

NO WAY BACK

-Late Saturday night, Twenty years ago-

He kept his head down and pushed deeper into the shadows. The situation had changed so rapidly, so dramatically that he was still unable to think straight. And being more than half cut wasn't helping. They'd all had far too much to drink.

It had happened so quickly, with no time to consider right or wrong. To work out a better way. To think it through. He'd been forced to act and he already regretted his actions. Deeply.

Kieran was dead, of that there was no doubt.

His temple throbbed and his heart literally hammered in his chest as he risked a quick peek out of the darkened hiding place. He saw no one and pushed himself back into the shadowed nook of the ferries lower deck.

The Kestrel was a double-ended wooden vessel with two levels, about forty metres long and almost a hundred years old. And he had to get off it somehow – quickly and unseen.

He risked another look. The throbbing in his temple intensified and he shook his head to try and clear it away. From his hiding place he could only see a short way around the lower deck in either direction. The lighting was dull with patches of deep shadow. There were good places to hide, for both himself and anyone who may be seeking him.

Again he saw no one.

The Kestrel was still and quiet, bobbing only gently. It had been tied up alongside the wharf at downtown Auckland now for less than a minute. He didn't know if it had finished working for the night or not. But a fresh boarding of passengers would be a disaster. He couldn't be found here.

With trembling legs he stepped out of his hiding place again. The gangway off, to leave the ferry in the normal way, was on the upper level. But he couldn't risk using it without being seen by the crew. So he crept towards the harbour end of the vessel with no real purpose.

A creak from the upper deck made him duck into a shadow and freeze. He waited breathlessly. Muffled noises above filtered through from the Auckland end of the ferry. People were coming. Panicking, he darted away from the sounds and found himself almost at the bow of the, currently, seaward end of the boat. But he couldn't go any further. That was where it happened. Kieran's blood was still on the deck around there. He stopped, looking around desperately for a way out. For some way off the bloody boat.

Then he saw something. A ladder ran down the side of the wharf into the water. If he could get over to it somehow he could climb up and reach the wharf. He moved forward, gauging the distance. It was a good two metres from the side of the ferry to the ladder. Not a long way but he would have to jump. He lean out over the railing, looking first around the curving deck of the ferry for signs of life. No one emerged from the gloom, but he could clearly hear voices now. More drunken revelers were boarding to catch the ferry back to Devonport.

He needed to move quickly.

Staring over the side he found the water dark and murky, sucking endlessly at the massive pylons that held the wharf up. But the tide was out so the lower level of the Kestrel sat well below the wharf's surface, offering him a terrifying opportunity. If he could reach the ladder he could escape. But if he missed the jump he would fall into the water and be sucked between the ferry and the wharf. He wasn't a strong swimmer and he was still quite drunk. He would probably drown. Even in his current state he knew jumping was a bad idea, but he could think of no other way out.

With a final glance down the ferries deck he carefully climbed the rail and positioned himself. There was a ledge on the outside of the ferry that afforded him a tenuous foothold, only half the width of his boot. Stepping down he initially slipped and had to scabble back over the railing before finally managing to wedge his boot roughly into place. He wished he was wearing sneakers, but he would never have been allowed into any of the pubs or clubs wearing them.

He tried to steady the butterflies in his stomach but fear gripped him tightly. Balancing on the ledge wasn't ideal but it did bring him significantly closer to the ladder. He took a deep breath, gripped the Kestrel's rail as firmly as he could with one hand, and stretched out towards the ladder. It was still too far. Only about half a metre separated him from freedom. His temple continued to throb wildly. When his hand on the rail slipped slightly he drew himself nervously back to the ferry.

More noises above. The new passengers were moving around the upper level without a care in the world. He could hear them laughing and joking, just as he and his friends had been doing earlier. He tried to block out the sounds – and his memory of the terrible event that had so unexpectedly unfolded.

It was now or never. He needed to get off the ferry before anyone came down to the lower deck and saw him. He had no choice, time was against him. The ferry would depart soon. He released one hand again and stretched it out. He bent his leg, ready to thrust off the railing – and he jumped.

