

Praise for *Where the Truth Lies*

‘A gritty tale full of twists, *Where the Truth Lies* is a page turner packed with compelling characters. An exciting new voice in Australian crime fiction.’

**Jane Harper, author of *The Dry*, *Force of Nature*,
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‘A complex and compelling debut that’s impossible to put down!’

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‘A clever, explosive thriller that twists and turns through Melbourne’s gritty underside, with complex characters and chilling secrets at its core.’

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‘You will be spellbound . . . Death comes vividly to life in news reporter Chrissie O’Brian’s chilling search for *Where the Truth Lies*.’

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Aoife Clifford, author of *Second Sight*

‘Chrissie O’Brian is a terrific new character in the crime fiction pantheon. Broken, tenacious and uncompromising.’

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WHERE THE TRUTH LIES

KARINA KILMORE



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For my one and only

PROLOGUE

She was slipping away. The further she fell, the closer the clouds seemed to come. Wispy transparent slipstreams of white. *Cirrus*. Pain smashed her head. *Floating*. Her life snapped as her body folded in two. But still she hung in the big city sky, like a seagull in an updraft. She could smell the harbour, feel the winter sun. The pain began to ease. *Going home*. Hands lifting her. False hands. Falling again, down through metal and men and power, to regret.

CHAPTER 1

Gulls screamed and wheeled, diving around the towering metal cranes that stood as a silent guard between the land and the sea. Tall and proud, they stretched almost through the blanket of grey that hid the morning sky. The cranes' splayed feet set solid, crucified by rusty bolts and rails to the concrete wharves.

The rain had stopped but droplets still hung from the wire security fences, a glitter of water shook loose with each gust of wind. Chrissie pulled her coat tight, not just from the cold but also to cushion the memory. Childhood. Her grandfather. The rumble of trucks vibrating through her feet, the constant whistles and sirens of caution, the shouts and cheers of working men. It was the same in every port.

The picket in front of the main gates had been going all night. Portable generators chugged, tent canopies were tightened,

digital sign boards reprogrammed with new messages: 'Safety first'. 'People not profits'. There were about forty men, some with drooping banners held loosely in tired hands, others with slogans stretched tight across t-shirts on strong chests and pot bellies alike. Chrissie had been there for about an hour, still and unnoticed off to the side, leaning against a car. She could see the anger as she watched the men, it wafted off them like steam.

Finally, she stood straight, took a slow deep breath, clenched her jaw and stepped into their midst.

They quickly jostled around, a hand pulled on her shoulder from behind and spun her around.

'You're with that right-wing lot. The fake news brigade,' he said as he yanked on her media ID tag. Outrage in his eyes. Spittle in her face.

Another tapped her notebook so hard it almost fell to the damp gravel but her fingers kept a thin grasp on the spiralbound pages. It was her red cross of neutrality. Her shield.

'How you going to twist this one, then?' the big mouth added. Chrissie pulled the notebook to her chest and took a step back then lifted her face to them.

'Why haven't you been down here before this?' A new voice.

'No celebrities or footy stars, that's why. Bloody workers don't rate! Just another story too boring for the likes of you.'

But it wasn't just another story. The wharves had once been part of Chrissie's life, her old life. She had been following the snippets of information about the picket from a distance; it was not her round, it was no one's round, *The Argus* had other priorities. But like these men, she knew this change would be

their last. Ghost ships already roamed the oceans, automated ships with just a handful of crew. Ghost wharves were next.

Chrissie stood her ground among the men and did her job. She listened. Centuries of shared tradition between ships and men were at an end. The wharf was being automated, workers were no longer needed. The media, too, she knew, faced a godless future. Algorithms dictated assignments, traditional news judgement now optional.

The dispute had been going for almost six months. The news cycle had long moved on, but she had gone straight to the wharf on instinct this morning and slowly worked her way through the men and their need to be heard. Perhaps she had been drawn by the memories. Perhaps she had come to test her resolve to block out the past. Or maybe it was just a story that needed to be told.

