

# 1

On a Tuesday morning in mid-November, late spring, the air outside the bedroom window warm and pollinated, Adrian Wishart watched his wife urinate. He happened to be sitting on the end of the bed, dressed, comb tracks in his hair, tying his shoelaces. She was in the ensuite bathroom, perched naked on the loo, wearing the long-distance stare that took her so far away from him. She didn't know she was being observed. She tore off several metres of toilet paper, patted herself dry, and as the water flushed it all away he came to the doorway and said constrictedly, 'We're not made of money.'

Ludmilla started and gave him a hunted look. 'Sorry.'

Folding in on herself, scarcely moving, she opened the glass door to the shower stall. He rotated his wrist, tapped his watch face. 'I'm timing you.'

Little things, but they cost money. No one needed a long shower. No woman needed that much toilet paper. No need to leave a light on when you go into another room. Why shop for groceries three or four times a week when once would do?

Adrian Wishart watched his wife turn her shoulders under the lancing water. It darkened her red hair and streamed down her body—a body a little heavier-looking in the thighs and waist, he thought. She was doing her daydreaming thing again, so he rapped

on the glass to wake her up. At once she began to work shampoo into her hair.

Wishart slipped out of the ensuite, out of the bedroom, and made his way to the hallstand where she always stowed her handbag. Purse, mobile phone, tampons, one toffee—so much for her diet—diary and a parking receipt that he checked out pretty thoroughly: a parking station in central Melbourne, maybe from when she'd attended that planning appeals tribunal yesterday. He unlocked her phone, scrolled through calls made, stored text messages, names in her address book. Nothing caught his eye. He was running out of time or he'd have fired up her laptop and checked her e-mails, too. Then again, she had a computer at work, and who knew what e-mails she was getting there.

Her little silver Golf sat in the carport, behind his Citroën. The odometer read 46,268, meaning that yesterday she'd driven almost 150 kilometres. He closed his eyes, working it out. The round trip between home and her office in Waterloo was only seven kilometres. That meant one thing: instead of driving a shire car up to the appeals tribunal in the city yesterday, she'd driven *her* car.

Their house was on a low hill above the coastal town of Waterloo. He stared unseeingly across the town to Western Port Bay and fumed: They were not made of money.

He checked his watch: she'd been in the shower for four minutes. He ran.

Ludmilla was towelling herself, skin beaten pink by the water, slight but unmistakable rolls of flesh dimpling here and there as she flexed and twisted. She was letting herself go. He scooped the scales out from under the bed, carried them through to the bathroom and snapped his fingers: 'On you get.'

She swallowed, draped her towel over the heating rail, and stepped onto the scales. Just over 60 kilos. Two weeks ago she'd been 59.

Wishart burned inside, slow, deep and consuming. Presently his voice came, a low, dangerous rasp: 'You've put on weight again. I don't like it.'

She was like a rabbit in a spotlight, still, silent and waiting for the bullet.

‘Have you been having business lunches?’

She shook her head mutely.

‘You’re getting fat.’

She found her voice: ‘It’s just the time of the month.’

He said, ‘At lunchtime on Friday I called you repeatedly. No answer.’

‘Ade, for goodness’ sake, I was in Penzance Beach, meeting with the residents’ association.’

He scowled at her. The Penzance Beach residents’ association was a bunch of do-gooding retirees intent on preserving an old house.

‘Your car, or a work car?’

‘Work car.’

‘Good.’

They breakfasted together; they did everything together, at his insistence. She drove to work and he walked through to the studio and arranged and rearranged his architectural pens, rulers and drafting paper.

# 2

Meanwhile in an old farmhouse along a dirt road a few kilometres inland of Waterloo, Hal Challis was saying, 'Uh oh.'

'What?'

'A flaw.'

The detective inspector was propped up on one elbow, playing with his sergeant's hair, which was spread over the pillow mostly, apart from the stray tendrils pasted to her damp neck, temples and breasts.

'I find that most unlikely,' she told him.

Ellen Destry was on her back, her slender limbs splayed, contentedly. Challis continued to fiddle at her hair with his free hand but his gaze was restless, taking in her eyes, lips and lolling breasts. She looked drowsy, but not quite complete. She hadn't finished with him yet, and that was fine by him. He freed his hand from the tangles and ran the palm along her flank, across and over her stomach, down to where she stirred, moist against his fingers.

