

Chapter One

Cold as a meat safe and crawling with ships, black saltwater thrusts against the stone teeth of the harbour mouth. Beside the sheltered waters of the inner harbour, in one of Newcastle's few trendy cafes, its brushed metal chairs only ten years out of date, sat a young man with olive skin and dark hair. He was not a handsome man, yet few women walked along this busy promenade without stopping to glance at him. Inured to this kind of scrutiny, he merely continued to chew his fried toast and mechanically sip black coffee. When a particularly beautiful woman jogger slowed as she pounded past, he examined her briefly with his pale eyes, mentally recording her fine profile and long legs. But she felt that he was looking through her, not seeing her, and his indifference burned like a hand grabbing between her legs.

Every Saturday Jon came to this waterfront café and ordered the same breakfast: black coffee, fried eggs and toast. He liked to watch the tugs crawl across the harbour, head out past a squat lighthouse into the snarling ocean, and return nudging yet another coal tanker into the city's crowded dock. No matter how many times you saw the tankers, you never grow accustomed to their huge size. Like most Novacastrians, Jon always stopped what he was doing to watch them enter the harbour. Enjoying the winter sun on his face, Jon watched a pair of tugs straining to manoeuvre a steel leviathan, a vast ship adorned with a battered Panama flag, topsides bloody with rust. Leaning back in his chair, half closing his eyes, Jon watched the giant vessel pass the café, superstructure temporarily blocking out the vivid white disc of the sun, the boat's shadow as endless as the night.

The sun on his face, though cold, made him feel sleepy and he stretched as he thought of his girlfriend. When he left the house for his morning run, Anna was stretched out naked on the bed, fine strands of blonde hair floating across the pillow as if she was swimming underwater. He had stopped to look at her, gingerly reaching out to stroke her hair, as if she was a museum exhibit in a glass case, before easing open the front door and sliding out. A nightshift nurse, Anna would be awake soon. He knew that if he timed it right, he could arrive home after she had brewed a pot of coffee, but before she had put her clothes on. She would still be sleepy but not fractious, pink face, candy floss hair and heavy lidded eyes, perhaps cradling a cup of coffee or bending over to grope for clean underwear in the wicker laundry basket next to the bed. Feeling himself stiffen, Jon calculated that this was his best chance of sex for the day. He reached for his coat and stood up. It was time to go.

A clanging noise startled him. Turning away from his view of the harbour, Jon saw a little boy standing at a nearby table, a metal chair lying on its side. The kid looked frightened, head down, close to tears. The part of Jon's mind that was always working took a mental photograph of the boy: five years old, dark brown skin, curly dark hair, chipped front tooth, large eyes, skinny. Standing over the kid, her neck tendons standing out like guitar strings, was a gaunt blonde woman. Jon watched as she reached out, clearly wanting to shake the kid, but pulling back to fire questions at him. With each question the boy became more confused and upset. As her voice got louder, Jon heard her cry: 'Are you sure? Why didn't you say anything? When did it happen?' Huge eyes black with fear, she reached out and snatched the boy's upper arm and this time squeezed it brutally. 'Alex, when?'

Engrossed with the blonde woman and the boy, Jon barely registered another woman sitting at the same table. It wasn't until she stood up and ran towards the café counter, calling urgently for the manager, that he noticed her. His mind snapped another mental photograph: pale skin, brunette, short hair, solid build, mid 40s. The duty manager came running over, listened briefly to the brunette, then reached down and dialled a short number on the phone behind the counter. Shit, thought Jon, that's triple zero, I'd better fucking do something.

Walking quickly over to the blonde woman he announced 'I'm a police officer'. He looked directly into her eyes, feeling the familiar surge of adrenaline tingle his skin, sharpen his vision. Automatically he took a deep breath to keep his voice firm. Years of training kicked in and he felt like it was any other day at work, except today is a Saturday, his rostered day off, and he's wearing a sweat stained tracksuit not his dark blue uniform, a uniform he both loved and hated. 'What happened?' Jon asked the blonde woman, eyes never leaving her face, he slowly repeated 'tell me what happened'. The woman pointed at the boy, 'Alex said that he saw a woman fall off the wharf, but he won't tell me when it happened or where'. Panic closed her voice down, her throat so tight that words emerged dry and mangled, a wave of anger thrust fear aside. 'He won't tell me what happened' she cried, taking the boy by the shoulders and shaking him very hard, 'tell me! Tell me!'

Jon put his hand on the boy's shoulder, twisted it firmly, like pulling a cork out of a bottle, and gently steered him backwards out of the woman's grip. Ignoring her, he dropped down onto his knees and looked into the boy's eyes. 'I'm Jon' he introduced himself, willing the kid to trust him, 'and you must be Alex...' The boy nodded, only a small nod, but accompanied by the faintest of smiles. 'You and me' continued Jon 'have to find the lady who fell into the water'. Alex's smile vanished and his face froze, 'I need to find the lady in the water' said Jon quickly 'but I need you to help me. Ok?' Again the kid ducked his head, murmured assent. Christ, thought Jon, if there's someone in the bloody water they're going to be long gone by now. 'Alex, I need you to show me where the lady fell in. Can you do that? Show me where it happened'.

