


A
L
ROUTINE
INFIDELITY



ELIZABETH COLEMAN



PANTERA
PRESS

PROLOGUE

Bridget

Then

So much for binning Froggy yesterday in a failed attempt to make him ‘disappear’. Here he was clutched in Teddy’s little mitt again, showing every second of the four years he’d been sucked and dropped and dragged through the dirt. Filthy, disembowelled Froggy, the victor. Bridget knew she should have hung tough, but poor Teddy had been so bereft, it had brought her undone. And what’s a few million germs, really? Kids had survived a lot worse.

So she’d caved and miraculously ‘found’ Froggy, and she’d put him through the washing machine again. And now here he was, staring up at her triumphantly with his single plastic eye, as the sun beat down on them at Bushrangers Bay. Teddy was stomping around in her yellow bathers, a Gulliver to the Lilliputian sea life in the rock pools. *Splash! Splash!* No quietly gathering pretty seashells and arranging them into neat little piles for Bridget’s youngest. She watched Teddy tramp around like a ragamuffin, and her heart turned to mush like it always did. Bloody kid.

CHAPTER ONE

Ted

Now

As Ted laid the photos out on her desk, she heard a scrappy bark assert itself at Wags Away Canine Day Care. Ha! Ted felt a familiar rush of pride, but she kept her face immobile. Across the desk, Chantal was shifting in her chair. She looked worried sick, and Ted couldn't help feeling sympathy. She focused and opened her report.

'It's good news. Andrew's not cheating on you.'

'He's not?'

'No.'

Chantal's face lit up with relief, and Ted felt glad to be bearing good tidings for once. Overwhelmingly, the anxious spouses who employed her surveillance services had their worst fears confirmed. How many times had she sat here in her office at Edwina Bristol Investigations – or EBI, as she thought of it – and watched a client's face crumble as they sifted through evidence they'd desperately sought but simultaneously dreaded? Women who wanted to torture themselves with too many details, guys who couldn't get out the door fast enough. You could never predict people's reactions. Ted's mind flew back to last week and a bloke whose weathered face was wet with tears

he refused to acknowledge, even as she edged a box of tissues across the table at him. It was incontrovertible – infidelity sucked. Chantal was one of the lucky ones.

Ted watched her client pore over the surveillance pics of her husband, Andrew, visiting a Port Melbourne house for the past five Thursday nights. A woman with sleek dark hair appeared like clockwork and gave Andrew a visitor's parking permit, but Ted had been forced to take her chances, and last week she'd scored a parking ticket – ninety bucks – an occupational hazard she couldn't charge to Chantal.

'The woman's name is Eiko Asaka,' she told Chantal. 'She's a cooking teacher.'

'A cooking teacher?'

'Yeah. At first, I wasn't sure if that was relevant, but then I posed as a student and found out Andrew's been having lessons.'

'Oh, thank God. You've made my day. But why's he been doing that in secret?'

'To surprise you. He told Eiko you love Japanese food.'

'I do!'

Ted was pretty partial to Japanese herself, with one notable exception. She remembered once being offered sea urchin – or 'uni' as the Japanese call it – at a tiny restaurant tucked behind the Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo, on a day so hot she thought her hair might fry. She didn't know it was served live, and feeling the poor urchin wriggle around in her mouth had made her want to gag ... but when in Rome, right?

She wondered why Andrew Considine thought cooking lessons warranted a surprise? Maybe he was one of those dudes who never graced the kitchen, and just stirring up a teriyaki sauce would make him some kind of superstar in Chantal's

eyes? Although, from what Ted could glean, he already was. Relief was radiating from Chantal, and it sort of illuminated her peachy skin beneath her halo of fluffy blonde hair.

‘I can’t believe I doubted him!’

Out of nowhere, Ted felt a twitch of irritation. Why couldn’t Chantal see the irony? Weren’t ‘mediums’ supposed to be mind readers? But she squashed the thought. It was probably best to cut this short.

‘I’ll have to wrap things up, I’m afraid,’ she said politely. ‘I’m due at another job.’

