

TWO BIRDS

A Short Mystery

Vicki Tyley

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ALSO BY VICKI TYLEY

Thin Blood
Sleight Malice
Brittle Shadows
Fatal Liaison
Bitter Nothings

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TWO BIRDS

by Vicki Tyley

Daniel Abbey crouched on the kitchen floor, his broad frame shading his wife from the late afternoon sun streaming through the window behind him. He sensed movement and reeled.

His sister-in-law Leah Jensen stood rooted in the doorway, her eyes and mouth wide in shock.

He gasped, the cloying mix of perfume, blood and adrenaline catching his throat. The knife flew from his hand and clattered to the floor.

“Don't just stand there. Call an ambulance,” he screamed, at the same time clamping his hands over the wound, desperate to staunch the blood flow.

A gurgle sounded from deep in his wife's chest.

Leah remained frozen in the doorway. Daniel leapt to his feet, his hands and shirt covered in his wife's blood. He pushed past Leah, shoving her out of his way as he grabbed for the phone.

“Emergency. What service do you require? Police, Fire, Ambulance?”

He dropped to his knees, the legs of his work trousers mopping the blood pooling from his wife's upper abdomen. “Ambulance.”

The operator connected him. Seconds later he rattled off his name and address, barely pausing for breath. “Hurry.”

“Please stay on the line, sir. An ambulance is on the way. What is your wife's name?”

“Kristine. Kristine Abbey.”

“Can you tell me if Kristine is conscious?”

Daniel shook his head. “No.” Blood oozed from under his hands.

“Is she breathing? Stay with me, sir.”

He leaned down, turned his ear toward her mouth. Heard only the sound of his own blood rushing in his ears. “I don't know.”

“Can you feel a pulse? Use the pads of your fingers and, if you can, place them in the groove on the side of the windpipe on her neck.”

His fingers felt hot against Kristine's clammy skin. Nothing then the tiniest flutter. “A very faint one.” His voice tightened. “Where's that ambulance?”

The sound of approaching sirens gave him his answer.

“Oh my God... oh my God... oh my God.” Leah had found her voice, though not her legs. “Too much blood. Too, too much...”

Two male paramedics, one taller and greyer than the other, weighed down with bags and equipment bulldozed past her and into what was now a cramped kitchen. Daniel stood and moved into the corner.

The older guy snapped on a pair of blue gloves and leaned over Kristine. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“I... don’t know,” Daniel stammered. “I... found her like this.”

The two paramedics worked quickly. With the older one focused on her breathing and blood pressure, the other bandaged a mountain of thick gauze pads across the wound. Wasting no time, they shifted their patient onto a stretcher and whisked her out the door.

Leah, her gaze transfixed on the bloodied, once cream floor tiles, had yet to move of her own free will. Fighting the urge to shake her, Daniel snatched up his car keys and raced to his work ute parked in the driveway behind his wife’s Mini Cooper. Where had Leah parked?

He didn’t hang around to find out. Reversing at high speed onto the street, he almost collided with a teenager on a bike. In one breath, he uttered an expletive and an apology, though it was doubtful the cyclist heard either.

Peak-hour traffic thwarted any notion of making it to the hospital at the same time as the ambulance, but he wasn’t far behind.

He screeched to a stop and jumped out of his ute.

A uniformed guy wearing sunglasses called out, “Hey, mate, you can’t park there,” stopping in his tracks when he saw Daniel’s bloodied attire. Or maybe it was the crazed look in his eyes. Whatever, Daniel didn’t care.

Inside the hospital, getting information about his wife’s condition proved more difficult. All they would tell him was that she was in surgery, and then they directed him to the waiting room.

The green-walled, windowless waiting room smelled of sterilized hopes and fears. Clinical and cold. On two of the seats, a young couple clung to each other, the man whispering to his partner. Daniel chose a vinyl-covered armchair and picked up a magazine from the table next to it. Words and pictures blurred with each tick of the clock.

He stood and paced, rubbing his arms against the chill. The door swung open. Leah rushed in, breathless and pale, the blood on her shirt like some macabre designer pattern. The young couple gave her the same strange look they’d given him when he’d first entered the room.

Arms out, bottom lip trembling, Leah ran straight for Daniel. He sidestepped, unable to bear the thought of touching her. Look where that had got him.

She faltered, her gaze narrowing. “You got what you wanted.”

