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Opening Extract from...

Hit

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CHAPTER 1

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK on Thursday evening, Makedde Vanderwall stood in the kitchen of the terrace house she shared with her Australian boyfriend, holding a freshly minted celebrity cookbook in her hand and trying not to feel out of place.

Dammit, I suck at this.

Attempts at domesticity were awkward for the Canadian. Makedde – or Mak, as her friends called her – knew her way around a cookbook and a kitchen like Archbishop George Pell knew his way around the annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras – which is to say, not at all. Her total lack of culinary skills was a source of great amusement for her friends, and buying cookbooks for her had become a running gag: *The Australian Women's Weekly Cookbook*, the *Donna Hay* cookbooks, *Cooking for Idiots.* Mak's friend Detective Karen Mahoney had recently purchased this latest one for her, and Mak was determined to prepare the pasta dish on page 135 to surprise her live-in lover. It was only pasta, after all. How hard could it be?

With something short of confidence, Mak watched the potful of pre-prepared pasta sauce bubble on the stove. The empty jar she'd poured it from sat upturned on the counter nearby, a smear of red sauce oozing out. The penne should be ready by now, she figured. She wrapped her hand loosely in a tea towel and grabbed the handle of the boiling pot on the stove.

'Ouch! Dammit!'

In a flash she had pulled her hand back and licked the pad of her index finger. A burn. She nursed her finger, and gingerly poured the penne into the sieve with her unburned hand, cursing.

'Bloody dangerous things, kitchens . . .'

Though domestically handicapped, Mak had skills in other areas of her life. She had finished her forensic psychology PhD back in her native country a mere eighteen months earlier, scoring very well with her thesis on the variables affecting eyewitness testimony. The topic was something she'd ended up having far too much first-hand experience with, by becoming an intimate witness to the sadistic acts of her friend Catherine's deranged murderer. At times Mak thought she might never finish her PhD, but she had refused to let her personal dramas stop her just short of her dream. Sure, most of the other students were nearly a decade younger, but she had finally done it.

Then Mak had bitten the bullet and moved to Sydney to be with her boyfriend, Andy, shortly

after. At twenty-nine, it seemed that a more-or-less normal life was finally within her reach. A new country. A new beginning.

Isn't it an unwritten rule that everyone is supposed to have their life in order before they turn thirty?

Mak still had a chance at it – if she worked fast. Maybe then her father would stop giving her those doubtful looks, and her happily married and once again pregnant sister, Theresa, would stop gloating all the time.

Hmmm.

She inspected the pasta in the sieve; it didn't look right. Mak glanced at the picture in the book, and then at her efforts, and screwed up her face with disapproval. *Her* meal looked white and soggy, each piece of penne limply oozing against its neighbour. Had she overcooked it? She didn't know. It was all so much more complicated than instant noodles.

I suck at this.

Mak might never be a chef, but her boss thought she was showing promise at her part-time job. She had stumbled onto a lucrative side-gig working for Marian Wendell, the infamous Sydney private investigator – much to the chagrin of her boyfriend and her father, both of them cops. But Mak needed work. Once she had quit her fifteen-year middle-of-the-road modelling career, she couldn't just sit on her butt and hope for a windfall. After answering an advertisement for a part-time research job, she had hit it off with

Marian and become intrigued by the work of her investigation agency. At Marian's urging, Mak had even successfully completed her Certificate III in Investigative Services, the basic licensing requirement for professional investigators.

The work was helping her save up the money she needed to open her own psychology practice, and, what's more, she was enjoying it. Certainly she found it a lot more engaging than her previous rent-paying job as a fashion model, a career that had taken her on photo shoots around the globe but was ultimately unsatisfying. The jobs Marian put her to were varied: running background checks, checking public records, photographing and conducting basic surveillance, and more. One of her easiest jobs to date had taken place only the evening before, when she had been paid a handsome $500 cheque for a mere ninety minutes of work, to chat up the sleazy husband of one of Marian's clients and see if he would follow her back to a hotel room for sex if she propositioned him. He had come to the room, all right – only Mak hadn't been there when he had. His wife had been waiting at the door. The long-suffering spouse got her money's worth of truth; Mak got paid handsomely to do nothing more than pretend to flirt with a stranger in a bar for an hour and enjoy tax-deductible cocktails; and her employer, Ms Wendell, was impressed once more with the attractive new secret weapon her agency could provide for hire.

