

ANNE BUIST
DANGEROUS
TO KNOW



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PROLOGUE

I have examined my life; but examining murder is another thing altogether.

The hospital door is ajar and I catch a glimpse of the uniformed officer stationed there. There have been no charges, not yet. But soon the ICU physician will take his head out of the chart where he has plotted my electrolytes, heart rate, blood pressure and fluid balance, and will decide that the morphine and pain are in equilibrium. Then Natalie's detective friend will arrive armed with recording devices, reciting my rights. They believe that they know. But they are wrong. Natalie thinks she is my equal, with her intuition and her single-minded search for the truth. She believes that if she searches she will find the answer that she wants to see.

We are all guilty of wanting to see our world in a particular way, at least for brief periods of time. Who hasn't looked back at a wedding or graduation photo and marvelled at the innocence and aspirations, at odds with the

later reality in all its different, perverse forms?

I have allowed myself to be blinded for too long. I no longer have that luxury. The time to make decisions is running out; but the decision will be mine not theirs.

I have examined my life. I have reflected on what childhood experiences might have driven my parents and their choices and I know my own strengths...and those areas I was likely to avoid delving deeply into. How then, can I justify avoiding so much? How could I not have seen what was happening when I understood the *why* so well? How could I have persevered in my ignorance, now to have deaths on my conscience?

Impossible, unforgiveable. Eighty per cent of juries have made up their mind after the opening address, and do not change their view. No defence attorney's arguments could possibly be as compelling as the simplest of statements from the prosecutor:

How could he not have known?

She watched the needle prick the vein in her hand and wished it hurt more. Pain—real pain, rather than the deadened reality of the last weeks—would have been welcome. Or had it been months? The man with the needle told her she was going to sleep; she had been doing a lot of that. The bitch nurse who talked to her like she was retarded put her notes on the trolley and walked off. The male nurse, still smelling of a recent cigarette, smiled at her. In her mind she smiled back, though she doubted her lips moved. The facial expression she saw occasionally when she caught sight of herself in a mirror was wooden, her hair hanging dull, the red highlights washed out; she couldn't recall when she had last used a brush. She had barely recognised the face as hers. Her brown eyes appeared enormous, her cheek bones too prominent, her slender body wasted. The line of silver studs in her ear was the only hint of any kind of attitude.

The blood in the syringe confirmed Needle-man's expertise. She closed her eyes as the anaesthetic took over, her last image the small white cubicle and the steel trolley of equipment, the anaesthetist turning to retrieve the mask. She felt him place it over her face as the psychiatrist, a tall lean

Indian man whose name she had forgotten, checked dials and picked up the paddles that he would apply to the right side of her head. When she woke up, only a few minutes would have passed. She would be in the recovery room, as she had been twice already this week. She would have a headache and her memory would be hazy. If she was lucky, for a period of time she would forget where and who she was. The decisions she had to make. The things she needed to leave behind.

‘How are you feeling, Natalie?’

Declan’s look of concern had acquired a tinge of hope. The creases around his eyes seemed less compressed than they had on his recent visits. She had washed her hair and was wearing a clean T-shirt, not the grubby green one that had doubled as a nightie for most of the last two months. It wasn’t her usual bolshie sub-Goth style but it was a step in the right direction. And she was sitting upright in a chair. In his office, at the front of his house, surrounded by polished surfaces, brocade curtains and antique furniture.

‘Hamilton Depression Scale score of eight?’ She shrugged. ‘I’m cured.’

A slight exhale, but he was still watching her carefully as he ran his hand through what was left of his hair.

‘Don’t worry, they stopped zapping me when I asked Vijay Venkatasubramani for a date.’ Not a date exactly, but she thought she’d keep things nice for her supervisor.

She saw Declan smile before he was able to stop himself. ‘It was probably more that you could recall his name.’

‘Have you met him? At least there isn’t anything wrong with my taste.’ She knew she was avoiding what she was here to talk about. Knew Declan would be wondering if she

even remembered the last conversation, when he'd come to see her in hospital. Speaking as friend and mentor, rather than as her supervisor.

She did remember.

You didn't choose this illness Natalie, but you have a choice about how to manage it. Right now your lifestyle isn't working. I know it's not fair, but to stay well you have to make sacrifices.

That meant giving up the stressful work that energised her; the late nights; the alcohol and wild sex in favour of a quiet life. Early nights, a balanced diet and a stable relationship.

Could she? Maybe.

Alcohol wasn't such a big thing for her, and in the short term she wasn't contemplating any kind of sex. But the band, the music that made her feel alive—that would be harder.

And her job? Impossible to give that up. Right now she didn't need the money, but she needed the sense of purpose. And she was good at it. It had taken her five years of medical school and five years of specialist training to get to where she was. She wouldn't throw that away.