‘Of course.’

Ted gathered up the surveillance shots and slipped them back into her report. She got to her feet and proffered the folder. Chantal stood. She was much taller than Ted, but Ted was used to that because everyone was. People often told her she was pixie-sized, or they said she looked like Snow White, ‘only shorter’. They used adjectives like ‘dainty’ and ‘petite’ that made her sound like she had no agency, when she was actually a kickarse PI. It drove Ted nuts. Her older sister, Bob, had once suggested she wear high heels for added gravitas, but high heels were dumb and they hurt Ted’s feet. She wore black flats on the days she was in the office, along with white shirts under structured pantsuits like this navy one she’d bought from Zara online, because who could be bothered trying stuff on? She was comfier in her ‘uniform’ out in the field – jeans and floppy hoodies that made her disappear, a distinct advantage in her profession. And she always wore runners in case she needed to chase a dangerous crook. As a civil investigator, she hadn’t encountered any actual crooks yet, but you never knew.

She handed Chantal the report.

‘Here’s the overview of the job, the surveillance running sheet and the itemised charges for the report, my cooking lesson and my travel expenses. My invoice is on the last page.’

As Chantal took the report, Ted felt a familiar tickle rising from her throat to her nose.

‘Ab-choo!’

She skirted her Ikea couch and closed the window on a yellow wattle that was hanging over the side fence. Behind the wattle, Ted could see straight into a room next door. Crystals of various sizes and colours were lined up along a shelf, and pictures of rainbows and angels adorned the walls. A feathered dreamcatcher hung in one corner, and two chairs covered in tie-dyed shawls faced each other intimately. From the window, Ted could just make out a framed New Age quote sitting on a table next to a pack of tarot cards:

When an inner situation is not made conscious, it appears outside of you as fate.

‘Hayfever?’ Chantal asked behind her. ‘Sorry, I’ll cut that wattle back today.’

The New Age room was Chantal’s office – for want of a better word – in the timber cottage where she and Andrew lived, next door to EBI. Edwina Bristol Investigations was based in an old converted milk bar in Abbotsford, a suburb sandwiched between the verdant Yarra River bicycle trail and the polluted horrors of Punt Road, one of Melbourne’s most loathed thoroughfares. Much of Abbotsford was gentrified, but café culture had somehow escaped this semi-industrial street where the few houses were lost in a clamour of mechanics’ garages and tile warehouses and the rear entrance to Wags

Away Canine Day Care. Ted figured that's why she could afford the rent, although by the skin of her teeth.

When she'd first moved in, she'd been intrigued to see a parade of women pass through Chantal's front room, their faces hungry with need as they clung to her every word. She'd assumed Chantal was some kind of New Age counsellor, but then one day she'd found a business card fluttering in the gutter:

Chantal Considine, Spiritual Medium. Need guidance from your loved ones who've passed over? I can make contact with them on the other side and seek their wisdom for you.

Wait, *what?* Ted had thought. So *that* was how Chantal made her living, by fleecing the bereaved? A 'medium'? As if! What if the alleged 'loved ones who'd passed over' gave Chantal's vulnerable clients the wrong advice? Who was Chantal to play God? Not that Ted believed in God, but she didn't believe in mediums either. She wondered how Chantal's clients could fall for this stuff, but of course, she knew exactly why. Because their hearts were broken after losing a love, and they wanted to believe the end wasn't the end, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Surely what those people needed was someone who'd gently guide them towards the truth, not exploit their desperation for financial gain? Ted could feel herself getting all worked up about it, but she'd tried to take a step back and tell herself not to judge. Live and let live, right? And how her neighbour made her living was none of her business anyway. But she couldn't help it, her opinion of Chantal had plummeted that day.

She watched now as Chantal slipped the report into her droopy beaded bag. The fringe on her rainbow-hued poncho

got stuck in the bag's zipper, and as she bent to extricate it, a pink crystal hanging around her neck dangled briefly in mid-air. Ted's thoughts flew to the fortune tellers she'd seen in Jemaa el-Fna Square in Marrakesh, sitting under umbrellas, wearing layers of multicoloured clothes and beads in the searing heat, their wizened faces somehow a testament to their authenticity. Of course, Ted didn't believe in those 'seers' either, but she appreciated the theatre of it.