‘Here she is,’ someone called as a grey four-wheel drive pulled up. The passenger door opened before it even came to a stop. Chrissie guessed who it was as the picketers sent up a round of cheers and whistles, moving forward in a good-hearted surge. Helen Carter, the maritime union’s scrap-loving state boss. Chrissie had only seen photos and footage of her until now: shouting the odds at rallies, walking out of negotiations, slamming her fist at news conferences. She would stop at nothing for her members.

In person, Carter was more rumpled than her TV image. Her shirt threatened to burst its buttons as she leaned back to give her pants a much-needed hitch, a big mop of grey curls bounced around her face. Chrissie knew Carter’s reputation. A ball breaker, a pub fighter. Hel on a bike. Hel the dyke. She had earned her passage through the union the hard way. At forty-two she was at the top of her game.

The men soon pointed Chrissie out and Carter hitched again and started to roll towards her.

‘Hi, Helen. Chris O’Brian, *The Argus*.’ She took the greeting up to the union boss. They had spoken on the phone just yesterday about the latest injury, a man’s legs crushed.

‘Giddyay, nice to see you here.’ Carter’s hangdog face wrinkled upwards, her eyebrows offered a warm welcome. But then she pounced. ‘I barely noticed your piece in the paper this morning. Thought you could have made more of it.’ She tilted her head back. ‘Dangerous shit going on down here, people’s lives.’ Her voice a coarse mixture of highs and lows.

Chrissie looked down. She had checked the story early in the morning, it had been slashed. The quotes from Carter deleted, the background to the dispute gone. Now it was just a handful of words at the bottom of a page, a few paragraphs on the website, a tweet to help meet her quota for the day.

‘I’m sorry. No space. But this is good timing.’ Chrissie stepped closer. The noise around her was ramping up, the men were cheering as the morning trucks started to rumble through the wharf gates. Her palms started to itch. ‘I’m keen to do something in-depth about the docks. A behind-the-scenes piece.’ Carter maintained a smile but it came with a pause. *She wants an out*. ‘I’m happy to be steered by you,’ Chrissie added. ‘What do you think are the issues for a modern workforce? How many generations have you still got working here?’ Chrissie switched to automatic, giving COQ, as her old boss would say. Control. Opinion. Question. Let them think they’re in control. Encourage an opinion. End on a question.

A truck horn blasted extra loud but it was a sudden percussion of air brakes that forced Chrissie’s hands over her ears. *Breathe*.

The picketers lifted their clicker rattles high in the air and spun them loudly in response. Panic rising. Chants: 'Safety first. Safety first.' She shook her head but it only made the sounds fade in and out on a sickening wave.

'Okay, why not?' Carter finally replied. 'Yeah, let's do that . . . you all right?'

Chrissie fanned herself with her notebook. *Got to get out of here.*

'Tail end of a flu.' She feigned a cough. 'I'll be in touch, thanks. I'm late and I'm busting.' She indicated towards the toilet block at the tram depot and rushed off. She felt Carter's eyes on her but didn't turn back.

Safely away, now she walked across the ancient metal pedestrian bridge that linked the sea to the city, high above the rail lines. Chrissie gave a last look back at the wharves and the solid grey clouds, *stratus*, before she was swallowed by the deep skyless valleys of the city's office towers.

CHAPTER 2

‘O’Brian! What the hell’s going on with this wharf piece? Supposed to be a news story, not a bloody novel. Cut it back. O’Brian!’

Chrissie jumped up and glared across the newsroom. Dare she argue back to the news director, again? She walked towards him, sidestepping waste paper bins and navigating crowded desks, all eyes on her. She swallowed, lifted her chin.

‘Harry, it’s worth the space. The wharf’s hot news. Everyone’s got a piece of this story, the strike, the city, big business. Whole place is a fire cracker.’

‘Forget it.’ He held up his hand to silence her, a glimmer of white where a wedding ring once was. ‘It’s me who decides. You’ve got 170 words. Get rid of the fluff.’

Chrissie threw her hands up and turned back. *A short show tonight, folks*, she thought as the heads popped back down behind

their partitions. They had become used to her being hauled over the coals; they probably even looked forward to it.

