

SNOWFLAKE'S HOPE

A novel by Elizabeth Harvey

Chapter 6

Settling In

July 1987

**The Hon Bill Hayden MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade**

invites

Mrs Alice Perry MP

***to luncheon with Dr Hussam al-Khateeb
Professor of Comparative and Modern Arabic Literature
Damascus University***

28 July 1987, 12.30 pm

Albert's Restaurant, Lyneham, Canberra

RSVP

Alice emerged from her office and handed the invitation to Joan. 'Did you see this?' she asked, eyebrows raised. 'I've been an MP for a week and the Foreign Minister is already inviting me to lunch – with a Professor of Arabic Literature. Aren't you impressed?'

'Yes. So, are you going?'

Alice looked at her disparagingly. 'Of course not, Joan. I'll be here in Adelaide on that date. Parliament doesn't sit till September.'

Joan shrugged. 'There's nothing stopping you from going to Canberra before then.'

Alice stared at her dumbly. 'For lunch? Fly to Canberra for *lunch*? At tax-payers' expense? No, Joan. I couldn't possibly do that. Ring Hayden's office and tell them I couldn't possibly do that.'

Ten minutes later Joan said, 'I spoke to Sue in Minister Hayden's office. She spoke to the Minister and he said that he'd really appreciate you being there because he once spoke with you at dinner when you were in Canberra with Senator Bradley and he was impressed by your knowledge of Arab culture.' She shook her head resignedly. 'I don't think you can refuse.'

Shortly after the election Alice was summoned to a meeting in Melbourne of all the Centre-Left faction members of the Federal Labor Caucus. The Victorian capital was a convenient place for them to meet because not one of them lived north of the 32nd parallel.

She was actually quite excited about the meeting; it meant she was really in the big league now.

In the Commonwealth car from Tullamarine, she perused the meeting agenda. One of the items, indeed the principal item, was the election of the Centre-Left members to be in the new ministry. Their number would be roughly proportionate to the number of C-L members in Caucus. The other two major factions, the Right and the Left, were meeting in other places to pick their own favourites, and the leaders of the three groups would get together in Canberra to endorse the combined list of thirty or so candidates to stand and be elected to the ministry in the Caucus ballot that week. The Prime Minister would then allocate the portfolios.

Of course, there would be the customary two or three non-aligned members or factional malcontents who would, in a quixotic gesture, nominate themselves, but they rarely got more than two or three votes each.

It was widely assumed that, by and large, the existing ministers would be re-elected, with the addition of a few others required to replace those who'd retired.

On arriving at the designated Centre-Left meeting place, Alice alighted from her car and was immediately accosted by a South Australian colleague. He took her aside and muttered in her ear. 'We're dumping Michael Tate.'

'Pardon?' she said.

'We're dumping Michael Tate.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean we're dumping Michael Tate.'

'From the ministry?'

'We're dumping Michael Tate from the ministry. Which language would you like me to say it in?'

The penny dropped. 'You're telling me that I shouldn't vote for Michael for the ministry.'

He nodded.

'But he's good,' she said. 'He's a good minister.'

'I didn't say he wasn't.'

'So who am I supposed to vote for?'

'You vote for all the current C-L ministers, except Tate.' And he then named the man she should support in Tate's place.

She shook her head despairingly. 'Why are we doing this?'

'For strategic reasons.'

She frowned. '*National* strategic reasons?'

He huffed. 'Don't try to be funny.'

She agonised for half an hour, and then did as she'd been told.

Alice's bolt-hole in the hopelessly crowded old Parliament House was on the top floor of the eastern wing, overlooking the House of Representatives rose garden, the tennis court and the recently built detached annex. Her office was just big enough for her desk and chair and another smaller desk and chair, supposedly for a staff member. But, unlike most members and Senators, she didn't anticipate bringing any of her staff to Canberra during parliamentary sitting weeks. She considered that their time was much better spent back in her marginal electorate. Besides, none of them particularly wanted to come and, moreover, she was not averse to opening her own mail and answering her own telephone.

One of her male colleagues said to her, 'But don't you get lonely in your office all by yourself?'

She looked at him as though he were three years old. 'No. Do you?'

'Yes, I do. I like to have someone to talk to.'

