

# EXCERPT

Excerpt from *A Line Too Far* by B. C. Colman

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## 3.42 a.m.

*Private quarters, The Lodge, Canberra*

It seemed he had been asleep only minutes when a rustling noise outside the door woke him.

He squinted at the bedside clock. Its dull-green digit flicked to 3.42.

A rap on the door sat him up. He heard a murmur of hushed voices. Then a second, firmer knock brought him to his full senses.

Elaine gave a start.

“What’s happening?” she said.

The door to the private quarters half opened. A stab of light cut in to the room.

Stone tossed off bedclothes and swung his feet to the floor in a single move.

“Prime Minister. Are you awake?”

The urgent voice of John Able seemed incongruous in the pre-dawn bedroom setting.

"Yes, John." Stone stood up uncertainly. "What is it? What the hell's going on?"

Stone could see the tall backlit profile of the Prime Minister's Department's boss in the doorway. Able hesitated a long second.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we have been unable to find the Minister for Defence and General Thompson needs to talk to you — right now."

"At this hour? What's he want that's so bloody urgent?" Stone turned again to the clock. He hadn't been mistaken. It was only 3.42.

Able didn't reply.

"Come on, John, for God's sake." Stone felt a flush of impatience and the first serious stirrings of unease.

"I'll put the general on your secure line, sir," Able answered. He turned and left before Stone could respond. Stone heard several sets of footsteps retreating down the passageway.

Able had arrived with security guards in tow.

\* \* \*

Stone sat on the bedside. Elaine anxiously hurried around to sit next to him. She unconsciously took his left hand, a habit of thirty-two years. They waited in silence for the shrill ring of the secure phone.

When it came, Stone leaned over to push the speaker button. His finger missed. He breathed in deeply, willed his shaking hand to stillness and stabbed a second time.

"General Thompson. What is it?"

"I have some pretty startling news I'm afraid, Prime Minister."

The sentence was left hanging. At sixty-four, General Alan Thompson had just nine months to run as the country's Chief of Defence. He struggled for words to describe his worst military nightmare. And the certain humiliation that would end his career.

Stone waited, slowing his breathing, hoping the general could not hear its raggedness.

"Defence Headquarters took a call from the base commandant at Lavarack, up in Townsville, early this morning," Thompson said. "Since then there's been a steady stream of calls from all our base commanders in northern Queensland, the Northern Territory and the far northwest of Western Australia."

He paused again and heard Stone mutter something indecipherable.

"Forces wearing the uniform of the Chinese People's Liberation Army have seized all our bases in the Top Half — army, air force and naval — the lot."

Stone said nothing, his mind spinning to grasp the news. He worried Elaine's fingers with one hand, twisting the bed covers with the other till his knuckles went white.

"I know it's a lot to take in, sir," Thompson offered in the silence.

Stone cleared his throat. "The Chinese have just seized all of our northern military bases in the last couple of hours and occupied half of our country?"

Before Thompson could answer, Stone went on: "How the fuck could that happen? It's not possible ... are you absolutely sure, Alan?"

He tried to keep any trace of panic from his voice. He saw Elaine staring at him, one hand covering her mouth in shock.

Thompson named all the bases across the vast northern shores of the world's sixth-biggest country. Teams of lightly armed Chinese had simultaneously seized each one without a fight.

The modus operandi was identical. All base commanders reported their fate directly to Canberra as ordered. The Chinese had descended on their unsuspecting targets in anonymous civilian vehicles, mainly buses, four-wheel-drives and even the odd taxi.

The element of surprise was total. The enemy's strength was still unknown but its control in Queensland stretched south to Gladstone.

"There's more bad news I'm afraid," Thompson said. "Our base commanders say the Chinese regard all prisoners as hostages. If

there is any counterattack they will be killed immediately. They are booby-trapping all barracks to guarantee that."

"How many of our people are up there?" Stone realised his voice was a hoarse whisper.

