

ONE

Saturday 4th November 2017

Andy stumbled to her feet, grasping at the remnants of her torn dress. It was over. She had beaten them. A cool breeze whipped through the building's front doorway. Andy shuddered. She'd had to do it — they would have killed her and Mel.

Andy spun around.

Mel sat a few feet away, slumped on a bar stool, half naked with her wrists bound to the armrests and a pool of blood on the plastic sheet beneath her. Two paramedics hovered over her, holding compression bandages to Mel's forearms.

'Mel!' Andy stepped closer. *Please be okay.*

A figure blocked her path. 'It's all right. You're safe now.'

Andy gaped at the female police officer standing before her.

'You're bleeding. Are you hurt?'

She glanced down at herself. Blood — her hands and body were covered in it. 'No, I ... it's not my blood.' Her voice sounded like it was coming from someone else. 'It's their blood.' She stepped around the officer as the paramedics cut Mel's wrists free from the chair. A weak moan escaped her friend's lips.

Andy exhaled in relief. Mel squinted up at them; her matted, brown hair clung to her now pale and empty face. 'Andy,' she whispered, 'what happened?'

Earlier that evening, Andy and Mel strolled along Pittwater Road flanked by Ryan and Matt. The cool night air whipped at Andy's dress, a refreshing relief after another warm spring day in Sydney's Northern Beaches.

Ryan leaped ahead of Andy on the sidewalk, throwing his arms towards the sky. 'What a gorgeous evening.' He turned with a charming smile. 'And such lovely company.'

Oh man. Andy's stomach fluttered. She was so out of practice. He took her hand and spun her into his arms. 'Likewise.'

Mel gasped. 'Let's go dancing, like last time.' She grabbed Matt's hand and dragged him towards the road. 'There's a taxi ... No, wait. It's taken.'

'We can dance here.' Matt pulled Mel into his arms and spun them around in circles on the sidewalk, finishing with a fancy dip.

Mel squealed with delight then pulled a sad face. 'Aww, come on. We need to go dancing.'

Ryan squeezed Andy's hand, his fingers interlocking with hers. 'Dancing sounds fun.' He winked.

Her face flushed and she bit her lip in an attempt to hide her embarrassment. *Don't make a fool of yourself now.* Goodness. Could this possibly lead anywhere serious? Crap. If her mother knew that she was on a date she'd already be planning their wedding.

'Your eggs aren't getting any younger, Andy.'

No pressure there.

Dammit. Stop overthinking.

Just enjoy yourself.

JUST PLAY ALONG

She gazed into Ryan's dark brown eyes and ruffled his hair. 'It does sound fun.' She kissed him on the lips and he met her intensity, hugging her closer.

Matt coughed. 'How about a game of pool?'

Andy pulled away. That was nice.

'Ooh, I love pool.' Mel's eyes widened. 'And we need more drinks.'

Ryan tugged Andy's hand. 'Come on, there's a great pool room just a bit further.'

A pool room? 'I didn't know there was one around here.'

'It's in a secret location.'

'Sounds intriguing.'

Ryan grinned. 'You'll love it.'

Andy groaned. Something hit her face. What the...? She squinted up at a figure standing over her, bright lights blinding her vision.

'Wake up.' Firm hands gripped her shoulders and yanked her into a sitting position. Something crackled beneath her.

Crap! Andy glanced down. A layer of plastic covered the lounge chair she was sitting on.

'Hey.' A hand stung her face. 'We need you awake.'

What? Was that Ryan's voice? She stared at the man kneeling before her. His face somehow distorted. No. She reached out and touched him. Something soft surrounded his eyes. Was that a mask?

'You like?' He tilted his head and licked her hand.

Andy reeled backwards. 'What's going on?'

Ryan stepped aside, clearing her view of the room. Mel sat slumped on a black bar stool with her wrists tied to the armrests.

No. Was this some kind of joke? Where the hell were they? Another lounge chair was set on the other side of the room and what looked like a kitchen to the left. On the right there were shelves and a laptop on a table. And a long stand ... wait, was that a microphone? What was that for?

Oh God. Her gaze fell on a camcorder set up in one corner. And another camera on the other side. Oh no. The room flooded with the gritty riff of Metallica's *Enter Sandman*.

