

HOT PURSUIT

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CHAPTER ONE

The synthetic, metallic beat drove relentlessly into my head. I stared into the depths of my gin and tonic looking for the answer to the question that'd plagued me for the last three months: how does a smart chick in a committed relationship end up broke, single and sozzled in a pretentious South Yarra bar? The ice just glinted back at me in the half-light. The lime wedge, macerated by the vicious stabbings of my straw, floated on top.

'You're no help at all,' I mumbled into my glass.

'That must be some drink you've got there.' The voice, with its lyrical Scottish accent, was an unwelcome interruption to my self-pity. I threw a heavy wave of my hair over my shoulder and frowned at the guy on the other end of the couch, ready to shut him down with a well-timed rejection.

But his face was open and friendly, and the smart retort I'd prepared died on my lips. 'I'm not having a very good night.'

He shuffled along the couch towards me. 'Why are you out if you're not having a good time?'

I glanced at him in surprise. It'd been at least two years since a guy had tried to pick me up. Not since... well, the less said about *that* the better. Back then I'd been single and hot, before I fell in love with James and happily let myself go. Recent heartbreak

had taken care of the few spare kilos, but I still wasn't feeling quite on my game, despite the low-cut top and push-up bra my best friend Lana had insisted I wear.

I wasn't looking for a rebound boy, but I had to admit, the attention of a cute Scottish guy could be a welcome diversion in my present circumstances. James dumped *me*, after all. I didn't owe him my fidelity. And wasn't picking up a stranger in a bar a mandatory part of the healing process?

'My friends dragged me out to cheer me up,' I said.

'How's that working out for you?'

'They're having a great time.' I gestured across the room at my three friends, who were tearing it up on the dance floor. We watched as they writhed in time to the music, their arms above their heads, skirts riding up their thighs.

Lana looked over, checked out my companion, then gave me an exaggerated double thumbs-up. My face grew hot. Jeez, Lana, why don't I just tattoo *AVAILABLE!* across my forehead? I shot an embarrassed look at him, but he just chuckled and threw back the last mouthful of his beer. An awkward silence followed and just as I was thinking my desperado status had put him off, he spoke again. 'So why do you need cheering up?'

I snuck another look at him. His face was worn and tired-looking, but its angular lines, garnished with a generous layer of stubble, were striking in the bluish light of the bar. His dark blond hair was messy and stood straight up as if he'd sat with his head in his hands for a long time, and his leather jacket was cracked and old. He certainly didn't fit the stereotypical image of the metrosexual men who usually haunted this kind of place.

'My boyfriend dumped me,' I said. 'Not only that, but he left me with the mortgage on our house and pissed off interstate.'

He whistled. 'Ouch, that's harsh.'

This small expression of sympathy, combined with the copious amount of alcohol I'd consumed, dissolved the last of my resistance. And I was far from immune to a man with an accent.

'We'd stretched ourselves to afford the house in the first place,' I went on, 'and now I'm trying to keep up with the repayments on my own. I shouldn't really be out spending my non-existent money on booze.'

I would never forget the shock I'd felt when, two weeks after James had left, the bank called about the missed repayment. That same panic had lurked within me ever since I discovered that James's salary wasn't coming into our shared account anymore. Not to mention the lingering disbelief that someone I'd loved so wholeheartedly could have done this to me without warning.

My companion stood up and took my glass from my hand. 'In that case, I'd better buy you another. This one's looking a bit worse for wear. Gin and tonic, isn't it?'

He disappeared before I could protest and I leant back against the couch feeling foolish. What an idiot, pouring my heart out to some random guy before I even knew his name. And now he was buying me a drink when he looked no more able to afford it than me.

Meanwhile, my friends were still shimmying away, oblivious to my plight. A couple of years ago I would've been up there with them, strutting my stuff, so it wasn't unreasonable for them to assume it might make me feel better. But all that seemed so far in the past. I'd given up playing the field after the humiliation that had followed my last one-night stand. Shortly after that I'd fallen for the shithead's best friend and thought I'd settled down for good. Meanwhile, my friends were still happily single. They didn't care that James had ripped out my still-beating heart and thrown it under a freight train.

They didn't know the joy of cooking together, the comfort of drifting off to sleep in someone else's arms, the contentment of just loving and being loved. All the clichés I'd taken for granted with James I now yearned for as I sat alone in the dark, impersonal embrace of a crowd of strangers.

