

Prologue

Chayse Jarrett looked down at the body sprawled across the satin sheets.

Soft blonde hair.

Light, almost translucent blue eyes.

No lipstick coloured the well-defined lips, no make-up enhanced the delicate complexion, her beauty spoiled only by an abrasion on the side of her jaw.

His gaze followed the slender curve of her neck and narrow shoulders; lingered on the almost pubescent breasts with their slight swelling and pale pink areola.

He didn't want to look any further. Didn't want to re-live the horror that had shot through him only a short time ago.

'This the one?' The hefty sergeant from Homicide looked at Chayse, probing eyes seeing more than they revealed.

Chayse nodded. 'Yes,' his voice a bare whisper, the sound almost absorbed by the room's plush furnishings.

He forced his gaze slowly down, across the lightly fleshed ribs, to where the slash started. The knife had cut through the skin, the thin layer of fat, penetrated the bowel, and ripped through the folds of small intestine, spilling their contents to mingle with the red blood lying sticky on the white skin.

The pubic bone had stopped the knife's downward thrust, but only briefly. Twice more the blade had slashed, creating ribbons of flesh and destroying what little innocence may have remained.

Pain and guilt shafted through Chayse, and he closed his eyes for a second. Then he refocused, concentrated on the girl's right hand still clutching strands of black hair.

Clumping and shuffling of shoes in the hallway spun him around. Two uniformed officers were struggling with a tall, voluptuous woman who was trying to use her feet and teeth as weapons.

'Look what we found hiding upstairs, Sarge,' the older officer called out.

The woman's struggles ceased as she saw Chayse. Her mouth curled, a red gash that matched her hair and turned a passably pretty face into an ugly caricature. Her eyes, filled with hatred, bore into Chayse.

She spat towards the mutilated body. 'Won't do much for you now, will she!'

## Chapter One

### *Eight weeks later*

Chayse parked his battered Falcon in front of a small fish shop in Brisbane's eastern suburbs. Peeling paint was offset by a flashing light that drew attention to the day's specials chalked on a large board in the window. People drifted into the shop, to the newsagency next door, and the bakery next to that.

People. Ordinary people. Ordinary people doing ordinary things like shopping, chatting to friends, watching the constant traffic on the narrow street. Other people. That's how he was beginning to think of them. Almost as though they, with their ordinary way of life, were aliens.

He walked over to the fish shop, pushed open the glass door to the tinkling of a loud bell, and walked inside. A young woman, plump hips encased in tight black bike pants, was handing money over to the shopkeeper. She dropped the last coin onto the counter, grabbed her purchase, and walked out as another customer entered.

Chayse gazed at the display of whole fish and fillets in their stainless steel trays. Glassy-eyed prawns stared at him from their beds of ice, and the smell of seafood permeated the air. He looked up at the young male customer. 'You go first, mate. I can't make up my mind.'

Within a minute the young man had left, and Chayse nodded to the burly shopkeeper. The man inclined his head slightly towards the rear of the shop, and Chayse walked through a beaded curtain to a large room behind the sales area. He barely glanced at the gleaming stainless steel benches, the filleting knives and safety gloves, the enormous ice boxes stacked against two walls. The white tiled floor had recently been washed, and a chemical smell irritated his nostrils.

He strode over to a staircase clinging to the back wall, and within seconds was knocking on a door at the top of the stairs. He waited the customary few seconds while he was assessed through the security viewing hole, then the door opened.

'The victim was Ewan McKay, a deckhand on the *Kladium*, a trawler operating out of Bundaberg.' Peter, his supervisor, handed Chayse a photograph of a man sprawled on his back, the handle of a knife protruding from his chest.

'He was found in the freezer room, and although the hatch was still open, the cold made it difficult for the coroner to determine the exact time of death. However, the owner of the house where the boat was moored came down to investigate after he'd heard yelling, and what sounded like fighting. The house was a bit of a distance from the jetty, but when he arrived he found this man,' he placed another photograph on the table in front of Chayse, 'trying to climb out of the freezer room.'

Chayse studied the photograph. Mid-fifties, fair hair going grey at the temples, broad, tanned face. No hint of menace or aggression in the green eyes. 'Who is he?'

‘Allan Bretton. Known as Tug. Owns the trawler *Sea Mistress*.’

‘His knife?’

‘No. It belonged on the *Kladium*. Filleting knife. Bretton’s fingerprints were on it though he swears he didn’t touch it. Reckons he saw the hatch to the freezer room was open, looked down, saw the body, then someone hit him on the back of the head. When he woke up he was lying next to the body. And his leg was broken.’

‘What do the local boys think?’

‘Well, he did have a contusion on the back of his head. But they’re convinced the two men were fighting and when Bretton stabbed McKay they both fell into the freezer room and that’s how Bretton sustained his injuries.’