Thompson said there were approximately twelve thousand service personnel and a few hundred civilian contractors on the various bases.

Stone made an effort to collect his thoughts. "If they have Gladstone, are we likely to see them take a shot at Brisbane next?"

"They say not. The message relayed from our commanders claim the Chinese have no further territorial ambitions. This also leads us to believe the actual number of Chinese on the ground is small. I don't think they'd be able to handle a full-scale counter-attack from us so the prisoners' lives are a chip they're playing, at least till they get reinforcements."

Before Stone could speak, Thompson said: "The Chinese also say their ambassador wants to meet you urgently this morning to discuss details of a peace settlement."

"A peace settlement?!" Stone exploded. He felt his pulse race.

He knew why the Chinese might possibly be content with the Top Half: it held most of Australia's mining and energy resources.

The most vulnerable frontier on earth had been protecting some of its most valuable energy riches. It had been breached without a shot fired in anger. It beggared belief.

But Australia had always been an impossible land to defend. A mass the size of the United States but with almost 26,000 kilometres of coastline.

Its resource wealth was scattered over enormous deserts with tiny populations. It was an empty land. It had been a sitting duck for determined invaders ever since Queen Victoria's Imperial forces had claimed it as a British colony more than two hundred years ago.

Stone heaved himself to his feet. "Well, what now? And where the hell is Bob Bradbury? Someone must be able to find him."

"Not so far, sir. I'll get the Defence Minister to call you as soon as we locate him," said Thompson. "Meanwhile we are mobilising

and putting all our forces on full alert. I'll call you directly if there are any further developments."

He asked to be excused and Stone slowly leaned over to cancel the speaker button. He hit it on the second attempt.

\* \* \*

Elaine watched the dawn light beginning to bleed around the edges of the heavy bedroom drapes.

"How could this have happened?" she said quietly. "This is madness."

Stone looked down and shrugged. "This madness happened to the Ukraine. Russia walked in and annexed Crimea," he said. "And got away with it."

Stone put his huge arm around her. They sat motionless, trying to absorb the enormity of the morning's events.

Elaine said, "Do you think the Chinese will get away with it too?"

Stone did not answer. He rubbed his chest and straightened his back.

Elaine shook him by the shoulder. They had to get up. He needed to take charge, she said.

Stone nodded in silent agreement.

He made for the en suite while she went downstairs to stir the rest of the household. But seconds after the shower was flowing the secure phone was ringing again. He trudged naked back to the bedroom while hot water drummed impatiently on the shower box floor.

It was Lindsay Noble who had insisted his call be connected immediately.

The Foreign Minister was in a panic. He had made the first call anyone in his position would after a military attack. To the US State Department in Washington. To invoke the ANZUS Treaty, the cornerstone of Australia's defence strategy since World War Two. Its ultimate security guarantee.

For its part in the alliance Australia had loyally gone off to

war alongside America in its battles around the world, including Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

As he listened, Stone was alarmed his minister, a former strategic affairs professor with the prerequisite alphabet of degrees, had lost any vestige of his usual urbane manner. Noble had reached the US Secretary of State, Ben Strong.

“Christ, Gary, I got Strong on the line and he already knew what I was going to tell him!”

“For heaven’s sake, Lindsay, calm down, man,” Stone said, already fighting an icy shiver in his own stomach.

“He knew all about the Chinese. Everything. The Chinese briefed him as the bases were being seized, for God’s sake,” said Noble.

Stone said nothing.

“Do you realise what this means? They’re going to hang us out to dry. We’re on our own. We’re fucked.”

Noble paused to suck in a breath. “Strong said the Chinese had briefed him because they didn’t want to risk the shock the Yanks would have if they’d turned on CNN and found out. The Chinese didn’t want a macho jerk reaction. They wanted the cool heads in the White House to pacify the big dogs in the Pacific Fleet.”

Noble stopped suddenly. There had been something America had offered. Slowly, imitating Strong’s southern drawl, Noble said: “Lindsay, rest assured we will call immediately for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to condemn this flagrant act of aggression.”