'I asked the hospital manager for a six-month leave of absence,' Natalie said. A compromise. 'To decide what I want to do.' And to avoid running into Liam O'Shea until she knew she could handle it.

Declan nodded, pouring tea from a faded bone china teapot. No wine today. He was being careful with her.

'I thought I'd move to the country. Maybe try out research.' Declan raised an eyebrow. He knew of Natalie's fraught relationship with academe. But all he said was, 'Anywhere particular in mind?'

'Little spot west of Lorne on the Great Ocean Road. I

used to holiday near there when I was a kid. Fresh sea air and not too many people. Not now the summer's over.'

Declan rubbed his chin. 'It's a long way from Melbourne.'

Natalie shrugged. 'A two-and-a-half-hour ride. I can come up once a week to see you and my Monday patients. And Geelong's only an hour away.'

She'd done a cursory search of the university department in Geelong, which boasted Associate Professor Frank Moreton as the sole psychiatrist with any academic standing. She remembered him vaguely from some lectures he'd given on somatisation; how people's early childhood and personality could influence the type of illnesses that afflicted them. He was British, from memory. Good looking but way too self-important. A few of the female registrars had been conned, but good looking and arrogant was not her style. Not since Liam, anyway. The new Natalie King was going to do yoga every morning and be in bed sipping herbal tea by nine each night. Alone.

The concern was still there in Declan's eyes when he wished her well.

Natalie packed up her Ducati, carefully covering Bob's cage so the ride wouldn't strip out all of his feathers. As relationships went, this was one of her more successful. Since a patient had asked her to take care of the cockatoo and then gone AWOL, Bob was one of the few predictable elements of her life.

She took the wide new freeway that led to the winding coast road. A chill blew off the cool grey ocean, and there were long sections of sweeping curves with no traffic. After she'd left Lorne behind, the houses on the hills to her right were lost among the trees. The only light came from her

bike, sending eerie shadows across the road.

When she arrived at Separation Creek, fog hugged the meagre street lights and the houses—mostly built on stilts to deal with the steep hillside, probably all weekenders—were dark. She slowed the Ducati. *Keep on after the last house*, was the agent's instruction. *You won't get lonely will you?*

She only found the driveway after the road disappeared into a dip and she knew she'd gone too far. Slower on return, she caught sight of the track between two gum trees shedding bark like snake skin and gunned the bike up the steep incline. She cut the engine as she roared into the carport, which was empty except for a stack of wood.

'How do you feel?' Poor Bob. He sounded like he wasn't feeling well.

Natalie foraged for the key and opened the door, then grabbed his cage and headed up the staircase.

'You could have been a star,' Bob muttered unconvincingly. Why did the damn parrot have to misquote Dylan?

She forgot him as soon as the stairs opened into a huge living area. Floor to ceiling glass doors led to the balcony; beyond, the moon was just visible through the sea mist, the wide expanse of the bay below largely hidden apart from splashes of white surf.

Natalie threw open the doors. The sounds of waves crashing in the distance and a gust of cold salty air greeted her. It couldn't have been more different from the warehouse in Collingwood where she had lived for the last two-and-a-half years, wedged between a printer's office and a brothel. Her new home backed into a thickly wooded forest. Only a few lights twinkling on the distant hills opposite suggested any civilisation at all.

If isolation was what she wanted, she'd certainly got it.

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She was woken by a screech, like a train going through a tunnel. Several trains. Natalie was out of bed clutching a knife before she even remembered where she was. There was more screeching; too loud to be just Bob. The bright light streaming through the doors was dazzling and she had to squint to make out what the problem was.

Bob was marching up and down the far banister periodically letting rip. Six very large white cockatoos were lined up along the balcony. Another two were fighting over an empty feed container surrounded by cracked seed hulls. They eyed Natalie with minimal interest, even as she opened the door to join them. Bob flew to her shoulder and bit her ear.

‘I don’t think you’re going to be lonely here Bob,’ said Natalie.

Would she be? Or worse? Natalie looked at the blade in her hand. It had been over six months since the attack, and the Worm was now in prison awaiting trial on child-porn-related charges. But his intent when he came for her had been clear, and she’d escaped more through good luck than good management. And it had left a mark: she slept with a knife now.

It was only six-thirty. She tried meditation for ten minutes then abandoned it for coffee and the view.

By nine she was on the road, to make a ten o’clock appointment in Geelong. She’d told Declan she’d take it easy, and she intended to. But she knew she needed something to focus on. The arrogant associate professor had said he’d be happy to see her, and some low-key academic work would be perfect. Stimulating enough; nothing to get her into trouble.