Five hundred dollars to chat with some idiot. That even beat some modelling gigs for pay. Why would she want to stand around a boring studio all day, being told what to wear and how to pose, when she could command decent cash and be right in the thick of it, using her brain and her instincts on her own terms? Besides, she had been hit on by many a sleazebag in her life – at least now she was getting paid for it.

Her wallet lined with a fresh pay cheque, and feeling positive, Mak had sped home from Marian's office on her motorbike, stopping by the supermarket for supplies first. She had stripped out of her overheated leathers, showered, and changed into a light, easy summer dress in anticipation of dinner with her boyfriend. Her leathers now lay dishevelled in the entry hall and shopping bags were strewn over the kitchen countertop. With the few extra bucks in her pocket she'd even bought a nice Merlot.

Mak looked at the time. It was nearly seven-thirty. He was late. She wasn't sure what to do with the soggy pasta to keep it warm. Should she microwave it?

★ ★ ★

At eight-fifteen, Mak heard a car pull up outside.

Footsteps.

A key in the front door.

Andy. Finally.

She hurriedly zapped the pasta in the microwave, laid out the salad and made her way down the hall, pausing to lean in the hallway, attempting to look cool.

Detective Senior Sergeant Andy Flynn stepped inside the terrace they shared, fussing with his keys, and at first failing to look up and see Mak in her carefully nonchalant stance. Her eyes took him in greedily, nonetheless.

Andy wore his usual plain-clothes uniform of suit and tie. He was older than Mak by a few years, his short-cropped hair still dark and full. He had an unrefined, masculine appeal she had found maddeningly attractive since day one of their tempestuous union – the strong frame, the square jaw, the generous mouth and imperfect features, the scar on his chin – and, of course, that irresistible Aussie accent. It had probably also helped that he always wore a piece and some handcuffs under his jacket – a kind of fetish of Makedde's.

But though she was pleased to see Andy awake and upright, Mak had to admit that he looked tired. His deep green eyes were underlined with dark circles, his jaw darkened with stubble. Perhaps the years of police work and the inevitable overtime were taking their toll. He was dedicated to his work, so it was hardly surprising that this dinner would be the first they had shared in ages. Despite moving to Australia just over a year earlier to become what the Department

of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs rather unromantically termed a 'de facto spouse', she and Andy had not seen nearly enough of each other of late. And, to make things worse, he was about to head overseas for a while.

Now the table was set and the candles lit, the Merlot freshly opened and ready to pour. This was not just some penne: this was a peace offering, albeit a soggy one.

He'll be so surprised.

'Andy …'

She gave him a hug, her body grateful for the contact. At six foot four, he was one of the few whom she could literally look up to – a quality she found intoxicating, for although she was just over six foot tall herself, he towered over her barefoot.

She tilted her face up to his. 'How were things today?' she asked. Mak couldn't wait to show him the dining room. He wouldn't believe it – the candles, the effort.

'Yeah, good, thanks,' he muttered. 'You know … I'm looking forward to getting stuck into it.' There had always been one hitch or another – a lack of funding, a change of politics, a shift of focus in the Federal Police – but now Andy was finally getting traction with the project he had long pushed for: a top-notch national unit dedicated to solving violent serial crime, Andy's speciality. It would be based in Canberra, the national capital, and aligned with the US Federal Bureau of

Investigation's program at their academy in Quantico, Virginia. He would do a three-month stint at the academy in preparation, starting in a few days. Andy would take on major national violent serial crime cases, help train up new profilers and oversee their work in the field. It was a far more exciting and senior position. It was what he had always dreamed of.

'Well, relax, take your coat off . . .' Mak began.

But Andy frowned. 'There was a shooting at Pyrmont where the old Water Police station used to be,' he stated abruptly, sounding harried. 'Sorry, but I gotta run. Just changing my shirt.'