Stone grunted. “Lindsay, they’re are not going to risk a war with China for us. Let’s not kid ourselves. They never were. Not when it came down to the wire. All ANZUS ever entitled us to do was to ‘consult’ with America if we were attacked. There was never any guarantee they would gallop to our rescue in a war. Perhaps if we’d picked up some intelligence before the attacks they may have stationed a carrier force off Queensland but ...”

“Fuck, Gary. We’re on our own. The Chinese ... I cannot believe we fell for all that hoopla and smiling photo ops with the

new chairman. And their Pacific Fleet is off the Queensland coast on its way to Sydney for a goodwill visit, for God's sake."

"Lindsay, settle down, man. You're not helping matters. You're the Foreign Minister, you should know the Yanks and Chinese are the two most interdependent countries in the world. America runs on Chinese cash to fund its economy, China runs on its bullshit undervalued currency and cheap labour to rack up huge trading profits. Neither of them can afford a shooting war with each other."

Stone heard Noble take a slurp of something. He hoped it was only coffee.

Noble said: "The Chinese ambassador has called wanting a meeting. His name is Chen. He's only just been posted here. None of their embassy staff were expecting him. His wife is still in Beijing."

"So we're going to be meeting the next Governor of the Far North," said Stone.

"It's not funny, Gary. But it does look that way if they get away with his ... this ... Christ ... it's unbelievable ..."

Stone told him they would meet the ambassador at The Lodge. Stone was determined not to confront a media pack outside his parliamentary office.

"Lindsay, I really have to go," Stone said.

"But we haven't even begun to discuss our strategy when we sit down with Chen. What's so urgent?"

"I hate cold showers," said Stone.

## 4.15 a.m.

### *Private quarters, The Lodge, Canberra*

Elaine straightened his tie, brushed some imagined lint off his shoulder. He was good to go. She said John Able was in the dining room downstairs working on a timetable for the day. He should eat a good breakfast. It would be a long day.

Stone kissed her and looked around the private quarters. They

were, like The Lodge, comfortable, not palatial. The building had never been intended as a prime minister's official residence when it was built back in 1926, let alone the 21st-century War Office he planned to make it.

Its small dining, lounge and reception rooms downstairs had been big enough for the state and royal occasions they had had to host, so they would be big enough for their new role.

The forty-room Georgian mansion was very close to Canberra City, Parliament and the Federal bureaucracy. Ministers and officials would come to him. He would preserve his precious energy. The media would be kept at bay till he was ready. His doctor would approve.

The Lodge had recently been renovated. It had bombproof windows and a state-of-the-art security system.

He went downstairs to find his department head fully suited at the dining table. Able's fingers were speeding across a laptop keyboard, a semicircle of notes and pads already surrounding it.

Able looked up. He was used to being at the crossroads of all government information.

"Prime Minister, it's getting light in Queensland. We don't have much time before all hell breaks loose," he said. "The news is already the big story of the day on the international news channels."

"And good morning to you, young man," Stone said pulling a chair from the table.

Able grinned and sat back. "Sorry about that, Prime Minister," he said. "Your breakfast is coming. Elaine ordered bacon and eggs. Says it's a special treat. Are you on a diet or something?"

"More like the condemned man's last meal," Stone said, and sat facing Able.

"Just joking," he added, a second too late to prevent a frown crossing Able's face.

Able held out a single sheet of paper. The proposed timetable for the morning. He had arranged a meeting with General Thompson and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) chief Frank Church first off.

The Foreign Minister would be second cab off the rank and then Ambassador Chen of the People's Republic of China. An urgent televised address to the nation was scheduled and then a full Cabinet meeting.

Stone nodded his agreement as his breakfast arrived. Elaine joined the pair and ordered strong coffee.

"Where the hell is Bradbury? Has anyone found the bugger yet?" said Stone hacking into a large piece of bacon.

