edged with excitement. ‘I mean, check that out. Everyone’s hammered out their positions on electing a president, the role of each state, all that. Kinda wild.’ Merindah exhaled, twisting a lock of dark hair around her finger.

‘Yes, it is. But I can’t shake the feeling that not everyone’s on board,’ she replied. ‘Look at Western Australia. They’re vocally cautious. Some want a separate path, or at least strong guarantees about state autonomy.’ John glanced at her.

‘We knew it’d be a fight. The monarchy’s had a hold on us for over a century, after all. This Convention is just the start of setting up a new system.’ On TV, the broadcast shifted to a post-session panel. A journalist recapped the day’s highlights: talk of how to select the president, whether a parliamentary vote or direct election was best, and how to preserve each state’s interests. She mentioned how delegates from the Northern Territory where Merindah had strong allies, were pushing for a model that balanced popular vote and state nominations. Joe turned the volume down a notch, meeting his sister’s eyes.

‘So, if the Convention passes these proposals, how does the final selection happen?’ Merindah glanced at him, mind zipping through bullet points she’d gleaned from the day’s documents.

‘They’ll recommend a procedure to Parliament. If approved, each state and territory nominates one candidate for President. Then there’ll be a final national confirmation, probably a direct vote or an assembly of delegates. Nothing’s set in stone yet, but the principle’s been hammered out.’

‘That’s straightforward enough,’ John remarked, though his tone carried a tinge of cautious optimism.

‘Of course, the real test is making the public trust this system.’ Joe nodded.

‘Right. They might love the idea of a republic but might be wary about how we choose our first head of state. Some folks are used to the Governor-General. This is new ground.’ A fleeting smile touched Merindah’s lips as the camera panned across the Convention floor: delegates exchanging handshakes, some hugging in relief after tense debates.

She recognised a few faces from the day’s panels. They had tired but satisfied expressions hinting that, perhaps, they’d found some fragile consensus.

‘This is so unreal,’ she murmured. ‘Only a few years ago, a republic was just talk. Now we’re setting out the framework. By tomorrow, we might have a draft agreement to sign.’

‘And with that,’ John added quietly, ‘Australia steps fully onto the world stage. No monarchy, just our own system. For the first time in history.’ Merindah’s chest tightened with a mix of pride and apprehension. The monarchy had shaped so much of Australia’s identity. Severing those ties was exhilarating but also a plunge into unknown waters.

‘I just hope it unites more than it divides,’ she whispered. The TV cut to an outside shot: delegates stepping out of Old Parliament House, cameras flash-ing, reporters hounding for immediate soundbites. Applause drifted from small pockets of supporters who had gathered, though some protest signs: *No Republic***,** spotted the periphery, reminding everyone that not all hearts were won over. John squeezed Merindah’s hand again.

‘I have faith in us Aussies,’ he said softly. ‘We’re a resilient bunch. Stubborn, but resilient. This is just a new chapter, yeah?’ She nodded, forging a small smile.

‘Let’s hope so.’ On screen, a reporter beamed at the camera: *Stay tuned for tomorrow’s final session, where delegates hope to finalise the structure for Australia’s prospective presidency. We’ll have continuing coverage of this historic Convention.*

The broadcast ended, credits rolling as the channel switched to a panel of late-night commentators dissecting the day’s highlights. Merindah muted the TV, letting silence reclaim the room. She leaned back against the sofa, turning inward to reflect on all that had transpired. Joe rapped his knuckles gently on the coffee table.

‘You need sleep, sis. Big day tomorrow. Maybe the biggest day Australia’s seen in a century.’ Merindah gave a soft laugh, the tension in her shoulders loosening.

‘Can’t argue with that,’ she said, standing. John rose with her, placing a comforting arm around her waist. Together, the three of them made their way to switch off the lights. Merindah closed her eyes, letting gratitude and determination settle. The Convention replay might have ended, but the real work was ensuring Australia’s smooth path into a republic was only beginning.

# EIGHT

*Monday, 24 November 2025*

*Republic Day*

Chaos erupted on the street. Screams filled the air as pedestrians scattered, seeking shelter from the unseen threat. Darrin pressed his back against the car door, his breath coming in short gasps. ‘You okay?’ he asked, glancing at Nicole. She nodded, her face pale but determined.

‘Yeah. You?’

‘Yep.’ Darrin reached for his radio, his fingers fumbling as he keyed the mic. ‘This is Agent O’Connor. We have shots fired on Northbourne Avenue. Suspect down. Requesting immediate backup and medical assistance.’ The radio crackled to life. Darrin saw the lifeless body of Perry Haynes sprawled on the concrete. Blood oozing from the remains of his skull.

‘Copy that, Agent O’Connor. Backup units are en route. ETA is five minutes out.’

‘Five minutes? Bloody hell.’ Nicole peered around the edge of the car, her eyes scanning the nearby buildings. She stiffened.

‘Darrin, I’ve got eyes on the shooter. Top of the Commonwealth Building, northeast corner.’ Darrin followed her, catching a glimpse of a dark figure on the rooftop. As they watched, the figure disappeared from view.

‘Son of a bitch. We can’t let him get away,’ Darrin growled, checking his weapon. ‘I’m going after him.’ Nicole’s hand shot out, gripping his arm.

‘Are you insane? We should wait for backup.’

‘That shooter might have Intel we need. We can’t risk losing him. Cover me. I’m going for the main entrance.’ Before Nicole could protest further, Darrin disappeared. He darted across the road, his footsteps echoing in the empty street. Nicole raised her weapon, eyes darting between Darrin and the rooftop where she’d last seen the shooter.

‘Darrin, wait!’ she called out. But he approached the building’s entrance. ‘Stubborn bastard,’ she groaned to herself. Darrin sprinted, every nerve on high alert. The minute he stepped away from safety, he exposed himself to danger; he became a lone figure sprinting across open ground, like an antelope escaping the clutches of a praying lion. A sharp crack split the air. The bullet whizzed past his ear, missing him by inches. Darrin veered to the left, diving behind a large mailbox. His breath came in ragged gasps as he pressed himself against the cool metal, adrenaline coursing through his veins. Nicole watched the scene unfold with growing anxiety. She raised her gun, ready to provide cover fire if needed, but the shooter remained hidden. She watched Darrin huddled behind the mailbox, his chest heaving as he caught his breath. ‘Come on, Darrin,’ she muttered under her breath. ‘Don’t do anything stupid.’ But her murmurs of caution dwindled. Darrin closed his eyes for a moment, forcing himself to take several deep breaths. The sound of distant sirens reached his ears, backup approached, but still too far to be of immediate help. He knew he had to move soon, or risk losing the shooter. Darrin assessed his surroundings. He saw the entrance before him. If he could make it inside, he’d have a better chance of catching up to the assassin. His muscles tensed, the silk fabric of his maroon shirt creasing as he prepared to move. He took one final deep breath, then exploded into motion. He sprinted the final distance to the entrance, his footsteps echoing loudly in the empty street. As he reached the doors, he threw himself forward, crashing through into the relative safety of the foyer. Inside, startled faces turned towards him. A receptionist behind the front desk stood frozen, her eyes wide with fear at the sight of Darrin’s drawn weapon. Several other people in the lobby backed away, hands raised. Darrin held up his badge.

‘Federal Police. Everyone stay calm and remain where you are. There’s a dangerous suspect in the building. Backup will be here soon.’ Darrin made his way to the elevators. He jabbed the call button repeatedly, willing the doors to open faster. Each second that ticked by became another second the shooter had to escape. He gave up, and made for the stairs.

The whole time he quickened each step, he thought about how he planned to apprehend the shooter. He tried to figure out the identity of the shooter. As he neared the eighth floor, he shortened his step, taking two at once. One floor after another, he made it to the top. His training kicked in and he hugged the wall. At the same time, he withdrew his Glock 19 handgun. He stepped forward with caution. The roof access door sat ten feet in front of him. He had to be wary of his surroundings, as the shooter could be anywhere by now.

Outside, Nicole grew frustrated. She saw Darrin make it into the building, but now she became useless, unable to provide any meaningful support to her colleague.

She took a moment, then decided to take the risk. She darted from her cover and sprinted towards the building’s entrance. She burst through the doors, start-ling the frazzled occupants of the foyer.

‘Federal Police,’ she announced, flashing her AFP badge. ‘Which way did my partner go?’ A trembling receptionist pointed towards the elevators.

‘He, he went up. I think to the roof.’ Nicole nodded and headed for the stairs. She knew taking the elevator would be too risky, it would announce her arrival and trap her. The stairs would be slower, but safer. She knew Darrin would’ve done the same, given his physical abilities. As she began her climb, Nicole’s mind raced with panic. *What if Darrin had confronted the shooter? What if something happened?* She pushed the thoughts aside, focusing on the task at hand. *One floor at a time*, she told herself. *Keep moving. Darrin’s depending on me*. On the roof, Darrin emerged from the access door. The gravelled surface crunched under his feet as he scanned the area, gun at the ready. At first glance, the roof appeared empty, a forest of ventilation units and satellite dishes, but no sign of the shooter. Darrin moved forward, his senses on high alert. The wind whipped around him, carrying the faint sounds of chaos from the street below. He checked behind each potential hiding spot, his frustration growing with each empty space he encountered.

‘Where are you, you bastard?’ As if in answer, a shot rang out. The bullet grazed his arm, tearing through his sleeve. He dove for cover behind an air conditioning unit, hissing in pain as his injured arm hit the ground. ‘Federal Police!’ Darrin shouted. ‘Drop your weapon, come out with your hands up!’ Another shot fired, the bullet pinging off the metal mere inches from Darrin’s head. ‘Fuck!’ He returned fire, aiming in the direction the shots had come from. The sharp report of gunfire echoed across the rooftop as both men exchanged shots, neither able to get a clear advantage. Darrin’s mind raced as he reloaded his Glock. The shooter pinned him down, unable to move without exposing himself to the shooter’s line of fire. But he had to move. Sooner or later, one of them would get lucky, and Darrin had no intention of it being the assassin. Darrin prepared to make a move. He’d caught a glimpse of movement to his left during the firefight, if he could get to the stack of crates, he might have a better angle on the shooter. Darrin tensed, ready to sprint. But before he could move, he heard a sound that made his blood run cold, the metallic click of an empty chamber.

Darrin emptied his pistol, within seconds. Silence echoed in the immediate area. Darrin heard footsteps approaching, slow and deliberate. He glanced around for anything he could use as a weapon, but found nothing within reach.

The shooter appeared around the corner of the air conditioning unit, his own gun levelled at Darrin’s head. The man wore a black balaclava, but Darrin could see the cold determination in his eyes. ‘Stand up,’ the shooter ordered. Darrin got to his feet, his hands raised. He saw the opportunity to strike. He lunged forward, tackling the shooter around the waist. The gun went flying as both men crashed to the ground. They grappled each other, each fighting for dominance. Darrin managed to land a solid punch to the shooter’s ribs, but received a vicious elbow to the face in return. Darrin tasted blood in his mouth, and his vision swam from a blow to the head. But he fought on, knowing that to give up meant certain death. Darrin had met his match. The assassin gained the upper hand. With a powerful move, he flipped Darrin onto his back, straddling him and wrapping his hands around Darrin’s throat. He struggled, clawing at the man’s arms. Black spots danced around his vision as his lungs screamed for air.

‘Federal Police, put your hands in the air!’ Nicole stood in the doorway, her gun trained at the shooter. Exhaustion washed over her, but her aim didn’t waver. The shooter hesitated, hands gripping Darrin’s throat. ‘I said, hands up! Now!’ The shooter raised his hands. He stood, backing away from Darrin, who rolled onto his side, coughing and gasping for air. Nicole kept her gun trained on the shooter as she moved closer. ‘Take off your mask,’ she ordered. The man didn’t move, his eyes darting between Nicole and the roof access door. ‘Take the mask off now!’ Nicole held her finger over the trigger, her patience wearing thin. The shooter’s hands moved towards his face. But before he could remove the balaclava, a blur of movement caught Nicole’s attention. Too late, she realised her mistake; a second assailant, hidden until now, rushed at her from behind a ventilation unit. Nicole tried to turn, to bring her weapon to bear, but the new attacker got too close. A powerful shove sent Nicole sprawling to the ground, her gun skittering across the rooftop. She rolled, trying to regain her feet, but by the time she looked up, both suspects started running. The two men sprinted for the edge of the roof. Nicole’s heart leapt into her throat, as she watched in disbelief, the pair leapt off the building. She fell into a moment of terrifying freefall, then the sound of fabric snapping taut. Parachutes bloomed above the suspects, carrying them away from the scene. Nicole scrambled to her feet, rushing to the edge of the roof. She watched as the two figures drifted further away, becoming smaller and smaller. ‘Damn it!’ Nicole slammed her hand against the roof's parapet in frustration. A groan from behind her snapped Nicole back to the present. She turned to see Darrin struggling to sit up, one hand massaging his bruised throat. ‘Darrin!’ She rushed to his side, kneeling next to him. ‘How you doing?’

‘I’ve, I’ve been better. Did we get them?’

‘No. They got away. They both had parachutes. I didn’t see it coming.’ Darrin punched the air in anger.

‘Damn. We were so close.’ The sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs interrupted them. A few seconds later, a team of AFP officers donned in tactical gear, burst onto the roof, powerful assault weapons drawn.

‘Clear!’ one of them called out after a quick scan of the area. Nicole helped Darrin to his feet as their colleagues approached.

Large, screaming crowds had gathered outside, eagerly awaiting to see Jarrah Bradley. The atmosphere was electric as the students chattered with anticipation. For the last thirty minutes, Jarrah had been giving his speech in front of hundreds of young eyes, captivated by his words of wisdom. Jarrah approached the school, his dark eyes warm and approachable despite the burden of his heritage. He wore a dark blue blazer over a white shirt, neatly pressed khaki slacks; simple, but professional enough for the event. A sea of eager faces surrounded him, as he engaged with the excited children, his security detail of two bodyguards on his flank. A mob of reporters followed him, ignoring their spatial awareness, knocking past children to grab a snippet of information. But Jarrah simply ignored them. He was more focused on the kids, the ones who mattered. ‘Hey there, champ,’ Jarrah said, tousling the hair of a young boy. ‘You excited about today?’ The boy nodded, unable to contain his excitement. Jarrah signed the front of his school bag. The boy jumped with excite-ment and showed it off to his mates. Jarrah continued to make his way through the crowd, taking selfies and chatting with the teenagers. Five minutes on, he moved into the main building. Nerves kicked in as he prepared to deliver his speech. He’d never done public speaking before, but he hoped that with the crowd being a similar age, he would better cope with it. Jarrah stood backstage, hands clutched around the podium, knuckles whitening from his firm grip. His heart thumped against his ribcage, the anticipation of addressing the entire school assembly sending a surge of adrenaline coursing through his veins. He drew in a deep breath, exhaling, reciting the opening lines of his speech in a hushed whisper. A gentle tap on his shoulder jolted him from his trance.

‘Mr. Bradley, you’re on in five,’ murmured his assistant, offering an encouraging nod before retreating behind the curtain. This was it. The moment he had been both dreading and anticipating for weeks. From beyond the velvet curtain, he could hear the Principal’s amplified voice introducing him to the assembly.

‘—and without further ado, please welcome the son of our esteemed President, Jarrah Bradley.’ A thunderous roar of applause and cheers erupted from the audience, the sound echoing off the auditorium walls. Jarrah steeled his resolve and stepped forward, parting the curtains to reveal a sea of eager faces, their expressions alight with excitement. He raised a hand in greeting, a warm smile spreading across his features as he made his way to the centre of the stage. The cheers and whistles swelled. Jarrah reached the podium, and rested his hands on the smooth surface, allowing the noise to subside before leaning forward.

‘What’s going on, everyone!?’ Jarrah’s stomach churned the entire time. ‘It’s an honour to be here today, addressing the bright young minds of Canberra.’ He paused, drawing in a breath before delving into the heart of his speech. He saw a mob of photographers in the back row, snapping shots of him as he spoke. ‘I know you’re all expecting me to give a boring political speech, but I’ll try not to bore you too much.’ The audience chuckled at his light humour. ‘I want to talk to you about growing up in Alice Springs. My life wasn’t always easy. I faced challenges and struggles that many of you might not be able to imagine. But those hardships,’ he continued, ‘they shaped me. They forged within me a resilience and determination that have carried me through even the darkest of times. I want you all to know that, by being in the spotlight, being the son of Australia’s first President, it doesn’t change who I am at my core. I’m not a celebrity, I’m not a hero, nor am I a politician. I’m still that kid from Alice Springs, with dreams and aspirations like you.’ Thirty minutes passed. The speech concluded. Jarrah’s security detail, two imposing figures dressed in sharp suits, ushered him back towards the waiting car. The Holden Caprice WM idled nearby, ready to transport him back to Government House. Jarrah settled into the plush leather seat in the back of the car, and his mind filled with joy. His speech had gone well; conveying the importance of bridging the divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. His mother had always taught him the value of unity, and he was determined to carry on her legacy. The car pulled away from the school grounds, and Jarrah’s phone buzzed with an incoming call. He grabbed it from his pocket and saw his father’s name on the screen. ‘Hey, Dad,’ Jarrah answered.

‘Hi, son. How was the speech?’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I think it went well. The kids were excited. I think we’re getting the message across.’

‘That’s excellent to hear. Your mother will be thrilled when she hears about it. Speaking of which, she’s running a bit late, but she should be home soon.’

‘I can’t wait to see her again, Dad.’

‘You will soon, son. We’ll catch up when you get back. Love you.’

‘Love ya, Dad.’ He hung up. As Jarrah recalled the conversation in his mind, he jumped onto his social media feed on his iPhone. Supportive messages and positive comments filled his screen. The security guard in the front seat turned to face Jarrah.

‘We’ll be at Government House in less than five minutes, Mr. Bradley.’ Jarrah tilted his head, the familiar landmarks of Canberra passed by, and the anticipation of reuniting with his mother grew. A white van careened out of nowhere, smashing into the side of the Holden Caprice WM with brutal force. The car tumbled end over end, rolling several times before coming to a shuddering halt, its roof crushed. Inside the car, both bodyguards lay unconscious, bloodied, and battered. Jarrah, too, was in a daze, his world spinning.

As he regained consciousness, he realised he was on his head, suspended by his seatbelt. Pain coursed through his body, but he knew he had to act quickly. He fumbled to release himself from the seatbelt. Smoke billowed from the wreckage. With effort, Jarrah managed to free himself, his body protesting every movement.

He knew he had to get out of the car before it erupted into flames. He crawled through the shattered rear window, his limbs trembling as he crawled over the piercing, shattered glass. But before he could make sense of the pandemonium, masked men descended upon him, their faces concealed by dark balaclavas. His instincts kicked in, and he attempted to fight them off, but the crash had drained him of his strength. With ruthless efficiency, the men subdued him, over-powering his feeble resistance. They wrapped a black bag over his head, plunging him into darkness.

# NINE

ArthurWilliams stepped into the café. The relentless, sticky sweat built up around his neck. His eyes darted around the café as he scanned for potential threats. His weak, tinnitus riddled eardrums strained from the hustle and bustle of the patrons, and the clatter of plates and cutlery from the café staff. He’d checked out of the hotel; traffic’s gonna be crazy today, Arthur thought as he joined the queue. Donned in his uniform, he didn’t care that the other patrons in the café glared at him. As he approached the counter to order his coffee, he spotted a group of Indigenous people as they strolled along the street outside. They carried the new flag, a design which the nation agreed on; it featured the national colours, green and gold, with the southern cross star constellation in the centre. Arthur grew frustrated as he saw the kids with painted faces, the same colours as the flag, as well as the Indigenous colours, black, red, and yellow. He scowled and muttered something crude under his tongue, a surge of anger and resentment burned towards them. His hatred for Indigenous Australians burned deep inside him, fuelled by years of racism and prejudice he’d seen during his time on the force. He watched as the group walked past the café and wanted nothing more than to run out to them and arrest them. *Those black cunts don’t deserve to breathe the same air as I do!* But he remembered all the reasons he had convinced himself to do it. Arthur ordered his coffee, his hands trembling as he handed over the money. The staff member made an awkward smile at him, as she returned his change. ‘Happy Republic Day, sir,’ she said.

‘Huh, whatever, stupid woman.’ He snatched the money back with one swift motion. The woman gasped from his attitude, but brushed it off as he stormed out. He glared at the Indigenous people again, his hatred and anger returning. They laughed and chatted to each other, unaware of the danger that lurked nearby. As he walked out of the café, Williams inhaled, allowing the cool air into his chest, and steeled himself for what had to come. He knew what he had to do, and he had prepared to do it, no matter the consequences. Arthur returned to the safety of his car. Seeing those Indigenous people walk along the streets of the nation’s capital added fuel to his desire to carry out the most important assignment of his lifetime. ‘I’m gonna kill that fuckin’ Abo slut!’ He sculled the coffee, and his mind wandered back to the day he decided he hated the Indigenous people.

*Alice Springs, Northern Territory*

*11 October 2023*

Arthur Williams stood in front of the bathroom mirror, his blue eyes reflecting the seriousness of the day ahead. The uniform of the Northern Territory Police Force hung on a hook on the bathroom door, a symbol of his life’s dedication. He picked up the uniform, fingers brushing over the embroidered patches. Each thread told a story, a tale of service and duty. The shower’s cool spray cascaded over him, washing away the remnants of sleep and the heaviness of yesterday’s concerns. He measured his movements, habitual. He lathered his face with shaving cream, the razor gliding across his weathered skin, tracing a familiar path. As he dressed, sliding into the uniform, Arthur’s mind turned to the news he had glimpsed earlier. The TV in the living room had been tuned to the parliamentary proceed-ings. He’d seen the Prime Minister, a determined expression on his face, addressing his cabinet. The words ‘republic’ and ‘change’ echoed in his mind, mingling with the distant memories of a nation’s history. Arthur cradled a steaming cup of coffee in his hands. *Over my dead body*, he thought to himself. He checked his watch, its face scratched and worn. The time had crept away from him. He took a final sip of his coffee, the bitter taste lingering on his tongue, before setting the cup on the table with a sense of determination.

Arthur climbed into his Toyota Hilux Ute, the leather seats had been warmed by the sun. The engine rumbled to life, and he began the familiar drive from his home a few kilometres outside of town. The road stretched ahead, a ribbon of asphalt surrounded by the vast expanse of the Outback. The ancient land held its secrets buried deep beneath the red soil. He approached the intersection that would take him onto the main road to town. He saw a disturbance ahead. He spotted a child, lying motionless on the road; an Indigenous child, no older than seven or eight, with dusty feet and tangled hair. He brought the car to a halt, and his instincts kicked in. He climbed out, the oppressive heat hitting him like a solid brick wall. The child lay still, and Arthur drew nearer, his footsteps crunching on the gravel. ‘Hey there, mate,’ he called, bending beside the child. He extended his arm to shake the child’s shoulder. ‘Are you okay?’ The kid didn’t answer, and a shiver of unease crept through Arthur’s spine. ‘Wake up, kiddo.’ The child’s eyes snapped open, wide, and filled with fear. He scrambled to his feet, stumbling backward in a panic. Before Arthur could react, the child turned and bolted, his bare feet pounding the hot asphalt. ‘Wait!’ Arthur called out, but the child dis-appeared behind a large, weathered rock at the roadside. He stood, perplexed by the child’s sudden flight.

Something was amiss. As he turned back to his car, his senses on high alert, a group of older Indigenous kids emerged from the shadows. All of them were teenagers, their faces etched with a mixture of defiance and anger. The leader of the group, a lanky boy with a mop of thick, black hair, sneered at Arthur.

‘What ya think ya doin’, old man?’ Arthur’s hand instinctively went to his hip, where his baton rested. He took a step back, wary of the hostile atmosphere that had descended upon the scene.

‘I’m, I’m here to help.’ They laughed and teased. Arthur watched them as they circled him, taunting him.

‘Help? You ain’t helpin’ no one. This is our territory, and we don’t need no white fellas stickin’ their noses in.’ Before Arthur could react, the group closed in on him, their numbers overwhelming. The leader lunged forward, his hand snatching at the baton hanging from Arthur’s belt. With a swift motion, the baton now fell in the teenager’s grip, and he swung it with a savage force. He stumbled, as the baton struck him in the ankle. His vision blurred for a second. The mob descended upon him, their fists raised in the air, and before he knew it, he collapsed to the ground. He struggled to defend himself, but the odds stacked against him. The door to the hospital room opened. Arthur sat up in his bed, groaning as the crippling pain shot through his body. Arthur saw the familiar face of his supervisor standing in the doorway. ‘Williams, I’m glad to see you’re awake. How are you?’

‘Like I got hit by a truck. What happened out there? Did they catch the kids?’

‘Not yet. But we’re investigating the incident. I’m sorry this happened to you. It shouldn’t have come to this.’

‘I appreciate that. Those kids need to be brought to justice.’

‘I know. Listen, there’s something else we need to discuss. The Commissioner has decided to suspend you from duty.’

‘Suspend me? Why? I was the one attacked!’

‘It’s about the incident from six months ago, with the three Indigenous girls that were in your custody. The Commissioner believes this latest incident could cause significant PR issues, considering your past.’

‘Those girls were badgering me for weeks. I didn’t have a choice. You know that!’

‘I understand, Art, I do,’ the Sergeant replied, his tone sympathetic but firm. ‘But right now, there’s nothing I can do. You’ll be suspended with pay until further notice. Take this time to recover.’

‘I don’t need time off. I need to get back to work. It’s all I have.’

‘I’m, I’m sorry, Art. This is out of my hands.’ The sergeant stood, and leaned closer to Arthur. ‘Take care of yourself.’ With that, he turned and left the room, leaving Arthur alone with his thoughts. Arthur leaned back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling. He found himself back in his home in Alice Springs.

The familiar surroundings that once brought comfort now felt suffocating, a constant reminder of his forced inaction. He paced the living room, restless energy coursed through his veins with nowhere to go. The clock on the wall ticked away the hours, each second building like an eternity. He cradled a bottle of cold beer, a bottle of liquid sympathy, because no one else would give him that. He replayed the events that led him here, the altercation with those two young girls, the recent attack, it all swirled together in a maelstrom of in-justice. He collapsed onto the couch, running a hand through his greying hair. The TV droned on in the background, news reports blurring together until the buzzing of his mobile caught his attention. ‘H-hello?’

‘Mr. Williams, I hope this call finds you well.’

‘Who is this? What do you want?’

‘My name is not important right now. The less you know, the better. I’ve heard about your predicament. I’m calling to offer you an opportunity. A chance for redemption.’