Mak's smile faltered as her romantic plans came to an abrupt halt. 'Oh.' A little knot formed in her stomach.

Andy grabbed his tie in one hand and loosened it. 'I've got crap all over it,' he said, pulling back his jacket to show brown and red stains along the front of the pale blue shirt. 'This kid has gone and decapitated himself on a fence, running away from Deller. I can't believe it.'

'Oh.' She took leave of his chest as she realised it was most probably the kid's blood that had stained the shirt.

Andy's eyes moved this way and that, recalling something that frustrated him, his mouth caught in a tight frown. 'He was only wanted for questioning.'

Not any more, Mak thought darkly.

Retreating a couple of steps down the hall,

Mak managed to flick the dining room door closed with one foot, blocking the view of the candlelit dinner set up inside. She didn't want him seeing what she had attempted – not like this. Thankfully Andy failed to notice her actions. He was wrestling with his shirt buttons instead.

Beep.

'What was that?' he asked.

It was the sound of the microwave finishing in the kitchen. Mak had reheated the pasta for dinner. She thought she'd nuked it for a minute, but maybe she had hit ten … It would be like rubber now.

'What was what? I didn't hear anything,' she lied.

He shook his head. 'Well, this bloody kid tried to jump a fence or something and caught his neck on some cable. I have to help them sort everything out. I'm sorry, Mak, I won't be long. Just a couple of more hours.'

There goes dinner.

Mak nodded. 'Oh, that's bad luck,' she said, pretending to arrange her motorcycle jacket and helmet on the hall table. 'Is that still your job now? I mean … you leave on Saturday …'

'Jimmy wanted me to help out. I know all the boys and … you know.'

She did know – too well.

'Do you have time for a bite or anything?' she said, even though she was sure the answer would be no.

Andy paused. 'I'm sorry, Mak. Jimmy's waiting outside. We've gotta go.'

She nodded again, her thoughts a swirl of black clouds.

'Oh … dammit.' Recognition flitted across his face. 'Oh, Mak, I'm sorry about dinner. I should have called ahead.'

Yes, you should have. 'It's no big deal.'

'Well, I'll be back in a couple of hours at the most. Sorry, Mak.'

'That's fine. No problem. I know it's important,' she said.

Andy moved past her and up the staircase to the bedroom they shared, while she remained planted in the hallway, secretly livid.

Mak had called him earlier in the day to confirm their dinner date at seven. It was just a normal weekday – not a weekend or a holiday, or a full moon when everyone ran out and started killing one another. It was a simple, boring Thursday night, so why would he have not called once he knew he couldn't make it? Why couldn't he have let her know before she made an ass of herself waiting around and trying to play bloody Martha Stewart? He had forgotten completely, and had no doubt also forgotten their discussion about why spending some time together was important at the moment. They only had two days left, and America was a long way away. If she couldn't afford to visit him there, they would not see each other for three whole months.

'You're going to force me to have an affair, Andy,' she'd joked. Half joked.

She wasn't about to remind him of their discussion now, not in the state the two of them were in: her angry and him stressed. It would come out all wrong, anyway. He had the scene of a fatality to attend to; who cared if his girlfriend had cooked her first meal in history? What did it matter? It didn't.

Feeling the razor-sharp clarity that always consumed her when she was annoyed, Mak walked towards the front door and stepped out into the darkening evening. A stiff summer breeze tossed her dress around, the clouds above turning purple and gold with the last of the setting sun.

A police cruiser waited at the kerb with Andy's longtime police partner, Detective Senior Constable Jimmy Cassimatis, in the passenger seat. Where Andy was tall, lean and strong, Jimmy was fuzzy and rounded like a man-sized teddy bear or football mascot. He was a man perpetually eating and finding excuses to look at, or talk about, women's anatomy. On this occasion he appeared to be doing both.

Eyes narrow with coiled tension, Mak walked down the path towards him, dress floating, hands on hips.

'Hello, Jimmy,' she said, and came towards the window of the cruiser.

