
THE SETTLEMENT

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REVOLT

Beyond the Devil's Staircase

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*You are stronger than you think
and loved more than you know.*

Your story isn't over yet.

—

For all those who serve

GLOSSARY

ATV	All-Terrain Vehicle
CQB	Close Quarter Battle
ETA:	Estimated Time of Arrival
FLIR	Forward Looking Infra-Red
FUBAR	Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition
GLA	Grenade Launching Attachment
IAs	Immediate Actions
IED	Improvised Explosive device
KIA	Killed In Action
LocStat	Location Status
ND	Negligent Discharge
NVG	Night Vision Goggles
POW	Prisoner of War
RATEL	RAdio TELecommunications
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
SITREP	Situation Report
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedure
USMC	United States Marine Corps
Wilco	Will Comply

PROLOGUE

Shek was running towards him, but he felt his hand depress the clacker and watched in horror as the hillside came away and fell in slow motion, cascading in an avalanche of mud, vegetation, dirt and bones.

Shek looked at him with wide eyes as his legs sank into the mud and he struggled to escape. He reached toward Brad, then screamed in pain as a boulder connected with his outstretched arm and smashed it into an unnatural angle.

He was being slowly crushed by the weight of the rubble falling all around him and, for the first time ever, Brad saw fear cross Shek's features.

As he watched, Shek's face disappeared beneath the tumbling debris and he would've sworn, as it had vanished, that it had been Kiwi's eyes looking back at him.

Brad watched blood trickle out of the ever-increasing mound of dirt, and he knew, impossibly, that Kiwi was in the rubble as well!

"HOLD ON, MATE! I'M COMING!" Brad shouted, but he couldn't move. Something was holding his arms and legs fast.

The noise of gunfire and rumbling earth drowned out his words and he felt slightly panicked. Shek couldn't hear him; he was being buried alive and would think he was alone.

Brad's heart raced and he fought with all his might to free his legs. Suddenly, he broke away, his foot connected with something, and pain shot through his ankle.

"GET THE FUCK OFF ME!" he shouted and flailed his arms about in a bid to escape the things that were binding him, that were stopping him from protecting his friends.

They were relying on him to protect them.

He *had* to get to them.

“Brad, wake up!” Jonty’s gruff and commanding voice pierced through the haze and panic of the nightmare that tormented him.

Brad sat bolt upright, heart racing and sweat pouring despite the chill in the night air. His foot throbbed painfully where it had connected with a rock, and he was otherwise completely tangled up in his sleeping kit. Jonty was crouched next to him and Davo sat by the campfire watching him with a look of concern on his face. He breathed in great gulps of air and tried to shake off the spectre of death that still prickled his goose fleshed skin.

“You okay?” Jonty asked and handed him a canteen of water.

He nodded in reply, but it was a while before he felt composed enough to speak.

“That was a bad one,” he said almost apologetically, “thought I’d put that shit behind me. Apparently not.”

Davo and Jonty just sat quietly with him, holding the space, no words, no judgement. They didn’t need to say anything, they understood.

Eventually he laid back down on his sleeping kit, but sleep evaded him. The nightmare still haunted the edges of his consciousness, and he knew it wouldn’t take much to fall back into its grip. It was still several hours before the troops would start the day and continue on to Corbyvale so he resigned himself to a long night of watching the stars above.

CHAPTER 1

Tāne had had his eyes trained on the shoreline when he spotted the movement far off in the distance. Binos pressed to his eyes, he had waited with his breath held, until he identified that they were indeed, boats approaching. His young hands shaking, he fired a flare and the two responding flares from one of the boats made him exhale sharply. They had injured on board, but more importantly, the mission had been a success. Scarpering over to the other side of the bluff, he sent three more flares into the sky to alert the Settlement to the arrival of the militia. The third flare indicated that there were wounded on board and would be a great relief to those at the Subby and Little Wanganui. A single flare would've meant they had to prepare for a fight.

Within the hour, there was a flurry of subdued excitement at the Little Wanganui pub. The locals, having seen the flares, were assembled and planning the approach. William was deep in conversation with Ben over the logistics, and the decision was finally reached that they would split into two groups. A convoy would go south along the road with Jacko's bus to meet the teams at Corbyvale, and the others would meet the boats on the beach. While supplies were loaded into vehicles, Ben and Dean quickly rounded up Jacko's horses and connected them to the bus. Climbing on board, Ben noticed Isobel hurrying down the road toward them, a worried expression creasing her face.

