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PROLOGUE

She waited across the road from the house she grew up in until the lights went out and her breathing steadied enough for her to cross. She paused in the front yard, looked up at her father's window, then decided to go around the back.

The door was unlocked. The familiar smell of stale booze almost made her turn around. She didn't. She moved down the hall to the ajar door of his office. Stepping around overflowing boxes and strewn bottles, she bypassed the paper-piled desk, making for the corner of the room. She ran her fingers along where the stained carpet met the wall and when she found the loose part, she pulled.

Beneath the carpet was a safe, set into the floor. Her father had never seen her watching him from the doorway as he drunkenly jabbed at the numbers. It had taken her a long time to be confident of the code and even now, when she was sure, doubt slowed her hand. But she keyed it in anyway. No tell-tale beep or sudden alarm. The door clicked open.

The money, bulky in calico bags, was the only thing in there. She piled it all into her backpack, then ran her hand around the metal interior of the safe. Her heart was louder now, even more so than outside.

Then the voice, a scrape of whisky-soaked spite, came from behind her.

‘This is how you ended up then.’

She stood slowly. Turned. Her father leaned in the doorway, little more than a spindly figure in the dark, raising the bottle to swig then wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘You won’t find her.’

She asked him, trying to keep the tremor from her voice, where the maps were. She had seen him going over them. Seen him cross-referencing town names with what had to be witness reports, part of his never-ending hunt for the woman who walked out on them.

‘You gonna take the money, too?’ He was drunk, too drunk to be angry. He laughed and she would have hated him less if he tried to hit her. She pushed past him, catching his horrible, sour smell as she made for the stairs. He staggered after her, slipping and falling. ‘You thieving, ungrateful bitch?’

She walked up the stairs.

She had just reached the top when his taunts stopped. She heard the footfalls, heavy and fast. She turned as he reached the landing, and his snarling face was in hers, hand around her throat. He slammed her against the wall, then let go.

‘I should have killed you,’ he said.

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She felt it then. The swirling blaze that filled every inch of her, that hardened her voice as she looked him in the eye and said, 'Yeah. You should have.'

She shoved him. He yelled, swiped for her, then was falling. She heard the crack of the first impact, the crunch of bone bent in ways it wasn't supposed to, the tiny, almost shy pop as his neck broke and he hit the bottom of the stairs.

The fire was gone, as quickly as it had come. Some shrieking instinct told her to run to him, to call an ambulance. She ignored it.

She found an annotated map in a drawer next to his soiled bed. She put it in the bag with the money.

The walk down the stairs could have lasted years. With each step, his shattered form came closer and clearer, even in the dark. It was only when she reached the bottom that she realised he was still breathing, feeble and uneven. His flickering eyes found her.

As she passed him, he managed a word.

'Maggie.'

CHAPTER ONE

About a year later

Maggie sensed danger the moment the man walked through the door. Standing behind the dimly lit bar, polishing a pint glass, she glanced up and felt the slightest warning prickle across the back of her neck. It wasn't that he looked especially threatening; he was middle-aged in a dark blue suit without a tie and hair slicked back in an apparent attempt to hide how little there was of it. Maggie saw plenty of guys like him come through here every night. No, the danger lay in the way he held himself. He stood in the doorway, hands on hips, wide-set eyes lazily scanning the bar, a thick-lipped smile suggesting people should know who he was and be scared.

Maggie wasn't about to please him on either of those fronts. But she did watch as he swaggered in, running a finger along one of the empty tables and inspecting it for dust. He glanced at the four other customers tucked away in booths lit only by low blue lights, talking quietly over beers, the sound of their conversations dampened by the crawl of

mournful country music. The bar wasn't a happening place. Which was precisely the reason Maggie liked it.

The man took his time strolling to the bar. He placed both hands on it and turned his smile to her.

She kept polishing the glass.

'Scotch.' He pointed one ringed finger to the top shelf behind the bar. 'The single malt. Two cubes of ice, thanks.'

'Eighteen dollars,' Maggie said.