‘Redemption? What are you talking about?’

‘Let’s just say I have a proposition that could make use of your skills and experience. An opportunity to serve your country in a different capacity.’

‘Sounds intriguing. I’m interested.’

‘Excellent. Your flight to Canberra leaves in three days. A car will pick you up on the morning of de-parture. Pack light and tell no one of your destination.’ Before Arthur could respond, the line went dead. He stared at the phone for a moment, then sprang into action. His luck may have been down, but it was about to change.

*Monday 24 November 2025*

*Republic Day*

*Perth, Western Australia*

The day had only just begun in Russell Square in Perth’s cosmopolitan Northbridge district. The square was packed with a sizable crowd. Men, women, and families, many waving flags adorned with the Union Jack or brandishing placards that read *No Republic* and *Yes Monarch*. The air buzzed with a vibrant energy, a sea of faces charged by shared conviction. At the centre of it all stood Gary Sullivan, the Premier of Western Australia. Perth was his hometown, and she believed in the British Monarch. Draped in a neat blazer of deep royal blue, and a red tie, he clutched a microphone, expression resolute. Just behind him, an impromptu stage had been erected, flanked by speakers blaring a short orchestral anthem. Police officers lingered at the perimeter of the square, watchful but maintaining a respectful distance. Sullivan stepped forward to a volley of cheers and applause. He lifted his hand in greeting, then allowed the crowd’s noise to subside before speaking. ‘My fellow Australians,’ he began, his voice echoing across the bustling plaza, ‘thank you for gathering here today.’ The crowd quieted enough that the rustle of crisp posters and the distant hum of Perth’s traffic became audible. Sullivan cast a determined gaze over the throng, his posture erect, chin held high. ‘We stand at a crossroads in our nation’s history,’ he declared, voice steady but tinged with passion. ‘I know that many Australians are heralding this change as the dawn of a new era. But I ask you, will this so-called ‘new era’ bring us closer together, or split our beloved country in two?’ A murmur of agreement rippled among the attendees, signs bobbing up and down. Some carried the Royal Ensign, while others gripped placards depicting the Crown. In the audience, supporters ranged from middle-aged families to elderly monarchists wearing medals from their service or that of their ancestors. Gary took a measured breath and pressed on. ‘Look around you. Our Commonwealth roots have shaped who we are: a diverse people with a shared history. The monarchy isn’t just a figurehead. It’s been a unifying symbol for centuries. And now, this rush toward a republic threatens to undo our unity. The government claims it will empower us, but I say it will only fan the flames of division.’ Scattered clapping broke out, punctuated by a few shouts of: *Hear, hear!’* Sensing momentum, Sullivan’s voice grew bolder.

‘I respect the Prime Minister and his supporters, truly, I do. But I urge you all to consider: do we throw away our heritage so quickly? Do we risk upheaval? My answer is simple: *No.* We must stand with our traditions. We must keep the bond we have cherished under the Crown, so our children inherit the same stability and identity we have known.’ Another wave of applause and cheers crested over the square. The huddle of media cameras rolled, capturing every angle of Sullivan. Several journalists whispered hurried notes, glancing at the gathering’s size with raised eyebrows. The crowd was no small fringe group, this was a formidable showing. Sweat beaded along Sullivan’s brow in the Perth heat, though the mild breeze offered some relief. He pressed the microphone closer, continuing, ‘This is not about shutting down debate. We are Australians, after all, and debate is in our blood. But we must not forget that unity is fragile. What the monarchy represents, continuity, tradition, that in-tangible thread to our history, shall we cut that thread so hastily?’ Nearby, a group of teenagers hoisted a large sign reading: *Keep Calm and Crown On*. The slogan brought a grin to Sullivan’s lips, a flash of gratitude that the younger generation could still be swayed. He ended with a note of resolute conviction:

‘I call on each of you to stand firm. Write to your MPs, speak out, show the rest of Australia that not everyone is willing to sacrifice our past for an uncertain future. Let them see that *we* are the voice of reason. God bless you all, and God Save the King!’ Thunderous applause erupted, echoing across Russell Square and spilling into surrounding streets. The rally’s energy surged, signs lifted high in defiance of the republic movement. A brass band started up near the edge of the crowd, playing a brisk, patriotic tune reminiscent of a Commonwealth celebration. Gary Sullivan stepped back from the mic, handing it off to a local councillor who was next to speak. As he descended the temporary stairs, adrenaline pulsed through his veins. He scanned the rows of supporters, many wearing T-shirts decorated with regal imagery. *Maybe*, he thought, *just maybe, there’s a chance to turn the tide.* With that thought, Sullivan slipped through the throng of admirers and cameras, forging ahead to greet backers one-on-one, fully aware that a political fight of historic magnitude was only just beginning.

# TEN

*Canberra,*

*Australian Capital*

Policeofficers had secured the entire office building of the Royal Vanguard. Staff and other personnel had been told to evacuate. They stood to the side, watching forensic officers and detectives investigated the murder scene. Darrin and Nicole whispered to each other, trying to calm themselves and process such a brutal attack. Not to mention the fact that he almost died. ‘Are you sure you’re okay, Darrin?’ asked Nicole, as they leaned against the side of their car.

‘I will be, mate. I’m just in shock by what happened,’ said Darrin.

‘Me too. I, I should’ve seen it coming.’

‘There was no way of knowing,’ he said. They shared a quiet moment, but it dwindled when Darrin’s phone rang. ‘O’Connor.’ He kept an eye on Nicole as she recovered from the incident.

‘It’s Paul. What’s happening over there?’

‘Perry Haynes is dead. He was shot.’

‘Bloody oath. Are you and Nicole okay?’

‘Yeah, we’re fine. Backup is here now, we’re securing the area and checking for CCTV cameras from the adjacent buildings.’

‘I attempted to secure the shooter, but he managed to get away with the help of an assailant. They had parachutes.’

‘Which means the shooter must’ve had inside help. Did you get anything from Haynes before he was killed?’

‘Yeah, we did get a name. He mentioned someone called Arthur Williams. He may be connected to this.’

‘You think Haynes may’ve hired Williams to kill the President?’

‘Yeah, we have to find out who this guy is. Listen, you were right about there being a mole inside the agency. Whoever is behind this must have warned them about our meeting with Haynes.’

‘I agree. Only a select few knew about us going to speak with Haynes. Finish up with the particulars, then head back to HQ.’

‘Copy that.’ Darrin hung up and turned to Nicole.

‘What’s happening?’

‘The Boss wants us back at HQ. You okay?’ She nodded, unable to find the right words. They climbed into the car. As they drove away, Nicole knew some-thing bothered Darrin. He’d been tense the whole time since the briefing.

‘What’s on your mind, Darrin?’

‘Nothing. I’m pissed that Perry was killed.’

‘It’s more than that. Something’s bothering you, what’s up?’

‘Fine, but Paul demanded this information be kept confidential.’

‘Sure. What’s up?’

‘Paul warned me there’s someone inside the agency working against us.’

‘You mean, a mole?’

‘Yes. He said someone inside the agency is leaking classified intelligence. I think the mole had Perry killed because he knew about the shooter.’ The thought of one of their own working against them sickened her to the core.

‘Shit. Do you have any leads?’

‘Not yet, but the Boss said it’s someone within our unit. This has to stay between us. Can I trust you?’

‘Wait, you think I’m the mole?’

‘Of course not, but we have to be careful who we trust.’ They fell into a lull, as Nicole struggled to realise they had a mole. ‘Let’s get back to the office and act normal.’ The light changed and Darrin continued driving.

Nicole looked out the window, in shock by what she’d learned. She didn’t know what hurt more; the fact that there’s a mole working against them, or the fact that Darrin knew about it and didn’t tell her, and he suspected her of being a traitor.

Prime Minister Stephen Archer sat at his desk, admiring the large portrait of the late Queen Elizabeth II. He was lost in thought as he attempted to finish his speech for the upcoming ceremony. As he attempted to write, Alyssa Crawford stepped in. ‘Sir, the AFP Commissioner to see you. Says it’s urgent,’ she said. Stephen gave her a wave. Following her was a towering figure, Shaun Buckley, the AFP Commissioner, a man of un-questionable grit and integrity.

‘Prime Minister, we have a situation,’ said the Commissioner.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Stephen.

‘Jarrah Bradley, the President’s son, has been kidnapped.’

‘Kidnapped? How?’

‘Details are sketchy, Prime Minister. ACT Police is securing the crash site, but his whereabouts is un-known,’ said Shaun.

‘And what are we doing to find him?’ he asked, lowering his spectacles.

‘My agency is coordinating with ACT Police, and we’re conducting an extensive search. However, witness accounts suggest the possibility of a vehicle switch,’ Shaun said.

‘Has the President been informed?’

‘No, sir. We thought it would be better if it came from you.’

‘Very well. I’ll tell her.’ With that, he pushed back his chair and stood. He grabbed his blazer and headed towards the door.

Paul hated knowing a mole existed inside the AFP. It shook him to the core; he tried to imagine who it could be, but each time he came up with an answer, he shuddered with fear. He knocked on the glass door at the top of a flight of stairs. He stepped in and saw Anna Mackenzie. ‘Ah, Paul. Thank you for coming.’

‘Superintendent. You wanted to see me?’

‘Yes, Paul. The Commander wants an update on the investigation. We have less than two hours before the President goes on stage. What’s your progress?’

‘I spoke with O’Connor. Haynes was shot by an unknown sniper,’ said Paul.

‘You’re kidding me? Haynes was our only lead.’

‘I know, but it’s clear: we have a mole.’

‘Did your team get anything from Haynes before he was killed?’ Paul watched her as she carried on with her paperwork.

‘When I spoke with O’Connor, he said Haynes revealed a name at the last minute. Someone by the name of Arthur Williams.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘Me either, but I’ve got my analysts working on it now. We should have something in the next few minutes.’

‘What about the mole?’

‘That we’re still working on. If there is someone working against us, they will slip up.’

‘Moving on, I’ve been informed the President is going ahead with her speech at Commonwealth Park. We need to find out who’s behind this assassination attempt.’

‘And we will. It’s taking longer than we originally thought.’

‘That’s not good enough!’ The room fell quiet. Anna continued. ‘I’m sorry, that didn’t come out right. You and your team are doing a great job, Paul.’

‘Thank you, I appreciate that.’ Anna nodded.

‘I can assure you my team is doing everything possible to resolve this.’ Paul stood.

‘Paul, one more thing.’ He turned, his face skewed with confusion. ‘It’s regarding O’Connor’s behaviour at Haynes’ office.’

‘Yes, I did read that report. O’Connor threatened Haynes.’

‘He threatened him with a gun, Paul. He threatened to throw him out the window of his head-quarters.’

‘I’m sure there was a logical explanation for it.’

‘Yes, there is: O’Connor is a loose cannon. I can’t afford to have weakness on this task force, Paul.’

‘O’Connor is grieving, Anna. He lost his wife. It takes time.’

‘In case you didn’t realise, Paul, we don’t have the luxury of time. My superiors have warned me that if the President dies, we will all be out of a job.’ Paul paused. ‘If O’Connor doesn’t keep himself in check, he will be dismissed.’

‘I don’t think there’s any need for that. I’ll have a chat with him.’ Paul stood and buttoned his blazer.

‘See that you do, Inspector. O’Connor is treading on thin ice.’

‘I understand. Thank you, Superintendent.’ Paul turned and made his way out the door. As he made his way back to his office, his phone buzzed. It was a message from Agent Meyers. Darrin and Nicole had just cleared security.

Darrin parked the BMW X5. He sat saying nothing. A sense of dread filled his body as he listened to the radio in the car. The velocity of the bullet hit Darrin as it struck Perry Haynes in the head. She had specks of Haynes’ blood on her neck. ‘Hey, are you okay?’ asked Darrin. Nicole took a moment to collect herself.

‘Yeah. I can’t get over what happened.’

‘I know. We got lucky, but hopefully we find who did it.’ They fell silent for a moment.

‘We’d better get inside.’ The two carried them-selves into the building; their minds whirring from the shooting at Haynes’ office. Darrin and Nicole made their way to CTC, and headed to Paul’s office. They saw him, and stepped in.

‘Welcome back, you two. How are you?’

‘Like we cheated death.’

‘Haynes took a bullet by a sniper. He didn’t make it.’

‘Damn. Haynes had information about the threat.’

‘What about the shooter?’ asked Darrin.

‘I’ve been told our CID and forensics is looking into CCTV from the buildings opposite Royal Van-guard’s headquarters. Hopefully their techs can find out who the shooter is. They may be connected to the threat.’

‘Did you get anything from the name Arthur Williams?’

‘Yes. Nate has something for us. He’s in the briefing room.’ Paul stood and led them to the briefing room. They sat opposite Nate, as he manned a laptop. ‘What’ve you got for us, Nate?’

‘My team found out that Arthur Williams is sixty-five-years old. He’s from Alice Springs, Northern Territory.’ An image of Arthur appeared on the screen. ‘He was a senior constable with the Northern Territory Police Force, and served with them for the last twenty years before being dismissed.’

‘Why did they dismiss him?’

‘This is where it gets interesting. According to reports, Arthur Williams took part in a series of assaults against Indigenous Australians, all females, while work-ing in Alice Springs.’

‘Police arrested Williams, and he was charged for assaulting two girls in their teens,’ said Felicity.

‘Sounds like a piece of trash.’

‘Did he go to prison for it?’

‘No. There was no conclusive evidence that Williams assaulted the girls. He did, however, get put on unscheduled retirement, and is receiving a reduced pension.’

‘He got a slap on the wrist?’

‘It looks that way, yes.’ Felicity Meyers stepped forward.

‘We found out something else.’ Felicity clicked a button. ‘Williams lost his sister, Michelle. She died from breast cancer twelve months ago.’

‘Shit. Which means he’s on a revenge, power trip?’ Nate nodded.

‘Where is he now?’

‘He’s been living at his home address in Alice Springs, but he arrived in Canberra last night. CCTV at Canberra Airport caught him leaving the terminal at roughly eleven o’clock. Plus, a buddy of mine who works for airport security spotted Williams. He follows popular criminal trials.’

‘You think he’s the shooter?’

‘He’s got the motive. He’s the ideal candidate for the job.’ Paul nodded.

‘Moving forward, I’ll be alerting the President’s Head of Security about Arthur Williams. He may be on his way to Commonwealth Park,’ said Paul. ‘In the meantime, I want the rest of you to continue working on Haynes and his connection with Williams. Let’s go.’ The others stood and went to carry out their tasks. Paul watched as his subordinates packed up their gear and headed out. ‘Hey, Darrin. You got a minute?’

‘Sure, what’s up Boss?’

‘I wanted to ask how the investigation was going. Any leads on the mole?’ Darrin let out a sigh.

‘I’ve been trying to do as much as I can while not causing too much distraction, or to draw attention to myself.’ Paul nodded. ‘There’s one more thing: Bailey knows about the existence of a mole.’

‘How’d that happen?’

‘She ambushed me. When we left Haynes’ office, she knew something was wrong. She practically dragged it out of me, you know what she’s like.’

‘I do. But do you think it was the right call involving her?’

‘I think we have to give her the benefit of the doubt. Bailey doesn’t strike me as a traitor. Besides, she was more pissed that I kept it from her.’ Paul let out a sigh.

‘Well, let’s hope that’s all she’s keeping from us. Any other promising leads?’

‘Right now it’s hard to be sure. I’ve got my suspicions, but I need more time to justify them.’

‘We don’t have much time, Darrin. The President will be going on stage in less than fifteen minutes.’

‘I know, but we can’t afford to rush this. Trust me, Boss. I know it’s the right thing to do.’

‘Okay, I trust you. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.’ Darrin nodded. He stood and turned to leave.

# ELEVEN

Jarrah’slife spiralled into a haze of confusion. In his confusion, he recalled the crash, the masked faces, and their cold eyes, and the blackened interior of the van swallowed him like a ravenous beast. A tremor of fear played on his lips, his hazel eyes clouded with terror. He remembered the adrenaline-fuelled ride across Canberra. He had arrived at an unknown location; an old house nestled within the desolate terrain of a remote bushland area The kidnappers had ushered him into the empty house. It was a relic from another time, tattered wallpaper peeling off in large chunks, windows boarded up, the musty air hinting at years of neglect. An obsolete flag hung like a ghost against the room’s grimy walls. The man drew closer, and the icy grip of the gun he wielded made Jarrah’s blood run cold. He moved close enough for Jarrah to sense his hot breath, and the cold fingers clenching into his hair were vice-like and ruthless. ‘Hey pretty boy, scared yet?’

‘What, what do you want?’ The leader chuckled.

‘Oh, we don’t want anything from you, mate.’ The room buzzed with activity as the other kidnappers wheeled in a rudimentary setup; a tripod-mounted camera that carried a hint of a grim spectacle. ‘Only your mother can give us what we want,’ he sneered. A cold rush of horror washed over Jarrah. His mother, the new President of Australia. What did they want from her? His train of thought was broken by a metallic click, the unmistakable sound of a phone being un-locked. The leader held Jarrah’s phone with a gloating satisfaction, his gloved thumb scrolling with an eerie precision.

‘Now, let’s call mother dearest,’ the leader drawled, his tone drenched in sadistic pleasure. Jarrah swallowed hard.

*Government House,*

*Canberra*

‘You know, no matter what you do, you’ll always look beautiful,’ said John, as he watched Merin adjust the Aboriginal print shirt. Merin blushed. He always knew the right words to say to win her over.

‘Thanks, Johno. You’re looking sharp yourself,’ she said. There was a pause in the conversation, as Merin attempted to fix her makeup. Merin looked up as a knock at the door disrupted the silence. ‘Come in.’ Joe stepped in, carrying an iPad. ‘What’s happening, brother?’

‘I wanted to let you know, the photographers are waiting downstairs. They want to take some photos before you leave for Commonwealth Park,’ he said.

‘Of course. I’ll be ready to go shortly.’ Joe stood alongside John, as Merin continued her routine. ‘Has there been any news about the security threat?’

‘I haven’t heard anything. Ms. Crawford said she’d message if there was any change.’ There was another knock at the door. Joe turned and went to open it. To his surprise, Alyssa Crawford stood there, a mundane expression on her face. ‘Ms. Crawford?’

‘Mr. Pittman, the Prime Minister is here. He would like to speak with the President,’ she said.

‘Ms. Crawford, sorry, I wasn’t expecting you.’

‘The PM insisted. He needs to see the President.’ Alyssa stepped aside. Stephen Archer entered the room, his mind focused and charged. The sight of the Prime Minister caused a stir. Most surprised of all was Merindah Bradley.

‘Prime Minister, what brings you by?’ Stephen stood ten feet from the President’s desk.

‘Madam President, I apologise for the abrupt visit, but something’s happened.’ His head bowed and his tone saddened. ‘I’ve had some troubling news. The AFP has informed me that less than half an hour ago, your son was abducted.’ Merin’s world crumbled. Her face drained of colour, her body sagging from the thought of her baby in peril. John caught her before she collapsed.

‘But, how?’

‘We don’t know. The AFP is on it, and I’ve been assured they’re doing everything they can to find Jarrah.’

‘They, they have my Jarrah.’

‘Madam President, I understand this is a difficult time, but the AFP suspects the kidnappers are still here in Canberra.’ A call from Jarrah’s number. Merin snatched the phone, her hands trembling, and answered.

‘J-Jarrah?’

‘You wish. It’s not Jarrah, but I’m the man who has a gun to your son’s head.’

‘What, what do you want with my son?’

‘We’ll get to that, but first you need to get access to a laptop. I’m sure one of your aides has one.’ Joe went to grab the laptop from his bag and placed it on Merin’s desk.

‘Yes, I have one. What now?’

‘I’m sending you a link. Click on that link and you will see your precious son.’ The link came through on her phone and she gave it to Joe. He typed in the link on his laptop. A window appeared on the screen. Merin gasped, almost dropping the phone as she saw Jarrah tied to a chair in a darkened room. She saw the old flag behind him. Jarrah struggled in the chair, but his wrists were tied, and his mouth taped over. Two of the kidnappers stood either side of him, their guns trained at him.

‘Do you see your son, Madam President?’

‘Y-yes, what do you want?’

‘This country made the wrong choice by becoming a republic. We want you to resign as President of Australia, and publicly announce the disbandment of the Republic of Australia.’

‘You know I won’t be able to do that. This country is a republic,’ said Merin.

‘Really?’ Merin watched the kidnapper. She saw him walk over to Jarrah, grabbing his hair. What she saw no mother should ever have to see. Jarrah screamed in agonising pain as the kidnapper cut through the bone of his finger. Blood oozed everywhere. The kid-napper looked back at the camera, and he held up Jarrah’s finger, dripping blood.

‘This is what happens if you do not comply with our demands,’ he said. ‘Resign the presidency. Dismantle this sham of a Republic. Be warned, I will not hesitate to execute your son.’

The call ended with a click.

The live-stream disconnected, leaving them with the haunting image of Jarrah’s terrified face. The room pulsed with a horrific reality. Merindah was caught in a maelstrom of terror and disbelief, one that no mother should endure. Stephen’s face mirrored a similar worry, albeit masked behind a political facade. John struggled to hold it together, his eyes far away, lost in a nightmare that became too real. Joe stood nearby, his jaw clenched and muscles taut. His life had been dedicated to protecting the President and her family, and now he was facing his worst failure.

‘Merindah, I understand you’re in a difficult place right now, but we cannot give in to these people.’ Merin’s eyes locked onto Stephen, ready to pounce at him like a leopard. ‘You cannot resign as President, it will be giving in to terrorism.’

‘They have my fucking son, Stephen!’ Her eyes boggled with anger, clenching her fists as she screamed. She didn’t care about cursing in front of the Prime Minister. ‘I can’t let them kill my son, my boy.’ Merin’s lips trembled at the thought of losing him. ‘I need some time alone.’ She calmed herself down, taking slow, steady breaths. She moved to the window, and John stepped over to her to comfort her. He placed a re-assuring hand on her back, gently rubbing the back of her neck. Joe ushered the Prime Minister and his staff out. Stephen turned at the last second.

‘Talk some sense into her, Mr. Pittman. We can’t give in to these demands.’

‘The President understands the situation, Prime Minister.’ Joe closed the door and Stephen marched off.

*Perth, Western Australia*

Gary Sullivan, Premier of Western Australia, shielded his eyes from the harsh November sun as he waved to the lively crowd. Sweat trickled down his neck, but the heat was something he’d grown up with; it felt like home. The applause from the monarchist rally lingered in his ears, and although he offered the crowd a bright smile, his mind churned with unspoken doubts. He slipped into the back seat of a white Holden Caprice, letting out a breath as the air conditioning swept over his. Keith Wilson, his chief-of-staff, settled next to him. The car’s engine roared, and they pulled away from the makeshift stage where Gary had just delivered a rousing speech championing WA’s right to choose its own destiny, separate from the new republic if necessary. Keith gave him a quick nod of approval. ‘You did well, Premier.’ Gary managed a small smile, removing his blazer and folding it over his lap.

‘Thanks. I just hope we got our message across.’

‘A lot of folks here are still loyal to the Monarch,’ Keith said. ‘You reminded them why we stand for self-governance: a Western Australia that can choose its own path.’ He glanced out the tinted window at the rolling suburban streets of Perth. *Republic Day*, ironically, had galvanised those who opposed the newly minted head of state.

‘Yes, but it’s Republic Day everywhere else,’ he murmured, voice carrying a certain edge of concern. ‘I feel like we’re the last bastion of defiance, and that might alienate half the country.’ Keith shrugged.

‘We have strong support. You promised voters they’d have a choice about WA’s future if the republic came to pass.’ Gary’s gaze drifted from Keith to the passing scenery. He remembered the vow he’d made to consider secession if Canberra forced a republic onto the states. *Was that political bravado, or something I genuinely believed?* The question pressed on him, and an old memory floated to the surface.

*11 March 2023*

Gary Sullivan was Leader of the Opposition in the WA Parliament. His office, bright with midday sunshine, bristled with piles of paperwork: white papers on local resource management, policy drafts on education, and budget notes. He had been scribbling a final note when a knock sounded. ‘Sir, your two o’clock appointment is here,’ said Claire, his assistant. Gary checked her watch, then stood, smoothing down his shirt.

‘Thank you, Claire. Send him in.’ Moments later, a man entered. He was tall, polished, blazer pressed to perfection.

‘Mr. Sullivan,’ said Perry. Gary gestured for him to sit.

‘A pleasure, Mr. Haynes,’ he replied.

‘I prefer Sir Haynes,’ he insisted, as though used to commanding respect. Gary blinked.

‘Oh, my apologies.’ A quiet tension settled in the office. He recalled vaguely that Perry Haynes headed some kind of powerful organisation, Royal Vanguard, known for championing monarchist ideals and anti-republic sentiments.

‘Thank you for seeing me on short notice,’ Haynes continued, settling into a chair. Gary clasped his hands on the desk.

‘Of course. You mentioned a proposal in your email?’

‘Yes. I’m eager to hear your thoughts. It’s all in this folder.’ He slid a file toward her. She opened it, scanning lines of text that spoke of forming a separate state, even a separate nation, should Australia move toward a republic. He couldn’t help a disbelieving scoff.

‘These ideas are quite bold,’ he said. ‘You’re essentially advocating Western Australia secede, adopting a system of government akin to what New Zealand has, correct?’ Haynes spread his palms.

‘Precisely. This talk of a republic is madness. And you must know half the country, South Australia included, isn’t sold on cutting ties with the Crown.’ Gary frowned, flipping through the pages.

‘I’m not convinced secession is the answer. There must be other ways for WA to maintain a voice if Canberra changes the constitution.’ Sir Haynes leaned forward, eyes glinting with conviction.

‘Imagine, Mr. Sullivan, that WA becomes its own sovereign nation. We’d keep our resources, manage our profits, avoid sending them east to fund the rest of the country. No more kowtowing to Canberra or a President in the capital.’ The notion swirled in Gary’s mind: a referendum on statehood, a radical break from the Federation.

‘But the current Premier would never approve something so drastic,’ he pointed out.

‘Which is why I approached you first. Your party has a solid chance in the next state election. If you win, you’d have the authority to introduce this referendum, and potentially become Prime Minister of an independent Western Australia.’ A hush settled. Gary felt a thrill at the prospect, tempered by caution. *Was she ready to gamble her political career on a secession push?* The polling on the republic was tight, but surging monarchist sentiment in WA gave his words weight.

‘I’ll think about it, Sir Haynes,’ he said. ‘But let’s be clear: this is a significant leap.’ Perry stood, button-ing his blazer with an air of finality.

