

GRAND VISION.

By
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FLYLEAF.

There is a tide in the affairs of men
which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
omitted, all the voyage of their life
is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
and we must take the current when it serves,
or lose our ventures.

William Shakespeare - Julius Caesar, 1V:3

POLITICIANS' FOREWORDS.

The distortion of the democratic function in Australian politics because of party discipline was the very reason I resigned from the Liberal Party and formed The Australian Democrats in 1977, demanding that an essential feature of its structure be that every parliamentary member of the party should not only be entitled to vote but have a basic obligation to vote either according to their conscience or for the interests of their constituents as they perceive them after a sincere consensus seeking discussion with their colleagues.

Author Mike Cole's novel, GRAND VISION, will be criticised by the shallow-minded political commentators of Canberra but will be welcomed by those thinking Australians who hold the old fashioned view that elected politicians should dare to vote in accordance with the interests **of those people who put them into parliament.**

DON CHIPP.

Founder of The Australian Democrats.

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I enjoyed Grand Vision by J.M.P.Cole, which I believe presents an interesting concept in political democracy. Mr. Cole has a deep understanding of the Australian political scene and has tapped into the inequities of the party political system. As an Independent State politician I agree with him that many politicians do not truly represent their constituents but follow the party line.

My battle cry for my foray into State politics was "The People's Voice not the Party's Puppet" and it was very effective. My endorsement of the Beattie Labor Government handed me the balance of power in this State, but I realise that in general Independent politicians are in the political wilderness. I therefore fully endorse Mr Cole's idea of an Independent Party comprising politicians who truly represent their constituents on all matters and vote accordingly in Parliament.

PETER WELLINGTON MLA

Member for Nicklin (Queensland State Parliament)

PROLOGUE.

With the rifle cradled in his arms he sat on top of the high ground alongside the highway where it ran through the cutting two hundred metres from the bridge across Scrubby Creek.

Hidden behind a low sparse bush he was invisible to motorists. His slouch hat had twigs and leaves stitched to it. His face and hands were streaked with dirt. The rifle had been painted in irregular stripes with non-reflective paint, light brown and grey green, the colours of the Australian bush. Hanging from his belt was a mobile telephone.

The time was six forty-two and according to the call two minutes earlier he should have less than a minute to wait.

He settled into a comfortable shooting position, eased off the rifle's safety catch and stared intently down the road to the bend five hundred metres distant.

The seconds ticked slowly away as he waited. The increasing warmth of the sun brought beads of perspiration to his forehead and to the palms of his hands. He dried his forehead under the brim of his hat with his shirtsleeve and wiped his palms on his trouser legs.

The car came round the bend, travelling fast.

He raised the rifle immediately but unhurriedly, knowing that the vehicle would take eleven seconds to travel the three hundred metres to the bridge. He watched it through the telescopic sight, checking description, registration plate and the driver's features.

Lining up the sight on his target he held his breath for steadiness and softly took up the slight slack of the trigger.

When the car reached the thin guide post thirty metres from the bridge he gently squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER 1.

As the red On Air light in the Channel Five studio lit up, Christine Jordan looked straight into the eye of the central television camera.

"Good evening," she said. "I'm Christine Jordan and my first guest tonight is the Prime Minister of Australia, The Right Honourable Rex Marlow." She turned towards Marlow, her long, raven-black hair swirling lightly around the tops of her shoulders. "Welcome to Question Time, Prime Minister," she smiled, masking her loathing.

"Thank you, Christine. It's a pleasure to be here," Marlow replied, feeling perspiration starting to form on his forehead but not wanting to reach for his handkerchief straight away. Already he could feel the back of his shirt becoming clammy under his coat. God, how he hated these TV studio interviews, with the heat generated by the stage lighting enveloping him. He should have pleaded a prior engagement because, apart from the heat and the physical discomfort, it was almost certain this tricky bitch would try to stick a knife or two into him.

When she'd made her request for the interview she'd said she wished to discuss the settlements for the Voyager disaster victims which the Attorney General's department had announced the previous day, but he knew from past experience that once these TV interviewers had you live on camera in front of an Australia-wide viewing audience, they could ask you anything they liked and pin you to the wall with embarrassing questions. He'd been foolish to agree. A weak performance tonight could drop him four or five points in the opinion polls and he couldn't afford that during the run down to the approaching election.

Well, she wasn't going to get the better of him. No smartypants female was going to make him look like a fool. Certainly she was very astute and on top of the TV ratings at present but she was still new in her job whereas he'd been in Federal Parliament for twenty-five years, a Cabinet Minister for nine of them and Prime Minister for these last two.

Christine noticed his uneasiness. That's good, she thought. I love it when they sweat. Well, suffer you swine. Tonight is for me. Tonight is retribution time. "Prime Minister," she said, "yesterday afternoon your Attorney General's department announced that a total of eighty-eight claims for damages arising out of the Voyager disaster were to be settled out of court for some forty-five million dollars. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Christine. Our Attorney General, I'm pleased to say, has worked very hard to bring this matter to a speedy and equitable conclusion and my Government is very happy to be generously compensating those fine men who suffered so grievously."

"I'm sure you are, Prime Minister," said Christine, green eyes flashing, "because these claims seem to have been in the Too Hard Basket for ages. As I understand it, on the tenth of February 1964, THIRTY YEARS AGO, our Australian aircraft carrier, HMAS Melbourne, accidentally rammed and sank our destroyer, HMAS Voyager, during nighttime training manoeuvres off Jervis Bay. Eighty-two young crewmen died and over a hundred others were injured, some very seriously. Is that right?"

"Yes, Christine. I'm not sure of the exact numbers but those were the circumstances."

"But THIRTY YEARS to settle these claims, Prime Minister? That's an awfully long time, isn't it?"

There it was. The first of the knives. He'd sensed all along that this bitch would try to stab him. He squirmed a little in his chair and patted the perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief. He could feel it forming all over his big bloated body.

"Christine, our Australian Labor Party was not in government when the sinking occurred," said Marlow. "Our opponents, the Liberal/National coalition, were in power at the time and for most of the next twenty years. They blundered around for ages, holding two Royal Commissions to find out who was to blame. Then all the legal eagles came into the picture and the Libs thought it was too messy and they shelved it. They didn't care about those poor devils."

"Well, what happened when Labor came back into power? You were a Cabinet Minister then, weren't you? Why did it take another eleven years? Thirty years after the sinking occurred."

He could almost see the knife in her hand. He could almost feel its cold, sharp point pricking the skin between his ribs. Perspiration was soaking his clothing. He reached again for his handkerchief. He knew there was no valid excuse. Thirty years was a national disgrace. He'd just have to keep talking around and around the subject without ever answering the question.

"Christine," he said, trying to sound as composed as possible, "the only thing that matters is that my Government has compensated those fine men very generously. These claims average more than half a million dollars each. That's a very satisfying result for those fine men and I'm sure they're all very grateful."

"But THIRTY YEARS, Prime Minister?"

"Over half a million dollars each, Christine. That's what we've given them."

"But they should have been paid much sooner, shouldn't they?"

"Christine, when we took over from the Libs, the country was in a mess. We settled these claims very generously and as quickly as possible. We really looked after those fine deserving men. Over half a million dollars each."

Christine looked piercingly at him. A vision of her dead father, huddled in his wheelchair, flashed before her eyes. "I find that a very remarkable statement, Prime Minister," she said, "when I have here a note from you to the Attorney General dated two years ago, and authenticated by a handwriting expert as being in your own handwriting, which says, and I quote, Jim, put off these Voyager claims as long as possible. They're just a mob of whinging bludgers anyway, and signed, Rex. Would you like to comment on this, Prime Minister?" she added, holding up the note while Channel Five flashed a transcript on the screen.

For a moment or two Marlow was speechless. Hell! How had she got hold of that? Why hadn't Jim destroyed it? His body felt paralysed, his mind almost a blank. Then twenty-five years of parliamentary experience and training came to his aid.

"Christine, that's obviously a forgery," he lied, straightening up in his chair and striving to sound believable. "I know absolutely nothing about it."

"Well, Prime Minister, we might leave it to our viewers to decide on that," said Christine. "Thank you for speaking with me this evening."

And on that cue, Channel Five went to a commercials break.

Mark Radford, tall, fair-haired, walked out of the National Australia Bank premises in East Street and headed for where his Jaguar XJS Coupe was parked. He had just deposited to his current account the largest cheque he had ever personally seen, after he and his partner, Trevor Johnson, had sold their software company to one of the southern giants.

He knew he would miss Trevor and their daily and nightly involvement in the business but the deal had been too good to even consider refusing. It was nine years now since he'd said to Trevor over a beer one day in Yeppoon, well, if there's that much money in it why don't we start up our own company. Nine years of hard, grinding, persistent effort. Longer than he'd stayed in any job and in any town since Tracey had died.

Together they'd forged a highly successful business, Trevor providing the technical expertise and Mark the commercial knowledge and marketing flair. After a slow inauspicious start in a tiny shop in North Rockhampton, they'd picked up several good service accounts and the business had started to flourish. Twelve months later they'd moved into larger premises and were employing four people. Now, at their time of selling, Rocky Resolutions was a multi-million dollar business.

He looked at his watch. A little after three thirty. Time to go back to his unit and start packing. Also he'd ring his brother, Barry, in Townsville to let him know he'd be coming up there for a few days. He'd ring the Aquarius On The Beach as well, to book himself in and he'd ring Ma and The Old Feller at Kooralbyn, tell them the news and that he'd be down there in about a fortnight for a few weeks.

He could imagine the reaction at Kooralbyn. His mother would be ecstatic about having him home for a while but worried that he'd sold the business and didn't have a job. Several million dollars in the bank would not cancel out her fear of him being unemployed in these hard times with 10% of the workforce, nearly a million people, looking unsuccessfully for work.

She was unbelievable. A real sweetie, but definitely unbelievable. He chuckled softly to himself.

In his orchard in Kooralbyn Valley, near Beaudesert, south of Brisbane, Bruce Radford was spraying his fruit trees to shield them from the dreaded fruit fly. With goggles, protective clothing and spray pump he looked like a typical hobby orchardist. He didn't look at all the type of person to be planning the overthrow of the Federal Government and major alterations to the nation's electoral system.

"Bruce! Afternoon tea!"

He turned round. Lilla was standing in the shade of the scarlet covered Poinciana at the rear of their house.

"OK," he called back. "Coming now."

He trudged back from the orchard and joined her in the garden room, a pergola-covered paved area on the western side of their low set brick and tiled home. With its slatted roof, which could be opened or closed, it was a wonderfully cool place on summer days. Today was hot and dry but their garden room, with its luxuriant tropical plants, was a cool, moist haven.

"How's the spraying coming along?" asked Lilla, handing him his large mug of white tea. At sixty-four she was a good-looking woman who had obviously been beautiful in her younger days. After years of fighting the greying process with colour rinses her hair was now completely white and waved and curled to her shoulders. Bruce called her his Snow Queen.

"I should have it finished today," he said. He sipped his tea and stared out across the valley. The view was breathtakingly beautiful. The valley browned off during the winter months from cold weather, frosts and sparse rainfall but now, after several months of storms and warm weather, the lakes were full and the grass was lush and green.

"I was thinking while I was spraying," said Bruce, "what a great job that Christine Jordan did on Rex Marlow last night. Nailed him to the woodwork, didn't she?"

"She certainly embarrassed him," said Lilla. "I don't think I've ever seen him so nonplussed before."

"She'd make a great Prime Minister," he mused. "Just the person to head up my new Independents' Party, kick out today's dreadful government and get rid of our disastrous two-party system."

He grinned at Lilla.

"Don't tell me you're on your hobby horse again," she said, raising her eyebrows. "I couldn't stand another session on the wrongs of the country and how to fix them. Let's just have a nice cup of tea and look at the view."

Before Bruce could reply, the telephone began ringing in the lounge room.

Lilla went to answer it. Their married daughter, Alison, rang regularly, as did their son Barry's wife, Leanne, while their elder son, Mark, who was still single, rang at infrequent intervals. Apart from them, most of the calls were from Lilla's women friends in the valley or from a handful of old timers in Brisbane and elsewhere.

He began thinking about Christine Jordan again and about his Grand Vision but he kept one ear cocked to hear who was calling.

"Mark! How lovely of you to ring!"

He could hear the excitement in Lilla's voice and his heartbeat quickened. He put his mug down on the table, rose stiffly to his feet, and went to join her in the lounge room. This was quite an occasion. Mark hadn't rung since he'd holidayed with them several months ago.

On his drive from Rockhampton to Townsville, Mark Radford was not in a hurry and the olive-green XJS cruised along comfortably with the speedo needle hovering around the hundred mark. He reached Mackay a little after midday and filled up with petrol at one of the numerous service stations on Nebo Road. He ate a hamburger and drank a mug of coffee in its cafe and then took off again.

He could have arranged to meet some of his old friends from the Racecourse Mill, where he'd worked for a couple of months several years before, but he'd decided to give them a miss today. They would have wanted to have a beer or two ... or more, but he never drank alcohol when he was driving long distances. He would spend an evening with them on his way back south to Kooralbyn. Probably stop at Bundaberg for a day or two also.

The Bruce Highway was almost like home to him. For twelve years he'd travelled up and down it and worked in many of the towns from Brisbane to Cairns. Today, as he headed ever northward, with nothing to do but watch the road and the speedo needle, memories came flooding back.

It was just on 5.00 pm when he slowed at the sixty K speed limit sign for the run into Townsville. The Friday afternoon traffic was thickening as he wended his way through the centre of town, heading for the beach.

The fourteen storey Aquarius hotel is on The Strand, which runs from Ross Creek to Kissing Point, and he'd told Barry he'd check into his suite first, ring to confirm his arrival and then drive up to Barry's house. Barry wouldn't be home from the factory when he rang but Leanne and the girls would be there.

When he picked up the telephone in his suite and rang Barry's number his watch was showing 5.27 pm. He was quite surprised when Barry himself answered the call. He was shocked when he found out why.

At the time Mark Radford was slowing for the run into Sarina, around eleven thirty in the morning, Rex Marlow, in his Canberra office, was ranting at his Deputy Prime Minister, Len Straun.

"These ratings are shocking, Len," he stormed. "The party's down to 37% with the Libs up to 44 and my own rating's down to 19. I've dropped eight points since that bitch hit me on Wednesday night. Damn her! We've got to fix her somehow, Len, or we're goners at the next election."

"It's certainly not too good at the moment, Rex," said Len Straun quietly.

"Not too good! It's a bloody disaster! We've got to do something about her. Any ideas?"

"Well, there's not much we can do, except perhaps don't do any more interviews with her."

"What! Just go away and hide? Come on now. Look what she did to Bill Williams when he did that. She crucified him night after night for not being willing to speak with her. And she's made goats out of three others of our Ministers lately with leaked information, like she hit me with."

"Yes, she's a major problem. We're going to have to find out the source of those leaks."

"And quick smart, Len. We can't afford another disaster like Wednesday night. And why Jim didn't destroy that note of mine is beyond comprehension. I've told him one more slip and he's out! Stupid bastard!"

"Well, I'll organise an operation to try to find the source or sources of the leaks straight away, Rex. If we can close off her supply we should nullify her."

"I doubt it. Not completely. We've got to go further than that. We've got to get her off the air ... one way or another."

"But how?"

Marlow's face tightened into an evil grin. "Never you mind," he snarled. "I've got a few plans for this bitch. Now, get out of here. I've got a couple of phone calls to make to get things started."

That Friday evening, after Mark Radford rang his brother, Barry, from the Aquarius hotel, all the television channels carried segments in their news bulletins about the closure of the Anderson's Clothing Company in Townsville. Two of them also had five minute allocations in their later current affairs shows while Channel Five devoted the whole of its half-hour Question Time program to the closure.

The news had broken mid-morning with a media release in Townsville by the company's Managing Director and had spread quickly throughout Australia.

As soon as it came to her ears, Christine Jordan commandeered Channel Five's Citation 3 jet, organized her special camera crew and flew straight to Townsville.

Prior to landing, and with permission from Air Traffic Control, they circled the city and suburban areas and shot several minutes of aerial views showing Castle Hill, the main commercial area, Magnetic Island, the Breakwater Casino and as far inland as James Cook University, the Lavarach Barracks army establishment and the three thousand foot Mount Stuart with the local television and radio stations' transmission masts on its rugged summit. They also showed close-ups of the Anderson's Clothing Company premises spreading over several hectares just south of Ross River.

After they'd landed, Christine stepped out of the aircraft's air-conditioned interior into the searing afternoon heat of a typical North Queensland summer day. It was like standing in front of the open door of a blast furnace. Her senior pilot, Jim Landers, helped her down the aircraft's folding steps.

"Welcome to the tropics, Christine," he grinned.

Mark Radford grabbed his younger brother in a bear hug. "I'm so sorry, Barry," he said. He turned to Leanne and gave her a friendly hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I told you he was a rotten accountant," he joked. He then picked up their two daughters in turn, Belinda, aged six and Roseanne, nearly two years younger, kissed them, hugged them to him, twirled them around in the air and put them down again, squealing with delight.

As he followed Barry and Leanne through their house to the covered patio at the rear with its panoramic view overlooking Cleveland Bay, the two girls pulled at his hands, jumping up and down with excitement at seeing him again.

"Daddy's on TV! Daddy's on TV!" they both shrieked, each one trying to be the loudest.

"On TV, is he?" Mark asked. "He must be very important?"

"Oh no," bubbled Belinda. "He's not important now! He's just got the sack!"

"Daddy's been sacked! Daddy's been sacked!" screeched Roseanne. "Isn't it great! Isn't it great! Now he'll be home all the time to play with us."

Leanne moved in and rescued him. "Now, girls, quieten down. Uncle Mark and Daddy and I want to watch Question Time on the portable and if you two are very quiet and still you can watch also. And after that it's bath time."

Barry handed Leanne and Mark glasses of ice-cold beer and turned on the portable television set. The Channel Five weather forecast was just finishing. There followed some advertisements and station promotions and then the aerial scenes of Townsville, shot from the Citation 3 jet that day, while Christine Jordan's voice introduced the program.

"Good evening," said Christine. "Welcome to Question Time. I'm Christine Jordan and tonight I'm speaking to you from Townsville, the largest city in North Queensland, where today a very sad occurrence has taken place ... an occurrence which should never have happened ... brought about by conditions which should never have existed ... conditions which have arisen through the stupidity and short-sightedness of successive Federal Governments ... our governments ... the protectors of our people ... of you and me."

The aerial scenery speeded up a little and then slowed again as the views of the Anderson's Clothing Company factory came on screen.

"This scene," she continued, "is the premises of Anderson's Clothing Company, which is about to cease business after sixty years of trading."

The aerial views vanished and Christine Jordan appeared on the screen, filmed in front of the impressive main entrance to the administration building.

"This morning," she said, "Mr Keith Anderson, Managing Director of Anderson's Clothing, announced to the staff and subsequently to the media that the company would cease manufacturing this afternoon and expected to wind up all its operations within the next few weeks. This is a shattering blow to Townsville, where the company employed some four hundred of its total staffing of around four hundred and fifty throughout Australia. Mr Anderson has agreed to talk with me about the circumstances leading to what must have been a very sad decision."

Christine turned away from the camera and walked slowly through the entrance doors, continuing to speak as she did so. "I will later be talking to several now ex-staff members," she said, "and to the Mayor of Townsville, several leading business people and members of the general public and finally with the founder of the company and still its Chairman of Directors, Mr Ted Anderson."

The scene changed and now Christine was seated in a large office at an oval, glass topped coffee table. Two men in light grey slacks with white long sleeved business shirts open at their necks also sat around the table facing the camera.

Mark Radford recognized the fair-haired Keith Anderson. The other man was his brother, Barry.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said Christine, turning to face the camera, "with me now are Mr Keith Anderson, Managing Director of Anderson's Clothing and his General Manager, Mr Barry Radford."

As she introduced them the camera zoomed in for close-ups of each man. It then went back to wider angle encompassing the whole group as Christine turned to speak to Keith Anderson.

"Mr Anderson," she said, "for the benefit of our viewers, would you like to tell us briefly about the origin of this company and its great history before we discuss what has brought about its sad demise."

"Well, Christine, this is really just the story of sixty years of one person's life, my grandfather, and of the people who worked with him."

Keith Anderson then went on to outline the interwoven history of Teddy Anderson and the company he'd founded during the Great Depression. A company which portrayed the hopes, aspirations, and indomitable spirit of its employees as well as its owners.

"So I suppose, Christine," he concluded, "you could say that the company sold its products to, employed and was truly representative of the Great Aussie Battlers. And that's the main reason why my grandfather, who's a lovely old fellow, is so upset and disappointed. He feels for his friends - our employees - not for himself."

"Yes. I can well appreciate that," said Christine. "Now, tell me, Mr Anderson, has the company been in financial trouble for a long time or has some sudden catastrophe caused this closure?"

"No. It's been a gradual deterioration over a number of years."

"Very well then," said Christine. "Let's get right down to the nuts and bolts. What went wrong? And when?"

Keith Anderson leaned forward pugnaciously in his chair. "When I joined the company fifteen years ago we were going great," he said, "but the conditions that existed then have been changed ... mostly by our Governments. Many Federal Government decisions over the last ten to fifteen years have crippled numerous other businesses as well as our own."

He then explained how reductions in tariffs on cheap imported goods from very low labour cost third world countries made it completely impossible for Australian manufacturers to be financially competitive.

"Also," he concluded, "there has been the effect of high and increasing unemployment. We have always sold low cost, sturdy basic clothing and our market has been at the cheaper end of the spectrum. And it has mostly been the poorer people who have lost their jobs during these last ten years - the people who used to buy our products but now can't afford to buy anything but food. When you've got nearly a million people, ten percent of the workforce, unemployed and a Government which won't protect its own industries and their employees' jobs against floods of cheap imports then you have a country in very bad shape. You really can't imagine such stupidity, can you?"

"No," said Christine, very softly. "You really can't."

She stood up, terminating the interview. The two men stood also. Christine shook their hands. "Thank you for speaking with me," she said. She turned towards the camera.

"And now," she continued, "I am about to speak with some of the staff who have just lost their jobs ... and their hopes for the future ... courtesy of our Federal Government."

Out in the huge employees car park, under the shade of large, spreading, scarlet Poinciana and pink Cassia trees, a large crowd of the company's ex-employees had assembled. The news had spread like wildfire that Christine Jordan from Question Time was coming soon to speak with them and although they had all been paid off shortly after lunch and were free to go home, over two hundred of them had waited patiently here in the stifling afternoon heat to see her.

As Christine came round the corner of the Administration building and into view of the car park multitude, the chattering of the crowd ceased and a great roar of welcome sent birds fluttering from the trees.

She looked a vision of loveliness in her cream linen slack suit with long button through V necked sleeveless jacket, elegant Cuban heeled bronze and cream sandals, little round gold earrings and with a thin gold chain at her throat. As she walked slowly among them, her long black hair, worn loosely around her shoulders, glinted in the sunlight as it bobbed and swirled with her every movement.

"How long have you worked for the company, madam?" Christine asked an elderly lady in the first group.

"Oh, I've been with 'em for near on forty years, luv," said the woman.

"You must be bitterly disappointed at losing your job after all that time?" Christine asked kindly.

"More disappointed with that damn Government what caused it," spat out the older lady.

Christine turned to a younger woman whose eyes were red from crying. She looked no more than a teenager and clutched a sodden hanky in her right hand.

"And have you been with the company very long, dear?" asked Christine.

"Only two years," sniffed the girl. "And now I've got no job and a baby at home and my husband's out of work too. I just don't know what we'll do now."

Christine moved on to group after group, a word or two here, a question or two there, her warm smile and obvious sympathy showing she cared deeply for their plight.

"Did the company really have to close?" she asked a fifty-year-old man from the Accounts Department.

"Oh, yes," he replied instantly. "They had no option. They held on as long as they could, just to save our jobs for us. Old Teddy could have closed three years ago and saved himself millions of dollars, but he kept going, just for us. Now all he's got is that old house at Pallarenda and whatever few thousands they save out of the ruins."

"What?" Christine was amazed. "You mean he's not a very rich man? That he sacrificed millions of dollars just to help all you employees?"

"Teddy? Rich? Geez, that's a laugh," said a grizzled old yardman. "He never took much out of the company. Just enough for him and his family to live pretty well and to shout a few beers for us staff after work. One of us, he was."

"And how about Mr Keith Anderson?" Christine was curious now. "Is he like his grandfather?"

"Yair. But in a different way. He's sort of got more polish. You know. Went to Uni and all that, whereas Teddy never finished primary school. But Keith's a good bloke just the same and he comes down the canteen and buys a few stubbies for us every Friday arvo. He used to, that is."

Christine turned to another group, mostly women and girls from the machine rooms.

"Why did the company have to close?" she asked a heavily built woman perspiring freely in the sweltering afternoon heat.

"Cos the bloody Government keeps letting in all them cheap Asian clothes," she stormed. "Aven't got the brains of a headless chook, they aven't."

"And they won't do nothing about putting taxes on the imports, so we can keep our jobs," said another.

"They're giving all our jobs to them Asians overseas. Soon we Australian workers won't have no jobs nowhere."

"Well, what can we do about it?" Christine asked cunningly.

"Sack the bloody Government!" yelled a voice just outside the group.

"Yair! Sack the bastards!" screamed another.

Very quickly more and more voices joined the chant until the whole assembly was shouting in unison, "Sack the Government! Sack the Government! Sack the Government!"

Christine's cameraman, who had been filming mostly over her shoulder or from her side, catching close-ups of the people she spoke to, now backed away and gradually wide-angled the crowd into the middle distance until he had the whole assembly in view, framed by the scarlet Poincianas behind them and the pink Cassias on each side, while the chanting swelled to a roar and continued and continued.

On the screen, Channel Five used four minutes of the car park coverage and then went to commercials. Next they showed brief sections of Christine's interviews with the Mayor of Townsville, several leading business people and two minutes of short questions and answers with passers-by in the city's mall.

It was quite obvious that the whole population was shocked and saddened by the closure. For a city of just over a hundred thousand people, to lose four hundred jobs was an economic disaster, particularly during a recession with an already alarmingly high level of unemployment.

Another commercials break followed and then the station screened her interview with Teddy Anderson for their closing segment.

Christine Jordan sat in a cushioned cane chair on the concrete-floored patio of Teddy Anderson's modest, low-set bungalow at Cape Pallarenda.

She felt the tranquillity of the surroundings enveloping her. She looked across the beachfront road at the peaceful scene of small wavelets lapping on the sand with the large bulk of Magnetic Island a handful of kilometres across the bay.

To her left, beyond the Quarantine Station, the cape jutted out towards the island, seemingly only a stone's-throw away. The sea breeze was beginning to die as the late afternoon moved onward towards sunset. It was still very hot, but nowhere near the furnace-like, exhausting heat in the factory car park that midafternoon.

Teddy Anderson, tall, thin, eighty-six years old, still quite active but now slowing in his movements, came carefully through the fly-screened front door with glasses and a large jug of iced water.

He placed the jug and glasses gently down on the small coffee table. He moved slowly around the table, sat down in another cushioned cane chair next to Christine and poured water into the glasses. Christine accepted one gratefully. Her camera crew kept working. Theirs were thirsty jobs.

"Thank you, Mr Anderson," said Christine. "I was just dying for a cool drink. It gets very hot and steamy here in the tropics, doesn't it?"

"It sure does, girlie," he answered. "Specially this time of the year. Great place in midwinter though. Hardly ever need a jumper."

"No. I suppose not."

She paused, her gaze sweeping the view from the tip of the cape across to the island and beyond to the massive Cape Cleveland on the far side of the bay. The air was so clear, the sky so blue, with just a few puffy white clouds.

"This is a beautiful spot," she said. "How long have you lived here?"

His forehead crinkled in thought. "About thirty years. Since a few months after Colin, that's my son who died, was married. Jane and I had just over two years here before she died also. She got cancer, you know."

"Yes, I heard." Christine's voice was very soft.

"She loved this house, and the view. We used to sit out here in the evenings, just looking at it ... watching kids playing on the beach. It's a lovely place. We had two great years here ... just the two of us."

He was silent for a few moments. Then he straightened perceptively in his chair and looked at Christine again. His eyes were a little misty but his voice was firm.

"Anyway, that's not really what you came to talk about, is it? Let's get on with it. What would you like to know?"

"Well, first of all, I suppose today has been somewhat of a tragedy for you, with the closure of your business?"

"No," he said. "Not really. Not for me. It's a tragedy for the staff and it's a set back for young Keith and Barry, but they'll move on. They're two good boys. They'll be OK. But I'm very sorry for all the others."

"The employees?"

"Yes. Some of them have worked with me for more than forty years and those older ones will never get another job. Not nowadays. Their lives are over. Their working lives I mean. They're going to spend the rest of their lives in poverty. That's what's a tragedy."

"It certainly is," Christine agreed. "Still, you must feel very proud to have created and built up such a successful business during your lifetime. Did you ever envisage, when you started off, Mr Anderson, that you would be employing over four hundred people sixty years later?"

"Hey! What's all this Mr Anderson business, girlie? Call me Teddy. That's what everyone around here calls me. OK?"

"OK, Teddy," she smiled.

"And as for being proud and all that. No, I'm not proud. It wasn't me who made this company such a success. It was all those friends of mine who worked with me. In the early days, when we were a small operation, we had a lot of fun doing what we did. About a dozen of us originally ... all young girls and boys ... having fun, working our guts out and making a quid. None of us ever made a fortune but we all had food to eat and a few beers on Friday nights."

He took a sip from his glass and stared unseeingly out over the bay.

"And we never really had any forward planning back then," he said. "When more people wanted our clothes we just brought in more people to help make them. The company just grew by itself in those days. We didn't plan it. Not back then."

He paused again and took another sip.

"But it changed a bit when Colin took over. He was a real smart kid. It mushroomed while he was alive. And afterwards, when Keith took over also. He's another whiz-bang. He's got brains, that boy ... and guts. Anyway, I'm rambling. What was it you asked me again?"

His eyes twinkled as he smiled at Christine.

A really loveable old fellow, she thought. No wonder all the staff adored him. She smiled back at him.

"You've answered it all, Teddy," she said. "But now I have a hard one for you. Four or five years ago you were a very cashed-up company, and today you're gone. What went wrong?"

He looked across the bay. He was silent for what seemed a long time.

She was conscious of the length of the pause and was on the point of asking him again when he started.

"Everything's different now, girlie," he said quietly. "There're too many rules and regulations now. If I tried today to walk the streets begging for old clothes and material and me and some mates were turning them into new clothes, working twelve hours a day under a high set house in the suburbs, the Council and the Unions would come and close me down. It's a free country here, until you try to do something. You can do what you like as long as you do what you're told. You know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"You're right, though. We were a cashed-up company a while back. I should've closed down then and gone fishing. That's what I should've done."

"Why didn't you?"

"I made one big mistake. I thought the Government would see and understand what was happening to this industry. See the big, increasing flood of cheap Asian imports undercutting our Australian factories and threatening our jobs and livelihoods. But they didn't. None of them. Or else they didn't care."

"Yes."

"I thought, and so did all the others, that the Government would increase tariffs on these imports to protect our own people's jobs, like all the other countries protect their own industries. But they didn't. They reduced them! Can you imagine that? They're stark raving mad! The lot of them!"

"Did you talk to the Government?"

"Talk to them? You bet we talked to them! Individually and as an industry. And do you know what they said?"

"No."

"They told us we had to learn to become competitive! Some Asian manufacturers' wages to an employee are as low as two to three Australian dollars a day! Our rates are close to a hundred! And the Federal Government says we have to learn to become competitive! To get smarter! They need their heads read. They're a mob of idiots. The whole damn pack of them."

"But are other Australian companies in the same trouble?"

He looked at her in obvious disbelief. Then he laughed softly.

"You've gotta be joking," he said. "Don't you remember a year ago the House of Jenyns closed its factories in Ipswich and Wynnum and took their manufacturing offshore. Four hundred Australian employees lost their jobs. Their jobs went overseas."

"Yes. I do remember now."

"And eight or nine years ago, Stubbies Clothing, in Brisbane, employed some seven hundred people and now they're down to about a hundred. And they'll close soon. You see if they don't. There's another seven hundred jobs of ours given to other countries! No! It wasn't us! It was the stupid, rotten Government! They have single-handedly almost wiped out our industry!"

He looked away from her, his eyes moistening, his head drooping a little.

Christine felt for him in her heart. She must finish now. She didn't want to upset him any further. She must be almost out of time anyway.

"Teddy," she said gently, "thank you very much for speaking with me. I really enjoyed meeting you and letting our viewers meet the man who made the company. Tell me, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going fishing," he said, brightening. "See that young boy down there on the beach, with the two rods and the creel and the tackle-box? That's young Eddie. Keith's boy. My great grandson. He's named after me. We fish for an hour every sunset off the beach here and then Keith picks him up. He doesn't catch much yet, but I'm teaching him ... just like I taught all the others ... Keith, Colin ... and Jane."

He rose stiffly from his chair and walked with Christine to the front gate.

"Good bye, Teddy," she said kindly.

"Good bye, girlie."

He turned away, crossed the road and wandered slowly down to the beach. At eighty-six he was in no hurry.

The young, curly-haired eight-year-old turned to meet him. They hugged each other. They picked up the rods and gear and trudged off along the beach in the last of the dwindling sunlight. An old man and a young boy - gone fishing.

The cameraman gradually faded them away into the distance with his zoom lens as Christine signed off the program.

CHAPTER 2.

In the New Horizons restaurant on the fourteenth floor of the Aquarius On The Beach hotel in Townsville, Barry, Leanne, their two daughters and Mark had a table alongside the large plate-glass windows overlooking the bay. They were lingering over coffee, cheese and liqueurs and the two youngsters were finishing off chocolate topping covered ice-creams when a voice broke into their conversations.

"Celebrating? On a day like today, Mr Radford?"

Barry, sitting alongside the aisle, looked up, as did Leanne sitting next to him. Mark, across the table from Leanne and facing towards the Cocktail Bar, had to turn to see who was speaking. At first he didn't know who she was. Then recognition came to him.

On the screen Christine Jordan always looked stunning. In real life she was something to dream about. Her oyster-grey sleeveless silk dress with scalloped neckline and swirling skirt was complemented by an amethyst necklace and matching earrings. She wore very little make-up. Just a touch of rose lipstick and soft eye shadow. The subdued lighting from the recessed ceiling fitting above her head glinted and sparkled through her jet-black hair, shimmering with her every slightest movement.

Mark sat frozen in surprised appreciation as Barry pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Hello, Christine," he said. "No. We're not celebrating. Just a family reunion." He turned towards Leanne. "This is my wife, Leanne, my two daughters, Belinda and Roseanne and my brother, Mark. Everyone ... meet Christine Jordan."

As all the Hellos and How Are You's floated back and forth, Mark also pushed back his chair and stood up. From his upright position he realized she wasn't as tall as he'd imagined from her television appearances. Probably about a hundred and sixty-five to a hundred and seventy centimetres.

"Are you on your own?" asked Barry. "Would you like to join us for coffee and a liqueur? I presume you've already eaten?"

She paused for a moment. Why not, she thought. They seem a nice family.

"Yes," she said. "Thank you. That would be very nice. But I can't stay long. I have some phone calls to make before it gets too late."

Mark pulled back the spare chair next to him and she sat down.

"Thank you," she smiled.

He signalled to a passing waiter. "What would you like to drink?" he asked her.

She surveyed the table scene quickly. There was an empty Houghton's White Burgundy bottle in an ice bucket. The wine glasses were empty but used. Leanne was half-way through what looked like a normal cup of white coffee and had not yet touched a liqueur and the men had each drunk a little of what appeared to be Irish Coffees and glasses of Port. Leanne was almost finished some sort of sweets dish - probably the Black Forest Terrine, the little girls were massacring chocolate sauce covered ice-creams and Barry and his brother had made inroads into a cheese platter.

"I'd love a white coffee and a Tia Maria, thank you," she said to Mark, who relayed her choices to the hovering waiter.

"Are you the TV lady?" asked Belinda, wide eyed.

"My Daddy's on TV! My Daddy's on TV!" bubbled Roseanne through an ice-creamy mouth.

"Yes. I'm one of the TV ladies," said Christine, smiling at the two little girls, "and I know your Daddy was on TV this evening. Did you watch us talking with each other on Question Time?"

"Oh yes," said Belinda. "And we saw Mr Anderson and all the people at the factory and in the Mall and Grandpa Teddy and ... and ... everything."

"Daddy got the sack! Daddy got the sack!" said Roseanne.

"Now, girls, quieten down and eat your ice-creams," said Leanne. "They think you're just wonderful," she said to Christine, "and they both want to be television hostesses when they grow up."

