

SNOWFLAKE'S HOPE

A novel by Elizabeth Harvey

Chapter 4

Nuts and Balts

May 1987

AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

**Marginal Members and Candidates meeting
30 May 1987, Senate Committee Room 2, Parliament House**

AGENDA

9.30 am

1. Introductions
2. Opening comments by National Secretary
 - Latest polling
 - Possible election date
 - Current issues
3. Report from National Campaign Director
 - Campaign budget
 - National campaign strategies
4. Reports from members and candidates
 - Local issues
5. Exchange of information / ideas
 - Publicity
 - Press campaigns
6. Other business

LUNCH

2.00 pm

Media training

'How did the marginals' meeting go?' Alice's campaign director asked the next day. He was a local state MP and they were in his electorate office having a take-away pizza lunch of which she was partaking sparingly.

She shrugged. 'It was okay. There were a lot of Queensland candidates. We could pick up a few seats there, apparently, as more and more people are waking up to Joh.'

He offered her the last slice of Napolitana which she declined. 'You're not eating much,' he said.

'I'm eschewing carbohydrates. Despite all my pounding of streets, I've acquired a kilo or two lately.'

'Really? Where?'

'None of your business. Let's just say that the skirt of my pin-striped power suit is rather too snug.'

He rolled his eyes and took the slice himself. 'So what did you learn at the meeting?'

'Well, I now know who Wally Lewis is.'

'Who?'

'Wally Lewis. The National Campaign Director told us that Wally Lewis is a Labor supporter and is willing to have his photo taken with individual candidates for use in their campaign pamphlets and advertising. Then he went around the table asking each candidate if they wanted their photo taken with him and they all said, "Yeah, too right, you little beauty!" When he got to me he said, "Alice, do you want the photo with Wally Lewis?" and I said, "Who's Wally Lewis?" *Well!* You could've heard the proverbial pin drop. They were stunned that I'd never heard of him. Then someone explained that he was a famous Queensland rugby player and I explained that I was from South Australia, an Australian Rules state, so how the hell would I, or any of my voters, have heard of him? But I think that some of them still thought that the real reason I hadn't heard of him was because I'm a woman.'

John was laughing behind his hand. 'So, I assume that you didn't take up the offer?'

She declined to answer.

'And the media training? How was that?'

'Quite useful. It was taken by a nice young man called Mark Bannerman. He's John Button's Press Secretary. The most useful thing he said was that if you're being interviewed on radio or television on a particular matter, you always say what you want to say, get your message

over, irrespective of what the interviewer asks. You don't completely ignore the questions, but you twist them round to suit you.'

He nodded. 'Anything else?'

'Yes, don't wear a striped shirt on TV because it will op.'

'Will what?'

'Op. On camera the stripes will appear to jump around.'

'Uh, huh. Anything else?'

'Oh, don't make too many verbal pauses, and so on. But I knew that already.'

'Too many what?'

'Verbal pauses. That's where you say *um* and *ah* and *well* and *you know* and *I mean* and *and so on* all the time.'

'You said *and so on* a few seconds ago.'

'Did I?' She slapped herself on the wrist.

'But you're forgiven, because I'm not interviewing you on the radio.'

She shook her head despairingly and put on a plummy voice. 'One doesn't say "radio" any more, John. One says "the *meeja*". It used to be "the press" and "radio" and "television". Now it's "the *meeja*". Don't forget that.' She closed her eyes and groaned. 'Oh, it's all so scary, John. The sooner Hawkie calls the election, the better. Get it over with.'

Hawkie called the election a week later. It was to be on July 11. Her chief campaign worker was Warren, a bright young politics graduate on John's electorate staff. One Thursday afternoon he was at his desk in her campaign office, a previously vacant house on South Road, drawing up the booth roster for election day, when Alice staggered through the front door and collapsed into a faded blue brocade armchair, her parents' contribution to the campaign office furniture. He looked up inquiringly. 'How did it go?'

She exhaled loudly. 'That's the last time I door-knock in Morton Park. Too many Balts.'

'Balts?'

'*Balts*. People from the Baltic states – Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians – refugees from Stalin. Tens of thousands of them came to Australia after the war and they're all living in Morton Park and they all hate me.' She bent over and started to unlace her sneakers.

Warren grinned. 'Why do they hate you?'

‘Because I’m a communist. “The Labor Party is full of communists,” they say, and I say, “No, it’s not,” and they say, “Yes, it is,” or they say, “You’re socialists then,” and I say, “No, we’re not even socialists.” I feel like adding, “But I wish we were,” but I’m too cowardly.’ She kicked off her shoes and slumped further down in the chair. ‘Do you realise that the Australian Labor Party is largely responsible for the communist domination of Eastern Europe?’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. In 1945 the Allies handed Eastern Europe over to the Russians, right? And the Australian Labor government was a member of the Alliance. And – get this – John Curtin strongly supported that action.’ She threw her head back. ‘Poor John Curtin! As if *he* had any say in what happened! Anyway, I said to this Latvian bloke, “It was Churchill and Roosevelt who made the pact with Stalin. Are you saying they were communists?” And he says, “Roosevelt had communist sympathies and his wife was definitely a communist. The FBI had a file on her.”’

Warren said, ‘They did have a file on her actually – a thick one.’

