

Crooked House

Bush Capital, #1

by Peter Menadue,

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*„Every time you tell yourself it is alright it just
becomes a bigger lie“*

—Powderfinger

„Power only tires out those who do not have it“

—Giulio Andreotti

Prologue

Early morning. I sat in my cubicle in the Canberra bureau of the Melbourne *Age*, sipping coffee, reading the papers and feeling unusually serene. The day was bursting with promise. Something great was going to happen. All my veteran journo instincts told me so.

My mood dipped slightly when I saw my bureau chief, Thomas Bilson, heading towards me. Tall and wiry, he looked slightly lost, as if he couldn't find an arse to kiss or credit to steal.

We'd been at logger-heads since I joined the bureau, two years ago. He considered me lazy and disruptive. I thought him an average journalist crawling his way to the top. Both assessments had some truth. But our relationship really nosedived when I told some colleagues that he was a total prick then turned around to find the total prick standing right behind me. His expression showed disdain for honest and robust criticism.

Yet, the atmosphere would have been even worse if he knew I'd been sleeping with his wife for the last six months. She was a political reporter for ABC radio whom I occasionally bumped into around Parliament House. Nothing happened until we accompanied the Prime Minister on a trip to Perth. One night, in a bar, after several drinks, she started complaining about her husband: he was boring, selfish, self-absorbed and lousy in bed. In other words, I wouldn't spend the night alone.

I soon discovered she had a healthy sexual appetite and perverted imagination. Giving me good sex was a way of getting revenge on her husband. Her barely suppressed anger certainly kept it spicy.

But recently I'd got tired of her whinging about Bilson and even started to feel sorry for him—which really hurt. I also realised her shining eyes didn't signify a vibrant personality, but a demented virago.

Yet I still enjoyed turning the fast approaching idiot into a cuckold. Whenever he annoyed me, I had a private laugh at his expense. What bliss.

Today, he looked especially overcast.

I said, brightly: "Morning. You don't look happy."

"I'm not."

"Why not? What's wrong?"

"I had a fight with my wife last night."

"Really?"

A frosty stare. "Yes. And during it, she told me she's been having an affair."

My throat turned to corrugated iron. Only one word crawled out, barely alive. "Really?"

"Yes. In fact, she even told me *who* she's been fucking."

I didn't like his tone, his expression or the glint in his eye. Not one little bit. Another word scraped out. "Really?"

He scowled and yelled: "Yes. She said she's been screwing you, you prick."

Suddenly, my personal and professional lives collided like freight trains. I said "shit" and he adopted the archaic and petulant remedy of throwing a punch. It started somewhere in the nineteenth century and travelled very slowly through the next hundred years - ignoring the rise in promiscuity and decline in values—until it grazed my jaw. A piss-weak effort. But the shock tipped me off my chair.

I wish I could say that I hit him with a bell-ringer, watched him crumple to my feet and then moon-walked around the bureau while waving my arms aloft. However, what transpired was much less cinematic. As I got up, he threw another punch. I ducked under it and tackled him. We rolled around on the floor, punching the air and collecting carpet lint. We must have looked like two bad actors trying to stage a fight. Afterwards, an onlooker told me we exchanged some of the hardest slaps he'd ever seen. Another said we looked like two chicks mud-wrestling.

After what seemed an eternity, numerous hands dragged us apart. We stumbled to our feet and stood back, breathing hard, glaring.

He snarled: "You, prick. You'll pay for this."

I knew I would. The bureau wasn't big enough for both of us. One of us had to go and, because Bilson had his head right up the Editor's crack, it would obviously be me.

So I wasn't surprised, the next day, when the Editor phoned and spoke in a sinister whisper. "Paul, I'm afraid your presence in the bureau had become, well, an embarrassment to me."

"Embarrassment?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you're a disruptive element. This latest episode just confirms that. I'm giving you one month's notice."

"You're sacking me?"

"Yes."

"I'm a good reporter."

"You're a pain in the arse."

I put down the phone and mentally cursed my stupidity. One thing was certain: the fucking I got definitely wasn't worth the fucking I got.

If I had to get the sack, I would have preferred it to be for laziness, tardiness or incompetence. Instead, I'd tripped over my dick and become a figure of fun. Colleagues even started giggling when I approached. Somehow, I had to restore my pride and credibility.

Fortunately, I should, at least, be able to find another good job.

Chapter 1

Wrong. Jobs were scarce. Political journalism was getting blogged to death: any nasty little tick with access to the internet could now pretend he was a reporter and write just as much bullshit as the professionals. Further, my bout with Bilson for the Overweight Championship of the Press Gallery consolidated my reputation as a trouble-maker. Indeed, some bureau chiefs who interviewed me seemed worried I'd shag their loved ones *and* punch their lights out. No big metropolitan paper would hire me. The best job I could get was as the National Political Correspondent for the *Launceston Herald*.

So, after sliding down a very long snake, I climbed onto a short and rickety ladder. The *Herald* had a tiny readership with a concentrated gene pool at the arse-end of Australia. In Parliament House, everybody calculates your usefulness with microscopic precision. When I joined the *Herald*, lots of people re-did their calculations and, after making many subtractions, came up with zero. Suddenly, their eyes glanced off my face or went right through me. I talked to lots of people who wanted to be talking to someone else.

I realised just how far I'd fallen when I discovered the *Herald* wouldn't pay me any overtime and my expense allowance wouldn't feed a hamster. I was denied the petty plunder that sweetens a journalist's dreary life.

I needed to hook a big story to get my name up in lights and return to my rightful place among the Press Gallery elite. I wasn't greedy. I would have happily uncovered a sex scandal or tale of corruption. However, I soon found myself chasing a huge story along a path strewn with murder victims while trying not to join them.

But that was all locked away in the future. In the meantime, like all journos, I lived one day at a time.

The 250-odd members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery were housed on the second floor of the Senate Wing. Their bureaux stretched along both sides of a long corridor running the length of the floor.

Eight months after I started working for the *Launceston Herald*, I got to work at about nine o'clock. The *Herald's* press box contained a small mound of letters, faxes, press releases, speeches, draft bills and Hansard extracts.

I tucked them under my arm and wandered down the corridor to the *Herald's* bureau, really a large office with two desks. Filing cabinets lined the walls. In a corner was a small kitchen bench with a coffee machine. A long window faced Black Mountain. The bureau looked bare and functional because the paper was too lousy to buy any decent furniture. I even had to buy my own stapler.

My wing-man in the bureau, Michael Boyd, was already at his desk, reading a paper. Michael was in his early twenties, spotty faced and lightly built. Blue braces tamped down a heavily wrinkled white shirt. He had the sort of village-idiot haircut and vague expression that sometimes hides brilliance, but in his case spoke the truth.

I was surprised to see him because he usually arrived late, if at all. Certainly, I preferred it when he didn't turn up, because he was one of the most useless reporters to ever pull on a sports jacket, lacking drive, initiative and common sense. When I asked him to cover a story, he usually seized the wrong news angle and wrote it up in pre-school prose. Joining words together was not his forte. I always thought journalism a fairly easy profession until I saw him try his hand.

However, his indolence and lack of talent had not cruelled his ambition. His oft-stated goal was to snare a big scoop that would make him famous. Of course, he did little to achieve that goal. Just smugly assumed that, if he hung around long enough, a scoop would eventually fall into his lap. I knew better. I'd been in Canberra for a decade and still hadn't jagged a really big one.

However, despite his failings and illusions, his job was totally secure because his father owned the *Launceston Herald*. That was why, instead of being sacked for incompetence, he was sent to Canberra to get experience under my tutelage. It was also why I was usually very nice to him. I just hoped that, in return, he'd praise me to his dad. So far, I'd seen no signs of that and was getting impatient.

He stared at me through tired, bloodshot eyes, as if he'd slept with a vampire. He pursued nocturnal pleasure with far more dedication and enthusiasm than he applied to his job.

I said: "God. You look like shit."

"Feel like it. Went to a nightclub in Queanbeyan last night. Got to bed about four. Hah. Hah. Then I had to get up and go home."

I didn't care if he was half-comatose for the rest of the day. If he wanted to spend it sleeping in a cot in the corner, I'd tuck him in. What I feared most was his enthusiasm.

Wistfully, I recalled the distant mornings when I'd arrived at work feeling like shit after a night on the prowl. But that all ended when I started cohabitating with Anne. I envied the little bastard.

I sat at my desk and sorted through the documents, looking for potential stories or important forthcoming events. Nothing grabbed my eye and I filed them in the bin.

Next, I scanned the big city papers, looking for any political stories we might have to follow up. None.

It looked like being a slow news day, unless there were fireworks on the floor of the House or Senate, both in session.

I phoned the paper's newsroom in Launceston and spoke to the Editor, Dirk Tucker. I'd met him once, when I flew down to Tasmania to be interviewed for the

job. He was a gruff ex-police reporter with a shaven head, who sat next to a window ashing his cigarette on the sill. Most Tasmanians I met seemed fat and jolly, but he was just fat. I tried to break the ice by joking that at least Tassie journos had six fingers to type with. He was not amused.

The *Herald* was an if-it-bleeds-it-leads tabloid, particularly if the bleeding occurred in Tasmania. It also ran more news about Launceston City Council than Federal Parliament. So when I warned Tucker it might be a slow news day, he didn't sound concerned. Just gave a hacking cough. "Let me know how it goes."

As I hung up, Michael glanced at me and said: "What do you want me to do?"

"Arrange a one-on-one interview with the PM."

It took him several moments to realise I was kidding. "Ah, right. And if I can't do that?"

The leader of the Greens had scheduled a press conference. It probably wouldn't produce any news. Hopefully, though, it would keep Michael out of my hair. I told him to cover it.

"OK."

Fortunately, he didn't mind being given shitty stories. In fact, he preferred being given as little responsibility as possible. That was understandable, because the little rat didn't have to prove himself. To succeed, all he had to do was keep breathing longer than his dad. I wished I could buy shares in him.

Chapter 2

It was the best of times, because it was the worst of times. In any power structure, confusion reigns at the top while disillusionment and bitterness eat away at the foundations. The present Government was no exception. For the last six months it had gone through what several of my clique-addicted colleagues called a "winter of discontent". There had been Cabinet splits, ministerial resignations, backbench revolts, factional brawls and policy divisions, all played out in the media spotlight.

However, the biggest blow to the Government was the economic downturn, the worst in twenty years. As the unemployment rate soared, the Government's popularity plummeted.

The Prime Minister, Brian Hislop, had always been a dour and uninspiring leader. That didn't matter while the good times rolled. But when the economy fell out of bed, voters turned on him savagely. Now his personal approval rating was below serial killers, child molesters and journalists. His strongest demographic was anyone who'd been in a coma for the last three years.

At a recent by-election, the Government lost a usually safe seat. Government MPs panicked and started looking around for a new leader. Rumours swept Parliament House that various Ministers were planning a palace coup.

Of course, all of the potential challengers gave him the dreaded vote of confidence which, in pollicie-speak, meant they were circling for the kill.

That day, after lunch, I sat in the House, watching Question Time. As expected, the reinvigorated Opposition spent most of it asking the PM barbed questions about the economic crisis.

The PM blamed the recession on the global economic downturn and drop in international commodity prices. "However, this Government has worked hard to improve our economic competitiveness. So when the global economy does recover we will be well placed to take advantage of that."

While he talked, Opposition MPs kept up a stream of jeers and interjections. But Government MPs only offered a few chirrups of support and many looked distinctly unimpressed with his performance. If this was the Roman senate, he'd now be a corpse wrapped in a bloody toga.

After Question Time, I strolled around to Aussies' Coffee Bar with a couple of other reporters, where we spent the next hour slurping lattes and speculating about how long the PM would last. None expected him to be occupying the Lodge when the first leaves of autumn fell.

When I returned to my bureau, Michael was at his desk, still looking like shit.

I said: "How'd the presser go?"

He looked a little embarrassed. "Umm, I've got some bad news."

I sighed. "What?"

"I forgot to put any batteries in my tape recorder. So I didn't get any of it."

Christ. If only his dad could see him now.

I said: "Did you make any notes?"

"No. I thought my tape recorder was working."

I stared at him. He was almost too stupid to roll rocks down a hill. But for that reason his success in life was assured. He'd join the long list of boobs I'd met with glittering careers.

I turned on my computer and pulled up a wire service story about the press conference he'd attended. Nothing interesting happened. I told him not to bother filing a story. It wouldn't get into the paper anyway.

"Then I probably should go home," he said wearily.

"Yeah. Good idea."

As he departed, I started typing up my story about Question Time. That was easy. My mind has a template of the basic newspaper story. I just pour the facts into it.

The Prime Minister yesterday claimed that the economy would soon recover from the present recession...

Chapter 3

Canberra is a strange, unnerving city in the middle of nowhere, attached to the coast by a 300-kilometre umbilical cord made of bitumen. If a competition was held to find the world's most boring city it would win hands down, if the judges could be bothered visiting it. A few bold public monuments remind residents that

it wasn't build yesterday—that it has a history. But Canberra has no centre, no ghettos, no ethnic quarters, no red light districts and no industrial zones. It's just a vast archipelago of suburbs scattered through bushland and linked together by four- and six-lane expressways. In Canberra, it's easy to drive anywhere, but there's nowhere worth driving to.

The suburbs themselves are pockets of smug complacency and quiet desperation. Its inhabitants have the highest living standards in the country, and the highest rates of alcoholism, suicide and divorce. That's not surprising, because in Canberra you get the awful feeling that everything exciting is happening elsewhere, except wife-swapping, of course.

I lived in Ainslie, one of the older suburbs, with wide parklands and long curved streets lined with wattle and grevillea.

Most homes are brick bungalows. But I lived in a townhouse, the last in a row of five, with a line of garages behind them. I parked in my garage shortly after eight o'clock and strolled around to my front door. The chilly night air nipped at my legs. I opened the front door and stepped into a large open-plan living area.

Soon after my affair with Angelica Bilson ended—and I got kicked off *The Age*—I started dating an attractive solicitor called Anne Holloway. She was, quite frankly, much too good for me. But she didn't realise that and I tried hard to keep her in the dark. Indeed, she still hadn't cottoned on, four months later, when she moved in with me. Or maybe her lease ending had something to do with that.

Back then, my unit looked as soulless as a transit lounge: most of the furniture was assembled with a cavalier disregard for the instructions; the walls were festooned with faded Van Gogh posters; the pot-plants had died of thirst and everything was covered in prehistoric dust. My ornaments could have fitted into a small suitcase and I barely had enough crockery to eat alone. But Anne quickly imported pot-plants, dhurries, vases, rugs and a complete dinner set. Watching her clean the unit left me mentally exhausted.

At first, I enjoyed the transformation. Recently, it started to irk me. The walls seemed closer together and I kept bumping into things. I yearned for the days when I could leave empty pizza boxes on the coffee table and laundry on the back of the sofa.

However, because it was my house and *my* mortgage, I couldn't just walk out, and didn't have the courage to ask her to leave.

When I walked through the front door, she sat on the sofa, watching TV. It was the same sofa that, in days of yore, I would have flopped onto, face-first. Now I felt annoyed I couldn't.

She turned and smiled. "Hi. How was your day?"

"Nothing I'll put in my memoirs. What about yours?"

"OK. I spent most of it in court."

Anne worked for a small firm in Civic.

I sat next to her. "Doing what?"

"My client owed \$4,000 in parking fines. I was trying to keep him out of gaol."

"Did you?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"I got him to pay the fines."

I slapped my forehead. "Oh, what a brilliant legal manoeuvre. I hope he was grateful."

"Yeah, he was. He's a dentist. He offered to cap my teeth at a ten-percent discount." She exposed her lovely teeth. "Do you think I should have them capped?"

I shook my head. "Look great to me."

"He also asked me out to dinner."

Something squeezed my heart. I may have had doubts about our relationship, but I didn't like other bulls wandering into my paddock. "The dirty bugger. What did you say?"

"I said I was engaged."

That, of course, was a lie. But it still made me uncomfortable. "Why'd you say that?"

"Because he was a jerk, and it was the easiest way to get rid of him."

She stared at me, sensing my discomfort, and enjoying it. There was a long pause. Wanting to change the subject, I said: "Have you had dinner yet?"

"No. I've been waiting for you."

"OK. What are we eating?"

"Ratatouille."

"We had that last night."

"Not all of it."

She went into the kitchen and took a chunk of frozen ratatouille out of the freezer. While she stuck it in the microwave, I broke out the cutlery and set the table.

"Oh, yeah," Anne said from the kitchen, "I forgot to tell you. Rebecca rang."

"What did she want?"

"Didn't say. She wants you to call her back."

I was married once, for three years. Rebecca was our only offspring. She was now fourteen and lived with my ex-wife, Jane, in Yarralumla.

I went over to the phone and dialled Jane's number. Rebecca answered.

I said: "Hello Becky. How are you?"

"Fine, Dad. I need to ask a favour."

I felt a twinge of concern, because when Rebecca wanted a "favour" it usually pushed me closer to the poverty line.

I said: "You mean you want some money?"

"Well, umm, yes."

"What for?"

"The school's ski club is going to Thredbo at the end of next month. I want to go along."

She spoke quickly, like a saleswoman talking through a screen door.

I said: "What's the damage?"

"About \$1,400."

I wistfully recalled the days when all I had to do, to make her happy, was stick a dummy in her mouth.

I said: "Jesus. My wallet just had a heart attack. Hang on while I try to revive it. Clear!"

"Dad, it's not that much."

"It is to a poor man like me."

"Come on Dad. You're not poor."

"No. I just can't afford to eat."

"Oh, Dad, don't be lousy. All my friends are going."

I sighed. I felt guilty about being an absentee Dad and rarely denied her anything. This was just a ritual struggle I would eventually concede.

I said: "I suppose your mother expects me to pick up the tab?"

"Yeah, it looks like it."

"Alright, I'll pay, on one condition."

"What?"

"You behave yourself until you go. If your mother tells me you've been acting up, you won't get a cent, OK? In fact, I'll cut you out of my will."

Empty threats. But they made me feel more like a father.

She said: "Don't worry Dad. I'll be an angel. Thanks a lot."

"OK. You still want me to pick you up on Saturday?"

I had access to Rebecca every second Saturday.

She said: "Of course. Nine-thirty?"

"OK. Is that all?"

"No. Mum wants to talk to you."

"Sure, put her on the phone."

Jane came on the line. Although it was a long time since we'd been together, I still felt a little guilty about the way I'd treated her. Thankfully, she was now in a good relationship and happy with the whole world, including me.

She said: "Hello Paul. How are you?"

"OK, except I'm poorer than I was five minutes ago."

"You'll give her the money?"

"Of course. But I told her that she'll only get it if she behaves herself."

"Thanks" she said. Some women might have said that sarcastically. Not Jane. She really meant it. That's why it hurt so much. "You still going to pick her up this Saturday?"

"Yes. I'll see you then."

We exchanged goodbyes and I hung up.

Anne took the ratatouille out of the microwave and brought it over to the table. "What was that all about?"

"Rebecca just mugged me, again."

While I ate, Anne regaled me with office gossip. It had taken me several months to work out that she had two colleagues called "Dave" and two called "Robyn". But I still couldn't work out who was who.

Later, in bed, Anne rolled on top of me, kissed me on the mouth and rummaged around in my boxer shorts. Soon, we were humping like teenagers.

I'll say this about our sex life: it lacked spontaneity and we had to grab a lot of flesh that felt awfully familiar. But at least we knew which buttons to push and knobs to twiddle.

Afterwards, as usual, I quickly fell asleep. I dreamed I was rowing a dingy across a vast ocean. The sun was high and I was dying of thirst. Huge vessels crawled across the horizon, like slugs on a wire, drifting in and out of haze. I kept signalling for help, but none turned towards me - none at all.

Chapter 4

The next morning, instead of driving straight to work, I detoured through Manuka to pick up an old friend, Alan Casey.

He'd worked on the Gallery for almost thirty years and was now Chief Political Correspondent for the *Sydney News*. He was also, in my humble opinion, the best goddamn political reporter I'd ever met or heard of. His warmth and wit had earned him a far-flung network of contacts, all desperate to leak him stories. Indeed, he was one of the few reporters in Canberra who, if he quoted a well-placed government "source", had actually spoken to the guy. Almost everyone else just manufactures "sources" to mouth their pet theories or hobby horses. I've certainly been guilty of doing that, though I've almost broken the habit.

He drank booze like an athlete drinks Gatorade. Indeed recently, after downing three bottles of wine in a restaurant, he tried to drive home. On the way, his car jumped a curb and hit a tree so hard the engine landed in his lap and his balls, he claimed, got wedged in the glove-box. The fireys spent two hours cutting him free.

Only the good die young. He emerged without a scratch and told the attending cop that he swerved to miss a kangaroo. The cop wrinkled his nose and asked him to blow into a breathalyser. According to Alan, when the cop saw the blood-alcohol reading, his eyebrows almost touched his hairline. One Gallery wag said it was amazing the reading showed any blood at all.

A magistrate took away Alan's licence for six months. So I often chauffeured him to work.

He lived alone in a small brick-veneer cottage on a large block. His car sat under a carport, neglected and forlorn. The front yard had graduated from lawn to savannah.

I pulled up outside and honked my horn. A few minutes later, Alan waddled out, dressed in a rumpled suit, holding a battered briefcase in one hand and half-eaten sandwich in the other. The harsh morning light highlighted the broken capillaries that smeared both cheeks. He was a throwback to an era when the main vices of political reporters were booze and cigarettes rather than party drugs and lattes. But his eyes were bright and alert.

"Thanks cobber," he said as he sat beside me. "I'll do the same for you when you lose your licence."

"That won't happen, because I don't drink and drive."

"Nor do I."

"You were five times over the limit."

"That's hardly drinking. That's sipping. I was in complete control of my faculties. Unfortunately, the kangaroo was not."

As he stuffed the last of the sandwich into his mouth, I put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb.

I said: "So when're you going to cut the lawn?"

"Why, you offering to do it?"

"No, because I don't own a combine harvester."

"Hah. Hah. It's not that bad."

"Yes it is. It could feed a herd of buffalo."

He shrugged. "Well, I'm not cutting it. Whenever I do, it looks so fucking self-satisfied, because it knows I've got to do it again."

We drove in silence for a while. He said: "Any luck finding a new job?"

The truth was that since my career had veered off its intended trajectory and landed fizzing in the bureau of the *Launceston Herald*, I'd spent little time looking for a new job. There was no point while my fistic fandango was still fresh in everyone's minds. Also, I'm ashamed to admit, I was starting to enjoy working for the *Herald*. The job had no prestige and lousy pay, but there was little pressure and an easy work-load.

I said: "No, because, right now, I'm not flavour of the month."

Alan smiled. "You know, I've got a theory that deep down you *wanted* Bilson to catch you fucking his wife."

"And get tossed off the *Age*?"

"Yes."

"You mean, I *wanted* to fuck up my life?"

"In a way, yes."

"Why?"

"Because every time you start getting too much responsibility, you look for a way out. Getting caught provided the perfect escape hatch."

"Aren't you overlooking one very important fact: the mad bitch told Bilson about the affair, not me."

"True, though I'm sure that, given time, you'd have let the cat out of the bag."

"Really? How much time have you wasted thinking up this theory?"

He smiled. "Not long. It came to me pretty fast."

His theory sounded completely crackpot and unnervingly true.

I said: "I think it's got one big flaw."

"What?"

"I'm not that complex."

"Mmm, you may be right."

I sighed. "But maybe it's time I got out of journalism."

"And do what?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Become a lobbyist or a PRasite, or something like that."

"Don't be crazy. You've got to stay in journalism, because you're not qualified to do anything else."

"Thanks," I said sourly.

"Stick it out. Something will turn up." Alan took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "You know the saddest thing about your fight with Bilson?"

"What?"

"The general consensus is that Bilson needed a good hiding—he really did—but you were the wrong man for the job."

"What do you mean?"

"From what I've heard, you two should have been charged with public indecency. Hardly the Thrilla in Manila."

"Not my fault. He crowded me and stopped me using my jab. I like to stick and move, like Ali, but he didn't let me dance." To make my point, I took my hands off the wheel and unleashed a barrage of air-jabs that smashed Bilson through the windscreen and deposited him on the hood. "He must have scouted me."

Alan giggled. "Who do you think you're kidding? You couldn't punch your way out of a piss-soaked paper bag."

I frowned. "It's hard to believe, isn't it, that I generously chauffeur you to work most mornings without a word of complaint?"

He shrugged. "We all make mistakes."

For the rest of the drive, we chatted about politics. That gave Alan a chance to strip off his outer layer of self-protective cynicism and reveal the genuine misanthrope below.

I drove up Commonwealth Avenue towards Parliament House, which looks like the bunker headquarters of Intergalactic Starfleet Command. Only a super-laser mounted on a Death Star could destroy it. I ignored that danger and zipped into one of its underground car parks.

When I entered the *Herald's* bureau, Michael wasn't there, obviously incapable of being on time two days in a row.

Sitting on my desk was a pile of just-delivered newspapers. I sat and picked up the *Launceston Herald*. The front-page lead was about a group of bushwalkers lost in a national park. It seemed half of Tasmania was out looking for the dozy buggers. My story on the PM's upbeat prediction about the economy was on page eleven, below a story about a local pet show. Any further back and it would have been in the sports section. Thus I was surprised that a sub-editor had gone to the trouble of mangling it.

I read through the other papers. Only *The Australian* grabbed my attention. Near the bottom of the front page, a headline said: "GOVT INTERNAL POLLING SHOWS PM ON ROPES". The story, slugged "exclusive", said the Government's private polling had revealed that the PM's popularity had dived to a depth no PM had ever reached.

What intrigued me most was not the PM's growing unpopularity, hardly a surprise, but how *The Australian* got the poll data in the first place. Only a few party high-ups had access to that sort of information. One must have leaked it to the *Oz* to destabilise the PM. So the PM must be wondering which confidant held a dagger behind his cloak.

I wasn't upset *The Australian* got the story instead of me, because nobody in federal politics leaked good stories to a tiny rag like the *Launceston Herald*. And even if someone did, Dirk Tucker would probably bury it in the back of the paper, if he ran it at all. Then I'd have to explain to my source why his hot story sunk without a trace.

Of course, if I wanted to get back onto a major metropolitan daily—where I belonged—I needed a big scoop. But I'd started to realise I had more chance of finding diamonds in my backyard.

After reading the papers, I waded through the mail and consulted my diary to see what newsworthy events were scheduled for that day. I noted the Minister for Defence, Vincent Martin, would be the guest speaker at a Press Club luncheon.

Martin was Government's brightest hope: the star player on a losing team. He was intelligent, telegenic, popular with voters and full of unquiet ambition. Indeed, he was widely touted as the strongest potential challenger to the PM.

Of course, so far he'd denied coveting the PM's throne. But I'd heard that, behind the scenes, he was canvassing fellow MPs for support with considerable success.

In politics, when opportunity arrives, you've got to grab it with both hands, because it might not come again. Martin's big moment had arrived and the big question was whether he'd seize his destiny or seize all of the available excuses: too young, too inexperienced; not sure of his support; not a good time to lead. Was he a real politician with real balls or just a faker? We'd find out soon enough.

I'd better attend the luncheon, in case he dropped a hint about his future intentions. And even if he didn't, I'd still get a free meal.

Michael Boyd slouched into the office, looking, as usual, like a reporter for the *Zombie Times*. I gave him a few press releases to play around with and headed off to have coffee with a few Government backbenchers.

Several hours later, in the auditorium of the National Press Club, a ravenous horde of political reporters sat around a dozen tables, wolfing down food and guzzling plonk.

Up on the dais, Vincent Martin and a several club officials sat at a long table, eating and drinking a little more decorously. Martin was tall and well built, with a mop of silvery hair and a slightly fleshy face that hinted at self-indulgence. Power made him glow.

I found a vacant seat and got a waiter to bring me roast chicken and some wine. I'd just started disembowelling the fowl when the bulky figure of Tom Riddick, Martin's press secretary, loomed up behind me. Tom was once a third-rate reporter. Now he was a first-rate prick who doled out stories as if throwing scraps to pigs.

Most press secretaries quickly realise their Minister is just another grasping and opportunistic political hack, but keep working for him because they love the perks of office and proximity to power. Not Tom. He was a true believer who'd hypnotised himself with his own spin.

He had a pile of documents under his arm. He handed me one - a copy of Martin's speech. I tossed it onto the table and looked him in the eye.

I said: "Interesting story in *The Australian* this morning, about the PM's declining popularity. Any idea who leaked the poll data to the *Oz*?"

Tom only told the truth under duress. So I didn't expect a big admission. But I enjoyed watching him dissemble, which he lacked the wit to do well. It was like watching an elephant dance.

He tugged his earlobe and his voice fluttered: "Of course not. I don't get access to that sort of data."

"The story will certainly help your boss if he decides to challenge the PM."

"Maybe. But we didn't plant it."

"OK. But when's Martin going to stop flouncing about and act like a man?"

I expected him to flatly deny Martin was planning any sort of coup. But, to my surprise, he just shrugged and smiled thinly. "Why don't you wait and see?"

A huge blip appeared on my news radar. "What does that mean?"

Another watery smile. "It means you should wait and see."

Before I could ask any more questions, he scurried along to the next reporter and handed him a copy of the speech.

I put a slice of rubbery chicken in my mouth and chewed over what Riddick said. Something big was about to happen. I knew it.

I was still destroying my molars on the chicken when the Club President strolled to the lectern and introduced Martin. He said Martin had been a commercial barrister in Sydney for 15 years before entering Parliament five years ago. After only 18 months on the backbench, he joined the junior ministry. A year later, he entered the Cabinet as the Minister for Defence.

The Club President didn't comment on his performance in that portfolio, though most defence pundits believed he'd done well. The recent civil war in Indonesia had made national defence a major political issue. In response, Martin shook up his department by cutting the bureaucracy, boosting troop numbers and replacing a lot out-dated equipment. Recently, the Government had purchase a squadron of Vulcan attack helicopters, three squadrons of F-32 jet fighters and three new navy frigates.

When the Club President had finished, Martin stepped up to the lectern, thanked the President for his remarks and read his speech. I followed what he said in the printed copy Riddick gave me.

He spoke well, but said little of interest. Mostly, he delivered a panegyric about his performance as the Minister for Defence. I was relieved when he reached the last page.

"...unfortunately, we live in an increasingly unstable area of the world. If Australia wants to ensure its survival as a prosperous nation it must be prepared to spend more—a lot more—on defence. This Government has made a good start. Our defence forces are now leaner, tougher and better equipped than before. But more still needs to be done." He looked up and glanced around. "Now, are there any questions?"

A female waiter appeared holding a microphone. Darcy Adams, from *The West Australian*, got to his feet and grabbed it. His pebble-frame spectacles, puckish expression and goatie beard made him look like a leftie uni lecturer who traded A's for sex—which is exactly what he did until he got caught and a Vice Chancellor gave him the boot.

He said: "Minister, my question is about the economy. Despite this country being in a recession, the Government is still running very tight economic policies. Don't you think it's time for the Government to start spending more money to stimulate growth?"

Martin shuffled the papers in front of him as if uncertain how to respond. Then he looked up. "Darcy, you've asked me to stray outside my portfolio. You should really ask the Treasurer that question. However, if you want my personal opinion, I think you're right. The Government's fiscal and monetary settings are too tight and that's inhibiting growth. We should put together a package of stimulatory measures which will boost economic activity."

Shit.

After two glasses of wine and Martin's turgid no-news speech, I'd become sleepy. Now I was wide-awake. Around me, reporters who'd been idly quaffing coffee or rummaging around for mint chocolates looked like startled hares. Those who thought they were free to get pissed sobered up fast. It's always big news when a Cabinet Minister attacks his Government's handling of the economy. It's even bigger when that Minister is a potential challenger to the PM. The PM couldn't tolerate such disloyalty. Martin would have to either resign his portfolio or be sacked. The phoney war was over. Tom Riddick said I should "wait and see" whether Martin challenged the PM. Well, I didn't have to wait long. Martin had just lobbed a political shell into the Lodge. He was a real politician.

Government MPs were due to meet in ten days time. It was now almost inevitable that, at that meeting, Martin would challenge the PM for the top job.

Barry Burbage, from *The Telegraph*, in Sydney, was the next person to grab the microphone. "Minister, what sort of stimulatory package do you have in mind?"

"I think that the corporate tax rate should be lowered and there should be a higher depreciation allowance for new plant and equipment. I also want to see more spending on job creation schemes and infrastructure projects."

An ABC Radio reporter seized the microphone and introduced herself. "How much money do you think the Government should spend on this package?"

"I think \$3-or-\$4 billion would be enough to kick-start the economy."

The next few questioners sought more information about the proposed stimulatory package, but Martin refused to give any more details.

Finally, I got my hands on the microphone and said: "Minister, your criticism of the Government's handling of the economy is, obviously, also a criticism of the Prime Minister. Does this mean you now want his job?"

Martin again shuffled the papers in front of him, as if caught by surprise. That was just an act. He must have expected a question like mine.

He said: "I think the Prime Minister has done an excellent job. But I think it's time for new ideas and a new approach. Certainly, if there is a leadership ballot, I'll put my name forward."

Before I could ask a follow-up question, a waiter snuck up, wrestled the microphone off me and passed it to another reporter. But Martin held up his hands. "Sorry, ladies and gentlemen. I've answered enough questions. Thank you for coming."

The Club President returned to the lectern, thanked Martin for speaking and invited everyone to applaud.

Usually, politicians only received polite and prissy applause. But this applause had a primal edge, flecked with the sound warriors hear when going off to battle. He looked a little surprised and gratified as he left through a side exit.

Everybody knew they'd just witnessed a major political event. Voices bubbled loudly. The forthcoming leadership struggle would be a gift that kept giving.

On the way out, I passed Darcy Adams, smiling widely, and said: "Good question Darce."

"Not mine, I'm afraid. Riddick put me up to it. Said that if I asked Martin that question I'd get an interesting answer."

"For once, Riddick wasn't lying."

Crossing the main foyer, I saw Barry Graham, Martin's political adviser, nervously pacing about, talking into a mobile phone. He was in his early thirties, with a wine-waiter hairstyle, gaunt features and oily smile. I've always distrusted men who wear pinstripe suits, and his were wide as railway tracks.

His job was to ensure Martin hewed to the path of political expediency, a task he obviously relished. Once, over a beer, he confided that the politician he most admired was Stalin. I almost fell off my chair. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. Of course, some of his methods were a little primitive", he said, sounding like he was criticising the tyrant's table manners rather than the liquidation of millions. "But he was cunning and effective. A master politician."

I studied his face to see if he was pulling my leg. He wasn't. Indeed, after our conversation, I wondered why he didn't nominate Hitler. I also wondered if he had the political nous his job required. He had most of the attributes of a political adviser. Sharp suit. Sharp face. Sharp tongue. But sharp brain? I wasn't so sure. Maybe, in the tumultuous days ahead, Martin wouldn't get the best advice possible.

Political advisers fantasise that their minister will one day become prime minister and let them wield real power. So Barry's face was flushed with excitement and he started chewing his fingernails.

Both were bad signs. Top political operatives send out waves of calm authority and definitely don't chew their nails. This was like seeing James Bond pick his nose or leave his fly open.

As I drew close, he turned off his mobile and saw me. He obviously wanted to talk to someone—anyone. "Hi Paul. What did you think of the Minister's speech?"

"I'd love to be a fly on the wall when the PM hears about it. He'll be fucking homicidal. Your man will have to resign. You know that."

"Don't worry. The letter's already on its way to the PM's office."

"He must be pretty confident he's got the numbers."

A thin smile. "Don't worry, he has." He suddenly realised I wasn't worth talking to and glanced at his watch. "Anyway, can't hang around. Things to do."

Plots to hatch, more like it. He shot out of the entrance ahead of me and got into a Comcar parked against the curb.

I believed him when he said Martin had the numbers. Martin wouldn't have launched a challenge unless plenty of backbenchers had pledged their support.

I strolled towards the car park with a spring in my step. Like most political reporters, I'm not really interested in social issues or economic policies. I don't care whether the Government is good or bad for the country. I just report on gladiatorial politics: the clash of personalities. I tell my readers who's going up and who's going down, who's in and who's out.

The struggle between Martin and the PM was the biggest personality clash imaginable. And at the end of it, one of them would go crashing to the canvas. Until it was over, I'd have a mortgage on the front page.

As I drove back to Parliament House, I mentally rummaged through my stock of political clichés, wondering which ones to use in my story. Should I say Vincent Martin had "laid claim to the PM's throne", "thrown down the gauntlet" or "crossed his political Rubicon"? I felt obliged to use at least one.

The PM's office hastily announced that, at 4 p.m., their boss would hold a presser in the Ministerial Courtyard. I got there a few minutes early. A portable podium had been set up in a rope-off area, surrounded by dozens of collapsible chairs. Almost a hundred reporters stood or sat around, chatting excitedly about Vincent Martin's challenge.

The PM came out. For once he had a bounce in his step and gleam in his eyes, as if Martin's challenge had re-invigorated him. But his surge of enthusiasm had probably come too late. His tumbrel was already rolling.

From behind the podium, the PM announced that he'd accepted Martin's resignation from Cabinet and would take over his portfolio until he had time to organise a Cabinet reshuffle.

There would obviously be a leadership ballot at the next meeting of Government MPs. So in a show of bravado the PM said that, at that meeting, he would vacate the leadership of his party. "I will then re-nominate. That will give my parliamentary colleagues a chance to decide whether they approve of my leadership and my economic policies, or want change. Anyone else who wants to stand for the leadership—including Mr Martin—is welcome to do so. Now, any questions?"

The Prime Minister pointed to a female reporter in the front row.

She said: "Prime Minister, Mr Martin has claimed that your economic policies are off track. Do you intend to alter those policies?"

I suddenly realised how brilliantly Martin had cornered the PM. Even if the PM wanted to change the Government's economic policies, it was now too late. Any shift would be an admission that Martin was right and further weaken the PM's position. But doing nothing was also the PM's favourite approach to most problems.

The PM said: "No. There will be no changes. Mr Martin is entitled to his view, but I believe he is wrong. This Government is on the right track, and if everybody shows a little patience, the economy will soon recover."

Unfortunately for the PM, in politics, the scarcest commodity is patience. Everybody, particularly voters, want instant results.

The PM pointed to Angus Reid, the Political Correspondent for Channel Nine. "Yes Angus?"

"Mr Prime Minister, the next meeting of Government MPs is 10 days away. Will you try to hold it sooner?"

The PM shook his head. "No. I don't intend to bring it forward to suit Mr Martin's convenience. Further, if I did, some MPs might not be able to attend, particularly those now overseas. Don't worry, Mr Martin will get a chance to challenge me. He'll just have to be little patient." He held up his hands. "Alright. Thank you for your questions. I've got work to do."

