

CHAPTER ONE

For someone who believed image was everything, this couldn't have looked worse. Me, slumped in the front seat of my car in the predawn stillness, watching a building. Inside, there was a party for two going on. I didn't have an invitation, but I was dressed for the occasion, decked out in black from top-to-toe. Not Little-Black-Dress elegant, more Grungy-Drug-Dealer inelegant – if the definition of 'drug dealer' included a woman on the wrong side of thirty, with bad hair, a worse attitude, and no knowledge of illicit substances.

The Admiral's Retreat was as I remembered. Seeing it again recalled days when life was simpler, especially mine. The building faced the beach where waves whooshed back and forward on the shoreline, their tips glistening in the moon's waning light. A bluestone wall separated the sand from the footpath. Rohan and I had strolled that path in the past, holding hands, promising each other we'd be together forever.

Lights dotted the verandah of the mid-nineteenth century cottage.

Beyond a wrought iron gate, the path to the entrance was lined with standard roses. A former private home reincarnated as a boutique Bed and Breakfast, The Admiral's Retreat was an ideal cover for a multitude of sins. My only interest was one specific transgression being committed within its walls.

I checked my watch. 4.15am. Two hours had passed since I'd parked, choosing a spot behind a leafy tree that segmented the nature strip and kept me inconspicuous. I needn't have worried; people see only what they want to see.

Until today, I'd been blind, too.

My nether regions were numb and I shifted constantly to wake them. This was what came of working all day and running a surveillance mission in the early hours of the morning. Your bum goes to sleep, although your brain never stops.

I poured coffee from a thermos into a plastic cup and took a sip.

The hot liquid scalded my tongue and I jumped. Coffee spilled between my thighs. I sat glumly in the puddle and rubbed my gritty eyes, then lowered the window to let in cool air. I had a mission to complete. A mission that had started around twenty-four hours earlier when Draga had waddled through the rear door, carrying her canvas tote and a bulging bag of groceries.

The pinnacle of housekeepers, Draga was old enough to be my mother. With more energy than a six-year-old on a sugar rush, she could kill a germ at forty paces. She'd arrived to do her daily clean-vacuum-bleach-cook routine early enough to make breakfast for me, served with a side order of unsavoury news.

'Good morning, Missus Jac.'

As I switched on the coffee machine, Draga put down her load, then bumped me aside with her hip. The kitchen was her territory and she asserted it at every opportunity. 'I fix coffee, then I make the strangled eggs for you.'

Draga's English wasn't great. She didn't know her 'you' from her 'your', disregarded plurals, confused pronouns, and considered correct tense optional. Every day, I had to pick through her convoluted sentences. Still, she was a sunny presence in the house and, although I would never tell her, I missed her on the weekends. Our offbeat conversations had become part of my life.

Soon she was clashing utensils like a discordant one-woman band, muttering in Croatian. My Croatian was negligible, but I'd learned enough to know there was something on her mind. It didn't stop her dishing up the goodies. In the short time it took to pack my work bag, she'd set out a plate piled high

with fluffy scrambled eggs and two slices of perfectly toasted sourdough bread.

Hiring Draga had turned out to be one of my better recruitment choices. As the owner of All Class Recruitment – a name I chose to reflect the ethical and reliable service my company provided – I took pride in picking the best person for the job.

While I scoffed breakfast, she unloaded the dishwasher. ‘Mister Ruin be home tonight?’ she asked, stacking plates into the cupboard with a little more force than usual.

‘That’s what he said when I spoke with him yesterday.’

Knowing I treated coffee as a nutrient, Draga poured me another large mugful and a demitasse for herself. Her face creased in consternation. ‘You husband be gone many nights.’

‘Why are you so worried?’

‘Why you not be worry? That man go more meeting than Prime Minister.’

‘Stop fussing.’ True, the number of overnight meetings Rohan attended had increased, and he was preoccupied when at home. He stuck to his study, mobile phone glued to his ear and paperwork scattered across the desk. But Rohan’s work ethic had been one of his most attractive traits. ‘He’s running a large firm, Draga. I understand why he’s away so often.’

‘You think this good thing?’ She slipped on her glasses and blinked rapidly. Her eyes magnified through the lenses, giving her the appearance of an owl.

One with grey curls and an abundance of off-centre wisdom.

A fork-load of eggs stopped midway to my mouth. ‘What?’

‘I think long time if I should say. I think da, no, da, no. Up, down like toilet seat.’

‘What?’ A clump of egg tumbled off my fork and splattered onto the bench.

Draga pounced to wipe it away and expelled a resigned

sigh. 'Bah! I show you.'