"You really are beautiful. Not just on TV," said Belinda.

"Why, thank you. That's very sweet of you," smiled Christine. "My goodness," she said to the grown ups, "this really is a nice town. I must come again."

"Is this your first time in Townsville?" Mark asked.

"Yes. I've never been north of Maryborough before today."

"And are you staying long or just overnighting?"

"I was just overnighting. The company jet's going back tomorrow morning but I've decided to stay for the weekend, see some of the sights and catch a commercial flight back on Monday morning."

"You must see a lot of Australia, flying here and flying there all the time," said Leanne.

"Not as much as you'd think. Mostly I'm inside studios and at airports and on freeways and at hotels in the capital cities. I haven't seen much of the countryside or the tourist attractions as yet. And, of course, I've only been hosting Question Time for a few months."

"What were you doing before Question Time started?" asked Barry.

"I hosted our current affairs program for the previous twelve months and prior to that I was just one of the many helpers and hinderers in our Brisbane studio."

"And where are your flight crew and camera crew tonight?" asked Mark.

"They all went to the casino."

"And you're not a gambler?"

"No. I have nothing against people gambling, if they can afford it. But it's never interested me. I'm too canny with my money. And I've seen how it wrecks a lot of people's lives. You see and learn a lot about life in my job. And I hate the way our Governments encourage gambling ... just for the sake of the income it brings them. Ruining people's lives for the sake of the mighty dollar. They don't care about people, only about money ... and power."

Later that evening Mark opened the door of his suite, turned on the light and closed the door behind him. He moved around the room restlessly for a while, did some unpacking from his suitcases, turned on the TV but didn't like the programs and switched it off.

He undressed, put on his pyjama shorts and took a stubby bottle of beer from the refrigerator, which room service had stocked for him earlier.

He opened the glass door to the balcony and stepped out into the warm night air.

As he stood against the railings, looking out into the darkness, the lights of Picnic Bay and Arcadia on Magnetic Island twinkled at him from across the water. To his right the Casino Hotel was a blaze of light. Down at street level, twelve floors below him, a group of people walked along The Strand, talking loudly among themselves. A taxi emerged from the hotel driveway, turned left and accelerated away towards Kissing Point.

There was activity all around him, even though desultory, but up on his balcony he seemed quite detached - separated from the world. He took a swig from his bottle and channelled his thoughts back to the events of the afternoon and evening.

He'd felt quite shattered when Barry had told him the bad news. The kid deserved better. He'd worked hard all through his schooling and at University and had sweated his guts out at Anderson's. But now, just when he should have been starting to reap substantial rewards for his efforts, the company had collapsed. He hoped he'd get another

position quickly, after the company had finally been wound up, but it wouldn't be easy, with unemployment hovering around ten percent.

His mind drifted then to their dinner. It had been a nice quiet family evening. He and Barry had always been the best of friends - all their lives. And Leanne was a great girl. He'd liked her from the very first time they'd met - at that party at Keith Anderson's home, when she and Barry had become engaged. She'd bounced up to him in jeans and a floppy T-shirt with her ash-blond hair bobbing every which way, given him a warm kiss and a big hug and said, so you're going to be my big brother-in-law ... goody! She was a real pearl.

Yes, this evening had been great. So good to be with them all again. Almost like coming home.

And that Christine Jordan had been nice too. A very interesting and intelligent lady, easy to talk with and a raving beauty. He'd been very conscious of her sitting right alongside him at the table, her black hair glistening each time she turned her head to speak to him, her green eyes sparkling when she laughed and just the faintest trace of some mysterious perfume wafting around her. He could still smell it in his nostrils. It seemed to linger.

Mark finished the bottle. He felt like bed now. He was golfing with Barry at eleven tomorrow morning and there was a barbecue at Barry's house in the evening. Should be a good day.

From the Aquarius On The Beach hotel along The Strand to Kissing Point is roughly a kilometre and Mark Radford, with the long, loping gait of a distance runner, took a little under four minutes for each lap. His normal daily routine, when staying at the Aquarius, was to do six laps - three times up and back - starting at about 6.00 AM each day. After that he would swim a dozen or so leisurely lengths in the hotel pool, have a shower and shave in his suite and then have breakfast in the New Horizons Restaurant.

The morning after his dinner with Barry, Leanne and their children was no different at the start, but when he was almost back to the hotel at the end of his fourth lap he saw, a hundred metres away, a slim, girlish figure cross The Strand from the Aquarius and start walking briskly towards him.

In jade denim shorts, a baggy white T-shirt, a raffia hat and white joggers, Christine Jordan was also out for her daily constitutional.

"Good morning, Christine," Mark said, coming to a stop as they met. "You're up bright and early today."

She stopped also.

"Yes, Mark. But you've obviously beaten me to it."

"Are you walking to Kissing Point?" he asked, waving his hand in its general direction.

"Is that what it's called? That bluff at the end of this road?"

"Yes."

"What an unusual name. I suppose there's some history behind it?" she smiled.

Mark smiled also. "I've never known," he said, "but I could hazard a guess."

They both laughed, looking into each other's eyes.

Mark felt his heart speed up a little. "Mind if I walk with you?" he asked.

"Not at all. But I do only walk. I don't run."

"That's fine. I've run four laps already. That'll do me for this morning. I'll be walking ten to twelve kilometres on the golf course with Barry from eleven o'clock."

They set off together, Christine at her normal brisk pace and Mark keeping level.

"So you're a golfer, are you?" she asked.

"Yes. I love the game, but I'm not very good."

"And how good is not very good?"

"Well, I'm on a twelve handicap but I have trouble playing to it."

"Sounds rather good to me. Most of the golfers I know are around twenty or well over."

"Do you play?" Mark asked.

"No. I've never tried. I'm not a very sporty type."

They were silent for a minute or two, each with their own thoughts.

"I'm glad you joined us for a while last night," he said at last, turning and looking at her.

She turned also and their eyes met ... and held.

"I'm glad too," she said, rather softly.

Just for a brief, magical moment time stood still - for both of them. Then the moment was gone and they started talking about mundane things while they walked to the end of The Strand, turned and walked back to the hotel.

"I'm going for a swim now," he said, as they crossed the roadway and headed for the hotel entrance. "Would you like to join me?"

She thought for a moment. "I think I'll give it a miss," she said. He was very nice and pleasant, good looking and easy to talk to, but something strange was stirring within her and she needed her own space and some time to think. "I need to wash my hair," she added, by way of apology.

Mark was disappointed. He didn't know why, but he wanted her to stay. If she left now he might never see her again. She might change her plans at breakfast and fly out with the Channel Five team, and he didn't want that.

"Well then," he said, a little crestfallenly, "what about sharing a breakfast table?"

Again she paused for a moment. She could say no, make another excuse, or whatever, and that would be that. He would go off to his golf and probably right out of her life. Did she want that? She didn't know ... yet. She had to buy time.

"That would be nice," she said. "But I'll need an hour. What time is it now?"

He brightened visibly and looked at his watch. "It's nearly seven o'clock. What say I meet you in the restaurant about eight? Will that be OK?"

"That will be fine," she smiled as they walked towards the lifts.

He pressed the button and the door of one of them opened.

She walked in, turned around, pressed button nine and smiled at him again. "Bye," she said, as the doors closed.

Mark walked to the reception desk, rang the restaurant and booked a table for two on the inland side. Then he asked for his towel, which he'd left at the desk earlier.

Nancy, the blond, friendly receptionist, handed it to him with a cheeky grin. "She's gorgeous, isn't she?" she smirked.

"No prettier than you, Nancy," he laughed, and headed for the pool.

"I'd like some orange juice, grilled whiting with a slice of lemon, wholemeal toast and marmalade and white tea, please," said Christine, handing her menu back to the waitress.

"And I'd like pineapple juice, nutrigrain, fried eggs, bacon, tomatoes and sausages, white toast and marmalade and a large glass of cold milk, please," said Mark.

Christine raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. "Can you eat all that?" she asked.

"You betcha. You just watch me. That's just a healthy breakfast, not a feast."

"Well, you certainly won't be hungry when you've finished," she laughed. "It's a very pretty view on this side of the hotel also, isn't it?" she continued, looking out through the window towards Castle Hill.

He pointed out various items of interest while they waited for their orders - the General Hospital, the huge Botanical Gardens, the Townsville Grammar School and the many-ovaled Sports Reserve.

"You seem to know Townsville very well," she said. "Have you lived here?"

"Yes. Several years ago. For a few months."

"And where are you living now, Mark? And what do you do for a living?"

"At the moment I'm one of the great unemployed and I'm homeless," he said, with mock sadness. "Do you feel sorry for me?"

"Yes," she said, in mock sympathy. "You poor thing. You must be destitute, staying here at the Aquarius in an air-conditioned, luxurious suite. My heart bleeds for you."

"Hey!" he said, sounding hurt. "This is only for a few weeks. Then it's back to bread and dripping and the slave labour camps for twelve hours a day."

Involuntarily she reached across the table and momentarily touched his bare left forearm lightly with her fingertips. "You know I was only teasing," she said softly.

"Yes. I did know," said Mark, looking deeply into her eyes.

Her cool, light touch nearly paralysed him. He wanted her fingers to stay, but they didn't. But the gesture had been made, no matter how fleetingly.

Just then their waitress returned with their fruit juices and his nutrigrain.

"What are your plans for today?" Mark asked. "I'd show you the sights myself but Barry and I are booked in a fourball at eleven and I'd disrupt things if I pulled out."

"Oh, you couldn't possibly do that!" She was horrified. "No. I'm going to go browsing and shopping first. I need to buy some clothes. I came up yesterday very light on, with just my emergency suitcase that I keep in my car for unexpected trips and so I need a wardrobe for today and tomorrow. This slack suit is what I wore yesterday and I feel all yucky at present."

"Well, you look just great."

"You're so kind," she smiled.

"And what comes after the shopping?"

"I'll bring all my goodies back here, have lunch and then go sightseeing. What would you recommend? You being the local Cook's Tour guide for lost strangers."

He laughed. "I tell you what," he said. "Straight after breakfast, you go and powder your nose and then I'll drive you down town and leave you at the Post Office. I'll show you where to go to the Barrier Reef Wonderland

complex, which is really terrific, so you can go there after lunch for a few hours. When I leave, you can browse your way through Flinders Mall, buy your frillies and things and come back here for lunch. I'll pick you up here about five o'clock, we'll drive up Castle Hill, look at the view, watch the sunset and then go down to Barry and Leanne's house. They're having a barbecue tonight. Just them, Keith and Betty Anderson, Keith's mother, Nanette, and three kiddies. There you are. I've planned your day. How does that sound?"

"It sounds just wonderful, but I don't think I should gate-crash Barry and Leanne's private barbecue without being invited."

"Oh rubbish. They'd just love you to come. Anyway, I'll organize it this morning when I pick Barry up for golf. OK?"

"Well ... yes ... all right. If you're absolutely sure they won't mind."

"I am absolutely positive. I know they'd love you to come."

The waitress replaced his now empty nutrigrain bowl with a huge plate of eggs, bacon, sausages and tomatoes and gave Christine her grilled whiting, which looked puny by comparison.

"And tomorrow," he continued, "we'll take a ferry to Magnetic Island, borrow Barry's old four-wheel drive at Picnic Bay and I'll show you the sights over there. So don't forget to buy a swimsuit and heaps of sunscreen. The UV rays up here are fierce."

Mark came into the reception lounge after putting his golf bag, shoes and buggy into his car. As he did so, a lift door opened and Christine emerged. She handed her room key to the receptionist and went to join him.

"That's good timing," he said. "Let's go."

Nancy, the receptionist, gave him a wink and a huge grin. "Have a nice day, Mr Radford," she smiled.

Mark walked Christine to his car. The XJS gleamed like a jewel in the sunlight in the hotel's open-air car park.

"My goodness! What is it?" she asked, wide eyed, as he opened the passenger side door for her.

"It's a Jaguar XJS V12 6 litre coupe," he grinned. "Don't you have one?"

"Good gracious no. I doubt I could even afford the petrol."

"Actually it's very economical to run, and it didn't cost me a lot. It's a few years old and I got it at a really good price from a friend of my dad in Grand Prix Motors in Brisbane. I've had it nearly twelve months now. It's my one extravagance."

He shut her door for her after she'd settled into her seat, walked around the car, slipped into the driver's seat and started up. He pointed out some of the Jag's many features as he drove.

Christine could tell it was his pride and joy and she listened in apparent rapture. What was that old saying about men and boys and the size of their toys, she mused.

They came over the saddle between Stanton Hill and Melton Hill and then down Denham Street. He pulled over and stopped fifty metres from the Post Office corner and gave her directions to the Barrier Reef Wonderland and the start of Flinders Mall.

"You'd better get a cab to and from the hotel," he said. "It's too far to walk in this heat. You'd melt away, and then I'd be sad."

"Would you, truly?" she joked.

"Cross my heart."

He got out of the car, came around and opened her door and helped her out, his strong fingers lightly under her left elbow. She sensed, rather than felt, the steel in them.

"Thank you," she said. "Have a nice game and I'll meet you at the hotel about five."

"I'll be counting the minutes."

He watched her walk away from him down the footpath to the Flinders Street corner and stop at the traffic lights. When they changed, she crossed Denham Street and vanished into Flinders Mall. She never once looked back, but he was sure she knew he was watching. And so intently was he watching that he completely failed to notice a dark-haired, Italian looking woman follow Christine down the street and into the Mall.

Mark got back into the Jag and drove to Barry's house. When he asked Barry and Leanne if he could bring Christine to the barbecue their response was exactly what he expected. They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"By gosh, you're a fast working smoothie," giggled Leanne. "Of course we'd love her to come."

"Well! It's about bloody time!" exclaimed Barry. "I was starting to wonder about you."

"Hell," said Mark. "It's no big deal. She's on her own. She doesn't know a soul in town and she's here for two full days. I'm only being friendly."

It was a little after five o'clock when Mark Radford returned to the Aquarius.

She wasn't waiting in the reception lounge area and there was no answer when he rang her room. His heart started to beat a little faster. Perhaps she'd changed her mind?

He found her seated in the shade of the palms and ferns in the Pool and Relaxation Area overlooking the bay. She was wearing fawn linen slacks, a pale fawn silk blouse in a shirtmaker style, dotted with one centimetre sized olive-green polka dots and with olive-green sandals on her tiny feet. On her right hand was a large jade ring, which matched her jade earrings, while her lips and finger nails were brandy coloured.

He stood gazing at her in admiration until she somehow sensed his presence and turned her head towards him. Her long hair bounced and swirled as she did so.

"Oh, hello," she said. "I must have been daydreaming. It's so beautiful and peaceful here. Isn't this a delightful little spot?"

"Yes, it is," he replied. He wanted to say she made it seem like heaven, but the words wouldn't come out. "That's a lovely outfit," he said instead. "Is it one of your morning purchases?"

"Yes. I bought some very nice things. The shopping here is really excellent. So many nice shops and such a wide range of choice. I really enjoyed myself and I've spent half a fortune. I just love shopping."

They sat and chatted for a few minutes about her morning and afternoon activities.

Then, eventually, he looked at his watch. "Come on," he said. "I'll show you the view from the top of Castle Hill. All visitors to Townsville get taken up there. It's almost mandatory."

They walked through the reception lounge and out to the car park. They drove up to the base of Castle Hill, then onto the road which winds its way through three hundred and sixty degrees as it circles and climbs to the summit. On the way up he showed her Barry and Leanne's home, nestling into the side of the foothills just below the road.

"What a marvellous view they have," she said.

"Wait 'till you see it from the top."

Mark parked the Jag in the car parking area. They left the car and walked up the steps to the highest lookout.

"It's breathtaking," she exclaimed, gradually turning around full circle. "It's like being in a plane, or in a balloon. And it's so beautiful. And doesn't Magnetic Island look close?"

"It is," he said. "It's only about eight kilometres from the boat harbour to Picnic Bay, over there," he pointed. "And up at Cape Pallarenda, over there, where you saw Teddy yesterday, they say it's only about one K at low tide. The locals say you can walk the shallows then, but I've never tried it."

"And are those smudges out there islands?" she asked, pointing to the left of Magnetic Island.

"Yes. That one, there, is Palm Island and right on the horizon, over there, that bulky blob that looks like part of the mainland is Hinchinbrook Island. On a very clear day, particularly after rain when the dust has been washed out of the air, you can see the sun reflecting from the roofs of the bulk sugar sheds up there at Lucinda Point, at the start of the Hinchinbrook Channel. And that's got to be a hundred kilometres from here in a straight line. It's all cane country up there, around Ingham and the Herbert River. Beautiful country, and scenery."

She looked at him. He had a faraway look in his eyes. "You love this country, don't you?" she said quietly.

"Yes. I guess I do. It's in my blood now, I suppose. I've lived and worked all up and down this Queensland coastline, and inland, for twelve years now and I guess it kind of gets to you. It's got to be the best country in the world. Certainly one of the prettiest ... and the friendliest."

"It certainly is," she said. "Tell me, Mark, what do you do for a living ... when you are working?" she emphasized the ARE. "When you're not unemployed and homeless."

"You've got a good memory," he laughed. "Come on, let's go find ourselves a barbecue."

From a metre away he reached out quite naturally to take her hand, and, in similar fashion, she put hers into his. It was spontaneous. It was friendly. Perhaps a little more?

They turned slowly and walked happily back to the car together, hand in hand, and drove down the hill to his brother's house.

As they left the car park, a late-model dark-blue Commodore followed them down the hill.

Lying on her bed later that night, Christine Jordan was thinking about this man who had come so suddenly into her life.

He really is very nice, she thought. Curly short fair hair, brown eyes, tall, well built and with a friendly, clean cut, boyish face that belied his apparent age. He'd be somewhere between thirty-five and forty, and had the physique of a twenty-five year old athlete. She remembered the underlying feeling of strength in his fingers under her elbow when he'd helped her out of his car that morning and also when they'd held hands on top of Castle Hill as the daylight started to fade.

Why had she done that, she wondered. She'd never ever held hands with a man before. Not in her whole life. And yet this man, almost a complete stranger, had simply held out his hand and she had put hers into his. It was as if she'd been under some sort of spell. How strange ... but nice.

Just like last night had been strange. She'd stopped at his table, on her way out of the restaurant, merely to say hello to his brother, because it would have been rude to just walk past after interviewing him that afternoon. But from the moment she'd sat down in the vacant chair next to Mark a strange sensation had gripped her. She'd sat next to hundreds of men just as closely in a variety of settings for years but never before had she been so conscious of the presence of the person next to her.

It was quite weird ... uncanny. It must be him. He must be having this effect on her. But why? She hardly knew him.

Her mind wandered back over little things he'd said and done and she found herself smiling happily as she recalled them. I'm glad you joined us for a while last night he'd said when they were walking, and he'd looked deeply into her eyes as he said it. Then, when he'd dropped her near the Mall to do her shopping and suggested she get a taxi back because of the heat, he'd said, you'd melt away and then I'd be sad.

She was sure he'd watched her walk all the way down the road and across the intersection because she hadn't heard his car start. She'd had that spooky feeling you get when you can almost feel someone watching you. Even now she felt her spine tingling at the thought of it.

But how did she feel about him? What, if anything, did he mean to her? And what about tomorrow? She was going to be with him all day tomorrow. From breakfast 'till nighttime! What should she do and say if he got keener? And suppose he wanted to kiss her? What should she do? Did she want him to? She didn't know. She just didn't know. And she was getting sleepy ... very sleepy ... very, very sleepy.

In her drowsy, half awake, half asleep state, Christine rolled over on her bed, turning her head away from the moonlight outside her balcony and towards the dark and shadowy interior of her suite. Her long hair lay strewn over the pillow and her slim, lightly tanned limbs contrasted with the milky whiteness of her satin pyjamas and the pale blue of the bed linen.

As she lay in that hazy state halfway between sleep and consciousness, where the mind plays unusual tricks, she sensed a shadowy form taking shape in the darkness. She couldn't see his face in the swirling, thickening mists which somehow were filling the room but she knew, with certainty in her heart, that it was Mark.

She rose effortlessly from her bed and glided slowly to meet him. As his strong arms enveloped her and drew her gently but firmly to him she felt her heart starting to race. Trembling with emotion, she raised her quivering, yearning lips towards his. They were only centimetres apart when sleep finally claimed her.

Sunday was a lovely day - sunny, cloudless, a little cooler than the previous one but still very hot. The wind from the south-east was light but refreshing and stirred little white crests on the tops of the wavelets in Cleveland Bay.

Mark and Christine walked to Kissing Point together at six thirty - by arrangement this time. When they reached the end of The Strand and were about to turn for the walk back he stopped her. He waved his arm at the bluff. "Kissing Point," he said, with a grin forming at the corners of his mouth. "Sounds almost like a challenge, doesn't it?"

"Oh, you are a tease," she smiled. "This isn't the right time of the day."

"Now who's the tease?" he asked.

They laughed together, turned and walked back to the Aquarius.

They swam in the pool together.

They breakfasted together, while her swimsuit and his swim shorts dried together in the laundry drier. After he'd put his in the drier with hers he'd said this is true togetherness. They'd both laughed. Oh, you are a silly, she'd said.

After breakfast they left his Jag in the car park and took a taxi to the ferry terminal.

The twenty-minute trip across the bay to Magnetic Island was delightful. The sea breeze blew her hair backwards in long, ever changing streamers.

They disembarked at Picnic Bay and walked, hand in hand, through the tropical coconut palms and huge banyan fig trees fronting the Picnic Bay Shopping Mall, to Barry's friend's house where they picked up Barry's old four-wheel drive.

He drove her all over the island - everywhere there was a road.

They went bushwalking.

They visited Koala Park, where she cuddled one and Shark World, where she didn't.

They lunched at the Arcadia Hotel restaurant and changed into their swim clothes in rooms lent to them by the proprietor, one of Mark's old friends.

Then they drove to tiny Radical Bay, the most picturesque and secluded spot in North Queensland, with its sparkling blue water and crescent shaped golden sands beach shielded from the ocean by rugged headlands strewn with huge granite boulders and towering hoop pines, its only access by land a rough, potholed, barely useable four-wheel drive track deterring all but the most intrepid locals and tourists.

"Oh, Mark, it's magnificent," said Christine as they walked from the tropical rain forest onto the beach. "It's so beautiful. It's like something in a Hollywood movie"

Mark agreed, and after he'd checked the water for sea wasps they swam lazily in the shallows for half an hour. The water was crystal clear and quite calm, sheltered from the south-easterly.

Cooled and refreshed, they left the water and lay on their towels on the beach under Barry's monstrous, multi-coloured beach umbrella.

Christine lay on her back, her head and chest raised, propped up on her elbows. She was looking out over the softly rippling water, her long hair cascading around her shoulders and moving slightly in the breeze.

Mark, within touching distance to her right, lay on his side, his left arm raised from the elbow with his hand supporting his head. He wasn't looking at the view. He was looking at her.

She looked absolutely beautiful, he thought, lying there in her smart, well tailored one piece crossover swimsuit, navy-coloured with a wide white band around the neckline. Her slim arms and legs glistened from the sunblock she'd rubbed on them, while her lovely face, with those thin, black eyebrows, laughing green eyes and perfect sparkling teeth, was washed completely free of make-up. She looked wholesome and delicious.

Conscious of his gaze, Christine turned her head towards him. "A penny for your thoughts," she said, smiling at him whilst remembering the words her father had used so often.

Mark looked into her eyes. "I was just thinking that you look good enough to eat," he said.

"Oh no. Not so soon after lunch," she laughed.

They chatted away for ages, about everything and nothing, as the lazy afternoon drifted languidly along and the burning sun moved unstopably across the sky.

Then, after a somewhat longer than usual pause, she turned to him and said softly, "Mark, tell me about yourself. I seem to have known you for ever, instead of only two days, but really I know almost nothing about you."

"Do you really want to know about me?" He looked deeply into her eyes as he spoke.

She blushed very slightly. "That's not fair," she said very slowly, pausing momentarily after each word.

He reached out and touched her arm where it lay on the sand. Just lightly. Just with his fingertips. Just for a moment. As she had done at breakfast yesterday.

"No. It wasn't fair," he said quietly. "And I'm sorry."

He paused for a moment or two. Then he started.

He told her he was thirty-eight, single and had never been married. He said he had a married sister, Alison, thirty-two, in Bundaberg with two youngsters and that apart from Barry he had no other brothers or sisters. He told her of his early schooling at state school, his five years secondary schooling at Brisbane Grammar and his five years Commerce/Law degree course at Queensland University, followed by four years in tax and audit at Price Waterhouse in Brisbane. He told her his parents lived in Kooralbyn Valley, outside Beaudesert, that he'd played a bit of cricket and football at school and some tennis and golf after he'd left. He said he liked beer, fishing, chocolate, Jaguar cars, ice-cream and pretty women with long black hair and green eyes.

They both laughed at that.

"After I left Price Waterhouse I went bush," he said. "I went out to Mt. Isa and worked in the mine ... underground. It was hard, gritty and tiring. It put fourteen kilos and a lot of muscle on me. I stood it for twelve months and then did some fencing on a sheep property outside Winton for a school friend for two months. Then I came to Townsville and worked as an accountant for the Ford dealer. Barry was up here by then but wasn't married yet. I stayed at the dealership for five months, got sick of it and then went to a school friend's cane farm at Innisfail for three months to help him pull scrub for an additional allocation."

He'd then gone to Cairns for a few months, he told her, and sold cars, finance and insurance for a used car dealer but was shocked at all the lies and rip-offs and had left. After that he'd drifted down to Mackay and worked for two months at one of the sugar mills as an accountant.

"After I left the mill," he said, "I called in to see Alison and John in Bundaberg, liked the town and got myself a job selling life insurance for the Prudential. I stayed in Bundaberg for twelve months and then, on the way north to see Barry and Leanne for a week, I called in on another old Grammar friend in Rockhampton, Trevor Johnson, and finished up starting a business with him."

He then told her all about Rocky Resolutions and how he and Trevor had worked their guts out night and day building it up into a multi million-dollar business. He'd stayed in Rocky for nine years, he said, until a few days ago when they'd sold to one of the major southern companies and he'd packed all his meagre possessions, just clothes, fishing gear and his golf clubs, into the Jag and come up here for a few days to see Barry and Leanne.

"Why on earth did you sell Rocky Resolutions if it was such a goldmine?" Christine asked.

"We couldn't say no. Concept Solutions came along and offered us zillions. I wasn't particularly interested in the money, being single, but for Trevor and Helen and their two kiddies, several million dollars meant very high security for the rest of their lives. It was just too good to refuse."

"Well, you certainly moved around a lot in the three years before you started Rocky Resolutions. Why did you leave Price Waterhouse in the first place? Didn't you like the big corporate scene?"

He was silent for a minute, looking out over the water. When he spoke his voice was low. "Before I left," he said, "I was engaged to a very wonderful girl, but she died, and I had to get away for a while."

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"No. It's no problem. Tracey's been gone for twelve years now and I'm well over it. But it knocked me around badly for several years."

"And what are you going to do now? Now that you really are unemployed and homeless!"

They both laughed at the memory.

"Well, next week I think I'll slip up to Innisfail and see Roger, my friend with the cane farm, for a couple of days. Then I'll have a few more days here and then drift south to Mackay for a day to see the boys at the mill. Then I'll spend a night with Trevor and Helen in Rocky and a few days in Bundy with Alison and John and then go down to Kooralbyn and spend a few weeks with Ma and The Old Feller. That's Mum and Dad.

"And after that?"

"I don't know. I haven't given it any thought yet. Anyway, it's your turn now. Tell me all about you."

"There's not very much to tell," she said. "I haven't been all around the countryside like you've been."

She told him she was thirty-six, single, never married, no brothers or sisters and that her father had died four years ago and her mother two years later. She didn't tell him her father had been crippled in the Voyager disaster. She wasn't looking for sympathy. She told him of her primary and secondary state schooling and that after she'd finished high school she'd obtained a clerical position with the ABC television station in Brisbane.

"I worked there for six years," she said, "studied journalism at night and when I was thirty I left the ABC for a position with Channel Nine doing investigative work for news and current affairs programs. I'd always wanted to do interview work and when Channel Five started up two years ago I was lucky enough to obtain a position with their current affairs production team compered by Bernice Hazelton."

Then, one day, Bernice had resigned on the spot, she said, after a blistering row with Lance Boswell who owned and ran the station and Christine had been pitched in at a moment's notice to host the half-hour program. Boswell had been so impressed with her performance that he'd given her Bernice's position on a permanent basis. That was a year and a half ago. Then six months ago, after many, many discussions, she'd persuaded Boswell to allow her to change the direction of their program and that was when Question Time was born.

"So there you have it," she said. "You now know more about me than anyone else knows ... anyone in the whole world."

"Only what people see," he said. "Now, tell me about the real you. About what's behind those lovely green eyes. What you do when you're not working."

"I'm really a very simple girl," she said. "Until Dad and Mum died I lived at home with them. We were always very poor and Dad was crippled and I helped Mum in the house and garden in the weekends and at night. Most of my wages went into helping support us. I didn't have money for self entertainment."

She paused for a moment and looked out over the water. Then she continued.

"After Mum died, two years ago, I moved into an apartment on my own in Toowong. It's nothing flash but it's quite nice and it's convenient for work and for shopping. I drive a five-year-old Commodore, which gets me to work and the airport and places. I like music and the beach and Tia Maria and I just adore going shopping, especially since my income jumped amazingly eighteen months ago."

She turned towards him. "So there you are. That's me," she smiled.

"One last question and then we'd better make tracks for home," Mark said. "I've seen you many times on Question Time. Not every night, because I've never been home every night by six thirty. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but you always seem to be getting stuck into Governments - Federal, State, Local, whatever. Is that right? Do you hate Governments or am I misreading your interviews?"

Christine's eyes flashed fire. Mark sensed her body stiffening as the dreamy, soft smile around her mouth hardened. Her voice sounded harsh when she spoke.

"Yes, I hate them," she said. "I hate the whole rotten system. They don't care about the people. We elect them to govern for the benefit of us, the electors, to do what we want done, but they don't do that. Once they're in power they take no notice of the people's wishes. They do only what's best for themselves for two and a half years and then, six months before each election, they start throwing money and promises at the electorates in order to win votes and get re-elected."

Mark looked at her in consternation. She was starting to tremble but her voice was still strong and very firm.

"Yes, I do hate Governments," she continued, "and Question Time is my means of letting the people have their say and find out what's really happening. Question Time is the people's forum. I conduct it but the people ask the questions. We get thousands of letters and telephone calls from viewers every week. We can't possibly keep up with

all their requests. They're from thousands and thousands of people all over Australia and they all hate the governments, and what they're doing."

Her voice became very low and steely and her eyes flashed fire once more. "But none of them hate like I do," she almost hissed.

Mark was stunned. He was frozen stiff. This was unbelievable - the transformation. One minute she was lying there so peacefully, radiantly attractive, happy and gay and the next moment she was like a tigress protecting her cubs ... snarling and spitting and clawing at some fearsome enemy.

His voice dropped to a whisper, as if to calm her. "But why, Christine? Why do you hate them so much?"

She stood up quickly and looked away from him - out over the quiet waters of the bay. She was shaking now, almost uncontrollably. And then she started to sob. Deep, raking sobs that shook her whole slim little frame.

Mark stood up, grasped her by her shoulders, turned her around and took her in his arms.

She put her dainty, tiny hands on his shoulders and sunk her head sideways onto his chest. After a few minutes her shuddering sobs diminished and she cried softly, with her tears running down his chest in little rivulets.

Mark held her gently to him, feeling her warm, tender body against his, stroking her back softly, nuzzling her hair. He kissed the top of her forehead, lightly, fleetingly. For an eternity they stood together, with his arms around her, protecting her from the world and, gradually, her crying eased and finally stopped. Still they stood together, almost motionless, until eventually she gently pushed herself away from his chest and, still in his arms, looked up at him with damp eyes and the tiniest of smiles.

"I'm sorry, Mark," she whispered. "I'm such a goose, and you're so kind to me."

He nearly bent his head to kiss her lips but he stopped himself. He didn't want to take advantage of the situation. And he didn't want her to think he was kissing her out of sympathy. If he ever did kiss her it would be at an appropriate time - not when she was upset and at a disadvantage.

"I'm sorry I upset you," he said. "I shouldn't have asked you what I did."

"Oh no. It's not your fault. It's nothing you said. It's just that I started remembering my poor Dad."

Then she told him about her father - how he'd been crippled in the Voyager disaster and turned into a paraplegic, to spend the rest of his shortened life in a wheelchair.

"I was only five years old when the sinking occurred," she said, "so I don't remember much of what happened at first. But as I grew older I began to realise how shockingly he and the other injured crew members were treated by successive Federal Governments. All that the victims wanted was some reasonable compensation, like victims of civil accidents receive, but the various Federal Governments all wanted to ignore them and pay them nothing. And this went on for over thirty years! Even this present Government only agreed on the steps of the courthouse to settle their claims because they didn't want the bad publicity which would have arisen out of a court trial so close to the next election."

"No wonder you dislike politicians so much," said Mark.

"And he was such a wonderful father," Christine continued. "He seldom complained and he was always cheerful and gay and fun to be with. I loved him so very much. The only bitter words I remember him uttering were one day when he was upset at one of the politician's statements. He looked at me with blazing eyes and said, never trust a politician, Chrissie. They don't care about people. They only care about votes and about being in power and what they can get out of it for themselves. I've never forgotten those words. They became my driving force. That's why I got into journalism and television ... to show people the true picture ... to expose all the rottenness ... to try to improve things for the people."

"Well, you're certainly doing that," said Mark.

"Anyway, I feel better now," she said. "Let's go back, shall we? That's if you'll let go of me," she laughed.

As he took his arms away she stood up on tiptoe and kissed him quickly and softly on his lips.

"That's for being so understanding and lovely," she whispered.

"I'll never wash my lips again," he grinned.

As they walked back from the beach to the tropical rain forest, a blonde-haired man, hidden among the hoop pines on the far headland, took the binoculars from his eyes and spoke to his dark-haired female companion.

Later, on the ferry ride back to the mainland, after he was quite sure she wouldn't be upset again, Mark told her about his father and his father's hobby horse.

"I don't remember the details because we all treat it as the family joke and then he clams up and doesn't expand. However, he's got some very definite ideas and plans formulated for changing the whole political system and giving more power to the people. You should talk to him sometime. You're obviously on the same wavelength."

"I'd love to. He sounds very interesting. Would he do an interview with me about his ideas, do you think?"

"I'm sure he would. He'd see a nationally screened TV interview as being a great launching pad for his Grand Vision."

Christine paused for a few moments, thinking of her schedules back at the station. She was pre-planned and pre-booked for the next fortnight on non-urgent matters but although this sounded exciting, it wasn't a must do it today subject.

"I'm fairly tied up for the next two weeks," she said. "If I gave him a ring in a fortnight do you think he'd be home then? He's not going away, is he, do you know?"

"He's home all the time. You have to literally drag Ma and The Old Feller away from there. And that's really good timing because I should be down there by then. I tell you what. Why don't you hold fire until I get to Kooralbyn? I'll ring you from there and we can then arrange a suitable day for you. You'd like to see me again, wouldn't you?"

He grinned cheekily at her and she smiled back.

"I don't really know what I should say," she teased. "You seem to need so little encouragement to put your arms around damsels in distress. I don't want to over excite you."

When the ferry berthed, Mark and Christine took a taxi back to the Aquarius. They went to their rooms, showered, changed and then dined together in the New Horizons restaurant.

They lingered over the meal, toying with their food.

"What time does your flight leave tomorrow morning?" he asked, his voice very quiet.

"Six o'clock."

"May I drive you to the airport?"

She knew she should say no. That it's too early. But she wanted him to. This was not the time to be bashful or shy.

"Yes," she said, and after a pause, "I'd like that."

He pushed his chair back from their table and stood up. "Let's go for a walk in the moonlight," he said.

They went down in the lift, holding hands, and out through the reception lounge onto the moonlit driveway. Nancy saw them pass Reception but said nothing. She knew Christine was leaving in the morning and sensed that tonight was not for joking.

They crossed The Strand and sat on top of the rock wall, two metres above the beach. The tide was nearly full and the moon was high as it shone down on them - a man and a woman holding hands, like a pair of teenagers on a first date.

"It's late, Mark," she said softly, "and I have an early start and a long day tomorrow. I can't stay very long."

"I know," he said quietly. "I wish you weren't going." He squeezed her hand gently.

"I wish I wasn't too," she said.

"I'm going to miss you, Christine. Will you miss me? ... just a little?"

"You know I will. And much more than just a little."

"I think I'll go down to Kooralbyn next week. I don't think I could wait two weeks to see you again."

