



**THE  
UNDERCURRENT  
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## Prologue

It's on every channel.

The gutted science lab, smouldering classrooms and water-soaked textbooks. The quadrangle dusted in ash. Students with oxygen tanks and angry parents. It's the same on each news update: accusation and speculation.

And Jules' name is everywhere.

By the window, Angie De Marchi tightens her grip on the TV remote and checks her daughter. Jules is curled up on their worn couch, finally asleep, her school uniform stinking of smoke. Her face flickers in the light of the TV, cheeks streaked black.

The newscasters talk about grief and teenage rebellion. The legacy of a lost father, a war hero killed in his prime. They can't help themselves: they show a photo of Mike. It's the one they always use, him in his dress uniform, chestful of medals. Not smiling. He'd hate them using it—using *him*—to paint Jules as an overwrought sixteen-year-old.

His widow, journalist and activist Angela De Marchi, was arrested six weeks ago in yet another Agitators protest outside Paxton Federation, and has already been linked—

Angie stabs the remote at the TV, killing the power before she sees her own face again. How can she protect Jules now? Grief claws at her, tight and familiar. What would Mike do? But she already knows the answer: he'd do whatever it took to keep their daughter safe.

It's dusk outside but Angie doesn't turn on the lamp. The local cops are still on the street and that means the cameras are too. The vultures want to interview Jules—better yet, film her being dragged from the house in cuffs. Nadira Khan, the federal agent who brought Jules home an hour ago, promised neither would happen, at least not tonight. But Angie knows all too well how easily reporters can pressure decision-making. She's built a career wielding that sort of power. Right now, though, all the influence is out on the street.

Khan is in the kitchen making another pot of herbal tea. She's not going anywhere until the circus packs up.

Angie's phone vibrates on the coffee table. She waits a few seconds—Jules doesn't stir—and reaches for it.

It's over.

Angie's chest tightens. Really? They want to come at her *now*?

She's pissed a lot of people off over the years but these messages warning her away from the Agitators—always from an unlisted number—have become more frequent over the last fourteen months. Since Mike died.

She doesn't respond.

With the TV off, she can hear snatches of fuzzy chatter on the police radio outside. The last time Angie peered through the blinds a crowd had gathered across the street. None of the faces are local. She can't bring herself to count the parasites out there taking selfies in front of the house.

On the couch, Jules whimpers in her sleep and Angie almost reaches for her. What could she have done differently today? Jules was fine when she left for school this morning. There was no sign she was on the edge, no sign this would be the day that undid them. Something must have happened at school. Something Jules doesn't want to talk about in front of Khan.

The phone buzzes again. Angie glances at the kitchen door, hears the kettle boiling and china clinking as Khan rinses their cups.

Cut contact with the Agitators.

That's *it*. She jabs at the screen, her fingers furious.

Or what?

A pause. Another message arrives. Angie reads it and her heart stumbles.

Or I'll show the world how that explosion today really happened.



## Two years later

Jules hears the shouting as soon as she reaches the street. Her mouth was already dry, the skin between her fingers tacky, but now there's a stab of panic. She steps from Central Station into the steamy morning, her heart thudding.

Even from two blocks away the sense of the mob reaches her. It feels *huge*. She needs a second, but there are too many people surging out from the station to get to work or coffee or whatever they're late for. A pinstriped suit bumps past Jules, swearing. A woman—fitted lilac dress, oversize sunglasses—steadies her by the elbow before pushing past. Jules is carried along in the throng down to the street. Nervous energy crackles under her skin and dread snakes through her. She clenches herself tight. The last thing she can deal with right now is a *moment*.

Jules reaches the traffic lights and draws in the tension, tries to settle herself. People crush closer, fidgeting, impatient for the lights to change. She forces herself to focus on the *tock, tock* of the pedestrian signal. Sweat gathers in her armpits: thankfully she's wearing a white shirt. But what was she thinking? Pantyhose in this weather?

Jules takes a shaky breath and straightens her skirt. At least her shoes survived the train ride. Nobody spat or stomped on them, she even managed to avoid the usual funk on the carriage floor. Designer heels are an improbable luxury for her, an aberration. Even during the argument with her mum about coming

in here today, Angie didn't say a word about the shoes. When else was she going to get a chance to wear them?

