

Ashes of the Southern Cross

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Introduction: The Precipice

Before the blinding flash erased it all, the world teetered on a razor's edge, a delicate, fragile equilibrium threatening to collapse into the abyss. For decades, the region had lived under the looming, suffocating shadow of nuclear arsenals, a silent, ever-present threat that colored every interaction and political maneuvering. Yet, nowhere was the tragic, poetic beauty of this doomed era more palpable than in the sprawling, vibrant heart of Western Sydney. The suburbs of Parramatta and Granville were living, breathing epics of their own, modern Odysseys where diaspora communities

had woven their histories into the very fabric of the asphalt. In the twilight hours, the sky above Granville would bruise into magnificent shades of deep violet and bruised plum, casting long, melancholy shadows over the bustling streetscapes. The sensory overload of these streets was a testament to life's stubborn persistence. The air was a thick, intoxicating tapestry of scents: the sharp, citrusy tang of sumac and za'atar wafting from warm Lebanese bakeries, the rich, smoky, deeply charred aroma of charcoal chicken slowly rotating over open pits, and the delicate, sweet scent of night-blooming jasmine clinging desperately to the brick walls of old terraces.

The pungent aroma of street food, once a deeply comforting anchor of community and shared humanity, now seemed to carry a devastating undertone of extreme fragility. The people walking these streets—the modern equivalent of the chorus in a classical Greek tragedy—moved with a quiet, persistent dread. The air, even thousands of miles from any contested maritime border, seemed to hum with an unspoken tension, a collective, vibrating anxiety that seeped like groundwater into the daily rhythm of life. Beneath the brilliant, multi-colored neon signs that bathed the wet pavements in pools of liquid crimson and electric blue, the ambient noise was a beautiful, chaotic symphony. It was a multilingual orchestra of Arabic, Mandarin, Hindi, and thick Australian drawls, all overlapping, debating, and laughing. But beneath the laughter lay a profound, heavy silence. Everyone knew, deep in their bones, that the delicate, complex balance holding peace together was fraying rapidly, unraveling thread by painful thread.

In the heart of Parramatta, where sleek, modern glass towers reflected the murky, historical waters of the Parramatta River, the juxtaposition of the ancient and the hyper-modern felt acute. The

glass facades caught the dying light of the sun, burning like monoliths of gold and copper, a visual prophecy of the fire to come. News channels projected onto massive public screens droned on incessantly, their harsh, white LED light cutting through the dusk, reporting on the escalating, aggressive diplomatic rhetoric and the relentless military posturing. The imposition of a 50% tariff had effectively drawn a line in the sand, and the rhetoric had shifted from diplomatic posturing to existential threats. It wasn't just the high-level political analysts in Canberra who felt the seismic shift in the geopolitical tectonic plates; ordinary citizens carried a grim, unshakeable awareness that their world was ending.

As the streetlights flickered to life, casting an artificial, sickly amber glow over the suburban sprawl, mothers instinctively held their children a little tighter, their knuckles white against the fabric of small jackets. The vibrant, chaotic, deeply saturated colors of daily life—the bright red awnings of fruit grocers, the deep emerald green of the riverbank, the flashing yellow lights of passing trains—suddenly felt muted, filtered through an unseen, suffocating lens of dread. Like the ancient citizens of Troy watching the Greek armada gather on the horizon, the people of Western Sydney went about their evenings knowing the siege was imminent. They just didn't know how, or when, the fragile string would finally snap. Liam Davies, wandering through the fragrant, crowded streets of Granville with his reporter's notebook, felt the tragic poetry of the moment. He smelled the cardamom tea brewing on corner stalls, heard the rhythmic, percussive beat of traditional drums from a nearby celebration, and felt the chilling, cold wind blowing off the harbor miles away. This was a world holding its collective breath on the absolute precipice of its own undoing, blissfully unaware that the impending sunrise would herald a new, terrifying, and violently

radioactive era. Leaving the streets behind, Liam decided on a long drive up the coast to greet the dawn.

Chapter 1: The Flash

The morning dawned over Sydney with a brilliant, piercing azure sky, the kind of flawless, crystalline blue that made the harbour waters sparkle like crushed emeralds under the Southern Hemisphere sun. The air was crisp and carried the city's usual vibrant, chaotic symphony: the deep, resonant, baritone horn of a yellow-and-green ferry cutting aggressively across the white-capped swells of Circular Quay; the shrill, demanding squawks of silver gulls fighting viciously over discarded hot chips on the boardwalk; and the impatient, rhythmic, low-frequency hum of early-morning commuter traffic crawling over the massive steel arch of the Harbour Bridge. At his shaded outdoor cafe table in the distant coastal suburb of Palm Beach, Liam Davies, a junior reporter for a digital news outlet, breathed in the rich, earthy, deeply roasted aroma of espresso beans mingling with the sharp, briny, salty tang of the ocean breeze. It was a comforting, familiar scent that sharply contrasted with the grim, anxiety-inducing headline he was drafting on his tablet. Following the government's sudden imposition of a crippling 50% tariff on Chinese imports, diplomatic channels had gone entirely dark, creating a suffocating vacuum of political communication. The world teetered on a razor's edge, the air humming with unspoken tension.

Beneath the glittering, sun-dappled surface of the Tasman Sea, just beyond the continental shelf, a Chinese stealth submarine—a silent, matte-black leviathan composed of radar-absorbent polymers—slipped undetected past the automated coastal defense sonar nets. Inside its pressurized hull, the lighting was a dim, blood-red, illuminating the sweating faces of the crew as they