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There is a moment as she comes into frame when she hesitates. Just before the anger takes over, there is a glimpse of something else. Then she takes the stairs two at a time, headed towards the man with the wispy goatee standing halfway up. Mid-twenties, wearing a suit that looks to be borrowed from his dad, puffing nervously on a cigarette.

She turns and in the movement there's that fierce energy. Her eyes are shining like a cat's, brown pools in kohl rings. She shouldn't wear kohl, it makes her look cheap. Her legs are bare, her knees knobbly over heavy black boots. The scar at the top of her right thigh is visible as her index finger drums against the chest of the man. She has taken a position two steps above him but he is still taller.

Goatee-man looks surprised at what she is saying. It's impossible to hear her words over the standard-issue blonde reporter at centre frame reporting for Channel 7 from the Supreme Court. He tosses his cigarette away, narrowly missing Blondie, and looks around for help.

A curl of red-brown hair escapes the clasp on the top of her head and falls over an ear studded with metal. She

ignores it and pushes her hand into goatee-man's chest. He pulls back, grabs the banister and leans against the bluestone wall.

The Crown Prosecutor arrives—pin-striped suit, blue tie, cocky—and Blondie intercepts him. Will you be asking for the five-year maximum? He ignores her, not even breaking stride as the camera tracks him. He reaches the arguing couple and puts his hand on the woman's arm.

Bad move. Her leg swings, with a flash of white inner thigh, then with a look of cartoon astonishment the Crown Prosecutor staggers backwards. His arm catches the banister and breaks his fall. But his Armani-ed arse still hits the concrete. She puts one hand on her hip, a naughty-girl giggle on the edge of her lips. Goatee-man smirks as Blondie races into frame, her microphone thrust forward.

Another lawyer, shambolic and aghast, descends with gown billowing. The microphone catches him saying, 'Dr King...' He grabs her arm, whispers in her ear. Whatever he says pulls her up. The intensity collapses and suddenly she looks young. Her face is a perfect oval. There is a tiny heart-shaped birthmark on her cheek that would be easy to miss. Like the faint scar where she used to wear a nose stud.

Unless you knew her. Really knew her.

The frame freezes and he rewinds to the moment of hesitancy that reveals her vulnerability; no, more than that. He knows this expression: shame. His own reflection is on the plasma screen, next to hers, as if they were joined in the same world. He leans forward, and his fingers trace over her image, tongue running over the edge of his teeth.

He replays the footage. Again.

Natalie gunned the bike through the gap in the morning traffic, then braked hard before she hit the driveway. She would have missed Liam O'Shea, standing just inside the wrought-iron gate, but he sidestepped into the flower bed anyway. She parked her bike, pulled off her helmet and shook out her hair.

He was wiping his muddied feet on the brickwork border as she walked back. 'Fantabstic.'

She had forgotten his Irish brogue. And the bedroom eyes.

'Didn't anyone tell you motorbikes are dangerous?'

'Yes.' Her stepfather, most Sundays. She walked past O'Shea, towards the building.

'I need to speak to you, Dr King.'

Over her shoulder she said, 'You *want* to speak to me. I don't need to speak to you.'

'I'd only be wantin' five minutes.' The Irish accent was laid on with a trowel.

Natalie, halfway up the staircase to the Victorian mansion where she saw private patients, turned back to look at him. 'Give me one good reason why I should waste my time.'

‘A chance to get Amber Hardy out of gaol?’

Reasons didn’t come any better than that, but O’Shea was expecting opposition and she’d have hated to disappoint. ‘You got her in there on your own didn’t you? I imagine you can get her out as well.’

‘Five minutes?’

She could think of a more enjoyable way of spending five minutes with him; but that would have been almost as problematic as reopening Amber’s case. He followed her up the stairs, across the balcony and into the dimly lit corridor. Natalie nodded good morning to Beverley, the office secretary, whose smile was directed at Liam as he followed Natalie to the coffee room. They had the space to themselves.

‘I’m here about Amber’s ex-husband,’ Liam said.

Natalie turned towards the espresso machine and tamped the coffee down hard.

‘Travis?’

‘Him and his new partner. Did you know about her?’

She knew. Where was he going with this?

He continued. ‘She was pregnant pretty damn quickly.’

Amber had been her patient until just after the plea hearing, and was devastated to discover that Travis had found a new partner so quickly. At that time she was still coming to terms with the charges, with incarceration and life without her infant daughter. ‘Didn’t he love us?’ she had asked, bewildered.

Natalie handed Liam the coffee. If he took it any other way than short and black he didn’t say. She studied him for signs he was leading her into a trap. ‘And?’

He had the grace to look away briefly. ‘Look, we all knew she did it. She confessed.’

‘There were extenuating circumstances I could have raised if I’d been allowed to take the stand.’ She felt a surge of guilt and squashed it. She couldn’t afford to feel vulnerable in front of Liam.