But I wasn't being fair. When I said they didn't care, that wasn't exactly true. They just didn't understand how it felt to have the love of your life turn out to be a bastard.

A guy wearing a tight white T-shirt and an out-of-fashion Beckham hairstyle gave me the once-over as he strolled past. I glanced down and saw that my top had slipped down to reveal the proud cleavage that only a heavy-duty push-up bra could give me. I groaned. No wonder this guy was buying me a drink. He must have thought I was throwing myself at him.

'Your drink, ma'am.'

I gave him a half-smile as I took the gin and tonic. He sat down, closer this time, his body turned towards me and his knee touching my thigh. A sage voice somewhere in the back of my head advised me that the last thing I needed was to get involved with someone else. I told it to shut up. Surely there was no harm in chatting to him. And he really was hot.

'I'm Chris,' he said.

'Sarah.'

'Here's to drowning sorrows.' We clinked our glasses together.

'So what do you do, Sarah?' he asked after we'd both taken a sip of our drinks.

I hesitated. For years I'd cringed at this banal question, made some flippant comment, tried to avoid further conversation. But the temptation to create a fantastical character for this stranger I'd probably never see again was overwhelming.

'I'm a journalist.'

It wasn't *exactly* a lie. I was a journalism graduate, after all. I did work for a women's magazine and I did write a column. But the slightly less glamorous truth was that I was a former beauty therapist trying to crack the career I'd wanted after years of study. I'd started working in Mum's beauty salon in the school holidays when I was seventeen. It was a job that helped me pay my way through uni even after I'd moved out of home. It was never supposed to be a long-term thing. When I graduated and didn't pick up the lucrative cadetship at one of the major papers I'd naively planned for in my mind, I stubbornly clung to my standards. But then weeks became years, and the positions I applied for moved further and further down the rung. Before I knew it, I was twenty-eight, still working for my mum and no closer to my dream of reporting on women's rights in some beautiful-and-exciting-but-not-too-dangerous international location. That's when I decided it was time to make a change.

I got the job at *Women's Choice* on the strength of an eight-year-old exposé I'd written back in uni, and so far I hadn't exactly set the industry on fire. I still submitted the occasional essay to online feminist publications and sometimes they were picked up, but never with sufficient regularity to result in an actual job. And my boss refused to give me anything more meaty than my weekly beauty column.

It's not that I couldn't write. I just knew nothing about celebrities. While *Women's Choice* did run the occasional gutsy investigative story, its main focus was celebrity scandal and gossip. I didn't know who was hot and who was not. I didn't know who was having an affair with whom, or whose marriage was on the rocks. In order to advance to investigative stories, I was expected to do my time on the fluff. But my ignorance of the world of the beautiful people was holding me back.

Great career move, Sarah. I'd progressed from waxing hoo-hahs to writing about waxing them.

Chris was looking at me, and I realised he'd asked me a question.

'Sorry, what?'

'I just asked whether you like your job.'

I shrugged. 'It pays the bills. Well, it did anyway.'

When James and I had combined our incomes, it'd seemed like an impossible amount of money. James was a petroleum engineer and casually brought home more than double my wage. It had felt surreal to move to the inner Melbourne suburb where I'd never imagined being able to live; to buy furniture and decorations and hang bright prints on the walls; to play house. I'd got comfortable... too comfortable. I'd sacrificed my independence for love and now I was literally paying the price.

I knew I should sell up and start again, but that house meant something to me. It was a symbol of becoming a real-life grown-up. And anyway, even if I wanted to sell it, I needed James to consent, and he wouldn't even return my calls. I took a hasty gulp of my drink, then another for good measure.

'What about you?' I asked Chris. 'What do you do?'

'I'm a musician.'

'So I guess you're broke too, right?' Well, that explained the tattered leather jacket.

He laughed. 'I manage.'

'Do you live here in Melbourne?'

He hesitated. 'No, just visiting.'

I waited, but he didn't elaborate further. 'What instrument do you play?'

'Lead guitar and vocals.' His voice was short, almost impatient at my curiosity. Maybe I'd misinterpreted his signals.

‘How is it possible to play an instrument and sing at the same time?’ I babbled in an attempt to lighten the mood. ‘Isn’t it a bit like patting your head and rubbing your belly?’

His teeth glowed white in his face as he laughed. ‘I guess it is, kind of.’

‘So you’re part of a band then?’

His smile faded and his jaw tightened. ‘Aye.’

