

KISS ON THE BRIDGE THREE

CHAPTER ONE

13th January 1976 2:00am. AEST

“MAYDAY, MAYDAY,” screamed Jordan Ashcombe into the CB radio. He ran his fingers through his dark hair. His handsome looks quickly faded, replaced by a stressful expression. “If anyone can hear me please answer, I need urgent help.”

Jordan moved his finger off the button of the hand-held microphone. Several moments of static followed. He re-sent his urgent call. In fact, he needed to resend the same mayday call several times before he finally heard a calm reply.

“This is the Australian coast guard. What seems to be the problem?”

“I’m adrift forty miles off the coast of Brisbane Queensland. I’ve been turning my small ship in circles searching for my wife all night. She fell overboard. There’s a storm approaching. Please help. I’m now out of fuel. I’m grieving over losing my wife. If the calm sea begins to deteriorate I’m afraid she might drown. Please, I need urgent help. Send helicopters, boats, hell I need the whole Australian naval fleet. She must be found.”

“We’re on our way. We’ll be at your location in about twenty minutes,” replied the gruff voice of the officer in the Australian coast guard.

“Please hurry.”

“Who am I talking to?”

“My name’s Jordan Ashcombe. My wife’s name is Meredith. We’ve been married for only six months.”

“Be advised, in precisely fifteen minutes send up a red flare so we can get an exact fix on your location.”

“Shall do.”

Jordan set the alarm on his watch. He threw the CB radio microphone at the wall, swiped a large torch off the small navigational table and sprinted for the side of his ship. Jordan shone the beam of light across the surface of the dark water. Above him, the stars were quickly blinking out due to the fast-moving clouds in front of the approaching storm. On the horizon, he saw a flash of lightning. Jordan knew he needed to keep the panic emotion out of his mind if he were to succeed in finding Meredith alive. She’d gone through too much in the past twelve months to drown in the ocean miles from anywhere.

Jordan walked in slow circles lapping his forty-foot yacht, desperately searching the surface for any faint splashes. A light breeze brushed the front of his shirt open. The material slowly moved back and forth, scraping across his deep chest.

On his second lap of the boat, he snatched a pair of binoculars out of the bridge and lifted them to his eyes. For what seemed like hours he watched the water.

He saw and heard nothing.

At the rear of the ship, something thumped the side of the hull directly under him. Jordan dropped the binoculars on the deck and shone his powerful torch at the water. Seeing nothing, he squatted. Again, he searched the water directly under him. Still seeing nothing he leaned his torso over the side and shone his torch along the side of the ship. Making sure his feet were securely wedged onto something solid he leaned still further out. Shining the torch, the whole way along the side of the hull towards the front he detected nothing. Then the thud came again. Arching his back away from the water he groped for the side of the ship. In a desperate move to get away from the water he dropped the torch. The object which thumped the side of the ship belonged to a large fish. Its body thumped the hull several times as it fed on the small fish. Fearful of the light in the water the large cold-blooded vertebrate dived for the safety of the ocean depths.

Jordan lay on the deck for a short time facing the stars. His chest heaving from the panic he’d endured over the fish scene. Slowly his pupils returned to normal, so too his breathing. Exhaling the last of the fright, he again took up his position at the low wall staring out over the water.

Jordan's watch vibrated four seconds before he heard its high-pitched alarm. He sprinted across the deck to a side cupboard in front of the bridge. His million-dollar boat, the 'Quasar' still sparkled in what light came from the sinking moon.

Jordan threw open the door to the waterproof cupboard, swiped one of the few remaining red flares off the single shelf, pointed it skywards and pulled the cord. In the light made by the flare, he again searched further away from his boat.

Jordan Ashcombe seemed to have everything; millions of dollars in the bank and countless businesses to his name. He married Meredith after bringing her back from the dark recesses of her mind and helped her save the multi-million-dollar company her ex-husband created. After his death which Jordan alone proved to be an accident, Meredith said 'yes' to his marriage proposal. They enjoyed a simple wedding ceremony in Darwin. In front of a priest and a witness they exchanged their solemn vows. Now on their return trip to Melbourne and the waiting arms of Meredith's sister, Anneli, and her husband Wade Mackenzie, his former lawyer partner, Jordan felt devastated he hadn't lived up to his promise to look after Meredith. He'd assured her father and Anneli he would.

Searching the water on the other side of the yacht, Jordan didn't know the coast guard had arrived until he saw the beam from a searchlight sweeping the deck.

The noise of a coast guard cutter roaring towards him out of the dark made Jordan march across the deck to the rear of the 'Quasar.'