She gave her colleague James a look and slammed her hand across the desk as she sank hard on her chair.

‘Why do you bother?’ James asked quietly. ‘How many times, Chrissie? Play by Harry’s rules or end up in the dog house.’

‘Woof, woof!’

He was right of course. She stared at the screen, her hands curled and ready on the keyboard but unable to type. Harry’s dismissal had got to her. She flicked back and forth through her notebook.

The newsroom was loud. People, desks, tables and partitions were jammed into every spot. Journos, subs, producers, editors, assistants, they all worked on top of each other. Televisions blazed different channels on every wall, radio stations were monitored and constantly tuned in and out, phones rang nonstop.

The noise didn’t usually bother Chrissie but tonight she couldn’t shut it out. She shook her head to clear her thoughts but it only heightened her senses. Voices grew shriller while the thumping bass of the newsroom amped up even more. Two people argued at a sub’s desk, the chief of staff shouted for copy, a mobile phone rang, over and over, the same irritating tune. And all the time Harry prowled.

‘Do you want me to do it?’ James broke her thoughts. ‘I’ll cut it for you.’

She smiled. Her one friend since she’d arrived at *The Argus* a year ago. Despite being from an old Melbourne family, a toff slumming it with the ordinary folk, he seemed genuine. He’d latched on to Chrissie from day one, god knew why. Perhaps the

stray dog syndrome. He'd thrown her a lifeline amid a storm of resentment. A year later, he still shielded her from some of it. He invited her to drinks when the others didn't. He put her forward to work on joint projects. He even signed her name on farewell and baby cards when no one passed her the envelope.

In turn, Chrissie toughened him up. Showed him how to go in for difficult questions, how to hit a story hard and run with it. James was already a good journo but he was too polite. He had the best contacts in the city, 'access all areas', but his natural instinct was to politely step back.

'Nah, I'm okay. Just need to shake Harry off. His pacing is doing my head in. Cup of tea, that'll fix it.'

'Hey, you're in Melbourne now, remember? Coffee capital of the world,' James called after her.

Coffee was the last thing she needed for her jangled nerves, now or ever. Chrissie walked straight past the kitchen and into the bathroom. She locked one of the cubicles and leaned against the grey laminate. She stared at the hook on the back of the door, anything to avoid another inspection of the grubby walls and the cracked lino. Even in here the noise buzzed in her ears. Her skin itched. Sometimes her medication made her extra sensitive, on edge. But so too did Harry. The meds she could tinker with, adjust her dose to slow things down. Harry was constant. There was no turning him down.

He'd resented her being hired at a time when he had to let other staff go. He'd said as much on her first day, a withering put-down loud enough for everyone to overhear.

Chrissie unlocked the cubicle and stood over the basin. She splashed cold water over her face, two hands working to cup it

over her nose and mouth, her eyes, her forehead, as she held her breath for as long as possible. She looked into the mottled mirror. Dark shoulder-length hair plastered around her neck as water dripped inside her collar. People had told her that she had a strong face, beautiful even, but she could never see it. Intense blue eyes framed by thick black lashes and ruffled eyebrows, despite her almost thirty years her nose still had the evidence of a childhood sprinkled with freckles. She saw only ugly in the cracked reflection. The fluorescent light hollowed her cheeks and greyed her pallor. Fractured, inside and out.

She practised in the mirror to set her mouth to a determined grin. 'Stuff him!' she said to the reflection, then walked back to the newsroom. She dropped a teabag in a mug, filling it from the boiling tap. What was this stuff? 'Essence of tea'. Not even real tea anymore. When she neared the main news desk she slowed her walk and absently dunked the teabag as she passed Harry. *That'll piss him off.*

Chrissie had thrown herself into work that morning and as usual she ran too hard. The stories became too important. She was always determined to outdo her rivals. Different angles, extra comments, paint a bigger picture. She had just one speed at work, full throttle. Now, in this new job, she had to work even harder to prove herself. Tonight, with another story spitefully rejected, she hated that she cared so much. It's just a job; just another story, she chided herself as she deleted line after line of type.