“What the hell are you talking about, woman?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“Sorry,” he crossed his arms, “you’re going to have to spell it out.”

She glared at him, but didn’t speak.

Turning his back on her, he moved to the other end of the room and picked up another magazine. Not that a year-old issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* could hold his attention, but it

meant he didn't have to look at Leah. He wished he'd never laid eyes on the woman. Hard when she'd been married to Kristine's brother.

#

A solid, motherly-looking woman with curly hair entered the waiting room. "Mr Abbey?"

At the opposite ends of the room, Daniel and Leah stood in unison. The woman introduced herself, the name forgotten before she'd even finished speaking. She asked him to accompany her. Daniel followed blindly, not caring that Leah was trailing two steps behind him. He could tell from the set of the woman's face that the news wasn't good.

She led them to a smaller but still windowless room. The room, decorated with plush wallpaper and thick-piled carpet, looked to be an interior designer's idea of homely in a hospital environment. That or a soundproof cell. Colors and lights were muted, a hint of rose scent to the air.

Daniel sank into the nearest armchair, a high-backed leather recliner. Leah perched on the edge of the matching couch. They waited.

The woman pulled up a stool, bringing herself down to their level. With one hand clasped over the other as if she were about to ask for forgiveness, she leaned forward, a hint of mouth freshener following. "The surgeons did their best, but I am so sorry to have to tell you that Kristine never regained consciousness."

Dead?

Next to him, Leah burst into loud sobs, her hand clawing at his shirt.

Kristine was gone. Forever.

He felt nothing, as if somehow the news of his wife's death had frozen all his emotions. The word "police" registered somewhere in his brain. "Sorry?"

The woman drew a breath, pressed her lips together. "The nature of your wife's injuries puts the hospital under a legal obligation to inform the police. They have requested that you remain at the hospital for now."

Daniel nodded. "Of course."

Leah let out another loud wail. Daniel patted her hand, a non-intimate tap that had Leah clutching at his arm.

The instant the woman left the room, he shook off Leah. "Don't go getting any ideas. It's never going to happen." Cruel to be kind.

She peered up at him from mascara-smudged eyes. "We were so good together."

"For God's sake, Leah. My wife has just died. She's been murdered..." He hesitated, his hands clasped to his head. "You?"

Before Leah had a chance to respond, there was a knock at the door. A dark-suited Asian woman, her hair pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck, entered, followed by a much taller and stockier man also wearing a suit.

The woman extended her hand. “Mr Abbey, I’m Detective Sergeant Adrienne Teo and this is my colleague Detective Constable Grant Masters. Our sincere condolences on the loss of your wife.” She eyed Leah.

“Leah Jensen, Mr Abbey’s sister-in-law. I was married to Kristine’s brother.”

DS Teo nodded first at Daniel, then at Leah. “Mr Abbey, Mrs Jensen, thank you for agreeing to talk with us. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances.”

DC Masters jotted something in his notebook.

“Kristine Abbey’s death is now being treated as a homicide. Before you leave the hospital, we require the clothes you are wearing, including your shoes. If you would go with DC Masters, he will arrange for this.”

#

Daniel emerged into the corridor in time to see Leah exit the door diagonally opposite. He couldn’t read her expression; it was if she’d disappeared inside herself and put the shutters up, her face as white as the crepey coveralls they both wore.

The detectives escorted them outside to two waiting patrol cars. You didn’t need to be a genius to understand why, Daniel thought.

“Are we under arrest?” Leah asked, her voice small and meek.

“No, but we would appreciate it if you’d accompany us to the police station to help us with our enquiries.”

“How long do you think that will take?”

“Hopefully not too long.” DS Teo held the door open, placing her hand on top of Leah’s head as she got into the patrol car’s back seat.

Daniel slid into the back seat of the other vehicle, not convinced that DS Teo meant what she said.

Once at the police station, a uniformed officer showed him into an interview room. Everything was grey, from the dark-grey industrial carpet to the ash-grey walls to the laminated table. Even the air smelled grey, the echo of countless police interviews trapped within the four walls. He sighed, a craving for a single malt gnawing at his gut.

Left to his own devices, he paced the room, wishing he had his phone with him. Not that he had any idea whom he’d call. Kristine, the vivacious teacher he’d fallen in love with and married eight years ago was gone forever. He would never hear her voice again.

And after the way he’d treated Melissa, it was unlikely she’d ever want to speak to him again. But then she was the one who’d issued the ultimatum: her or his wife. Shame that.

