

Return to Retribution Bay

Aussie Heroes: Retribution Bay

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Chapter 1

“I’m getting out.”

Sergeant Brandon Stokes jolted, ripping his gaze from the two attractive women across the crowded bar in the army mess hall. He looked for his best friend’s tell-tale lip twitch to prove he was having him on, but the lighting was too dim. “You’re kidding me, right?”

Sam shook his head. “It’s time, mate. That last tour to Afghanistan...” The despair in his eyes didn’t need to be spoken. They’d both been there. “Besides, Izzy’s due any minute and her partner’s walked out. The kid’s going to need his uncle. I’ve done my time.”

As if the army was a prison sentence. Perhaps for some it was. For Brandon it was penance. He clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder and while he wanted to shake some sense into him, he couldn’t argue with his reasoning. The prospect of not signing on for another four years had crossed his mind more than once in the past twelve months. But unlike Sam, he couldn’t face his family. Not after what he’d done.

He forced a smile. “So how much longer have I got to put up with you?”

“Another couple of months. Brass want me to spend time with the younger recruits, take them through their

paces.” Sam smiled.

Not long at all. It wouldn't be the same without Sam. “What are you going to do with yourself?” Brandon sipped his beer. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be sitting behind a desk pushing paper.

“Not sure yet. I've got enough saved to cover me for six months and I reckon Izzy will need me for at least that long if the baby doesn't sleep.”

Brandon ignored the pain in his chest. His own sister, Georgiana was about Izzy's age and he hadn't seen her in over a year, not since she'd finished university and moved back to Retribution Bay. She sent him a chatty email every few months, but it had been a while since he'd heard from her.

“So, what about you?” Sam asked. “You re-enlisting?”

He shrugged. “What else would I do?”

“You could go home.”

Brandon shook his head. “You know I can't.”

Sam studied him as he took a long mouthful of his beer. “Mate, don't you think it's time? We're not getting any younger. I'm sure they've forgiven you.”

That wasn't the problem. Brandon could never forgive himself. He tapped his middle finger on the bar. “Leave it.”

“That last tour almost killed us both—”

“I'll think about it,” Brandon interrupted. His chest constricted at the memory. The intense barrage of ammunition, the race through the streets. They'd made it out. Just.

“What are you two moping about? You promised me a good time if I dragged myself out.” Arthur “Sherlock” Hammond stood stiffly at the table, as if the military posture had fused his spine.

Brandon grinned. “About time you showed.” Sherlock didn't know the meaning of ‘at ease’, and

rarely came out, always working on some extra task for the military, always trying to get ahead. "Sam's just saying he's not re-enlisting." The absolute disbelief on Sherlock's face made Brandon chuckle. The only way Sherlock would leave the army was in a body bag.

"Why?"

Sam shrugged. "I've got my sister to take care of."

Sherlock flinched. "The army needs men like you."

The words could have come out of Major Hammond's mouth. Sherlock always parroted his father, only Brandon wasn't convinced he believed what he said. The one time Brandon had cracked that stiff, duty-bound shell, he'd discovered an emotionally vulnerable man underneath.

"You're staying in, aren't you?" Sherlock asked him.

He nodded as his mobile rang and he grabbed it, glad for the distraction, even if it might be his brother, Darcy trying him again. It wasn't.

Major Hammond. Not good. "Major."

Across from him Sam raised his eyebrows and Sherlock stood even straighter.

"Sergeant Stokes, I need to see you in my office immediately."

"Yes, sir. I'm on my way." There was no other answer even though it was seven at night and he was off shift. Brandon stood as he ended the call.

"What's that about?" Sam asked.

"Major Hammond wants me to see him in his office."

Sam frowned. "I'll wait for you here."

"Does he need me as well?" Sherlock asked.

Brandon shook his head.

As he walked out of the mess he ran through his activities over the past forty-eight hours, but nothing stood out that would get him into trouble. He zipped his jacket closed as the wind whistled past him. Summer

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was a long way off down here in Perth. Even after twelve years living south of the Tropic of Capricorn he still hated the cold.

The major's office was across the field from the mess, so Brandon broke into a jog, partly to keep warm and partly not to keep the major waiting. He wasn't a patient man and had extremely exacting expectations.

Brandon hadn't broken a sweat when he arrived in front of the building. He unzipped his jacket as he walked into the heated room and approached the major's office. His team leader, Lieutenant Colonel Dobson, affectionately known as Dobby, was also there, along with a padre and a woman he didn't recognise. They all looked solemn.

Shit. This couldn't be good. He saluted.

"At ease, Sergeant," Major Hammond said.

The woman clenched her hands together and looked at the padre, who shuffled his feet, but it was Dobby who cleared his throat and spoke. "There's no easy way to say this, Brandon," he said. "We had a phone call from your brother, Darcy. There's been a car accident."

The breath left his lungs. "Where? Who?"

"I'm sorry, Sergeant," the major said. "Both your parents were killed."

"No." The denial was instant as the bottom dropped from Brandon's stomach to be replaced by a deep numbing pain. The last clear image he had of his father was his look of disgust when... He squeezed his eyes closed. "I've got to get home." Too late for a flight and driving would take over thirteen hours, but if he left now he'd be there by morning. He turned to go.