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Frank Moreton's office was easy enough to find. The department of psychiatry was sign-posted in the hospital foyer. But the secretary's desk showed no evidence of any recent activity. Behind it, a door was propped open with a pile of journals. Natalie peered cautiously into a large room. Three dormant computers in carrels. No paperwork or personal touches. Two office doors, one open and the other closed, at the other end. Natalie was debating whether to try the far door when she heard a chair scrape. A head appeared above a carrel.

'Yes?' High cheek bones and cropped black hair above prominent ears. Behind red-rimmed hipster glasses, wide-spaced eyes suggested a Chinese heritage.

'I was looking for Professor Moreton.'

'Is he expecting you?' An educated British accent.

'I'm Natalie King. Prof Moreton suggested this time.' Natalie kept a careful neutral smile in place.

There was a fleeting expression of impatience before a reluctant smile. 'I'm Wei.' An androgynous figure rose. About the same age as Natalie, and a willowy five centimetres taller. Skinny jeans. No visible waist or bust—probably male, Natalie decided, although close up it looked like he was wearing mascara and nail polish, so she wasn't putting money on it. Wei looked at the bike helmet in Natalie's hand, seeming equally uncertain how to categorise her. Natalie had changed into an unusually demure dress, so the confusion was understandable.

'You can leave your gear here. Frank's in his office.' Wei tilted his head backwards, towards the closed door, then sat down and went back to his computer.

Natalie recognised Associate Professor Moreton immediately. He stood up, smiling. As she had recalled, he

was good looking. Maybe even exceptionally good looking. A little under six foot and solid. Not overweight, but filling the room with his presence. Blue striped shirt with sleeves rolled up to expose a smattering of fine dark hair; silver-blue tie. Pretty, she decided. Boyish, with dark hair that curled over his collar and long eyelashes. He was wearing a wedding ring.

‘Dr King.’ He took her extended hand with both of his, smiling playfully, and held it. Pulled back an instant before it became too much, too long.

‘Natalie.’

Frank went to the door and stuck his head out. ‘Wei? Would you mind getting us some coffee?’ There was a slight formality to his speech: a British childhood that had given way to some Australian broadening of vowels, was Natalie’s guess. He’d been in Australia longer than his research assistant.

Natalie didn’t hear Wei’s response.

‘So, Natalie, you’re interested in research?’

Not really, but that probably wasn’t the ideal comeback. ‘Looking at possibilities.’

‘You said in the email that you were interested in PTSD?’

It had been the only overlap between his publications and her interests. ‘I was thinking childhood abuse as a risk factor for post-traumatic stress disorder and postnatal depression.’

‘Excellent! We have an obstetric ward here and I’m sure we could set that up easily.’ He was outlining some of his own research when Wei returned with plunger coffee and a surly expression. When he left he banged the door loudly behind him.

‘We might get you a scholarship,’ Frank continued, oblivious, pulling mugs from his shelf, ‘but it wouldn’t pay

anything like your clinical work.' He sat back in his chair, at ease, eyes not leaving her.

Natalie nodded and took the coffee he poured; luckily she liked it black and unsweetened.

'But,' Frank leaned forward so she could see the flecks of green in his irises. 'I could easily get you some clinical sessions to top up your income.'

'How about I try out the research first?' asked Natalie.

Frank smiled. 'Of course. We...I...look forward to it.'

He made no move to touch her. Why did it feel as if he'd patted her hand?

At that moment a pretty blonde woman Natalie recognised breezed into the office and stopped dead when she saw who Frank was talking to. She was obviously pregnant, probably early third trimester. Her skin had the glow that women get when the hormones agree with them, and she exuded a kind of satisfaction; her life was apparently on track. Her outfit was tailored, in a pale blue that offset her eyes, with whimsical lace at the sleeves and hem. Feet in strappy heels, light blonde curls framing her face. The blue eyes narrowed as they moved from Frank to Natalie.

At that moment something Declan had said flashed into Natalie's mind. Something about what she was making sacrifices for, but she lost the thought with the final realisation.

Alison was not happy to see her.

Natalie was more attractive than I expected her to be. I like beautiful, striking women, women who make a statement with their presence; life is too short to bother with the others. And women like me. Really like me. Alison, for example, was interested in me from the first time we met, even though I was married at the time. I take care of myself, and women appreciate that. Italian designers, fair trade coffee; a balanced intake of omega three.

I could tell that Natalie was a man's woman. I hadn't expected that either. Ten years or more in the medical course and specialist training, trying to prove they belong, is rather at odds with developing an alluring manner. Desperate and lonely is more common—supposed professionalism shrouding fear and lack of imagination. She was not as opinionated as I had been told to expect, either. Perhaps my colleague got it wrong about her, or she was just on her best behaviour.