‘I understand. The national referendum on the republic is in eight months. I’d like to know your stance by then. Good day, Mr. Sullivan.’ He watched Perry leave, uneasy excitement mingling with doubt. Turning to the window, the sun cast a stark glare on the skyline of Perth. *Could Western Australia truly go it alone?* he wondered, feeling the first stirrings of ambition that would define his political future.

Gary Sullivan let the memory fade as the car sped down the highway. He refocused on Keith Wilson, who was glancing at his phone, presumably checking updates on the day’s speech. A pang of reflection settled in his chest: Sir Haynes had planted the seed of secession, and he’d nurtured it when the republic referendum passed. Now, as Premier, he stood on the brink of delivering that promise to her voters. He sighed, adjusting his blood red tie. ‘It’s almost surreal, Keith. I gave that speech, stirred up the crowd with talk of preserving the Monarchy, and yet I keep asking myself if this is truly right for WA.’

‘You did promise them a voice. They trust you to stand up for them if the republic fails to serve their interests.’ Gary peered out the window at the Perth skyline, dwarfed by endless blue sky.

‘Yes, I just hope we don’t plunge the state into chaos.’ The tension of her vow to consider in-dependence weighed on him. He wondered how history would judge him: *As the man who defended WA’s sovereignty, or the one who divided Australia further?* He closed his eyes briefly, thoughts drifting to the conversation with Sir Haynes. His ambition to protect Western Australia from an overreaching central govern-ment had evolved into a full-blown secession push. *No turning back now*, she thought, heart pound-ing with both excitement and dread.

‘We’ll be at Parliament House in a couple of minutes. The media’s waiting for a follow-up comment.’ Gary nodded, settling into a more composed stance. ‘Let’s show them Western Australia’s not backing down.’ With renewed resolve, he pressed his hand to the warm glass, feeling the city’s heartbeat. *This is home*, he reminded himself, *and I’ll do what it takes to protect it—even if that means forging a separate path from the rest of the nation.*

# TWELVE

*Canberra,*

*Australian Capital*

ArthurWilliams sat in his car, hands gripping the steering wheel with a controlled anger. He sat parked on the side of the road, waiting. The radio hummed in the background, a monotonous droning that Arthur half-listened to. A historic moment the reporter declared. The first speech of our new president, a mile-stone for Australia. Arthur’s jaw clenched. The words: *historic* and *milestone* felt like bile rising in his throat. He despised what Australia had become. The transition to a republic had been bad enough, but having an Indigenous Australian as president? *Unacceptable*. The thought alone ignited a cold fury within him. He reached for the dial and turned up the volume, needing to hear the enemy’s propaganda. ‘This speech will be televised nationwide,’ the reporter continued. ‘In every home, pub, restaurant, and business, ensuring everyone can listen to the new president.’ *Perfect*, Arthur thought. *The more people who see her death, the better*. The radio broadcast became an unwelcome reminder of every-thing he loathed about the current state of the nation. The planned speech, the media’s uncritical coverage, the public’s blind acceptance. It all made him sick. He glanced at the digital clock on the dash-board. The time drew near. Arthur’s mind raced through the details of his mission, each step planned, each action timed. He had no room for error. Outside, the world came to life. A jogger passed by, oblivious to the man sitting in the car, lost in thoughts of defiance and purpose. Arthur’s eyes followed the jogger for a short while before returning to the park’s entrance. He imagined the crowd gathering, the security tightening, and the atmosphere buzzing with anticipation for the president’s speech. Arthur’s fingers tapped on the steering wheel, a subconscious habit when he day-dreamed. He focused on the beat, using it to steady his mind. The reporter on the radio shifted to another topic, but Arthur’s mind remained elsewhere. He reached over to the passenger seat and picked up a worn leather folder. Inside he spotted detailed maps, photo-graphs, and notes. He flipped through them, double-checking every detail. His eyes lingered on a photo of the president, a symbol of everything he opposed. He returned the folder to its place. A soft chime from his phone pulled him from his thoughts. A message from his employer, confirming the job. Arthur nodded to himself, satisfaction mingling with his cold de-termination. He turned off the radio, the sudden silence amplifying the sound of his own breathing.

The official car glided along the tree-lined avenue. Prime Minister Stephen Archer sank into the plush leather seat, gaze drifting out the window at the well-tended lawns and neat gardens that whizzed by. His mind kept returning to the conversation he’d just had with President Merindah Bradley. *Her son, Jarrah, kidnapped by monarchists.* *No mother should endure such torment*, he thought, frustration gnawing at him. Next to him sat Alyssa Crawford, his chief-of-staff. She’d been on the phone since they left Government House, juggling multiple updates. Stray snippets of her voice punctuated the otherwise hushed car interior. At last, she ended the call, slipping her phone into her blazer pocket. ‘All right. Thank you, I’ll let him know,’ she murmured into the receiver before cutting the line. She exhaled, then glanced at Stephen with cautious optimism.

‘Tell me that was good news?’ Stephen asked, forcing his voice to remain steady despite the swirl of anxiety churning in his chest.

‘Kind of,’ Alyssa replied, adjusting a stack of briefing papers on her lap.

‘That was the Commissioner. He’s on his way to The Lodge now with an update on the investigation.’ Stephen’s heart picked up a beat.

‘Did he say what about?’ Alyssa smoothed a crease in her skirt.

‘From what I gather, they’ve got a lead on a possible location where the kidnappers are holding Jarrah.’ A flicker of relief mingled with tension in Stephen’s stomach.

‘That’s promising. Where is this location?’

‘The Commissioner has the details,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘He didn’t want to risk relaying specifics over the phone.’ Stephen nodded, a muscle jumping in his jaw as he turned his gaze back to the window.

‘Very well,’ he sighed. ‘Let’s hope we find him in time.’ Outside, the orderly streets of Canberra seemed almost too calm, a world away from the crisis overshadowing the government. *If I can’t help rescue her son, the President will be devastated.* The thought remained unfinished, heavy in the silent car. Alyssa busied herself with her notes, checking her phone for fresh updates. Stephen leaned against the seat, eyes momentarily closed, but rest eluded him. Instead, he envisioned Jarrah, a young man with a promising future, caught in a clash of ideologies that turned violent. The car slowed, turning past a security check-point and rolling onto the grounds of The Lodge. Uniformed personnel stood ready at the gates. Stephen felt the weight of the next few hours pressing on him, arranging a rescue, calming a distressed president, preserving national stability. As the vehicle came to a stop, he let out a long breath. ‘All right. Let’s get this done,’ he murmured, pushing the door open. Alyssa followed, gathering her papers.

‘John, please talk to me,’ said Merin, as she used the last bit of energy to stand. ‘Please, I don’t like seeing you angry.’

‘I don’t know what to think, Merin. This is our son we’re talking about.’

‘I know that, but I can’t resign. It would undo everything we’ve worked for. Australia has just become a republic. Imagine if I went out there and told the people it’s being disbanded, it would cause chaos.’

‘Imagine if you didn’t, these madmen will murder our son.’

‘If I give in to these people, it will tell the world Australia caves to extortion.’

‘It would also tell the world you’re a bad mother.’ John’s hurtful words stabbed Merin in the chest like a knife. ‘I’m, I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean that.’ She turned at the knock on the door. Joe stepped in.

‘Merindah, I’ve been on the phone with Ms. Crawford. She said the AFP is getting closer at finding Jarrah.’

‘That’s wonderful, Joe. How much longer?’

‘Their cyber team is having trouble locking onto the server used by the kidnappers. But they’ve got a starting point. They know it’s somewhere in Canberra.’

‘Well, that tells us a lot doesn’t it?’ Merin retorted with heavy sarcasm. ‘Sorry, Joe. I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘It’s okay, John. I get it. The AFP is doing every-thing they can to get him back.’

‘How much time do we have until the speech?’ Joe checked his watch.

‘It’s coming up to quarter to twelve. The Prime Minister is getting ready to leave for Commonwealth Park. I think we should do the same.’ Merin nodded. Joe sensed the tension in the room. ‘I’ll be out in the hall.’ She watched Joe as he left. Merin paused for a moment, then she grabbed her kangaroo skin cloak that lay on the bed. John’s hand gripped Merin’s wrist.

‘You’re not going to resign, are you?’

‘I don’t know what I’m going to do, John, but I have to give this speech.’ They stared at each other, locked in a torment of uncertainty. She slipped on her cloak and turned to leave.

‘Merin.’ She kept walking. ‘Merindah—’ She wanted to say something, but she had no words. She left John standing alone in the study. Out in the hall, Joe stood waiting. He checked his phone for messages, but nothing new. He looked up to see Merin standing there.

‘Merindah. The car is ready.’ Merin nodded. ‘Is John joining us?’

‘He’s welcome to, but I don’t think he will. We had a slight disagreement about the situation with Jarrah.’

‘I understand. I can’t imagine what you’re going through. But I’m here for you,’ he said.

‘Thanks, brother. Let’s do this.’ They made it to the main entrance and Merin’s security formed up. Mick Ross opened the rear door, and the President thanked him as she climbed in.

*The Lodge,*

*Canberra*

Prime Minister Stephen Archer returned to his private residence. He knew the President was tough to deal with, but he never imagined her to be this challenging. The president’s speech at Commonwealth Park was fast approaching, and with Jarrah Bradley kidnapped, the Prime Minister was running out of options. He looked up from his paperwork as the door opened. ‘Prime Minister, Commissioner Buckley has an update,’ said Alyssa, as she stepped into the PM’s office. The Commissioner stepped in after her, his police cap under his arm. Stephen dropped his pen, and stood.

‘I’ve got five minutes before I have to leave for Commonwealth Park. Let’s hear it, Shaun.’ The Commissioner acknowledged and tucked his police cap under his arm.

‘Sir. We’ve been given a tip off by an anonymous source that Jarrah Bradley is being held at a house in the northern suburbs,’ said Shaun.

‘Do we have confirmation it’s them?’

‘No confirmation yet, sir. But the intel is solid. We’re preparing to move in.’ Buckley’s words were no-nonsense, each syllable a step towards action. ‘Awaiting for your Go-Ahead.’ Stephen’s wordless approval echoing in the room like a gavel strike. ‘We’ll be able to monitor the raid from here, sir.’ A blur of activity overtook the room. Screens flickered to life, bodycam feeds pooling light into the semi-darkness, revealing the AFP’s Tactical Response Team gearing together outside the safe house. ‘Alpha Team. You have a Go to proceed. I repeat. A Go to proceed.’

‘Copy that. Alpha Team moving in on target location.’ The pounding in his chest echoed the forced entry, the breach of the front door reverberating through the bodycam footage. He watched with anticipation as he saw the officers checking each room.

‘Alpha Team, status report.’

‘First two rooms clear.’ The search continued. Stephen and Shaun kept their eyes on the screen. It was a gruelling couple of minutes before the next response came through.

‘Hostage not found. It’s clear, no hostiles in sight.’

‘Copy that. Alpha Team, secure the property. Conduct a thorough sweep of the area, look for any clues that may help us.’

‘Affirm.’ The bodycam footage disconnected.

‘Damn. I was hoping we’d get him,’ said the Prime Minister. He grabbed his blazer and slipped it on.

‘We will continue the search, Prime Minister.’ Alyssa stepped forward.

‘Prime Minister, it’s time to depart for the ceremony.’

‘Keep me updated,’ said the Prime Minister. The Commissioner nodded and he watched as the Prime Minister made for the door, his chief-of-staff following close behind.

# THIRTEEN

*AFP Headquarters,*

*Canberra*

Darrin turned off the tap as he rinsed his hands under the cold water. He lifted his head and stared at his face in the mirror. The crinkled lines on his skin came through from the stress of the morning. The thought of almost dying rocked him. He paused for a moment, a vivid memory of almost being killed flashing through his mind, only for it to be broken by the bathroom door opening. Simon stepped in. ‘Darrin, sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.’

‘Nah, it’s fine Sarge. I’m all done.’ Darrin grabbed some paper towel and dried his hands.

‘Hey, look. I heard about what happened at Haynes’ office. I’m here if you need to chat or anything.’

‘Thanks, Sergeant. I appreciate that.’ Simon patted Darrin on the shoulder, and then stepped into one of the bathroom stalls. Darrin took one final glance at his reflection, then headed out. As he stepped into the hallway, Nicole caught up with him.

‘Hey, the Boss has an update for us. There’s been a development with the Jarrah kidnapping,’ she said.

‘Have they found him yet?’

‘Not sure, but it could be promising.’ Darrin nodded. They stepped into the briefing room, where Paul and the others waited.

‘Where’s Sergeant Harper?’

‘I saw him in the bathroom. He can’t be too far behind.’

‘Fine. I’ll update him later. I’ve received a call from the Inspector. It appears the kidnappers have made their demands.’

‘What do they want?’

‘From what Mackenzie told me, the kidnappers are demanding that the President resign from her position, and disband the republic.’

‘That’s absurd. There’s no way the government would let this happen?’

‘I don’t think they would, but it’s what we’re dealing with.’

‘I think it’s also safe to assume that these kid-nappers are connected to the assassination plot, given that they’re pro-Monarchists.’

‘Correct. I’ve been advised that a Tactical Ops unit raided a property near Fyshwick. The house was empty, but it is apparent they were keeping him there for a short time.’

‘Any clues as to where they’re keeping him?’

‘Sadly no. The window for the kidnappers’ demands is fast approaching. We don’t have long before they make good on their promises.’

‘They must know the President won’t give in. They’ll have to keep him alive long enough until she does.’

‘I know, which is why I want to make finding Jarrah a priority. We are coordinating this investigation with ASIO, so utilise as many resources as you can. Let’s go.’ The agents stood and got to work.

*Commonwealth Park,*

*Canberra*

Commonwealth Park shimmered with a renewed sense of purpose. Towering eucalyptus trees swayed in the summer breeze, their leaves whispering secrets of the land’s ancient past. An array of native flowers, wattles, bottlebrushes, and delicate waratahs burst forth in blooms, paying homage to the nation’s rich soil. The park’s meandering pathways, the domain of casual strollers and avid joggers, now thronged with folk from every corner of Australia. They’d come far and wide to witness this great celebration, to see one person who made a promise to make Australia a better nation: the President of Australia. Beneath the eucalypts, a grand pavilion stood with green and gold banners fluttering in the gentle breeze. The new flag of the Australian republic, consisting of the national colours; green and gold, and a proud kangaroo and emu at its centre, swayed back and forth. The atmosphere was charged with electricity, the excitement of a new era. Banners celebrating the birth of Republic of Australia, and the new President, Merindah Bradley, fluttered in the wind, their messages of unity and progress mirrored in the hopeful faces of the crowd. Families laid out picnic blankets on the lush grass, children chased each other with flags in hand, and groups of friends gathered under the shade of majestic fig trees, their laughter mingling with the melodies of live music drifting from the main stage playing popular songs such as, Waltzing Matilda, or Home Among the Gum Trees. The distinct smell of frying beef sausages mixed with a hint of sizzling brown onions, and the light tang of Tomato sauce wafted in the air. Kids with painted faces ran around holding the new flag. The sparkling waters of Lake Burley Griffin nearby provided a serene backdrop, their surface reflecting the deep blue sky and the iconic silhouette of the distant Parliament House. Boats were covered with celebratory bunting glided across the lake, adding a touch of nautical festivity to the scene. Local Indigenous Australians conducted a corroboree, the traditional ceremonial meeting, where people interact with the Dreamtime through music, costume, and dance.

Dignitaries gathered and news cameras captured the important events. The Prime Minister and his wife sat near the front, along with a majority of his cabinet ministers, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Defence, as well as the Minister for Indigenous Affairs. The PM had arrived moments before the President, and he mingled with the thousands of Aussies who’d flooded Commonwealth Park. He wore his traditional Akubra. Many had arrived before-hand to set up their barbecues and seating to enjoy a momentous Republic Day. Part of the ceremony included a squad of F/A 18 Hornets from the Australian Air Force, conducted a low fly over. Each streamed green and gold, the national colours of Australia. As the Prime Minister conversed with his wife, Alyssa Craw-ford approached. She leaned forward, attempting not to trip over anyone. ‘Prime Minister, I’ve been advised the President is on her way. She should be here momentarily.’ Stephen nodded. He turned and gave Susan a peck on the cheek, and followed Alyssa to the staging area.

Arthur pulled into the main car park at Common-wealth Park, and scanned the crowd. He spotted the President near the staging area, surrounded by a throng of cheering supporters. Arthur reached for the glove box and retrieved his Glock 19 pistol. He knew he had to stop the President from going through with the speech. ‘I can’t wait to put a bullet in that bloody Abo cunt!’ He loaded the Glock. He stepped out of the car and made his way towards the staging area.

A hush of silence blanketed Commonwealth Park. A sleek, white Holden Caprice WM turned a corner and slowed to a stop at the park entrance. Merindah Bradley, the President of Australia, climbed out. Everyone cheered and whistled as they saw her. She walked over to the large group of people and shook hands with children and other attendees. The President’s security detail didn’t approve of the close contact, but she knew the importance of connecting with citizens. She even took selfies with some of the crowd, which would appear on their social media accounts later. Merin extracted herself from the well-wishes and made her way to the staging area. Cameras flashed, capturing the historic moment, as she strode without effort towards the grand pavilion, her confident stride echoing the significance of the occasion. She strolled with an aura of quiet strength determination, her arm extended into the air, waving at her supporters. Cheers and whistles erupted as she emerged. She walked over to the large group of people and shook hands with children and other supporters. Her security detail didn’t approve of the close contact, but she knew the importance of connecting with citizens. Security guided the President to the staging area, where the Prime Minister wrapped up his speech. The new President stood by the steps leading to the podiums. She turned to face Joe. ‘How are you, Madam President?’ he asked, struggling to speak over the booming cheers behind him.

‘Nervous. Have you heard anything about Jarrah?’

‘Not yet. I’ve got my phone ready in case I get the call.’ She tried to focus on delivering her ground-breaking speech, but all she could think about was her son. ‘I’m proud of you,’ said Joe. President Merindah Bradley turned as she heard the Prime Minister making the announcement. The crowds cheering grew louder, piercing Merin’s eardrums.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure to formally welcome Australia’s first head of state, Merindah Bradley.’ She approached the Prime Minister.

The two leaders exchanged a brief embrace, and the new President shook hands with other politicians on stage. Merin readied herself to commence a speech for the ages. Standing at the podium afforded an impressive view of the smiling faces of all her supporters, supporters of the republic.

‘Fellow Australians. It is with immense pride and gratitude that I stand before you today, here at Commonwealth Park, to address our nation on this tremendous occasion. I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather today, the Ngunnawal People. I pay my respects to their Elders, both past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples present here tonight.’ The audience clapped, and cheered as the new President spoke. ‘Today, Australia has embarked on a new chapter and become a republic, severing its ties to the United Kingdom, and the Commonwealth of Nations. We are our own country, and I am proud to have been chosen to represent you, the people, and Australia as its president and head of state. We commemorate the spirit of democracy, the power of unity, and the resilience of our nation. It is a day to honour the voices of all Australians who have fought tirelessly for our shared values of equality, fairness, and freedom. As a nation, we are defined not by our differences, but by our shared aspirations for a better tomorrow. Our diversity is our strength, and it is in unity that we find the courage to confront the challenges ahead, hand in hand, as one Australia. As we stand on the threshold of a new era, let us embrace the opportunities that lie before us with optimism and determination. Let us continue to strive for a more just, inclusive, and prosperous Australia, where every individual has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the common good. Thank you, my fellow Australians, for your outstanding commitment to our nation’s journey. Together, let us forge ahead with courage, compassion, and hope. May we always stand united, resilient, and proud. Long live the Republic of Australia!’ The President’s speech concluded, the crowd erupted into cheers and whistles as they waved their flags in the air. Merin waved at everyone with a big smile on her face. The national anthem began to play in the back-ground. As Merin prepared to move off the stage, she stopped and glanced to the left.

‘Oi!’ A powerful, aggressive voice shattered the momentum. ‘You, black bitch!’

‘Gun!’ One of the President’s security guards tackled the shooter, but he fired a shot. The gunshot rang out like a deafening pop that echoed off the surrounding buildings and through the crowd. People screamed and panicked, charging in all directions. The bullet grazed Merin’s neck, and she collapsed to the floor.

Blood oozed from the wound and dripped onto the grassed area. As more security arrived, the crowd dissipated, with some having the composure to head for marked exits. AFP security rushed to the President and took defensive positions in key locations around the platform. Additional security also arrived to rush the President to safety. Amidst the chaos, police officers seized the gunman.

*Perth, Western Australia*

Premier Gary Sullivan paced his study. His speech at Russell Park had gone well. The media had been cycling it nonstop for the last hour, highlighting the Premier’s decision to go forward with a referendum. While no date had been set for such a referendum, plans were set in motion to gather support. He knew the idea of secession was extreme. He knew if it went ahead, it had the potential to cause widespread chaos, splitting families, and posing security risks. But he also knew the benefits if they went ahead. He likened the idea of Western Australia becoming its own country, more to the point, he liked the idea of being prime minister. But it wasn’t just about him. It was about every day Western Australians who longed for recognition, and independence. As Gary sips on an iced latte, there is a gentle knock at the door. Keith Wilson shows himself in. ‘Afternoon, Premier.’ Gary nodded. ‘We just got some new polling data from your speech,’ he said. He approached the desk, a folder in his hand and a big grin on his face.

‘Is it good or bad?’ asked Gary, returning to his desk.

‘It’s bloody brilliant. More than sixty-six percent of those who turned out today said they’d support a referendum. We also know that more than forty percent of the state’s population are in full support of the *WA4Independence* movement,’ said Keith, as he flicked through the report.

‘That’s promising news. We still can’t jump the gun based on polling data.’ The conversation halted as Keith’s mobile buzzed.

‘Premier Sullivan’s office,’ he answered. Gary took a moment to read through some of the paperwork. The data itself was overwhelming, but Gary was a man of caution, and never fully trusted the polls until they were confirmed. ‘All right, I’ll tell him.’ Keith hung up the phone. ‘Sir, there’s been an incident in Canberra.’

‘What’s happened?’ Keith turned and went over to the TV. A news report appeared on the screen, and Gary’s eyes widened at the sight of it. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing: an assassination attempt on the President of Australia. ‘Is she alive?’

‘Unclear. But the PM will be contacting you with-in the hour.’ Gary checked his watch. He thought for a moment, then looked back at Keith.

‘Right. Let’s get this referendum moving.’

# FOURTEEN

*Yarralumla, Canberra*

Thescent of grilled meat, and frying sausages wafted through the air, mingling with the sound of laughter and the clink of glasses. Gordon stood on the veranda, his eyes sweeping over the gathering of his family members scattered across the backyard. His son, James, manned the barbecue, spatula in hand, flipping burgers and sausages. James’s wife, Samantha, sat at a nearby table, engrossed in conversation with Gordon’s brother, Allan. Their children, Tommy and Emily, chased each other around the yard, their shrieks of delight punctuating the lazy afternoon air. Gordon’s eyes lingered on the flag fluttering gently from the flagpole at the far end of the garden. A familiar twinge of disappointment tugged at his chest. He’d spent years serving as the Governor-General of Australia, rep-resenting the British monarch as the country’s de facto head of state. Now, that role no longer existed. Australia had become a republic, with a President at its helm. He took a sip from his glass of whiskey, savouring the burn as it slid down his throat. The transition to retirement hadn’t been easy. The loss of purpose, the sudden abundance of free time; it became foreign to a man who’d spent his life in the public eye. ‘Hey, Dad!’ James called out, waving the spatula. ‘How’d you want your steak?’

‘Medium-rare, as always.’ James nodded, turning back to the grill.

‘Comin’ right up.’ Gordon watched as his son expertly manoeuvred the cuts of meat on the hot surface.

‘You’re looking pensive today, Gordon,’ Allan said, approaching with a fresh beer in hand. ‘How are you holding up old mate?’

‘Yeah. Not bad. Right now, just enjoying the view. It’s not often we get the whole family together like this.’

‘I agree. It’s a challenge, but today’s a special day.’ Gordon scoffed.

‘If you say so.’ Gordon took a sip of beer. Allan wanted to press harder, but he knew talking about the Republic was difficult for him.

‘Have you spoken to Marge recently?’

‘No. Not since the divorce.’

‘I did invite her, but she said she wanted some time for herself,’ said Allan.

‘That’s probably for the best. She deserves some time alone.’

‘I still think you should call her once in a while. I’m sure she’d appreciate the call.’

‘Maybe.’ Gordon’s mind drifted elsewhere, as he took another hefty gulp of beer.

‘You’re thinking about the old days, aren’t you?’

‘Well, it’s hard not to, especially on a day like Republic Day,’ Gordon admitted. He gestured towards the original Australian flag. His blood boiled in anger, knowing what the Republic stood for. ‘Things have changed so much.’

‘Change isn’t always bad, you know, brother. The country’s doing well.’

‘Is it? I’m not so sure about that.’ Before Allan could respond, one of Gordon’s staff members approached, his crisp white shirt a stark contrast to the casual attire of the family gathering.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ the young man said. ‘You have a visitor. He’s waiting in the main hall.’

‘Thank you, Michael. I’ll be right there.’ He looked back at Allan. ‘Duty calls, it seems, even in retirement.’

‘Some things never change,’ Allan chuckled. ‘Go on, we’ll hold down the fort.’ Gordon made his way through the house, his footsteps echoing in the empty corridors. As he entered the main hall, he froze, recognising the tall, uniformed figure standing near the fireplace.

‘Your Excellency,’ said Australian Army Major-General George Stanley, turning to face Gordon. He saluted the former Governor-General. ‘Apologies for interrupting your afternoon.’ Gordon rolled his eyes.

‘What the bloody hell are you doing here? I told you no further contact until after the mission is complete.’

‘I know. But as you are aware, the President survived the assassination attempt.’

‘In my study, now.’ Gordon ushered George along a short hallway. At the end, a wooden door led them into Gordon’s private study. George observed the large portrait of His Majesty King Charles III hanging on the wall above the fireplace. Gordon slumped into the leather chair behind his large, wood oak desk. Stacks of papers neatly presented. A quill and ink sat on the corner of the desk. He observed the photo of himself with Margaret, as they stood at the main entrance to Government House. The photo had been taken on his first day as Governor-General. ‘What was it you said to me this morning? Williams is a crack shot?’

‘I thought he was,’ George replied. ‘But it seems he didn’t have the motivation I thought. There is another problem that needs your attention,’ George continued, remaining standing. Gordon lit up a cigar, leaning back in his chair. The smoke curled lazily towards the ceiling.