The man didn't move or react. His smile stayed where it was.

Maggie finished polishing the glass and put it away. She picked up another one.

'Getting thirsty,' the man said.

'Eighteen dollars.'

'New?'

'Ish.'

'Andrew hasn't been doing his managerial duties then. I don't pay.'

The man waited, but she just kept polishing. His smile didn't waver but Maggie saw the hot rage in his eyes. She finished polishing, put the glass away and picked up another one.

'Maggie.'

Andrew stood behind her, watching the man in the suit. He almost always looked pale and worried, and his grey hair and light blue eyes made him appear washed out. Tonight, however, was different. There was genuine fear in his expression.

'It's alright,' he said. 'Just get the drink.'

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Maggie didn't bother to look back at the man in the suit. Smug smile or grim satisfaction; it meant the same thing. *You've been put in your place, bitch.* Maggie poured the drink and slid it to him.

'Are you hungry, Len?' Andrew asked, the quake in his voice almost hidden by determined loudness. 'We've got some good cuts on tonight. Could do you a—'

'Might just have a couple of drinks while I wait,' Len said.

Maggie had returned to her polishing, but she was almost certain Len's eyes were still on her.

'Wait for what?' Andrew asked.

Maggie looked at Len. His eyes were cold and hard on Andrew. 'For us to chat, mate.'

Len made for an empty booth. Andrew's mouth hung slightly open as Len settled himself. Without acknowledging Maggie again, Andrew hurried out the back. Maggie watched after him until the glass was gleaming and she returned it to its usual spot.

'Any idea what that was about?' Evie sidled up next to her, spinning a tray between her hands. Evie was around Maggie's age with a mass of dark hair barely tamed by a scrunchie.

Maggie shrugged.

'When Andy saw that man he nearly ran for the door,' Evie went on. 'What do you reckon? Spurned lover? Grim reaper?'

'Something to do with taxes probably.' Maggie poured herself a glass of water from the tap. Movement in Len's

booth snapped her eyes back to him. He was heading for the hall behind the bar where Andrew stood with a bad attempt at an easy smile on his face. Len nodded to Maggie as he and Andrew disappeared out the back.

‘Mind watching the bar for a sec, Evie?’ Maggie asked. ‘I need to go to the bathroom.’

The staff toilet was tucked away in a dingy room where nobody had ever bothered to clean the cobwebs. Maggie shut and locked the door behind her then turned her attention to the small, barred window above the toilet that Evie regularly joked made her feel like she was in prison. Maggie flipped the toilet lid closed then climbed up onto it. The window was high and she doubted anybody would see her from outside, but she was still careful as she leaned close and listened.

‘... told you, I need another couple of weeks,’ Andrew was saying, fast and low. ‘Jane’s interstate for work and I can barely afford the babysitter—’

‘Another couple of weeks wasn’t the deal,’ Len replied. ‘You were supposed to have the lot to me last Monday.’

‘You changed the price. That wasn’t fair.’

‘That’s interest, mate. You already had an extension. It’s my money you’re spending to keep this shithole afloat.’

Silence for a moment. Maggie leaned a little closer.

‘You gave me too much.’ Andrew sounded on the verge of tears. ‘I only wanted a couple of grand.’

‘For fuck’s sake, what’s wrong with you? You’re complaining about getting a better deal than you planned for? You needed the money to pay for advertising, and to hire those pretty girls out the front. A couple of grand would

have cleaned the dust off the kitchen and not much else. And I don't remember you complaining when I offered more.'

'Please, Len,' Andrew said. 'We're friends, right?'

'Sure, mate. As good as family back in the day. But that makes it a bit worse. You can't just go around fucking over family.'

'I haven't made the money I thought I would. I haven't—'

'You've got customers in,' Len said. 'There's some money, so that's what I'll take. Tonight's earnings, and every night's until we're square. And *because* we're friends, I'll come in myself to make sure the transaction goes smoothly. I'll come in and be served drinks and at the end of the night, you'll hand me the cash and thank me for being so considerate. How does that sound?'