"Don't you dare! You're due for a holiday and you have a lot of friends to see up here and on the way south. If you cut your plans short I'll be very upset because it will have been my fault. I'll still be there in two weeks time. No one's going to run off with me."

They were silent for a minute or two, looking out over the water, each with their own thoughts. Then she turned towards him, the moonlight glistening in her hair.

"Mark ... " she said, and stopped.

"Yes?"

"Mark ... I don't quite know how to say this, but, well ... you are the only man I have ever really spent much time with, and if ... well ... if nothing more ever comes of it, I want you to know ... that these last two days have been the loveliest days of my whole life."

He squeezed her hand lightly again and stroked her silken fingers with his thumb.

"Chrissie," he said, his voice low and sincere, "I didn't think you'd ever come. When Tracey died I thought there could never be anyone else. But now that you're here I know I was wrong. These last two days have been wonderful, but they're just the beginning."

He stood up then and she did also.

"Let's walk to Kissing Point," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"We don't have to go there," she smiled up at him.

She came to him then and he wrapped his arms around her. She stood on tiptoes, put her arms around his neck and lifted her lips eagerly towards his.

He drew her slim, warm body to him and his heart started pounding. As their lips met he saw her eyes closing just before his own. Her lips felt warm and soft and yielding and her lipstick clung to his lips. She was breathing quickly and he could feel her heart beating against his chest through her thin silk blouse and from inside her small, firm, exquisitely rounded left breast.

He took his lips from hers and kissed her below her left ear, then on her left eyelid, then the tip of her nose. He kissed her lips again, then just above her top lip, then the left corner of her mouth. Then he lifted her chin with his nose and kissed her just below her chin and then in the recess where her throat joined her chest.

"Oh Mark! Oh Mark!" she gasped, her blood coursing wildly through her body.

He kissed her on her lips again and held her tight. He could feel all of her trembling against him. He'd forgotten how wonderful it was to hold and love somebody. He wanted Christine to stay in his arms forever but he knew it was late. It was time to let her go.

He stroked her long hair and ran his fingers gently through it. "Wake up, my darling," he said lovingly. "It's time to go to bed."

When he saw the startled expression in her eyes he laughed softly and kissed the tip of her nose.

"Alone, silly billy," he said. "Alone."

Christine sighed happily and snuggled up to him.

"Kiss me one more time, Mark, and hold me close again," she murmured.

In the Airport lounge on Monday morning her boarding call pulled them to their feet. He held her gently by her upper arms and looked down at her beautiful face and deeply into her eyes all aglow with warmth and love. He bent his head down and kissed her softly and tenderly. Then he let her go.

"Goodbye, Mark," she whispered.

"Goodbye, Chrissie."

She turned, moved away from him and disappeared into the crowd, followed by a dark-haired Italian looking woman who watched her board her aircraft.

Mark walked out to the car park and drove the XJS quickly to the top of Castle Hill. As he parked the Jag in the empty car park and walked swiftly to the lookout, her Qantas Boeing 737 came into view from behind the right hand side of the hill. It accelerated out over Cleveland Bay towards Magnetic Island, its tail blood-red in the post-dawn sunlight, banked slowly to starboard in a graceful climbing arc and, gradually diminishing in size, vanished into the morning haze to the south-east.

He stood there waving like a schoolboy until long after it had gone, then turned and walked slowly back to his car.

In the aircraft, in her starboard side window seat, which he'd arranged for her, Christine watched as the car park on the hill came into view. Yes, there they were - a tiny, miniature green car alone in the car park and an even smaller figure standing on the lookout, waving.

She watched until she could see him no longer, then laid her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes, alone with her thoughts. These next two weeks were going to be the longest in her whole life, but at least she had some wonderful memories to sustain her.

CHAPTER 3.

On the Monday that Christine Jordan flew out of Townsville, Channel Five screened its Question Time program from its Canberra studio. The highlight was to be Christine's interview with Rowena Roberts, the recently appointed Minister for Immigration and, depending on how long this live interview ran, they had back up tapes available to fill the rest of the program if required.

In the studio the two women sat looking at each other, not friendly, not unfriendly, as they waited the last few moments for the interview to commence.

For Christine, this was just another in a long succession of interviews stretching back over the last eighteen months but intensifying since the launch of Question Time. To her it was not a new or nerve-racking occasion and she looked fresh and completely at ease as she waited those last few seconds. Thank goodness for make-up, she thought. It had been a long day, with three air flights and a few hours in Brisbane headquarters en route from Townsville.

For Rowena Roberts, however, this was her first face-to-face interview since her appointment to Cabinet. Media interviews en masse, with reporters and TV people shouting questions from all angles, were not new to her and had never worried her, but tonight, sitting alone with Christine Jordan in front of the remorseless, unblinking eyes of the Question Time cameras, she was feeling keyed up and tense.

And Rowena Roberts was well aware that being interviewed by Christine Jordan was fraught with danger. Only last week Rex Marlow had floundered around and come off second best and others before him had suffered a similar fate.

However, she said to herself, they had all been men, whereas she was a woman - all eighty-five kilograms and one hundred and eighty centimetres of solid woman. This was a great opportunity to show those chauvinistic clots in

Cabinet that a woman could succeed where males had failed and particularly that she, Rowena Roberts, was worthy of the highest positions in the land - destined for greatness - ready to rule!

So when the request for tonight's interview had come to her last week she had jumped at the chance and had not even asked for reason or subject matter. Now though, as she waited those last few seconds, she could feel her body stiffening and her heartbeat quickening.

Suddenly they were live.

Christine went through her regular welcoming and introduction routine, then turned and smiled sweetly at Rowena. "Welcome to Question Time, Minister," she said.

"Thank you, Christine. It's nice of you to invite me."

"I thought this would be an opportune time to have a nice friendly chat, Minister, following your elevation to Cabinet two weeks ago, so that I and all our national viewers can get to know you a little better ... get to know the real Rowena Roberts ... not just what we see and read about in press releases and on those packed televised media conferences."

Christine smiled her most disarming smile - her come in to my parlour said the spider to the fly smile.

Rowena smiled back. A little forced. A little tentative. A be careful Rowena smile.

Christine, who had seen similar reactions on many occasions, noted it mentally. This one won't lose her cool or be easily trapped, she thought.

"There's nothing very much to know," Rowena said, relaxing slightly.

"You're too modest," said Christine, looking at her notes. "My spies tell me you graduated in Law at Monash University, became one of Melbourne's leading barristers before switching to politics and that somehow you still had time to raise two sons and a daughter. Also that you are forty-seven years old, are looked upon as being the leading lady in the Labor Party and of being Prime Ministerial material for the future. Is all that correct?"

Rowena laughed, in spite of her intention to be careful. "You certainly do your research well," she smiled, "but I don't know about that last part."

"Would you like to be Prime Minister? At some time in the future, of course?"

"Oh, I suppose so. At some future time, perhaps. I don't think many politicians could truthfully say no to that question ... on a purely hypothetical basis. But I certainly don't have any present intentions or desires in that direction. I'm just honoured to have been appointed to Cabinet and determined to do a good job as Minister for Immigration for the benefit of the country."

"A very commendable attitude," said Christine. "Now, let's talk a little about some matters relevant to your particular portfolio of immigration, and to start with, would it be correct to say that during the last twelve months some one hundred thousand or so immigrants have been allowed into Australia for the purpose of becoming Australian citizens?"

"I don't know the exact number but that figure is probably close to correct."

"And I believe that over the last twelve to fifteen years approximately one and a half million immigrants have come into Australia, courtesy of our Immigration Department. Is that about right?"

"Yes. That's probably about right."

"And is it also right to say that in this country at present we have virtually one million people unemployed? One million!"

Rowena could see the trap. It stared at her like a yawning chasm. "That's correct, but there's no relationship between those two lots of figures," she said.

"No relationship? None whatever?"

"No."

"Now ... Minister ... you're surely not going to tell our viewers," Christine asked softly, "that only half a million of those immigrants have found jobs in our country. That we have imported one million other immigrants who are now unemployed and receiving the dole from the Australian taxpayers?"

Christine paused.

Rowena didn't answer.

"Or are you going to tell us," Christine continued, "that one million of those immigrants did indeed get jobs here while one million Australians, living here before they arrived, lost their own jobs? ... that we have, in fact, imported immigrants to throw our own people onto the unemployment scrapheap? Is that what you're going to tell us?"

Rowena searched her mind frantically for a reply. This was dreadful! What could she say? Finally, grasping for straws, she remembered some words from her predecessor.

"No," she said desperately, defiantly. "We have not been importing unemployment as such. We have been importing skills ... skilled workers, needed by our Australian industries and businesses, to enable them to expand, to employ more people."

"In that case," said Christine sweetly, "if industry and business needed skilled workers who were not available in our country, why hasn't the government told the employers to train the people they want themselves instead of importing them? If industry had trained their own, we would have lowered our unemployment numbers, wouldn't we? We wouldn't have had to import any skilled immigrants, would we?"

"If it was that easy, I suppose industry would have done so," Rowena smirked.

"Why would they, when governments are bringing in workers already trained?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Rowena in petulant exasperation. "I've only just been appointed Minister for Immigration. I don't know all the reasons for past decisions and actions."

"Very well. That's fair comment. Let's leave the past and look at the future. Now, bearing in mind that we have roughly one million people unemployed at present who no doubt would be happy to be trained by industry to acquire the skills that industry needs in order to profitably employ them, would you, as Minister for Immigration, consider putting a total ban on any further immigrants of working age being allowed into this country?"

Rowena sat stunned. She knew that Cabinet wished to keep industry on side by maintaining immigration levels irrespective of the unemployment numbers, but to say that on national television to millions of voters was unthinkable. It would be committing political suicide. She'd learned very early in her career to never tell the truth unless it was politically advantageous.

So what should she say? She had to say something.

Finally, in desperation, Rowena Roberts put together the fatal eighteen words which would come back to haunt her for the rest of her life.

"Oh. I don't think I could do that," she croaked. "That would be too hard on our industries and businesses."

Christine looked at her in loathsome amazement. "Well, Minister," she said scornfully, "on that note we might close this little chat. Thank you very much for speaking with me tonight."

Turning towards the central camera, Christine continued. "Apparently," she said, "our Government considers it would be too hard for our industries and businesses to train their own workforce, as other countries do. Harder, obviously, on them than it is for our one million unemployed Australian people to exist on the dole ... trying to pay rent and to clothe and feed their children. Makes you wonder where real hardship exists, doesn't it?"

Channel Five then went to a commercials break.

At lunchtime on Tuesday, in his favourite restaurant in Melbourne, James Farrington, Leader of the Opposition in Federal Parliament, handed the menu to the waiter hovering at his elbow.

"I'll have the oysters kilpatrick, large, and a lobster mornay, thanks, David," he said.

He turned back to face his old friend and luncheon guest, Albert Bygrave, Federal National Party Leader and his Deputy Opposition Leader. "What would you like, Bert?" he asked.

"I'll have a large oysters natural and a medium/rare T-bone with salad, thanks," Bert said, smiling at the waiter as he handed back his menu.

"You certainly like your steak, Bert," James grinned. "Don't think I've ever seen you order anything else. Not at lunchtime, anyway."

"Well, when you've grown as much beef as I have, you'd never eat anything else. A man couldn't do a hard day's mustering on one of those lobster things."

Both men laughed good-naturedly. They had been friends for many years, long before they'd become leaders of their respective political parties. Now in their late fifties, their appearances were totally different, as were their backgrounds.

James Farrington was the son of a Sydney industrial magnate, educated at Scotts College and Macquarie University and a senior partner in one of Sydney's leading legal firms. He was a thin, shortish man with wavy fair hair. His clothing was always immaculate, his speech almost always correct and his smile was dazzling. He had slipped with ease into the role of Liberal Party Leader in Federal Parliament fairly recently, after ten years on the front bench and twenty years in total in Federal politics.

Albert Bygrave was quite different. He was a giant of a man, one hundred and ninety-five centimetres and a hundred and fourteen kilograms of bone and muscle. His thinning hair was dark brown, as were his eyes and his deeply wrinkled skin. His hands were strong and massive and the veins stood out on them like knotted cord. His shoes were specially built for his huge feet and he always looked to be bursting out of his clothes.

The restaurant, with its fine linen and silverware, did not look the right setting for Albert Bygrave. His place was out on the plains; out on the scrubby flats of the Gulf Country south of Normanton, near the old Beef Road, where he was born and raised; out on the cattle property that his two sons had run ever since some of his old UGA mates had talked him into standing for Federal Parliament sixteen long years ago.

Bert didn't like the cities. He yearned for his cattle country. But someone had to do this job - try to help unravel the mess the country had got into.

"Did you watch Question Time last night, Bert?" James asked, after the waiter had departed.

"Sure did. That Jordan girl sure made mincemeat of Rowena Roberts."

"She certainly did. Just wonderful, wasn't it? Labor will drop four or five points in the opinion polls after Rowena's performance."

"Yes ... probably."

"That Christine Jordan's been the greatest thing that's happened for us in the last few months ... her last week in particular. Last Wednesday she nailed Marlow. Then there was the Anderson closure on Friday and last night the Rowena Roberts debacle. And this evening she's talking to Ingram, which should be very interesting if she's up to her usual high standard."

"It's a wonder Marlow let's any of his mob talk to her."

"He's not game to ban interviews. Not after what happened to Bill Williams," said James. "She crucified Williams when he refused any further interviews after his disaster."

"Yes. I guess so. But it's one hell of a risk talking to her. I sure wouldn't want to front the cameras with her."

"But she hasn't got it in for us, Bert. It's only the Labor Party she's been hammering. We've got nothing to fear."

Albert Bygrave was silent for a minute, his deep-set brown eyes screwed up a little in thought, the creases on his forehead deepening.

"I dunno," he said at last. "I've got a strange feeling about this lass. Seems to me she's more anti any form of government rather than just anti Labor. You'd better watch yourself when she's got you on the stage on Thursday evening."

"Rubbish. She's never had a crack at us. Not that I can remember. Not on any of her shows that I've seen."

"Yair. But none of us have been interviewed by her before. Have we?"

"No. But we're clean. We're in Opposition. We haven't been stuffing up anything."

"Well, I dunno. You think back on some of the things she's hit them with. Firstly she got Marlow with that Voyager fiasco. We were in power when it happened and again for seven years after Fraser ousted Whitlam, and we did nothing about those boys either. Secondly, the Anderson closure was basically because of lack of industry protection and we've been advocating the abolition of tariffs and quotas for years. And thirdly, last night she was onto immigration and unemployment and our hands aren't too clean there either. No, I think this lass is as big a threat to us as she is to Labor, don't you reckon?"

James Farrington sat back further in his chair and looked at his old friend. A lot of what Bert had just said was true, he thought. His original feelings about Christine Jordan were that she was a Liberal supporter who was using her position to denigrate the Labor Party, and in an election year, and he had been very happy about that. However, if Bert was right and she was anti all politicians and not just anti Labor, then he and his own team had better be careful also.

"You could be right, Bert. Yes ... you could well be. Now why didn't I see that?"

"Cos you're a city boy. Like I've been telling you for years. You city fellers don't look beyond your noses most times. And you don't care about people the way country folk do. You only know a handful of people in your own suburbs and you don't really care about anyone outside your own close circle of friends. But country people are very different. We care about everyone. And this Jordan lass is like us. She cares too ... about people. She sure as hell looks like a born and bred city girl ... clothes, hairdo, the way she walks. But she feels like a country girl. She feels for people ... with her heart. She doesn't worry too much about actions and decisions as such ... only what happens to people, and especially the little people ... the poor people ... the ones that governments forget."

James Farrington looked thoughtfully at Albert Bygrave. You really are a good man, he said to himself.

The old, grey, battered Chev ute groaned its way up from the South Johnston river along the two-wheel dirt track between the cane fields. With only a few months until the crushing season commenced, the cane was quite tall, blocking out everything from view until the rows ended and the track lost itself in the grassy mown area that surrounded the outbuildings and the house.

Roger Perelli parked the ute under the high set house, alongside his silvery grey BMW, and stepped out. He didn't have to open the door to do so. There weren't any. He'd taken both doors off years ago. It was cooler in the tropics without doors and he only used the Chevy around the farm, mostly, like this afternoon, to go fishing.

He reached into the back of the ute and picked up the sugar bag with the three barramundi in it, already scaled, gutted and filleted.

"I'll throw these in the beer fridge, Mark," he said. "You going to leave your gear in the ute, for tomorrow, or lock it up in the Jag?"

"I'll leave it here, eh? It'll be safe enough, won't it?"

"Yair, mate. Still no burglars out here. They'd never know when some bloke'd come round the corner of a shed with a .22 or a .303 in his hands. Never had anything pinched out here."

Mark Radford walked with Roger Perelli to the beer fridge in the little storeroom under the house. It was one of the old eight cubic foot models and was three-quarters full of beer cans.

"Still like a drop, Roge," he grinned.

"Yair, mate. Nothing like a cold one at the end of a hot day, don't you reckon? What'll you have, Fourex or Powers?"

"I'll have Fourex, thanks."

Roger took three Fourex and three Powers cans out of the fridge, put them in a small esky that was sitting on the floor alongside the fridge, slapped the top on it and picked it up. "Let's go sit on the verandah in the breeze," he said. "Should be quite cool there now."

The two men walked up the front steps and sat down in the squatters chairs on the wide, completely open front verandah, with the esky between them.

Roger was right. It was a good deal cooler there, with the south-easterly sweeping along the verandah. And the view was relaxing, with field after field of waving green sugar cane tops as far as the eye could see. Very peaceful indeed, Mark thought. An ideal place for a few quiet beers with an old friend.

"When did you say Maria and the kiddies are coming home, Roge?" Mark asked, pulling the rip top off a can of Fourex.

"Some time Thursday arvo, mate. So you'll see them before you go. You pulling out after lunchtime Friday, are you?"

"Yes. I told Leanne I'd be back before dinner. Barry and I are playing golf on Saturday morning."

They talked spasmodically for a while ... about old friends, old scenes, old times, as the late afternoon drifted towards evening. Twenty-five years of friendship had forged bonds of steel - unbreakable, everlasting, needing no set regularity of recharging, making no demands.

As the time approached six o'clock, Roger picked up the small portable television on its tiny stand from against the wall behind them. He sat it down before them at the verandah's edge and switched it on. The Channel Nine news was just starting.

"Do you always watch the news on Nine?" Mark asked.

"Yair, mate. Every night. And then their current affairs show. Best program of all the channels, don't you reckon?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't you ever watch Question Time on Five?"

"Did a couple of times ... a while ago. But that skinny sheila with a head like a dog's breakfast who runs the show turns me right off. She's a bloody shocker, don't you reckon?"

Mark stared at him in disbelief. Was he serious? Then he saw a trace of a grin at the corners of Roger's mouth.

"You rotten sod! That damn Barry rang you, didn't he?"

Roger laughed and laughed, his huge frame, all bone and muscle, shaking the squatters chair so violently that Mark feared it would break.

"Yes, Mark. Course he did. But don't worry, mate. We're not telling everyone. Only the good secret keepers."

They watched the news in relative silence and when it finished Roger got up and changed channels. "I suppose we should have another look at this bird," he said. "She might have stopped taking her ugly pills by now, eh?"

Mark threw his now empty can at him and reached for a fresh one. "You're either very brave or very drunk," he said.

Federal Treasurer, Harvey Ingram, was really a nice man at heart. Many of his Labor colleagues and quite a few Opposition Members had been saying for years that he was too nice for politics – too honest, too decent, too highly principled. There was even a saying among his Ministerial peers that if anyone had to front a press conference and tell the big lie, for God's sake don't send Harvey. He'll blow us out of the water.

The reasons that Harvey had lasted two years as Federal Treasurer, in spite of his dreadful affliction, were that he really did have a brilliant mind and he had a remarkable ability to talk his way around a problem instead of simply lying his head off.

So when he'd told Marlow on Monday of the previous week about the request for an interview on Question Time for this evening with Christine Jordan about taxation matters, Marlow hadn't been overly concerned and had agreed. This was before Marlow's unfortunate Voyager interview and the Rowena Roberts debacle.

Because of these two disasters Harvey was feeling a little less confident than usual as, in the Channel Five Canberra studio, Christine Jordan turned towards him after her introduction and welcomed him to the program.

"Mr Treasurer," she continued, "as you are no doubt aware, this program's main purpose and reason for existence is to ask the questions that a great number of our viewers want asked and answered. I am only the mouthpiece. The questions come from our viewers, and as we get closer to election time their questions are becoming mostly political ones."

"I see," said Harvey.

"And, Mr Treasurer, of the hundreds of letters we receive each week, a very substantial percentage of them are taxation oriented, and as you are the expert in this area," she smiled, "naturally we turn to you."

"I'll be happy to answer any questions I can," said Harvey.

"Thank you, Mr Treasurer. Now, the main questions, complaints and suggestions are as follows. First, there are too many indirect taxes by all levels of government and viewers say they don't know how much of their gross income finishes up in governments' hands, and second, the richer people are paying out a lower proportion of their gross income than the poorer people and the whole tax system needs drastic revision."

Christine paused and looked expectantly at Harvey Ingram. He just sat there in his chair, smiling slightly, saying nothing. So she continued.

"Let's look at indirect taxes," she said. "The main ones which come to mind are Sales Tax, Capital Gains Tax, Fuel Tax, Fringe Benefits Tax, Training Levies, Company Superannuation Contributions, Payroll Tax, Company Tax, Excises, Levies, Rates, etcetera. That's a lot of extra taxes and charges that people are paying to governments as well as their personal Income Tax. Don't you think so, Mr Treasurer?"

This time Christine didn't pause. She waited. And because she had asked him a direct question and was obviously going to await his answer, Harvey responded. After all, it wasn't a dangerous question and he could water it down a lot.

"Really, Christine, I think your viewers are a little confused. You see, of all those items you mentioned, the only ones which individuals pay are Capital Gains Tax which applies only to a few, some levies, charges and rates if they own their home. All the rest are taxes on business."

"But Mr Treasurer," Christine said, "you don't expect our viewers to believe that businesses pay these taxes and charges from their after tax profits, do you? These costs are all built into and paid out of gross turnover, like all other operating costs, aren't they? They all finish up as an inclusion in the retail price of the product or service, don't they? So, in effect, the consumers, our poor little taxpayers, who think they are only paying Income Tax and Rates, are, in fact, paying all these other costs as well ... aren't they?"

Harvey looked at Christine with new respect. No wonder Rowena had a hard time, he thought.

"Well," he said, a little condescendingly, "if you want to be pedantic about it I suppose you could say that."

"Very well then," said Christine, bristling, eyes flashing. "Let's be pedantic about it. Let's not treat it in an airy-fairy manner. Do all the consumers, or do they not, finish up paying all the indirect taxes and charges that governments at all levels impose on businesses?"

"Yes, they do," snapped Harvey. "But I didn't introduce indirect Taxation."

"And you didn't abolish it, either, did you?"

"No. But governments have to obtain their income in some manner or other."

"But indirect taxes and charges are taxation by stealth, aren't they?"

"No. I wouldn't say that."

"Well then, why do we have them? Why not have no indirect taxes, charges, levies, etcetera and simply increase personal income tax rates to cover the shortfall?"

"We couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"It would cause too much confusion ... too much disruption."

"Too much knowledge?" Christine asked softly, her eyes smouldering.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean would it be a problem for governments if people knew exactly how much their governments were taxing them?"

"I wouldn't think so."

Christine looked down at her clipboard, flicked over the top sheet of paper and found what she wanted.

"According to the National Tax Agents Association," she said, "an average taxpayer earning \$27,000 a year is paying \$15,900 in various Federal and State taxes! That's almost 60% of Gross Income! \$6,000 in personal tax and almost another \$10,000 in indirect taxes! Do you think, Mr Treasurer, that until tonight, many of our viewers would have realized this?"

"But that's just the NTAA having a whinge, Christine. You can't take everything they say as gospel."

"Well, they say these figures are based on official figures included in your last year's budget papers on tax revenue for the 1994/95 year. They also say those papers disclose that out of 122.4 billion dollars to be raised by Federal and State governments from all forms of tax this financial year, only 48.5 billion will come from individuals income tax payments. That's a little over one-third. One-third that we know about. Two-thirds that we don't. And an effective tax rate for the little people of sixty percent ... SIXTY PERCENT! Mr Treasurer, I imagine the natives are getting rather restless, don't you?"

"Christine, nobody likes paying taxes. Everybody whinges about it."

"At sixty percent it's no wonder. The little person is paying a total tax bill of almost sixty percent and can hardly keep his head above water. Why can't you increase the load on the high earners, so they pay a similar or higher proportion of their earnings?"

"It wouldn't work. High earners would corporatize, use trusts, contracts, a variety of legal means to beat the system."

"Oh, come on, Mr Treasurer. The Government makes the rules. The Government runs the system. You could change the rules if you wanted to, couldn't you?"

"Yes, we could. But it would be highly disruptive."

"As disruptive as trying to live on forty percent of your gross income when you're a low wage earner, after paying sixty percent to governments who won't tax high income earners fairly?"

"I suppose," said Harvey grudgingly, "that there's a lot of truth in what you're saying. I'll have a think about it."

Christine smiled genuinely at him. She'd heard he was too decent to be in politics. "Thank you Mr Treasurer," she said. "I'm sure a large number of our viewers will be happy to have heard that and I'm certain they'll remember. Thank you for speaking with me."

As soon as Question Time finished, Roger Perelli climbed out of his chair and turned off the portable.

"Let's go barbecue some barra, Mark," he said.

Mark Radford picked up the esky and followed him down the front steps. They took the fish from the fridge, some cooking oil, margarine, bread, plates, knives and forks, refilled the esky and went out to the barbecue.

"You know, I think that sheila may have improved a bit in her looks, mate," grinned Roger. "Still got a long way to go though."

"Oh, she's all right. Scrubs up pretty well off the screen."

"Yair. I guess so. Turn on the lights, mate, and we'll get this show on the road."

The daylight had faded and gone and the darkness had fallen like a shutter. Here, in the tropics, in the summertime, twilight was almost non-existent. One minute it was daytime and then, almost in the twinkling of an eye, it was night.

Mark moved around to the back of the barbecue and turned on the light switch on the pole at its rear. The twin, one metre fluorescent tubes flickered and then burst into light two metres above his head, flooding the barbecue and the lawn area with their bluish whiteness. At the four corners of the lawn, high voltage mosquito zappers, also on tall poles, crackled into life, their bright, purplish blue glow luring the hated mosquitoes to their doom.

Roger busied himself at the hot plate, set flush into the quarry tile covered concrete tabletop, the gas burners and controls hidden below.

Mark walked around it, beer can in hand, inspecting it critically. He and Roger had built it together years ago when he'd worked here, giving Roger a hand clearing additional land from the scrub.

"We made a good job of this, Roge," he said.

"Yair, mate. Best one in the district, thanks to you. No one else's got one that'll touch it ... not even go close. We've had some good parties here since we built her."

They chatted happily about this and that while the fish sizzled and spluttered on the hot plate - about old friends, old times, schooldays years ago, places they'd been, things they'd done together.

To a casual observer their obvious depth of friendship might have seemed unusual. They seemed so different - Roger, the massive, hulking, dark-skinned Italian cane farmer with a chest like a bullock, jet-black unruly hair and flashing white teeth, and Mark, tall, broad shouldered but slim of hips and waist, neat, tidy, well groomed, but with steely strength quite obvious in his confident carriage.

It was twenty-five years since they'd sat at the same twin desk on their first day at Brisbane Grammar School and ever since then they had become and remained the firmest and closest of friends, among a large circle of good school mates from the same year.

They'd been highly competitive and equally matched, both academically and in all the school's sporting activities. Their mutual respect for each other's capabilities and their desires to be the best, to beat each other at every opportunity, had driven them both to excel but had also united them in a depth of friendship seldom seen.

The fish was beautiful, fresh from the river mouth that afternoon. They ate it with just bread and margarine, washed down with a couple of cans of beer - a feast fit for a king.

Then they retired to the verandah and resumed their reminiscing, while the moon, a little beyond full, climbed higher and higher, bathing the landscape in its ghostly luminance.

Much, much later, Roger went downstairs and refilled the esky from the beer fridge. He came back, sat down, ripped the tops off two cans and gave the Fourex one to Mark.

"Mark," he said, and after a slight pause, "we've been yarning away here now for near on two hours since tucker time and you haven't said a word yet about this new bird of yours. What's the go, mate? Is this serious? Is this the real thing?"

Mark gazed out over the moonlit cane fields, so still now since the breeze had died. Today was Tuesday - two full days and a night since he'd last seen Christine but already he was missing her terribly.

He'd known at the airport yesterday morning that it would be like this, from the moment he'd let her go and she'd vanished into the departing crowd. He'd known then that he was going to miss her dreadfully. But in a way it was a warm, pleasant loneliness, with the certain knowledge of joyous reunion in the future ... in under two weeks time. Totally unlike the bleak, tear filled desolation he'd felt when Tracey had died - when he'd felt that his own life had also ended.

Yes, this definitely was serious. He'd only known Christine for four days but he knew in his heart that this was for keeps. This was for ever.

"Yes, Roge. This is serious. I didn't think there'd ever be anyone else. But Christine is very special. She's a really wonderful person."

"This was very sudden, mate, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I guess so. I only met her last Friday night, but we seemed to pack a lifetime into only two days. Funny, isn't it. I thought I'd never feel this way again. You know, like I did for Tracey."

"Well, I'm very glad for you, Mark. I really am. And I do hope everything goes all right for you this time."

"Thanks, Roge."

"But Mark ... there's something that's been worrying me ever since Barry rang."

"Worrying you? What do you mean?"

"Well, mate, I'd hate to see you get hurt again. You know that. And there's nothing I wish for more than to see you really happy with a good woman again, but mate, this Christine lady, she frightens me. She's a load of trouble just waiting to happen."

Mark stared at Roger in disbelief. He was stunned into silence. Before he recovered, Roger continued.

"Mate, I don't mean she's not a lovely lady. I'm sure she is, or you wouldn't be keen on her. And she sure is a stunner to look at, but mate, she's been playing with fire in some of her interviews lately and she's gotta be making a heap of enemies now. And mate, one of these days someone may decide she's becoming too dangerous to them and then, you know, they'll just blow her away. That's what's worrying me, mate. And not just for your lady. For you too, cos I know if anything happened to her you would be absolutely shattered, like you were when Tracey died."

"Oh, Roge. That's rubbish. This is Australia, not Italy, you big log. People don't get blown away in this country because they've been giving someone a hard time on television."

"Well ... I dunno, mate. I hope you're right. But there've been plenty of killings and people going missing over the years for bucking the system. And the crims are standing over people in a lot of areas now, you know, like the Melbourne Markets and Sydney's Kings Cross for instance. Corruption and major crime are rife here now."

"But, Roge. Christine's not interviewing criminals or suspected criminals. Not the sort you're talking about."

"I know, Mark. Until recently most of her interviews have been with employees who'd been badly treated, con-men, councils and governments, or companies doing the wrong thing, like polluting or ripping people off and so on, but lately, mate, she's been getting very political and that's what's worrying me."

"Well, this is a Federal election year."

"Yair, mate. But she's been hitting them good and proper and they won't be liking it."

"But, Roge, you don't seriously think some politician is going to kill her? Surely not?"

"I hope I'm wrong, mate, and I don't imagine she's in any danger right now, but if she keeps on making it real hard for people and if they see their futures and their cushy life styles threatened, I mean really threatened, well ... there's a few nasty types in politics nowadays and they're not all in parliament you know. There're the people in the branches and in big business and in the unions."

"Roge, you've been watching too many horror movies."

"Maybe. But just remember, when people see their way of life being threatened, their power and their glory at risk, some of them get desperate and turn real nasty. And then, anything can happen. They can do anything."

"You really believe this, don't you?"

"Well, mate, I know how easy it is to have someone put away ... for people to have accidents. The blokes in the big cities don't always know what's going on but up here in the country towns, in the cane country, we know these things. It's common knowledge up here. You remember that old joke when we were at Grammar ... five hundred dollars for a broken leg ... seven hundred with the bone sticking out. Well, it's not a joke up here. It happens. And it happens down south also, only people don't realize it's going on. It all looks accidental. That's how it's done. And it's not hard to arrange. All you need is the money."

Mark looked questioningly at his friend with suspicion showing in his eyes. So much so that Roger grinned widely and then burst out laughing.

"Mate! Don't look at me like that," he said. "I'm not in the bloody Mafia, or anything. I'm as Australian as you are ... well, nearly. Most of us up this way, in the cane country, are third, fourth, even fifth generation Australian. We just have Italian or Sicilian ancestry and mostly we marry among our own kind. But mate, we do know what goes on and we all know people who know people who know people ... if you get my drift."

"I get your drift."

"Well, all I'm saying is that this Christine lady of yours should watch her step a bit. Don't go overboard on the big people and keep her eyes peeled. You know, look over her shoulder. And if you or she ever want any help, just give me a ring. I know some people who know some people who know some people!"

He looked at Mark with twinkling eyes and laughed heartily again and Mark laughed also. But he was to remember this conversation.

"Geez, Len, couldn't you find out anything? Do I have to do everything myself?"

They were in Marlow's office the morning after Harvey Ingram's Question Time interview and Marlow was in one of his more obnoxious moods. Whenever he was dissatisfied or angry he invariably turned sarcastic and nasty. And this morning he was more angry than usual. For the last two nights in a row that rotten Jordan woman had made idiots of his Ministers on national television and although he knew that the details would be forgotten by the general public in a short time, he was very aware that the overall impression being built up by her of his Government's incompetence would last for a considerable time and would cost them dearly at the coming election.

Len Straun ignored the sarcasm. He was used to it and it was politic to not get insulted. "We dug very deep, Rex, and particularly in Jim's department. It could only have been one of his staff who took that note," he said, "but we couldn't pin it on anyone. It was probably taken soon after you sent it to Jim two years ago and then kept for future use. I don't think we'll ever find out."

"All right," Marlow grunted. "Forget it. We've got other things that are more urgent. This bitch is turning the heat up on us now and we've definitely got to stop her. She made Harvey look a fool last night and that big, fat, egotistical Rowena stuffed up completely the night before. I don't know what's wrong with these idiots. When will they ever learn to not answer embarrassing questions from interviewers? You have to ignore their questions and just continuously say only what you want to say. That's what politics is all about. Right?"

"Yes," said Straun, very quietly.

"Geez, Len, I was a fool to ever suggest Caucus promote Rowena to Cabinet. I only did it to get those feminist movement bitches off my back. What a mob of whingeing, whining women they are. Should get back to their kitchens where they bloody belong."

Straun stayed silent. He'd found this was the best option when Marlow was steamed up.

"Anyway, Len, the time's come for us to strike back. To give her a few worries of her own. Don't you think?"

"Yes, Rex, but what are you planning on doing?"

"Never you mind, Len. It's probably best you don't know. I'm going to arrange a few things to frighten her off. Now get out of here while I make a phone call to get this organised."

The call came through midafternoon on Wednesday, as Christine Jordan was finalising her clipboard notes for that evening's Question Time program.

"Christine Jordan," she said into the telephone mouthpiece.

The voice was muffled and harsh and unmistakably threatening. "Git off the air," it said. "Git outta TV, now! Or yer gonna be sorry." Then there was a light click and the line went dead.

Christine sat stunned. Not from fear but from surprise. She'd never had a threatening phone call before. After a few moments of indecision she remembered the Company's guidelines and rang Security.

"Steve, Christine Jordan here," she said. "Can you come and see me? I've just had a nasty phone call."

A few minutes later, Steve Warner, Channel Five's chief security officer, came bursting into her office. "You OK, honey?" he asked.

"Yes, Steve, but it shook me up for a minute."

"They always do the first time. This your first?"

"Yes. I've had a few nuisance and argumentative ones before but never threats."

"OK. Now, if you feel all right, tell me exactly what the person said."

Christine told him, word for word. She had no difficulty remembering them. They were seared into her memory.

"Male or female do you think?" asked Warner.

"I'm almost certain it was a man but it sounded sort of muffled."

"Probably a handkerchief."

"And it sounded very harsh. And chillingly threatening."

"They all do. Don't worry about it. Did he sound young, medium or old?"

"Medium."

"Now, Chris, Think very carefully. Have you ever heard this voice before? Any of your previous abusive calls? Or any other time?"

Christine thought back to the call, remembering the tone of the voice, trying to remember any other occasion when she'd heard it, but couldn't. She was quite certain she'd never heard it before. It had been such a chilling tone she was sure she'd have remembered any previous time.

"No, Steve. I'm certain I haven't."