Her heart skitters at the thought of her mother sitting on the edge of their couch watching the protest on TV, picking away at the stitching on the big yellow cushion and swearing at the newscasters.

Jules can make out the chants now, louder than the traffic. Reverberating against steel, glass and concrete.

*Pax Fed. Global dread.*

On the street, she feels eyes on her: a guy about her age in a black singlet with a skateboard tucked under one pale, skinny arm. Staring, recognition dawning. He takes a step back, glances up at the lights.

Another head turns. The energy shifts, ripples. Traffic stops.

The pedestrian signal flips over—*whirrup*—and all attention snaps to the flashing green man on the opposite side of the road. People flood the crossing. Jules falls into step with the cotton and polyester herd, dodging oncoming walkers and avoiding eye contact. Wobbling a little on her four-inch heels. She reaches the other side of the road and heads down into the belly of the city.

She's not late, anyway. Not yet.

It's been five months since school finished. Twenty-six job applications and only one offer of interview: the one locked in for this morning. Paxton Federation is the last place on earth she wants to work. The agency only told her yesterday it was Pax Fed who'd shortlisted her and by that point she was too desperate to back out. What's that old saying? Beggars can't be choosers. She and her mum aren't beggars yet, but if this job doesn't come off...A swell of anxiety pushes the air from her lungs. She takes three quick breaths, straightens her handbag strap. She has to keep it together and convince these people she's not a liability. The Pax Fed recruiters know who she is, her history. Who her mother is. So they're not interviewing her to amuse themselves. Right?

*Pax Fed. Global greed.*

*What do we want? Pax Fed to bleed.*

Today, at any rate, they have more pressing concerns than her.

Her handbag bumps lightly against her hip as she makes her way down Edward Street. She passes a hole-in-the-wall espresso bar, smells coffee and brioche. There's enough cash in her wallet to grab something on the way back if her nerves have settled.

The crowd mostly deserts Jules at the next intersection. The protest is a block away, around the corner out of sight, and nobody wants to get any closer than they have to.

Jules has to.

Rain clouds are suspended over the breathless city, drawing down the sky. Steel and glass crowd in. She feels the static on her skin a split second before the distant roll of thunder. *Please, not now.*

Jules is twenty metres from Queen Street. It's blocked to traffic by two marked cop cars parked nose to nose. The chanting drowns out the usual hum of the city. A lime-green hatchback with a peeling stick-figure family slows as it reaches the intersection, blinker flashing as if the driver plans to turn. Two cops step into view and wave it on. Across the street at the edge of the mall, a mob huddles with bucket-size disposable lattes, straining to see over the cop cars. Obviously tourists—locals are far too cool to be caught gawking. It's not like these protests are new.

Jules is conspicuously alone on her side of the street. She turns her face from the traffic and the dark-haired girl keeping pace with her, window by window, is stiff and nervous-looking. She's spent the past two years trying to avoid this sort of attention but here she is: Brisbane CBD in peak hour, heading for an Agitators protest outside Pax Fed headquarters.

She braces for a reaction from the mall crowd but nobody calls out or even notices her. They're too busy watching whatever is happening further up Queen Street. Jules almost makes

it to the corner before the older of the two cops spots her and cuts her off, one hand on the butt of his gun, the other out in front of him.

‘Road’s closed. You need to cross over.’

She can’t tell if he recognises her because his eyes are shuttered behind police-issue sunnies. Jules stops, blows out a nervous breath. ‘I’ve got an interview at Paxton Federation.’

‘Not today you don’t. Nobody’s going in or out of that building until this street is cleared.’

There’s no way for Jules to know if the interview has been cancelled. Every network in the city went down twenty-four hours ago when the federal police caught wind of the protest. Standard procedure under the new *Commonwealth Civil Order Act 2028*. Which means everyone except cops, security authorities and professional hackers are offline and off-air. No voice service. No data network.

Jules tries to ignore her reflection in the cop’s sunnies. ‘I can’t *not* show up if there’s a chance they’re expecting me.’

The cop measures her for a good five seconds. She checks out the sergeant’s stripes on his shoulder and wonders if he knows anyone from her neighbourhood. Those guys would recognise her from fifty metres.

‘Come here.’ The sergeant gestures for her to follow him to the corner and points up the street. ‘Look.’

