

Trapped in Retribution Bay

Aussie Heroes: Retribution Bay

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Chapter 1

The sun beat relentlessly on Darcy Stokes' red-checked shirt, and a trickle of sweat ran down his back. He lifted his Akubra and wiped the sweat from his brow. Stifling heat was a constant in his life, one he embraced or ignored. His bigger concern was the trough float, which wouldn't shut off, wasting precious water. He swore he'd fixed it last week, so why was it broken again?

Maybe he was losing it. The past two and a half weeks had been hit after hit, starting with his parents' sudden deaths. Perhaps his brain couldn't take any more bad shit happening. He couldn't afford to lose it. He'd already cost the sheep station far more than it could sustain. It was his fault they were on the brink of bankruptcy. If only he hadn't pushed his father so hard... He squashed down the guilt and, with a final twist of his spanner, tightened the nut and tested the float. The water squeaked through the pipe before gushing out in a warm stream. As it reached the level, it cut off like it was supposed to.

Relief filled him. If it hadn't worked, he would have had to replace the whole mechanism, and that was an extra expense they couldn't afford. He shoved his tools in the toolkit and splashed the warm water on his face.

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Mid-afternoon was always the most viciously hot. Getting to his feet, he scanned the land that had been in his family for over a century. Many would view the rich red dirt and scraggly low shrubs as ugly, but to him it held a harsh beauty. It was home.

For as long as they kept the debtors at bay.

He prayed he and his siblings could come up with a solution so it would stay in their family for another century.

The occasional baa of the sheep soothed him. Most of the sheep in this paddock would give birth in the next couple of weeks. He'd move them closer to the farmhouse on Monday to further protect them from wild dogs and dingoes.

His toolkit clanked as he tossed it into the tray of his ute, then he climbed into the cab and radioed Matt. "All done here. Heading back now."

Matt's response came back a moment later. "Roger. I'm almost done at the windmill. I swear you gave me the hardest job."

Darcy chuckled at the gripe. "Knew you'd be able to handle it, mate." He could picture Matt grumbling to himself.

"Flatterer," Matt answered. "See you back at the house."

Darcy started the engine, cranking the aircon to high. The radio crackled.

"Darce, are you still at the station?" It was Amy, their campground guest liaison and his brother, Brandon's fiancée.

"Yeah." Where else was he supposed to be? The answer hit him the moment Amy spoke.

"You need to pick up Lara from pony club."

Shit. He shoved the ute into gear as he calculated the quickest way to get into town. How could he have forgotten his daughter? "On my way now," he told

Amy. It would take him over an hour, but if he pushed it, he'd only be a few minutes late—ten at the most.

The ute bumped over the rough red track as his heart raced and he cursed his forgetfulness. He hated letting down his daughter, especially with her still grieving over his parents. Normally Amy drove into town with Lara's horse and picked up Lara from school to take her to the pony club, but today camp guests were coming in late and Amy had asked Darcy to do it.

It was one small thing. Amy had even taken Lara to school, dropped the horse at the pony club this morning, and arranged for Lara to get a lift from school with a friend so Darcy could work as late as possible before having to leave.

He was an idiot.

The idea of Lara waiting by herself while the other parents picked up their children made his chest squeeze.

It had been just the two of them almost since the moment Lara was born. Darcy's ex, Sofia, had taken less than a month to decide that having a baby at eighteen and living on a sheep station in the middle of nowhere was not the life she wanted. So she'd left them both.

Ripped his heart right out of his chest.

And if Sofia couldn't bear to stay in a place she'd grown up in, what chance did he have of finding a woman who loved this land as much as he did?

She'd left him with a tiny bundle of joy he'd no idea how to care for. Sofia's parents had wanted custody of Lara, but even as young as he was, he'd never seriously considered it. Lara had snuggled her head into his chest the first time he'd held her in his arms, and the moment he'd brushed her fine, dark hair, he was a goner. He would die to protect her.

But he would have been completely lost without his

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mother. The sharp pang of loss had him rubbing his chest. She'd taught him to make formula, how to test the heat on the crook of his elbow, and refused to change dirty nappies if he was there to do it.

