

# Escape to Retribution Bay

Aussie Heroes: Retribution Bay

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## Dedication

To Michelle Diener, my Nullarbor road trip buddy.

## Chapter 1

“You imbecile! Get her into my office.” Tan’s low snarl made Tess Lim cringe and she changed her trajectory, heading towards a table she’d already cleaned, rather than into the kitchen where Tan was. Her hand shook as she sprayed cleaner and wiped the surface. Calm down. She hadn’t raised Tan’s ire.

Her feet desperately needed a rest but if she sat down, even for a minute, Tan would be angry.

The restaurant door opened, and two police officers walked in. She glanced towards the kitchen. Tan normally dealt with them, but he was nowhere to be seen. Tess swallowed hard and forced a smile. “Can I help you?”

“We’ve got a takeaway order for the station,” the taller one said.

She hadn’t heard the sizzle of food cooking in at least half an hour. As far as she knew, all the kitchen staff had gone home already. She’d been waiting for the last table of diners to finish, and they had just left. “One minute, please.” Had their order been forgotten? That would make Tan even angrier.

As she approached the kitchen, Tan strode out carrying a paper bag. He smiled widely in what Tess

thought of as his customer smile. “Officers. How has your day been?”

“It’ll be better after we’ve eaten,” the short one said.

Tess couldn’t smell any food. How long had their food been sitting in the kitchen? Or was there even food in the bag? The way Tan carried it, just by the top, made it seem as if it wasn’t particularly heavy.

She tore her gaze away before anyone could notice her looking. She’d learnt not to show any interest in Tan’s affairs. Tess did a final lap of the restaurant checking each table was set ready for the next day. When the police left, she’d tell Tan she was finished. Her aching feet could make it. Soon she’d be home, and flopping on her bed, and wouldn’t move until morning.

“You done?” Tan demanded.

Tess flinched. Tan stood at the restaurant entrance. Arms crossed, he pinned her with the scowl he reserved for her. Behind him in the car park, the police were getting into their patrol car. “Yes, Tan.” She gathered the cloth and spray bottle and hurried towards the kitchen, keeping her head bowed.

“Leave them on the bench,” he said.

Odd. Normally he insisted she return everything to its proper place. He handed her a yellow envelope. “This fortnight’s pay.”

She bowed. “Thank you, Tan.” The packet was thin despite the fifty-hour weeks she worked. The rest he said he sent to her parents back in Singapore or kept for her food and board, but if that were true, her parents had never mentioned it. Still, after eighteen months, she had almost ten thousand dollars saved, but only because she had no opportunity to spend it between university and work.

“You can walk home tonight. I have business to attend to.”

No, not another hour on her feet! She forced a smile,

trying not to think of the cold, dark streets. “Yes, Tan.” She shrugged on her thick puffer jacket, her muscles already tense, and retrieved her bag from under the counter, her fingers automatically feeling out the lining to ensure the cash she saved was still there. She hadn’t opened an Australian bank account, and didn’t trust Tan not to steal it from the granny flat she rented from him.

Tan pointed to the front door. “Leave that way. I’ll lock it behind you.”

She stepped into the dark night, zipping up her jacket and shivering as an icy breeze brushed past. Rustling trees lined the streets like boogey-men. She could do this. She’d walked home in the dark before. All she had to do was pretend to be one of the daring female pirates she liked to read about, or one of those intrepid women who had come to Australia and thrived, despite its strangeness.

Buoyed by the thought, she avoided the puddles left by the rain and was halfway across the car park when she reached into her jacket pocket for her phone. Empty. Damn it. She’d left it charging in the kitchen. She couldn’t survive without her phone. It was her safety net, and her connection with the world. But Tan wouldn’t like her returning.

She stayed where she was a moment, debating. She sighed. What would Da Lim do? She smiled at the thought of her rogue ancestor. Da would do what it took to get what she wanted. The journals of her exploits in Australia had sparked Tess’s desire to leave Singapore and study here. Da wouldn’t leave without her phone.

Though Tess’s stride wasn’t as confident as she would have liked, she retraced her steps and knocked on the front door. Tan didn’t come.

Probably hadn’t heard her.

She’d go around the back and use her key. Her steps faltered and her skin prickled at the car parked in the alley

behind the restaurant. Tan didn't like to be disturbed if he had others in his office, and he'd been angry before she'd left. Tess hesitated. The phone was on the bench right next to the door. If she was quick, she could reach in, grab it, and leave with no one noticing.

She listened at the door, but couldn't hear any voices. Slowly, she turned the key and pushed the door open a crack. No one talking. Her phone was right there on the bench. She reached in, pulled the charger from the socket, and tucked it and her phone into her pocket. As she eased the door closed again, a cry made her freeze. "I'm sorry," a woman sobbed. "It's not my fault. I didn't know he would talk."

