

# **DISLOCATION DISLOCATION**

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# PROLOGUE

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*400km south of the Cocos Islands, 3500km north-west of Perth (Indian Ocean), 1540 hours*

Lieutenant Glen Robertson squinted through the sparkling sea-spray and adjusted the strap on his Austeyr semi-automatic rifle. Whistled a jaunty ditty through his teeth and flexed his foot in the floor strap as Fitzsimmons, laughter-lined eyes narrowed against the breeze, launched their rigid-hull inflatable over the soft swells. Bumping legs next to him was the heavily freckled Andrews, the latest addition to their party.

‘I’m telling you, boys, she’s the one,’ said Ahearne, one sunburnt hand cradling his rifle, the other fidgeting with his coarse red moustache.

Robertson stopped whistling so he could reply. ‘How long have you been seeing her?’

‘Two weeks,’ said Ahearne without irony.

‘Gillette,’ shouted Robertson over the roar of the motor. ‘How long is this cruise?’

‘Eighty glorious days!’ barrel-chested Gillette shouted back.

‘What?’ said Ahearne, trying to suppress a grin. ‘She’s not stupid, she knows she’s hit the jackpot.’

Robertson smiled, shook his head and started whistling again. Everybody had their own way to keep their minds from pre-mission jitters. Ahearne’s was to gossip about women.

Of course, nobody believed it, least of all Ahearne, but lying to each other about their women was something sailors had been doing since the first bark canoes.

They were en route to a leaking wooden fishing trawler overloaded with

asylum seekers out of Jakarta called the *Bau Anjing*. Robertson's CO had tasked his team with taking control of the little boat and guiding it back to the HMAS *Melbourne*. There, they would load the *Anjing's* passengers into life rafts, and the frigate would tow them back out of Australian waters.

Every detail of the mission was cut like crystal into Robertson's memory, as though a high-speed camera was playing it super slow-motion in his head. Things had been quiet on the Atlantic approach to West Australia, and the *Bau Anjing* was the first illegal boat they'd seen for a while. The closer they got, the less he thought the term 'boat' applied to it.

'Look at that piece of shit.' Fitzsimmons laughed. 'Junk by name, junk by nature.'

*Harsh but fair*, thought Robertson. The vessel was indeed a decrepit piece of garbage. He pondered a moment, as his squad began to settle and prepare for their mission, the levels of bravery, stupidity, and desperation a person would have to feel to get into a barely seaworthy vessel like this and sail across an ocean! It had the traditional low stern, sweeping hull, and high-pointed bow typical of most Indonesian refugee boats he'd seen. *Bloody tragic*.

He examined the vessel. There was a boxy wheelhouse at the rear. *A good place for belligerents to fire from cover*. Then scanned the splintered gunwale for logical places to board. As he examined it from a tactical perspective, part of his brain decided it was pleasing from neither an aesthetic nor a functional point of view.

The junk was only about twenty-five metres long. Near the waterline, the rotting hull was barely covered by flaked blue paint, but salt-washed red covered the majority of it. The wheelhouse was yellow. The deck had once been green but was now a chipped shade of vegetable-compost grey. To Robertson, it looked like a child had painted it with a rainbow colour scheme in mind. Jarring colour combinations everywhere, like a renovator removing layers of wallpaper from an old house.

Mouldy bilgewater stained the side, fore and aft, and the slime glistened in the hot sun. Desperate, skinny people crammed the deck; men, women and children, who'd strung up makeshift shelters with sheets on poles. The cloth hung limp and listless in the dense atmosphere, like a flag of surrender. Whoever was piloting this poor gypsy's trawler cut the pattering diesel motor as the RHIB drew close.

Overly large eyes in burnt, gaunt brown faces stared out from under shade-cloth. The whole scenario made Robertson uneasy.

He matched vectors with the junk, and they closed to board. The illegals seemed skittish somehow, sharing furtive glances, mothers clutching children close. A wizened old man in tattered robes stood on the gunwale and subtly held up his hands in a placating gesture that Robertson couldn't figure out. Usually,

they just displayed a mix of sullen defiance and fear; this time, it was like they were trying to tell the crew of the RHIB something, without telling them...

The old man stared at them meaningfully and shook his head.

*Stay away...*

'This all feels a bit weird,' said Fitzsimmons.

'Just a routine pacify and tow, sailor,' Robertson said, more to himself than Fitzsimmons. *Quit being so jittery and focus.*

Every detail, every second – the faster things get out of control, the slower it plays back in your brain... one second everything is routine, a microsecond later–

Able seaman Andrews was crossing between the two vessels, about halfway down the junk and five metres from the wheelhouse. Suddenly, there was a rustle of gasps from the illegals, and then someone stifled an abrupt scream as three dark, sinewy men emerged from the wheelhouse with AK-47 rifles, hollow ends pointed. Andrews lined up the taller smuggler with his Austeyr, and Robertson activated the megaphone on the RHIB, turning it to full volume. 'Put down your weapons! I say again, put down your weapons!'

Completely ignoring him, the men shouted at Andrews, spittle flying through the air, gesticulating with their barrels for him to get off their boat. They looked as panicked as Robertson felt.

Andrews was completely open; he had no cover.

