

SNOWFLAKE'S HOPE

A novel by Elizabeth Harvey

Chapter 3 Some Stuck-up Tart from the Hills

April 1986

Alice and Barbara Sage MLC were doing lunch at their usual table in the Railway Station café. They'd both ordered mineral water and what Alice called a *salade composée* which was ninety percent lettuce, scattered with other vegetables, a small quantity of some kind of processed meat or cheese and a vinaigrette dressing. They conducted a brief discussion on what they were doing to prevent weight gain. Alice said she was power-walking several kilometres before breakfast.

Barbara said, 'I'm eschewing carbohydrates.'

Alice nodded approvingly. 'Better to eschew than chew.'

Inevitably, they moved on to Party matters. Barbara said, 'You know, don't you, that the Holder pre-selection is coming up at the June state convention? Jack's retiring from Parliament. The seat's up for grabs.'

'Yes, I do know that, Barbara.'

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Are you thinking of throwing your hat in the ring, as they say?'

Alice, who wasn't eschewing carbohydrates, spoke through a mouthful of bread. 'No. It's too hard.' She swallowed. 'If it were a State seat, I might. But my kids are too young for me to be off in Canberra for twenty weeks a year. It wouldn't be fair on them – or on Michael.'

Barbara nodded resignedly, then perked up. 'Anyway, you've got a month to consider it – before nominations close.' She picked at her salad. 'But it'll be hard for Labor to hang on to a marginal seat like Holder. I'm not sure what our margin is exactly...'

'Three point four percent,' Alice said.

‘Is that right? Mmm...narrow. Especially when the retiring member is so popular. Jack is estimated to have a personal vote of up to ten percent. Some say it would’ve become a Liberal seat years ago if it hadn’t been for Jack.’

‘I’m aware of all that,’ Alice said, rolling her eyes.

Barbara forked the last lettuce leaf into her mouth and pushed her plate away. ‘But on the plus side, there shouldn’t be too many contenders for pre-selection. A couple of local Holder stalwarts might put up their hand – or some innocents who want to notch up a few brownie points in the vain hope of getting a safe seat later.’ She drained her glass. ‘And because it’s a marginal seat, no union heavy or factional boyo is going to want it. They’d actually have to do some work – and display some social skills.’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘So, you’d have a good chance, I think. And then there’s the “woman” factor.’

‘Which is...?’

‘Well, if you won it you’d be the first Labor woman from South Australia in the House of Representatives. It has a nice ring to it.’

Alice stared long and hard at her empty plate. ‘The Centre-Left would have to support me. I mean all of them – not just the sub-branch delegates, but the unions too. Most of the union delegates wouldn’t know me from the proverbial bar of soap.’

‘Well, my dear’ – Barbara smiled – ‘we’ll have to do something about that.’

‘And I’d need the support of the Right too. The C-L doesn’t have the numbers by itself, does it – to beat the Left?’

‘No.’ Barbara nodded sagely. ‘You have some work to do, my girl.’

So, a month later, Alice took the lift up to the city office of the man who was a Federal minister and the acknowledged leader of the Right faction in South Australia. She’d never had much to do with the Right, largely because of the sparseness of its ranks which were principally made up of conservative Catholic survivors from the National Civic Council and the DLP. Being a small faction, they were subjected to the joke that they met in a confessional box, but they were, it seemed, ‘a force to be reckoned with’ whose support was essential if she were to get the numbers at State Convention for the Holder pre-selection. It was the big Right unions, in particular the Shop, Distributive and Allied Trades Union, the notorious ‘Shoppies’, who held the crucial votes.

(‘What are the “Allied Trades” in the SDA?’ Alice had once asked someone who knew about union matters.

‘Mainly hairdressers, I gather,’ he said.

‘So, are all shop assistants, distributors and hairdressers arch-conservatives?’

He shrugged. ‘They must be. Even the gay ones.’)