He dropped onto one of the steel-framed chairs, elbows on the table, kneading his temples with his thumbs. His life was never going to be the same.

The door opened and the two detectives entered. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” DS Teo said, taking the seat opposite.

Daniel made no comment. What could he say? No worries, I have nothing better to do with my time?

“We realize that this is a difficult time for you, but it’s important that we understand what happened.” DS Teo referred to her notes. “Please take us through your day from when you got up this morning.”

He took a slow breath, collecting his thoughts. “I had breakfast and went to work like I always do.”

“What time was that?”

“I left the house at six-fifteen.”

“Where was Kristine?”

“Still in bed. She doesn’t...” He swallowed. “She didn’t start work until after eight.”

“Did you call Kristine or did she call you during the day?”

“No.” He could’ve lied, but he knew they would check.

“Was that unusual?”

“No, we both had busy jobs.” Not the whole truth but close.

“And you left work at what time?” she asked, pen poised.

“A few minutes after four. I stopped to buy gas and arrived home around four-thirty.”

“Did you notice anything unusual, no matter how trivial you consider it?”

He shook his head. “Not until I got inside and saw...” He closed his eyes, his head bowed.

“How did you enter the house?”

“Down the chimney.” He was rewarded with a scowl.

“Did you enter via the front door or the back door?”

“The back.”

“Did you use a key?”

“No, it was unlocked.”

“Did your wife always leave the back door unlocked?”

Daniel slid further down his seat. “During the day when she was at home, she did.”

“So anyone could’ve entered the home unannounced?”

“If you say so.” Enough with the banal questions.

“Don’t you want justice for your wife, Mr Abbey?”

Daniel sighed and shifted in his seat. “What sort of question is that?”

“When you entered the kitchen, what did you see?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he took a moment to compose himself. “Kristine on her back in a pool of blood...” His voice cracked. “A knife in her chest.”

“Was she conscious? Did she say anything?”

He shook his head, unable to form the words.

“We can give you a few minutes, if that would help.”

He needed more than a few minutes. He needed out of there. “I’d like to get this over with if you don’t mind.”

DS Teo nodded knowingly. “Did you see or hear anything that may have indicated someone else was in the house?”

“No...” He stopped himself. “Yes, Leah Jensen was there.” For how long, though, he had no idea.

“Did she visit your home often?”

Too often. “From time to time. She was married to Kristine’s brother.”

“Was?”

“He died in a boating accident six years ago.”

The mute DC Masters grunted and scribbled something down.

“Tell me about your relationship with Melissa Pascal.”

Daniel’s right eyebrow quivered. “Excuse me?”

A smirk played across the lady detective’s lips. “We have reason to believe that you and Ms Pascal are intimately involved.”

“I don’t know where you’re getting your information from. That finished more than three months ago.”

“Who ended the relationship?”

Two fingers pressed hard on the tic above his eye, he remembered, wishing he could undo everything he’d done. “What does it matter?” She has nothing to do with any of this.”

“Please answer the question, Mr Abbey.”

His right shoulder lifted in a lopsided shrug. “I did, okay?”

“How did she take it?”

“How do you think she took it?”

Silence, the lady detective’s glare more than enough.

“She was upset. She wanted me to leave Kristine. I couldn’t do that.”

“How noble,” muttered the note-taking detective under his breath.

“Why did you kill your wife?”

Daniel shot up off his seat as if a fire had been lit under it. “What the...?”

The male cop towered above him. For such a large man, he moved surprisingly fast. “Sit down, Daniel.” Stern but quiet.

Daniel did as instructed. “I. Did. Not. Kill. My. Wife.”

The lady cop made as if to refer to her notes. “According to Leah Jensen, you and Kristine argued. You grabbed a knife from the kitchen bench and repeatedly stabbed her. At least four times.”

“That’s a lie!” And it was. “I did no such thing.”

“What reason would Leah have to lie to the police?”

“To frame me.”

“And why would she want to do that?”

“I’d had a few too many...” He swallowed, the saliva drying in his mouth as he struggled with the words. “It was only one night, but she wanted – wants – more. She’s been stalking me.”

The lady cop raised a delicate eyebrow, questioning.

Daniel leaned forward, palms out. “If you give me my phone, I can show you the emails.” He released a silent sigh, now thankful that he hadn’t gone with his first instinct and deleted the ramblings of a delusional woman.

