

CRISIS

CHAPTER ONE

In which my obsession for Dinusha originates in the lingerie shop
and I decide to abandon my serial-killer image for good.

FELICITY AND I had been divorced for six months when I fell in love with Dinusha. It appeared to be a sudden thing, but actually it happened over time. I had been observing Dinusha for some weeks, but it wasn't until I went into the lingerie shop where she worked that the whole thing hit me.

I was living in this run down house (Felicity, you understand, had the four-bedroom mansion with the pool, bought, as she liked to point out, mostly with her grandfather's money) and the only good part about this place I was in (I mean the *only* good part) was the window that faced the street. Don't get the idea that I used to stand at the window and watch girls walking past. No, I had a better method. Facing the window there was a large framed poster of a beach in Fiji, and the outside world was reflected in the glass. So I'd lie on the old brown sofa with my back to the window and I could see whoever went by. Plenty of old blokes with bags of shopping, and boys on skate boards. Sometimes it was this dark, mysterious, sexy Indian girl with a Walkman. She was like some vision in a dream, drifting across the glass in the picture frame. There I'd be, listening to the cricket, and She would manifest on my screen.

I have a good friend called Ross—and when he went through his divorce he started going to an analyst. They would discuss *imaginary* visions not to mention *dream* images of dark voluptuous strangers and what it all meant. The Anima and such. I knew what it meant, and when my houri (in the nicest possible sense) made her way into my waking life, at a shadowy remove, I lay on the sofa and accepted what fate had to offer. A scruffy pile of books Ross forced upon me was piled up more or less unopened on the floor beside this sofa—*Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D (a runaway

best seller as seen on TV) and things like *Spiritual Awareness in the Mid-Life Crisis*; *The Conscious Marriage* (which was full of exercises for things such as the container transaction understanding your partner's inner world). I know all about Felicity's inner world actually—it resembles a casserole of cold Irish stew with eels and spiders in it. *Travelling With the Tiger*—I rather liked the sound of that one, but it turned out to be about some sort of grace and revelation. These books were gradually moving *under* the sofa. Soon they would be out of sight. Goodbye Harville Hendrix.

Felicity has often been known to criticise me for lying on sofas listening to the cricket or whatever. If only, she used to say, I would mow the lawn or prune the roses or sweep the paths or clean out the gutters. She would explain that I would be so much happier, healthier, more useful, more in touch. I asked about 'in touch'—in touch with what, exactly. My feelings, the earth, reality, life. Quite good value for a fellow who's just cleaning out the gutters. In any case, I said we had experts to do these things, people we paid to get the jobs done. We wouldn't want to take their jobs away from them etc. etc. Whenever our discussions came round to this point, Felicity just said 'mmmmm' and walked out of the room. She thinks all the money is hers. Well, it is in a way. I'm just a poor old teacher—senior lecturer in fact—and I don't exactly bring home much bacon. Harville Hendrix no doubt covers points like this in his book.

Anyhow, when I had my own place, with my own gutters simply crammed with leaves and dirt and sprouting weeds like eyebrows, I took considerable pleasure in lying on the sofa with my back to the world (and life and reality) watching for the moments when my dream girl went gliding by.

Then there was the day I was walking past the lingerie shop, idly looking in the window at the black lacy numbers, when what should waft into view behind a display of silver stockings but my deep dark heart's desire. I noticed her eyes and her breasts. Fabulous. Intelligent, if you know what I mean. Really intelligent tits. I hadn't realised any of this when I had watched her reflection in the glass, but through her little white top I could see what I could see. I followed an urge to buy underwear and went in. All I could think of was 34C—Felicity is a 34C—and so I exaggerated and said 34D and it seemed OK because my dark beauty didn't bat an eyelid (well, actually, she did a little discreet eyelid batting, but it was playful, not judgemental) and got out a small selection of white satin and lace bras. I said they were for my fiancée. I felt I had to say something—white seemed a better idea somehow than black—and a fiancée had a feeling of less permanence than a wife. Although heaven knows a wife is a will-o-the-wisp sort of a thing these days.