He started, dropping a magazine in his lap and

spilling a bag of salty chips. Flustered, he shoved the publication down by his side and out of view, but not before Mak caught an eyeful of fleshy amateur photographs on the pages. She saw the words HORNBAG NEXT DOOR CONTEST printed above someone's labia and smile. SEND YOUR PHOTO IN AND WIN $50!

Yeah, I'll be sure to do that.

'*Skata*. You shouldn't go sneaking up on me like that,' Jimmy squeaked awkwardly.

'Catching up on world news while you're waiting?'

He nodded, his face turning crimson.

Mak leaned straight into the window, her blonde mane falling forwards, deliberately hovering above him as he sat helplessly strapped into the car seat, sinking ever lower.

'So what *are* the latest presidential polls?' Mak asked, her tone dripping with sarcasm. 'Is Bush in or out?'

Jimmy coughed.

'Out of favour, then? Hmm, yes, it would seem so,' she replied with mock thoughtfulness and placed an arm on the top of the car. 'You boys had a rough one today by the sound of it.'

'Uh-huh,' he said, clearly uncomfortable.

Mak was well aware that she could make Jimmy Cassimatis nervous, and she had years ago decided that it was the best way to deal with him. They'd had a rocky relationship from the start. Four-and-a-half years ago, when Mak had only just met Andy

and he was little more than the detective in charge of her friend's murder case, Jimmy had tracked down a photo of 22-year-old Makedde in a bikini – complete with golden tan and heaving breasts – from a back issue of *Sports Illustrated*, and had posted it on a very public evidence board in police headquarters. He had even gone to the effort of circling her private areas in a bright felt-tip pen, as one sometimes did with crime-scene photographs. The entire Homicide Squad had seen it. Years on, not much had changed between them.

A cursory inspection of the car revealed Freddo Frog chocolate wrappers and an empty KFC carton in addition to the toppled bag of salt and vinegar chips. 'Dinner?' she asked.

'Uh, lunch.'

Jimmy had not improved his health habits one iota, despite his doctor's warnings and a near-fatal stroke that had left one side of his face with a slight droop that seemed only to add to his hangdog expression. Perhaps he believed that the blood-thinning Warfarin medication he was taking had been provided merely to support his desired cuisine preferences. There was probably little that his long-suffering wife, Angie, could say to teach her old dog new tricks.

'What do you think of Andy's new job?' Mak asked him.

Jimmy frowned. She could see that he didn't like losing his old police partner to a new position. 'He's a lucky sonofabitch.'

'Yeah, it will be good for his career.'

It was a return visit – he had trained as a profiler there as part of their international program.

Mak changed the subject. 'So is Deller under a bit of pressure now?'

'Cos of the runner? I dunno. Don't think so. He didn't tell the kid to bolt off and try to leap over a wire barricade. He told him to stop.' Jimmy shifted in his seat. 'What about you? You still playing PI?' He said the words tauntingly, clearly looking for some subject to give him the upper hand.

'Playing' PI.

Mak smiled mischievously, trying not to show her annoyance with his tone. 'Why? Do you need some help with something?'

He smiled smugly. 'Hey, has Andy told you about Ferris Hetherington, the ex-cop?'

He had. Many times. Mak was aware that her work with Marian was causing some minor friction with Andy, but she loved her new-found freedom far too much to dwell on any negative attitudes he and his colleagues might have towards private investigators and their trade. What she did was legal and professional, and it had a place. People needed the services Marian's agency provided, and those who were coming to her for the wrong reasons – to get some professional help to stalk an ex or to spy on a rival business – were quickly vetted out. Marian was an excellent judge of character, and so long as her clients didn't lie to

her – about the things that counted, anyway – and they fell within her basic amoral–moral guidelines, the judging stopped there.

'Ferris,' Jimmy said, 'quit his *real* job to start a private investigation agency. He tried to break into a room at the Westin –'

'Yes, I know,' Mak broke in. 'Ferris tried to pick the lock on the hotel room door with his driver's licence, and it got stuck in the door.' Hard to talk your way out of that.

'You heard the story, then?'

Mak continued the story, verbatim, the way she'd heard it from Andy a dozen times since she started working for Marian. 'He got arrested for breaking and entering, lost his licence and went broke after six months. Fascinating story, Jimmy, but one I've heard before. Oh, Pete says hi, by the way,' she countered.