"OK. Now, I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to link up a tape recorder to your telephone and show you how to scrub it and reset it each day, so if he rings again we can get him on tape and have his voice analysed and kept for evidence."

"Do you think I'll get more calls?"

"You going to stay on the program?"

"Of course I am. This show is vitally important and I don't scare off."

"Then I reckon he'll call again. Chris, this call was obviously politically motivated. You've been slamming politicians for several weeks now, and someone wants you off the air. So you'll get more threats. That's for sure. Now tell me, have you got any good friendly contacts in political circles?"

"Why?"

"Because a lot of people can't keep their mouths shut, and one of your contacts might hear something. If they did, would they tell you?"

"Probably. I've got dozens of very close contacts in political circles and government departments who hate what their bosses are doing but who need their jobs. I started cultivating them years ago, to help my father in his compensation claim. Also, I always knew what I wanted to do in television and I knew that contacts like these could feed me confidential information. That's how I get a lot of it. I'm sure all of them would tell me if they knew about this."

"OK. Then get onto them all, tell them about the call and ask them to keep their eyes and ears open."

"Right, Steve."

"And don't tell anyone else. We don't want a media circus if we can help it. I'll tell Lance Boswell of course. He probably won't take any action at this stage but he insists on knowing about anything involving security. Well, that's about it for the moment. I'll be back later to fix that recorder for you. You feeling quite OK now?"

"Yes, Steve. I'm fine. And thanks very much."

CHAPTER 4.

James Farrington, cool, debonair, radiating self-confidence, sat with Christine Jordan in the Channel Five Canberra studio waiting enthusiastically for Question Time to commence.

His wavy, fair hair shone like gold in the brightness of the 2Ks back lighting and the station's make-up lady had done an excellent job of softly bronzing his face to contrast with and highlight it. The 5Ks field lighting in front flashed on his dazzling white teeth as he laughed briefly with Christine over a witticism he'd just recounted. In his impeccably chosen attire he looked a picture of sartorial elegance.

After his discussion with Albert Bygrave at lunch on Tuesday, James had given a good deal of thought to this interview. The Government were in big trouble in the opinion polls right now, there would be an election later this year and this evening's interview was a golden opportunity for him to show a large percentage of the population that he would make a far better Prime Minister than Marlow and that they should vote him and his Liberal/National Coalition into government when the election was held.

The opinion polls were so much in his and his Coalition's favour that all he had to do was make sure he didn't put his foot in it tonight and at any future time in the run up to the election date.

With those thoughts in mind he had decided to sidestep any definite statements on policy issues where possible, be vague if necessary, be non-committal on contentious subjects and plead a change of thinking in relation to any past statements that did not look like vote winners today. As long as he looked good tonight he could change his mind on any statements or promises after the election. Everyone knew that politicians did that all the time. He felt confident he could do this quite brilliantly and so he waited happily for the program to begin.

Christine looked at him across the intervening space, smiling dangerously.

The Floor Manager finger counted down the last five seconds.

The red On Air light lit up.
Question Time was live.

"Good evening. Welcome to tonight's presentation of Question Time," said Christine. "I'm Christine Jordan and my first guest tonight is a man who hopes to become the next Prime Minister of Australia ... a man who is constantly saying he would do a far better job of running our country than our present Prime Minister, which shouldn't be impossible ... a man who says this present Government is ruining the lives of many and throwing away our futures, which could well be correct."

Christine paused, looked sideways at James Farrington, smiled sweetly at him and then continued.

"But does this man have the answers? Will he really be any better than who we have at present? Let's find out. My guest tonight is the Leader of the Opposition in Federal Parliament, the Honourable James Farrington."

Christine turned away from the central camera and watched Farrington as he smiled confidently in his friendly, trust building, vote buying manner and nodded his head slightly in acknowledgement of her introduction. So different from that dreadful Rex Marlow, she thought, but still a politician. Still untrustworthy. Still a facade. Tell you anything to buy a fistful of votes.

"Welcome to Question Time, Mr Farrington," she said.

"Thank you, Christine. It's a pleasure to be here."

"Mr Farrington, the Prime Minister has to hold an election within the next six months and on present opinion poll results it would appear that your Liberal/National Coalition could win government quite easily. It therefore seemed to me that now would be an opportune time for our viewers to find out your feelings and intentions on important subjects which greatly concern them."

"I'm very happy to discuss anything with you, Christine."

"Well now, Mr Farrington," said Christine. "Let's talk about unemployment, which is currently a little over ten percent ... over a million people with no jobs. Are you satisfied with this situation?"

Farrington's eyes lit up. Here was a subject with which he could really crucify the Government.

"Of course I'm not satisfied with it," he said. "This horrendous level of unemployment is completely unacceptable. It's outrageous. It's a damning indictment of the callous attitude of this Labor Government and they are doing absolutely nothing about it."

"Then tell me, Mr Farrington, if you are elected to Government, what will you do to immediately reduce unemployment?"

"Our Coalition Parties have done a great deal of research into this problem, Christine, and we have come up with several initiatives which will enable us to quickly reduce unemployment quite dramatically."

"How quickly and how dramatically?"

"Christine, as soon as we are elected to Government we will institute measures which will, we are confident, reduce unemployment to seven percent within the next twelve to eighteen months."

James Farrington sat back in his chair, beaming confidently. That should bring in another couple of hundred thousand votes, he thought.

Christine looked at him with disbelief in her eyes. Only seven percent? Twelve to eighteen months? "Mr Farrington," she said, concern in her voice, "that still leaves nearly three-quarters of a million people without a job in over two years time from now, presuming the election is held in six months time. Can't you do better than that?"

"Christine, the economy is a very fragile thing. It is not completely controllable. It is not a machine into which we can punch some figures, pull a handle and produce a wished for or predictable result."

"I'm sure all our viewers realize that, Mr Farrington, but I'm also quite sure that they would wish for a much lower figure and in a much lesser time frame. Anyway, these are your figures. Now, tell me, what are these measures you will institute?"

"Oh, come now, Christine. I can't tell you what these measures are right now."

"Why not?"

"Because that would be disclosing a major part of our coming election campaign to our opponents."

"Mr Farrington, are you telling me that your party really believes it has formulated some initiatives which will reduce unemployment from ten percent to seven percent in a twelve to eighteen month period and that you won't tell us what these initiatives are because it might reduce your chances of winning government at the next election?"

"Yes. We don't want to show our hand ahead of time."

Christine felt her slim frame tensing. Her poor dead father's face swam momentarily in her vision, his crippled body huddled over in his wheelchair. Never trust a politician, Chrissie, he'd said. They don't care about people. They only care about votes and about being in power. How right he'd been. Servants of the people? What rubbish!

She looked at James Farrington in his thousands of dollars clothing with the 2Ks back lighting turning his hair to gold and with that smug smirk around his mouth. And you're as bad as all the rest, she thought.

"So ... " Christine said slowly, "you are prepared to allow three hundred thousand unemployed people to remain unemployed for an extra six months in order to help you win Government. You, who are part of the Australian Parliament, who have ideas you say will give jobs to three hundred thousand of our destitute unemployed, will not disclose these ideas for another six months because, by doing so, you might weaken your election campaign and cost yourself the Prime Ministership. Is that what you are telling our viewers? Is that what you are telling our one million unemployed voters?"

He knew immediately that he'd blundered. He knew in his heart that the system was wrong. But that was how it was. They were the rules. And you had to play by the rules, or you couldn't play at all ... you couldn't win. And after all, that's what it's all about, isn't it?

"Christine," he said, his voice slow, measured, but without a quaver, "if I were to disclose these plans of our Coalition this evening, the Government wouldn't institute them now, because that would be admitting that we were smarter than they were and that would adversely affect them at election time. And even if they win the next election, they still wouldn't use these ideas, because we thought of them first. That's the Westminster system of adversarial government. We wouldn't be helping the unemployed by announcing our initiatives tonight. We would merely be hurting our election prospects."

"So that's what Party Politics is about, is it, Mr Farrington?" Christine asked sadly. "Well, on that high note I think this would be a good time for a commercials break, so that our viewers can ponder the ethics and benefits of our present system of government."

And on that cue Channel Five went to commercials.

The second phone call came on Friday morning. Christine had spent the first hour at work ringing several of her friendly political and government department contacts, telling them about her original threatening phone call and asking them to let her know if they found out who was responsible. But, similar to the day before, none of the people she spoke to had any information. She had just finished speaking to one of them when her phone rang.

She picked up the receiver again. "Christine Jordan," she said.

"I told yer before," said the voice. "Git off that program, or yer gunna be very sorry." Then the line went dead.

This time she wasn't so stunned, just a little surprised. But the harsh muffled voice still chilled her to the bone. After a few moments she rang Steve Warner and told him.

"Don't touch the tape, Chris," he said. "I'll be with you in a minute to collect it and give you a replacement."

Mark Radford left the Perelli cane farm around one thirty on Friday, following a light lunch with Roger, Maria and their children. He'd thoroughly enjoyed the three days of lazing around with Roger. He was a great friend. Always had been. And Maria was a wonderful girl - a real Italian beauty, with raven-black hair, ruby-red lips and flashing dark-brown eyes. On any other visit he would have stayed for a week or more but now he wanted to head south. He was longing to see Christine again.

"She's very beautiful, this girl, hey?" Maria had teased him when they had all watched Christine interviewing Farrington on Question Time the previous night.

"If you say so, Maria," he'd laughed, without taking his eyes from the television screen.

As he slowed the XJS almost to a stop, preparatory to turning left onto the Bruce Highway from the narrow dirt road which ran back to and beyond Roger's farm, Mark glanced instinctively into the rear vision mirror.

The road behind him was virtually straight and flat for three hundred metres, until it vanished around a bend, hidden then by the high standing sugar cane in the bordering fields. Beyond the bend it wandered past several of Roger's neighbours' cane farms, past the dirt track into Roger's farm, and petered out a little beyond the next farm past Roger's, which also backed onto the South Johnston River.

Behind him the road was clear, except that right at the bend Mark caught a quick glimpse of the front half of some darkish coloured vehicle which didn't seem to be moving. That's funny, he thought, it wasn't there a minute ago when I came through the bend. Then he dismissed it from his mind, turned onto the Bruce Highway and accelerated southward towards Townsville.

He was feeling a little thirsty as he drove into Cardwell nearly an hour later, so he slowed on the esplanade fronting the beach, found the cafe he knew well from previous visits and pulled up at the kerb almost opposite it.

As he stepped out of his car, locked it and turned to cross the road, he saw a late-model dark-blue Commodore, with a man and woman in it, pull in and park a couple of spaces behind him. He didn't take much notice, however. He crossed the road, bought himself a Pineapple Crush and sat down at one of the cafe's gaily-coloured wooden tables overlooking the water.

The air was hot and the breeze was light. Across the road and beyond the beach, with small waves rippling almost unnoticeably, the Pacific Ocean stretched to the horizon. To his right the massive bulk of Hinchinbrook Island

reared up majestically out of the water at the northern end of the Hinchinbrook Channel, which wanders south to Lucinda Point, the bulk sugar terminal for the Herbert River cane fields.

As Mark looked out idly and almost unseeingly at the picturesque scene in front of him, he barely noticed a slim, dark-haired Italian woman get out of the dark-blue Commodore, cross the road and enter the cafe. She bought two cans of soft drink and returned to her car.

Being a male, unconsciously he watched her walk away from him and cross the road. Something about her stirred his memory. Did he know her? No, he didn't think so. Had he seen her before? Perhaps ... but where? And when? He couldn't remember, but she definitely looked familiar. He drank deeply from his Pineapple Crush again, his mind searching ... searching.

In the dark-blue Commodore the man and the woman drank from their soft drink cans.

That Friday evening, Christine Jordan opened the door of her unit, felt for the light switch in the darkness, turned it on, moved inside and shut the door behind her. She kicked off her shoes, wiggled her toes in ecstasy and walked barefooted into the kitchen, placing her handbag on the coffee table on the way.

She took a large glass from one of the kitchen cupboards, poured a cold drink of orange juice from the bottle in the refrigerator and took the glass back into the lounge room, putting it down carefully on the coffee table alongside her favourite lounge chair.

She looked at her watch. Eight twenty-eight.

Moving restlessly around the room she opened the windows to let in some fresh air, then went back to the kitchen and did the same there, and in her bedroom. The unit was always warm and stuffy when she arrived home but now, with the windows open, the evening breeze was refreshing.

She moved back into the lounge room, took her mobile phone from her handbag, placed it on the table next to her orange juice and sat down alongside it. She looked at her watch again. It was now eight thirty-one.

Would he ring her this evening as he'd promised?

Christine took a long, cool mouthful from the glass of orange juice, letting it slide slowly and deliciously down her throat, cooling her as it went. She stared at the telephone, willing it to ring, wanting it to ring, waiting expectantly for it to ring.

As she waited patiently for his call his face swam before her eyes - that lean, bronzed, strong looking face with those finely chiselled features, laughing, twinkling brown eyes, light-brown curly hair and thin brown eyebrows. His perfect teeth flashed as he smiled at her with that debonair, almost cheeky grin he constantly wore. Oh, he was so handsome, so strong, so nice, so ... loveable.

Oh! Good gracious! Was she really in love with him? Had she finally fallen in love with a man? After all these years?

She wanted desperately to see him again, to feel once more the firm grasp of his hand holding hers. She yearned to have his fingers running gently through her hair, to be again in his arms with her face upturned towards his ... to feel his warm, firm lips upon her own.

But then a sobering thought interrupted her wistful remembrances. What if Mark didn't feel the same way about her as she did about him? What if last weekend had not meant as much to him as it did to her? Could it have been just a two-day holiday romance as far as he was concerned? She didn't really think so. She was quite sure he was very fond of her. But how fond? Could he be in love with her?

Suddenly her telephone began ringing.

Christine, her mind hundreds of kilometres away in Townsville, jumped involuntarily. She almost spilt the orange juice in her haste to put the glass down and pick up the telephone. "Hello," she said softly into the mouthpiece, almost breathless with excitement.

The sound of her sweet, melodious voice was like music to Mark's ears. "Hello, Chrissie," he said soulfully, and then, with a hint of humour and laughter, "my name's Mark Radford. Do you remember me?"

Suddenly she was back in North Queensland. Suddenly she was with him again, leaning backward in his arms, looking up into his laughing, teasing brown eyes, with the beach sands of Radical Bay between her toes. Suddenly happiness poured all over her as her heart started pounding. He did love her. She knew it now. She could tell - just from his voice - from that depth of feeling that somehow he'd squeezed into those first two short words. Hello, Chrissie, he'd said. But the way he'd said them, the warmth and feeling he'd injected into them, told all.

"Oh, you are a silly," she laughed happily. "Of course I remember you."

They laughed and joked and teased each other for ages - Mark, lying on his bed, now in total darkness in his suite, looking out over a moonlit Cleveland Bay, and Christine, curled up like a contented kitten in her lounge chair, her hair spilling around her shoulders and her eyes closed now, so she could see him more clearly in her mind's eye. They were fourteen hundred kilometres apart, by road, but in their hearts and minds they were together again.

Later, so much later, he remembered Kooralbyn.

He told her he'd rung his mother and father and they would love her to come and visit for the weekend, that his father would love to tell her about his Grand Vision, which would certainly fully take up two whole days and that because of that he supposed he'd just have to put up with spending another two days and three nights with her, just for his father's sake, of course.

She'd agreed, against her natural desires, of course, she'd said, and only because of business - so she could arrange an interview with his father on Question Time.

"So I thought," he said, "that I'd leave Alison and John's place in Bundaberg in mid afternoon on Friday, pick you up at Channel Five after QT finishes and then we could toddle on down to Kooralbyn in time for a late dinner at home. What do you think?"

And so it was arranged, and the next morning he rang his mother and told her when they would be arriving.

For Christine Jordan, the next seven days after Mark's phone call seemed like the longest days of her life. Never before had a Friday evening seemed so far away - so unreachable.

Thankfully for Christine, this working week was a very busy one with a heavy program of several short interstate live-cross interviews and their background coverages each day. This was a godsend, because it involved her in more planning, organization and research time than she normally required in a week.

Christine disliked these two-way interviews. She liked to be physically present with the person with whom she was speaking. She disliked talking with someone on a TV screen in another location. To her, that was so remote - so impersonal.

But with the demands on her time all around Australia it was impossible for her to be physically present at several locations at the same time. For major lengthy interviews with Federal or State politicians she invariably flew interstate, unless they were in Brisbane at the time, and used the local State or Territory Channel Five studio facilities or took their local camera crews to the person's office or other chosen location.

Whilst interstate on such occasions she usually taped one or more local interviews for screening later, when the time and date of presentation was not important and the issue was not an urgent one. Only when these two methods were impractical did she abandon her preferences and fall back to using live-cross.

All this flying around the countryside and overnighting in quality hotels was highly expensive, but she had discussed this fully with Lance Boswell before he'd agreed to put Question Time to air. He'd been very happy with her as compere of his current affairs program for the twelve months after Bernice Hazelton had resigned. Their program ratings had started climbing almost immediately and within three months it had become the most popular current affairs program on Australian television.

So when she'd told him seven months ago that she would like to change the format and direction of the program he had not been very enthusiastic. But she had kept at him for two weeks. Not in a disrespectful way. Not in a nagging way. But certainly in a persistent way, with the flames of conviction in her flashing eyes.

We should be giving the people what they want, Lance, she'd said, not just what they like. We shouldn't be simply reporting and showing what has happened. We should be helping the people to make happen what they want to happen. We shouldn't be following the action. We should be leading and directing it, and not in the direction that you and I want but in the direction that they want ... our audiences ... the people of Australia. We should be the mouthpiece of the Nation. We should be our country's conscience.

Lance Boswell had sat looking at her intently. He'd seen the dedication and determination shining in her eyes. I would swap four years college education for a burning desire in anything, a leading American industrialist had once said and Lance had always remembered those words. And there, in those flashing green eyes, he had seen that burning desire.

What Christine had been saying had certainly made sense to Lance. He'd read the hundreds and hundreds of letters that viewers had sent to her and he'd read dozens and dozens of letters to the editor in the local Queensland newspaper every day. And she'd been right. The people were crying out for help, but were not getting it. Federal Parliament had become a farce, a circus, a shambles, a national disgrace. State and Local Government were not much better. And the business sector was lying and cheating at every opportunity and contaminating the environment and crime and corruption were rampant.

And so Question Time had been born ... to become the voice of the people, to highlight areas of discontent, to raise subjects of concern and to ask the questions to which its viewers demanded answers.

This week, after Mark's phone call, was a fairly good example of an average Question Time's weekly coverage for Christine, except for the absence of any interviews with Federal politicians.

Her main interview on Monday evening was in their Brisbane studio with the Queensland Minister for Regional Development, responsible for the decision to throw two hundred families off their land holdings in the Albert River valley by resuming their farming and grazing properties to enable the construction of a dam.

"Minister," she asked, "why should these families be thrown out of their homes and businesses to provide additional water for the people of Brisbane, fifty kilometres away?"

"Because, Christine, the existing dams in the Brisbane area are unable to provide sufficient supply at present and our increasing population here will worsen the situation in the future."

"Minister, correct me if I'm wrong but isn't over fifty percent of Brisbane's existing supply used for watering domestic and Council lawns and gardens?"

"Yes. I believe that's correct."

"Well, why don't you ban the use of water from the reticulated supply for these purposes? That would solve your problem until the population doubles, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would. But then all the domestic lawns and gardens would die and we would be pitched out at the next election. The people of Brisbane wouldn't stand for it."

"But couldn't they recycle their normal household usage - baths, washing machines, dishwashers, kitchen sinks, hand basins, etcetera - by installing sullage tanks with electric pumps, supplemented by large tanks collecting and storing rainwater, like country people do?"

"Christine, most people couldn't afford that."

"Then, why don't you do it for them? It probably wouldn't be any more costly than resuming properties, constructing and maintaining another dam and continually pumping its water all the way to Brisbane, would it?"

"I really don't know," said the Minister. "We've never thought of that."

"Then how about thinking about it right now, instead of pitching people out of their homes and ruining their lives and family businesses so that other people, fifty kilometres away in Brisbane, can keep watering lawns and gardens that are already oozing water."

"Yes. I will."

"And, if you ever do have to resume properties anywhere for any purpose, why don't you pay those people ten times the realistic previous value of their properties instead of the pittance you pay them now. They deserve this for the disruption and heartbreak you cause them. Then we'd really find out how necessary resumptions are, wouldn't we? Well, how about it, Minister?" Christine asked, and then closed that segment of Monday's program.

Her other segments on Monday evening were live-cross interviews with the Victorian Police Commissioner on juvenile crime, particularly in the suburbs, where housebreaking and bashing of elderly people in their homes was becoming increasingly prevalent, and with an unnamed truck driver for a chemical manufacturer who had been filmed off-loading toxic waste into the Parramatta River in Sydney after a tip-off from a conscientious employee.

Her fourth, and concluding interview that evening, had been with a distraught mother in Perth, whose sixteen-year-old daughter had run away from a good home, conned the Social Services Department into paying her the Government's Homeless Youth Allowance and was now living in filth and squalor in a ramshackle apartment building with five other boys and girls, experimenting with drugs and sex, stealing from homes and shoplifting to supplement their Government payments.

"If the Social Services Department really believes these children when they say they're ill-treated," sobbed the mother, "why doesn't the Government run staffed and disciplined hostels, house, feed, clothe them and transport them to and from school, all in a controlled situation instead of throwing money at them and turning them loose on the streets. The Government is encouraging them and paying them to leave good homes and turn into junkies. It's monstrous. They're breaking up families and wrecking the lives of our children and they don't even care about what they're doing."

Over the next four nights, Christine spoke with school teachers and the Ministers for Education in several States about the increasing dreadful lack of literary and numerary abilities of school leavers, with several Attorneys General about the high financial cost of obtaining justice through the courts and the absolute impossibility of poor people being economically able to take legal action.

She spoke with residents of the Queensland Sunshine Coast about their newly elected Shire Councillors voting themselves wage rises of up to eighty percent within weeks of being elected and with the relevant Queensland Minister who forced three small Shires on the Darling Downs to merge into one large Shire against the volatile expressed opposition of most of the people in all the Shires involved. Jack Boot government she labelled it.

She talked with unidentified public servants about wastage and the fraudulent use of purchasing authorities and about the widespread use of Public Service credit cards for personal purchases and for huge amounts.

She spoke with the Queensland Minister for Sport and Recreation about the Government continually pouring millions of dollars of taxpayers' money into the Indy Car Race at the Gold Coast each year under guarantees to fund any deficit, for virtually no benefit to ninety-nine percent of the population.

She interviewed several Government department heads about the recent Auditor General's report which showed that only twelve percent of Government purchases were for Australian made products, which was contributing to the country's massive unemployment problem.

She argued with the Justice Department about tightening corporation law and the Bankruptcy Act and closing the loopholes which allowed smart bankrupts to siphon off the assets of companies and to continue living a life of luxury while their creditors received only cents in the dollar payments of their outstanding accounts.

And finally, in the last section of her Friday night program, Christine spoke with the Queensland Minister for Health at some length about the shocking and increasing inadequacy of the Queensland Hospital System. She spoke about the Government's closure of dozens of beds and many operating theatres in south-east Queensland. She castigated the Government about people having to wait two to three years for heart surgery and other vital requirements and of doctors and hospitals being told they could do only a stipulated number of these operations each year because of the costs involved, not because of lack of staff or facilities.

"Minister," Christine said softly and almost in disbelief, "I find it hard to be civil to a Minister of this Government which allows people to die while waiting years for heart surgery, or any other surgery, because of a lack of funding by the Government. The very same Government which put eleven million dollars this year into the Gold Coast car race. That's inexcusable, isn't it, Minister?"

"Christine," he said, "it all comes down to money. We simply can't do everything we would like to do with the limited funds at our disposal."

"No, Minister," said Christine, eyes flashing, "it doesn't come down to money at all. It comes down to priorities. Thank you for speaking with me. I'm sure our viewers have been very enlightened."

It was nearly ten o'clock on Monday morning when Mark Radford turned the nose of the XJS southward for his drive to Mackay and left the last houses of Townsville behind him.

He stopped in Ayr for half an hour to say hello to the Ford Dealer, whom he'd known during his days in Townsville many years previously and he had lunch at a little restaurant overlooking the harbour in Bowen with an old school friend from Grammar who was the leading local solicitor and also Chairman of the local Shire Council.

"How did you ever get to be Shire Chairman, Harry?" he asked.

"Talent, Mark. Just talent and good looks."

"You must have acquired both since you left Grammar," Mark joked.

"Don't let jealousy get to you, Mark," laughed Harry. "Anyway, what are you going to do, now you've sold the business?"

"I don't know yet. Got any good ideas?"

"Well ... why don't you go into politics? You don't need any brains for that. Not if this Federal mob are any indication. Should suit you just fine."

"Look who's talking," laughed Mark. "You've been in politics for seven or eight years."

"No, matie. This isn't politics. This is Local Government. We're non-political in this Shire now. Took us some time though. We'd had Labor and the Nationals fighting for years for control of our Shire Council but four years ago we pitched the last of them out and now all our Councillors are Independents. We don't have any damn political parties telling us what to do. Now the people tell us. And we listen to them. And that's the way it ought to be ... everywhere."

"You could be right. There certainly seems to be a lot of discontent with this party system lately, judging from the media reports."

"A lot of discontent? You have to be joking! The people are sick of it! Those idiots down in Canberra are a bloody laugh. They're like a mob of immature schoolkids clowning around and calling each other names instead of knuckling down and running the country."

"Well," grinned Mark, enjoying the tirade, "you certainly don't seem to have much time for them."

"You bet I don't. And you shouldn't either. Not after what they did to your brother and Teddy Anderson. They're crippling the country with their head in the clouds theories. We must be the only country in this whole darn world that doesn't protect its own industries and look after the jobs of its own people."

"Yes. I guess you're right."

"You bet I am. Anyway, there's a Federal election coming up within the next six months or so. Why don't you stand for the seat of Capricornia? You're very well known and respected in and around Rockhampton, you've worked in the mine at the Isa, you've mended fences out west, you've pulled scrub in the far north, you've an in-depth accountancy background and you've built and run a highly successful business. You've been out there in the real world. Not like some of those fools in Parliament. You'd be a natural."

"What? Stand as a Liberal or National candidate?"

"No, you idiot. As an Independent! If you join any of the political parties you have to do what you're told. You know, vote the party line."

"But I'd stand no chance as an Independent. Nobody votes for Independents. Not in Federal elections."

"Years ago that was right. But times have changed. The mood has changed. Nowadays someone like you would have a really good chance. As long as you listen to what the people want - not what some other politicians want."

When he reached Mackay, Mark Radford turned off the Bruce Highway towards Eimeo, on his way to the Dolphin Heads Resort where he'd booked in for the night. Only fifteen kilometres from the Mackay Central Business District, it was right on the beachfront with magnificent views across the sea to some twenty small tropical islands.

After he'd checked into his Studio Unit he swam lazily in the cooling waters of the Resort's main pool, slowly drank two beers at the poolside bar and then went for a run along the beach to Eimeo and back.

The late afternoon breeze was brisk and the sea was white-capped but reasonably calm.

On his return he noticed three teenagers wind-surfing fifty metres or so from the shore, a couple of youngsters canoeing closer in under the watchful eyes of parents, and a blond-haired man and a slim, dark-haired Italian looking woman dangling lines from one of the Resort's fishing dinghies thirty metres from the beach.

As he looked disinterestedly towards them the woman turned her head away from him and looked out to sea. In the fraction of a second before she did so he saw her face clearly. She was the woman at Cardwell ... wasn't she? The one who had come into the café while he was sitting having a cold drink, bought two cans of soft drink and walked back across the road to her car. The woman he was sure he'd seen before ... somewhere else.

Mark stopped and watched her, waiting for her to turn back so that he could see her face again. But she didn't. He was quite sure, however, that she was the same woman.

After a minute or so, when she still hadn't turned her head, he walked up from the beach into the Resort's grounds and through to its parking area. There was a late-model, dark-blue Commodore in the car park, similar to her car at Cardwell. Out of curiosity he mentally noted its registration number.

Mark walked back to his Studio Unit, which overlooked the beach, and looked out of the window. The wind-surfers and the kids in the canoe and their parents were still there but the blond-haired man, the Italian looking woman and their dingy were not.

Mark went and had a shower, deep in thought.

After a leisurely breakfast on Tuesday morning Mark Radford packed his suitcase and loaded it into his car. He noticed that the dark-blue Commodore was still parked where he'd seen it late the previous afternoon. He wondered idly whether it did belong to the blond-haired man and the dark-haired Italian looking woman.

And if it did, what then? What if she really had been the same woman he'd seen at Cardwell? What was unusual about that? Nothing, really. They were probably a couple of tourists, drifting down the Queensland coastline from town to town. He hadn't seen the man clearly at Cardwell because he hadn't been taking much notice but he was quite sure the woman was the same one. And he was still sure he'd seen her somewhere else also ... but where? ... and when?

After he checked out of the Dolphin Heads Resort, Mark drove into Mackay and spent several hours visiting other old friends in the main business centre.

He left Mackay after a light lunch and pointed the nose of the Jag southward again. The air was very hot now. Against his usual inclinations, he closed up the windows and turned on the air-conditioner as the last of the houses gave way to field after field of sugar cane.

During the drive to Rockhampton, Mark went over and over in his mind that weekend he'd shared with Christine. Was it only the week before last? It seemed such ages ago. He relived the whole weekend, scene by scene, each occasion indelibly imprinted in his memory, right from their Friday night meeting through to her Monday morning departure, eight long days ago.

Eight days! It was really only eight days since he'd seen her, been with her, spoken with her and yet it seemed like an eternity.

But actually that was not absolutely true. He'd spoken to her four nights ago, when he'd rung her last Friday evening ... for two hours! Holy cow! What had they talked about for two hours? And the telephone bill had been astronomical. When he'd checked out of the Aquarius yesterday morning that cheeky Nancy, the receptionist, had looked at the call cost in amazement. Ring someone special, Mr Radford? she'd asked, with a grin so wide it split her face in two.

Also, he'd seen Christine every night on television, except Saturday and Sunday. He'd seen every show. Monday in Townsville, Tuesday to Thursday at Roger's place, Friday in Townsville again and last night at the Dolphin Heads Resort, before the boys from the mill arrived for a reunion dinner.

That Roger Perelli was a swine, though, Mark grinned. Fancy calling Christine a skinny sheila with a head like a dog's breakfast. Just as well he was only fooling. And as for all that rubbish about someone maybe wanting to kill her. What a laugh that was. That Roger's been out in the sun too long. Still, it was probably the result of all the Italian

talk about the Mafia and all that. They had it in their minds all the time. And, of course, there were heaps of Italians around Innisfail. Right through North Queensland in fact.

Suddenly Mark sat upright in the car seat, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. Into his mind had come a vision - a vision of himself, Barry, Leanne, their young daughters and Christine all going down in the lift together at the Aquarius Hotel after dinner on that Friday evening, and with them in the lift was a woman. A woman who had been sitting on a stool at the cocktail bar but who had come over and joined them in the lift just before its doors closed - a slim, dark-haired Italian woman - the woman at Cardwell! - the woman at the Dolphin Heads Resort!

And her car. It was dark-blue. It was about the same colour as the front of that vehicle he'd glimpsed momentarily in his rear vision mirror when he was leaving the road to Roger's farm and turning onto the Bruce Highway. The vehicle which had been stationary and half hidden at the bend in the road. The vehicle which had not been there a few moments earlier when he'd come through that same bend. It had been far enough round the bend for the driver to watch which way he turned onto the highway. To watch ... and perhaps to follow!

Now he realized why he'd thought he'd seen her before, when she'd come into the cafe at Cardwell. Yes, she was definitely the woman in the lift. And when they'd all got out of the lift and he'd gone to the front door to see Barry and his family off in a taxi, the woman had sat down in one of the chairs in the reception lounge. And she'd still been sitting there when he'd come back inside and taken the lift to his floor.

Good God! He was being followed! He was being watched!

But why? And by whom?

Mark looked in the rear vision mirror. The road behind was straight and flat for over a kilometre. There was no vehicle in sight.

Just before the next slight bend he looked again. Still nothing. He relaxed a little but his mind kept turning over.

As the initial surprise of his remembrance subsided, Mark began reasoning with himself. Was he really being followed? Or was it simply coincidence that he'd seen this Italian woman in three places at three different times. The front of the dark coloured vehicle he'd seen on the road to Roger's cane farm probably could be discounted. It had been just a momentary glimpse he'd had. He wasn't even sure whether it was a car or a utility or a truck, or perhaps even a tractor.

No. There were really only three instances to consider. Firstly, at the Aquarius on the Friday evening in the lift. Secondly, on the following Friday at the cafe in Cardwell and, thirdly, at the Dolphin Heads Resort late yesterday afternoon. Three occasions with gaps of seven days and three days in between them. That hardly constituted being followed, did it?

Mark mulled over that for several minutes as the XJS ate up the kilometres. As each new bend in the highway approached he looked in the rear vision mirror again. Still no vehicle in sight.

And anyway, what would anyone want to follow him for? Why would anyone want to watch him? If anyone had any evil designs on Christine, as Roger had intimated, they would be following her, not him. Well ... wouldn't they? Certainly this Italian woman could have been following Christine, and not him, on the Friday night at the Aquarius, but Christine had flown south long before the Cardwell sighting.

If this woman, or these people, or whoever, were watching Christine, surely they would not be interested in him? Not now that Christine was in Brisbane. After all, they wouldn't have to follow him to find Christine again. No, he was probably getting all excited over nothing. It was probably just three, coincidental sightings.

As the sixty kilometre per hour speed sign came into sight on the northern outskirts of Rockhampton, Mark slowed the XJS and had one last look in the rear vision mirror. There was a maroon Toyota Crown a hundred metres behind him now and further back a white vehicle which looked like a Falcon. But of the blond-haired man and the slim, dark-haired Italian looking woman and their dark-blue Commodore there was no sign whatever.

Mark sighed, relieved that it was not there, and headed for Trevor Johnson's home on The Range. He had obviously been worrying about nothing.

That same morning, at the Dolphin Heads Resort, some ten minutes after Mark Radford had paid his account and driven into Mackay, four people stood chatting together in the car park.

A few minutes later the tall, dark-haired man and the fair-haired, shortish woman got into a new model white coloured Ford Falcon sedan while the blond-haired man and the slim, dark-haired Italian looking woman entered their late-model dark-blue Holden Commodore.

The two cars left the Resort together and drove towards Mackay. Where the road to Eimeo meets the old, original Bruce Highway in North Mackay, the Commodore turned right and headed back towards Townsville.

The white Falcon turned left and drove across the Pioneer River into the Central Business District. It cruised the streets in a widening grid pattern until eventually it found a parking space thirty metres from an olive-green Jaguar XJS V12 6 litre coupe that was shining like a jewel in the sunlight.

Here it parked ... and waited.

Mark Radford left Rockhampton on Wednesday morning after spending the previous night at Trevor and Helen Johnson's home.

He lunched in Gladstone with three major clients of Rocky Resolutions, who had become close personal friends over the years, and then continued southward towards Bundaberg.

He stayed in Bundaberg with his sister, Alison, and her husband, John Parker, until after lunch on Friday. While he was there John offered him a job. They were having a beer together on the patio on the Wednesday evening while Alison bathed the children.

"Mark, have you given any thought to what you're going to do in the future, now that you've sold Rocky Resolutions?" John asked.

"Not in any real depth, John. I have a couple of thoughts at the moment but I'm not going to think seriously about it for a fortnight or so. I just want to relax for a while, mooch around, play a bit of golf, do a bit of fishing, see a few of the boys ... you know ... just have a good old loaf."

"Half your luck. Sounds great. When you do get around to it, however, I have a proposition for you to think about. My old man turns sixty-three in a few months time and he's going to hang up his boots and enjoy himself from then on. When he does, we'll be looking to bring in an additional partner ... a buy in venture. I've spoken to Dad and Gordon and we all agree that you would be an ideal person. You may be a bit rusty in some areas because you've been out of the scene for a few years but with your past experience and training and ability it wouldn't take you long to get up to speed. Obviously we wouldn't expect you to make a decision until you've given it some good thought, but at this stage, after these few seconds," John laughed, "do you think you might perhaps be interested?"

Mark thought quickly, his mind racing. The proposition had instant appeal. He and John were great friends and had teamed up together very well years ago during his twelve months in Bundaberg when John had called him in regularly to talk investment and life insurance plans for Parker and Grimshaw accountancy clients. Gordon Grimshaw, the other partner, was a nice old fellow and very friendly and the staff were efficient and well presented. He loved the city - there wasn't another as nice in Queensland, with the possible exception of Mackay and Cairns, which were much hotter. The idea appealed to him tremendously, but there was one very major disadvantage. He would be four hours drive time away from Brisbane ... and Christine. Still ... ?