I took two bras at some fifty dollars each and two pairs of matching knickers which were thirty dollars a pop for a minute draping of snow white lace and gave her my Visa card. Then I changed my mind and wrote a cheque because that way I could put my address on the back. Showed her my licence with the god-awful photo of me looking like a serial killer. Simon James Tyler, Serial Killer. I always expect people to do a double-take when they see the licence and try to connect the picture with me. They never do. She didn't either.

I watched her slender brown hands as she lifted the lingerie up and gently let it fall over her wrist and drop onto the tissue paper. I said, 'Champagne' out loud, meaning the colour of the paper. The word just slid out of my mouth. 'Beg yours?' she said. That threw me. 'The paper,' I said, 'the tissue paper's the colour of champagne. Wouldn't you say?' 'I hadn't thought of it,' she said, in a way she had, cocking her head on one side and letting her incredible smile light up her face. 'No, I had never thought of that. But now you mention it.' And she laughed. God, the laugh. That was when I actually felt the thrill as the heavens opened up to receive her laugh. I was a fish to the lure, a lamb to the slaughter—except it wasn't really like that at all. I always reach for an animal image. It's because of my discipline. For years now I've been teaching the second year subject of the Psychoanalytic of Birds and Animals in Literary Discourse (East and West) and the beasties have naturally gotten into my blood.

It used to drive Fliss wild. Can't you ever think about anything but hyenas and carrions crows—she'd yell at me. It wasn't fair. It is, after all, my job, and a bird in the hand—or a hare and a tortoise here and there—is a harmless enough thing, I would have thought. Felicity, I should point out, has a very low opinion of my chosen profession—says it is scarcely fit for grow-ups—she despises Ross. I wonder why she married me; I also wonder, sometimes, why I married her. I was madly in love with Felicity, but I can't remember the details. Ross says it must have been just sex. He's probably got a point there.

But back to Dinusha for a sec. Because I had made a fool of myself over the champagne, I decided to go the whole hog (as it were) and I just said straight out—well, in a round-about crooked sort of way—I said, 'Patik, is your name Patik, by any chance. You look uncannily like a student I had a few years ago—her last name was Patik.' She smiled mysteriously and looked down and out came this most low and musical of sounds. She murmured, 'Maharaj. My name is Dinusha Maharaj.' I nearly choked at the loveliness of it and I stood there stunned and staring into her eyes, dark pools of

mystery and passion. ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘sorry, my mistake. Maybe you’re related.’ And she said in this amused and faintly pitying way, ‘I really don’t think so.’ As if I was a half-witted child who couldn’t be expected to know the finer meanings of the gulf between a Patik and a Maharaj.

I needed to get home, to start to take in what was happening to me. Harville Hendrix, where are you? Is this love? Do I sense the contours of this beauty’s inner landscape? She wrapped the stuff up so slowly, deliberately and delicately (deliciously), as I watched in a hypnotised sort of way. I could have watched that woman wrap up knickers forever. She *fondled* everything—the bras, the knickers, the paper, the raffia. I swear she bound the parcel up with tufts of raffia. I’d never seen that before, but afterwards I started to see it everywhere. Even in the market they started tying bits of raffia round white paper packets of cheese, round bunches of dried herbs. It’s a truism, of course, but when the beloved displays a particular piece of behaviour, the lover (!) begins to find that particular little novelty all over the place. I discovered raffia. I *wanted* raffia, longed to find myself bound hand and foot with raffia bonds while I gazed up at Dinusha with eyes of anguish, begging for pity. (This is all bullshit, of course. What I wanted was to grab her round the waist and throw her to the floor and fuck her in a pretty straight-forward sort of way. Forget the raffia.)