Along the same corridor were twenty or so other back-bench offices, whose occupants represented all three major parties and all states and territories. It was quite an intimate

arrangement and she got to know the other Members and their staff quite well through chance encounters outside her door. There was just one near neighbor whose company she didn't welcome – a Labor colleague whom she privately called Louie the Fly. Straight from rubbish tip to you. Whenever she saw him heading in her direction, capped teeth bared in a lascivious smile, she'd pretend to be in a tearing hurry, wave, make an 'Oh, God!' face and rush into her office or down the stairs. She rarely caught the lift up or down for fear of encountering him – either in it or waiting for it.

Directly above her office, in a kind of makeshift extension on the roof, was the Press Gallery. Some of her colleagues, the ones who themselves shamelessly courted journalists, told her that she should go up there and 'connect' with the reporters who covered the Adelaide media. It was what all marginal members did, they said, and a lot who weren't marginal. In over a year she never set foot in the gallery, but always felt a frisson of excitement when some big-deal TV presenter passed her in the corridor. She often fantasised about one of them stopping and saying something like, 'Oh, hello! Aren't you Alice Perry? The member for the oldest electorate in the country? Would you like to come on the show tomorrow night and talk about aged care policy?' But none of them ever did, of course.

The other opportunity she had to hob-nob with journalistic royalty was in the Non-Members' Bar. She usually went with a few colleagues on the last night of a sitting week, there to watch Mungo MacCallum holding court and catch a glimpse of Michelle and Laurie, the two Mikes, Peter, Greg, Kate, Barrie, Heather, Alan and Laura. But they weren't the least bit interested in her.

On the opposite side of Lake Burley Griffin from Parliament House stands the Department of Defence complex known as the Russell Offices. In a large quadrangle in front of it, dominating the vista at the far end of Kings Avenue, there looms an 80 metre-high tapered concrete column, topped by a 10 metre-high stylised concrete eagle with its wings extended skyward to form a V for victory. It was constructed in the early 1950s in the brutalist style then popular with governments and monumental artists, as a memorial expressing the gratitude of the Australian people to the United States of America for its support during World War Two.

When in Canberra, Alice slept on the third floor of one of several blocks of 1960s-vintage one bedroom flats in the suburb of Campbell, immediately behind Defence and the American Eagle. She took great pleasure in telling her father that her flat was in a street

named after Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey, an Australian World War II commander, and a hero of his.

First thing every morning she would dress in old clothes and sneakers, power-walk past the shops to the slopes of Mount Ainslie, and follow a wooded path southward towards Defence. The first time she took this route was on a cold foggy morning in August. Puffing up the hill she was stopped in her tracks by the sight of a terrifying creature hanging motionless in the gloom ahead of her – a giant prehistoric bird perhaps, or an avenging angel. Then she realised that she was looking at the Eagle, close up and personal. After that first unsettling encounter she quite looked forward to greeting it as she passed.

Her flat was tiny, sparsely furnished and sparsely equipped. She didn't have a TV set because most nights the parliament didn't rise until 10.30 and on Wednesday nights, when it got up early at 7.30, the last thing she wanted was TV babble. What she wanted was to escape the babble, to extricate herself from the never-ending, headache-inducing drone of voices – in the chambers, in committee rooms, in party meetings, in the corridors, in the dining rooms, in the electronic media. She wanted to go back to her flat, flop on the sofa, eat fish and chips from the shop around the corner, drink a glass or three of white wine, read a salacious novel and hear not one solitary word uttered until the clock radio woke her at 7 am.

If she tired of her book she could, on most nights, pursue an alternative diversion, namely observing the young man who lived in the adjacent block, in a third floor flat almost exactly opposite hers. He was tall, thin, dark haired and pale skinned – rather delicate-looking really – and he went about his nightly domestic duties completely naked. She knew this because he did so with bright lights on and curtains wide open. The first time she saw him she was quite chuffed – he was her first exhibitionist – but he lost some of his novelty after a while. She thought she caught him watching her one night as she climbed the external stairs to her flat, but she wasn't sure. Anyway, she assumed that she was not the only beneficiary of his display; there must have been a number of other flats exposed to it, but obviously no-one had complained. She rather liked that thought.