She wasn't as confident as she wished to seem, but of course women rarely are, not in both aspects of their life. If they are beautiful then they fear they aren't clever enough. If they are intelligent, they worry about their looks. And she

isn't young anymore. Thirty-three and single. The biological clock was evident behind the uncertain look back at me when she entered, the casual glance at my ring finger.

I understand, of course. Age and women and the whole children thing. I didn't think much about it until I had my career well established. I had the male advantage, could bide my time and play the field. But then, I became tired of the endless small talk and bored by inane smiles. Tired of games.

I wondered, when Natalie arrived in my life, at the similarities between her and my first wife. A similar look, the same sharp intellect, but with an underlying insecurity. If I believed in fate, I would have read much into Natalie's sudden need for a sea change. But I didn't ask. When she came into my office I saw Reeva; and I was missing Reeva.

‘Natalie. What a surprise.’ Not a pleasant one, judging from Alison’s expression.

Frank had stood up and was looking at them with a coy smile; probably his way of dealing with tension. Natalie had the impression he’d be happy to let her and Alison slug it out rather than get his hands dirty.

‘You know each other?’ he asked.

‘We were interns together.’ Alison’s tone was tense.

‘We were just finishing up talking about possible research projects,’ said Frank, his smile now almost provocative.

‘How interesting.’ Alison’s lips were stretched tight, her eyes wary.

Frank turned to Natalie, smiling. She wondered whose reaction he was testing. Or was she reading too much into the scenario? She wasn’t completely certain that shock therapy hadn’t messed with her judgment along with her short-term memory.

‘We have an appointment to get baby photos,’ Frank said, adding ‘...via ultrasound,’ as Natalie shot him a bemused look.

‘Yes of course.’ She stood. ‘I’ve got plenty to think about.’

Maybe I'll email you?' As she left she turned to Alison. 'Congratulations. I had no idea you and...Well, you look great.' She didn't wait for a reply. Academe was probably not a good fit for her anyway.

Natalie and Alison hadn't been close friends in their first year working as doctors. But the end-of-year revue—a hospital-themed spoof of *The Rocky Horror Show*—had meant nightly rehearsals together, along with Alison's fiancé, Oliver.

It was in the last rehearsals that things started to derail, with Oliver's suggestion he could down more vodka shots than Natalie and still be under the legal limit.

'Fighting words,' Natalie said with a giggle. She'd been giggling a lot lately; completely out of character.

Next day, despite the hangover, she didn't seem to be able to stop talking.

'Jesus Nat, what have you been smoking?' asked Tom, her on/off boyfriend and the drummer in her band. He was still pissed off at her for coming on to one of the groupies the week before; it had seemed a good idea at the time.

'You know I don't take any of that shit.' She hadn't gone home the night before the revue. Just a couple of hours sleep on the X-ray table next to the emergency department. Too much to do.

Like the backdrops.

'Pretty wild, hey?' she said when someone commented on them. The colour enlargements of scenes from the emergency department had cost her most of a week's wage. It was possible that she had gone a little overboard with them.

She'd held it together until after the performance, which

felt brilliant. There had been lots of laughs, and that was what it was all about. Unwinding after a year of almost unbearable pressure.

She had vague memories of Alison looking pissed off with Natalie's after-party performance of Alison's big number from the show, along with the pelvic thrusts the song called for. But Natalie hadn't made Oliver leave with her afterwards; or at least she didn't think so. Her mind hadn't been able to hold onto any one idea long enough to consider consequences.

Afterwards she would never be able to put together exactly what happened. A splash through the moat around the National Gallery and a wild drive along the coast road, a stop somewhere for a skinny dip. Oliver had given in to exhaustion long before her and she had no idea how he got back to Melbourne. She returned two days later—via the police station. She gave them Tom's number and it was Tom who called Declan.

In the whole horrible mess that followed, including a four-week inpatient stay, Declan's role changed. No longer just the therapist who had helped her recover after a motorbike crash at sixteen, he became more like her minder.

That was her first bipolar episode. Not her last. None since had ever been so out of control, though.

At the time she thought she would never speak to Tom or Declan again. Later, after the lithium kicked in and Natalie realised just how the night shifts had destabilised her, she came to thank them, albeit grudgingly. She hadn't thanked anyone for her diagnosis, and still railed against it at times. But as a psychiatrist, she was now well aware how sleep deprivation could trigger manic episodes.

In the end, the only ones among her colleagues who

really knew how far off the rails she'd gone were Alison and Oliver. Oliver wasn't going to tell anyone because he was just as embarrassed as she. And Alison? Eight years later in Frank's office, her tight-lipped smile told Natalie she hadn't forgotten—and she sure as hell wasn't forgiving.