"Wait, Brandon," Dobby said. "The RAAF are flying supplies up to their base tonight. We've got some equipment going up for our next training mission. Maybe they can fit you on." He glanced at the major, who scowled but picked up the phone to call. He hated

anything personal getting in the way of the military.

Flying was the fastest way to get there. He should have answered Darcy's phone call earlier. How was he coping? Georgie would be a mess. Had Ed made it home yet? "My youngest brother's in Perth, too."

The major inclined his head, phone to his ear. "Call him. I'll see what I can do."

Brandon dialled Ed's number, but it went straight to voice mail. Shit. What to say? "I just heard the news. Might be able to get a flight with the RAAF to Retribution Bay. Let me know if you need it." He hung up and noticed the missed call from Darcy was from around midday. Chances were high Ed had got the afternoon flight home.

The padre watched him carefully as if waiting for him to break down. Wasn't going to happen. He had a mission—to get home as soon as possible. "What happened?"

"Darcy said your parents were heading into town," Dobby said. "The car rolled and both were dead by the time anyone found the wreck."

Brandon closed his eyes. The stretch of road between the family sheep station and the main road into the Bay didn't get a lot of traffic. Had his parents survived the crash and been waiting for help?

Major Hammond hung up. "You've got a flight if you can get to the airbase within the hour."

"I'll be there." Brandon saluted and strode out of the building. The cold hit him, penetrating his thoughts, reminding him to focus on something other than his parents trapped in their car. He jogged back, already planning what he needed to take with him and by the time he arrived at his car, he'd packed everything in his mind. Sam and Sherlock were waiting for him.

"Dobby called," Sam said. "I'm so sorry, mate. I'll drive you to the RAAF base."

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Sherlock shifted uncomfortably. "I'll catch you when you get back." He didn't do emotions well.

Brandon nodded and jumped in the car with Sam. They detoured past his place only long enough for him to throw some things in a bag and then headed east towards the RAAF base.

"What do you know?" Sam asked.

Brandon stared out at the street, the darkness his friend. "Car rolled when they were heading into town. They were dead by the time someone found them."

Sam swore. "Call me if you need anything. I can probably get time off to attend the funeral."

Always had his back. Sam knew how hard it was for Brandon to go home. He was the only one he'd ever confided in. It had been during a moment of weakness on their first tour together when Brandon was certain he was going to die. "Thanks."

They pulled into the airstrip and were directed to a plane on the runway. Sam parked and got out, coming around to hug him and slap his back. "Take care, mate. Keep me up to date."

Brandon nodded. He grabbed his bag from the back and strode across the tarmac, greeting the airman at the base of the plane. Not long after, he was in the air on his way home for the first time in twelve years.

He stared at the floor in front of him. Home. Memories stampeded him; barrel racing at gymkhanas, playing pranks on his brothers, taking Georgie across to the bay so she could swim. Every moment revolved around the family he'd destroyed, the ones he'd failed. He'd only seen his niece, Lara once, but she had to be ten by now. He'd failed to be there for Darcy.

How would they react seeing him again?

The plane landed just after ten. "You got someone to pick you up?" the officer in charge of the flight asked.

“I’ll sort something out.” He wasn’t calling and waking his brother. The station ran on daylight hours which meant they were usually in bed early to be up with the sun. Besides, his family had already had a shit day and the station was a good hour’s drive away. He’d walk over to the public airport and hire a car. Then he’d have his own wheels and could leave whenever he wanted. They wouldn’t want him staying past the funeral anyway.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and walked with the other men across to the hangar. Several uniformed officers were inside but it was the man leaning against one of the walls, dressed in jeans and a blue checked shirt who caught Brandon’s attention. Despite the fact that the sun had long since gone to bed, a brown Akubra shaded his face. Shit.

Darcy had grown up. He was no longer the lanky teenager who had been by his side through all their adventures, always the one to add a little caution to their plans.

The man pushed himself off the wall and strode over, his forehead furrowed, eyes narrowed, and a glare so bright it would give away his position on a battle field. This reunion would be as bad as Brandon had expected.

“Darcy.” He nodded a greeting at his younger brother. Two years his junior, he stood a good two inches taller than Brandon.

Darcy’s blue-grey eyes darkened. “Couldn’t be bothered to return my call?”

“Figured I’d see you soon enough.” The whites of Darcy’s eyes were bloodshot, evidence of crying. Brandon’s heart pulled. “How’d you know I’d be here?”

“Your lieutenant colonel called me back, said you were hopping an air force plane.”

What could he say to the man who used to be his

best friend, but who he hadn't seen in the twelve years since he'd joined the military? How could he convey the devastation hammering away in the part of his brain where he'd locked it? "You got a car?"

Incredulity swept across Darcy's face. He shut it down. "This way."

Brandon waved to the officer and followed his brother out of the hangar into the warm night air. This far north and this close to the coast, it never got too cold. Such a contrast with the city.

As they exited the air force base Darcy drove away from town, the darkness of the night swallowing them immediately. Only the high beam spotlights illuminated the road, giving them early warning of kangaroos, emus or feral goats.

