

THE
THIEF
CATCHER

JONETTE BLAKE



THE THIEF CATCHER

JONETTE BLAKE

Chapter 1

Room 101

ONE DAY AGO

A door slammed, startling the cleaner who had left the balcony door open to air out the smell of bleach. The wind liked to whip across the ocean straight into the rooms on this side of the resort. Josephine pulled the glass door closed, slipped a mask over her face to block out the acrid stench of cleaning products, and popped her headphones onto her head.

Cleaning the hotel rooms with headphones was against hotel policy. It was written on the board in the staff room: PLEASE DON'T WEAR HEADPHONES WHILE CLEANING THE ROOMS. It had something to do with a cleaner once surprising a male guest who had left a sign on the door handle to make up the room, but had forgotten something and returned. The cleaner, a young woman from the Pacific Islands named Roxy, had not heard him return. The way Josephine had heard the story; Roxy claimed the guest had groped her, and the guest claimed he'd busted Roxy rummaging through his suitcase. Roxy had a habit of stealing items, so Josephine had believed the guest's story. But Roxy was also stunningly beautiful, and often international guests would offer her money to come live with them, so Josephine had also believed Roxy's story. Both were probably right.

Bottom line: the cleaners always got blamed.

Deep in her thoughts, Josephine hadn't heard the door to the bathroom open. And she hadn't heard someone creeping across the tiled floor. But the song on her music list ended and she heard a noise coming from within the closet.

This room was empty. Guests weren't due to arrive until tomorrow.

Glancing at the balcony door, she saw it was closed.

Her mother believed in ghosts. Josephine did not.

She switched off the music. *There*. Something was inside the closet.

Probably a possum, she thought. Or a stupid bird. The resort was swarming with wild animals that liked to break into rooms and steal food or other items. Once, a magpie had flown in and stolen a woman's bikini and used it in its nest.

Josephine crept towards the closet door. She was deathly afraid of animals. But she had to get it out of the room before it caused the worst kind of mess to clean.

Halfway across the room, the closet door opened.

Someone stepped out.

They wore a white billowing top and pants and a large straw hat, as if they were a ghost, and her breath caught in her throat. She slipped off her mask, suddenly unable to breathe.

"You can't be in here," Josephine said. "This room isn't supposed to be occupied till tomorrow. How did you get in?"

The intruder held up a hand and pointed a finger at the balcony door. This room was on the second floor. The intruder would have to have climbed thin air to get inside.

She still couldn't see the intruder's face: the hat was pulled down low. They were a small build, nothing discernible, and she was too startled to pull her gaze away to check for features that might tell her more about this person's identity and intention.

It could have been a man beneath the loose-fitting clothes, but it could also have been a woman. And until she saw the face, she had no idea if they were young or old.

"I have to call the manager," Josephine said.

The intruder's finger wiggled in the universal sign of 'I wouldn't do that if I were you'.

Suddenly loud music blasted out of the small stereo – each room had a DVD player, a TV, a small stereo, and a selection of CDs. This was loud, noisy, angry music.

Josephine's insides chilled. This was just how Roxy had described her attack.

At last the intruder lifted their head. She stared into a set of dark eyes that brimmed with anger.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, shouting to be heard.

The intruder stood there, blocking her exit through the front door. The balcony door wasn't an option because it was a sheer drop to the pool area below.

"Okay," Josephine said. "You can leave now. I won't report you. I can keep my mouth shut. You ask my cousin if I've told anyone about the money she stole from her in-laws' restaurant."

Angry, dark eyes stared back at her.

"Okay. *I'll* leave and *you* stay."

Josephine took a step toward the door.

The intruder took a step forward.

She quickly backed up.

A knife appeared in the intruder's hand.

Her weapon of defence was a spray bottle containing bleach, which she threw at the intruder before spinning to bolt for the balcony door.

She felt a hand grab her long hair, which hotel rules stated had to be tied back, only now her ponytail was being used like a rope to drag her into the room.

She started kicking and screaming. Realised that nobody would hear her screams over the music, but she screamed anyway.

A hand landed on her mouth.

She bit it.

She bit harder, so hard that she was flung across the room. She scrambled up, hissing like a cat, curling her fingers into claws, her long nails now her only defence.

The glint of the steel knife stopped her. And then the intruder surprised her by tossing the knife onto the lounge.

Her gaze was fixated on the knife as it swung through the air, and she followed its trajectory to the lounge. Her reflexes sprung into action. She lunged for the knife, but the intruder lunged at her, barrelling into her and knocking her to the ground, knocking the wind out of her.

