

## PROLOGUE

### **Ten years ago**

Laura clenched her jaw tight in an attempt to stop the desperate sob escaping her throat. Her body hurt. Her head ached. She needed to be sick. To fall apart. The constant beep, beep, beep in her ears wouldn't leave her alone.

Her son sat on her lap, playing cars on the table. He wore his cartoon pyjamas adorably askew, the buttons out of place. Mikey insisted on doing them himself. They're allowed to be cute at three, aren't they? Like the time he wore his undies over his shorts for a week because he'd made the mistake once at daycare and the kids had picked on him, so his teacher had told everyone he was a trend-setter. None of the kids had had any idea what that meant, but her praise had given him some serious cred in the pony room. Made him feel good about himself, rather than silly. Mrs Mayes was a lovely teacher.

She breathed in the sweet scent of his Minions shampoo as he twisted around to snuggle that beautiful baby face into her neck, still clutching his red and yellow Matchbox cars in his tiny hands.

He was tired, needed a nap. But he never slept well without Goatee, his favourite stuffed brown goat. And Goatee wasn't here. She swallowed another sob, bit down hard on her lip. It wasn't fair, this wasn't his fault.

'Mummy, why are those men meanies?'

She struggled to find her voice, make it normal. 'They're mad, baby.'

'You had tears.' He drew a line down her cheek with his finger. 'If I was big I would protect you. Like Superman.'

Her soul shattered. She was big and she couldn't protect him. 'They didn't hurt me. Not really.'

'They're mad at Daddy.'

'Yeah, at Daddy.'

'I'm hungry. I miss Daddy.'

Her own stomach churned, but not with hunger. 'If you could have anything in the world, what would it be?'

'Ice cream!'

She pressed her lips to the top of his head and cuddled him close, ignoring the pain every movement his small body caused her broken one. 'Double scoop?'

'Yeah!' he said and bounced on her lap. 'Ice cream forever! Can we have some soon?'

Her eyes welled again. This time there was no stopping the tears from sliding down her cheeks. 'I hope so, baby. I hope we can have ice cream. All the ice cream ever.'

'It's hot, Mummy.' He shifted on her lap and tried to get more comfortable, his forehead dotted with sweat. 'Do you think we can go soon?'

The hope in his voice was too much. Just too much.

'Yes, we'll go. Soon.' Her voice choked and her arms trembled around him as she watched the bomb's timer.

5 ... 4 ... 3 ...

Oh, God. No. *No*. 'I love you so much, baby.'

His eyes beamed back at her out of his flushed little face and his arms snaked around her neck. 'Love you too, Mu—'

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Monday, March 21**

I flatten the accelerator to get around a P-plater in a beaten-up work ute and my tired little Civic revs hard. I swerve into the next lane, have to brake quickly to avoid rear-ending a Lexus before the gap increases. I pass two more cars before diving back across. I have a vague recollection of some weird dream about a car accident last night, have to hope it's not prophetic. I take a chance anyway and put my foot down again, slide into a rudely tight gap and earn a beep from the car I cut off. Whatever. The M1 motorway is slow with peak-hour traffic and I need to get through.

I see a sign for the Morisset exit and swing back into the left lane to take it, following three other cars onto the offramp. In the fast-dying light, the horizon stretches into a sea of dense bushland forming shadowed, rolling mountains. I turn right onto a single-lane road. Where is all this traffic going? Am I still on the Central Coast? I'm pretty sure I won't be by the end of this. I spot some light industrial buildings, signs to suburbs I've heard of. Shops. There's life out here. The knowledge is reassuring as the phone message

plays over and over in my head. ‘Lexi dear, it’s Dawny. I’m afraid Desmond and I have gotten ourselves into a rather urgent little pickle. Now, try not to worry too much, but I’d appreciate it if I could meet with you. Just you, please. Now would be good. So no one dies. I’ll text you the address. Ta-ta.’

My fingers catch painfully in my hair as I sweep some stray black wisps from my line of vision. *Urgent little pickle*. I can only guess what that could possibly mean. Coming from Catherine Dawn Delaney, the sweet old pie-making, dodgy-kneed lady who once helped me stash a body in a freezer, I’m guessing it’s nothing minor. I haven’t seen her for more than a year, and as her plan was to stay gone with that gangster-style husband of hers, I’m intrigued. I’m also very nervous and hoping the ‘so no one dies’ part includes me.

I glance at my phone to see I’m still seven minutes out. More, probably, because the old twat in the funny hat in front of me doesn’t seem to be able to do over fifty in the eighty zone. I’m trying not to sit on his arse. There’s got to be somewhere I can overtake. I hope Dawny doesn’t have a gun to her head or something.