She'd been adamant he take responsibility for his actions, even on those early nights when Lara wouldn't sleep. He'd spent hours walking Lara around the yard, so as not to disturb his family, and yet his mother was always there when he came back inside, to offer support. She'd take care of Lara in the mornings, so Darcy could get a couple of extra hours of sleep.

He shook his head. Always there for him—until now.

Lara had lost another mother-figure in her life.

He blinked to clear the tears from his vision.

He reached the gate which led onto the main road and jumped out to open it. He frowned. The chain dangled rather than being wrapped around the post. A strong wind would blow it open. Maybe one of the camp guests had been this way.

Darcy drove through and latched the gate behind him before hitting the bitumen. He pressed his foot a little closer to the floor than he should, scanning the roadside for kangaroos, emus or feral goats that might want to mess with him.

Nothing moved.

He accelerated. He couldn't disappoint his girl.

Lara's father was late. Faith Arnold crossed her arms and tried not to let her agitation show to the young girl next to her. Lara had been the first to finish unsaddling her horse and brushing it down. She'd watched the other parents collect their children.

But instead of doing nothing, Lara had grabbed one of the shovels, and started cleaning up the piles of

manure left in the arena after the lesson. Such a considerate kid.

Faith checked the time again. Her own father would be home soon, and if she wasn't there, he would be furious.

"Where's your favourite place to ride?" Lara tucked a stray chocolate brown hair behind her ear. "Mine is along the beach." She normally eagerly waited for Faith's response to questions, but now her gaze constantly flicked to the road into the pony club.

"I've never done it," Faith said.

That got Lara's attention. "You've never been riding on the beach?" Eyes wide, she stared at Faith as if she was an alien.

Faith chuckled. "Not many places in Perth where I can." Plus, work took up all her daylight hours. She shovelled the last pile of manure into the wheelbarrow and wheeled it out of the arena, Lara falling into step beside her.

"Well, Retribution Bay is better than Perth," Lara said. "Perth is noisy and smelly." She turned to glance back to the road.

"You don't think manure is smelly?"

Lara waved her argument aside. "That's normal. The city has all the dirty car smells."

Faith couldn't argue with her logic. On those two accounts, the small town of Retribution Bay was better. Lara was silent again, which was unusual for the normally chatty girl.

Faith dumped the manure in the composting pile, and when she turned, Lara's bottom lip trembled, and her worn boots scuffed the red dirt.

"Do you think he's had an accident?" Lara whispered.

Nuts. Lara's grandparents had died in a car accident less than a month ago. Faith placed her hand on Lara's

back and rubbed it. "I'm sure he's fine. He might have been caught up with something at Retribution Ridge."

"But he never forgets me." The conviction was as sweet as it was worrying. If Lara was right, then something might have happened to Darcy.

Faith got her phone out of her pocket. She'd call Amy and check Darcy had left. As she dialled the number, a white ute sped down the road.

"There he is!" Lara yelled.

Faith hung up and waited for the ute to pull up next to the horse float. The man who climbed out was more good-looking than Faith remembered, and her memory put him at pretty darn hot.

He was tall and tanned, with his dark brown hair peeking out below the Akubra, but it was the rangy body of a man who worked with his hands that captured her attention. And his smile sent a shot of lust straight through her body.

"Hey, pumpkin..."

Lara burst into tears and flung herself into his arms. The smile vanished, and he scowled at Faith over his daughter's back as if she'd mortally wounded his child.

"What's wrong? Did something happen at pony club? Was Natasha mean to you again?"

Lara was sobbing too hard to answer him. Faith walked closer. Quietly she said, "Lara was worried you might have had an accident."

The devastation in his blue-grey eyes pierced her soul, and Faith pressed her lips together and turned away. They needed a minute.

Darcy lifted Lara under the arms, and she wrapped her limbs around him, hugging him like a koala. Not a mean feat because the ten-year-old already reached Faith's shoulder. "I'm sorry, pumpkin. I should have called Miss Arnold, but I didn't have her number in my phone. A trough out near the sheep was broken."