'Welcome.' Matt strode in front of her, wearing the same Zorro-style mask as Ryan, his hair now a dark blue with blue paint streaked across his face. 'It's action time, ladies.'

Andy jumped to her feet and stepped towards him. 'Is this some kind of joke? What's wrong with Mel?'

Matt sniggered and lunged in her direction.

She jumped back, bumping into a hard body. Strong arms snaked around her waist. A hand thrust between her legs. Shit! She writhed in Ryan's embrace. His grip tightened and her feet lifted off the ground. 'Don't worry you'll get your turn.'

She dropped onto the lounge, gasping under his weight. What the hell was happening? Would he rape her? Or kill her? She stared at the twisted smile on his face.

A sense of dread consumed her. They were wearing masks. Did that mean they wouldn't be killed? Or was it all for the camera? Shit. 'What are you doing?'

She gasped — suddenly staring down the barrel of a gun.

'Shut up!' Ryan pressed the cold metal into her forehead. 'Now, do what you're told and we might let you live.' The gun slid down between her eyes. 'Get it.'

Andy nodded, unable to speak. As if they'd keep their word.

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Ryan stood and pulled her into a sitting position. A tray containing a line of white powder appeared in front of her.

‘Take it.’

Andy stared at it, shaking. ‘What is it?’

‘Speed.’ He held out a rolled up twenty. ‘You know what you’re doing, right?’

Andy nodded and leaned forward, her gaze landing on the plastic sheets that lined the floorboards. Dread flooded her. *It can’t be.* Shit! She’d watched enough crime shows to know what that meant.

‘Take it!’

‘Okay.’ With trembling hands she leaned over the tray, her stomach in knots. *Come on, Andy ... You can do this.* If she made them think she was cooperating, then maybe she could find a way out. She had to.

She forced out a deep breath and sniffed the line, then wiped her nose with her hand.

‘That wasn’t so hard now, was it?’

Andy gaped at him, gripping the edge of the lounge. What now? Would they be tortured? Raped? Killed? She glanced at Mel, still slumped over on the bar stool. Why wasn’t she moving?

A flash of metal caught her eye. No. Not a knife. Andy jumped up from the lounge, side stepping Ryan as Matt used the flat side of the blade to stroke Mel’s face. ‘Stop it!’

Matt looked at her with a deranged, sadistic smile.

Oh God. Andy took a step towards Mel, but a hand grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back, slamming her against a hard body. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ An arm crushed her windpipe and Ryan dragged her back to the lounge in a headlock.

Struggling to breathe, she clawed desperately at the arm around her throat. The pressure eased slightly and she gulped in a sharp breath. ‘Let ... me go.’ She writhed in his grasp, stopping short as the gun pressed into her neck. ‘No. Please.’

‘Shut up, bitch! Now you do what you’re told or he might start using that knife.’ He spun her around to see Matt holding the knife to Mel’s throat.

Mel jolted upright and struggled to move her arms. She stared at Andy. ‘Wha—’

Matt laughed and pressed the blade against Mel’s chest. ‘You’re not going anywhere, gorgeous.’ Mel cringed as Matt’s free hand ran down her chest to her stomach. He licked her neck.

‘Ahh ...’ Mel shuddered, jerking against her restraints.

Andy stiffened in Ryan’s embrace. His breath heavy against her neck. ‘Now do we understand each other?’

‘What do you want?’ Andy glared at Matt who was leaning over Mel, jabbing a needle into her arm. ‘What are you giving her?’

Matt slowly looked up and met her gaze. ‘Just a little something to take the edge off the pain. Don’t want her bleeding out too quickly now, do we?’

Andy’s insides twisted.

Pain? Oh, crap. Her heart thumped in her chest.

Ryan squeezed her against his body, his heart beating just as fast. Shit! This excited him.

Matt straightened, his gaze fixed on Andy. The look in his eyes — pure evil.

God, please help us —

Ryan shoved her onto the lounge, straddling her and tearing her dress open. His rough hands groped her breasts,

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and she sucked in a breath, startled by his speed. Hot breath stung her face. A wet tongue licked her cheek followed by the cold caress of the gun. She stiffened, unable to avoid Ryan's forced kiss as his free hand crept up her dress.