"That's very nice of you, John," he said. "I certainly could be interested, very much interested. But I'd like to think about it for a couple of weeks and give you an answer then, if that's all right. There are some unassociated considerations to which I'll need to give some thought."

So they'd left it at that.

Then, on Friday, while sharing a sandwich lunch with Alison prior to leaving for Brisbane, she raised the job offer again. "Do you think you'll take up the partnership offer and come back here to live?" she asked.

"I don't know, Alie. I'll certainly give it a lot of thought," he said. "If I hadn't met Christine I probably would, but now I don't know. It's four hours drive to Brisbane, both ways, which would make it rather difficult to see her very regularly."

"Well ... marry her!" Alison laughed. "Then you could both live here and you'd have no problems."

Mark laughed also. "It's not as simple as that," he said. "We hardly know each other yet. We've only spent a few hours together and we only met two weeks ago."

"Time is immaterial," Alison said wistfully. "It's feelings that count."

Mark sipped his coffee and took another sandwich from the heaped up plate. "Yes," he said, between mouthfuls, "but if all goes well and we eventually do think of marriage, there's her work to consider. She couldn't do that job from here and she might not want to give it up."

"Well ... why don't you bring her up here for the weekend after this coming one ... to see the city. She can have the spare room and you can bed down in the lounge room on our blow up mattress ... or, you could both use the same bed," she laughed. "That should hurry things along a bit."

"Hey! Whoa back, Alie," said Mark. "Christine's not that sort of lady."

"How do you know?" teased Alison. "She might be all hot and sexy under all that glamour. She might be burning up inside with pent up emotion and red hot desire."

Mark looked at her laughing face and smiled. He knew she was teasing him. "You should be writing love stories for Mills and Boon," he said. "You've got just the right imagination."

"Anyway ... to be serious," said Alison, "why not ask her up for the weekend. You could come up late Friday night and go back on Sunday evening or early on Monday. John and I would love to meet her. You could show her all around the place, I'll organize a barbecue party for Saturday evening so she can meet some of our nice friends, you can play golf with John on Saturday morning while I take her into town with the kiddies and show her all our nice shops ...

she's bound to love shopping ... and we could go picnicking on Sunday, to the Kolan River, or to Woodgate, or ... or whatever. What do you think? That would be great, wouldn't it?"

"There's no doubt about you, Alie," said Mark. "You're a real, scheming matchmaker. You're even worse than Leanne."

"Oh, come on, Mark. Do ask her," pleaded Alison. "I really am dying to meet her. Leanne couldn't stop raving about her when she rang me. Please ask her, and tell her we'd really love to have her here."

"I'll think about it. If this weekend with Ma and The Old Feller goes off OK then I'll ask her. And I'll ring you on Monday and let you know either way. How's that suit you?"

"That's lovely, Mark. I'm so excited, and I just know she'll come. I know everything's going to go well for you this time. I can feel it deep down inside."

Mark drank from his coffee cup and took another sandwich. "I hope you're right, Alie," he said.

It was two o'clock by the time Mark left Bundaberg and headed for Brisbane. The drive time would be about four hours, perhaps a little more. Meet me in Reception, she'd said, and then added that she'd be there a few minutes after seven. However, he intended to arrive by six thirty, so that he could watch her program on the TV monitor she'd said was in the Reception Lounge. It would be like seeing her before he saw her ... or something like that. He didn't really know. He was getting too excited to think clearly.

CHAPTER 5.

It was six o'clock when Mark Radford slowed at the sixty K speed sign on the outskirts of Aspley on the northern approaches to Brisbane and by the time he'd reached Channel Five, parked and locked the Jag in the visitors car park and found his way to the Reception Lounge, Question Time was just commencing.

"I'm meeting Christine Jordan here at seven o'clock," he said to the receptionist. "Is it all right if I sit in here and wait?"

"Yes. Certainly, Sir. Is Miss Jordan expecting you or would you like me to have her given a message when her program finishes?"

"No, thanks. She's expecting me. She knows I'll be here."

Mark turned away and sat down in one of the chairs where he could see the TV screen positioned high up on the wall near a door which led into the interior of the building.

She'll come through that door in half an hour's time, he thought. She'll smile at me with that lovely warm smile of hers and she'll say, Hello, Mark, in her soft sweet voice. And I'll stand up and I'll move towards her and I'll look into her eyes and I'll say, Hello, Chrissie. And then what? I can hardly kiss her. Not here. Not with this receptionist watching. I don't want to embarrass her. No, that will have to wait. Perhaps in the car park?

As Question Time ground on through its thirty-minute time slot Mark watched with close attention. A few minutes after seven o'clock the door opened. Mark looked up expectantly, but it was not Christine. Two men came in swiftly, crossed the room and left the building through the large plate glass front doors. Mark recognized the one with the scowl on his face. He was the Queensland Government Minister for Health with whom Christine had been speaking in her last interview. No wonder he was scowling, Mark thought. She'd really put it on the line with him tonight, especially right at the end.

And then she came ...

The door opened again, and there she was ...

As she came through the door, saw him and walked towards him, her face broke into the most wonderful smile. Her eyes shone with joy and happiness as her long hair swirled around her shoulders.

Oh God, she's so beautiful, Mark thought, as he rose from his chair to meet her.

"Hello, Mark," she said, in her soft sweet voice, just like he knew she would.

"Hello, Chrissie," he said quietly.

He wanted to take her in his arms, hold her close, and bury his nose in her hair, like he'd done on that Sunday night in Townsville twelve long days ago. But he knew he shouldn't. Not in this Reception Lounge. She was so close to him now, only a metre away, but he couldn't even touch her, or could he ... ?

And then, before he could even consider such a thing, he realized that they were not alone; that someone else had followed her through the door while he only had eyes for her - some man who was now standing alongside her and looking at him with a friendly but rather inquisitive look - a great, huge, dark-haired, olive-skinned giant of a man.

Christine gestured towards this man mountain. "Mark," she said, "I'd like you to meet Lance Boswell. He's my boss, so be nice to him," she smiled. "And Lance, this is Mark Radford, a friend of mine."

Lance Boswell stuck out a long arm and the two men shook hands. "Hello, Mark," he said, his strong voice seeming to fill the room and bounce off the walls.

"Hello, Lance," Mark replied, conscious of the other's firm, but not crushing, handshake.

"Christine tells me you two are weekendending at Kooralbyn," Lance said.

"Yes. With my parents. They've lived there for several years."

"Lucky them. It's a lovely spot."

"You know Kooralbyn, then?" Mark asked.

"Only the golf course, the hotel, the airstrip and what you see when you drive or fly in."

"Oh, then you're a golfer," Mark said, with interest. "How do you like the course?"

"Tough as all hell! Never played a tougher course. But it grabs you. It brings you back for more. You play, I suppose?"

"Mark plays off a twelve handicap," Christine said proudly.

"I have trouble playing to it, though," Mark grinned.

"Hell," Lance Boswell said. "I got down to fifteen once, years ago, but I'm on nineteen now, needing twenty-seven."

They all laughed.

"Well, have a nice weekend, you two," Lance grinned, and then, looking directly into Mark's eyes with his own piercing, steely grey ones, "and you look after her well, Mark. She's rather special."

Mark looked the older man in the eye. "She certainly is," he said.

Lance Boswell watched them turn away and walk towards the large plate glass front doors which opened automatically at their approach. He smiled to himself as he saw Christine's hand reach out for Mark's, find it and clasp it. They make a nice looking couple, he thought, and Radford seems a good style of a guy with a pleasant, honest looking, open face, good carriage and an air of quiet confidence and assurance about him. Yes, perhaps she'd finally found what she needed ... what had been missing ... someone to love.

After they left the building, hand in hand, Christine led Mark to the executives brightly lit, undercover car park to fetch her suitcase from her car.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Chrissie," Mark said quietly as they walked.

"I know how you feel," she said tenderly. "I feel the same."

"I've missed you very much ... and the days have been so long."

"She squeezed his hand gently. "I've missed you too," she whispered.

"And I've watched you every night on television, to see you ... and to hear your voice again."

"Did you like what you saw?" she laughed softly.

"Yes," he said, and after a short pause, "I loved what I saw."

They were at her car now. He let go of her hand. They turned towards each other and he reached out and held her arms, very lightly, just below her shoulders. He looked down into her eyes and his love for her rose within him.

She either sensed, or felt through his hands, the building up of his longing and her heartbeat quickened. She ached to have him hold her again - to feel his arms around her again - to feel his lips on hers once more. But not here. Not under this blaze of lighting. Someone might see them, and she wasn't ready for that.

"Mark," she murmured, "please wait. Someone might come."

He squeezed her arms very gently. "I'm sorry," he said, "I forgot there are other people in this world. What rotten luck."

They laughed softly together and then she opened the boot of her Commodore. He took out her suitcase, a large one, and she picked up her make-up case with its over-the-shoulder strap. He then shut the boot.

"Are you only staying for the weekend?" he asked with a grin. "You must have enough clothes in here for a fortnight."

She laughed lightly. "A girl's got to be prepared," she said. "Specially when she's being taken out into the bush ... where she can't go shopping."

They laughed and joked together as they walked happily to the visitors car park and to his Jaguar.

The lights here were not bright and the car park was deserted. The Jaguar was in the deep shadows of an overhanging Poinciana, crouching there like a beast of the forest. He put her suitcase and make-up case into the car. There was no moon yet. It had still to rise. He turned and looked at her, so close to him now, so beautiful, so appealing.

She stood as still as a statue in the semidarkness, her black hair tumbling around her shoulders and glinting softly in the faint light filtering through the Poinciana's foliage. Her face was upturned towards his, her lips slightly parted, her heartbeat starting to quicken again. Time ground slowly to a halt. There were no sounds. There was no

movement anywhere, save the racing of her heart as she looked up at him in the dim light. He was so handsome. He was so thoughtful and considerate. He was so loveable.

And then, somehow, she was in his arms.

As he drew her to him, Mark looked deeply into her lovely eyes. Through his thin shirt he could feel the cuddly softness of her pressing against him.

Her arms encircled his neck, her face upturned, with her lips waiting eagerly for his.

He could feel his heart pounding as he held her to him. Then, slowly, he lowered his head ... and their lips met.

The first kiss lasted almost for ever.

Her soft, warm lips clung to his and moved gently in unison with his own. Her lipstick tasted divine. The faint fragrance of perfume from behind her ears was intoxicating.

She was breathing quickly now, her firm but yielding breasts pressing urgently against his huge chest. Her blood was on fire and her whole body was alive and tingling and vibrant.

He could feel her every slightest tremor as she moved softly against him; as his hands caressed her back from her shoulders to her waistline. Oh, God, she was so wonderful; so soft to touch and hold; so beautiful to look at; so desirable.

At last he took his lips from hers, opened his eyes and kissed her below her left ear. It was such a sweet, cute, delicate, little ear. It looked so white against her jet-black swirling hair. Then he kissed her lips again, softly, just brushing them lightly with his own as he moved them slowly back and forth across hers. Her lipstick clung to him again as he did so. He could feel it smearing over his mouth. He loved the feel of it and he hugged her more strongly, pulling her tighter against him. Then he lifted his head and looked down at her.

"Chrissie," he whispered, his voice husky and thick with emotion, "I love you, darling. I love you so much."

Christine, her heart beating wildly, opened her eyes and looked into his. In the dim light she sensed, rather than saw, the love and devotion in them. Oh, he was so wonderful. He was so strong, yet so gentle. And he had such an effect on her. Never in her whole life had she felt anything remotely like the sensations she was experiencing now. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined such excitement, such emotion, such burning desire.

"Oh, Mark. Oh, Mark," she murmured breathlessly. "I love you too."

She reached for his lips again with her own and he kissed her once more - lightly, tenderly. She pressed her lips more firmly against his now, her eyes shut, desire for him rising within her, her senses reeling. Then suddenly she stiffened slightly and pulled her head back. Her eyes opened wide.

"Mark," she said urgently, "we must stop. I'm getting all messed up. My blouse must be crushed to bits. My make-up must be smeared all over my face. And I'm meeting your mother in an hour for the very first time!"

Mark smiled as he looked into her startled eyes. Then he kissed the tip of her nose. "Silly Billy," he laughed softly. "Ma wouldn't mind if she knew we'd been kissing."

"I'm sure she wouldn't. But I'd be so embarrassed. I'd just die if I arrived looking a mess ... looking like some big, wild brute had been having his way with me."

Reluctantly he let her go.

Reluctantly she left his arms.

"Don't ever leave me, Chrissie," he said, very quietly.

"I won't," she whispered. "Not ever."

Christine liked Lilla and Bruce Radford as soon as she met them. She'd been sure that she would. Ever since Mark's telephone call last week when he'd invited her to his parents' home for the weekend she'd been thinking about this meeting.

She was quite confident that the parents of a man as nice as Mark were sure to be nice people. She was also quite confident of her own ability to get on well with, and to be readily accepted by, people of both sexes and all ages and in almost any social circumstances.

However, she was sure that Mark's mother would have realized that she, Christine, was someone rather special to Mark. His mother would have known immediately that there was far more to this weekend invitation than just a discussion with Mark's father about his political ideas. That would have involved only a half-day. No, Mrs Radford would know that Miss Christine Jordan had become someone very special in her son's life.

Because of this, Christine had been wondering what sort of reception she was likely to receive from Mark's mother. She wasn't worried about his father. Everyone knew that fathers were not nearly as concerned about whom their sons fell in love with and married as mothers were. Mothers were a totally different proposition. She knew this from listening to various sad tales and happy tales from her numerous female acquaintances and co-workers over many years. She wasn't really worried about Mrs Radford but she was feeling a little wary.

As it turned out her concerns had been quite needless. Lilla Radford was warm, friendly, charming and motherly to her from the moment they met.

"Come on, dear," she said to Christine, after the introductions had been made and after she'd hugged and hugged her big son almost to death. "Come on in and sit down and we'll have a lovely cup of coffee. You must be tired out after such a long day. And then, after coffee, I've made a nice chicken salad for you. I didn't think you'd want a heavy dinner so late at night and when you're feeling tired. Sit down here, dear, next to me, and take your shoes off if you'd like to. Bruce," she said, turning to him, "make us all some coffee, would you, love."

Christine sat down on the large leather couch in the huge lounge room with its wall of glass doors opposite her looking out into the blackness.

"Ma, which room is Christine's?" asked Mark, walking through with her suitcase and make-up case in his hands.

"The best one, of course," said Lilla.

"There's no doubt about you, Ma. Giving Christine my room, are you? Think she's someone special, do you?"

"Of course Christine's someone special," Lilla smiled. "I have my spies, you know. Leanne rang me last week and Alison rang straight after you left Bundaberg this afternoon." She turned away from Mark and smiled warmly at Christine. "My girls and I stick close together," she said. "There's nothing happens in this family that we don't all tell each other about."

Later that evening Christine unpacked her suitcase, hung her hanging clothes in the wardrobe and folded others into the chest of drawers in the bedroom that was so obviously Mark's. Yes, it was very definitely a man's room. His mother had told her that the other children, Barry and Alison and their families, used it when visiting because it was considerably larger than the third bedroom, but that Mark was the most frequent user. The others come at Christmas and sometimes through the year but Mark pops down here quite often, being single, you know, she'd said.

As she put her brush and comb set, that had been her mother's, down on top of the dressing table, Christine looked at the large colour photo in its gold frame that stood alongside the mirror. Two schoolboys in dark-blue football jerseys and shorts stared out at her from the photograph with wide grins on their faces. Their arms were around each other's shoulders with their free hands clenched in victory salutes. They had mud and dirt all over them, a few bleeding scratches on their knees and beads of perspiration on their faces.

Christine recognized the thinner, broad shouldered, slim waisted one as a younger Mark - probably twenty years younger. He hasn't changed much, she thought, looking at his cheeky grin. The other lad was thicker, much thicker, with a mass of black, unruly hair. He looked Italian. There were no names on the border around the photo but a hand printed caption simply stated, The Super Centres - The Grammar Greats.

Also on the dressing table were two other photographs in frames - studio ones. She recognized Barry, Leanne and their children in one of them. The other was another family group of a man, a woman who looked like Mark's mother would have looked at that age and a young boy and girl. That must be his sister and her family.

When she put her shoes away in the bottom drawer, beneath the hanging section of the wardrobe, Christine came across a whole host of other photographs, large and small. She hesitated for a moment. Should she be looking at these? She didn't think it would be wrong to do so. Gathering them up carefully she carried them over to the king size bed, sat down on it, kicked off her shoes, wiggled her toes in ecstasy, curled her legs up under her and started looking through them.

It was like looking at Mark's life, all spread out on the bed in front of her.

There were school photos by the dozens - the school prefects, the first eleven, the first fifteen, the athletics team, the swimming team, the shooting team - and Mark was in all of them. Then there were snapshots of various boys and groups of boys and sporting action shots of Mark doing various things. There were younger photos back to about age five or six and a great many after school photos, some business ones of groups of young men, some groups of golfers and fishermen and one of Mark being presented with a certificate for something. Finally there was an assortment of some family ones - Mark, Barry, his sister and his mother and father.

He's hardly changed over all these years, Christine thought. You could pick up a photo of him when he was six and you'd know instantly that it was Mark. A lovely looking young boy.

Christine gathered up the photos and took them back to the drawer. She was just about to put them back in when she noticed something she'd missed before. Right in the back corner of the drawer was a small, slim, brown plastic folder about the size of an envelope. She hesitated again. This time, for some unknown reason, she felt nervous. She put the photos down on the floor, picked up the folder and sat down on the bed again, holding it in her hands ... staring at it.

She gazed fixedly at it for several minutes, unable to move.

Then she opened the folder.

Each side held a small colour snapshot. The thin, clear plastic coverings behind which each snapshot sat were brittle with age but were still transparent.

The left hand one was a head and shoulders close up of a young girl - a beautiful, lovely, golden-haired young goddess in her early twenties. Her shining short hair curled in behind her ears and her blue eyes, so full of love, looked straight at Christine. She was the sweetest, loveliest, prettiest, most adorable young thing Christine had ever seen.

The other snapshot was of the same girl, but this time she was with Mark - a younger, mid twenties year old Mark. The girl's head rested against Mark's shoulder and his arm was around her waist. His head was tilted, his chin touching the top of her head, his eyes looking down towards her. He was holding her hand - the one wearing an engagement ring.

Christine sat as still as death ... staring at the snapshots. Tears came to her eyes. Oh, you poor darling, she thought. What a, beautiful girl. What a dreadful loss. No wonder you were devastated for years.

She sat there for ages with tears running down her cheeks, dabbing at them with her sodden little hanky, while time trudged onward. Eventually she pulled herself together. She rose from the bed, had one last, long look at the two snapshots, carefully closed the folder and put it back where she'd found it. Then she put all the photographs back and shut the drawer.

Changing quickly into her pyjamas, Christine turned out the light, drew back the heavy drapes from the plate glass sliding doors that looked out into the garden and then slipped into the huge bed.

Sleep did not come to her immediately. She lay awake for a long time, thinking of Mark ... and of Mark and herself, and what was happening to them ... and of a lovely, golden-haired, blue-eyed young girl who had died twelve long years ago.

After her bath the next morning, Christine put on a simple cream cotton blouse, green tailored shorts and natural coloured scuffs. She joined Lilla in the kitchen and helped her with the breakfast preparations. Mark was in the bathroom, showering, and Bruce was out of sight somewhere.

"Mrs Radford, who's the boy with Mark in the football clothes in the photograph on the dressing table in my bedroom?" Christine asked, putting bread into the toaster.

"He's Roger Perelli. He's Mark's best friend. Ever since their first days at Brisbane Grammar."

"Is he the one with the sugar cane farm at Innisfail?"

"Yes. Mark spent a few days there with Roger last week, Leanne told me. After he met you in Townsville."

"Yes. He told me he was going to. And the family photos ... I've met Barry and Leanne and their two little girls. Is the other group your daughter and her family?"

"That's right. That's Alison and John and their children, Brent and Joanne. They live in Bundaberg."

"You have a lovely family, Mrs Radford," Christine said, a little wistfully. "Barry's such a nice man, Leanne is really sweet and their little girls are just gorgeous. I haven't met Alison and John but he's a fine looking man and Alison's very pretty and looks so full of fun."

"And Mark ... ?" Lilla turned the eggs over expertly in the frying pan and looked sideways at Christine, a trace of a smile lurking at the corners of her mouth.

Christine blushed slightly. She didn't know what to say. "Mark's very nice too," she said finally, knowing it sounded inadequate.

"Yes, he is," said Lilla quietly. "He is very nice ... He's always been such a nice boy. Never caused us any worries or problems. Neither have Alison or Barry. They've been lovely children, all of them. We're very proud of them, Bruce and I."

Lilla took the eggs from the frying pan and slipped them onto the large metal tray in the warm oven with the already cooked bacon. Then she picked up the pieces of tomato that Christine had sliced thickly for her and put them, spluttering in protest, into the frying pan.

"Tell me, dear," she said, half turning to look at Christine, "do you live at home with your parents?"

"No. Both my parents died a few years ago. I live alone in a little unit in Toowong. It's nothing pretentious but it's quite nice and it's close to work."

"I'm very sorry about your parents," Lilla said sympathetically. "They couldn't have been very old?"

"No. Dad was only fifty-five when he died four years ago and Mum was fifty-six when she died two years later."

"And do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No. I was an only child."

"That's rather sad," said Lilla. "I'm glad you and Mark have met. You should be very good for each other. He's had some sadness in his life also. Has he told you?"

"Yes. But not in any detail. Just that he'd been engaged to a very wonderful girl twelve years ago, but she died. That's all he's told me."

Lilla Radford was silent for a while. "Yes ... " she said eventually. "She was a very wonderful girl. She was so sweet. We all loved Tracey very, very much."

She turned towards Christine. "But that was twelve years ago," she said, "and now you have come into his life. And, dear, I want you to know, that Bruce and I are very happy that you have."

After breakfast, Bruce Radford took Christine into the garden room, the roofed pergola area where Lilla's pot plants and hanging baskets resided, while Mark helped Lilla clean up in the kitchen.

Christine excused herself for a minute and went to her bedroom. When she returned she sat down on the wooden bench next to Bruce. She had a tape recorder, some spare cassettes and her clipboard with her.

"Would you mind if I tape our talk and take some notes, Mr Radford?" she asked, placing the recorder on the garden table. "I may want to discuss this with Lance Boswell, my boss."

"No problem," said Bruce. "Do these tapes run for very long? The cassettes seem so small."

"They take an hour on each side, so you can talk for ages," she said.

Bruce laughed. "I'm glad Mark and Lilla didn't hear that. They reckon I can talk for ever and under fifteen feet of wet concrete."

Christine smiled at him. She liked this man. He and Mark are so alike, she thought. Same cheeky grin. He was tall, too, like Mark, but leaner - more wiry. His light-brown hair was still thick and his brown eyes were shrewd and calculating behind the friendliness. This is what Mark will look like in his sixties. That's good. I'll like that.

"Well now, I can condense this or I can ramble," Bruce smiled. "Which would you like, and how much has Mark already told you?"

Christine turned on the recorder. "He's hardly told me anything," she said. "Just that you have this Grand Vision for changing the political system in Australia, to give more power to the people and that I really should talk with you ... that we have a lot in common ... you and I ... in our views. So why don't you just ramble ... tell me everything ... right from the beginning. That way we won't miss anything. I've lots of time."

"Well," he said, "I guess it really started a couple of years ago. I was in Beaudesert Fair, our local shopping complex, one morning having my hair cut. I go to the same fellow every time. He's quite a friend of mine now. Anyway, on this particular day, Denis Godfrey and I were both ranting and raving about some stupid, ridiculous thing the Federal or State Government had just done. I forget what it was. They're always doing something stupid. And then Denis said to me at the end of it all, and I'll never forget this, he said, Bruce, it's all very well for you and me to go sounding off all the time about these idiots but it doesn't do any good ... it doesn't change anything, and we can't do anything about it, can we? Well, that got me thinking. That was when it began."

He paused for a few moments, staring unseeingly at the view of the valley. Then he turned and looked at Christine.

"You know," he said quietly, "this country of ours really is in one hell of a mess. And in so many different ways. We've got massive and hidden unemployment, an astronomical and escalating foreign debt, violent crime increasing, a failing hospital and health system, fraud and corruption in Government and the public and private sectors, a dreadful collapse of moral values, a drugs problem that's almost out of hand, ten percent of the population can't read or write, a tremendous increase in the numbers of people living in real poverty and Governments who do nothing to correct these problems. It's shocking, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Christine.

"Now, you already know this," he continued, "because you're involved with much of it with your Question Time program. But most of the population don't realize what a mess we've got into. They don't realize how bad our conditions really are, because the bad things that we see and hear about don't all come at once. They happen on a day by day, week by week basis and are then gone from our immediate memory, replaced by some newer horrors."

Bruce turned away from her once more and looked out over the valley again.

"Actually," he said, "it's not the country that's in a mess. It's not the country that's the problem. It's the people. Well, some of them - politicians, thieves, hooligans, foul-mouths, cheats, rip off merchants, greedy business people, loafers, sex deviants, child abusers, rapists, murderers - you name it - we've got the lot. And the stupidity of it is that these sort of people are only a small minority. The great majority of our population are hard working, caring and relatively honest people whose otherwise great country and good lifestyle is quickly being ruined by these other creeps. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," said Christine.

"And our Governments are allowing them to do it. That's right ... our Governments ... yours and mine, and everyone else's, irrespective of whether they're Labor or Liberal, Federal, State or Local. They're in charge of and therefore ultimately responsible for what is allowed to go on in this country. Businesses, organizations and countries normally succeed or fail from the top down, seldom from the bottom up. At the very core of our problems today are our Governments. They make and apply, or fail to apply, the rules. They own the game. Don't they?"

"Yes," said Christine.

"So ... " Bruce said, "if we are ever going to get out of this mess, if we are ever going to improve the conditions and standards of living, if we are ever going to right all the wrongs, then we have to do something about the Government - about the system of government, because all governments are as bad as their predecessors. Is that fair comment?"

"Yes," said Christine.

"Now that I'm retired," continued Bruce, "I have plenty of time to think and to read. Before I retired I used to merely skim through the paper each day. But now I read our Courier-Mail every day, virtually from cover to cover. And especially I read the Letters to the Editor. These letters tell you what the people think, what they are concerned about. They show the fear, the sorrow, the anger and the rage of the population. The people are crying out in pain. They are crying out for help. They are screaming that something's got to be done. But, do you know what?"

"No," said Christine.

"Nobody is doing anything. People are saying this should be done or that should be done but there is no action. A lot of talk. Heaps of talk. But absolutely no action."

Christine looked at him. His eyes were on fire. He was getting excited. She felt a tinge of excitement herself.

"But governments nowadays don't care about the people. They only care about power, and the reason behind this is party politics. Party politics is the ruination of this country. One party wins power and forms Government and the other party spends its time shooting at the Government, decrying its every action. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," said Christine.

"Parliament has become a circus, full of name calling clowns. Our politicians spend most of their time trying to score cheap political points over each other instead of getting their heads together and running the country efficiently. Years ago, when I was a boy, there was no such thing as party politics in City and Shire Councils. All the councillors were Independents. Even today a lot of Shire Councils are free of party politics and they work very well, don't they?"

"They certainly do."

"And this is what we need to have in Federal and State Parliaments. We need a preponderance of Independents. We need a government that is composed of Independents, who all belong to an Independents party whose only platform is to serve the people – to do as the people wish."

Bruce stopped speaking. Lilla and Mark had come from the house into the garden room to join them. Mark was carrying a silver tray on which were four mugs of coffee. He put the tray down carefully on the large wooden table. "Well, now," he said, smiling broadly at Christine, "how's The Old Feller going? Has he told you everything?" He sat down on one of the white metal chairs opposite her, where he could gaze adoringly at her across the table. "Has he told you how he's going to save the country?"

"He's started to," said Christine, "and he's very interesting, so don't you go disrupting him. This is serious talk, isn't it, Mr Radford?"

"Yes," Bruce replied. "It certainly is. You sit there quietly, son, and don't interrupt we saviours of the nation."

They all laughed and Lilla sat down opposite Bruce as Mark handed them their coffee mugs.

"All right," said Bruce. "Time to get serious again, Christine. Where was I when these two infidels crashed our party?"

"You had just said that what we need is a Government composed entirely of Independents belonging to an Independents party whose only platform is to serve the wishes of the people."

"Ah yes. Well now, let's first go back a step. Let's look at what we have at present. This country, politically, is reputed to be a democracy. OK? Well, if you look in the dictionary you will find that the word democracy is defined as government by the people. But we don't have that. No way! Sure, we have election of members of Parliament by the people but we don't have government by the people. We have government by political parties over which we have no control - by the political party which currently has the greatest number of its members elected to the House of Representatives. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," said Christine.

"And the worst feature of the lot in our present system is that once a Government, or for that matter any individual member, has been elected, they can't be pitched out for three years, four in some State Parliaments. So if you find out a few weeks or months after an election that the Government you helped vote into power, because of its election time promises, is not doing what you elected it to do then there is nothing, absolutely nothing, you can do about it. Not before the next election, that is. They can do anything they like and the people can't do a darn thing about it. We are living in a dictatorship! It's shocking, isn't it?"

"I totally agree with you," said Christine. "But what alternative do we have? What's this idea of yours of an Independents Party all about?"

"The only way to have true democracy," Bruce said, "is to have the electors in full control of the Government, and at all times. The ultimate democratic system is one in which every eligible voter has an entitlement to vote for or

against every bill that goes before Parliament. Now that does not mean that they should have to vote. It simply means that they should be entitled to and be reasonably physically able to. It should be made possible for them to do so without any great personal effort or disadvantage. Does that sound fair and reasonable?"

"Yes," said Christine.

"In the past this has been completely impractical. Nowadays it is not. Nowadays, with all our electronic gadgetry and know-how it is physically possible to do this. However, before we, the electors of this country, can reach this ultimate goal we first have to win control of Government; control which is presently in the hands of the major political parties, not in the hands of the people."

"Why?" Christine asked.

"Because they, the political parties and their members of parliament, are not going to give up their existing power. They're not going to vote themselves out of their jobs, are they?"

"I suppose not."

"Now the only way the people can gain real control of the government, other than through revolution," Bruce laughed, "is through the ballot box - by electing representatives who really will do what their electors want them to do, instead of representatives who will do only what their political parties tell them. And the only representatives who will do that when elected are Independents - Independents who have signed, before election, statutory declarations to do, at all times, the bidding of the majority of their electors and to resign immediately if they fail to do so. When we have achieved a majority of these Independents in Parliament then we can form Government and we can then provide the people with the opportunity to move on to the ultimate goal, if they so wish. Do you follow me?"

"Yes. So far. Keep going."

"To organize and control all this we need to form a party ... an Independents' Party. This party will not dictate policy to its endorsed candidates and elected parliamentarians. It will investigate and subsequently endorse potential candidates who it considers are reasonably intelligent and highly trustworthy. It will co-ordinate national and local advertising. Its platform will simply be that its endorsed candidates will do the bidding of their electors at all times or resign from Parliament. The party will require these candidates to sign legal guarantees in this regard which will be lodged with State Governors or the Governor-General, whichever is applicable, prior to elections. Sound good to you?"

"Yes ... "

"I intended to call this party The Independents' Party but the Electoral Commission does not allow the word independent to be included in a party's name, so I've decided to call it The People's Party of Australia or PPA for short. Well, that's the bones of it. That's the skeleton of my Grand Vision, as Mark named it. There's a lot more detail and modus operandi of course, but that's the concept. What do you think of it so far?"

Christine put her clipboard down on the table. She didn't answer Bruce straight away. She drank a mouthful of coffee first, staring out past Mark's unseen face at the peaceful panoramic view. This was a revolutionary concept. This was something entirely new. Not the idea of Independents in power. That was not uncommon. As he had said, many cities and shires had no party politics in their councils. But the ultimate goal? The people voting on everything? That was way out! She really wasn't sure how she felt about that. She needed more time. She needed more information.

"Mr Radford," she said at last, "I don't really know what I think about this idea yet. I'm a little stunned to tell you the truth. It's so totally different. And I don't really understand how it's going to operate. Would you tell me something about the mechanics? For instance, how will the elected PPA members find out how their electors want them to vote on all matters? There are some seventy thousand people in each of the Federal electorates. It would be an impossible task."

"Until now, Christine, that's been right. But not nowadays. What we will do when our PPA is elected to govern is immediately commence to install an electronic voting system, an EVS, which will enable all eligible voters in all electorates to immediately advise their wishes on all matters to their elected representatives."

"An electronic voting system? How will that work?"

"Christine, if you go into a supermarket today you can pay for your purchases electronically, can't you? You simply swipe your credit card through the slot in their programmed reader and press some buttons according to the instructions on its display screen to select your account and to authorise the transaction, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, with our EVS, every elector would be given their own plastic voting card, similar to a bankcard, with their own PIN number for verification. We will install electronic readers in various suitable permanent locations like we now have polling booths. People would then simply swipe their cards through the slot in any of the readers at any time during voting periods, key in their PIN number like they do with automatic teller machines, and follow the instructions on the display screen to vote on the various questions asked. You follow me?"

"Yes. So far."

"This system," Bruce continued, "could be used to instruct individual elected representatives how to vote on various issues. It could be used for Federal, State and Local Government elections and for referendums and eventually, if the people so wish, for all matters raised in parliaments and councils. The technology and security necessary is now available. If the people want this we will give it to them. Our creed will simply be to serve the wishes of the people."

"But wouldn't this be terribly expensive?"

"No. Not really. Mark costed it for me recently. We can install it Australia-wide for under ten million dollars on today's prices."

"You won't be able to compel people to vote though, will you?"

"Oh no. It won't be compulsory."

"Then why will people bother?"

"Because this way they'll have an actual say in the running of the country, which they've never had before. Because now they'll be able to have some real control over their own destiny, instead of being treated with contempt by politicians. We won't get a hundred percent of people voting, of course, but we will get a good many. And the numbers will grow quickly because the non-voters will see other people's votes ruling their lives and they won't want that. They'll want to have their say also. That's why they'll vote."

Christine stared out over the picturesque valley, seeing nothing, her mind in a whirl. He was quite right, of course, ... this man ... this visionary. You couldn't tell your local member what to do under this present system. Oh, you could physically tell him, but he wouldn't take any notice of you. He only had to take notice of his political party. They were the ones who told him what to do. And if he didn't do as they said, they were the ones who chopped his head off - who tossed him out of their party into the political wilderness. This was common knowledge.

And then, as she sat there on the bench in the garden room, surrounded by the peace and tranquillity and beauty of nature, a vision of her father came to her. She could see him as clear as could be, sitting in his wheelchair in the tiny front garden of their Housing Commission home in Stafford, and she could hear again his voice speaking to her the words he had said so many years ago, the words she had always remembered, the words that had become her driving force. Never trust a politician, Chrissie, he'd said. They don't care about people. They only care about votes and about being in power and what they can get out of it for themselves.

Yes, she thought. Her father had certainly been right ... then. But what about now? What would he think of this new idea; of this new concept; of Mr Radford's Grand Vision? As she watched him in her mind's eye he seemed to smile at her. He seemed to nod his head ... a little. And then the vision faded, and he was gone.

Christine turned and looked into Bruce Radford's brown eyes, all aflame with dedication and determination. Her own eyes flashed green fire.

"I'm with you," she said, her voice vibrant with excitement. "When can we get started?"

After a break for morning tea, Christine changed the cassette in her tape recorder and switched it on again.

"Right, Mr Radford," she said to Bruce, "where do we go from here? And can I interview you on Question Time about it yet, or is this too soon for you?"

Bruce's heart leaped. This was wonderful - an opportunity to launch his Grand Vision on national television. Also, it seemed that Christine Jordan was very interested in his concept.

"No, it's not too early, Christine," he said. "In fact the sooner the better because the next Federal election could be called at any time in the next six months. Now, to become a Registered Political Party it is necessary to have a minimum of five hundred members, all of whom must be eligible voters, and a written constitution which sets out the aims of the party. I have a constitution already prepared but at this point in time there are no members and the party has not even been formed. That's why an interview with you on your program would be a tremendous help, because at the end of the interview I could urge viewers, who are interested, to join the party. Would that be all right?"

"It certainly would," said Christine, "and I'll urge them to join also ... as much as I can without appearing biased. Now, let's get down to some detail. First of all, you need to form the party immediately and I think you should hold an inaugural meeting straight away, just you, Mrs Radford and Mark, take minutes of the meeting so it's all legal and appoint yourself President and Mrs Radford Secretary. Then all of you pay say a dollar each and become financial members. On Monday you can open a bank account. Then, at the interview, I can introduce you as the President of this new party which has already been formed and is now looking to increase its membership in order to apply for registration as a Registered Political Party. By the way, what did you say the name is going to be?"