"Ahoy there on the ship," yelled the voice of a coast guard officer through a megaphone. "Jordan Ashcombe, this is the Australian coast guard. We're here to help."

Jordan waved at the light. "Come onboard," he called back.

The large engines of the coast guard cutter fell silent. Fifty feet of water separated the two ships. Jordan spied a rubber dingy full of men being lowered onto the water. A few moments later he heard a motor roar to life. He watched the small rubber dingy bearing down on him. Ten feet out, the boat made a sharp turn and headed for the other side.

Jordan ran over to the aft side of his ship. Pushing the small black button on the side of the yacht he heard a small motor whirl to life. The stainless-steel dive ladder slowly lowered into the water up to its bottom rung. Jordan glued his gaze on the dingy. When it closed to arm's length he dropped a rope so the dingy could be tied to the ladder. Four men scrambled up the ladder and onto the deck.

"Thanks for coming so quick," stated Jordan, fidgeting.

"No problem," replied the first coast guard officer to step onto the deck. He reached out to shake Jordan's hand.

"You reported searching for your wife all night?" questioned a tall straight-backed navy man. His black outfit and machine gun looked threatening.

Jordan deduced not much got past the man.

"Yes. We haven't been married long. We were in Darwin taking photos of the state's rebuild after Cyclone Tracy blew it off the map. We were using the trip for a honeymoon. Please, I don't want to chat, can't you begin a search grid?"

"Don't worry, we'll find her. First thing on the agenda, do I have your permission for my men to search this ship?"

"Yes, please feel free," insisted Jordan. He watched three men fan out in separate directions. When they disappeared below he focused on the remaining officer.

"I'm Officer Baker. I'm in charge of this exercise. Do you have any idea where your wife fell overboard?"

"No, not exactly," replied Jordan. "What I can ascertain she should be around this area."

"What do you do for a career Mr. Ashcombe?"

"I'm the best defense lawyer in Australia."

"So, this small ship belongs to you?"

"Yes. Please, forget the questions, find my wife. I've been going back and forth and around in circles for hours. I'm out of fuel. I'm growing concerned for Meredith's well-being. Every second we stand here chatting the closer she gets to drowning. I couldn't stand to lose her."

"We have four boats and a helicopter scouring the ocean as we speak. In about an hour we'll be forced to abandon the search; the weather is against us. Why didn't you call us earlier?"

"I felt confident I could find her. I threw two lifebuoys overboard the moment I discovered she went missing. When the wind started picking up I knew I needed help. It costs a lot of money to have you guys join the search. Have it recorded I'm more than willing to pay the bill. I can't thank you enough for coming to the rescue so quick."

Jordan eyeballed the tough sounding man. He looked like he ate drank and slept the Navy defense force. Judging him by the way his face appeared to be so tanned Jordan decided he'd seen a lot of years out at sea.

"How come there's no fuel?" questioned Baker.

"Let me ask you something. If your wife fell overboard what would you do?"

"I'd never be out in the middle of the ocean knowing a storm is bearing down on me. I'd have made sure the weather remained fine. The moment I knew the weather might change I'd be plotting a course for the safety of land. There's no way I'd want my wife to fall overboard."

"You didn't answer my question," growled Jordan.

"Circle the ocean searching for her."

"I've already stated I've been crisscrossing this area for hours. I've lit the floodlights. I've let off a whole box of flares. I've even sounded the fog horn. I can't think of anything else I can do? If I couldn't see Meredith in the dark I'm still hoping she'll be able to see the bright lights of the 'Quasar.' She's a strong confident swimmer. If she could see the lights I'm certain she'd be swimming this way."

"Let me ask you something," growled Baker. "If you're so keen to find her why aren't you holding a large torch?"

"I lost it overboard?"

"If I was searching for my wife I'd never lose the torch I held overboard."

"I'm not Navy minded," groaned Jordan.

"Losing two precious items overboard is untimely."

"What are you implying?"

"Jordan Ashcombe I'm not implying anything. I'm merely stating the run of back luck you're having at the moment."

"Bad luck usually runs in threes."

"So, they say. I'm not superstitious."

"Same here," grumbled Jordan.

"Good. If you were, I'd say the approaching storm is the third strike."

Glancing at the sky Jordan nodded slowly.

"How long ago did the incident happen?" asked Baker. "Seeing how you're not Navy minded I'm referring to the loss of the torch."