Andy gasped, letting out a small whimper. The cold metal continued down her neck and cleavage, then jabbed her in the stomach. 'Ahh!' She glared up at him and he kissed her again.

How would they get out of this? Andy squirmed, struggling to fight back tears. The music was blaring. Surely one of the neighbours would complain about the noise. But if they knocked ... would they be killed, too? She strained her neck, trying to look around the room. But if they did knock, with no reply — would they call the police? Shit, there wasn't time.

The weight lifted and Ryan stood above her, swaying the gun in the air. 'Time to get up now. Can't disappoint our customers. They're waiting for a show.' He smirked, grabbed her arm and yanked her to her feet. 'Now smile for the camera.'

'What?' She grasped at her tattered dress. 'Who's watching?'

'Only our valued customers, through our live feed,' Matt said with a dirty smile on his face. 'They pay top dollar for this.'

A cold chill flooded over her. 'You sick bastards! You won't get away with this!'

Matt sniggered. 'You need to lose that dress.'

Ryan grabbed her from behind, posing her for the camera and ripped down the straps of her dress.

'No!' She writhed, half exposed and jammed an elbow into his ribs, flinging a heel backwards, making firm contact with what she hoped was his groin.

‘Ahh!’

Ryan hurled her to the floor. She pulled her knees to her chest, breathless.

‘You fucking little bitch!’

Shit. He’s going to kill her. A sob escaped her lips and she dared to look at him. He sat on the floor a few feet away, seething with one hand clutching his groin — the other on the gun.

‘You’re gonna pay for that!’ He nodded at Matt.

Andy’s stomach tensed, her eyes darting to Matt. He gave a swift nod and went straight to Mel — with the knife.

‘No!’ Andy pushed herself up, halted by the gun in her face.

Ryan tipped his head towards Matt. ‘Watch.’

Nausea flooded her. The first slice on Mel’s forearm woke Mel up, and she writhed on the seat, screaming, and struggled fruitlessly against the cable ties. The second cut on her other arm filled her eyes with terror.

Oh, Mel. Andy gagged.

Matt sniggered at her. His eyes glowed with maniacal pleasure. ‘Get up.’ A hard boot landed in her side.

Andy squealed, curling into the foetal position. Oh God, no. She glanced up at him standing over her, holding the knife with Mel’s blood on it.

Matt hoisted her up, shoving the knife to her neck. ‘Now, you don’t have much time before your friend bleeds out. So no more bullshit!’ He let go and she stumbled backwards. Matt turned to Ryan who was still moaning on the floor. ‘Get up, you wimp.’

Ryan glared at him, then at Andy and wiped his mouth on his sleeve and pulled himself up, tucking the gun into the back of his jeans.

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Trembling, Andy braced herself, preparing for the worst. She glanced across at Mel, now passed out on the stool; a pool of blood had already collected on the plastic sheet beneath her.

Hang on, Mel. She had no choice. She had to do what they wanted.

‘Okay.’ Andy took a step towards the camera. ‘I’ll do what you want. Just don’t hurt Mel. She needs help.’ She looked at the camera. Shit! What could she do? Lose the dress — then what? She swallowed the lump in her throat and pulled down the straps of her dress. It fell off her shoulders, exposing her bare chest. She clung to the fabric, shaking, unable to let go.

Matt narrowed his eyes at her with a flicker of suspicion. He dragged the flat side of the blade across his tongue, licking the blood. Then with a sick smile he approached her, running the knife over her body.

Andy tensed, goosebumps consuming her. *Just play along, just play along.* Shit! She wanted to scream. Hold it together.

A sticky tongue crawled up her neck and she cringed, turning away from his hot, rancid breath. ‘Don’t worry about her,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll make her feel better.’ He took Andy by the hand and spun her around in a circle, then passed her on to Ryan.

‘No, wait.’ Andy jerked her head back to Matt. What did he mean? What’s he doing?

A rough hand snaked around her waist and Ryan hugged her from behind, making no effort to hide his arousal. He kissed her neck and spun her around to catch sight of Matt approaching Mel with a cushion. Andy’s stomach dropped. He’s going to kill her!

Matt grabbed Mel by the shoulders, pulled her forward and shoved the cushion behind her back. He pulled her legs

down until she was almost hanging off the bar stool then buried his face in her chest, gradually working his way down to her legs.