‘Defence’s call, not mine. Anyway the judge, he wasn’t going to buy anything you said. The media would have crucified him.’

‘She shouldn’t have got a custodial sentence.’

Liam drank his coffee, watching her. ‘Your testimony wouldn’t have made any difference.’

‘Just given you a chance to destroy my credibility and bolster your own ego?’

‘It wouldn’t have helped her. She’d already refused to request bail. The expert witness was good but Tanner wasn’t going to accept the dissociation line. Nor anything else you came up with.’

Natalie put her cup down. A trail of black liquid slopped down its sides.

Liam placed a photo on the table next to her coffee cup. A blonde-haired girl of about a year old looked up at the camera. The photographer had caught her in a moment of delight, blue eyes shining and hands coming towards her mouth as if to suppress a giggle. She looked vaguely familiar.

‘Chloe. Travis’s daughter with the new partner.’

‘And?’

‘She’s missing.’

‘Missing?’

‘Disappeared two weeks ago.’

That was where she’d seen the girl’s photo before: in the newspaper. She hadn’t paid much attention. Certainly hadn’t connected it to Amber. The article had been more

about the subculture of chaos and irresponsibility in their regional town than about the child.

‘I’d love to hear your thoughts.’ Liam was watching her intently.

‘On?’

‘Could Travis have got Amber to take the rap for him?’ He added his heartbreaker smile to the accent.

Natalie stared at him. ‘You think you got it wrong?’

‘I want to know the truth. Which could take a wee while—and I’ve already used my five minutes. Can we do it over lunch?’

‘How about we leave it at coffee and you finish telling me now?’

‘We’re talking about a child here. She may still be alive. To say nothing of Amber. You surely want to hear the full story?’ He paused. ‘Dinner?’

Natalie narrowed her eyes. He was using Amber as bait. ‘As in a date?’ She made a point of looking hard at his wedding ring.

‘Call it what you like.’

‘Let me guess. She’s got cancer. She doesn’t understand you. You’ll leave as soon as the kids are grown up.’

‘I’m thinking we’re as happy as most and my kids like things the way they are.’

She didn’t believe him but at least his position was clear. ‘Okay, tomorrow night then. But I don’t discuss wives.’

‘That’d be just on first dates?’

‘Don’t expect to make it any further.’

She watched him leave. If Liam’s suspicions about Travis were right, there might be a chance of getting Amber out of prison—a chance to rectify an injustice that Natalie was partly responsible for. There were just three problems.

After the incident on the Supreme Court steps she had been forbidden by her supervisor to see Amber and Travis. Permanently.

She'd just agreed to have dinner with someone who had an axe to grind with her and whom she loathed. And wanted to sleep with.

And Bella-Kaye, Amber and Travis's baby, was still dead.

Natalie's first patient didn't turn up. No surprise there. At least one patient a day failed to show, without bothering to call, apologise or explain. Half the women who saw Natalie existed in a permanent state of chaos.

Monday was the hardest day of the week. At times she felt like she was on a treadmill for months with her psychotherapy patients, listening to similar stories of abuse and its aftermath of anger, pain and despair. And each patient had to play out the same scenarios many times before the endings changed. The process was slow, and it was repetitive. She often wondered if she was doing any good at all.

Jessie Pryor, the new patient, arrived five minutes late. The one-line referral she had brought was over a year old and said nothing about why she might need to see a psychiatrist. Natalie didn't know the referring GP, and there was nothing to indicate why Jessie had decided to see her now.

Jessie was exactly twenty-two. 'Happy Birthday to me,' she said, rolling her eyes. She was wearing a Misfits T-shirt, cut off at the shoulders to reveal heavily tattooed rolls of flesh. The upper part of her left upper arm was a mess of anime cartoons inked onto her skin, overlapping with other figures that had been partly removed. Black roots were showing

in her short blonde hair. Her demeanour communicated a succinct message: 'I hate you and I hate the world, but I hate myself even more'. Natalie had been in this space at sixteen, minus the weight and with piercings instead of tats. Probably with a lot less cause.

Grist for the treadmill.

'What do you ride?' asked Jessie as she threw herself into the corner armchair rather than the upright one opposite Natalie.

Liam's arrival had interrupted Natalie's routine and she hadn't had time to change out of her leather trousers. An analyst would have said, 'Why do you ask?' Natalie was happy just to have the connection.

'Ducati 1200.'

'Big bike.'

'You ride too?'

'Nah, my brother. Used to take me on the back.' Her look suggested bike riders were cool, but that she wasn't sure what to make of a psychiatrist who rode to work.

Natalie smiled in response. 'How old were you?'

'Twelve. Me and Dad had just moved in with Jay and his mum. His real name's Jesse, can you believe? We had to call him Jay to stop the confusion.' One of the more benign problems of blended families.