The next morning there was an email from Frank. She figured it would say, *On reflection...or It doesn't look like I'll be able to fit you in after all.* She left it while she filled Bob's feed container—indoors where the local flock wouldn't harass him—grabbed a towel and wandered down to the beach.

The water was still warm enough but there was an icy chill in the early autumn air when she resurfaced. It felt good—she needed the wake-up, needed to think about her other options. She had the triggers for her depressive episode mostly in hand: medication—tick. Calmer lifestyle—tick. But the assault in her warehouse the previous year by the man she called the Worm was still giving her nightmares. And there was Liam.

She knew she couldn't avoid him forever. He was running the prosecution case against her patient, Georgia, charged with murdering her three children. It was due to go to trial in two months. Natalie wanted to avoid testifying but suspected Liam was relishing the idea of a cross-examination. Liam O'Shea, with his deadly Irish brogue and cocky smile, the black curl that hung over one eye. She dreaded the reminder of what had been between them. Something she had hoped would become a distant memory still felt raw.

When she got back she made herself a coffee and sat out on the balcony with her laptop to read Frank's email. Then read it again.

Frank was welcoming her on board. Almost effusively: *It'll be wonderful having a fellow psychiatrist working here.* He'd already lined up some sessions in the acute ward whenever she wanted to start. There was no doubt he was keen.

She doubted his wife was so enthusiastic. But Alison was remembering the old Natalie. Declan said she had to change her lifestyle in order to stay well, and that was what she was doing. She didn't know how her life would end up looking, though. Husband, family...the white picket fence—Alison's ideal?

Natalie couldn't quite picture herself with a domesticated suburban new-age guy. And she didn't want to think about Eoin, who had died in the motorbike accident that nearly crippled her at sixteen, still wanting everything. Or Liam, who she wanted and couldn't have.

She went to get dressed to meet with her new supervisor.

Nine a.m. and no one had bothered turning on the lights. She understood that research didn't have the urgency of clinical work, but surely Frank's team should be here by now?

'If you're looking for Frank,' Wei's voice echoed out of the darkness, 'he does a teaching round Monday mornings.'

Natalie hit the light switch. 'Where is everyone?'

'Everyone?' Wei squared his glasses. 'I am everyone. PA, RA and general dogsbody.'

Natalie took a moment to process this in the context of the deserted space, and Frank's list of publications. 'But there were more of you once, right?'

'Eight of us when I started.'

'Research money ran out?'

'I'm finishing the tail end of the final five-year grant,

writing up the last papers. After that...' He indicated the door.

Natalie nodded. Her clinical sessions could pay for her time with some research on the side if she wanted; the funding wasn't such an issue for her. But poor Frank. And there was an uneasy sense of loneliness about the space. She had pictured a vibrant group exchanging ideas and inspiring her.

'Why are you here?' Wei looked at her suspiciously.

'Thinking of doing some research.'

'Well you'll have to do it on your own.' Wei zipped up a satin jacket. His eyes had a line of kohl under them today. 'Why here?' he said. 'Why now?'

Questions Frank hadn't thought to ask.

'A change of scene. I have a touch of PTSD. After an assault.'

Wei's expression softened fractionally. 'Maybe,' he said, watching Natalie carefully, 'you'll turn out to be another whizz-kid medico.'

'I've never written a research grant.' Natalie shrugged. It wasn't like that would stop her, even if Wei wasn't going to be much of a help. 'Another?'

'Frank's first wife was the grant queen. Sadly, his second isn't.'

First wife. And one that Alison couldn't match on the work front.

'Reeva, you understand,' said Wei, 'was responsible for the grant that got this lab up and running. She was brilliant.' Wei's tone left no doubt about his admiration for the absent Reeva.

'They're divorced?' Natalie asked, wondering how research grants could be part of the alimony.

Wei had turned back to the computer. 'No. She died.'

Reeva was not beautiful. At first I didn't think she was attractive enough, truth be told. Nose a little too prominent, eyes a fraction too close. And worse, it bothered her. I like women who are confident in their femininity. Who aren't surprised to turn heads and would not question that they deserved such attention.

Once a girlfriend caught me looking into a mirror and called me vain: rolled her eyes and sang a line from the Carly Simon song. But I was not looking just at myself; I was looking at us as a couple. If I was guilty of vanity, it included her. While attractive enough, she was, regrettably, also stupid. An arts degree from a minor college that she kept mentioning as if it proved something, but her stupidity was mainly about human nature. She underestimated me and overestimated her own power. Thought that being young and attractive was enough. It isn't. We looked good together, but that was all.