'What flaw?' she said unsteadily.

'Split ends.'

'Not in this hair, buster,' she said, punching him.

He rolled onto his back, pulling her with him, and as he took one of her nipples between his lips the phone rang. She said 'Leave it' fiercely, but of course he couldn't, and Ellen knew that. Because he

was pinned beneath her, it was she who snatched up the receiver. 'Destry,' she said, in her clipped, sergeant's voice.

Challis lay still, watching and listening. 'He's right here,' she said, rolling off and handing him the phone.

'Challis,' he said.

It was the duty sergeant, reporting a serious assault outside the Villanova Gardens on Trevally Street in Waterloo. 'That apartment block opposite the yacht club, sir.'

'I know it.'

'Victim's in a coma,' the duty sergeant went on. 'Name of Lachlan Roe.'

'Mugging? Aggravated burglary?'

'Don't know, sir. Uniforms took the initial call. The nextdoor neighbour stepped outside to fetch her newspaper and saw Mr Roe lying on his front lawn in a pool of blood.'

'Anyone from CIU there?'

'Sutton and Murphy.'

Scobie Sutton and Pam Murphy were detective constables on Challis's team. 'Crime scene officers? Ambulance?'

'The techs are on their way; the ambulance has been and gone.'

Challis, wondering why he'd been called, rolled his eyes at Ellen, who grinned and waggled her breasts. When he reached out a hand she ducked away, rose from the bed and padded naked to the window. He watched appreciatively. 'Cute ass,' he drawled, covering the receiver with his hand.

She did a little shimmy and opened the curtains. The morning sun lit her, and the dust motes eddied, and the world outside the window was vibrant: the chlorophyll, the spring flowers, the parrots chasing and bobbing.

Challis returned to the phone. 'So it's all under control.'

There was a pause. Finally the duty sergeant said, 'It could get delicate.' That meant one thing to Challis: the victim was well known or had connections, and the result would be a headache to the

investigating officers. 'In what way?'

'The victim's the chaplain at Landseer.'

The Landseer School, a boarding and day school on the other side of the Peninsula. Not quite as old as Geelong Grammar, Scotch College or PLC but just as costly and prestigious. Some wealthy and powerful people sent their kids there, and Challis could picture the media attention. He glanced at his bedside clock: 6:53. 'On my way,' he said.

He replaced the handset and glanced again at Ellen, who remained framed in the window. Struck by the particular configuration of her waist and spine he crossed to her, pressed himself against her bare backside.

She wriggled. 'Do we have time?'

'Certainly not.'

In the shower afterwards, Challis outlined what he knew of the assault. 'The Landseer School?' said Ellen in dismay.

'Exactly,' Challis said. He watched the water stream over her breasts, fascinated.

'Keep your mind on the job, pal.'

'Fine,' he said, 'I'll attend at the assault.' He stepped out and started towelling himself, watching as Ellen wrapped one towel around her head and another around her body.

She gave him a complicated look. 'And you want me in the office?'

He nodded. 'If you could follow up on that sexual assault from Saturday night...'

This was delicate territory, there was the faintest tension between them. He was her boss, they were living together and it was too soon to know what the fallout would be. But it would come, sooner or later. It was there in their minds as they dressed, Challis in a suit today, guessing he would need to make an impression on the media or his

boss later. He knotted his tie, watching Ellen pull on tailored pants, low-heeled shoes and a charcoal jacket over a vivid white T-shirt, the dark colours an attractive contrast with the shirt and her pale skin and straw-coloured hair. It was a familiar outfit to Challis, sensible work wear for a detective who might sit at a desk one minute and be obliged to trudge through grass to view a corpse the next, but she still managed to look spruce and intemperate. Her clever, expressive face caught him watching. 'What?'

'I'll never tire of looking at you.'

She went a little pink. 'Ditto.'

They breakfasted at a rickety camping table on the back verandah, where the sun reached them through a tangled vine heavy with vigorous new growth. Realising that he'd forgotten the jam, Challis returned to the kitchen. He was pretty sure that one jar of quince remained from the batch he'd made back in April, but when he checked the pantry, he saw that the spices, condiments and tubs of rice and pasta were on the middle shelves, where he'd traditionally stocked jam, honey and Vegemite. These had been moved to a bottom shelf.