'I think Andrew's having an affair,' Chantal had said when she'd turned up at Ted's office.

Who told you that? Ted wanted to ask. Princess Diana? Kurt Cobain?

Privately, she suspected Chantal would be proven right. Andrew Considine was one of those charming types who seemed to expect Ted to swoon when they passed in the street – and yet, the surveillance had proven Chantal wrong. Her powers as a 'medium' had failed her, but she seemed unfazed by that reality. Could she *really* not see the irony? Or maybe she could, but she didn't care? Was she that shameless? Ted found herself wondering what the point was to any of this, if Chantal wasn't prepared to acknowledge what her mistaken suspicions actually meant? If she'd just admit she was a charlatan and show some remorse, they could both move on.

But instead, Chantal smiled and said, 'I pruned that wattle a few weeks ago, but it's going wild.'

Ted suddenly wanted to punch her in the head, but not as much as she wanted to avoid a negative Google review, so she smiled back instead.

'Yeah, it'd be great if you could cut it back,' she said, but she could feel all her nerve ends screaming. Woah. She hadn't realised how much Chantal's job was pressing her buttons.

Of course, it made complete sense when she thought about it, which was why she'd made a point of not thinking about it. And she wasn't going to start now. She might be a PI, but she knew there were some things that were better left uninterrogated. She walked to the door.

'Well, I'm glad I could set your mind at rest.'

'Me too,' Chantal said, but then she gave Ted a smile that looked distinctly conspiratorial. 'And just so you know, I *can* appreciate the irony.'

She could? Then why did that make Ted even madder?

'I'm glad about that,' Ted said recklessly. 'I can't help thinking your deceased buddies let you down on this one.'

She waited for a flash of embarrassment or defensiveness or *anything*, but Chantal just smiled serenely, and her blue eyes swam in her soft round pool of a face. She was at least ten years older than Ted, maybe late forties, Ted guessed, and there was something about her curvy and comfy vibe that clearly made her clients relax. Not for the first time, Ted was forced to admit that her neighbour looked like the kind of person you'd want to tell your secrets to – that's if you were the kind of person who wanted to tell their secrets to anyone, which Ted wasn't.

'It's different when it's me. With a client, I'd be able to seek the counsel of a close relative who's passed over, but my vulnerability impedes my ability to make contact with my own loved ones.'

'Would you like *me* to pass on a message for you?'

Chantal laughed.

'Just so we're super-clear,' Ted said, forgoing all pretence at professionalism and probably her four-star Google rating along with it, 'your clients have a right to believe what they like, but *I* for one, am not buying your chats with dead people.'

‘I know that,’ Chantal laughed. ‘I’ve known for months. You stopped bringing our bins in for us.’

Ted realised with a start Chantal was right. The bins had never crossed her mind, so it must have been some kind of unconscious protest. Wow. She tried to gather her thoughts – where had they got to all of a sudden? But Chantal was already talking again.

‘Don’t worry, I’m used to it. You’re not the first person to feel threatened by the afterlife.’

‘I’m not threatened,’ Ted said, feeling threatened by how threatened she felt. ‘I just think it’s a pile of steaming crap and I don’t want any part of it.’

Chantal smiled again. Ted had never realised a smile could be so incendiary, especially when it was suffused with ... was that *sympathy*?

‘I hear you, Ted, and I feel for you. I can tell it’s a bit too close to the bone.’

Ted tried to snort but nothing happened. She suddenly wanted this woman out of her office more than she wanted anything else in the world, which was out of proportion to the moment, but that was something else she’d choose not to interrogate later. She opened the door and stepped aside.

‘If you don’t mind, I’m expected elsewhere.’

