

A DANCE
WITH
MURDER

Also by Elizabeth Coleman

A Routine Infidelity

Losing the Plot

A DANCE
WITH
MURDER
ELIZABETH
COLEMAN




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SPARKING
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Marianne, Jackie, Stephanie and David, this one's for you.

Thank you.

Dogs never bite me. Just humans.

Marilyn Monroe

CHAPTER ONE

Ted

Ted Bristol surreptitiously glanced at her watch. She was now thirty-seven minutes into her Tinder date with Jarrod Beasley, and he still hadn't asked her a single question about herself. Not that she could tell him the truth if he did. She obliged him with a rapt smile as he rabbited on about how he'd made the courageous move from chartered accountant to life coach. According to Jarrod, he was a feminist with an excellent sense of humour, and even though he had washboard abs from his daily workouts, his true priority was his spiritual fitness.

Ted looked down at her miniature schnauzer, Miss Marple, who was sprawled at her feet, and she could've sworn she saw her eyes roll.

It was a crisp spring night, and all around them the joint was jumping. They were at Trax, a dog-friendly outdoor restaurant sandwiched between the murky Yarra River and Flinders Street Station, lit up golden against the night sky. Ted could see pedestrians crossing the nearby Princes Bridge and diners across the water at Southbank, as the tall spire of the Victorian Arts Centre jutted up behind them and disappeared into the dark clouds. The whole precinct was buzzing, but she forced her attention back to Jarrod, subtly studying his

squarish freckled face and his small blue eyes for signs of malevolence.

Saturday night last week, an ethereal ballerina called Giselle had turned up at Edwina Bristol Investigations (EBI), desperate for Ted's help. She'd recently been forced to deactivate her Insta account after an anonymous stalker had slid into her DMs with love messages from multiple untraceable accounts. But leaving Instagram hadn't worked. Handwritten notes had started turning up in her letterbox and even under her back doormat, and earlier last Saturday night, things had escalated. When Giselle had returned to her car after *Don Quixote* rehearsals at the Australian Ballet, she'd found a bloody lamb's heart on her bonnet. An archer's arrow was plunged through the heart, with a handwritten note:

See what you're doing to me?

The implicit menace in the blood-spattered note was chilling, and Ted wasn't surprised that poor Giselle was terrified. After Ted had calmed her and helped her to focus, Giselle had pointed her finger at Jarrod Beasley. Apparently, they'd gone on a Tinder date about six weeks ago, and when Giselle declined a second date, Jarrod had bombarded her with passive-aggressive texts, like:

How can you claim to be a fully evolved human if you're closed off to other humans?

'The guy's a narcissist,' Ted had told her.

'I suppose you're right,' Giselle had agreed. She was wearing a floaty dress in a smoky pink. A dark curl had escaped from her bun and was hanging atop her translucent face. 'I called him to try and discuss it, but that just seemed to make things worse.'

Ted was astonished, although she was careful not to show it.

‘You called him? It’s never a good idea to engage with a stalker, Giselle.’

‘I know, it was stupid. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t *you* apologise. There’s only one person who should be apologising.’

When Ted thought of the men who wanted to own women and chose to terrorise them if they couldn’t have them, and the men who tried to manipulate women into doubting themselves and took pleasure in making them feel violated in their daily life, it filled her with rage. Of course, women were capable of stalking too, but that wasn’t the case in most instances, and certainly not in this one. It was a guy who’d left the bloody lamb’s heart on Giselle’s windscreen; she’d seen photographic evidence. The stalker had used a wi-fi jammer to disable all the CCTV in the vicinity, but luckily a passer-by had spotted something suss, and he’d snapped some pics from behind a tree.

Now, at Trax a week later, Ted reminded herself to take a step back and not jump to conclusions about Jarrod – even though he’d just told her he was home alone last Saturday night, which equalled no alibi, *and* he was a perfect physical match.

The shots showed a guy who could unhelpfully be described as ‘of average height and build’. He was wearing a nondescript hoodie that obscured his face, and his jeans were equally nondescript. But in a stroke of good luck, his distinctive sneakers were captured in stark relief by a streetlight. Within twenty-four hours, Ted had identified the sneakers as Cariuma Gerry Lopez red canvas sneakers with a white ‘lightning’ stripe.

Did Jarrod own a pair? Once he let her get a word in, she was planning to ask. Not that a yes would be definitive, but hopefully it would be the first incriminating clue of many. She was hoping she could somehow get a sample of his handwriting,

although she doubted that would prove conclusive. The writing in the notes slanted backwards, and the t's had a flamboyant loop, both of which were no doubt designed to disguise the stalker's regular writing.