When I glanced into the mirror at Reeva and myself, I saw something she gave to the relationship that was beyond the superficial. It radiated out of her. She may have lacked the showy confidence that men would want to be with her,

but there were depths to her self-esteem, not beset with questions about her worth as a human being. It was a look that developed in tiny steps and I watched her as if she was a bud developing. Her delight, quickly tempered, when I asked her out on the first date; the hesitancy in her when it became clear I wanted her to share my bed; the steady glow that each encounter added, until that point when she finally knew I was the one. When the mirror showed us as *almost perfect*.

After a restless night, Natalie managed a full hour of something that approximated meditation, though it was more mindfulness mantra and enjoying the sounds of the water breaking, the smell of salt, the cold air rustling her hair, than blank mind. She had read that it was possible to come off medication altogether by managing your circadian rhythms and meditating daily. She suspected that this also required giving up a desire to live life on the edge, and she had a long way to go before she'd be ready to accept that. Mindfulness was living in the moment and here the moment was a wonderful place to be. Bit quiet, maybe, but that was what she was after. She could do this.

After a herbal tea—if she was going to be health conscious she might as well do it right—she went for a jog along the road behind the house that wound through the national park. No one else was about, but the birds were alive and active, and several koalas observed her with interest from the trees. The road finally turned south and back to the main road by the ocean that in summer was cluttered with tourist buses. As soon as she could, she cut down to the beach, the run harder but worth it, the sand and water bringing home

the lesson of celebrating the present time.

She'd been running for over an hour when she decided it was time to head back along the main road. It was a mistake. The pack of bikers riding past her took her back in an instant to living with Tom and always being on the edge of something dangerous. One rider wobbled as he was showing off and made her think of Eoin, just before the fatal crash. A lone man at the café, sitting watching her, made her heart accelerate even as her pace slowed. And all the good of an hour's meditation was gone in an instant.

After a month of her new life Natalie had lost track of the days. Each seemed to roll into the next. She was spending nights alone with Bob playing guitar and reading, and days at 'work'—still waiting for ethics approval to come through before she could start any research. The drawn-out process added to her feelings of depression. It was so safe and predictable; it made her feel like she was edging closer to the black hole that had swallowed her only weeks earlier. She remembered the days before being hospitalised. Taking all the pills out of their bottles, counting them. Calculating their effect, the risks if her calculations were wrong. Hated her weakness and found herself shaking now as the memory taunted her. She'd played Passenger's *Let Her Go* on repeat in the darkness of her warehouse for weeks but she wasn't entirely sure she had completely let Liam go, even though he'd never been hers in the first place. Now even Bob quoted her version of some of the lyrics. Jesus, she had been sick. What had she been thinking? Passenger? Really?

Now, looking in the mirror, she wasn't sure she even recognised herself: had she really bought this top with *flowers* on it? Who the fuck was she?

At least she found the work easy. She was already well into the second chapter of what would ultimately be her thesis if she continued, but it was a big if. She hadn't started clinical sessions—her income-protection insurance would last for another couple of months at least—but the lack of patient contact, apart from her Mondays in Melbourne, was taking its toll. The lab was empty except for the uncommunicative Wei and the silence wasn't helping. She was deeply bored.

'Free for a drink before you go home?'

Frank's smiling face tilted past the door frame. He had the ability to smile innocently and provocatively all at once. He played it, she figured. Emphasising the long eyelashes and dimples when he grinned a certain way.

The computer clock said 6.30 p.m. She remembered Wei leaving earlier with a stunning blonde woman who'd looked at her curiously, but they'd disappeared without introductions. She'd thought she was alone but here was Frank smiling a cub-scout grin. They'd had coffee at least once a week in the month since she'd started; three times last week, now she thought about it. She had the impression he was lonely. Probably not getting much at home, with Alison in her third trimester.

'A drink? Not sure that's a good idea.' Actually she was completely sure it wasn't. A drink after work was different from a coffee date. Particularly if he was sensing her sexual frustration.

The last time she was in Melbourne had only made it worse. It was great Tom and the rest of the band wanted her back singing while they did a stint along the coast, but it turned out Tom was no longer a friend with benefits. He'd awkwardly announced that he'd moved in with Maggie, the bartender at Natalie's Collingwood local. Shit, why was

everyone settling down when all she wanted to do was burn the speed limit on her Ducati and shag someone silly?

Frank sat down next her, scratching his head and avoiding eye contact. 'I didn't mean...' He sighed. 'Sorry that was stupid, wasn't it? But there aren't too many people I can talk to right now.' His eyes, now resting on her, said the rest.

'How about Alison?' Natalie probably sounded harsher than she intended, as she broke eye contact. Married men? *Not again.* Particularly since she already owed this man's wife.

'Not a good idea at the moment.' Frank's expression now was bordering on plaintive Labrador.