Alex spun on his heel and dashed to the eastern edge of the wharf. Caught unawares, Jon caught up with him only right at the edge, the little boy precariously balanced on the heavy timber rail, pointing down into the water, his young face impassive. Looking down, Jon saw nothing in the water, nothing but a surprised seagull looking up at him. The only sound was the short, sharp slaps of an incoming tide hitting the concrete pylons underneath the wharf. No splashing, no yelling, no sign of anyone in the water. Fuck, thought Jon, the kid's making it up. Pulling off his sweatshirt and shoes he asked 'Alex: are you sure it was here?' The boy shrugged helplessly, looking miserable, refusing to make eye contact. With a sinking feeling in the base of his stomach, Jon realised that the kid was wasting his time. Like all police officers, he was used to people screwing him around for fun: people crazy hungry for attention or so bored with their chickenshit lives that they pretended to witness something just to feel important. Fuck them all, thought Jon, and fuck all that civic duty shit they told us at the Academy, nobody gets paid enough for this crap. Fetid debris washed around the base of the wharf, a cold wind whistled through the harbour mouth, only stopping to slam against the jetty on which he is standing, poised to jump. Jon stepped up onto

the timber railing and dives off. As the cold water closed over his head, he still thinks the kid is lying.

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Overhead the sky is dazzling blue, but beneath the shadow of the wharf the water is bone cold. The shock of the liquid's temperature presses against his chest like an iron girder, Jon opens his eyes, but in the grey brown underwater world there is nothing to see. Poor visibility all year round, the tugs churning water into constant whirlpools of silt and sediment, harbour water polluted by constant traffic and corrupt industries further upstream. When Jon reaches the surface, he looks around, but he is alone. He duck dives and swims through the water, eyes closed, arms outstretched, trying to feel for a large object. A large warm object. Still there is nothing. As he breaks the surface of the water again, taking in a large gulp of air, salt water stings his eyes. Then he is underwater again, back into the cold, searching a different area, trying to go as deep as he can.

His body is rapidly losing heat and wants to drift upwards. Each time he dives he kicks hard towards the harbour floor, going straight down, trying to fight his body's natural buoyancy. A few times he manages to brush the harbour bottom but feels only silt between his outstretched fingers. After he has dived about six times he starts to tire and stops to tread water on the surface, needing more air, desperate to catch his breath. On the wharf above he can see Alex's worried face of and a crowd of people from the restaurant. The boy's eyes look huge, black and serious. 'Can you see anyone?' yells a middle aged man, wearing a cardigan but fit, no sign of a gut, notes Jon. 'No' he calls back. He takes another deep breath. If there is a person in the water, they may be trapped under the wharf, somewhere amongst the pylons. He knows he's getting tired, can feel the cold spreading delicate numbing fingers inside his arms and legs.

This time when he dives he swims forward and enters the dangerous space under the wharf. It is extremely dark as he feels his way through the huge wooden posts, an underwater forest supporting the old wharf, the timber corroded by broken oysters and salt. Overhead is a claustrophobic sheet of solid concrete. He swims away from the light, deeper into the gloom and it is like he is swimming into his own coffin. The striped shadows of the posts merge and become a single blackness. Darkness closes around him like wet wool sucking against his skin and the water feels stiff and heavy. Jon's arms continue their desperate search for objects, panic moving them in the frightened circles of an injured crab, but there is nothing. Using the wooden posts as a ladder, he pulls himself down towards the bottom of the harbour, a rising blanket of filth greeting his descent. As his lungs start to ache, he breathes out slowly to ease the pressure, lost bubbles of air meandering upwards, searching for light.

The human mind is infinite, but the body knows its limits suddenly and without doubt. In the heartbeat second that it takes to brush the harbour floor, Jon knows that he cannot stay down there any longer. His lungs are empty, oxygen supplies spent, a cavernous feeling in his chest, throat collapsing inward. Swimming under the wharf has disorientated him so he turns and briefly opens his eyes to see which way the light is coming from. Then he kicks out madly towards an area of paler water, hovering at the edge of his vision, a small rectangle of luminous water wedged between the dark

vertical stripes. Reaching the open water, he swims upwards, breaks the surface, his mouth chewing for air. This time salt water jets out of his nose and mouth.

Someone has thrown a life ring down into the water, Jon guesses that it was the middle-aged guy: practical, fit but not willing to help. He grabs hold of it, barely able to stay afloat, working hard to catch his breath. 'Did you see anything?' a voice yells from above. Now he can barely see the crowd of people lining the wharf. The salt stings his eyes and his vision blurs. He shakes his head. His chest is heaving and his heart thumping, the banging drowns the noise of the curious bystanders above. He does not want to go back under the wharf again. He wipes his eyes and his vision clears. He sees the boy looking down at him. There is something about the Alex's frightened face and round black eyes that made him dive again. Those black eyes follow him down.