It had been a turning point, after two years alone with her father. Jessie denied he was abusive, just said that 'he drank too much' after her mother died. But she had all the hallmarks of abuse: poor sense of self, inner emptiness, suspicion about people's motives and instability in her relationships. The marks of self-harm on her arms, half-hidden by the tattoos, were testimony to the times these things had overwhelmed her. Textbook borderline personality disorder.

The fifty minutes were nearly up before they got to why she was there. Jessie's life was spinning out of control and she was having thoughts of self-harm. Again.

'What's changed?'

Jessie shrugged.

Natalie began to outline the rules of therapy. Turn up on time, no suicide attempts, use the crisis line...

Jessie was grinning. There was the hint of a twinkle in her eye and dimples that negated the tattoo artillery as Natalie walked her out to the waiting room and watched her leave.

'Did you forget your change of clothes?' Beverley scanned Natalie's attire with a *what were you thinking?* expression.

Natalie let the comment go. Since her divorce, Beverley's mission had been to find a man. Her latest outfit was a canary coloured skirt and jacket that screamed out a refusal to disappear at forty-five.

Beverley handed Natalie a red envelope. Her name was printed in neat capitals, but there was no address or sender's details. 'Someone gave this to one of Dr Miller's patients as she came in and told her to give it to you,' she said. Her tone made it clear that this was both weird and interesting.

Natalie opened the envelope. A plain white filing card with a handwritten message: *Breaking the rules has consequences*. It sounded like something Declan would say but he was hardly going to send an anonymous note to remind her. He was her supervisor; he got to tell her in person on a weekly basis. What rule was the note referring to? Some perceived breach of ethics? The duties of patient confidentiality and mandatory reporting of risk were sometimes in conflict.

Confidentiality? She didn't discuss patients with anyone

except Declan so it was unlikely to be anything she had said.

Risk? She flipped mentally through her current patients. No apparent danger to any of their children. The two in domestically violent relationships were already well known to police and Natalie had done nothing to incur either partner's anger. Maybe it was something she had yet to be told or figure out. Apart from child abuse, the only thing that mandatory reporting covered was the risk of serious harm to someone. As far as she knew, none of her patients was planning a murder any time soon.

Shit, this had to happen to forensic shrinks all the time. In any event, the note was just stating the obvious. It wasn't like there was any real threat. She'd better get used to it. She turned the card in her hand, considering her options, but in the end dropped it in the paper shredder pile as she headed out the door.

‘C’ould have been the star!’

Natalie hit the punching bag again, harder.

Bob danced from foot to foot on his perch, screeching periodically. When Natalie continued to punch, ignoring his butchered version of Dylan’s ode to Rubin Carter, he raised his yellow crest and screeched at the top of his voice, ‘You’re a complete unknown!’

Natalie paused for breath and wiped the sweat trickling down her face. ‘Bob, you really know how to make a girl feel good.’

Bob strutted, looking pleased with himself. He flew after her, up the stairs from the makeshift gym in the garage below her warehouse apartment, where she let him fly free. He regaled her from the curtain rail.

‘Shit there and you’re parrot au vin,’ Natalie warned him. She filled his seed container to give him time to reconsider.

A patient had asked her to care for Bob while he was incarcerated. The patient had a well-demarcated delusional system that revolved around a belief that Bob Dylan had stolen and changed his lyrics; the cockatoo had picked up a

few lines from his owner's versions of 'Hurricane' and 'Like a Rolling Stone'.

'You're a complete unknown,' Bob reiterated before flying to his stand. Natalie clipped his chain on and went to get showered and changed for work.

From her warehouse, Natalie cycled between the Housing Commission towers. The grounds were empty apart from a tall Sudanese woman and a dog scurrying to get out of her way. Zigzagging through the back streets of Abbotsford, she joined the bike path that ran past Yarra Bend, the forensic psychiatric hospital where she worked Tuesdays and Thursdays. Clouds of mist rose in patches from the river, and she ducked as she passed trees wet with the previous night's rain. A few cyclists were headed into town in the opposite direction. The winding route made for a longer trip but she was convinced that the physical regime kept her well, at least as much as the medication did.

The forensic hospital facility was on prime real estate. The tree-lined river path opened out onto lush parklands and a back road to the hospital gates. It was all the same to the inmates. They couldn't see out from behind the red-brick walls topped with wire any more than passers-by could see in.

Natalie greeted the security team, eyeballed the iris scanner and was let into the main yard. On the way to her ward, she stuck her head into the administrative section. The hospital manager had, as usual, arrived before the office staff. Only the top of her grey hair, pulled back into a bun, was visible as she checked her emails. She looked up over half-rim glasses. 'Good morning, Natalie.'

'Do you have a moment, Corinne?'

Corinne hesitated, then indicated the vacant chair opposite.

‘Wadhwa is being unreasonable,’ said Natalie.

‘Professor Wadhwa has considerable experience.’