Jarrold leaned across the table, and his eyes stared intensely into hers. He smiled, and his teeth were almost freakishly white. 'Why don't we skip the meaningless small talk?'

I'm not talking, Ted thought.

'I'm all about getting to the true essence of a human,' Jarrold said. 'I've got three questions I like to ask my life-coaching clients, in no particular order. I call it my Three-Step Self-Discovery Test.'

'Wow,' Ted said, when she was really thinking, *How much longer do I have to humour this guy before I can start my interrogations? Would another six seconds suffice?* 'Okay, I'm up for it. What are the questions?'

Jarrold paused, presumably to build the anticipation.

'First question: What's the most courageous thing you've ever done?'

That was easy, Ted thought. Emotionally, it was finally admitting to her dad that she blamed herself for her mum's death. Physically, it was defending herself against a violent embezzler twice her size who'd been intent on killing her and Miss Marple. Not that she'd share those things with Jarrold. And as it happened, she didn't have to.

'For me,' said Jarrold, 'it was making a difficult decision to do the right thing.'

Ted stifled a snort. Of course, she should have known Jarrold would only be interested in his answer.

'It was before I became a life coach. I was head accountant for a celebrity chef, and the guy was a crook. He wanted me to

cook the books while he was cooking the food.’ Jarrod paused so Ted could absorb his clever word play. She tried to look appropriately appreciative. ‘And I’m not talking peanuts, the guy wanted to hide *big bucks*. So, I doxed him in to the cops, even though I was scared for my safety. I didn’t know if I’d end up in concrete shoes.’

No, Cariumas, Ted thought.

‘He never went to jail, so I don’t know what happened from the cops’ end, but at least I know I did the right thing. And I’m still here.’ He smiled at her as if to say, *Lucky for you*.

Ted wondered what the point of this story was. Was she supposed to applaud?

He took a swig of his wine. ‘He’s still a celebrity chef, and everyone thinks he’s Mr Nice Guy, but he’s bad news. You’ll know his name, but there’s no point asking. I’m not going to say.’

Ted couldn’t rouse any curiosity. She suspected Jarrod had fabricated the story and, besides, she had no interest in celebrity chefs. Every time you went online, some random was telling you how to sauté spinach.

Just then, a large alsatian passing their table bared its fangs, and Miss Marple emitted a low growl. Jarrod glanced down at her as if he’d forgotten she was there.

‘The little guy must be scared of that German shepherd.’

‘She’s female,’ Ted reminded him pleasantly, ‘and she’s not scared.’ This was the blackest mark against Jarrod yet. Since when would a dog called Miss Marple be male? And Miss Marple wasn’t scared of anything. ‘She’s just warning him to keep his distance.’

But Jarrod was nodding at a waitress who’d appeared with their meals.

‘Cheers,’ Jarrod said as she deposited a lump of lamb shanks in front of him.

The shocking sight of the bloody lamb’s heart on Giselle’s windscreen flashed into Ted’s mind, but she pushed the ugly image away. She braced herself for Jarrod’s second ‘self-discovery’ question, but he seemed to have shelved that subject for now.

‘You’re a beautiful lady.’

Ted attempted a flirtatious smile. ‘Thank you.’

Jarrod leaned across the table to look into her eyes. ‘I hope you let yourself own the power your beauty gives you.’

Was this guy for real? Ted didn’t derive power from her looks, she derived it from being a kickarse PI who’d recently solved her first murder. Not that it served her to share that with Jarrod.

‘I try to,’ she lied.

‘And I love your dress.’

‘Thanks.’

She’d bought this black silk halter-neck online from Zara especially for this covert job. She doubted she’d ever wear it again, but it was on sale, so that was a win. And at least it was tax deductible. Jarrod’s approval was vindicating her decision to ditch her usual outfit of jeans with a T-shirt and/or hoodie and sneakers. That would never have worked with a guy like him. He’d said in his Tinder profile that he was looking for a woman ‘who takes care of herself’, which everyone knew was code for ‘skinny and glamorous’. So, Ted had even applied some lipstick she’d bought from Chemist Warehouse and used a bit extra to rub into her cheeks. But that was as far as she was prepared to go.

‘You’re tiny,’ Jarrod said.

Typical. In spite of his BS about being a feminist, Jarrod clearly wanted a doll. No wonder he’d been attracted to

a ballerina. He'd probably wanted to pop her on top of a jewellery box (and a few other things) and watch her daintily twirl around.

Letting this probable stalker set the agenda was driving Ted crazy. It was time to start the investigating. 'So ... Have you met many other women on Tinder?'

Jarrold laughed. 'Are we going there already?'

'I guess we are.' Ted giggled.