My phone rings and I hit the button. ‘Yeah?’

‘You didn’t take the apartment keys,’ Finn tells me. Finn Carson, friend and temporary landlord, is subletting me his apartment and I’m moving in tomorrow.

‘Oh, right. I’ll ... get them later.’

‘When you tell me what’s really going on?’

I’d been last to leave his housewarming party, sitting on his back veranda trying to pry information on a current case out of him when Dawny’s message had come through. I’d gotten up as casually as I could and made what I thought had been a reasonable excuse to take off. But being that he’s a detective sergeant—and a pretty good one—I’m not surprised he saw through me.

‘Can’t believe I forgot those keys. I’m looking forward to moving in. You said the cleaners would be out before two? I’m sure that’s when my furniture is supposed to arrive.’

‘It was Dawny on the phone, wasn’t it? I heard her voice.’

‘I mean, Tom’s great and I thought a night or two staying in a room at his pub while waiting to get into the apartment might be fun. But no. No, it’s not. Way too noisy!’ An overtaking lane opens up—yes!—and I jump into it, put my foot down.

'You know the dead giveaway here is the small talk, right? You don't do that. Ever.'

*Smartarse.* 'I'm evolving.'

'Do you really think you should be rushing off on some Dawny-style mission? You're not fully recovered from our last case.'

He was right. The thumb that had been sliced to the bone is still bandaged, I have a chest full of not-quite-healed ribs and my face looks like a slowly fading war zone. But what can I do? I was the one stupid enough to join the police force. 'You've got to be shitting me!'

'Why would I be—'

'Not you! Turbo here!'

'Sorry?'

'The old snail in front of me who suddenly got a rocket up his arse when the overtaking lane began. For fuck's sake!' I lean on the accelerator and end up having to do twenty over just to edge ahead before the lane closes. I glare as I pass but the gaze of the dick straining to see over the steering wheel never shifts from the road ahead. 'You know, I'm a police officer. There should be some way to arrest people for that shit.'

'Yeah, like we do with people who drink and drive.'

Drink and— What had I had to drink? A Champagne, a JD, another couple of sips of Champagne. Shouldn't be over the limit, should I? Maybe. A headline flashes in front of my eyes. LOCAL PROBATIONARY CONSTABLE FIRED FOR DRINK DRIVING ON HER WAY TO AID AND ABET A FORMER FELON AND HER WANTED HUSBAND.

Damn it, Dawny. 'I'm not over. I barely drank any of that second Champagne.' Even though I've eased up on the speed, Turbo's rapidly losing ground, trapping the cars still behind him as the lanes merge back into one. Poor bastards.

'Where are you going?'

'I told you.'

'You told me you were going home. Home was a half-hour ago. You're still driving.'

'You're using your fancy detective skills on me now?'

'You get a phone call with a mysterious message then all but sprint to your car with the lamest excuse I've ever heard and tear out of my street at light speed. It doesn't take much in the way

of detective skills. Nor does knowing that, whatever this is, you shouldn't be doing it.'

'Don't be dramatic.'

'I'm being anything but dramatic. You know how this goes. You get into trouble, then I nearly die stopping you from dying.'

I want to argue, but it's a valid point. 'Can't you just be grateful I'm not dragging you into it then?'

'No, because I'm bound to be dragged into it. It's only a matter of when.'

'I could say the same about you and Rachael not telling me everything you know about Vaughn's next move,' I say of the murdering arsehole I've been hunting for more than a year.

'Can we deal with one thing at a time, please?'

I see the road I'm looking for and make the turn. It's a quiet enough street lined with narrow, small-acreage blocks stretching back to what looks like a lake. Pretty. There's a large brick fence hiding the number I'm looking for and I pull up in front of it. 'I've got to go.'

'Lexi—'

'I'll call you as soon as I know what's going on. Bye!' I want to push out of the car, hurry to reach Dawny, but I force myself to wait. Look around. Listen. There's no traffic on the street. Lights are on in homes and someone in the house over the road has a monster TV with the nightly news showing. I hear a kid squeal, another shout and laugh. Otherwise, all is quiet. Seems safe enough.

I get out of my car and lock it. Then on another thought, I type Dawny's address into a message to Finn. Anything goes wrong, I just have to hit the send button. I open the gate and am faced with a very ordinary eighties brick home with a serious security system: one of those military-grade screen doors, cameras, warnings of a potential guard dog on duty. Shit. Really? Where?