"What's the combination to the safe?" a gruff voice asked.

"I. Don't. Know."

"Liar."

"I..."

The hands around her throat were squeezing tight.

"Tell me."

"I..."

Tears coursed down her cheeks, blinding her.

Play dead, her brain commanded.

And so she did. She let her body go limp, her mind go free, and she closed her eyes and took herself to a quiet place, a special place, one reserved for moments of enlightenment.

And then the tight feeling around her throat was gone.

She lay there, too afraid to move, and equally afraid not to leap up and run for her life.

And the music stopped.

In the distance, she heard seagulls squawking. A warm breeze blew into the room. Laughter billowed up from the pool. The balcony door must have been open for her to hear the sounds of activity down below.

How long should I lie here, she wondered? Five minutes. Ten? An hour?

She finally opened her eyes.
And realised that she couldn't move. Her body was numb. Her
mouth wouldn't open. None of her limbs worked.
And then loud music blasted again.

Chapter 2

SUNDAY

Twilight reflected on the water like millions of fireflies, casting a shimmering haze to reflect off the surface. The white hulls of the luxurious cruisers in the harbour captured the remaining afternoon sun. Smaller boats bobbed gently up and down. Seagulls flew overhead. Pelicans settled to roost on the streetlights. A gentle breeze blew in as if it also sought a place to settle for the night.

A perfect balmy evening. Just the way I liked it. Not too hot. Not too cold. Moments like this were called Goldilocks moments, where everything was ‘not too this’ or ‘not too that’. I stood motionless, gazing out across the marina, soaking up the perfect moment, wishing for a glass of champagne to toast this magnificent sight. I could see why this place was called Majestic Island.

I tore my gaze away from the marina and pulled it toward the mainland, eight kilometres away and yet still visible from the island. At least for another few hours until night closed its curtains. A moving light on the water’s surface caught my eye. It belonged to a small dinghy. The white anchor light moved up and down, as if it was drifting along the current. Darkness had not yet fallen so I could see that the dinghy was without its master.

“What are you looking at, Mrs Frost?”

I flinched. Richard had startled me. And why was my husband suddenly referring to me as Mrs? He knew I hated the reference, it made me feel old. Worse, it made me feel like his mother, who insisted on everyone calling her Mrs Frost. I liked his mother, and she liked me, but I wasn’t interested in becoming her.

His lips lifted in a smile; he was teasing me.

“Just watching the harbour, Old Man,” I replied, using the term he disliked the most. His silvery hair was the only indication that he was almost fifty-five, but his hair had been silver for so long, strangers had difficulty guessing his age.

He stopped beside me and joined me in gazing out over the bay. “Gorgeous view.”

“Yes, but that boat is floating in the water without a master.” I pointed a finger; it took Richard a few seconds to locate the slow-moving anchor light.

“Are you sure it’s adrift?”

“I’ve been watching it for a while. It’s moved with the current, but there isn’t anyone on board. It’s out there, floating aimlessly, alone, lost.”

“Delia, you make it sound like it’s in the depths of despair.”

“It could be dangerous when the ferry arrives.”

“You’re right. I’ll tell the restaurant manager about the boat. He can call the marina manager to check it out.”

The ferry had dropped us on Majestic Island an hour ago. I’d hardly had time to unpack: Richard had made dinner reservations at the marina restaurant. We’d been on our way there when Richard had told me to wait while he went on ahead to check on our booking. I hadn’t questioned his reasoning: this might have led to a long discussion about something I was too tired from the ten-hour drive today to feign interest in. So I’d let him go on ahead while I stopped to soak up the sunset.

“Our table is ready,” Richard said. “We can go in now.”

I nodded, too distracted to give him my full attention. The dinghy was keeping me mesmerised. To wish to be in that boat as it floated out to sea was an irrational desire to escape, and yet I couldn’t stop the idea from settling in.

At last, I pulled my attention away from the boat and headed inside the restaurant, a place named The Shack, with wooden walls and floors, and marina paraphernalia strung about. Fishing nets hung from the ceiling. A large aquarium with colourful fish inside sat behind the main desk. There was a large metal artwork with the four cardinal directions hanging behind the bar. A massive blue marlin fish was mounted to a wooden beam.

The waiter smiled at me and held out his arm like he was directing traffic. I’d lost sight of Richard, so I had no idea where our table was located.

“Where are we sitting?” I asked the waiter.