CHAPTER TWO

Ted

Ted was still mad with herself when she crossed the road twenty minutes later and opened the rear door to Wags Away. There was no excuse for insulting a client, no matter *what* they did for a living. And how was she going to grow the business if she couldn't control her personal feelings? She wondered how many potential cases she'd lose if Chantal trashed EBI on Google? Just because she hadn't yet (Ted had been checking every five minutes), it didn't mean she wouldn't.

She stepped inside Wags Away and closed the door behind her. Barks echoed through the building, and a smile found her in spite of everything. Her thoughts flew back to a past gig as a dog walker in Paris, and one particularly snooty poodle called André, who'd tried to mess with her head. Ha! When was that, six years ago? Seven? It was hard to keep count. Her fifteen crazy, amazing years in Europe working as a dog walker, Contiki tour guide, Uber driver and beer-puller were all a bit of a blur now. The only memory still in sharp relief was that awesome feeling of being on the opposite side of the world from home.

Woof! Woof! That scrappy bark cut through the rest and brought her back to the present. Ted quickened her step to the

Small Dogs Room. When she'd returned to Australia three years ago, it had seemed like owning a dog might help her settle down. She'd gone to the RSPCA in search of a kickarse breed like a German shepherd, but all the dogs – even the big ones – had wagged their tails at her needily, as if to say, *Please pick me, I'm so lovable*. All except for a miniature schnauzer who'd regarded Ted dispassionately, as though she, the dog, were doing the choosing. It had earned Ted's instant respect. This schnauzer was clearly kickarse, regardless of her size. She was Coco then, but Ted had rechristened her Miss Marple, and Miss Marple had taken to her new name instantly, as if she understood the compliment implicit in its provenance. Miss Marple was six kilos of pure muscle, with a grey coat enhanced by a fluffy white beard and chest, and her ears stood upright and then flopped over themselves. Right from the start, her alert brown eyes had communicated with Ted in surprisingly conversational detail. At first Ted had wondered if she was anthropomorphising, but now she'd stopped asking herself the question.

She walked into the Small Dogs Room and felt a familiar rush of delight when she saw Miss Marple's inquisitive little face, but she knew better than to let that show. Miss Marple was always pleased to see Ted but she played it cool, which was cool by Ted.

'Early today,' Laura, the chief canine carer, observed in her characteristically friendly fashion as she retrieved Miss Marple's lead from a hook on the wall.

'Yeah,' Ted smiled. 'We've got an assignment.'

'An assignment? How exciting! Go get 'em, Miss Marple,' Laura said.

Miss Marple waved her fluffy tail politely, but her eyes said, *Cool your jets, it's no biggie*.

Ted took Miss Marple's lead from Laura and clipped it onto her harness.

'Thanks Laura. Have a great weekend!'

Ted and Miss Marple emerged into the nascent spring sunshine and Ted unlocked the blue racing bike she rode to work when she didn't need her SUV for surveillance. She deposited Miss Marple into the cane basket she'd attached to the handlebars. The effect was a bit cutesy for Ted's tastes, but the basket was perfectly sized for Miss Marple's proportions. Ted slung her backpack over her shoulders.

'Let's do this, eh?'

Miss Marple metaphorically raised her thumb. Ted climbed onto the bike and tore off around the corner, past single-fronted cottages sitting barefaced on the edge of the footpath and arty types drinking outside quaint old pubs, before turning left onto Langridge Street and pulling up outside The Tea Pup, a canine-centric café. Ted lifted Miss Marple out of the basket and they headed inside. The owner, Jethro, was behind the counter, bagging up treats for a Weimaraner.

'Jethro, hey!'

'Ted! Miss M!'

Ted bought a latte and a liver and sweet potato muffin and went out to the courtyard, where dogs and their owners were chilling at tables decorated with paintings of paws. There was no sign of her quarry yet, but judging by her investigations into Vince Wexford's daily routine, he wouldn't be here for another few minutes. Keeping one eye on the door, Ted took up position at a table and pulled out her phone. Regret was still gnawing at her, and she knew she owed Chantal Considine an apology. It stuck in her craw – after all, Chantal was the one exploiting the bereaved – but she'd still behaved unprofessionally. So, while

Miss Marple devoured her liver and sweet potato muffin, Ted pressed Chantal's number. The call went straight to voicemail. Phew. She waited for the beep.