Hmmm. There it was again. I thought all musicians were egomaniacs, but this one was obviously different. Which was cool, except I sucked at small talk and I was running out of topics fast.

‘So is the band here as well?’ I persisted. ‘Are you doing any gigs?’

He stared straight ahead. ‘All done now.’

There was no mistaking that he was getting pissed off with my questions. Across the room a number of girls were staring at Chris and casting baleful glares in my direction. Poor guy. A bar full of chicks perving on him and he was stuck with a whining dumpee giving him the third degree about his music career.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to be nosy. I’m just gonna go to the loo before I make a bigger fool of myself.’

As I leapt to my feet, the glass in my lap upended onto Chris, spilling ice cubes over his legs. I dropped to my knees to retrieve one, but it slid out of my clumsy fingers. I was chasing it up his leg when I realised I was about to grab his balls and I snatched my hand away, face burning with embarrassment.

‘Oh god, I’m sorry! I’m such an idiot.’

Smooth, Sarah. Really smooth.

He looked down at me, a bold smile covering his own awkwardness.

‘Sit down, Sarah.’ I did as I was told as he brushed ice cubes from his lap onto the floor. ‘You don’t need to go anywhere. Unless you actually need to go to the loo, in which case you probably *should* go.’

We both laughed.

I fidgeted with my empty glass. The last thing I needed was more booze. I could drink a grown man under the table any day of the week, but even I knew I’d just about reached my limit. Nevertheless, I was on the verge of doing something I might regret tomorrow and could really use another drink right about now.

‘So, what’s going to happen with you and your ex?’ Chris asked. ‘Think you’ll get back together?’

My stomach lurched at the reference to James. I forced a rough laugh. ‘Not bloody likely. I don’t even know why we broke up. He just... he just left.’ To my horror, I could feel tears in my eyes. I stood up again. ‘I think it’s my round.’

As I waited at the bar, I stared up at the ceiling to prevent the tears from spilling out onto my cheeks. Every time I thought I was coping with the break-up, someone else would bring up the topic and it would all come back. James’s face, expressionless where I had only ever seen tenderness. His voice flat as he told me he needed a break. His body unyielding as I tried to turn him towards me, pleading with him to tell me what I’d done wrong, what I could do to fix this. His back, rigid as he walked away, a bag over each shoulder packed with his clothes and other belongings.

And now there was no money left in my purse and I was going to have to put my nearly maxed-out credit card on the bar all because I didn’t want a stranger to see me cry. As the bar girl dropped my card into an empty glass on the shelf between

the vodka and gin bottles, I almost felt the dull thud of my proverbial arse hitting the ground as I fell off the last step of my dignity.

I probably should've called it a night, but it wasn't like I had anything to go home to. Or anyone. The single, cash-strapped life certainly wasn't the carefree experience I remembered from when I'd been a student. Now I was thirty years old, I should well and truly have my shit together.

Heading back over to Chris with our drinks, I saw another girl chatting to him, leaning over to give him prime view straight down her top. I paused to watch as she gushed over him. Chris was smiling back at her, but he had the same aloof expression I'd observed earlier. No one likes a try-hard, honey, I thought with grim satisfaction.

She backed up a few paces, then skittered away to her group of friends. They crowded around her as she brandished a scrap of paper, laughing excitedly. I frowned. Had he just given her his phone number? I may not have come out with the intention of picking up, but it was a bit much if he was teeing up a date with another girl while I was at the bar buying him a drink. And how charmingly old school to write it on paper rather than entering it straight into her phone like everyone seemed to do these days.

Then Chris looked up at me with an easy grin. His eyes lingered a moment too long on my breasts and my spirits lifted by an almost imperceptible degree. Obviously I hadn't totally lost my touch if this guy, who those other chicks were drooling over, was interested. Either that or he felt sorry for me.

Meh. Lust or pity, it was better than sitting here by myself.

'So, you're from Scotland, right?' I asked as I sat down.

'Edinburgh. Have you ever been there?'

‘I’ve never been anywhere,’ I said. ‘Well, I did go to New Zealand with James last year, but I don’t think that really counts.’

‘You must go to Europe.’ Chris’s face was earnest. ‘It’s amazing—the culture, the food, the people. I travel as often as I can, particularly to Rome. It’s my favourite city. I’ve got a friend in Testaccio who I stay with.’

‘Testaccio?’ My lips and tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar syllables.