Tess's skin heated, fear racing through her veins. What was going on? The woman sounded terrified. Every instinct shouted at her to close the door and leave, but that wasn't what Da would do. She would help those less fortunate than her, and strive to make the world a better place. That was the person Tess wanted to be. She hated scurrying away at the slightest sign of conflict. Bracing herself, she inched the door open wider and gasped. An older woman sat tied to a wheeled office chair, her face bruised, her dark hair full of grey. Tan and his new driver, Salvatore, stood over her, Tan holding a gun to the woman's head.

What on earth?

"I warned you what would happen if either of you talked," Tan said.

"Please! I never thought Roger would. He promised me. I thought he loved me."

"Obviously not enough."

The cold venom in Tan's tone made Tess shiver. This man was far more dangerous than Tess had suspected. She had to call the police.

The woman struggled against the ropes, glancing wildly around, and her eyes met Tess's. They widened.

“Help me. Call—” The gunshot’s echo exploded in the stainless steel room and red sprayed from the woman’s head, coating the newly mopped floor. She fell back, her head twisting towards Tess, the life fading from her eyes.

Tess shrieked, and Tan whirled around. He swore and raised his gun, pointing it at her.

Tess ran.

Her feet pounded the bitumen as she rounded the corner of the restaurant and cut across the car park. Dirt sprayed beside her and a pop chilled her core. They were shooting at her!

Only a few more metres and she’d reach the tree-lined footpath. She pushed herself harder and ducked behind a tree as the bark exploded next to her and a second pop followed the first.

What was she doing? She couldn’t stay here. Though her fear wanted to override her feet, wanted her to pull her arms over her head and crouch down and pray she could disappear like she had when she’d had nightmares as a child, it wasn’t possible.

This was a nightmare, but she was wide awake.

She pushed off the tree and ran, her breath coming in gasps, weaving around the trees so Tan couldn’t get a clear shot.

Usually the streetlights were spaced far apart, leaving too much darkness between them, but tonight they seemed much closer together, illuminating her when all she wanted to do was hide.

A car roared to life behind her. She had to get off the road.

Up ahead was an alley between two houses. Her arms pumped as she urged herself faster, the weight of her laptop banging against her back. She charged down the path as the headlights illuminated her. Her lungs burned, and she couldn’t breathe.

Think.

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She knew this neighbourhood. The next house had a dog which barked whenever she walked past. On cue, deep woofs sounded on the other side of the fence and the thud of feet as the dog raced along with her.

Tess glanced behind. Salvatore raced down the alleyway after her, his bulky body slowing him down. Fear made her fly.

Think.

The car must have gone around the block, which meant it would come for her from the right. Directly in front, bushland separated her from the highway, and to the left, a bend in the road led around into a cul-de-sac.

The bushland was filled with deadly Australian snakes and spiders which could kill her.

But she faced certain death if her pursuers caught her.

She dashed out of the alley and turned left, sprinting across the road and into the dark trees. A narrow dirt path led to the cycle way which ran along the main highway. Perhaps in the dark, Salvatore wouldn't see it.

Another glance behind her. Salvatore ran onto the street. He looked right, and she ducked low to the ground and behind a tree. Her skin vibrated with tension as her eyes strained to pick out movement in the darkness. How many venomous creatures were watching her right now? Was a snake winding its way towards her, or a spider lowering itself on its web?

She sucked in oxygen, her breath loud to her ears, but she didn't dare move.

A car roared down the road, the throaty burble identifying it as Tan's Mustang. She froze in place. "Where is she?" Tan shouted.

"I don't know," Salvatore yelled back. "Might be in the bush or around the bend."

Tess curled into a ball, picturing Tan looking into the bush. Around her she felt beady eyes watching her from the dark, waiting to jump out and strike her. She bit down

on a sob.

“No. She’s terrified of snakes. Check the front yards, I’ll sweep the streets.” The car roared off again.

Tess stayed where she was, trying to breathe quietly, trying to calm her heart rate. She needed to move. After they’d searched the front yards of the houses, they’d search the bush. Tan knew she wasn’t athletic enough to jump a fence into a backyard.

She peered through the bush towards the highway. At this time of night, the traffic was intermittent. She could run across the road into the next suburb, but more bushland lay on the other side, and she wasn’t sure if there was a path through it. Did buses run this late at night? They must. Tan had let her go to an end of year university celebration last year as long as she was home by midnight, and she’d caught the last bus.