"The People's Party of Australia ... PPA for short," said Bruce.

"Why do I have to be the Secretary?" asked Lilla, looking worried. "Why not Mark?"

"Because, in the first few weeks, there will be a lot of phone calls and mail and Mark won't be here much to attend to them," Christine answered.

"Why? Where's Mark going to be?" Lilla was puzzled.

"Well ... " Christine smiled impishly, "if this Grand Vision explodes into action the way I expect it will, Mark will probably be driving and flying all over the country, interviewing potential electoral candidates, speaking at television, radio and press interviews, holding membership rallies and fundraising drives with business houses, and lots of other vital activities. In fact, at this inaugural meeting, I think he should be appointed Vice-President, to give him a high-ranking position for promotional reasons. Don't you agree, Mr Radford?"

"Hey!" said Mark. "Why me? Why not you?"

"Because you're unemployed and you need something to occupy your mind," Christine laughed lightly, "and I can't be actively or visibly associated with this. I can be far more help as an unseen supporter. I can and will do a great deal for this party through Question Time. Far more than I ever could if I was a known party member and therefore obviously biased."

"I suppose you're right," said Mark.

"Anyway," Christine said, turning to Bruce, "let's now list up all the points we want to discuss in this interview. Then, after we've done that, we can put them into sequence, I can think about how best to lead you into each section and I can do a time appreciation of the total interview. I'm quite sure this will fill a whole program, because we only have twenty minutes available out of the thirty-minute time slot. Advertising and station promos take up the other ten. On that basis, would Tuesday evening at our station this coming week be suitable for you, Mr Radford? It's the only evening in the next two weeks that I have a full program free."

"That would be fine," Bruce said happily.

"Good. I'll have to check with Lance Boswell first thing on Monday morning. He gives me virtually a free hand in what I do, but this is something out of the ordinary. I'm quite sure he'll agree however and I'll ring you on Monday morning and confirm it. Well, let's start, shall we?"

The rest of that Saturday morning all four of them sat around the wooden table in the garden room discussing the various points that should be used in the Question Time interview while Christine took down notes on her clipboard and monitored her tape recorder.

At twelve-thirty Lilla excused herself and retired to the kitchen to make sandwiches for lunch.

In spite of all her previous thoughts of how stupid Bruce's ideas about changing the political system were, she was gradually, but grudgingly, starting to get rather excited. Perhaps it wasn't quite as idiotic as she'd thought. After all, Christine Jordan was very much in favour of it and she was a very intelligent and shrewd young lady.

Yes, Christine was really excited about it ... and she was getting Mark excited about it also. That's good. Give him something to think about. Not that he really needs anything to think about now that Christine has come into his life.

Leanne had been right when she'd rung. Christine Jordan really was very nice ... very nice indeed. And Mark was absolutely head over heels in love with her. It was so obvious. The attention he paid to her. The way he couldn't keep his eyes off her. The way he teased her and joked with her. Oh, yes, he was madly in love with her. And she with him. Yes, Christine loved him too. She had that look in her eyes. Lilla had seen that look before. She knew. And she was happy for them ... very, very happy.

CHAPTER 6.

After lunch they drove Christine around the valley, showing her the various facilities, attractions and magnificent views, and then visited Ringtails, the Kooralbyn Hotel's coffee shop, for afternoon tea.

They sat outside on the decking area, at one of the tables shaded from the afternoon sunlight by huge gums and palms and tree ferns, looking out over the manicured lawns and garden beds filled with Australian native shrubs and ground covers. The outlook over the par three golf course and the eighteenth fairway of the main course was green and peaceful.

When they'd finished their coffee, Lilla turned to Mark. "You and Christine should go for a walk through the gardens now, Mark," she said, "and you can show Christine the Pavilion area and the Tennis Complex. Dad and I will stay here and have another cup of coffee, won't we dear."

Between the tennis centre buildings and the tennis courts and the residential villas is a tiny free form swimming pool, tucked away from view and hidden on all sides by dense vegetation, like a cool, secluded pond in the depths of a rainforest - the valley's secret place! Hardly anyone is ever there. And today, as usual, it was deserted ... except for them.

He could wait no longer.

And she didn't want him to.

"Don't mess my lipstick, Mark, darling," she murmured as he took her in his arms and drew her close. "I've left my handbag with your mother."

"I've got a handkerchief," he said, as his lips reached for hers.

As she stood on tiptoe to reach his bent head, her long hair, falling below her shoulders, glistened in the dappled sunlight filtering through the treetops. She loved the seductive feel of his chest pressing lightly against her straining breasts, the strength of his strong arms holding her and the warm firmness of his lips caressing her own.

Passion and desire rose within her and her blood started to heat and race wildly through her veins as she pressed herself closer to him, thrilling at the feel of his body against her own, her head starting to spin, her senses reeling. Oh, this was wonderful. Oh, this was divine. She had never imagined in her wildest dreams how marvellous love would be; how thrilling; how heavenly.

At last, after a hundred years, she took her lips reluctantly from his and laid her head against his heaving chest. Through the roaring of a thousand waterfalls she heard his voice, thick with emotion.

"I love you, Chrissie," he whispered. "I love you more than life itself."

"And I love you too, Mark," she whispered back. "I love you very much, darling."

On their slow walk back to rejoin his mother and father, Mark told Christine about his sister's invitation to spend the next weekend in Bundaberg.

"You'd really like them," he said. "Alison's great fun and John's a very nice fellow. And he's offered me a job – a partnership in his family's accountancy firm."

Christine immediately felt a twinge of unhappiness. Bundaberg was so far away. He might get sick of driving down and back regularly just to spend a few hours with her. But what could she do? She couldn't say don't take the job. She couldn't even hint at it. That would be selfish.

With a heavy heart she turned and looked at him. He was so wonderful and she didn't want to lose him. He was her whole life now. He was always in her thoughts. She couldn't bear the thought of him going so far away.

"Are you going to accept it, Mark?" she asked, her voice low and a trifle dispirited.

"I don't know," he said. "In some ways it's very appealing but it has some disadvantages. Also, there are two other possibilities I'm thinking about. My old partner, Trevor Johnson, suggested we get back together again and start up a business in Brisbane like Rocky Resolutions, which is something we thought semi-seriously about some time ago."

"And what's the third possibility?" Her voice was brighter now. If he lived in Brisbane it would be just marvellous. She could see him regularly.

"You'll laugh at this," he grinned, "and so will The Old Feller, if I tell him."

"Why? What is it?"

"Well, on the drive down from Townsville I stopped in at Bowen and had a bite of lunch with an old school friend from Grammar. Anyway, Harry, who's Chairman of the Bowen Shire Council, suggested I should get into politics; that I should stand for the seat of Capricornia at the coming Federal election ... as an Independent! How do you like that? The Old Feller'd burst his sides laughing if I did, after I've been ribbing him about his Grand Vision for ages."

Christine stopped in her tracks.

"Oh, Mark!" she gasped excitedly, "that would be just marvellous. You could stand as a member of your father's new party. You could be the Parliamentary Leader of the party. Your father said he didn't want to be the leader ... he didn't want to be in parliament ... he only wanted to organize it, to get it up and running. You might even become Prime Minister. And I'd be so proud of you. I really would."

"Hey! Whoa back, Chrissie. Don't get so excited. I haven't said I was going to ... only that it's a possibility I'm considering."

"Don't you dare say you won't! You've got to, Mark! You've just got to! You could do so much good for this country if you were Prime Minister, if you were leader of a party of Independents dedicated to doing the wishes of the people and who had won enough seats to become the Government. Oh, say yes, Mark! Say you will!"

"Chrissie. Settle down. You're getting over excited. I'm definitely thinking seriously about it. After Harry mentioned it and on the drive down from Bowen to Mackay I thought a good deal about it ... about how this present Government keeps ruining people's lives, like all those employees of Anderson's in Townsville and Barry and Keith in particular. A lot of those people are friends of mine, and now some of them, the older ones, will never work again, just like Grandpa Teddy said when you interviewed him."

"I know. It's so sad."

"But Chrissie, even if I stood for Capricornia, where I'm well known, and won the seat, one person can't really do anything much unless they happen to hold the balance of power in a hung parliament."

"Mark, your father's Grand Vision will change that. His People's Party concept will be a tremendous success. This new party will win lots and lots of seats and probably enough to win Government ... certainly enough to hold a balance of power. So you really can make a difference. You really can, Mark. Oh, please say you will. Please, Mark!"

Mark looked into her eyes, all afire with excitement. Oh God, she's so adorable. I'd do anything for her, he thought.

"Chrissie," he said seriously, "if I stood for Capricornia I'd have to live in Rockhampton, or elsewhere in the electorate, and that's a good seven hours drive from Brisbane. We'd never see each other again. Well, hardly ever. And I couldn't bear that. You do want to see me again, don't you?" he grinned.

"Oh, you are a silly," she laughed lightly. "What makes you think I'd ever want to see a big, hulking brute like you again? All you ever do is crush my blouses and smear my lipstick."

He grabbed her then, gave her a big hug and kissed her ear.

"Anyway," she gasped, after he'd let her go, "you don't have to stand for Capricornia. You could stand for this electorate here ... Forde, isn't it? You can make your mother and father's home your residential address, which it is now. That way you can still see me whenever you want to ... if you really do want to, of course."

As he reached for her again she skipped away from him. Then she reached for his hand. "Come on," she said, "let's go and tell your parents."

After her shower the next morning, Christine joined Lilla in the kitchen to help with the breakfast preparations.

"Do you really think this new party idea will succeed, dear?" asked Lilla.

"Oh yes, Mrs Radford. I'm absolutely certain. They'll win in a landslide at this coming election."

"But how can you be so sure, dear?"

"Mrs Radford, every day at Channel Five I receive hundreds and hundreds of letters, faxes and telephone calls from people all over Australia complaining about our Governments. Mostly it's the Federal Government. Some of the letters are so sad they make me cry and some of the phone calls are just heartbreaking. There is a tremendous amount of poverty out there ... extreme poverty ... and sadness and fear and despair. There is anger there too, and bitterness and rage. Yes, especially rage. There are not thousands of these people. There are millions of them, especially the unemployed. And they all hate the Government."

She paused for a moment. Then she went on.

"But even more than that, they hate the system of government. Because, no matter what party they vote into power, they know it won't make any real difference. Because the next government won't help them either ... won't do what they ask ... won't listen to them."

"Is that why they'll vote for us?" Lilla asked.

"Mrs Radford, that's why your husband's party will be so successful ... will sweep the polls. Because its members will listen to the people and will give them, if the people want it, the opportunity to really contribute to the running of the country; will give them a way to be heard; will give them the right and the means to vote on everything; will give them true democracy, and," Christine's voice dropped almost to a whisper, "will give them hope ... hope for their future."

Lilla looked at her. She saw the green fires smouldering deep in Christine's eyes. She saw the determination written all over her lovely face, and the dedication, and the strength of purpose. In another life she could well have been the fabulously beautiful Helen draped in silvery white at the gates of Troy, or Boadicea, the fierce warrior queen in her chariot slaying the Romans, or Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orleans, in her suit of white armour arousing the spirit of French nationalism against the British invaders. Lilla looked at her again. She was so sweet. I hope they don't burn you at the stake too, she thought, figuratively speaking of course.

Later that day, after the morning had been devoted to planning and after they'd finished a light lunch, Lilla turned to Mark and Christine.

"And what are you two going to do this afternoon?" she asked. Then, to Christine, "Would you like to lie down on the day bed in the lounge room, or in your bedroom, dear, and have a little rest for a while? You must be tired out. It's been such a hectic two days."

"Oh no thank you, Mrs Radford," replied Christine, "I'm fine. I'm not at all tired. In fact, Mark is going to walk me up to the top of Polo Hill shortly to show me the view from there ... and to burn off some calories. I don't seem to have stopped eating since I arrived here."

"Well, don't go overdoing it, dear. Don't let Mark run you off your feet. He's so energetic. He makes me feel exhausted sometimes, just watching him."

A little later Mark and Christine excused themselves and went for their walk. It wasn't far from the house to the top of Polo Hill and only the last hundred metres or so was at all steep. The house was high above the valley floor,

almost at the crest of a ridge which ran from Polo Hill along to the water tower, and the walk up to the ridge and along it and up to the picnic area on the top was only a few hundred metres.

"A nice short stroll in the country air," Mark grinned. "Just enough to overcome those last two sandwiches. My God, I do believe you're putting on weight," he said, in mock horror, bending his head and staring at her flat stomach.

"Don't be so rude," she laughed. "I'm still slim and delightful, aren't I?"

"Yes," he said, "very delightful."

As they came to the flat ground at the top where the bitumen road widened at its end into a large turning circle, they passed a parked SEQEB Electricity Department enclosed van. An electricity pole at the side of the road alongside the van had a long extension ladder propped against it, reaching almost to its top. A man in work overalls was climbing the ladder. The back doors of the van were closed. On its top was a contrivance that looked similar to an indoor television aerial.

"Hi," said Mark, to the workman, as they passed. "Pretty rotten luck having to work on a Sunday."

The man stopped climbing, turned and looked down at them. "Yes," he answered, "it is rather bad luck. Still, the money's good."

Mark and Christine walked on, past the end of the bitumen road and along the dirt track to the picnic area.

"Oh, this view is magnificent," Christine said, looking all around her. "Not as high as from the lookout we went to yesterday, but you can see more detail."

"Also it's a different perspective," said Mark. "Look down there. There's an ultralight taking off from the airstrip."

"Oh yes. Isn't it tiny!"

They stood there for several minutes as he pointed out the various features - the places they'd been to, the circuit road they'd walked each morning and the polo ground at the base of the hill.

"What's that place down there, behind all the trees and shrubs at the back of the golf practice ground?" asked Christine.

"That's the Country Club. There's a great swimming pool there, in a garden setting. We should go down there and have a swim. Did you bring your togs?"

"Oh yes," she said. "A girl's got to be prepared. Yes, that would be nice. Let's do that."

They turned and walked back to the road, hand in hand.

"What's that metal thing on top of the van?" Christine asked, as they came towards the SEQEB vehicle.

"I don't know. Looks like some sort of directional antenna. I've never seen one before on these vans."

"Oh, look!" said Christine excitedly, as they drew level with the van. "You can see your parents' house from here. Doesn't it look pretty? And the orchard. And your Mother's rain forest on the knoll. And look, there's your Mother. Oh, she's gone out of sight, into the garden room on the far side."

"Come on," said Mark. "Let's go and have that swim."

The man on the ladder watched them go. Then he climbed down the ladder and entered the back of the van, closing its door behind him.

The Country Club was a hive of activity when Mark and Christine arrived. Dozens of golfers, their rounds completed, sat in the lounges near the bar and at tables outside on the paved terrace. There were plenty of children, teenagers and adults in the large, sparkling-blue swimming pool, while others rested and relaxed on lazyboys and in chairs or lay on the surrounding lawns.

"What a lovely setting," said Christine. "It's so pretty."

They swam and frolicked in the refreshingly-cool water for half an hour and then lay on their beach towels on the lawn in the shade of one of the large, low-spreading palms fringing the grass area.

She lay on her back in her navy-blue swimsuit with the wide white band around the neckline that he remembered she'd worn at Radical Bay.

As he lay alongside her on his stomach with his head raised, looking down into her eyes, he knew that he could never live without her. He bent down and across and kissed her softly and lovingly.

Their lips clung, like there was no tomorrow, as she raised one arm and ran her fingers through his hair. Then realization of their surroundings returned to her and she reluctantly drew her lips from his and turned her head sideways to see if anyone was watching. As she did so, he dropped his head lower and kissed the base of her throat, in the little hollow where her throat joined her lightly heaving chest.

On the other side of the pool, Bill O'Brien, Political Editor of The Courier-Mail, was photographing his children playing in the pool and sitting around its edge. They didn't know they were being snapped and from ten to twelve metres away he was getting some great candid shots of them with his telephoto lens. He was using a large lens opening, while a cloud passed slowly overhead.

"Well, that's all, Marlene," he said to his wife sitting nearby, after he'd taken the last shot on the roll. "There should be some good ones in this lot. I'll get them developed tomorrow or Tuesday."

On their return from the Country Club, as Mark swung the XJS into the driveway of his parent's home, a momentary flash of sunlight reflecting from something on the top of Polo Hill caught his attention.

He parked the car and as he walked around the back of it to open Christine's door for her he looked up at the hill towards the spot from where the reflection had come. Through a gap in the, scrubby eucalyptus undergrowth on the hill he could see the side of the SEQEB van against the skyline. Its rear doors were shut and the ladder still rested against the electricity pole, but of the workman there was no sign.

"Mrs Radford," said Christine, "I want to thank you very much for having me here this weekend. It's been a wonderful two days and I've enjoyed every minute of it."

The four of them were lingering over cups of coffee in the garden room after Bruce and Lilla's regular Sunday evening barbeque. The cutlery and crockery were already in the dishwasher. The day had died two hours ago and darkness was everywhere, save for the pool of light from the overhead fluorescent tube and the softer lights inside the house. The night air was cool but pleasant and the evening breeze brought with it a variety of scents from Lilla's rain forest.

Lilla turned to Christine, sitting beside her on the bench. You really are a lovely person, she thought. Well mannered and refined. Friendly, thoughtful and kind. So different from the image I had of you from your television appearances. And you're so good for my boy. He's never been happier and more alive than he is right now. It's wonderful to see him like this again.

"It's been lovely having you with us, dear," Lilla said. "Apart from all this Grand Vision business it's been so nice to meet you and to get to know you so well. I do hope we see a lot of each other in the future."

Christine felt herself blushing slightly. "Yes, I hope so too," she said, and then, "Mrs Radford, are you going to come to Brisbane on Tuesday with Mr Radford, when I do the interview with him?"

"Oh. I don't know, dear. I haven't thought about it."

"I was thinking," said Mark, to his mother, "that I'd run you and Dad to Brisbane and you and I could watch on the set in the reception lounge while these two go through their paces."

"That would be lovely," said Christine. "And then I could take us all to dinner afterwards. But you don't have to watch from reception, Mrs Radford. You and Mark can come into the studio and watch us live."

Just then the telephone began ringing in the lounge room. Bruce rose from his chair and went into the house to answer it. In a minute he was back. "It's for you, Mark," he said. "It's Roger."

Mark excused himself and went into the house. "Hi, Roge," he said into the mouthpiece. "How're Maria, and the kiddies?"

"G'day mate. They're fine. And Maria sends you a big kiss. Not that you probably need one right now ... now that you've had that skinny sheila shacked up with you for the weekend."

"Don't get excited, Roge. Ma and The Old Feller have been here all weekend also."

"Well, that's bad luck, mate. Anyway, that's not what I rang about. Now listen. Gino Cavalaro, who's got the place past me on our road, right at the end where it stops just short of the river, came over for a few beers this arvo and while we were yarning about this and that he asked me if I'd seen this strange car hanging around the area a week or so ago. Well, I asked him what he meant and he said he'd seen this dark-blue Commodore on several days, and, the days he'd seen it were the days you were up here."

Mark felt himself tensing as Roger spoke.

"Gino said he'd seen it parked down at the river," Roger continued, "in that cleared area where the road ends, on two separate occasions. There was no one in it either time and no sign of anyone near it. Also, he said he saw it a couple of other times between my place and the highway - just parked, empty, at the side of the road. And mate, I started thinking and I remembered what I'd said to you up here about your lady maybe buying herself a truckload of trouble in the future and I started to wonder if perhaps someone was following you ... you know, checking you out cos they'd seen you spending a bit of time with her. What do you reckon? Have you noticed anyone following you?"

A cold hand gripped Mark's heart. Suddenly, while Roger Perelli was speaking, visions returned to his mind. He could see again that slim, dark-haired Italian looking woman in the lift and in the reception lounge at the Aquarius. He could see her, an hour after he'd left Roger's farm, walking away from him in Cardwell across the road from the cafe towards that dark-blue Commodore. He could see her with her male companion in the fishing dingy off the beach at the Dolphin Heads Resort, and he could see her car, or an identical one, in the resort's car park. It had been the only dark-blue Commodore there.

Time seemed to stand still for Mark as he relived those scenes, now etched so vividly in his memory. My God, he was being followed! He was being spied on! Or rather, he had been. He searched his memory quickly. Had he seen

her since he left Mackay? No, he was sure he hadn't. He'd checked his rear vision mirror regularly during the drive into Rockhampton and also down to Bundaberg. No, he was quite sure she hadn't followed him further south. He was certain he would have seen her if she was still following him. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps it really was simply coincidental. Or was it?

"Hey, Mark. You still there, mate?"

Roger's voice brought him back to the present.

"Yes, Roge. Sorry. I was just remembering a few things."

Then Mark told him quietly and slowly and in complete detail everything he could remember about the woman and her car - even about perhaps seeing the car in his rear vision mirror back at the bend on the road to Roger's farm when he'd almost stopped prior to turning south onto the Bruce Highway.

"But I'm certain she hasn't been following me since I left Mackay, Roge," Mark said. "I'm positive I would have seen her if she had been. I was keeping a good eye out for her, right down to Brisbane."

"Hey, mate. Don't be so bloody dumb. She could've swapped with someone else in Mackay. If you were looking for her you could well have missed someone else."

"Yes ... I suppose so."

"It's a pity Gino didn't get the rego number of this vehicle that was hanging around here. We could've done a rego check to see if it was a local or not. We ... "

"Roger! That's it! That's how we can find out! I memorized the number of this car that looked like hers in the Dolphin Heads car park. It was the only dark-blue Commodore there."

"You're a real champ, mate. What's the number?"

Mark told him.

"Attaboy, mate. I'll get Antonio, at the Government Agency up here, to check it out tomorrow and I'll ring and let you know what he comes up with."

"Thanks, Roge. That's great."

"OK, mate. I'll be in touch. And you make sure that you and that lovely Christine of yours keep your eyes peeled. OK?"

Mark hung up the receiver and returned to the garden room, deep in thought.

Around ten o'clock, Bruce and Lilla excused themselves and went to bed. After they'd left, Mark turned off the fluorescent in the garden room and sat down on the bench next to Christine. The soft glow from the lounge room lights filtering through the trailing greenery from Lilla's hanging baskets shimmered in Christine's hair as it fell loosely around her shoulders. The light evening breeze wafted traces of her faint perfume towards him as he gazed adoringly at her in the dimness.

Sensing that he was watching her, Christine turned her head and looked into his eyes. Her lips were slightly parted. Her heartbeat was starting to quicken. She knew, with her womanly intuition, that he was about to kiss her and her breathing became a little deeper and a little faster as the thrill of expectancy tingled through her body. As he put his arms around her, drew her gently to him and lowered his head towards hers she closed her eyes and waited contentedly for their lips to meet.

And they did.

It was so lovely just being here in his arms, with his lips pressing tenderly on her own, moving softly in unison with her own, while her taut, straining breasts lay comfortably against his chest, feeling its every movement.

After years had gone by he took his lips from hers. He took his hand from behind her shoulder blade and very gently ran his fingers up through her hair. He held the back of her head in his spread fingers and looked down at her as she opened her eyes. She was so wonderful. He loved her more than words could ever say.

From ten centimetres away she looked lovingly into his eyes, almost hidden in shadows. "Kiss me again, Mark, darling," she murmured.

And so he did.

But not for very long.

Because he had to talk to her.

Ever since Roger's phone call earlier that evening Mark had been worrying about whether or not he should tell Christine why Roger had rung. He didn't want to worry her unnecessarily. He hadn't previously told her about the Italian woman and her dark-blue car because he hadn't seen them since leaving Mackay and, until Roger's phone call, he'd become quite convinced that the several, separate sightings had been simply coincidental. To have told her prior to Roger's call might have worried her needlessly.

But now it was different. Now he was quite sure that his first thoughts had been correct. Yes, he definitely had been watched. And why? Quite obviously it was because he'd become involved with Christine. It had started on that

night when they'd first met - up in the New Horizons Restaurant in the Aquarius. That was the first time he'd seen the Italian woman.

However, she obviously hadn't been there to watch him that night. She'd been there to watch Christine. And, of course, she'd then watched them both, seeing as how they'd virtually spent the whole weekend together. And when Christine had flown south the woman had followed him, because someone else would pick up with Christine in Brisbane and wherever.

The enormity of it was staggering. This was like a major operation. There must be people involved everywhere. And because of this, someone, quite obviously, was taking a great deal of interest in Christine - and not a kindly interest, unless he, Mark, was greatly mistaken.

That was why he was worried.

That was why he had to tell her.

She might be in danger.

He remembered Roger's words that Tuesday evening twelve days ago in Innisfail. Roger had said, she's gotta be making a lot of enemies now, and mate, some day someone may decide she's too dangerous to them and then, you know, they'll just blow her away.

He'd laughed and ridiculed Roger then. But now, who knows? Roger might be right. Christine might well be in danger. And because of this she had to be told.

And so he told her.

He told her slowly and quietly, with one arm around her shoulders and with his free hand holding hers and resting gently on her warm thigh and with his eyes, so serious now, looking deeply into hers. He told her every detail - every minutest detail he could remember.

Gradually, while he was speaking, Christine's demeanour changed. When he'd first started to speak she hadn't really been listening. She'd still been in that delicious state where the mind seems to be detached from the body; where the senses of touch and smell and hearing are so alive, so acute, so electric, so magnified, but the mind just sits back foggily and watches what's going on; where time stands still and is quite unimportant while you live completely through those three basic senses.

But as he kept speaking his words started to filter through the foggy. She started to forget how lovely it felt to have his arm around her, to have her hand in his, to feel the back of his hand resting lightly on her thigh, where no man's hand had ever rested before. She began to hear what he was saying ... and to understand.

By the time he'd finished the change was complete. She was alert. Her brain was spinning like a dynamo, turning over like a well-oiled, high-speed machine, receiving information, analysing, considering, accepting, rejecting, storing or discarding ... but never worrying ... never overly concerned ... not for herself, anyway.

She'd always known, of course, that she would upset some people. She'd always known that some people would be angry with her and would loath and detest her. But that had never worried her. The whole intent of Question Time had been to expose the evildoers and to enlighten the masses and to provide the people with a forum to ask the hard questions. That was its *raison d'etre*. That was its sole purpose.

And because of this aim, because of this ideal, quite obviously her program and particularly she, herself, were going to make some enemies; were going to make some bad enemies. And the threatening phone calls she'd received were additional proof of this.

But that was an accepted fact. That was to be expected. When you play with fire you risk being burnt. So you have to be careful. Yes ... you take care ... a good deal of care ... but you don't stop playing! No! Not when it's important!

"I don't really think I'm in any immediate danger, Mark, darling," she said quietly, "because if anyone had wanted to harm me they could have done so quite easily by now. And the fact that those people, that man and woman, were apparently watching me in Townsville and then watched you for several days after I left makes me think they were simply fact finding, you know, looking for information, rather than waiting for an opportunity to do harm to me ... or to you. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do. But what worries me, Chrissie, is that sooner or later they'll have gathered all the facts there are. And then what? What comes next? That's what concerns me. And not for me, darling. For you."

Then she told him about her phone calls the week before last and how Steve Warner didn't seem to be overly concerned at this stage. "And I haven't had any more for over a week now," she said, "so it was probably just someone who was upset about something at that time."

He was horrified. "Well, there you are, Chrissie," he said. "They're probably from the same source. Now I'm even more worried for you."

She squeezed his hand. "You're sweet," she said, and put her face up to be kissed.

At any other time he would have obliged. At any other time nothing would have stopped him. But not this time.

"Hold on a minute, Chrissie," he said. "Don't be so unconcerned. You really could be in danger. Whoever's behind this has been expending a lot of time and money on this exercise to date and they're going to want a return for their efforts and costs. And I don't see a booklet of facts and information being their ultimate goal. Someone wants your head, or wants you off the air, or wants you out of their hair one way or another. And those phone calls substantiate this."

"I'll be careful then, Mark. I promise, darling."

"Chrissie, I'm worried about you living alone in Brisbane. I'm worried about you being alone at night ... alone in your unit."

She looked into his eyes, her own sparkling with fun in the dim light. "You're not going to come and sleep in my unit," she smiled. "I'd never get any sleep, would I?"

"Actually," he said, "I hadn't thought of that, although I must admit the idea is very attractive. No. What I was thinking was that you should come and live here for a while. It's only an hour and a half's drive to Channel Five and you'd be safe here."

She was thoughtful for a while. His suggestion was tremendously appealing ... to be so close to him, every day, every night. But she knew she couldn't.

"Mark," she murmured, "you know I'd love to. But I can't. It would be very inconvenient for work schedules and airport travel and emergency situations and now, of course, with the launching of your father's Grand Vision it would be most damaging to the promotion for me to be living in your father's house whilst publicising his concept on my program. It would show obvious bias and would crucify the launch. You do understand, don't you, darling?"

"Yes," he said. "Unfortunately I do."

After he'd dropped Christine at Channel Five on Monday morning, Mark drove to Compac Services premises a few minutes away in Milton. They'd been Rocky Resolutions' main hardware suppliers and the Managing Director was well known to Mark.

He spent the better part of an hour with the Managing Director, Brad Coleman, discussing various technicalities associated with the installation, programming, operating and ongoing maintenance of the Electronic Voting System his father had dreamed up. He mightn't be a technician, The Old Feller, thought Mark, but he's a pretty shrewd old bloke.

While he was with Coleman, Mark told him about his fears for Christine and the plans he had discussed with her, during their drive from Kooralbyn, for installing security at her unit and in her car. Coleman gave him the name and address of a top class security company in Toowong which he highly recommended.

"Also," said Coleman, "you'd better get yourself a good quality mobile phone so she can get in touch with you instantly if she ever needs to. There's a business friend of mine in Toowong who stocks all brands."

Mark drove into Toowong as soon as he left Compac Services and located the mobile phone dealer. He bought a top quality, hands free, voice activated car phone with a cradle for charging a separate, identical brand mobile, which he also bought, which would use the same telephone number. He also bought two aerials, for clearer reception, for the front and the rear of his Jaguar.

The dealer gave him the name and address of an auto electrician in the Toowong area who could install the car phone and aerials but Mark knew he could do it himself. He and Barry had installed one in Leanne's car a year ago.

After that he drove to Total Security Systems premises, had an initial discussion with one of the partners and then took him to Christine's unit.

"I want you to make this place absolutely impregnable, Geoff," he said to the partner. "This lady is very important to me and I want this unit turned into a fortress, and price is not a consideration."

While the partner looked through and around the premises, Mark rang Channel Five on his new mobile to give Christine his phone number. She was unavailable so he left it with the telephonist to pass on to her. He then rang home, gave his father his mobile number and told him of his planned movements for the day and that he'd be late home after dining with Christine sometime after eight.

"You just rang in time," said Bruce. "Christine rang a little while ago and said Mr Boswell is very happy about tomorrow night's interview and so your mother and I are about to drive into Beaudesert to open the bank account, see Charlie Brent, the Editor of our local newspaper the Beaudesert Star, and also to do a few other things. And don't hurry home tonight, son. We won't wait up for you. I guess you won't be home before midnight if you're not eating before eight."

By the time Mark had finished the two calls, Geoff Hoskin, the security company partner, had finished his inspection. He gave Mark his recommendations and an approximate idea of the all-up costs.

"That sounds fine," said Mark. "How long will it take?"

"If we can start first thing tomorrow, we should have everything installed and the alarm system operational by say Thursday afternoon."

Mark looked at him in disbelief. "Geoff," he said quietly, "this is vitally urgent. This lady could be in grave danger. I want this job commenced and finished today, and that includes her car system. I don't care what it costs. If you have to hire additional staff at extra cost, that's fine. But I want it done today. Can you do it or not?"

Geoff Hoskin looked Mark in the eye. He saw the sincerity and determination there. "We'll try," he said. "Now, get me back to the factory, quick. We need to get rolling in a hurry."

Mark let him out at the factory entrance and then went back to where he'd bought his phone. He bought an identical system for his father, which he would install tomorrow at home in Kooralbyn. He was quite sure The Old Feller would need it during the coming weeks, when instant communication might be invaluable. Also it would be like a new toy for him.

After he'd bought the second lot of telephone equipment in Toowong, Mark drove back to Total Security Systems' premises. He parked in their customers car park, borrowed some tools and spent the better part of an hour installing his new car phone equipment, testing it and programming its memory bank with the various numbers he was likely to call frequently.

When he was quite satisfied that all was working well and that he fully understood the various functions and features he returned the tools he'd borrowed.

He then drove back to the Toowong shopping centre and located the computer and office equipment company's premises which Brad Coleman had recommended. He bought two top quality PCs, a modem, a fax machine, a photocopier and a host of miscellaneous items and equipment that he and his father had decided would be necessary to initially set up their new party's administration systems at home. He loaded one of the PCs and the modem into his Jaguar and arranged for the rest of his purchases to be specially delivered to Kooralbyn the next morning.

His next call was to the Post Office where he obtained the Brisbane white and yellow pages directories to keep in his car. He then rang Telstra and arranged for them to install urgently two new, additional telephone lines into his parents' home for the fax machine and the modem.

After that, he went to a coffee shop and had some toasted sandwiches and a cappuccino for lunch while he recounted to himself his morning activities and planned his afternoon ones.

As Mark pulled up and parked the Jag outside Christine's unit after lunch, to check on the progress of the installing of the security arrangements, his car phone started buzzing. It must be Christine or The Old Feller, he thought. He was wrong.

"G'day mate. That you?" Roger Perelli's voice came through loud and clear. The reception was excellent. For a moment Mark wondered how Roger knew the number. Then he realized he must have rung home and The Old Feller had given it to him.

"Yes, Roge," he said. "Were you able to trace that Commodore through your friend at the Government Agency?"

"No, Mark. We drew a blank, mate. It didn't show up at all on the rego number you gave me. What was the number again, mate?"

Mark told him.

"Yair, mate. That's it right enough. That's the number you gave me last night and that I gave to Antonio."

"What do you mean, it didn't show up?" Mark asked incredulously.

"Just what I said, mate. Antonio found there's no record of it. No bloody trace at all."

"But there must be. That's the number all right. I'm certain of it."

"And I'm sure you are too, mate. I know that photographic memory of yours. But mate, that number is not showing in registration records."

"What do you mean by not showing? Do you mean there are no details of the owner - no name and address?"

"No mate. I mean nothing! As in nothing at all! That number just doesn't pull up a screen. It's like it doesn't exist."

"Are you sure Antonio keyed it in correctly?"

"Hey, mate? He showed me. I watched him. The numbers each side of it came up but this one didn't."

Mark was silent for a moment or two, deep in thought.

"You still there, Mark?"

"Yes, Roge ... tell me ... what does Antonio think this means? You know, a number in a series missing. A number that's on a vehicle, definitely on a vehicle, but not showing up in records? Does he have any ideas?"

Roger Perelli paused for a second or so. Then he spoke very slowly and deliberately. "He thinks," he said, "that someone has scrubbed the record. Or else no record was ever created in the first place."

Mark also paused momentarily. "Has he come across anything like this before," he asked.

"Yair, mate. A couple of years ago he was trying to pull the details of a suspected DUI and there was no record of the rego. And you know what?"

"No. Go on."

"When he reported the matter to his chief in Brisbane he was told, a couple of days later, to forget all about it - to forget he knew anything about it."

"And what does he think about it, Roge?"

"Mate, he thinks that either there are some vehicles floating around the country whose details have been deliberately and officially left off Department of Transport data bases or someone has a method of being able to completely erase all details, including the rego number itself, as and when required, and without trace."

"If it's the former," Mark said, "it's got to be Governmental. If it's the latter, it could be anyone - anyone powerful enough to have, or to be able to obtain, access to an area high enough up the ladder to completely erase records. What do you think, Roge?"

"You're spot on, mate. But I don't know which."

"Roger," Mark said, thoughtfully, "do you have any connections higher up the ladder who might be able to help us here ... you know ... like people who know people who know people?"

Roger Perelli laughed softly. "Yes, Mark," he said. "I do know a few people like that. I'll see what I can do. See you, mate."

Mark turned off the phone and replaced it in its cradle. He sat in the XJS in the hot sunlight, deep in thought, not noticing the heat and humidity and the perspiration that was forming all over him. After a while he got out of the Jag, locked it and went to see how Total Security Systems were progressing on this rush job he'd given them - a job which now seemed desperately urgent.

Mark spent the rest of the afternoon inside Christine's unit while the security people went about their work. It was too hot to sit in the Jaguar in the sun for several hours and he was sure she wouldn't mind.