She said she hoped my fiancée would like the things. I had forgotten all about the fiancée and nearly said what and who, but I stopped myself in time. Then in came some repulsive woman covered in gold costume jewellery and reeking of Poison (I know these things; Fliss is a perfume freak. For fourteen years I have lived in a house where the first rule of life is to smell good—and that means expensive, exotic, new.) This creature came tottering in and started fingering the leopard skin slips and glaring at Dinusha. I knew my time was up. ‘Tell her she can change them if she needs to,’ Dinusha said as she handed the parcel to me in a plastic carry-bag that said ‘Fantasia’ on the side. I’d never noticed the place was called Fantasia. I say she handed it to me, but it was like a ballet, more like a ballet. ‘I think they’ll be right,’ I said, quite calm. ‘I’m sure they’ll be right.’ And I drifted from the shop, from the precinct, from the hallowed ground, the sanctuary, and floated along the street, turning the corner into my own street without so much as a backward glance. I did not look back.

Just then the sun came out and I saw the light shining through the pale leaves of the trees in the street. Little hands of leafy fabric unfolding before my eyes. Incredible radiance, translucent umbrellas of tender green. I realised it was spring. The pavement was as a ribbon of silk beneath my

Nikes. My sweatshirt bore the faded title Atlanta USA and a kind of rubber impression of the Stars and Stripes. And a pizza stain on the elbow. I was wearing (I can hardly believe this now) a pair of half-dead navy track pants that were unravelling at the ankles (which were bare). There I was floating along in seventh heaven, the parcel tied up with raffia safe inside the Fantasia bag, dressed as a serial killer.

I don't know why I kept thinking serial killer. Maybe it was because she was so divine and untouched and innocent (that's what I thought then) and I was so old and tired and filthy and guilty and—well—*unworthy*. By all appearances. Beneath the surface of me there beat a heart of gold, not to mention a certain amount of perfectly healthy and practically moral lust. I suppose if I went to Ross-boy's analyst I'd find out I secretly wanted to capture, imprison, torture, rape and murder Dinusha and dump her battered, unrecognisable and dusky naked body in a shallow bush grave. I know for a fact that that's what the analyst and Ross worked out, more or less, about Ross and the female courier. Personally I find it absolutely normal for a man to race off the girl in black leather and helmet who brings the manila envelope with the exam papers in it; but Ross and the analyst decided it was really deep, and they discussed it for weeks. I *wonder* about the analyst sometimes. But that's a completely different train of thought, and why should I care what kind of unspeakably sordid bullshit that and the analyst cook up at a hundred and ten dollars a go? Although I *have* had some gross thoughts about what I'd like to do to Felicity, violence-wise. But enough of this.

I was all toggled up as a serial killer, swinging a plastic bag full of delectable little undies in my paw. I thought I was going to start whistling a tune—'It's a lovely day today' kept running through my killer's head. I controlled my lips and swung into the drive of the bloody awful hovel where I lived. Suddenly the fluttering jade parasols of the trees in the street disappeared; the sky went dark and I was alone among the weeds in my driveway, where the peeling timber of the house, the rusty metal of the widow frames, the shoots of some terrible growth sprouting from the chimney all rose up before me and I instantly went for my nose-hairs with my right thumb and forefinger. I stood still and yanked one out and wiped the little spot of blood on my arm. They don't always bleed, but this one did. I was vicious at that moment. Then I felt better, a bit better, and took a deep breath and went into the house.

The house *stank*.

It stank before I got there, before I went to live there. Having me there hadn't improved the smell, although I *had* prized open the bathroom window which was glued in place by layers of paint and encrustations of grit. In the

process of opening it I snapped the catch, an ancient metal rod with holes in it like a belt, and breaking this meant the window would never again close properly. It swings and bangs in the wind, and the rain comes in. I could analyse the smell of the house. Age mostly. Decay. Mould and dust and nobody had opened the windows for about a century. The trapped odours of years of fried sausages and chips. Cigarettes. Cigars (some self-indulgent down-and-outer had spent his dole cheques on half coronas and left the remains in a heap in the fireplace where no fire had burned for a good fifty years). Dog shit. Cat piss. Other stuff best left to the imagination. I looked in the oven once. I really don't want to talk about it.