She fetched a laundry basket. From a jumble of clothes, she retrieved a pair of tiny men's briefs. She held them in front of her and stretched the waistband. 'Mr Ruin buy like this. All new. So small, I not know how he cover his business.'

Granted, jockettes weren't Rohan's typical choice. His taste was more conventional. Cotton boxers. Usually grey. Usually boring.

'So?' I paused, trying to recall the last time I'd seen Rohan in his underwear.

Draga's eyes narrowed. Her shoulders sagged, affirming her disappointment with my lack of insight. 'You smart lady, but not today. Man buy new underpants for one reason.'

'If you're implying Rohan is up to something, you're wrong. Why would he be? I'm a good wife and a good stepmother to his son. I keep the household running. We're happy.'

Draga crossed herself and looked to the heavens. 'Forgive me to say this, Missus Jac. Three thing.' She raised four fingers and began a countdown. 'One, you not go nowhere with Mr Ruin for long time. Two, you not like the boy much. Three, I the one who make everything in this house to run good.' She glanced at her uncounted pinkie finger and abruptly brought her hand down.

Bad maths aside, I hated it when she was right, although it was a little unfair to bring 'the boy' – my teen stepson, Anthony – into the equation. Rohan and I hardly saw him. Still, I wasn't ready to concede anything.

'Rohan loves me,' I said, but my conviction had developed a hairline crack.

'You not count the chicken if is burning in oven,' Draga said.

'What the hell does that mean?' I threw her a challenging look. 'Anyway, how is this any of your business, Draga?'

'I with you long time, Missus Jac. You always my business.'

For the last four-plus years, Draga had had the full run of our domestic world. She'd washed my husband's – and my – underwear for a substantial portion of our marriage. A certain level of intimate knowledge had to be assumed. This had to be just another of Draga's crazy notions. But she wasn't cruel and would never say anything to hurt me.

Okay, so Rohan had bought new underwear. And he was absent more often and for longer than usual. His mobile chirped every few minutes, although he tended to end calls and pocket it whenever I came into the room. None of it proved he was having an affair.

I took a swig of coffee, my lipstick leaving a cutthroat red slash on the cup rim as a small cloud of doubt gathered.

Draga reached into her apron pocket, extracting a business card. Her eyes grew dark as she offered it with stubby fingers. 'I not want to give you this, but I must. I find in Mr Ruin pocket when I wash shirt.'

I snatched it and ran my finger over the raised lettering, embossed on silky paper stock and bearing an address printed in gold – The Admiral's Retreat. It was once our favourite getaway. Memories of lazy Sunday morning beach walks with Rohan flooded back. My hand trembled as I flipped over the card to see a message written in an unfamiliar script.

Darling, I've booked the night of Wednesday 15th for our anniversary celebration.

The signature was a large cursive 'J' followed by a string of kisses.

Anniversary. I stared at the word.

'Fifteen is today,' Draga said.

'I don't need a calendar,' I said. My mouth had gone dry.

Her gaze softened. 'Missus Jac, you be kind to me when I look for work. I look many years, but no one want give me job. But you do. You help me much. I like look after you. I not like you be hurt but is better you know before is too late.'

It was already too late. My life was a cliché based on the notion that all cheating husbands invest in new underwear.

Draga set her mouth like a hyphen and fetched a broom. It was her cleaning weapon of choice and she had a collection of them. Her favourite was a blue, bristled one with a dark, wooden handle. She clung to it when she had a problem to solve, claiming she could think better while holding it. Her knuckles tensed around the handle as she waited for me to speak.

‘I hate it when you’re right,’ I said.

‘Sometime, me, too.’ Draga wrapped a thick arm around my shoulder and pressed her head against mine.

There was no going back. I should know the problem with any contract is the fine print. A marriage contract was no different and I hadn’t read all the terms and conditions before I’d signed on the emotional dotted line. The ‘out’ clause had been revealed by those few words written by my husband’s lover. A lover he’d been with long enough to celebrate an anniversary. The hurt went all the way to my bones.

I had to see it for myself, which is why I now had my gaze glued to the front door of The Admiral’s Retreat, waiting on the painful proof.

I leaned against the headrest, closed my eyes, and drifted. A dog barked from behind a nearby fence. I sat up, disoriented, and checked the time. Only three minutes had passed. I sighed. This was torture. I wished Rohan would hurry up and come out.

On cue, the front door opened, and light flooded out onto the verandah. I bolted upright, raising the opera glasses I’d included in my surveillance kit. I hadn’t used them since Rohan and I saw *La Bohème* years ago. Now the lorgnettes confirmed my life had more drama than Puccini could ever have composed.

Rohan was silhouetted by the light. Twelve years older than

me, he was tall, with a strong jawline and salt-and-pepper hair at his temples that branded him 'distinguished'. He stepped out in his dark business suit, clutching his briefcase and a small overnight bag. A woman followed him out.