Lara's voice was muffled, but Faith still made out the words. "But you fixed it last week."

"I thought I did too," he said. "It broke again." He wandered away from Faith, rubbing circles on Lara's back and murmuring to her. Lara relaxed her death grip around his neck, and she rubbed his back in return as if soothing him. When he finally placed her back on the ground, his words carried. "Let's hitch up the float and get you and Starlight home. Amy mentioned something about a barbecue for dinner tonight."

Lara wiped her eyes and nose on her shirt and sniffed. "OK."

As they worked together to hitch the horse float, Faith's phone rang. One look at the caller made Faith suppress a groan. She walked away from them before answering. "Hi, Dad."

"Where the hell are you?" he demanded.

"I'm at the pony club," she said. "We ran a little late."

"You left your mother alone for that long!"

She shifted the phone away from her ear, the volume far too loud. She prayed for patience. "I asked if she wanted to come, but she wasn't interested."

"That's beside the point. I said you can't leave her alone. What if she had another stroke? No one would be here to help her. She'd die and her death would be on your conscience."

Fear put those words in his mouth, but she still rallied against them. At her mother's last check up, the doctor had assured Faith she was at little risk of another stroke. But her father refused to believe it. "I'll be home shortly. I need to talk to a father."

Darcy was leading the bay mare inside the float. He was efficient, she'd give him that.

"We'll discuss this more then." Her father hung up.

Faith sighed and strolled back to the father and

daughter team who were closing the float door.

Darcy turned. "I'm sorry about being late. I hope I haven't caused you any trouble."

How much of the conversation had he heard? "Nothing I can't handle."

Darcy retrieved his phone, one arm around Lara. "Can I have your number? I shouldn't be late again, but just in case..."

She told him and he saved it. "Thanks."

"Dad, Faith said she's never been horse-riding along the beach," Lara said. "Can she come out to our place and ride along the gulf?"

Faith's face heated. She hadn't expected an invitation. "Thank you, Lara, but it's not necessary."

Darcy smiled. "You're more than welcome," he said. "Think of it as an apology. I hope your husband won't be too cross at you."

She frowned. "My husb—" The penny dropped. She held up her phone. "Oh. No, that was my father. He doesn't like Mum being left alone for too long since her stroke."

Darcy shifted. "I'm sorry for putting you into that position. I'll set an alarm next time."

"We could all go on a picnic together!" Lara suggested, warming to the topic, her enthusiasm returned now her father was there. "On the weekend 'cos it takes a couple of hours to ride to the ocean from our place."

The urge to accept was strong. When was the last time she'd been on a decent trail ride? At least eight months ago when she'd been in Perth, probably longer. She glanced at Darcy to see if he was sincere.

He nodded. "I can take some time on Sunday. It's better if you have a guide, so you don't get lost. You can borrow one of our horses."

"I have my own horse," she said. "But I'll need to

find someone to look after Mum.”

“There’s always someone at the farmhouse if you want to bring her out too.”

Such a kind offer and so tempting, but her father was already cross. “Can I let you know?”

“Sure. Probably best if we get an early start, say seven or eight so it’s not too hot,” Darcy continued. He pressed some buttons on his phone and her mobile beeped. “That’s my number.”

A thrill went through her and she ignored the flutter in her chest.

Lara jumped up and down. “You’ve got to come, Faith. Amy and I will put together an awesome picnic.”

Faith smiled at the girl’s enthusiasm. “I’ll do my best.”

Darcy dipped his hat as he climbed into the car. “I hope to see you Sunday.”

She waved goodbye as they drove off, resisting the urge to fan her face. The man stirred all her insides. His strong hands, the way he dipped his hat in greeting and his sweet encouragement of Lara... She sighed as she broke off a hay biscuit and fed Spirit. It wouldn’t be long before her mother wouldn’t need a regular carer and Faith would go back to Perth, back to her corporate law job and her townhouse.

Faith retrieved a curry comb from the box of equipment, and brushed long strokes down Spirit’s dappled grey coat.