You could wonder where I got this house, what agent had it on his books. There are agents, as it turns out (Ross knew all this) who specialise in this kind of place for husbands who have been displaced from the marital home. The analyst Ross goes to put Ross in touch with Kang and Kang and they got Ross a place by the river with an actual earth floor and snakes in the roof. It didn't smell, as it happened. I went for smell. And he didn't have rats and mice because of the snakes. I have rats. Possums too. If I do become a serial killer, I'm going to start with the possums. I should point out that all this costs a fair bit, more than you'd imagine. It's a form of therapy, so-called.

Enough of the seamy side of things. I sat on the sofa with my back to the window (sacred opening through which I had first glimpsed my darling's shade in the glass) and removed the parcel from the carry-bag. The champagne tissue paper her fingers had so recently folded was tucked at the ends like the best kind of bed-making. Hospital corners, crisp and clean. I think I was trembling as I took the ends of the raffia and prized apart the bow. The paper shifted open and there in my lap was the nest of pearly satin and frothy lace. I brought it all up to my nostrils and drew a long sweet breath. There's nothing like the smell of new lingerie, nothing like the feel of it against your cheek, nothing like the promise of how the perfume of this pair of knickers will subtly change with wear. Musk.

I read the labels. They were all made in New Zealand. That's a funny thing. You don't associate New Zealand with lingerie, somehow. Still, considering how much they cost from a plain little neighbour like New Zealand, I suppose I ought to be glad they were not French. It's a long time since I bought any French undies for Felicity (or for anybody, for that matter) and I had chosen to forget how ill the prices always used to make me feel. Fasten hooks before washing—something Fliss never caught on to. Forever hooking up to the holes in my Airtex singlets and attaching themselves to socks. Very sensible advice—fasten hooks before washing. Dark colours wash sepa-

rately. I thought about that one for a while. I thought of the dark body of Dinusha Maharaj and of washing not separately but together. Wash in company with dark colours. Pour in milk, champagne, bubbles, pearls and add one fresh Indian maiden. Was I in danger of going racist? Was this racist? Sexist? Everything bad and forbidden, worse than capture, torture etc? Satin pintuck. That's poetry anyhow. Satin pintuck. Pin Tuck. Sat In Pin Tuck.

I lay back on the sofa with my back to the window and I closed my eyes and indulged in a few moments of personal intimacy. I deliberately didn't think about Dinusha—it was an exercise in discipline and respect. I thought about my usual dental nurse fantasy—we are in a public swimming pool changing-room and she undresses with her back to me, slowly taking off her saucy little cap, starched white uniform, white stockings, plain panties, plain bra. Then she turns round. It always works.

I stayed there with a silly smile on my face, the nest of pintuck satin crumpled in my hands, and fell asleep.

It was dark when I woke up, and the damp and mould and cobwebs and dust and all the rest of it had collected in the gloom about me. But I still had the sweet smile on my face. I also had a little bundle of slightly used female lingerie. What to do with it? I took an empty Heineken carton from the bedroom and put the things in it, and stowed it in the hall cupboard. There isn't much furniture here. Most of my things are in suitcases or hanging on hooks on the walls and on the backs of doors. Somebody—probably the cigar man—had a thing about hooks and there are brass knobbly ones, stainless steel, plastic stick-on ones, fancy ones with china balls on the end, and they are on the backs of all the doors, on the walls, inside the cupboards, everywhere. Rang for a pizza. Had a few beers. Watched the news and a thing about getting water into the desert by diverting a lot of coastal rivers, and I started to go really agro. About everything and nothing.