‘Of course there is. What’s going on?’

‘Williams: the AFP has him in custody.’

‘If he spills his guts, this entire operation is over.’

‘He doesn’t know anything other than being hired for the assassination attempt,’ George assured him.

‘I’m concerned he’ll manipulate the situation.’

‘If it’s a concern, we can arrange to take him out.’

‘You know that’s risky.’

‘I do, but we have someone on the inside that can take care of it. Williams knew what he was getting into when he took your money.’

‘I’ll make contact with my man on the inside.’

‘Then I assume you’re authorising the secondary operation?’

‘Of course,’ Gordon replied. ‘Everything depends on removing that President.’ The General stood, snapping to attention. He offered a crisp salute, then turned and left without another word. Gordon leaned back in his chair. For a moment, he closed his eyes. He let his mind wander, as he often did. He remembered the first time he met the President of Australia.

*Sunday, 24 November 2024*

‘Gordon, you’ve been in here all night,’ said Margaret Lewis. ‘The ceremony is in a few hours. Don’t you think you should get ready?’ His Excellency, Sir Gordon Lewis, holder of three distinguished awards, stood by the window of his study. The room, once symbolised his influence and authority, but now stood as a sanctuary for his brooding thoughts. The study had bookshelves lining the walls, filled with volumes on history, politics, and law, their spines showing the wear of frequent consultation. Heavy, mahogany furniture dominated the space, the centrepiece being a large, ornate desk cluttered with papers, letters, and a few framed photographs of past dignitaries and royal engagements. His face, etched with lines of experience and a lifetime of public service, set in a deep frown. His eyes, sharp and discerning, reflected a storm of emotions: anger, disappointment, and a profound sense of loss. He tapped a gold pen on the desk, the rhythmic sound filling the silence of the room. The pen, a gift from a visiting monarch years ago, was now a cruel reminder of the past he cherished. His gaze drifted to the framed photograph of himself shaking hands with Queen Elizabeth II. A moment that symbolised the peak of his career and his belief in the monarchy. This was before the Queen had died. The news that Australia had become a republic developed into a personal affront, a betrayal of everything he stood for. He spent months pleading to the Prime Minister and others, warning against the reckless step of becoming a republic and severing historical ties that grounded the nation. Today was no different. Today, he was being forced to attend an official ceremony, the signing of Australia’s new Constitution. It crushed him like an insult, yet he was bound by duty to be present. Marge, his wife, the unofficial first lady of Australia, moved with quick precision. Her wrinkled hand covered the glass of Scotch Whiskey before he could grab it. ‘This isn’t helping.’

‘What would you have me do, Marge? Dress up and smile while they dismantle everything we’ve worked for?’ She sighed, pulling up a chair to sit beside him.

‘I know this is hard for you. But it’s happening. The people have spoken. This nation has become a republic.’

‘The people. They don’t know what they’re doing. Pretty words and empty promises have swayed them.’

‘Maybe,’ Marge conceded, her tone gentle. ‘But it’s important we convey our willingness to collaborate with the republic, even if we don’t support all their beliefs.’ Gordon said nothing as he focused on the papers in front of him. The face of Merindah Bradley, Australia’s first President, stared back at him from the front page. Her dark, intriguing eyes challenged him, even from the printed image. Marge reached out, her hand covering his. ‘Gordon, please. We’ll face this together.’

‘All right.’ He knew she meant well, but there was no way she could convince him to get behind this change. ‘But I won’t pretend to be happy about it.’ As Gordon stood and moved towards their bedroom, Marge called after him.

‘That’s all I ask, dear. Just be there.’ Gordon stood before the full-length mirror in their bedroom, adjusting his tie. The man who stared back at him looked older than his sixty-two years, the lines on his face deeper, his silver hair a touch more dishevelled than usual. Marge appeared behind him, smoothing out the shoulders of his jacket.

‘You look very distinguished,’ she said, offering a small smile. Gordon met her eyes in the reflection.

‘Distinguished,’ he repeated, his tone flat. ‘Is that what they call it when you’re being put out to pasture?’

‘Try to keep an open mind. This change: it might not be as bad as you fear.’

He turned to face her, his expression softening slightly at the concern in her eyes.

‘I was Governor-General for seven years, Marge. I served forty years in the Defence Force. I’ve seen governments come and go, policies shift and change. But this, this is different. We’re not just changing a law or electing a new Prime Minister. We’re fundamentally altering the very structure of our nation.’ Marge paused, allowing her husband to breathe, and calm himself. But she also felt sorry for him.

‘I know, dear. But Australia has always been a country of change and adaptation. Maybe this is just the next step in our evolution.’ Gordon leaned into her touch, closing his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, there was a glimmer of determination amidst the weariness.

‘Well, if it is, then I suppose we’d better be there to make sure they don’t muck it up entirely.’

‘That’s the spirit, love. Now, shall we?’ Marge linked his arm. Together, they made their way out of the house.

The drive to Old Parliament House was awkward, tense even, the streets of Canberra more crowded than usual. The change to a republic had been a much talked about topic, with social media being flooded with debates and questions asked. The official state car approached Old Parliament House. Gordon could see the throngs of people gathered outside. Some waved flags, while others held up signs both for and against the change.

‘Quite a turnout,’ Marge observed, peering out the window. Gordon scoffed, his jaw clenched as he spotted a large banner, with Aboriginal colours. It read: “Welcome President Bradley.” Their driver navigated through the security checkpoints, pulling up to the entrance. Gordon stepped out of the car, and he was accosted by the noise and energy of the crowd. Cameras flashed, and he could hear his name being called by various reporters.

‘Mr. Lewis! Mr. Lewis! How do you feel about today’s ceremony?’

‘Governor-General, what’s your message to those who oppose the change?’ Gordon ignored the reporters, offering only a tight-lipped smile, and a wave as he helped Margaret out of the car. A group of politicians and other officials had gathered near the main entrance. They made their way towards them, the weight of the moment settling on Gordon’s shoulders. Gordon nodded to a few familiar faces, accepting handshakes and words of greeting with practiced politeness.

‘Your Excellency,’ a booming voice cut through the crowd. Prime Minister Stephen Archer strode towards them, his hand outstretched and a broad smile on his face.

‘Prime Minister,’ he said.

‘Glad you could make it. It’s an important day for all of us.’

‘Indeed it is, Prime Minister. Though, I suspect we might have differing opinions on its importance.’

‘Now, Gordon, let’s not start the day on a sour note. We’re all here for the good of the nation, aren’t we?’ Before Gordon could respond, a woman with shimmering red hair, dressed in a cream business suit approached.

‘Excuse me, Prime Minister,’ said the woman. ‘The President is arriving.’

‘Thank you, Alyssa.’ He turned to Gordon. ‘Gordon, I know you’re pissed, but this is supposed to be a day of celebration, and a step forward for the nation. Please, can you put aside your differences for one day?’

‘Fine. I’ll try.’ Stephen patted him on the shoulder.

‘That’s the spirit. Now, I’d like you to meet the first President. Let’s go.’ Stephen marched on ahead. Gordon glanced at Marge, a look of disgust etched on his face.

A few moments on, he saw a white Holden Caprice WM pulling up near the main entrance. The car, a similar model to what Gordon used, parked on a slight angle. The car stopped. A mob of reporters swarmed the vehicle. In that second, all eyes ignored Gordon. His existence was albeit erased. Security personnel surrounded it. One of the bodyguards opened the rear door. Merindah Bradley emerged. Cameras flickered and flashed at the new President, forcing her to shield her eyes from the madness. Question after question from the reporters infiltrated the President’s mind, as she attempted to make her way to the main entrance. Cheers from a gathered crowd reflected the importance of her arrival, but they contended with the angry mob of protesters as they chanted hateful slurs and explicit language. She chose to ignore them, and continued on to the group of politicians; one of them being the Prime Minister. She cut an impressive figure in her tailored suit, the fabric garnished with subtle Aboriginal designs, along with a traditional kangaroo-skin cloak draped over her shoulders. Her brother, Joe Pittman, walked beside her, his eyes scanning the room with a mixture of pride and wariness. Merindah made her way through the crowd, shaking hands and exchanging greetings. Gordon watched her closely.

‘Ah, here she is.’ Stephen waved Merindah over. They shook hands. ‘Madam President. Welcome to Canberra. How was your flight?’

‘It was great, thank you, Prime Minister. I’m happy to be here,’ she said. She spotted Gordon and his wife.

‘Excellent. Now, I’m sure you are familiar with Mr. and Mrs Lewis?’ Merin nodded.

‘Your Excellency, Mrs. Lewis,’ she said, extending her hand. ‘It’s an honour to meet you both.’ Gordon shook her hand, noting the strength in her grip.

‘Mrs. Bradley.’

‘That’s “Madam President”, Gordon. Let’s not slack on formalities,’ he said. Marge kept close attention to him, and she could tell he hated every second of this. She tugged at his blazer, an attempt to keep his attitude in check.

‘Your Excellency, I hope we’ll have a chance to speak more later,’ Merindah continued. ‘Your experience and insight would be invaluable as we move forward.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find your own way, President Bradley. After all, isn’t that the point of all this?’ A flicker of something, disappointment, frustration passed across Merindah’s face, but her smile remained in place.

‘Every step forward is built on the foundations laid by those who came before, Your Excellency. I have no intention of disregarding our history or the wisdom of those who have served our nation.’ Alyssa Crawford stepped forward.

‘Prime Minister, the Committee is ready for us,’ she said.

‘Of course. Time is of the essence, and we have much work to do. The signing will take place shortly. So, let’s move inside, shall we?’ Stephen followed Alyssa, and stepped through the main entrance. An entourage of reporters flocked the area, along with a mob of protesters. A mix of emotions swirled in Gordon’s mind; anger, resignation, and a grudging curiosity about what was to come. The chamber was packed, with every seat filled and additional chairs brought in to accommodate the growing crowd. Gordon and Margaret were ushered to their designated seats in the front row, directly across from where the President sat. As the ceremony commenced, Gordon found his attention drifting. The speeches, filled with lofty rhetoric about new beginnings and the dawn of a new era for Australia, washed over him. He’d heard it all before, in various forms, throughout his long career in public service. Part of him wanted to dismiss the entire affair as a farce, a misguided attempt to rewrite history. But another part, a part he was reluctant to acknowledge, a spark of something. Not quite hope, perhaps, but a grudging recognition that this moment, for better or worse, was significant. The ceremony concluded with the signing of the official Constitution of the Republic of Australia. Gordon watched as Merindah’s pen moved across the Constitution, each stroke cementing the change that he had fought so hard against. The crowd began to disperse, moving towards the reception area. Gordon found himself hanging back, overwhelmed by the excitement. Marge touched his arm.

‘Are you all right, dear?’ Marge attempted to show her husband sympathy. She knew he was angry inside.

‘I just need a moment,’ he said. ‘A bit tired.’ Marge squeezed his arm in understanding before moving ahead with the crowd. Gordon remained seated, lost in thought, until a voice broke through his reverie.

‘Your Excellency?’ Gordon looked up to see Merindah standing before him.

‘Madam President,’ he acknowledged, rising to his feet. Merin waved her hand.

‘Please, call me Merin,’ she said. He was surprised by her casual response.

‘I noticed you hadn’t joined the reception,’ she said. ‘I wanted to check if everything was all right.’ Gordon studied her for a moment, trying to reconcile the woman before him with the image he had built up in his mind.

‘Tell me, Madam President,’ he said with authority, ‘why did you want this job?’

‘It’s not about wanting a job, Your Excellency,’ she replied. ‘It’s about wanting to serve my country, to help shape its future as a republic.’

‘That’s what they all say. But you must know the challenges you’re facing. The division, the resistance to change, especially being an Abo. So, why take it on?’

‘I don’t appreciate that tone, Your Excellency,’ she said. ‘But our country is changing, whether we like it or not, and I know I can help guide that change in a positive direction.’

‘What makes you think you’re qualified to do that?’ Gordon pressed.

‘Last I checked you were a bloody school teacher. No leadership experience, no political affiliation. Nothing.’

‘I, I don’t have all the answers,’ Merindah admitted. ‘But I’m willing to listen, to learn, and to work with everyone, including those who may not agree with me to find the best path forward for Australia.’

‘This won’t be easy, you know. You’ll face opposition at every turn. Some of it justified, some of it not.’

‘I know. But I’m ready for the challenge.’

‘Are you?’ he asked, a hint of his old authority creeping into his tone. ‘Because let me tell you, Madam President: the view looks very different from behind that desk. Every decision you make will be scrutinised, criticised, and second-guessed.’ He paused, his eyes boring into hers. ‘And there will be times, mark my words, when you’ll question everything. When you’ll wonder if you made the right choice in taking on this role.’ Merindah listened, her expression serious. When Gordon finished, she took a deep breath before responding.

‘You’re right, Mr. Lewis. I know it won’t be easy. But I also know that nothing worth doing ever is. I’m prepared for the challenges, and I’m committed to doing what’s best for Australia. All of Australia.’ Gordon studied her for a long moment, searching for any sign of hesitation or insincerity. To his surprise, he found none, he gave a small, imperceptible nod.

‘Well then,’ he said, his tone softening. ‘I suppose we’ll see how you fare.’ A small smile tugged at the corners of Merindah’s mouth.

‘I suppose we will,’ she agreed. ‘And, Mr. Lewis. I meant what I said earlier. Your experience and insight would be invaluable. I hope you’ll consider offering your counsel, even if we don’t always see eye to eye.’

‘You’d welcome the input of someone who opposed this very change?’

‘Especially someone who opposed it,’ Merindah replied. ‘Different perspectives are crucial if we’re to move forward as a united nation.’ Gordon didn’t know what to say after that. He paused, his mouth running dry. Joe Pittman stepped forward.

‘Sis, we’re ready for some photo ops,’ he said. She nodded.

‘Was there anything else, Your Excellency?’ Gordon glared at Merin.

‘Be careful, Madam President. There are those who don’t believe you deserve to be in this position.’

‘Is that a threat?’

‘Not a threat, just a warning.’ Merin grinned.

‘I appreciate your time,’ she said. ‘But I have to get on with being President.’ She turned, and she followed Joe to where the Prime Minister stood. As they walked towards the reception area together, Gordon found himself reassessing his thoughts on Australia’s new President.

He still had his doubts, his concerns about the path the country had taken. *But perhaps*, he mused, *Merindah Bradley could be good for the nation*. *But unlikely, she’s a bloody Abo*, Gordon thought, as he observed the new President of Australia standing next to the Prime Minister. She posed for photos, showing off like she was some Hollywood celebrity, not a head of state.

# FIFTEEN

*Monday, 24 November 2025*

*Republic Day*

Morethan a dozen journalists had gathered in the media scrum at Parliament House. They stood as the Prime Minister walked in. A podium and microphone had been positioned in front of the room, with an Australian flag placed as backdrop. He approached the podium and adjusted the microphone. The cameras were positioned at the back of the room began broad-casting to an apprehensive nation. ‘Afternoon. I’d like to make a brief statement.’ Journalists listened, capturing every word, and scribbled short-hand on their note-pads. ‘I can confirm that at approximately 12:05pm Eastern Standard Time, an incident occurred at our nation’s capital.’ The Prime Minister cleared his throat before continuing. Cameras clicked and flashed. ‘An unknown suspect entered the grounds of Common-wealth Park armed with a firearm. The suspect proceeded to fire a shot at the staging area. Merindah Bradley suffered a gunshot wound to the neck. She is alive and has been taken to hospital for treatment. Everything is being done to resolve this.’

‘Prime Minister, what’s happening with the shooter?’ a journalist queried.

‘I am in communication with the Commissioner of the AFP. The shooter has been apprehended, and a thorough investigation is underway.’ The cameras continued to flash, and conversations flared amongst the reporters. ‘Right now, the best thing we can do as a community is to remain calm and optimistic that our intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies will resolve this crisis. That’s all the information I have for you right now. Thank you.’ The journalists heckled at him for more information, but the prime minister gathered his paperwork and left. Making his way out of the media room, Alyssa Crawford caught up with him.

‘Impressive speech, Prime Minister,’ said Alyssa.

‘Thank you. What’s the latest?’

‘The Director-General of ASIO is here to see you. He wants to give you an update on the investigation,’ she said. They walked the corridor in tandem, making their way back to Stephen’s office. As he stepped in, he saw the Director-General of ASIO sitting in one of the chairs.

‘Director-General, thanks for coming. What’ve you got for me?’ he asked the Director-General of ASIO, as he stood to greet the Prime Minister. The spy chief opened a folder and adjusted his glasses.

‘I’ve been informed the AFP has the suspect in custody,’ he said.

‘They’ll be interrogating him shortly.’

‘What do we know about him?’ asked Stephen.

‘His name is Arthur Williams. He’s sixty-five years old, a former senior constable with the Northern Territory Police Force.’ Stephen picked up a piece of paper from inside the folder.

‘I see, and what’s being done to find out what he knows?’

‘I’m coordinating with the AFP, as well as the ACT Police. They’re conducting a thorough investigation and will do everything they can to get him to talk. My officers are assisting the AFP with their investigation.’

‘Hopefully we can find out what this bastard knows.’ Stephen paused for a moment. ‘What about the President’s son?’

‘That we’re still working on, but we are narrowing the search. We’re using our high-tech surveillance drones to scour the area. So far, they haven’t detected Jarrah’s identity,’ said the DG. ‘But we are getting close. We should be able to get a location within the hour.’

‘We have to find him soon. The kidnappers are demanding the President resign, and dismantle the republic. If we don’t concede, they will kill him.’

‘I understand, Prime Minister. We’ll do all we can to make sure that doesn’t happen,’ said the DG.

‘Keep me updated.’ The DG nodded, then headed to the door.

News of the assassination attempt on the President rippled through AFP Headquarters like a maelstrom. The news hit the team hard, as the officers blamed themselves for what happened. It had been more than an hour since the incident at Commonwealth Park. Darrin and Nicole stepped into Paul’s office. ‘I’ll keep you updated,’ said Paul Duncan, as he hung up the phone.

‘What’s happening?’ asked Nicole.

‘We’ve had confirmation: Arthur Williams fired a shot at the president.’

‘Shit. Is the President okay?’

‘She got hit, but from what I’ve been told, the bullet grazed her neck. She’s at the hospital undergoing treatment.’ A collective sense of relief filled the room. *At least the President survived*, Darrin thought. ‘She will be kept under heavy security for the remainder of the day.’

‘What about the Prime Minister?’

‘He’s fine. He’s at Parliament House.’

‘Did they get Williams?’

‘Yes. I spoke with Mackenzie. Williams is being remanded into custody.’

‘If Haynes hired Williams, it’s likely he knows something about this assassination plot.’

‘Who’s questioning Williams?’

‘He’s being remanded into custody, so, I’d like the two of you to speak with him. Find out as much as you can.’ Paul checked his watch. ‘He’s being transferred to one of our holding rooms.’

‘No problem. We’ll let you know if we get anything from Williams.’ Nicole turned to leave.

‘Darrin, can I have a moment?’

‘Sure. What’s up?’

‘You tell me.’

‘I’m not sure what you mean.’

‘Nicole told me about your outburst at Haynes’ office. You pulled a gun on him?’

‘Look, I know I shouldn’t have done it, but I had to do something to get him to cooperate.’

‘I’m not sure threatening to throw a person of interest out the window is a technique the AFP uses, Darrin.’ Darrin sighed.

‘I guess Bailey told you everything?’ Paul titled his head in acknowledgment.

‘I’m, I’m sorry. I guess Haynes pushed my buttons.’ Paul nodded, and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

‘We’re worried about you, buddy. I had to beg Mackenzie not to suspend you. I need you on this case.’

‘I, I understand, and I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.’

‘I hope not. I’d hate to have to send you home in the middle of an investigation.’

‘There’s no need. I’m fine, I swear.’

‘Come and talk to me if you need to.’ Darrin stood, buttoning his blazer.

‘Thanks, Boss. I will.’

‘Let me know how it goes with Williams.’ Darrin headed out and caught up with Nicole, who stood waiting by the elevators.

‘Hey,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry I told the Boss about what happened.’

‘No, it’s fine. I completely understand. You were right to tell him.’

‘I’m worried about you, Darrin. I think Paul is too.’

*Brisbane, Queensland*

The news camera opens on a bustling South Bank Parklands near the Brisbane River. Festive stalls and pop-up stages line the waterfront, with the iconic city skyline in the background. Despite the sunny skies and colourful decorations, an uneasy tension lingers in the air. Samantha Lewis, a field reporter for Channel NineNews, stands before a small camera crew. She’s dressed in crisp business attire, her expression grim despite the celebratory backdrop of balloons and bunting. ‘Good afternoon, Brisbane. I’m Samantha Lewis, reporting live from South Bank, where the atmosphere was celebratory just moments ago. But now, breaking news from Canberra has rattled the nation: there has been an alleged assassination attempt on our first President, Merindah Bradley.’ A hush falls over the crowd behind Samantha. Some families clutch their phones, reading the latest updates with alarm. Others huddle in small groups, discussing rumours and half-confirmed reports. ‘As you can see, people here in Brisbane are in shock. What began as a day of festivity, celebrating our new Republic Day, has taken a dark turn. We have limited information so far, but preliminary reports say that President Bradley was targeted by an unknown assailant earlier this afternoon. The condition of the President remains unclear at this hour, though authorities are urging calm.’ The camera panned, showing a cluster of worried onlookers near a large outdoor screen that had been broadcasting Republic Day coverage from around the country. That screen now displayed a news reading:

*BREAKING: PRESIDENT BRADLEY ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT: UPDATES TO FOLLOW.*

‘Queenslanders have been deeply affected by this news. I spoke to a few residents just moments ago.’

‘*I can’t believe someone would try to hurt the President. I mean, we finally get our own head of state, and this happens. It’s messed up*.’

‘*I’m scared for President Bradley. She seems so genuine when she spoke last week. I hope she pulls through*.’

‘*We were out celebrating the day, and now this. We’re praying she’s okay*.’

‘These are the sentiments echoing across Brisbane and, indeed, across the whole country. While the situation remains fluid, I can confirm that an investigation is ongoing. Law enforcement agencies, including the AFP and local counterparts, are working around the clock to identify the attacker and ascertain their motives.’ She shifts her stance, glancing at an earpiece update. Then she continues, voice steeled with professionalism: ‘I’ve just received word that President Bradley is receiving emergency medical care. No official updates on her condition have been released, but early statements from the Prime Minister’s office say they are ‘cautiously optimistic.’ In the meantime, local authorities here in Brisbane tell me they are increasing security at Republic Day venues. People are worried, but many have chosen to stay and show their support.’ The camera pans again, capturing children clutching little flags, looking sombre, while parents hold them close. A few tears glimmer in the eyes of festival-goers.

‘We remain hopeful that President Bradley will recover. It’s a sobering moment, but also a testament to our resilience as a young republic. My sources within the Queensland Police confirm that there’s no immediate threat to events here, and ask everyone to stay calm and vigilant.’ She took a step closer to the camera, the Opera House or large screen behind her replaced by the distinctive Brisbane cityscape. ‘From speaking with locals, one thing is clear: Australians stand united behind their President, no matter their personal views on the republic. Tonight’s scheduled festivities may be subdued, but the spirit of this new era endures, even in the face of tragedy.’ She lowered her microphone, a solemn expression settling on her face. The camera lingered for a beat on the worried but determined faces in the crowd, then transitions back to the *Channel Nine* studio feed. The anchors in the studio promise continuing coverage and updates on the President’s condition. And in the parklands of Brisbane, the people soldier on—fearful for their newly minted republic, yet firm in their hopes that Merindah Bradley will pull through this crisis, and Australia will emerge stronger than ever.

# SIXTEEN

Merinfought to stay awake, her body wracked with pain. She had been in and out of consciousness since arriving at the Accident and Emergency Department of Canberra Hospital, her mind struggling to make sense of what had happened. She remembered the gunshots, the screams of the crowd, the chaos of the President’s visit to the hospital shattered by an act of violence. The agonising pain seared through her body, as the bullet tore a gash through her neck. The doctors monitored her but conceded with the gunshot wound to her neck, she needed surgery. A wave of fear washed over her at the thought of going under the knife, but she had no choice. She had to get through this, for John and the country. Mick Ross had a broken arm and some bruises, sustained in protecting the President. Joe and John walked into Merin’s hospital room, looking worried. A rush of relief at the sight of her husband’s face, his strong features etched with worry. ‘You must be Mr. Bradley?’ asked one of the doctors, as he observed the President.

‘Yes, I’m John Bradley. How is she?’ asked John, sweat dripping off his face. He’d never been more scared in his life. He hated himself for not being there during her speech.

‘The bullet grazed her neck. She received some damage, but she got lucky. With minor surgery, she will be fine.’ John stepped forward, caressing her head.

‘Love, it’s me.’ He stroked her forehead.

‘J-John?’

‘Yes, I’m right here. I came as soon as I heard. It’s going to be okay. I’m glad you’re safe.’ John rested his head against hers. Merin found the strength to respond.

‘They have my boy,’ she said.

‘I know.’ Merin sobbed.

‘Hey, it’s going to be okay. I promise.’ The doctor observed the monitors, attempting to block out the personal conversation. He watched her as she attempted to keep her eyes open.

‘W-what about, what about Jarrah? My boy?’

‘I don’t know, Merin, I haven’t heard anything. They will find him, though. I promise.’

‘Mr. Bradley, we’re ready to stitch that wound.’

‘Do what you have to, Doctor.’ John stepped back allowing the doctor to work.

‘She’s a fighter, John. She’ll get through this,’ said Joe.

‘I know. I want to know how this happened to my wife.’

‘I’ve been in contact with the AFP. They have the suspect in custody, but that’s all I know right now.’

‘And what about Jarrah?’

‘They’re attempting to locate him. They’re getting closer to finding him, though.’

‘We need to know the moment they rescue him.’ Joe nodded, his eyes watching with unease as the doctors stitched up the wound. John stood next to Joe, watching as the doctors did their work. *I wish I was there for her*, John thought, as he kept an eye on her.

Arthur Williams found himself cuffed to the metal table. He’d been stripped of his security guard uniform, and now wore a basic shirt and pants. Two uniformed constables stood in either corner; their arms folded over and kept a steady glare at Arthur. Arthur sat in a metal chair, his eyes fixed on the wall in front of him.

Darrin and Nicole walked in tandem as they made their way along the corridor. As they approached the holding room, Nicole read over Williams’ profile. ‘How can someone go from being a highly distinguished officer with the Northern Territory Police Force, to a racist piece of shit?’ Nicole thought, as she flicked through the pages.