The cops exchanged glances.

“So what did Leah see?”

“In me?”

A muscle twitched in the lady cop’s jaw. “What did Leah Jensen witness you doing if not stabbing your wife?”

“What do you think she saw? Me trying to save my wife’s life, of course.”

“How?”

Eyes closed, he pinched the bridge of his nose again. “The knife. I pulled the knife out...”

“To stab her again?”

His eyes sprang open. “No!”

“Any thinking person knows to leave the knife in.”

Daniel frowned.

“Come on, Mr Abbey, you can’t tell me that you didn’t know that removing the blade could cause more blood loss.”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Daniel mumbled. “She was tugging at it – I wanted to help her.”

“So she was conscious then?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Or not in any sense that she was aware of her surroundings.”

“So how do you explain her grabbing the handle of the knife?”

“Involuntary reflex?” Bile rose in his throat.

“Is that a question?”

“No.”

The questioning carried on in ever decreasing circles until in the end they had him doubting his own name. After what seemed like hours, the lady cop called for a break.

As she got up to leave, Daniel said, “Hey, I’m not the only one with blood on my hands.”

#

Daniel slumped forward across the table, his arms above his head. The laminate felt cold against his cheek and smelled of disinfectant. Whatever Leah thought she had seen, it wasn’t him repeatedly stabbing Kristine. Did his sister-in-law despise him that much she was prepared to perjure herself? Possibly the police just told him that in the hope he would confess.

He groaned, the craving for a single malt intensifying, the bottle of water they’d left him not cutting it. He needed time and space to grieve the loss of his darling bride. His wife was lying on a slab in the mortuary and here he was penned up in a police interview room. It wasn’t right.

Somewhere a woman screamed. Daniel froze, his ears straining to hear what was going on.

“No! No. You’ve got it all wrong.” Leah’s voice.

More voices. None that he could make out. Doors closing.

Then quiet.

He stood. Before he could reach the door, it opened.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” said the lady detective, standing aside to let him through. “You are free to go.”

“That’s it? You’re not going to tell me what’s happening with Leah? These walls aren’t exactly soundproof, you know.”

The detective steered him back into the interview room and closed the door. “We have charged Mrs Jensen with the murder of your wife.”

His jaw dropped, his brain in overdrive.

“Preliminary findings are that your wife died from a single stab wound to her upper abdomen, which punctured her stomach and on through her liver, which in turn caused massive hemorrhaging. Contrary to what Mrs Jensen told us in her statement, there were no other wounds to your wife’s body. She also had your wife’s blood on her clothes and skin.”

“So did I.” What was he doing?

“Yes, but your account correlates with the evidence.”

Daniel nodded, extended his hand. “Thank you, DS Teo.” Amazing what not being charged with your wife’s murder could do for his memory for names.

Outside, the day had drawn to a close, the pavement still warm from the day’s heat. A knot of loud-voiced men spilled out of a bar down the street. That single malt beckoned. With a lick of his dry lips, he trudged head down toward the noise and light of the bar.

The bar, he soon discovered, was a gay bar. Not that he cared. His needs were simple: a whiskey or two, a silent toast to his freedom and a final farewell to the woman who’d once been the love of his life. That was until two years into their marriage, when she started criticizing every little thing he did. Nothing he did was ever right.

Leah hadn’t lied when she told the police he and Kristine had been arguing, though he was sure she hadn’t witnessed it. The bit Leah made up about him repeatedly stabbing Kristine had been her undoing. He’d only stabbed her once.

Luck had been on Daniel’s side when he pushed past Leah in the doorway to get to the phone, transferring Kristine’s blood from his skin and clothes to hers. Leah had been unable to tell the police how it got there. That, along with the lie about what she’d witnessed, had been enough for the police to pass judgment.

He raised his glass and smiled. Two birds, one stone.

Thank you for reading *Two Birds*. I love to hear from my readers: vickityley@gmail.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Based in rural Victoria, Australia, Vicki Tyley writes fast-paced mystery and suspense novels in contemporary Australian settings.

Born in New Zealand, she emigrated with her husband to Australia in 1982. Vicki has travelled extensively, spending a year touring the world before terrorism was an influencing factor. She has lived in the central business districts of large cities, suburbia, idyllic seaside locations, rural areas, bushland, and remote desert mining camps.