He turned and headed for the table against the window.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a porthole-shaped mirror: white Capri pants with a red and black off-the-shoulder top. I could take no credit for the top – it had belonged to my twenty-two-year-old daughter Georgia, and I’d inherited it after she’d left for her overseas trip. I hadn’t had the chance to wear it until now; summer wouldn’t reach our hometown of Batemans Cove for another few months. My suitcase was filled with whatever of my daughter’s tops and summer shoes were suitable for a fifty-three-year-old woman, and whatever I could fit into.

The waiter stopped at the table.

Richard sat on the left, and there were two other people seated around the table.

“Mum.” Georgia leapt up, hugged me and planted a kiss on my cheek. I noticed that she’d cut her dark hair so that it fell in curls

just below her shoulders. Her skin was golden brown, that I almost hadn't recognised her.

My son stood up next. Tristan was two years older than Georgia. I had last seen him a few months ago, and yet I was taken aback at how much he'd changed. He had a neatly-trimmed beard and he seemed to have grown another two inches taller. I had to stand on my toes to accept his kiss on the cheek.

"What are you doing here?" I said to them both. "You weren't supposed to be arriving until tomorrow."

Georgia grinned. "Dad wanted to surprise you. Surprise."

I spun to find Richard grinning like a man with the winning lottery ticket.

"If I'd known you were coming," I said feigning annoyance, "I'd have had my hair done and worn make up."

Georgia laughed. "Oh, mum you look great. Hey, isn't that my top?"

I grabbed them both and pulled them close. They were my rocks and I felt anchored by their presence. All thoughts of drifting out to sea were instantly forgotten.

The waiter arrived, his presence breaking apart our huddle. Standing beside him was a gorgeous woman with long dark hair, dark eyes, and a pale yet not sickly complexion. She wore an off-the-shoulder yellow top and a denim skirt. I suddenly wondered if we had been seated at her table and the waiter was here to move us.

Tristan brushed past me to stand beside the woman. "Mum. I'd like to introduce you to Mary Ramirez. She's my fiancé."

My hand reached for the back of the chair for support. Three months ago, Richard had suffered a heart attack. I finally knew how it felt to have one's heart just *stop*.

"Way to go, big brother," Georgia said, hugging Tristan tightly then throwing her arms around Mary.

"Congratulations," I said, finding my voice. "This is a bit of a shock. A nice shock, but still a shock."

"I'm sorry to spring this on you," Tristan said with an apologetic smile. "But there's no easy way to announce something like this."

I supposed there wasn't.

"Tristan stressed about how to tell you on the plane ride over," Mary said. Even her voice was gorgeous, throaty and melodic.

She flashed her finger at me; it was as if a star had exploded and one bright shard had fallen to earth and landed on her finger. How could Tristan have afforded such a ring?

While Georgia gushed over the diamond, I sought out Richard's hand. From the corner of my mouth, I said, "Did you know about this?"

“As if I’d keep something this big a secret from you,” he stage-whispered back.

It was my turn to admire the ring. All those years of wondering if my son would find true love drifted away.

I glanced up to see that Mary was staring at something happening in another part of the restaurant. She finally turned back to face us; her smile seemed forced.

“I thought you were in Africa on holidays,” I said to Tristan.

He grinned. “I *was* on holidays. That’s where I met Mary.”

“Let’s all sit down,” Richard said. He turned to the waiter. “We’d like a bottle of sparkling wine please.”

“Make it two bottles,” I said.

My nerves were in overdrive. I could literally have drained one of them on my own.

The waiter nodded and left. He returned with two bottles of sparkling wine and two buckets with ice, fussing over opening the first bottle, making so much noise with the ice bucket it was like listening to a cat at a litter box. I grabbed the other bottle and handed it to Richard to open.

I felt Tristan’s gaze on me.

“Aren’t you happy for me?” he asked.

“Of course I’m happy. I’m just a little shocked.”

“It’s still a bit of a shock to me too. I mean, who’d have thought I’d ever land a woman like Mary.”

He began to move his cutlery around on the table. That was when I suspected that Tristan was nervous about something.

Georgia blurted out what had been on my mind a few minutes ago. “So did you pay for the ring or did Mary?”

“That doesn’t matter,” he said.

Georgia address Mary next. “Well, if you take it off to go swimming, my advice is to leave it in the hotel main safe. The safes in the rooms are like toys. They’re too easy to break into.”

Chapter 3

Georgia nudged me. “What are you having to eat?”