He spun around and retreated into the building.

I joined the tide of reporters flooding back to their bureaux. When I entered the Herald's bureau, anxious to start writing my story, Michael sat at his desk, typing on his computer, a press release beside him.

He gave me a blank expression. "Hi. What's happening?"

If I'd rolled my eyeballs, they never would have stopped. "Oh, nothing much."

"Good." He looked down at the press release. "What's a Machavalen scheme?"

"*Machiavellian*. It's a cunning or devious plot. Named after a famous politician called Machiavelli."

"Really? When was he in parliament?"

Good grief. "He wasn't. He was Italian; lived about six hundred years ago."

Michael looked relieved. "Oh. No wonder I haven't heard of him."

Chapter 5

The next day opened brightly and ended in blood and despair. First, the shining dawn which proved so false: my story dominated the front page of the *Launceston Herald*.

MARTIN CHALLENGES PM

By Paul Ryder

The Minister for Defence, Vincent Martin, yesterday challenged the Prime Minister, Brian Hislop, for the Prime Ministership.

In a day of high political drama, Mr Martin attacked the Government for its handling of the economy and then resigned from Cabinet.

The PM responded by declaring that, at the next meeting of Government MPs, to be held at the end of next week, he will declare his leadership position vacant and then renominate.

Mr Martin threw down the gauntlet to the Prime Minister at a National Press Club luncheon...

The rest of the story quoted what Martin and the PM said the day before.

At such a magical moment in Federal politics, most reporters would have crawled on their bellies to get to work. However, Michael Boyd had called in sick, so I didn't even have to send him on a fool's errand.

I hoped Vincent Martin would call a press conference and launch another attack on the PM. But he obviously didn't want to be accused of damaging the Government for personal gain and, instead, lobbied for support behind the scenes.

The PM also kept a low profile. So I spent most of the day talking to Government MPs, trying to gauge who'd win the leadership ballot. Most thought Martin would win hands down, though a few of the PM's cronies claimed their boy still had a chance.

I'd always got on well with Kevin Medlow, the Minister for Administrative Services, and trusted his judgement. I phoned him and asked if he'd see me for a chat.

"Why?" he asked sarcastically. "You want to write a story about *me*?"

"Of course not. Surely you don't want coverage in the *Launceston Herald*."

"Not really. What do you want to talk about?"

"I want to know who's going to win the leadership battle."

He laughed. "No kidding? OK, I'll talk. But off the record."

"Sure."

"Alright. I can spare you ten minutes, if you hurry around here."

I quickly strolled around to the Executive Wing that houses the PM and his Ministers, and used my security pass to scan my way through the entrance door. When I reached Medlow's suite, the receptionist picked up a phone and told her boss that I'd arrived. After listening briefly, she told me to go into his office. I strolled up a short corridor and pushed my way into Kevin Medlow's office. It was a long, narrow room with jarrah-panelled walls and a long window overlooking the Ministerial Courtyard.

Kevin Medlow sat behind his desk, reading some papers. He was about medium height, balding with fleshy features. A former professor of biochemistry, he was undoubtedly one of the brightest and most talented men in politics. However, he had none of the personality defects needed for political success like chronic insecurity, megalomania and intense narcissism. His tendency to be appallingly candid and laugh at himself also made his colleagues suspicious.

He recently got into trouble while campaigning in his electorate when a constituent wandered up and aggressively asked why politicians told so many lies. According to a newspaper reporter on the scene, Medlow replied: "We lie because fat fucks like you can't handle the truth."

Of course, Medlow claimed he was misquoted - he merely said "Ain't that the fucking truth?"—but nobody believed him and there was quite a hoo-hah for a while.

Certainly, the incident underlined why he would climb no higher in federal politics.

He rose, approached and shook my hand with an impish grin. "Hello Paul. Haven't seen you for a while. I heard about your fight with Bilson."

Christ, who hadn't? It would dog me all my days. "I wouldn't call it a fight. It was just an altercation."

"That's not what I heard. I heard you two went old school, toe-to-toe, over his wife."

"Like I said, it was just an altercation. Bilson started it. He didn't enjoy being a cuckold and attacked me. Then we had a sissy fight on the floor. It was definitely not the Rumble in the Jungle."

"I'm disappointed to hear that. I heard there were lots of savage blows and an ambulance was called. Obviously, an exaggeration. You know, it sounds to me as if you two have unfinished business. Maybe you should go down to the lake one foggy morning and fight a duel. *En garde*."

Medlow imitated a swordsman driving Toledo steel through the gizzards of a dastardly villain. His gracefulness and springy front knee reminded me of Errol Flynn.

I laughed. "Sorry, I'm a journalist, not Cyrano de Bergerac."

Medlow laughed again. "Too bad. Take a pew."

We sat on tan leather couches facing each other across a glass coffee-table.

I said: "Thanks for seeing me."

He smiled. "I'm very popular today."

"What do you mean?"

"I've had calls from the PM and Martin trying to enlist my support, and their staffers have worn holes in my carpet."

"Did either of them offer you anything?"

"Of course. Both offered me a Cabinet portfolio, if they won."

"Can you trust them?"

"Of course not."

"So what did you say?"

He grinned. "I promised them both my undying loyalty and support, of course."

He could do that with impunity because the leadership contest would be decided by a secret ballot.

I said: "Who do you think'll win?"

"Well, as you'd appreciate, it's hard to count numbers. Most of my colleagues are even worse liars than me. I can only tell you what my gut says and hope I don't have indigestion."

"Which is?"

"Martin will romp home."

"Why?"

"Most backbenchers are terrified that, if the PM stays, we'll lose the next election and they'll end up on the scrap heap with a meagre pension. If Martin becomes PM we'll have a fighting chance. He's a new face; he's got some style; he can offer fresh leadership." Medlow picked up a drink coaster and fiddled with it. "Of course, the PM still has a solid rump of support. Most of the ministry will back him. So will the toadies and careerists who've prospered under his reign, plus a few misguided souls who still believe in loyalty. But there aren't enough of them to save his neck."

"Does the PM know he's in trouble?"

"Of course. If he thought he could beat Martin right now, he'd have brought forward the meeting of MPs. He obviously wants time to lure disaffected MPs back into his camp."

I said: "How well do you know Martin?"

"Reasonably well. We've worked together on a few committees and often run into each other at political functions. I've also met his wife a few times. Nice woman. I think they've got three kids."

"What makes him tick?"

He smiled. "You mean, besides burning ambition?"

"Yeah?"

"Not much, as far as I can see. I think his core ideology is political opportunism. But there are plenty like him around here. We're politicians, not priests."

"True."

"Though one thing about him does worry me."

"What?"

"His relationship with George Potter."

Potter was a billionaire property developer in Sydney. He was also the president of the NSW branch of the governing party, which he ran like an oriental despot: rewarding friends and crushing enemies.

It was well known he'd helped Martin get into politics by finding him a safe seat. But their relationship recently got a lot of unwanted attention when Potter's firm

won a lucrative tender to build a new army base in Northern NSW. The Opposition claimed in parliament that Martin gave Potter's firm special treatment. However, Martin denied discussing the tender with Potter or interfering in the tendering process.

I said: "How much control does Potter have over Martin?"

"Potter owns him lock, stock and barrel. I mean, Potter handed Martin his political career. So Martin owes him plenty. And George Potter is the kind of guy who expects all debts to be repaid."

"Even if Martin becomes the PM?"

"Especially if he becomes the PM."

"OK. But what's wrong with Potter holding a few IOUs?"

Medlow rolled his eyes. "You kidding? Potter is the most ruthless shit I've ever met. He's the last person you'd ever want the PM of this country beholden to." Medlow sighed. "Of course, Martin's not the only MP who's indebted to Potter. Most Government MPs from New South Wales owe him something."

"Including you?"

Medlow grimaced. "Yep. Including me."

"Really? What do you owe him?"

He frowned. "I'd rather not say."

"So you're not that enthusiastic about Martin?"

"No. I'm afraid we might depose a doddering old king and replace him with a dark prince."

After leaving Kevin Medlow's suite, I visited a few more Government MPs who also predicted Martin would soon be moving to the Lodge. Then I strolled back to my bureau and started typing my story.

The former Minister for Defence, Vincent Martin, has the upper hand in his leadership struggle with the Prime Minister, Brian Hislop.

Reliable Government sources said yesterday that Mr Martin appears to enjoy greater support among Government MPs.

The big test for both men will come in 10 days' time, when Government MPs will hold a leadership ballot.

Behind the scenes the Prime Minister and Mr Martin are desperately lobbying for support...

The phone rang. I picked it up and gave a vague hello, still concentrating on the story.

"That you Paul?" a woman asked nervously.

"Yes."

"This is Yvonne—Yvonne Clarke."

About a year ago, Yvonne and I had a brief affair, after which we occasionally bumped into each other around Parliament House. The last time was about a month ago. So I was surprised she'd called, out of the blue. With difficulty, I blocked the story out of my mind and focused on her voice. "Hello Yvonne. How can I help?"

Her voice was quick and tense. "I've got to see you, as soon as possible."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. Please, it's important - very important."

"OK. Let's have lunch tomorrow?"

"No," she said desperately. "I have to see you tonight. Please Paul. It's important. This is life and death."

So was my story. Shit. "OK. Where?"

"My place."

"Alright. I've got a story to finish. But I'll be there in about an hour."

"OK, an hour. Please hurry."

The phone went dead.

Chapter 6

Long-lasting relationships have never been my style. My one foray into marriage was a disaster. It shouldn't have been, because I had a lovely wife and wonderful daughter. But I couldn't stop jumping into bed with other women. I was caught, pardoned, caught again and then told to pack my bags.

For many years after that I was a lost soul, desperately sleeping with one woman after another, and having the time of my life. But because my happiness was so completed it didn't, for some strange reason, seem real or meaningful. An irritating voice in my head kept telling me to connect with someone else, settle down and try bitter-sweet happiness for a while.

During those golden years, I slept with Yvonne Clarke. She was an attractive blonde, in her early thirties, who worked as a policy adviser for the Minister for Employment, Percival McCloud. We met at an end-of-Session party and, after several beers and some hard-core flirting, caught a taxi back to my place and fucked like rabbits.

We slept together several times after that. But I soon realised we wouldn't grow old together. I liked her. She was smart and funny, and great in bed. But there was little warmth in her soul. She didn't seem to need me, or anyone. After the initial excitement wore off, we drifted apart. Then I met Anne, who bowled me over and made me a tentative convert to monogamy.

Because my fling with Yvonne reached no great heights of passion, we stayed on good terms. Whenever we bumped into each other, we exchanged friendly hellos and sometimes had a cup of coffee together. The last time was about a month ago.

As I drove over to her house I wondered why she wanted to see me. Did she want sex? And if she did, would I succumb? Christ, what stupid question. Of course I would. Not my fault if she couldn't keep her hands off me.

However, unfortunately, she didn't sound like she wanted a bonk. She sounded desperate: "*It's important—very important.*"

Yvonne lived in Woden, a typical Canberra suburb with broad, tree-lined avenues and brick bungalows on quarter-acre blocks. She lived by herself in a small house in a quiet street. Neat hedges bordered the front lawn; rose beds sat under the windows.

I parked against the curb and strolled up the granite path to the front door. No lights on inside. That was a little strange.

I trotted up the steps onto the patio. The front door was slightly ajar. Something was wrong. My heart pumped hard.

Nervously, I pushed open the door and looked down a dark hallway. "Yvonne?" No response. Maybe she'd gone out for some reason. But, if so, why leave the door open?

I fumbled around, found the light switch and gingerly turned it on. A long hallway with two doors on each side. No sign of Yvonne.

"Yvonne," I yelled again.

No response.

Something was definitely wrong. My heart rate slipped up another gear. I edged cautiously down the hallway until I reached the second doorway on the left. It was open.

I stepped into the darkened living room, turned on the light and caught my breath.

Yvonne always kept her house immaculately clean. That was one reason I knew we had no future together. But the living room looked like it had been looted by a wild mob. Bookshelves had been toppled, the carpet ripped up, drawers emptied and posters torn down.

Yvonne lay in the middle of the floor, on her back, arms outstretched, face covered in blood. Under her head was a large pool of blood, matching her crimson blouse.

Her monumental stillness and lifeless eyes said she was dead. To make sure, I quickly bent down and grabbed her wrist. Stiff, cold and horribly waxy.

I dropped it and tottered backwards on weak legs, until I hit the wall behind me. Bile rushed up my throat and tickled my tonsils. I closed my eyes until it receded.

I opened my eyes to confirm what I'd just seen. Yes, she was still on the floor, dead. Bile rattled up my throat again, but this time with less force.

For about a minute I stood there, staring at her body, trying to comprehend how, an hour after I'd spoke to her, she could be dead. It seemed absurd. Ridiculous. Unreal.

Who could have done this? A lover? A burglar? And, if so, why?

I considered running away and leaving this mess to someone else, but couldn't. Yvonne and I weren't together for long. But we were together. My conscience told me to report this to the authorities. Further, the cops would soon find out Yvonne phoned me at work, just before she was murdered. If they suspected I'd been to her house and didn't report finding her body, I'd be up to my eyeballs in shit.

With grave misgivings, I stumbled over to the phone, on the sideboard. The receiver had come off and now dangled in mid-air. I picked it up and was about to dial triple-0 when I noticed the redial button. Who was the last person Yvonne called? Me? Or somebody else? My journalistic instincts took over. I reached into my jacket, pulled out a pad and pen, and punched the redial button. A number—not mine—flashed up on the display. I jotted it down.

The phone automatically dialed the number, which rang several times. Nobody answered. I hung up and punched triple-0. After a couple of rings, I got a female operator.

"Emergency Services," she said calmly.

"Hello," I said hurriedly. "I've got a dead woman here. She's been murdered."

"Murdered?"

"Yes. Murdered."

"Alright, sir, I'll contact the police and ambulance services. What's your address?"

I spat out the address and hung up.

My legs went weak again and my guts started to churn. I staggered out the front door and sat heavily on the front steps, gulping cool night air.

Five minutes later, a loud siren cut through the night, surging towards me.

An ambulance stopped under a streetlight. Two ambulancemen got out, opened the back door, took out a couple of suitcases and carried them towards me.

Both were in their early thirties, with close-cropped hair and clean-cut features. They looked relaxed. Nothing surprised them. Death was routine.

"You reported a body?" one said.

I was still dazed. "Yeah. She's in the living room."

They stepped past me and went inside.

A few minutes later, the first police car arrived, lights flashing, siren screaming. Two uniformed cops—a thin man and a stocky woman—got out. An ambulanceman came out of the house, stepped past me and approached them.

"What have we got?" the female cop said.

"Dead woman in her thirties. Definite signs of foul play. Better call Homicide."

The male cop returned to the patrol car.

His female partner nodded towards me. "Who's he?"

"Don't know. Here when we arrived. He reported the body."

Lowering her voice, but not enough, she said: "You think he did it?"

The ambulance man shrugged. "How would I know? I'm just a humble ambo. But if he did, he must have cleaned himself up. There's heaps of blood inside."

The female cop strolled over and crouched next to me: late twenties, short blonde hair, strong face, chunky build and plenty of attitude.

She said: "I understand you reported the body?"

"Yes."

She asked for my name and address, which she entered in a leather-bound notebook. "Good. And the woman inside, what's her name?"

"Yvonne Clarke."

"Does she live here?"

"It's her house."

"Well then sir, perhaps you can tell me how she died?"

My brain was also a mess. It took me a while to explain how, while working in my bureau, I got a call from Yvonne, arrived at her house and discovered her body.

The policewoman said: "What did you do when you discovered it?"

"Umm, I felt her pulse—then called triple-0."

While I talked, she kept making notes in her pad. Finally, she rose stiffly. "Thank you sir. Now please wait until the detectives arrive. I'm sure they'll have some more questions."

Christ. This was just a rehearsal? I wanted to say something tart, but restrained myself.

During the next half-hour, several more police cars arrived and a large crowd of gawking neighbours gathered on the nature-strip across the road. Lights flashed, sirens blared, radios chattered. Police trotted in and out of the house. To get out of their way, I strolled to the end of the porch and leaned against the wall.

Finally, a large white Holden Commodore parked imperiously in the driveway and three men in suits got out. One was in his mid-thirties, thin and sharp-featured. The other two were a little younger and considerably fatter. The thin guy turned to the others and spoke briefly. I couldn't hear what he said, but he was obviously in charge. His two companions ambled into the house.

The female cop who'd questioned me sidled over to the thin guy. They chatted for a few minutes, occasionally glancing in my direction.

Finally, the thin guy approached me. "Hello. My name's Special Agent Gilroy. I'm from the Homicide Unit."

No. He wasn't on secondment from the FBI. Many years ago, Australian Federal Police officers started calling themselves "agents", to distinguish themselves from the yokel "detectives" in the state forces. I'm not sure why the AFP was so determined to emulate a police force that couldn't stop 19 foreign guys flying two planes into two skyscrapers. Further, so far as I'm aware, the re-branding has not produced any more arrests. But it obviously makes them feel better when they strapped on their guns.

I said: "Hello. I'm Paul Ryder."

"I understand you're a journalist?"

"Yes. I'm on the Press Gallery. I work for the Launceston Herald."

"Got any ID to confirm that?"

I showed him my press card, which he inspected closely, before handing it back.

He said: "Alright. I've got to go inside and look at the body. But I've got plenty of questions to ask you. Please wait here."

"How long will you be?"

He looked at me sourly. I'd obviously got under his skin already. "As long as it takes."

He disappeared into the house.

Canberra is a fairly peaceable community and the local media is fairly small. So it was another twenty minutes before the first television van beetled into view. Ten minutes later, another turned up. Then came a station wagon with *The Canberra Times* emblazoned on the side. A news reporter and photographer got out. Another television van arrived.

The media mingled with the neighbours standing across the road. Eventually, three TV cameramen and four news photographers had their lenses trained on the house. In fact, most of them were pointing straight at me. Didn't they realise I was just an innocent bystander?

Out of respect, I thought about Yvonne. She was one of the few girlfriends who never caused me any grief. That put her on a pedestal. But I had few memories or regrets to chew on. Soon, I returned to feeling shock and discomfort at being in a media spotlight.

After half-an-hour, Gilroy returned. He didn't thank me for waiting or comment on what he'd seen—just pulled out a leather-bound pad and biro. "How well did you know the deceased?"

"We were friends."

He raised an eyebrow. "Friends? Did you sleep together?"

I knew little about murder investigations. But I knew that suspicion often fastens on either the boyfriend or whoever found the body. So I didn't want to reveal I had an affair with Yvonne, but had little choice: lying would be even more dangerous.

I said: "Umm. Yes. A few times."

"When was that?"

"Oh, the last time was about a year ago."

"Why did you break up?"

"Well, we never really *broke* up. I mean, our relationship wasn't serious enough for that. We just stopped seeing each other."

His grey eyes stared at me. This man was obviously no fool. I shouldn't trifle with him.

"OK then," he said doubtfully. "Why did you stop seeing each other?"

I shrugged. "We just weren't compatible, I suppose. It's a familiar problem."

"And you stayed in touch afterwards?"

"Not really. I mean, we both worked at Parliament House, so we sometimes ran into each other and had a brief chat."

His eyebrow arched again. "That's all? Just a chat?"

"Yes."

"Then what were you doing here tonight?"

I explained how Yvonne had phoned and said she wanted to talk about something important.

He said: "Did she say what that was?"

"No."

"So you've got no idea what she wanted to talk about?"

"Correct."

"How did she sound - what was her tone?"

"Nervous. Worried."

"Like she was in trouble?"

"Yes."

"But if she was in trouble, why did she call you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she wanted to talk to a reporter; maybe she had a story for me."

"Can anyone else verify what you've just told me?"

"About getting a call from Yvonne?"

"Yes."

"Umm, not really. Michael Boyd—the guy who works with me—was off sick today. But surely you can look at the phone records."

"Don't worry. We will."

A large white truck parked against the curb. Stencilled on the side were the words "POLICE SCIENTIFIC UNIT". Three guys in white overalls got out, went

around the back and pushed up a roller-door. Each took out a large suitcase and carried it into the house.

Gilroy said: "Do you know if she was in a relationship?"

"No. We didn't talk much about her love life. The last time I asked her if she was seeing anyone was about three months ago. She just laughed and said she couldn't love anyone after me."

"Was that true?"

"Of course not. She was just joking."

"So you don't know if she was seeing anyone when she died?"

"Correct, though I wouldn't be surprised if she was. She liked the company of men."

"And men liked her company?"

"Yes."

"OK. And what about you? Are you in a relationship?"

I was uncomfortable about the direction our conversation was heading, but couldn't see any way to divert its course. "Umm, yes."

"Living together?"

"Yes."

"When did that start?"

"Oh, about six months ago—well after I stopped seeing Yvonne."

Gilroy tucked his notepad inside his jacket. "Alright. Now I must ask you to follow me back into the house."

I would have preferred to be tied to a rocket and fired through the gates of hell. "Why?"

"Because I want you to show me exactly what you did when you arrived, and identify everything you touched."

His request sounded reasonable. I swallowed hard and nodded. "OK."

I took him over to the front door and explained how, when I arrived, I pushed it open, before going inside. Then I led him up the hallway to the living room, heart thumping. I stepped through the doorway.

Yvonne still lay in the middle of the floor, drenched in blood. I almost fainted. Gilroy studied me intently.

Crime scene technicians were moving around, dusting, scraping, photographing, lifting prints and bagging evidence.

Gilroy tapped me behind the elbow. "What did you touch in here?"

"Umm. Her wrist, to find out if she was dead. And, umm, the phone, to dial Emergency Services."

Should I mention hitting the redial button? No. Why make Gilroy unhappy? I bit my tongue.

He said: "Anything else?"

"No."

"Alright. Now I want you to provide hair and fibre samples."

I already feared being accused of murdering Yvonne. Now my paranoia took wing.

"Why?" I bleated.

"Because we need hair and fibre templates from everyone who's been in this room. That will help us work out what we know and don't know, understand?"

Not really. I didn't want to give him any samples. Instead, I wanted to talk to a lawyer. But demanding that would be like holding up a big sign that said "Guilty". I also wanted Gilroy to like me. I desperately wanted that.

"OK," I said, trying to sound relaxed, with little success.

Gilroy summoned a white-overalled man in his late fifties, told him to take samples and wandered off.

The crime scene technician spent the next twenty minutes plucking hairs from my head and fibres from my jacket, before taking fingerprints. Finally, he said, almost as an afterthought: "Oh, and I'd better get a DNA sample."

He swabbed my mouth with a cotton bud, which he popped into a plastic jar that he sealed and labelled.

Gilroy had returned and was leaning against a wall, watching us. Now he straightened up and said to the technician: "Finished?"

"Yep."

I looked at Gilroy. "Can I go home now?"

"No. I'm afraid not."

"Why not?"

"Because I want you to come down to the station and make a full statement."

I looked at my watch. It was almost ten-thirty. "Can't I do that in the morning?"

"Afraid not. I want to get your statement while the facts are fresh in your mind."

I suspected he really wanted to tie me down to a story, as soon as possible, before I could organise an alibi or conceal any evidence. But I had nothing to hide and nodded. "Alright. But I have to call my partner and tell her I'll be a while."

"Sure. Go ahead."

How do you phone your partner and tell her, out of the blue, that you've just discovered the body of an ex-girlfriend, who's been murdered, and the police want a statement?

As I fished out my mobile phone and dialled my home number, I couldn't think of a good answer. I still didn't have one when Anne answered the phone, sounding worried.

"Paul, where are you?"

"I'm afraid I've been held up at work. I'm going to be a bit late."

"Why? What's the problem?"

"It's a bit hard to explain right now. I'm rather busy. Got a breaking story. But don't worry. I'm OK and I'll be home as soon as I can."

Her voice developed a real edge. "When will that be?"

"In a few hours, OK. I've got to go now."

"Paul ..."

"I'll see you soon."

As I pocketed my phone, Gilroy said: "You handled that well."

What he really meant was: you're a glib liar, aren't you? I ignored his barb. "Alright, let's go."

"OK. Let's take your car. You'll need it later."

Outside, the media contingent across the road had swelled. There were now at least four TV cameramen, half-a-dozen photographers and about a dozen reporters. I wished I was with them, a news-hound instead of the fox.

Most television viewers are armchair detectives who presume guilt on the slenderest evidence. Certainly, I do. So I didn't want to be filmed leaving the house with a Homicide detective. If I did, couch potatoes all across the country, who'd just flipped over from *CSI*, would tell themselves I was guilty as hell and deserved a long spell behind bars.

However, it would look even worse if I turned around and ran back inside. I strode ahead boldly.

The media scrum surged towards us. Strobe lights turned night into day. I blinked hard and made a forlorn attempt to look innocent.

As we neared my car, the reporters surrounded us, waving microphones and tape recorders. I didn't recognise any and assumed they were local reporters. Most of their questions were directed at Gilroy, wanting to know what was happening. He ignored them.

When we reached my car I couldn't remember where I'd put my keys. Bathed in harsh light and bombarded with questions, I nervously dug around in my pockets for 30 seconds until I found them. Despite the cold, my shirt was drenched in sweat.

A reporter yelled: "Detective, where are you going with Mr Ryder?"

Gilroy turned. "Mr Ryder is helping us with our enquiries."

Shit. The magic formula. That was like saying that I'd been found with a bloody knife in one hand, a shovel in the other and a signed confession in my back pocket.

I got behind the wheel and started the engine. Gilroy got into the passenger seat next to me. He parted his small, thin lips to reveal large predatory teeth. I think he was trying to smile.

He said: "How does it feel, being a part of the story for once? It must feel ironic."

It was beyond ironic. I should never have done the right thing and called the cops. I had only committed one crime—being naïve—and was going to be heavily punished for that.

Christ, when would this night end?

Chapter 7

Bureaucratic buildings in Canberra tend to be either Outback Neo-Stalinist or Middle-of-Nowhere Modernist. They look like they hate the landscape and want to be somewhere else. Certainly, the Australian Federal Police Headquarters in Braddon was a non-descript building decorated with filigrees of exterior plumbing. It looked like it housed obscure bureaucrats who stamped documents and issued certificates rather than men who wore guns, kicked down doors and verbed criminals. But my legs shook as we crossed the pine-panelled lobby. Would I emerge a free man? Or was my next destination a prison cell?

I half-expected to be put in a small white room and interrogated by a bad cop and a worse cop. But my visit was far more civilised than that. Gilroy took me

upstairs to a small, cramped office where he sat me down, facing his desk, and turned on his computer.

He asked me to repeat the story I gave earlier. While I did he typed it up on the computer. He wasn't much of a typist, so I itched to perform that task myself. If I had, we'd have finished a lot earlier, with better punctuation.

Two hours later, he printed out a draft witness statement and handed it to me. I read through it and, after getting him to make a few corrections, signed it. He photocopied the signed version and gave me a copy.

I said: "Can I go now?"

"Of course."

He took me downstairs and pushed open the glass front doors. "Thank you for your assistance. I'll be in touch."

I hoped not.

Despite emerging a free man, I felt nervous. Maybe I was already the prime suspect and Gilroy was messing with my head: relaxing his grip before tightening it again; cutting me loose in the hope I'd make a stupid mistake.

Maybe I was under surveillance right now. Startled, I looked around, but only saw darkened buildings and an empty street. But they were trained to be invisible, right? They owned the night. If I couldn't see them, they were probably there.

Shit. Stop being stupid. I'd told the truth and was innocent. I had nothing to worry about. Nothing.

Somehow, I wasn't fully convinced. If Gilroy couldn't find the real killer, he might fit me up with the crime. And if he did, no hot-shot investigative reporter would expose the miscarriage of justice and free me from gaol with a full pardon. None of my useless colleagues were capable of that.

I got home at about 3am, tired, hungry and depressed. I just wanted to climb into bed and sleep. But Anne sat on the living room couch, in pyjamas. As I came through the door, she jumped to her feet, looking tense.

"Paul. What's happening? I've been up most of the night, worrying. Where have you been?"

I didn't want to describe the night's events, but had no choice. They would soon be splashed all over the media. I took a deep breath and plunged forward. "Umm, I've been with the police?"

Her eyes widened and jaw dropped. "What?"

"I found a body tonight—a dead body—so I had to contact the police."

She took a step back, as if I'd connected with an uppercut. "You're kidding, right?"

"No," I said grimly.

"Jesus. Whose body? Where? When?"

"A woman I know—knew."

"A woman? What woman?"

"A woman called Yvonne Clarke."

"Where did you find her body?"

No point lying, because the TV news would soon reveal all. "Umm, in her house—at Woden."

"What were you doing there?"

I described how Yvonne telephoned and asked me to meet her at her house. "But when I got there, she was dead."

"Oh, my God. How did she die?"

"I think someone bashed her to death."

Anne's eyes widened. "You mean she was murdered?"

"Yes."

"My goodness. You must have been shocked."

"Horrorified."

She reached out and brushed the hair off my forehead, sympathetically. "How terrible. But why did she want to talk to you?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe she wanted to talk to a reporter. Maybe she had a story to give to me. But when I got to her place, she was dead."

A dark suspicion flitted across Anne's face. I was surprised it had taken so long to appear. She obviously suspected me of a far worse crime than murder: namely, infidelity.

She said: "How well did you know her?"

Once, when Anne and I were having a rare heart-to-heart chat, I foolishly admitted that, in some of my previous relationships, I'd been less than faithful. So if I told her I once had a fling with Yvonne, she'd probably conclude I went to Yvonne's house for a bonk.

However, I'd fallen into the habit of telling the truth and let my guard down. "Umm, well, I went out with Yvonne before I started seeing you."

Her brow furrowed deeply. "Really? How long ago?"

"Oh, about a year ago. Like I said, before I started seeing you."

Several more furrows created a frown. "Did you see her after that?"

"She worked at Parliament House, so we sometimes ran into each other—that's all."

Anne obviously had dozens more questions banked up in her brain. But to her credit, she suddenly stopped her interrogation and looked concerned. "OK. You look very tired. You'd better get some sleep. Come on."

We trudged upstairs and got into bed. I was so tired I should have gone straight to sleep. But images of Yvonne's corpse flashed through my brain. I tried to recover feelings for her that I never had. Anne threw an arm around me and held me close. But I'd never felt so lonely.

What a fucking night.

Chapter 8

After four hours of restless slumber, the alarm clock screamed in my ear. Groggily, I clobbered the "off" button. The harassment ceased. I rolled over and stared at the ceiling, body crying out for more sleep. But the events of the previous night tumbled back into my head. Horrible images gave me no peace.

I turned over and saw Anne was gone.

I staggered into the en-suite bathroom. Anne wasn't there either, though the condensation on the mirror and a wet towel suggested I was hot on her trail.

Still dazed, I showered and put on my suit, before strolling downstairs to the kitchen area. Anne sat on a stool, eating cereal.

She looked up sympathetically. "How do you feel?"

"Like the lowest grade of shit."

"Maybe you shouldn't go to work?"

I thought about Michael running the bureau on his own and shook my head. "No. Got to."

"OK. Let me make you some breakfast."

I usually had to fend for myself at breakfast time, so this was a special treat. She went over to the fridge, took out some bacon and eggs and started frying them in the skillet. She was obviously dying to ask more questions about Yvonne's death. Eventually, the dam burst. "Have you got any idea who killed her?"

"No," I said curtly, making it plain I didn't want to discuss the topic.

She put a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me. I ate it quickly, said I was going and kissed her on the cheek.

She said: "You really sure you should go to work?"

If I didn't turn up, Michael would spend the whole day playing computer games. "I've got no choice."

"OK. But if you feel like a chat during the day, give me a call."

"Sure."

Few places look as desolate as Canberra on a cold winter's morning. Brownish grass, streaked with frost, covered the nature strips; gauzy mist drifted through gaunt trees.

Driving from my garage, I recalled that I'd promised to pick up Alan Casey that morning. The last thing I wanted was a passenger on the ride to work. But Alan was expecting me.

I drove over to his house, parked outside and beeped the horn. He soon emerged, a dishevelled journalistic dinosaur, the last of his herd, shambling through the dew-encrusted weeds. He obviously hadn't watched the TV news that morning, because he got into the car and didn't mention Yvonne Clarke. Just said a brisk hello and asked how I felt.

"A bit tired."

"How come?"

"Late night."

"Really? Why?"

"Oh. I found a dead body and got questioned by the cops."

Alan's head snapped around. "Fuck. You serious?"

"*Deadly* serious."

He assailed me with questions and was still asking them when Parliament House came into view. I only finished telling him about my big night out while driving into the underground car park.

He whistled. "Shit. Poor woman. Got any idea what she wanted to talk about?"

"Nope. None at all."

"Maybe she just wanted a shag, for old times' sake?"

"I doubt it. Women don't usually pine for me like that."

"True. So you've got no idea who might have killed her?"

"Absolutely none."

He shook his head in amazement. "Boy, catching a lift with you is never boring."

I parked my car and we caught a lift up to the Press Gallery floor. Alan told me to call him if I needed to talk and peeled off.

I emptied the *Herald's* press box and headed up the corridor towards my bureau. I soon discovered I was a celebrity of sorts. In quick succession, two journos I knew waylaid me to say they'd seen me on TV that morning. Tiredness exacerbated my paranoia. I studied their faces for signs they thought I was a brutal murderer. They cleverly masked their suspicions.

I muttered about being in the wrong place at the wrong time and kept walking.

I was half-an-hour late. Michael Boyd was already at his desk, looking alert but not intelligent.

He said: "Wow, you've had a big night."

Shit. If Michael already knew what had happened to me, the whole world must know. I hung my jacket on a peg behind the door and strolled over to my desk.

"What do you mean?" I said, dreading his reply.

"Saw you on tele this morning, coming out of that woman's house. You discovered the body, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Shit. What were you doing there?"

I was reluctant to tell him anything. But we did work together and I'd better tell him what happened, to get the record straight. So I gave him a very brief run-down of the previous night, without mentioning I spent three hours at the police station. Why add to the manure in his brain?

He said: "God. When you saw her body, I bet you freaked out?"

"I was upset."

He looked suspicious. "She was an old flame, huh?"

"Yes."

"Sure you weren't going over there for a quick poke?"

Was my reputation that bad? I wanted to punch the cheeky little shit.

"No," I said firmly.

He looked disappointed. "You've been getting a lot of calls this morning from other reporters wanting some sort of comment. I've left their numbers on your desk." He pointed at a small pile of message slips.

I picked them up and dropped them in the bin. "If anybody else calls, tell them I've got nothing to say."

"Sure."

I scanned the newspapers laying on my desk. Most of the lead stories were about the leadership struggle between the PM and Martin. The general consensus was that Martin would win handsomely.

However, the lead story in the *Launceston Herald* was about the hiking party lost in the national park. Despite a massive search operation it was still missing. My story about the leadership struggle was at the top of page three, headed "MARTIN HAS UPPER HAND OVER PM".

As I expected, the *Canberra Times* was the only paper that gave extensive coverage to Yvonne's death. The story, at the bottom of page one, was headed

"WOMAN FOUND MURDERED". But what really grabbed my attention was the accompanying picture of Special Agent Gilroy and me leaving the house together. He looked calm and confident, while I looked dishevelled, wide-eyed and furtive, as if doing a perp walk. Anxiously, I read the story.

A thirty-year-old woman was murdered in her home in Woden last night.

The woman, Ms Yvonne Clarke, was a policy adviser for the Minister for Employment, Dr Percival McCloud.

Her body was found, shortly after nine o'clock by a national press gallery reporter, Mr Paul Ryder, who works for the Launceston Herald.

A police spokesman said Ms Clarke, who lived on her own, died "from blunt force injuries to the head".

He said that, at present, the police have no leads in their murder investigation.

"It looks like the house has been ransacked, so this may have been a burglary that went wrong," he said. "But we are keeping an open mind."

If the police had "no leads", I wasn't a suspect. Relief flooded through me until I realised the cops might be pretending they had no clues while quietly building a case against me. Anxiety returned. I told myself to calm down, stop jumping at shadows. Show some intestinal fortitude. But my guts gurgled nervously.

I pushed aside the papers, read through the press-box material and consulted my diary before dialling my editor, Dirk Tucker.

At least, he wouldn't know I'd discovered Yvonne's body, nor want to know. He'd only be interested if Yvonne came from Tasmania or was murdered by a Tasmanian. So far as I was aware, neither circumstance prevailed. So I wouldn't tell him about my excursion the night before.

He was typically peevish: "Paul. I've been waiting for you to call. Where've you been?"

"Sorry. Had a busy morning."

"OK," he said gruffly. "But you should have called earlier."

Normally, I'd have overlooked that comment. But I was in a seriously bad mood. "Don't give me that crap. As far as I can see, you're not interested in anything I tell you. In fact, I'm surprised you even take my calls."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about my story in today's paper. The biggest political story of the year is on the boil up here and you run my story on page three—page fucking three."

"I know," he said a little defensively. "But the lost hiking party is big news down here. Huge news. It's what our readers want to know about."

"You mean, they're not interested in who their Prime Minister will be?"

"To be quite frank, no, they're not. I mean, they don't really care much about federal politics. They certainly don't jump out of bed in the morning wondering what's happening in Canberra."

"Then why the fuck does your paper bother having me here?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"No."

"Because your stories—even though nobody reads them—give the paper a touch of class. You get me? Having you in Canberra makes the *Herald* look like a real newspaper, not some suburban throw-away."

I sounded like a carnival attraction. "That's a fucking relief."

"What's happening today?"

I sighed and told him we'd be covering pressers scheduled by the Shadow Treasurer and leader of the Greens.

He said: "OK. What about Martin's challenge to the PM? You going to write about that?"

"Yeah, I'll try. But right now neither's saying anything publicly."

"OK. Then write a story predicting who's going to win."

I looked at the ceiling and said icily: "That's what my story on page three is about. It says Martin has the upper hand."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. Well, I'm sure you'll find a follow-up," he said and hung up.

Normally, I would have covered the scheduled press conferences. But neither would generate much news and I wanted to make a few enquiries about Yvonne Clarke. I turned to Michael and told him to cover them.

He looked surprised. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I've got a few things to do. Just remember your batteries, OK?"

"Sure. Leave everything to me."

Usually, those words would have sent a shiver down my spine. Now I was too tired to care. I needed a cup of coffee before I slipped into a coma. I made the coffee machine give me an extra-strong cup, carried it back to my desk and took a few bitter gulps.

Maybe it was the coffee. I suddenly remembered the redial number listed on Yvonne's phone. I opened my jacket, pulled out the pad I'd jotted it onto and dialled it.

The phone kept ringing out.

Yvonne had worked as a policy adviser for the Minister for Employment, Dr Percival McCloud. I knew the minister's press secretary, Brian Strom, quite well because we once worked together on the *Melbourne Age*. I gave him a call.