Time seemed to stop. He tumbled through the air gracelessly as the outstretched hand reached the ladder and he grabbed at it for all he was worth. His left boot hit a lower rung and slipped off the barnacle encrusted steel. Twisting in the air he wrapped one arm around the side of the ladder and forced his other hand through the space to lock onto a rung. His body smacked into the ladder and both feet flailed momentarily in the air.

But he held on, dangling precariously in space, cursing softly to himself.

Clinging desperately to the cold and slippery ladder he gingerly raised a leg, his pants scraping along the sharp barnacles of the lower rungs until his foot finally found purchase. He almost cried aloud in relief. Awkwardly he set himself on the ladder and then climbed around to the other side, beneath the wharf and into the shadows. Almost immediately a whistle sounded and he felt the ladder shudder as the Kestrel came to life and began to move away.

He scrambled higher up the ladder, pulling himself into deeper darkness beneath the wharf and waited for the lumbering old ferry to begin another repetition of its endless cycle. It would sail again to Devonport before returning to downtown Auckland, relentlessly plying this same course as it had – dozens of times a day, every day– for the last three-quarters of a century. The water beneath him churned and sucked and eventually the Kestrel was gone.

It became quiet again.

His nerves were almost completely shot and his head was about ready to explode, the pain at this temple reverberating like a cannon. Yet still he waited.

After nearly ten excruciatingly long minutes he rounded the ladder and cautiously ascended. The wharf above him was an open area, covered by a corrugated tin roof and barely lit. But the darkness would continue to be his friend as he slipped quietly between the wooden benches and made his way to the gates. The ferry terminal was quiet once again and only one man was seated in the little office beside the only entrance and exit. He was reading, it was late, and he was expecting only a few more customers. And they would all be coming from Quay Street, not from the wharf.

Moving silently away from the main entrance he would climb the big iron fence and cut across Queen's Wharf behind the main entrance – reversing the route that he and his friends had used to get in there earlier.

He felt slightly more confident now, away from the ferry. But he still had no idea where he would go once he got clear of the area. His heart continued to race in panic as he desperately tried to understand just how his entire world had so quickly become so incredibly messed up.

He knew that he had to get out of Auckland. That was the only thing he could think of with any clarity. Disappear. Escape. Get as far away as he could, as quickly as possible. He had to put distance between himself and that damned ferry.

He wasn't going to go to jail. Not again. He'd had a small taste of it once before and was terrified that it would destroy him. He couldn't live like that. No way, no how. He would have to run. And hide. Perhaps forever.

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-Late Thursday night, Present day-

"I have never met such a self-serving bunch of wankers in my life. Why the hell do we keep coming to these goddamn stupid dinners?"

I just stared at him, more than a little bleary eyed. It was late in the evening and Brent was winding up into yet another of his meandering, bigoted rants. Usually I would disagree with him, just for the sake of taking an opposing view, but I was tired and kept my mouth shut.

"These pricks don't know shit, and yet here they all are, slapping themselves on the backs, kissing up and stroking each other's egos like their lives depend on it." He pointed across the room openly at a short, chubby man with a pixie haircut in a brightly coloured shirt. "I mean, take that little prick. That bloody ass-bandit, Armitage. He should never have won the fucking Qantas trans-Tasman sales award. He couldn't bloody find Australia if it bit him on the ass."

"He's got a good Aussie team," I said.

Brent glared at me. Most mere mortals' would quiver when Brent Barclay glared at them like that, but I just rolled my eyes. He ignored me.

"He's a prick, and a fucking pillow-biter. There's far too bloody many of them in this industry. And that bitch . . ." He pointed again. This time at a buxom woman wearing oversized rectangular 'I-think-these-make-me-look-intelligent' glasses sit-ting only two tables away. "That bitch couldn't find her way to Auckland airport with a GPS up her twat . . . and yet, somehow, she manages to win a pair of Global Explorer round-the-world airfares. I mean, for fucks sake, how is that possible?"

I couldn't answer him. Frankly, I was just as surprised.