CHAPTER 3

‘Who’s for a drink? Chrissie, you finished?’ James flashed his best grin. Mid-thirties, he still had his twelve-year-old face, cheeky and privileged, unlined by the hardship that wealth had allowed him to avoid. James was a ‘lucky’ journo, Chrissie had realised soon after arriving at *The Argus*. He was good, but his success had been from luck more than skill. He often had trouble with his social filter. He could be side-tracked to think that someone was untrustworthy because they lacked his social niceties, the polite practices that were ingrained in him.

Chrissie sometimes wondered why he even wanted to be a journalist. The pay was lousy and the kudos was dubious, yet silver-tails had always been drawn to the job. The first time Chrissie had met James, she thought he looked out of place in the newsroom. He didn’t move quite fast enough; wasn’t hungry enough.

His appearance, too, said it all, even though he tried to keep it low key. His handmade shoes and no-label clothes stood out, even his watch, a see-through Hublot, a brand Chrissie had only seen in glossy magazines. A timepiece, he called it.

‘A present from my fiancée,’ he had explained when Chrissie first eyed the watch. ‘And yes, I know, she could have bought a small Pacific island for the same price.’ To entertain her, he had slipped the watch off and had made Chrissie try it on. They had laughed about it ever since. It had become a running joke and now he regularly turned and asked if she wanted to know the time, shaking his ‘nude’ Hublot at her.

At first Chrissie was wary; most at *The Argus* had given her a frosty welcome. But James was easy to like, unconventional in a conservative way. He made her laugh. Unlike Chrissie, he wasn’t competitive: another reason she liked him. And he was popular, despite his background or maybe because of it. He was the office toff. The ‘thar thar thar’ Melbourne Club footy supporter. And importantly, for Chrissie, he knew how to handle Harry.

‘Harry’s a good man in a bad way. It could happen to any of us,’ he had said once after Harry had doled out another public dressing-down. His comment cemented her liking for him. Not because it excused Harry but unbeknown to James the description could just as easily apply to her. Yet as the months went by she realised James was too forgiving, in both his assessment of Harry and his approach to stories. His upbringing had meant a life of open doors. In turn, he didn’t know how to make trouble. He avoided controversy. Not a good trait for a journalist, Chrissie decided. He preferred the easy route.

But somehow, she appeared to be James’s project. He refused

to accept her excuses for not having a drink after work. Introduced her to his contacts. Insisted on bringing her treats from his favourite bakery for lunch or an afternoon snack. He was like a giant golden Labrador, Chrissie thought, always bounding up to her with a big smile.

Despite the open offer it was just the two of them that headed off for a drink tonight. Chrissie pretended not to notice sideways looks as they left. Rumours of more redundancies had started up again and so had the resentment towards her.

They walked a few blocks, their coats buttoned but not so cold as to make them hurry. The weather had started to turn as the last of Melbourne's winter retreated. New leaves had already sprouted on the plane trees. Chrissie kept up with James's long stride. Her hands pushed deep into her pockets, head tilted down, she was used to walking fast.

A handful of people were in the bar. It was a bit swankier than their usual watering hole. Gina, James's fiancée, was already at a table sipping a pale-yellow wine. She smiled and stood to give them both a hug. Chrissie reluctantly accepted Gina's huggy ways.

Most of Panama's regulars were corporate types, lawyers like Gina, accountants, traders. Unlike Chrissie in her black pants, white t-shirt and black blazer, not quite a suit, Gina fitted in perfectly with her smart tailoring.

They made a good-looking couple, Chrissie thought. Like James, Gina had tucked Chrissie into her life quickly and easily, even though Chrissie preferred to keep her distance. They would feel betrayed if they ever found out about her.

Chrissie started to talk about Harry but Gina skilfully interrupted.

‘You know he’s a jerk. I know he’s a jerk. So please, let’s have a fucking jerk-free night,’ Gina said. Her Californian accent was still a novelty to Chrissie. Gina’s swearing didn’t fit in with her sweet-mouthed image and she expertly rationed it for maximum impact.

