

## Chapter 1

Thursday, June 4

Chaz Bailey was naked, sitting tightly bound to a chair. His wrists and ankles hurt. They'd used thin white rope to tie him, the kind you might find on a small sailing boat. The room was nearly empty. Some kind of storage facility. It had a grey cement floor, faded brick walls, a stack of brown cardboard boxes in the far-right corner, no windows that he could see, and a pair of old-fashioned fluorescent lights. A steel table was pushed up against the wall beside him. The only clean thing around.

He heard a door opening behind him. Turned out to be Blondie, the same lady he'd seen outside the Imperial Hotel. Dressed like a cocktail waitress.

'You're in good shape,' she said, giving him the once over. Her accent had an Australian twang to it, but there was something else there, too. French or Swiss. 'I hope you stay that way.'

'Who are you?' Chaz demanded.

Blondie was pacing around the room. 'Doesn't matter.'

'Can you at least tell me why I'm here?'

'Come on, Chaaaazzzzzz. You know why.'

'I honestly don't. Maybe this is some kind of mistaken identity or something?'

She sat herself down on his lap and crossed her legs, placing a cigarette between her lips. 'Look at you. Putting it all together.' She lit the cigarette and leaned into him, her elbow resting on his shoulder.

'Please...'

'Can you hear that music out there?' she asked. 'It's one of those small Bluetooth speakers. They'll bring it in here, soon. Not for you, of course, but for themselves. They'll turn the volume up until the speaker distorts, and they'll pretend you're screaming along to it. Like you're some kind of rock star. Isn't that something?'

'What are you saying?'

'People make some awful noises in these...circumstances. I prefer the sound of music.'

‘What is this – some kind of torture routine?’

‘Chaz, you upset some people. Some very serious people. Now you have to give them what they want.’

‘Look. I’m not fucking James Bond. What do they want?’

Blondie continued to pace. She played with her cigarette, like in some old black and white movie. The room was cold. Silence seemed to make it colder.

‘So,’ said Chaz, ‘where are they?’

‘Keep your pants on,’ she winked.

Chaz couldn’t believe it. Blondie didn’t give a damn! She just kept walking around the room, like she was at a medical centre waiting to see the doctor, or the dentist, or a plumber, or – whatever. How did someone get that frosty?

The door opened again. Two men walked in. Steady. Deliberate. Eastern European types. Blondie tensed and left the room.

\*\*\*

A solitary blonde locked eyes with Sam as he scanned the bar for any sign of his CFO. She was mouthing the words to a Vance Joy song playing in the background and playing with her drink. He’d noticed her looking at him before, when she still had another man’s company, but now she seemed to be alone. Sam quickly looked elsewhere.

‘Where are you Chaz...’

He said he’d be at the pub by seven, and it was now past eight. Sam checked his mobile again. He wasn’t one to assume the worst, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain positive. He phoned Zoe Barnes, his business partner. The call went straight to voicemail.

‘Great.’ Sam finished the soft drink he’d ordered fifteen minutes ago. He was deciding whether to leave or order something stronger when the phone rattled:

#### WE HAVE BAILLEY

A thousand thoughts ran through Sam’s head, but there was no time for any of them. The Clock Hotel was not the place for him to be, he knew that much. He raced downstairs and leapt into his car. He drove past the office, and a police station he probably should have stopped at, straight home to his cottage in Bondi.

The front door was open, as if Lauren were hurrying him inside. After leaving the car a little crooked on their driveway, Sam tolerated

an enthusiastic greeting from their winsome black Labrador. ‘Hi, Rax,’ he said. ‘Smells good out here, doesn’t it?’

The rain had receded, leaving the musky fragrance of apricot-yellow roses floating in the air. Sam thought back to that first afternoon after their move, after all the boxes were unpacked and they’d drunk their only bottle of wine, digging up plots for two dozen roses with only a serving spoon from the kitchen, Lauren laughing and smiling at him all the while. When Sam walked inside, he was reluctant to close the door behind him.

‘Hi, darling!’ called Lauren from the kitchen. ‘By the way, I think you’re amazing.’

Sam mumbled softly, ‘You might not think that when...’

He walked over to the dining table and sat down as she came to meet him. ‘I’ve got to...’ He looked up. ‘There’s something I’ve got to tell you.’

Lauren’s face normally had the freshness of a model in a Myer catalogue, but now it was morphing into dread. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘You remember Chaz Bailley?’

‘Your finance guy?’

‘He’s missing.’

‘What do you mean, *missing*?’

It was strange, but Lauren almost looked relieved to ask after Chaz, as if she’d been in fear of hearing something worse. ‘Well...’ Sam said. He thought about all those TV dramas they’d been watching together, how the stress was always short-lived and things would all resolve by the end of each episode. Should he tell Lauren how bad it was, how deep his own fears fell for Chaz? ‘He’s disappeared.’

‘That clears things up,’ she said sarcastically. She touched his nose and disappeared into the kitchen, calling out from there, ‘You sound like you could use a drink.’

Sam stared wistfully at the partition while he waited for her to return. She was like a detective, seducing her hesitant witness into spitting out whatever he was hiding by sliding a glass of white wine into his hand.

‘You look pale,’ she said. He gazed at his wife in her floral-print dress, her head tilted to one side, hair falling around her shoulders. ‘What do you think has happened?’

Sam couldn’t recall how much he’d told Lauren about his conversations with Chaz and Zoe over the last few days. She knew most of what was going on, but nobody shares everything, do they?

Sam's mother had said there are two types of people in this world: those who sweep uncomfortable truths under the carpet and those who like to give them a good airing. Lauren always denied it but, just like her parents before her, she did the odd bit of sweeping. It was not driven by ill intent; rather, it was to avoid confrontation. Sam, on the other hand, liked to get everything out in the open.

'Zoe reckons...'

Lauren gave him her furrowed brow look. 'Reckons what? You're scaring me!'

Sam retrieved the mobile from his pocket but held off showing Lauren the text, telling her instead that, 'Zoe thinks someone from YRG wants Chaz – out of the picture.'

'Someone from America?'

Sam nodded.

'But why?'

'He wouldn't stop asking questions,' Sam explained. 'The deal seemed too good to be true – because it was.'

'The deal to buy the company?'

'That'd be the one.'

'To die for,' she said quietly. 'I remember you saying that.'

'Unfortunate figure of speech.'

Lauren shook her head, though Sam was pretty sure she realised this was not a problem one could just shake off. 'So, what now?'

Sam stood up and put his arms around her. 'I'm sorry.'

She pulled back from him. 'Don't be. It's not your fault.' He watched her certainty soften into hope the longer they stood there. 'Is it, Sam?'