'Chantal? It's Ted Bristol,' she said in a rush. 'I'm sorry I was rude to you before. I behaved unprofessionally and it wasn't appropriate. Bye.'

She hung up, relieved. At least now she'd done the right thing, and who knew, her apology might even stave off a bad review. She shrugged off thoughts of Chantal Considine and turned her attention to her socials. She shared an article she'd seen in the *Herald Sun* – '10 Signs Your Spouse is Cheating' – to Facebook, and added the comment: *Well worth considering. I see the emotional devastation this causes my clients. Don't be the last to know.* She snorted. It was a pretty clichéd article, but like all clichés it was grounded in truth, and socials were part of her job. She'd just started flicking through LinkedIn when the back door opened and Vince Wexford emerged with a massive Rottweiler. Ted felt a frisson of fear as she took in Vince's bulging shoulders and the aggro exuding from his barrel-chested beast. She nodded to Miss Marple: *We're on.* Ted held her breath as Miss Marple trotted over to the Rottweiler without a second's hesitation. That dog was pure guts! Her heart swelled. Miss Marple stuck her snout in the Rottweiler's bum, distracting Vince. Ted seized her moment and swiftly approached. Vince gave her a grin.

'Cute dog. Schnauzers are ace.'

Ted whipped the summons out of her backpack, along with twenty-five dollars 'conduct money' stapled to the front to cover transport costs to the Magistrates' Court.

'Vince Wexford. You've been served.'

His square face contorted with fury, which wasn't unusual. But as Ted turned to leave he leapt in front of her, blocking

her path, and his Rottweiler started barking like a hound from hell. Ted froze. She contemplated grabbing Vince's wrist and attempting a Jiu-Jitsu Arm Drag to Rear Naked Choke, but Miss Marple already had it covered. She nipped Vince on the calf and he reeled backwards.

'Fuck!'

Ted and Miss Marple raced past Vince out into the rear lane and around the corner into Langridge Street. Ted tossed Miss Marple back into the bicycle basket. As she fumbled with the bike lock, she noticed her hands were shaking, but Miss Marple's paws remained steady as a rock. What a legend. Ted jumped on the bike and sped away, turning the corner and cutting through residential streets that skirted the Eastern Freeway. She turned onto the Yarra River Trail at Dights Falls, a pretty but unprepossessing weir just six kilometres from the CBD. Ted decided to aim for a Personal Best, and she flew up and down the trail's twisting hills towards Collingwood Children's Farm and the Abbotsford Convent Arts Precinct.

Melbourne was glorious in spring – it was like everyone came out to play at once. The sun emerged from the gloom as pasty joggers and walkers reappeared carrying a couple of extra winter kilos, and they all tried to avoid the swooping magpies and stocked up on extra Claratyne. Two smug young mums with prams yelled, 'Hey, watch out!' as Ted made a wide arc to whiz past, and Ted yelled back, 'I rang my bell!' while swerving around an errant cocker spaniel. She laughed out of sheer exhilaration. Miss Marple barked, her floppy ears flying, high on adrenaline, Ted could tell. The miniature schnauzer was up for anything.

They arrived at Ted's Richmond apartment building in nine minutes and twenty-three seconds (a PB!) and caught the lift up to the fourteenth floor. Ted's compact, neutral-toned apartment

was identical to the sixty-one other apartments in the building, which seemed to perturb her sister, Bob, but Ted couldn't rouse enough interest to form an opinion. She entered and pulled off her bike helmet, wiping her sweaty fringe from her face. She hung the helmet from her handlebars and pushed her bike into the laundry through the small kitchen, passing cornflakes and jam left out from breakfast, and some dirty dishes in the sink. Returning, Ted put the cornflakes and jam back into the cupboard and loaded the dishes into the dishwasher, which was already chockers. She turned it on as Miss Marple lapped loudly from her bowl, spilling water onto the beige-tiled floor. Ted opened the fridge to retrieve Miss Marple's dinner and realised she had more food for her dog than she did for herself. But at least she had plenty of beer. Ha!