'It'll kill me.' Andrew sounded strangled, faint. 'I won't be able to pay the staff. I can't ... please, Len. Please, just two more weeks and—'

A gasp, then a brief, loud crunch that made Maggie jump and then a quickly stifled cry.

'Shut it,' Len said.

She heard whimpering, then a thud as Andrew hit the ground.

'Come see me at the end of the night.' Len sounded bored. 'Get one of the girls to set that for you. You don't want it healing dodgy.'

Maggie slid from the toilet, unlocked the door and moved swiftly back into the bar. She glanced at one of the mirrors behind the drinks shelf. She looked composed. And, as she'd taken care to ensure, unmemorable. No makeup, shoulder-

length dark hair – the only thing about her that might stand out were the clothes that covered her whole body in the heat of Port Douglas, but even those clothes, jeans, boots and a black, loose-fitting collared shirt, were plain and forgettable.

Evie was no longer in the bar and a customer was waiting, tapping his finger impatiently. Maggie adopted an easy smile and walked over to him just as Len swaggered past her.

The rest of the night dragged on. Andrew appeared after about half an hour; his nose a swollen, angry red. Usually, he checked the state of the bar and pointed out things that needed tidying. Tonight, he barely even looked at Maggie. He seemed to just drift in and out, staying very clear of the corner where Len waited like a shadow.

Predictably, Andrew told her to leave early, before she'd even mopped the floors. Maggie didn't argue. She walked out with her hands in her pockets and even nodded to Len, who just watched her as she left.

Out on the street, she took a deep breath of the warm, salt-tinged air, then scanned the cars parked out the front. One caught her eye immediately: an oversized black, shiny thing with the silhouette of a driver in the front seat. A gangster, then. Maggie didn't look at the car for any longer than any passer-by would. She put her head down and walked.

She could hear the rumbling croaks of cane toads sheltering from the cars. Above her, the shadows of countless bats burst from a tree, filled the night and were gone. She didn't even jump anymore when that happened. The bar sat on a side street. It was close enough to the centre of the town to be accessible, but away from the noise of Port Douglas by

night. Not that the noise was ever unbearable in this little tourist town, but tourists liked to get loud and drunk. They just seemed to prefer doing it away from Andrew's bar.

But she hadn't chosen Port Douglas for the noise or quiet. She'd chosen it because she had never lived anywhere warm before, and the change of scenery felt somehow symbolic. A new place for a new life. She had driven into town a couple of months back, worn out and sick of the road. Her plan had been to have a few drinks, crash in a motel and leave, but she needed the rest more than she'd realised. Or rather, she needed time to heal.

A few drinks in a quiet bar had led her to meet Andrew, who was looking for staff and, a little tipsy, Maggie had taken the opportunity she wasn't aware she was looking for. Within a week, she had a job and a little apartment in a resort town that somehow managed to toe the fine line between tacky and beautiful. The smells of the ocean and fruit were thick on the air, and the people wandering down the palm-tree-lined main stretch always seemed relaxed. The glass-fronted shops and stalls sagged with bathers and beads, and all-around easy smiles flashed in greeting at the cafés and pubs that had the look of having once been brightly coloured but now were slightly sun-bleached. Everything here was just that little bit spaced out, as though even the buildings were giving each other room to breathe.

Maggie had arrived in the middle of summer, when the air was heavy and humid and the rain would bucket down in relentless torrents. She would sit under cover watching and marvelling at how somewhere so hot could be so far from

dry. But as the weeks crept past the rain had slowed, the heat became that little bit less oppressive and she found a whole new rhythm to a life that was, if not normal, then at least pleasantly unremarkable. She had been surprised by how quickly she found herself fitting in. Life here was lazy and unassuming, and nobody looked twice at another young woman working behind a bar.

Maggie's apartment was essentially a bedsit: one room and an adjacent bathroom with mouldy smell in the air. Her flat was tucked away behind a shop on the main street, accessible only by a narrow alley. It was the opposite of fancy, but Maggie liked the simplicity of it. Everything she owned could fit into one duffle bag if she needed to leave in a hurry.