He'd piqued her interest. *Why not at the moment?* Natalie closed down the computer. It wasn't as if Bob and the cockatoo contingent were missing her. Anyway, this was work. Her supervisor: a colleague. And she owed Alison: she'd lend Frank a sympathetic ear and direct him back to his wife. 'One drink.'

The bar was nondescript, wedged between a pub and an upmarket steak restaurant. Probably aiming for clientele that no longer existed in a town hit with business closures and high unemployment. The after-work crowd was thin, the guy behind the bar periodically checking out his Twitter feed, and the female server was disengaged. From Natalie anyway. Frank rated a double-take and a smile.

Natalie watched her supervisor struggle to start and felt as though she was with a psychotherapy patient.

'Do you know about Reeva?'

'A little.'

'I know there's no reason to be anxious, that it was all just one of those random things, but...'

‘You’d better back up. I know she was your wife, and a researcher, and that she died.’

‘A brilliant researcher.’ The light was dim but Natalie was sure his eyes were glistening. No wonder he couldn’t talk about this with Alison. He was still grieving. Maybe this was how she could make it up to Alison; help him move on.

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know. One moment she was fine, a bit tired of course, went to bed early and then never woke up.’

‘Why *of course*?’

Frank looked puzzled. ‘Tired you mean? Nothing out of the ordinary. Just the pregnancy.’

Natalie stared at him. *Pregnancy?* ‘How many weeks?’

‘Thirty-nine.’ Frank was looking down into his glass of wine.

‘So the baby?’ Natalie’s voice was little more than a whisper.

‘We lost him too.’ Frank looked up so slowly it was as if there was physical pain in the action. ‘He was...I’d felt him move right before she went to bed.’

‘Oh Frank, that must have been...’ Been what? There were no words for this.

‘Both being doctors, I think makes it worse. Like we...I... should have been able to do something.’

‘It’s hard to sit with the feeling you’ve failed.’ Natalie knew this all too well. She’d spent months wanting to go back and tell Eoin not to get on the bike that last time.

‘And now Alison thinks I’m neurotic.’

‘It’s natural for you to be worried.’

‘Yes, but it isn’t just me. She thinks we’re all neurotic. But my...mother had lots of miscarriages and...we just want this baby...and Alison...to be well.’

‘How many weeks is she, Frank?’

‘Thirty-six.’

Natalie automatically put her hand over his. ‘Only a month, Frank. It isn’t the nineteenth century, maternal mortality’s around one in ten thousand.’

‘Talking with you helps. I appreciate it.’

In his look she read more, but dismissed it. The shock treatment; she still wasn’t herself.

Georgia Latimer arrived on time at Natalie’s Punt Road rooms. Furious.

‘You want me to go to prison, don’t you?’ Georgia, fully made up, looked younger than her thirty-eight years. Blonde hair brushed the collar of her white cashmere top. Her jeans were tucked into long brown boots. She made an unlikely defendant to three murder charges.

She’d read Natalie’s report.

‘It’s not up to me Georgia. I think you are very troubled, but—’

‘But you think I killed my children, don’t you?’

Natalie pondered this. There was still doubt. Georgia continued to deny it. The pathology wasn’t conclusive. And Georgia’s self-harm, the cutting, had happened before the first of her children died: it could have been the only outlet for her anger.

‘I’m neither jury nor judge,’ Natalie hedged.

‘I’ll never agreed to a guilty plea.’

Natalie nodded. This had always been the dilemma for Georgia and her barrister: try to convince the jury that all the children died of natural causes, an improbability that might be explained by an undiagnosed genetic problem. Or try for a lesser sentence by agreeing to plead guilty to

infanticide. In which case they needed to use mental illness as a defence strategy.

Seemed like the Office of Public Prosecution—Liam’s office—wasn’t playing ball on the latter. And her mental illness would not be enough to defend a murder charge.

‘Do you believe Paul influenced me?’

‘I know you tried to make me think that.’

‘Because he did!’ Georgia banged the window hard, the wooden frame shaking. She was crying.

After she had reined in her fury, Georgia started again. ‘I’ve been having this dream,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t ever quite remember it. Just that I’d wake up and feel...’

The silence stretched out and finally Natalie, looking at the time, prompted her. ‘Feel what?’

‘Ashamed,’ said Georgia, so softly that Natalie couldn’t be sure she hadn’t missed something.

‘Ashamed of what, Georgia?’

‘I remembered then, you see.’ Georgia turned around, leaned back against the window frame, pressing her flushed cheek against its cool glass. ‘It was before Genevieve was born. Before I was pregnant. Just a look, nothing more.’

Natalie waited and as Georgia described the scenario, she tried to picture a younger Georgia and Paul. She had met Georgia’s husband once.