‘I guess one day he snapped,’ said Darrin. ‘Don’t forget he lost his sister.’

‘True, but that’s no reason to want to assassinate the nation’s first head of state. There has to be more to the story.’

‘I guess we’ll have to wait and see what he has to say.’ They approached the interview room and Darrin signalled the senior constable who stood by the door. He moved away allowing them to enter.  Together, they stepped into the windowless room. Arthur Williams’ hard expression locked onto both newcomers. He didn’t say a word as Darrin and Nicole took their seats opposite Arthur. ‘Mr. Williams, I’m Federal Agent Darrin O’Connor. This is my colleague, Federal Agent Nicole Bailey. We have the right to hold you for up to eight hours,’ said Darrin, but Arthur took no notice. ‘You also have the right to request legal representation. Do you understand these rights?’ Arthur glared at Darrin. ‘I’ll take that as a yes.’ Darrin proceeded to open a folder in front of him. ‘The time is 3:35pm, Monday, 24 November, the interview will now commence. Mr. Williams, we’d like to ask you some questions regarding your role in the assassination attempt on President Merindah Bradley.’

‘Fuckin’ Black Bitch.’ Arthur spat on the floor.

‘How charming,’ Nicole sneered at him. Darrin continued the interview, disregarding Williams’ rude remarks.

‘Mr. Williams, you intended to go to Common-wealth Park this morning and fire a shot at the President of Australia. Do you deny those accusations?’

‘No. I don’t deny those accusations, because she’s a black bitch, and I wanted her dead.’ Darrin glanced at Nicole.

‘I’m not saying anything more, not until I get a signed deal.’

‘That’s not going to happen,’ Nicole blurted.

‘We know someone hired you to assassinate the President. We know you deposited a large sum of money into your personal account.’ Darrin presented Arthur with a bank statement under Arthur’s name. ‘Our technical experts have determined that the sum of one million dollars ended up in your account early this morning. We know you’re receiving a Territory pension, and we know the money you get from that doesn’t add up. So stop playing games, Mr. Williams. Tell us who hired you and we may be able to help you with a reduced sentence.’

‘Fine. Yes, someone did hire me, but I don’t know who they are,’ said Arthur.

‘How could you not know?’

‘Are you fucking dumb, woman? I was hired to assassinate the President of Australia. I would’ve thought the man who hired me wanted to remain anonymous, for obvious reasons,’ said Arthur.

‘Do you know who it could be?’

‘None. It could’ve been anyone, but I know they work within the federal government.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘When I arrived last night, I was taken to an undisclosed location by government agents. They looked like bodyguards, so I assume it’s someone of high importance.’

‘Can you tell us anything more about the place you were taken to?’

‘I told you, I’m done talking.’ Arthur glared at them.

'I won’t say anything else, not unless I get a signed deal.’

‘We’re not going to negotiate with you. You’re in enough trouble as it is.’

‘I don’t care about the trouble,’ Arthur sneered.

‘I care about getting what I want, if you want to know more, get me a fucking signed deal!’ Arthur’s voice echoed throughout the room. Darrin took a moment, and glanced at Nicole.

‘I’ll have to speak to my superiors about getting you a signed deal, but I can’t promise anything. Sit tight.’ They stood and departed the interview room.

‘I still think it’s wrong to even consider letting that son of a bitch go. He’s a racist piece of shit, Darrin.’

‘I’m aware of what he is. But like I said, he may be the key to finding out who’s responsible for the assassination attempt.’ Darrin and Nicole turned and made their way out.

Merin rubbed the bullet wound on her neck as she stepped out of the hospital into the mid-afternoon sunshine. Her recovery from surgery progressed well, but the press mobbing her outside threatened to undo it all. The press had gotten wind of the President’s location, and swarmed the main entrance to the hospital, like vultures circling their prey in the desert. With her shoulder in a sling, she shielded her eyes from the flashing cameras. Mick shielded the President, as they made their way to the Holden Caprice. John kept his arm linked around Merin’s good side, supporting her in every way he could. As Merin approached the car, the reporters moved in. ‘Madam President, can you comment on the shooter’s motives?’ asked one of the reporters. Merin paused for a moment, as she tried to come up with an appropriate response.

‘Oh, it’s my way of making new friends,’ she said. The reporters clamoured for more, but Merin had had enough. ‘I promise to give a full statement when I’m ready, and I promise to deliver my presidential address at a later date. Right now, I need to rest and focus on my recovery. Thank you.’ The reporters continued hounding her with questions. Merin pushed her way through the mob, flanked by heavy security. She climbed into the back seat of the Holden Caprice, and it sped off. Merin leaned back against the soft, leather seat.

‘How are you, love?’

‘I’m, I’m okay Johno.’

‘We’re going to get through this, Merin. One day at a time.’

‘I know.’ Her eyes wandered outside the window, watching the trees as the car sped along.

A short drive later, the Holden Caprice WM pulled up underneath the partitioned entrance and with John’s assistance, she climbed out. She found herself in a familiar and secure environment. Joe stood at the door waiting for her. He’d arrived beforehand in a separate vehicle.

‘Merindah, how are you feeling?’

‘I’m hanging in there, thanks brother.’ The three of them made their way up the stairs, taking one step at a time, at Merin’s pace. She stopped halfway up the stairs, dizziness hitting her like a ton of bricks.

‘Merin, I think you should be in the hospital. The doctors wanted to keep you in for observation.’

‘No. I’m fine. I need to sit.’ With the help of Merin’s security, they continued up the stairs. They arrived at Merin’s private study. She slumped into the chair, relieved to take the weight off her feet. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into her warm bed and sleep the day away, but she had to carry on with the affairs of state. Joe Pitt-man’s phone buzzed. Merin leaned back in her chair, the conversation muffled as she took a moment to herself.

‘Thank you, I’ll let her know,’ said Joe. He hung up, and turned to Merin.

‘Madam President, I wanted to let you know, the Prime Minister is on the line for you.’

‘Thanks, brother.’ She picked up the phone to speak. ‘Prime Minister, this is the President.’

‘Madam President, thank you for taking my call. I’m glad to hear you’re safe.’

‘Yes, it was a shock to us all. How are you coping, Prime Minister?’

‘A little shaken, but I’ll bounce back.’

‘I’m glad to hear.’ Merin cleared her throat. ‘And what about my son?’

‘The AFP has managed to locate your son. With the help of ASIO, they located him at a property not far from the city. I’ve ordered a strike team to move in and secure your son.’ Merin’s heart fluttered. Hearing the news sent a wave of relief over her.

‘That, that is such wonderful news. Thank you, Stephen.’

‘Of course. We have the best intelligence and security operatives in the country,’ he said. Merin struggled to form words. ‘What, what’s happening with the suspect?’

‘The AFP has the suspect in custody. They are conducting a thorough investigation and attempting to find out what he knows. It may be some time before we hear anything—’ But Stephen was cut off before he could continue.

‘That’s not good enough, Stephen.’ Merin felt bad for yelling. She never intended to explode like that. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap, Prime Minister.’

‘It’s perfectly understandable. You’ve been through an ordeal today. But I can assure you, we will get to the bottom of this.’

‘I appreciate that, Prime Minister. You and your team have done an amazing job today.’

‘My pleasure, Madam President. We’ll speak later. Rest easy.’

# SEVENTEEN

Thefederal agents stepped into Paul’s office, disrupting him from his endless paperwork. ‘How’d it go with Williams?’ asked Paul.

‘Apart from the rude remarks about the president, I think we’re getting somewhere, slowly,’ said Darrin.

‘Any developments with finding out who hired him?’

‘Not so far. He did say that the person who hired him is someone inside the government,’ said Nicole. ‘He said he was picked up by government agents when he arrived here last night.’

‘He’s refusing to say anything more without a signed deal,’ said Darrin. Paul shook his head.

‘What kind of deal?’ asked Paul.

‘Williams stated that if we get him an immunity deal, he’d tell us more,’ Darrin explained.

‘Do you think an immunity deal is going to work?’ Darrin paced the office, mulling over the predicament.

‘It’s the only thing Williams wants. We know a professional hired him, if we give him this, he’ll provide us with the identity of his employer.’

‘I still think it’s a mistake to give that racist piece of shit anything.’

‘I appreciate your enthusiasm, Agent Bailey. But while I agree with your assessment, I have to side with Darrin on this. I don’t want this scumbag to walk free, but if we’re going to be proactive at solving this investigation, we’ll have to live with his freedom.’

‘What guarantees does Williams offer in exchange for immunity?’

‘All he said was that if we get him this deal, he will tell us who’s behind it. That being said, what’s the process here?’

‘I’ll need to speak with the Superintendent regarding this. There is a lengthy process involved. We’ll need to reach out to the Department of Public Prosecutions. Once we put forward a request for an immunity, the DPP will need time to review the case.’

‘How long will it take?’

‘To be determined. An immunity isn’t something that can be rushed. We may be looking at up to a week for a deal to be reached. Unfortunately, the DPP is running a skeleton crew today, being a public holiday. We may have to wait until tomorrow to get the ball rolling. Williams is going to have to accept this is going to take time.’

‘We’ll head back and see what he has to say.’ They left Paul’s office and made their way back to the interview room. ‘Look, I know you don’t agree with this plan, but we have to try something.’

‘It sickens me knowing that this racist fucker gets to walk free.’

‘I know. We just have to hope Williams can help us find out who’s behind all of this.’

‘One can hope.’ The senior constable unlocked the door, and the agents stepped in. Arthur observed the agents as they appeared. He remained seated, saying nothing. Darrin and Nicole sat in front of Arthur. ‘Mr Williams, my superiors have informed me that your request for a signed deal is acceptable. However, an immunity deal is not something we can magically appear out of nowhere. That said, we are prepared to meet you half way.’

‘Halfway?’

‘Correct. If you provide us with details about who hired you to shoot the President, we’ll ensure your immunity deal is expedited,’ said Darrin. Arthur leaned back, he stretched his arms and placed his hands behind his head.

‘I don’t accept.’

‘Why?’

‘I told you, I want a signed deal. A guarantee of immediate release, no questions asked. Then, and only then will I reveal my employers’ identity,’ he said. Darrin glared at Arthur, his eyes fixed on his, attempting to expose any deception. Darrin glanced at Nicole. He could tell she was frustrated by his decision.

Jarrah fidgeted and tensed his gnarled knuckles white against the cold, metallic chair to which he was bound. His consciousness oscillated in the void between slumber and wakefulness, a hazy fog blurring his senses. Jarrah blinked several times, enough to make out the blur of ghostly figures pacing around the room. A hot, piercing pain seared through his left hand. Unseen chains held him hostage, and an involuntary gasp escaped his chapped lips. A finger, he realised with a grimace, was missing an unholy trade between the ransom of freedom and a gruesome assurance of obedience. Laughter echoed through the cavernous space. A second figure approached. His large hands, scarred with tattoos, clasped around Jarrah’s head, lifting it with an uncaring brusqueness. ‘Look, mate,’ he sneered, tilting Jarrah’s head towards a flickering television screen tucked away in the corner of the room. His vision, although smeared by unconsciousness, traced the pixels across the screen. An assassination attempt, the newsreader announced. The target: Merin-dah Bradley, the President of Australia. His mother. She was lucky to be alive. ‘Got her good, didn’t they?’ One of them taunted, his words a ragged lullaby to Jarrah’s suffering.

An AFP Tactical Response Unit formed into a small group. Armed to the teeth with tactical gear, and heavy weapons, they were prepared for the assault. The abandoned property on the outskirts of Canberra loomed like a sentinel of forgotten days. Its walls, once sturdy and alive, now wore the ravages of neglect. Broken windows and creeping vines told tales of the years gone by. Inside, shadows and silence reigned, save for the occasional murmur of conversation from the kidnappers. Major Cameron Dawson stood apart, focused on the mission. His earpiece crackled to life. ‘Major Dawson, we have confirmation. You have clearance to proceed. The drone has pinpointed Jarrah Bradley’s location. He’s in the room to the east, surrounded by two armed men. Move in.’ Dawson acknowledged the command with a curt nod, his fingers tapping against his thigh as he considered their approach. Every second counted, and he knew the lives of his team and the hostage depended on their swift, coordinated execution.

‘Copy that. Team, we’re going in. Jarrah Bradley is in the east section of the property. Expect resistance. Move fast, move smart.’ The assault commenced with a series of coordinated breaches. The decaying, wooden doors splintered under the force of battering rams, and flashbangs exploded, disorienting the kidnappers. The tactical unit stormed in. In the chaos, Dawson led the charge.

He spotted the armed men, their surprise evident as they scrambled for cover. Gunfire exploded, sharp and deafening in the confined space. Bullets whizzed past, ricocheting off walls and furniture. Dawson’s training took over. Dawson returned fire. His team followed suit, advancing methodically, covering each other as they pressed forward. Despite the initial shock, the kidnappers fought back with fierce aggression, and the air was soon thick with smoke and the acrid smell of gunpowder. Several of the tactical officers took hits, their Kevlar vests absorbing most of the impact but not all. Dawson saw one of his men go down, clutching his shoulder, blood seeping between his fingers.

‘Keep moving!’ he barked. ‘Secure the subject!’ The team pushed deeper into the building, their progress relentless. They reached the room where Jarrah was being held. Dawson’s heart pounded as he kicked open the door, his weapon at the ready. Inside, two armed men surrounded a haggard-looking Jarrah, bound to a chair. The kidnappers turned as the AFP unit entered.

Dawson didn’t hesitate. He fired, the bullets finding their marks with deadly accuracy. One of the kidnappers collapsed, his weapons clattering to the floor. The second man lunged toward Jarrah, his gun raised. Dawson reacted without remorse, diving to the side and firing a single, decisive shot. The thug crumpled, his threat neutralised.

‘Clear!’ Dawson shouted, and his team surged into the room, securing the area. Dawson approached Jarrah, who was pale and trembling but very much alive. He cut through his bindings, his hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins. ‘You’re safe now, son,’ he said. ‘We’ve got you.’ Jarrah looked up, gratitude and relief washed over his features. Jarrah was safe, and the kidnappers had been subdued. Dawson removed his helmet, wiping sweat from his face.

Major-General George Stanley surveyed the progress of his men from an elevated platform. He bore a stern face etched by time and circumstance, eyes flickering with an icy intelligence as he assessed the handpicked men. Eight strong soldiers, each bearing the essence of a warrior. Their synchronised movements through the military obstacle course echoed an unseen harmony that men of their ilk could fathom. The General’s glare bore into their efforts. He raised his hand, a silent command halting the training. The men fell in line. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘The hour of our nation’s need has arrived. We don’t serve the cowards who hide in the shadows, but we do serve His Majesty, King Charles III of Australia,’ he proclaimed. One of the soldiers raised his hand.

‘Sir, what about the recent assassination attempt on the President?’ asked one of the soldiers.

‘Indeed, it was a despicable act of cowardice. But let it be known, no deed goes unnoticed in this political chessboard.’

‘But, sir, won’t that make it harder for us to get the President?’

‘The path to honour is often paved with difficulty, soldier. We do not falter because the path has stones, we tread over them.’ George’s mind jolted. The harsh vibration of a mobile phone broke the lingering dead air. The General answered the call. ‘Yes?’ His men watched him, their eyes flickering with curiosity and suspense. ‘Hold on course,’ George said, his words confirming the adherence to the plan. ‘We proceed as planned.’ As the call ended, George turned back to his men, a fire now alight in his eyes. His lips parted to deliver the next command. ‘Load up the vehicles. We’re heading to the secondary location.’ The General watched as his men loaded up the army trucks. They hauled several boxes with ammunition and weapons. The General ensured his men had enough to start a small war. He knew the task ahead was risky, but he had to do it. He had to save the country from destroy-ing itself.

The President paced the small study. She had the blinds closed, but she knew if she looked outside, she would see at least three members of her security detail, standing in front of the house. The story-hungry press hovered near the main gates, like vultures circling their prey as it lay on the burning desert ground. Multiple footsteps approached her door, one set heavy and the other light and alert. Merin ceased her pacing, in the middle of the room. The office door swung open, and her husband entered with a kettle and teacups on a metal tray. ‘You’re going to stomp the rug into fine dust if you don’t stop your pacing.’

‘I’m tired of this. I want to know what’s happening.’ She sat behind her desk, wincing as a sharp pain shot through her side. She had been on the mend since the assassination attempt, but her injury still caused her discomfort. It’d been several hours since the incident and she found the whole ordeal over-whelming. She struggled to pick up the bottle of pain medication the doctors had given her and swallowed a pill, hoping it would ease the ache. As she leaned back in her chair, the door opened. Joe stepped in.

‘Merindah, I really think you should rest.’ Merin shook her head. ‘Your health is more important than anything else right now.’

‘I can’t rest, brother. Not when my life is in danger and someone out there is trying to kill me.’

‘I understand, but you also need to take care of yourself. The doctors said that you need to take it easy.’

‘We’ll see. Have you heard anything new from the AFP?’

‘Yes. I spoke with the Prime Minister’s chief-of-staff. They’ve identified the shooter as a man named Arthur Williams.’ Joe handed Merin the iPad. ‘According to the AFP, he’s a former correctional officer, and worked as a police officer with the Northern Territory Police. Ms. Crawford told me Williams retired after he assaulted two young girls. Both girls are Indigenous.’

‘Unbelievable.’

‘Do they know why he wanted to kill my Merin?’

‘They are questioning Williams, but Ms. Crawford will give us updates as he receives new information.’

‘Did anything happen with those poor girls?’

‘Sis?’

‘The girls Williams’ assaulted. Did they get justice?’

‘From what I’ve read, the case got dismissed. Williams pleaded not guilty, and his superior officer claims Williams suffered from a chronic impairment affecting his judgement and coordination.’

‘Sounds like complete bullshit to me.’

‘They gave him community service and a police pension for his twenty years in the force.’

‘Which means he got away with assaulting two innocent young girls?’

‘Yep, but with this new incident, he will go to prison.’

‘I’m not holding my breath. If he got away with assault the first time, he’ll get away with this.’ The conversation hit a pause. Joe’s mobile rang.

‘Joe Pittman.’ He turned to speak. John comforted Merin as she listened. ‘Thank you, I’ll tell the President.’ Joe hung up.

‘Joe, what’s going on?’

‘That was Ms. Crawford. Jarrah’s been recovered.’

‘How, how is he?’

‘He’s being monitored. Surgeons are gonna do everything they can to reattach his finger.’

‘Thank you, brother.’

‘I’ll give you some time.’ He turned, and headed to the door, knowing his sister and John would need a moment to themselves.

‘I’m so glad that Jarrah is safe,’ said John, as he walked over to be with Merin.

‘I know, it’s such a relief. Hopefully he pulls through.’

‘He’s going to be fine. The doctors will take care of him.’ She took a nervous sip of water from the glass.

‘I want to go and see my boy.’

‘I don’t think that’s wise, Merin.’

‘No. I want to see my boy, Johno. He needs his mother.’

‘Merin, please. You’re not well. You need to stay here.’ Merin let out a sigh. ‘Besides, your life is still in danger.’ John saw the disappointing look on his wife’s face. ‘Would it help if I went to the hospital and stayed with him?’

‘Would you?’

‘Of course, Merin. I’ll go and make sure he’s looked after.’

‘That would make me happy.’

‘He’s a Bradley, he’ll push through this.’

‘Let him know I love him.’

‘It’s the first thing I’ll tell him.’ John pecked her on the forehead. He turned and went to the door. He stopped as he opened it and looked back at his wife. ‘We’ll survive this day, Merin. I believe in us.’ John turned to leave, leaving Merin alone once more. As John departed, Joe stepped in again.

‘I saw John out in the corridor. You okay?’

‘Yes, fine. He’s going to the hospital to see Jarrah.’

‘Ah, I thought as much.’

‘I wanted to go myself.’

‘I did ask your head of security, but he wouldn’t allow it. He wants to be sure there’s no longer a threat to your life.’

‘I understand, but I’m going to see him first thing in the morning.’

‘Of course.’

‘Listen, Joe. I know you’re not going to approve of this, but I want to go and see Arthur Williams.’

‘You do realise who he is? He’s the one who tried to kill you.’

‘I’m aware of who he is, Joe.’ He let out a sigh. ‘I want to confront him, and find out why he wanted to kill me.’

‘You know your security detail won’t like this.’

‘Well, they can deal with it. Either get them to take me, or I’ll drive to wherever he is myself.’

‘Last I heard, he’s being held at AFP Headquarters. Detectives are interviewing him as we speak.’ Merin grabbed her kangaroo-skin cloak, and slipped it on.

‘Then let’s go.’ She made for the door, not bother-ing to wait for Joe.

# EIGHTEEN

Darrinleaned back in his chair, studying the man across from him. Arthur Williams sat upright, his hands cuffed to a ring bolted to the tabletop. Beside Darrin, Nicole flipped through the thick file. ‘Mr. Williams. Sixty-five years old, former senior constable with the Northern Territory Police Force.’ Williams said nothing, his jaw set in a tight line. ‘You’ve got the career behind you,’ Darrin continued, scanning the pages before him. ‘Twenty-five years on the job, decorated for bravery on more than one occasion.’ He paused, letting the words hang in the air. ‘Then there’s this incident from 2023. You were assaulted by a group of Indigenous youth.’ Nicole shot him a warning look, but Darrin pressed on. ‘Says here you suffered a concussion, broken ribs, and a dislocated shoulder. That must’ve been traumatic.’ For a moment, some-thing flickered in Williams’ eyes, a flash of masked pain. Darrin leaned forward, sensing a crack in the man’s armour. ‘I can’t even imagine how terrifying that must’ve been. A mob of young Indigenous men, beating you senseless.’ He shook his head. ‘No one should go through something like that.’ Williams’ nostrils flared, and his knuckles whitened as his fists clenched on the tabletop. Across from him, Nicole shifted in her seat, shooting Darrin another warning glance. But Darrin showed no remorse. ‘You dedicated your life to protecting your community, and that’s how they repaid you. Savages, the lot of them.’ The words hung in the air, heavy and charged. Williams’ face contorted, his eyes squeezing shut as if to block out the memories. His breath came in ragged bursts, and for a moment, Darrin thought he might break. Williams’ eyes snapped open, cold, and hard once more. He leaned back in his chair, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

‘I’ve nothing to say to you.’

‘Have it your way, then.’ He gathered up the file, sliding it across the table towards Nicole. As they rose to leave, Williams spoke again, his words laced with venom.

‘You don’t know half of what’s coming. This is just the beginning.’ Darrin paused, one hand on the doorknob.

‘We’ll see about that.’ Darrin and Nicole’s attention drew to a knock on the glass window to the observation room. They nodded at each other, then stepped out of the room. Outside, Paul met them.

‘Sounds like you’ve been having a charming conversation.’

‘You can say that again,’ said Nicole. ‘What’s going on?’ asked Darrin.

‘The Superintendent called. It appears we’re expecting a VIP guest shortly.’

‘Oh, who is it?’

‘The President—’

‘Wait, she’s coming here? Why?’

‘She wants to speak with Arthur Williams, and try to find out why he wanted to kill her.’

‘I have to admit, she’s got balls facing her would-be killer. When’s she getting here?’

‘She should be arriving in a few moments, so heads up. Stay vigilant.’ Darrin and Nicole looked at each other, surprised the President of Australia would be coming here. Paul turned as Superintendent Anna Mackenzie walked up to him.

‘Inspector, I thought you’d be at the main entrance by now?’ she asked.

‘Just filling in my team, ma’am. Heading down now,’ he said. Anna nodded, and made for the elevators. ‘We’ll be back in a few moments.’

*Canberra Regional Hospital*

‘Dad.’ John approached the hospital bed.

‘Jarrah,’ John said, taking a seat beside his son’s bed. ‘How are you, son?’ Jarrah winced as he shifted his balance, his bandaged hand resting carefully on his chest.

‘Hurts, but I’ll live.’ John brushed a lock of sweat-dampened hair away from Jarrah’s forehead.

‘I’m glad. Your mother asked me to come and check up on you.’

‘Is she okay?’

‘Physically, she’s going to be fine. It’s, it’s been a long day for her, and she’s exhausted.’

‘I wish I could’ve been there for her,’ Jarrah said. John placed a reassuring hand on his son’s shoulder.

‘Jarrah, there’s no way of knowing this was going to happen. It’s not your fault.’

‘Dad, I’ve been thinking: if you had been there with us, you might’ve ended up…’

‘Dead. I know, Jarrah. But I would’ve done any-thing to protect you and your mother.’ They knew the dangers that came with being a part of Merin’s life, a woman who had risen to become Australia’s first Indigenous President. The door to the hospital room swung open, and two detectives stepped inside. They wore grim expressions that matched the tone of the room.

‘Mr. Bradley, Jarrah Bradley?’

‘Yep. That’s me.’ The detective exchanged a glance with his partner before taking a step closer to the bed.

‘We’re with the police.’ The detectives flashed their badges. John checked them to ensure their authenticity. ‘We’d like to conduct an interview regarding your kidnapping,’ he explained. ‘If you’re up for it, of course.’

‘Sure, no problem.’ He needed answers, as much as the authorities did. The second detective pulled out a small notepad and a pen, ready to take notes.

‘Let’s start with the events leading up to the kid-napping. Can you remember anything at all?’ asked the second detective. Jarrah closed his eyes, trying to remember.

‘There were several men in the room. They were rough, rude. They kept calling me pretty boy.’

‘It’s okay, son. You’re in safe hands, now,’ said John. The first detective made a note of the description.

‘Anything else? Any details about their appearance or what they said?’ asked the second detective, as she took notes.

‘I wish I could remember more. But, it’s all a blur. They were wearing masks, I think. I couldn’t see their faces.’

‘That’s okay, Jarrah. We’ll do our best to solve this,’ he assured. The first detective shifted the focus of the conversation.

‘Did the kidnappers say anything at all about your mother?’

‘I, I remember them talking like this was just the beginning. They said something about going after my mother. I blacked out shortly after.’ Jarrah rested his head on the pillow, exhaustion setting in.

‘I understand, Mr. Bradley. I appreciate your help with this investigation. We’ll do our best to protect your mother at all costs.’ Jarrah forced himself to smile as he watched the detectives pack up their gear and depart in silence. John followed them out, ensuring they got what they needed. Jarrah leaned back against his pillow. He couldn’t help but think it was all his fault. His fault that his mother’s life was in danger.

It didn’t take long for the local mob of journalists to know about the President’s visit to AFP Headquarters. Joe Pittman did everything he could to keep it as discreet as possible, but someone inside the AFP must’ve leaked her arrival. The Holden Caprice WM pulled up outside the main entrance. The group of journalists and photographers swarmed the car, but fortunately, AFP personnel moved in, securing the area. ‘Are you sure about this?’ asked Joe. Her security team stood by the door.