We were both hiding behind our menus to whisper between ourselves. It used to infuriate Richard and Tristan that we’d deliberate over the menu items with the precision of generals heading to war. *What if you ordered ‘this’ and I ordered ‘that’ and then we shared? What else have you eaten today? What if we shared ‘this’ or ‘that’ meal and then each got a dessert? What dessert would we order? What if you ordered ‘this’ dessert and I ordered ‘that’ dessert and then we each got a taste? Should we have the creamy dessert knowing we are having the creamy main meal? Perhaps we should rethink our main meal selections?* All the while deflecting the looks of exasperation from Richard and Tristan because they knew what meals they were having, because for them it could only ever be the most calorie-laden foods on offer.

But I wasn’t studying the menu. I was clutching it like a lifeline, using it as a shield, and as a means to study Mary. I had known that Tristan was bringing his girlfriend with him on this holiday – I had learned that he was serious about a girl, via my sister Madison, so I’d insisted that Tristan’s new girlfriend accompany him on this trip. If they were serious, I wanted to meet her. I hadn’t expected her to turn up waving an engagement ring around.

Though, I ought *not* to have been surprised. This was Tristan, the boy who fell in love with whoever smiled at him.

Lowering my menu, I snuck a glance in Georgia’s direction, and she wasn’t the slightest bit subtle about studying Tristan’s fiancé.

Tristan swatted her with his napkin. “Cut it out.”

“I’m not doing anything.” Georgia was unable to keep the grin off her face. “So are you two having an engagement party?”

Tristan’s gaze flickered to Mary who was placing her napkin in her lap. She looked up and gave Tristan a polite smile.

“It all happened rather quickly,” Tristan stammered. “We haven’t thought about it yet.”

“How did it happen, exactly?” Georgia sat with her arms folded over themselves, leaning in close. With one hand she lazily grabbed for the wine glass and took a sip. “I want all the details. How did you two meet?”

Tristan shot her a cautionary look. “We met at work.”

“I thought you weren’t working. That was the last email I

received from you. 'Still haven't found a job'. I wondered how you were paying for your travels. Unless mum and dad loaned you money."

Richard scowled. "We didn't loan him money."

"You got an email?" I asked, feeling left out.

Georgia flicked her curly hair. "So, big brother, how can you afford such a lovely ring? Can I look at it again? It's so big and shiny, it's like it needs planets orbiting it."

She didn't wait for Mary to offer her finger. Georgia grabbed Mary's hand and stroked the ring.

There were times when my daughter's boldness could grate my nerves as thinly as dust, and then there were moments like this when her boldness was inspiring. The ring must have cost *thousands of dollars*. Tristan didn't have *thousands of dollars*.

At last, Georgia let go of Mary's hand. Mary returned to calmly sitting at the table, as if she had trained for this inquisition. Precisely what had Tristan told her about our family?

I topped up my glass. "How about we go around the table and catch up on what we've been up to. Who wants to start?"

"Well, Tristan's already caught everyone up," Georgia said. "So it must be my turn. I've been having a ball in Europe." She took the bottle off me and topped up her glass. "It's amazing how cheaply you can travel if the right people tell you where the non-touristy places are. I've tasted so much new food. I've picked grapes at vineyards and berries at orchards." She set down the bottle and took a drink from her glass. "Not bad. I stayed at a villa in France recently where I learned to distinguish good wine from bad. This is not bad."

"I thought you were in Finland," I said.

"I've been all over Europe. You can get to most places by train. Or you can hitch a ride."

"Who are you running away from this time?" Tristan said, giving her a wry smile.

Mary sat up. "Why would she run away?"

Tristan shrugged. "The moment a guy gets interested in my sister, she's suddenly not interested in him."

Richard tossed his napkin onto the empty plate. "Georgia, you will not hitch rides in foreign countries. We've taught you better than that." He turned to me. "Haven't we? We've told her not to hitch rides."

"Of course we've told her not to."

Georgia was giggling. "Relax, Dad. I was joking. Just waiting to see how long before you got all fired up."

"You are so immature," Tristan said. "And you should know better than to rile Dad up in his condition."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Richard snapped.

Tristan spoke to Mary: “Dad had a heart attack a few months ago.”

“A *mild* heart attack.” Richard leaned in close to Mary. “I’m as fit as I was when I was twenty-four.”

Good lord, was he flirting with her?

“He’s supposed to take things easy,” Tristan added.

Georgia groaned. “Can’t you take a hint, big brother? I’m trying to deflect the attention off you by lightening the mood. You’ve sprung this engagement on Mum and Dad, but fine, you still want the limelight. You’re up. Tell us everything.”