‘It’s a working class district near the Tiber River. The food is out of this world, like nothing you’ve eaten before. And the best thing is you can go there and be completely anonymous. There aren’t many tourists so you can live life like a true Roman.’

His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and I couldn’t help feeling a little affected myself. I was lucky to get a weekend in Sydney once a year.

‘And how does a true Roman live, exactly?’

He smiled. ‘Espressos in backstreet cafes. Long, slow lunches with as many bottles of wine as there are courses. Shopping with the locals at the Mercato di Testaccio. There’s something about the place I never get tired of.’

‘Hopefully one day I’ll make it there. Maybe once I’ve knocked off this mortgage. In a gazillion years. Oh, Christ,’ I groaned, putting my head in my hands. ‘I can’t believe how depressing that sounds.’

Chris patted me on the leg. ‘Have another drink. Always good for shutting out the real world.’

I glanced at him through the curtain of my hair. ‘The problem with the real world is that it’s still there when the hangover wears off.’

‘In that case, why don’t you come back to my hotel room and we’ll see if we can come up with some other ways to ignore reality?’

I started. After a year and a half in what I’d thought was a stable relationship, I wasn’t used to things moving so fast. We’d barely even touched each other (well, not counting my accidental ball grope) and he was already propositioning me. I was about to politely rebuff his offer when the image of my big, empty house flooded my mind, and before I could think it through I found myself following him out of the bar without even saying goodbye to my friends.

We didn’t speak much on the walk to his hotel. My mind, addled with grog, tried and failed to make sense of what I was doing. I didn’t owe anybody anything. Except myself, and what I needed right now was a no-strings-attached good time.

I was surprised when he led me into the opulent lobby of a boutique hotel. ‘Five star? Nice!’

He threw me a smile as we stepped into the lift, but didn’t comment. His room was on the top floor with a balcony and a view towards the city lights of Melbourne. It was impossible to ignore the enormous king size bed that took up most of the room, a reminder of what we were here for.

I babbled to cover up my nervousness. ‘How does a starving musician afford a king suite at the Lyall?’

Chris stepped towards me and rested his hands on my waist. ‘Do you really want to talk about this right now?’ He bent his head to kiss me.

OK, so no small talk then.

He was a good kisser—not out of this world, but it was nice to feel a man’s arms around me again. I allowed my body to relax into his as his hands moved up under my shirt to caress my

back. His phone began to buzz with an incoming call, but he pulled it out of his pocket, rejected it without checking to see who it was, then threw it onto the chair beside the TV.

He grinned. 'Whoever it is can wait.'

He pulled my shirt over my head and threw it on top of the phone before covering my mouth with his own again. I pushed his battered jacket off his shoulders and we parted for a moment so he could pull off his own shirt. He was very tall and it was difficult to continue kissing with him stooped over and me on my toes, so he guided me to the bed and we half fell onto it.

I fingered a large purple patch of skin below his ribcage. 'What's this?'

'Birthmark,' Chris said. 'I hate it. I'd get it lasered if I could, but it's too big. You have the most beautiful eyes.'

He pulled my hand away from the birthmark and up to his chest, then bent his head to kiss my breasts, one hand inside my bra. I sent a mental note of thanks to Lana for her insistence on the push-up bra. My hands explored his muscled shoulders. He had a nice body, even if he did obviously wax his chest.

And then, as I abandoned myself to the sensations his hands and mouth were sending through my body, I made the mistake of closing my eyes. There, in my mind's eye, was James. James, with his enormous triangular physique that had always dwarfed mine, his sandy blond hair, his clear blue eyes. Sweet, gentle James, always such a considerate lover, always pausing to make sure I was enjoying every caress, every kiss.

I broke away from Chris and sat up, tears burning behind my eyes.

'Sorry,' I said. 'Sorry, I don't think I can.'

He propped himself up on one elbow. 'Are you OK?'

'Just got socked in the eye by reality after all.'

‘Ah. Your ex?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Damn.’ He gave me a wry grin. ‘That’s too bad.’

‘Sorry,’ I said again.

‘Sarah, I was kidding. It’s OK. Believe it or not, I don’t usually do this.’

The chair beside the TV began to buzz. We both glanced over towards his phone, but he made no move to answer it.

Chris turned back to me. ‘So, you’re still in love with him then?’

I shrugged. ‘Hopelessly. Unfortunately.’

‘Well I hope the silly sod realises the mistake he’s made. If that’s what you want, of course.’