"Ah, no, sir. Not yet." Able broke eye contact and was suddenly occupied with his papers.

"Well, get someone to find him. Tell him there's a small invasion on. We've lost half the country before breakfast and it would be appreciated if, as the Minister for Defence, he might show up and take some interest."

Elaine raised her coffee cup. And her eyebrows. She took a mouthful and stared at her husband.

"For God's sake, Gary," she said with resignation. "Are you and Mrs Bradbury the only people who don't know?"

A forkful of bacon stopped halfway to Stone's mouth: "Know what?"

"He's been enjoying his lonely nights out in the suburbs for the last six months with a divorcee."

Stone slowly put his fork down, shaking his head.

"Fuck me. You mean the respectably married Minister for Defence is AWOL, out rooting his mistress, while the country is being raped by the Chinese army?"

"Watch your language, Gary. You're not at your trucking company's canteen any more," Elaine said.

"John." Able looked up from his keyboard. "Put Bradbury on your timetable. Before Cabinet meets. And I won't be requiring him at Thompson's briefing."

Stone glanced at the original timetable he was about to hand back for amendment.

"You didn't have Bradbury at Thompson's meeting."

"No, sir," said Able. "I didn't think he'd make the cut."

Stone picked up his fork again. "You're becoming a cynic, young man."

Elaine watched the exchange between the pair. Able was thirty-two, twenty years Stone's junior. But there was an instinctive osmosis between the pair. Able had been appointed to his position by the previous prime minister, an old foe of her husband's.

She knew the position was the most politically sensitive of any departmental job. The nerve centre of every government. Sifting, collating, coordinating and prioritising a flood of sensitive, secret, critical and occasionally embarrassing information.

After winning power, Stone had wanted a fresh face he could trust. A new broom for his new administration.

Amid his search Elaine heard rumours about Able on the cocktail circuit. She confirmed them. Able had told his colleagues he would resign if the next government was to be led by Jeremy Whittacker. She told Stone. He quietly shredded his potential candidates list.

Stone stood up to leave for his meeting with Thompson and Church.

"Well, tell me, before you go. What are you going to do with Bradbury? Sack him?" Elaine said.

Able squirmed at her bluntness.

Stone put his hands in his pockets and stretched backward.

"I'm going to do Defence myself, it'll make things much tidier," he said turning to leave without meeting her eye.

Able stopped him with a polite question: "Prime Minister, do you think I'd better call the Governor General then? He issues the ministerial warrants."

"Oh, shit. Yes, of course. Of course. Thanks, John. Put him on your timetable too."

"Of course, Prime Minister."

Able looked at Elaine. Her reaction following the Bradbury conversation had been a little odd. As though she were disappointed and upset at Stone taking Bradbury's portfolio. There was some strange, new dynamic between them. She sat silent,

deep in thought. Then she finished her coffee and excused herself.

6.30 a.m.

*The Lodge, Canberra*

“Twenty-three million people will be waking up this morning to find their country has been invaded. Their grandfathers’ worst nightmare has become a reality: the yellow peril has swarmed down on them.”

Stone spoke slowly. Seated before him the Defence Chief, General Thompson, and Frank Church, the head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, tension evident in their eyes. They found it impossible to hold his gaze. Instead they sat motionless in the lounge’s big armchairs, bulging briefcases at their feet.

“And every one of those twenty-three million is going to ask the same question: How the hell did this happen?”

Thompson moved to speak but Stone’s right hand shot up to cut him off.

“They will be in a state of shock when they learn that every single guard, at every single military base in the Far North, was derelict in their duty. Not a single shot was fired and the whole takeover was complete in less than an hour over three time zones and four thousand kilometres.”

It was the greatest national military and intelligence debacle in the country’s history.

“And you two are responsible for it. What am I going to tell them?”

Neither man spoke. Neither wanted to be first.

Stone stood up and removed his suit jacket. He crossed the lounge and stared out.