She was fairly sure she passed him in the street one morning as she returned from her walk. He wore a business suit and carried a brief-case and was heading towards Defence. She didn't manage to catch his eye, which was rather disappointing because she wanted to be able to say, 'I didn't recognise you with your clothes on.'

At 8.30 am she would lock up the flat and walk down to the Commonwealth Car waiting in the street to take her to Parliament House. She had a high opinion of the Comcar drivers;

they were invariably reliable, polite and protective. When they dropped her at her flat late at night they always waited until she'd walked across the courtyard, climbed the stairs and was safely inside, before they left.

They were also very funny. Sometimes, when they talked to each other on the Comcar radio, they pretended to be World War Two fighter pilots:

'Blue One to Blue Leader. Come in, Blue Leader. Over.'

'Blue Leader to Blue One. What is your position? Over.'

'Five minutes to touchdown, Blue Leader. Over.'

'Roger, Blue One. Any enemy sightings? Over.'

'Car on Kings, Blue Leader. Took evasive action. Over.'

'Jolly good, Blue One. Over and out.'

Her favourite driver was one who often picked her up at Canberra airport at the beginning of a sitting week. He had a very large paunch and always steered the car with one hand only, even when turning sharp corners. He would greet her at the luggage carrousel and take her suitcase. 'Good morning, Mrs Perry. How are we today?'

She'd huff. 'Glad to be here. Sitting weeks are like a holiday for me after working in the electorate.'

He'd open the front passenger door for her, go to the back of the car, heave her luggage into the boot, slam it shut as though he never wanted it to open again, and manoeuvre his bulk into place behind the wheel. 'Home or House?' he'd ask.

'Home first for a few minutes, if that's all right, and then to the House.'

'No worries, Mrs Perry.'

She asked him once how the drivers recognised the newly-elected MPs and Senators. How did they know whom to approach at the airport? He told her that all the drivers, as well as the security guards and attendants at Parliament House, had a book with the mug-shots and names of all the parliamentarians. They called it the Stud Book.

'So I'm in the mares' section, am I?' she asked.

He managed to suppress a smile. 'No, it's in alphabetical order.'

One of the first communications Alice received as the new Member for Holder was an invitation from the Islamic Society of SA Inc to attend the mosque at Parkholme during its celebrations for the *eed-ul-adha*.

Joan showed Alice the invitation and asked, 'What is it exactly?'

Alice read it and opened her mouth wide. 'Oh, wow! It's the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice. It's a very important occasion.' She'd been chuffed to discover during the campaign that there was a mosque in her electorate and had wondered whether she, a woman, would ever set foot in it.

On the day of the feast she was graciously received outside the mosque by two women – one young, one middle-aged – wearing western dress and head scarves. Inside, in a kind of forecourt, the younger woman offered her coffee and cake and explained that the Imam was occupied in the mosque and would come to greet her shortly. She was introduced to a number of other women and one of them, who lived nearby, shook her hand and said in a low voice that she was very pleased to have a woman as her member of parliament.

After a few minutes the Imam emerged with two other men. He approached her, smiling, and introduced himself. Then Alice did what she instinctively did whenever she met someone, some dignitary, for the first time; she extended her hand to be shaken. He looked at it, but didn't take it, leaving her standing stupidly with her hand out. She immediately realised her *faux pas* and lowered her arm, even before one of the women hastily and quietly explained to her that the Imam, or any Muslim man, was not permitted to touch a woman who wasn't a member of his family.

That night after dinner Alice said to her husband, 'You know, I feel quite conflicted about the incident. Yes, I am aware of the Muslim *mores* in this regard, and I should have at least thought twice. But, on the other hand, the Imam is living in Australia, where social practices are different, and I am a person of some standing in the community who was expressly invited to the mosque. Could he not have made some gesture of cultural recognition and shaken my hand?' She huffed. 'God knows I abided by Muslim custom when I was in Jordan – always covered my shoulders, didn't wear slim-fitting trousers, never ventured into the old town without you at my side. If I'd done otherwise I'd have been sworn at.'

Michael nodded slowly. 'Was the Imam embarrassed, do you think?'

'No, I don't think so. But I was – and so were the Muslim women.'

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