‘And there’s only Bretton’s word against pretty substantial evidence.’

Peter nodded. ‘Forensic couldn’t prove he *didn’t* do it, and the evidence was stacked against him. He’s out on bail.’

‘So where do I come in? And why?’

‘Because it looked like a fight that’d ended badly, and Bretton wouldn’t say why he was on board the *Kladium*, it appeared a closed case. Then some bright spark ran a check on both vessels and discovered that the *Kladium* is owned by AGZ Investments. When he dug a little deeper into the company, he found it was a subsidiary of another company that’s owned by this man,’ another photograph joined the other two, ‘Stefan Kosanovos.’

This photograph showed sparse black hair and a bulbous nose that drew attention to the narrow dark eyes and thin lips of a man in his late forties.

‘Kosanovos,’ Peter continued, ‘is one of the lynch pins in the drug trade in Melbourne. About four months ago, his company bought a fishing licence, purchased the *Kladium* from a Gold Coast fisherman, and hired a Brisbane skipper and deckhand to run it.’

‘I guess that deckhand was McKay.’ Chayse leaned back and stretched his long legs under the table. He sometimes wondered if Peter had chosen the hard plastic chairs so the discomfort factor would prevent anyone from falling asleep. He was tempted to ask for a coffee, but experience told him the quality would be unpalatably low and the temperature too high to finish a cup before he’d want to get out of the cheerless room. Even the sexy calendar taped to the door of the old-fashioned fridge and the mismatched but colourful coffee mugs on the sink couldn’t dispel the cold air of sterility that seemed to emanate from the room below.

‘We wanted to get an operative to take his place, but the *Kladium*’s skipper, Karl Folter,’ another photo joined the growing pile, ‘wasn’t hiring anyone locally. But when the boat was released after being impounded, he soon had another deckhand.’

‘From Brisbane?’

Peter’s bushy eyebrows drew together and he shook his head. ‘No. Melbourne. We’re looking into his background now.’

‘And Folter?’ The square-jawed, ruddy-complexioned face, framed by shaggy brown curls, looked innocent enough, but Chayse had long ago learned that even serial killers could be the most charming people imaginable - until you became one of their victims.

‘We don’t have a lot on him. His wife took out a restraining order against him because he used to belt her up. She’d never press charges, but divorced him seven years ago and went interstate. He was also up on an assault charge after a pub brawl but got off with a good behaviour bond. We did find out one other thing. A few years ago Folter skippered a trawler operating out of Gladstone.’

‘Then he’d know the local area.’

Peter nodded. ‘Probably the reason Kosanovos picked him.’

‘So what are you proposing?’

‘According to our boys in Melbourne, Kosanovos has been very active lately. He seems to have extra money, but they can’t determine where it’s coming from. We need to know if he’s using the *Kladium* for smuggling drugs into the country, and if Bretton is involved. The *Kladium*’s out, but we want you to get a job on Bretton’s boat, the *Sea Mistress*. As a deckhand.’

‘If the skipper has bail restrictions, *and* a broken leg, he won’t be working.’

‘No, but this man, Bill Marvin, has worked for him for more than twenty years, so he’ll probably take over. The boat usually has two deckhands, so we intend you to be one of them.’

Chayse’s craving for coffee was getting stronger. But not as strong as his urge to dash the growing pile of photos to the floor and walk out of the soulless little room. He knew Peter wanted him to ask more questions; it was a game the older man played, he with the knowledge, spooning it out in small dollops with Chayse as his dutiful *Oliver Twist*. The same with the photos. Some supervisors lined them up with identities listed, and explained the entire case while the operative simply looked, took notes and absorbed.

But Chayse was tired of playing games, so he just crossed his arms, and waited.

‘The local police have spread the word that they will be keeping a very close eye on the *Sea Mistress*,’ Peter eventually offered, ‘and that seems to have killed any interest in the deckhand position.’

‘Does Bretton have family?’

‘Marcy, his wife. A thirty-year-old son, Brendon, and a twenty-nine-year-old daughter, Samantha, both living in Bundaberg, and a twenty-year-old daughter, Tina, at university in Bundaberg. They all check out clean. Not even a speeding ticket.’

Silence descended as Peter placed the rest of the photographs on the table, and walked over to the bench and turned on the kettle. Chayse knew that he would turn back and offer him a coffee, and the need to end the session and get out became too great. ‘Why me?’ he asked.

‘We had another operative picked out for the job, until he told us he gets seasick,’ Peter grimaced as he walked back, ‘violently seasick. And as your file shows your hobbies are fishing and boating...’

‘I haven’t thrown a line in the water for years. And I know nothing about prawns.’