So I rang Felicity—well, I rang my own number, my own home, didn't I—and when she answered I didn't say anything. And she said, 'Is that you again Simon,' and so I hung up. Then a few minutes later I rang her again and Flora answered—she's fourteen—and she said, 'If that's you dad, mum says to piss off will you.'

I wasn't going to take that. So I said, 'Look here Flora, I won't be spoken to like that. I need to have a word with your mother. It's very urgent.' Why do I do these things? Fliss came on and said what was so urgent, and so I said I had just found out that you had to do up the hooks on bras before you put them in the washing machine. It was the first thing that came into my head. Then there was a bit of a pause and Felicity, ever so gently, hung up on me.

That's how it goes. I get agro, ring her up, go silent, hang up, ring again, get one of the twins, usually Saskia, the sensible one, or Toby, say something stupid, and that's the end of it. I have a wife (well, an ex-wife I suppose you'd have to say) and three children who live in luxury with three bathrooms and room for four cars currently occupied by the 4WD and Eamonn Bloody Waterford-Saxby's Peugeot 405 with its famous structural rigidity, and with Hi-Fi the lilac Persian (a cat you understand) and Nobby the golden retriever and the fish and the guinea pigs and the silkworms and all the other sundry pets that come and go—Flora has spiders—and a rat—and a security system fit to keep out a rebel army. And piped music because Felicity likes to think life is a big hotel. (The effect of this particular attitude of hers is that when you *do* happen to get into a five-star hotel it's not so different from home—not as good, as it happens.) And the other element in the house is Natalia the cleaning woman (girl really) who was the straw that broke the camel's back when the marriage was falling apart. Felicity assumed I was having it off with Talie and she kept Talie on and I had to go. Not fair really. I see it as being completely unfair. It was nothing, nothing, the thing that was nothing, between me and Talie. just one of those pleasant hiccups of married life.

What I'm getting at is the fact that there they are, Felicity and her gang, barricaded against the rebels or the devils or whatever it is in the outside world that threatens their existence, with more running hot water than the Shah of Persia and here I am with a fireplace full of somebody else's old cigar butts and a beer carton of almost new satin underwear in the hall cupboard. Sometimes I don't know what it all means.

But I brightened up. I may be a statistic in some great register of male mid-life crisis kept in a computer in the desert by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., but I don't let myself stay down for long. I rang Ross.

'I have met the most wonderful woman,' I said. You have to be a bit laid back, a bit guarded. I wasn't going to admit I had met my Fate, the girl on my red velvet swing. No, I have met the most wonderful woman, I said. And he said thank God for that, thank God somebody had met somebody. Where did I do it, how? So I said she was the friend of a friend and he didn't know the people, old family friends really from Wangaratta. We were at a dinner party ... He started to get suspicious, I could feel it in his voice, so I back tracked a bit and said it wasn't exactly a dinner party, more casual, I dropped in on them and they were having dinner and ... 'You *dropped in* on them?' Ross said. 'Since when did you start dropping in on people—with your crisis going at the rate it is.' He made dropping in sound like a crime or a sort of griddle cake. *Drop In*. Or even a place for bored and useless sub-criminal

youths to go for a plastic foam cup of instant coffee and a bit of pool and a lecture on making your own paper. Drop-ins for Drop-outs—I could sense all this in his voice.

‘Yeah, I was passing, and I decided to drop in on the Winters and they were having dinner and this girl was there, woman, girl, I don’t know. She’s sort of Indian.’ I felt his ears prick up like Nobby’s, and his eyes light up as well. ‘Oh yes,’ Ross said. ‘Yes,’ I said ‘she’s part Italian and part Indian.’ Now I don’t know why I said that. I was getting very nervous for some reason. ‘That’s unusual,’ Ross said, ‘quite multi-cultural, really, old son.’ When he starts the old son routine I know I’m getting into trouble, but I more or less ignored him and went on with the story. I was getting right into it. Casual. ‘I think she said she was a dental nurse,’ I said, the dental nurse just slipping out somehow. ‘Stay away from them, old fellow,’ Ross said. ‘They are nothing but trouble, nurses, dental nurses, psychiatrics, midwives—believe me. Trouble. You’d better believe me. I *know*.’