I step around two Harley Davidsons parked by the front step. One's an old shitbox, the other is a seriously nice bike. I bang on the door, hope for the best.

'Dawny?'

Nothing. I bang again. 'Hello!'

A curtain moves and I get the fleeting impression of a round, hairy face in the window before I hear a snapped, 'What?'

'I'm looking for Dawny?'

'Why?'

'Because she asked me to come.'

'Who are you?'

'My name's Lexi.'

'Lexi who?'

I growl impatiently. I didn't bolt over here to play knock-knock with some random asshole. 'Winter! Is Dawny there or not?'

'Strip down.'

'Ask me that again. I dare you.'

'I need to know you're not armed!'

Oh, for fuck's sake, who are these people? I pull off my jacket, do a spin. 'Happy?'

A dog barks and I freeze in fear before deciding it's behind next door's fence. My nerves are returning. What's taking so long? Maybe I should call Finn.

Maybe I should toughen the fuck up. 'Look, I'm not leaving until I've seen Dawny.'

'You'll do what you're fuckin' told, bitch, or else.'

'Or else *what?* I kick this door off its hinges, smack you over the head with it and use it for your fucking headstone? Where's Dawny!'

'Lexi! Better late than never. You can let her in,' I hear Dawny call out.

'I'll do more than let the bitch in!'

I hear three locks click over; the door opens an inch. A shotgun barrel emerges, pointed straight at my head. Before I can process more than an initial flash of *Oh shit!*, I'm shoved sideways and a large figure barges past into the house, pointing the gun barrel skyward and sending its hulk of an owner back several steps into the room. The door slams back against the wall with a crack.

'Don't move!' Finn demands, now in possession of the gun and pointing the barrel at the hulk.

For a moment, I'm as stunned as the hulk. Then, 'You *followed* me?' I ask stupidly.

'What's going on?' Finn says, ignoring me.

'Oh, Lexi, dear! How lovely to see you ... eventually.'

I spot Dawny and another asshole, younger and weedier, in the doorway to the kitchen. Dawny hasn't changed much, she's still

dressed like a street kid, but her Clairol brown hair now sports a purple streak. Other than looking a little dishevelled, she seems unharmed. 'And you brought that big, bad boyfriend of yours. How's business, Finn? I hear the body count's going up? No need to be taking anyone out tonight though, please. How about we all sit down, eh? Have a nice calm chat.'

I take my eyes off Dawny and flick a nervous glance around. Black leather lounge, old carpet, smart TV, coffee table. The stink of cigarette smoke and old beer courtesy of an overloaded ashtray and half-a-dozen empty beer bottles. Beyond is a hallway with an older-style kitchen to the left. More mess.

'Great idea,' Finn says, then, 'Sit,' he orders, waving the gun towards the lounge.

The hulk is probably fifty-something, dressed in ripped jeans and a stained tee with a patched leather bikie vest, big boots and a chilly expression. He does as he's told.

'You too,' Finn tells the tattooed and multi-pierced weed standing next to Dawny.

Dawny hobbles in behind the weed on the knee that's been dodgy as long as I've known her. My gaze returns to the hulk's vest, the patches. The ones I'm most interested in tell me he goes by Woolly and belongs to the Chaos Reigns Motorcycle Club. He's a full member. I check the weed. Just a prospect. I'm not familiar with this MC, but they're both displaying one-percenter patches.

'Dawny,' Finn says. 'Are you hurt?'

'Oh, no need for all that drama, dear,' she says with a casual wave of her hand. 'I'm perfectly fine.'

Finn shoots me a glare and I aim my own at Dawny.

'You're perfectly fine?' I say, before placing my hand to my head. 'That message you left on my phone suggested you were about to die!'

Dawny's eyes crinkle with amusement. 'If I ever am, I'll call someone who drives a bit faster.'

'Okay,' I say, because honestly what's the point? 'You said, "urgent little pickle".'

'Well, it is rather,' Dawny says, taking a seat in an armchair across from the lounge. 'I need you to sort something out for me. Nothing major, I'm sure you'll be fine.'

I'm not fooled by the conversational, all-the-time-in-the-world speech. Nothing fazes this woman. Nothing. Armageddon could be imminent.

Her gaze moves over my bruised face and she grimaces. 'Although from the looks of you, I might have overestimated things slightly.'

'Can we get to the point?' Finn prompts.

'Ah, yes. Desmond's depending on us, so we'll push on.'

'Fine,' I say. 'Let's get out of here and you can tell me about it.'

'She's not going anywhere till we got proof!' Woolly snaps, folding his arms and glaring at Dawny.

'You're not exactly in any position to call the shots,' Finn reminds him.