All heads swivelled to stare at Tristan, whose face was turning bright red. Obviously Georgia had hit a nerve.

Mary stood up and swept her polite smile around the table. “Perhaps I’ll go to the bathroom to freshen up. Excuse me.”

Tristan and Georgia glared at one another.

“That’s enough out of you two,” I said. “We are here for a holiday and I will not have you ruin it with your constant bickering.”

“Sorry,” they both said in unison.

Then Tristan lowered his voice and snuck a furtive look over his shoulder. “The thing is, Mary comes from a very wealthy family and her parents don’t approve of her job.”

“And what job is that?” I asked.

“She works with a large security firm. Her parents want her to return to the family business.”

“Which is?”

Honestly, this holiday would be over by the time Tristan finished connecting the dots of this story, which was his way of saying he didn’t want to tell me anything; this had been his way of avoiding telling me about a bad grade or a fight he’d gotten into at school. *Give only vague answers.* Better than Georgia though, who had, between the age of fourteen and fifteen, chosen to grunt as her method of communication.

“They own a chain of jewellery stores,” he said.

“In Africa?”

“No, in Argentina.”

“What’s the issue about not wanting to work there?”

“She lives in Africa. The stores are in Argentina.”

“Tristan!”

“I don’t know exactly what the issue is. I haven’t met her family. Please don’t make a big deal out of this. We’re planning on visiting them after this holiday.”

My insides warmed that Tristan had wanted Mary to meet us before he met her family.

“What about siblings?” Georgia asked. “How many?”

“I don’t know. Shut up, will you. It’s not like you know

anything about the men you date.”

Georgia’s sly grin deepened. “I’m not marrying any of the men I’ve dated.”

The conversation around the table halted abruptly when Mary appeared. She wore a confused look on her face.

“I didn’t get a chance to explain,” Tristan said with a sigh.

“Oh.” Mary looked back toward the toilets. “Perhaps I should...”

“Our apologies, Mary,” Richard said. “It appears as if our children have returned to Australia without their manners. I’d have thought holidaying abroad would have matured them.”

“We’re not cheese,” Georgia said, slugging back the wine.

I’d lost count if this was her third or fourth glass. Not that I could criticise. I’d almost finished my bottle: it had done nothing to settle the shock of learning that my son was getting married and I wasn’t getting his emails.

As Mary took her seat, she appeared to be sending Tristan a silent message that I couldn’t interpret. Then the waiter arrived with a basket of warmed rolls and none of us got to hear any more about how Tristan and Mary met.

During the lulls in conversation, Tristan refused to fill in the gaps. Mary was polite, charming, she spoke of her life in a vague way, never giving specific details. She lived ‘near the coast’. She worked ‘in security’. Her family was ‘just like any other family’. How would the two of them even be able to open a joint bank account if neither of them could provide any real information?

Georgia tried her best to pry the finer points out of the two of them, but Tristan wasn’t talking and Mary wasn’t offering anything, and I realised it wasn’t them being vague. It was as if the two of them had an arrangement in place: *no spoilers*. Which meant there was something better to come.

My hand shook as I tore my bread roll in half. *Good lord she was pregnant*. It was the only explanation for this sudden engagement. Because now that a little of the shock had worn off, they didn’t look like a young couple in love. They looked like two scared teenagers.

To get things back on track, I tapped my glass with my fork and waited until all eyes were on me.

“I too have an announcement,” I said. “I’ve quit my job and your father and I are travelling for the next nine months.”

“It was meant to be twelve,” Richard said. “But we’ve spent the

last three months getting things organised.”

“Anyway, I think we should have a birthday party for your father while we are here.”

“That’s a great idea,” Tristan said.

Richard’s eyes lit up. “I do like a party in my honour.”

“Mum and I can organise it,” Georgia said. “It’ll be fun, like old times.”

“*Mum* is on holidays,” I told her. “The resort must have an event planner. At the very least we can have a fancy dinner.”

“We could have a combined birthday and engagement party.” Georgia was giggling, so I knew it was a joke. Richard, however, could not see the funny side.

“I’m not having a combined party,” he said. “No offense to the happy couple, but I spent my childhood having a combined birthday with your Uncle Reggie. It’s not fun.”

All heads swung in the happy couples’ direction, and once again I was struck by how much they looked like frightened children.

They were a happy couple, weren’t they?

Did you enjoy this sample of THE THIEF CATCHER?

You can purchase your own copy.

Head on over to Jonette Blake’s website for links to buy in ebook and paperback.

www.jonetteblake.com