"The incident happened just before I let off the flare so you could find me. I heard a thumping noise against the hull. I thought Meredith might have been banging on the hull. I leaned over the wall to take a look. Instead of seeing my beautiful wife I saw a large fish. In the half dark, I couldn't tell how big it was. I panicked and as I groped for the wall to haul myself back onboard I dropped the torch. Please, enough delay. Find my wife."

"We're doing all we can."

Jordan started to pace the deck. He lifted his hands to hide his face. Over the sound of the increasing wind, he started to sob uncontrollably. Without warning, he sprinted for the rear of the ship. In front of a least four navy divers, Jordan jumped high over the wall, landing face first in the water.

The leader of the navy landing party whistled for someone to dive over the side.

Two divers instinctively jumped into the water. They quickly swam towards Jordan while a third threw the last life buoy into the sea. Baker marched to the wall of the yacht. Leaning over, he watched the whole scene unfold.

Slowly the navy men managed to drag Jordan back to his ship. When the swimmers got to the dive ladder the navy men forced Jordan to climb. Sitting at the small round table near the rear of the ship Jordan watched Baker march over. Uninvited he sat on the chair opposite Jordan. For a few moments, he didn't say a word. Finally, he leaned forward across the table.

"Why on earth did you jump overboard?"

"It's too much to bear knowing Meredith has drowned."

"You have to hold onto hope."

Jordan stared into Baker's brown eyes. "How can I keep going when I know Meredith's out there somewhere?"

"I've never been in your predicament, so I don't have any ideas. The only thing I can suggest is that you must keep on hoping we'll find her."

Jordan switched his attention to a man carrying two Gerry cans as he walked across the deck to the dive ladder. Placing the cans into the dingy, he marched back. Hovering over Jordan he said his report military style.

"Sir, we've given you enough fuel to get your yacht back to the mainland."

“What about filling up the tank?”

“It’ll take my men too long,” growled Baker breaking into the conversation. “Already the sea is choppy. The storm I told you about is bearing down on us real fast. I doubt whether I’ll be able to extend the search for much longer.”

“You have to keep searching,” snarled Jordan. “I’m not leaving until I’ve found Meredith. If my ship sinks, so be it.”

“It’s advisable to start the engines and head back to the mainland immediately. This storm is set to be a real kicker,” urged Baker.

Jordan began to shake his head when Baker took him by the shoulders. “Let’s take a walk.”

Baker led Jordan back to the bridge of his small ship. Out of the strengthening wind, the officer sat him down. Exhaling heavily, he crossed his arms.

“I know what I’m about to say might come across like I don’t care. Let me begin by saying I do. It’s why I joined the navy. Helping people in your predicament is something I live for. I always strive for a happy ending. If I can locate and help to rescue only one person in my career it’ll be worth the effort I put in.”

“What are you implying?”

“I sometimes don’t achieve my happy ending. Mr. Ashcombe, you have to understand where I’m coming from when I tell you honestly the chances of surviving a storm is zero, especially now I know Meredith has been in the water for over two hours. I’m not saying miracles don’t happen. Please, take a moment to let my statement sink in. By all means stay out here for a while, hoping and praying to the man upstairs he will show you where Meredith is so you two can be reunited. It’ll be some story to tell your grandkids one day.” Baker gave Jordan a nudge in the ribs. “Of course, we’ll be out here until the storm hits. When I call off the search we’ll have done everything humanly possible to find your wife.”

“Give me enough fuel to fight the storm. I’m staying out here,” bellowed Jordan.

“I can’t allow it.”

“I don’t care what you think.” Jordan stood to full height glaring down at the man.

“I understand your reasoning.”

“You don’t understand a damn thing.”

“Committing suicide isn’t going to solve anything. The little stunt you pulled back there didn’t help the situation either.”

“What do you mean?”

“Staying alive for Meredith’s sake is the best thing you can do.”

Jordan turned his back on the man. Hearing the wind buffeting the rigging along the entire mast he knew they didn’t have long. Somehow, he needed to find a way to force Baker into continuing the search long after the storm hit. Leaning against the wheel Jordan studied the darkening sky. He felt it would be only a matter of time before the rain started falling. Trying to spot at least one-star Jordan quickly gave up the hunt.

“Mr. Ashcombe, why don’t we compromise?”

“In what way?” probed Jordan. He turned to stare at Officer Baker.

“We’ll review the weather every five minutes. When I think it’s advisable for you to race back to the mainland, we’ll inform you via the radio.”

“Please, I’m begging you not to quit on me.”

“I have a ship full of crew. I have to think of their safety. If the navy ship sinks or I lose a man overboard all hell will break loose. The first thing I’ll be asked is to explain why I stayed out too long.