After cutting up Miss Marple's beef and veggie roll, she showered and changed into trackpants and ugg boots. Then she grabbed a Corona and ordered some Thai food from Uber Eats. She removed the single clean plate left in the cupboard and placed it on a card table that was one of the few items of furniture she actually owned. When she'd moved in here three years ago, taking on a lease and a dog already felt like more commitment than she could handle, so she'd bought the bare minimum – a bed, a couple of chairs, this table – so she could kid herself she wasn't tied down. Most of her other stuff was borrowed, including a small sideboard from Bob, and the more recent addition of a comfy sofa, courtesy of her 'friend with benefits', Joel. Furniture wasn't strictly the benefit they'd agreed on, but Joel had a spare couch and Ted wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

She took a frayed baseball cap and a discarded jumper off the sofa and hurled herself down, looking out through the floor-

to-ceiling windows. Across the road, the sprawling Ikea store and Victoria Gardens Shopping Centre loomed like behemoths, and in the near distance, the Melbourne cityscape sliced the sky. The city skyline was changing so fast that Ted had devised a game called Spot the Crane.

‘Look,’ she pointed out to Miss Marple, who’d just jumped up on the sofa beside her, ‘there’s another new crane near Bridge Road. You owe me five bucks.’

Miss Marple looked like she’d be good for it. Ted took out her phone and pulled up Facebook to check the response to her post about the ‘cheating spouses’ article: two hundred and twelve likes, nineteen shares and thirty-seven comments – not bad. She wondered if any of the comments would translate into actual clients, but a quick flick through revealed that most of the responses were as generic as her original post. But hey, at least the shares would help raise EBI’s profile. She signed into Google Analytics to see how many clicks her website had attracted today. It was definitely worth paying Google per click for top billing when someone typed in ‘Private Investigator Melbourne’ – it was all about funnelling traffic to her site. She’d had forty-three clicks and six email enquiries, which augured well, as long as Chantal hadn’t written a toxic review. But a quick check revealed that she hadn’t – yet. Maybe Ted’s call had made her think twice? The memory of her encounter with the phoney medium brought back all those churned-up feelings, and Ted was grateful for the interruption when her phone cheeped with a text. She checked the screen. It was Joel.

Hey, want to catch up tonight?

Ted felt herself smile. She was glad she’d reconnected with Joel. As kids, their families had been friends, and Joel had

always included Ted in the boys' games, even when her seven boofhead brothers had tried to lock her out. All these years later, Joel was still her brother Lee's best mate. He worked as a PE teacher at Preston High, the same high school he'd attended, which still had the same principal, Mr Bryce, although Joel now called him Gary. Ted sometimes tried to imagine herself hanging out in the staffroom at Our Lady of Sorrows with her former principal Mrs Hanley and calling her Bernadine, but she thought it would freak both of them out.

Not Joel, though – he took that in his stride like everything else. Joel understood that Ted was focused on building her business and wasn't interested in a relationship, and, being freshly divorced, he felt the same way. And there was no danger of anyone getting too involved, because they weren't each other's type. Ted had a sudden flashback to her last boyfriend in Europe – Torstein, a mercurial Norwegian pro snowboarder who paid more attention to his knees than he did to her. But wow, the sex! Not that Joel was any slouch in that department.

She'd ordered enough Thai food for two, so Ted texted back rapidly with her thumbs: *Sounds good. Netflix? True crime? I've ordered Thai, bring ice cream.*

But just as she was about to press Send, she remembered that Friday night was garbage night in Moonee Ponds. She felt a spark ignite inside. Her research into rubbish collection in every LGA in metropolitan Melbourne was paying off yet again. Garbage night presented the perfect chance to search her client Gail Witherspoon's bins for evidence that her husband, Matt, was having an affair. It seemed incongruous in this digital age that cheaters would leave paper trails attesting to hotel trysts and secret gifts, but Ted knew from experience it was still a thing. She'd head over when it got dark. She deleted

A Routine Infidelity

her text to Joel and started again: *Sorry, working tonight. Let's talk tomorrow. x*

Ted tossed her phone down and raised her beer to Miss Marple.