He swims back under the wharf and it is the last place on earth he wants to be. He wills his legs to kick, faster and faster, muscles beating against the water, arms rapidly losing their strength, his mind telling his legs to keep going, bone pushes muscle, fear gives him speed. Again the water darkens, cools, becoming still and quiet as an abandoned house. He goes much further than the first dive. This time he can't see anything, there is no light, there is nothing at all. Black water. He is swimming blind, his arms outstretched like the flippers of a fish. Somehow his fingers seem to have developed their own intelligence. They feel their way through the water, debris and over the mud of the harbour floor. His mind translates the data that they send him and give it words; wood, mud, rusted metal, plastic, sand. The words reassure him but at the back of his mind he knows that if he doesn't get air soon, his lungs will stop working and his body will drown.

He is about to give up and go back. With the anticipation of failure comes an unexpected release, a feeling almost like peace. He finds himself practising a speech for the people who will ask: I did everything I could, there was no-one in the water, the boy must have made it up, maybe I was looking in the wrong spot. He imagines that he is telling his boss, a tough old cop, a charismatic man with leather skin and a kind heart. The guy was a legend: over the years, hard men had wept on his shoulders, and women threw themselves at him like ships on a rock. When Jon was a fresh recruit, straight from the Academy, the old man had looked into Jon's eyes, like a human x-ray, and seen straight through him, had seen in an instance all the crap Jon tried to hide. But his boss didn't give him away, never shared his knowledge, and for this Jon loved him. Light spots dance at the edge of his vision and his legs move slower, slower, soon they will stop. He has stayed under the wharf too long. Jon feels his body relax and sink gracefully towards the harbour floor. In his mind's eye, the picture of his boss vanishes, and is replaced by the piercing whine of his father's Scottish accent, a scowl twisting the man's ever critical gaze: 'you never finish anything, son.' Then everything goes quiet.

When his fingers brush against a new object, it flicks his mind back to reality. Without thinking, Jon knows it is a person. It feels cool, soft and rubbery: a texture that is alien to a marine environment. It is human. His hands close around what feels like an arm and he takes a firm grip. I won't leave you here, he silently promises the person lying helpless on the harbour floor, we're going to get out of here. Jon braces his feet against a pylon and propels himself forward, swimming back towards the

light. Dragging the weight of the body with one arm, and trailing a thunderous wake of a thousand tiny bubbles, he knows that this is the fastest he has ever swum.

Jon's training tells him that brain death can start seconds after drowning. The longer a person is under water, the more catastrophic the damage to their central nervous system will be, after only a short time under water revival will not be possible. The length of time varies according to the water temperature and the age and physical condition of the victim. It is unpredictable, some people reach the point of no return much faster than others, but generally you have only two minutes before it is too late. As he swims, Jon calculates that the person has probably been in the water at least five minutes. Even though it feels like he had been in the water for hours, it must only be a matter of minutes, perhaps three at most. If he gets this person out of the water quickly enough, and begins CPR, he or she still has a chance at survival. His mind races as he kicks towards the surface: how is he going to get the body out of the water? He has seen water access points on the wharf, a couple of rusted old ladders leading down into the water, fishermen descending to collect bait off the harbour rocks, or to step into dilapidated tinnies. There is a ladder on the western side of the wharf, but trying to pull the body out of the water and up a steep ladder will take too long. He remembers the nurse that taught him first aid, years ago, her wry smile as she explained that it was pointless to neatly bandage a corpse, the importance of breath over all other injuries. He decides to try and revive the person while still in the water.

Still dragging the body, he finally breaks the surface. Luckily he has surfaced next to the life ring; he grabs hold of it with one arm and with the other pulls the body to his side. He heaves it upwards so that the person's head will clear the water. Saltwater stings his eyes and he cannot see properly. He turns his head away from the body and vomits seawater. Between gulping up mouthfuls of liquid he tries to catch his breath. With his head still turned away, he shifts his grip on the body, moving his arm upwards so he holding it around the side of its chest, and steadying it against his body with one arm. He looks up at the people on the wharf and sees horror and distress on their faces, dimly wonders why they looked so scared, pauses to puke more water through his nose. The middle-aged man is kneeling on the ground, his head in his hands. While his lungs continue to heave and spasm, Jon desperately tries to slow his breathing, still unable to give the person mouth to mouth resuscitation. In the background he can hear the barren howling of police and ambulance sirens.

He stops vomiting, takes a long breathe of air to steady himself, salt water streaming from his nose. He turns towards the body to start resuscitation. He looks, cannot believe what he is seeing, and turns away from the form that he is holding. Unable to breath, he vomits again and again, his mouth squelchy with bile, lungs ripped apart in jagged spasms. And then the smell hits him. He retches until his legs double up under his torso and his body curves with the force of the contractions. The sirens scream louder and louder, he hears the excited clamour of bystanders, the sound of police radios crackling as cops run towards the edge of the wharf. Back up is here. A wave of gratitude washes over him: the police have responded to the triple O call quickly, bringing an ambulance, and the ambos will take responsibility for this awful situation. Then he can go home, go home to Anna, wrap his arms and legs around her warm body, bury his mouth into the sweet fuzz at the back of her neck, push his penis into her firm flesh, and try and forget what has happened.

The body that he is holding has been in the water for at least a month.

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