'Oh, yeah,' he said sheepishly. 'Tell him I say hi.' He shifted in his seat. 'He's a good man, Pete.'

Pete Don was ex-undercover Drug Squad. He had quit the force to start an investigation agency after being outed in a freak intelligence bungle that saw him nearly killed by a major organised crime syndicate. The entire police force had a quiet respect for him, and Mak knew damned well that he had, on occasion, done work for various cops, even though it was not something she discussed with him. Pete was one of Marian's friendly rivals, and he had been a lecturer in Mak's investigator course.

Mak heard footsteps and turned. Andy had changed into a fresh shirt and was walking towards her.

'Sorry about dinner,' he said and kissed her on the mouth. 'I hope you didn't prepare anything.'

She licked her lips when he pulled away. 'Me? Are you kidding? Ha!' She let out an exaggerated laugh as he moved around the car and got in the driver's seat.

Jimmy laughed as well, but more genuinely. 'Fat chance!' He knew Mak wasn't the cooking type. His wife, meanwhile, prepared hearty, home-cooked, three-course meals on a nightly basis.

'We'll go out tomorrow night, I promise,' Andy said. He seemed sincere about it. 'I'll take you somewhere nice.'

So we can celebrate our last night.

She smiled. 'Consider that a deal.'

'I'll be home in a couple of hours.'

'See ya, boys,' Mak replied and stepped back from the cruiser.

They drove off.

'Fuck,' she said to the quiet street.

Mak stood for a moment with her arms crossed, feeling the breeze whip around her. She felt a long way from home, and she had begun to question the wisdom of the choices that had taken her so far away. Looking back, she could see how it had happened, step by inevitable step. The years had mapped out a roller-coaster of emotions and difficult decisions, and now she

was here in Sydney, Australia, so far from her birthplace. In her dreams, things had run a lot more smoothly. In her dreams, she and Andy shared normal, simple domestic bliss – although one that didn't involve her doing any cooking. In her dreams she had not abandoned her widowed father in the country of her birth.

'It will work itself out,' she muttered under her breath. 'It always does.'

She loved Andy. Where there was love, there was a way, right?

Mak walked back inside and locked the door behind her. She snatched her backpack off the bench and strode through the open doorway of the dining room, throwing the pack on the table in front of the empty plates. It skidded along the oak and knocked over a candle, spilling a teaspoon of white wax on the surface of the wood.

Wait.

She had closed the dining room door after Andy arrived home, but the door was now open . . . So Andy *had* seen the dining table laid out.

Great. That's just great.

With little feeling of occasion, Mak poured a glass of the Merlot and swigged it down like grape juice. Grumbling to herself, she then dished up a couple of ladles' worth of the penne from the microwave. Her cooking had not gained any appeal in the interim, sadly. The little pasta pieces looked suspiciously like tyre tread. She brought one forkful to her lips. She tasted. She lowered

her fork. Then she took her bowl back to the kitchen and slid the starchy contents into the bin.

Mak poured herself a bowl of cereal instead, and she ate it by candlelight while she flipped through the real estate listings in the *Wentworth Courier*, in search of affordable office space for her psychology practice. Thus far there was little that was affordable in any suburbs she might conceivably wish to work from. It would come with time, she hoped. She had to try to be patient.

And if you move to Canberra when Andy gets back, you'll have to start looking all over again . . .

She polished off her unsatisfying bowl of cereal – which tasted at odds with the wine – and she called Karen Mahoney to tell her how unsuccessful her attempt at pasta had been.

Karen didn't answer. She, like Mak's boyfriend, was working overtime on this particular Thursday night.

★ ★ ★

What a waste.

Detective Constable Karen Mahoney stood at the feet of a recently deceased young woman, observing the scene of her death, police notepad and pen in hand. It was a Thursday night, and Karen had just been looking forward to going home when the call came in to the Homicide Squad. Now she found herself in this sad one-bedroom apartment, taking in every bit of

information she could to piece together what had happened.