He wandered all through the unit, looking at everything, absorbing the atmosphere, feeling close to her again ... just by being where she lived. He didn't open any drawers or cupboards or wardrobes, but he did take in everything on view.

The unit was all Christine. It reeked of her. Her personality was everywhere - both sides of it. The lounge/dining room and kitchen were methodical, neat, clean cut, colourful but not gaudy. Order, discipline and restraint were all around. Everything was tidy and spotlessly clean. The furniture was functional, sufficient, comfortable, inexpensive and the colour co-ordination was excellent.

But it was not an I live here room. It was a let's sit here for a few minutes before I go to work room; a let's relax with my shoes off for a short rest before I get dinner room. It was not a personal room ... save for the photograph on the octagonal cedar table by the window. A very old photograph, in a cheap, very old frame. A photograph of a young man in Naval uniform with his arm around the shoulders of a pretty, dark-haired young lady. A young lady who looked very much like a younger Christine.

The bedroom was entirely different. It was warm. It was soft. It was pretty. It was a this is the real me room. On the simple, old style rocking chair in the corner, which had come down from granny to mother to daughter, sat a large, weather-beaten rag doll. Its face was almost faded away, its clothes yellowing with age. On the dressing table was another photograph of the young man in Naval uniform and the pretty, dark-haired young lady. But this time there was a little girl with them ... a skinny little five-year-old with long, jet-black hair ... a very pretty little thing who was holding her daddy's hand very tightly ... so he couldn't possibly go away.

Mark picked up the photograph carefully, in case he damaged its old frame. He looked at it closely for several minutes. Right at the bottom was printed, in faded ink, Christmas 1963.

He replaced it carefully, went thoughtfully into the kitchen and poured himself some orange juice from a large bottle in the refrigerator. Then he returned to the lounge room and sat down, unknowingly, in Christine's favourite chair.

I suppose, he thought, that I'm one of the few people, maybe the only person, to have lifted the veil - to have seen behind the curtain.

At eight o'clock that evening Christine joined Mark in the Channel Five reception lounge and walked out with him to the visitors car park.

"What about my car, Mark?" she asked. "Shouldn't we drive it to my unit now, darling? I'll need it there tomorrow morning."

"It's at your unit already, Chrissie," Mark said. "I had the security people drive it there after they installed the alarm. We can go and eat straight away and I'll drive you home afterwards."

The Jaguar was in the deep shade of the Poinciana tree, in the same spot where he'd parked it on Friday evening. She smiled up at him as they reached the car and he bent his head to kiss her.

"I see you're a creature of habit," she smiled.

"It seemed a perfect location," he grinned. "And a successful one in the past."

"Well, don't mess me up, darling. There's sure to be some other staff at Oxley's."

"Would you rather I resisted the temptation?" He sounded a little disheartened.

"No! Of course not! Only, be gentle, darling."

So he was. And after she'd smoothed herself down, checked her lipstick in the rear vision mirror with the aid of the Jaguar's interior light and wiped his lips clean with her hankie, they drove to the Oxley's On The River car park and walked under the roadway to the restaurant.

As they were guided to a window table overlooking the water, which she'd booked, Mark noticed all the heads turning and the eyes watching them. Also, several people spoke to or waved or nodded and smiled at Christine as they passed.

It didn't surprise him. Much the same thing had happened in Townsville on that Sunday evening in the New Horizons Restaurant. But here it seemed more so. Or perhaps he was noticing it more. Oh well, he didn't blame them for looking and admiring. If he wasn't escorting her he'd probably be watching her also. She was enchantingly beautiful. And such a warm, loving, wonderful person as well.

"You know," he laughed softly, after they were seated, "going anywhere in public with you is like being with royalty. All the eyes in the room pop out and swivel around to watch you."

She reached out and touched his arm with her fingertips, in that gesture he knew so well and loved so much. "Are you finding it disconcerting?" she smiled.

"No. Not disconcerting. Just unusual ... for me. You probably don't notice it because you're used to it."

"Normally, yes. But tonight is different for me also. There are quite a few Channel Five executives and other staff here this evening who wouldn't usually look twice at me, but they're all having a good look tonight. But at you, darling ... not at me."

"At me?"

"Yes, darling. At you. And they're all saying things to themselves and to each other like, who's that man with Christine Jordan? Or wow, Christine Jordan's finally got herself a man! You know what staff are like."

Mark grinned. "Well then, why don't I lean right over the table and give you a big kiss?" he smiled. "That should give them something to really get excited about."

Christine quickly withdrew her fingers from his arm and shrank back in her chair in mock horror. "Oh no!" she said. "They've had enough excitement for one night already."

"Well, if you don't want me to kiss you, we might as well eat," Mark grinned. "What would you like, Chrissie?"

They laughed lightly, then studied their menus. They made their choices and Mark passed them on to the hovering waitress.

When the waitress had departed, Mark told Christine all about his day's activities, including his telephone conversation with Roger Perelli. He also asked whether the Channel Five switchboard operator had given Christine his mobile phone number, which she had. He told her about all the security installations and how the monitored alarm system operated and promised to show her everything in detail when he drove her home.

"And I have three keys for your front door," he said. "Two for you, so you've got a spare, and one for me ... in case I need it."

"For what?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with merriment.

"Oh, I don't know. I just thought it might be a good idea."

"I'll bet you did," she laughed.

Their food arrived and the conversation dwindled as they looked after their inner selves. Then, when they'd finished their deserts and were lingering over coffee, Christine told Mark all about her day, how excited Lance Boswell had been about her coming interview with his father and also that she'd received another threatening phone call.

"Chrissie, this is really getting serious," Mark said with concern in his voice. "You'll have to get off Question Time for a while."

"Mark. I can't do that. But don't worry. When Steve told Lance Boswell about today's call, Lance called in the police."

"And what are they going to do?"

"They said there's not much they can do at this stage. But they're going to put surveillance on my unit for a few nights, even though they think it's just some weirdo trying to scare me. They really don't think we need to be worried."

"I hope they're right."

"Anyway," said Christine, "some good news is Lance is so enthusiastic about your father's Grand Vision that he'd like your father and mother and you and me to have dinner here after the program with him and Pauline, Pauline's his wife, so he can discuss it further. And he'll provide accommodation for you all in the Coronation Motel, down the road, for the night so you can have a drink and not have to drive home to Kooralbyn late in the evening. Isn't that nice?"

"Yes, that's very nice of him and I'm quite sure Ma and The Old Feller will be delighted."

"They are. I rang them again this afternoon. Also, I think he's going to give your father a sizeable donation for the new Party. He donates to all the other political parties so he's not showing any favouritism. But don't say anything yet. I'm not absolutely certain."

"My lips are sealed."

"And," said Christine, in a demure voice but with a twinkle in her downcast eyes, "he said he was sure he wouldn't need a room for you ... that you'd probably bunk down at my place. Isn't he awful!"

"Sounds a very practical and clear headed man," Mark grinned. "Just exactly the way I would have analysed the situation. I now have great respect for his reasoning ability. Now, hurry up and drink your coffee. I've got to tuck you into bed and drive home to Kooralbyn tonight ... or perhaps tomorrow morning," he laughed.

"Definitely tonight," she laughed also.

CHAPTER 7.

On Tuesday morning at seven forty-five in the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's Head Office in Melbourne, Brian Markwell's red phone started its low-pitched buzzing. He put down the report he'd been reading and reached for his scribbler pad with his right hand while he picked up the receiver with his left.

"Brian?" asked the receiver.

"Yes, Don." It was Don Farsley, who headed up their Queensland operation.

"I've got some info on Jordan for you, Brian." Farsley's voice was excited.

"OK. Shoot."

"You remember a week ago I told you she was going to Kooralbyn Valley with Radford this last weekend to speak with Radford's father about some Grand Vision of his?"

"Yes."

"Well, tonight, on her program, she's going to interview him about it. And Brian, it is dynamite! It's going to blow the political scene in this country wide open!"

"Why? What's it all about?"

Farsley then told him all he'd learnt about Bruce Radford's new political party and its aims and proposed methods of operation.

"That's good work, Don," said Markwell. "How did you get it? Did you bug the house?"

"Yes. We were able to get in on Friday morning and bug all rooms and the telephone while Mr and Mrs Radford were shopping in Beaudesert. Then Bert Norton took the electronics van up on top of a hill behind their house and was able to monitor and record all conversations, including some outside ones with the sound gun. We missed a lot because they spent considerable time under a roofed pergola on the blind side of the house - an area that Bert didn't think of. However, Jordan had tape recorded a trial run of her proposed interview with Radford senior that they'd done earlier and she replayed it somewhere inside the house and that gave us the complete picture. It's virtually what's going to air this evening."

"And is Jordan going to have anything to do with this new party? You know ... like being a member or an office bearer or whatever?"

"No, Brian. Not as far as we know. She appears to be very much in favour of the idea and obviously this evening's interview will assist Radford senior in the launching of his party, but her interest appears to be entirely professional ... except, of course, that she's nuts about his son ... and he about her."

Brian Markwell was thoughtful for a few moments.

Don Farsley waited patiently, knowing that his friend and boss was absorbing the information he'd just received and was considering what future action should be taken.

"So, really," Markwell said slowly, breaking the silence, "after two weeks of investigation and surveillance, we've got nothing on Jordan of any relevance. Nothing at all, except a new boy friend whose father just happens to be starting up a new political party and who, with his son, was completely unknown to her until two weeks ago. Is that how you read it?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Just a couple of nice, clean kids? And a father with a Grand Vision?"

"Yes. That's right."

Brian Markwell was silent again, thinking. He'd felt right at the start, when Len Straun had first rung and instructed him to have Jordan investigated, that this operation was going to be a waste of time. As soon as Jordan's name had been mentioned he'd felt that this was just a witch-hunt with the object, hopefully, of discovering some damaging information with which she could be defamed in an attempt to destroy her credibility as a current affairs interviewer and to have her sacked from her position. And just because she'd been giving the Government a lot of stick, heaps of stick in fact. And after Don's first report, a fortnight ago, he'd been even more certain. Yes, this was quite definitely a party political witch-hunt. There was no doubt about it. What a mob of bastards! Well, bugger them!

"Don," he said, quietly and determinedly, "close this operation down and send me a final report when you've done so. OK?"

Don Farsley felt very relieved. This was an assignment he'd never felt happy about. It had stunk of politics right from the start and he was glad that Brian had made the big decision. It wouldn't have been an easy one, with the inherent threat of retribution from above hanging over you like the Sword of Damocles. But that was one of Brian's attributes that he most admired. He didn't shirk the hard decisions.

"Good, Brian," he said, and then, "but before you go, a couple of minor matters. We can get our bugging gear back out of the Radford house OK because they often drive into Beaudesert to shop but we might have to write off a voice-activated recorder and some bugs we installed in Jordan's unit. Radford junior had a security firm tie it up tighter than a drum yesterday. There's no way of tracing the equipment to us however, if it's ever found, which is unlikely. Also, we had to wipe one of our vehicles in Department of Transport records. Radford spotted it, and a mate of his has been nosing around. He won't get anywhere though."

"Geez, Don! How did he spot a vehicle? Whose was it?"

Don Farsley told him of Mark Radford's telephone conversation with Roger Perelli on Sunday evening. "It wasn't sloppy work, Brian," he said. "It's just that we're not invisible and Radford has a very retentive memory and he's very observant."

"Come on, mate! Cardwell was a disaster! Gina had no need to get out of the car. That's bloody stupidity. Give her a rocket and tell her to play it by the book in future. And Innisfail wasn't very smart either. One of them should have stayed with the car at the end of the road and fished the riverbank. They've both got mobiles, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"Well, you tell that damn Tony I'm very disappointed with him too. Every man and his dog knows a vacant car on a country track stands out like a sore thumb. Specially if it's there a couple of days or more. It's just as well this turned out to be a fizzer. If it had been something important and they'd blown our cover I'd be angry as all hell. As it is, we've lost a voice-activated recorder and some bugs because of their stupidity. Radford probably wouldn't have put in all that security at Jordan's unit if he hadn't noticed Gina and if the same car hadn't been noticed at Innisfail. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, Brian."

"OK. Well, you get stuck into them and send me a final report next week."

"Right oh, Brian."

Brian Markwell put the receiver down and leaned back in his chair, thinking. Grand Vision, eh? Well, well, well. That should put the cat among the pigeons up in the halls of Parliament House. Serve the bastards right. Specially that swine of a Marlow. It was going to give him great satisfaction to tell Len Straun the full picture - to tell him the guillotine was going to fall at six thirty this evening on Question Time. Yes indeed ... very great satisfaction. He only wished it was Rex Marlow he had to ring. He reached for the telephone with a smile on his face. No. Not really a smile. More of a smirk. A serve you right you rotten swine sort of smirk.

Len Straun wasn't in. One of his several secretaries answered his direct line telephone the third time Markwell rang it. No, she didn't know where he was. Yes, he did usually tell her his next day's movements the afternoon or evening before but yesterday he didn't.

Markwell asked her to have Straun ring him back as soon as possible. Then he picked up the report he'd been reading before Don Farsley had rung and settled into his day.

The morning moved on. Lunchtime came and went. By four o'clock in the afternoon, when he still hadn't heard from Straun, he wondered whether he should ring again, in case that secretary hadn't passed on his message. Then he smiled to himself. No, he wouldn't ring. Let them see it on television tonight or read about it in the newspapers tomorrow morning, the rotten swine. He was covered. He'd rung Straun's office and left a message to ring back. And he had it on tape. He was always a careful man.

At four thirty on Tuesday afternoon, on his way back to The Courier-Mail building in Bowen Hills, Bill O'Brien picked up, from the fast-photo shop, the printed photos from the roll of film he'd finished on Sunday afternoon at

Kooralbyn Valley. He pulled them out of the folder to look at them as soon as he sat down at his desk. It had been a very enjoyable family weekend and the photos of Marlene and the kids were excellent. Just as he was about to put them back in their folder, Julia Johannus, their fashion editor, came to talk to him.

"What have you got there, Bill?" she asked. "Photos of a new girl friend?"

"No way, Julia. You know you're my only heart-throb."

"Apart from Marlene, of course."

"Of course."

O'Brien passed over the photos and gave her a running commentary on each of them as she inspected them slowly, one by one.

"And these last few of Trenton and Kirsty are at the Country Club pool on Sunday afternoon," he said.

She looked slowly at each of them and then suddenly stiffened. She looked very closely at the last photo and then at the second last one again. She quickly checked the other pool photos and then looked intently at the last two once more.

O'Brien watched her, wondering what was interesting her so much. He was just about to ask, when she looked up at him, her face alive with excitement and her eyes sparkling with merriment.

"Oh, Bill!" she exclaimed. "You darling man! You've just got the scoop of the century!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, in bewilderment.

Christine Jordan was a little nervous. As she sat opposite Bruce Radford under the arc lights with the three television cameras trained on them waiting for the Floor Manager to start the countdown of the last few seconds to screening time she felt a little tense. Not worriedly tense. More like excitedly tense. After all, tonight was a big night. Tonight, if she did her job really well, could be the beginning of a new era of true democracy, when the power of decision became the prerogative of the people.

And it was her job to help Mr Radford get his message across in the most comprehensive yet most concise manner; to lead him, to assist him, to prompt him and to enthuse him. She knew that what he had to say would stretch out if she let him run. So she had to keep him condensed yet highly explicit, just as they'd planned and practiced at Kooralbyn. It was vitally important that she did this successfully. That was why she was a little tense.

Hans Gerhard had noticed her tenseness. He'd been Floor Manager at Channel Five from the day they first went to air. Apart from his holiday times and an occasional day off work from sickness he had floor-managed all Christine's Brisbane studio sessions since she'd taken over from Bernice, and he knew her personality and her idiosyncrasies like the back of his hand.

Hans half knew the reason also. Word had leaked through the organisation that this interview this evening was an earth-shattering one and highly important. So important, in fact, that the studio had been closed off to everyone other than production staff and on instruction from Lance Boswell himself. Hans didn't know the subject matter and he'd never even heard of Bruce Radford but he did know that this was a momentous occasion.

Hans was a very friendly man and very kind. Apart from her first program, on the day Bernice had stormed out, he had never seen Christine tense or nervous, so when the ten-second mark arrived he gave her a huge smile. "Go get 'em, tiger," he said, and started the five-second finger countdown.

The red light came on. They were on air.

"Good evening," said Christine, to the central camera, her tenseness vanishing with her first words, like a swimmer coming off the starting block and hitting the water, "and welcome to Question Time. I'm Christine Jordan and my guest tonight is a man with a vision ... a man with a Grand Vision ... a vision of true democracy and of the giving of real power to the people ... of giving to we people of this nation, the power of decision."

Christine paused momentarily, emphasizing her last few words. Then she continued.

"Almost all of you," she said, "won't know this man. I, myself, had never met him until four days ago, had never heard of him until two weeks ago, but in the space of a few short hours of listening to him he overwhelmingly convinced me that the vision he has is one that he should share with you. He lives in the country at Kooralbyn Valley, near Beaudesert, south of Brisbane and his name is Bruce Radford. Welcome to Question Time, Mr Radford."

Bruce Radford smiled at Christine and nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Thank you, Christine," he said, his voice firm and clear.

"Mr Radford, I understand you have just recently founded a new political party whose object is to completely change the political system in Australia. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Christine. That's correct." Bruce remembered Christine's instruction to not expand or elaborate until asked. He'd played the tape they'd recorded over and over again yesterday and today, in the house, in the car and in the orchard and he almost knew what to say by heart. But he knew that he must follow her cues and he must not ramble. If you do, we'll run out of time, she'd said.

"Now, Mr Radford, before I ask you to tell our audience what changes you would like to see and how you would go about obtaining them, would you first tell us why you consider any changes to our present system of government are desirable."

Bruce looked straight at the camera nearest to Christine, the one pointing directly at him, just like she'd instructed him.

"Christine, this country of ours is in a mess ... an absolutely shocking mess," he said, slowly, firmly and with obvious conviction. "We've had around ten percent unemployment for two years now. We have a frighteningly high and increasing level of foreign debt of about ten thousand dollars for very man, woman and child in the country. The Government keeps selling off our assets and treating the money as income. We have small sections of our population receiving ridiculously excessive incomes like some executives on salaries from \$700,000 to \$1.8 million per year. Our hospital systems are underfunded, with people dying awaiting operations while we spend \$40 million building a bridge in Thailand, or wherever, as a gift."

Bruce paused for a moment and looked at Christine, who smiled encouragingly. Then he continued.

"Our crime situation is uncontrollable with people being bashed and killed in their homes by intruders. Armed hold-ups and shootings are occurring daily and nightly. Moral degradation, graft and corruption are escalating. Some television shows are pure filth, whereas if you used the same language in the streets you'd be arrested. Our education system is in tatters with ten percent of the population unable to read or write. We have a drugs problem that's out of control and embedded in many of our schools as well. A huge and increasing number of people are living below the poverty line. And our Governments obviously don't care, or they'd fix up these problems."

"And do the people care?" Christine cued him softly.

"Yes, they do," said Bruce. "They care very much indeed. Every day I read the Letters to the Editor in The Courier-Mail. They are the windows to the hearts and minds of the Nation. They show the sorrow, the poverty, the despair, the feelings of hopelessness of the population. And they show the anger and the frustration and the rage. The people are sick and tired of what our governments are doing wrong or not doing at all. They are demanding change. They are begging for it. They are crying out in anguish for it. And the letters published are only a small percentage of the ones received."

"But are these wrongs, these unacceptable conditions, the faults of our governments, Mr Radford?"

Bruce looked at her with amazement on his face, just as they'd planned. "Christine," he said, slowly and solemnly, "countries are just like businesses and families. They normally succeed or fail from the top down ... seldom, if ever, from the bottom up. And countries are run and controlled by governments. Governments make the laws. Governments decide the rules. Governments are ultimately responsible for everything that happens or doesn't happen, good or bad. They own the game."

"So, Mr Radford ... are you advocating a change of Government?"

"Yes, Christine. But not just a change of Government. What we really need is a change in the system of government. You see, Christine, this present Government, even though it's been an abject failure, is not a great deal different from all its predecessors. The real problem is the system ... this adversarial, party politics system. That's our basic problem."

"Why is that?"

"Christine, governments nowadays don't care about the people. They only care about power ... about being in power and staying in power, and the reason behind this is party politics. Party politics is the ruination of our country. One party wins power and forms government and the other party spends all its time and energy decrying its every effort. Parliament has degenerated into a circus full of name calling clowns acting like squabbling schoolchildren instead of grown men and women working together to run the country efficiently and to do the bidding of the people."

"Then what are you suggesting, Mr Radford?"

"Christine, what we need is a government in power that is composed of Independents, all of whom are members of an Independents' Party whose only platform is to serve the people ... to do as the people wish ... as the people direct, and not as some political party machine dictates."

"Yes," said Christine, quietly.

"We are reputed to live in a democracy," Bruce continued, "to have a democratic system of government. But we don't. Democracy is defined in dictionaries as government by the people. But we don't have that. We have election of members of Parliament by the people but we have government by the political party which wins the most seats. Once members are elected to Parliament they then ignore the wishes of their electorates. They do what they're told to do by their party. That's not democracy. Not in my book."

Christine had noticed her Floor Manager's signal a few seconds ago. She'd known from the wall clock also that they were right onto the first ad break. "And it's not in my book either, Mr Radford," she said. "Now, we are going to have a short commercials break for a few minutes, viewers," she added, facing the central camera, "and when we

return, Mr Radford," she turned and smiled at Bruce, "you might like to tell our viewers how you feel you can help us all to achieve this true democracy of which you speak."

As the monitoring screen went to the first advertisement, Christine smiled happily at Bruce Radford. "That's just great, Mr Radford," she said, happiness sparkling in her voice. "You couldn't have done better. It's going very, very well and we're virtually right on our time schedule."

"Good," said Bruce. "I'm trying not to ramble and I'm watching your signals. This is really quite enjoyable and I'm not at all nervous."

"Would you like a drink of water?" asked Christine, indicating the carafe and two glasses on the small, low set coffee table in front of them. "There's plenty of time if you would."

"No thanks. I'm fine."

Christine stood up and stretched her limbs. She walked over to the cameraman filming Bruce front on and spoke briefly with him. Satisfied, she walked back and sat down again, smoothed her skirt, checked through the notes on her clipboard and looked at Hans Gerhard.

He signalled fifteen seconds.

"Right oh, Mr Radford," she said. "We're almost live again."

Hans finger counted the last five seconds and then they were back.

"Well now, Mr Radford," said Christine, "before the break you were telling us that here, in Australia, we do not have true democracy ... that we are governed by the political party in power and that its members obey their party's directives instead of the wishes of their electorates ... and that what we need instead is a government composed of Independents, who are members of an Independents' Party and who will do the bidding of their electors. Is that right?"

"Yes. That's right."

Christine smiled sweetly at Bruce. "Then tell me, and all our viewers ... will members of your party, if elected, do the bidding of their electors?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because, before we endorse them as one of our party's candidates to stand for a seat, they will be required to sign a legal contract guaranteeing their resignation from Parliament if they fail to do so."

"If they fail to do what their electorate instructs?"

"That's right."

"At all times?"

"Yes. At all times and in all matters."

"Mr Radford ... our viewers are obviously going to want to know how you intend being able to find out the wishes of all the people in all the seats your party members may win, but before I ask you to tell them that, let's first find out a little about the party. For instance, what is the name of your party?"

"Its name is The People's Party of Australia. PPA for short."

"And when was the party constituted?"

"Last Sunday."

"Only two days ago?"

"That's correct."

"Well then, I don't suppose you have many members yet?" Christine smiled.

"At present we have eighty-seven people who have joined or agreed to join and who have paid or are paying in their membership fees."

"In only two days! That's excellent! You must be very happy."

"It's been a busy two days and an exciting and promising start."

"We'll talk more about how people can join your party later in the program, but right now let's look at your aims and objects and the envisaged mechanics of operation."

Christine then led Bruce expertly and quickly through the discussion points they'd planned - the sole platform of the party, simply to do at all times the bidding of the electors. The legal guarantees to resign which would be held and enforced if necessary by the Governor-General. The Parliamentary Leader to be chosen from the successful candidates by the full party membership and in the meantime his elder son would fill that role. Present office bearers were Bruce, his wife Lillian and his elder son, Mark. And elected members would accept, and table in Parliament, petitions signed by one hundred electors and agreed to by thirty percent of electors in that electorate.

She then skilfully and concisely steered him through the introduction to and the envisaged operations of his planned electronic voting system, which was the key to his whole concept of control by the people of their own destiny and she then had him explain his present and future intended means of disseminating all necessary information to all electors on matters requiring decision.

"And voting at elections would be preferential?" she asked, as they approached the next ad break.

"That's my recommendation, but we would do what the people decide."

"And all voting would be optional, not compulsory?"

"Here again we would act according to the majority decision. My own view is that interested people will always vote and disinterested people only distort the picture when forced to."

"Well then, Mr Radford, let's leave it there for the moment," said Christine, turning to face the central camera. "We'll have a short break now, ladies and gentlemen, and return again after the commercials."

During the break Christine chatted brightly with Bruce about their progress. She was very happy with the way the interview was progressing and they were again right on time at the half way mark. That was good. She'd be able to let him ramble a little at the end if they were still on time at the next break. She'd allowed some time tolerance in her planning of the last segment in case they drifted. It was always easier to pad than to cut.

Hans Gerhard's signal brought her back to the ready. "Here we go again," she said to Bruce, and then they were live once more.

"Mr Radford," Christine smiled, "you said, before the break, that your elected members will always do the bidding of the people ... of the voters in their electorates. Correct?"

"Yes, Christine. That's right."

"But what about your own wishes? What about your own personal views and the views of your elected members and your party? Will you be expressing them?"

"Oh yes, Christine. When we disseminate information on matters requiring decision we will put forward all the various viewpoints and all known facts both for and against all propositions and the party's future spokesperson will make known our own preferences and our reasoning. We will not, however, try to unduly influence the people and whatever they choose, that is what will be done. It's written into our constitution, which all members will have to agree to abide by. We will advise all the facts, options, viewpoints and our preferences and reasons, but the electors will decide."

"Right oh. Now ... Mr Radford, a lot of people are going to attack this concept of yours - political parties, economists, business people, you name it, and one of the points they will make is this. They will say that the general population is not sufficiently knowledgeable to be allowed to make decisions on most matters that are currently decided by Cabinet and voted on by Parliament. What do you say to that?"

"Christine, any person who makes a statement to that effect is virtually inferring that the voters are too dumb and stupid to be allowed a say in how their country, yes, THEIR country, should be run. That would be tantamount to saying that smart people should be allowed to vote but dumb people shouldn't. And who is to decide which people are the smart ones? This country has been run for too long already by people who consider themselves smarter than the general public and look what a mess they've made of it."

"But irrespective of various levels of intelligence, Mr Radford, the population as a whole wouldn't have the expertise to make the correct decisions in a lot of intricate situations, would they?"

"Christine, correctness is a state of mind ... an opinion. What is correct for me may be incorrect for you. Outside of two and two make four, correctness is in individuals' minds. And as for expertise! Let's not fool ourselves. The Government, in itself, doesn't do the actual physical running of the country. That's done by the Public Service and Government Departments and the private sector. Thoughts, ideas and suggestions are channelled upward and downward to and from the Government who then simply say yes or no."

"Yes," said Christine quietly.

"You don't have to be smart to say yes or no. You simply have to choose what you, yourself, want. Except that in our present system a handful of people, controlled by a single political party, do the choosing. Do you think that the people in Cabinet are smarter than the rest of us out here in the real world? I don't. And what matter if they were? If two-thirds of the people really were stupid but wanted certain actions taken then their will should prevail. We are not our brothers' keepers ... none of us."

Christine signalled him to stop. His eyes were flashing. He was wound up and ready to take off. Dedication and passionate belief shone on his face. He was so convincing. But she had to rein him in. They still had a long way to go.

"But if the whole population of voting age is involved in decision making," said Christine, "you might never get bills passed. You might never get budgets approved."

"You will, if the people want them. And if the people don't want them then they shouldn't be passed anyway. It's as simple as that."

"But what about if the people keep changing their minds? You know, you have a bill passed this month and two months later they want it changed and three months after that they want it scrapped? You'd have utter chaos, wouldn't you?"

"It would be my recommendation that bills on entirely new subjects or matters should require sixty-six and two-thirds percent of the votes cast, but that bills to change existing matters should require seventy-five percent of the votes cast. However, on this also, the people will make the decision. We will recommend, but the people will decide."

"Fair enough ... now, another point. It has been said in many countries at various times that the masses, the common people if you like, need strong leadership, for their own good ... for the good of the country. This is in direct opposition to your concept. What do you say to that?"

"Firstly, who said it? I bet it was the leaders, not the masses! And secondly, whose good are they talking about? The masses, or the leaders?"

Christine laughed, her eyes lighting up with joy and merriment. "Mr Radford," she said, "you've got a great sense of humour and you have that wonderful knack of cutting away all the deadwood and getting right to the core of a subject."

Bruce grinned at her. "Well, really," he said, "most matters are basically quite simple if you don't let yourself get snowed by all the so called experts."

"Very well," Christine smiled at him, "what if a great number of people don't want to vote ... don't want to decide?"

"That's OK. They don't have to. That would be my recommendation. But I'm sure that after a while they would get sick of other people making the rules which govern their lives when they could be having a say themselves."

"Another point, Mr Radford. Those swipe cards everyone would be given to use for your electronic voting system. Wouldn't they destroy secrecy in voting?"

"No. The system would be programmed so that a keyed in PIN number validated the card number, as with credit cards, and then allowed one response only to each question during a voting period, put a bar against any further votes on that question by that card and did not record a relationship between the card and the votes cast. It's quite foolproof and will maintain confidentiality completely."

"Well, Mr Radford, you certainly seem to have thought of everything, but I'm sure you realize that all the other political parties will be gunning for you between now and the next election."

"Of course, Christine, but it's going to be very difficult for them to convince the voters of Australia that they should not be allowed to decide their own destiny."

"Following that very true statement, viewers," Christine said, turning away from Bruce and towards the central camera, "we'll have another short commercials break and when we return for our final segment we might find out how Mr Radford intends to promote his party's concept and expand its membership."

During the commercials Hans Gerhard spoke with Christine. She was twelve seconds over her planned time at the break, he told her. She looked at her notes, made some minor adjustments and arranged for a warning sign thirty seconds out from the close. Then she had a few quick words with Bruce Radford, sat down again, smoothed her skirt and waited the final few seconds for their last segment to begin.

Hans' signal brought them back live.

"Mr Radford," said Christine, "to refresh our viewers' memories, you are the President of your new People's Party of Australia, your son, Mark, is Vice-President, your wife, Lillian, is Secretary/Treasurer and you have eighty-four other members either signed or committed. Is that right?"

"Yes, Christine."

"Well then, what are your immediate plans for expanding your membership base, both numerically and geographically and how will you select candidates to contest seats at the forthcoming election?"

"Our immediate aim is to obtain in excess of five hundred paid up members. This then allows us to apply to the Australian Electoral Commission to become a Registered Political Party. This will then enable us to receive electoral funding on the basis of primary votes received and also to have our party's initials, PPA, shown alongside our endorsed candidate's names on ballot papers."

"And what should people do who want to join your party?"

"They should simply print their full name, occupation and full residential address on a piece of paper, advise if they are prepared to, or wish to, stand as an endorsed candidate of our party at the next election and whether they are prepared to help organize a local branch of our party in their town or district. They should also include a personal or bank cheque for their one dollar membership fee and for any donation to the party that they feel they are able to make and post their details and cheque to us as soon as possible."

"And to where should they post it?"

Bruce then advised the new post office box number in Beaudesert which he and Lilla had arranged and also the postcode.

"So, there you are, viewers," said Christine, as Channel Five flashed up the name of the party and its postal address on the screen, "and if you aren't able to remember this or to note it down now, just telephone your local station

and we will give it to you. Now, Mr Radford," she continued, "one dollar seems very low for membership fees? That would only cover the cost of two postage stamps."

"That's why we are also requesting donations from all those who can afford more. There are thousands and thousands of people in this country who I'm sure would like to join and support us but who would find twenty or thirty dollars too much for them. So I do ask all you people out there," Bruce looked directly at the central camera, "who really believe in the true principal of democracy, to dig as deep as you can and send us as much as you can spare. We have a big job in front of us over the next month or two, including, hopefully, a lot of interstate travel and telephone calls to set up State branches and to check potential candidates, and all this costs money."

"And what about further promotion?" asked Christine. "Are you going to be able to afford to advertise in the media to help increase membership?"

"I doubt it. I think we may have to depend on media interviews, press, radio and television, such as your program tonight, to awaken our nation to the truly democratic future our party can provide."

"And what will you do about pre-election advertising? The three major political parties, Labor, Liberal and National, all spend huge volumes of money in the weeks immediately preceding elections in advertising their policies and denigrating their opponents."

"We hope by then that we'll have some limited funds available. However, we certainly won't be spending the same massive volumes. But we won't need to spend very much. Our only platform, our only promise, is to do what the people decide. It's as simple as that."

"Yes," Christine said, very softly, "it is very simple ... but just exactly what we need. Now, Mr Radford," she continued, "we only have two minutes or so left. Is there anything you would like to say, in conclusion, to our viewers ... to the people of Australia?"

"Yes, thank you, Christine."

Bruce Radford turned and looked straight into the eye of the central camera. At a sign from Christine, the technician in charge of the lighting gradually dimmed the front arc lights very slightly, at the same time slowly increasing the brightness of the rear lighting. The effect was quite magical. On the monitor screen Bruce's head and shoulders seemed to stand out against an ethereal background.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of Australia," he said, "what I have to say to you is very simple. Do you want your lives to continue to be ruled by the political party which controls the Government, or, would you like to have an active say in what the Government does ... in how it rules your life ... in what it does to your country ... and to you ... and to your children and your grandchildren?"

"Politicians," Bruce continued, "are elected and paid by you, the people of Australia, from your taxes. But do they do what you want done? No way! They do what their party dictates. They take no notice of you, their employer. Is that what you want? ... an employee of yours who ignores your wishes and does what someone else dictates? Well, I don't! Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your chance to climb out of the mess our party politicians have got you into. And the mess we are in today is THEIR doing. Don't let them tell you any different. They, the government of the day, are ultimately responsible for everything."

Bruce paused for a moment, allowing time for his words to sink in. Then he continued.

"In the past," he said, "we have not had the technology to allow us to improve our system of government, but today we do have. Now, it is possible for you to vote on absolutely every decision that has to be taken in Parliament. Now it is possible for you, the people, to control Parliament. Now you have the opportunity to really have your say ... to control your own destiny, and that of your children."

Bruce paused again, momentarily. Then he went on, his voice a shade lower and full of sincerity, honesty shining in his eyes.

"But I can't arrange this for you by myself. I need your help. This new People's Party of Australia is for you. It's not my party. It's yours. It is your chance for your future. But it needs your support. It needs you as a member, and it needs your one dollar membership fee and as large a donation as you feel able to give. Also, it needs men and women of honesty and integrity all over Australia who are prepared to help form and run branches in their States, cities, towns and districts and it needs others who will stand for election to Parliament and who will sign legal contracts to do the bidding of their electors. So, if you want to have a real say in your future, this is your chance. Join now."

Bruce turned and looked at Christine. "Thank you, Christine," he said.

She smiled happily at him. He'd done a great job. He'd followed her cues faithfully. He'd stuck to the script almost exactly and he hadn't rambled. He'd been passionate when needed and he'd just oozed sincerity, honesty and dedication. She was very sure he would have made a great and lasting impression on their viewers, nation wide.

And now was the time to ram it home!

She turned away from him to face the central camera, the smile fading slowly from her face, replaced by a look of solemnity. "Ladies and gentlemen of Australia," she said, "we are on the brink of a new era ... an era of true

democracy. But only YOU can make it happen. It's all up to YOU. Will you take that step? ... I look forward to being with you again tomorrow evening, and until then, God bless you all."

CHAPTER 8.

Mark Radford sat in the lounge room outside the dining room in the Coronation Motel, where he'd arranged to meet his mother and father for breakfast. He'd been up since six o'clock, run the walkway along the riverbank to the Regatta Hotel and back, and then showered, shaved, dressed and put his overnight bag into the boot of his Jag.

As he opened up The Courier-Mail the large headlines and the photo of Christine on the front page leapt out at him. It was a beautiful photo; the one The Courier-Mail regularly used when featuring her.

GRAND VISION OF TRUE DEMOCRACY screamed the banner headlines. Then followed several paragraphs of quotations of various statements by The Old Feller, obviously taken from transcripts of the previous evening's Question Time program. At the end of the front-page article were references to other pages for editorial comment and views by political columnists, an economist, three parliamentarians and several members of the general public.