‘Associate Professor Wadhwa’—she leaned a little on the title, awarded by some minor university without a medical faculty—‘is being sucked in.’

‘Because?’

‘Georgia is attractive, and doesn’t wear tracksuits. She’s a very good liar.’ Georgia Latimer had been transferred to Yarra Bend from the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre for an assessment. It was nearly complete, and she was due to return to prison to await the bail hearing at the end of next week. Natalie and Wadhwa were no closer to agreement about her than when she arrived.

‘This case, it is Dissociative Identity Disorder,’ he had pronounced after their joint assessment a week earlier.

‘On what evidence?’

‘We are not lawyers, Dr King. Not evidence—*history* and *mental state examination*.’

‘All right then, on what history and mental state findings?’

‘Her postings on Facebook. This is most certainly dissociation. The vagueness and memory lapses, these, they are classical.’

‘Maybe. I don’t see two or more distinct personalities.’

Wadhwa waved his hand dismissively. ‘We have the middle-class wife and mother and the regressed child. The details will come out over time. When you have seen as many as I have, Dr King, you will know the signs.’

Natalie had gritted her teeth then and remained unconvinced now.

‘I’m not saying Georgia doesn’t dissociate,’ she told Corinne. ‘But if you’re asking me to make a call, then she’s putting on an act. It’s a gift for Wadhwa’s research project. If he didn’t need the numbers, he’d be saying she had a personality disorder. Which is what she has.’

‘I know what you think of his research but the project has been good for the hospital. The board of directors like us to be on the leading edge and Professor Wadhwa is helping us meet our KPIs.’

Natalie raised an eyebrow.

‘Look,’ said Corinne, leaning forward on her desk. ‘Hear me clearly: you have to find a way of working with him. It won’t look good in court if you contradict each other and you know how much media coverage he gets.’ She rested her chin on her hand. ‘Natalie, he’s in here complaining to me as often as you are. In the end if I have to choose between an Associate Professor and a junior consultant...’ she shrugged. ‘And I’m not just talking about this specific case. Am I being clear enough?’

Natalie was still fuming when she squeezed into the ward office for handover.

‘Most kind of you to join us, Dr King.’

Jesus, she was only five minutes late. ‘Always a privilege, *Associate Professor Wadhwa.*’

Kirsty, the unit manager, winked as she handed Natalie the patient summary sheet. They had shared more than one drink reviewing Wadhwa’s esoteric diagnoses, treatment disasters and lack of bedside manner. Any time anyone criticised him he would whip out a pre-written resignation from his leather compendium and storm into Corinne’s office, confident she would never accept it.

‘For those who have come in late,’ said Wadhwa, ‘we had just heard that Celeste has deteriorated.’

‘Did anything happen over the weekend?’ said Natalie.

‘Just her brother visiting as usual,’ said Kirsty.

Wadhwa looked at his list. ‘She is married. Why did her husband not visit?’

Natalie tried not to smirk. ‘He’s probably still upset about her cutting his dick off.’

In the absence of any response, Kirsty continued handover. ‘Susie has been slashing up again.’

‘How?’ said Wadhwa.

‘Her own toenails,’ Kirsty said.

Wadhwa’s nodded. ‘Perhaps her medication needs review.’

‘Does she need suturing?’ Natalie addressed Kirsty.

‘No; she’s so scarred you wouldn’t be able to is my guess.’

‘Consider lamotrigine,’ Wadhwa said.

‘Last time I looked at the College guidelines there wasn’t a medication likely to cure severe borderline personality disorder.’

Wadhwa was shaking his head, giving up. ‘So,’ he paused and Natalie knew what was coming. ‘Along with your other patients there will be sufficient to keep you busy, I should think?’

‘Busy enough,’ said Natalie. ‘But don’t worry, I can still squeeze Georgia in.’

‘She’s completing my assessment forms.’

‘I’ll be sure to ask if she needs them explained.’

‘She has D.I.D., Dr King.’

‘Well then, Associate Professor Wadhwa, I imagine that’s what my diagnosis will be, don’t you?’

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Natalie started her rounds, mindful of the research meeting she was meant to attend. She was going to make time to see Georgia and had no intention of kowtowing to Wadhwa, or Corinne for that matter.

Celeste was back to the state she had been in at admission: rocking and pleading with her dead mother to stop yelling at her. Natalie pulled the treatment sheet from the file.

‘Besides her brother, anything different? Could she have been putting the pills under her tongue?’ Natalie asked Kirsty.

‘Doubt it; we watch her after the pile we found under her mattress. Saturday she was playing table tennis with a few of the others and she seemed fine.’

‘Spending time with anyone in particular?’

‘Not really. Georgia’s the only patient that seeks out company, and she prefers the nurses.’

‘Good morning, Georgia.’