"Hello Paul," he said glumly. "I saw on TV that you found Yvonne's body. What a tragedy. Such a nice woman."

"Yes, she was."

"Who killed her? Any idea?"

I was clueless, but wanted to chat with him, face-to-face, so I played it coy. "That's what I want to talk to you about. Can I see you in your office?"

He paused for a few seconds. "Umm, OK. When?"

"As soon as possible."

"Alright, come straight around."

I strode over to McCloud's suite in the Executive Wing. The receptionist said Brian Strom and the Minister were waiting for me in the Minister's office, and I should go right in.

So the Minister wanted to see me. Very interesting.

I pushed open a door and entered the Minister's office. It was a large room with wood-panelled walls covered with Aboriginal paintings. Close to the door were two couches, aligned at right angles. At the far end of the office was a boomerang-

shaped huon-pine desk with three television monitors embedded in the wall behind it.

Brian sat on one of the couches, facing the door. A heavy-set man, with dark hair and a thick beard, he always looked slightly unhappy, as if his dog had just bitten him.

As a general rule, I have absolutely no faith in press secretaries. Most will lie just for practice. But I trusted Brian more than most. He only lied when absolutely necessary, and took no pleasure in it.

On the adjoining couch sat the Minister for Employment, Dr Percival McCloud. Tall and thin, he had a beaky nose and lank hair with a razor-sharp part. His stony features, fixed stare and metallic voice made him perfect to play a Bond super-villain, if he could persuade a Persian cat to appear with him.

However, high political office gives plausibility and a tinge of charisma to even the most lacklustre personalities. It made his dullness seem like gravitas and taciturnity look like profundity.

Certainly, he was very popular among right-wing voters because he strongly believed that welfare benefits stifled the potential of the unemployed and that the selfish poor should make more sacrifices for the deserving rich. A third-rate university once gave him a doctorate in economics. So, not surprisingly, his nickname was "Dr No", a tag he seemed to enjoy, to the extent he could enjoy anything.

McCloud was one of the few Cabinet ministers with an electorate in Tasmania. So I had more contact with him than most.

As I entered, they both got to their feet. Brian stepped forward and shook my hand. "Hello Paul. After we spoke I told the Minister you were coming around, and he said he'd like to see you as well. I hope you don't mind."

McCloud was obviously concerned there might be political fall-out from Yvonne's death.

I turned and shook his hand. "Of course not. I just wish we could meet under better circumstances."

McCloud wore a grave-digger expression. "I agree. This is a tragedy—a terrible tragedy. Yvonne worked for me for almost two years. I was shocked to hear she'd been murdered—bashed to death. How appalling. I hope you can tell us what's going on."

No chance of that. I was stumbling around in the dark and wanted to milk *them* for information.

"I'll tell you what I know," I said equivocally.

They sat together on one of the couches. I sat on the other.

Brian coughed nervously and looked at me. "Umm, before we start, I should clarify the ground rules. I hope you'll agree this chat is entirely off the record - entirely."

I said: "Of course. My lips are sealed."

"Good. Well, ummm, how well did you know Yvonne?"

I said we'd had a brief fling about a year ago. Then, yesterday evening, she summoned me to her house, to tell me something important. when I got there, she was dead.

Brian and the Minister exchanged glances.

Brian said: "Umm, what do you think she wanted to talk about?"

"Not sure. Maybe she wanted to talk to a reporter and I was the only one she trusted."

Dr No leaned forward. "You spoke to the police after they arrived?"

The truth be told, I spent most of the night talking to the police. But why put myself in the frame? "Yes."

"Do they have any idea who killed her?"

"If they do, they didn't tell me." I glanced at both of them. "Have they spoken to you two yet?"

Brian spoke up. "No, though I've had a call from the detective in charge, a guy called Gilroy. He said he's coming over later to interview us."

Time to start prising information from them. "Yvonne was a policy adviser, right?"

Brian said: "Yes. She looked at proposals from the Department, or anywhere else, to train the unemployed or find them jobs. Then she advised the Minister on those schemes."

It was hard to believe Yvonne was killed because someone disagreed with her policy advice. Nor did it sound like she was privy to sensitive political secrets.

I said: "Was she at work yesterday?"

McCloud hated being a wallflower and leaned forward. "I don't know. I didn't see her yesterday, which is quite usual. Lots of people work for me. Brian saw a lot more of her than me." He turned to Brian. "What do you say, Brian? Was she here?"

Brian said: "Yeah. She spent most of the day in her office. In fact, now I think about it, her door was mostly closed."

"Was that unusual?"

"Yes. She usually kept it open, so she could chat to anyone drifting past."

"Did you talk to her?"

"Yes. A couple of times—very briefly—about work matters."

"Did she seem nervous or worried about anything?"

"Like I said, I only spoke to her a couple of times. Yet, now I think about it, she did seem a bit edgy."

"Any idea why?"

Brian shook his head. "Nope."

"Did she have any enemies, in your office or outside?"

McCloud leaned back. "I wouldn't have a clue."

I glanced at Brian, who shook his head again. "Not so far as I'm aware. She worked hard and was friendly to everyone."

"Was she seeing anyone?"

"You mean a man?"

"Yes."

McCloud shrugged again.

However, Brian flushed slightly. "You probably know more about her private life than us, though I got the impression she saw, umm, quite a few men."

"Yeah, and who was the latest?"

"Don't know. She was fairly discreet, though she once joked to me that she was attracted to powerful men."

"And you think she wasn't just joking?"

"Yeah. I think she was a bit of a political groupie."

Parliament House is awash with women who sleep with politicians because, corny as it sounds, power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. Alan Casey often said that, in his next life, he wanted to come back as a politician, because it didn't matter how fat, ugly or stupid he was, he could always get a root: "It's a bit like being a 70s rock star."

Yvonne never told me she had a penchant for politicians. But she was single, attractive, interested in politics and perfectly positioned to meet polities. The ingredients were all there.

I glanced at Dr No and wondered if he bonked Yvonne. True, he was married with six children, a pillar of the Anglican Church and looked like he had embalming fluid in his veins. Yet nobody is who they seem, particularly bible thumpers. If he was a tin can, the label would say "*Contents under Pressure*".

I struggled to regain my focus. "Umm, who were her close friends—I mean women friends?"

Brian said: "The only one I can think of is Joanna Parker. She's Bob Douglas' secretary. You know her?"

I knew Douglas, a Government Senator from Queensland, but had never met Joanna Parker. "No."

"She was always popping in here to see Yvonne. They often lunched together and went out for drinks after work. I think they were both single, so they had a lot in common."

McCloud got to his feet, looking impatient. "Well, I suppose we should now leave this matter to the police."

I wanted to ask them where they were the previous night, but that would have been a rapport-killer. "OK. Thanks for the chat. If I learn anything interesting, I'll let you know."

Brian and I also got to our feet.

McCloud said: "Brian will show you out."

As I headed towards the door, I had a thought, which spun me back around. "Umm, maybe we should look around her office, in case there's some clue about who killed her."

McCloud gave me his undead stare. What were people thinking, or not thinking, when they voted for this human facsimile with gimlet eyes?

He said: "No. I think we should leave that to the police, don't you?"

When Dr No says "no", he means it.

I said: "OK. You've got a point."

After leaving their suite, I headed back towards to my bureau. Halfway there, I decided to visit Joanna Parker, to see what she knew.

I strolled around to Bob Douglas' suite, on the ground floor of the Senate Wing. The receptionist was typing on a computer. She was in her early twenties, with short-blond hair and a sun-scorched face. In a few more years her skin would have the pliability of shoe leather and she'd need a permanent tan to hide the damage already done. She wore a sleeveless top that exposed bony shoulders and

sinewy arms. The unfortunate girl was obviously a fitness addict. Nothing would cure her except muscular dystrophy.

I said: "Hi there. Joanna Parker in?"

She glanced up. "No, not yet."

"When's she going to arrive?"

She looked annoyed. "I don't know. She hasn't called. That's why I'm doing her typing."

"Have you tried to call her?"

"Of course. She didn't answer."

"OK. Thanks. If she comes in, will you ask her to give me a call?"

I handed her my card. She glanced at it. "You're a journo?"

I smiled. "And proud of it."

A thin-lipped smile. "OK. I'll let her know you called."

I strolled around to the lifts. When the doors opened, I found myself staring straight at Thomas Bilson, that virus with shoes who got me kicked off the *Age*. My hatred of him felt deep and old, inscribed on my DNA.

Since the editor of the *Age* asked me to take a long walk on a short plank, I'd often bumped into the Bilsons around Parliament House.

The first time I saw Angelica, I scowled. "I thought our affair was supposed to be a secret."

"It was."

"Then why the fuck did you tell your husband, my boss, about it?"

She looked deeply unconcerned. "Sorry about that. I got incredibly pissed off with him—I mean, he's such an arsehole—and told him everything."

Her eyes glinted with madness. How did I escape this woman without getting stabbed in my sleep, fed rat-poison or falsely accused of rape? Losing my job was a small price to pay.

I said: "You cost me my job."

She shrugged and stared at my tie. "I said I'm sorry." A lurid half-smiled. "You know, you boys shouldn't have fought over me."

Fought over her? Jesus, who the fuck did she think she was: Helen of Troy? In fact, in the harsh light of day, without my hormones in overdrive, she looked a bit gristly. What a hide. "You're crazy? I didn't fight over you."

"That's not what I heard."

"Then you heard wrong. I was very happy to hand you back. Unfortunately, before I could, he attacked me."

She scowled. "You're a pig."

"No, I'm an idiot, for getting involved with you."

Her look said the gloves were off. "Well, if you really want to know, you were a lousy root."

Bitch. "Not my fault. You didn't exactly inspire me."

"Fuck you," she said and stomped off.

I subsequently heard that the Bilsons somehow patched up their differences and stayed together, even though she often taunted and belittled him in public.

My post-*Age* encounters with Thomas Bilson were even frostier. We snarled and glared, and said nothing. Now we had to talk, unfortunately.

I stepped into the lift and the doors shut behind me.

A malicious smirk. "Hello Paul. See you've been in the news recently."

"What do you mean?"

"Finding the body of that woman. Hope you're not in any trouble."

"Why would I be?"

He shrugged. "Oh, you know the cops. They sometimes go off the rails and accuse the wrong people. I know a few good lawyers if you need help—pricey, but good."

My blood boiled. If he was on fire, I would have used him to light a cigarette. "Where do you get the energy?"

He frowned: "What energy?"

"To be a prick all the time. The effort would wear out most men."

His face reddened. "Fuck off."

"No, you fuck-off."

"No, you fucked off."

It's hard to believe, isn't it, that we were professional wordsmiths. We would have kept trading puerile insults if the lift doors hadn't opened.

I stepped out and fired a parting shot. "Look, Thomas, if it's any consolation, I won't be going near Angelica again. I shagged her until my dick almost fell off. Now I've lost interest."

"Fuck off."

Strolling up the corridor, I reflected that Parliament House wasn't big enough for both of us. High noon was approaching, and one of us was destined for Boot Hill.

When I reached the bureau, the door was open and Michael wasn't around. He'd obviously wandered off without locking it, as usual.

I tossed my notepad on my desk. God I felt tired. I needed the services of a high-powered defibrillator. Instead, I made a cup of coffee and carried it to my desk.

While sipping, I accessed the internet telephone directory and looked up "*J Parker*". Two listings, one in Waniassa and the other in Campbell. I doubted "*J Parker*" lived in Waniassa, a far-flung suburb known as "Nappy Valley". However, I called the number listed and got a whiney woman who explained that "*J Parker*" was her husband, Jim.

I looked at the second number. For some reason, it seemed familiar. I took a big swig of coffee and tried to remember why. Then I realised it looked like the redial number I found on Yvonne Clarke's phone. I pulled out the notepad on which I'd scrawled down the redial number. Yep, it matched the second number I just found on the internet.

I called that number and listened to it ring out for about thirty seconds before hanging up.

Either Joanna Parker wasn't home or she knew about Yvonne's death and was too upset to take any calls. It would only take me about 15 minutes to drive over to Campbell and find out. Why not?

Usually, I left my electronic diary on my desk, and took it with me when I left the building. I rummaged through the junk on my desk. Not there. Maybe, through tiredness, I mislaid it. Or maybe someone wandered into the bureau and stole it. Damn. Hopefully, it would turn up.

I left a note on Michael's desk saying I'd be gone for a couple of hours. On the way out, I carefully locked the door.

Twenty minutes later, I stood in front of a long two-storey apartment block in Campbell. Its only redeeming feature was the thick row of poplars that shielded it from the street.

The numbers on the ground-floor apartments suggested that Joanna Parker lived on the first floor. I climbed the concrete steps and strolled along the balcony in front of the apartments.

A balding, heavy-set man in a grey overcoat walked towards me. Normally, I wouldn't have paid him much attention. But he emitted a dark energy and glanced away, as if not wanting to be recognised.

As I trembled with apprehension, he slipped past.

I reached Joanna Parker's door and knocked. It wobbled in its frame. There were splinters around the jamb. Something was wrong - very wrong. Fear put its icy hand on my back. The coward inside me sounded the retreat, and curiosity nudged me forward. Nervously, I gave the door a small shove. It swung open, revealing a short corridor.

Heart thumping, I edged down the corridor, past a narrow kitchen to a small living area.

"Hello," I said loudly, through dry and thick lips.

No response. As I stepped into the living room, I saw why. A woman in her early thirties, in blue silk pyjamas, lay on the floor next to an upturned coffee table. Her blank expression said she was permanently dead. So did the large knife in her chest.

Discovering Yvonne's body had not conditioned me to such scenes. Instead, it had depleted my emotional reserves. My heart red-zoned and veins ran dry.

Again, my inner coward told me to run, while morbid curiosity shoved me towards the body. I edged over and crouched down. The knife had a thick blade, only a fragment of which was still exposed. The rest was buried in her chest, covered with crusted blood. I wasn't a forensic expert—I didn't even watch CSI programs—but she'd obviously been dead for a long time. Her eyes were wide open, frozen. Stupidly, I passed my hand in front of them. No reaction. Christ. What did I expect? A wink?

As I rose, my legs buckled and I almost fell on top of the body. I regained my balance, stumbled backwards and fell into an armchair, hyperventilating. It was almost a minute before I managed even ragged gasps.

Christ. First Yvonne, now this woman. I was up to my armpits in bodies. Women were dying all around me.

Though I was sorry for the dead woman, I didn't know her and quickly focused on my own predicament. What to do?

I briefly considered ringing the cops. But I'd already reported finding Yvonne Clarke's body and didn't want to report finding *another* body. I imagined two beefy detectives frog-marching me into Court with a jacket over my head. I'd definitely get 25 years-to-life.

Fuck that. I had to get out of there.

It was vital I left no trace of my presence. What had I touched? Christ. When I crouched over the body, did I touch the knife? I was still in shock and had trouble remembering. Concentrate. Concentrate. I mentally replayed crouching over the body. No, didn't touch the knife. Was I sure about that? I did another mental replay. I was. Didn't touch the knife.

However, I touched the front door handle, on the way in. I lurched up the corridor, pulling a handkerchief out of my trouser pocket. I polished the handle frantically, until it almost shone.

Cautiously, I looked up and down the balcony. Deserted, thank God. I scurried down it, trying not to look furtive, without success. I went down the stairs and across to my car.

I drove around aimlessly for about twenty minutes, brain churning and guts heaving. Finally, I pulled over next to a park, got out, hurried around to the gutter and laid out my breakfast for inspection.

Though it was a cool day, my shirt was sweat-soaked. I got back into the car and sat for about fifteen minutes while my guts, pulse and breathing slowly settled down.

Who killed Joanna Parker and why? I had no idea. All I knew was that her death must be connected, in some way, with that of her close friend, Yvonne Clarke. The rest was a deep and dark mystery.

I now had two options: return to work or go home.

If I went to work, I wouldn't function. I pulled out my mobile, called Michael Boyd and said I wasn't feeling well—which was entirely true—and was going home.

He said: "No probs. I've got everything under control."

That was highly unlikely. But I didn't care. Right now, my job seemed even less important than usual.

Though I usually preferred beer to spirits, spirits were the quickest route to oblivion. Back home, I headed straight for the sideboard and poured myself a stiff double brandy. It disappeared in one gulp. I poured myself another. Two gulps.

I unsteadily carried the bottle over to the couch and poured myself another libation. After downing that, I lay on my back and stared at the swaying ceiling. Soon I was so plastered I couldn't remember what I saw in Joanna Parker's apartment. And whenever the fog of amnesia started to lift, I downed another shot of brandy.

Several hours later, when Anne got home from work, I still lay on the couch, a near-empty brandy bottle on the coffee table.

After a desperate effort, I sat upright.

She looked upset. "Paul. Why are you home so early?"

"No feelin' good," I slurred, through rubbery lips.

"What's the problem?"

"Dunno. Maybe I got thuh flu."

"Then you should see a doctor."

"Nah. Just need ta lie down for a luddle bit."

She picked up the brandy bottle. "How much of this have you had?"

"Ah, a few glasses. Gotta bit bored lyin' here. Had few drinks. Mucidinal."

"You've obviously had more than a few."

"You're probably right. Lost count."

She sat on the couch, looking concerned. "Were you thinking about the woman who died?"

She was referring to Yvonne Clarke. However, I wasn't drinking because of her. I was drinking because I'd just discovered another body. Anne was one dead body off the pace.

When I'd told Anne about finding Yvonne's body, she responded rather well. She must have at least suspected that I was sleeping with Yvonne. Yet she'd held her tongue. I couldn't ask for more than that. If I told her I'd found *another* body, she'd think "serial killer" and head straight for the door.

Without waiting for permission, a lie staggered off my tongue. "Yes, I was thinking about her. Finding her body was a big shock."

Anne could have used that opening to delve further into my relationship with Yvonne. Instead, she touched my cheek, sympathetically. "I can understand that. Let me make you some dinner. Then you can go to bed."

"OK. Thanks."

While she prepared a spaghetti dish, I lay on the couch, staring at the ceiling. However, as my head cleared, images of Joanna Parker's body floated through my brain. I thirstily eyed the brandy bottle but, to please Anne, left it alone.

Anne and I ate the spaghetti at the dining table. Stress and booze had killed my appetite, and I ate little. While she kept trying to make conversation, my mind was back in Joanna Parker's apartment. Eventually, we lapsed into an uncompanionable silence.

After playing hockey with my food for a while, I complained that I still didn't feel well, climbed the stairs to our bedroom and lay down. I was being a royal pain in the arse. Anne deserved better. But I just didn't care.

Joanna Parker followed me upstairs and kept intruding into my thoughts, barring sleep. After a while, I got angry with her. Why the hell did she have to die just before I visited? And why did I have to find her body?

An hour later, Anne crawled into bed beside me and silently turned off the light. This time, she kept to her side of the bed and was soon snoring.

I still couldn't sleep. The scene in Joanna Parker's apartment kept playing over and over again in my head. Only at about 4am did everything go blank. Then I slept like I was in the middle of an air raid.

Chapter 9

Anne prodded me in the ribs and barked Nazi-style: "You going to work this morning?"

Sleepily, I opened my eyes and glanced at the clock. Almost nine. Shit. I should be at work already.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. My head ached and body begged for more sleep. I didn't want to venture out into a world now brimming with nastiness and danger.

However, a heckler in the back of my head said I had to work. I left Michael Boyd in charge yesterday and he probably wouldn't notice if the army launched a coup and started shelling Parliament House. I couldn't tempt fate a second day running.

I glanced up at Anne, already dressed for work, and groaned: "Yeah. I'm going."

"What about your flu?"

A wan smile. "Sometimes you've gotta play hurt."

Her look said I didn't add anything to the team. "Well, if you don't feel up to it, come home."

"Sure."

She pecked me on the forehead. "Alright. I'm off to work. See you tonight."

After she'd gone, I lay on my back, eyes closed. But if I did that for too long, I'd fall asleep. I rolled out of bed and staggered into the bathroom.

I washed and dressing before stumbling down to the kitchen to eat a couple of Weet-bix. At least my tiredness stopped me dwelling on the events of the last two days.

Driving to work, I turned on the radio and listened to the ABC local news. Had the police investigation of Yvonne Clarke's death made any progress? And had Joanna Parker's body had been discovered?

The announcer said nothing about Yvonne's death. However, one news item broke through the fog of tiredness that enveloped me.

The newsreader said: "Police say the body of a woman was discovered in her apartment at Campbell early this morning. It appears the woman, whose name has not been released, was stabbed to death. She is believed to have been in her early thirties. A police spokesman said that Homicide detectives have been called to the scene."

My heart thudded and stomach lurched. Only after I'd driven another five kilometres, was I was sure I wouldn't have a heart attack or vomit.

I parked under Parliament House and caught a lift up to the Press Gallery floor. When I walked into my bureau, I found Michael Boyd slumped over his desk, motionless.

My heart started a wild jungle beat. My God. Not another fucking dead body. *Three in three* fucking days. This can't be happening. I was walking through a charnel house. Death was all around me.

"Jesus Christ," I blurted out.

Michael took that as his cue to rise from the dead. He sat up straight and displayed two blood-shot eyes. "Ah, morning boss."

His sudden resurrection put another heavy strain on my heart. For a few moments, my fate hung in the balance. Then my heart slowed to a more measured beat. I took a few deep breaths. "Christ. You scared the shit out of me. You alright?"

"Yeah, of course. Just had a big night, that's all."

That was his problem: lots of big nights and no big days. As he rubbed his bland eyes, I realised that coming to work was the right decision.

He said: "You know, you don't look so good yourself. How do you feel?"

"Like shit on a stick."

"What's the problem?"

The problem was that I hadn't slept properly for two days, because I kept tripping over dead bodies. I recycled the lie I told Anne: "I think I've got the flu."

"Seen a doctor?"

"No. Don't worry, I'll survive. Much happen yesterday?"

"No. I went to those press conferences you told me to cover, but my stories didn't make the paper."

"OK. Did the PM or Martin say anything interesting?"

"Not so far as I'm aware."

That assurance didn't ease my mind. "What did the other papers say this morning about the leadership struggle?"

"Nothing much. Nothing new, anyway."

I sat at my desk and looked through the morning papers, hoping he was right. He was. Neither the PM or Martin had said anything publicly about their leadership fight. They'd obviously decided that if they threw mud in public they'd be accused of putting personal ambition before party. Better to fight a guerrilla war behind the scenes.

The lead item in the *Launceston Herald* was still about the missing hiking party. I skipped through the story: "widening search ... grave fears for safety ... poor weather ... cold nights ..." Sounded like they were fucked. Served them right for keeping me off the front page.

After looking through the mail and consulting my diary, I drew up a preliminary news list and called Dirk Tucker in Launceston.

As usual, he sounded like he'd missed breakfast. "Where were you yesterday?"

"I got sick and had to go home."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I felt too sick." Piss-weak excuse.

"You OK now?" he asked roughly.

"I think I'll make it."

"Good. Then what have you got for me?"

I went through the preliminary news list with him: the visiting New Zealand Foreign Minister was going to hold a press conference; the Senate Estimates Committee was going to barbeque some bureaucrats, and the Bureau of Statistics was scheduled to release the latest unemployment figures at eleven o'clock.

As usual, he didn't sound impressed. "OK. Send as much as you can. Tomorrow's Saturday, so we've got a few extra pages to fill."

"Maybe, if you're lucky, they'll find the missing hikers."

"I hope not—not for a few more days, anyway. Then, with luck, their bodies will turn up and the grieving rellies will start complaining the whole search effort was a shambles. We can't lose."

I hung up and asked Michael to cover the Kiwi Foreign Minister's press conference and then attend the Estimates Committee hearing. Though neither would generate much news, they would keep him out of my way. However, the release of the unemployment statistics would make a good story. I kept that for myself.

He nodded casually and went back to reading the paper.

Desperate for a caffeine hit, I rose and headed towards the coffee machine in the corner. Halfway there, the phone rang. I sighed, retraced my steps and picked it up.

"Paul Ryder?" said a vaguely familiar voice.

"Yes."

"Mr Ryder, this is Special Agent Gilroy."

Fuck. I'd have preferred to hear from Beelzebub. My poor beleaguered heart did another lap of the track. Yet, I managed to keep my voice even: "Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I want you to come down to police headquarters for a chat."

No fucking way. He was the last person I wanted to see—ever.

"Umm, what sort of chat?" I asked nervously.

"Oh, there are just a few more questions I'd like to ask."

He spoke very casually, as if trying to calm a child, which increased my suspicion. "What sort of questions?"

"I've been going over your statement, and there are a few, umm, gaps."

"Gaps?"

"Yes, gaps."

"What gaps?"

"I'll tell you when you get down here."

"Does it have to be today? I'm very busy."

"I'm sure you are. But this is very important."

Did he mean the murder investigation was important or his new questions were important? I wanted to clarify that. But if I did, I'd reveal that I was shit-scared.

"OK. What time do you want to see me?"

"How about in twenty minutes."

There was obviously no point trying to fob him off. He was determined to see me. I should get our meeting over and done with. "Alright. Twenty minutes."

He hung up.

While I was on the phone, Michael pretended to read the paper, while obviously eavesdropping. I couldn't blame him. In his position, I'd have done the same. Maybe he was showing a hint of journalistic talent. Or maybe not.

I got to my feet and looked at him. "I've got to go out."

"Where to?"

"The cops want to ask me a few more questions. Don't worry, I won't be long."

Unless, of course, Gilroy arrested me. Then I might be gone for at least twenty years. My left leg trembled like it was possessed.

A few minutes later, I was behind the wheel of my battered Volvo, heading towards the Australian Federal Police Headquarters in Braddon.

Even if I felt healthy, I'd have worried about why Gilroy had summoned me. But I'd been running on the rims for a long time. Dark suspicions festered in my brain. Maybe Gilroy didn't want to ask any questions at all; maybe he just wanted to arrest me. I imagined myself being handcuffed and dragged off to a cell.

If my hands weren't on the steering wheel, they'd have shook. As it was, my stomach did its now-customary acrobatics while a voice inside my head kept repeating: "Why me? Oh, God, why me?"

I parked outside police headquarters, went inside and told the uniformed constable on duty I had an appointment to see Special Agent Gilroy. He picked up a phone and told the detective I'd arrived.

I paced around for five minutes, until the lift doors opened and Gilroy emerged, wearing a grim expression that would have shaken tougher men than me.

He ignored my outstretched paw and said crisply: "Thank you for coming. Please follow me."

I desperately wanted to rebuild our rapport. But he pirouetted and headed back towards the lifts. I trotted after him.

A lift took us up to the second floor, where he guided me through a maze of corridors until we reached his small office overlooking the street. It was bare and functional as a prison cell, with grey-metal filing cabinets and a large white-Formica desk. In the middle of the desk sat a three-cassette tape machine, ready to multi-track my confession. My mood plunged through the ground floor and landed in the basement.

He pointed to a chair and asked me to sit. As I obeyed, he sat behind his desk and nodded towards the tape machine: "I hope you don't mind me taping this conversation. I'm no good at making notes, and it may save a lot of confusion later."

You mean, at my trial? A big lump formed in my throat. Maybe I should demand to have a lawyer present. Or would that be an over-reaction?

"Sure," I croaked.

Gilroy turned on the machine and recited the date, time and place of the interview, as well as both our names. Then he looked up at me. "OK. Ready?"

Definitely not. "Yes," I squeaked.

"Good. First question: do you know a woman called Joanna Parker?"

Shit. I'd expected him to ask about Yvonne Clarke. My guts turned liquid and air burst from my lungs. Why was he asking about Joanna Parker? I knew the cops found her body that morning. Yet, surely they didn't know I'd stumbled upon it the day before. Surely not. Christ.

So far, I hadn't lied to him. Now, I had no choice. Trying to sound relaxed, I plunged into a dark world of falsehood.

"No," I said firmly—too firmly. "I don't know her."

His cold, all-knowing eyes reminded me that he was no dummy. "You sure?"

"Umm, yes. I don't know anyone called Joanna Parker. What's she got to do with Yvonne's death?"

Sweat soaked my undies. At least, I think it was sweat.

He said: "She was a good friend of Yvonne Clarke—and was found dead early this morning."

"My God. How did she die?"

"Someone stabbed her to death."

"Christ. And you think their deaths are related?"

"Of course. They were best friends and were both killed about the same time. What other conclusion should I draw?"

"I didn't know her," I said determinedly.

"So you've never been to her apartment?"

It's hard to talk when your jaw's quivering. "Umm, ah, correct. D-d-don't even know where she lives."

"Really," he said casually. "Then would you mind telling me if you recognise this item?"

He reached into his desk and took out a clear plastic evidence bag. Inside was an electronic diary which looked a lot like my diary - the one that went missing the day before.

Then, to my horror, I realised it was my diary. Bloody hell. Where did he find it? Something told me I wasn't going to like the answer. Yet, there was no point denying it was mine.

I said: "It looks like my diary. I mean, if you turn it on, you can find out. My name will come up on the display."

"I know. I've already done that—and your name did come up."

"Then it must be mine. Umm, how did you get it?"

"We found it."

God, I was desperate to pee. "Ah, where?"

He leaned forward, eyes glinting. "At Joanna Parker's apartment."

Fuck me dead. An adrenal power surge scrambled my brain and almost stopped my heart. My guts hit spin cycle.

"Shit," I blurted out.

"Yes. 'Shit' indeed. Can you explain how your electronic diary got there?"

"Umm, ah, umm, no. I've got no idea."

"Do you still claim you've never been to Joanna Parker's apartment?"

"Yes," I squealed.

"Then how did your diary get there?"

Despite my terror, a small portion of my brain realised that someone stole the diary from my bureau and planted it in Joanna Parker's apartment.

Inspector Javert here would never believe that. But I had no other excuse lined up. I tried to look incredibly sincere. "Can't you see? I'm being framed. Whoever killed Yvonne saw, on TV, that I found her body. So before he killed Joanna Parker, he stole my electronic diary and planted it in her apartment, to make me the fall-guy."

He leaned back in his chair, looking amused: "Really? A fall-guy? How interesting. You know, I've been a Homicide detective for many years and I've never met a fall-guy—not a real one, anyway."

"It's true—believe me."

"OK. Then how did the murderer manage to steal your diary?"

"I had it in my bureau yesterday. It was sitting on my desk. then it went missing."

"When?"

"Some time during the morning."

"So you're saying that someone who works at Parliament House stole your diary and killed this woman?"

"Yes, I suppose."

I searched his face for some sign he believed me, and saw only unalloyed scepticism. Christ. Maybe he was about to arrest me. I looked at the tape machine, the spools turning remorselessly. Crap.

He said: "I find that very hard to believe. You want to know what I think?"

I didn't want to know, because it would be bad news. Yet I was a moth to the flame. "What?"

"I think you killed both of those women."

For a few seconds, I couldn't breathe, then squealed: "That's ridiculous."

"It doesn't sound ridiculous to me."

"Surely I wouldn't be stupid enough to leave my electronic diary at a murder scene?"

His glinting eyes said man is a wolf to man. "Mr Ryder, I've been a Homicide detective for almost ten years and I never cease to be amazed at the stupidity of killers: they pawn their victims' stuff; they boast about their crimes; they drop their wallets and business cards at murder scenes. So I have no trouble believing you dropped your diary in Joanna Parker's apartment when you struggled with her."

I put my hands over my eyes. "God, this is a nightmare."

"I bet it is," he said unsympathetically.

"I'm telling the truth," I bleated. "Why would I want to kill those women?"

"It's easy to understand why you killed Yvonne Clarke: you were sleeping with her and she threatened to tell your girlfriend. So you killed her. Then you *claimed* you found her body."

"I *wasn't* sleeping with Yvonne and I *didn't* kill her."

"So you say."

I saw a chink of light and rushed towards it. "Even if I killed Yvonne—which I didn't—why would I kill Joanna Parker? What possible motive could I have?"

He shrugged. "I'm still working on that. Maybe you were sleeping with her as well—you were all involved in a kinky ménage a trois. I don't know. I aim to find out."

"This is absurd," I wailed. "I can't believe this is happening to me."

He stared hard. "You'd better start believing it, because I'm this close to charging you with murder."

He leaned forward and held two fingers so close together no light slipped through—zero.

I said, desperately: "But you're not going to, right?"

"No. Not just yet. First, I'll wait for all of the forensic and pathology reports. *Then* I'll probably charge you with murder. So make sure you don't leave town. No, on second thoughts, please *do* leave town. Running away is always a clear admission of guilt. It'll make our case a lot stronger."

My tongue felt bloated and dry. I croaked, "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere."

"Good. Now, give me all of your phone numbers—work and home—in case I want to contact you urgently."

"Urgently? Why?"

A lopsided grin. "For instance, if I decide to charge you with murder, I don't want to muck about. I want to give you the news straight away. Remove any uncertainty in your mind, understand?"

His eyes gleamed fanatically. I tried to meet his stare, and was foiled by my fear and his stigmatism.

Numbly, I said: "Yes, of course."

With a shaking hand, I took my wallet from my jacket and promptly dropped it on the floor. I bent over to recover it and smacked my forehead on the desk, setting off fireworks in my brain. Though it was perfect slapstick, I was too terrified to laugh. "Shit," I yelled.

He looked contemptuous. "You alright?"

No, I wasn't fucking alright—nowhere near it.

I used one hand to rub my forehead and the other to pick up my wallet. Slowly, I opened it and nervously fished out a business card, which I handed over.

He glanced at it and handed it back. "Write your home number on it."

My right hand shook so badly I wasn't sure I could. I controlled it long enough to reach inside my jacket, take out my pen and scrawl my home number on the card. I handed it back to him.

"Thank you."

"Can I go?"

"Of course."

He escorted me out to the lifts and saw me get into one. Just before the doors closed, he stared at me. "Till we meet again."

Fuck you, I smiled.

"I will probably charge you with murder."

Those words thudded in my brain as I descended in the lift and walked out to my car. Until now, I'd never imagined I could end up in prison. After all, I was a white, middle-class professional; I had a university degree, a mortgage and a solid job. People like me didn't get locked up. Prisons were for unlucky members of the underclass.

That glorious certainty had now disappeared, and I realised that gaol wouldn't be some sort of monastic retreat where I could toil away on the prison memoirs of a sensitive man wrongly accused. A lascivious bikie would probably turn me into his bitch while loathing me for being so old and ugly. Kindness and respect? Forget it. Stimulating political discussions? Bend over.

When I reached my car, I crouched over the gutter and - once again - threw up. However, I'd lost my appetite several days ago and vomited many times since, so little emerged.

I staggered over to a vacant bus shelter and slumped onto the bench, wondering what to do next. I was strongly tempted to go home and guzzle another bottle of brandy. Instead, I reluctantly accepted the call of duty. If I left Michael at the helm much longer, a disaster was almost inevitable. I was also keen to find out who stole my electronic diary.

I piloted my car back towards Parliament House, wondering who swiped the diary. The perpetrator must have strolled past my bureau, seen the diary laying on my desk and stolen it. Then he took it over to Joanna Parker's apartment and dropped it there.

However, the Press Gallery's floor wasn't open to the general public. Access was limited to journalists, politicians, political staffers and Parliament House employees. The killer must be one of them. So now I only had 5,000 suspects on my list, most of whom were quite capable of cold-blooded murder.

I remembered the tough looking bald guy I saw outside Joanna Parker's apartment—the guy who avoided eye contact. Maybe he stole the diary and planted it in the apartment. Yet, I'd never seen him around Parliament House, or anywhere else.

I got back to my bureau just after lunch. Michael sat at his computer typing an e-mail, probably to his girlfriend in Tasmania. When I saw his bland countenance, I felt a surge of anger. If he'd locked the bureau's door, like he was supposed to, the killer couldn't have stolen my electronic diary and framed me for murder.

Why the fuck was I so nice to him? He didn't even commend me to his dad. I constantly debased myself for no reason.

I sat at my desk. "Michael."

He glanced up, and kept typing. "Yeah?"

"Did you see anyone acting suspiciously around the bureau yesterday?"

He stopped typing and stared at me. "What do you mean, suspiciously?"

"Someone stole my electronic diary off my desk yesterday. Got any idea who might have done that?"

He shrugged complacently. "Nope."

"Did you see anyone enter the bureau who shouldn't have?"

"No, though I was out for most of the day. Someone might have come in when I was gone."

"I know. But how could that person have got in?"

I'll say for this for Michael: whenever he fucked up, he didn't let it get him down. He just gave me a dopey grin: "Oh, I must have forgotten to lock the door. Umm, sorry about that."

Sorry? If I ended up spending the rest of my life in prison, it would be his fault. I wanted to reach over, grab the wispy tuft of hair that clung tenuously to his stupid fucking chin and tear it off. He was lucky I didn't have a gun. I took a few deep breaths and reminded myself he was the boss's son and I needed to keep working to pay for a criminal barrister. That did the trick. I frowned. "Well, don't do it again."

"Sure thing."

Being, for the first time, the prime suspect in a murder investigation run by a rogue cop was a disorientating experience. For the rest of the day, I staggered around like a zombie. When people told me things, it was just white noise. I started doing tasks, then forgot what I set out to do. I just kept hearing a constant refrain in my head: "*I will probably charge you with murder*".

However, against the odds, I managed to write a story. The Bureau of Statistics released data showing another rise in unemployment. That would be big news at any time. Now, it was particularly damaging to the PM, because he was fighting for his political survival.

After the figures were released, I attended press conferences of the Treasurer and Shadow Treasurer. Not surprisingly, the Treasurer claimed a recovery was just around the corner, while the Shadow Treasurer was all gloom and doom. Afterwards, I returned to my bureau and started writing the story:

The Prime Minister's grip on power weakened yesterday when the Bureau of Statistics released figures that showed another rise in unemployment...

I usually find it easy to write stories. I've even dictated some from noisy restaurants, half-drunk, under deadline pressure, without making a slip. But writing that story was a nightmare. I kept wondering if it would be the last one I ever wrote; whatever I typed turned into a meaningless porridge.

Eventually, I realised there was no point fiddling with the story any longer. Even if I got it right, the sub-editors would probably butcher it. I fired it down the wire to the Tasmanian newsroom and fled the bureau.

When I got home, I parked in the garage and turned off the engine. A huge wave of tiredness washed over me. I decided to sit in the car for a few minutes and rest. That was a big mistake, because I quickly nodded off to sleep.

I dreamt that I stood in a courtroom and Anne was the judge in a wig and gown. She scowled. "Mr Ryder, you've been convicted of being a cheating bastard. In view of your long history of prior offences, I sentence you to life in prison, without parole."

"I'm innocent," I wailed. "For once, I'm innocent."

She looked smug. "Keep your prison cell clean, and don't just throw your clothes around like a slob." She turned to the Sheriff's Officers. "Take him away."

"I'm innocent, innocent."