"Hop in with Dean, he's a couple of vehicles back," he told her and clicked his tongue for the horses to walk on.

Her guts were roiling as Isobel sat quietly in the horse-drawn car next to Dean. The Coasters had spotted the boats heading north following

the rugged West Coast shoreline just before daybreak, and now she, and several others from the settlement, were heading south to rendezvous with the returning teams in Corbyvale. The wheels crunching through the gravel and the sound of the horses' hooves clip-clopping along rhythmically couldn't soothe her. Surely, she would know intuitively if Brad had been killed, surely something inside her would feel empty. She silently agitated. She hadn't really told him how she felt before he left. What if it was too late? The thought made her sick.

Dean didn't know what was going through her mind, but he could guess by the furrows in her brows and the waves of anxiety that radiated from her. He knew that stating anything consoling at this point would come across as hollow and meaningless, so he just reached over and squeezed her hand. She smiled tightly back, and they sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts of what the next twenty-four hours would reveal.

William made his way down to the beach to await the arrival of the boats and set up areas for the wounded. As Tracey had gone south with the militia, Fiona, the local vet, had temporarily taken over as the community medic. She was busily sorting out the supplies and people needed to manage the casualties. Everyone had realistic expectations that they would be heavy. The fighters had been up against insurmountable odds.

The fact the boats had come back at all was a positive sign, though no one knew how many wounded would be on board. For now, it was all hands-on deck.

The convoy arrived in Corbyvale in the late afternoon. The going had been slow with the general deterioration of the roads and the vehicles having to navigate around a couple of slips. Everyone was on edge, and

nobody felt much like talking. The conversations around the campfires were muted and it was fairly obvious nobody would be getting much sleep that night.

Dot, who'd hitched a lift with Anthony, walked over to Isobel as she sat staring into the fire, lost in another world.

"Mind if I join you?" she interrupted, startling Isobel out of her thoughts.

Dot offered her a full glass of Chardonnay, which she accepted gratefully with a small smile. Only Dot would have thought to bring wine glasses she mused.

Dot placed the wine bottle between them and settled onto the log beside her. They sat together quietly, sipping their wine, and watching the sparks from the crackling fire fly upward into the night sky.

"God, I hope he's okay," Isobel said with a rush.

"I hope so too. I do love embarrassing him," Dot replied with a wry grin in an attempt to lighten the mood. Though she was stressed by the uncertainty of the situation, Isobel couldn't help but give a small laugh.

"Yes, he does go a nice shade of red, doesn't he?"

Dot laughed and regaled the first time that she'd met him.

"For a rough bastard, he does have chinks in that armour of his."

Isobel nodded her head. "That he does ... and I love him for it," she blurted. It was the first time she'd admitted it out loud to anyone, and the colour rose in her cheeks under Dot's knowing gaze.

"I know you do, honey. Question is, does he know?" Dot replied gently. Isobel just shook her head and stared into the flames, once again lost in her thoughts.

As the evening wore on, other women joined them at the campfire.

Everyone had been in two minds on whether to stay and see who arrived on the boats injured, or to head south to welcome and reunite with those who had put their lives on the line to protect them.

Despite the black cloud hanging over them, intermittent laughter rang out as stories were told and memories were shared. Eventually, one

by one, people said their good-nights and headed off to sleep, finally giving in to sheer exhaustion.

The next morning Isobel was feeling decidedly grotty. She'd been unable to turn her brain off, so had barely slept, and her stomach was in knots. As the sky began to lighten, she gave in and got up to start the day's chores of stoking the fire and preparing the breakfast. The camp packed up just after dawn, and the air of anticipation was palpable. She'd never felt more anxious in her entire life.

An hour into the journey, the vehicles came around a bend and Isobel spotted figures in the distance approaching. The convoy came to a standstill as people started leaping down and rushing towards the soldiers on foot. Swept along in the rush, she recognised Davo's towering form lumbering up the road under the burden of his pack.