Tess didn’t dare check her public transport app yet. The light would be a beacon straight towards her. Tan drove past after going around the cul-de-sac, and Salvatore was several houses away, searching. This was her chance.

Slowly she shifted, crouching still, and slunk down the path. It had rained most of the day, so the leaves were damp, softening her steps. As soon as she reached the highway verge, she moved away from the path so she wouldn’t be seen.

No cars. She dashed across the dual-carriage way and climbed over the concrete divider in the middle of the highway. She stayed there for a moment, waiting for a car to pass. Thank God there wasn’t a lot of traffic at this time of night.

Crossing to the median strip, she eyed the bushland for a path through. Up ahead was an intersection, but it was a couple of hundred metres away and she was too exposed here. Tan might leave the suburb and check the highway.

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The very thought chilled her bones, so she dashed into the bush. Just a couple of steps in, enough so she could crouch and hide behind a tree while she checked the transport app.

What she wanted was the next bus anywhere, but the farthest she could go was preferable. Home. If she left the country, Tan couldn't hurt her.

She typed in the airport and discovered a bus would go past the nearby shopping centre in about half an hour. Now to get there.

She'd turn left at the traffic lights up ahead. Tess was about to stand when she heard the burble of Tan's car. She froze, eyes on the highway, and the Mustang crawled by, going far below the speed limit. Searching for her.

Her pulse raced as he pulled up at the red light. How far would he go before he doubled back?

She glanced through the bush. The streetlights gave enough light to illuminate the shapes of trees, and it was maybe twenty metres until she'd reach the street. The lights turned green, and Tan continued straight ahead.

Tess had to do this. She would face her fears. She would channel Da's courage. One of her university friends had laughed, saying there weren't as many snakes in the city as tourists believed. She'd said vibrations scared them off, but Tess couldn't risk stomping in case Salvatore crossed the highway too and heard her.

Staying crouched, she stepped carefully through the bush. Something soft and sticky covered her face. She shrieked and ran, swiping the spider's web away, not caring about where she was going. Bursting free of the bushland, she stopped under a streetlight, running her hands over her face and then her body to make sure no deadly redback clung to her clothing. She shivered and kept brushing her hair and her clothes.

Exhaling slowly, she scanned her surroundings and then checked the app. She was on a street parallel to the

road Tan would turn down if he came this way, but she enlarged the map to find the least obvious way to get to the shopping centre.

One which avoided as many roads as possible.  
She had a bus to catch.

Almost there. She'd been forced to hide twice on her way to the shopping centre because cars had driven past. Now the bus stop was only a few hundred metres ahead across the deserted car park. Her skin crawled at having to cross such an open field with nowhere to hide. She glanced down the road and her heart jumped. That was her bus.

Her fear of missing the bus overrode her fear of the open ground and she ran, her feet slapping through puddles, her backpack pounding into her back. She lifted a hand and waved, yelling as loudly as she could.

The bus didn't stop.

Tess's steps slowed and she panted, staring at the red tail lights of the bus as it turned the corner and out of sight.

She hunched as nausea flooded her. What now?

She stood in the middle of an open car park in plain view of anyone driving past and had missed her last chance to get to the airport.

First, she had to hide. The shopping centre behind her was the most obvious place. She'd walked past its loading bays on the other side.

She jogged back the way she'd come as the rain that had been threatening all night, started to fall.

Faster. By the time she reached the loading bay, her black pants stuck to her legs around her ankles and her hair was soaked. She should have bought a jacket with a hood.

The loading bay's ceiling overhung, providing shelter from the rain, and she tucked herself behind the

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dumpster at the back and took out her phone. The airport was still her best bet. A quick search told her it would take four hours to walk there, and the last plane left in half an hour.

She kept searching.

No buses, no trains, no hire car places open. Not even a taxi could get to her in time.

There was no leaving the city tonight.

Should she go to the police?

Would they even believe her? Those cops were good friends with Tan. Salvatore had probably already cleaned up the evidence.

But maybe she could call anonymously.

Over the patter of the rain on the roof, a low burble caught her attention, and she tucked her phone into her pocket. Then it rang, the sound terrifyingly loud, and her fingers fumbled to switch it to silent. Tan was calling.

She wanted to be sick. Quickly she held down the button to turn off her phone. At the entrance to the loading bay, the mustang crept past. She held her breath and curled into a ball, praying it wouldn't stop. The car turned, its headlights illuminating the loading bay.

The rain came down harder, the sound like thunder on the roof making it impossible to hear anything else.

Was Tan getting out of his car?

Was he walking towards her?

Tess didn't dare move.

After a long minute, the light shifted as the mustang backed up and drove away.

Tess exhaled. She was safe.

For now.