Returning to Perth didn’t hold as much appeal as it should. Lara’s words *noisy and smelly* echoed in her head. She’d become accustomed to the small town, being able to walk to the shops, or down to the beach. If she was feeling energetic, she could even walk to the pony club and ride. She’d also made friends with people who worked on her father’s tour boat and caught up with them at least once a week for a drink.

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Life was less hectic, more enjoyable here. She barely had time to catch up with friends in Perth. There, seventy-hour work weeks were the norm.

“You get neglected in Perth, don’t you, Spirit?” she murmured, moving behind her horse to brush its other side.

Spirit nickered at her voice. She had lost the roundness from her belly caused by a lack of exercise and her coat now shone from being brushed regularly.

Faith’s tanned hands and unpolished nails made her chuckle. Spirit’s appearance had improved, while she had let go of all the professional gloss that was part of her law job. She’d loved not needing makeup, and having to look the perfect part every moment of the day.

But she had enjoyed the challenge of a well-written contract, and the money that came with the job. Her townhouse was in a trendy part of the city, close to restaurants, so she never needed to cook, and she could walk when she went out occasionally with friends.

She shook her head. It was pointless comparing the two. The differences were too great. Faith returned the comb to the equipment box and gave Spirit one last hug. “See you tomorrow.”

She couldn’t delay her departure further. It was time to head home to face her father.

Faith’s father was at the front door of his modest brick house before she closed her car door. The sun edged its way towards the horizon, casting him in shadow, but his entire posture was tense, and his grey hair was its normal dishevelled mess. Her father used to let nothing get to him, but Faith had discovered over the past eight months anything to do with his wife’s health really riled him.

She sighed. “Hi, Dad. How was your day?” Sometimes she could distract him by asking about the boat.

“It would have been a lot better if I hadn’t got home to find your mother alone.”

Faith brushed past him, pecked a kiss on his cheek and continued to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water. Her mother sat on the couch in the open plan living area, her walking stick beside her, her dark hair belying her age and as always, impeccably done. She shrugged apologetically at Faith.

“Now Rob, I told you I insisted Faith go to her class. She has a commitment to those children.”

“The agreement was she would come to Retribution Bay to nurse you,” her father argued. “Not to reinvigorate an abandoned pony club.”

Faith would have lost her mind if she hadn’t had something else to do after the first few difficult months of helping her mother with constant physiotherapy. “It was the only way I could agist Spirit there. *You* helped me arrange it.”

“I didn’t know it would take so much time.”

A typical example of how her father never thought ideas through. Before he could bring up his other gripe, she said, “*And* you were the one who told your friends to bring their legal questions to me.” She appreciated the chance to use her law skills, but it hadn’t been enough. Four months after her stroke, Milly had improved to the stage where she was more independent, and had encouraged Faith to find a hobby.

“At least you can do that at home, with your mother here.”

Her father would never admit his part in this. Time to defuse him. “Did you have a good group today?” Faith asked.

His posture relaxed. “We went a fair way to find a whale shark,” he said. “I couldn’t disappoint them.” He rolled his shoulders a few times.

But he expected her to disappoint the children who came to her classes. Her father only ever considered what he wanted. Faith didn’t know how her mother put up with him.

He scowled, turning to his wife. “You should have gone with Faith rather than stay here by yourself.”

“It was far too hot outside,” she said. “And a little alone time was pleasant.”

“No.” He slammed his fist on the kitchen table. “I won’t have you here by yourself and that’s final.” He strode out of the room and a few seconds later the bathroom door banged, and the shower switched on.

Her mother sighed. “It will take some time for him to understand I’m all right.”

Faith understood why her father was so protective—her mother had had her stroke while he’d been working, and it had been pure luck that a friend popping around to visit found her. His actions came from a place of love and fear, not of control. “I guess I won’t be going on Sunday,” she murmured. She sighed and opened the fridge, staring without seeing the items inside. A trail ride with her favourite student and a sexy farmer would have given her something to look forward to, but she didn’t dare suggest it with her father already in a mood.

“What was that, Faith?”

Faith shook off the disappointment and retrieved the stir fry ingredients for dinner. “One of my students invited me on a trail ride to the beach on Sunday.”