I peered through the lenses, assessing her features, prepared for what I'd imagined his lover to be – tall, blonde, and youthful. She was the opposite – short, redheaded, and old. Okay, she wasn't quite pension-worthy, but I guessed older than me by a good fifteen years. That made her older than Rohan.

He hugged her. She raised her face and they kissed. He helped her shrug on a jacket, button it, then kissed her again. It looked so effortless, so normal. So damned ... practised.

I bit my lip and tasted blood.

A cab drew up at the entrance. Rohan held the woman for another long squeeze before he slipped into the front passenger seat. The cab's interior light illuminated his smile as he waved goodbye. Exhaust streamed into the cool air as the cab accelerated away and turned at the end of the street.

The woman began to walk towards my car.

I ducked, hitting my head on the steering wheel. Ouch. I counted. One, two, three, and reached ten before daring to peek over the dashboard to see her pulling away in a white Toyota Corolla parked a few spots ahead of me. Had I known it was hers, I would have keyed the damn thing. As an investigator, I was clueless.

For once, I was unsure of what to do. Confrontation wasn't in my nature, which was why I was hiding in the car, parked behind a tree. A self-respecting woman would have marched up to Rohan and kicked him in his new jockettes. Not me. My first reaction was denial, followed by rationalisation. I could be misinterpreting what I'd seen. It could have been a business meeting, a passing phase, an hallucination. I slapped my forehead. They've had an anniversary, idiot. Worse, Rohan had taken her to a place special to us. She wasn't only stealing my

husband – she was stealing my memories.

I needed to know a whole lot more before I decided what to do: who she was, how they met, and what she could offer Rohan that I couldn't. What was Rohan planning to do? Was my marriage over? First, I'd find out where Rohan's lover lived. I started the engine and, with my cap pulled low, I followed the Toyota.

On the open road, I surrendered to tears, remembering how in love I'd been in those early days. After years of too many first-but-last dates, I'd met 'the one'. We had business in common. He was charming, handsome, and filled my days with flowers, nice restaurants, and surprise gifts. Two months later, he slipped a ring with a diamond the diameter of a five-cent coin on my finger. A circle of diamonds in a wedding band followed a month later. It happened so fast, I was giddy.

That was only five years ago, but now it seemed a lifetime.

I trailed the Toyota along the meandering beach road, through the suburbs. My grip on the steering wheel was so tight, the stones in my wedding ring cut into my finger. Its solitaire partner was now worth little more than the five-cent coin it resembled.

The woman's car slowed. In the distance, a garage door went up on a white, rendered house with a sea view balcony across the upper level. I pulled over, near enough to see the car swing into the garage and disappear behind the descending door. The street stilled again.

Watching my rival's home, my internal critic's voice was louder than usual, chanting how unlovable I was. The bump on my forehead pulsed. A long time passed, then a priority one message from my bladder urged me to restart the engine. I hung a U-turn and sped home. I wanted my bed and my doona. I wanted to hide from Rohan's betrayal and everything else I couldn't control, including my spinelessness.

Everything Draga had noticed about our relationship

was correct. I shouldn't be angry with her, but I cursed her for making me face it. It was easier than acknowledging my stupidity and humiliation. I should be angry with myself for being so gullible when it came to Rohan's behaviour. I'd refused to see him drawing away. Now he'd found someone else. I could forgive a lot, but never that. I knew the answer to the most important question – my marriage was over.

I'd divorce him. I was young enough to take my share and start over – if I got my share. Marriage is supposed to be grand, but divorce could be several hundred grand. Even a civilised settlement could take years to reach. Given Rohan's capacity for deviousness, that might be difficult. He ran an investment business, that's why I'd agreed to let him handle our joint finances in the first place. Like an idiot, I'd trusted him. A deep chill ran through me. He could have our assets tied up in complex schemes, which even a slick Cheat'em & Fastbuck-style law firm wouldn't be able to unravel.

Why make it easy for him and her then, whoever she was? I should be as sneaky and calculating as Rohan. Okay, I'd need to consult an instruction manual on the subject, but I could learn. I wasn't stupid, just blind.

My tears dried. A fire ignited in my belly and grew. I slowed to a steady speed, and I sat up tall. The road ahead opened out and so did my thinking. I cruised homeward as the summer sunrise inked a blood-red line along the horizon, underscoring what I knew beyond certainty – Rohan Anthony Burne, my 'devoted' husband, was a lying, cheating dog. I wasn't going to let him take anything more from me. Not my assets nor what was left of my self-respect.

The streetlights went out. It was a new day. With it came a new solution to my problem.

I was going to kill the mongrel.