In the lead up to her writing career, she worked in a multitude of different industries including banking, stockbroking, importing and wholesaling, human resources, mining, hospitality, civil engineering, and toys, in predominantly accounting, IT and management roles.

All these life experiences are brought to bear in her writing.

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OTHER BOOKS BY VICKI TYLEY

THIN BLOOD

Craig Edmonds, a successful stockbroker, reports the disappearance of his wife, Kirsty. What starts as a typical missing person's case soon evolves into a full-blown homicide investigation when forensics uncover blood traces and dark-blond hairs in the boot of the missing woman's car. Added to this, is Craig's adulterous affair with the victim's younger sister, Narelle Croswell, compounded further by a recently acquired \$1,000,000 insurance policy on his wife's life. He is charged with murder but, with no body and only circumstantial evidence, he walks free when two trials resulting in hung juries fail to convict him.

Ten years later, Jacinta Deller, a newspaper journalist is retrenched. Working on a freelance story about missing persons, she comes across the all but forgotten Edmonds case. When she discovers her boyfriend, Brett Rhodes, works with Narelle Croswell, who is not only the victim's sister but is now married to the prime suspect, her sister's husband, she thinks she has found the perfect angle for her article. Instead, her life is turned upside down, as befriendng the woman, she becomes embroiled in a warped game of delusion and murder.

PROLOGUE

Craig Edmonds stared at hands sticky with darkening blood.

His hands.

He held them away from his body and looked down at his chest in horror. Large, dirty-red blotches marred the once pristine white shirt. Forgetting the blood on his hands, he tore at the buttons, ripping the shirt open.

Breathing in short, sharp gasps, he frantically examined his torso, looking for the wound. No cuts. No injuries. No holes where there shouldn't be any. His chest heaved in relief. He wasn't dying, after all.

But then, mid-sigh, it struck him: if it wasn't his blood, whose was it? His head whipped around, his eyes scanning the room like radar on overdrive.

Even in the half-light, he quickly saw all was not as it should be. The glass shade from one of the bedside lamps lay in shattered fragments on the floor. The curtain rail over the bedroom's bay window hung at a precarious angle. Usually a black-and-white photo of a nude, tattooed woman hung above the bed; now the frame lay in pieces in the doorway.

He focused on the queen-sized bed. His stomach clenched as he took in the twisted and disheveled bedclothes. Instinctively, he knew the dark patches on the sheets weren't shadows that would disappear once the curtains were opened.

He swallowed, the acrid morning-after taste of whisky harsh in his parched mouth.

“Kirsty?” he croaked. Clearing his throat, he called again, hesitant but louder.

In the crushing silence, time stood still.

“Kirsty!” he screamed, as he dashed into the master bedroom’s compact, white-tiled en suite. He stumbled, clutching at the doorframe. He took in the bloodied handprints adorning the vanity unit and walls like some sort of macabre finger-painting. Fighting an intense wave of nausea, he looked down at the blood-smeared floor.

Trying desperately to rein in his growing panic, he raced to the main bathroom. His wife wasn’t there either. Next room.

Out of breath, heart hammering, he reached the internal door that led to the double garage and opened it. The external roller door was down and his red Alfa Romeo and Kirsty’s silver Lexus were parked next to each other.

Gripping the door handle, he sagged against the door. He took a deep breath. Fought for control of his adrenaline-charged body. He lurched into the kitchen, heading for the sink.

Hands shaking violently, he somehow managed to turn on the cold water tap. He watched, mesmerized, as the blood from his hands, diluted by water, swirled in a pink eddy in the bottom of the sink before disappearing down the plughole.

Oblivious to the water dripping from his hands, he dropped onto the pine storage-box-cum-bench beneath the window at the end of the kitchen. Elbows on knees, he dropped his forehead into his hands. If only the infernal pounding would let up, he could think straight.

His memory of the previous evening was patchy, to say the least. He had a vague recollection of arriving home stressed after a late-night meeting at the office and, bypassing the dried-out dinner Kirsty had kept warm for him, heading for the bottle of Chivas Regal. After that, it was anyone’s guess as to what had happened.

A series of short clips flashed through his mind. In one, he saw himself shouting at Kirsty, her throwing up her hands and yelling back. What had they been arguing about? In another, he was picking up his car keys, and...

Damn it! Why can’t I remember? he thought, glancing towards the door leading into the garage. It was then he saw the set of four smudged, rust-brown streaks low on the doorframe. He closed his eyes, praying for the nightmare to end.