‘Good morning, Dr King.’ Unlike the other women in the unit, Georgia was well groomed—hair and makeup nicely done, clothes casual. She gave no indication that she was there for anything more serious than a chat with a girlfriend over coffee; in fact, she had a mug in her hand. In her late thirties, slim, with pale blue eyes and bobbed blonde hair, she looked younger than her years. Natalie wondered if her appearance had contributed to Wadhwa’s rejection of borderline as a diagnosis. She was a qualified nurse and halfway through an online arts course. Until her arrest Georgia had been married and middle class: a gym membership and a first-name relationship with her hairdresser.

Natalie decided to deviate from her focus on building a

trusting relationship. Right now she needed some hard facts and time was short. Georgia would be returning to the main prison soon.

‘How are you finding Professor Wadhwa’s forms?’

‘Interesting. A lot of very unusual questions. They pass the time.’

Natalie made a mental note to check them out. She knew one was a personality inventory. Georgia was too smart not to know what the forms were looking for. In any case, Wadhwa had already shared his opinions with her lawyer.

‘What do you think of his diagnosis?’ Natalie asked.

Georgia gave an exaggerated sigh. ‘I don’t really know. It doesn’t make much sense to me.’

‘Have you had periods where you lose time?’ Natalie had already been through many of these questions, but one of the hallmarks of Dissociative Identity Disorder was that memories changed according to which ‘personality’ was present. Natalie hadn’t seen any sign of this, though. She only ever saw the same woman—sometimes agitated, sometimes calmer. No more fragmented than her other patients with borderline personality disorder. Wadhwa might need Georgia to have D.I.D., and so might her lawyer. It didn’t mean she had it.

‘There are events I don’t remember very well.’

‘Tell me about those.’

‘I’ve told you before. When the ambulance and police first arrived.’

A time when memory impairment was to be expected. ‘What about sleep walking? Ever find yourself somewhere and not recall how you got there?’

‘Would you count the time when I drank most of a bottle of vodka?’

No, Natalie wouldn't. It had been in response to stress and was not repeated. Wadhwa was an idiot.

'Tell me about your mother.'

'I was two when she went to prison. I don't remember her.'

'But you've thought a lot about her.'

'Of course. She was the sort of mother I wasn't going to be.'

'What about your aunt? The one who raised you. What sort of mother was she?'

'She prided herself on being tough.'

Natalie was aware that she was seeing an act and was conscious of how gullible psychiatrists could be, how ready to believe what they were told. It was a reasonable starting point—if you weren't working with criminals. Georgia had a lot at stake. Everything in this interaction was admissible in court.

'So what sort of mother were you, Georgia?'

'Caring, devoted.' She paused. 'Not perfect. My children were good kids, but they got sick. Have you ever looked after children, Dr King? Being woken up every night for a week at a time. Hourly at times. I think I did quite well under the circumstances.'

Georgia looked down. Probably not wanting to appear confrontational. She might be using the conversation as practice for the bail hearing. She had been denied bail the first time because she was pregnant and the unborn child was deemed to be at risk from a woman facing three murder charges—all her own children. The fourth child, a girl, had been born in custody.

'What about your youngest child? Do you miss her?'

Georgia looked up, ice-blue eyes unwavering. 'Three

of my children died tragically, doctor. Then Miranda was taken from me. She was taken from me in the labour ward. What do you think?’

It was a good question: one Natalie wished she had an answer to.

She brought the interview to a close and watched Georgia leave, watched her turn in the doorway to look back and smile before closing the door softly. A half-smile that Natalie was left to wonder about: carefully staged or secretive? Or merely friendly and hopeful; nothing that would be pondered on, had it been given by anyone else?

The interview had been inconclusive. Natalie understood this woman no better than she had at the start. She couldn’t tell whether she had been talking to Wadhwa’s fragmented, disorganised soul or a cold-hearted monster.

What the hell had possessed her, agreeing to have dinner with Liam O'Shea?

She read the online newspaper stories about Liam's case to pass time before they were due to meet. She was irritable and it didn't help that she knew why. She didn't do dinner dates; particularly with married men she fancied fucking. She had caved in instantly, and why? Because of an Irish accent and blue eyes?

Vow number one: no matter what, she was not bringing him home after their dinner meeting. He was already too cocksure and there was far too much of a payback element involved.

She couldn't even console herself that the evening would be worthwhile because of what Liam ostensibly wanted to discuss. She wanted desperately to know more about Travis and the little blonde girl, and to help Amber, but she had to leave it alone, or there'd be hell to pay with Declan, her supervisor.

Vow number two: she'd help him as far as she could over dinner. For Chloe and Amber's sake. Then no more Liam and no more involvement with Amber's ex-husband Travis.