"And yet here I am, with the best performing corporate agency in the country –that's right– in the whole fucking country, and all I get is a lousy block of plastic from Air New Zealand for selling a shit-load of bloody premium space."

He pointed at the offending award on the table beside us. Presented for Top Sales of Premium Class seating it was, in fact, exactly that – an engraved block of plastic. Not even smoked glass, as they had been in previous years, but obviously plastic. It looked cheap and probably was. "Life's a bitch, big fella," I said. "These award ceremonies sure aren't what they used to be."

He looked at me again and morosely shook his head. We've both been to well over a dozen of these annual gala Travel Industry award dinners and the prizes were definitely getting worse every year. Back in the day, when we both first became travel agents, almost everyone in attendance, regardless of how well they operated their business, would walk away with a couple of free domestic airfares – or at least a few nights in a flash hotel somewhere. But these days, with airlines and operators all struggling to make a buck, and the intrusion of the bloody internet, you couldn't even lay your hands on one of those little plastic model airplanes. And the endless free drinks stopped quite a few years ago.

"You want another beer?" he asked.

I'd already had a couple more than I should and shook my head. It was going to be hard enough dragging myself up and into the office in the morning as it was. "No. Thanks anyway. I should be going."

"Come on, don't be a girl. I've got a night off. You're not gonna piss off and leave me with all these pansies?"

I smiled. Brent and I have been friends forever, which is probably why I so easily ignore his perpetually homophobic and expletive-laden rants. You just get used to it. But we haven't been out all that much since he got married last year. It's odd really. I never thought any woman would tame him. I checked my watch. It was late, but not that late. "Go on then. But it's the last," I said.

"You're a soft-cock. Harden up," he called back over his shoulder as he snaked his way between the tables. People moved aside as they always did when Brent ploughed through a room. He was a big guy and carried a real aura of superiority around with him. It's one of the things that's helped to make him a very successful businessman – in addition to his obviously charming personality.

The hotel ballroom was vast, with over a hundred tables beautifully set out across it. But the evening was drawing to an end and only about half the attendee's remained scattered about the place. As I gazed about the room, Linda, the new Picarso Rent-a-car sales rep glanced my way and then started moving in my direction. I looked away quickly tried to decide what to do. But I didn't move fast enough and only got a couple of steps towards the open doorway out onto the hotel's balcony when she called my name.

"Adam. Hey, Adam. How's your night going?"

I turned and smiled. "Linda, hey. Didn't see you there."

"It's been a good evening, hasn't it?"

"It has, yes. This is your first gala, right?"

"Yeah, very glam. It's nice to dress up a bit."

I looked at her. She was very pretty and, feeling the knot of guilt in my stomach tighten, the form-fitting red evening gown she wore showed off some spectacular curves. But I couldn't think of anything else to say and just nodded meekly. Her dark hair was down, flowing over bare shoulders, yet I found the heaviness of her make-up distracting. Usually she wore very little. She didn't need much. There was an awkward silence before we both spoke in unison.

"So, are you—"

"Look, I've been—"

I looked away, unable to meet her eyes. Standing near the doorway I gazed briefly across the balcony to the lights of Devonport glittering onto the Waitemata harbour. The awards dinner was being held at the Hilton Hotel in downtown Auckland and we had a spectacular view over to the North Shore.

I turned back to Linda and bit the bullet. "I'm sorry I haven't called you."

Her response was surprisingly warm. "That's okay. I know how busy you are."

But that's just the thing. I haven't been busy. Again I didn't know what to say. We had a couple of dates and they actually went pretty well. It's just . . . how do I put this. Linda's really nice, but she isn't . . . well, she isn't the one.

"I had a good time," she said. "You're easy to talk to, and fun. So . . . you know. If you want to . . ."

"Yeah," I said, hating myself as I spoke. "We should . . ."

And then Brent returned, brashly interrupting and saving me from myself. He thrust two fresh bottles of Heineken into my hands and turned quickly to Linda.

I cringed as he reached out to take her hand in his massive paws.

"Well, Hello young lady, I don't believe we've met. I'm Brent Barclay of Barclay and Dodd. You must be new to the industry."