'To us. Two kickarse females, living life on our own terms.'

CHAPTER THREE

Chantal

Chantal squished her naked body against Andrew's, and her breasts made little farting sounds. She laughed.

'Just call me Farty Boobs.'

Andrew chuckled and slapped her on the bum and she felt its wobble reverberate. She returned the favour, but Andrew's bum was as tight as a drum. Just how she liked it. They kissed, and she tasted the remnants of her specialty chicken tandoori.

'I still can't believe you put a private investigator onto me,' he said. 'Are you off your tree?'

'I think I must be.' Chantal laughed. 'I was having some kind of episode.'

She draped a leg over his and thought how extraordinarily lucky she was to have a husband who not only took secret cooking lessons to surprise her, but was unperturbed when he found out she'd had him covertly followed and blown his secret to boot. She'd thought about letting it slide. Why disrupt things by telling him? But she didn't want to compound her deception, and it would be so much worse if Andrew somehow found out later. She needn't have worried, he'd taken it like a trooper. The relief of it still made her feel light-headed. Andrew was hers and only hers, and he was the only one she'd ever wanted.

Of course, he could be a grumpy shit like any bloke, but most of the time he was everything she'd ever dreamed of, and she'd repaid him by betraying him with her doubts.

'I feel lousy about it, but you were out so often and I could sense there was something you weren't telling me.'

'Why didn't you just ask?'

Good question. The answer: because she'd been frightened he wouldn't tell her the truth. Which seemed absurd in retrospect. But Chantal hadn't been herself since their twenty-year-old twins, Bonnie and Grace, had left home eight months ago on a one-way ticket to explore the world. Her beloved babies, who weren't identical which sometimes seemed unfair, because Bonnie, with her lush dark curls and creamy skin, was the 'pretty one', while Grace was freckled and as ungainly as a foal. Mind you, that seemed to bother Grace less than everyone else, unless Grace was faking it, which Chantal doubted. Grace had been born with an easy confidence that was probably a greater gift than beauty anyway, and for all the attention Bonnie attracted, she was shy by nature and followed in her extrovert sister's wake. They were both 'mummy's girls', and now they were gone, and Chantal didn't know when, or even if, they'd return. Was this really all she got? Just twenty years? Two decades of fiercely nurturing her chicks, only to watch them emerge from under her wings and fly off without a backward glance.

Andrew had tried to help by suggesting they turn Bonnie's bedroom into a gym, and Chantal had reacted with such histrionics that she'd surprised herself more than him. That's when she'd realised this new distrust was more than just Empty Nest Syndrome. It was so irrational, it must have a scientific explanation.

‘I was in the grip of perimenopausal anxiety.’

‘Hmm, that’s a sexy state.’

‘I’ll show you how sexy,’ Chantal whispered, and she raised herself to straddle him. Andrew smiled up at her as he cupped her breasts in all their stretch-marked glory. ‘And of course, Empty Nest Syndrome didn’t help. Too much time for thinking.’

‘Poor baby. Why didn’t you ask your spirit mates to clear things up?’

‘They weren’t answering their phones.’

Andrew laughed and pulled her down to him, and they whiled away the next several minutes making love again, before Andrew gave a sated sigh and immediately slipped off into sleep. Chantal stretched luxuriantly and listened to the low hum of the city. Sometimes she wondered how she’d got here, even though she knew exactly how. She’d hear herself advising a bereaved client, ‘Your mum is telling you to search your soul’ and her mind would fly back to that primary school fete in Swan Hill, where she’d been assigned the fortune-telling tent. So what if she’d never actually communicated with a spirit? Her clients were in pain, and where was the harm if they left believing a lost loved one had given them guidance? Chantal didn’t see anything wrong in dispensing hope to the grieving, regardless of what people like Ted Bristol said. Some of her clients couldn’t afford counselling, or they were in desperate emotional straits and needed their solace fast-tracked. And she was uniquely placed – she’d always been highly intuitive about people, and it’s easy to nudge someone towards reassurance when in reality, they already know the answer they seek. She mulled over today’s meeting with Ted. She hadn’t been entirely surprised to find Ted so triggered, but it had seemed to throw Ted for a loop. She’d called to apologise for her rudeness later,