She was quite nervous about her interview. ‘Do you think he’ll ask me about abortion?’ she’d asked her husband as he was leaving for work that morning. ‘Because I’m not going to lie and say I’m opposed to it.’

‘I don’t think he will. He won’t get that personal. You just have to look and sound like a respectable married woman and mother of two.’

‘Which I am!’

He laughed. ‘Then you won’t have a problem.’ He opened the front door. ‘Just don’t wear a mini-skirt.’

‘Gimme a break, Michael. I haven’t worn a mini-skirt for fifteen years.’

She wore a black and white pin-striped knee-length skirt suit. The Member for Adelaide, who wore a black and white pin-striped shoe-length trouser suit, stood up to greet her, bade her sit on one side of his impressive mahogany desk and resumed his own seat on the other. She’d always thought him quite a handsome man, in a conservative accountant kind of way.

‘So, Alice,’ he said, with an avuncular smile, ‘You want to be the Member for Holder,’ and, before she could respond, he continued, ‘Jack is a highly respected and hard-working member. You’d have big shoes to fill.’

She’d given up counting how many times in recent weeks she’d heard that awful cliché. ‘Yes, I know. But I’m confident that I can carry on his good work.’ *Carry On Working*, she thought.

He leaned back in his executive chair and put the corresponding fingertips of each of his hands together to make a diamond shape, as self-important men do when they’re cogitating. *Jim Hacker*, she thought. ‘So, Alice, tell me about yourself. What made you join the Labor Party?’

She took a deep breath. ‘Well, I joined eight years ago when I was a stay-at-home mum’ – *stay-at-home mum, he’ll approve of that* – ‘and spent a lot of each day in the kitchen spoon-

feeding babies and yelling at Malcolm Fraser and his ministers being interviewed on talk-back radio. Then one day I got into a discussion with an electrician who was doing some work on our house and he told me about the local ALP sub-branch, of which he was a member. So I went along to their next meeting, which happened to be the AGM, and I was elected Junior Vice-President. That was before I was even a financial member of the party. Then I got involved with the Women's Policy Committee at state level, and, well, went on from there.'

'You did well as a candidate in the state election, I'm told.'

Oh, you were told? 'Yes, quite well.'

He nodded slowly. 'And I understand that you now work on Malcolm Bradley's staff.'

'Yes, just part-time.' *Not full-time, just part-time. I don't completely neglect my children. Not yet, anyway.*

'Malcolm's a good man,' he said.

'Yes, he is. I've learned a lot from him.'

'I'm sure you have. Are you an economist like him?'

'No. Well, of course everything is related to the economy, isn't it? But when it comes to policy areas I'm probably most interested in education. But I also like international relations, immigration...'

'You're not after *my* job, are you?'

She huffed. 'Ask me again in about ten years.'

He nodded again and smiled this time. 'I'm told that you spent a few years in the Middle East.'

'Yes, in Jordan.'

'An interesting place. What were you doing there?'

'My husband was working on an Australian Government aid program. I taught at the International School in Amman. Part-time.'

'Did you travel to the Holy Land?'

She shrugged. 'Well, all of that region is somebody's holy land.' *Naughty, she thought.*

He seemed unfazed. 'I've always thought,' he said, 'that I'd like to visit Nazareth, Jesus's childhood home. Did you go to Nazareth?'

'Yes, once.' As they'd driven into the town Michael had broken into song – '*Pulled into Nazareth, I was feelin' 'bout half past dead...*'

‘What’s it like?’

‘Oh, much like the other towns around there. Flat-roofed houses, yellow dogs, timid children. And Israeli soldiers everywhere.’ She smiled disarmingly. ‘I didn’t see any carpenter’s shop, I’m afraid.’

He returned her smile, then pondered for a few seconds. ‘So, what was the political situation at the time – in the region?’

The same as it’s been for thirty-five years. She paused and said, ‘Well, I was there in September 1982 when Christian Lebanese Phalangists, with the assistance of the Israeli army, raped, mutilated or killed hundreds, perhaps thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims in refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila.’ *Why am I going down this path?*

He said nothing.