My head fell forward and smacked into the steering wheel. Pain lit up my nervous system. I leaned back and groggily rubbed my forehead. The pain subsided and my head cleared. My watch said I'd slept for almost half an hour. Hell. Anne would be waiting for me.

I got out of the car, still dizzy and almost fell flat on my face. I recovered my balance and walked unsteadily towards the front door.

Inside the townhouse, Anne was chopping some beans on the kitchen bench. The nap in the car has refreshed me. Now I just felt awful.

She looked concerned. "Hello. You don't look too good. How do you feel?"

"Shit on a stick."

"Did you see a doctor?"

I remembered I was supposed to have the flu. "No, didn't have a chance. But I'll survive."

She chopped a few more beans and tossed them into a pot. Casually, she said: "Have you heard anything more about that dead woman?"

I almost asked *which* dead woman—Yvonne Clarke or Joanna Parker?—and checked myself. "Umm, what do you mean?"

"Have the police been in touch with you again?"

"No," I lied.

She chopped a few more beans. "Oh, yeah, Rebecca called about ten minutes ago. Wants you to call her back."

As I've already mentioned, Rebecca was my daughter, now fourteen, the product of my one disastrous foray into matrimony.

I said: "What did she want?"

"Wants to know what time you're going to pick her up tomorrow morning."

I usually looked forward to my fortnightly access visits to Rebecca, but had been so terrified during the last few days that I'd completely forgotten I had a daughter.

I didn't really want to see Rebecca, or anyone else for that matter. I just wanted to sit in a dark room and feel sorry for myself. Yet, I had no choice. Even though I might be the prime suspect in a double-murder investigation, who could be arrested at any moment, I was still a dad.

Indeed, this might be my last chance to see her as a free man. A shiver ran down my spine. "OK. I'll give her a call."

I picked up the phone and rang my ex-wife's house. Rebecca answered.

"Hi Dad," she said, excitedly. "I saw you on TV the other night, at that woman's house. God, how amazing, finding her body. I wanted to call you, but Mum said I couldn't. What was it like?"

I hadn't considered Rebecca might see me on TV. She was the last person I wanted to discuss the murders with.

I said: "Very unpleasant."

"How come you were there?"

"I'll tell you when I see you."

"Dad," she pleaded.

"When I see you."

"OK. You're going to pick me up tomorrow morning, right?"

"Yes. What time suits you?"

"Nine-thirty."

"OK. I'll be there."

"Good. Then you can tell me everything."

I hung up and turned back to Anne, tossing beans into the pot. How could I have a drink without looking like a pisshead? I smiled and said lightly: "Umm, feel like some wine?"

She eyed me closely. "Not really."

"Well, umm, I might just have a glass."

I slid over to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of chardonnay, uncorked it and poured myself a glass. A minute later, the glass was empty. God, it tasted good.

Over dinner, I polished off four more glasses of wine and had just poured another when Anne spoke up. "You're drinking a lot tonight."

I looked innocently at the full glass in my hand. "Am I?"

"Yes."

"Mmm. Maybe you're right. This'll be my last."

After we'd cleared the table, Anne said: "What about another episode of *West Wing*?"

Anne was watching every episode of *West Wing*, for the second time, and usually forced me to watch with her.

"Sure."

She went over to the cabinet where we kept our collection of DVDs and opened it. Before long, she turned and gave me an accusing stare.

Paul," she said sharply.

"What?"

"You know I like to keep these in order."

I certainly did. She was addicted to neatness and hated it when I left dirty dishes in the sink or damp socks on the back of the sofa, or didn't keep the DVDs in strict alphabetical order. Yet, this time I was truly innocent.

I said: "Don't look at me. I haven't touched them for weeks."

She wiggled her eyebrows. "You sure?"

"Scout's honour."

"You got kicked out of the scouts."

"No I didn't, I resigned."

"Bullshitter." She found the DVD she wanted and slipped it into the player.

Normally, I enjoyed *The Bill*. Not that night. I just wasn't in the mood for a cop show.

I'd heard or read somewhere that, these days, when cops take you to prison, they hand you a toilet bag. However, just in case they didn't, when we went upstairs, I gloomily packed one with everything I might need, including a new toothbrush.

I got into bed drained of every emotion except self-pity.

Chapter 10

I slept for almost nine hours and woke feeling calm and refreshed.

A nanosecond later, I remembered the events of the previous day and had a full-blown panic attack. Holy fuck. I might soon be in prison, cooking and ironing for the bkie who was humping me. "Shit," I exclaimed.

"What?" Anne mumbled sleepily.

"Umm, shit, it's cold."

She threw an arm around me. "It's not that bad."

I glanced at the alarm clock. Almost nine o'clock. I had to pick up Rebecca at nine-thirty. Christ, why wouldn't the world just leave me alone? Though I had my faults, I didn't deserve this.

Dumping me was the best thing my ex-wife, Jane, ever did. Her life improved dramatically. She was now in an excellent relationship and lived in a big redbrick bungalow in Yarralumla, not far from the G-G's residence.

I pushed the buzzer on the front door and her partner, Henry, appeared. A top mandarin in the Department of Foreign Affairs, he was in his late forties, tall and urbane, with an ambassadorial thatch of grey hair. Most Australian diplomats I've met can speak three or four languages and are socially inept in every one. But he was a genuinely nice guy. Jane had done well.

He smiled pleasantly, as always. "Paul. You here for Becky?"

He was too polite to mention my recent discovery of a dead body.

"Yeah, though I'd better see Jane first."

He turned and called out for Jane.

My ex-wife came up the hallway, wearing a pair of old jeans and a faded blue blouse. Though nudging forty, she would keep her looks for at least another

decade. God she was gorgeous. As usual, I felt a small local disturbance in my pants which.

Henry said goodbye and *diplomatically* disappeared back up the hallway.

Despite the way I'd mistreated Jane, no bitterness marred her lovely face. I think she regarded me as a rather sad and comical figure still struggling to leave adolescence. How long before Rebecca shared her view?

She said: "Hi Paul. Becky's getting ready." Her brow wrinkled. "I saw you on tele the other night—at that murder scene. What was that all about?"

I shrugged casually. "Oh, wrong place at the wrong time."

"You knew her?"

Like Anne, she obviously suspected I'd been bonking a murder victim. Great. Still, I couldn't blame her. After all, she still wore bruises from my infidelities.

I said: "Yeah. We had a fling a while ago, before I met Anne - not recently."

She lifted an eyebrow, almost imperceptibly. "Really?"

I frowned. "Yeah. Really."

She shrugged, unconvinced. "Well, that's nothing to do with me."

Rebecca wandered up the hallway, wearing slacks and a plain yellow T-shirt. She was tall for her age, and quite attractive on the rare occasions she didn't slather her face with make-up. Surprisingly, today she was exposed to the elements.

Rebecca had reached that worrying age when frantic, frisky, hormonal boys start sniffing about. According to Jane, a kid called Angus kept turning up to the house. He was a pimply youth in baggy pants, trainers and a baseball cap on backwards. Though they seemed very close, Rebecca said he was "just a friend".

Having been a horny teenager myself, I knew what Angus wanted. But, for his sake, he'd better not get it. Otherwise I'd introduce him to a lump of wood.

Just in case things got out of hand, I'd asked Jane if Rebecca knew about the birds and the bees.

"Don't worry," Jane replied, "they taught her at school, using anatomically correct dolls."

I said: "Good, though if things get too serious, we'll get a dentist to put her teeth in braces."

Today, I was taking Rebecca horse riding. She carried a riding helmet and crop.

I said: "Hello pumpkin."

She looked annoyed. "Dad. I'm not your 'pumpkin' no more."

"Sorry, I forgot. My mistake."

"We'll don't call me that again."

"Sure."

As we got into the car, I realised this access visit had a special poignancy, because I might soon be in prison. Somehow, despite the odds, I had to enjoy myself and create a memory to treasure.

As I backed out, Rebecca looked across at me. "So Dad, tell me about it."

"About what?"

"Finding the dead body?"

"I don't wanna talk about it."

She hung tough. "It must have been a shock."

"I *really* don't wanna talk about it."

She grimaced. "Come on Dad. What happened?"

"OK. I walked in. The body lay there. I called the police."

"Dad. You can tell me more than that. What were you doing there? Come on Dad, be cool. Lots of people have been asking me about it, at school."

After a long sigh, I quickly explained how I came to find Yvonne's body.

She said: "You don't know why she wanted to see you?"

"Nope."

"Bummer. Do the cops know who did it?"

In truth, the cops thought her dear old dad 'dun' it'. I tried to be open and honest with my daughter, but there were limits. "No. I don't think so."

We drove on for a while, in silence.

"Dad," Rebecca said.

"What?"

"You don't seem quite yourself today."

"What do you mean?"

"Usually you're a lot more talkative. I mean, you haven't made me laugh once."

That's the problem with fatherhood. Even when your life's falling apart, you're expected to crack hardy and do a song-and-dance routine. "Sorry. I've got a few things on my mind."

"Like the woman who got killed?"

God, back to that already. "No." After a long pause, I said: "OK, if you want to chat, tell me about this guy Angus who keeps turning up at the house?"

She looked annoyed. "Mum told you about him?"

"Yep."

She shrugged. "He's just a friend at school. We sometimes hang out together."

She was cagier than a lot of politicians I'd interviewed. I half expected her to say "no comment". "Really? Just hang out?"

"Yeah. Don't worry Dad. It's not serious or anything."

"Good. Then he can come along with us one day?"

"No," she said determinedly.

"Why not?"

"That wouldn't be cool. You'd just ask him lots of embarrassing questions, and he'd feel intimidated."

"I wouldn't intimidate him."

"Yes you would. Don't worry Dad, he's not a problem - I know how to handle boys."

Her steely tone made me a believer.

When Rebecca was small, I could usually inveigle her into attending a Rugby Union match. But she eventually tired of watching sweaty oafs engaged in a Neolithic struggle over a leather bladder. So, in a spirit of compromise, I offered to let her caddy for me at golf. She turned me down. No, she wanted to go horse riding. So I started taking her to a riding academy just outside Goulburn. She usually rode an energetic mare called Trixie, while I mounted a consumptive gelding called Old Snowy that didn't look worth feeding.

The owner of the academy was a leathery ex-jockey called Gary Bishop. When we arrived, Rebecca asked if Trixie was available. Gary said yes and she smiled

widely. I asked for Old Snowy and she looked annoyed. "Dad, Old Snowy's half-dead."

"No he's not. He's a fine steed."

"You won't be able to keep up with me."

"Don't worry. He ain't fast, but he's got endurance."

"Yeah, he can walk for hours."

I crossed my arms. "I'm sorry, we're a team, and that's that."

She sighed. "Oh shit."

Gary saddled Trixie and Old Snowy in the mounting yard. Then I grabbed the pommel, threw a leg over the swayed-backed beast and dug my heels into its withered flanks. It just turned its head and gave me a rheumy stare that told me to stop being silly: I wasn't John Wayne and we definitely weren't gonna outrun the posse.

A couple more kicks produced a loud snort that made its bones rattle. It shuffled forward.

Rebecca and I rode slowly along a trail that wound through a large pine plantation. She told me what she was doing at school, and gave me the low-down on her teachers. I discovered who was a lesbian, who had bad body odour, who never did up his fly and who was sleeping with the school principal. She had the whole place wired.

I made some delicate enquiries about the state of Jane and Henry's relationship and got the depressing response they were wildly happy. Rebecca was a good source of information about Jane's life, though I often wondered if she told me everything, and what went back the other way. Was she a double agent or a triple agent? For that reason, I sometimes provided disinformation to sow confusion in the enemy camp.

After about an hour we were almost back at the academy. With about 300 metres to go, we spurred our horses forward. Rebecca galloped off. Old Snowy, who wouldn't gallop out of a burning stable, slipped into a gentile canter.

By the time I reached the mounting yard, Rebecca had already taken the saddle off Trixie. Old Snowy cruised to a halt and I dismounted gingerly, inner thighs aching.

I said: "It's still true."

"What?"

"I've never been thrown off a horse."

"Dad, Old Snowy's hardly a horse."

I patted a scrawny flank. "No need to insult this noble steed."

Rebecca laughed, just like old times.

On the way back to Canberra, Rebecca turned to me. "Dad, I've been thinking about what I should do when I finish school."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe I should become a journo."

Most parents are delighted if their kids want to follow in their footsteps. However, if Rebecca became a reporter, it would break my heart. Good reporters are tough, rude and pushy. Rebecca had none of those traits—not yet, anyway—and I didn't want her to acquire them.

I said: "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Umm, well, you'd have to live in my shadow."

She giggled. "Don't worry Dad. I'm not planning to write for a Tasmanian paper."

Wow, that put me on my arse. "Ouch."

When I pulled up outside Jane's house, just after four, she pecked me on the cheek, said thank you and dashed inside.

As I drove off, I realised that, for a few hours, I'd forgotten my problems. Now they flooded back. By the time I got home, I was sullen and withdrawn. Anne asked me to do a few chores and I snapped at her, and she snapped back.

On Sunday, craving solitude, I went into our small backyard and acted like a real Aussie bloke: sweeping up leaves, mowing the lawn and pulling out weeds. When Anne saw that behaviour, she really got worried.

When I got a chance, I monitored the TV and radio news for items about the murders of Yvonne Clarke and Joanna Parker. The media only reported there were no new developments. The police certainly didn't reveal that the two murders were connected.

Nothing I heard toppled me as the prime suspect. Fear corroded my stomach lining and loosened my bladder. I even started to wonder if I did kill the two women, and my mind had repressed both incidents. Maybe the truth lay hidden in my unconscious; maybe I was a savage killer with a split personality. Or maybe I needed to get a grip before I went nuts.

On Sunday night, Anne and I climbed into bed together, and she tried again to bridge the gulf between us.

She said: "Paul, are you alright?"

"Why do you ask?"

"For the last few days, you haven't been your normal happy self. In fact, you've been very shitty."

I wanted to throw my head between her breasts and explain what was twisting my guts. Yet, how could I reveal that I'd found two bodies and was now the prime suspect in a murder investigation? I kept to the script I'd been following. "I'm just tired. I've had a bad week."

"OK," she said, sympathetically. "I understand."

To re-establish some intimacy, she tugged my penis. But I was too tired and overwrought for sex. No amount of yanking would bring my cock to life. For the first time in our relationship - in my life - I couldn't get a woody. Now my dick's sole function was to connect my bladder with the outside world. I was, effectively, a eunuch. I hadn't felt so depressed since I got beaten up on my first day at primary school.

I said: "Sorry, I'm just not in the mood."

"That's OK," she said with a strange mixture of forgiveness and contempt.

She turned off the light and rolled away.

For a long while, I stared into the darkness, feeling hopeless and alone. I'd shamed myself and insulted Anne. My dick was useless. But despite that, the way my luck was running, the cops would probably charge me with rape.

Chapter 11

I got about six hours of sleep, in three instalments. After the last, I woke bathed in greyish light. Fear jangled my nervous system and made further sleep impossible.

I remembered my launch-pad flameout the night before and glanced over at Anne, thankfully, still asleep. What if she woke and demanded my services. My confidence was shattered. To avoid further embarrassment, I slunk into the bathroom.

Later, we breakfasted together in complete silence. She was obviously annoyed with me, and it wasn't because I was perfect. I spied some crumbs I'd left on the bench-top the previous evening and wondered if they would form a *casus belli*. Instead, she scoffed some toast, grabbed her handbag and left without even saying goodbye.

At eight-thirty, I climbed into my battered Volvo and turned the key. It groaned and moaned—surly as usual—before kicking into life. I headed for work. Fortunately, Alan Casey hadn't asked for a ride and I didn't have to detour past his place.

As I crossed the Captain Cook Bridge, my mobile rang. I put it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Mr Ryder. This is Special Agent Gilroy."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Not him again. My heart stopped and blood froze solid. Steel hoops squeezed my chest. Shit. Was the sadistic prick about to arrest me for murder?

A squeak emerged. "Yes. Umm, what can I do for you?"

"I want another chat."

"What about?"

"I'll explain when you get here."

Panic gripped me. The phone grew hot. I was about to hit the front page of newspapers in a way I never imagined. A headline jumped into my head: "*Journalist Arrested For Murder*". My car drifted into another lane. A horn blared. I swerved back.

Gilroy said: "Mr Ryder, you still there?"

"Yeah. When do you want to see me?"

"As soon as possible."

I couldn't avoid seeing him. So I base-jumped into the canyon of fate. "Alright. I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"Good. See you then."

He hung up.

Christ. What should I do? Making a run for it? Fake my own death, then change my identity and move to another city?

I knew I was being ridiculous. I wasn't equipped to be a fugitive from justice. I knew no criminals, dodgy plastic surgeons or document forgers. I'd stick out like a sore thumb. And hell, I was innocent. That must count for something.

I walked into AFP Headquarters on rubbery legs and presented myself, once again, to a uniformed constable on duty. He picked up the phone and summons Gilroy, who soon emerged from the lifts.

I told myself to stay calm. Play it cool. Maybe he wouldn't arrest me; maybe he just wanted to ask a few more questions or sell me tickets to the Police Ball.

However, I'd been running on the rims for a long while and suddenly reached breaking point. "What's this about?" I blurted desperately. "I'm being set up, you know. *Set up.*"

Only an immense act of will kept me off my knees.

He looked with contempt at the babbling middle-class coward before him. "Let's go to my office and I'll explain why I want to see you."

At least he didn't slap handcuffs on me and take me down to the cells for some truncheon treatment. Instead, he escorted me up to his small office on the second floor. When we entered, he pointed to a chair facing his desk and asked me to sit down, which I did.

No tape recorder on his desk. Just a few folders. Surely a good sign. My heart skipped.

He sat behind the desk and tapped the folders with an index finger. "I've been very busy since we last talked. Very busy."

An elephant kneeled on my chest. Bile snuck up my throat and coated my tongue. I swallowed hard. It receded, leaving only the taste.

I told myself to stay cool and be a man, to no avail. I had lost control of my tongue: "Are you going to charge me with murder?"

"No."

I'd braced myself for bad news and didn't fully comprehend what he said. "No?"

"No."

Relief flowed, tentatively, through my system. "Umm, why not?"

"Because I know you didn't kill either woman."

It was hard to accept such good news. Surely I was being set up for a sucker punch. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

A half-smile. "Yes, I'm sure." To his credit, he looked a little embarrassed.

Wow, this was a miracle. Amazing. "Why the big change of heart?"

"Our forensic examination of Yvonne Clarke and her house has made it clear you didn't kill her. The DNA we found on the knife doesn't match yours. Further, if you killed her, your clothes would have been spattered with blood. They weren't."

Always a smart-arse, I said: "I could have changed them?"

"No you couldn't. You wouldn't have had time."

"Why not?"

"Because Yvonne lived in Woden, about 20 minutes south of Parliament House. We've looked at the Parliament House security cameras. They show you left the building about 20 minutes before you telephoned Emergency Services to report her death. So you must have driven straight to her place. You definitely didn't have enough time to kill her, clean up and then change your clothes *before* calling Triple-0."

"Of course not."

"That timetable also shows you couldn't have killed Joanna Parker."

"What do you mean?"

"She lived in Campbell, about 15 or 20 minutes north of Parliament House. So, after you left the building, you wouldn't have had time to detour past her house. Impossible."

He picked up a pen off his desk and tapped his blotter.

I said: "And, of course, I couldn't have killed Joanna *after* I reported finding Yvonne's body, could I?"

He looked annoyed. "Correct. You have a good alibi after that time."

"No. I have a *perfect* alibi: I was with you until about 3am."

He frowned. "That's right."

The last week had been a ride through hell: I'd found dead bodies, been threatened with prison and had my manhood turn to putty in my partner's hands. But now, after descending into a dark pit of despair, I was back in the blinking sunlight. I should have been grateful for my deliverance. That would have been good for my soul. But Gilroy accused me of murder. Relief and its deformed cousins, arrogance and vindictiveness, came out to play. Time for him to feel the full weight of my awesome wrath. "Are you going to apologise?"

"For what?"

"Accusing me of murder."

"Of course not." He leaned forward. "Listen, Mr Ryder, I'm not going to charge you with murder. But you're not off the hook, because I still don't know how your electronic diary ended up in Joanna Parker's place."

I wished I'd kept my awesome wrath to myself. I was sliding back into the dark pit.

I whined: "I've already explained that. Someone tried to frame me. It obviously didn't work."

"Maybe. Or maybe you visited Joanna Parker's apartment at some time and left your diary."

I shook my head vehemently. "No. I've never visited her place."

The big-toothed bastard grinned wolfishly. "Mr Ryder, is there something you're not telling me?"

I had a terabyte of information in my brain that I hadn't told him. However, this was no time to be honest. I couldn't untangle all of the lies I'd told.

"I've told you all I know," I said resolutely.

"For your sake, Mr Ryder, you'd better have. Because if you haven't, I'll come down on you like a tonne of bricks."

Maybe. But right now, he couldn't pin anything on me. So my vindictiveness returned. "I gather, from what you're saying, that you've got no idea who murdered Yvonne Clarke or Joanna Parker?"

He nodded sorrowfully. "I'm afraid so."

"Then I suggest you stop harassing decent citizens like me and try to find the real killer." I stood up and glared. "Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

"No."

"Good. Then I'll be on my way."

He didn't show me to the door.

I left the building floating on air. Whoever tried to frame me as a double-murderer almost succeeded, and ultimately failed. I wouldn't be charged with murder or sent to gaol. I was free as a bird.

My only remaining problem was the lack of lead in my pencil. I would fix that. Tonight, I would exercise my *droit de seigneur*—if Anne let me.

I walked into the bureau an hour late. On my desk were a large pile of mail and a bundle of newspapers. Michael could have shown some initiative and looked through the mail. Instead, he sat at his computer playing *Thermonuclear Destruction*.

However, nothing could dent my good humour. "Sorry I'm late. What's happening?"

"You'd better look in *The Sydney News*."

I extracted *The Sydney News* from the bundle of newspapers and looked at the front page. The splash headline said it all:

SENIOR MINISTERS DESERT PM

Exclusive

By Alan Casey

National Political Correspondent

A delegation of senior Ministers has told the Prime Minister to resign and let the former Minister for Defence, Vincent Martin, become prime minister.

A delegation comprising the Treasurer, Michael Smallwood, the Finance Minister, Douglas Bannon and the Health Minister, David Perez, approached the Prime Minister in his suite at Parliament House yesterday evening.

According to a reliable source, they advised the PM that his support among backbenchers had slipped and he would lose the leadership ballot due to be held on Friday.

They said that, in the interests of party unity, he should relinquish the prime ministership.

However, the PM told the delegation that he intends to fight for his position on Friday.

The delegation's approach to the PM is a serious blow to his chances of holding onto his office, because it indicates a serious erosion of support in Cabinet...

You could cash Alan's stories at the bank. So the future looked bleak for the PM. He was in the Last Chance Saloon, at closing time.

I glanced through the other papers. All, including the *Launceston Herald*, had missed Alan's story. At least Michael and I had a good excuse: we didn't work on Sundays; our paper relied upon wire services. If Dirk Tucker wanted to blame anyone for getting scooped, he should blame them.

And even if I was at work, it's highly unlikely the "reliable source" would have given me the story. Political insiders rarely leaked big stories to provincial publications like the *Herald*.

And even if I got the story, Dirk Tucker probably would have buried it in the back of the paper. Indeed, that morning the front page was again spattered with stories about the hikers lost in the National Park, who'd finally been rescued. Their deliverance did not make the paper rejoice. Its editorial demanded they pay the cost of the whole rescue effort.

I glanced at Michael. "If the PM didn't already know he was neck-deep in shit, he certainly does now."

"Yeah, we got an e-mail from his office this morning. He's gonna hold a press conference in half-an-hour, in the Ministerial Courtyard."

My pulse rate lifted. "Really? Did his office mention why?"

"Yeah. He's gonna announce some program to put more computers in secondary schools."

Though that was the ostensible reason, he obviously wanted to respond to the story in *The Sydney News*.

I said: "OK. I'll cover it." Michael went back to fighting the Azurian Federation and I read through the mail before calling Dirk Tucker. He was grouchy, as usual. First he complained about me being late for work, then about getting scooped by *The Sydney News*.

I explained that all of the other major metropolitan dailies missed the story, and Michael and I didn't work on Sundays.

"It would have been nice to get it."

"Why? So you could chop it to ribbons and stick it in some obscure part of the paper?"

"That wouldn't have happened."

"You mean, you wouldn't have run it at all?"

Annoyed, he said: "Look, stop pulling my chain and tell me what's gonna happen today."

"OK. The PM's finally broken cover: he's going to hold a press conference in about half an hour so we'll probably get a good story from that."

"OK. Let me know how it goes."

In the Ministerial Courtyard a lectern stood inside a roped off area. Outside the rope were several rows of collapsible chairs. However, most of the hundred-odd reporters gathered in the courtyard stood in clusters, chatting excitedly, or playing with their mobiles. The major topic of discussion was the story in *The Sydney News*. Many predicted the PM was about to accept the inevitable and fall on his sword. However, I doubted that. Few politicians retire gracefully. Most have to be dragged from office, kicking and screaming. They only fear being nobody.

I looked around for Alan, wanting to congratulate him on his scoop, and couldn't see him.

Shortly after eleven-thirty, the PM emerged from the building and stationed himself behind the lectern. The assembled media rushed to their seats.

The PM gave a short speech announcing a Federal Government program to spend \$300 million providing computers to secondary schools. However, as soon as he asked for questions, the media pack got down to business. A male reporter up the front asked if it was true that a delegation of senior Ministers advised him to resign.

The PM replied: "I don't intend to talk publicly about any discussions I've had with my Ministers or anyone else in the Government."

A female radio reporter chimed in: "Do you expect to win the ballot on Friday?"

"Yes. I'm confident the party will support me."

The same reporter squeezed in another question. "What if you only narrowly defeat Mr Martin? Will you stay on as PM?"

That was a good question, because if the PM only beat Martin by a few votes, his aura of invincibility would be shattered and Martin's credibility would skyrocket. The PM had to win decisively. Otherwise, he was done.

The PM forced a smile onto his face. "One extra vote will be enough for me."

He obviously realised he'd tarried too long and put up his hands. "Alright, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your questions. That's all."

He turned and strode back into the building.

Martin didn't react publicly to the PM's speech, not wanting to be accused of openly damaging the Government for personal gain. However, his lieutenants circulated around the Press Gallery backgrounding that the PM was "delusional", "out of touch" and "heading for a fall".

Until now, nobody else had announced their candidacy. Indeed, several no-hopers had grabbed some cheap publicity by declaring they would not be standing. However, a little later in the day, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Derek Haddon, called a press conference to announce that, on Friday, he *would* be throwing his hat in the ring, making it a three-cornered contest. He was putting his name forward to give Government MPs "a wider choice".

Haddon had a small rump of support, though nowhere near enough to win the top job. It was hard to believe that he was so deluded that he thought he could win. But I eventually convinced myself that he was.

Hoping to find out what was really happening behind the scenes, I telephoned the Minister for Administrative Services, Kevin Medlow, my best contact in the Government, and asked if he'd see me again.

"What for?" he snapped.

"Oh, nothing in particular. I'm just trying to be sociable."

"You mean you want to talk about the leadership fight?"

"Definitely."

He sighed. "Alright, come around. I can only spare you a few minutes."

Five minutes later, his secretary showed me into his office, where we sat on couches, facing each other.

I said: "I assume you saw the PM's press conference?"

"Yeah, on closed-circuit."

"What did you think? Can he hold on?"

Kevin shook his head. "He's whistling in the dark. When three senior Cabinet Ministers tell a PM his time is up, it's fucking well *up*."

"So the story in the *News*, about the delegation visiting him, is true?"

"Yeah, according to what I've heard."

"And he hasn't picked up any support?"

"If anything, his supporters are deserting him."

"Then why's he hanging on so desperately?"

Kevin looked bemused. "Because he loves waking up every morning knowing that, for the rest of the day, everyone will kiss his arse and tell him he's a political genius. He's scared to death that, one day, all those brown-nosers and flunkeys will disappear. Then he'll have to spend all day with someone he's never really liked."

"Who? His wife?"

"No, himself. He'll do almost anything to hang on—*anything*."

That afternoon, Alan Casey telephoned me. I quickly congratulated him on his scoop that morning.

"Oh, that?" he said nonchalantly. "That was nothing. I shake stories like that out of my sleeve."

"Congrats anyway."

"Thanks. But that's not why I called. I was wondering if you want to have a drink after work. I've got some interesting news to impart."

"What news?"

"I'll tell you over a beer."

We arranged to meet in the Safari Bar, in Manuka, just down the hill from Parliament House.

After hanging up, I called Anne at work and said I'd be home a little late.

"Why?"

"I'm going to have a few drinks with Alan."

"A few? You two always get pissed. But do what you like. And if you get a chance, buy some washing powder, OK? We've run out."

"Sure," I said, without opening a mental file for that request.

So that evening, after writing a story about the PM's and Derek Hatton's press conferences, I drove down to the Safari Bar.

The bar had dark walls, a glass-brick bar and grey-granite topped tables, all bathed in crepuscular light. It was a favourite watering-hole for the Parliament House crowd: politicians, political staffers and reporters stood in clusters, drinking and lying to each other.

Alan sat on a stool at the bar, a half-empty schooner at his elbow. "Ah, Paul. What'll you have?"

"A Fosters."

Alan drained the rest of his glass, turned to the bartender and held up two fingers. "Fosters, *duo, por favor*."

The bartender put two schooners in front of us and Alan paid him.

Alan said: "Let's find a table."

We picked up our beers and weaved through a sea of cynicism to a table in the corner, where we sat facing each other.

I said: "That was a good story in the paper this morning. Who was your source?"

He smiled. "Love to tell you. Unfortunately, he's a very shy chap: doesn't want any publicity."

"Fair enough. I bet the PM was stunned when three senior ministers told him to pack his bags."

"Yeah, though he recovered quickly. According to my source, he called them a bunch of pricks and told them to fuck off." Alan sipped his beer. "Enough of that. You heard anything more from the cops about the woman who got murdered?"

"No."

"Strange, isn't it? Bob Douglas's secretary also got killed last week. There seems to be a murder epidemic at the moment."

Not my favourite topic. "Yeah. We live in dangerous times. You said you've got some news to impart."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. It's that soon there'll be a vacancy for a senior political reporter on *The Sydney News*."

Alan was the Chief Political Correspondent of the News. Beneath him were several senior political reporters.

"How come?"

"Vince Poulson's going back to Sydney."

"Why?"

"His wife's sick of living in Canberra. Hankers for the bright lights of a big city."

"Fair enough. How does this affect me?"

"I want you to apply for the job."

My mouth went a little dry. Becoming a senior reporter on the News would be a big step-up from my present job. I would also get a much bigger salary and a fat expense account. Plenty of potential for plunder.

I said: "Me? You must be kidding?"

"No. You've got the experience and the ability. You're just the right man for the job."

"Yeah. But they won't pick me. Not after the way I got booted off the Age."

Alan waved his hand dismissively. "Forget about that. It's history. And, if you do apply, you'll have a big edge over the other candidates."

"Really? What?"

Alan leaned forward conspiratorially. "Me. I'll have a big say in who gets the job."

It was a very tempting offer. "Who else has applied?"

"Oh, a few people, including your old mate Bilson."

Just hearing that dead-shit's name made my beer taste sour. "That prick. Why does he want the job?"

"I hear he's annoyed a lot of people at the *Age*. That's one of his special talents. He wants to jump ship, before he's pushed."

I smiled. "Hah. I bet the editor now wishes he kicked out Bilson instead of me."

"No, he wishes he kicked *both* of you out."

"You can't let Bilson get the job."

He smiled. "I know. But if you don't apply, he might get it."

"OK then, I'll apply."

"Good. And I'll see what I can do. But you've got to promise me one thing."

"What?"

"If you get this job, you'll behave yourself. No acting like a prick."

"I never act like a prick."

A jaundiced stare. "And no arguing with everybody."

"OK, OK."

I bought another round of beers and carried them back to our table. I handed one to Alan, who quickly drained half and said: "Thanks cobber. You know, while on the subject of Bilson, have you heard the latest gossip about him?"

"What?"

"He's having an affair."

"You're kidding?"

"No."

Christ, the hypocritical bastard got me kicked off The Age for having an affair with his wife. Fucker. A strange emotion seized me, which I eventually realised was moral outrage. "What a fucking fraud."

"Thought that might be your reaction."

"Christ. Who's he bonking?"

Alan smiled: "Hah. The story gets even better, because - wait for it - he's shagging an MP."

"Really? Male or female?"

"Tut, tut. Female, of course."

"Who?"

"The Member for Baxter, Maureen Hogan."

Hogan was a shrill left-winger from Western Australia with a helmet of bullet-proof platinum hair and cement-like make-up. She paraded around Parliament glowing with ambition and scalding people with her tongue. If she swam in the Amazon, the piranhas would head for dry land.

I said: "God. He must be mad. What does he see in her? She looks like a female impersonator."

"I know. He seems to like tough, domineering women."

"True. How do you know they're bonking each other?"

"One of my impeccable sources saw them rendezvous, mid-afternoon, at a motel in Yarralumla."

"Which one?"

"The Florida Motor Inn."

"The little snake. Why are you giving me this information?"

Alan waved nonchalantly. "Oh, I thought you might use it to your advantage."

"How?"

"That's up to you."

I shrugged. "You know, though I hate the little shit, it's probably time to let bygones be bygones."

Alan frowned. "I'm surprised you'd say that."

"Why?"

"I hear he's been telling people that, during your little scuffle, he, umm, cleaned your clock. In fact, he uses those exact words."

"Cleaned my clock?"

"Yup."

"Bastard. Who told you that?"

"Another impeccable source."

Now I was deeply annoyed. During our confrontation, I certainly didn't cover myself in fistic glory. Nor did Bilson. I said: "He didn't even muss my hair."

"That's not his version."

I had a mental image of Bilson dancing around a boxing ring, arms triumphantly aloft, while I lay prostrate on the canvas. What horseshit. Never happened. Now I was deeply pissed off. "You know, on second thoughts, I may be able to use your information."

Alan smiled. "Really? How?"

"I'm not sure yet. But I promise you that, whatever I do, it'll be nasty, very nasty."

"Attaboy."

Because I was worried about booze buses, and anxious to redeem myself in bed with Anne that night, I only drank one more beer with Alan. Then, much to his dismay, I said I had to push off home. He elected to stay and keep drinking.

As I got into my car, I remembered that Anne wanted me to buy some washing powder. If I wanted sex tonight, I had to buy it. So I stopped outside a Seven-Eleven in Braddon and strolled inside. I bought three boxes of powder, guaranteed to make clothes whiter than white, and carried them back to the car.

I tossed the boxes onto the back seat, got behind the wheel and started the engine. However, before I could drive off, the passenger-side door opened and a man in a heavy blue overcoat sat next to me.

The sudden appearance of the intruder was enough to give me a jolt. When I saw he was Richard Reston, the Prime Minister's chief political adviser, my jaw dropped.

The PM had a large camarilla of fixers, pollsters, image consultants, spin-doctors and other political parasites whose only function was to keep him in power. Reston was his top political minder. A lot of people in federal politics pretended to be cunning and ruthless pricks. He was the real deal.

I had fairly regular contact with him when I worked for the *Melbourne Age*. When I joined the *Launceston Herald*, I dropped off his radar screen.

I quickly recovered my breath. "Richard, what the fuck are you doing here?"

He had a smooth, almost cherubic face and small, hard eyes. "I want to have a chat."

"What about?"

He crossed his arms. "Let's go for a drive, and I'll tell you."

"Why should I?"

"Curiosity. You want to hear what I've got to say."

"Why don't you tell me what you've got to say in the morning, at work? I'll even make you a cup of coffee."

"Because then people would know we chatted, and I don't want that." He smiled. "I like deniability. In fact, I'm addicted to it."

I must admit I was curious. Reston was a big player in Canberra politics. All the ministers danced to his tune. As Alan Casey once said to me: "The PM *thinks* he runs the country, Reston *knows* he does". Reston wouldn't waylay a lowly reporter buying washing powder at a Seven-Eleven unless he had something very important to impart, and deny imparting.

I said: "OK. Where do you want to go?"

"Head towards the airport. I'll tell you when to stop."

I put the car in gear and reversed out onto the roadway. Then, after a few turns, I was on Limestone Avenue, heading towards the airport. After about five minutes, he told me to take a left turn, which I did.

I couldn't resist poking around for some information. "What are the PM's chances of winning the leadership ballot?"

"Excellent," he said tersely.

"Really? Why?"

He looked at me as if I was stupid. "Because he's got me working for him."

Arrogant dickhead.

We drove for about a minute down a winding suburban street with well-lit houses on both sides. A large park appeared on the left. The entrance had two brick pillars with a wrought iron sign over the top. I tried to read the inscription, but it was too dark.

He said: "Turn in here."

I drove through the entrance and down a narrow bitumen road with ghostly gums on both sides, like grotesque sentinels. I grew nervous. Maybe he didn't just want a chat. Maybe he wanted to hurt me.

We reached a small wooden grandstand, with peeling paint, next to a football field.

He said: "Stop here."

Heart thumping, I parked next to the grandstand and looked at him nervously. "W-w-hat do you want to talk about?"

He reached up and turned on the ceiling light. Now we could see each other clearly. "You've been very busy recently, haven't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"For a start, you found Yvonne Clarke's body at her house. In fact, I've read your statement to the police about that."

That shocked me. "You've what?"

"I've read your statement to the police."

"Bullshit."

He put his hand inside his overcoat and took out a thin sheaf of papers that he held under my nose. It was the statement I gave to Gilroy.

He said: "This is your statement, isn't it?"

"Where'd you get that?"

"No comment." He tucked the papers back inside his overcoat. "You were also in contact with Joanna Parker before she died, weren't you?"

"No I wasn't."

"Really? Then why was your electronic diary found at her apartment?"

Jesus. He knew everything. He obviously had a mole deep inside the Federal Police. That shouldn't have surprised me. He was hard-wired into the whole Canberra political network: little happened without him knowing about it.

I said: "Someone tried to set me up."

"Oh, really?" he said doubtfully.

I was now very annoyed. "Yeah, though let's not talk about my problems. Tell me what the hell you want."

He stared at me. "OK. I want the item that Joanna Parker gave you."

"What item?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"No I don't. She gave me nothing. Jesus, I didn't even know the woman."

"Don't lie to me," he barked. "She gave you something, didn't she?"

"No, she didn't."

He sighed, as if dealing with a difficult child. "Look. What she gave you is very valuable. I'm prepared to pay a great deal of money for it."

I shook my head. "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about. She gave me nothing. I never met the woman until I found her ... I mean, I never met the woman."

His eyes burnt into me. Like all good political operators, he was a great student of human nature and realised I was telling the truth.