Jarrold leaned back against his chair and revelled in her attention. His mousy-brown hair was shaved at the sides and floppy on top. Ted couldn't help noticing that the floppy bit hadn't budged, despite the stiff spring breeze. That must be some Trump-grade hairspray.

'I've met a few. I was seeing a model for a while, not that her career was relevant. I was attracted to her self-actualisation.'

Ha! Ted thought. *I'd be willing to bet her self-actualisation looked hot in a bikini.*

'And I dated a ballerina.'

Ted straightened. 'A ballerina? Wow.'

'She's a pro, she's in the Australian Ballet.'

'Oh my God, really? What's her name?'

'Giselle Tereiti.'

'Giselle? Beautiful name. And what happened with you guys?'

'It didn't work out. She wanted to take things to the next level, but she wasn't evolved enough for me. So, I cut off contact. It was the kindest thing.'

Ted nodded. Why would Jarrold need to lie if he wasn't Giselle's stalker? The evidence seemed to be adding up. All her synapses were screaming, *It's him!* She clutched at something else to say.

‘How are your lamb shanks?’

‘They’re excellent,’ Jarrod said. ‘And I know my meat, my old man’s a butcher.’

Ted watched him expertly dissect the lamb. ‘Your dad’s a butcher?’

‘Yeah, and I’m proud to own my humble origin story.’

So, Jarrod had lied about breaking up with Giselle, he had no alibi for last Saturday night, *and* he’d also been around offal his entire life – it made sense that he’d use a lamb’s heart to intimidate. For Ted the deal was now sealed, but she glanced down at Miss Marple for affirmation. Miss Marple’s acutely intelligent eyes narrowed, and she wagged her grey tail to the left in a classic canine expression of negativity. So they were on the same page, as always.

While Ted was contemplating what to do next, Jarrod reached over and took her hand. It happened so fast that it took her a second to react, and before she could do anything—

‘Ted!’

The voice was familiar, but out of context. Ted was still trying to place it when she turned to see Usma Ali, her warband leader from Swordcraft, the medieval battle game, where she usually spent her Saturday nights. Usma was at the tail end of a group leaving the packed restaurant. Ted hadn’t noticed her in the crowd.

‘Usma, hey!’

‘Hey, Ted. Hey, Miss Marple. Why aren’t you at Swordcraft?’

‘Look who’s talking.’

‘My sister’s birthday,’ Usma said. She looked down at Ted and Jarrod’s clasped hands and grinned. ‘I’m guessing this isn’t your brother.’

Ted laughed weakly. What if Usma blew her cover and outed her as a PI? Jarrod thought she was a real estate agent. But

luckily Jarrod maintained his tradition of only being interested in himself.

‘I’m definitely *not* her brother.’

He squeezed Ted’s hand and she wanted to puke. Usma knew her as a fierce warrior in their all-female Ice Elves warband, who left a trail of ‘dead’ combatants in her wake. She wasn’t the type who’d dump her warband for the sake of some guy, especially a guy like him.

‘This is Jarrod. Jarrod, this is my mate, Usma.’

Usma gave Ted a sly little smile. ‘Well, I’ll leave you to enjoy each other’s company.’

But I’m not enjoying it, Ted wanted to shout. *This is strictly work. I’m trying to take a toxic stalker off the streets.* But, instead, she was forced to say, ‘Awesome. See you at Swordcraft next week.’

‘Yeah, see ya then.’

Usma gave Ted another cheeky grin and sauntered off. Ted thought Jarrod would ask about Swordcraft, but it didn’t involve him, so why would he? She tried to disentangle her hand, but he was already squeezing it again.

‘Have I told you I’m developing a wellness app?’

Ted wanted to suffocate herself in her risotto. As she tried in vain to formulate an escape plan, Miss Marple trotted over to the water bowl that Trax left out for canine patrons. Ted watched distractedly as her dog lapped from the water. But when Miss Marple turned away from the bowl, she suddenly yelped. Ted felt a little kick of alarm.

‘Miss Marple?’

Miss Marple limped back to the table, her fluffy tail hanging bleakly between her legs.

‘Miss Marple! What’s happened? Are you okay?’

Ted pulled her hand from Jarrod's and crouched down beside her dog, who was now sitting with her front right paw lifted plaintively in the air. Ted gently took the paw in her hand, and Miss Marple yelped again.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it worse.' Ted straightened and grabbed her handbag.

'What's wrong with him?' Jarrod asked.

'She's a *she*, and I don't know,' Ted snapped. She could feel herself freaking out as she took in the mournful expression on Miss Marple's fluffy little white face and the vulnerable way her injured paw was dangling in the air. 'She must have twisted her leg or something. I hope she hasn't done an ACL. I'll have to take her to the emergency vet.'