'Andrews, you're coming back across, slowly,' called Robertson. Andrews nodded, his Austeyr still trained on the three smugglers.

At that moment, a side-swell slapped into the junk, staggering Andrews, who stumbled towards the gunmen. One of them fired, three rounds from an AK jolting Andrews's body as the bullets smacked into him, two into his bulletproof vest, one through his neck. The bullet deflected into the RHIB next to Robertson, puncturing the skin. Red blossomed into the air as Andrews staggered, dropping to a knee. Blood spat out of his body onto the deck, splashing off the gunwale and into the ocean, mingling with the chipped paint.

A micro-second of stunned silence that lasted forever... *Jesus fuck*, thought Robertson, as he fingered off the safety on his rifle and the world held its breath... then Andrews brought his weapon up, selected full automatic with a distinctive *click* that echoed impossibly loudly, and hosed the smuggler with bullets, blowing him right over the side.

Hell broke loose. Bursts of fire spattered from the wheelhouse as more gunmen weighed in with their lead, firing on the crew in the RHIB. Robertson watched in horror as Andrews collapsed, clutching his neck, gurgling wetly, eyes screaming for help. The two smugglers left on deck had retreated behind some civilians,

hosing the Australians with 7.62mm rounds, safe from return fire under their unwilling human shields.

'There's minimum three more inside!' Robertson shouted, trying to get a bead on the shooters through the human shield. At point-blank range with multiple automatic weapons, Robertson ducked behind the wheel console in the RHIB, trying to shrink down to a pinprick and find an armed target amongst the mass of people on the junk. The RHIB crew started dropping, with roars of pain and anger, muzzle-flash from their Austeyrs, screams from the illegals and the salty tang of blood and seawater...

Keeping low, Robertson peeked around the wheelhouse console, targeted a gunman, steadied his breath and squeezed the trigger as a woman dashed across his line of sight. Going against all of his training, Robertson jerked his rifle upwards at the last second; she disappeared, and he didn't know if his bullet was the reason.

With the smugglers shooting from behind the asylum seekers, the boarding crew could do nothing to defend themselves without harming civilians. Bullets slammed into them and their craft; they were being cut down. The .50 cal was next to Fitzsimmons, mounted in front of the wheel.

'Fitzsimmons,' Robertson yelled. 'Get on that fucking gun!'

Fitzsimmons crouched behind the weapon, cocked it and swung it around, like a wrathful god.

'I can't get a clear shot!'

Robertson took a second to take stock. Andrews was dead. Ahearne was dead. Gillette was down, screaming and clutching at a gaping wound in his stomach. Unlucky that it missed the body armour.

*Us or them*, Robertson thought fatalistically.

'Light it up!' he bellowed.

Fitzsimmons lit it up. It was like trying to gouge a splinter with a jackhammer. He'd aimed primarily at the shooters, but there were so many civilians in the way.

One .50 calibre round will punch through five human beings without any trouble, and Fitzsimmons was pouring fire at point-blank range. Blood spurted into the air. Body parts exploded across the deck like liquid fireworks. People burst apart as though someone had rigged them with internal detonators which were all going off at once. Bullets were shredding the *Bau Anjing* itself, splinters of timber and flecks of paint flitting into the air, suspended momentarily in the soft ocean breeze. Fitzsimmons bellowed incoherently, like a gorilla beating its chest. Women and children shrieked in panic, pain and terror.

The shooters dove further behind the asylum seekers for cover, but Fitzsimmons started shooting *through* their protection and hitting them anyway.

Robertson glimpsed a woman clutching a child to her chest, cowering next to the wheelhouse, when the kid's head just exploded, splattering blood and brains all over his mother's face. Her shaking hands held the air where his head had been. She stared at her empty hands. The thumping concussion, the licks of flame and the brutal efficiency of the machine gun were like a hellish combine harvester, processing human beings; people one minute, clouds of blood and meat the next.

A smuggler dropped, a round hitting him in the shoulder, blowing his entire arm off in a spray of viscera, and catapulting him back into the wheelhouse. His AK went flying, bouncing off the gunwale and into the ocean. Fitzsimmons had taken out most of the gunmen, but in doing so had slaughtered most of the people on deck. He now turned his fire onto the wheelhouse, where the last two shooters were.

Within seconds, the wheelhouse was reduced to a cloud of sawdust and slivers of paint. The incoming hail of bullets ceased, and Fitzsimmons realised there was nothing left for him to target. The big gun, finally silenced, smoked lazily. Moans and whimpers broke through the ringing that still filled the air, along with cries of pain and shock, the ticking of the cooling gun and Fitzsimmons's hoarse gasping.

Robertson huddled behind the wheel in disbelief, absently slapping another clip into his Austeyr. Flakes of green paint drifted serenely in the breeze, and sunlight seemed to cruelly peek through the clouds, as though God had decided to start paying attention again.

He stared, stupefied, at the little flecks as they slowly sank to the deck in front of him. So graceful, almost elegant in their descent. He was only broken out of his reverie by Fitzsimmons calling hoarsely.

'Glen... what have we done?'

He swallowed ashes. His whole crew was dead, except for him and Fitzsimmons. Not to mention the butcher's yard on the refugee ship. 'Get on the radio to the *Melbourne*. Tell them to get a medical team out here right now.'