They chatted easily as they filled Chrissie in on their oddball families. Gina’s parents were arriving within weeks for their wedding, along with a bevy of other crazy US relatives. James’s home-grown Toorak pedigree had been exaggerated over the years to become Melbourne elite. Both of their backgrounds were a dramatic contrast to Chrissie’s puddle-splashing rural New Zealand childhood.

Just as the three were about to call it quits, the doors pushed open and Harry bowled in with one of the night editors. His mean walk, straight to the bar, signalled his sour mood.

Chrissie immediately turned her back and slunk lower in her seat.

‘I know how this is going to end,’ she said and started to gather her things.

James had seen how this had played out before too and nodded. But Gina’s striking looks always grabbed people’s attention, including Harry’s now as he scanned their table.

‘Hey James,’ Harry guffawed, ‘perhaps you’d like to introduce me to your blonde friend here?’ He put a clumsy hand on Gina’s shoulder.

James stood instantly. ‘Harry, this is Gina, my fiancée. You’ve met before, actually.’

Gina blasted him with her brightest smile as she expertly brushed his hand away.

‘I hope you’re feeling better next time we meet,’ she said to Harry in her slow lilt and began ushering Chrissie away from the table.

‘Come on, Harry, you’re out of line,’ Chrissie heard James say and she risked a look backwards. ‘I mean with Chrissie too. It’s getting out of hand –’

‘James, you think you know everything, but you don’t know shit!’

Harry slammed his hand on the table. The empty glasses jumped and thudded.

‘You don’t know *shit*,’ he repeated, pointing his finger in James’s face. Then he turned and stormed back to the bar.

CHAPTER 4

The trip home that night passed in a blur of graffiti until Chrissie got off at North Richmond station, oblivious to the seedy surroundings.

When she'd first moved in, she hadn't realised how deep the problems in the area were but the cheap rent and the quick commute to *The Argus* were drawcards. Close enough even to walk through the clean calm streets of East Melbourne, passing the suburb's historic iron lace facades and balconies, every front garden a manicured treat. Then across the grand English-style parks that breathed clean air into the city and buffered the city from the inner east. The contrast between the cramped threat-filled pockets of Richmond and the genteel wealth of East Melbourne always made her pause.

Now, walking through the neon and noise of Victoria Street and into the alleys, the addicts, dirty streets and busted lights

meant nothing to her. She'd stopped thinking about it. A year on, she knew it was no accident she'd ended up in Richmond. It was another way to take risks with her life. Instead of trying to creep timid and unseen through the streets, she had taught herself to walk without fear.

But she had learned the hard way. At first the creeps just watched, tried to freak her out. They probably couldn't believe their luck, a weak fool in the wrong place. They snapped the thin handle of her computer case in a snatch-and-run the first time. The next time they grabbed her leather jacket, slung over her arm.

During the first real mugging she knew she had to fight. When someone pulled her satchel, she refused to let go. Chrissie didn't scream or shout, she just held on in a speechless tug of war. He won, of course. She was pulled along the street until she fell on her knees, but, still, he had to turn and kick her to make her finally let go. Her defiance must have struck him equally as hard. Instead of running off with the bag, he tipped its contents out on the bluestones. Chrissie, still brazen, grabbed her wallet and threw it in his face.

'Take it, you fuck,' she shouted, scrambling around for scattered keys and phone and stuffing them back in the satchel. The rest she could live without. He looked like he was coming down. He'd be agitated, in need of another hit, she thought. But he was amused. He grinned with a near-toothless mouth as he took the money and threw the empty wallet back in her face, just as hard. He walked off almost cocky.

Chrissie had seen him several times since and he'd seen her. He would come out of a shop doorway or step from one of the lanes. Often, he was with a woman. After months of traipsing

Victoria Street, he realised Chrissie was one of them. Different but accepted. She too learned to accept him. If he passed too close, his bad breath was overpowering, he only breathed through his mouth. His clothes filthy from constant wear. Every cent spent on crystal, or E, or scag. But it was the woman who always caught Chrissie's eye. Her vulnerability showed in every cringing body movement. Her bones threatened to poke through her wrists, she was so thin. Greasy blonde hair plastered to her head.