'Oh, he is, dear,' Dawny says. 'At least, as long as I want to see Desmond alive again.'

My stomach sinks. 'Desmond's in trouble?' I ask. 'What do they want proof of?'

Dawny sighs dramatically. 'A very desperate young fellow bailed up a few of the members last night at gunpoint.'

'Where is Desmond?' Finn asks.

'Not here, unfortunately.'

'Is he injured?'

'Oh, please, dear. Desmond just gave this young fellow a bit of a bop on the head and that was that. Turns out the young fellow wasn't supposed to be where he was and it all got a bit out of hand and ... these things happen. Anyway, someone needs to see this young fellow and we need you to get him for us.'

I shift my weight onto my foot closest to the door, as though by backing up I can lessen the impact of the drama I know I'm about to be hit with. 'Why call me?' I ask suspiciously. 'You don't know where he is?'

Dawny pulls a face. 'Well, that's the problem, dear. We do.'

'So ... he doesn't want to come in?' I ask.

'Oh, I don't think it would bother him too much to be honest.'

'Dawny.' I hear the exasperation in my tone, but seriously. 'What's the problem then?'

'Ah, well, Desmond didn't realise the boss would need to see this fellow and he'd already ... removed the evidence.'

'Evidence?' I stare at her for two seconds. Three. Then it hits me. 'How hard was that bop on the head?'

'And where is this young fellow?' Finn demands.

'Oh, just off Patonga Wharf. It's not deep.'

'He took him all the way out to Patonga?' Is that even really the question I should be asking? 'Why?'

'Supposed to be lots of sharks.'

If Finn clenches his jaw any harder he's going to break teeth. My gaze shifts to Woolly just to make absolutely sure no one is taking the piss. He certainly seems serious enough.

'We need to know he's dead,' Woolly tells me. 'Make sure Desmond hasn't jumped ship. Changed sides.'

'Sides of what?' I ask, but the look on his face tells me I don't need details.

'I can't believe this,' Finn mutters to the ceiling. Then to Dawny, he says, 'You called Lexi here to dive into shark-infested waters to recover a murder victim to prove Desmond is loyal to a motorcycle gang.'

'You need to relax, dear,' Dawny soothes, 'you'll give yourself a migraine.' Then to me, she says, 'And yes, please. It's a bit past me, I'm afraid. In the dark would be best. Shouldn't take you long.'

Like fuck. 'Dawny, I am absolutely not—'

'I know it's not a glam job,' Dawny hurries on, 'but I'll make sure you get your normal fee. And you don't even have to kill anyone! It's your lucky day, I'd say.'

Normal fee? Kill anyone? I'm trying to keep up but I've got nothing.

'Right, that's enough,' Finn says, and I can see he's done with whatever game this is. Fuck. I need to manage this. 'You're both—'

'Okay! Fine!' I cut in loudly. I'd rather he didn't tell these guys we're cops. 'But only because we owe you a *serious* favour,' I add to remind Finn that Dawny and Desmond once helped save his daughter's life. 'We'll get your proof, but nothing better happen to Desmond in the meantime,' I say with a glare at Woolly. 'What do you need?'

Finn takes his eyes off Woolly long enough to give me the sort of *what the fuck?* look I've become accustomed to. I pretend not to see it.

'Photos. Video. Whatever. Just some general proof. Once we know he's dead, they're both off the hook,' Woolly tells me.

'Oh, we have until tomorrow night,' Dawny adds.

'Then what?'

'Then we stop being nice,' Woolly says with a mean smile.

'Dawny, you're coming with us,' Finn orders.

'Oh, no, dear—'

'That's non-negotiable,' Finn tells Woolly. 'You've got Desmond, we get Dawny. That's the deal.'

'Fine! Take the old bat. She's as annoying as fuck anyway.' Then to me, he says, 'You send the proof to this number I'm gonna give ya. You don't come through, Desy's getting some dentistry, a solid meal and a long cruise.'

The prospect sniggers like he's sharing some private joke. Half-wit. Still, the idea Desmond might have his teeth removed and concrete poured down his throat before being dumped far enough off the coast to never be found is not a nice one.

'Won't be a problem, dear,' Dawny promises. 'These two are very dependable. What's the number?'

Woolly reads it out and I store it in my phone. 'Got it.'

'Right. Go,' Finn tells me. 'Get Dawny out of here.'

'Give me my damn gun back!' Woolly demands as Finn follows us out.

'Not going to happen.'

'There'll be hell to pay!' Woolly growls.

'You're right on that,' Finn mutters. But I'm pretty sure he's talking to me.