Except he had a feeling the nightmare was only beginning...

SLEIGHT MALICE

SLEIGHT ~ use of dexterity or cunning, especially so as to deceive.

MALICE ~ the intention or desire to do evil; ill will.

One cold Melbourne winter's night a suburban bungalow goes up in flames. Despite their best efforts, firefighters are unable to save the home. When a badly charred body is discovered in the remains, web designer Desley James is devastated. Her best friend, Laura Noble, had been the only one in the house that night – her partner, Ryan Moore, is away in Sydney on business. Then Desley learns the unidentified body is male. But it's not Ryan. He and Laura have disappeared...

Not realising until it's almost too late what some people will do to cover their tracks, Desley teams up with private investigator Fergus Coleman to search for the missing couple.

“In perfect Vicki Tyley fashion, ‘Sleight Malice’ entertains and stuns its readers.” – Lit Fest Magazine

CHAPTER 1

Rough hands grabbed her. Clamped across her waist, his powerful arm squeezed the breath from her lungs. He hauled her backwards, her thrashing arms and legs no more an inconvenience to him than if she had been a pinned fly.

She coughed, her eyes watering as the hot, acrid air seared the inside of her throat. With both hands, she tried in desperation to prize the immovable weight from her stomach. “Let me go! Get...”

Her chest convulsed against the heavy, grit-laden smoke. The man’s hold on her eased. She seized her chance and wrenched herself from his grip. She stumbled forward, shielding her face with her arms, but the fire’s intensity drove her back.

Back into the arms of the firefighter.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t go in there!” shouted the hulking black and yellow protective-clad figure. “You’ll get yourself killed.”

Desley James scarcely heard him over the din of the fire trucks, pumps and roar of the blaze. Her only concern was for Laura. Where was she? Had she been at home? Had she escaped the inferno? What about Ryan?

She opened her mouth to speak, inhaling a mouthful of burnt air instead. Spluttering, she bent her head forward and drew the thin cotton T-shirt she wore over her mouth and nose.

“Have you got everyone out?”

The firefighter leaned down, his ear almost touching her face. “Sorry, what was that?”

She repeated her question, watching his face as her words, muffled by the fine weave of her makeshift filter, sunk in. He averted his gaze, but not before she had her answer.

“Oh dear God, no. Please tell me it isn’t true. It’s not possible,” she added in a whisper only audible to herself.

This time when he lifted her off her feet she didn’t resist; all the fight had left her. A female police officer joined them, draping a blanket around Desley’s shoulders as the firefighter set her down beside the open back door of a police car.

She shivered, pulling the blanket in tighter as she sunk onto the backseat, the wool fibers bristly against her hot skin. The vehicle’s interior light cast a ghostly pall over the two faces staring down at her.

BRITTLE SHADOWS

When soon-to-be-wed Tanya Clark is confronted with her fiancé's naked corpse hanging from a wardrobe rail in the upmarket Melbourne apartment they share, her life is torn apart. Two months later, distraught and unable to cope, she drowns her sorrows in a lethal cocktail of alcohol and prescription drugs.

On the other side of Australia, a grieving Jemma Dalton struggles to come to terms with the suicide of her only sibling. Despite there being no evidence to the contrary, Jemma refuses to accept Tanya had intended to kill herself. Not her sister. Then the coroner's report reveals that at the time of her death she had been six weeks pregnant. The will, too, raises more questions than it answers. How did a young woman on a personal assistant's wage amass shares worth in excess of \$1,000,000?

In a desperate bid to uncover the truth, Jemma puts her own life at risk and starts to probe the shadows of her sister's life. But shadows, like bones, grow brittle with age. The consequences can be deadly.

PROLOGUE

One foot inside the apartment, the smell hit her. Sour, like cat pee. Except they didn't own a cat. "Sean?" she called, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat. "Sean, honey, are you home?" Louder this time.

Not a sound. Only that putrid smell.

She dumped her heavy satchel on the floor, kicked the door closed, and surveyed the room.

The late afternoon sun streamed through the balcony-facing floor-to-ceiling windows. Long shadows from the life-sized, headless bronze nudes standing sentry sliced the living area. The Age newspaper lay open at the business section in the middle of the narrow glass-topped dining table, Sean's mobile phone next to it. Apart from one of the eight chairs sitting askew from the table, she could have stepped into the pages of Home Beautiful.