As soon as Jules steps out from the protection of the building, a wall of energy hits her, forceful and frenetic. It’s like being shoved in the chest by a scrum of front-rowers.

Protesters—hundreds of them—are packed behind six-foot mesh barricades less than twenty metres away. They press against the metal, chanting at the line of cops guarding the revolving door into Pax Fed Tower.

*Pax Federation, strangling our nation.*

Placards sprout up like weeds. Almost all feature the Pax Fed logo, but instead of the trademark colours, the buff head of

wheat and bright yellow sun, the awn is painted toxic black and the sun is bleeding. Other signs are more literal:

SAY NO TO GMO.

WE WON'T EAT MUTANT MEAT.

Someone lights up a placard and tosses it over the barricade. A cop breaks from the line to stamp it out, the crowd cheers. Jules tries to swallow. Thank God her mum didn't come. This rabble would have recognised Angie De Marchi in a heartbeat and dragged her into the throng—probably carried her on their shoulders. Jules searches instinctively for the news crews and finds them at the other end of the barricades interviewing protesters through the fence. A wave of nausea bubbles up.

'You really want to go up there?' the cop asks.

She really doesn't.

But when has life ever been about what she wanted? For a heartbeat she imagines herself rushing back to Central Station and catching the first southbound train home. Curling up on her bed and blocking out the world again. But then that other fear kicks in—the one where she and her mum can't pay the rent or the electricity bill due next week or put food in the fridge. That fear takes charge again.

Jules gestures to the two-way radio tucked against the sergeant's shoulder. 'Is there someone you can talk to at Pax Fed? Can you find out if my interview is on?'

The sergeant looks her up and down, lingers on her shoes. Sighs. 'What's your name?'

*Oh.*

In any other situation she'd consider lying, but that's not going to get her inside Pax Fed Tower. 'Julianne De Marchi.'

His fingers stall. 'Is that meant to be a joke?'

'Please.' Her skin tingles. 'Ask if I still have an appointment.'

He slides his sunglasses down, peers at her from under his cap. A bead of sweat slides from his hairline and down his sun-reddened neck. He depresses the handset and turns away to

speech. Between the chanting and the traffic, all Jules catches is: ‘...you sure you want her in the building today?’

When he turns back, his eyes are shaded again and she can’t read them. ‘You stay by my side and do exactly what I tell you to do.’ He’s all business now, checking the clip on his gun holster, jamming his cap down tighter. ‘You pull any kind of stunt, I *will* arrest you. Understand?’

She nods. What does he think she’s going to do in four-inch heels and a pencil skirt?

‘I don’t want the reporters to see me.’

‘Then don’t draw attention to yourself.’

He leads her to the footpath on the Pax Fed side of Queen Street. The cops—in uniform, not riot gear—have moved further back from the barricade out of range of burning placards. They don’t seem overly concerned by the rabble; they’re acting like it’s a peaceful protest. It doesn’t feel peaceful to Jules. The air sizzles, lifting the fine hairs on her forearms and setting a tremble to her fingers. She walks quicker but the entrance isn’t getting closer fast enough.

The sergeant is back on his radio; a hulking cop from the police line waves them through and they draw level with the barricades. The sergeant uses his body to shield Jules and she turns her head, tries to hide her face. Her heart is anxious against her ribs. A quick glance and she can see the tower entrance less than ten metres away, the front door slowly revolving.

Five metres. They’re going to make it without being noticed—  
‘De Marchi? *De Marchi!*’

Jules ignores the shouts, puts one foot in front of the other. A chant starts up. *De-mark-ie. De-mark-ie.*

‘Julianne!’

Jules looks up, realising too late that nobody she cares about would be in that crowd. Faces are mashed against the steel, trying to get a better look at her.

‘You know what to do, girl!’

One of the news crews has broken away from the barricade: a leggy woman gripping a microphone and a guy balancing a camera on his shoulder, both calling out for Jules to wait.

The sergeant grabs Jules' wrist, jerks her towards the door. Jules has a fair idea what's coming next and there's nothing she can do to stop it. A new chant starts up as the revolving door propels them inside.

*Burn it down!*

*Burn it down!*

*The Undercurrent* by Paula Weston is available now at all good bookshops, in ebook, and via the [Text Publishing website](#).