The internet search didn't provide much information. No one seemed to think anything more than bad parenting was involved in Chloe's disappearance. The story had only warranted brief mentions in the metropolitan papers, but it had made the front page of the *Welbury Leader*. One picture included Travis but Natalie wouldn't have recognised him. Only his eyes were the same as she remembered, a slightly puppy-dog look. More self-assured now, in a fuller face with the goatee neatly trimmed. His chin was thrust towards the photographer, meaning business in a way that had been absent on the steps of the Supreme Court. Tiphonie, the baby's mother, had her head turned, avoiding the camera. Didn't she want her fifteen minutes of fame? Chloe looked sweet, vulnerable and innocent. In this photo she was holding a small soft toy.

Natalie arrived at the pub early after a short walk in fine rain through the backstreets, her neighbourhood of factories closing down for the night as she passed. Liam had suggested a city bar, likely to be full of lawyers and stockbrokers, but she had insisted on her local. She could free up her mind talking to the bar staff and be ready for Liam when he arrived.

The Halfpenny was one of those Collingwood classics named for an old-school union leader. In contrast to the tapas bars and cocktail lounges of Smith and Gertrude streets only a block away, it was a seventies throwback with faded floral carpets, walls crowded with photos and a *No thongs or shorts* notice over the doorway.

Vince, the owner, wasn't there. His son Benny, with his red Mohawk reverting to frizz in the damp air, nodded in acknowledgment. Maggie behind the bar had opened a

Corona and put a lime wedge in place before Natalie had even made it across the room.

‘He’s waiting for you in the corner,’ said Maggie, tilting her head to her left.

Natalie took the beer. ‘Come again?’

Maggie shrugged with a smile that suggested approval. Vince wouldn’t have been as easily persuaded, Natalie thought as she glanced where Maggie had indicated. The lighting was dim but she could make out Liam in the corner watching her, sitting in front of a picture of Vince with a footballer in Collingwood black and white.

‘Casing the joint?’ Natalie asked as she joined him.

‘I like to be knowing the lie of the land.’ He was drinking a Guinness. Of course.

‘Does the leprechaun impression usually work for you?’ she asked, trying not to grin as she sat down at the table. She put her feet up on the third chair and took a slug of the Corona, looking him over as she did. With his curling black hair, only slightly grey at the temples, and an open-neck shirt and leather jacket, Liam could have passed as something other than a lawyer. Almost. ‘So tell me about Travis.’

‘Over dinner.’ He took a sip from his glass, eyes never leaving her. ‘Do you live around here?’

Natalie pushed the lime into the bottle. ‘I like Collingwood.’ Was he testing her out or trying to show he hadn’t done a background check? ‘I thought there was a lot to talk about. The case. Now seems a good time to start.’

Liam waved for another drink. ‘Winding down from a hard day at the office first. Helps focus my attention.’

Yeah, right. Focus it on what?

‘So how did someone like you end up a forensic shrink?’

‘Someone like me? What does that mean?’ Natalie inwardly cursed herself. She’d let him draw her away from the main issue.

‘Well...’ Liam lay back against the picture of Nathan Buckley and finished his drink as Maggie brought another. ‘Not—shall we say—mainstream?’

‘That good or bad?’

‘More earrings than I can count? Motorbike that’s too big for you? I’d lay bets on a tattoo somewhere. Right? Interesting.’

He was right. Annoyingly. Safer to answer his original question. ‘Why forensic psych? Amber’s case, in part. Plus a run-in with a motorcycle club; their psychopathology intrigued me.’

‘I’m guessing that all makes you too tough for relationships?’

‘I said I didn’t want to talk about your wife. Same goes for men in my life, okay?’

‘Not after specifics. Just wondering if you spit them out after one night or whether they occasionally last a few.’

‘One’s a lot more fun.’

‘No care, no responsibility?’

Natalie grinned despite her best intentions. ‘Something like that. Now, back to Travis—’

Liam stood up. ‘Do you know what you want to eat?’

Natalie wondered if the sudden need for food was to avoid talking about Travis and Chloe because he didn’t actually have any need for her input, or to streamline the pathway to the after-dinner possibilities. She went with him to the window into the kitchen and ordered her usual: steak, salad and chips.

‘Same,’ said Liam. ‘Rare.’

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‘I ended up in the Office of the Public Prosecutor because I couldn’t shake the idealised view of justice I’d had as kid,’ Liam told her as they waited for dinner. She’d agreed to listen if he’d get to Travis as soon as the food arrived. The truth was, he was good company.

‘And what was that about?’

‘My da’. I guess you’d tell me that it was because I couldn’t stop him beating up my ma, right? That I’m compensating now for what I couldn’t do then, by going after the bad guys. Does that answer your question?’

‘Do you think it does?’ Natalie grinned. One point to her.

‘Well it’s working; little while ago I put a drug boss behind bars for a ten-year minimum. Ice was scarce on the street for weeks. I have to confess that felt good. I’d have done anything to get his brother as well.’

‘Anything?’ It sounded flirtatious and Natalie cursed herself silently. It wasn’t as if he needed encouragement.

‘Almost. As long as no one innocent gets hurt.’

Natalie looked at him sceptically.