The tense silence grew heavy. Stone pivoted and leaned back on the windowsill crossing his big arms, his body language mak-

ing its own statement and not inviting any response. Finally he strode back to his chair.

"Right. First business of the day. I'm sacking the Minister for Defence."

There was an involuntary intake of air from the young, pinstripe-suited ASIO boss. He crossed his legs in a failed attempt to mask his surprise. Thompson remained still but his lined face began to flush.

"Church, for the sake of national morale and the outward appearance of government competence, you will arrange a cover-up to explain his resignation."

Church looked puzzled and wary.

"Bob Bradbury was AWOL, unreachable, in the early hours of this morning because he was out shagging his mistress when the invading hordes took over the country. Can you imagine the implications if this leaks out? The last thing we need right now is a sex scandal. What we need right now is the full confidence and trust of the people to sort this Chinese shambles out. Find out who this woman is and send her on a long foreign holiday. The same goes for Bradbury's driver. Transfer him today to our Wellington embassy. A promotion. Remind him as forcibly as necessary about his confidentiality agreement."

The two men stared at him.

"Am I clear?"

Church nodded.

Thompson cleared his throat. "Who will be the new Defence Minister then, sir?"

"I will be," said Stone.

Both men nodded neutrally. Their worlds had somersaulted in less than four hours. Stone knew they were worrying about their own fates and was content to let them stew.

"First, I'd like to know what our military status is. Secondly, I'd like to know how it happened."

The old soldier exchanged a glance with Church and began.

It was a simple story of daring military planning, precision, speed and surprise. The current status was also simple: the Chi-

nese had made a clean sweep and occupied all northern army, air force and navy bases. They had thousands of Australian service personnel locked in barracks.

Several patrol boats, three frigates and two Collins submarines were at sea when the attack took place.

One frigate was in the Indian Ocean, the other two off the New South Wales coast.

One submarine was in the Arafura Sea immediately to the north of the country where it had been monitoring scheduled Chinese naval exercises before the Chinese fleet sailed for the Sydney goodwill visit. The other submarine was in the Coral Sea, relatively close to Townsville.

The RAAF's thirty-six Super Hornets along with another seventy-eight, older fighters were at their bases in southern Queensland and New South Wales. The air force had no access to its emergency, defensive, standby airfields in Far North Queensland and the Northern Territory. The Chinese had seized the bases and their skeleton maintenance and security personnel.

Because of the distance from the conventional southern bases to the probable frontline, RAAF fighters would be unable to provide any worthwhile air cover for a land counterattack in the Far North.

Stone was unable to prevent a sigh as the litany of the disaster unfolded.

The Chinese had occupied most of Queensland north of Gladstone, which was 550 kilometres north of Brisbane, the state capital. They had apparently made Queensland's second biggest city, Townsville, with its population of almost 200,000, their administration headquarters. The captured Lavarack base was in one of its outer suburbs.

The Chinese had set up roadblocks along the Bruce Highway outside Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton and Gladstone.

Service personnel not at Lavarack at the time of the raid had been called to their barracks in a general call-up alert in the early hours. In a clever ruse, hundreds of off-base personnel had subsequently been imprisoned as they hurriedly and unsuspectedly

responded. An unknown number of regulars were still free in the city.

The Chinese had seized the rifles and automatic weapons belonging to local police but had allowed them to retain their pistols and told them to maintain civilian law and order. The Townsville chief police inspector had been taken, presumably as a hostage, to Lavarack.

The Chinese were short of manpower, thought Stone.

Roadblocks were also set up on the desert highways leading west to the far-flung mining and outback townships.

The Chinese had mounted a mass cyber attack and created a communications blackout across the occupied areas. Landline and cellphone services had been terminated progressively since 3 a.m.

Internet service providers were disabled. Normal television and radio programmes had ceased and all stations in the north were simultaneously transmitting the same nonstop light music.

But the situation was about to worsen dramatically, Thompson said, gathering a folder from the briefcase he had ignored till then.