He shook his head sorrowfully. "You really don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No, I don't," I said desperately. "What's she supposed to have given me?"

He sighed. "Nothing you need worry about. Sorry I've wasted your time."

Reston seemed to know more about why the two women were killed than me. Plaintively, I said: "You know who killed Yvonne and Joanna, don't you? Who did it? Who?"

He stared at me and said firmly: "I have no idea."

Though he sounded sincere, I wasn't convinced, because he was a virtuoso liar.

I said: "I don't believe you."

He grinned. "My goodness, you really are cynical, aren't you?"

"Maybe it's the company I keep?"

"I've told you the truth. If you don't believe me, I don't care." He put his hand on the door-handle. "Now, I'm going. Just remember, we never had this chat."

"Don't worry, nobody would believe me."

"Dead right." He opened the door and started getting out. Then he seemed to remember something and sat back down. "Oh, and just a word of warning: though you may not realise it, right now you're swimming with sharks, and one might just turn you into dinner. I'd be very careful, if I was you—very careful indeed."

A shiver ran down my spine. "What do you mean? Are you saying someone might try to kill me?"

"I'm saying that's a distinct possibility."

"Who? Who'd want to kill me? And why?"

Instead of answering, he opened the door, slipped out and said, politely: "Don't worry. I'll find my own way home."

He slammed the door and disappeared like a phantom. I sat there for a long while, heart thumping, nerves shot to ribbons.

Eventually, I collected myself and headed home. The whole episode was so strange that a part of me wondered if it happened at all. But that didn't stop me pondering what Reston said. He'd obviously thought Joanna Parker gave me an important item - an item Reston desperately wanted to acquire.

So maybe Reston was the killer? Maybe he killed Yvonne Clarke and Joanna Parker while trying to get that item? A teasing thought which was hard to accept. Reston was a cynical political operator who probably had no moral qualms about committing homicide. But he'd regard murder as a messy and unsophisticated solution to a political problem. Bribery and blackmail would be more his style.

I remembered Reston's warning about sharks. Maybe one of them killed Yvonne and Joanna, and now wanted to kill me. Hell.

I parked in my garage and headed for my front door, clutching the washing powder to my chest, where it offered the most protection, while avoiding shadows and looking around nervously. Something hit the ground behind me. I spun around just in time to see a cat skitter away, meow trailing off into the night. I squeezed the box of washing powder so hard it split and vented acrid fumes.

Bloody hell.

At the front door, I shakily tried to insert my key into the lock. After a few misses, I let myself into the townhouse.

Though the lights were on downstairs, Anne was not around. Must have gone upstairs. I put the powder in the laundry and tramped upstairs, where I found her in bed, reading a book.

I was afraid that, because of my appalling behaviour during the last week, and my late arrival home, she'd be upset. However, she'd obviously decided to give me another chance—maybe my last—because she put down the book and smiled. "How was your evening?"

If I'd told her about my meeting with Reston, she wouldn't have believed me, with good reason. So I only told her about Alan's promise to help me get the vacancy at the *News*.

She said: "That's nice of him. So you'll apply?"

"Of course. The *News* is a bigger paper and I'd get more money—a lot more. I'd be a fool not to apply."

I went into the bathroom and got into the shower. I kept thinking about Reston's warning: "*Right now you are swimming with sharks, and one might just turn you into dinner*". Christ. Just when I thought I'd climbed out of a dark pit, Reston grabbed me by the ankles and pulled me back in.

I got into bed next to Anne, still thinking about Reston's warning. She rolled over, kissed me and fondled my penis. I've read that a fear of death usually focuses and promotes the libido. That wasn't my reaction. Anne was wasting her time. I couldn't focus on sex; I was too busy thinking about sharks.

She tugged at my penis like a pilot desperately trying to pull out of a steep dive, to no avail. She even tried oral resuscitation. No reaction. My equipment was still out of order.

She released my love tackle with a hint of distain and it flopped onto my belly.

I croaked: "Sorry. It's not going to happen tonight."

"Why?" she asked, a little worried. "Is it me? Have you lost interest in me?"

"No. It's just—just—I've had a rather stressful week, and I I've had too many drinks."

She looked doubtful. "You sure it's not me?"

"No. Don't worry. Let's forget about sex for a few days, OK, and try again."

"OK. But, Paul, I think we need to talk, about our relationship and where it's heading."

Christ, why wouldn't she—and the rest of the world—just leave me alone to suck on my self-pity? "I know. But not now. I'm just not in the mood."

"Paul..."

"Don't worry. We'll talk later."

"OK."

She switched off the light and turned over, facing away. I didn't mind. My big fear was that she would try to grope me again. I just couldn't bear the humiliation.

Chapter 12

The next morning, I woke early, pale sunlight sneaking through the window. Anne still slept. I rose from the sniggering sheets, showered and dressed.

Downstairs, I breakfasted alone and was about to leave when Anne appeared, dressed for work.

She said: "Hi. You're up early."

"Yeah. Got things to do."

She bit her lip. "I want to talk about our relationship."

She didn't look happy; I couldn't blame her. Our relationship was circling the drain, and she wanted to know why. How could I tell her that I'd been the key suspect in a double-murder investigation, that persons unknown probably want to kill me and that I'd recently told her more fibs than a triple-agent? If I did, she'd flush me away.

I had to fob her off. "We'll talk tonight, I promise."

I gave her a quick peck on the cheek and headed for the door. Soon I was in my car heading for work.

I had clearly bumped up against a huge story which I couldn't grasp and was in terrible danger from unknown forces. To understand both I had to find out who murdered the two women. So I decided to make a few discrete enquiries of my own.

Of course, I could have left everything to the cops. But they weren't getting anywhere. Indeed, they'd put most of their energy into falsely accusing me of murder. Further, despite being tired and afraid, I was still a reporter. I was on the cusp of a big story and didn't intend to share it with the cops or anyone.

When I got to the bureau, Michael hadn't arrived. I skimmed through the mail and newspapers. The Launceston Herald had put my story about the PM's press conference at the bottom of page one, which gave me some satisfaction. Too bad the sub-editor tried to encode it.

I rang Dirk Tucker and gave him my preliminary news list, which wasn't exciting. He responded with a few unhappy grunts. When I hung up, Michael still hadn't arrived.

Time to snoop. Joanna Parker had worked as a secretary for Bob Douglas, a Government senator from Queensland. I strolled around to his suite and confronted his super-fit receptionist. Her narrow face looked flushed, as if she'd just run to work, which she probably had.

I said: "Hi. Bob in?"

"No. He's gone to see Senator Taggart, and should be back soon."

"Good. I'll wait."

I sat in one of the chairs lining the wall.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

She pursed her lips. She obviously regarded people without appointments as dangerous subversives. "And your name is?"

"Paul Ryder. I write for the *Launceston Herald*."

She smiled tentatively. "Oh, that's right. You came around a few days ago, asking about Joanna Parker?"

"That's right."

Her face clouded slightly. "Her death was such a bummer. I still haven't got over it."

I saw an opening and, like a good reporter, jumped through it. "Did you know her well?" I asked sympathetically.

"Of course. We worked together for almost a year. She was a good pal."

"What was she like?"

"Lovely. Lots of fun. Big laugh. I'll miss her heaps."

"Did you see much of her outside work?"

"Not much, though we sometimes went to the gym together. She loved working out."

"Which gym?"

"The Hot Bod Fitness Centre in Barton."

"Why not the Parliament House gym?"

"Because it's hard to get in, particularly when Parliament's sitting. The polties hog it."

"Was Joanna in a relationship with anyone?"

"I don't think so. I mean, sometimes she talked about going out on dates. But I don't think she was in a steady relationship, if you know what I mean?"

I knew what she meant. Joanna Parker—like many around Parliament House—enjoyed hopping from one bed to another. So did her friend, Yvonne Clarke.

I said: "When she talked about men, did she mention any names?"

A puzzled look. "Maybe. I can't remember any."

"She was a good friend of a woman called Yvonne Clarke. Did you know her?"

Before she could answer, Bob Douglas entered the suite and raised an eyebrow, obviously wondering why a reporter from a Tasmanian rag was in his reception area.

"Christ, Paul," he said in his usual blunt manner. "What the fuck're you doing here?"

"I want to chat with you."

"What about? Your Tassie readers don't give a shit about anything I've got to say."

"True. I want to chat about Joanna Parker."

His eyebrows joined like magnets and his hands twitched slightly. "Why're you interested in her?"

"Because I found the body of a woman called Yvonne Clarke. Their deaths might be connected. So I'm doing some digging around."

"Shouldn't you leave that to the cops?"

"Maybe. But so far they haven't kicked any goals."

He pursed his lips and looked uncertain, before nodding his head. "Shit. Alright. Follow me."

I got up and followed him into his office.

Bob Douglas owed his political career to a lucky bounce of an ellipsoid ball. Twenty years ago, during a Bledisloe Cup game played on a soggy pitch in Wellington, the All Black fullback fumbled in-goal and Bob, who'd just run on as a replacement, flopped onto the loose ball to score the series-winning try.

That effort buffed up a pedestrian rugby career, which he parlayed into a mediocre business career sitting on the boards of several shonky companies, well paid to look the other way. Then, before the balance sheets got too smelly, he sidestepped into politics.

He was one of the Government's foot-soldiers. Vote-fodder. Yet, while many of his more talented colleagues crashed and burned, he survived by watching his back, sucking up to the right people and—most importantly—staying out of trouble. He often pontificated about the lessons he'd learnt while playing rugby, like team-work and dedication. However, the biggest lesson was how to talk in cliques. In his bluff, no-nonsense manner he said absolutely nothing: no original or controversial thought ever escaped his lips.

In politics, survival is victory. Now he had his beady eyes fixed on the fully parliamentary pension that, in a few years, would be his.

We entered his office. He plopped into a chair behind his desk and asked me to sit facing him. He was now several kilos heavier than during his playing days, and his face still bore the scars of battle: scuffed ears, cuts above his eyes and a nose that looked stuck on too hard.

He said: "Poor Joanna. Fuckin' tragedy. Lovely woman. When they catch the prick who did it, they should hang him by the balls."

"How long was she your secretary?"

"About two years?"

"Good at her job?"

"Excellent. She'll be hard to replace."

"Have you spoken to the cops about her death?"

He looked suspicious. "This is off the record, right?"

"Of course. My lips are sealed."

"Good. Of course, I've spoken to them. They came around here the morning after her body was found, asking lots of questions."

"What sort of questions?"

"For a start, questions about her friendship with your pal, Yvonne Clarke."

"What did you tell them about that?"

He shrugged. "Not much I could say. I only met Yvonne a few times, when she dropped in to see Joanna. They seemed pretty chummy. That was my only contact with her."

"And Joanna didn't talk about their friendship?"

"No. We didn't talk much about her private life."

"What else did the cops ask you?"

"Oh, the sort of stuff you'd expect, like whether Joanna had a boyfriend."

"Did she?"

"Like I said, I don't know much about her private life. So far as I'm aware, she didn't."

"Any idea why not?"

He shrugged again. "Nope. Maybe she couldn't find the right guy. Maybe she liked playing the field. I don't know. But I can't tell you this—she must have had plenty of offers."

"What do you mean?"

He leered slightly. "She was a bloody good sort. Lots of guys must have had the hots for her."

I smiled. "Like you?"

His leer widened. "Of course. But I didn't lay a finger on her, understand? Maybe, when I was younger, I might have. Not now. Finally, in my third marriage, I'm happy. Also, one of my big rules is that I don't screw the crew. Just leads to trouble."

I hadn't accused him of anything. Yet he gave me a detailed defence of his conduct. Now I was suspicious, though I couldn't take that anywhere.

I said: "Did the cops give you any idea where their investigation's heading?"

"Yeah, they said they've got a firm suspect."

The cops must have been referring to me. Something sharp jabbed my heart. My throat went dry.

"Oh, really?" I blurted out.

"Yeah, though they didn't identify him."

Though I wasn't named, I felt a perverse desire to defend myself. "I've heard they *had* a suspect, but decided he's innocent. Now they're back to square one."

"Not surprised, because the cops I spoke to looked pretty stupid. Bet they couldn't find shit in a sewer."

As I strolled back to my bureau, Vincent Martin's political adviser, Barry Graham, rounded a corner and strode buoyantly towards me, glowing with self-satisfaction. His expression said that Martin would soon be in the Lodge, with Graham standing behind him, pulling the strings, more powerful than most Cabinet ministers.

He saw me and slowed. "Hello Paul. What's tomorrow's headline?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me. How many votes do you think Martin will get on Friday?"

A smile leaked from the corners of his mouth. "On the record, 'no comment'; off the record, 'it's going to be a massacre'."

"When's your man going to call a press conference and throw us a few scraps?"

Graham shook his head. "No chance."

"Why not?"

"Because there's no point. I mean, he doesn't have to win over the public—just Government MPs."

"Yeah, I suppose so."

He glanced at his watch. "Anyway, I'm late for an appointment with some of those MPs. I'd better hurry."

As he raced off to plot and intrigue, I reflected that he seemed supremely confident Martin would win, probably with good reason. However, he was an

arrogant tool, and his opposite number, Richard Reston, was twice as cunning and experience, and quite capable of pulling a big rabbit out of a small hat. So maybe the leadership contest wasn't a foregone conclusion.

That day, there were no new developments in the leadership struggle: nobody threw his hat into the ring or out of it, and none of the contenders spoke on the record. I didn't even file a story about it. Instead, I wrote about an Auditor-General's report that criticised the Department of Health for waste and mismanagement. Hardly big news.

When I finished that story, just after seven, I decided the best way to investigate the deaths of Yvonne Clarke and Joanna Parker was to talk to their neighbours. I'd start with Joanna's, because she'd lived close to my home in Ainslie.

I drove over to her apartment block and climbed the stairs to the first floor. A long balcony ran in front of ten apartments. Joanna's was the sixth.

I knocked on the first door. No answer. At the second, an elderly woman said she didn't talk to reporters; at the third, a middle-aged man just slammed the door in my face, and at the fourth nobody answered.

Discouraged, I knocked on the door of the apartment next to Joanna's. It was opened by a man in his early thirties, wearing a track-suit. He wasn't fazed when I said I was a reporter investigating the murder of Joanna Parker. He was obviously one of those people—highly prized by reporters—who just loves to talk.

He said: "Hi. I'm Patrick Vardon."

"You in the PS?"

"Yep. Department of Trade. Work in the accounts department."

In other words, a public service cubicle dweller. "OK. And you're happy to talk to me?"

He smiled. "Sure. But you can't use my name in anything you write, OK?"

"It's a deal."

I suspected that, like many public servants, he was bright, well-educated and unambitious, and loved knifing his superiors if that took little effort. I felt a surge of hope.

He said: "OK then. What do you want to know?"

"To begin with, have you talked to the cops?"

"Sure. Some guy called Gilroy."

"What did you tell him?"

He shrugged. "Not much. I've only been in this apartment for a few months and didn't know Joanna Parker well. When we ran into each other, we nodded and smiled—that was all."

"She have many visitors?"

"Not really, except ..."

"Except what?"

Vardon grinned. "Three or four times, a Comcar pulled up outside."

My breathing quickened. "How did you know it was a Comcar?"

He laughed. "Give me a break. It was a white sedan with government plates."

"Would you recognise it again?"

He chuckled. "You kidding? A government car is a government car. They all look the same. But I recognised the driver."

"Really? Who?"

A long pause for effect. Oh, he was enjoying himself. "Senator Bob Douglas."
My pulse-rate jumped. "You sure? How do you know it was him?"

"I saw his face."

"You mean, you knew what Bob Douglas looked like?"

"Because I'm not stupid. I read the papers. I watch the evening news. In fact, I've always thought he was a total dickhead."

That was Bob alright. This guy was nose-y and perceptive.

I said: "Did you know he was Joanna Parker's boss?"

"Not then. I do now."

"How? Because of the media coverage?"

"Yeah, and I think Gilroy mentioned it."

"When did Douglas usually turn up?"

"Oh, about seven or eight in the evening."

"Maybe he just dropped in for a cup of tea, to chat about work?"

He snickered. "Yeah, maybe. But, if he did, they had a hell of a lot to talk about."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes his car was still parked outside the next morning."

That buried Douglas' claim he didn't fuck the help. Joanna was obviously an office perk.

I said: "Did you tell the cops about Douglas' nocturnal visits?"

"Of course."

"How did they react?"

He smiled. "They looked very unhappy: like I'd done a huge fart."

I laughed. "I'm not surprised. You've put their careers and pensions in jeopardy. One slip and they can kiss them goodbye."

He smiled. "Always happy to cause trouble."

"OK. And did you see anyone acting suspiciously on the night she died?"

He shakes his head. "No. But something a bit unusual happened the day before."

My heart thumped. "What?"

"She had an argument with someone. It was so loud I heard them through the wall."

"What did they argue about?"

"Don't know. Their voices were too indistinct."

"Did you see her visitor?"

"No. Afraid not. I stayed in my apartment. Now I wish I was a bit more curious."

"Maybe she argued with Senator Douglas?"

He shook his head. "No. Definitely not."

"Why not?"

"Because she argued with a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yep. I only heard women's voices."

"You're sure?"

"Totally."

"And you told the cops that?"

"Of course."

I probed for more information, and obtained none. I thanked him and strolled towards the apartment on the other side of Joanna Parker's. However, after that, any neighbours who answered the door either wouldn't talk or knew nothing of interest.

I strolled back to my car wondering why, 24 hours before she died, Joanna Parker argued with another woman. And who was that woman? Yvonne Clarke?

I got into my car and drove off, focusing hard on those questions - so hard I completely forgot Richard Reston's warning that my life might be in danger.

Chapter 13

The good burghers of Canberra are usually home well before sundown, so Anzac Parade was almost empty as I headed down it towards the lake. I pulled up at some traffic lights. A vehicle stopped behind me, headlights bright.

In my rear-vision mirror, I saw it was a Toyota land-cruiser. To my surprise, a man got out of the passenger side and strode towards me. What the fuck did he want? My nerves sizzled.

Fearfully, I glanced in my side-mirror. The approaching man held something lumpy in his right hand. Christ. It looked like a pistol. Yes, it was a pistol. Shit.

Fear overloaded my synapses. Reston's warning rang in my ears: "*Right now you're swimming with sharks, and one might just turn you into dinner.*"

Though I didn't know the guy approaching, he was obviously a well-armed shark and I wasn't keen to meet him.

I glanced up at the traffic lights. Still red. No cars were approaching the intersection.

The gunman was only a couple of metres away.

Heart thudding, I stomped on the accelerator and shot through the intersection.

As I barrelled down Anzac Parade, I glanced in the rear-vision mirror and saw the man running back to the land-cruiser. He jumped into the passenger seat and it sped after me.

When my Volvo rolled off the production line, twenty years ago, it was ugly, safe and slow. After that, it had a hard life - the service log book made horrific reading - and was now even slower. Though the chassis shook like a rocket at main ignition, the car only snuck past 100kmph.

I glanced again in the rear-vision mirror. The land-cruiser was gaining fast. Fuck.

I zoomed across Constitution Avenue and turned right onto Parkes Way. On my left, a strip of bushland hid the lake. The Volvo whined in Swedish that it was only designed to take yapping kids to school. A car chase? No way.

The land-cruiser drew level. But at least I was safe while still in my car. I'd just drive around until I saw a police station, then stop.

Bad plan. The land-cruiser swerved across the road and slammed into the side of my car, which careered towards the bushes. My body had a power surge that almost stopped my heart.

I stomped on the brake pedal and tugged the steering wheel, fighting to keep the Volvo on the road. No good. It jumped the curb and skidded down a shallow embankment. I wrestled with the wheel and pumped the brakes. The car mowed down some bushes and saplings, then shot between two large gums, bouncing so hard my head hit the roof. My foot slipped off the brake pedal.

The Volvo slammed into a large gum. The emergency bags didn't inflate. My seatbelt stopped me turning into a hood ornament. I head-butted the steering wheel. Dazzling pain. Blood trickled into my eyes.

My vision was blurred and thoughts scrambled. But one thing was incredibly clear: the fuckers in the land-cruiser tried to kill me. Fucking fuck.

And maybe they hadn't finished for the evening. Maybe they were running towards me, right now, to deliver the *coup de* fuckin' whatever it is.

I turned to look up at the roadway and screamed with pain. Whiplash.

If paramedics had attended the scene, they'd have immobilised my neck and dashed me off to the nearest hospital, while I whimpered like a dog. But I couldn't wait for help. I had to escape.

Keeping my head steady, I unbuckled my seatbelt and tried to force open the door. Stuck. Fuck. The safety catch was down. Desperately, I pulled it up and shoved again. The door opened. I stumbled out, jarring my neck. Excruciating pain. I almost blacked out.

I turned my whole body around and looked back at the roadway. Two dark shapes were loping down the embankment. Were they from the land-cruiser or passing motorists who'd stopped to help?

Better safe than sorry. I exploded from the blocks.

Someone yelled for me to stop. Not fucking likely.

Two gunshots. The first bullet clipped leaves above me and the second thunked into a tree near my head. It was easy to imagine the sound it would have made if it hit my flesh. Jesus, I'd never been so terrified in my life. Mummy.

Definitely not Good Samaritans.

One of them obviously didn't want me dead, because he yelled: "Stop shooting, you fool".

As I ran over dark, rough ground, the top of my spine jabbed the base of my brain, setting off fireworks. I had to run stiff-legged, like a mummy in a bad horror movie, but still managed to poured on the coals.

After about two hundred metres, I reached the path running around the lake. Across the water, Old Parliament House shone in its footlights like a big birthday cake. I considered diving into the water and swimming for it, then remembered I was a lousy swimmer. I veered left towards the Carillon.

After about fifty metres, I realized that I'd plundered my energy reserves and gone into overdraft. Lactic acid flooded my system. The agony was unbearable. I stepped off the path and slipped behind a tree, heart pounding, gasping hard.

For a few seconds, I thought I was safe. Then two shapes emerged from the trees, about forty metres away. Moonlight illuminated their faces. One was a huge bastard with close-cropped hair and a big, flat face. His companion was thin, balding and hatchet-faced. Both carried pistols like they were tools-of-the-trade.

"Jesus," Baldy said, breathing hard, "He runs like a fuckin' jack-rabbit. Which way did he go?"

"Dunno. You go that way and I'll go this. And if you find him, don't shoot, OK, unless you gotta. I wanta talk to him first."

"Sure."

Baldy headed off in the other direction, while his colossal accomplice lumbered along the path towards me, Godzilla with a gun.

I wish I could claim that, primal juices pumping, I leapt out and engaged him in fierce combat. Instead, I slipped behind a tree, too scared to fight and too scared to run.

My mobile phone beeped. Fuck-a-duck. I desperately dragged it out of my jacket pocket and stabbed at the buttons until it shut up.

Anxiously, I looked up. The approaching behemoth was still a good distance away and didn't seem to have heard.

He drew level and scanned the trees. Surely the whole universe could hear my rasping breath.

Just as I was about to make a run for it, he turned and jogged towards the Carillon. Relief washed through me.

When he was at least fifty metres away, I headed back through the darkness towards the road. Half-way there, I tripped over a fallen branch, pitched forward and blacked out.

I woke with my face buried in cut grass, the smell filling my nostrils. Painfully, I glanced around and saw nobody. I staggered to my feet and lurched towards the road, reaching it about seventy metres from where my car jumped the curb.

I'd hoped that, by now, a police car or ambulance would have arrived. Instead, I only saw the goons' land-cruiser, parked on the embankment. Obviously, nobody else saw me go off the road. Great.

Then a miracle occurred. While trying to decide which way to run next, a taxi floated around the corner with its "vacant" light on. Was I hallucinating? I closed my eyes and looked again. I wasn't. Who said there's never a taxi when you need one?

I broke from the trees and dashed into the middle of the road, waving at the taxi.

The driver slowed and tried to swerve around me. I crabbed across the road and cut him off. He screeched to a stop a metre in front of me.

I dashed around to the front passenger door and yanked it open. The ceiling light came on.

Bending to get in, I ricked my neck again. A supernova exploded behind my eyes.

The driver said, in a thick West Indian accent: "What de fuck deh ya think ya doin' mun?"

Painfully, I looked at him. He was in his mid-twenties, very handsome, with close-cropped hair and strong dark features. His expression hovered between fear and anger. It said he had a crap job and didn't want it to get any crappier, and any fare I paid him wouldn't be enough.

I wondered how a West Indian ended up driving a taxi in Canberra. Maybe he was a diplomat, moonlighting for a few extra dollars. He wouldn't be the first. But that was a little mystery I could resolve later, if at all.

I felt the wound on my forehead. It was tender and sticky. I glanced down. Lots of claret on my shirt. Must look like a resident of Elm Street.

I said: "Sorry. I've had an accident."

"I can sees that mun. Where deh hell's your car?" His accent stretched words out and glued them together. I had to concentrate hard.

"Down the embankment."

"Fuck. An' nobody call de umbulance?"

"No. The bastard who hit me took off."

"OK. An youse not gonna bled all over ma fine taxi, is ya?"

I touched my wounds again. "No, I think it's stopped."

He sighed. "OK. Where ya wanta go?"

Anywhere, as long as we left straight away. "Just start driving. I'll tell you when I make up my mind."

He shot me a glance. "Ya sure mun?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Then shut deh door."

I slammed it shut, killing the ceiling light. As he drove off, I looked around anxiously, in case the goons returned. However, we slipped past the land-cruiser without them reappearing.

The driver glanced across at me. "Shit mun, ya looks bad."

"I'll live."

"How comes ya went off deh road?"

I remembered Alan Casey's excuse after his crash. "A kangaroo."

"Kungaroo? Here? In deh muddle of Canberra."

"Yeah. It looked lost."

"Musta bin very fuckin' lost, mun. Ya should go to deh hospital."

Though I obviously needed medical attention, the goons would probably head for my townhouse, where Anne was waiting. I had to reach her first.

I told the driver how to get to my place and promised that, if he drove fast, I'd give him an extra fifty bucks.

He gave me another strange look, and nodded. "It's a deel, mun."

Christ. This truly was a miracle: I'd been rescued by a taxi-driver who could speak English *and* knew his way around Canberra.

Thankfully, like most taxi drivers, he drove like a lunatic, heading up Anslie Crescent like it was the straight at Silverstone. When we reached the town-house, I was so relieved that, in a moment of rare generosity, I tossed him two fifties.

"Keep the change."

"OK, thanks, mun. Ya should see a doc."

"Don't worry. Next on my list."

As I got out of the taxi, I realised that he'd saved my life, but I didn't know his name. I glanced at his ID, displayed on the dashboard. Just a licence number.

"Thanks, mate. What's your name?"

He looked a bit surprised. "Trevor, Trevor Angyl, with a 'Y'."

Angyl. Get out of it! "You're kidding, right?"

He frowned. "No, course not."

Fuck, now I was insulting my rescuer. "Well, thanks man."

Enough chatting. I dashed towards my front door, rummaging for my keys, and couldn't find them. I punched the doorbell.

While waiting, I desperately considered my next move. I could call the cops, but couldn't tell them anything they'd believe. Probably charge me with making a public mischief, or something like that.

If I was in a western movie I'd have barricaded the door and hunkered down with a shotgun that my loyal wife stood waiting to reload. But it wasn't. I wasn't Gary Cooper and Anne wasn't a Maureen O'Hara. Somehow, I had to persuade her to go and stay with her sister. How?

About twenty seconds later, Anne opened the door. When she saw my battered face, her eyes widened and jaw dropped. "My God, Paul. What's happened? You alright?"

"Yeah. I'm OK."

"You look terrible. You've got to see a doctor—now. My God, what happened?"

I didn't want to tell the truth, because it wouldn't sound like the truth at all. It would just sound crazy. Yet, I had no choice. This really was a life or death situation.

I took a deep breath and plunged forward. "I had a car crash."

"Really? Why?"

"Ah, another car ran me off the road."

Her jaw dropped again. "What?"

"Another car ran me off the road."

"You mean, deliberately?"

"Yes. The two guys in the car were trying to kill me."

She suddenly realised she'd never really known me at all, because I was a deranged fantasist. Her brow furrowed. "You sure? Maybe it was just an accident?"

Desperately, I raised my voice. "It wasn't an accident. After I crashed, they came after me with guns—big fucking guns."

She looked bewildered. "Why would they do that?"

"Because, like I said, they wanted to kill me."

"Why would they want to do that?"

"It's hard to explain. I think it has something to do with my finding Yvonne Clarke's body."

"How?"

That was hard to explain without telling her a lot of stuff I'd withheld. It also would have taken all night.

I said: "I'm not really sure."

"Look Paul. You've just had a nasty knock on the head—and maybe these problems you're having in bed are affecting you—so maybe..."

The goons would probably arrive very soon. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her desperately. "Listen. You've got to believe me. You've got to. They're probably heading here right now. We're both in great danger. Believe me, *great* danger. I want you to pack some clothes and go and stay with your sister."

She looked upset. "Do what?"

"Go and stay with your sister. It's the safest place."

She pursed her lips and frowned. "Look Paul. I think you should get some medical treatment. Then we can have a talk."

She obviously thought the treatment should involve a straight-jacket and a rubber room. I couldn't blame her.

I said: "No. No. No. You've got to go to your sister's house. We're in terrible danger."

Her face darkened with suspicion and her tone grew hard. "You know what, Paul, I think you just want to get rid of me. That's it, isn't it? Well, you don't have to make up wild stories about people wanting to kill you. Just tell me to go, and I'll go."

This was obviously my week to get falsely accused of just about everything. "No. I don't want you to go. I mean, you've got to go because we're in danger—great danger. But believe me, I still love you and I don't want you to go."

The only thing clear about that statement was its lack of clarity.

She shook her head angrily. "Bullshit. I don't know what's going on, Paul. You've been acting very strangely lately. But one thing's sure: I've had enough. Understand? Enough. I can't put up with your mood swings and your lies any more. I'm leaving you, understand? I'm leaving you."

She probably expected me to be upset. Instead, I smiled with relief. "So you'll go and stay with your sister?"

My satisfaction annoyed her even more. She grimaced. "Yes, and I won't be coming back, understand? Never. Just wait here. I'm just going to get some of my stuff. I won't be long."

"Hurry. Hurry."

"Don't worry," she snapped. "I want to get out of here as soon as possible."

She turned and strode upstairs. I waited at the front door, ageing rapidly.

Anne took her own sweet time packing her stuff. Almost fifteen minutes passed before she stomped down the stairs lugging a heavy leather suitcase.

I stepped forward: "You need help with that?"

She scowled and brushed past me. "I'll pick up the rest of my stuff later. Let's go in my car. I'll drop you off at a hospital."

She clumped over to her Holden Astra. I pranced after her, keeping a look-out for the goons.

She heaved her suitcase onto the back seat and got behind the wheel. As I sat next to her, my neck got another painful jolt. Fuck.

She slowly reversed out onto the road, then glanced at me unsympathetically. "Which hospital do you want to go to?"

"What about Canberra Hospital? It's on the way."

"Good."

She silently drove across the lake and past Parliament House, then down Adelaide Avenue and Yarra Glen Road. Painfully, I kept glancing around, in case the land-cruiser was following us. I didn't see it.

Eventually, Anne pulled up in front of the casualty department of Canberra Hospital.

"Thanks." I unbuckled my seatbelt. "I'll give you a call in the morning."

"Don't you dare," she snapped.

"Look Anne, I know..."

"Shut up. I'm not interested in your excuses, OK? This is it. We're through. Finished. I won't be coming back to you. Now, you'd better go and get yourself

fixed up. You look fucking awful. And while you're at it, I suggest you see a psychiatrist."

As I got out of the car, I reflected that, though I'd ruined a lot of relationships in my time, this was the first one I'd ruined with honesty. I wouldn't make that mistake again. From now on, I'd stick to lying.

I closed the car door and Anne sped off, leaving behind a whiff of burnt rubber. It smelt like a bouquet of rotting flowers.

Quite frankly, I wasn't too worried about losing Anne. When things calmed down, I'd sweet-talk her into returning. I'd power up my charm and watch her melt. She'd be helpless.

My biggest concern was surviving the hit-men. They had my full attention because I'd never get them to love me.

As I strolled through the casualty department towards the reception desk, I saw myself in a mirror. Not a pretty sight. A fierce red gash bisected my forehead. Streamers of dried blood ran down my face. My jaw was heavily bruised and shirt spattered with blood.

About half-a-dozen walking wounded sat in the reception area, several with nastier injuries than me. I hoped that didn't mean they'd get preferential treatment.

At the reception desk, a young nurse looked at me blandly. She'd obviously seen worse—a lot worse.

I said: "Hello. I need to see a doctor."

"I can see that. What happened?"

"Car accident."

"Alright, fill out this form and take a seat. A doctor will see you as soon as possible."

"How soon will that be?"

She looked annoyed. "When he's available."

I sat and waited for half-an-hour, with a splitting headache, before a female nurse took me into a small room with a bed. Sitting on a stool was a doctor in a white coat, pulling on surgical gloves. He was tall and handsome with a shock of dark hair; he looked exhausted, which wasn't a good sign. He obviously needed to prescribe himself more uppers.

He said: "Hi. I'm Dr McGrath. What happened to you?"

"Car accident. Went off the road and hit a tree."

"Any particular reason?"

No point telling him that a couple of thugs tried to kill me. If I did, he'd just keep me distracted until someone arrived with a straightjacket.

I said: "Momentary inattention."

He leaned close and asked me to take some deep breaths. As I did, he prodded my chest, but was really smelling for alcohol.

I said: "Don't worry. I haven't been drinking. I wasn't pissed when I crashed."

He looked a little guilty. "Good. Who brought you here?"

"My girlfriend."

"Is she still around?"

"No, she just left me."

"At the hospital?"

"No, for good."

He looked at me curiously. "You're having a bad night, aren't you?"

"Fucking disgraceful."

He delicately touched the wound on my forehead. I winced.

He said: "Ugly. I'll have to do some needlework. Where else do you hurt?"

"My neck's pretty sore..."

"Probably whiplash."

"...and it feels like there's an axe stuck in my forehead."

He stood upright. "Alright. Take off your clothes so I can examine you."

I stripped down to my underpants and noticed a diagonal purplish welt across my chest, from the seatbelt. I sat on the bed while he spent twenty minutes poking and prodding. I manfully tried to hide my pain until he squeezed my neck; I squealed like a pig and almost fainted.

Eventually, he stood back. "Do you get much exercise?"

"Only hoisting beer glasses. What's that got to do with the accident?"

"Nothing. I just think you should look after yourself better."

I glanced down at the muffin roll hanging over my underpants and realised that, tonight, it almost got me killed.

He said: "Alright, I'd better patch you up. Then we'll get some x-rays."

"What for?"

"You've had a nasty knock on the head. We'd better make sure nothing's come loose. Then we'll find you a bed so you can spend the rest of the night here."

"Do I have to stay here?"

"I'd prefer it. I want to keep you under observation for a while."

"OK."

On his instructions, the nurse went away and got me some painkillers that I gulped down. I soon felt a lot better. Then the doctor spent twenty minutes cleaning and stitching the wound on my forehead. Finally, he put a large strip of plaster over it and gave me a tetanus shot.

He said: "Alright then, now we'll get some x-rays."

"Thanks Doc."

The nurse put me in a surgical gown and lay me on a trolley, which she pushed down a succession of long corridors.

The trolley-ride was my first chance to really ponder the night's events, which had been passing strange. Two thugs I'd never seen before tried to kill or, at least, kidnap me. That attempt was obviously connected in some way with the deaths of Yvonne and Joanna. How? Maybe the thugs—like Richard Reston—thought Joanna gave me something important and wanted to get their hands on it. Or maybe not.

In the X-ray Department, a technician slid the trolley under a big machine and told me to keep still while a lot of lights flashed.

Then the nurse wheeled the trolley into a nearby hospital room with a single bed. She helped me get between the sheets. The painkillers knocked me out fast.

I dreamt that I was at a funeral. Anne lay in an open coffin, pale-faced, with bruised plum lips, looked peaceful for once. Filing past, misty-eyed, I impulsively bent down to kiss her on the forehead.

Her eyes flashed open and she grabbed me around the neck. "You did this, you bastard. This is your fault." With superhuman strength, she dragged me into the coffin. The lid closed behind me. I plunged into darkness screaming "I love you", "I love you", "I love you".

The next morning, I woke in misery. My head and neck ached, and my attempt to become the first middle-aged white guy to run under ten seconds for the hundred metres had almost destroyed both hamstrings. Deciding where I hurt the most was like choosing Elton John's worst album.

I pushed the "attention" button on the bed-head. A few minutes later, Dr McGrath hovered over me, looking even more tired, a malpractice suit waiting to happen. A thin, attractive nurse stood next to him.

My smile turned to a wince. "You still here?"

"Don't worry. I'm going home soon. How do you feel this morning?"

"Horrible. You shouldn't have saved my life. I need more pain-killers."

"OK." The doctor glanced at the nurse, who went away. "Now, you'll be pleased to know the X-rays are good news. I was most concerned about your neck. But, while there is some soft tissue damage, there are no fractures."

"So I can go?"

"Yes. I'll give you a prescription for painkillers and you can go. Of course, if you have any new symptoms, come back immediately."

He wrote out a prescription, gave it to me and left. The nurse returned and gave me some more painkillers, before showing me into an en-suite bathroom where I showered and changed back into my blood-spattered clothes. Though I looked like a hobo, my vanity was in remission, for the moment anyway.

I caught a lift to the ground floor and wandered towards the main entrance. As I did, I realised the goons chasing me might have guessed I'd seek treatment at a hospital. Shit. What if they turned up and fucked with my health?

Heart racing, I looked around for Flat-face and Baldy. A few dozen people milled about. No sign of them, thank God.

After stopping at a clothes shop, to buy some new gear, I'd head straight for Parliament House, the most heavily guarded building in Australia, where I'd be safe.

I wandered outside and looked around for the taxi-stand. It was about thirty metres away. Three cabs were waiting. I'd just turned towards them when something unfriendly jabbed me in the back.

"Stand very fucking still," a voice behind me growled.

That was easy. Fear froze my muscles.

"W-w-w-what?" I trembled.

"Shut up."

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Flat-face behind me. He jabbed me again with something so hard it had to be a pistol.

Fuck. I'm dead. I'm dead.

"Now, listen very closely," he whispered menacingly. "Do what I say or I'll shoot you fucking dead. Understand?"

The pistol made him very credible. I didn't trust myself to speak and nodded.

He said: "Good. Now, move very slowly towards the car park. Move."

The car park was fairly empty and the land-cruiser—parked about 50 metres away—stood out like a sore thumb. Flat-face jabbed me with the pistol.

I'm dead. I'm dead.

