

# SNOWFLAKE'S HOPE

A novel by Elizabeth Harvey

## Chapter 2

### The Apprentice

*Four years earlier... September 1984*

Alice was seated alone at a table in the Adelaide Railway Station café, watching mid-morning travellers stroll leisurely by. Barbara Sage MLC was late, but she'd warned that she may be. She had a meeting in her office with a senior union official, one of the 'brown cardigan brigade', as she called them, and she might have trouble getting rid of him, she'd said. Then Alice spotted her coming. She was striding past a man who then turned to take a second admiring look at her from behind.

Barbara dumped her bag on the floor and, hooking long brown hair behind her ears, leant to kiss Alice's cheek. 'Hi, Alice,' she cried enthusiastically. 'God, how long has it been? Three years? And you're still gorgeous.'

'Not as gorgeous as you. How was your meeting?'

Barbara grimaced. 'I'll tell you another time. I haven't got long. What'll you have?' She went to the counter. 'I asked for "two cappuccinos",' she said on returning, 'but should I have said *due cappuccini*? You're the language teacher.'

'I wouldn't worry about it. I'm just glad I can get a decent coffee at last. I can't cope with the sludge they serve where I've been.'

The drinks arrived and Barbara tore open the sugar sachet. 'So,' she said, 'what did you do in the Middle East all those years?'

'I became a supporter of Palestine.'

'Really?' Barbara huffed. 'That doesn't bode well.'

'For what?'

'For what I want to talk to you about.'

'And what's that?'

‘Well, you may have heard that the Party in South Australia has become more factionalised in your absence. Or rather the factions have become more formalised.’

Alice shrugged. ‘I’ve never been in a faction.’

‘I thought you leaned to the Left.’

‘I like some of their policies, but there are a lot of double-dealers in their ranks. Like the ones who send their kids to private schools.’ She took a sip of coffee and licked the foam from her lips. ‘But were you implying a minute ago, Barbara, that one has to be in the Left to support Palestine?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Good.’

Barbara paused. ‘So...what do you know about the Centre-Left?’

‘I’ve heard it mentioned.’

‘Well, it’s a newly-formed grouping, you might say. I’m a member and so are a lot of other people that you know.’

Alice gave a sceptical smile. ‘Really? Who?’

‘Well, starting from the top, there’s Bannon, Blewett and Bilney here...and interstate there’s Button and...’

‘All the Bs then.’

Barbara raised her eyebrows. ‘Yes, you’re right, I hadn’t noticed that.’ She spooned into her mouth the chocolate sprinkles from the top of the coffee and then smiled. ‘And, of course, there’s also Bill and Barry...’

Alice pondered. ‘That would be Hayden and Jones.’

‘Bingo.’

‘B stands for brainy, then.’

‘You’ve got it in one.’

Alice stirred her coffee. ‘I’m changing my name.’

‘To what?’

She mused for a few seconds. ‘Boadicea. I’ve always liked her.’

Barbara looked hard at her for a moment and then said, ‘Are you working?’

‘Nuh. I probably should register for relief teaching, but I can’t summon up the enthusiasm. And anyway, I need to get my own kids settled back into school here, do a few things to the house. Maybe I’ll be a kept woman for a while.’

‘Well,’ Barbara said, eyebrows raised, ‘I happen to know of a senator who’s looking for a part-time staffer. Someone who’s literate, he told me. Someone who can read and summarise committee reports, do speaking notes, correspondence, press releases, things like that. You’d be perfect.’

‘And who would he be?’

‘Malcolm Bradley. He’s a good senator, Alice. He’d be interesting to work for. And, unlike most of the others, he has a shop-front office in the suburbs, rather than a suite in the rarified atmosphere of the eleventh floor of the Commonwealth Centre. You’d actually have real people coming in.’

Alice nodded. ‘I know Malcolm. He puts out learned economic reports. And he spoke brilliantly about tax policy at State Convention a few years back.’ She grimaced. ‘But I’m not an economist.’

‘You don’t have to be. You just need some political nous.’

Ten minutes later Barbara grabbed her bag from the floor and stood up. ‘Gotta go next door. I’m speaking on an education bill in a few minutes.’

‘I’ll come with you and watch from the gallery.’