Instead of shying away from her, Chrissie slipped her whatever money she had. On a good day, the woman – Demi, she would later learn – would nod an unspoken truce. On her hard days, she would stand silent and desperate knowing, now, that Chrissie would volunteer some money.

Despite the tough neighbourhood, Chrissie's flat was her haven. The Victorian house had long been divided into four apartments, two up, two down. The big front hall, once the home's grand entrance, was now crammed with a row of aluminium letterboxes constantly leaking unclaimed mail and advertising flyers. Still, the black and white marble tiles made a fine statement as they led to the timber staircase which curved up to the units above, including Chrissie's flat. Just two huge rooms, the lounge with its kitchenette and the bedroom, plus a small hall and a bathroom, but the high ceiling meant she never felt trapped.

Chrissie tried to shrug off the day, the wharf visit, the story she was later assigned to about a private school principal sacked for making racist comments. But her thoughts turned to her fight with Harry. *Another failure.* Her suggestion to take on the wharf as a news round had also been brushed off, instead she was asked to write a column of briefs from leftover stories. A junior intern's job.

She poured a glass of wine and walked around tidying, straightening, wiping. She poured a new glass. Rinsed a few dishes.

Harry the bastard. Her thoughts jumped. She wiped the small table and sorted the empty bottles. And all those other bastards at work. After a year, a year of trying, why wasn't she accepted? She rinsed the cloth, rinsed it again. Another glass of wine. It was Harry's fault; he deliberately made it difficult to fit in.

'Listen, I've lost good people, people who should have kept their jobs. I didn't agree with you being hired,' he'd told her on that first day.

He picked on minor issues with her copy, assigned her the shittiest jobs and made no secret that he wanted her gone. He ruled the newsroom through fear. No one wanted to be on his bad side even when he was wrong.

Chrissie stared at the white plastic bottles on the shelf above the kitchen bench. She reached for one, tossed it in the air a couple of times then twisted the lid off.

She swallowed one, two, three pills between bites of an apple and deep mouthfuls of wine. Wine, dine and doze, she thought. Harry would be delighted if she spat the dummy and just walked out. Or took another way out.

In the bathroom now, she adjusted the towels on the rail, pulled the sleeve of her jumper and gave the mirror a quick polish. The tiles were cold on her feet, the fluorescent light above the cabinet fizzed and hissed angrily at her. She took another two tablets from a new bottle. She flicked the light off and slid the plug into the bath.

Finally relaxed. Warm, safe, sleepy. Chrissie nestled further down into the water. The dim light from the hall gave out a

soft glow. The pills would kick in soon. She soothed herself. Closed her eyes. Let the darkness fill her mind. It flowed gently into every space. Back to black. She began to float as she welcomed the creeping loss of consciousness. *How long would it take?*

But then the knife-sharp panic was back. *Fight it.* Small white explosions were calling her back. *Fight it.* Her eardrums threatened to burst. Pain ripped across her chest and her body, a power of its own, forced her head out of the water. Forced her to sit up. Forced her to gasp a desperate ragged breath, followed by another and another. Forced her to keep living.

She sat in the cooling bath and hugged her knees, her mind a familiar peaceful wooze. Just seconds from oblivion. *Had Dave felt that peace?*

Chrissie stepped out of the bath. Water dripped over the tiles. There hadn't been any need for a bathmat because she wasn't supposed to be getting out. Now she wrapped herself in a towel and padded across the hall.

Here again, she thought, as she collapsed on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Its centre rosette a white swirl of flowers and leaves. She pulled up her quilt, a rare keepsake, worn with the years, and her neediness, its soft fabrics easing her raw hands. Finally, she rolled towards the bedside cupboard and reached far in the back for her timer: 33 days, 1 hour, 17 minutes. She stared numbly for a few more minutes. Tears slid as she gently pressed the reset button to zero and pushed the clock back in its hiding place. It had been thirty-three days, one hour and seventeen minutes since the last attempt.