‘Is that right? Oh well, that proves it then. If Eleanor Roosevelt was a communist, then so am I.’ She stood up, stretched and groaned, and said, ‘I’m ravenous. What’s that you’re eating?’

‘Walnut cake,’ he said. ‘A woman who lives around the corner made it and brought it in because she thought we’d need sustenance. She’d noticed how busy we were.’

‘How nice of her!’ Alice broke off a morsel of the cake and popped it in her mouth. ‘Mmm, yummy – very moist. It’s got cinnamon and nutmeg and...something else. If you see her again, Warren, thank her for me and get the recipe. I love anything with walnuts.’

At that moment, Joan, a highly capable Labor stalwart who normally worked in the office of Jack, the retiring member, entered from the back room. She was holding an item of mail. ‘This is very odd,’ she said to Alice. ‘Someone has sent you the minutes of the Holder Liberal Campaign Committee meeting. Do you think it’s a mistake?’

It obviously wasn’t a mistake because, over the next four weeks, Alice received, from an anonymous source, further reports on the outcome of her rival candidate’s campaign meetings. He was a bright lad, her opponent, and a leading member of the white supremacist faction of the Young Liberals. The word was that he had a number of enemies in his own party.

When she told John about these leaks, he said, ‘So, is there anything useful in the minutes? Anything he’s doing that you can pre-empt?’

She shook her head. 'Nuh. It's the usual predictable stuff. In fact, if you didn't know better, you'd think you were reading *our* campaign committee minutes.'

It was a cold Friday morning in early July, and a week and a day away from the election. Her husband had gone to work, her sons had just left for school and she, dressed in a daggy track suit and ugg boots, was perched on a stool at the kitchen bench, listening to the radio and waiting for the phone to ring. When it did, she switched off the radio and picked up the receiver. 'Hello, Alice Perry speaking.'

'Mrs Perry, please hold the line. Phillip Satchell will speak to you in a few minutes.' The producer cut out and, through the phone, Alice heard more of her Liberal opponent's brash assertions about how badly the Hawke Labor Government had treated old people. It didn't care about them at all, apparently; all it cared about was its union mates and welfare bludgers.

Then Phillip Satchell said, 'I have Alice Perry, the Labor candidate for Holder, on the line. She's the woman tasked with retaining this very marginal seat for the Government. Good morning, Mrs Perry. What do you say in response to your opponent's claims?'

'Good morning, Phillip, and thank you for the opportunity to correct the deliberate misinformation that the Liberal candidate is spreading...' She spoke firmly and fluently for a few minutes and was about to answer a further question when the front door bell rang. She panicked for a second, then calmly went on speaking, telling herself that there was nothing she could do. Then she heard the front door open and footsteps in the hall, and she twisted on her stool to see two unfamiliar men walk into the kitchen. One of them was carrying a camera, and the other mumbled his name and the name of the news organisation he worked for. Continuing to speak into the phone, she made frantic hand signals, trying to indicate to the men that she was live on radio.

Ignoring her, they walked into the family area off the kitchen and looked around and then the one with the camera approached and took a couple of flash photos of her. In a state of great agitation she continued with the interview but at one point lost the thread of what she was saying. Then, while she was still speaking, the two men left the kitchen and she heard the front door close. A minute later the interview finished and she hung up, opened the front door and saw a car pulling away from the kerb.

That evening she was painstakingly assembling a lasagne and the kids were watching *The Goodies*, when her husband arrived home. He kissed her on the cheek. 'Hi. How's your day been?'

She huffed. 'Did you hear me on the ABC this morning?'

'Yes.'

'What did you think?'

He hesitated. 'Well, to be honest, I thought you started out very well – focused, strong – but then you seemed to lose it a bit.'

'I lost it all right!' She told him about the home invasion and ended up in tears.

He put an arm around her shoulders. 'Hey, don't let it upset you. They were arseholes.' He picked up a half-full wine bottle from the night before and poured her a glass. 'Are you going to complain to their editor?'

She sniffed and took a sip. 'No. They'll think I'm pathetic.'

'Do you want me to complain on your behalf?'

'God, no! That'd be worse.'

He blew out loudly. 'So, is your picture on the front page of this evening's edition?'

'No. I went and bought it.' She wiped her eyes with a tea towel and smiled wanly. 'It's not on page three either. But I thought of a nice photo caption' – she swept her arm in the air – '*Labor sheila woos ugg vote.*'

She spread cheese sauce on top of the lasagne, put the dish in the oven, and sat up on a stool. 'You know, what I can't understand is why they didn't wait until I'd finished talking. They must have known I wasn't going to be on the radio for long.' She emptied her glass and held it out for more. 'And why did they come in the first place? If they'd wanted an interview and a photo they could've rung yesterday and arranged a time. Instead they turn up unannounced, enter the house uninvited and leave without speaking to me.' She shook her head in puzzlement.

'They obviously knew your address,' he said.

'Well, I gave it out to a few people before I had a campaign office' – she huffed – 'and of course there's a bloody great poster with my name and face on it nailed to the front fence. But how did they know I was at home?'

He paused. 'They knew you were here...and they knew what you were doing.'

'How?'

'They'd been listening to you on their car radio.'

She was stunned. 'Do you think so?'

'I'm sure of it.'

Their younger son came into the kitchen, chanting, 'Goody, goody, yum, yum...what's for dinner, Mum?'