Peter smiled and inclined his head towards the processing room below. ‘Max is going to teach you all he knows. You have twenty-four hours. Starting at four in the morning.’

With a barely restrained sigh of relief, Chayse levered his tall frame out of the chair and walked to the door. The knob was cold in his hand as Peter’s voice, soft with underlying meaning, asked, ‘Chayse, are you ... up to this?’

His knuckles whitened under the pressure of his grip, but Chayse didn’t reply.

‘That case in Sydney two months ago,’ Peter persisted, ‘I heard you got personally involved, and it ended badly.’

‘Is that why you’ve had me working with the spooks since I got back?’

‘Everyone does surveillance when there’s no specific job for them, you know that.’

Chayse nodded. ‘I’m fine.’

It was a lie, but he wasn’t sure who he was lying to.

Samantha Bretton tried to control her anger.

‘I can handle it, Dad.’ She looked down at her father as he struggled to rise from the living room chair. His crutch slipped as he balanced on one leg, and Sam ignored his frustrated curse. She wanted to pick it up for him, but knew that would only emphasise his current incapacity. And fuel his temper. ‘I *know* trawling is a lot different to skippering a catamaran, but you have to concede the *Lady Musgrave* is one big cat.’

‘She’s a bloody tourist boat. All you have to do is sail out to the island, nursemaid the tourists, then bring them back. That’s hardly the same as skippering a trawler for a couple of months.’

‘I’ve skippered the *Sea Mistress* before.’ It was hard to keep calm when he did this to her. She knew he was only being protective - no, amend that - over-protective, but it was time he recognised her abilities. And in the present circumstances he really didn’t have much choice. ‘I have my ticket. Bill has his Master Fisherman’s Licence.’ She kept her tone reasonable. ‘We’ll get a deckhand to replace Eddie, and -’

‘No way!’ If the plaster cast on his leg hadn’t prevented it, Tug Bretton would have stomped over to his daughter and shaken her. There was no way she was going to get into *that* situation again. ‘I’ll hire another skipper.’

‘You can’t afford to, Dad, and you know it.’ Sam felt her patience snap. ‘You’ve lost two weeks already. If you miss any more of the season you’ll lose the *Sea Mistress* as well. The bank will repossess her, and the house. I won’t stand by and watch that happen when I’m capable of preventing it. Don’t you think Mum has enough to worry about with you being arrested for murder?’

‘You know I didn’t kill him, Sam!’

‘Then tell the police why you were on the *Kladium*.’

‘I can’t do that.’

‘Yes, you can. You’ve been set up.’ Sam watched her father’s rigid jaw, and silently cursed his stubbornness. ‘And by not saying anything to the police you look guilty. Dad, I’ll go to the police myself if you don’t.’

‘You can’t. It would kill your mother.’

The pain in her father’s eyes dissolved Sam’s anger. ‘She doesn’t have to know, Dad. The police can keep it quiet.’

‘Not in this town.’

‘Mum hasn’t found out yet.’

‘Only five of us knew, Sam, and we weren’t likely to say anything.’

‘I’ll take the risk.’ Tears of frustration moistened her eyes. ‘I don’t want to see you go to jail.’

‘Okay. You can skipper the *Sea Mistress*.’ Defeat lowered his voice.

‘What?’

‘If you don’t go to the police, you can take my place.’ Tug’s heart was in his eyes as he pleaded with her. ‘Your mother’s not strong enough to handle the shock, Sam. If she finds out what happened, she’ll blame me. But she’ll also blame herself. I’d rather risk going to jail than have her find out.’

Sam brushed at her eyes. He was right, damn him. And he knew she would do anything to protect her mother. Marcy Bretton had won her fight against cancer eleven years ago, but a year later a stroke had paralysed her right side and affected her speech. As she’d struggled to regain her health once again, her family had shielded her from any stresses that may have affected her adversely. Now only a slight limp and an occasional hesitation in her speech were indications of her long battle.

Tug was tough, and stubborn enough to have gone back on board the *Sea Mistress* and run the whole operation from the skipper’s chair in the wheelhouse, but the bail restrictions prevented this. Three times a week he had to report to the police. So now he thumped about at home, fuming over the wasted sea time and fretting at the worry he knew he had caused his wife.

‘Tell Bill to meet me at the wharf at nine in the morning.’ Sam walked towards the front door. ‘Oh, I got the boat keys off Mum before she went out. Now I’d better go and get some provisions on board.’

‘What about a deckie?’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll find one.’ Her smile was grim. ‘One with more guts than Eddie.’

As she pushed open the screen door, it nearly hit a man with his hand rising as though to knock. In the split second it took for her to register his striking good looks, she also noted the complete stillness of his body and the swift reflexive motion of his arm.