'What, now? Can't you do it tomorrow?'

'She's in pain!' Ted threw some cash down on the table. 'Sorry about this—'

'Are you serious? At least give me your number before you go.'

Ted paused for a millisecond, but she was too concerned about Miss Marple to argue the point, and it was smart to have the stalker's contact details. They exchanged numbers, and then Ted scooped up Miss Marple and carried her out of the restaurant, weaving her way through the revellers and over the pedestrian bridge to Southbank.

Despite the circumstances, it felt lovely to cuddle her dog in her arms. Miss Marple was aloof by nature, and although she'd recently learned to accommodate occasional displays of affection, it wasn't an easy transition for her. Ted knew the feeling.

The second they were over the pedestrian bridge, Miss Marple started trying to wriggle free of Ted's embrace. Ted wasn't surprised, she must have reached her PDA threshold.

A Dance with Murder

‘You shouldn’t walk, you’ll make your leg worse.’

But Miss Marple wouldn’t take no for an answer, so Ted gently deposited her on the ground. To her amazement, Miss Marple started trotting along without the tiniest hint of a limp. Ted looked down at her, stunned, and Miss Marple looked back at her as if to say, *You wanted to get out of there, didn’t you?*

Ted laughed. Miss Marple was the best.

CHAPTER TWO

Ted was still frothing when she and Miss Marple arrived at her small SUV in the bowels of the Victorian Arts Centre carpark. She flung open the back door with an obsequious flourish.

‘Madam.’

Miss Marple leaped onto the seat, and Ted clipped her harness into the seatbelt lock.

‘You’ll find the chilled champagne in the bar fridge beside you, and this switch makes the disco ball rotate.’

Miss Marple seemed to appreciate the gag.

Ted slid behind the steering wheel. She felt elated, and she knew that wasn’t just down to Miss Marple’s excellent ruse. She was elated because she’d already ID’d Giselle’s stalker – and that meant she could soon deliver Jarrod to the cops and things would get back to normal with Spike. Well, the new normal. Whatever that turned out to be. She felt a rush of longing. Yikes.

Her phone rang, bringing her back to planet Earth. She checked the dash. Speak of the devil, it was Giselle. Ted was glad she could ease her client’s mind. She pressed Accept on the steering wheel as she exited the carpark.

‘Giselle, hey—’

‘He’s been in my house!’

Ted's heart skidded to a stop. 'What? Who?'

Giselle's voice was shrill. 'Who do you think? Jarrod!'

Jarroed? But how was that possible? Ted's brain was twisting itself into a pretzel as she turned left onto Southbank Boulevard.

'Hang on a sec – what are you saying?'

'He left another anonymous note and some flowers in my living room, *tonight*. I only dashed out for dinner for a couple of hours. He must have been watching the house! He broke in through the laundry window. There's glass all over the floor! And blood!'

'Blood?! Are you okay?'

'I'm fine!' Giselle shrieked unconvincingly down the line. 'No-one was home. The blood's the stalker's – he must have cut himself when he smashed the window.'

Oh my God. Ted's head was spinning. Jarrod couldn't have done this – he'd been with her. She was still trying to catch her breath as she pulled off the road.

'What does the note say? Don't touch it, just tell me what it says.'

'It says ...' Giselle's breath sounded ragged. 'It says ... *I'm sorry about the lamb's heart, I hope I didn't frighten you.*'

The nerve of the guy. Flames of rage licked at Ted's vital organs. Two cars beeped behind her, and she realised she was parked in a clearway.

'Just because I didn't want to go out with him again.' Giselle was weeping now. 'What's wrong with him?'

There was no point stalling. Ted ripped off the bandaid.

'It wasn't Jarrod.'

'What?!'

'I'm sorry, Giselle. It wasn't him. I've been with him for the past two hours. Jarrod's not your stalker.'

There was silence from the other end of the phone, until Giselle made a small mewling sound.

‘Then who is?’

Someone who has no qualms about violating your home, Ted thought. This was exactly the kind of escalation she’d warned Giselle about when she’d urged her to go to the cops. But Giselle had refused to involve the police, and she’d insisted on a non-disclosure agreement so Ted couldn’t involve them either. For Giselle’s own safety, Ted had to make her see sense.

‘Giselle, this is break and enter! Who knows what he would have done to you if you were there. I can’t state this strongly enough – you *have to* go to the police.’

‘No. I don’t want it getting back to my ex. Spike’s a detective, remember? I thought you said you knew him.’

Ted squirmed. She wondered when she should reveal to Giselle that she knew Spike a lot better than she’d let on. She decided that time wasn’t now.