‘I was having lots of problems with my periods. Cramps and bleeding. The doctor had started me on another pill to see if that helped. But Paul walked into the bathroom and I hadn’t disposed of the pads. The look...’ She shuddered and looked at Natalie. ‘I didn’t want to ever, not ever, see that look again. I felt so...ashamed.’ Georgia smiled suddenly. ‘But why on earth should I have been?’

‘Did you suggest formal psychotherapy?’ Declan was pouring tea again. At least it wasn’t Morning Dew, a herbal brew the organic food shop in Lorne had foisted upon her. They said it would improve her morning meditation and in a roundabout way it had. She chose meditation as a way to avoid drinking tea that smelled of dog piss on cut grass. Neither had yet led to spiritual enlightenment.

‘It’s only a month.’ She caught Declan’s look. ‘Anyway, Frank’s far too narcissistic to ever admit he needs real help.’

‘So it’s informal?’

‘Absolutely. Like...like peer support, I guess. Frank’s got a lot on his shoulders. He’s trying for a new grant, a big one, and without Reeva, Wei thinks they have at best a fifty-fifty chance. If he doesn’t get it, he’ll lose his one researcher at the end of the year.’ And her, if she was to stay even that long. It seemed unlikely. Her Monday patients made her feel more alive than at any time in the empty research lab.

‘Peer review has its own rules and obligations. Being vulnerable in front of your colleagues creates its own issues. Have you thought about why he’s chosen you?’

‘Yes.’ Natalie took a sip of tea and grimaced. ‘No chance of a dash of bourbon I suppose? Okay, I was joking. Just all this healthy living is...’

‘Natalie.’

‘I said yes and I meant it. I mean I really thought about it. Have you ever known me not to take your wise counsel?’

She put the cup down. ‘This is how I see it. Frank is your average narcissistic academic; better looking than most and knows how to use it. He’s also a little fragile, defences low because he’s been skating on the skirt tails of wife number one and isn’t sure he’s up to the task by himself.

On top of this, he lost her and his son and remarried almost immediately after. It fits with his take on the world—that is, he needs to be adored. Alison would be good at that. She got her second-year registrar position despite a screw-up with a patient, because she burst into tears. The surgeon was probably afraid she'd go him for harassment, but she followed him around like a puppy for the rest of the rotation.'

Natalie paused, checking Declan was following. 'Trouble is, now Alison's pregnant and needing Frank. And he's still traumatised by Reeve's death.'

Declan smiled tightly, lining his pens up on the desk. She tried to interpret the obsessional defence but couldn't see what his issue was. Her own mental health? Okay, she rated her mood as about four out of ten most days, but that wasn't zero.

'So no way in hell is his ego going to survive scrutiny by someone like you, Declan. In me, he sees someone younger and less experienced and he's used to charming women. He thinks I'm a pushover and you can't blame him.' She gestured at her bland top and navy skirt. 'I'm dressing like Miss Krabappel these days.'

'And are you a pushover, Natalie?'

'For a charming older married man?' Natalie's eyes glinted. 'Now that ain't any mistake I'm going to make twice. I'll get him through until he's a new dad and then relinquish the responsibility with pleasure.'

Declan looked down. If she thought there was doubt there, it was trumped by her certainty that she had Frank in hand.

Reeva was pregnant almost immediately. I was not enthusiastic. We had decided to wait, at least until after the American conference where our preliminary data was to be presented.

‘I’m as shocked as you,’ said Reeva, the brilliant physician. She pointed out that she had been on the pill since she was eighteen. ‘I thought it would take months just to start having periods.’

It hadn’t.

I didn’t lose my temper. But I ended up going to the USA alone—she was in the third trimester and there had been some complications—and the meeting was not the same without her. She had the flair and warmth that the Americans seem to like. She also had a great mind. At least until her hormones rendered it little better than gorgonzola cheese in the heat.

I missed her, too, the core of her that was mine. I missed her from the moment she turned inward to focus on the baby, however natural that might have been.

And of course I knew the ripples the pregnancy had set in motion. How could I not? I felt the ghosts from my

nursery like a cold breeze over my skin. They insinuated themselves into my life as if greedy to take hold and score points. They were there when I caught myself criticising Reeva again for being unduly anxious, when I heard the lilt of my grandfather, Antonije, in my voice and when I felt the safety in the remoteness of my father as I pulled away from her.

When Reeva died, I cried. I missed her and all we could have been. I wanted her back, if only for a moment, to say I wished I had done things differently.

‘You have impossible standards,’ she had said and she was right. But by then we were estranged and she no longer confided in me.

I cried for the loss. I wondered, as I looked at Natalie, head bent over the articles piled on her desk and spilling onto the floor, what would help me heal.