Heat flooded Andy's face and she thrashed in Ryan's arms. 'Get off her you bastard!' A hand gripped her throat and dragged her to the lounge, shoving her against the armrest so her thighs were pinned and she was positioned facing the camera.

'Shhh ... don't worry about them,' Ryan cooed, releasing his grip on her throat. 'You'll get yours.'

Andy squirmed. 'No!' His coarse fingers raked across her stomach, groping at her breasts and thighs. The sound of a zipper sent tears streaming down her face. She closed her eyes in an attempt to block out the invasion on her body. How long could she play along to their sick, sadistic games? Once they got what they wanted ... then what?

Her eyes snapped open. They were running out of time. She had to do something. The gun. Could she reach back and grab it? She twisted an arm back, her hand brushing his hip.

A hand gripped her arm and yanked it away. Shit.

She glanced at Matt draped over Mel. He let out a satisfied moan and climbed off her, grinning at Andy. 'You want some?' He grabbed his groin in a gyrating motion.

Andy swallowed in disgust, staring at Mel sprawled naked and lifeless in the chair. Matt zipped up his fly and nudged Mel, putting his ear to her mouth. 'Still breathing, for now! Don't worry, either way when this is over you two will be together.'

Andy shuddered and diverted her eyes to the floor. *Let him think he's won.*

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Ryan collapsed inside her, moaning in her ear. What now? She had to fight back. Or die trying. She bent down and slowly moved her fingers to the heel of her shoe. 'I need to take these heels off.'

'No.' Ryan gripped her arm. 'Leave them.'

'But I can't stand in them any more.' She let herself fall to the floor and slipped off her heels. 'I can't do this!' She waited for a reaction.

Ryan's face flashed red. 'You do what you're told, bitch!' He slapped her across the face and straddled her.

Something crashed outside the house, followed by shouting.

Andy screamed towards the door, 'Help! Call the poli —' A hand smothered her mouth.

'Shut up!' The gun pressed into her neck.

No. She wasn't going out like this. She strained her neck, catching a glimpse of Matt headed to the hallway, knife in hand. Something was wrong. Someone was out there.

Ryan gazed down at her, a cold twisted smile appearing on his face. 'No one's coming to save you.' His lips met her mouth and she let him kiss her.

She grasped one of her high heels and flung it in his face. Ryan reeled back and Andy grabbed for the gun, using all of her strength to twist his arm back.

The gun fired. Ryan stared at her, then at his stomach. Blood oozed out of his mouth and he collapsed on top of her.

Crap. She did it.

Quick, get up. She heaved Ryan from her and crawled to her knees, grasping at her blood soaked dress.

'Ryan! What are you —' Matt froze at the sight of Ryan lying in a pool of blood. His face turned red and he charged.

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Andy raised the gun and fired several shots. One hit him in the chest. Yes! He stumbled and dropped to the floor.

Thank God.

Was he dead?

Andy pushed herself up and crept to Matt's side, keeping the gun aimed at his head. Blood stained the shoulder part of his shirt. She kicked him in the side.

No response.

A wave of relief swept over her. She stepped towards Mel. A hand caught her ankle. No! The gun flung out of her grip and she landed hard on her side, the wind knocked out of her. Matt flipped her onto her back and straddled her. *Please no.* She caught her breath and attempted to raise her head. His broad hand smothered her face, slamming the back of her skull into the floor. Blackness flashed before her. She coughed in a breath, squinting up at him.

'This will be a big finale, killing you!' His hand smothered her mouth and nose, blocking her airways.

No. Andy clawed at his arms, unable to reach his face. No time. She threw her arms out, reaching for whatever she could find. A cold blade brushed her fingers. She grabbed the knife and plunged it into his leg.

Matt screamed and lifted his hand. Andy gasped for air and stabbed him again. He crawled off her and shuffled into the kitchen, collapsing in a heap on the tiles.

She scrambled to her feet, grabbed the gun and started for Mel. Her gaze fell on the camcorder and heat flooded her face. Sick bastards! She aimed the gun at the camera and pulled the trigger.

Empty.

A loud crash filled the room.

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‘Police! Drop the weapon!’

Thank God, someone had called them. Andy threw the gun across the room and glanced at the police officers that filled the entrance. Blackness engulfed her.

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