but she'd sounded like she had a gun to her head. Chantal had left a return message assuring her she wasn't offended. Which was largely true. People like Ted could take refuge in contempt if they liked, but Chantal had faith in her mission. She wasn't sure if she believed in life after death, but she knew how she felt when her clients trudged into her house weighed down by grief, and floated out an hour later. It gave her such pleasure to soothe their pain that sometimes she thought she'd even do it for free. Not that that was an option, or ever would be, by the look of things.

As Chantal gazed down at her sleeping husband, she wondered exactly how many 'get rich quick' schemes had come to naught, and decided it was better not to count. Fifteen years ago, Andrew had given up a career in real estate to become a full-time 'entrepreneur', which, as far as Chantal could see, involved investing all of their money into enterprises that went belly-up. But Andrew was still convinced he'd hit that sweet spot one day, so the least she could do was be convinced too.

He sighed in his sleep and farted.

'Nice,' she murmured with a smile, but she found her smile wouldn't stay in place. For all her faffing on about her fabulous instincts, she'd been reading her own husband wrong. She'd always implicitly trusted her gut, but was it starting to let her down? Sure, she was perimenopausal, so God knows what hormones were swirling around, but Andrew had always been her rock, even more so since the girls had gone. Mistrusting him made Chantal feel off her game, and she supposed she couldn't blame a sceptic like Ted for her derision – even though she knew it revealed more about Ted than it did about her. What (or who) was Ted really running away from, when she gave Chantal's wheelie bins such a wide berth? Chantal

knew grief when she saw it, and she saw it in her neighbour's guarded green eyes. With her tiny stature, her snowy skin and her shiny dark urchin cut, Ted exuded the air of a beautiful, bereaved little pixie. But that didn't stop her from being a pain in the bum.

Andrew started snoring softly. Chantal tried to guess what Japanese fare he'd cook for her first. She pictured him cutting a raw salmon fillet into cubes and waiting for the applause.

Tada, sushi!

Chantal amused herself in that mindless manner until she could almost taste tempura prawns in her mouth, and then she started drifting off too ... until she was yanked back from the brink of sleep by something seizing her heart and squeezing.

She shot up in bed, her breath wrested from her chest. Was she having a heart attack? But no – the anxiety had returned, and this time it was so much worse, like a monster from a movie sequel replicating itself inside her. Chantal clutched for oxygen, but there was no air to be found. And then she felt her lungs start filling with the briny taste of the sea. The sea? My God, she was submerged. She was drowning! She fought to get her head above water but she was being tossed on waves of terror, roiling up and down in the blackness, being sucked under and over the sea. But it wasn't her own terror drowning her. The terror belonged to another woman, a mother she could sense but couldn't see. And then a single light appeared and hurtled towards Chantal in the darkness. A lighthouse? Or was she having a stroke? But something told her that wasn't how this felt. As she tried to cough out the deadly taste of the ocean, she was filled with the ghastly realisation that another mother was trying to tell her something. Something bad. And then she knew beyond any doubt that somebody's daughter

A Routine Infidelity

was going to die. Oh God, not Bonnie or Grace? And now her girls were being dragged out beyond the waves by the merciless sea. As Chantal screamed and clutched for them in vain, the maternal presence reappeared in the water, although not in any actual physical shape. She pulled them all back to shore with preternatural strength, as if to assure Chantal it wasn't them. Chantal felt her body sag with relief.

But somebody's daughter was going to die. Whose? She sensed the mother's urgent tug on her arm, and then a face emerged fully formed in the mist.

Ted Bristol's.