About an hour earlier, nearby Kings Cross Police Station had received two complaints from separate neighbours about the sounds of a violent argument. When they sent a couple of connies over, the boys had found much more than the expected domestic disagreement. The tenant, a young woman, had received multiple stab wounds to the chest. The officers said she was already dead when they arrived.

An as-yet-unidentified young man was also in the apartment at the time, seeming to be disoriented, and holding in his hand a blood-drenched knife – the obvious murder weapon. He had not attempted to flee. The young man was now in police custody, being interviewed. He had track marks on his arms: a junkie. It looked like a drug-fuelled burglary gone wrong. Perhaps she had surprised him while he was stealing from her, or perhaps he had made an unsuccessful attempt at rape.

What a horrible way to die.

The victim was clothed in blue jeans and a pale blue top, now marred excessively with blood that a mere sixty minutes before had been coursing through her veins. She wore a pair of white socks but no shoes, suggesting she had been relaxing at home when attacked. Karen noticed blood on the victim's hands, and what might have been defence wounds. Her arms and

legs were splayed, platinum-blonde hair swept messily across her forehead. Since the moment of death, the victim's body had been cooling one or two degrees per hour, and her skin had already begun to turn waxy and pale, giving her the appearance of a smooth mannequin.

What a damned waste.

Karen, who had made detective recently, had seen a few crimes like this. Such scenes did not exactly reinforce the idealistic views of human nature she had entertained in her days as a rookie cop, especially as she had learned that the majority of violent crimes were committed by those known intimately to the victims – lovers, family, friends. *So much for the ties that bind.* And she'd seen complete strangers kill one another over something as petty as jewellery or cash, even a pair of running shoes. Or drugs.

Crime-scene investigators moved around the apartment like busy worker bees, going about the painstaking ritual of collecting microscopic forensic evidence. A photographer recorded the body from various angles and then moved on to concentrate on other minute details, his flash illuminating the rooms.

Karen crouched near the victim and peered at her face through a mess of pale, blood-streaked hair. She had been pretty. Karen noticed that the victim wore no wedding band or rings; her only jewellery was a pair of stud earrings with the two distinctive linked letter C's of the company

Chanel. There did not appear to be any lacerations above the neck, the concentration of wounds being to the chest. Her attacker had missed her heart, leaving time for her to suffer. Crimson handprints traced a fatal struggle around the room, leaving blood across the coffee-table legs and top, an area of white-painted wall and the floor. A stack of magazines had slid off the table; picture frames were on their sides. One frame containing a photo of a middle-aged couple – probably her parents – lay on the floor in a spray of broken glass. It appeared that the struggle might have lasted some time before the stab wounds ended the woman's life.

You fought back. You tried.

An officer swathed in protective clothing moved in and Karen stepped back to give him room. He covered the victim's hands with brown paper bags and tied off the bags so they were secure for the trip to the morgue, preserving any damning microscopic DNA evidence of the attacker's flesh under her nails.

Karen had once seen a rookie cop named Finker use plastic bags instead of paper, causing a murder victim's skin to slough off inside the moist bags until there weren't even fingerprints left when the body reached its destination. Karen thanked her lucky stars that she had never done anything quite so damagingly inept in her stage of initiation – not that she was accepted as part of the gang just yet. She was still considered a

'newbie'. Karen may have thrown up at her first dismembered victim, but that was almost a rite of passage. Besides, she'd managed to miss most of the evidence, and that's what counted.

'Fifteen minutes earlier and we might have caught him in time,' someone commented.

Karen looked over her shoulder to see the uniformed officer who had spoken. He appeared shaken, standing with her superior, Detective Senior Sergeant Bradley Hunt, as he was questioned by the older man. She guessed that it was probably the constable's first homicide or, at least, his first stabbing homicide. Karen wondered if the two connies had taken their time in arriving, considering that the complaint from the neighbours would have seemed routine. The young constable might be troubled by guilt if that were the case.

It's too late now.

There was nothing anyone could do that would bring this young woman back to life. Immediate family would soon be informed. Karen only hoped she wouldn't have to be the one to lie to the family that their daughter 'did not suffer'.

At only twenty-three years of age, Meaghan Wallace was dead.