Oh, what the hell! ‘It became quite personal for me,’ she said. ‘There was a Palestinian woman who came to our house once a week to clean. One day she was very upset and I eventually understood that she had relatives in Shatila who were killed. She herself had lived in a refugee camp near Amman since 1968. She’s probably still there. She’s known as Om Atiyah – Mother of Atiyah. That’s her eldest daughter’s name. It means ‘gift’. I’ve lost contact with her, unfortunately. I can’t write to her because she’s illiterate, even in Arabic.’

He nodded slowly. ‘So you know some Arabic?’

‘Yes, I went to classes’ – she huffed and attempted to get back on message – ‘but my Arabic won’t be of much use to me in Holder. It’s not a very diverse electorate, ethnically-speaking. Mainly Anglo-Celtic’ – she gave a little laugh – ‘like me.’

‘Do you live in the electorate?’

You know I don’t. ‘I used to. I grew up in Plympton and my parents are still there. But my husband and I (*oh god*) moved to the Hills a few years ago. I intend to move back to Holder, though, if I’m pre-selected.’

He looked impressed. ‘That would be quite a commitment – especially if you ended up losing the seat. But moving to the electorate would help because I understand that the party branches in Holder are rather parochial. Mostly middle-aged and elderly, long-standing members – old family ties. They’d like the party to pre-select one of their own.’

‘Yes.’

‘And they don’t think much of the factions – any factions.’

She nodded. 'I'm aware that a lot of them don't like me, or the idea of me being their Member.' *Some stuck-up tart from the Hills, someone had reportedly said.*

'So,' he went on, 'as the candidate you'd have to win them over. You'd need their help to hang on to the seat.'

'Yes.' She sighed resignedly. 'I'd have to expend a lot of time and energy winning over the ALP membership before I could start wooing the other seventy thousand voters. It'd be nice if I could take their support for granted.'

He looked rather grim. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

He paused and then said, 'Well, Alice, I'll recommend to my group that we support you for pre-selection. I think you'd be an asset to the Parliament. Thank you for coming to see me.'

That evening, in her capacity as the Mount Lofty Sub-Branch delegate to the monthly State Council meeting, Alice drove her pre-loved Mitsubishi Cordia down the hill to South Terrace, where stood the building known as Trades Hall, home of the head office of the Australian Labor Party (SA Branch). She was intending to speak to the assembled Council in support of a motion from the Glenelg Sub-Branch expressing, in the strongest terms, its disagreement with the decision of the Liberal-dominated Glenelg Council to approve the construction of a high rise apartment complex on the Glenelg foreshore, and urging the State Minister for Planning and Development to veto the decision. As she snaked down the hill she rehearsed what she was going to say:

'As a child, Mr President, one of my great pleasures in life was cycling with my friends along the Anzac Highway bike track on a hot summer's day, and taking the bend at the Morphettville Race Course, only to see ahead of me the sparkling blue waters of Saint Vincent's Gulf. It was a marvellous feeling to at last catch sight of the sea and know that in a few minutes I'd be diving into its cool, clear depths. I do not want to ever take that bend in the highway, Mr President, and see in front of me only an ugly wall of concrete apartment buildings. Glenelg is not Surfers Paradise, Mr President. We are not the White Shoe Brigade. I strongly urge delegates to support this motion of the Glenelg Sub-Branch and, in doing so, ensure the preservation of the character and history of this much-loved family beach.'

She would then return to her seat amidst rapturous applause. Her only concern was that some cynics might think she was supporting the motion simply because Glenelg was in the electorate of Holder. But it wasn't so. She really didn't want to see some god-awful apartments for rich retirees on *her* beach.

She was walking through the Trades Hall entrance, still muttering to herself, when Barbara Sage MLC, who'd obviously been waiting for her, grabbed her arm and drew her into a corner. She spoke quietly and gravely. 'I'm sorry to tell you, Alice, that you are the subject of a malicious rumour circulating within the Party.'