He would know, actually. He has had very wide experience. Once he was locked in a cupboard (by mistake) in a nurses’ home for two days. They passed him wet face cloths to suck, and gave him bedpans. I find the details of this pretty bad, but he seems to think it’s funny. I decided not to pursue the subject of dental nurses at this stage and said, ‘Have you had your pizza?’ He had. ‘Want to come round for a night-cap then?’ He did.

We sat on the sofa. Golf on the TV with the sound turned off. And had a few beers. ‘Let’s punish a can or two,’ Ross said, and we did. I gave away nothing about Dinusha, just told him the thing was in progress and I’d keep him posted. He said I was looking good on it, and assumed the best of me, assumed I had spent one or two nights at Dinusha’s house. It’s good the way people assume; it helps.

I noticed the socks Ross had on, conscious of my own bare ankles above my Nikes. ‘Are they those seed repellent socks, Ross?’ I said, and he said that as a matter of fact they were. For some reason I couldn’t take my eyes off them—they were a kind of terracotta colour and they looked so nifty somehow. ‘They alsocome in green. I’ve got some green.’ He has a style of dress that I sometimes aspire to—a sort of stockman look with Drizabone and short cowboy boots—everything olive and chocolate and lichen and antique mahogany or chestnut. I’ll never quite understand how Ross emerges from the riverside hovel looking like the man in the old Marlborough ad, definitely high country. This image is at odds with his deranged habit of driving past Meredith’s (his ex) house every other night, late, slowly, with a double-headed Bad Axe on the floor under the mat in front of the passenger seat and

a butterfly knife in his boot. This night his boots were the colour of wheat, golden against the rugged earthy tones of the seed repellent socks.

I imagined roaming through the spinifex (what *is* spinifex), the heavens clear blue and lilac above, the grasses brushing my ankles, Dinusha's hand in mine, and the socks repelling every seed attack. I realised of course that the socks had a contraceptive sort of reference. Safe sex with the grasses. It's my one-track mind that can start with an innocent sock and end up with Dinusha in my arms in the bushland high above a rushing river. I imagined soft pink skin inside cafe latte labia and felt my temperature rise.

I turned up the volume on the golf and stared vacantly at the screen. Ross leant forward, intent.

The decision was made then and there to up-grade my wardrobe so that the next time Dinusha saw me I'd be a new man. I cringed when I realised what she must think of me so far, a kind of derro trying to impress his fiancée. I shuddered. And I was sorry I'd put my address on the cheque. Damn, damn. How could I face her after she had got a look at this place from the street. I could say I was waiting for my own house to be renovated, that I was minding this patch for a friend—or something—or what? It was all too hard. I gave up and put my mind to the golf.

We were both staring straight ahead, drinks in hand, when Ross said, 'I've been meaning to tell you, by the way, Pixie and I are getting together.' I thought I must have missed something, overlooked some vital part of the conversation when I was dreaming on about Dinusha and the socks and the colour of her naked skin. Anyhow I said, 'Pixie,' as if I wasn't asking, just throwing the word around a bit. 'Yes,' he said, 'I'm ready to come out of analysis and get into the analyst, if you follow me.'

I didn't. 'No, I don't quite, Ross-Boy,' I said, coming clean. 'Who the fuck is Pixie?' And he said, trying to make out he hadn't been misleading me for months, 'Pixie, Pixie Moon. She's my analyst. Did you think the analyst was a bloke? God no.' 'No,' I said, trying to keep up, 'no, of course I knew it was a woman, but I didn't know her name, and I didn't think you were supposed to get it off with the analyst. I thought that was a really strict thing.' And Ross just said, not taking his eyes off the TV, 'Get real Tyler old son. Get real.'