‘Er yeah, I know him a bit—’

‘Well, he already thinks I’m a flake, and he’d freak out about the kids.’

‘But your kids are safe. Aren’t they staying with him?’

‘Yes, and they’re sleeping at his mum’s tonight. I told him rehearsals are getting intense, so they’re with him for a couple of weeks.’

‘Okay, good,’ Ted said. ‘So, *they’re* safe, but what about *you*? I don’t want to alarm you, but this could escalate even further. And he’s your kids’ father, you can’t keep him out of the loop forever.’

There was a small silence on the other end, and Ted suspected she’d found a chink in Giselle’s armour. Another car beeped behind her.

‘All right,’ Giselle acquiesced, ‘let’s give it a week. If you haven’t found my stalker by next Saturday, I’ll tell my ex.’

‘You promise?’

‘I promise.’

‘Okay, deal.’

Phew. Ted felt a load lift, although she hoped the agreement would prove academic. She was sure she could nail this snake within a week – she just needed a clue about who he was.

She careered across two lanes of traffic and flicked on her right blinker. ‘Sit tight and don’t touch anything, I’m coming straight over.’

‘Okay ...’

‘And in the meantime, I need you to think hard about who else it could be. Rack your brain, all right?’

‘I will.’ Giselle sniffled and hung up.

The arrow in front of Ted flashed green. She turned right onto St Kilda Road, away from the box-like National Gallery of Victoria and the Arts Centre next door that was always teeming with eclectic patrons. She was still reeling. While she’d been wasting her time with Jarrod Beasley, the real stalker had struck undetected because – of course – Giselle’s security cameras weren’t being installed until Monday.

Ted lowered the left rear window, and Miss Marple stood on her back paws and stuck out her head. In the mirror, Ted could see her miniature schnauzer’s floppy ears flapping in the night breeze.

When she thought about it, Jarrod lying about breaking it off with Giselle was only evidence of an immature, bruised ego. And it seemed he was telling the truth about being at home alone last Saturday night. Why had she been so quick to jump to conclusions?

As if she didn't know. She'd wanted this case over with so she could start things with Spike. Ted felt appalled with herself. So now she was putting romance ahead of her investigations? *Get it together.*

Twenty minutes later, she pulled up outside Giselle's house.

It was an Aussie classic, a ubiquitous 1970s brick box. An apricot-coloured cat was curled in a plush ball on the front porch. Cats were Miss Marple's Kryptonite, so Ted took a pig's ear from the glove box and reached over to the back seat. Miss Marple hadn't noticed the cat – her eyes were fixed like lasers on the pig's ear.

'You stay here, I won't be long.'

But Miss Marple wasn't listening, she was already gobbling the ear.

Ted climbed out of the car. As she headed through Giselle's front gate and started up the path, she felt her step falter. This was the home where Giselle and Spike had been (presumably) blissful newlyweds, and where they'd conceived their three little girls. The thought put Ted on edge, but she told herself to snap out of it.

Giselle appeared at the front door. She was wearing jeans and a fitted top that accentuated her flawless skin, and her long dark hair was flowing in waves around her shoulders.

'Ted, thank God!'

'How are you doing? Are you okay?'

'Of course I'm not.' Giselle said as if it was a dumb question, and Ted had to admit she had a point. She led Ted through the surprisingly untidy house, into a living room filled with glitter, dolls, tutus, My Little Ponies and such.

It looks like a packet of marshmallows exploded in here, Ted thought. But then she noticed a tiny Western Bulldogs AFL

jersey, a soccer ball and a toy truck among all the princess stuff. So, one of Giselle's little girls was less into sparkles and pink, and more like Ted had been as a kid.

'There they are,' Giselle said shrilly. She was pointing to a large bunch of Oriental lilies as though they might jump up and strangle her.

Ted sprinted to the coffee table and looked down at the note, written in the same hand as the earlier one, with those same large looping t's.

I'm sorry about the lamb's heart, I hope I didn't frighten you.
Psycho!

Ted took photos of the scene from several angles and did the same in the laundry, where droplets of blood were spattered on the floor with the shattered window glass. It wasn't a lot of blood, enough for the stalker to have cut his hand. Which gave Ted a clue to look for, if only she could work out where to look.

They retreated to the kitchen, and Giselle said out of nowhere, 'If it wasn't Jarrod, it must have been Tommy.'

'Tommy?'

'Yes, Tommy Braithwaite.'

Ted was surprised by the certainty in Giselle's voice.

'Who's Tommy Braithwaite? You've never mentioned a Tommy Braithwaite.'

'Why would I? He wears drawstring pants.'

Er, what? Ted couldn't make hide nor hair out of that, but now didn't seem the time to pursue it. Giselle was leaning against the kitchen bench, drained of colour. She looked as if the slightest breeze could topple her over.