His phone stopped ringing, then immediately started up again. He threw me an apologetic smile and got up to get it.

‘Sorry, I’d better see who this is.’ He looked at the screen and his smile disappeared. ‘Excuse me a moment.’ He threw on his shirt and opened the sliding door to the balcony as he answered the call.

Through the window I could see him pacing up and down the balcony, raking his hand through his hair and speaking rapidly. Obviously the call was not a welcome one. An ex of his own, perhaps?

I tried to recall the last fight I’d had with James. Somehow it would’ve been comforting to remember a fiery, explosive session of shouting and plate throwing. But I think we’d had a petty argument over leaving the lid off the Vegemite and had given each other the silent treatment for a few hours.

My own phone began to ring and Lana’s name flashed up on the screen.

‘What happened to you?’ she demanded. ‘I know you weren’t having the best time but it’s not like you to pull the ghost exit.’

‘Sorry, babe. I kind of picked up, believe it or not. But—’

She shrieked with delight. ‘Was it that cute guy you were talking to before? He was hot-diggity-damn delicious.’

‘As if you could have seen him properly from that distance. You really should wear your glasses when you go out.’

‘I don’t need my glasses to know he was hot. But why are you answering your phone? Get back to it, girl!’

‘I kind of chickened out,’ I admitted. ‘I couldn’t go through with it. I’m too drunk, and all I could think about was James.’

‘Oh, honey. Don’t waste your emotion on that dipshit. You should’ve got your freak on anyway. Are you still with him?’

‘Yeah. He’s on the phone though.’

‘Well, when he hangs up, jump his bones. Don’t let James ruin your fun.’

‘Nah. I’ve made enough of a fool of myself already.’

‘Why don’t you come back to the bar and dance with us? It’ll be fun.’

‘Thanks, but I need to go to bed. Alone,’ I added in anticipation of her response.

‘OK, babe. Call me tomorrow, we’ll catch up for breakfast.’

‘Sure,’ I said.

I hung up just as Chris walked back into the room. His face was pale and he looked stressed.

‘Sorry to do this to you, but I’ve gotta go,’ he said.

‘Is everything OK?’

He barely looked at me as he began to throw clothes into a backpack. ‘Uh, sure, sure, something’s just come up. I have to take off.’

I watched, mute, as he shrugged into his jacket. I was still sitting on the enormous bed with only my bra on, and starting

to feel a little miffed. 'Are you making this up? Because I'm quite capable of taking a hint, you know.'

I stood up and put my shirt back on. It was as if he'd become a completely different person in the last few minutes. He rushed into the bathroom and I heard him scrabbling toiletries into his bag. When he reappeared, he looked ever so slightly contrite, but I was in no mood to take this lying down.

'I'm terribly sorry to have gypped you out of an easy lay,' I said, 'but it might come as a surprise to you that it's quite legal for me to change my mind.'

When he finally met my gaze, there was real fear in his eyes. 'Look, I'm sorry about this. I'm not ditching you because you wouldn't have sex with me. I just really need to go. The room is paid for so stay as long as you like, but I have to get out of here right now. It was nice meeting you, Sarah.'

He picked up a black guitar case from the corner of the room and, without a backwards glance, he rushed out, leaving the door gaping open. I peered into the hallway and watched as he ran to the lift and punched the call button four times in rapid succession. Either my rejection had royally messed him up, or there really was something wrong. Regardless, I was alone once again.

I put on my jacket and surveyed the room. It really was quite grand. I was tempted to stick around for a while, lounge on the big bed, order room service and charge a porno to the room to get him back for running out on me, but I was exhausted and just wanted to pull the pin on this complete arse of a night.

The lobby door closed behind me as I walked out into the icy cold of the Melbourne winter. The driver of the first taxi in the rank greeted me with a big smile as I slid into the passenger seat.

'Hello, my friend, how are you?' he asked cheerfully.

‘I’m great,’ I said. ‘Just great.’

I gave him my address and he pulled out from the kerb, whistling along to the Bollywood song playing on the stereo. It was only as we were turning into my street that the image of my credit card sitting in the glass behind the bar flashed into my mind. I leant forward in my seat, elbows on my knees and head in my hands, and the tears I’d been holding back all night came at last in a prodigious flood of misery.

‘Everything OK, miss?’ the driver asked.

‘We’re going to have to go back.’ My voice shook and the tears dripped through my fingers and into my lap. ‘I’ve left something behind.’