She never hung around long in the apartment, and tonight was no different. Once inside she went to the tiny bar fridge and took out a couple of beers. She didn't bother to turn on the lights before she was back out the door and on the main street again. Some of the bars still had sound coming from inside, but it was muted and the town was largely empty. A weeknight.

Usually, she enjoyed her nightly stroll down the main street, but there was a twinge in her chest that she didn't like. That feeling tended to precede trouble of some sort, and Maggie's initial interest in staying here had been to avoid trouble. That was half the reason she'd chosen to work for a man who could be knocked over by a light breeze.

Sometimes the beach near the town still had a few drunk idiots staggering about, or else a couple enjoying a

romantic, moonlit walk, but tonight, as Maggie preferred, it was empty. The white sand stretching away under the shadows of trees and the clear, starry sky met the dark, lapping, languid sea. It was as though a blanket had been draped over the place to keep it preserved until dawn, and with no nearby people, it was easy enough to assume the blanket was covering them as well, leaving Maggie the only person awake and aware.

She sat about halfway down the beach and cracked a beer. She took her first sip and waited for that familiar sense of tension unwinding, of another day having passed without being recognised or hunted.

It didn't come.

Whatever was happening with Andrew and the gangster had nothing to do with her. It shouldn't affect her life in any way. It was, simply put, none of her business. Andrew was obviously terrible with money and had appalling taste in friends. Those were his problems to deal with.

And yet.

Even thinking this way was dangerous. She had managed to stay ahead of any pursuit for a long time, and it had taken every second of that time to gain enough confidence to settle even in this limited way. Tenuous as it was, this peace was the definition of hard won and Maggie had no interest in doing anything that might upset it.

And yet.

Without Andrew, there would be no peace. He had offered her the fragile infrastructure she needed, even found her the apartment. She was under no illusions; it was no act

of great charity, but it mattered to her. What she knew was this: Andrew was a good person, and beyond that, without his bar, she would lose what little she had.

Her first beer was finished. She ground the bottle into the sand until only the top half stuck out. She looked at it for several seconds, considering. The twinge in her chest had built into a low thrum, something electric and angry and simmering, something that she knew, left unchecked, would only keep building. She cracked the second beer.

What did she have?

She lurched awake in the early hours of the morning, then lay there, heart pounding, her eyes on the roof.

She got out of bed and walked to the door. Opening it a crack, she saw that the first touches of light had entered the sky, the clouds turning a vivid blue in the dark grey. She sat down on the front step and leaned against the doorframe. The air was still cool.

There was no point in trying to get back to sleep. There never was, after one of the dreams.

They varied but the effect was always the same. Whether it was the blood and the laughter and the guns, the tiny figure falling from the rock or the clawing hands slipping away into the dark, it didn't matter; they burned through her like acid and poisoned the whole day ahead.

This time it had been her parents. That had happened before. Fractured images of her father and his bottle, the blur of dark hair and maybe-smiles that was all she had

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left of her mother. In this dream she had been standing in a burning house – maybe her childhood home but it was hard to tell – as her father poured petrol on the flames and she begged him to stop but the fire didn't affect him and then through a window unobscured by smoke and flame, her mother watched and Maggie tried to reach her but then the fire built and Maggie was sinking into it but still her father stood clear and determined, pouring that petrol.

In life he had never operated with such determination. His bursts of violence had vanished as soon as they arrived; forgotten the moment he took another swig from that newly opened bottle. Sometimes he asked her where the bruises had come from.

Her mother, for all she knew, might as well have been lurking outside windows, watching and doing nothing to help. Maggie had been maybe five when her mother had slipped out of the door and never come back, escaping her husband's fists but leaving her daughter to them.

It had been about a year since the decision to try to find her, the decision that sent her father down the stairs and Maggie on the run. So far she had found only trouble. The last solid clue to her mother's whereabouts had led to a torn-up leg, more fuel for the nightmares and the vague hint that her mother had gone 'north'. So Maggie had done the same, except 'north' could mean just about anywhere and so she had ended up here, pouring drinks and keeping quiet and hoping that the dreams would stop.