Brandon swallowed the lump in his throat. "Where'd it happen?"

Darcy glanced at him. "Hangman's Bend."

The only real bend in an otherwise straight road. Legend had it that sailors on the Retribution had mutinied when their ship was wrecked in the bay and the mutineers had eventually been hung from a tree in the area.

So not on the station. "What happened?"

Darcy sniffed and cleared his throat. Brandon didn't dare look at him. If he saw tears in his brother's eyes, he'd be a goner. "They were taking the day off. Georgie had arranged for them to go out on her boat, do a whale shark tour, so it was pretty early in the morning. When they didn't show at eight, she called to make sure they hadn't forgotten."

His mother never forgot a thing.

"They'd left plenty early enough. You know mum never likes... liked to be late to anything."

Brandon bit his cheek at the past tense and tapped his finger on his leg.

“I jumped in the ute and found the car on its roof. They were already dead.”

Fuck. “Jesus, Darce, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t.” The word was a bullet. “You don’t get to say sorry. You haven’t given a fuck about this family for years.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? When was the last time you visited? When did you last talk Georgie down from one of her crazy ideas? When did you last chat to Dad about the station and how it was doing? When did you sit and have a cuppa with Mum?”

Each question pounded on the wall he’d built to protect himself. Cracks began to form.

“I’ve got commitments,” he managed. It was his standard response. The military as a mistress had been a damned good excuse over the years. He was deployed over Christmas and Easter regularly. His family didn’t know he’d requested it.

“Bullshit. It wouldn’t have taken much time to call Mum. Once a year on her birthday didn’t cut it. She made excuses for you, but I could see in her eyes she was disappointed.”

Brandon wanted to press his fingers into his ears and block out Darcy, but his brother was on a run now.

“Did you know Georgie tried to visit you when she was at uni?”

She’d stopped by a couple of times, but he didn’t spend much time at his house. “Shut up, Darce. You don’t know shit.”

It was the wrong thing to say, but as Darcy drew in a breath to retort, they rounded the bend.

His parents’ four-wheel drive was still on its roof, the ute’s headlights reflecting off the white surface, the body crumpled, windscreen smashed and police tape surrounding it. “Stop the car.”

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Darcy pulled over without comment, turning the car so the lights shone on the wreck.

Brandon fumbled for the door handle and got out. On the rear window was a faded sticker proclaiming *I love horses*. He took a closer look. Shit. It was the same car they'd had when he'd left, the car which had taken them to many gymkhanas, and now it was destroyed. For it to be that far into the bush it had to have rolled a few times. He could imagine his mother's screams as it did. The same anguish he'd heard in her voice only once before. No. He squeezed his eyes shut. Don't go there.

Behind him the car engine stopped, and a door closed. Footsteps crunched over the red dirt as Darcy joined him.

Silence. Deep and endless.

"Who was driving?" His question was almost offensively loud in the night.

"Dad."

Brandon frowned. That couldn't be right. "He wouldn't have been going that fast around the bend." It was the one thing his father had droned on about when he'd taught Brandon to drive. Bends were often deceptive, always approach with caution. And with decades of experience on this road, his father knew every inch.

"Maybe he was worried about missing the boat."

"No signs of a 'roo?" He slid down the gravel decline and walked closer, saw the blood around the door frame and clenched his teeth, looking away.

"None."

It made no sense. "What did the police say?"

"Priority was getting Mum and Dad out. Major Crash Investigation are coming up from Perth tomorrow."

He'd be interested in what they had to say. He ran a

hand across his cropped hair. Darcy's face was in shadow and his arms wrapped around himself like he was cold.

He couldn't imagine what it would have been like finding the crash. He stepped closer. "Darcy, I'm sorry you had to find them."

Darcy spun around, strode back to the ute. "You can look more in the morning."

Silence stretched between them for the remainder of the drive. Brandon's skin prickled as they drove through the wide gate, passing the sign Charlie had made weeks before he was killed. *Retribution Ridge*. An angry looking ram staring out at them.

Nausea swelled and he fought the urge to jump out and walk back to town. Darcy pulled up in front of the farmhouse, a solitary porch light illuminating the verandah. His mother had always left the light on for him on the odd occasion he'd gone into town to meet friends.

"The house is full. You'll have to sleep in the shearers' quarters," Darcy said as he closed the car door. "Just don't take the first two rooms. They're occupied." Without another word, he headed inside, closing the door quietly behind him—never mad enough to forget the others who would already be asleep.

Brandon sighed and trudged the short distance across the yard. In the dark he could make out the shape of the machinery shed, and behind that, the sheep pens and shearing shed. He used the torch on his phone to ensure he got the right room and dumped his bag on the floor. The single bed was unmade and there was no linen in sight, but he'd slept in more uncomfortable places. He kicked off his shoes and lay down. After over a decade he was back at the Ridge. The ceiling stared back at him, dark and judgmental.

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He shouldn't be here. He didn't deserve to be here.
His family didn't want him here.

He inhaled deeply. Red dirt and lanolin.

Home.

His chest constricted and a tear escaped down his
face.