‘I had a case when I was green,’ he said. ‘Guy named Tim Hadden; alcoholic, wife beater, record as long as your arm. He always maintained his innocence.’

‘Don’t they all?’

‘Mostly, but in this case he was. DNA testing came in and we had another look. And I’ll never be sure that when I first prosecuted him I didn’t let my dislike of the man interfere with the facts.’

‘He got out?’

Liam paused, and she found she couldn’t read him. Anger? Regret?

‘He was killed in gaol while they stuffed around with the paperwork.’

It shed light on why he was open to reviewing Amber’s case.

‘My da,’ he concluded, ‘was a walking Irish stereotype; the bad one, unfortunately.’

‘You think your father got in the way of your objectivity when you prosecuted Tim Hadden?’ Natalie had put her observation into words before she remembered she was out socially, not in her office.

Liam drained his glass. ‘Same again?’ he asked as he headed to the bar. He returned just as the food arrived. Natalie brought him back to the reason for the dinner.

‘So what happened to Travis’s daughter, this one with the new girlfriend?’

‘If I knew that I wouldn’t be asking for your help. Not that there aren’t other attractions...’

It occurred to Natalie that he worked his sex appeal without thinking. A habit. ‘You think I can help because...?’

‘The first priority is finding the child. We wouldn’t normally be involved this early in a case but ever since the Leskie debacle we want to make sure we get everything right from the beginning. They may not find the child. The police don’t have enough points of proof for a charge. No forensic evidence, all hearsay. No one’s talking, probably everyone’s lying about something and the obvious answer isn’t falling into our laps.’

‘You make it sound like a Mafia hit rather than a missing child.’

Liam shrugged. ‘Nothing that well organised. Stupid eejits behaving badly.’

‘Smart enough to keep you guys running in circles.’

‘Which is why I’d be wantin’ you running around with me.’

Was it her imagination or did the brogue thicken when he was spinning a line?

‘So take me back to the beginning.’

Liam cut his steak and it bled on the plate. ‘Travis and Amber broke up straight after the plea hearing. Poor hard-done-by man: tries to stand by the bitch who murdered his daughter, but in the end he has to put the love of his surviving child first.’

Natalie tried picturing Travis in the role of hero. Some women found him cute. But the poor-me attitude that appeared by the second interview had alienated her long before Amber had started to reveal the level of domestic abuse. Which was more psychological than physical, but every bit as effective. Travis had been a clear factor in Amber’s depression. Had he been supportive, their daughter would probably still be alive. Which was the primary reason for Natalie’s avenging-angel moment on the Supreme Court steps.

The memory of putting Liam on his backside was still sweet. She suppressed a grin.

‘What’s she like?’ she said. ‘Travis’s new woman?’

‘Tiphonie Murchison. First name spelt T.I.P.H.A.N.I.E.’ His look suggested that the quirky spelling said it all.

‘Let me guess. Small, vulnerable and a bit plain. Maybe an abusive background, if not at home then in the schoolyard.’

Liam looked impressed. ‘Why doesn’t he go for the pretty ones? He’s not a bad looking bloke.’

‘Because he needs to dominate and doesn’t want to share the limelight. Pretty girls have too much self-esteem.’ She thought about Amber: ordinary looking, eyes too small,

facial features a bit asymmetrical. In the first police video she had been flushed and flustered. Subsequently she had looked bewildered, disappearing into clothes too big for her, hiding behind long, lank brown hair that fell over her eyes. Her family had been supportive but anxious and overprotective.

Liam rested his cutlery against the plate. 'Tiphannie looks average in the photo I saw but she's only nineteen. Police describe her as timid. Not bright, I guess, given who she ended up with. A little dumpy.' Liam looked directly at her. 'But then I like my women petite.'

Natalie stopped herself responding, but couldn't prevent a flutter rippling through her stomach. Damn it.

'Family?' So far Tiphannie fitted the profile Natalie had constructed.

'Prior to hooking up with Travis she lived with her parents. Not known to police.'

Natalie wondered what it was about Tiphannie's home life that made Travis a better option. 'Job?'

'She was working on the checkout at the supermarket where Travis was doing some building work.'

She would have known who he was, that he was married, that his wife had murdered their baby. Welbury wasn't that big. Had Tiphannie felt sorry for him? Was it a celebrity thing?

'So all seems to be going well,' Liam continued after another mouthful of steak. 'Maternal health centre nurse reports she was an exemplary mother.'

Was. The child would be dead, of course. Missing just sounded better.

'Chloe was nearly one when she disappeared. Eleven and a half months. The nurse hadn't seen her for a while. Tiphannie and her mother had had a falling out, so her parents hadn't seen them for a couple of months either. Travis's father left

when he was a kid and his mother was in Melbourne.’

‘Neighbours? Friends? Was Chloe in childcare?’