Her instincts told her she would have sensed his movements if he had walked across the patio as she’d reached the front door. How long had he been standing there, she wondered. And how much had he overheard?

‘I’m looking for Tug Bretton.’

Warmth lit eyes the colour of polished mahogany. Wavy light brown hair, a long straight nose, chiselled bone structure and perfectly shaped lips - the kind of classic handsomeness she distrusted on sight. She guessed his age to be early thirties.

‘What do you want to see him about?’ She watched interest flash briefly across his face at her curt tone, but his friendly expression didn’t falter.

‘I need a job, and a bartender said Tug Bretton might be hiring. Said your deckie quit.’

Sam slowly looked him over. The faded jeans and T-shirt were clean, and he wouldn’t be mugged on a Sydney train for his ancient Reeboks, but an old resentment flared. ‘You don’t look like a deckhand.’

‘I’m not. But I work hard and I need the money. And I did a stint of prawn sorting in Brisbane.’

Muscle rippled under the cotton knit across his chest as he crossed his arms to match hers, and she realised she had instinctively adopted a defensive stance. Casually, she moved her hands to her sides. ‘Did the bartender also tell you that if you have a drug problem or you’re trying to hide out you’re wasting your time because the *Sea Mistress* is being watched by the police?’

‘Doesn’t worry me. I’m clean. I just need to earn some money so I can pay for my car repairs. A kangaroo used it as a trampoline just outside town. It’s not insured, and the panelbeater won’t start on the repairs until he sees the colour of my money.’

‘Which you don’t have.’

‘Nope. Not that much anyway. I have prospects of work in Townsville, but I’ll need my car when I get there.’

‘Inexperienced deckies don’t get paid a lot.’

‘So long as I have somewhere to sleep, and I’m earning money, I’m better off than staying in the pub and using up what little I have left while I search for work.’

‘There’s tomato picking.’

‘I’d prefer to be on the water.’

If she had the time to search for another deckhand, or if she could find one willing to sign on with a raw female skipper whose father had been arrested for murder, she thought bitterly, then she would tell the man in front of her she didn’t need him. The mid-afternoon sun slanted heat onto her bare legs as she closed the screen door and walked out onto the patio. He moved aside, but not enough for her to feel comfortable. Sam was tall, but even wearing medium-heeled sandals, she had to look up at him. She took a step back. ‘I suppose the bartender told you my father has a broken leg and won’t be the skipper.’

He nodded. ‘He thought the other deckie, Bill Marvin, would be taking over.’

‘Bill has the sea time, but he never went for his ticket.’

A dark eyebrow raised in query.

‘He doesn’t have a Skipper 3 ticket, the necessary qualification to skipper a boat.’ She watched the understanding on his face, then threw him the crunch line. ‘I’ll be skippering the *Sea Mistress*.’

The other eyebrow rose as well, but he simply nodded. 'Okay. Am I hired?'

She wanted to say no, but expediency forced her to say, 'Yes.'

'Great.' He smiled as he held out his hand. 'I'm Chayse. Chayse Jackson.'

Sam had thought she was immune to devastating smiles from good-looking men, but her heartbeat seemed to skitter as she reluctantly reached out to grip his hand. Heat engulfed her palm and the skittering increased. 'Sam Bretton.'

She resisted the urge to rub her hand down the side of her shorts when she drew it back from his grasp. She didn't want, didn't need, to feel any attraction for this man.

'Meet me at the *Sea Mistress* at six tomorrow morning.' She gave him a brief description of the wharf where the boat was moored, then walked towards the front steps.

'Are you going into town?' he asked, nodding at the keys in her left hand, then adding, 'I'd appreciate a lift back. It was a long walk out here.'

It would be churlish to refuse, but Sam was tempted. At the moment she didn't want company. In spite of her bravado with her father, it had been nine years since she had been behind the wheel of a trawler, and she was worried she wouldn't remember everything she needed to know. At least she had the reassurance of Bill's twenty years working for her father. 'Okay. I have one stop on the way, but that should only take a few minutes.'

'Fine. I don't have much to organise. Perhaps I can give you a hand getting the boat ready?'

She shook her head. 'Bill's been looking after it. All I have to do is buy some stores. Any food preferences?'

'I like my steak thick. Otherwise I'm easy to get along with.'

'I hope so,' Sam said with meaning. 'It isn't easy living and working in a confined area with the same people for weeks at a time. Bill doesn't talk much, and I won't have time to hold your hand if you can't get the hang of things straight away.' At the instant gleam in his eyes she realised the literal meaning of her words, and was grateful she hadn't blushed, a trait that sometimes plagued her. But he only said, 'I'm a fast learner.'

Although his expression was serious, the gleam deepened.