For a while, they had. Then Len had walked into Andrew's bar.

There was a hint of sunrise over the buildings now, a slight touch of red in the pale blue. It was pretty. It looked, to Maggie, like spreading blood.

She went straight to her car that morning, skipping the run that had become a daily ritual once her leg had healed enough for exercise. Her car was parked on a residential street about a ten-minute walk from both her apartment and the bar in either direction.

The car was a station wagon, probably around twenty years old. It was a drab tan colour and fairly battered along either side. Its licence plate was the third Maggie had used – a fake, unregistered.

She didn't keep much in the car. An old, worn book of maps and a few other odds and ends: rocks and a couple of knives tucked under the front seat, rope, a crowbar and a chisel in the back along with some other spare licence plates. Maggie liked to be prepared. She locked up the car and leaned against it, thinking through the slowly formulating idea. It wasn't a great one. It couldn't be without her knowing more about Len. But she had tools at her disposal, and that was a start.

She had breakfast at a small café on the main street, watching families in garish Hawaiian shirts and bathers pass by, the occasional car moving in either direction towards the beach or the nearby city of Cairns.

Generally her days weren't spent doing much of any use. She'd bought a pile of books – nothing intellectual, pulpy crime novels – and would read them down by the marina, until the first splashes of sunset on the still water and the

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windows of the boats told her it was time to head to work. On the days when she didn't work, she might catch a bus to the Daintree rainforest, or even Cairns. A couple of weeks back, she'd got a boat to a small island about an hour off the coast. She'd walked around all of it, relaxed under trees in the centre and had only just caught the last boat back. Not because she'd lost track of time but because part of her genuinely considered staying. Stupid idea. But a nice one.

Much of the rest of her time was spent at the gym. At first it had been purely to gain her strength back, but she soon went beyond that; a new tautness to her already lean body that she liked. Preparation not for anything specific, but preparation all the same.

By the time she arrived at the bar that night, she was no clearer on her plan. Like a scattered jigsaw puzzle, she had a few pieces that fitted together reasonably well, but the key was gaining information. She didn't ask Andrew about his bandaged nose and pretended not to notice his eyes darting to the door every time he ventured out of his office. She got to work, kept her head down, laughed at Evie's snide comments about customers and didn't blink when Len entered, wearing the same suit and smile as the night before. She made his drink before he could try to talk to her and only looked at him when she was sure his back was to her.

She gave it about an hour before, clenching her teeth and moving gingerly, she told Evie she was feeling sick.

'Are you shitting me?' she exclaimed. 'You can't bail in the middle of service.'

'It's a quiet night,' Maggie said. 'You'll be fine.'

‘Andy won’t be happy,’ Evie warned, which seemed to Maggie like projection, especially as Andrew barely reacted when Maggie told him she had to go home. He was leaning against the wall out the back, drawn and distracted. More to keep up appearances than anything, Maggie asked if something was wrong. He didn’t react.

Maggie let herself out through the back door. In minutes she was around the front of the bar. The black car sat in the same place as it had the night before, the bulky figure of the driver again in the front seat, waiting. Len had to be paying well. That told her something. She glanced at her watch. Nine.

She walked fast to her car. She made it there in seven minutes, then got straight in and started the engine. She had dressed in black – dark jeans and a hoodie – just in case.

She drove slowly back towards the bar. She parked well down the road, where she was sure the driver wouldn’t notice her. She could only see the vaguest dark outline of the car, but it was a clear night and she would know when it left. She leaned back in her seat and waited.

It was just after eleven when Len strode out of the bar and got into the back seat. The car pulled away from the curb. Maggie started the engine and followed at a distance. Len’s car remained a dark shape ahead, and that was how it would have to stay for now. Despite the temptation, she didn’t turn off her headlights. Doing so would draw more attention than just an old car trundling along the road.