Chinese reinforcements were about to land. Satellite reconnaissance had picked up inbound flotillas of small craft packed with men. They had come from the Chinese aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, and its four escort destroyers, which were cruising close to Townsville.

Previously the *Varyag*, the carrier had been purchased partially completed in a controversial deal from a penniless Ukraine in 1992. Refitted, she was a 67,000-tonne, 302-metre-long war machine bristling with thirty-six warplanes.

Stone rubbed his chin. "I can remember when they bought it and towed it to China. They said it was going to be a multi-purpose leisure facility."

He shook his head. Now it was sitting off Australia with enough firepower to sail south and create havoc in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

Thompson looked directly at Stone and said: "Don't forget, sir,

we sold them our carrier for scrap too. They used the *Melbourne* to study how aircraft carrier hulls were constructed."

Stone stared back but made no reply. He knew the Chinese were already trialling their first home-built carrier.

Thompson looked back at his briefing papers. Satellite reconnaissance had revealed the movement of sixteen Chinese jet fighters from the carrier to Townsville's joint military-civilian airport at first light.

"The situation in a nutshell is we have lost our trained, ready, reactionary force, about seven hundred armoured fighting vehicles and a hundred artillery guns in one fell swoop with the takeover of Lavarack," said Thompson. "We have no other forces capable of mounting a counterattack immediately."

Thompson put his papers down and sat back stiffly. He knew his career was over.

He added, almost as an afterthought, "If we did have the forces for a counterattack, we'd have to deal with the Chinese promise to butcher all the prisoners they've taken."

No one spoke.

Stone stood again and walked back to the window. He attempted to calm his racing heart and steady the wheezy breathing he was afraid the others could hear.

Thompson broke the silence.

"It's an issue we'll have to face, sir, if the chips go down," he said quietly. "We cannot sit idly by while China brings in reinforcements. Our position would become militarily hopeless."

Stone stayed at the window, his back to the room.

His mind went back to the comforting Australian Strategic Policy Institute report on national military preparedness he had studied when he took office.

"Australia has the most capable air and naval forces in the South-East Asian region," it had said, "but while restricted by ageing equipment, the Australian Defence Force is highly capable of defeating direct attacks by conventional force. The ADF's intelligence-gathering capacities should allow it to detect any attacking force before it reaches Australia."

6.45 a.m.

*The Lodge, Canberra*

At thirty-nine, Frank Church was the youngest ever ASIO boss, controversially appointed three years earlier to clean out an agency that had stumbled about ineptly creating a string of politically embarrassing intelligence fiascos.

Pale-faced and worn thin by too many half-marathons, internal mutinies and the inability to delegate his overpowering workload, Church shuddered inwardly as Stone crossed the room to take his seat again.

Church had been awake since a panicked 3.24 a.m. call from an ASIO duty officer. He was stricken when he realised the catastrophic extent of the intelligence failure. He decided he would email his resignation to the Prime Minister's office.

His career was over and only a day of humiliating post-mortems would lie ahead.

He explained the situation to Jocelyn. His wife had been startled and flung herself from their bed, tearing the sheets off him.

"We have two young babes fast asleep just down the passage. What will they think when they find out their dad threw a sickie when we were attacked? What will everyone else think?"

One of the children woke at the sound of her raised voice and began to cry.

"How can it be all your fault?" she demanded. "No one else saw them coming."

She had stood with hands on hips glaring at him. "Go to work, Frankie. We all need you to do your job."

She left him and he could hear her seconds later quietly soothing one of their sobbing twin daughters.

Stung and humiliated, he dialled his driver and made for the shower. She was right. How could it be all his fault?

In the following early morning hours he had roused officials nationwide and overseen a furious-paced investigation with the determination of a man with a day to live.

"We know how the Chinese arrived, Prime Minister," Church said.

"Pity you couldn't have told me yesterday," Stone said. "How? By submarine?"

Church tapped his gold pen nervously on the palm of one hand.

"Ah, um, no." He took a deep breath. "Not submarines, sir. They came as tourists and conference delegates."