I lurched forward, like a sailor walking the plank. Just as I reached the roadway, Dr McGrath appeared, also heading for the car park.

He smiled. "Hello Mr Ryder, feeling better?"

I sensed Flat-face's attention shift. The pressure of the pistol lessened slightly.

I had one ace up my sleeve: this thug had probably never met anyone as cowardly as me. I'm sure he usually tangled with hardened crims who put up a fight. But I was middle class, so my fight-or-flight mechanism was stuck on "flight". I instinctively brushed aside the pistol and bolted towards the hospital entrance.

Flat-face yelled something. I braced myself for a bullet. None came.

Thankfully, the automatic sliding doors were open. Otherwise, I'd have run straight through the plate glass.

As I entered the lobby, I glanced over my shoulder. Flat-face was about twenty metres behind, running hard. He didn't seem embarrassed or uncomfortable about waving a pistol around in public.

I've heard soldiers describe how, in combat, their adrenalin pumped so hard they reached a state of total awareness. I felt something like that. The imminent prospect of catching a bullet made me run like a gazelle and process information like a super-computer. My heart smoothly pumped high-octane blood all around my system. Kick in the afterburners? Why not?

As I ran, I looked around for an escape route. On my right were a newsagency and coffee shop. Dead-ends. Up ahead was a cul-de-sac of lifts. Before I got into one, Flat-face would shoot me dead. Death-traps.

Fuck.

I looked left and saw some toilets. Just beyond them was a door with an "EXIT" sign above it.

The word "exit" triggered a Pavlovian response. I grabbed the handle of the door and prayed it would turn. It did.

I glanced over my shoulder. Though Flat-face had fallen back, he was still in hot pursuit, waving his pistol.

I shoved the door so hard that, when it opened, I almost fell on my face. I stumbled into a fire-escape.

Christ, up or down?

For no particular reason, I ran up the stairs.

As already mentioned, I wasn't fit. But my rabbit-heart pumped hard as I bounded up on steel springs. Funnily enough, in the back of my head, I heard the voice of my dickhead high school rugby coach: "Lift your legs, you fucking lazy bastard. Lift them. On your toes. On your toes".

After three stories, a hand seemed to grab my heart and give it a warning squeeze. I ignored it. Bad move, because it soon gave my heart an angry twist and tried to yank it out of my chest cavity. My body caught fire and legs went numb. The proverbial grand piano landed on my back. I desperately tried to suck in air, and found I was in outer space.

My system was near melt down. I lurched through a door and found myself in a long corridor with rooms along both sides. A big sign on the wall said: "CARDIOVASCULAR WARD". The irony escaped me.

A couple of nurses stood talking, at the end of the corridor, about forty metres away. Neither noticed me.

Gasping hard, I strode down the corridor, looking for an empty room. The first three rooms had patients suffering from bad -emias or -omas. The fourth, with two beds, was empty.

I glanced behind me. Flat-face still hadn't emerged from the fire escape. I slipped into the room and crawled under the far bed, comfortable with being a coward.

I lay on my back, quivering and wheezing, gnawing at the air. I tried to regularise my breathing: in, out; in, out. No good. Start again. In, out; in, out. For a while I'd feared a heart attack more than Flat-face. As my heart-rate subsided, he got top billing again.

For the next half-hour I lay there, afraid that Flat-face would turn up and flat-line me. He didn't. I'm not sure what happened to him. He just didn't appear.

Eventually, I heard voices in the corridor. Though they were fairly indistinct, I picked up words like "police", "pistol", "big man" and "dangerous".

Cautiously, I slipped over to the doorway and glanced out. Two male uniformed cops and a security guard were talking to two female nurses.

A nurse said: "Sorry, we haven't seen anyone who looks like that."

A cop said: "OK. If you do, don't approach him, OK? He's very dangerous. Just give us a call."

The hospital must be crawling with cops looking for Flat-face. Great. I just might live.

The cops and security guard headed towards the lifts. I followed them at a discrete distance, acting casual while scanning for Flat-face.

When they reached the lifts, the security guard pushed the down button. I strolled up and stood next to them. They didn't even look at me.

A cop said: "We're wasting out time. This guy must be long gone."

"Yeah," his partner said.

A lift arrived and we all got in. A cop pushed the button for the ground floor. The lift descended and they got out with me hot on their heels.

There were about a dozen uniformed cops in the lobby, chatting in groups or striding about purposefully. Several had police dogs.

I considered identifying myself and asking for protection. But then I'd have to explain that a man I didn't know was trying to kill me for reasons I didn't understand. I'd recently had several dealings with police, none pleasant. They kept suspecting me of wrong-doing. Why give them another chance?

As I approached the entrance, I saw Dr McGrath talking to a couple of policemen. I looked away, praying he wouldn't notice me. He didn't. I sailed out of the entrance.

Outside were about a dozen more uniformed cops, including several from the Tactical Response Unit carrying rifles and looking keen to shoot someone.

About ten marked police cars were parked against the curb, lights flashing. I heard the heavy beat of rotors and looked up at a helicopter with "POLICE" stencilled on its belly.

I scoped the car-park for Flat-face's land-cruiser. Gone. Flat-face and his accomplice must have got away.

Comforted by the police presence, I strolled over to the taxi rank, where four cabs waited. I got into the back seat of the first one. The driver was a short, balding guy with a three-day growth. His belly almost touched the steering wheel.

Glancing about, he said: "Shit, man. What's the big fuss about?"

"Some guy's been running around the hospital with a gun."

"You don't say? They catch him?"

"I don't think so."

"OK. Where do you want to go?"

I told him to head for the Manuka shopping area, just down the hill from Parliament House, where I could buy some new clothes.

As he drove off, I lay down on the back seat, in case Flat-face was still lurking about.

The taxi-driver turned and glanced down at me. "Still feeling crook mate?"

"Yeah. I've had better days."

"I know just how you feel. I was in hospital recently for an appendectomy. They gutted me like a fish. Fuckin' one side to the other. Left a huge bloody scar..."

For the rest of the journey, he gave me a cut-by-cut account of his recent operation. Though I wasn't the slightest bit interested, he didn't care. Finally, he pulled up outside a clothing shop in Manuka.

"...so, the doctor reckoned it was a bloody miracle I survived," he said.

"Really? Just wait here. I won't be long."

I ducked into the shop and purchased a whole new ensemble. At least, if I got killed, I'd be wearing clean underwear and socks. That would please my mother.

Then I told the taxi driver to head for Parliament House.

Funnily enough, despite everything that had happened to me that morning, I was only a little late for work. Indeed, when I walked in, Michael Boyd still hadn't arrived. That was a relief, because it gave me a chance to make a cup of coffee, sit at my desk and ponder the events of the last 12 hours.

Though I'd long ago accepted I wasn't everyone's cup of tea, I'd always expected to die in bed from heart failure or cancer, not a bullet. Surely, I was too lovable to get murdered. But last night a couple of thugs almost killed me, and I was still in shock.

In the process, I also lost my girlfriend. I briefly considered calling Anne to patch things up, and decided against that course. My first priority was to survive the goons chasing me. Somehow, I had to climb out of the dangerous story I was stuck in and go back to routine activities like attending press conferences, boozing with contacts and gossiping with colleagues. When I'd done that, I'd work things out with her.

Certainly, I couldn't go home that night, because the goons would probably be waiting for me. I had to find somewhere else to stay. Of course, I could check into a motel. But I didn't want to spend the night on my own: I was too afraid and

depressed. I needed companionship. So I decided to ask Alan Casey if I could stay at his place.

I wandered down the corridor to the bureau of the *Sydney News*, where half-a-dozen reporters lolled around in spacious cubicles. Alan's was next to the outer window. I found him reading a newspaper.

He looked up at me, wide-eyed. "Shit, Paul. You look awful."

"I know, though at least it's not contagious."

"What happened?"

The less he knew the better. I would chop away everything except the car crash. "I crashed my car last night."

"Jesus. I hope Anne's alright?"

"Don't worry, I was on my own."

"Good. What happened?"

I shrugged. "Slammed into a tree."

He grinned. "You mean you were pissed?"

"Hah, hah. This may surprise you, but I was sober. Somehow, I lost concentration and, before I knew it, bam, hit the tree. Maybe I had a micro-sleep."

A doubting grin. "Yeah, that can happen." He leaned back in his chair. "What do you want? You here about the job? Don't worry, I've already recommended you to the Editor, and the signs are good."

"No. It's not about that. Let me buy you a cup of coffee, and I'll explain. Come on."

He shrugged. "OK."

We wandered around to Aussie's Coffee Bar, where we sat and ordered cappuccinos. I was tempted to tell him everything that had happened to me during the last week, but reminded myself that, though he was a good mate, he was also a journalist. Though I didn't know why my life was in danger, I sensed I was close to a huge story. No point tipping him off about it.

I said: "I've got some bad news."

"What?"

"Anne's given me the boot."

He said: "You're kidding? Why?"

"Oh, being rude, not listening enough, leaving my pubic hair in the bath, leaving crumbs on the bench-top, etc, etc..."

"Did she catch you with another woman?"

"No. This time, that wasn't a problem."

He looked me in the eye. "True?"

"Yeah, true."

He crossed his arms and frowned. "God, you're a dummy. If I had a woman like Anne, I'd do anything to keep her. Anything. Yet you let her slip through your fingers."

"Thanks. You've made me feel a lot better."

"Maybe you can get her back?"

"If I do, it will take time."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "Boy, you're really having a rough trot, aren't you? Last week you found a dead woman. Now you've crashed your car and lost your girl."

"My life's turned to shit."

"So how can I help?"

"Umm, you can let me stay at your place tonight."

"My place?"

"Yeah. You've got a spare bedroom."

He nodded. "OK. But I don't provide luxury accommodation."

I knew that. "Thanks. I feel like giving you a big wet sloppy kiss."

He grimaced. "That won't be necessary."

I shrugged. "Then I'll save it for later."

When I got back to the bureau, Michael still hadn't arrived. The best way to forget my problems was to immerse myself in work. I read through the mail and that morning's newspapers.

An opinion poll in *The Australian* caught my eye. It showed that Vincent Martin was almost twice as popular among voters as the PM. The poll was bad news for the PM because it would encourage wavering backbenchers to dump him.

I'd just finished reading the papers when Michael arrived. When he saw me, his eyes widened and eyebrows fluttered. "Fuck. What happened to you?"

"Car accident."

"You look like a crash-test dummy."

"Very funny. Now, I want you to hold the fort for an hour, OK, while I pop out and get a new car."

"Sure."

I caught a taxi to the Budget Rent-a-Car office in Civic and hired a Nissan Pulsar, which I drove back to Parliament House and left in the underground car-park. When the time was right, I'd buy a permanent replacement for my dead Volvo.

The meeting of Government MPs to decide the leadership struggle was now only three days away. But the main contenders were keeping low profiles. So, that evening, I filed another story which said Martin had the upper hand and support for the PM was waning.

Just after 8pm, I strolled around to the bureau of the Sydney News and found Alan ready to go. We wandered down to the Nissan Pulsar, which I drove towards his house in Manuka.

Still worried about Flat-face, I drove down backstreets and kept glancing in the rear-vision mirror. There was no sign of him.

Alan said: "Why are you going this way? This isn't the quickest way to my place."

"Oh, umm, I'm worried about booze buses."

"You haven't been drinking."

"Umm, yes I have. I had a few earlier."

Alan frowned. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing at all. Why do you ask?"

"You look worried."

"I am worried—about booze buses."

"OK. OK."

To divert him, I said: "What's for dinner?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"What sort of pizza you like."

I followed his directions to a pizza shop in the Manuka shopping area. Alan went inside and bought a couple of pizzas. Then we headed for his house.

As we strolled towards his front door, he turned to me. "Just think mate, tonight, you could be cuddling up to Anne. Instead you'll be spending it with me. I hope that shows you the error of your ways."

Maybe I should have checked into a motel, because his moralising was getting on my wick.

I hadn't lived by myself for a while and had forgotten how much mess a bachelor can make without really trying. Once inside, I was reminded: books and newspapers were scattered everywhere; a tower of dinner plates sat in the sink and drying socks lined the sideboard. Cobwebs clung to the cornices and the dust lay in geological strata. A melange of unpleasant odours wafted under my nose.

Alan shrugged. "I probably should clean up, but life's too short to waste on housework." He sounded like he would rather lay down his life than pick up a sock.

"Don't worry: this place has—umm—character."

"Exactly."

We ate the pizza in front of the TV, watching the late news on the ABC. After the first item, a picture of Canberra Hospital appeared behind the newsreader. I leaned forward nervously.

The newsreader said: "Police were called to Canberra Hospital this morning when a man with a gun was seen running through the hospital. The man was described as in his early fifties, tall and very solidly built. However, by the time the police arrived, the man had fled. It is believed he was last seen leaving the hospital in a Toyota land-cruiser."

We watched footage of police milling around outside the hospital.

Alan muttered: "Typical. Cops are always too late. Weren't you at Canberra Hospital this morning, after your accident?"

"Yeah."

"See that guy?"

"No, I try to avoid men with guns."

"Wise policy."

There were no items about Yvonne and Joanna's deaths, so I assumed the police were still looking for someone else to frame.

When we'd finished eating, Alan got a couple of beers from the fridge; we drank them while watching the sports news.

There was a time when I'd have enjoyed such an evening. But I couldn't help thinking that, in 20 years time, I didn't want to be like Alan, eating takeaway every night with only the TV for company. I already missed Anne.

During one commercial, Alan turned and said casually: "You want to talk about your broken heart?"

I shrugged. "Do you really want to hear about it?"

He pursed his lips. "Not really."

"Then I'll spare you."

We resumed watching the TV.

When the sports news had finished, Alan turned to me. "Well, tiger, you've had a big day. You'd better get some rest. I think the sheets in the spare bedroom are clean. If they're not, let me know and I'll have a poke about."

Chapter 14

That night, I dreamt that I was sitting in a beautiful art deco café with friezes on the wall, marble columns and onyx tables, looking out over the main square of an ancient central European town. Horse-drawn carriages passed by.

I wore a straw boater and a pastel sports jacket. A German language newspaper was spread out in front of me. I was reading about Hitler becoming Chancellor. That was strange because, except in dreams, I couldn't read German.

An elegant waiter delivered a cup of coffee. As I picked it up, I heard a shot. The cup shattered, spraying coffee all over the newspaper. The coffee turned to blood which ran off the sides of the table.

I looked out across the square and saw Flat-face running towards me, firing a Mauser pistol.

Bullets whizzed past my head. One hit me in the arm. I crashed to the floor and snapped awake, bathed in sweat. Then I realised it was only a dream and sighed deeply. Thank God. I silently prayed that I never saw Flat-face again.

I glanced at my watch. Just before seven. I wouldn't get back to sleep, so I rolled out of bed, showered and dressed. As I slipped past Alan's bedroom, his massive snoring hinted he was still asleep.

Alan had the *Canberra Times* delivered every morning. I strolled outside and stalked around his overgrown lawn. Dewy grass soaked my bare feet and shins. I kept an eye out for spiders and snakes.

The paper lay in a clump of thick weeds. I carried it into the kitchen, ripped off the plastic sheath and unfurled it on the table.

Suddenly, I saw Flat-face again. There was a large photograph of him at the bottom of page one. Holy shit. My heart ricocheted around inside my chest.

I looked at the story next to the photo.

SYDNEY CRIMINAL FOUND DEAD IN MOTEL ROOM

A notorious Sydney crime figure, Jack Cooper, was found shot dead in a Canberra motel room yesterday afternoon.

The body of Mr Cooper, 53, was found in the Big Western Motel, in Reid. He had been shot twice in the chest.

According to a spokesman for the Australian Federal Police, Cooper booked into the motel four days ago, under an assumed name.

The spokesman said that, at present, the police have no idea who killed him.

"It's not even clear why he was in Canberra," the spokesman said. "But you can be sure he wasn't here to visit the National Gallery.

"Cooper had a lot of enemies. His death probably resulted from a gangland vendetta."

Cooper was well known figure in the Sydney underworld.

During the 1970s he spent five years in prison for armed robbery. After being released, he worked as a minder and debt-collector for a number of crime bosses. He was arrested several times for assault, and never convicted.

The Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service heard evidence from a police informant that Cooper paid bribes to corrupt police and was involved in the heroin trade. However, no charges were laid against him in relation to those allegations.

During my life, I'd read a lot of newspaper stories. But none gripped or rocked me like that one. It contained one stunning revelation after another. Indeed, it took me quite a while to digest them all.

Now I knew the man who ran my car off the road and tried to kidnap me at Canberra Hospital—Flat-face—was a notorious Sydney criminal called Jack Cooper. I also knew he wouldn't bother me again, because someone had punched his ticket. Of course, his accomplice was still at large. Hopefully Cooper's death would keep him distracted.

We are often told that every man's death—even an enemy's—is a tragedy to be regretted. I hadn't questioned that precept until now, when it dissolved into bullshit. When old Flat-face died, the bell didn't toll for me. Not even a ting-a-ling-a-ling. If I ever met the guy who whacked him, I'd definitely congratulate him. Though I wouldn't let him date my daughter, of course, I would certainly buy him a beer. In my head, a little man put on his dancing shoes and did a celebratory fandango on Flat-face's coffin. *Ooga booga, cha cha; Ooga booga, cha cha.*

However, many questions remained unanswered. Why did Cooper try to kidnap me? Did he think I had something important in my possession? And if so, what?

Further, there was obviously some link between him and the deaths of Yvonne and Joanna. What was it? And did he kill them?

And finally, who killed Cooper? And why?

I had no answers, and couldn't even make intelligent guesses.

"Were you making that noise?"

I glanced around. Alan pattered into the kitchen, wearing what I hoped was his number-three suit and a ragged blue tie.

"What noise?"

"Sounded like a war chant, or something like that."

"Not me. Must have been someone outside."

He shrugged and looked down at the table. "You got the paper?"

"Yeah, though I was a bit worried a rhino might charge out of the undergrowth."

He frowned. "Really? You should have been more worried about dog-shit. Anything interesting in it?"

"Not really. What's on the breakfast menu?"

"Weet-bix, of course." He took a pack out of the fridge and put it on the table. "You can also make yourself some toast, though the bread's stale and I've run out of jam and margarine."

"I'll have Weet-bix then."

"OK. You also want a beer?"

Jesus. Though I knew he liked a drink, this was a bit earlier. "No, Weet-bix will be fine."

He looked disappointed. "OK."

He took two bowls out of a cupboard, put them on the table and started doling out Weet-bix. "You look a lot happier this morning."

I smiled like I was witnessing the dawn of creation. "Yeah. Nothing like a good night's sleep."

After breakfast, I drove us both to Parliament House, arriving a little earlier than usual.

As we strolled down the main corridor of the Press Gallery, I turned to Alan. "Thanks for putting me up."

"No probs. You want to stay tonight?"

Because Jack Cooper was no longer a threat, I planned to return home, though I couldn't tell Alan that. "No, I'll be fine, thanks."

He said: "OK. Where'll you stay?"

"Oh, I'll find somewhere."

"OK. But, if you want my advice, you should get down on your hands and knees and beg Anne to take you back."

Jesus, if Anne and I had to divide up our friends, I probably couldn't even count on Alan. That scared me.

He said goodbye and slipped into his bureau.

I'd become fascinated with Jack Cooper and his violent demise. When I reached my desk, I called the Media Relations Unit at the Australian Federal Police Headquarters in Braddon. There was already a female constable on duty. I identified myself and my paper, and asked if she had any new information on the murder of Jack Cooper.

She said: "No. But there's going to be a press conference here at ten o'clock."

"Thanks." I hung up and glanced at my watch. Already nine o'clock. I raced through my morning chores - reading the newspapers and the mail - before calling Dirk Tucker to give him my preliminary news list. Then I headed for the AFP Headquarters in Braddon.

Just before ten, I strolled into its ground-floor auditorium, where several dozen collapsible chairs were arranged in front of a podium with a long table.

About twenty reporters, cameramen and photographers were milling about, either setting up equipment or chatting. Though it was a big turnout for a press conference at AFP Headquarters, I wasn't surprised. A lot of people wanted to know why a crime figure like Cooper got popped in a Canberra motel room.

I felt rather strange. Only the day before, Cooper tried to kill me. Yet nobody here knew that.

I wondered if the police had drawn a connection between Cooper's death and those of Joanna and Yvonne. Surely, if they had, Special Agent Gilroy would be in charge of this investigation.

I soon learnt that he wasn't. A door opened behind the podium and a man emerged. He was in his mid-forties, with a sallow face, grey hair and grey suit. He sat behind the table, now festooned with microphones. I deposited my tape-recorder in front of him and slipped off to the side.

He said: "Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Special Agent Green. I'm in charge of the investigation into the death of Jack Cooper."

No mention of the other murders. It seemed the police hadn't linked them.

Green made the usual appeal for anyone with information about Cooper's death to contact the police. Then he asked if there were any questions.

A female TV reporter in the front row leaned forward. "When, how and why did Jack Cooper die?"

"He died some time yesterday afternoon, while in his room at the Big Western Motel in Reid. He died from two gun-shot wounds to the chest. As to why, we're still looking into that."

She quickly got in another question: "Who found the body?"

"A member of the motel staff."

"Has the killer been identified?"

"No. Unfortunately, nobody saw the perpetrator. So anyone who saw anybody acting suspiciously in the vicinity of the motel yesterday afternoon—or has any other information—should come forward."

A male reporter standing near me interjected. "Any signs of a struggle or resistance?"

"None at all. So he may have been killed by someone he knew and trusted."

Like his accomplice, Baldy.

Another reporter said: "Was this a professional hit?"

"It has all the hallmarks of one."

The female TV reporter leapt back into the fray. "What was he doing in Canberra?"

"We don't know, though given his criminal history, he was probably up to no good."

"When did he arrive in Canberra?"

"We think he drove up from Sydney and checked into the motel about four days ago."

I caught the policeman's eye. "Do you know his movements while he was in Canberra?"

"No."

So the cops didn't realise Cooper was the pistol-wielding intruder at Canberra Hospital. Surely the penny would drop soon.

The press conference didn't quench my interest in Cooper. Back at my bureau, I got onto the internet and accessed the archives of the *Sydney News*, searching for stories about him. There was a large number, stretching back more than twenty years. He was obviously a big cheese in the Sydney underworld. Slowly, I read through them. They chronicled Cooper's many brushes with the police. Usually, he out-foxed them: investigations went nowhere, charges were dropped, trials aborted. He kept wriggling off the hook, until now.

I was growing bored until I read a story, written in the late-80s, which made me sit up straight.

DEVELOPER ACCUSED OF USING STAND-OVER MAN

A property developer was accused yesterday of using threats and intimidation to silence a critic of his controversial residential development.

The developer, Mr George Potter, wants to build a large apartment block in Balmain.

Many local residents have strongly opposed the plan, claiming it will cause congestion and noise. The local council had also rejected the plan.

Mr Potter has brought an action in the Land and Environment Court, seeking to reverse the council's decision.

In that court yesterday, a local resident, Mr Gary Swansea, said he'd been subjected to threats and harassment since he started campaigning against the development.

"I've received abusive phone calls and excrement has been pushed through my letter box," he said.

"Only last week, a man grabbed me in the street and pushed me against a wall. He told me that if I didn't shut up, he'd silence me permanently."

Mr Swansea said he reported the incident to the police.

"The police showed me a number of photographs, including one of the man who accosted me," Mr Swansea said.

He said that man was Mr Jack Cooper, a well-known Sydney stand-over man who has served a term in prison for armed robbery.

"Potter is obviously using Cooper to scare me," Mr Swansea said.

I let out a long, low whistle. George Potter was the political patron of Vincent Martin. But it seemed that, in the late-80s, when a tyro property developer, he employed Cooper to intimidate critics.

That was the only connection I found between Cooper and federal politics. So I wondered if Potter soiled Cooper onto me. But, if so, why? Maybe he did that to help his protégé, Martin, in some way? Maybe Martin had something to do with the deaths of Yvonne and Joanna?

I was engaged in wild speculation. But that was hardly surprising when I had so few facts to tether my imagination.

As far as I could see, my only option was to talk to George Potter and see what information I could prise from him.

As must be obvious by now, I only had slender reserves of courage. But when chasing a good story, I sometimes forgot that fact. After consulting the telephone book, I called Potter Enterprises in Sydney and asked to be put through to George Potter's secretary.

Eventually, a toffy-sounding woman came on the line. "Mr Potter's secretary."

"Hello, my name's Paul Ryder. I'm a reporter for the Launceston Herald."

"You mean Launceston in Tasmania?" she asked, as if it was still a penal colony.

"Yes."

"What can I do for you?"

"I want to interview Mr Potter."

"What about?"

"I'm writing an article about Vincent Martin. I understand that Mr Potter has taken a keen interest in his career. So I'm hoping to get some background information about him."

"Look, Mr Ryder, I'm sure Mr Potter would love to help you. But I'm afraid he's very busy. He certainly wouldn't have time to give an interview."

Her tone was brusque. She'd obviously had a lot of experience fobbing off officials, creditors, business competitors and reporters like me.

I said: "Why don't you ask him. Let me give you my number."

"I don't think..."

I told her my number. "Have you got it?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly.

"Alright, I'll wait to hear from you."

"Umm. Alright. If I get a chance, I'll mention it to him."

She hung up.

I'd called Potter's secretary more in hope than expectation. half-an-hour later, she called back, sounding surprised and apologetic. "Umm, Mr Ryder, I've spoken to Mr Potter and he said that he's prepared to see you tomorrow morning, at eight-thirty, here in Sydney. Are you happy with that?"

"Yes. You'd better give me the address."

"Oh, you won't need that," she said tartly. "We're in the middle of town, in the biggest building."

"What's the building called?"

"Potter Tower."

"Of course. I'll tell the taxi driver."

I hung up, hand trembling. Why would a mega-mogul like George Potter agree to see a press jackal like me, at short notice? Very strange. Maybe he really did soil Cooper onto me. And maybe he'd already found a replacement thug. Jesus. Was I getting too close to the flame? I called Qantas and booked a flight to Sydney that evening.

Finally, I focused on the work I was paid to do. The meeting of Government MPs was now only 48 hours away. So Parliament House was awash with rumours and counter-rumours. A Government backbencher whispered to me that more ministers had defected to Martin, but when I contacted those ministers they denied it; another backbencher told me the PM was about to resign, but the PM's press secretary said that was a load of crap. Eventually, I wrote my now-standard story that Martin was heading for victory and the PM was under pressure to resign and depart gracefully.

That afternoon, when I spoke to Dirk Tucker, I told him I was going to Sydney that evening and wouldn't be back until mid-day tomorrow.

"Why are you going?" he demanded.

No point mentioning the interview with George Potter. He just wouldn't understand.

I said: "Umm, a family funeral."

"Who's going to write tomorrow's stories?"

"Don't worry. I'll be back by mid-day."

"OK. You've been spending a lot of time out of the bureau recently."

Why did he care? He didn't run my stories anyway.

I said: "Yeah. That's why Michael's here: to cover for me when I'm away."

"No he's not. Michael's there because he drove me nuts down here. If we had a bureau in Antarctica, I'd have sent him there, though I'd have felt sorry for the penguins. That's why I need you in the bureau all of the time."

"I promise that when I get back from Sydney, I'll never leave the bureau again. I'll even piss in a bottle."

"I'll keep you to that promise," he snarled and hung up.

I had a bad feeling about my job on the *Herald*. When I started, Tucker was friendly and complimentary. Now he hated everything I did. We were like a couple that had fallen out of love and indulged in rough sex.

I wondered what was bugging him. Maybe he'd worked out I only intended to stay on the *Herald* until I got a better job. Or maybe his dog had died, or his wife had left him, or he had haemorrhoids or was just a moody bastard. Impossible to know.

I just prayed I got the job on the *Sydney News* before I lost my present one.

Chapter 15

Political journalism had brought me face-to-face with many powerful men. Most were intensely disappointing. Up close, they were as ordinary and full of shit as anyone; they convinced me that luck rather than talent governs our destinies.

However, I'd never met a billionaire before. So before leaving Canberra, I trawled the internet to find out more about George Potter. I read that he left high school at fourteen and became an apprentice carpenter. Soon he was a licensed builder employing other tradesmen. His projects grew in size until he was a fully-fledged property developer erecting cramped and ugly apartment blocks all over Sydney. Now, according to the latest Rich List in the *Business Review Weekly*, he was worth almost \$3 billion.

He had a fearsome reputation. Even in the rough-and-tumble world of Sydney property development, he was known as a tough nut. He battled with unions, terrorised sub-contractors, fought with local councils, intimidated residential action groups and undercut competitors.

When I'd finished surfing the net, I rang a friend who reported for the Australian Financial Review and mentioned I was going to interview Potter. I asked what the billionaire was like.

My friend laughed. "George Potter makes the politicians you hang around with look like sissy boys. He's tough, ruthless and very, very secretive, so I'm surprised he'll talk to you. He usually doesn't talk to the press."

"Why not?"

"Because he doesn't like people poking their noses into his business."

"Why? What's he got to hide?"

"Are you kidding? You don't become a billionaire without breaking a lot of laws and having dozens of skeletons in your closet. Don't forget what Balzac said..."

"Perhaps you'll remind me."

"He said that 'Behind every great fortune is a great crime'. Potter's no different. If you want my advice, don't ask any difficult questions."

"What'll happen if I do?"

"My friend laughed louder. "You might end up propping up one of his buildings."

"You're joking, right?"

My friend paused and sounded serious. "You know, I'm not sure."

"Thanks. You've put my mind at ease."

I hung up. Maybe interviewing Potter was a really duff idea. But I couldn't back out now. Too many questions needed answers.

Potter Tower was a gleaming 64-storey spike just behind Circular Quay. The next morning I joined a stream of luminous young professionals trekking through the lobby. I wore my number-one suit, which would be barred from entering their wardrobes. My barber-shop haircut and the huge bandage on my forehead also cost me style points.

I squeezed into a crowded lift and pressed the button for the top floor. The lift rose and steadily decanted passengers until I was alone. My hands trembled and upper-lip glistened with sweat. Even my bravado was gone.

At the top floor, the lift doors opened and I found myself in a large white-marble reception area. The receptionist had high cheek-bones and pouty lips. She sat behind an antique huon-pine desk. Both had well sculpted legs.

I explained my business. She asked me to take a seat and made a phone call.

A heavy black-leather couch sucked me into its embrace. A few minutes later, a panelled door opened and a woman in her early forties—sharply dressed, fine-featured and proudly grey-headed towards me, wondering why her boss wanted to see someone so poorly dressed.

She said: "Hello. I'm Beverley Harper, Mr Potter's secretary. Please follow me."

She led me through the panelled door and down a corridor with offices on both sides. The Australian impressionist paintings on the walls looked sadly out of place. She took me through the last door on the right, into an enormous office with panoramic city views. It was the sort of room in which people plotted world domination.

Some distance from the door was a large granite-topped desk. George Potter sat behind it, watching us.

We hiked towards him across a wide expanse of thick carpet. Universes expanded and collapsed, galaxies disappeared, and stars turned to hot giants and fizzed out before we reached his desk. Not wanting to keep him waiting, I almost broke into a trot.

He was in his early sixties, with thick grey hair and a blunt face that looked like it belonged under a hard-hat. He took off his reading glasses, tossed them down and came around the desk, eyeing me suspiciously.

Despite his heavy build and big hands—which could easily strangle me—he was light on his feet. Did he look capable of having two women murdered and trying to have me iced as well? You bet. My balls started to shrivel.

Near the desk were two enormous leather couches, facing each other across an antique wooden chest.

"This is Mr Ryder," Beverley Harper said.

Still looking suspicious, he said gruffly: "OK. Leave him here. Don't stay."

As the secretary left, he pointed towards a couch. "Sit."

I sat, pulled out my tape recorder, turned it on and put it on the wooden chest.

He sat opposite and glared. "You're not recording this."

"I want to make sure my quotes are accurate."

"Turn it off."

"But..."

"Turn it off. You can make notes."

I reached over, turned off the tape recorder, and pulled out my notepad and pen.

He said: "You want to chat about Vincent Martin?"

"Yes. I understand you know him well."

"That's right. Known him for about 15 years. When he was a barrister he often appeared for my companies. I also know his wife, Roberta. Lovely woman."

While speaking, he looked straight at me, sizing me up, probably wondering how his goons could have failed to murder me. Despite feeling queasy, I stared back.

I said: "When did you realise he had a big future in politics?"

"As soon as I clapped eyes on him, it was obvious he was different, stood out from the crowd. So when the time was ripe, I helped him find a safe seat."

"Do you regard him as your protégé?"

"Of course not. I'm the President of the NSW branch. It's my job to ensure we send talented people to Canberra. Vincent was very talented and I was happy to help him."

"Do you talk to him often?"

"He sometimes turns to me for advice. But I'm sure he asks a lot of people for that. All good politicians do."

"Umm, what would you say are his strengths and weaknesses?" The loud-mouth spectator who sits in the bleachers behind my eyes jumped up and yelled that was a fucking stupid question. I ignored him.

Potter responded with a long spiel about Martin's intelligence, imagination and honesty. I pretended to make notes, but was just doodling.

"...he's someone who really has a big vision for this country. If he does become Prime Minister, he won't just be a time-server. He'll make things happen."

He talked as if dictating a memo. Then he glanced at his watch and leaned forward ominously. "Is that enough? Any more questions?"

A lump formed in my throat. "Yes. Just a few more."

"What about?"

I paused. The skirmishing was over. Now I had to start asking hard questions or go home. I was strongly tempted to do the later. However, I've always hated the rich and powerful, without exception, and had quickly grown immune to this guy's aura. He was just another smug corporate bully who, in a decent society, would be in gaol. Nor could I forget that two goons made me run for my life. Though I'm far from brave, anger and envy gave me just enough strength to plunge forward.

"Umm, when I was researching this article, I saw you had an association with Jack Cooper, who recently..."

His face went hard as granite. I half expected him to leap over the antique chest and throttle me. Stupidly, I prepared to shield behind my notepad.

He snapped: "We've never had an association."

"Oh, umm, well, he got murdered in Canberra yesterday and..."

"We never had an association, understand?" he snarled. "Never. And if you print anything which suggests we did, I'll sue you and your grubby little rag for every cent you've got." He stood and glared down at me. "So, if you want to stay healthy you'd better keep your nose out of things that don't concern you. Have I made myself clear?"

Very, very clear. Couldn't be clearer. He obviously did have a close association with Jack Cooper and employed the goon to attack me. Jesus. My courage evaporated under the white heat of his glare. Time to beat a hasty retreat back to Canberra. I spoke with lots of vibrato. "Don't worry. I wasn't trying to suggest anything. I mean, I'm not going to print anything that might upset you. So don't worry."

He frowned: "Good. I'm glad we see eye to eye."

I was desperate to get out of there. I closed my notepad and tucked away my pen. "Thank you for talking to me. I'll be on my way."

As I started to rise, he showed his palms, ominously. "Don't go just yet. There's one further matter we have to discuss."

I stayed seated. "What?"

"I understand you may have an item I'm trying to acquire. Give it to me and I'll pay you a very large sum."

"Really? What item?"

"An item you received from a woman called Joanna Parker."

Potter wasn't the first person to assume I'd received an important item from her. So did the PM's adviser, Richard Reston.

I now realised that Potter must have dispatched Cooper to Canberra to recover that item from me. Cooper's mandate included kidnapping, torture and possibly murder.

I just wished I knew what the hell I was supposed to have that was so important, and dangerous. "I don't know what you're talking about. What item?"

He glared down at me. "Don't play games with me, Mr Ryder. As I've said, if you give it to me I'm prepared to be very, very generous."

I shook my head. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. Absolutely none."

He gave me a long stare, still sizing me up. He obviously concluded I was a weak bastard who, if I had the item, would have surrendered it for the money, because he shook his head unhappily. "You don't, do you?"

"No, I don't."

He made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a sigh. "Alright then. I've wasted enough time on you. Get out of here."

I leapt to my feet.

He scowled. "And just remember to keep your nose out of my business. As I said, your health depends upon it."

Maybe I should have laughed in his face and flung back a few threats of my own. But fear curdled my blood and snap-froze my brain. "You shouldn't threaten me," was the best I could manage.

"Oh, I'm doing more than that," he snarled. To my surprise, he stepped over to the window and looked down at the street. "You know how long it took me to build this tower?"

I edged towards the door. "Ah, no."

He turned and glared. "Seven months. *Just seven fucking months.* So if you think I'll let a piss-weak little bastard like you get in my way, you must be fucking kidding."

His anger was mesmerising. I almost agreed with him. Instead, I took a step back and almost tripped. "I'm going, I'm going."

"Good. Get the fuck out of here." He spun around and headed back towards his desk.

I left Potter Tower and stepped onto the pavement, hands still trembling. The building created a cold shadow. I looked up. Jesus, it was big. It seemed to lean forward, as if about to fall over and bury me. I scurried away.

I'd learnt three things from my interview with Potter. The first was that Potter had something to do with the deaths of Yvonne and Joanna Parker, though I wasn't sure what. The second was that he sent Cooper to recover, from me, an item that Joanna Parker once had in her possession. And lastly that, if I kept snooping around, he'd probably have me killed.

The last revelation dwarfed the others. From now on, I'd stop trying to be a hero. No more poking about. Whatever Potter wanted to hide could stay hidden. Three billion dollars had won him that right.

Having finally listened to the coward inside me, I felt much more at peace with myself.

Chapter 16

In less than 24 hours, Government MPs would meet to decide the leadership struggle between the Prime Minister and Vincent Martin. I was anxious to get back to Canberra and monitor events.

I caught a taxi to Sydney Airport and then the first plane back to Canberra. It touched down just after eleven.

I'd left my car at the airport overnight. I got behind the wheel and headed for Parliament House. After passing Duntroon Military Academy, I crossed over Kings Avenue Bridge. While passing through Barton I saw a two-storey tinted-glass building with a big sign on the roof: "*Hot Bod Fitness Centre*".

Someone had recently mentioned the centre to me. Who? And why? Then I recalled that Bob Douglas' receptionist said Joanna Parker often trained there. *She loved working out.*

Not anymore.

After meeting George Potter, I resolved to stop snooping around. I'd let sleeping dogs lie. Yet I kept wondering about the missing item that George Potter and the PM's adviser, Richard Reston, were hunting for.

I only knew three things about that item: it was very important, Joanna Parker once had it, and it was still missing.

Reston and Potter must have searched Joanna's apartment and her office at Parliament House, without success. Where else could she have hidden it?

She loved working out.

Shit. My vow to stop poking around flew out the window. I fizzed with nervous excitement.

I pulled over to the side of the road and used my mobile phone to call directory assistance. I got the number of the Hot Bod Fitness Centre and gave it a call. A man answered.

I said: "Hello, I'm thinking about joining your gym and want to know how much it costs."