'I think you need to sit,' Ted said.

Giselle nodded wanly and sank onto a dining chair. Ted put on the kettle and made tea. She set down a Peppa Pig mug in

front of Giselle and removed a fake feather boa from a chair and sat.

‘Tell me about this Tommy Braithwaite.’

Giselle sighed worriedly. ‘He works at Mother Earth, where I buy my organic groceries.’

‘Okay. And what makes you think it could be him?’

‘He’s into wellness, and he’s always making suggestions about the best bone broths. Sometimes I order online, and he does the deliveries, so he knows this address. And he’s a bit *too* friendly, you know? He asks about ballet way too much.’

Ted considered Giselle. With her air of fragility, she was probably a magnet for dudes with a saviour complex.

‘Have there been any specific incidents of concern?’

‘Yes. A couple of weeks ago he turned up here after my groceries had been delivered, because I’d forgotten to order my cinnamon toothpaste. *I* didn’t even know I’d forgotten! He knows my order off by heart. Is it just me, or is that a bit creepy?’

Ted was still trying to process the cinnamon toothpaste.

‘Ted?’

‘Ah, yeah. That does seem a bit creepy. And does Tommy fit the physical description of the guy in the photos?’

‘Yeah. He’s the same height and build as Jarrod.’

Ted wanted to throw her hands in the air. Why was she only hearing about him now?

‘I wish you’d mentioned Tommy sooner.’

‘But *you* convinced me it was Jarrod.’

Ted thought that was a bit rich, considering she’d pressed Giselle for other names, and Giselle had only come up with Jarrod’s. She reminded herself that her client was under a lot of stress.

‘Plus,’ Giselle added, ‘like I said, he wears sustainable drawstring pants. And he’s got dreadlocks. He’s kind of alternative.’

‘You mean he’s a hippie?’

‘Yeah. And I didn’t think hippies did things like this.’

‘Don’t count on it,’ Ted said. She knew from experience that people were all kinds of weird, so why should hippies be any different? ‘His dreadlocks could have been hidden by the hood, and the guy with the lamb’s heart was wearing Cariumas, remember? They’re a sustainable brand, that’d fit with his ethos.’ Ted could feel her nerve ends prickling with adrenaline. ‘I’ll pay Tommy a visit at Mother Earth on Monday morning and see if he’s got cuts on his hands.’

Giselle stared plaintively at Ted across the table. ‘I hope it’s him. I don’t know how much more I can take ... It’s so scary dealing with this all alone.’

‘You’re not alone,’ Ted comforted her. ‘I’m in your corner.’

‘I meant without my husband,’ Giselle said. ‘But I had to end it, the marriage wasn’t working.’ She fixed Ted with her hooded steel-grey eyes and sighed fretfully. ‘What is it with the world? Why is it so hard to sustain relationships?’

Ted had no idea, having spent the bulk of her adult life actively avoiding relationships that had any hope of going the distance.

CHAPTER THREE

It was almost midnight when Ted turned right from Burnley Street into Victoria Street in inner-city Richmond. She stopped briefly at a pocket-sized park, Williams Reserve, so Miss Marple could do her thing. The tree-lined park was eerie in the darkness, but Ted was too preoccupied to be spooked.

She knew she couldn't blame Giselle entirely for pinning the stalking on Jarrod Beasley so quickly.

'It's my fault too,' she said to Miss Marple. 'I should have pushed Giselle harder to come up with other potential names.'

Miss Marple looked at her as if to say, *Don't beat yourself up*. But that was easy for her to say. To Ted's knowledge, Miss Marple had never allowed her personal feelings to intrude on a case.

Ted had stayed at Giselle's place to clean up the glass and drops of blood, and she'd waited until an emergency window repair was underway and Giselle's brother James had arrived to spend the night. Before she left, she'd briefly canvassed the street, but as she'd expected, no-one had seen the break-in. Giselle's laundry window wasn't visible from the street and, besides, it was a Saturday night and most of her elderly neighbours had been glued to *Death in Paradise* on the ABC.

Miss Marple finished her ablutions and they made their way out of the tiny park and back to the car. As Victoria Street widened into a boulevard, the monolithic Ikea store and Victoria Gardens Shopping Centre appeared ahead. Ted's apartment building was on the left, across the road from Victoria Gardens, near the iconic Skipping Girl Vinegar sign that was sadly no longer illuminated. It wasn't until she'd almost arrived at the building that she noticed a dirty old ute parked out the front. Her heart leaped. As she got closer, she could see a guy's broad shoulders outlined in the driver's seat, and a mop of curly, crazy hair hitting the ute's ceiling.