‘Oh, you must! It’ll be riveting. But not as good as the speeches you’ll write for Malcolm.’

As it turned out, Alice didn’t need to write speeches for Malcolm Bradley because he always knew what he was talking about and could speak fluently from his own hastily scribbled, memory-jogging notes. She provided him with much factual material, however, gleaned from her exhaustive reading of parliamentary committee submissions and reports, inquiry reports, academic treatises and newspaper and journal articles. She would summarise, analyse, synthesise, compare, contrast and recommend and, in the process, she learned an awful lot about economic policy – both macro and micro.

She also composed, on her boss’s behalf, innumerable media releases which always got a run in some paper, if only in the Murdoch suburban ‘freebies’. In a short time she mastered the preferred media release structure and style and then found that some papers would print her

releases as they stood – uncut and verbatim. She quickly cottoned on to her boss's peccadilloes in this respect, such as the inclusion, wherever possible, of the word 'powerful'.

Malcolm had a knack for digging up really obscure economic data and turning it into a positive story for the Government. One of his favourite ploys was putting out a regular media release on bankruptcy figures:

*South Australian Labor Senator Malcolm Bradley has today released figures indicating that the number of bankruptcies in South Australia fell by 10 percent in the year to 30 June. Senator Bradley, a member of the powerful Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, said, 'The combined economic policies of the Hawke and Bannan Labor Governments have significantly improved the profitability of business and private investment...'*

Malcolm would admit privately that any link between bankruptcy figures and government policy was, at best, tangential, but no journalist or Opposition member ever challenged him on his assertions, because they didn't have a clue.

Since Malcolm was also Chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, Alice had the opportunity to read a lot on international relations. He was invited to the USA, at US government expense, to meet with Senator Richard Lugar, his US Senate Committee counterpart, and talk to Pentagon and other officials involved in our two nations' special relationship. Malcolm used to joke that the Americans didn't realise that his committee, the Australian Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, was nowhere near as powerful or prestigious as the Australian Joint House Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, but he wasn't going to put them straight, was he?

Unlike some other senators, Malcolm took seriously his responsibility for the welfare of the entire state that he represented, and Alice accompanied him on a number of expeditions to far-flung regional and outback centres, undertaken in tiny single-engine planes.

('Can't we get a plane with at least two engines?' she once asked him. 'I'd feel a lot happier having a second propeller in case we flew into an eagle or something.'

'Too expensive to lease. It'd use up too much of my electorate allowance,' was his response.)

At the Defence facility near Woomera she met with a group of 'army wives', as they were termed, who told her that they wanted, among other things, electric clothes-dryers in their houses.

'You need a clothes-dryer? How often does it rain here?'

The climate was not the point, they said. It would just make their lives easier if they had a dryer. And besides, the American wives had them.

'What American wives?' she asked.

The ones at the US base up the road, they said.

Later she said to Malcolm, 'I didn't know there was a US base here.'

He put a finger to his lips and hissed, '*Shhh!*'

In most places they would meet with local farmer representatives. Alice's husband, who knew about things agricultural, advised her on how to converse with them. She learned to say, 'How's the season looking?' then nod grimly while they spoke and say, 'Ya reckon?' whenever they paused.

During the 1985 State election campaign, Malcolm and Alice had the distinction of being present in the throng of reporters and by-standers at a Port Pirie shopping mall when the Prime Minister, with some justification, famously referred to an elderly gentleman there as a 'silly old bugger.' In later years Alice would often silently express her gratitude to Hawkie for coining that phrase because she was to find it immensely useful in her own dealings with the seniors' community.

Malcolm's inner suburban office was, according to census statistics, situated in a multi-ethnic, socio-economically diverse and relatively well-educated post-code area. Consequently, he (or Alice in his absence) received frequent visits from visionaries of various persuasions who wanted to discuss the state of the government, the nation and the world. There were the conservatives who wanted to bring back the White Australia policy, and well-intentioned anarchists who believed that the world would be a much better place if national boundaries were abolished entirely. There were the secularists who complained about the recitation of the Lord's Prayer when parliament resumed every day (what is this – some kind of seventeenth century Divine Right monarchy?) and devout Christians who thought there just wasn't enough praying going on. There were the high-taxers, the low-taxers and the flat-taxers (or 'flat-earthers' as Malcolm called them), Trotskyists, creationists, eugenicists, gut-busters and ghost-busters.