'Really? What?'

'Well' – Barbara looked around furtively – 'the word is that you were seen late one night here, in the Trades Hall car park...' She broke off and started to giggle behind her hand.

'Barbara, for god's sake!'

Barbara pulled herself together. 'You were seen late one night, here in the Trades Hall car park, in the back of a car with a union official...'

Alice waited for more, and then said, 'Doing what?'

Barbara rolled her eyes. 'What do you think? Rumpy-pumpy, that's what!'

'I don't believe it.'

'No, really Alice, it's true. I mean, it's true that this story is going round. I've heard it now from three independent sources.'

'Who?'

'Well, Maggie for one, and um...'

Alice spoke slowly. 'I mean, Barbara, who is the union official I was allegedly in the car with?'

Barbara whispered his name.

Alice did not move a muscle for at least five seconds. Then she put her hand over her mouth.

'There you go!' Barbara cried triumphantly. 'Now you see why I was laughing! The mind *boggles!*'

As they walked towards the meeting hall Alice said, 'Don't get me wrong, Barbara. I'm not taking this lightly. I'm quite offended by this scuttlebutt – but offended not as much by the aspersions cast on my morals, as by those cast on my dignity and good taste.'

At the June State Convention there were six worthy contenders for the Holder pre-selection. Alice gave a brilliant speech, of course, but one of her factional colleagues felt obliged to point out afterwards that she could have read aloud excerpts from *Mein Kampf*, in German, and still won, the numbers having been so tightly stitched-up.

In the bar later, one of the sub-branch delegates from Holder approached her. She was tempted to ask him how he had voted but didn't, of course. He proffered his less than fulsome congratulations and said, 'Well, you'll have to come down to some Holder branch meetings.'

Down, she thought, *come down*. 'I was intending to.'

'You'll need to build some bridges.'

'Build some bridges? What do you mean exactly?' (She did 'disingenuous' very well.)

'You know, get on side with the local members. You'll need their support.'

'Well, of course I will. I've already been invited to the Edwardstown branch meeting on Wednesday. You're a member there, aren't you?'

Michael was in the kitchen dicing carrots when she got home. She stood behind him and said, 'Do you still like the idea of catching the Glenelg tram to work?'

He put down the knife and turned to face her, suppressing a smile. 'I take it that you won, then.'

Before being officially endorsed as a parliamentary candidate, Alice had to appear before the State Executive of the ALP to answer three questions. She was called in to one of their regular meetings and waited outside the door until their business was finished. She was then summoned inside, directed to a chair and asked:

'Are you a member of any other political party?'

'No.'

'Are you a member of an appropriate union?'

'Yes.'

'Is there anything in your past which, if publicly revealed, could embarrass the Australian Labor Party?'

She was tempted to say something facetious, but didn't, of course. 'No.'

On the way out she recalled that Barbara Sage MLC had once suggested that prospective parliamentary candidates should have to undergo a literacy test. 'You really think that's necessary?' Alice had said.

'Yes, I do.'

A few days later, Jack, the retiring Member, invited her to his office on Marion Road for a 'chinwag' and to meet his electorate staff who were, she already knew, three long-serving middle-aged women called Joan, Fran and Nancy. She was aware that the local pre-selection scuttlebutt had included the confident assertion, put by some not entirely disinterested individuals, that if she were to win the seat she would sack all of Jack's staff and install a team of Centre-Left 'factional operatives' in their place.

After Jack performed the introductions she shook the women's hands and said, 'I'm looking forward to working with you all.'

Joan smiled diffidently and said, 'You mean, during the campaign.'

'And afterwards. I'm hoping you'll all agree to stay on when I become the Member. I'll be relying on your local knowledge and expertise to hang on to this seat.' And she meant it. And, as she'd told her husband weeks before, most of the Centre-Left 'factional operatives' had the interpersonal skills of Vlad the Impaler.