They drove for about half an hour, away from the tourist-courting centre of Port Douglas, heading towards Cairns. They

took one turn then another, down narrower streets fringed with towering fences behind which sat squat, shadowy warehouses. Maggie didn't know this area. Probably for a good reason.

Because of the distance between them, it took Maggie a moment to realise that Len's car had stopped. She killed the lights and pulled over. Her heart picked up. She was rusty. If they had noticed that they were being followed, she had just confirmed any suspicions.

Maybe there was movement around the car, but it was hard to tell. After a few minutes, it became obvious that nobody was approaching her. Maggie gave it another ten, then got out, a knife in her belt and a rock in her pocket. She kept low and watched. There was no movement, but a dim light came from near Len's car.

Keeping to the shadows of trees on the footpath, she moved forward, eyes sweeping the road for any sign of somebody watching. There was nothing. Her heart was getting louder and faster, but she ignored it. She couldn't control a physical reaction, so there was no point in letting it affect her any more than it absolutely had to.

About a hundred metres from Len's car, she stopped. It was parked near an open gate in a fence, through which a sloping driveway led down to a large warehouse. Inside the car she could see the driver, alone again. Len must have gone inside. The only light came from the warehouse.

She watched and considered for a moment, looking between the car, the driveway and the warehouse.

She hurried back to her station wagon. She slung the loop of rope over her shoulder, grabbed the crowbar, then moved

back towards the warehouse. She wasn't sure how much time she had. She wasn't even sure if she should be doing this now. The only thing she knew was that this might not be Len's destination every night, and she could do something with what she had here.

A couple of vans were parked about five metres away from Len's car on the opposite side of the road. She ducked behind one and tried to steady her breathing. She looked towards the warehouse again. Light shone from the high windows and under the door.

She took the rock from her pocket, aimed and threw. It hit the back of Len's car with a clatter that made her wince.

The door opened and the driver, a gun in his hand, stepped out into the night. He was a thickset, towering man. A bodyguard too, then. He looked around, eyes narrowed, then walked towards the back of the car. He came around to the side Maggie was on. He spotted the rock and knelt.

Swiftly and silently, Maggie ran across the road then hefted the crowbar and brought it down hard on the back of his head. He staggered, raised a hand, started to yell, then she hit him again and again until he was down. Maggie ignored the blood as she looked towards the warehouse. No sign of movement. The driver remained still on the ground. He seemed to be breathing.

She walked down towards the door of the warehouse. There were no guards outside; evidently the driver was supposed to suffice. Maggie paused near the door. A low buzz of voices, but nothing discernible. She moved closer then put her ear to the metal.

‘... anyway, mate, once the shipment comes in, we’ll be as good as gold. We’ve got people wanting product all over the place.’

‘You hear from Melbourne?’

‘Melbourne is *gagging* for it, Len. Ever since the Ford shit, they’ve been looking for an edge and they know this could be it.’

Maggie darted back up the slope to the car. The driver remained still on the road; she dragged him onto the footpath, trying not to grunt with exertion. She searched his pocket and found a set of keys. She glanced towards the warehouse again. Nobody was leaving yet.

She got into the car and started the engine. She looked out the window. No movement. She reversed the car, then swung it around and rolled forwards onto the driveway. She applied the handbrake and killed the engine. She stepped out. The wind lifted slightly. The warehouse remained still.

She unscrewed the fuel cap and took the rope from her shoulder. She cut a length of it, then, resisting the urge to check the warehouse again, fed it into the tank. She kept pushing until she held only a couple of centimetres. She pulled it out again. It dripped with petrol.

Letting the rope hang from the tank, she returned to the front of the car and pushed down the handbrake. The car didn’t shift. She took a lighter from her pocket and moved back to the rear. She pushed.

It took a moment before it started to move. As soon as it did, she flicked the lighter on and touched it to the rope.

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Flame danced and Maggie ran. She ran as the car rolled forward, as the fire raced up the rope, as she heard the collision, the yells, then the familiar rush of ignition and the surge of heat as the car went up in flames and the explosion filled the night.