He grinned when he spotted her and nodded his head rearward. "The scrawny bastard is back there..." he called, but his voice trailed off as a riot of blonde curls caught his attention and his focus zeroed in on Tina who was jogging down the road toward him.

"He's alive!" The emotions that hit Isobel were overwhelming, and she faltered, dragging a hand through her own auburn locks.

Dot sidled up beside her and placed an encouraging hand on her arm. "Go on, honey. Go and welcome him back."

Nodding, she took a deep breath and started to make her way along the line of people. She was shocked by the smell, the blood on their clothing and how gaunt they all looked, but what struck her most especially was the harrowed look in their eyes.

Jonty saw her and approached with a tight grin. "We'd not be here if it weren't for him. Not for me to say, but I think he deserves a hug."

"Thank you, and I think you need one as well," she said, giving Jonty a fierce hug that surprised him.

"Just don't tell that mad bastard you hugged me first," he said in a

mock whisper, but this time the smile reached his eyes.

“How far back is he?”

“Only a couple of teams back,” Jonty called over his shoulder as he continued on, toward the waiting bus.

Brad came into view looking a lot more haggard than she'd ever seen. She noted dismissively the dark circles under his eyes, the unkempt hair, the deep furrows in his skin and the concavity of his cheeks; all she could see was the fire in his blue eyes as he spotted her. She broke into a run, and Brad dumped his pack and used the last of his energy to jog towards her. She leapt into his arms and poured all the relief she felt from the weeks of separation, waiting and turmoil into the hug.

Eventually, happy tears streaming down her face, Isobel pushed him back, her nose wrinkling. “Geez, you bloody stink!” she exclaimed playfully with a soft laugh.

Brad smiled sheepishly. “It’s good to see you too,” he said and just pulled her back toward him for a kiss. He felt his heart begin to lighten a fraction as he held her close, and although he just wanted to stand there in her embrace and let the world disappear, the troops moving past him forced him back into reality.

He turned to go back and pick up his pack, only to find Ollie had already picked it up and brought it to him. Brad nodded his appreciation, hefted it onto his back and swapped his rifle to the other hand so he could hold Isobel’s.

As they got closer to the camp, Brad saw Pete’s wife anxiously scanning the faces of those returning. He disentangled Isobel’s hand. “I need to talk to Jinny,” he said emotionlessly, but she saw the sad look in his eyes. Isobel gave his arm a reassuring squeeze and nodded.

As Brad approached Jinny, her eyes got wider, and she frantically searched the troops for any sign of her husband. Her hands were clenched in front of her and her whole body exuded distress, as if she had sensed what he was about to say but didn’t want to believe it.

Brad quietly told her the bad news. The other returning troops knew what was being said but weren't prepared for her howl of anguish and to see her launch herself at Brad, pounding his chest. He stood stoically, doing nothing to stop the storm of rage and grief being unleashed upon him. Eventually, she just ran out of steam, stood there, and sobbed, her fists clenched on his chest, her body shaking uncontrollably. Dot gently pulled her away and cradled her as she wept.

Several others who had been milling around in the background anxiously approached Brad for news of their loved ones who hadn't returned. Some had a wounded survivor on the boats, and he watched stark relief cross their faces; others had a similar reaction to Jinny, dissolving into the grief that overwhelmed them.

Isobel watched Brad carefully and could see underneath the hard exterior that it was taking a mental toll on him. She looked over at Dot who nodded. "He needs you. I have this."

Isobel walked over and took Brad's hand. She tugged him towards Dean's Ute and was a bit shocked when he went without any resistance. It was like he was sleepwalking.

"We're leaving, NOW!" she told Dean.

Seeing her look, Dean didn't argue and clicked his tongue to get the horse moving. The vehicle circled back towards Brad's home.

Thanking Dean, Isobel let him know they'd be over for dinner at the pub later on while giving a look to Brad that meant there was no debate about it. Through a haze of fatigue, he just nodded in agreement. Upon entering his home, Isobel led Brad directly to the shower. "Dump your crap there and have a shower. I'll run a bath for you so you can soak a bit," she ordered.

Brad stood under the shower for a few minutes, head bent into the spray and letting the water cascade down his back and shoulders. He flinched as the hot water washed over the multiple cuts and abrasions