Jack motioned her to sit in a comfortable chair at a coffee table in his office, and installed himself in another. 'I usually talk to my constituents here,' he said. 'I don't like having a desk between them and me.' At that point Joan entered, carrying a tray with two cups of coffee and a plate of cream biscuits. 'I hope you drink coffee, Alice,' she said.

'I do, but go easy on the Monte Carlos next time.'

Jack settled back and said, 'So what do I need to tell you about this electorate?'

'Well,' Alice said, 'I have a good idea of the geography and the demographics. I guess it's the electoral behavior that I need to know more about – and the psychology, if you know what I mean.'

'Yes. Well, let's start with some history...' Jack related how, as a result of a 1969 redistribution of electorates, the seat of Holder was created with a notional Labor majority of three percent. At the election of that year he stood for the first time and took Labor's majority to 16 percent.

She broke in. 'Sixty-nine was the first election I voted in. I was part of your 13 percent swing.'

He nodded. 'You and a lot of other newly-enfranchised baby boomers with progressive ideas. That was the election that Gough Whitlam should have won, but we had to wait till '72 for that.'

'Did you get another swing in '72?' she asked.

'Only one percent. I'd got my big swing the time before. But I had another small swing in '74 and then there was that act of political bastardry in November 1975 which you know about and, in the Labor defeat the following month, my winning margin was reduced from 18 percent to one percent.' He glanced through the window at a magpie squawking loudly in a tree. 'That was when I realised the true nature of much of my Labor constituency – that they would change their vote at the behest of charlatans and imperialists who couldn't countenance the fact that they were no longer in power.' He emptied his coffee cup and brought it down so hard on the saucer that she thought it would break. 'And it was the *old* mugs around here who changed their vote, Alice. Gullible pensioners and veterans, working class people who believed all the Liberal propaganda. The young ones like you stuck with us because they realised the enormity of what had happened.'

'They were turbulent times,' she said lamely.

He nodded and smiled grimly. 'I like to think it was the time I lost my political virginity – my innocence, if you like. I'd always thought of the Australian electorate, even the conservatives, as basically decent and well-meaning. I realised in 1975 that most of them are ignorant and self-serving. And nothing has happened since to change my mind.'

They were silent for a few seconds and then Alice said, 'Someone told me of a little saying that you're fond of repeating.'

'What's that?

'It is impossible to underestimate the intelligence of the Australian electorate.'

He threw his head back and laughed. 'Yes, and some electors with a poor grasp of the English language take that to be a compliment. That's why they keep voting for me.'

The Perry family's move to Glenelg went smoothly, but settling the boys into a new school posed problems. Alice knew that, after their little hills school with horses and sheep grazing on

the boundary, her sons would find Glenelg Primary, situated on one of the busiest intersections in Adelaide, a stark contrast.

While their Year 5 younger son, who normally didn't like school, loved his new teacher, their studious Year 7 elder son, hated his. 'He's nasty, Mum. He likes to humiliate people. He made fun of me in front of the other kids because I come from the hills. He said, how do I like slumming it down here. And he really bellowed at me today for something he knew wasn't my fault... and he knows about you standing for parliament, and thinks he can make a joke about it.'

She said, 'Well, I hate to tell you this, love, but in a few months' time my face and name, your name, will be stuck up on every pole and tram stop for miles around.'

That night she stopped outside his room after he'd gone to bed and heard him sobbing quietly in the dark. She went in. 'I'm sorry, love,' she said, wiping away his tears with the sheet. 'You can change to another class or go to another school. It's Saturday tomorrow. We'll talk about it in the morning.' She kissed him good night and went out, feeling like shit.

The next morning he said, 'It's all right, Mum. I've decided to stay at Glenelg in the same class. I'm not going to let him get me down. I've made some good friends there. And, anyway, I'll be going to high school next year.'

'Are you sure about this?'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

'I'll still go and speak to the Principal.'

'No, don't,' he said. 'That'd only make it worse with the teacher. He'd call me a mummy's boy or something.'

She left it at that and didn't catch him crying again. But she still felt like shit.