“There’s no way I can leave the area knowing my wife is still in the water.”

“If it’s any consolation there’s little hope a swimmer can survive heavy seas. At the end of the day, we can all rest assured we have done everything humanly possible to have a happy ending to this rescue.”

Jordan lowered his gaze to look at his feet. He sighed heavily and nodded hesitantly.

Baker slapped Jordan on the shoulder. He lifted his two-way radio, pushed the open button and walked off barking new orders. The three men who went below came back onto the deck.

“All clear,” reported one of the men.

“I want you three in the dingy scouring the surface of the water. When I give you the word I want you back here to collect me. We’ll make a dash to the frigate and for port. We don’t have long. Already the waves are crowning at three feet. Soon they’ll double in size. I estimate the wind is blowing at a good thirty miles per hour.”

Jordan knew at a stretch they might have less than twenty minutes remaining. He marched to the side of the yacht to recommence his search.

Jordan watched the small navy boats rising on the crest of the waves then vanishing from sight when they went into the troughs only to reappear a few seconds later on the crest of the next wave. Crisscrossing the ocean, the brave navy men scrutinized every drop of water. The helicopter buzzed the Quasar several times as it flew overhead for an aerial view.

In a tad less than three minutes the rain started. The drops were large. In the darkness, Jordan couldn't see the drops splattering on the surface of the sea. The deck soon appeared drenched. The rigging dripped water. Each time the small ship climbed a wave Jordan clutched the wheel with a white-knuckled grip waiting for the nose to point down into the next wave. Sea water flowed over the deck and dropped like a waterfall on the other side of the boat. The double wiper blades could hardly keep the rain and the sea water off the glass. Visibility began to drop. Inside five minutes the rain was bucketing down. Jordan could hardly see the anchor chain at the front of the ship. He felt sick. The motion of the ship rolling sideways and up and down at the same time was getting to him. Letting go of the wheel Jordan opened the narrow storm door. He clung to the handle afraid if he let go he'd be blown overboard. He vomited. The next wave to wash over the deck swept the area clean.

Closing the door, he again took the controls of the Quasar. In his absence the ship had turned hard right. The hull was now side on to the waves. He heard the high-pitched scream of the engines as he tried desperately to turn the nose around to face the next wave.

"That wall of water must be at least six feet high," bellowed Jordan.

Managing to swing the Quasar around in time the ship went up and over the wave. Seconds later, he stood staring at the ink colored clouds billowing directly above his head.

When the radio screeched to life Jordan's heart skipped a beat. He pondered the question what if they actually found her? Will she be dead?

"Baker to Jordan Ashcombe, how do you read; over?"

Jordan snatched the CB radio mike from its cradle. "Have you found Meredith?"

"No. I'm forced to advise you to head for the mainland."

"I've already told you I can't go."

"Mr. Ashcombe we did have an agreement. There is no argument. We'll be leaving the area in two minutes. Be warned if you stay out here and don't follow us into port we won't be coming back until after the storm has blown itself out and the waves have calmed."

"I have to stay. Besides, you can't force me to call off the search. If I do it'll mean I gave up and let her drown. I'll feel like I committed murder."

"I know I can't force you to leave the area," drilled the navy Captain. "It's my duty to point out the weather is about to turn really bad. I've called the boats in. The helicopter has just landed on deck. The men are lashing the craft down as we speak. I'm giving the search one more minute before calling it a day. I've also been watching your ship. By the way, she's sitting low in the water I believe she's taking in water. The pumps are struggling to keep her afloat."

"I'm staying," yelled Jordan.

"This is your last warning. Follow us in or you're on your own for the next three days."

"I understand," replied Jordan. "Thanks for trying."

"How's your fuel?"

"It's getting low," reported Jordan.

"If you run out of fuel you'll be at the mercy of the storm."

Jordan clicked the radio off and checked the clock on the wall. Thirty minutes floating in three-foot waves which have increased to four feet and the occasional seven-foot swells were making him feel exhausted.

"Tethering the wheel so it couldn't move Jordan reached for a small glass and a wine bottle from a plastic container in a drawer under the bench.

Hurriedly unscrewing the cork and throwing it on the floor, Jordan poured half a glass. Clutching a handle on the side of a bench he raised the glass of wine to his lips. Seeing a larger than usual wave bearing down on the Quasar he sculled the liquid. Lifting the empty glass to toast the power of the wave he whispered under his breath.

"Rest in peace my lovely Meredith."