Stone's dismayed reaction was as bad as Church had feared. Stone sat speechless for several seconds.

Finally, he asked, "And no one anywhere detected anything unusual with thousands of young Chinese men pouring into the country?"

Church straightened up defensively. "There was nothing to arouse any suspicion, Prime Minister. Some of the men were posing as tourists and others were pretending to be conference delegates — delegates attending the International Geological Institute conference. It was to be held over three weeks in several Top Half regions. The delegates used hotels and motels in Townsville, Cairns, Darwin and Broome."

He looked quickly down at his briefing notes to avoid the incredulous look on Stone's face. "They came by scheduled airline and civilian charters, mainly through airports at Brisbane, Cairns and Perth. Our border control data shows about six thousand young Chinese males arrived in the three weeks before the attack."

"But where the hell did all these guys stay?" Stone demanded.

"They packed into every hotel and motel in the Top Half, by the look of it. The local businesses loved it. They were welcomed with open arms. And they were all polite and well behaved — not like most delegates to big corporate conferences," Church said.

"But surely there aren't that many places up there they could stay at. Not that number," said Stone.

"No, you're right, sir. But many of them were supposedly geologists, so it attracted no attention when groups of them drove off

with their tents and vanished into desert country on research and study trips.”

Stone threw himself back in his chair. “Fuck me. The Chinese made the perfect invasion. So perfect we didn’t even notice it.”

Church nodded. “Prime Minister, it wasn’t an invasion as anyone would understand it. What we’ve had is a terrorist attack on a grand scale. These people came disguised as civilians, armed themselves once they had infiltrated and then overran bases taking prisoners to use as hostages. Classic terrorist tactics. And done with speed and professionalism.”

Stone grunted. Church was right. It was not the sort of attack any defence strategist would have prepared for. But it did not forgive the failure of the bases’ guards. Even with peacetime mentality, their wholesale incompetence was scandalous.

Church opened another file. “Our investigations in the last few hours have uncovered the ring responsible for smuggling in the arms. Four Customs officers in Brisbane waved through a number of containers two months ago carrying a bill of lading for geological equipment. We’re certain those containers were full of weapons, ammunition and uniforms. We’ve arrested the four. They were stupid enough to bank rather large sums transferred from Macau into their own or family bank accounts.”

Church crossed his legs and went back to tapping his gold pen.

Stone nodded his head. “Thank you, that’s good work. Good work. At least we know how they pulled this off. Not that it helps us a hell of lot at the moment.”

Stone massaged his chest and squirmed in his chair. Church sat back in his chair with relief. It seemed he still had his job. So far.

“But surely six thousand men can’t invade the entire Top Half?” said Stone.

The question hung in the air.

Thompson spoke up. “Prime Minister, I’m afraid six thousand is more than enough. There were only a dozen bases and they were taken completely by surprise. The enemy’s lack of manpower wouldn’t have been a factor — and they’re not planning to have a full-on war. They are holding thousands of our people

hostage to prevent any full-scale retaliation. If it looks like we'll call their bluff and risk a hostage massacre, they will have time to call up major reinforcements while we mobilise. They probably have half a dozen nuclear subs sitting off the coast right now to put a stop to any serious countermeasure."

Stone swallowed but said nothing. He felt a familiar tight pain in his chest. He checked his watch. It was time to go. Ambassador Chen was due in six minutes.

7 a.m.

*Dean Street, Townsville*

Brenda Patterson pulled the drapes back. It was going to be another beautiful, late-spring day. She looked at her watch and yawned. Her husband was late. He had landed the graveyard guard shift at the base last night but should have been home by now.

Johnny, her only son, had followed his father into the Australian Army and was with 2nd Battalion also at Lavarack. He was currently on a survival exercise somewhere out west but wasn't expected back with the rest of his platoon for another couple of days.

She padded barefoot to the kitchen, activated the coffee machine and switched on the radio. The DJ had a hangover, judging by the weird, soft music he was playing.