She crossed the carpet toward the short hall that led to the bedrooms and stuck her head into the apartment's galley-style kitchen. Tomatoes, red onions and a cling-wrapped tray of meat – the makings of what looked to be one of her fiancé's specialties, Spanish steak – sat on the stainless steel drainer next to the sink. Further down the bench, she spotted a bottle of red wine together with two wine glasses, one of which was already poured. She sniffed the air and moved on.

Usually wide open, the door to the guest bedroom was half-closed. Hoping Sean hadn't offered a bed to one of his boozy mates, she hesitated for a moment and then gave the door a sharp shove.

The door swung in, releasing a rush of sour air. Pinching her nostrils together, she leaned into the room, ready to beat a hasty retreat if anyone was in there. Her gaze went first to the queen-sized bed. Although the quilt looked ruffled, the bed itself didn't appear to have been slept in.

Breathing out through her mouth, she glanced across the bedroom to where sunlight, filtered through the window's upward angled Venetians, striped the ceiling.

She took another step into the room and turned around. The leather strap of her handbag slid from her shoulder. She didn't try to stop it, couldn't stop it. Unable to move, all she could do was gape at the open wardrobe, her eyes bulging almost as much as the vacant ones staring back at her.

A silent scream blocked her throat. She couldn't breathe in; she couldn't breathe out. Her lungs wanted to burst. The purple, bloated face of the naked man hanging from the wardrobe's steel rail on a belt, his swollen tongue protruding from his mouth, was almost unrecognizable. Almost.

She stumbled backwards, snaring her handbag as she landed in a heap next to the bed. She scrambled in the bottom of her bag, her mobile phone eluding her like wet soap in the bathtub. When she did manage to get hold of it, she struggled to still her shaking hands. Her fingers felt fat and clumsy, the buttons on her phone tinier than she remembered.

"Emergency. What service do you require? Police, Fire, Ambulance?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but a magazine page stuck to her leg now had her attention instead. She peeled it off, dangling the magazine at arm's length as if it were a dirty sock. She had never seen anything quite like it. Naked flesh. Entwined bodies. Explicit sex scenes.

If she had thought things couldn't get any worse, she had thought wrong. She shook her head, unable to come to terms with what she was seeing. Her fiancé, her lover, her partner was dead; dead and surrounded with hard-core homosexual pornography.

FATAL LIAISON

“It's easy, enjoyable, captivating reading, and I am eagerly awaiting the release of her fifth...” - Book Boogie

“...easy, fluid readability factor. I didn't want to put the book down, and it was immensely enjoyable.” -MotherLode blog

The lives of two strangers, Greg Jenkins and Megan Brighton, become inextricably entangled when they each sign up for a dinner dating agency. Greg's reason for joining has nothing to do with looking for love. His recently divorced sister Sam has disappeared and Greg is convinced that Dinner for Twelve, or at least one of its clients, may be responsible. Neither is Megan looking for love. Although single, she only joined at her best friend Brenda De Luca's insistence. When a client of the dating agency is murdered, suspicion falls on several of the members. Then Megan's friend Brenda disappears without trace, and Megan and Greg join forces. Will they find Sam and Brenda, or are they about to step into the same inescapable snare?

CHAPTER 1

As he listened to the second phone call from his mother, Greg Jenkins noted the increased tremor in her voice.

“Samantha still hasn't arrived. And she's still not answering her phone. I'm so worried. Should I call the hospitals? What—”

“Whoa. Slow down, Mum. Don't stress out. Remember what the doctor said. Don't worry about Sam. We all know how bad she is with time. She'd be late for her own funeral.” Greg laughed, hoping to ease his mother's tension.

“Yes, but—”

“Please, Mum, I'm sure you're worrying unnecessarily. Sam has—”

“Gregory, dear, I wish you wouldn't call her that. Sam's a boy's name.”

“Okay, Mum.” He started again, using the name Sam herself loathed. “Samantha's a big girl now. I'm sure she's all right, but just to put your mind at rest I'll go and check on her. She's probably so wrapped up in her new man she's forgotten she was supposed to visit you this weekend.” He laughed again.

“What new man?” The pitch of her voice rose.

Greg could almost see her gripping the phone in both hands as she waited for her eldest child to answer. Silently berating himself for opening his big mouth, he wrestled with what he could say without digging himself into a bigger hole.

“Gregory?”

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