Spike!

A huge fit Māori man, shambolic smart-arse Spike Tereiti was the standout warrior in the 'Sons of Thor' Viking warband, and Ted's mock nemesis at Swordcraft. He was also a homicide detective and, inconveniently, Giselle's ex! Somehow, Ted and Spike had recently ended up solving a murder together. And after Swordcraft last Saturday night, Ted had *almost* taken him home.

Something had suddenly changed within her and Ted wasn't sure what it was, until she realised she was smiling. But she had to be professional. Was it wise, or even ethical, to engage with Spike in the circumstances? She decided to keep driving around the corner and enter her carpark through the rear. But Spike's car door had just opened, and he was unfolding his gargantuan body out of the ute. And now he was waving. He'd seen her. Ted had no choice but to pull over.

She brought her small SUV to a stop behind the ute, opening Miss Marple's door from the inside so she could regain her flimsy composure while her dog greeted Spike. Miss Marple bolted over to him, jumping up and down excitedly while he crouched to pat her.

‘Miss Marple! Great to see you.’

Spike treated Miss Marple with a respect not often afforded to miniature schnauzers, and because of that he’d gained entry into the tiny circle of humans whom she considered her equal.

Ted climbed out of the car and attempted her usual swagger, which had a high degree of difficulty in the strappy sandals she was wearing. Spike straightened and smiled down at her. It had only been a week, but she’d forgotten how wide his smile was. It was almost too wide for his face, but it worked. She felt all fluttery in her chest, so she dialled up the kickarse.

‘What are *you* doing here?’

Spike laughed his warm gravelly laugh. ‘Friendly as ever. I’m staying at Mitch’s place in Collingwood tonight.’

‘Yeah?’ Ted pointed behind her. ‘Collingwood’s that way.’

Spike laughed again, and his brown eyes travelled over her. ‘You look nice.’

For a second Ted was robbed of speech, so she pretended to cough. She rallied quickly.

‘What do you want?’

‘You didn’t come to Swordcraft tonight.’

‘Didn’t I? Thanks for letting me know.’

Ha! Ted was enjoying this already. If she couldn’t strike Spike with her foam sword like she did at Swordcraft, why not land a few blows with banter instead?

Spike grinned.

‘Do you try to be a pain in the arse, or does it come naturally? Rhetorical question.’

Ted laughed, but the moment was cruelled by a stab of guilt. Two minutes after she’d accepted Giselle’s case, she’d discovered the man she’d almost taken home just an hour before was Giselle’s ex-husband. What were the odds? This complicated

matters, but high-stakes cases rarely came EBI's way, and Ted had figured she could still take the gig as long as she came clean – *ish*. She'd told Giselle she knew Spike from Swordcraft, making it sound as if he was a vague acquaintance, which would have been true six months ago. And what was six months, in the scheme of things?

Giselle hadn't seemed too perturbed that Ted knew Spike, but she'd been stunned that a tiny woman like Ted would do battle with burly guys like him.

'My size can be a tactical advantage,' Ted had assured her.

'If you say so,' Giselle had replied dubiously. 'Regardless, I *really* don't want Spike to know about this.'

And so here Ted was a week later, complicit in a serious secret that Spike had every right to know. It was why she'd been so one-eyed about nailing Jarrod, so she could close the case before Spike found out she was lying to him.

'To tell the truth ...' Spike said.

'To tell the truth, what?'

He hesitated. Ted was prepping for the next mock insult, but he turned the tables on her by being sincere.

'I guess I wanted to make sure you didn't stay away from Swordcraft 'cause you're still mad at me about Maven. I tried my best.'

Ted felt a little clutch in her chest as she adjusted to the change in direction. 'I know you did.' She knew it wasn't Spike's fault that his homicide boss, Chief Inspector Craig Maven, had refused to publicly credit EBI for the murder she'd solved recently, even if she'd wanted to blame Spike at the time. 'I'm not mad at you.'

'Cool. So I haven't blown it then? You'll be back at Swordcraft?'

‘Yeah, I’ll be back at Swordcraft next Saturday, and I’ll beat the crap out of *you*.’

Spike laughed loudly. ‘In your dreams. It’s like swotting a fly.’

Ted snorted, but privately she wondered whether she *would* be back next Saturday. Or would she still be trying to catch the stalker? What if she hadn’t nailed Tommy Braithwaite or anyone else by then? According to their deal, Giselle would have to tell Spike about the stalker and Ted’s involvement. He’d probably be too furious with her to talk to her, maybe ever again. She felt sick.

‘But I tell you what,’ Spike was saying, oblivious, ‘after I’ve thrashed you, I’ll shout you a consolation drink at the pub.’