Liam shook his head. ‘Tiphannie was unemployed. She didn’t go back to the supermarket after the birth. The last sighting of the child—other than by Travis and Tiphannie—was earlier the day before. By a neighbour. She only heard her playing in the backyard, she didn’t actually see her.’

‘What’s Tiphannie’s story?’

‘That she’d got the child breakfast and left her watching cartoons, then went back to bed.’

‘As exemplary mothers do.’ Natalie remembered a home visit she’d done in another satellite town, closer to Melbourne. The mother ordered groceries online and never left the house. Her child spent all day in front of the television.

She didn’t notice Liam leaning forward until his hand brushed her hair out of her eye. She had no time to suppress her sharp intake of breath. They briefly made eye contact and he looked amused. Half-ready to defend himself. She reminded herself of her two vows.

‘So what happened next?’

‘When Tiphannie got up at eleven o’clock, Chloe had vanished.’

Natalie wondered how a child of less than a year old had become accustomed to entertaining herself for that long. Some babies who were left to cry for long periods all but gave up. What looked like compliance was actually depression, or some infant version of it. ‘Travis was at work?’

‘Yes. With witnesses. Impossible for him to have got home and back without being noticed.’

Natalie thought for a moment. ‘What was his reaction, his explanation?’

‘Blaming anyone and everyone.’

‘Including Tiphanie?’

‘Not yet. The cracks have started to show but his anger is still mainly at the police.’

‘And the cops think what?’

‘At first they thought she might have wandered off but no one’s seen her. They’re on a new estate—bit desolate but it’s not Siberia.’

‘Could she have been kidnapped?’

‘Possible. Unlikely. This is a small rural town, remember. The police are checking the paedophile registry, but she’s very young. Even if the door was unlocked, how would anyone know unless they’d been watching and planning? Same for those women who kidnap because they’re desperate for a child.’

‘So the next theory?’

‘An accident that the mother covered up. She looked spaced—vacant—but we haven’t found a body and she hasn’t cracked.’

‘Next theory?’

‘My favourite.’

Natalie looked at him expectantly. He leaned closer.

‘Travis kills the kid in a fit of rage the night before. He has Tiphanie under his thumb, beats her, threatens her, whatever. He does the cover-up and keeps her in the dark about it so she doesn’t have anything to tell us. Maybe he gave her some pills. Would account for her looking spaced. Maybe she was out of it when he killed Chloe.’

‘So if this theory fits—if it’s Travis—you’d have to question the previous child’s death.’

Liam smiled grimly. ‘Exactly. One child dying might be bad luck, but two, both under suspicious circumstances,

to two different women? Travis is the only thing tying it together.'

'Maybe he has poor taste in women.'

'Maybe. Neither woman looks like a killer to me.'

Nor to Natalie. It didn't mean they didn't do it. 'Amber confessed,' she reminded Liam, 'and went to gaol, as you may remember?'

'If Travis had been found guilty he would have gone to gaol for murder. He'd have got a much longer sentence and he wouldn't have had an easy time. If he survived.'

'Amber hasn't exactly had it easy,' said Natalie. 'She was spending most of her time in isolation last I heard.'

'They might reasonably have expected that she'd get a suspended sentence.'

'They didn't split until after the hearing,' Natalie murmured, talking to herself rather than to Liam. Could she have got it wrong? Had Travis been directly to blame for Bella-Kaye's death and now for Chloe's, or had he driven two women to the point of infanticide?

'Is it possible? That Travis murdered both his children?' said Liam.

'Much as I'd like to see him locked up, the circumstances are different.' Natalie moved around some chips on her plate. 'Still possible, but the child was nearly a year old for one thing; out of that sleepless-night stage and too young for full-blown tantrums. Men tend to kill children in anger. Where's the body? Even if he killed her accidentally he'd have to get rid of the body, and Travis isn't a great planner.'

'Still. Will you take a look at Travis and see what you think?'

'He'd never agree to talk to me,' said Natalie. To say nothing of the apoplexy Declan would have. She was *not*

going to get involved. She thought of the child in the picture with her soft toy and sparkling eyes.

Liam looked like he'd expected this answer. 'He doesn't have to. He's being called in for a formal interview next week. Decide what questions you want asked and watch from the other side of the screen.'

Natalie put her napkin on the plate, leaving the remaining chips. She was tempted. Not just because of Chloe, but because of Amber, whom she owed. She drained her Corona. She wouldn't be going back on her word if Travis couldn't see her, if she didn't directly talk to him. Liam grinned, knowing he had her.

'Text me and tell me when and where.' She stood up.

'No dessert?'

'Nope, and no coffee at my place either. I have a conference to prepare for.'

Liam laughed. 'You've got tickets on yourself. What about a second date then?'

'This wasn't a first date. Just work.' Which was the only reason she was going to let him get the bill.

Not even saying goodbye to Maggie, she walked into the cool night air and slipped into the shapeless shadows of the Collingwood streets.

Keeping one vow out of two wasn't bad.