"The basic fee is \$350 for six months and \$600 for 12 months."

"Including GST?"

"Yes."

"Umm, and what about lockers?"

"We have lockers you can hire permanently, or just when you're at the gym. It's up to you."

"Right. Thanks a lot. And, umm, how much will it cost if I just want to visit for the day?"

"Casual visitors pay ten dollars, including GST."

"When are you open?"

"Eight to eight."

"Thanks. I'll give it some thought."

Next, I called the Parliament House switchboard and got put through to Bob Douglas' receptionist.

I said: "Hi. My name's Paul Ryder, from the *Launceston Herald*. I spoke to you a few days ago."

"Oh, yes. That's right."

"Umm. You said you went to a gym with Joanna Parker?"

"Yeah. The Hot Bod in Barton."

"Did she hire a locker there?"

"You mean permanently?"

"Yes."

"Ah, yeah. I think she did. Why?"

My heart thudded. "Do you know the number?"

Sounding suspicious, she said: "Why do you want to know that?"

"Umm. I lent her some swimming goggles. I want to get them back." I cringed. What a clumsy lie. Was I losing my touch?

"Really?" She obviously thought I was a heartless turd. "Well, I don't know the number."

My heart sunk. I thanked her and hung up.

I rang the gym again. A different man answered the phone.

I tried to sound like Special Agent Gilroy: in other words, like a prick. "Hello. I'm Special Agent Gilroy, from the Australian Federal Police. I'm investigating the death of a woman called Joanna Parker, who, I understand, was a patron of your centre."

"I'll have to check that. Hang on a mo."

I heard the faint chatter of computer keys. Then the man returned. "Ah, yes. She was a patron. Membership isn't due to expire for another three months."

"Right. And I understand she had a locker there?"

"That's right."

"According to my information, it was locker 115."

"No, you got that wrong. It was 102."

"Alright. I'll be down there fairly soon to look inside it."

"Sure."

I hung up. Somehow, I had to sneak into the gym and bust open locker 102. That would require some break-and-enter paraphernalia.

I turned my car around and headed for my townhouse. When I got there, I trotted up to my bedroom where Anne had left, on the bed, a note in elegant handwriting.

"Paul. I've removed most of my stuff. I'll come back later for the rest. Sorry it didn't work out."

I opened the wardrobe and saw that most of her clothes were gone. Shit. Maybe my charm was more resistible than my ego was telling me.

However, my mind was focused on burglary. I took a sports bag from the wardrobe and went into the bathroom. Under the sink was a small toolbox. I extracted my largest chisel, slipped it into the bag and put a couple of towels on top.

The gym would have security cameras. So I found a baseball cap, jammed it on and pulled down the visor.

I sped back to the fitness centre and parked outside. Fear and excitement slugged it out for possession of my soul. It was a heavyweight contest.

Don't get your hopes up, I told myself. There's probably nothing in the locker. Nothing. But my heart pounded.

A woman sat at the reception counter. She was about twenty with an open face, lightly-toasted skin and long-blond hair in a plait. She wore a singlet that exposed the edges of a sports-bra and ropey arms.

Surely, my love handles would betray me. I didn't look like a gym junkie. She'd pick me as an impostor.

I said: "Hi. I'm not a member, so I just want to pay the daily rate."

She looked bored. "That'll be ten bucks."

I paid and pushed through a turnstile into the main exercise room. Nasty-looking weight-machines made it look like a medieval torture chamber. Though several patrons were busy flagellating themselves, none sweated as hard as me.

A big sign with an arrow said "CHANGEROOMS AND LOCKERS". I followed the arrow past a 50-metre pool and down a short corridor until I saw, above a door, another sign: "LOCKERS". I stepped through the door into a large room with metal

lockers around the walls and a long bench in the middle. Thankfully, it was deserted. I located locker 102 and rapped my knuckles on the flimsy looking door. A tinny sound.

I dropped my sports bag and, shaking hard, pulled out the chisel.

Now or never, I told myself. Do it. Do it.

No. Don't do it. Don't do it. You'll get caught. You'll get arrested. You'll go to gaol.

Shut up. Shut the fuck up. Fucking coward. Show some balls for once. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

I inserted the chisel into the gap between the frame and door. Then I heard footsteps in the corridor.

Fuck.

I glanced around. A young man entered the locker room.

Keeping my back to him, I returned the chisel to my bag and rummaged around as if I'd lost something.

I heard a locker door open. Twenty seconds later, it closed again. Footsteps receded.

Heart pounding, breathing ragged, I inserted the chisel back into the gap and shoved hard.

I half-expected sirens to go off and security guards rush in. Instead, I heard metal scream. The door buckled, and didn't open. Desperately, I reinserted the chisel and leaned on it again. This time, the lock broke and the door popped open.

Inside the locker were the usual accoutrements of a gym rat: perfume, shampoo, towels, a couple of swimsuits and a pair of running shoes. Then I saw, in the back of the locker, a DVD in a jewel-case. No sticker or writing on the disc. What was it doing there? It seemed out of place. And DVDs contain information, right? So maybe it was what I was looking for. My heart started a fancy beat I hadn't heard before.

I stuffed the DVD into my sports bag and tried to shut the locker door. But I'd knocked it out of shape and it wouldn't close properly. Fuck it. I picked up my bag and scurried towards the entrance.

As I left, the woman at the front counter didn't even look up. Then I was outside, sucking in fresh air.

Striding towards my car, I realised that crime was not my metier. A few more episodes like this and my life force would be used up.

Chapter 17

I rushed home to see what was on the DVD. Would it explain why Yvonne and Joanna were murdered? Or did it just contain old episodes of Seinfeld or Big Brother?

When I got there, I sprinted inside and popped the DVD into my player. I pressed "play" and prayed for a dramatic revelation. All I saw on the TV screen was

footage of an empty living room which seemed familiar. Then I realised it was Yvonne's.

She must have set up the camera. But why film her living room, particularly when it was empty?

I had to wait about ten minutes to find out. Just as my concentration was flagging, she entered the room with Vincent Martin trailing behind her. They were both dressed in business clothes, as if they'd just finished work.

Shit. Vincent Martin. A Minister of the Crown. What the fuck was he doing in Yvonne's humble abode? The answer was obvious: getting laid.

Then I discovered the DVD had a sound track.

Martin said: "Fuck. What a day."

"Come here. I'll make you feel better."

They spent the next minute kissing and fondling, while I developed a half-woody.

I didn't know much about Martin's private life, but knew he had a wife and three kids who lived in Sydney. So he was being a very naughty boy. Indeed, despite my own chequered past, I felt a flush of moral disapproval.

I was also a little perplexed. It was hard to believe two women were killed because of this DVD. So what if Martin had an affair with a political groupie? No media organisation in Australia would touch the disk. Someone could, of course, put it on the internet and embarrass Martin. But it was unlikely even that would harm his political prospects. Australian voters are very broadminded about sexual matters. They'd only crucify a politician if he was found in bed with a dead woman or a live boy.

Yvonne broke free of his clutches. "You want a glass of wine?"

"Sure."

She went off screen, while he removed his tie and sat on the couch, facing the camera. She returned with two wine glasses, handed him one and joined him on the couch.

She said: "So you had a bad day?"

Martin looked worried. "Yeah, fucking awful. During Question Time, I kept getting asked about that fucking army base."

The DVD must have been made several months ago, when Martin was being questioned in the House about whether he helped George Potter win the tender to build an army base in northern New South Wales.

She said: "I didn't see Question Time. What did you say?"

"I said I never talked to Potter about the tender."

"Was that true?"

He looked anger. "Of course not. Shit. The bastard kept calling me day and night about it. Wouldn't leave me alone."

"Why didn't you tell him to stop calling?"

"I couldn't. I owe him too much."

"So you helped him win the tender?"

"Of course. Had no choice. He's got my balls in a vice."

"How did you help him?"

"Oh, I had a quiet word with a few people on the tender committee, and I slipped Potter some information about the other tenders. Christ. If that comes out, I'm beyond fucked."

"Is that likely?"

He sighed. "No. I should be alright."

Famous last words.

Now I knew why this DVD was so important: why two women died because of it. It proved Martin was corrupt and lied to the House. The exposure of either offence would destroy his career. No doubt about that. Instead of ending up in the Lodge, he'd end up behind bars.

Of course, such pillow-talk is common in Canberra, and usually deniable. Not this time. Yvonne had secretly recorded Martin's confession for posterity.

That wasn't the last revelation on the DVD. Indeed, it wasn't even the greatest. Martin drained his glass.

She said: "You want another drink?"

"No. Actually, I'd like some powder, if you've got some."

"Sure."

Yvonne went off-screen and came back with a large mirror. On top was a long line of white powder. She sat next to Martin, handed him a tube and held the mirror under his nose. With the practised ease of a Sydney barrister, Martin shoved the tube up his nose and hoovered up a whole line of coke.

Oh shit, I thought. Naughty, naughty, naughty.

Martin said: "You going to have some?"

Of course not, you boob. She's filming this.

Yvonne said: "No, later." She put her hand on his crotch and suggested they go to bed. Without further ado they exited, stage right.

She obviously hadn't set up a camera in the bedroom, so I was save the sight of Martin's hairy arse going up and down. Why so demure? She hadn't shown much class so far. Maybe she'd realised that sex tapes were very passé.

I turned off the DVD machine and sat back, stunned.

Now I knew why Yvonne and Joanna were killed. They died because, like most people in Canberra, they couldn't keep a secret.

Let me explain.

Vincent Martin and Yvonne Clarke were having an affair, which she secretly filmed. That was easy, because these days you can even buy spy cameras in toy shops. Privacy is an out-dated concept.

Why did she film him? Probably because, like most mistresses, she wanted evidence of their affair so that, if it went sour, he couldn't just brush her aside. After all, she wasn't bonking him for nothing.

Anyway, the DVD was her little secret. But a secret isn't much fun unless you share it. So she told her best friend, Joanna Parker, and maybe even gave her a screening.

However, Joanna couldn't keep a secret either. For her, the DVD was an enormous opportunity. It was leverage to get what she wanted.

So Joanna stole the DVD from Yvonne's apartment and put it in her gym locker. Then she got in touch with Richard Reston, the PM's political adviser, and offered to hand it over, for the right price.

Yvonne discovered the DVD was missing and realised Joanna took it. She panicked, went over to Joanna's place and demanded it back. They had a screaming match, but Joanna wouldn't hand it over.

Yvonne had now run out of options. Desperately, she contacted Martin and warned him that she'd made the DVD and Joanna had stolen it. Maybe he could get it back from her.

Martin must have freaked out. He was on the verge of making it to the Lodge. But the Australian public draws the line at politicians snorting coke. If the DVD surfaced, it would be as deadly to his political career as growing a toothbrush moustache.

Desperately, Martin turned to his political patron, George Potter, and told him what had happened. Potter swung into action. He ordered his favourite goon—Jack Cooper—to recover the DVD from Joanna Parker.

I wasn't sure whether Potter told Cooper to kill Joanna Parker, or left that to his discretion. In any event, Cooper broke into her apartment and killed her. But when he looked around for the DVD, he couldn't find it, because it was tucked away in the gym locker.

Cooper realised that when Yvonne Clarke heard Joanna Parker was dead, she'd probably head straight for the cops. So Cooper had to silence her too.

By now, Yvonne was terrified. She knew Martin wasn't happy with her and the repercussions could be severe. To protect herself, she decided to talk to a journalist she trusted: me.

However, Cooper killed her before I got to her house.

Later, when Cooper saw on TV that I'd discovered Yvonne's body, he decided to make me the patsy. He got someone to sneak into my bureau and steal my electronic diary. Then he planted it in Joanna Parker's apartment, where the cops found it. However, luckily, his frame-up fell flat.

Meanwhile, Cooper pressed forward with his main mission. He'd killed two women, and still didn't have the DVD. He had to find it.

Suspecting I had it, he broke into my townhouse. When he didn't find it there, he tried to kidnap me. That attempt failed, very publicly, at Canberra Hospital.

Potter now realised Cooper was a very dangerous liability. If the police caught him, he might ruin everything. So Potter had him eliminated. Cooper left this world in a Canberra motel room, courtesy of a few bullets from someone he knew and trusted. Probably Baldy.

As I pieced together what had happened, I felt a mixture of surprise, horror, disgust, fear and—most of all—excitement. I'd stumbled onto a huge story that would bring down the Government. God. This was my ticket back to the big time. No, it was more than that: it was my ticket to journalistic superstardom. Women would want to be *with* me and men would want to be *like* me. I'd crush all my enemies with a single blow.

My by-line would endureth forever. Amen.

I was anxious to get back to my bureau and write the story. I slipped the DVD into the jewel-case and headed for the door. Then I flung it open and found myself looking straight into the muzzle of a pistol.

Fuck.

I don't know much about pistols and can't tell you its make or calibre. I can only report it was big, black and shiny. The muzzle looked enormous. Fear lit up every part of my system. My legs did a funky jive.

From behind the pistol came a gravelly voice. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Until now the cannon had my undivided attention. I peeked at the man behind it. Bald and heavy-set, he wore a grey overcoat and looked familiar. But my thoughts were so scrambled I couldn't remember where I'd seen him before.

My tongue felt snap frozen. "Wot?"

The man said: "Turn around and go back inside the house."

Though I was anxious to obey, my legs felt numb. I had trouble turning. He got impatient and shoved hard. I stumbled into the living room. He followed, shutting the door behind me.

"Sit," he said, pointing his pistol at a couch.

I tottered over to the couch and collapsed onto it, still holding the DVD. He looked at it and smiled. "I think you'd better give me that."

Nervously, I held it up. He stepped forward and grabbed it.

"Thank you," he said sardonically. "Now make yourself comfortable, because we have a short wait."

I spoke through rubbery lips. "Woy? Who fer?"

"You'll see. And remember, any funny business and I'll shoot you, understand? I don't want to, because I don't want to have to dig a grave and stick you in it. But if I've got to, I will."

He sat in an armchair, rock-steady pistol still aimed at my chest. We were playing his game, not mine, and I was the away team.

Suddenly, I remembered where I'd seen him before: outside Joanna Parker's apartment, just before I discovered her body. He walked past me, avoiding eye contact.

Shit. Had I got it all wrong? Did he, not Cooper, kill Yvonne and Joanna? And was he now going to kill me? Fucking hell, I really was in shit.

He seemed to read my thoughts. "You remember me, don't you?"

I didn't want to mention seeing him at a murder scene and lied: "No."

"Really? Because I remember you, outside Joanna Parker's home. Oh, don't worry. I didn't kill her. I was looking for this." He held up the DVD. "Fortunately, now I've found it."

It didn't look like he was going to shoot me—not immediately anyway—so my tongue loosened. "Who're we waiting for?"

He grinned malevolently. "Be patient. Everything will be revealed, in time."

Neither of us was in the mood to chat. We sat, facing each other, with dead air between us.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. The bald guy got to his feet and slide across to the door, still pointing the pistol at me. "Don't move."

I was so afraid I probably couldn't have budged if I wanted to. My bowels rumbled ominously.

My captor opened the door and I got another surprise to add to that day's long list. Richard Reston, the PM's chief political adviser—his Mr Fixit—stepped into my living room.

Reston glanced at me briefly, then at the man with the pistol. "You've got it?"

"Yeah, here."

Reston took the DVD with obvious relief. For a moment, I thought he might want to watch it himself. Then I realised he already knew what was on it: Joanna Parker told him before she died.

Reston looked over at me. "Hello Paul. Sorry to barge in like this."

Seeing a familiar, if unfriendly, face gave me some courage. "What the fuck's going on? You're not allowed to do this."

Reston dropped into the couch opposite, his beatific smile hiding a rotten soul. "Really? Why not?"

"Well, umm, because it's wrong. Give me back that disk."

Even to me, that sounded monumentally piss-weak.

He just laughed. "I'm sorry. I intend to keep it. I think you can understand why. You thought you had a huge scoop, didn't you? Could taste victory? Well, sometimes you've got to run *through* the tape. I hope my friend here didn't have to get rough."

"No, he was a perfect fucking gentleman," I said sarcastically. "Who is he?"

"You don't need to know. All I'll say is that he works for one of the Government's more obscure agencies."

"You mean he's a spook?"

"Yes. He specialises in what they call wet work. He also does odd jobs for me. Hah, very *odd* jobs. He knows how to arrange accidents or suicides. So don't do anything stupid." He waved the DVD in the air. "I bet you're wondering how I knew about this."

"I already know."

He lifted an eyebrow: "Really?"

"Yes. You originally found out about the DVD from Joanna Parker. She stole it from Yvonne Clarke and then offered to sell it to you."

"That's right."

"So you sent your goon here to Joanna's house, to get the disk."

"Correct. But all he found was her body. I also understand that, on the way out, he passed you on the balcony. After that, I told him to keep an eye on you, in case you had the DVD. In fact, we even bugged your phone. You know, you should make up with your girlfriend, she sounds very nice."

He looked at his bald henchman, who'd put away his pistol and was now unscrewing the back of my telephone.

Reston said to him: "Got it?"

The bald guy held up a small device, which I assumed was a bug. "Yep."

"Good." Reston turned back to me. "We didn't realise she'd hidden the DVD in her gym locker. That was smart work on your part. You've been very busy this morning, haven't you?"

I said: "What are you going to do with that DVD?"

"It's quite obvious that Vincent Martin isn't suitable to be our next Prime Minister. I mean, he has a few, umm, character flaws. Certainly, if this disk got out he'd have trouble selling the Government's family values and anti-drugs policies." Reston shook his head. "Silly bastard. He should have just got blasted on

booze, like most polities in Canberra. Then he'd be OK. He chose the wrong poison."

"So you're going to blackmail him into abandoning his challenge to the PM?"

"Of course."

"Then you'll give the DVD to the police?"

He frowned. "Oh, I don't think so. After all, my job is to protect the Government, not destroy it."

"Two women were murdered because of that DVD. Those responsible should be brought to justice?"

"The man who killed them—Jack Cooper—is already dead."

"Maybe. But what about George Potter? He gave Cooper his orders. He should be held accountable."

"Look, if I were you, I'd forget about Potter. There is absolutely no evidence against him. And even if there was, he's untouchable. When you've got as much money as him, you're fucking bullet proof. Understand? Normal morality just bends around you. Don't even think about fucking with him."

"OK. Then what about Vincent Martin? Surely you're going to tell the cops about his involvement in all of this, aren't you?"

Reston smiled at my stupidity. "Of course not. There's no evidence he knew those two women would be killed. Indeed, he has a solid alibi. He wasn't even in Canberra when they died. But don't worry. He'll be punished: his political career is over."

I shook my head. "It's a fucking disgrace."

"Maybe. But, if you're smart, you'll forget about everything that has happened. I mean, let's face it, the only evidence you've found is this DVD, and I've got it. Cooper is dead and we never had this conversation. You've got nothing. Zero. It's over."

Though it seemed he wasn't going to hurt me, I had a craven need to be sure. "So, umm, you're not going to harm me?"

"Of course not. We're not going to touch a hair on your head." He shrugged and gave me a big smile. "Shit. I may be a bastard, but I'm not a fucking bastard."

"And the PM gets to keep his job?"

"Of course. That's the plan."

"He's so fucking useless."

"Look, he's not much of a PM. In fact, sometimes he's pretty fucking stupid. But at least he's reasonable honest, unlike Martin."

"He can afford to be, because you do all his dirty-work."

Reston looked pleased. "I'll take that as a compliment." He got to his feet and held up the DVD. "Thanks for your help."

"Don't mention it," I said bitterly.

He smiled ruefully. "You know. This is probably the high point of my career. Too bad nobody will ever know what a fantastic job I've done. Still, I suppose that what really counts is personal satisfaction."

Whereupon they left, taking with them the story of a lifetime.

Chapter 18

After they'd gone, I sat on the couch for a long while, listening to my heart thump. When it was finally under control, I pondered my next move, and quickly realised I didn't have one. I now had no proof that Potter, Martin or even Cooper was behind the deaths of Yvonne Clarke and Joanna Parker. Everything that had happened to me—including finding the DVD—was like a dream. A monumental scoop was within my grasp. But just as I curled my last finger around it, it slipped away.

However, at least I was still alive, a status I probably wouldn't maintain if I kept poking around. George Potter—and now Richard Reston—had made that very clear.

No point sitting around, bemoaning my fate. I might as well go to work. I headed for the door.

Recently, every man and his dog had broken into my townhouse, so there was probably no point locking the front door. But I did, out of habit. Then I trudged disconsolately over to my rented car, got behind the wheel and headed for Parliament House.

As I drove over the Captain Cook Bridge, I reflected that Reston was probably already closeted with Vincent Martin, using the DVD to blackmail him into withdrawing his challenge to the PM. Though I'd always thought politics was a dirty business, recent events took my breath away.

As I've mentioned, in Canberra few people can keep a secret for long. I'm no exception. After the emotional roller-coaster I'd been through, I desperately wanted to unburden myself to the most sympathetic soul I could find.

I decided to tell Alan Casey what had happened. He was my best friend on the Press Gallery and the most experienced reporter I knew. He might even have some good advice.

When I reached the Press Gallery floor, I strolled into the bureau of the *Sydney News* and found Alan in the kitchenette, making a cup of coffee. He looked a little surprised to see me.

He said: "Morning, comrade. What brings you this way?"

"I want to chat."

"Right now?"

"Yeah. Somewhere private."

"OK. Let's go up to the Queen's Terrace."

The terrace runs along the top of the main portico of Parliament House. It has a cafeteria with a large outdoor eating area. When Alan and I reached it, about half-a-dozen tourists sat outside. We bought ourselves a couple of beers and carried them to an outside table.

It was a glorious day. From where I sat, I could see, scattered around the lake, the National Library, the old Parliament House, the War Memorial and the High Court. At any other time, I would have relaxed and enjoyed the view. Not today.

Alan said: "OK. What's on your mind?"

Over several beers, I told him everything that had happened to me during the last ten days. He didn't say much, just frowned, whistled, pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. When I'd finished, he shook his head in amazement. "Jesus Christ. That's quite a story. You're lucky you're still alive."

"I know. What should I do now?"

"Isn't that obvious? Do what Reston said: forget about all of this. Drop the story. I mean, you can't touch Martin or Potter, and Cooper is dead. It's all over—let it go."

"That's not easy."

"I know. But if you keep snooping around, or start making wild allegations, Potter will probably get someone even nastier than Cooper to punch your ticket. Remember, he can buy anything, including your death, and probably claim a tax deduction."

"You're probably right. But what if I could find proof—real proof—they were behind Yvonne and Joanna's deaths?"

He shook his head sorrowfully. "You're not listening to me are you? You keep chasing this story and Potter will have you killed long before you find any proof. And even if you do find some, no paper will touch your story."

"You're kidding?"

"No, I'm not. These days, newspapers don't want to uncover big political scandals."

"Why not?"

He frowned at my naivety. "Why not? Because the bean-counters who run them don't like upsetting either the Federal Government, which regulates the media, or big companies, which buy advertising. Christ, I bet Potter spends millions of dollars every year on newspaper ads. The management suits won't let you offend him. That's why some stories—like this one—are *too* big to print."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I suggest you drop this story now. Please. I don't want to be a pallbearer. You'll be too fucking heavy for a start." He waved towards the national monuments scattered below us. "This all looks very impressive, doesn't it? But we all live very close to the jungle—remember that."

I was no caped crusader or hero type. His words sent a chill through me. Yet, it stuck in my craw that Potter and Martin would get away with engineering Yvonne's murder, and Martin wouldn't be held accountable for his corruption and drug-taking. Nor was I happy about relinquishing such a stellar story.

So despite the gnawing fear in my gut, I planned to keep snooping about, very quietly, to find some solid proof. But if I mentioned that to Alan, he would have got angry and call me a fool. So I lied: "OK. OK. I'll pull my head in."

"Good, though maybe you can salvage something from the wreckage."

"What?"

"Martin obviously won't challenge the PM tomorrow morning. You can write that. In fact, it looks like you've got an exclusive."

"You won't write it?"

"No. Of course not. It's your story. You've earned it."

I got back to the bureau at almost three o'clock. Michael was at his desk, looking worried. When he saw me, relief flooded across his face.

"Paul. Thank God you're back. Tucker's been calling every half-hour. He doesn't sound happy."

"Yeah? So what's new? What does he want?"

"He wants to know what we're going to file today - I mean, the meeting of Government MPs is tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, I know. And what did you tell him we're going to write?"

"I said he'd have to ask you."

"You mean you haven't written any stories?"

"Correct."

My God he was hopeless. Why didn't they just send me a baboon? If only his Dad could see him now.

I said: "Don't worry. I've got one."

His face lit up. "Really? What?"

"Martin won't be challenging the PM tomorrow morning."

Michael's eyes bulged. "What?"

"He won't be challenging the PM."

"Shit-a-brick. Why not?"

I smiled. "It's a long story. I'll tell you when I get a chance."

I sat at my desk, picked up the phone and dialled Dirk Tucker in the Launceston newsroom.

His first words were entirely predictable: "Where the fuck have you been?"

"I was up in Sydney."

"I know. But you were supposed to be back by mid-day."

"Sorry. I asked the priest to hurry the funeral, and he wouldn't listen."

"OK, OK," he said doubtfully. "Government MPs are meeting tomorrow morning, and I've still got no fuckin' idea what fuckin' story we're going to fuckin' run."

"I can tell you that now."

"Really? What?"

"Martin's going to pull out of the leadership race."

"Ho-fuckin'-ho. Now get serious."

"I am serious."

"No you're not. You're just pulling my leg."

I was tired and annoyed, which helped me sound angry. "Listen, I'm being very fucking serious. You'd better start believing me."

After a long pause, he sounded a little contrite. "OK. Where did you get this story from?"

"A good source close to Martin."

"Who?"

"I promised not to reveal his name to anyone."

"OK. Why's Martin pulling out? I thought he was the front-runner."

If I told Tucker the whole truth, he wouldn't touch the story. So I gave him a drastically edited version. "I understand they've found a skeleton in his closet."

"What sort of skeleton?"

"My source wouldn't say. But it's obviously bad enough to take him out of the running."

"OK. And who else has got this story?"

"Nobody. It'll be an exclusive."

He sounded perplexed: "We've got it on our own? How come?"

He couldn't understand how a lousy reporter like me, working for a two-bit newspaper like the Launceston Herald, had snagged such a big exclusive. If it were true, surely one of the big metropolitan papers would have unearthed it.

"Look, don't worry," I said boldly. "It's legit. I promise you."

He paused. "Let me get this right: according to your source, Vincent Martin, who everyone expects will be our next Prime Minister, is going to withdraw from the race. But your source won't tell you why he's going to do that?"

"Yeah. That about sums it up."

"Sounds like crap to me."

"Believe me, it's true."

"It's your neck," he said with a tinge of pleasure.

"Good. Then my story will be the front-page lead?"

"Umm, that may not be possible," he said, a trifle embarrassed.

"Why not?"

"We've got another big story to run."

"What could be bigger than mine?"

"There's been a sighting of a Tasmanian Tiger."

The last Tassie Tiger died more than eighty years ago. But occasionally some fruitcake claimed he'd seen one. It was the Apple Isle's version of the Loch Ness Monster.

I said: "Fuck me dead. You must be kidding."

"Nope. A Yank scientist claims he's seen one. He's even got a photo."

"Jesus. You know it's a fake - it's been Photo shopped."

"Yeah. Probably. But stories about Tassie Tigers really sell."

My blood boiled. I'd heard enough of this garbage. "OK, OK. I'll send you my story, and you can do whatever the fuck you like with it. Stick it with the death notices, if you want. Or better yet, put it in code."

I slammed down the phone and looked across at Michael, who'd been listening intently.

"Arsehole," I exclaimed.

I turned on my computer and started typing.

Government MPs will meet today to decide the leadership struggle between the Prime Minister and the former Minister for Defence, Mr Vincent Martin.

Most political commentators have predicted that Mr Martin will depose the Prime Minister.

However, according to a party insider, Mr Martin has had second thoughts about challenging the Prime Minister and intends to withdraw from the contest.

The source would not explain why Mr Martin intends to pull out of the race...

It was a great story, though compared with the one I'd just lost, it was nothing.

Later, when I got home, my townhouse seemed very empty and lonely without Anne. I quickly retired to bed. Sleep overwhelmed me. I dreamed that I sitting at a green-baize card table in a big art-deco casino. I wore a black tuxedo and had a huge pile of chips in front of me. Two Bond-quality babes, wearing designer dresses and sable furs, purred at my elbows.

Sitting opposite was an evil-looking guy in a white tux. He wore an eye-patch and puffed on a cigar he sometimes cradled in his stainless-steel right hand. Come to think of it, without the sleeping goggle, he looked a lot like Richard Reston.

He leaned forward. "Mr Ryder, I don't think we've met. My name's Bastard, Dr Hard Bastard. I'm your arch-nemesis."

Because I was dreaming, his name and role didn't trigger any warning bells. "Pleased to meet you."

"Ready to play?"

"Of course."

Dr Bastard nodded to the dealer. "Deal."

I don't know much about cards, so I'm not sure what game we played. But one thing was certain: I kept losing. My chips marched across the table and grew in front of Dr Bastard.

Soon, all I had left in front of me was a familiar-looking DVD.

My opponent spoke *basso profundo*. "You're way out of your depth, aren't you, Mr Ryder?"

I smiled jauntily. "Don't worry about me, Hard Bastard. My luck's about to change."

"Really? Then let's have one last hand. We'll cut cards. I'll bet all of my chips against that DVD. What do you say?"

What a deal? I tossed the crummy DVD into the middle of the table. "Sure. You first."

The dealer shuffled the pack and slapped it down in the middle of the table. Dr Bastard used his metal claw to delicately pick up several cards and show me the bottom one. Ace of fucking Spades. Shit.

He grinned savagely, seized the DVD with his claw, slipped it into his jacket and strolled off, trailing cigar-smoke.

Someone grabbed my ear-lobe. I twisted and saw that Anne had replaced the Bond babes. She snarled. "You really are fucking stupid, aren't you? You've got no fucking idea what you're doing."

I'd always thought dreams were a lot of crap that meant nothing. When I woke the next morning, I wasn't so sure.

Chapter 19

That morning, the *Launceston Herald* splashed with an American zoologist's claim that he'd located a live Tasmanian Tiger. There was even a fuzzy photograph of the marsupial in question. Even I could see it was a fake. The guy must have spray-painted a dingo or something.

My story was below the fold on the front page. The headline said "MARTIN TO PULL OUT OF SHOW-DOWN". I read through the story and saw the sub-editor hadn't bothered to butcher it.

I glanced through the other papers. None suggested Martin might withdraw from the contest. Indeed, they uniformly predicted he'd be victorious. So I was the odd man out. I'd be either a hero or a goat. No other possibility.

The meeting of Government MPs was due to start in the Main Committee Room at nine o'clock. Just before that time, I joined a large band of reporters and cameramen gathered outside the room, watching MPs file in. Most looked tense and none wanted to be interviewed.

Vincent Martin strode down the corridor, looking subdued, with Barry Graham behind him. A few reporters asked if he had the numbers to beat the PM. He ignored them.

Soon afterwards, the Prime Minister scurried into the room, Reston at his elbow, waving off questions.

Just after nine o'clock, the doors closed.

The meeting only lasted half-an-hour. Then the doors swung open and Government MPs filed out. One of the first to leave was the Chief Whip, Gary Watts, who was quickly encircled. Watts was usually a very cool political operator. Today, under the glare of the strobe lights, he looked edgy and excited. Huge blobs of sweat broke from his hairline.

"What happened?" someone yelled.

Watts paused dramatically. "Ladies and gentlemen, the meeting voted decisively to elect Vincent Martin as the new leader of the party. He will become the new Prime Minister."

I'd been so certain that Reston would force Martin to withdraw from the contest that, at first, I didn't believe what I heard. Watts must be confused. Surely, Martin withdrew. The PM must have won.

A reporter behind me said: "What was the count?"

"65 to 41 in favour of Vincent Martin."

"Anybody else stand?"

"No."

Christ. He'd repeated that Martin won. My God. What the hell had happened? In that morning's *Herald* I said Martin would withdraw. But he didn't withdraw—he fucking well won. What a disaster. I had egg all over my face.

A female voice behind me said: "When is Mr Martin going to speak to us?"

"First he has to visit the Governor-General, to be sworn in as Prime Minister. Then he'll talk to the press." Watts held up his hands. "Alright. Thank you ladies and gentlemen."

After Watts disappeared, everybody hung around interviewing departing Government MPs, while keeping an eye out for the Prime Minister and Vincent Martin. Neither appeared. They slipped out a back door.

I strolled disconsolately back to my bureau, trying to make sense of what had just occurred. The Prime Minister's political adviser, Richard Reston, had a DVD which should have destroyed Vincent Martin's challenge. Yet, despite that, Martin triumphed.

How the hell did that happen?

The answer was obvious: Reston had double-crossed his boss. He decided that, instead of using the DVD to make Martin pull out of the race, he'd let Martin win. Then the Government would get a telegenic new PM whom Reston could blackmail.

I'd always thought Reston was a sharp political operator, but his latest manoeuvre—a Machiavelli roll with twist—was breathtaking. It was also, in hindsight, entirely predictable. I should have seen it coming.

So the country was about to get a Prime Minister who was corrupt, fond of ingesting illegal drugs, whom two women were murdered to protect, and who was deeply in hock to both George Potter and Richard Reston.

Of course, I couldn't prove any of that. So the general public believed—and would continue to believe—that Vincent Martin was just another slimy politician instead of a depraved crook.

After working out how Martin managed to seize the ultimate prize, I focused on my own predicament. My story in the *Herald* that morning said Martin was going to withdraw from the leadership contest. No ifs, buts or maybes. Yet he'd soon be sworn in as PM. Most people would call that a major fuck-up.

Christ. I looked like a fool.

As I strolled behind the Senate chamber, I saw Alan Casey ahead of me. I quickened my stride and caught up with him.

Alan smiled. "Hello Paul. What did you think of that?"

"I'm still in shock. Christ. I thought Reston would use the DVD to make Martin pull out."

"So did I. But he obviously decided Martin's the man of the moment. So instead of stopping his bandwagon, he jumped onto it."

Alan's analysis tallied with my own.

I said: "Yeah. So now we'll get a PM who's a total crook."

Alan shrugged: "What's new?"

Good point.

We got into a lift and I sighed. "You know, I wrote in the paper this morning that Martin would withdraw from the race. But he didn't fucking withdraw—he won. I'd call that a major miscalculation."

Alan smiled. "Don't worry. You're probably the only person in Canberra who reads the *Launceston Herald*, and I don't know why you bother. You're being too precious. Forget about it."

Suddenly, I was incredibly glad to work for a second-rate rag like the *Herald*. Its miniscule readership had given me some privacy.

I said: "Yeah. You're probably right."

"Of course I'm right. Forget about it."

As we got out of the lift, I felt much better. Alan was right. And even if he wasn't, the tide of political events would quickly wash away my mistake.

However, unfortunately, I did have one hurdle to overcome. When I got back to my bureau, I rang Dirk Tucker and nervously explained that Martin was going to be the next PM.

I waited for him to explode with rage. However, he preferred a gloating tone: "You mean, he didn't withdraw?"

"Ah, no."

"You got that pretty fucking wrong, didn't you?"

"I didn't get it wrong—my source did."

Though I expected further insults, to my surprise, he sighed. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. Most of our readers don't read your stuff anyway. When can I have today's story?"

I explained that both the outgoing and incoming Prime Ministers would hold press conferences later in the day. "I won't be able to write my story until after they're finished."

He sighed again. "Alright. Just try to get this one right."

"Look, like I said, my source told me..."

He hung up.

Fortunately, it seemed my stuff-up would not have serious repercussions. However, my naiveté would leave a long and bitter aftertaste.

Whatever goes up the slippery pole must come down.

At his press conference, later in the day, the deposed PM, Brian Hislop, wife at his side, shed a lot of tears while praising her support and thanking his staff for their hard work and loyalty. As he paid tribute to his staff, I glanced at Richard Reston, standing just behind him. He gave no hint of the blood on his hands. Didn't even blink. Something strangely impressive about that.

Finally, Hislop and his wife kissed and hugged, before exiting through a side door. While Prime Minister, he lived on a rarefied plane, wielding great power and surrounded by fawning courtiers. Now, he'd just tumbled from heaven. From now on he'd have to open doors for himself, carry his own bags, drive his own car and make his own appointments. And when he told jokes, few would laugh. For the next few years, he'd go through a period of painful adjustment, battling depression and self-doubt. Then he'd write an auto-hagiography in which he tried to avoid the verdict of history with a tissue of half-baked lies; he'd also give speeches attacking his successors for ruining his so-called legacy.

All in all, the most merciful option was drag him straight outside and shoot him in the back of the head. However, our society was too squeamish.

Reston was heading for an exit when I caught up with him, nobody within earshot.

I said: "Richard, quite a double-cross. Or is it a triple-cross? I've lost count."

He turned and looked at me. For once his natural ebullience was missing. I even detected some pain in his eyes. Not a lot, but it was there. However, he quickly smiled. "What do you mean?"

"You said you were going to use the DVD to make Martin withdraw."

"Did I say that? Well, I changed my mind."

"Why?"

He glanced down at my tape-recorder, to make sure it wasn't running.

I said: "Don't worry. We're off the record—way off the record."

He leaned close. "OK. You want to know why I changed my mind?"

"Yes."

"Because Hislop's use-by-date was up. Martin's the only person in this Government who can win the next election."

"And, of course, you now have him in your pocket."

He shrugged and grinned. "I'm sure he'll ask me for advice."

"He's a crook."

Reston shrugged again. "Sure he's got some flaws. But show me a Prime Minister who doesn't. I mean, he's going to be PM, not a priest."

"What about the two women who died?"

"He wasn't involved," Reston said forcefully. "Things, umm, just got out of hand. Cooper, umm, over-reacted."

"You mean, that's what Martin says?"

"Yes."

"He could be lying?"

"No he's not. I'm sure of that."

Maybe Reston was telling the truth, though I wouldn't bet a peppercorn on it.

He leaned closer. "If you want my advice, you should stop asking questions about those women. You'll just get yourself into trouble - a lot of trouble. In fact, you could wind up dead."

I could have laughed bravely, spat in his eye or even delivered a few threats of my own. I didn't because I was too busy imagining myself on a morgue slab.

However, I wasn't totally intimidated. I still wanted to nail both George Potter and Vincent Martin for their crimes. But, while I did that, I'd keep my head well below the parapet.

"Don't worry," I lied. "I plan to forget about the whole thing."

"A very wise move."

"What'll you do now? Join Martin's staff?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. That would look grubby and disloyal, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah. You wouldn't want to be accused of that. So what'll you do?"