‘Yes, brother. I have to do this. I need to get closure.’ Joe nodded. The door opened, and within seconds of the President stepping out, the mob of reporters swarmed her like flies over a piece of meat. Joe led her to the main entrance.

‘Madam President, this is Anna Mackenzie, she’s the Superintendent, and in charge of Counter-Terrorism Command.’ Anna and Merin shook hands. Mackenzie turned to Paul, who stood next to her.

‘Madam President, this is Inspector Paul Duncan, the team leader, and he’s been at the forefront of today’s investigation,’ said Anna. Paul shook hands with the President, something he never imagined would happen.

‘Pleasure to meet you, Madam President,’ said Paul.

‘Thank you. I’d like to speak with the suspect,’ she said.

‘Of course, this way, ma’am.’ Paul led the group inside, the President’s security detail keeping a close presence.

The elevator doors opened. Paul Duncan stepped off first, followed by Merindah Bradley. Adjusting her kangaroo-skin cloak, she walked side-by-side with Joe, her hand clinging to his arm. Darrin and Nicole stepped forward. Nicole’s chest gripped tight with excitement, knowing she stood face to face with the first President of Australia. The Counter-Terrorism Command came to a standstill, as the other officers and investigators watched on with envious eyes as they saw the most powerful woman in the country enter. ‘Madam President, this is Federal Agent Darrin O’Connor, Federal Agent Nicole Bailey. They’ve been heading up the investigation, and have been question-ing Mr. Williams,’ said Paul. Darrin and Nicole shook hands with Merin, and Joe.

‘I’d like to see him now, if you don’t mind?’ asked Merin.

‘Of course, right this way, Madam President,’ said Darrin. He and Nicole went ahead, guiding the President. Merin’s hands clenched as they drew closer to the room, and a pang of pain infiltrated her. ‘You don’t have to do this,’ said Joe, as they followed the agents.

‘We’ve been over this, Joe. I need to understand why.’ Joe knew he had no way of convincing her not to go through with this. They got to the interview room. Merin’s anxiety spiked, as they drew nearer. Darrin unlocked the door, and held it open for the President.

‘We’ll be watching through a double-sided window, ma’am. Plus, you’ll have security personnel inside the room,’ said Darrin.

Merin nodded. She paused, letting out a deep breath as she prepared to enter the room. Her feet stuck to the floor. I have to do this, I have to know why, she said to herself, trying to build up the courage to move. Her legs wobbled, as she prepared to move for-ward. One careful step after another, she made it into the interview room. Her eyes locked onto Arthur Williams. Merin attempted to remain calm, despite the urges of lashing out at him bubbling to the surface. Merin sat on the metal chair, opposite Arthur. He remained silent. Darrin and the others observed the intense moment through the double-sided window, watching Arthur’s every move. No one spoke. Merin stared deep into Arthur’s eyes, right into his soul.

‘Why did you try to kill me?’ she asked, leaning forward. Of course, Arthur kept silent. A grin formed on his face. ‘I need to hear it from you. Is it because of who I am, or what I represent?’ Arthur scoffed.

‘You and your kind don’t belong here, pretending to lead,’ said Arthur.

‘My kind? You mean, Indigenous Australians?’ Arthur nodded. A tear formed in Merin’s eye, but she fought to hold it back. ‘Did someone put you up to this, or was it your idea?’ Arthur cleared his throat, and leaned closer to the President.

‘It’s not just me, there are others who think like me, who believe you’re a threat to our way of life, to the Monarch,’ Arthur sneered.

‘Our way of life. You mean, a way that excludes people like me?’

‘You’ve changed everything.’ Arthur slammed his clenched fist on the metal table. Her security stood nearby, their hands placed on their holsters. ‘Traditions, laws. You’re destroying this country.’ Merin couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The garbage coming from his mouth. He sounded like one of those religious fanatics preaching to anyone and everyone.

‘We’re trying to build a country that includes everyone, Mr. Williams. Everyone deserves to have a voice.’

‘Your voice shouldn’t be louder than ours.’

‘You think I don’t understand struggle, Mr. Williams?’ Merin snapped. ‘Let me tell you about my life: I grew up in Alice Springs. My family, like many others, lived with the daily challenges of discrimination, and racism.’ Arthur listened, unchanged by her story. ‘I remember walking miles to school on dusty roads, where teachers barely noticed us because we were black kids. We were just the Abo kids to them, and we were expected to drop out, and fade away. One day, I answered a question in class. I’ll never forget the teacher’s reaction. She said: How surprising you actually know something, Merindah. The entire class laughed, humiliating me and my brother.’ Merin stood, towering over Arthur as he sat, rubbing his cuffed wrists. ‘Outside school, the racism was even worse.’ He rolled his eyes.

‘Serves you bloody right. You lot deserve it,’ Arthur grunted. Merin slapped Arthur across the face. He’d never experienced pain like that before. He’d never been slapped by a woman either, much less by an Aboriginal. The pain was severe. It was as though someone had slapped him with a sweltering hot towel.

‘Don’t fucking interrupt me!’ Merin blurted, her lips trembled. We weren’t served in certain stores, and people crossed the street to avoid us. I fought to stay in school, despite the odds. I worked odd jobs, studied under streetlights, and became the first in my family to attend university. While at university, I faced constant racism. Once, someone painted a racial slur on my door. But I didn’t let it break me. I graduated with honours and dedicated my life to helping young ones like myself. Giving them the chance to go to school, get an education, become noticed. Becoming for President was the hardest thing I’d ever done. The death threats, the smear campaigns, all because of the colour of my skin and the heritage I carry. But I never gave up.’ She turned, and made for the door.

‘Mr. Williams, my life hasn’t been easy, but it’s made me who I am. I’m not your enemy. I’m someone trying to make this country better for everyone, including people like you.’ Still, Arthur said nothing.

‘This country is a republic, and it will continue to flourish, and grow as an independent country. And, I am more than proud to represent Australians as their head of state.’ Merin glared at him for a moment. Security led her out. In the corridor, Joe stood waiting for her. She leaned against the wall, becoming faint.

‘Did you get what you wanted?’

They made their way to the elevators.

‘I think so. He’s not a man with a gun. He’s a symptom of a deeper problem. And that’s what we need to address.’

Major-General George Stanley stood on the large rock at Canberra’s Kurrajong Point; his eyes fixed on the murky waters of the Molonglo River. A wave of pride washed over him as he contemplated the mission ahead, a mission he’d been preparing for the last two years. The General’s mind raced as he watched eight men loading equipment into a zodiac inflatable boat. He had to ensure the safety of his men. As the General contemplated the risks and rewards of the mission, his satellite phone chirped. ‘Yes?’

‘Good evening, General. What’s your status?’

‘I wasn’t expecting your call, sir. The men are loading up now. We’re heading out shortly.’

‘Excellent. We need to get this done soon.’

‘And it will be. You have nothing to worry about, sir.’

‘It’s my job to be worried, General. I’m paying you a lot of money to do this job.’

‘I know, but I’ve chosen the right men for this task. It will be handled.’

‘I hope so. Good luck, General.’

‘Copy that. Out.’ The call ended and the General returned his phone to its rightful place. As he zipped the pocket, a young lieutenant approached him.

‘General, the boat is ready and loaded, sir.’

‘Affirm. Let’s move out.’ He followed the lieutenant to the riverbank, his boots crunching on the gravel as he marched. One of the soldiers onboard fired up the engine. It turned over on the first try, and the boat and George and his team sped off towards its target. A target only they knew about.

Darrin followed Nicole as they strolled the hallway. Meeting the President of Australia had been surreal, a once-in-a-lifetime experience that few ever got to witness. He stole a glance at his partner. ‘What are you so giddy about?’ he asked, noticing a grin on her face.

‘Oh, nothing. Just met the President of Australia,’ she said. Darrin shook his head, but he was laughing inside. CTC loomed ahead, a buzz of activity behind the reinforced glass doors. Darrin swiped his keycard, and they stepped through, the familiar scent of cold coffee and photocopier toner filled his nostrils. ‘What do you think Williams wants?’ Nicole asked.

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’ They rounded the corner to Paul’s office, the lead investigator leaning back in his chair, fingers steepled beneath his chin.

‘You wanted to see us, Boss?’ asked Darrin. Paul summoned them inside.

‘The President’s visit didn’t yield any new leads, but she got the justice she was after.’

‘So, what now? How do we get Williams to talk?’

‘That’s what I wanted to discuss with you two. He’s still demanding immunity in exchange for information about his employer.’

‘And we’re no closer to finding out who tried to assassinate the President.’

‘Not yet. I’ve spoken to Mackenzie about granting Williams’ immunity. But she’s working with the Commander to expedite the process.’

‘But shouldn’t we tell the President? She has a right to know what’s happening.’

‘Our priority right now is finding out who’s be-hind this threat,’ Paul said. ‘The President’s safety comes first.’ Nicole opened her mouth to protest, but Paul’s phone buzzed, cutting her off. ‘Paul Duncan.’ Darrin listened with intrigue as Paul spoke. ‘Oh, what made him change his mind?’ Paul’s tone sharpened, his free hand curling into a fist. Another pause, then, ‘Okay, they’re on their way.’ He disconnected the call, turning his attention back to Darrin and Nicole. ‘Well, it seems that Williams is ready to talk. He’s requested to speak with the two of you.’

‘Do you know what this is about?’

‘Unclear,’ Paul said, rising from his chair. ‘But we need to hear him out. Maybe he’s ready to cooperate.’ Darrin nodded. This could be the break they’d been waiting for, the key to unravelling the entire conspiracy. He followed Nicole out of the office, their footsteps echoing through the hallway. Whatever Williams had to say, it better be important.

‘I still think we should tell the President,’ said Nicole.

‘I agree, Bailey. But like the Inspector said. The President’s safety comes first,’ said Darrin. The door to the interrogation room loomed ahead, a stark reminder of the high stakes they faced. Darrin took a steadying breath, his hand on the doorknob.

‘I hope Williams can help us find out who’s behind all of this.’

‘Yeah, me too.’ Darrin unlocked the door, and the agents stepped in. As they did, Nicole gasped as she saw a puddle of blood forming on the floor around Arthur. ‘Fuck!’ Darrin screeched. He raced over to Arthur and attempted to stop the stream of blood coming from his neck. ‘Go get help!’ Nicole darted out of the room, as Darrin remained to control the bleeding. The wound to his neck ran deep. The bleeding refused to concede defeat. Darrin watched in horror, as Arthur Williams’ life slipped away.

# NINETEEN

*Government House,*

*Canberra*

BradHayes, a Close Protection Officer for the new President of Australia, had come back on duty after a short break. He’d been a CPO for a short time, and he’d been assigned to Government House. After clocking in, he made his way to the private boat dock. Brad looked sharp in his crisp grey suit and stood next to his colleague, Luke Johnston. The President had four CPOs protecting the residence. They maintained security around the boat dock to ensure no un-authorised vessels approached the area. ‘Welcome back,’ said Luke, as he saw Brad adjusting his micro-phone earpiece. ‘How was the break?’

‘Short, but needed,’ said Brad. ‘Anything to report?’

‘Nothing new. All is quiet on the western front.’ Brad chuckled. The CPOs carried on with their patrol. As Luke walked on ahead of Brad, he paused. His ears reacted to the faint, but audible thrum of an engine. ‘Heads up. We’ve got contact.’

‘What is it?’ Brad stepped forward. Within a couple of seconds, the thrum became clearer to both officers.

‘Sounds like a vessel. Dingy probably,’ said Brad. ‘Probably some party-goers got lost.’ He paused as he scanned the waterfront with his light. He could see the ripples in the water. ‘I’m going to check it out.’

‘Copy that. Standing by.’ He remained in his position and watched as Luke proceeded to the boat dock. Sure enough, a small boat had moored next to the jetty. He made out the silhouettes of eight men, but he struggled to see anything beyond that. Luke approached them.

‘Excuse me, this is a government restricted area, you can’t be here.’ Brad watched Luke as he descended the concrete steps to meet the boat. Brad got onto his radio.

‘This is Officer Hayes at the Boat Dock, we’ve got an unauthorised vessel with an unknown number of occupants. Officer Johnson is giving them instructions, over.’

‘Copy that. Standing by.’ Brad watched his superior speak to one of the occupants of the vessel.

‘You need to turn your vessel around.’ As Brad continued to monitor the exchange, Luke lurched backwards and fell to the ground. Hayes’ training kicked in and he got onto his radio again.

‘Security breach. Security breach.’ A bullet struck Brad in the head, killing him. The soldiers knew where to go. They’d been training for this day for months.

‘Boat secured, General. We’re ready to move in.’ General Stanley and the eight other members of the assault team headed up the concrete stairs that lead to the residence’s grounds. They eliminated the remaining four CPOs without warning. Now alone outside of the residence, the assault team made for their next objective: cutting power to the building.

With the events of Republic Day drawing to a close, many Australians continued their celebrations. Pubs and restaurants had been packed to the brim by patrons taking advantage of the public holiday long weekend. Fireworks exploded in the distance; news reports continued replaying footage of the assassination attempt on the President at Commonwealth Park. Following her surprise visit to AFP Headquarters, Merin returned to Government House, exhausted by the days’ events. She found herself leaning against the window, and gazing across the immaculate lawns of the residence. Her train of thought shifted as a tap at the door disrupted the air. The door opened, and Joe stepped in. ‘Ah, Joe. What’s happening?’ Merin returned to her chair.

‘I’ve been talking with the PM’s chief-of-staff. Ms. Crawford informed me that Arthur Williams is dead.’

‘How’d that happen?’

‘An investigation is still ongoing, but from what she told me, Arthur committed suicide in his holding cell.’

‘Coward. Now we’ll never know who hired him.’

‘I agree, but Ms. Crawford said the AFP is doing all they can with the information they have.’

‘Well, let’s hope they find something.’ Merin adjusted her glasses, and carried on with her reading.

‘Hey,’ said Darrin. ‘How are you holding up?’ Darrin let out a heaped sigh. His mind racing as they walked.

‘Yeah, not bad. Still trying to get over that Williams is dead,’ she said.

‘Me too.’ As they made their way across the command centre, a large screen replayed a news update on the recent assassination attempt on Merindah Bradley. Nicole’s mind boggled at the fact she met her in person. She knew it would never happen, and dreamt about it ever since the nation became a republic. She would remember this day for the rest of her life. They approached the briefing room. The glass door swung open. Paul stepped in, his eyes focused on the keen members of his unit. He saw Darrin and Nicole had settled in. He slipped on his glasses and picked up the sheet of paper in front of him.

‘Evening you lot. This will be a short briefing, lives are at stake so we can’t take up too much time talking about it,’ he said. ‘So far, we know that the Royal Vanguard is at the centre of this conspiracy. We also know Arthur Williams was the shooter.’ Paul pressed a button on the remote. An image of Arthur Williams appeared on the screen. ‘Less than twenty minutes ago, Arthur Williams committed suicide in one of our interview rooms.’ A hush whisper echoed throughout the room.

‘I still don’t know how Williams managed to kill himself,’ said Felicity. ‘Wasn’t he being watched?’

‘Correct. While his suicide is highly suspicious, he may have had some inside help from the Royal Vanguard,’ said Paul. He watched his team members take notes. ‘We’re also attempting to obtain the CCTV footage from Williams’ interview room, but so far nothing.’ Paul turned to Nate.

‘Where are you at with that, Nate?’

‘So far, it appears the CCTV has been tampered with. There’s a block of several minutes where the cameras in the room go dark. My team is attempting to rebuild the recording using the data it left behind.’

‘When do you think it could be repaired?’ asked Darrin.

‘It’s hard to tell at this stage. We’ve got every available technician working on it, but it could be hours before we restore it.’

‘Very well. Keep working on it,’ said Paul. Nate slipped out. ‘What about the Royal Vanguard front?’

‘We’re working on the two most promising leads. Three days before Haynes’ death, he received a large sum of money: half a million dollars ended up in his private bank account.’

‘That’s the same amount of money General Stanley got.’

‘Who’s General Stanley?’ asked Simon.

‘His name is George Stanley.’ Felicity brought up the General’s image on the screen. ‘He’s a former Australian Army Major-General. From the research we did, it turns out the General resigned from the army around the time the referendum took place. He also received the same amount of money as Arthur Williams did to shoot the President.’

 ‘So we can assume the General is someone who is against the republic?’ The others nodded.

‘Where did the come from?’ asked Simon.

‘We’re still trying to trace the funds. But Financial Crimes say they’re having trouble sourcing the origin of the transfer.’

‘I still don’t know what the General has to do with this,’ said Nicole, as she sipped her water.

‘It’s possible that Haynes contacted the General because he’s against the republic. Before he was killed, Haynes revealed Williams’ identity,’ said Darrin.

‘It makes sense. The Royal Vanguard has been advocating for the abolition of the republic ever since the referendum was held twelve months ago. Someone in the General’s position would be perfect to further their agenda,’ said Simon.

‘In the meantime, I’d like the rest of you to keep investigating General Stanley. If he is working for Vanguard, that may give us some idea what they’re planning. Let’s go.’

Merin sat alone in her private study, the carved wooden desk in front of her littered with stacks of documents. Her moment of reprieve soon ended, when Mick Ross stepped in. Several more security officers followed, their guns drawn. ‘What’s the meaning of this, Mick?’ asked Merin.

‘Madam President. The residence has been compromised. We need to move you to a new location.’ The residence’ power disconnected, and the room fell into complete darkness. Her Close Protective Officers turned on their weapon-mounted lights.

‘How, how is this happening?’

‘The residence is being attacked by armed hostiles. We have no idea who they are,’ said Mick, as he steadied his service pistol. They flinched at the sound of distant gunshots. Another bodyguard entered the room and ran to Mick.

‘Sir, the boat dock is unreachable. Looks like that was their point of entry.’

‘Ma’am, we have to move, now.’ Mick took hold of Merin’s arm and escorted her out of the study. Merin and the others moved in a swift motion along the corridor and headed to the staircase. As the group prepared to descend the stairs, the assault unit stopped them. The close protection security officers positioned themselves to defend the president but had no way out. Eight Australian Army soldiers moved in and aimed their heavy weapons at the group. Other hostages had been dragged out of nearby rooms. George Stanley approached Merin. He glared at her like an insect on the ground.

‘Good evening, Madam President.’

‘Who are you?’ Two of the soldiers gripped her, holding her secure.

‘My name is Major-General George Stanley, Royal Australian Army.’

‘What do you want, General?’ asked Merin.

‘I think you know what I want, Madam President.’ Mick lashed out and attempted to strike the General. Before he landed a blow, he took a strike to the stomach from the butt an assault rifle. Merin helped him. ‘A lot of loyalty to such a crooked president,’ the General sneered.

‘You can’t do this, General,’ said Joe, as two soldiers held him against the wall. The General’s glare snapped at Joe as the soldiers gripped him.

‘Joe!’ yelled Merin in fear.

‘You son of a bitch!’ cried Joe in defiance.

‘Ah, the President’s bastard brother.’

‘Don’t you fucking touch my brother!’ the General stepped forward with a speed that belied his age and took hold of Merin.

‘Listen here, President,’ the General spoke with a deep, intimidating growl. ‘Your brother will remain untouched, mostly, as long as you and your pathetic protection team do as we say. Understand?’ Merin scoured at the General before being taken away by the soldiers.

The evening wore on. Now well after 9pm, the Prime Minister returned to The Lodge. His duties as the nation’s leader never ended, but right now, he needed some well-deserved rest from a long day. As he caught up with the latest news, Alyssa barged through the door. Stephen looked up, surprised by the sudden intrusion. ‘Alyssa, I thought you’d gone home for the evening?’ he asked. Stephen saw the AFP Commissioner following close beside her.

‘Sir, something’s happened,’ said Alyssa.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Stephen. Shaun stepped in front of Alyssa.

‘Sir, apologies for the late hour. We’ve had confirmation: the Government House is currently being held by a group of rogue military soldiers.’

‘How could that possibly happen?’

‘We’re still getting all the details, but it appears they stormed the residence by force, and they’ve taken the President hostage.’

‘What are we doing about a response?’

‘With your permission, Prime Minister, I am prepared to send in a counter-terrorism strike team to retake the residence and secure the President and the other hostages.’

‘What’s the likelihood of success?’

‘Our counter-terrorist teams are highly trained, sir.’

‘Good. You have my authorisation. How long before they get there?’

‘I’ve got Tactical Response assembling as we speak.’ Stephen nodded.

 ‘I want regular updates.’ The Commissioner tilted his head, and about-faced before exiting the study.

Darrin attempted to stifle a yawn, his eyes still laden with the day’s fatigue, stared at his reflection in the metallic sheen of his locker door. As he began to change, his mind churned through the events of the day; the assassination attempt, hunting down a rogue sniper, Arthur Williams’ apparent suicide. The sound of footsteps echoed throughout the hall, pulling him from his thoughts. Nicole entered the locker room. ‘Hey,’ she said.

‘Hey,’ said Darrin, as he continued to remove his shirt.

‘What’s up, Nicole?’ Nicole shrugged.

‘Oh, you know, same shit, different day. Amber keeps hounding me. And not in a good way,’ she said. Darrin chuckled. ‘Look, Darrin. I know this is hardly the time, given what’s happened today, but if you want, we could grab a quiet drink later. A chat, perhaps?’ Darrin smiled.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘A drink it is.’ Felicity stepped in.

‘Darrin, Nicole, the Boss wants us in the briefing room, ASAP.’ Darrin followed Nicole out of the locker room, and made their way across the department. They stepped into the briefing room where Paul and the others waited.

‘Good, you’re here. We’ve got a situation: The President’s being held hostage at Government House.’

‘Bloody oath. How’d that happen?’

‘We’re still getting all the details, but from what we know, a rogue army unit lead by Major-General George Stanley stormed the residence by force. They’ve cut off all communication.’

‘What does the General want?’ asked Darrin.

‘I’m guessing it’s got something to do with the assassination attempt. There’s been no contact from the inside. We’re attempting to scan the residence using drones.’

‘What are we doing about a response?’

‘A Tactical Response Team is on site. They’re assembling at a forward operating base near the main entrance to the residence.’ Paul’s attention turned to Darrin and Nicole. ‘Mackenzie wants two operatives from this task force to join them. So, I’m sending O’Connor and Bailey,’ he said. Darrin looked at Nicole. ‘You are to report to Major Dawson, he’s in charge of the squad.’

‘No problem. We’re on our way.’ Nicole couldn’t believe it. It was only a short time ago that she’d met the President of Australia, now she was going to save her life from extremists.

# TWENTY

*Government House,*

*Canberra*

TheGeneral led the President into her private study, away from the other hostages. Two soldiers armed with assault rifles stood guard outside the door. The General made himself comfortable behind the President’s desk. He placed his handgun on the desk and clapped his hands together. ‘Take a seat, woman.’ At first, Merin refused. ‘Sit on the fuckin’ chair, bitch!’ Merin flinched at the elevation of the General’s voice, before lowering herself into the chair opposite the General.

‘What do you want from me, General?’ She eyed the pistol on the desk. She’d never used one before, but she wanted to use it against the General.

‘I think you know what I want from you, woman.’

‘Why don’t you tell it to me like it is, General?’

‘Fine, if that’s how you’re going to be. I want you to make an announcement. In the statement, I want you to declare the decision to become a republic was a mistake and resign as President of Australia.’

‘That’s not going to happen, George. This country is a republic.’

‘We’ll see about that—’

‘Why are you against Australia being a republic?’

‘You still think Australia is ready to leave the Commonwealth?’

‘We’ve been ready for the last twenty-six years, General. Since the 1999 referendum.’

‘Not in my mind. This country is weak, and it will grow weaker if someone like you is president.’

‘Someone like me. You mean, an Aboriginal?’

‘No, an Abo like you.’ The General stood as the office door opened.

‘General. We’ve got company, Sir,’ said the Lieutenant.

‘Special Forces?’

‘Looks like it. Tactical Response is preparing to move in. They’re forming up at the main entrance.’

‘Stand ready. Secure all entrances, I’ll take care of the President.’

*Mobile Command Unit,*

*Government House, Canberra*

Darrin and Nicole pulled up in their BMW X5 to a staging area where the AFP’s Tactical Response Team had set up a makeshift command post. Darrin looked over to her, and saw that she was tense. ‘Hey, are you up for this?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, you were fan-girling over the President when she showed up at HQ. This is a big deal.’

‘Don’t be stupid. I’m fine. Plus, I’d hate myself for not being involved.’ Darrin didn’t look so convinced. ‘I’m fine, Darrin. Trust me.’ She climbed out. Darrin did the same, but he knew she was good at hiding her emotions.

Two heavy Bearcat vehicles sat parked on a slight angle. Darrin took the lead as they approached the squad leader, Cameron Dawson.

‘Who are you two?’ asked Major Dawson.

‘Federal Agent Darrin O’Connor, AFP,’ said Darrin.

‘Federal Agent Nicole Bailey, AFP,’ said Nicole.

‘Major Dawson, Tactical Response. I’m the unit commander.’

‘What’s the sitrep, Major?’

‘We’ve confirmed the President is being held in her private office on the second floor, with at least six armed hostiles confirmed through satellite imagery. Our plan is to breach the residence and secure the president as quickly and efficiently as possible. I hope you’re ready for this, agents.’

‘We’ve trained for this, Major.’ He nodded. Darrin and Nicole armed themselves with their Glock 19 handguns. The Bearcats rolled forward approaching the main entrance with caution. At the entrance, silence hung heavy. The doors, however, remained shut. The team breached the entrance using C4 explosives. A smoke grenade followed, billowing into the main foyer. The second floor revealed the ominous presence of rogue soldiers who, upon sighting the officers, opened fire. Bullets ricocheted off the walls, and chaos descended like a tempest. Glass windows shattered from the impact of bullets.

‘Bailey. We have to get to the President!’

‘Copy that!’ Gunshots echoed through the corridors, mingling with shouted commands and the occasional thud of officers taking cover. The firefight raged, as some officers collapsed to the ground by enemy fire. Darrin and Nicole rushed up the stairs, their every movement deliberate. Darrin’s precision eliminated one of the rogue soldiers, and Nicole’s shots found their mark.

The officers moved like shadows.

They made it to the president’s private study, their assault rifles aimed in front of them. They prepared to breach the study. Inside, the President was being held at gunpoint, her eyes reflecting a mixture of fear and determination. General Stanley held the President at gunpoint. Officer Dawson arrived with a team of officers, forming a protective circle around the study.