She gulped down a glass of water and turned off the air-conditioning. She and Keith could only afford to run it at night. It made sleep possible in the constant, humid heat of subtropical Townsville.

She checked the radio dial. It was still on their local commercial station. But the usual classic rock favourites were missing. There was light, orchestral music instead. Maybe someone very important had died.

There was a roar outside. The house shook. She recognised the sound of jet engines. But fighter jets weren't usually allowed to

land with all that row over the city this early in the day. There were quite a few of them too. A big exercise must be brewing. There was always something happening in a military town.

She poured a cup of black coffee, lit a cigarette and sat at the kitchen table. The music suddenly stopped. There were several seconds of static.

Then a voice said, "This is the BBC World Service. Here is the news."

Brenda was puzzled. Keith didn't listen to the BBC. She didn't know if you could even get a BBC station in Townsville.

Her confusion turned to shock as the first words of the bulletin registered. She rattled her coffee cup back on its saucer.

"The Chinese Government announced today its military forces have occupied a large swathe of Australia, including the northern regions of Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory."

Brenda stared at the radio. Keith was late. Where was he? Oh, my God. What was going on? And Johnny. In deliberate isolation somewhere out in the desert.

The BBC voice flowed on calmly: "An official statement from Beijing says the action has been taken to ensure China of long-term access to mining and energy resources vital to its national interests. The statement says China will annex a new autonomous economic zone in the regions it has occupied."

Brenda padded over to the kitchen bench where the radio sat, as though the news would somehow be easier to understand if the voice were closer.

"It is understood the Chinese takeover was the result of a lightning, pre-dawn invasion of surgical precision, which met no armed resistance."

She snatched a tissue with trembling hands and dabbed welling tears.

"The Chinese claim their forces now occupy all Australia's northern defence bases. Thousands of base personnel are being held prisoner."

Brenda slumped to the floor leaning back on the kitchen sink cupboards. Her sobs began to drown out the newsreader.

"The Politburo stressed China had no further territorial ambitions and wanted all Australian export operations to continue uninterrupted. It was seeking talks with the Australian Commonwealth Government to reach an agreement to formalise new borders and compensation for nationalised railways, ports and mining and energy resources in the new zone. The talks would also cover the eventual, orderly repatriation of the existing resource industries' workforce, which would be replaced by what it described as skilled Chinese workers. Meanwhile, all existing employees in the occupied zone were required to continue work as usual. The statement says it will be an offence under China's Economic Crimes Regulations for any worker to refuse lawful instructions."

With her knees pulled up to her chin, Brenda didn't hear the voice report the alarmed reactions in world capitals; or America's call for a Security Council resolution calling for China's immediate withdrawal.

Or the academic analysts opining Australia's Top Half had always been recognised as too vast and thinly populated to be defendable.

They noted China's military spending had increased by two hundred per cent since 2000 to more than \$145 billion a year. Australia's defence spend was \$26 billion, the lowest per capita since the 1930s.

China had an army of two and a quarter million and an air force of 2055 jet fighters. Australia had an army of 58,000 and ninety jet fighters.

Importantly, China had an aircraft carrier in the Coral Sea. It was the perfect platform for an invasion force. The Pacific superpower also boasted a substantial, long-range nuclear arsenal.

Oblivious to the one-sided statistics, Brenda ran to the front door and threw it open. Everything looked normal. Mrs Bagley's home was still right across the street. Her neighbours' houses were all there too, still and unchanged in the early-morning sun.

Coming toward her along the pavement she saw Pat Houlihan, out on his usual morning run.

"Pat!" she shouted at him. "Have you heard the news? The Chinese have invaded us!"

Houlihan stared with surprise at his barefoot neighbour but didn't break his stride.

"Don't be ridiculous, Brenda!" he shouted back. "Are you back on the meth?"

She watched him jog away. Another roar shook her home. She burst into tears again. They would all find out soon enough.

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