"Oh, I've been thinking for a while about becoming a lobbyist. This seems the perfect opportunity."

It certainly was. He'd be a lobbyist with the Prime Minister in his pocket. He'd make a fortune.

He clapped me on the shoulder and smiled. "Anyway, good talking to you. See you around."

He strode off.

After Vincent Martin returned from visiting the Governor-General to be sworn in as PM, he held a press conference. He also had his wife in tow, and spent a lot of time hugging her with a 100-watt smile etched on his face. And standing just behind him, glowing with pride, was his political adviser, Barry Graham.

Martin made a short speech during which he praised the out-going PM and described how proud he was to take over the top job. He was determined, he said, to justify the trust that his party had shown in him and was anxious to start work.

His speech was, I had to admit, quite impressive. He looked and sounded every inch a prime minister.

He asked if there were any questions. A reporter enquired whether he'd spoken to Brian Hislop in the last few hours. He said yes, but refused to divulge what they said. Then I discovered that at least one other reporter in Canberra had read that morning's *Launceston Herald*.

Gary Knowles, from AAP, said: "Prime Minister, there was a story in the *Launceston Herald* this morning that you were going to pull out of the leadership contest. Was that ever a possibility?"

Martin smiled. "When you're seeking the prime ministership, you do have moments of self-doubt. Yet, I never seriously considered pulling out of the contest. I don't know where that story came from."

Mercifully, the questions moved on to other topics. A few minutes later, Martin disappeared, still groping his wife, still smiling.

Big news stories are easy to write. So my piece about Vincent Martin's victory almost wrote itself. I only hesitated over whether to mention Martin's refutation of my earlier story. No, why bother? That was just a side issue. Better to leave it out.

I fired my story down the wire to the Launceston newsroom and decided to get my personal life in order. I phoned Anne at the law firm where she worked, and hesitantly, identified myself.

"What do you want," she snapped.

Jesus, I'd obviously have to get straight onto my belly and start crawling over broken glass. "I was, umm, wondering if we could have a chat. I mean, umm, I've got a lot of apologising to do. I know that. Let me take you out to dinner."

"I'm sorry," she snapped. "We've got nothing to talk about. Leave me alone."

The phone went dead. I'd just lost round one. Luckily, I could take a lot of punishment.

Chapter 20

Few of the main players in the events of the past two weeks—including me—had emerged with much credit. Even the two murdered women looked bad: Yvonne Clarke secretly filmed Vincent Martin to blackmail him and Joanna Parker betrayed her best friend—Yvonne—for personal gain.

Indeed, the only person who deserved praise was Anne. She'd shown herself kind, honest and loyal until I pushed her too far. I was desperate to win her back.

The following evening, I waited on the pavement outside her work-place, holding a big bunch of flowers and wearing an ill-fitting mask of penitence. When she saw me, she grimaced and hurried past. I was hot on her heels.

"Anne?" I said plaintively.

"Leave me alone," she barked.

"Please. I want to talk. I think we should talk. I've got a lot to say. Please listen to me."

"Get lost." She strode to her car and got behind the wheel.

I had to make a bold gesture that proclaimed my love, like stabbing myself in the hand. But I didn't have a knife and hated pain. Instead, I lay on the road in front of her car.

She honked the horn and leaned out the window. "Move you bastard, or I'll run you over."

Pedestrians stared at her, wondering if she was serious, probably hoping she was.

I said: "Not until you talk to me."

"Fuck off."

"No."

She got out and looked down at me, her hard expression showing a few cracks. "I should have run you over. I know I'm gonna regret that."

I held up the flowers. "Please. Just a quick chat. Let me buy you a cup of coffee. Then I'll leave you alone."

"No, no coffee. Get in the car and we can talk there."

Before she could change her mind, I rushed around and jumped into the front passenger seat. Anne got in next to me, looking furious.

I held out the flowers again. "Do you want them?"

"No," she said gruffly. "What do you want to say? Hurry up."

"Look. I know I've been very nasty to you recently. But I've had a lot of things to worry about. I mean, a lot. In fact, there are some things you don't know."

She leered. "No kidding?"

"Yes. Now I want to tell you everything."

"OK then, talk."

So I told her everything that had happened to me since I discovered Yvonne's body, while she sat sphinx-like.

I said: "I know it sounds incredible. But it all happened, believe me."

She chewed her lip. "Funnily enough, I do believe you."

That shocked me. "Really?"

"Yes. I mean, I already knew a lot of that stuff anyway."

"You did? How?"

"Because the policeman told me."

Now I was perplexed. "What policeman?"

"Special Agent Gilroy. He came to see me a couple of days after Yvonne Clarke was murdered."

Christ. This was news—big news. "Why?"

"He wanted to know how long we'd been seeing each other and whether we were happy together. Stuff like that."

"Why did he want to know that?"

"He said he was trying to get a complete picture of you. He seemed to think you were sleeping with Yvonne Clarke and might have murdered her."

Shit. The bastard. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth, of course. I said we'd been going out together for about six months and our relationship was going well."

I wouldn't have described our relationship as going well. Still, it was sweet of her to say that. "You weren't worried that I killed Yvonne?"

She smiled wryly. "Of course not. You're pretty crazy, but you're not evil."

That was probably the nicest thing anyone has said about me. God, she really was a fantastic woman. I had to get her back. Just had to.

"Thanks," I said sincerely. "Why didn't you tell me about his visit?"

"Because he asked me not to." Her face hardened. "And because I was waiting for *you* to tell me what was going on. But you didn't. You kept me in the dark."

"I didn't want to worry you. I mean, it's hard to tell your girlfriend that you might be a murder suspect. A lot of women don't like hearing that."

"Listen, when you're in a relationship, you're supposed to discuss *all* your problems. You worry about them together. Don't ever keep me in the dark again, OK?"

"Sure. I'm sorry. I really am."

"Good. But that wasn't the only time I saw Gilroy."

She was full of surprises. "You saw him again?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"A couple of days ago. He came to see me."

"Really? Why?"

"I think he was rather embarrassed about suspecting you. So he said you were no longer a target of his investigation."

"How nice of him," I said sarcastically.

"He also said you weren't sleeping with Yvonne Clarke - not recently, anyway."

"Good. But, of course, you didn't need that reassurance."

She blushed. She'd obviously thought I was innocent of murder but guilty of the more serious crime of infidelity. I couldn't blame her. My track record was not good.

She said: "No, I didn't need it."

"So you'll take me back?"

She frowned. "Yes. I'll give you one more chance. Only one, understand? Only *one*."

"That's all I need," I said fervently. "I promise."

I really believed that. From now on, I would tell her everything. No more lies. And I wouldn't even look sideways at another woman.

She sighed and ripped the flowers from my grasp. "Good. Then I suppose I'd better take these."

After some heavy petting in the car, I took her to dinner at an expensive restaurant. She ate heartily and guzzled down plenty of wine. I matched her eating, not her drinking. My last two attempts at sex with her had failed miserably. I wanted to perform in the cot that night.

I needn't have worried. When we finally tumbled into bed, I was back in business. Afterwards, I whispered. "Babe, I'm going to love you forever."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna love you until I'm fat, and bald, and toothless, and incontinent and arthritic; I'm gonna love you until my balls are hanging down around my knees and my prostate is as big as a watermelon; I'm gonna ..."

She laughed and covered her ears. "Stop. Stop. I don't want to hear any more."

"I just want you to know how I feel."

"I get the picture. Now stop making me laugh. I've got to sleep."

I turned off the light and lay in the darkness. My chest felt strangely hollow. Why? Then I realised I was afraid. Life wasn't meant to be this sweet. As night follows day, something would come along and fuck it up.

Chapter 21

Our new Prime Minister, Vincent Martin, hit the ground running, albeit up and down on the same spot, dusting off some defunct policies and re-badging some current ones, and firmly promising to implement them all. He also pledged to increase spending to boost the economy.

At press conferences, he was confident and articulate, clearly revelling in his new role. And because the media craves new meat, and the love affair between the PM and the electorate was still young and fresh, the Government got a sizeable bounce in the polls.

Though the deluge of news kept me busy, I still found time to attend to a few personal matters I'd put off while my life was in chaos. At the top of my agenda was getting square with Thomas Bilson. Alan Casey had said the turd was bonking the Honourable Maureen Hogan, a shrewish left-wing MP from Western Australia. So I asked a friend in the Age bureau to tell me when Bilson sneaked off during the day.

A couple of days later, I got a call from my mole who, in a conspiratorial whisper, used our agreed code: "Eight-six to Control. Eighty-six to Control. Elvis is leaving the building."

I giggled. "Control here. Message understood. Will follow. Repeat, will follow."

I rushed to my new Holden Astra parked outside the building. A few minutes later, Bilson drove past in his Magna station-wagon. I tailed him to the Florida Motor Inn in Yarralumla, where he strolled into the reception office. Five minutes later, he emerged, with a key and a smirk.

A few days earlier, I'd hired a Sony Camcorder with a telephoto lens. Now, I wound down my window and filmed Bilson climb two flights of stairs to the first floor and let himself into Room 209.

Ten minutes later, Maureen Hogan, drove a small Honda hatchback into the motel car park. I filmed her trot purposefully up the stairs to the first floor. She knocked on the door of Room 209.

I zoomed up for a tight shot as Bilson open the door and step out onto the balcony. They embraced before retreating into the room. The door closed.

I idly wondered what it would be like to stain the sheets with Maureen Hogan. Probably like a bout of cage wrestling.

Earlier, I'd noticed a telephone box a little way down the road. I strolled over to it and dialled triple-0.

A woman answered: "Emergency Services."

I muffled my voice. "Hello. I want to report an assault, in a motel room."

"Please provide the details?"

I said I'd heard cries for help from a woman in Room 209 of the Florida Motor Inn in Yarralumla. "Hurry. I think she's in great danger."

"Thank you sir. Can I have your name and number?"

I hung up and phoned the news editor of a local television station. Knowing he wouldn't be interested in a common assault, I upped the ante and said I'd seen a murder.

"Who?"

"A politician called Maureen Hogan."

"Fuck. Where?"

"Room 209 of the Florida Motor Inn, in Yarralumla. Hurry."

When he asked for my name, I hung up.

After wiping my prints off the phone, I wandered back to my car and waited, the Camcorder on my lap.

Five minutes later, all hell broke loose. A police car with its lights flashing and siren off slid into the car park. Two burly uniformed officers sprinted up the stairs to Room 209. One knocked on the door and yelled "Police, open up."

I filmed the door open and Bilson, wearing only a singlet and underpants, step out, trembling. A policeman stepped past him into the bedroom.

A television van pulled up against the curb. A cameraman jumped out, dashed up the stairs and filmed the cop talking to Bilson.

Maureen Hogan, dressed in a bathrobe, stepped out and started berating the cop. Suddenly, she saw the TV camera, shrieked and ducked back inside.

I put down the Camcorder and muttered: "That's a wrap."

Feeling very self-satisfied, I drove back to Parliament House and anonymously mailed a DVD of what I'd filmed to Angelica Bilson at the ABC bureau.

That evening, I watched the TV news, hoping to see an item on the motel incident. Disappointingly, there wasn't one. The lovebirds must have persuaded the station to put a lid on it.

A week later, I met Alan Casey in the Safari Bar in Manuka for a drink. Half-way through our first round, he said: "Have you heard about Bilson and his wife?"

"What about them?"

"She discovered he's been doing the horizontal tango with Maureen Hogan."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And she didn't take it lightly. I hear she scratched his face and threw him out of the house. He's now wandering around with a big bandage on his forehead."

Angelica Bilson was half-crazy, so her reaction didn't surprise me.

"These are distressing tidings—they really are."

He smiled. "Thought they would be. Yet, that's not all she did. She went and saw Hogan."

"You're kidding?"

"No. Stormed into Hogan's office and kept screaming that Hogan was a 'bitch' and a 'slut'. Someone called security and she was led away. There's even talk about the Speaker getting involved: revoking her media pass."

"That likely?"

"No. She'll probably just get a slap on the wrist."

"You know, I could understand her reaction if she was married Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt. But Bilson's a dickhead. She should have told Hogan to keep the bastard."

"I know. But she obviously doesn't like other people messing with her property."

"I suppose so."

Alan emptied his glass. "Guess how she found out about the affair?"

"How?"

"Someone filmed the two lovebirds meeting at the Florida Motor Inn and sent her the tape."

"Really? What sort of sick bastard would do something like that?"

He smiled. "Don't know, though if you kept a copy, I'd love to see it."

"OK. I'm afraid the camera-work's a bit shaky."

"I won't complain."

A few days later, I bumped into Bilson in the Press Gallery corridor and couldn't resist a dig. "Hey Thomas, I hear you've been spending some time at the Florida Motor Inn."

He stopped and scowled. "That was you, was it? You made that film?"

"Of course it was me, you hypocritical prick."

"You cunt."

Recently, a professional killer had tried to ice me. That made Bilson even more insignificant than before. I took a step forward. "Fuck you. I'm ready for round two, if you are."

He took a step back. "What are you talking about?"

I took another step forward. "Any time you want to fight, I'm ready, you dickhead."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I am."

He frowned and took a half-step back. "You're not worth the trouble."

"Bullshit. You don't have the guts, do you?"

"Fuck off."

I took another step forward and raised my fists. Boy this was fun. "Come on. I'm ready."

"I wouldn't waste my time," he said and scampered away.

I looked around. No audience. Bummer. Nonetheless, I felt a deep atavistic glow and finally understood the appeal of violence.

Chapter 22

Every morning I scanned the *Canberra Times*, looking for stories about the police investigation into the deaths of Yvonne Clarke and Joanna Parker, and saw none. Out of curiosity, I gave Special Agent Gilroy a call and asked him what was happening.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked suspiciously.

"Just curious. After all, I found Yvonne's body and, at one time, was your prime suspect."

He cleared his throat. "Umm, that's true. But I'll only talk off the record."

"Sure. How's your investigation going?"

"Until recently, very badly. Then, a few days ago, we had a big break. In fact, I think we've identified the killer."

"Really? Who?"

"Guy called Jack Cooper."

I was tempted to tell him that was old news to me. "You mean, the crook murdered a few weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think it was him?"

"In his motel room, we found a map of Canberra. On it, he marked the locations of both Yvonne Clarke and Joanna Parker's homes. We wondered why he was in Canberra. Looks like he came down here to murder them."

Gilroy was obviously delighted to pin the murders on a notorious thug now too dead to create any tricky alibis or excuses.

I feigned ignorance. "Why would he kill them?"

"Don't know. In most homicide investigations there are loose ends. You've got to accept that."

Gilroy didn't seem to know that George Potter sent Cooper to Canberra or that the two women were killed to protect Vincent Martin, and I didn't plan to tell him. Not without any evidence. The blowback could be considerable.

I said: "Yeah, I guess so."

For the rest of the day, I mentally picked over my conversation with Special Agent Gilroy. It bothered me, though I couldn't work out why.

That night, as I drove home, I finally realised what troubled me: Gilroy didn't mention that Yvonne Clarke had a hidden camera in her house. Surely, if he knew about the camera, he'd have mentioned it.

The cops obviously didn't find the camera when they searched the murder scene because they weren't looking for it. But their failure made me even more curious to see where she hid it.

I turned my car around and drove back past Parliament House to Woden, where I parked outside Yvonne's house. It was almost eight o'clock. Every house had lights on, except hers. I looked around carefully. The street was deserted.

I opened my glove box, took out a torch and strolled nervously up the flagstone path to Yvonne's front door. Criss-crossing the doorframe was yellow tape labelled: "*Police Crime Scene—Keep Out*".

During my affair with Yvonne I saw her hide a key under a pot-plant near the back door. I scurried around there and picked up the pot-plant. Metal gleamed in the moonlight.

I unlocked the back door and, using the torch, anxiously padded through the kitchen to the living room. The biggest change to its décor was the absence of Yvonne's body. But the carpet still had large patches of dried blood and the furniture was spattered with grey fingerprint powder.

My hands shook so badly I almost dropped the torch. I closed the curtains and turned on the ceiling light.

Facing the couch was a large wall unit with a television and DVD player. On the top shelf was a radio clock. I looked behind the clock. Two thick wires ran from it, down behind the wall unit, and into the DVD player.

There was obviously a hidden camera in the radio clock, and the player recorded the picture. Simple, and very effective.

I looked at the player and idly pushed the eject button. To my surprise, a DVD popped out. No label or writing.

Excitedly, I turned on the TV, pushed the DVD back into the machine and pressed "play". The TV screen now showed footage of the living room behind me. It was empty. But I only had to wait a few minutes before Yvonne backed into the room, with Barry Graham, Vincent Martin's political adviser, pursuing her.

Christ. *Barry Graham*.

Yvonne held up her hands, fearfully: "Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it. It was a mistake. I'm sorry."

He yelled: "You silly bitch. You fucking stupid bitch. You could have ruined everything."

"Look. I won't say anything. I promise. I promise."

Graham held what looked like a metal pipe. He raised it high and hit her savagely on the head. She collapsed to the floor. He raised the pipe again.

My stomach heaved. I'd seen enough. I jumped forward and turned off the player. Mercifully, before he struck another blow, the TV screen went black.

Not for the first time in that room, I felt like throwing up. I stumbled back and sat on the couch, quivering. Bile caressed my tonsils before receding. I took some deep breaths and tried to make sense of what I'd just seen.

On the night Yvonne died, she turned on the hidden camera. Maybe she wanted to record her chat with me. Or maybe she knew Graham was on his way over to see her.

In any event, I was totally wrong when I concluded that Jack Cooper killed Yvonne and Joanna. In fact, the real murderer was Barry Graham. Cooper was only called in *later*, to clean up the mess that *Graham* had created. I'd unfairly maligned Cooper. He was probably responsible for many murders, but not those ones.

In a way, Graham's guilt didn't surprise me, because he depended on Vincent Martin for his political future. If Martin became Prime Minister, Graham would stand behind the throne and wield enormous power, making even ministers do his bidding; if Martin crashed and burned, so would Graham. Their fates were intertwined.

So when Yvonne Clarke told Martin that she'd made an incriminating DVD of him, and that Joanna Parker had stolen it, Martin asked Graham to recover it from Joanna.

Martin probably didn't ask Graham to kill Joanna. If he wanted her dead, he surely would have given the task to someone else. But Graham killed her anyway: when she wouldn't turn over the DVD, he got angry and stabbed her.

I'd never been interested in acquiring power, and therefore had trouble understanding why someone would kill for it. Yet, all the stories I'd heard, all the books I'd read, and everything I knew about history, said many people would.

Anyway, one murder quickly led to another. Graham realised that Yvonne would soon work out that he killed Joanna, so Yvonne also had to die.

Only after Graham had left a trail of dead bodies behind him, and still hadn't found the DVD, did George Potter—at Vincent Martin's behest—call Jack Cooper

into action. But Cooper's attempts to find the disk were also disastrous. After he made a public spectacle of himself at Canberra Hospital, Potter had him eliminated.

So Vincent Martin probably didn't order the deaths of Yvonne and Joanna. They died because his right-hand man, Barry Graham, tried too hard to protect him. Graham sallied out to save the day and ended up killing two women. As I always suspected: no common sense.

Clutching the DVD, I returned to the back door and peered outside. All was quiet. I scurried around to my car, got behind the wheel, slipped the disk into my briefcase and headed for home.

What should I do with the disk? I could, of course, give it to the cops. But I didn't trust them. Richard Reston seemed to know everything the cops did. He even had a copy of the statement I gave to Special Agent Gilroy. So the cops might be working for him. If I gave them the DVD, they might destroy it. Then Barry Graham would get away with murder, and I would end up on a morgue slab.

So I rejected that option.

I could, of course, write a story about the DVD and try to get it published in the *Herald*. But I wasn't enthusiastic about that option either. First, I'd have to deal with Dirk Tucker and the paper's defamation lawyers, who'd want to kill the story stone dead. Then, if it was published, I'd have to explain to the cops how the DVD came into my possession and why I with-held it from them. They'd probably charge me with obstruction of justice. I'd quickly go from being a paladin of the fourth estate to a prison inmate.

That left only one option.

I parked in my garage and made a beeline for my front door. Anne had moved back into the townhouse a few days earlier. I found her sitting on the couch, watching TV. I slumped down next to her, kissed her behind the ear and whispered a few endearments.

Because I was a born-again SNAG, I asked about her day and listened attentively while she gave me a 15-minute spiel on office politics: someone spread a nasty rumour; someone was having an affair; someone else got fired. I stifled several yawns and told myself that what does not kill me will only make me stronger. Eventually, she had to take a breathe.

"Mmm, sounds interesting," I said with practised sincerity. "Just out of curiosity, your computer at work can burn DVDs, right?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Can I drop past your office tomorrow morning and copy a disk I've been given."

She said: "What sort of disk?"

I'd promised Anne—and myself—that I'd stop lying to her. Yet there were some nasty truths it was better she didn't know. A lie with a big wing-span fluttered from my lips. "Umm, it's just a movie someone lent me. I want to keep a copy."

Oh well, I tried to be honest. It just didn't work out.

She said: "OK. No problem. You can drop by tomorrow morning."

"Thanks Babe. And, umm, will you be there?"

"Why? Don't you want me there?"

"I just don't want to get in your way?"

She stared at me. "It's not a dirty movie, is it?"

"No. Course not."

"OK then. I'll be in court from about nine-thirty. Drop in after that. My computer will be on."

Chapter 23

The next morning, Anne left the townhouse and drove to work. An hour later, I followed her. On the way, I stopped at a supermarket and bought ten blank DVDs.

Anne worked for a law firm called Gilson & Lowe, which occupied a large suite on the first floor of a drab office block. The receptionist knew I was Anne's boyfriend and let me wander into Anne's empty office. I spent the next hour using her computer to make ten copies of Yvonne's DVD. Anne didn't return.

I drove to Parliament House and caught a lift up to the Press Gallery floor, where I slipped the ten disks into the press boxes of all the major television networks and newspapers, keeping only the original for myself. Then I strolled into my bureau and made myself a cup of coffee. I'd lit the fuse. Now I just had to wait for the explosion.

I didn't have to wait long.

Chapter 24

The police never arrested Barry Graham for murder.

The following day he was found, slumped in his car, on a dirt road outside Canberra, dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

The Homicide detectives concluded that, after hearing about the incriminating DVDs circulating around Parliament House, he committed suicide; that was preferable to public ignominy and thirty years in a maximum-security prison.

However, I've always wondered whether he really killed himself. I say that because, according to a Park Ranger who saw Graham drive into the forest, a bald guy sat next to him.

The same bald guy who worked for Reston? Reston had boasted the guy did "wet work" for an obscure branch of the Government. Maybe the guy faked the "suicide".

I never found out.

Of course, our new Prime Minister, Vincent Martin, expressed shock and dismay at Graham's activities. He said he had no idea Graham was in a relationship with Yvonne Clarke or had murdered her. Indeed, he felt a profound sense of betrayal.

Certainly, it never came out that Martin was, in fact, the one who slept with Yvonne, or that Graham killed her in a misguided attempt to protect him.

About a week after Graham's death, I got a call from the PM's press secretary, Gary Holden. Did I want to have a one-on-one interview with new PM?

Prime Ministers rarely give exclusive interviews to reporters, particularly those who work for obscure publications like the *Launceston Herald*. Certainly, this would be my first. My suspicions were aroused. Was this just a PR exercise? Or did it relate to the deaths of Barry Graham and Yvonne Clarke?

I said: "What does he want to talk about?"

"Oh, how he's settling in as PM, his plans for the future—that sort of stuff."

"I can probably fit him in."

"Good."

The next day, Holden showed me into the PM's spacious office. Aboriginal prints festooned the Huon-pine walls. A huge glass wall overlooked the Ministerial Courtyard. I'd spent more than a decade working in Parliament House, but never entered this inner sanctum. I was awe-struck.

Martin, wearing a white shirt with blue braces, stood looking down into the courtyard. Gary coughed and he spun around.

On the few occasions I'd chatted with him, he was bursting with vitality: an alpha-male on the make. Today, though, his face looked flaccid and eyes dull. Due to the weight of his office or the burden of his guilt?

After a flickering smile, he shook my hand. "Ah, Paul. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for finding the time."

He glanced at Holden. "How long do we have?"

"Half-an-hour."

"Then let's get started. Take a seat."

We sat on a huge leather L-shaped couch, him on one limb and me on the other. Holden sat in a chair behind the PM and turned on a pocket tape-recorder to record our chat.

I turned on my tape-recorder and put it on the black onyx coffee table in front of the PM.

For the next half-hour we talked about his new job: the emotional demands of being PM, the new policies he'd announced, the political challenges ahead and his vision for the country. He spoke calmly, yet looked distracted. I soon became convinced the interview was a pretext. He had another agenda.

Finally, I took a deep breath and asked for his reaction to the death of Barry Graham.

He shook his head, sorrowfully: "A terrible tragedy. Terrible. But I've already spoken publicly about that matter and don't want to say any more."

Holden interjected: "Prime Minister, the half-hour is up."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Mmmm. Then I suppose we'd better stop." He looked at me. "Is that enough?"

"Of course."

His hands fluttered about. "Umm, before you go, I want to have a private chat."

"Really?"

"Yes." The PM looked at Holden. "Umm, Gary, would you mind leaving Mr Ryder and me alone. There's something we have to discuss."

Gary looked surprised and annoyed. He didn't want his boss closeted with a press jackal. Anything could happen. But the PM looked determined and Gary nodded. "OK."

"Thank you. We won't be long."

As Holden left the room, Martin looked at me keenly. "I want this chat to be off the record."

"Sure."

He looked down at my still-spooling tape recorder, as if it was an explosive device. "Then turn that off."

I complied.

He leaned forward and stared hard, hands dancing on his knees. "Umm, I understand you knew Yvonne Clarke, the woman who was murdered."

I was right: the interview was just a pretext.

Something caught in my throat. "Yes, I did. Did you?"

My question took him aback. He obviously hadn't expected to be interrogated.

He said: "Yes. Umm, I mean, I met her a few times around Parliament House." He leaned close. His face went grey and voice dropped. "But I had no idea—no idea at all—that Graham would kill her. None at all. I hope you understand that."

"You mean, you sent Graham to recover the DVD from Joanna Parker, and didn't realise he might get rough if she didn't hand over?"

"Umm, yes. That's right."

"Then you're staggeringly naïve."

"Maybe so, but I didn't want him to kill those women. I didn't."

"Yet, even if I accept that—and I don't—you can't deny what was on the DVD. It shows you're a crook and a cokehead. You're not fit to be the Prime Minister of this country."

He hunched his shoulders and whispered: "I'm not perfect."

"You're a fucking long way from that."

Now he looked annoyed. "Maybe. But I don't want to talk about my flaws. I arranged this interview so I could tell you that, if you keep quiet about what happened, you'll be well looked after—*very* well looked after. Understand?"

In other words, if I kept my mouth shut, his office would feed me good stories: I'd be put on the "A" drip. And if I didn't keep quiet? Would I end up in a hearse?

However, the PM didn't need to bribe or threaten me. I had no evidence that connected him with the murders of Yvonne Clarke or Joanna Parker, or proved he was a crook and a drug-taker.

Maybe I should have pretended that I did, and accepted his very tempting offer. But just being near him made me feel unclean. To my surprise, I developed a conscience: "You don't need to bribe me, because I've got no proof against you. And even if I did, I wouldn't take anything from you. You know why? Because you make my skin crawl." I picked up my tape recorder. "Now, is that all? I want to get out of here before I'm sick."

A big scowl. "Then go."

I headed towards the door. Halfway there I turned back towards him. "You've finally made it to the top. Was it all worth it?"

He just stared at me and I never got an answer. But I'm sure that, as far as he was concerned, it was worth every drop of blood that other people had shed.

Chapter 25

After a month of high excitement, I was deeply depressed, because I snared a huge story—big enough to bring down the Government—and didn't get to publish it under my by-line. True, I fingered Barry Graham for the murder of Yvonne Clarke. But I got no credit.

My depression grew even worse, a week later, when I arrived at the bureau one morning and found Michael already sitting at his desk, typing on his computer. The fact that he'd got to work early, and was already typing, made me suspicious. Something was up.

I said: "What're you doing here?"

He looked unusually excited. "I've got it. I've got it."

"Got what?"

"A scoop. A huge scoop."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, yesterday, I was really busy?"

On reflection, I didn't see much of him, and regarded that as a blessing, not a mystery. "Yes."

"I was chasing this story."

"The scoop?"

"Yes. *The scoop.*"

Was it really possible he'd scored a huge scoop? I felt a flicker of concern, then reassured myself he couldn't possibly have bagged one. He was still the only person around Parliament House who didn't know why I got kicked off the Age. He wouldn't know a big story if he fell over it.

I leaned back against my desk and crossed my arms. "What scoop?"

"It's about Dr McCloud."

"The Minister for Employment?"

"Yes."

"OK. What about him?"

"It seems that when he was a lecturer, at the University of Tasmania, he spent a lot of time shagging his students. Now two of them have come forward and accused him of rape."

The dour and deeply religious Percival McCloud did not seem like a rapist. Then again, who did? Indeed, on reflection, a taboo-ridden bastard like him was probably a prime candidate.

"You're kidding?"

"No. The police have interviewed both women and they're about to charge him."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

I stood up straight. Jesus. If Michael's story was true, it was obviously a huge scoop, particularly for a Tasmanian paper like ours. But surely it wasn't. How

could Michael have got this story when I—and the rest of the Press Gallery—hadn't? Impossible.

I said: "How do you know this?"

"Because I've talked to the cop leading the investigation. I spoke to him yesterday, on the phone. It was off the record, of course. But I taped our conversation and you can listen to it, if you want." He picked up a tape recorder. "I got it to work this time. You want to hear it?"

"How did you get this story? I mean, how did you find out about the investigation? Why'd the cop talk to you?"

Michael looked a touch - just a touch - embarrassed. "Ah, I had a contact."

"Who?"

"My Dad."

Now it all made sense. Michael's dad, a big shot on the Apple Isle, must have got early word of the police investigation. And when he did, he dropped the story into junior's lap.

Michael had often boasted that he'd get a big scoop, and now the self-satisfied boobie had honoured that pledge.

God, life sucked. I'd recently worked my arse off and risked my life to get a huge scoop, only to have it taken away from me. This guy, who'd spent his whole career in Canberra parked in the shade and had the sort of stupidity that loses empires, got handed one on a platter. Shit a brick.

I'm a keen student of the ironic and absurd. I can usually laugh at the perversity of fate. But his scoop was much too close for comfort.

I smiled wanly. "Congratulations. Have you written the story yet?"

"I've almost finished."

"OK then. You'd better let me read it, and I'll listen to the tape as well."

"No problem. Incredible huh?"

"Yes. Incredible."

Chapter 26

The next morning, Michael's story dominated the front page of the *Launceston Herald*. Under his by-line a huge slug said "Exclusive".

That afternoon, Dr No was arrested, taken to the Hobart Police Centre and charged with rape. A few hours later, he issued a press release that proclaimed his innocence, but revealed that he'd resigned from Cabinet to focus on clearing his name - which, of course, he never did. As often happens in these situations, lots of other complainants came forward to say what a dirty beast he'd been.

After his big scoop, Michael, to his credit, didn't gloat or show me any less respect. However, because I'm a petty man, I just wanted to strangle him.

His scoop made me even more desperate to win the job vacancy for senior political reporter on the *Sydney News*.

A few days later, I flew up to Sydney and was interviewed by the managing editor. Fortunately, he didn't know I wrote a story predicting Vincent Martin would

withdraw from the leadership contest or was kicked off the *Age* for sleeping with my bureau chief's wife. Nor did I enlighten him.

The interview went well and Alan Casey strongly recommended me. So I wasn't surprised when, a few days later, the managing editor called and offered me the job. I grabbed it.

I like to think I'm a good reporter: calm under pressure, good at developing contacts and capable—on the rare occasions it's necessary—of writing well. But I didn't cover myself with glory on the *Launceston Herald*. Yet that didn't matter, because Alan recommended me. In life, connections are everything.

I'd walked out of a dark tunnel into blinking sunlight. The new job was much higher on the Gallery pecking order. I'd also get a lot more money, better access to politicians and—let me repeat—a lot more money. My new boss would probably be a surly bastard, just like Dirk Tucker. But at least he'd be new. I needed a change.

I phoned Tucker and enjoyed telling him I was moving on, then twisted the knife. "I'll tell you what: pay me another \$50,000 a year and I'll stay."

"Christ, is that how much extra you'll get?"

The true figure was \$20,000, but I loved feeding his envy. "Yeah. Will you match it?"

"Forget it," he snapped. "In fact, I'm glad you're going. You've never been happy working for this paper: thought it was beneath you, didn't you? You've also been a bloody expensive luxury. Wire copy's a lot cheaper. In fact, if it hadn't been for Michael, I probably would have given you the boot long ago."

"What do you mean?"

"The little bastard kept telling his dad what a wonderful guy you are. He obviously thinks the sun shines out of your arse. I couldn't sack you."

Michael almost drove me mad. His faults ranged from missing good stories to making lousy coffee. Working with him was like putting on a bad sock every morning. He also committed the heinous crime of snaring—without effort—the biggest scoop of the year. Still, he obviously did me a big favour when he praised me to his dad. I really owed him for that.

I said: "So you won't replace me?"

"Probably not. Michael will have to hold the fort."

Because of my new affection for Michael, I didn't want to see him overburdened with responsibility. "You sure that's a good idea?"

Tucker sighed: "He should cope. I mean, he did snag the McCloud story."

"That was a fluke. His Dad gave it to him."

"Maybe. I sure as hell don't want him back here."

"Seriously, I don't think he's up to running this bureau."

"So what?"

Yeah, so what? The *Herald* ran few political stories anyway. "Matter for you."

"Yes."

I hung up.

When Michael slouched back into the bureau from doing God knows what, I told him I'd resigned and taken a job on the *Sydney News*.

He looked surprised. "Shit. I mean, congrats. But who's going to run the bureau when you're gone?"

"Looks like you. You've ridden the pine long enough. Time to be the big dog."

He responded to my pep-talk with a shrug. "I don't want to be the big dog. In fact I don't want to be a journalist any more. I've got my scoop. Time to do something else."

"Like what?"

He smiled. "Dad wants me to go back to Tasmania and work as his assistant, to learn more about the business. I reckon this is a good time to go."

At the first hint of responsibility, he was going to cut and run. I couldn't blame him. Because his Dad owned the paper, he had a golden parachute strapped to his back. Why not use it?

The next morning, he announced that he was heading home to work with his father and would be gone by the end of the week.

Dirk Tucker said that neither of us would be replaced.

Thus it came to pass that I was the first and last national political correspondent of the *Launceston Herald*. History quickly swept over that fact and moved on.

Chapter 27

My ex-wife, Jane, caught my daughter, Rebecca, holding hands with her little pal, Angus. They were obviously getting serious, so I insisted that Rebecca invite him to join us when we went horse-riding one weekend.

Angus looked like a pint-sized gangsta, complete with crew-cut, nose-ring, earrings and baggy pants, into which he'd probably piss if he met a real homeboy. His hands never left his pockets and he said "cool" so often I wanted to punch him. Like most teenage boys, he obviously had an under-developed brain and over-developed balls, neither of which had any future if he hurt my little girl. I was polite and affable with him, while also making it clear this was a game of death.

However, I soon realised Rebecca had him wrapped around her little finger. He followed her around like a lost puppy. I soon felt sorry for him. He was doomed.

On the drive back from horse riding, Rebecca leaned over the front seat. "Dad?"
Yeah."

"I've been thinking about what I should do when I grow up."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I want to be a vet."

This was about the tenth major career decision she'd made, so I took it with a grain of salt. How could a girl who spent a week mourning the death of her budgerigar put down other people's pets?

I said: "Mmm. That's a good idea."

"Yeah. I don't want to be a journalist. I mean, I hope you don't mind."

I smiled. "I don't mind at all. I don't care what you do, as long as you look after me in my old age."

She frowned. "Will that be expensive?"

"Depends on whether you wipe my chin and bottom yourself or employ top quality carers."

She frowned. Obviously neither option appealed. "That doesn't sound fair."

"It's not fair, it's life."

"I'll do my best," she said without conviction.

Angus leaned forward and uttered his longest sentence to date. "Yeah, but I want to be a reporter."

"Why?"

"Because it's not like a real job, is it? I mean, all you gotta to do is talk to people. Then you just write what they say. Sounds real easy."

I wanted to grab his nose-ring and make blood spurt. "It isn't always easy. It can be very difficult."

He looked doubtful. "Yeah, right."

Anne had asked me to do some shopping on the way home. We stopped at a supermarket in Civic. I commandeered a trolley and prowled the aisle, with Rebecca and Angus trailing behind.

I'd almost finished when I turned a corner and almost hit a heavily-laden trolley. I looked up, innocently. It was being pushed by Andrew Reston's bald accomplice: the spook who threatened me with a gun and probably faked Barry Graham's suicide. Shit. He looked less intimidating behind a supermarket trolley, though not much less. Could he use it to kill? My heart rioted inside my chest.

He recovered a lot faster than me. "Hi."

"Hi," I gasped.

He smiled coolly, obviously enjoying my discomfort. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Umm, yeah."

"How are you?"

"Fine. Fine."

"Good. Good." He grinned. "I'm looking for the dairy section. Know where I can find it?"

The dairy section? Was he kidding? My brain was a mess. I shook my head. "Ah, no, don't."

He shrugged. "Too bad. Thanks anyway. See you around."

As he cruised past, I saw he was fond of TV dinners and bought his toilet paper in bulk.

See you around. What the hell did he mean? Just a throw-away line? Or more sinister?

Rebecca watched him disappear. "Dad, who was that?"

My heart kept thudding. "What?"

"Who was the man you just talked to?"

"What man?"

"The man you just talked to." She spaced her words, as if talking to an idiot.

"Oh, him? I don't know him."

"What do you mean? You just talked to each other."

"Really?"

"Yeah, dad, what's going on?" She wasn't dumb.

I desperately pulled myself together. "Oh, I met him when I was doing a story. Now I don't want anything to do with him."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because you wouldn't understand. You just wouldn't."

Her face blazed with innocence. "Jeez Dad, sometimes you act real weird, you know? Real weird. And what happened to the story you were doing?"

"Nothing. Didn't get published."

"Why not?"

"Because it was too big to get published."

"I don't understand?"

"Nor do I, so let's leave it at that." I sighed and looked down at the trolley. "We got everything we need?"

"Yeah, think so."

"Good. Then let's get out of here."

Fortunately, there was no queue at the check-out counter and we got out without running into baldy again.

That night, I dreamed that I was back in that same supermarket, after hours, stacking boxes on the shelves. I stacked them for hour after hour, like a robot.

The next morning, I woke and realised I had no idea what the dream was about. That was not surprising, because I was a journo, not a shrink.