‘It’s over, General!’ Darrin shouted, his Glock 19 aimed at the unstable General. ‘There’s no way out of this!’ But the General, unmoved by Darrin’s words, refused to concede defeat.

‘You think I’m going to let this bitch live?’ he boasted, the veins in his forehead popping. He gripped his hold over the President, preparing to execute his desperate bid for power. ‘She doesn’t deserve to be president. She’s not my president!’ Darrin and Nicole, with nerves of steel, aimed their Glocks at the General.

‘One way or another, General, this country will change.’

‘I can’t let this animal live.’ He positioned his pistol and prepared to fire a shot. One of Dawson’s sharpshooters, perhaps sensing the imminent danger, fired a shot at the General. The bullet struck him in the ankle, forcing him to release his grip on the President. Darrin fired a shot that found its mark in the General’s shoulder. Another shot struck the General in the head. The General’s body crumbled to the ground.

Jarrah stirred in the hospital bed. He squinted around the darkened room, searching for the figure of his dad. He gently rubbed the bandages on his finger. Fresh blood had formed at the cut. He pressed the call button for the nurse.  He saw the TV screen above his bed. It showed a news report about the siege on Government House. His stomach clenched, like he’d been punched in the gut by a fist. The nurse arrived. ‘Mr. Bradley, are you okay?’

‘Argh, my finger. It’s bleeding. Plus, it kinda hurts again,’ he said. ‘Looks like your stitches have come loose. I’ll go and get some fresh bandages, and some pain medication.’

‘Dad was here before. Do you know where he is?’

‘I think he’s gone to get some coffee. He said he shouldn’t be too long,’ she said. She checked his temperature, then made her way out. A few moments later, the door opened. John returned. Coffee in hand. He had an extra one for Jarrah.

‘Dad, I thought you’d gone.’

‘Nah, I’m here for the long haul, son. How are you feeling?’

‘Not bad. Pain is coming back. The army nurse went to get some meds.’

‘Perfect. I got you a hot chocolate. Thought it might perk you up.’ John sat on the chair next to Jarrah’s bed.

‘Thanks, I saw the news. Did this really happen?’ he asked, pointing to the screen. John saw the news report. He realised he’d forgotten to switch it off.

‘Yeah, I heard about it a short time ago.’

‘Have you spoken to Mum, is she okay?’

‘Calm down, buddy. She’s fine. The AFP raided the house. She’s safe.’ Jarrah relaxed. ‘I’m about to give her a call. You need to get some rest, buddy.’

Police helicopters swooped overhead as reinforcements arrived at Government House. Darrin found himself in the midst of the action. He clutched his radio. Darrin’s eyes drifted to the BMW parked nearby, where his partner, Nicole leaned against the hood. Her chest heaved with the effort of the intense gun battle they’d faced. She ran a hand through her hair, pushing a loose strand behind her ear. ‘You did good back there, Bailey,’ he said.

‘Thanks, Darrin. So did you,’ she said. She patted him on the shoulder. ‘What’s happening with the President?’

‘Major Dawson told me she’s in Sydney.’

‘Thank God. That was too close.’ Darrin twisted the cap off the water bottle and handed it to her.

‘Take a breather. You earned it.’ Nicole took a sip of water.

As she drank, Darrin’s eyes scanned the surround-ings, ensuring that the threat had been neutralised. His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he fished it out.

‘O’Connor.’

‘It’s Paul. Darrin, what’s happening there?’

‘The residence is secure. General Stanley and his men are out. The President’s safe.’

‘Nice work, O’Connor. You and Bailey did a hell of a job.’

‘Just doing our job, Boss. TRT did most of the work.’

‘Okay, finish up there with the officers, then head back. Debriefing in an hour.’

‘No problem. We’re heading back now.’

# TWENTY-ONE

*Holsworthy Army Base,*

*Sydney*

‘Breathe normally,’ the doctor said, as he listened to Merin’s heart. ‘How are you now?’

‘Aside from shattered nerves, I’m fine.’

‘Well, your blood pressure is through the roof, which is not surprising. I’d like to keep you here overnight, run some tests.’

‘Is that necessary?’ The doctor removed his latex gloves, and Merin slipped on her blazer.

‘I’d be more comfortable with you being here. You’re dehydrated, and that wound looks like it could use some attention.’ A blood stain formed on her neck from where Arthur tried to shoot her. She lowered her head as the room began to spin. Her stomach churned. The doctor noticed her closing her eyes.

‘Are you okay, ma’am?’ asked the nurse as he rested his hand on Merin’s left shoulder.

‘I’m ok, a bit sluggish. I’m a bit thirsty.’

‘I’ll get you some water,’ he said. ‘and we’ll start an IV drip.’ The nurse turned to speak with one of the army doctors.

‘Madam President, your husband is on the phone.’ The soldier handed her a mobile phone.

‘Johno?’

‘Merin, thank God. I’ve been worried about you.’

‘Thanks, Johno. I’m a bit dehydrated. The doctors are looking after me. They want to keep me here overnight for observation.’

‘That’s probably for the best.’

‘I can’t believe this happened.’

‘I know, me either. I’m going to fly out to Sydney first thing in the morning,’ said John.

‘How’s my boy?’

‘He’s fine. He’s resting comfortably. The surgeons did a great job at reattaching his finger. It’ll be some time before he’ll be able to use it, though.’

‘I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.’

‘Don’t say that Merin. You have nothing to be sorry for.’

‘If I’d stayed in Alice Springs, this wouldn’t be happening.’

‘Stop that talk, Merindah. You’re the first President of Australia. Something we never thought would ever happen in this country. We will get through this, I promise. I love you.’

‘I, I love you too.’ The call ended.

‘Are you okay, Nicole?’ asked Darrin, as he killed the engine of the BMW X5.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Trying to wrap my head around what happened.’

‘I know. But the important thing is, the President’s safe,’ said Darrin. The car door creaked open, breaking the spell of silence. ‘We’d better get inside.’ They stepped into the crisp air, the concrete walls of the AFP Headquarters towering above them. Darrin led the way, his footsteps echoing in the empty garage, a solitary sound in the cavernous space. As they approached the entrance, Darrin stole a glance at Nicole. She was focused, determination replacing the shock that had gripped her a short time ago. Darrin guided Nicole towards Paul’s office. Darrin tapped on the glass door and Paul summoned them in. He’d finished up a phone call.

‘Welcome back, you two. How are you holding up?’ he asked. They stood in front of his desk, exhausted.

‘Not great to be honest. We’re still in shock by what happened at Government House,’ said Nicole.

‘I can understand that. The good news is that the President is in safe hands,’ said Paul. Federal Agent Meyers stepped in.

‘Sorry to interrupt, the briefing is ready to go,’ said Felicity, and Paul nodded.

‘Thanks, Felicity.’ Paul glanced at Darrin and Nicole. ‘Right, let’s get this done.’ He stood and followed his subordinates out.

Nate Turner pushed through the door of the Counter-Terrorism Command office, shaking off the lingering haze of his quick bathroom break. It had been a long, tiring shift, urgent calls, frantic bursts of data, and the endless hum of computers. *I’m used to this*, he reminded himself. *But it’s wearing me down anyway.* He slipped into his chair, logging back onto his workstation with a practiced flick of his fingers. The overhead lights buzzed softly, reflecting off an array of monitors that blinked with security feeds and code windows. He nearly jumped out of his seat when Angela Wells appeared behind him, tapping him on the shoulder. ‘Ange, you scared the crap out of me,’ Nate huffed, one hand clutched to his chest.

‘About time you got back,’ she said, not unkindly, but with an urgency that pricked Nate’s senses. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and gestured at his screen. He swivelled, casting a quick glance around the open-plan office. Teams of officers and analysts at their respective desks, monitors casting bluish glows on tense faces. Inspector Paul Duncan’s door stood open across the room, and beyond it, Nate could see Darrin and Nicole conferring on something in hushed tones.

‘What’s up?’ Nate murmured, taking a sip of the cold coffee on his desk.

‘We finally got that CCTV footage from the holding room where Williams killed himself.’

‘Bout bloody time. Let’s see it.’ She nodded, pointing at his main display.

‘I sent it to your screen. Heads up, it’s not good.’ Nate tapped at his keyboard, an uneasy knot forming in his stomach. A video feed opened, the timestamp indicating it was from several hours ago. Scrambled footage flickered, grainy colour, a camera angled at the door leading to an interview room. The same room where Arthur Williams was being held. A senior constable could be seen standing in front, taking guard. Nate leaned forward, brow furrowing. He saw another figure step into the frame. The figure could be seen talking with the constable. Nate watched him closely and saw him hand the constable something. Then, the constable disappeared. The figure disappears into the room. A few moments later, as Nate skips over the long pause, the door opened again. The figure’s back is turned, obscured from the camera. But as he closed the door, his head turned. It wasn’t for long, but just long enough for Nate to see it clearly. His heart plummeted as he realised who the figure was.

‘You, you can’t be serious?’ he whispered, adrenaline surging in his veins. Angela shot him a steady look.

‘That’s exactly who it looks like. I believe he’s the one who killed Arthur Williams.’ Nate was lost for words. ‘And we need to tell the Inspector, now.’ Nate swallowed hard, checking around the office.

‘Yeah,’ he managed, rising from his seat. He grabbed his laptop, heart pounding at the implications of the suspect’s identity. He spotted Inspector Paul Duncan stepping into the briefing room, with Darrin and Nicole in tow. Angela placed a reassuring hand on Nate’s shoulder. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘We have to show him this.’ Exhaling a shaky breath, Nate squared his shoulders. *Whatever happens next,* he told himself, *this new evidence just changed the game.* He clutched the laptop and followed Angela toward the briefing room, each stride carrying the weight of a secret that could blow the entire investigation wide open.

Darrin and Nicole stepped into the briefing room with Paul following close behind. They sat opposite each other, with Simon Harper taking a seat at the foot of the table. ‘Right, apologies for keeping you all waiting. I know you’re all tired. It’s been a hell of a day for all of us, but you’ve done great work today.’ The team kept their focus on Paul as he spoke. ‘The President is at Holsworthy Army Base in Sydney. She’s being kept there for additional security purposes, but in the morning, she’ll be heading to the Admiralty House. As for the hostiles, it’s confirmed they’ve all been eliminated by Tactical Response, including their leader, General Stanley.’ The federal agents sighed and chatted amongst each other. Nathan Turner and Angela Wells stepped in. ‘Yes, Nate? What can I do for you?’

‘Inspector, there’s something you should see.’ He placed the iPad next to Paul. ‘We managed to repatriate the CCTV footage from Williams’ holding room.’ That piqued Darrin and Nicole’s curiosity, as did Simon’s.

‘I thought that was corrupted?’

‘It was, but we worked our magic and managed to repatriate the drive,’ said Nate. Darrin applauded Nate’s expertise, but Simon became concerned. He stood, and buttoned his blazer.

‘Excuse me, I have to make a phone call,’ said Simon. Paul nodded, and Simon slipped out. Darrin watched his colleague as he left the briefing room.

‘What did they capture?’

‘You need to see this.’ Nate pressed a button on the screen, and the video buffered. CCTV footage appeared, and Paul, along with everyone else, watched the screen with growing unease.

‘What are we looking at here?’

‘The footage shows a suited man approaching the interview room where Arthur Williams was held. He appears to be speaking with the uniformed constable who was guarding Williams. The constable disappears along the hall. The male figure steps into the interview room. This is when the cameras get distorted,’ said Nate. He fast forwarded the footage. ‘About two minutes later, the door opens again.’ Nate played the video, and as he watched, Paul recognised the figure.

‘You can’t be serious about this?’ Darrin got out of his chair and approached Paul. ‘This is unbelievable.’

‘Simon is the mole we’ve been looking for all this time?’

‘Where is he?’

‘He said he had to make a phone call.’ Darrin looked around the main floor, but Simon had disappeared.

‘I think he’s trying to escape the building,’ said Darrin. Before Paul could say anything, Darrin rushed out of the room. Paul picked up the phone.

‘This is Inspector Duncan. I’m giving the authority to issue a Level One Security Lockdown of the build-ing. This is not a drill. Repeat, not a drill.’ The entire building echoed with a loud, pulsing security alarm. Simon panicked and his cautious walk became a barrel-ling run. He charged along a corridor and flew into one of the elevators. He jabbed the button for the ground floor car park. As the doors began to close, he took out his mobile phone to dial a number.

‘Yes?’

‘It’s me. We have a problem. They found out about my involvement.’

‘That is a problem. Have you left the building yet?’

‘Not yet, they’ve raised the alarm. I’m heading to the car park now.’

‘You got your passport ready?’

‘Yes. I need to make final arrangements and I’ll be ready to leave.’

‘Hurry. You need to get to the airport in twenty minutes. Don’t get caught.’ Simon checked his watch.

‘I won’t.’ Simon hung up, and pocketed the phone. He had to leave. The elevator arrived at the car park, ground level. He ran to where he’d parked his car, his pulse quickening with each ring of the security alarm. He grabbed his keys from his pocket, and unlocked the door.

Without hesitating, Simon jumped in, and turned over the ignition. The stairwell door opened. Darrin scanned the car park, trying to spot Simon. The desperate screech of tyres came from his left. A car leapt from a parking spot. Darrin withdrew his Glock 19 pistol and took careful aim at Simon’s car. Darrin’s first shot shattered the rear windscreen. He fired another, which hit the driver’s side mirror. Simon swerved the car, attempting to outmanoeuvre the gunshots. Darrin took careful aim, and fired once more. The rear tyre burst with the impact. Simon lost control of the car and smashed into a concrete support beam, deploying the airbag. Darrin ran to the disabled vehicle and raised his gun in anticipation of confronting Simon. He needn’t have worried; the traitor had ended up headfirst in the airbag.

‘Put your hands in the air!’ Simon appeared disoriented and unresponsive. ‘I said, put your hands up!’ Darrin stepped closer. He could see blood across the dashboard and the shattered windscreen. Darrin opened the front door; glass fell on the ground. He unclipped the seatbelt and dragged Simon out of the car by the collar. Using both hands, Darrin slammed Simon against the car, pressing his gun against Simon’s neck. ‘You’re a fucking traitor, Simon. How could you betray us like that?’

‘Go to hell, O’Connor.’ Darrin wanted nothing more than to put a bullet into Simon’s head. He gripped Simon’s throat and considered pulling the trigger. Paul arrived along with several senior constables to secure the area. Darrin let go of Simon; killing him wouldn’t achieve anything. The traitor gasped, but Darrin had no sympathy.

‘Take Sergeant Harper into custody.’ The senior constables moved in, cuffed Simon.

‘Darrin, are you okay?’

‘No. Simon being the mole destroys everything.’

‘Look, I can’t believe it either, but we have to hold on to our belief in each other and our mandate.’

# TWENTY-TWO

Merinlay in the hospital bed. The memories of the siege clawed at her consciousness, refusing to let go. The images of chaos, the shouts, the gunfire, they replayed like a relentless loop in her mind. She tried to push them away, to find solace in the quiet of the hospital wing, but the constant interruptions from nurses checking her vitals added to her frustration. Merin grabbed the plastic cup on the bedside table, its cool surface a fleeting comfort against her clammy palms. She took a sip of water, the taste familiar and grounding. The door to the hospital room opened, and Joe stepped in. ‘How are you holding up, sis?’

‘I’m okay. I can’t shake off the images.’ Joe pulled up a chair and sat beside her.

‘I know. It was hell.’ Merin studied her brother’s face. ‘I didn’t expect to find you awake, brother,’ Merin admitted.

‘Sleep’s a rare commodity these days. Besides, I wanted to check on you.’

‘Thanks. Any news?’

‘Transport’s been arranged. You’ll be heading to the Admiralty House in the morning. Security says it’s the safest place for you right now.’

‘And what about a public statement? We need to address the people, assure them we’re still standing.’

‘Yeah. I was thinking the same. I’ll contact the Premier’s office first thing in the morning, arrange for a statement at the Opera House. The people need to see that you’re all right.’ Merin exhaled, a mixture of relief and anticipation washing over her.

‘We can’t afford to let fear take hold.’ Joe stood.

‘I’ll get on it first thing. You try to get some rest.’ Joe turned to leave. Alone once more, Merin sank back into the pillows. She closed her eyes, hoping to find respite in the dark.

A soft glow permeated the room. Merin opened her eyes, the hospital surroundings replaced by a dreamscape. Standing at the foot of her bed, Ma, her mother appeared, but not as she remembered her in life. Ma appeared as a spirit, a shimmering presence of ethereal light. Surprise and disbelief flickered across Merin’s face.

‘Ma? What—’ Ma’s voice resonated like a gentle breeze.

‘What’s the word, kid?’ she asked, as she carried on with her knitting.

‘Ma, I never expected to see you again.’

‘I’ll always be here for you, kid.’

‘Ma, I needed you today. I needed your guidance.’ Ma’s ethereal form took a step closer.

‘I’m sorry, kid. I should’ve been there for you, always.’ Merin and Ma shared a time of reconciliation, the hospital room faded away, and Merin found herself cradled in the arms of peace; the siege, the assassination attempt on her life at Commonwealth Park, Jarrah’s kidnapping, all became distant echoes. She put that behind her and thought back to the Prime Minister’s victory speech.

*Parliament House, Canberra*

*One Week after the Republic Referendum*

*2023*

A week had passed since Australians voted to become a republic, yet the air still crackled with the aftershocks of historic change. Crowds gathered on the grassy forecourt, flags both new and old waving in the breeze. A broad stage had been erected near the front steps, flanked by cameras capturing every angle for an international audience. At the centre of the stage stood Prime Minister Stephen Archer, backlit by the midday sun. Dressed in a crisp navy suit, he pressed his palms against the podium, steadying himself. The hush that fell over thousands of onlookers was almost reverent. *This is it*, he reminded himself, a moment etched into Australia’s collective memory. But he couldn’t help be reminded of the tragedy that took place not far from here. Six people lost their lives in a terrorist attack. The AFP had confirmed it was the workings of a pro-Monarchist group who hated the idea of Australia becoming a republic. He hated himself for that loss, and knowing it was because Australia wanted to change. Of course, he couldn’t change what happened, and he couldn’t let fear take over. His voice carried across the sea of faces, measured yet brimming with emotion. ‘Fellow Australians**,** a week ago you made your voices heard. You chose resoundingly to shape a new identity for our nation. The referendum passed, and we embark on our journey as a republic.’ Applause burst from the crowd. Smiles and tears mingled among them as Archer paused, letting the cheers swell. In the front row, journalists craned their microphones closer. Families in the back of the crowd waved homemade signs: *Australia: Proudly Independent*, *First President, New Future*. The Prime Minister continued with re-newed conviction: ‘This was not a decision taken lightly. For over a century we lived under the Crown, an era shaped by tradition and the influence of another land. But now, we stand on our own, guided by the will of *our* people: modern, united, and free to choose our destiny.’ More applause, this time joined by whistles and a triumphant chant. Standing a few steps behind the Prime Minister stood Merindah Bradley, her posture upright, eyes glistening with the weight of the occasion. Clad in a sleek cream blazer, she exuded both composure and warmth. At her side, John Bradley, her husband. offered a supportive hand on her shoulder, while her brother Joe Pittman smiled broadly, capturing the moment on his phone. Jarrah Bradley, Merin and John’s son was with them also. The Prime Minister gestured toward Merindah, his voice ringing with respect. ‘Today, I’m honoured to stand beside Merin-dah Bradley, confirmed by our Parliament as the first President of Australia. She has demonstrated incredible leadership, wisdom, and compassion throughout this transformative period.’ Merindah stepped forward to a wave of cheers. The microphones picked up the Prime Minister’s next words, resonating above the crowd: ‘In President Bradley, we see a commitment to all Australians: city dwellers, rural communities, and First Nations people alike. We see a leader who will uphold our freedoms, protect our diversity, and forge the next chapter in our national story.’ A loud roar erupted; the crowd rose to its feet in a show of unity. Merindah smiled, placing a hand over her heart in gratitude. John squeezed her arm, pride evident in his teary eyes. Joe gave a quick nod, scanning the throng with an expression that combined disbelief and elation. ‘Let this day be remembered as one of renewal. Let it inspire future generations to believe that *we,* as Australians, can shape our destiny. Under President Bradley’s guidance, we will face the world with confidence, standing as a nation forged in independence and a shared, un-wavering spirit. *Long live the Republic of Australia!’* The final words ignited a thunderous chorus of applause, camera flashes strobing across the podium. Merindah stepped to the microphone, ready to address her fellow citizens for the first time as President. In that breathless moment, the crowd leaned in, hearts pounding with collective pride. Australia took its next step, emerging from a century of monarchical ties into a bright, uncertain future, buoyed by hope and unity in the face of a new era.

*Monday, 24 November 2025*

*Republic Day*

The federal agents waited in the briefing room, waiting in silence. ‘Nicole, are, are you all right?’ asked Darrin. Nicole sobbed, and wiped her nose.

‘I’ll be fine, still in shock by all of this,’ she said. Darrin placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting. How are you holding up?’

‘Not good to be honest. What’s happening with Simon?’

‘Simon is being remanded into custody. He’ll be charged with conspiracy to commit murder and treason.’ Darrin and Nicole found it difficult to form words. ‘I realise this is hard for you both, but it’s being dealt with.’ Paul checked his watch. ‘It’s now well after one in the morning. I want you both to go home and get some sleep.’ Darrin stood up, the adrenalin kicking in.

‘I’m too wired to sleep, Boss. But I do want to speak with Simon.’

‘No. I’m not going to allow that, Darrin. Mackenzie has added a higher level of access to him.’

‘Dammit, Boss, he betrayed us…sorry, I didn’t mean to snap.’

‘It’s fine, mate. I understand. I’m just as angry. But I’m afraid with your current mental state, I’m going to deny you access. It’s going to be tough, but you’ll get your chance to speak with him in due course, but right now, I need you two to go home. Get some rest.’ Paul stood and buttoned his blazer. ‘That’s an order.’ He turned and made his way out of the briefing room.

‘Are, are you gonna be okay getting home?’ Nicole stood.

‘Yeah, I’ll be fine.’ Nicole grabbed her leather jacket and dragged herself to the door. ‘See you in a few hours. Night.’

‘Night.’ The pain of Simon’s betrayal sunk deep into his bloodstream, like an addictive drug. He thought about going behind Paul’s back and storming into the interview room. But he knew that would be the wrong thing to do. He respected Paul’s decisions, and going against him would break that trust. Nicole Bailey fumbled with her key in the lock, cursing under her breath. Her Toyota Camry lay silent, unused for the last twelve or so hours. She nudged the door open, and climbed into the front seat. The exhaustion of the day pressed on her shoulders like a heavy cloak, a day that had started with some sense of routine, only to unravel into Simon Harper’s unimaginable betrayal. She inserted the keys into the ignition, but failed to start it up. The images from earlier replayed in her mind: the frantic radio calls, the shocking moment Simon turned his gun on them, and the revelation that he had been working against everything they stood for. *He was one of us.* The thought churned her stomach, a dull ache forming in her chest. She dropped her phone and bag onto the passenger seat, and buckled up her seatbelt. A ring of sweat had stained the back of her blouse; the day had been long, and usually she had time to change. She leaned back against the leather chair, her hands gripping the steering wheel as she closed her eyes. *Give me five minutes to breathe,* she told herself. *Just five.* But the silence offered no comfort, only a chance for her thoughts to overwhelm her. *Why, Simon?* she wanted to scream, remembering the easy camaraderie they’d shared on so many ops. *Was it the money, or something more twisted?* A tremor passed through her as the betrayal sank deeper, stinging like a fresh wound. Nicole forced herself upright, padding into the small kitchen. A half-finished take away coffee from that morning greeted her in the cup holder. She grimaced, picked it up, and thought about taking a sip. Instead, she reached for the water bottle sitting on the passenger seat. Even that felt like a laborious chore tonight. She sipped, the water cool against her parched throat. An image flickered in her mind: Darrin, dishevelled and hollow-eyed, leaning against a patrol car as the para-medics cleared the scene. He’d looked one step away from collapsing. *At least I know he made it home,* she reflected with some relief, recalling the brief text exchange they’d had on the drive back to headquarters. Her phone buzzed on the table, a short vibration. She snatched it up, pulse quickening. *Maybe the Boss. Or new intel about Simon.* But it was just a message from a colleague, checking in. She set it aside, not ready to talk about it all just yet. She caught her reflection in the rear-view mirror, a woman with heavy-lidded eyes and flustered hair. *You look like hell, Bailey,* she told herself. That was fine; she felt like hell. She took a larger gulp of water, the sudden urge to cry catching her off-guard. *Hold it together, Bailey.* There were forms to file, statements to record, a chain of evidence to build if they were going to prosecute Simon. The betrayal had ramifications she couldn’t begin to calculate. All at once, a strangled sob escaped her. The day’s events roared through her mind in a torrent: the shock on her team mates’ faces, the gunfire. She braced herself against the dashboard, tears sliding down her cheeks. *This is so messed up.* She allowed herself the moment of weakness, shoulders quivering under the invisible weight. Eventually, the sobs faded to tremors. She wiped her face, splaying her fingers wide against the sink. Her phone buzzed again, a quieter hum this time. She glanced at the screen, Felicity Meyer’s name. For an instant, she almost let it go to voicemail, but then she pressed: Answer. ‘H-hey,’ she croaked, her voice betraying her tears.

‘Hey, Nicole. You okay?’ Felicity asked. ‘I, I just wanted to check on you.’ Nicole sniffed, forcing a shaky chuckle.

‘Thanks, mate. It’s been a day.’

‘You can say that again,’ came her faint laugh. ‘I’m here if you need to talk.’ She closed her eyes, swallow-ing the lump in her throat.

‘I appreciate it, Felicity. I just, he was one of us, you know?’ A pause.

‘Yeah.’ The empathy in his voice threatened to unearth fresh tears, but she clung to composure. ‘Try to get some rest, okay?’

‘I’ll try,’ she murmured, blinking hard against the sting in her eyes. ‘You too.’ They hung up, the phone going silent in her hand. Nicole took a final sip of water, then turned over the ignition. She found the last bit of energy to get herself home. *Tomorrow,* she thought, *I’ll deal with the fallout. Sort through the evidence. Face the questions.* With trembling fingers, she put the car in gear, then took the parking brake off. Her mind focused on getting home safely.

Paul hated this part of his job. Having to report bad news to his superiors, but it was one of many requirements that came with his level of responsibility. He knocked on the glass door and waited. ‘Ah, Inspector,’ said Anna Mackenzie, as Inspector Paul Duncan stepped in. ‘What brings you by this time of night?’