One day Kath, another of Malcolm's staff members who was generally stationed at the front desk, said to Alice, 'I'm not superstitious or anything, but have you noticed that a disproportionately high number of nutters come in here when there's a full moon?'

Alice was intrigued. 'Really? Do you think so?'

'Yes, I do. Shall we start collecting statistics?'

So, over the next few months, they kept a meticulous record of lunar phases and the nature of constituent inquiries. And Kath's thesis was found to be true.

A few weeks before the State election, Alice answered the call from Party Office to stand as a candidate for the seat she lived in, the Liberal-held Adelaide Hills electorate of Heysen. Her boss gave his blessing, with one proviso: 'As long as you still come with me to the bush. You're much better than me with the cockies.'

She met with the State Campaign Director who said, 'Of course you haven't got a snowflake's hope in hell of winning the seat. The margin's over twelve percent. But we could get a small swing in the current climate – the Government's travelling well. You won't be expected to do much work, of course. No door-knocking or anything' – he snorted – 'not up there. You might have to turn up at a meet-the-candidates meeting. And you should try to get your face in the local paper.' He nodded slowly. 'Yeah, you'd be a good candidate for up there – a local, well-heeled woman...'

She smirked. 'Well-heeled?'

He shrugged. 'You know. Presentable. You won't frighten the horses.'

And she didn't. Frighten the horses, that is. In fact she got on very well with them. There were brown ones and white ones and grey ones and, as she passed by their paddocks, they would gallop up to the fence and whinny madly. 'I don't have any apples for you,' she would say firmly, 'but I can give you one of my lovely pamphlets if you promise not to eat it.'

And the human beings were amazed:

'I've lived here for almost forty years and you're the first person from any political party who's ever knocked on my door.'

'You're the *Labor* candidate! You're very brave!'

'Well, I won't be voting for you, dear, but I appreciate your visit.'

One very amused gentleman said to her, 'You've got a nerve coming to this town. It's Downer country.'

'I know. I like to live dangerously.'

At one house she had her first ever encounter with a guard goose, which is like a guard dog, except it's a goose. Entering through the gate, she was set upon by a huge hissing, honking, flapping, snapping, clawing white bird. The male occupant of the house, who eventually came to her rescue, said that guard geese were quite common in rural France (she envisaged the signs on French gates: *Oie de garde*, they would say, *Oie méchante*) and he was surprised that, being much less expensive to feed than dogs, they weren't more popular in Australia.

As there was a polling booth in each of the numerous small hills towns, she had trouble finding enough people to hand out her how-to-vote cards on election day. Many of her supporters ended up manning a booth for half a day instead of the usual two hour shift. Her father turned up at her house at 7.30 am dressed in grey flannel trousers, tweed sports jacket and tie. 'Dad', she said, 'you don't have to dress up to hand out how-to-vote-cards.'

'Yes, I do,' he said firmly. 'It's my daughter who's the candidate and I want to look respectable. I wouldn't want to give you a bad name.'

He manned the booth in Echunga for ten hours because the person who was meant to take over in the afternoon didn't turn up. Luckily her mother had given him a cut lunch and a thermos of tea. A few kilometres away her sister held the fort at Aldgate. That night she said to Alice, 'Has anyone ever handed out Labor cards there before?'

'Possibly not,' Alice said.

'Because they were very surprised to see me. One lady in a sweet pleated tennis dress took a card from the Liberal person, then came up to me, took my card and said, "Is this the upper house card, dear?" I said, "No, it's the Labor Party card." Well, I swear, Alice, she actually recoiled. She really did. She held the card very gingerly by one corner and handed it back to me. She could hardly bear to touch it.'

That night they had a few family and friends around to watch the count on TV. Alice was in the kitchen taking the canapés out of the oven when she heard the ABC election analyst say, 'Early figures are indicating a big swing to Labor in the seat of Heysen.' She almost dropped the tray. As was revealed later, the swing was about eight percent, not enough to unseat the sitting member.

‘That’s fantastic, Alice!’ everyone said. ‘You’ve turned it into a marginal seat!’

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