Ted heard the unspoken bit at the end: *And we’ll go home together and start something*. It made her feel a little flutter of panic. She liked to think she’d conquered the intimacy issues that had messed with her life since her mum died, but, really, who was she kidding?

‘I know you’ve been through a lot with your mum and everything,’ Spike said as if he were some kind of mind reader. His teasing tone had disappeared, he was gentle and empathetic. ‘If you’re not up for getting involved with anyone for a while, I can wait. I guess I just want to know ... if there’s anyone, will it be me?’

Ted stopped in her tracks. He liked her that much? She was touched by Spike’s willingness to make himself vulnerable, and she knew the least she could do was respond in kind.

‘I’ve always had lousy taste in men, so yeah, it’ll be you.’ She’d have to work on her vulnerability.

But Spike was undeterred. ‘Excellent.’

Ted was transfixed by his smile again. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, and that made her want to run a mile. Luckily, Miss Marple’s snout was pressing against her knee.

‘Sorry, Miss Marple. I hear you.’ Ted turned back to Spike. ‘She’s tired, it’s been a long day.’

Spike nodded understandingly. Ted could tell he was hoping she’d invite him up, but she could also tell that he knew she wouldn’t. They said their goodbyes and he climbed back into his dirty ute. As the ute pulled away from the kerb, she could already feel herself missing him. Which felt both scary and strangely nice. She climbed back into her car with Miss Marple and they drove to the underground carpark, then they caught the lift up to the fourteenth floor and headed down the corridor to 1421, Ted’s small apartment. They went straight into the tiled kitchen, and Ted gave Miss Marple a late-night snack of kibble.

She took the last Corona from her fridge and plonked herself down on a fold-up chair in her living room. The apartment was still in a mess after her former ‘friend with benefits’, Joel, repossessed the sofa he’d loaned her, and a violent embezzler had ransacked the place in a fruitless search for hidden evidence. Both on the same day! Ted supposed she should buy a sofa, but she hadn’t got around to it yet. Which was crazy, considering Ikea was literally across the road. She glanced briefly out her floor-to-ceiling windows and saw the Swedish megastore framed before the neon city skyline. She had too much other stuff to do, she’d order a new sofa online. Sometime. A rack of washing had been hanging out on the balcony for a couple of days, and she made a mental note to bring it inside.

She drank half the beer and realised she didn’t want the rest. She went into her bedroom with Miss Marple, who flopped into her own bed on the floor next to Ted’s and promptly fell asleep in a flurry of little snores. Ted brushed her teeth and climbed into bed. It had been such a huge day, she was expecting to fall straight to sleep. But, instead, she found herself consumed by

wistful thoughts of Spike and his mop of messy hair squashed under his Sons of Thor Viking helmet. She thought about her Swordcraft Ice Elf outfit of plastic elf ears and her long ice-blue skirt and pauldron. It was so much fun going mano-a-womano against Spike with their foam swords. They feinted, weaved and blocked while swapping smart-arse sledges, all while hundreds of goblins, elves, Vikings, knights and other fantasy characters lay 'deceased' on the battlefield all around them.

Last weekend, the momentum of their battle had kept building and building, until Spike had given an almighty thrust and she'd met his sword with hers. The battle had climaxed as they'd both struck each other under their armour, and then they'd fallen to the ground and lain on their backs beside each other, panting, as the crowd cheered. It was awesome.

Ted threw back the doona. She was hardly going to fall asleep thinking about stuff like this! But it was weird how she and Spike's playful sledging on the Swordcraft battlefield had somehow evolved into something else. Or at least, it had been about to, before Giselle materialised. And then Ted had allowed her feelings for Spike to compromise her professionalism. She'd always prided herself on casting her net wide but in this instance her focus had been way too narrow. Had she made a mistake, taking Spike's ex-wife's case? But a successful outcome on a stalking investigation was bound to bring in a lot of new business. Sadly, there was no shortage of creeps targeting vulnerable women.

Ted's brain took a sudden detour, and she found herself thinking of her beloved older sister Roberta, 'Bob', whose vulnerability had been targeted by creeps more times than Ted could count. At least poor Bob had never been stalked, although she'd recently been caught up in a crazy catfishing

scam that had almost cost her her life. Ted's blood still ran cold when she thought about what could have happened if she and Miss Marple hadn't arrived on the scene with seconds to spare.

Bob was seeing someone new now, and she'd already laid her heart bare again. That's who Bob was, and that was why Ted loved her, but it was also why she worried herself sick. If only Bob would learn to take a step back and protect herself just a little bit. But she was crazy about this new guy, Raj. Ted had never seen her sister so happy.

It terrified her.