‘I’ve come to let you know, we have the mole in custody,’ said Paul. Anna’s eyes flickered with a subtle mix of relief and anticipation.

‘Yes, I saw the report. I hope you know the Commander isn’t going to be impressed that one of our officers is a traitor,’ said Anna.

‘I don’t envy you one bit, but I think he should be more concerned by the fact that a senior AFP officer was involved with a conspiracy to assassinate the nation’s first President.’

‘I agree, but nonetheless, it’s what I have to deal with.’ Paul nodded. ‘Who did he answer to?’

‘I’ve got tech working on data mining his phone, hopefully we can uncover any messages, or emails.’

‘Finding out who he reported to is key to solving this investigation.’

‘I understand, and I will be speaking with Simon shortly.’

‘Let me know if he gives you anything.’

‘By the way, you should know that O’Connor requested to see him.’

‘Please tell me you didn’t—’

‘No. He’s gone home for the evening,’ he said. He saw Anna’s shoulders relax. ‘But he’s demanding answers, as is the rest of my team.’

‘And they will get them, Paul. It’s going to be a lengthy process. A senior AFP officer compromised the safety of the nation’s first Indigenous President and would cause quite the media scandal,’ said Anna. ‘Right now we have to focus on finding out who his employer was.’

‘I’ll get to it.’ Paul turned and headed out.

Darrin stumbled into his apartment, the behaviour of a drunkard. Exhaustion weighed on him, a relentless burden he held onto from the day’s events. He wandered into the spacious kitchen, his footsteps echoing in the silence. He opened the fridge door with a heavy hand and grabbed a cold bottle of beer. He twisted off the cap and took a long sip, savouring the cool, bitter taste as it filled his mouth. The alcohol became a feeble attempt to numb the whirlwind of thoughts swirling within him. He slumped onto the plush couch in the living room, the leather cool beneath his fingers. His mind raced, replaying the shocking events of the day. The truth about Simon being a traitor had hit him like a sledgehammer to the chest. His hands trembled as he grabbed the remote control and switched on the television. The screen flickered to life. It showed a news report revealing images about the days’ events. Darrin took another sip of his beer, the bitterness now a reminder of the bitterness in his mouth. He glared at the screen, his stomach churning with unease. One sip turned into another, and Darrin’s vision blurred as he continued to watch the screen. His body trembled with the fatigue of it all, and he knew he needed to collect himself.

Pushing himself up from the couch, he stumbled towards the bathroom. The cool tiles underfoot grounded him in the present. Darrin vomited, his body purging itself of the toxins of the day. It became a visceral reminder of the darkness that had infiltrated his world. With an unsteady gait, he moved to the shower, not bothering to undress. He needed the cold spray of water to wash away the remnants of the day’s chaos. He twisted the tap and cool water cascaded over him, drenching him in icy rivulets. Darrin leaned against the slick tiles, clothed and shivering. He let the water wash over him. The pressure of it against his skin became a stark contrast to the chaos within his mind. He closed his eyes and tried to find some semblance of peace. But the images of Government House under siege and the revelation of Simon’s betrayal haunted him. The pressure became too much, and he crumpled to the shower floor, curling into a foetal position. His shoulders shook with silent sobs, the water mixing with his tears. The faint buzzing of his mobile phone interrupted him. He used the last inch of strength to climb out of the cold shower, and checked the screen. ‘H-hello?’

‘Hey. I hope I didn’t wake you,’ she said.

‘No, no. I wasn’t asleep. I just had a shower. I’m soaking wet. I’m still in my work clothes.’

‘Oh, shit. Mate, are you okay? Do you need me to come over?’

‘No, I’m okay. It’s been a shitty day.’

‘Yeah, you can say that again. Have you heard anything from the Boss?’

‘No. I keep checking my phone. I thought it was him calling.’

‘Sorry. I wanted to make sure you got home safely.’

‘It’s okay, thanks. I think I need to crash.’

‘Join the club. Look, try and get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning. Take care.’

‘Thanks, Nicole.’ Darrin hung up.

# TWENTY-THREE

Paul Duncan stepped into the windowless holding room. His eyes lit up with rage as he came face to face with Simon, his former second in command, sitting at the table. Two senior constables stand behind him, taking guard, watching his every move. ‘Surprised to see you here, Duncan,’ said Simon, as he leaned for-ward. Paul didn’t say anything at first. He hesitated, and took a seat on the metal chair opposite him.

‘Cut the bullshit, Simon,’ said Paul. He placed a folder on the table in front of him and opened it.

‘If that’s even your real name.’

‘So, you figured out who I am?’

‘Correct. You’re a traitor.’

‘No, Inspector. I’m a Patriot. A true believer in the British Monarch, not the Republic.’

‘Why don’t we skip this song and dance and get straight to the point? We both know how this is going to end?’ asked Paul, twiddling a pen. ‘Tell us what you know, who hired you to betray your country?’

‘What makes you think I’m going to give you anything?’

‘You conspired to assassinate the first President of Australia.’

‘I demand to speak with a lawyer.’

‘No. You’re a killer, Simon. Right now, you’re being held under the Anti-Terrorism Act which gives us the right to question you without the presence of legal counsel.’

‘What do you want, Paul?’

‘I want the truth: why did you betray this country?’

‘Fine, but I want something in return.’

‘You’re not getting anything but a prison sentence.’ Simon leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

‘Then I have nothing more to discuss.’

‘If you’re not going to cooperate, I may as well add two murders to your charge.’

‘What do you mean?’ Paul showed him photos from CCTV footage. Simon leaned forward and observed each of the photos.

‘We know you killed Perry Haynes, we know you also killed Williams. You’ll be charged for his murder.’

‘Haynes knew the risks of getting involved. As for Williams, he was a piece of shit: a pawn if you will.’

‘You killed two people, Simon. I don’t think the courts will ignore that little detail. Killing two material witnesses in the middle of an investigation is a serious crime in itself.’ Simon squirmed in his chair.

‘I killed them because it was necessary. The person who hired me wanted to make sure you didn’t get close to the shooter before the attempt went ahead.’

‘Tell me, who hired you to do this?’

‘Fine. I’ll tell you who I reported to, but I can’t guarantee you’ll like what I have to say—’

‘Give me a name, Simon.’ He was about to, but a memory flashed in his mind. He grinned.

*Monday, 24 November 2025*

*Republic Day* AFP

Sergeant Simon Harper stood in the foyer of the towering Commonwealth Building in Canberra’s CBD, heart pounding against his ribcage. He exhaled, trying to still the nerves in his stomach as the elevator doors slid open. A quick glance at his watch told him he was right on schedule; time was running short, but this had to be perfect. He gripped the handle of a sleek black case, rectangular with silver rimming, heavy with lethal purpose. The elevator crawled, as if someone was hoisting it by hand. Even though his reflection in the brushed metal walls showed a composed expression, his mind raced: *So this is it*, he thought. *No going back once I pull the trigger*. His superiors believed him to be a straight-arrow sergeant, but the truth was murkier; he had debts, alliances, reasons that compelled him to do the unthinkable. When the doors chimed open on the top floor, he hurried down a narrow corridor, ignoring the curious glance of a lone janitor. He slipped through a heavy fire door onto the rooftop, where a stiff wind whipped at his hair. Perfect vantage point, he noted, scanning the cityscape below. A short wall rimmed the roof’s edge, providing just enough concealment if anyone thought to look up. He set the black case on a battered table near a rusted air conditioning unit. *Stay calm*. Flicking open the catches, he lifted the lid to reveal the distinct pieces of an Australian Army SR-98 sniper rifle. A wave of nostalgic pride coursed through him; back in the army, he’d trained as a sniper, one of the best. Now that skill was about to serve a far darker cause. Piece by piece, he assembled the weapon with the methodical care of someone who’d done it countless times before. The metal segments slid together with a faint click, each motion precise. *Focus on the job*, he told himself, sealing away any lingering guilt. He checked the scope alignment, tested the bi-pod’s stability on the rough concrete, and loaded the ammunition with a soft snick. The entire process took under five minutes, but every second felt like an hour. Straightening, Simon Harper let his gaze roam across the rooftops opposite him. The wind still buffeted his perch, but he welcomed the cool air on his flushed face. Then, he glanced at his phone. A single text glowed on the screen:

*Is it done?*

He responded:

*Not yet. In position. Will text to confirm*.

The reply was immediate:

*Good. No mistakes.* Simon pocketed the phone, rolling his shoulders to dispel tension. *No mistakes. Right*. He’d been told exactly who to target: Perry Haynes, CEO of the Royal Vanguard. The man was suspected of holding valuable information that threatened certain powerful interests. Powerful enough to bribe or coerce a once-honourable sergeant into murder. He lowered himself to the edge of the rooftop, rifle balanced on its bipod. Through the scope, he scanned the street below. It was busy, people moving in and out of buildings, but his eyes homed in on the structure across the square: the main entrance of an office building. *That’s where Darrin O’Connor and Nicole Bailey will be bringing Haynes out*. He recognised them from briefings, fellow AFP agents who believed themselves on the side of law and order. They have no idea I’m up here, he mused grimly. His earpiece crackled with distant city noise, leftover from a police band he still had access to. The wind gusted, threatening to skew his shot, but he compensated, adjusting the scope’s windage. *Stay focused. You’re a sniper, and this is your range*. At last, movement. He spotted two figures: Federal Agents Darrin O’Connor and Nicole Bailey, both guiding a handcuffed man in a crisp business suit: Perry Haynes. Simon’s breath caught, a surge of adrenaline making his palms damp. Haynes appeared worried, glancing around. He had every reason to be, though not in the way he thought. Simon steadied the rifle, the crosshairs dancing over Darrin’s shoulder before shifting to Haynes. *I can’t let them take this guy back to headquarters*, he reasoned. *He’ll squeal like a stuck pig*. His finger lightly touched the trigger, the moment he’d dreaded yet also felt compelled to see through. Goosebumps prickled along his arms. *One shot. That’s all I need.*Darrin paused to unlock a waiting vehicle’s door, and in that split second, Haynes turned, offering Simon a near-perfect profile. The crosshairs aligned with lethal precision. No second thoughts now. He had his orders. Simon’s muscles tensed, and he squeezed the trigger. The rifle cracked, echoing across the rooftop. In the scope’s aftermath, he watched Haynes’ body jerk, blood blossoming across his tailored suit. *Bullseye*. Darrin and Nicole dove behind the car, eyes wide, seeking the unseen shooter. But Simon was already moving, pulling back from the rifle, flattening his body.

The faintest smile curled his lips as he saw Perry Haynes lying motionless on the concrete, a small cluster of frantic onlookers rushing to him. No more confessions, no more risk. He felt a surge of grim triumph, mixed with bitter guilt. This is the path I chose. Lowering the rifle, he tapped out one final text: *Done***.** He snapped the phone shut, forcing aside the wave of self-loathing threatening to swamp him. *Get out clean*, he reminded himself. *No trace*. With practiced efficiency, he began disassembling the sniper rifle, piece by piece, returning it to the black case. He’d vanish into the city, leaving the AFP to reel from the loss of their star witness.

*The Lodge, Canberra*

*Tuesday, 25 November 2025*

It was well after two in the morning when Prime Minister Stephen Archer finally pushed away from his desk and rubbed his tired eyes. The warm glow of the lamp on the side table cast deep shadows across the private study at The Lodge, giving the room a hushed, intimate atmosphere. For the several years, ever since announcing his plan to make Australia a republic, Stephen felt as though he’d aged a decade, crises and challenges piling one on top of another. But he refused to let the haters win. He let out a long breath and slipped on his reading glasses, intent on skimming one last intelligence report before collapsing into bed for a few hours. The faint hum of the heater and the ticking of a nearby clock underscored the late hour. *Just one more file*, he told himself, fighting the urge to doze off. A soft knock at the door interrupted the silence. Stephen glanced up, surprised anyone was still awake. The door opened a crack, and Alyssa Crawford peered in, her own exhaustion evident in the dark circles under her eyes. ‘Prime Minister.’ she said quietly, ‘sorry to disturb you so late.’ Stephen stood, running a hand through his rumpled hair.

‘Alyssa, you really need to get some sleep,’ he admonished gently. Despite his fatigue, his voice held concern. He moved to the side table, pouring a small measure of Scotch into a crystal tumbler. Alyssa stepped inside, closing the door behind her.

‘I know,’ she conceded, ‘I’m heading home after this. But I have news from the AFP.’ He turned, drink in hand, and gave her his full attention.

‘What’s happening?’ She placed a slim folder on the desk, her tone turning all business.

‘The Commissioner informed me they’ve detained one of their own officers. Apparently, he was involved in the plot against the President.’ Stephen’s heart sank. *Another betrayal, so soon after everything else*.

‘Bloody oath,’ he muttered, swirling the Scotch in his glass. ‘Has he said anything yet?’ Alyssa tapped the folder.

‘All the details are in here, but so far, he’s refused to talk. The Commissioner will call once they have more.’ Stephen nodded, picking up the folder with a heavy sigh.

‘All right. Thank you, Alyssa. For everything. Now go home and get some rest.’ She managed a tired smile.

‘I will, sir. Good night.’ She slipped out, leaving him alone in the quiet study once more. Stephen sank back into his chair, taking a slow sip of Scotch. The warmth of the liquor offered a momentary solace in the face of growing anxieties. He opened the folder, scanning the pages: Sergeant Simon Harper, arrested in connection with an assassination attempt on President Merindah Bradley. The name alone sent a chill through him. *How could an AFP officer betray his oath so deeply?* Was it for money, or some twisted ideology? He rubbed his temples. *If even one high-ranking AFP member could be turned, how fragile was the security of the entire govern-ment?* The republic was still in its infancy, and it seemed every day brought new threats or revelations of treachery. Finishing his drink, Stephen pushed to his feet and wandered to the tall windows overlooking the manicured grounds of The Lodge. The night sky stretched overhead, pin-pricked with stars. He rested a hand on the cold glass, recalling how hopeful he’d felt the day Parliament ratified the shift to a republic: a bold step into a new era. Now that era was marred by violence and distrust. He wondered if Australia would ever truly recover from the shock of a near-successful assassination, or from learning a trusted AFP sergeant had conspired to kill the nation’s first President. The weight of that uncertainty coiled in his gut. *Then again, Australians were resilient*, he reminded himself. They’d survived economic downturns, wars, pandemics, and natural disasters. *Surely*, he thought, *the republic can weather this storm, too.* Exhaling, Stephen arched his stiff back. He’d grab a few hours of restless sleep before morning came. Then he would face another day of crisis management, legal briefings, and addressing a rattled public. Outside, the faint rustle of leaves seemed to whisper of the challenges still waiting. Yet, in the midst of exhaustion, he found a kernel of resolve. *We chose this path for a reason*, he reminded himself. *Australia deserves its own head of state. We’ll endure.* With that, he switched off the desk lamp, letting the room plunge into gentle darkness. *One more step on a long road.* He turned away from the window, heading for a short reprieve before dawn demanded his leadership once again.

# TWENTY-FOUR

*Sydney, Australia*

TheHolden Caprice WM state car pulled up to the main entrance of Admiralty House. Merindah Bradley stepped out, greeted by a handful of executive staff members. The ever-present mob of reporters, hung around like vultures circling their prey, had congregated at the gates, eager to capture words from the new President. But Merin, focused and resolute, had more pressing matters on her mind. She expressed her gratitude to each one for their support during the trying events. Joe concluded his call and approached Merin. ‘Merindah. The Prime Minister is on the line. He wants to speak with you.’

‘Prime Minister, this is the President. What can I do for you?’

‘Madam President, thank you for taking my call. The AFP Commissioner informed me that his agency has been infiltrated. One of their senior officers was involved in the attempt on your life yesterday.’

‘Oh, well that’s interesting. Has he said anything yet?’

‘The officer arrested has confessed to detectives last night. He admitted that the person who ordered the assassination attempt is someone you know.’

‘Who? Who is it?’ she asked. Joe watched on. The conversation went on for a further ten minutes or so. Merin hung up. She turned, her face bore a shell-shocked expression, one that Joe hadn’t seen since they received the news of their mother’s passing. She pocketed her phone and staggered over to Joe.

‘Sis, what’s wrong?’ Merin could barely hold her-self together.

‘I, I need you to call this number. I need to see this person immediately,’ she said. He followed his sister’s orders to the letter.

Darrin pulled into an empty parking spot at AFP Headquarters. He sat saying nothing, the purr of the Holden Commodore’s v8 engine offering some level of comfort. His mind occupied this morning; thinking about how Simon betrayed him, and everyone else in the AFP. He never imagined it would be Simon, someone he’d looked up to since day one. The radio droned on. He adjusted the volume as a news report gave updates on yesterday’s chaos. Darrin looked to his left as he saw another vehicle pulling in next to him. He recognised it as Nicole’s car. ‘Hey, stranger,’ she said. ‘You’re in early.’

‘Yeah. I didn’t get much sleep.’

‘I know. How are you feeling now?’

‘I’m alright. What about you?’

‘Numb, but I’ll be okay,’ she said, making a half-assed smile. ‘We’d better get inside.’ Nicole opened the door. Darrin did the same, but at a much slower pace. ‘I bought you some coffee.’

‘You’re a lifesaver, Nicole.’ She winked at him. He took a sip, and they made their way into the building. They stepped onto the elevator, and remained silent as it ascended. ‘By the way, I owe you an apology,’ said Darrin, breaking the silence.

‘Oh, what for?’

‘Yesterday, when we left Haynes’ office. I suspected you of being the mole,’ said Darrin.

‘Oh, look it’s fine. I get it, mate. The Boss told you that information in confidence, he trusts you.’ Darrin shrugged. ‘And to be honest, I would’ve done the same.’

*Admiralty House,*

*Sydney*

Merindah Bradley sat hunched in a high-backed chair, her expression vacant and lost in the panoramic view of Sydney Harbour. Her reflection in the glass wearied, mirroring an exhaustion that stemmed not from her physical trials but the emotional strain of an assassination attempt. A shiver of disbelief rippled through her spine as she recalled the siege at Government House, the distant echo of gunshots meant to end her life. The memory remained vivid, raw, painting her quiet solitude with hues of dread and disbelief. The door opened, and Joe stepped into the study. ‘Madam President,’ he murmured. She turned away from the window, her weary eyes meeting his. ‘How are you this morning?’

‘I’m hanging in there, brother. Much better than yesterday.’ Joe sunk into the chair across from her.

‘Is everything ready for the speech?’

‘Yes. There’s a large crowd gathering.’

‘Wonderful news. I thought it was only fair the people get to hear me speak after what happened yester-day.’ Joe nodded.

‘By the way, His Excellency Gordon Lewis is here to see you. You want me to sit in with you?’

‘No, I’ll be fine. Send him in.’ Joe turned, and left the study. The door opened with a groan. Gordon Lewis, the former Governor-General of Australia, stepped in, dressed in a dark blue suit, with a red tie.

‘Madam President,’ he said. She didn’t respond, too angry to worry about pleasantries. ‘First, let me tell you how glad I am that you’re safe. I am appalled by what happened yesterday and last night—’

‘Oh, save it, Gordon.’ He jumped at her sudden outburst. Merin leaned forward and pressed a button on her phone. ‘Send her in, please.’ Gordon looked confused. A few moments later, the door opened. Gordon turned and his eyes lit up as he saw a familiar face step in.

‘Marge?’ he said. ‘What on earth are you doing here?’ Marge stepped forward. Not making eye contact with Gordon, she took a seat next to the President.

‘I’ve invited Ms. Lewis here because she wanted to offer an explanation. She also offered to turn herself in, but I told her it wouldn’t be necessary.’

‘I, I don’t understand.’

‘Margaret came to me a short time ago. She in-formed me that she knew about your plan.’ ‘But, we’ve been divorced for eleven months now.’

‘Yes, and in that month we were still together, I knew you were planning something. I heard your conversations, talking about Merindah Bradley, talking about ending her life. You disgust me, Gordon.’

‘Marge, you have to understand. This was done in the interest of the Australian people—’ Marge stood.

‘No!’ Marge’s voice billowed across the room, piercing Gordon’s ears. ‘You did this for your own selfish desire. Nothing more, nothing less. You’re a criminal, Gordon. This country deserves better than what you have to offer.’ Merin turned to Marge.

‘Thank you for coming in, Margaret. Let me speak with Gordon, then I’ll catch up with you.’ Marge nodded. She stood, then made her way out of the room. Gordon remained seated, the realisation that his entire world had collapsed. Merin waited until the door closed. ‘Mr. Lewis, it’s time to come clean. Either confess, or face the consequences.’ Gordon paused for a moment. He cleared his throat, and straightened his tie.

‘Yes, I was the one who ordered the assassination attempt on your life,’ said Gordon. Merin’s heart dropped. ‘When this country made the decision to remove itself from the Commonwealth and become a republic, I was pissed by the fact that I was being re-placed. My appointment as Governor-General was made not long ago, and when the PM informed me I was being replaced by a fucking Abo President, I knew I had to do something about it.’

‘So, you decided to hire a racist piece of shit human to shoot me in public?’

‘I had no choice. If I wasn’t going to be the Head of State, then neither were you—’

‘This country is a republic, and it will be for as long as I’m breathing.’ Gordon bowed his head, ashamed of what he’d done.

‘What are you going to do, Merindah?’ Merin paused, weighing the punishment in her hands.

‘As President of Australia, it is my duty to disclose this new information to the Attorney-General. How-ever, this country does not deserve to go through a shitty trial that will last for months, perhaps years. It would wreck everything I, and the people of this nation have achieved. I am prepared to let this slide under the table for the nation.’

‘Madam President: I, I don’t know what to say.’

‘I’m not done yet. There are conditions.’

‘Conditions?’

‘I want you to make a public statement, I don’t care when, but I want you to announce that you support my position as President of Australia.’ Gordon knew his political life had ended; at least, his reputation would be intact. ‘Is that understood, Your Excellency?’ Gordon stood in front of Merin and buttoned his blazer. Adjusting his tie, he cleared his throat.

‘Understood, Madam President.’

‘Now, get the fuck out of my house.’ He thought about saying something, but left the office, ashamed of his treachery. Joe returned after the former Governor-General had left. Merin stood, and slipped on her kangaroo-skin cloak. ‘Is Mrs. Lewis still here?’

‘Yes, she’s in the sitting room. Shall I bring her up?’

‘Not right now, I’ll speak to her upon my return,’ said Merin.

‘Of course. By the way, the car is ready for you.’ Merin followed Joe out. ‘What did His Excellency have to say for himself?’

‘Nothing I wasn’t expecting. He admitted to hiring Williams, and authorising the assassination attempt on my life.’ Before she knew it, she climbed into the car with John.

Darrin and the others waited in the briefing room. Paul had been gone for some time now. As they chatted amongst each other, Darrin remained silent, pondering in deep thought. The glass door opened, and Paul entered. ‘Sorry to keep you waiting. I was speaking with Mackenzie. The former Governor-General was summoned to Sydney, so we can assume the President will be dealing with him,’ said Paul.

‘Do we know if he’ll be charged with treason?’ asked Nicole.

‘The punishment will be up to the President. I’m sure she’ll deliver the news in the coming days.’

‘What’s happening with Simon?’ asked Felicity.

'Our detectives will be launching a thorough investigation, and the appropriate action will be taken. The Commissioner wants to make an example of him. He will most likely face criminal charges for engaging in conspiracy to commit murder, and treason,’ said Paul.

‘The traitorous bastard deserves it.’ He knew it would be hard on them, but knew they’d get past it.

‘I will keep you all in the loop about Simon’s hearing, but rest assured, he will face justice.’ That put a smile on the agents’ faces. ‘Right, I know you were all supposed to have yesterday off, so Mackenzie has granted you extended leave. I want you to finish up your reports, then you’re free to head home. Great work, you lot.’ They picked themselves up and made their way out of the briefing room.

‘So, are you coming for a drink?’ she held out her arm, but Darrin checked his watch.

‘It’s like nine o’clock in the morning, Bailey.’

‘So, who cares? It's Republic Day. For us at least.’

‘Fine. I could use a bloody drink. You’re buying though.’

‘Deal.’ They linked arms and headed to the elevator. He couldn’t believe it was over, but he was certainly glad to have had Nicole by his side.

The trip to the Sydney Opera House took less than ten minutes. By the time the President’s car arrived thousands had gathered; waving their flags, cheering, and whistling as the car stopped. ‘We’re here, Madam President.’ Merin looked up as she packed folders of documents into her briefcase.

‘Thanks for being here with me, Johno,’ she said.

‘I’ll always be here for you, Merin. We’re in this together.’

‘Let’s do this.’ Mick exited first and opened the door for the President. The President waved as a thunderous, cheering roar washed over her. The national anthem played as Merin strolled through the sea of people. Security led the President to an area where local media had set up a podium with microphones. The Premier of New South Wales stood at the podium.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the President of Australia, Merindah Bradley!’ Merin stepped up to the podium.

‘Thank you, Premier.’ Merin waited as the crowd’s cheering ebbed away. ‘Yesterday, the people of this great nation came together to welcome the first day of the Republic of Australia.’ The swelling crowd cheered. ‘As we celebrated this new era of Australian history, we were struck by a terrible act, one aimed at destroying all that we have accomplished. I cannot begin to express my outrage, but I want to assure the Australian people that we will rise above this. We will move on. We will stand tall, and we will grow stronger together as the Republic of Australia!’ The crowd erupted into applause. The nation had accepted her, the Australian people approved of her, and she had set the bar to become the nation’s first President of Australia. To her surprise, she saw the ever so faded silhouette of Ma’s spirit. Ma placed a hand on her chest.

Joe stood nearby.

He was convinced he made the right decision, and relieved she accepted the offer to become President of Australia.

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**Glossary of Terms**

**PM** – Prime Minister of Australia

**DG** – Director-General of ASIO

**ASIO** – Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

**AFP** – Australian Federal Police

**ACT** – Australian Capital Territory

**AEC** – Australian Electoral Commission

**AG** – Attorney-General of Australia

**DPP** – Department of Public Prosecutions

**CTC** – Counter-Terrorism Command

**TRT** – Tactical Response Team

**PSO** – Protective Service Officer

**HQ** – Headquarters

**Ngunnawal Country** – Aboriginal name for Canberra

**Fed** – Federal Police

**Pollie** – Politician

**Referendum** – A vote of the Australian people on a proposed change to the Australian Constitution

**Bloody Oath** – Slang term for “of course”

**Vox Pop** - a short video or series of interviews with members of the public

**Sitrep** – Situation Report