Her mother stood, a little unsteady on her feet, and then leaning on her walking stick, she tottered over to the kitchen bench. She’d put a little weight on during her recovery, and had more of a roundness to her ever-

smiling face, when previously she'd been wiry. "You should go."

"Dad has a tour on Sunday."

Milly glanced behind as if to check her husband hadn't come back in. "Staying at home is driving me crazy," she said. "I want to join him on the boat and this is the perfect opportunity. We need to figure out how to convince him."

Faith studied her mother. She hadn't complained once of cabin fever, though she had been insistent about their little outings each day as she'd grown stronger. A walk down the street, a coffee at the local café, or going to visit a friend for an hour or more.

Before Faith could speak, Milly continued, "What excuse can we give?" She shuffled around and opened the soy sauce to add to the dish.

Faith hated seeing her mother so frail, but this was far better than she'd been a few months ago. It reminded her her parents were getting older, already in their seventies, definitely retirement age. She'd been the surprise child. Both her brothers were much older with families of their own.

"How about we say a friend of yours is in Coral Bay and you're meeting them?"

"Why don't we tell him the truth?" Faith asked. "Say you want to go on the boat with him, and I have plans."

Milly shook her head. "No, that won't work. He's cross with you anyway." She perked up. "You could say you're helping someone with a contract and the only day they have free is Sunday. Your dad's so proud of you being a lawyer and likes to brag. He couldn't refuse."

It seemed like a lot of work. "Mum, just tell him you're bored at home and want to go out."

"He doesn't think I'm ready yet."

"That's not his decision to make." She hated how

her mother always gave in to her father. Not once had she stopped one of his harebrained schemes which had seen them move every couple of years after the next shiny get rich scheme, even though as a child, Faith had begged her to.

The bathroom door slammed open and her father marched in. "Is dinner ready?"

Faith finished slicing the capsicum. "Just waiting for you to finish your shower." She turned on the gas stove and added oil to the wok. "Mum was saying how she misses going on the boat with you."

Her mother glared at her, but Rob didn't catch it. "The boat's no place for her. She's too unsteady."

Faith thought fast. "Inside the reef it's pretty calm most days. She could sit next to you on the captain's chair."

"She'd be bored."

Faith raised her eyebrows at her mother, hoping she would chime in.

"It might be nice to chat to some new people," Milly said. "I miss hearing everyone's travel stories."

Rob hesitated. For all of his bluster, he liked to keep his wife happy. "Let me check the forecast."

Faith added the garlic, ginger and chilli to the wok and hoped Sunday's forecast was for light winds and sunny weather.

Her father grunted. "The boat's going to sway a lot."

"I know. I'll stay seated. Perhaps when you stop to snorkel, I can jump in for a swim too."

"I don't know about that. You might have difficulty getting back on the boat."

"Oh, but you'll help me, won't you?" Milly said.

"Of course."

"Then how about we play it by ear?"

"All right."

Faith blinked. Just like that, her mother had got her

own way. Faith added the meat to her pan and it hissed, sending up a delightful aroma of spices.

“Faith, you’ll have a day to yourself on Sunday,” her mother continued. “Maybe you can take your horse for a long ride.”

“We haven’t agreed you’re coming on the boat,” Rob protested.

“Oh, but of course we did,” Milly said. “Our Faith deserves a day off, don’t you think?”

“So do I,” her father grumbled, as he brushed a kiss on her cheek and then set out bowls for the stir-fry.

“Yes, but you chose to be a tourist boat operator, dear. They don’t get days off during the season.”

Faith added the vegetables, smiling to herself. She was surprised her father had stuck it out as long as he had on the tour boat. They’d been in Retribution Bay for almost three years. Perhaps her mother’s condition had delayed the decision.

“You’ll have fun together,” Faith said as she switched off the stove and dished up the stir-fry. The excitement she hadn’t allowed herself to feel bubbled up.

Already she could hear the pounding of hooves against the sand, and feel the salt air on her skin. Maybe she could even take Spirit for a swim.

She couldn’t wait.