He's really blown them away, Mark grinned broadly. Torn this party politics system wide open. He turned to the Editorial and then the other articles, devouring them avidly. He'd finished them all and had just started on the comics section preparatory to reading the sports news and business section when his father and mother joined him.

"Well, Old Feller, you really blitzed them," Mark grinned, holding up the front page for his parents to see.

Bruce and Lilla sat down close together and read all the articles.

There was a mixture of reaction. The three Parliamentarians interviewed by a reporter all heaped scorn on the concept, as did the economist. The two political columnists were enthusiastic in principle but foretold turmoil if Bruce's party won power and his suggestions were all implemented. The editorial column, which normally covered two or three different subjects, was devoted entirely to the Grand Vision and was very favourable about the concept but doubted the mechanics.

But of the two dozen or so people telephoned at random in their homes who had watched the program, all except one were wildly excited and supportive and had stated they would become members of the party and would vote for the PPA at the next election.

"Well, overall, that's very encouraging," said Bruce.

"Very encouraging? It's terrific!" Mark said excitedly. "Forget the three Parliamentarians. We know they wouldn't approve of this because it puts their seats in jeopardy, and everyone knows that economists are only interested in figures, economic models and theories and don't give a damn about people, so you can ignore him also. Apart from them, you've got some ninety-five percent acceptance. I think that's great."

"Oh yes, Bruce, it's wonderful," said Lilla.

"Anyway," Bruce said, "let's have breakfast now, and then we'd better head for home. It'll probably be a busy day if Charlie Brent, Lance and Christine are right. They all said we're going to be swamped with media people today."

"I told you it would be a disaster for us, didn't I?" Rex Marlow stormed. "I told you everything she did would crucify us, didn't I? That bloody bitch! She's done it again! Grand Vision, eh? I'll give her Grand Vision! I'll get her off air so damn fast she'll think she's got a rocket up her bloody knickers."

"Now then, Rex. Don't get so het-up. A lot of people rubbished Radford's idea," Len Straun said soothingly.

They were in Rex Marlow's office, a selection of the Nation's daily newspapers scattered over his desk, several chairs and the floor. Almost every paper had run last night's Question Time bombshell as its lead story. Without exception they had all given Bruce Radford's interview detailed coverage. All of their editorials commended his concept of true democracy but most doubted its practicality.

However, those papers which had conducted quick telephone surveys of the general public reported very high acceptance and intense interest and excitement. And like Queensland's The Courier-Mail, they all had a handful of interview comments from whatever politicians, economists and business people they'd been able to contact at short notice.

"Geez, Len, you miss the point at times," Marlow spat out. "Those politicians and economists who bagged this Radford's ideas don't count. And neither do handfuls of business leaders, union officials and all the so called experts. At election times, mate, the only people who do count are the bloody voters - all those stupid, ignorant clots out in the electorates who get to put their useless hands up once every three years. They're the only ones who count. And that smartypants bitch knows it."

"Well, what should we do? And what should we say to the media? They're bound to be hounding us all today for our comments."

"Now listen, Len. The very first thing I want you to do is get hold of all our people and tell them no statements are to be made to the media by anyone except me. No statements whatever. You got it?"

"Yes, Rex."

"And the second thing you do is ring that Markwell at ASIO and find out why he didn't warn us of this. What the hell's wrong with his crowd that we have to find out from the media instead of from him?"

"Yes, Rex."

"Which reminds me, I'd better make a phone call and get some real pressure put on that bloody Jordan woman. We might have to break a leg or two, eh? Now get to hell out of here, Len, and get onto those two things immediately. I'm going to work on a media statement after I've made this phone call."

"Yes, Rex. Right away."

As Len Straun left, Rex Marlow, perspiring freely, flopped his massive frame down heavily into his chair and reached for his already damp handkerchief.

In James Farrington's office, Albert Bygrave tossed the last of the national daily papers down on the couch alongside him and picked up his cup of black tea from the coffee table in front of him.

"Same as all the rest," he said. "She sure got them away to a flying start, don't you reckon?"

James Farrington, elegant as ever, put his coffee cup down and looked across the table at his friend. "You think they'll go well then?" he asked.

"James, if they can organize candidates to contest every seat in the Reps before Marlow calls an early election, they'll romp it in."

"You don't think Marlow will run full term, Bert?"

"No. The longer he leaves it, the stronger this People's Party of Australia will become. And it won't take him long to realize it. He may be the wrong political colour and he may be a big, bloated swine but he's nobody's fool."

"OK. You're probably right. In any case, our problem right now is how best to handle this situation and what to say to the media. What time's that Press Conference scheduled?"

"I dunno. Tim's organizing it and he's going to let us know. It'll be sometime after lunch, so you've got a few hours yet."

"OK. Now, my thoughts are that we should state that we agree with the concept of every person having a say in the running of the country but we consider that it would be quite unmanageable for them to be voting on every issue. We could also say that we thought of this idea ourselves several years ago, did a feasibility study on it but found out it was completely unworkable. And, of course, we don't have to give reasons. So what we say is, yes, this is great but unfortunately it won't work. End of story. What do you think?"

"You're a lying son of a bitch, James."

"Don't be so complimentary. Anyway, do you think that will work?"

"James ... to be quite candid, I don't think it will. In fact I don't think anything we say will make any difference."

"Well then, what can we do?"

Albert Bygrave put his empty teacup back on the table. He rose from his chair and stood looking down kindly at his friend. "I don't know about you, James," he said slowly and deliberately, "but I'm going down to my office right now to write out a letter of resignation to my party and another letter to this PPA applying for membership and offering to stand for my seat as an endorsed candidate of their party. It may be my only chance of retaining my seat and of finally being able to really represent my electorate ... to do what they want me to do."

As the gleaming, green XJS came around the last bend on the valley floor and started up the long, steep hill, at the top of which was the driveway to his parent's house, Mark Radford realized they were in for a very busy morning.

"Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed Lilla, sitting next to him. "What a lot of cars and people."

Both sides of the road leading up to and beyond their driveway were lined with vehicles. The lawn area at the side of the house overlooking the valley held a mass of people and as Mark brought the Jaguar to a stop the mob surged forward, cameras flashing and microphones in hand.

"Hold it! Hold it!" Mark called loudly, stepping out of the car and fronting the sea of faces. "Let's get organized. I'm Mark Radford. I'm Bruce Radford's son ... elder son. Now, as I presume you all want to interview my father and mother, I suggest you move back and let them out of the car. They will then sit on that bench under that Poinciana tree, over there."

Mark pointed to the bench. Then he continued.

"You can then all gather around in a semi-circle with the TV camera crews in the middle. You put up your hand to ask a question. When I choose you, and I'll give everyone a fair go, state your name and organization and then ask your question. And don't worry about being first or missing out. We'll stay until you've had enough. How's that sound?"

After a chorus of approvals, Mark helped Lilla out of the Jag and ushered her and Bruce over to the bench, which a couple of helpful reporters had turned around so that the panoramic view of the valley was behind them when they sat down.

And then it began ... and went on, and on, and on.

They wanted to know Bruce's background. They wanted to know his age. They wanted to know was he a member of any other political party and was this just a vote splitting ploy arranged by one of the major parties. They asked had he been in politics previously. They asked how he came to think up his concept. How long had he been working on it? Why did he think people would support it? They asked his views on subject after subject, and so on, and so on.

After the first fifteen minutes, when it was obvious that she wasn't needed by the questioners, Lilla excused herself and went into the house to answer the telephone, which was ringing incessantly.

"If anyone wants to speak to The Old Feller or me, ask them to ring back after midday," Mark suggested to her. "I don't think we'll be free before then."

He wasn't far wrong. It was close to twelve o'clock before the last question was asked, the last photograph taken and the last bodies had climbed into their vehicles and departed.

Lilla was speaking on the telephone when Bruce and Mark came into the lounge room. She looked flustered and weary.

As soon as she finished the call she was attending to, Mark bent down and pulled out the wall plug. "I think we all deserve a lunch break with some peace and quiet," he said. "You two just sit and relax and I'll make us a cup of tea and some sandwiches."

They were just finishing lunch when a Telstra van arrived with two technicians to connect and test the new telephone lines Mark had arranged for on Monday for the modem and fax machine he'd bought.

While they were being installed, Mark, using his mobile phone, rang Trevor Johnson and arranged for some special programs for his computers. He spoke to Trevor at length, telling him exactly what he needed and why.

"I guess this means we won't be opening a business in Brisbane similar to Rocky Resolutions," Trevor laughed, "now that you've gone all political."

"Not for a while, Trev. Unless I get rolled at election time."

"And I guess you'll be hounding Helen and me for subscriptions and donations too."

"You're so right. But that's not all. I want you to start up a local branch of the party in Rockhampton for me. I'm appointing you the local Branch President as at right now. And incidentally, what was the reaction like in Rocky this morning, and in the local paper, to The Old Feller's interview on Question Time?"

"Brained them, Mark. Just brained them. Everyone's talking about it, and about you. You know. Local boy makes good. And our local paper was very enthusiastic."

"Great! Will you form a branch for me then? Should be a piece of cake, don't you think?"

"I guess so. When?"

"How about right now?"

Trevor Johnson laughed. "You never were slow out of the blocks," he said. "OK, I'll see what I can do."

Mark had hardly finished his call to Trevor and put his mobile back in its pouch when it started ringing.

"G'day mate," said Roger Perelli when Mark took the call. "Been pretty busy today, have you?"

"Yes, Roge. Flat out."

"Thought you would be, after last night's performance. Your old man went real good, mate. Tell him I thought he was real great."

"I will, Roge. He'll appreciate that."

"And that skinny sheila of yours is looking a lot better now. Still needs a good feed though. You should bring her up here for a barby one weekend and we'll put a bit of flesh on her bones, eh?"

Mark laughed.

"Anyway, mate, that's not what I rang about," said Roger. "We've drawn a blank on that dark-blue Commodore. Run into a brick wall. My people who know people who know people can't crack the answer. They got as high up several ladders as they could but they got absolutely nothing."

"What do they think about it then, Roge? Do they have any opinions as to why there's no record?"

"Yair, mate. They reckon it's not an error. They reckon the file was deliberately scrubbed by someone with an authorization code which leaves absolutely no trace, and mate, two organizations that could do this, they say, are the Federal Police and ASIO. So how do you like that?"

Mark was stunned. The Federal Police or ASIO! Surely it couldn't be? What on earth would they want to scrub a rego record for? ... unless the vehicle was one of their own! But why would either of those organizations be interested in watching Christine? He was quite sure that whoever it had been was not really interested in him. No, it was Christine they were interested in. He was sure of that. But why?

"You still there, Mark?"

Roger's voice brought Mark back from his thoughts. "Yes, Roge. Sorry. I was just thinking for a moment. Roge, why on earth would either of those organizations be interested in watching Christine? She's not the sort of person to have done anything to bring her under their notice."

"Mate? What's wrong with you? You're getting awful dumb lately. Who do you think the Federal Police and ASIO are responsible to? They're responsible to the Federal Government. And who has this Christine lady of yours been firing arrows at lately? At the bloody Government! And I told you when you were up here that she should calm it down and stop sticking it into the big wigs or someone might decide they wanted her out of their life for good. Remember?"

"Yes," Mark said slowly, his brain whirring, "I remember."

"And now, mate, what does this bird-brain sheila of yours do? She devotes a whole program to help promote a new political party which is going to be one hell of a threat to the Government and every other party politician in the whole damn country. Honest to God, mate, I couldn't give her more than three out of ten for common sense. And what's more, mate, you're letting her. Bloody hell!"

"Roge. Do you really think she's in danger?"

"I don't know, mate. But I'd dead set be real careful if I was her. And you remember this. When people get desperate, sometimes their minds snap and then they can do things they normally wouldn't do. They can do anything!"

On their evening news programs that Wednesday, all the television stations screened sections of media conferences by the Prime Minister and by the Leader of the Opposition.

When Rex Marlow was asked did he see the new Peoples' Party of Australia as a threat to his own party at the next election he went straight into election mode - straight onto the attack - and in the sneering, arrogant manner for which he was becoming widely noted and despised.

"Anyone," he thundered, "who thinks for one moment that a party of wishy-washy do-gooders, without the remotest streak of strong leadership qualities apparent in the head of their organization, is not doomed from the start has gotta be an idiot. This great and wonderful country of ours was not built up to its present stature by groups of mamby-pambies all running around in circles doing good deeds for each other. No! It was built up by successions of strong, forceful leaders who recognized what was best for the country and who had the guts and strength of character to do what had to be done. And all of them were Labor, too," he smirked.

"Is that why we've had ten percent unemployment for the last two years?" grinned a young reporter.

Marlow ignored him. "And as for people turning up every second day," he continued, "to vote for every act that's passed through Parliament, that's gotta be a bigger joke than Elvis still being alive. I mean, how many people are going to turn up every day while Parliament is sitting and vote on all the bills? You'd never get them away from the bingo halls. No, my friends, this party is gone before it starts. It's a real no-no if ever I saw one."

At the Coalition's media conference James Farrington took a different approach.

"We, in the Liberal and National parties, see this concept as a Utopian dream," he said. "A glorious, shining vision of a perfect world of the future. But unfortunately we live in the present. A practical present. Not a theoretical one. And as we all know only too well, there is a great deal of difference between theory and practice ... between Utopia and the real world. To be quite honest with you, some time ago a Liberal think-tank came up with an almost identical concept to this one espoused now by this new and completely inexperienced People's Party, but we abandoned it after a great deal of in-depth research as being absolutely impractical. A wonderful idea but totally unworkable."

But the people in the streets had quite a different attitude. Christine Jordan knew they would, so she went and spoke with them and she devoted the whole of that evening's Question Time program to her interviews with them.

She spent several hours until two o'clock at three suburban shopping centres and in the Queen Street Mall.

Then the rest of the afternoon she spent sorting, selecting, editing and putting the sections she wanted into sequence - a sequence which progressed naturally from a quiet and somewhat reserved beginning, through a gradual build up of feeling until the final interview with a very passionate, unemployed family man who had been on the dole for three years and was literally screaming his hatred of the Government.

Of the sixty to seventy people she had spoken with she used only twenty-two. They were all highly in favour of Bruce Radford's concept. They all said they were sick of governments who ignored their pleas, who wasted their taxes on frivolities, who could not sort out priorities and who treated the population like fools. Almost all of them were confident they would have no trouble with an electronic voting system as described and all except three said they

would almost certainly vote on all matters put to them if the system was installed. Without exception, every person she spoke to said quite emphatically that they were sure a government composed entirely of Independents would do a far better job of running the country successfully than had ever been the case in the past with political parties in power.

"And now, Ladies and Gentlemen," Christine said, after the last taped interview had concluded, "Question Time is going to give all you viewers throughout the Nation the opportunity to have your say in this matter. We are conducting a telephone poll commencing right now and running through continuously to six o'clock tomorrow evening in each of your States or Territories. The question is ... do you like the concept put forward by Mr Radford of the new People's Party of Australia enough to vote for their candidates at the next election. Your local Channel Five station is now putting on screen two telephone numbers to call to register your vote, the first to vote Yes and the second to vote No. Please ... please, do let us know what you think. And now, until tomorrow evening, God bless you all."

Thirty minutes later, Christine parked her Commodore at her unit and walked towards the front door.

When she saw what was resting against the bottom of the door she was nearly physically sick.

Sightless eyes stared glassily at her from the severed head of a large dog, hacked off bloodily at the neck from its body. The message, in capital letters on a big piece of white cardboard, simply said, YOU ARE NEXT.

Shaking from frightened surprise, Christine opened the door, stepped carefully over the head, turned on the lounge room light, locked the door and immediately rang the police.

Thursday morning dawned dull and heavily overcast in Brisbane. The southern end of a monsoon trough that extended down through Queensland from the western side of the Gulf of Carpentaria to the southern Border Highlands and beyond to Kyogle and Casino in northern New South Wales was moving steadily eastward, bringing with it strong winds, leaden skies and heavy rain squalls.

Clutching her light, silk dressing-gown tightly around her slim, pyjama-clad figure, Christine Jordan felt chill in the air as she bent down to pick up the rolled-up copy of The Courier-Mail from the small lawned area in front of her unit. Today and tomorrow look like being very wet, she thought, but with a little luck the weather should clear by Friday evening, in time for her weekend with Mark.

Shuddering momentarily at her remembrance of what had been on the doorstep the night before, she walked back into her unit, sat down in her favourite chair in the lounge room and began to unroll the paper, a vision of Mark's face, wearing that cheeky grin of his, floating before her eyes. Such a swashbuckling grin. Just like Errol Flynn in that old Robin Hood movie. Oh, you're so handsome, she thought, so wonderful, kind and thoughtful and I love you very much. These present days are just the happiest days of my life.

And then she opened up the paper!

Christine stared at the front page in a state of fascinated horror as a freezing-cold hand clutched at her heart. She felt chilled all over.

Gradually, after what seemed like ages, some warmth and movement returned to her body. She rose from her chair, went into the kitchen and made herself a cup of strong coffee, her brain still numb from the shock. Then she regained her self-control, marched firmly back into the lounge room, sat down in her chair again, looked determinedly at the paper once more and read and re-read the article.

ICE MAIDEN MELTS screamed the three-centimetre headlines across the front page of The Courier-Mail. Immediately below was a quarter-page photo of Christine Jordan's head and shoulders, taken in a lying-down position. Her head was turned sideways, her face towards the camera, with her long hair spilling down behind onto the ground, pillowing her head where it lay.

A man's head was touching her chest, his chin resting almost where her bosom started to swell, just above the top of her swimsuit. His lips were touching the base of her throat. Her eyes were open, a dreamy ecstatic look on her face, her lips slightly apart. The man's features were not evident - just the back of his head, a small portion of chin, the edges of his lips and his left ear.

The picture was a little fuzzy, from being enlarged so much from Bill O'Brien's snapshot at the Kooralbyn Country Club pool. In the two photos of Bill's children, which had grabbed Julia Johannus' attention, Christine's head, in the background, had been only a centimetre in size. However, despite the fuzziness of a one thousand percent enlargement for the paper, there was no mistaking that the person was Christine Jordan and there was also no mistaking the joy and happiness portrayed.

The story which accompanied the picture was tasteful and friendly. Everyone loved Christine. Well, mostly everyone.

Who Is Mystery Man, asked the sub headline, and then the article followed ...

Pictured here is Miss Christine Jordan, highly acclaimed hostess of Channel Five's popular Question Time program, who is often affectionately referred to by her media friends as The Ice Maiden.

Miss Jordan was jokingly dubbed The Ice Maiden because she is still single at thirty-six years of age and appears to have never had any romantic attachments despite being one of the most beautiful and charming ladies in Australia.

Our photographer caught Miss Jordan in this happy situation last Sunday afternoon at the Country Club swimming pool surrounds at the Kooralbyn Valley resort near Beaudesert.

A real workaholic, Miss Jordan is seldom seen socially, except at Channel Five staff functions or media gatherings, which she usually attends alone or in the company of other employees.

We do not yet know the name of this mystery man with whom Miss Jordan was thoroughly enjoying herself but we hope that he is worthy of the adoration she was showering on him last Sunday.

The Ice Maiden has now melted away for ever.

Christine read the article several times and stared at the photo until its image was emblazoned in her memory. Her immediate fears had been not for herself but for the ill effects Mark's father's new party might suffer if her very close and deepening relationship with Mark was to become common knowledge. The fact that she had been photographed being kissed by a man and that the photo had been published in Queensland's widely read daily newspaper was embarrassing to be sure and, she considered, an invasion of her privacy which she did not appreciate. But it was something she could have handled and lived with.

Over the last eighteen months she had grown quite accustomed to seeing photos of and articles about herself and lately about her Question Time program in the press throughout Australia. So publicity was no longer anything to worry about. If it had not been for Mr Radford and his Grand Vision and her growing involvement with it, this photo and article would have been merely an impertinent annoyance that would have slightly upset her but which she'd have taken in her stride.

And she was not worried for Mark either. You couldn't tell it was him in the photo. She smiled when she thought about his probable reaction. Oh no, there was no need to be concerned for Mark. Dear, darling Mark. He would think it was a huge joke, a quarter-page photo of her in a moment of passion with his lips at her throat. He would roar with laughter. And he would have asked the photographer if he wanted more shots, and perhaps from different angles. Darling Mark. You have such a great sense of humour, and of what's important and what's not.

No. She was not worried for Mark or for herself. It was for Mr Radford and his Grand Vision and his new People's Party of Australia that she was worried. Because she knew, with absolute certainty, that Mr Radford's main political opponents, the Labor, Liberal and National parties, would be overjoyed if they ever found out that she was deeply and romantically involved with Mr Radford's son, who was Vice-President of the PPA, would be contesting a seat at the next election and who, if the PPA won government, would very likely be elected the party's Parliamentary Leader and thus become the next Prime Minister of Australia. Yes, if they ever found out about her and Mark, it would be a dark day indeed for the PPA.

The first thing the other parties would do would be to scream to high heaven that her interview with Mr Radford was biased because she was involved with his son. They would say she had deliberately planned and stage managed the interview to portray Mr Radford and his new party and his Grand Vision concept in the best possible light - to help make it seem highly attractive and practical and to do her best to help denigrate the present party political system. And, of course, they would be right. That was the worst part.

Christine put the paper down on the table alongside her chair, stood up, went into the kitchen and made herself another cup of coffee. And also, she thought, as she waited for the hot water jug to boil, they will try to muddy the water. They will try to sidetrack people from thinking too much about Mr Radford's proposals. They will try to get them thinking about other things ... such as her and Mark. And to do so they would almost certainly start a lot of mudslinging and innuendo.

And, of course, this unfortunate photograph would bolster up all sorts of wild accusations and could well be the rock on which Mr Radford's PPA floundered.

Then, as she poured the boiling water into her coffee cup, another thought came to her. What about her program? What about Question Time? A lot of wide spread criticism and continuous accusations of biased presentation could very well adversely affect the credibility of future screenings and its ratings. Also, strong and continuous accusations of bias from many sources might perhaps cost Lance Boswell his license to operate if the Licensing Review Board believed them ... particularly if they wanted a reason to refuse renewal at the appropriate time under pressure from the Government.

Oh, poor Lance. And poor Mr Radford. And it was all her fault. All her own stupid, careless fault. How could she have been such a fool ... such an idiot?

Christine stared sightlessly down at the coffee swirling slowly in its cup, steam rising gently from its surface, while her eyes moistened, then welled with tears. She gripped the counter top of the kitchen bench tightly with both hands, her knuckles whitening, while deep, racking sobs started shaking her slim frame.

"Oh, Mark. Oh, Mark," she wailed softly, as tears began trickling down her cheeks.

Mark Radford had just finished his shower, after his early morning run, and slipped into some casual shorts and a T-shirt when his mobile phone rang. Picking it up from on top of his dressing table, he wondered idly who would want him so early in the morning.

As soon as he heard Christine's voice he knew something was wrong.

"Hello Mark, darling," she said, her voice dispirited and deflated.

"What's wrong, Chrissie?" he asked kindly. "You don't sound like your usual self."

"Mark ... something dreadful's happened." She was close to tears again. She'd calmed herself down after her first fit of the miseries, had a shower and then had another cup of coffee before she rang him. She'd been in full normal control when she'd dialled his mobile number but, for some unknown, inexplicable reason, as soon as she heard his voice she felt her self control slipping and her fears and tears returning.

"Oh, Mark ... today's Courier-Mail ... it's ..." Christine started to sob. She tried not to but she couldn't stop.

Mark didn't know what to do. He was so far away. He felt completely helpless. "Don't cry, darling," he said softly. "Don't cry, sweetheart. I love you, Chrissie. Tell me what's wrong, darling."

Eventually she calmed down and her sobbing slowed and then stopped, apart from an occasional snuffle. "Oh, Mark. I'm sorry, darling," she said. "I'm such a goose."

Then she told him about their photo in the paper and she read him the article - twice. And she told him of her fears for the future of his father's PPA and for the renewal of Lance Boswell's television station license and for the effect on her Question Time program, which was Lance's highest rating program.

"And it's all my fault," she wailed.

"Hey! Come on now! It's not your fault at all." Mark was quite definite. "I was the kisser," he stressed the ER. "You were only the kissee."

"But I let you," she said, her voice a little firmer now.

"And I should jolly well think so. How could you ever refuse?"

"Oh, you are a silly," she said, almost normal now.

"And were you enjoying it?"

"Enjoying what?"

"Enjoying being kissed. You know ... in the photo. Did it look like you were just swooning all over the place?"

"Unfortunately yes."

"That's good. I'd feel very inadequate if you'd been looking bored and disinterested."

"You really are a silly, and yes, you have made me feel much better now, but this article and photo really are a problem. Or rather, they are a reminder that we must not be seen together, other than on interview occasions."

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "I don't think it would do much damage, and anyway, as long as we're careful, the chances of being caught again are very remote."

"Mark! It could do a great deal of damage! It really could. You just don't realize how absolutely ruthless some politicians can be. You haven't been close to the political scene like I have. Truly, Mark, if they discover about you and me they will crucify my Question Time program and your father's new party. They really will. And because of that, I don't think I should go to Bundaberg with you for the weekend. Someone might see us together."

"What! Not come to Bundaberg? Don't you love me any more?"

"Of course I do. You know I do. But it's too dangerous."

"Rubbish. No one's going to recognize you up there. Not if you put your hair up under a scarf and wear a floppy hat and dark glasses, like you suggested on Tuesday night. The only people who'll see you close up will be Alison and John's friends at the barbeque and we'll swear them to secrecy, OK?"

"I honestly don't think I should go."

"Look, I'll park early in your executives car park, I'll get your suitcase and make-up bag out of your car with my spare key when no one's around and put them in my boot. Then I'll stay in the Jag. When QT's over, you come scooting down to the car park, hop straight into my car, put your hair up in your scarf, put your dark glasses on, sit down low in the seat, tuck your chin into your chest, and vroooooom, we're off like a rocket to Bundy. OK?"

Christine hesitated. Her head said don't go, but her heart yearned to. She knew she shouldn't, but she wanted to. She knew her weekend would be desolate without him.

"I know I shouldn't, Mark, darling," she said, "but all right, I will come."

"That's great, Chrissie. That's wonderful, darling. Now, tell me, are you feeling better now? Would you like me to drive up to Brisbane to be with you?"

"Oh no, Mark! I'm quite all right now and you couldn't possibly drive all the way up here and back just because I've been so silly. No, I'm fine now, darling, and I'll meet you in the car park tomorrow evening."

"You're sure you're OK?"

"Yes, Mark. I'm sure, and now I must fly. Bye until tomorrow, darling."

As she put the receiver down, Christine realised she hadn't told Mark about the dog's head and threatening message on her doorstep the previous evening. Probably just as well, she thought. He'd only worry more about her and urge her to leave Question Time. But she couldn't do that. Not now, with the launching of his father's Grand Vision. It was too important. She had to stay on QT and do all she could to assist Mr Radford, irrespective of any personal danger.

On Thursday evening's Question Time program, Christine Jordan's first two guests were on live cross from the Channel Five Melbourne studio.

Her first interview was with Ernie Hardcastle, the tough as teak President of the Australian Labor Party, who had fought his way up to the top through the brawling, factional branches in Melbourne after many years of working on the waterfront.

Rex Marlow had instructed all his Parliamentary Members that they were not, on any account, to take part in any more interviews with Christine Jordan and this instruction had also filtered down through the party's branch structures. However, Ernie Hardcastle was a law unto himself. He took advice from nobody. If he wanted to do something, he bloody well did it. So when Christine Jordan had telephoned requesting an interview he'd agreed without hesitation. After all, it was about time somebody stitched up this bloody female!

"Mr Hardcastle," said Christine charmingly, after her initial introduction, "before we discuss your views about the new People's Party of Australia, can you tell me why it is that neither the Prime Minister nor his Deputy, nor, in fact, any other Labor Members of Parliament will agree to talk with me on this program?"

"I have no idea, Miss Jordan. Perhaps they're too busy successfully running the country."

"Well, we might discuss that on some future occasion, Mr Hardcastle," Christine laughed softly, realizing grudgingly that this man was going to give as good as he got and could be quite a challenge, "but for now, let's talk about this new PPA."

"That's fine by me."

"Firstly, Mr Hardcastle, do you see this new party as a threat to your Federal Labor Government at the next election?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Why not? The people of Australia seem to be keen on their concept, according to media interviews."

"Oh, they'll drag a few votes away from the coalition parties but I don't see them hurting us. They'll just be another nine-day-wonder."

"But your own party's electoral support, according to recent opinion polls, is down to an all-time low. Even without this new party coming on the scene you look like losing the next election, don't you?"

"No way. We're not worried about opinion polls. They're up and down like yo-yos. The only poll that counts is the one on election day. And we'll win that one."

Christine changed course. "Tell me then," she said. "Do you agree with the PPA's ideas of an electronic voting system with people telling their elected members how they want them to vote on all subjects?"

"No way."

"Why not?"

"It's too damn messy. It'd never work."

"Why?"

"Because the people wouldn't vote all the time on every issue. You'd have one percent of them running the country. Just small, fanatical pressure groups."

"But under our present system, only some seventy to ninety people sitting on the Government benches run the country and most of them only do what Cabinet tells them to do and even Cabinet only does what the Prime Minister decides, otherwise he asks Caucus to change the Cabinet. Isn't that right, Mr Hardcastle?"

"But the people, all the voting age population, elect the government."

"Once every three years."

"That's right."

"And if the government then takes no notice of their election promises and starts doing things the people don't want done, the people can't do a thing about it until the next election. Can they?"

"It doesn't happen that way."

"So, in essence, our Prime Minister, one man, who can influence Caucus to hire and fire his Cabinet, rules the country as he sees fit. Isn't that right?"

"Only theoretically."

"Oh, come now, Mr Hardcastle. You're not going to tell me that Prime Minister Marlow would put up with having someone in Cabinet who did not do as he was told, are you?"

Ernie Hardcastle could see the trap. This blasted female was sharp all right. Sharp as a bloody tack. No wonder she'd made mincemeat of all his mob. And now she had him in a corner also and he hadn't even seen it coming. If he said Yes, Rex would accept a rogue Cabinet Minister, it would undermine Rex's authority and power over his Cabinet, but if he said No, that would be admitting that, in reality, one person alone ruled the country for three years irrespective of the wishes of the people after election day. Bloody hell! What should he say?

Christine saved him from decision. Not to help him, but because she'd made her point. She looked straight into the eye of the central camera. "It seems, from Mr Hardcastle's long pause, Ladies and Gentlemen," she said, "that he is lost for words. Perhaps he secretly agrees that the electors, not the Prime Minister, should really run the country but he's not prepared to say so. Thank you for speaking with me, Mr Hardcastle," she concluded.

After the commercials break that immediately followed, Christine introduced her next guest, James Farrington, and swapped pleasantries with him for a minute or so. Then she moved into the subject of the PPA.

"Now, about this new People's Party of Australia, Mr Farrington. Did you see Mr Radford, their President, on this program on Tuesday evening?"

"No, Christine. But I read the reported transcripts in the newspapers the next day."

"And what did you think about his ideas of true democracy?"

James Farrington knew he had to be careful - very, very careful. His previous joust with Christine Jordan had been a disaster, and while it had been quite safe to make fatuous statements to the media at a press conference, where you could pick out the easiest questions from the dozens being continuously hurled at you, it would be abject folly to do the same in a one on one interview with this woman on national television. He'd realized this when she'd rung to request the interview, but his desperate desire to ridicule, or at least downplay, the PPA and their concept before its popularity grew to unbeatable heights, had impelled him to accept her invitation.

"In theory it sounds wonderful, but in practice I have very grave doubts," he said slowly and carefully.

"And what, exactly, do you have doubts about, Mr Farrington?"

"For one thing, I don't think the people will bother to vote on all matters raised and there are dozens and dozens of Bills raised at every Parliamentary sitting."

"How many people, Parliamentarians, vote on bills presented to Parliament?"

"Oh ... anything from a hundred to a hundred and forty-seven, depending on the number of absentees at the time."

"And do you think, throughout Australia, with a voting population of some eleven million, that you could reasonably expect more than a hundred and forty-seven people to vote if Mr Radford's suggested system was adopted?"

"Yes. But that's irrelevant."

"Why?"

James Farrington sensed a trap. He couldn't see it or hear it, but he felt it. Deep down within him a little warning bell was ringing.

"Because," he said, very carefully, "those hundred to a hundred and forty-seven Parliamentarians represent all the people of Australia, whereas, if you had even fifty thousand people vote on a bill under this PPA system they would only represent themselves, individually, and they would be less than half a percent of the Australian voting population."

"You say, Mr Farrington, that the Parliamentarians represent all the people of Australia?"

"Yes. That's correct."

Christine looked intently at him. "Then why shouldn't their electors, whom you say they represent, be allowed to tell them what to do?"

"Because, Christine, all the electors wouldn't tell them. They would only be doing what a very small percent of their electors told them. You couldn't call that democracy, could you? One or two percent of the electors running the country." James Farrington smiled broadly. Got you, you swine, he thought.

Christine smiled back. "Mr Farrington," she said softly, "of all the matters that your Coalition parties have opposed in Parliament, has the Government taken any notice of your views?"

"Oh no, Christine. They just bulldoze their bills through. They've got the numbers on the floor of Parliament to do so."

"So all the people in the electorates held by your Coalition actually have no voice whatever in the running of the country. Is that right?"

There it was! He'd been sure there was a trap. And he'd been right. And now the dam wall was about to burst and he knew that in another few seconds it would split asunder and his whole political future would be swept away, lost forever under the roaring, swirling, turbulent flood of public opinion that this rotten woman was unleashing.

"Is that right, Mr Farrington?" Christine asked again.

"No. That's not how the system works," he said.

"And as far as the Government is concerned, does Cabinet take any real notice of views expressed by their backbenchers?"

"That's immaterial," he said desperately.

"And as far as Cabinet is concerned, what would happen to a minister who continually opposed the Prime Minister?"

"Marlow would sack him," he conceded wearily.

"So, in effect, the Prime Minister runs this country the way he wants to?"

James Farrington didn't answer. In the extremely unlikely event of him ever now becoming Prime Minister, he didn't want a Yes response coming back later to haunt him.

Christine stretched the pause, emphasizing his silence, underlining her statement. Then she continued.

"Mr Farrington, how many voters are there in the Prime Minister's electorate?"

"I'm not sure. Probably about seventy thousand."

"And how many people would have voted for him?"

"About forty thousand, I suppose."

"So, about forty thousand people, out of eleven million voters, elected the one person who, in effect, runs the country as he alone sees fit. Is that correct?"

"You're distorting the picture," he said defiantly.

"Mr Farrington," her voice was softer now. She'd made her point and was starting to feel a little sorry for him. "Would our current Prime Minister take any notice of those forty thousand people who voted for him in his own electorate if their wishes were opposed to his own?"

James Farrington could see the writing on the wall. In a sudden, blinding blaze of perception he could see the unscaleable, impenetrable wall of party politics, which had stood for hundreds of years in various countries throughout the world, starting to totter and crumble. This was the beginning of the end. Oh well, at least he could pull that rotten Marlow down with him.

"No, Christine. He wouldn't take the slightest notice of them," he spat out.

Christine signalled the control room and Channel Five broke for commercials.

Just before she wrapped up that evening's program, Christine announced the results of Channel Five's twenty-four hour telephone poll for viewers as to whether or not they liked Bruce Radford's new concept enough to vote for the PPA at the next election.

"The results, Ladies and Gentlemen, are ... Yes, sixty-three percent and No, thirty seven percent, which appears to be a very clear message that a great many people are heartily sick of party politics in this country. And now, until tomorrow evening, God bless you all."

CHAPTER 9.

Arthur O'Rourke, President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and Christine Jordan's first guest for Friday evening's Question Time program, was a dynamic, red-headed, arrogant ex builder who had abandoned his vocation many years ago to enter the Trade Union movement. After many backstabbing, internal brawls he had won the presidency two years ago. He always relished a fight, verbal or physical, and when Christine's invitation had come he'd jumped with joy. He was a staunch Labor supporter, hated watching his Government mates made to look like idiots on television by this smart aleck Jordan woman and saw tonight's invitation as a great opportunity to give this bloody bird what she had coming to her.

"Welcome to Question Time, Mr O'Rourke," Christine smiled, after introducing him.

"Thank you, Miss Jordan."

"Mr O'Rourke, the reason I invited you to speak with me this evening, for the benefit of our National audience, was so that we could discuss the ACTU's feelings about the possibility of having a party in power composed entirely of Independents if the new People's Party of Australia should happen to win the next election."

Christine paused and waited for O'Rourke to respond. He just sat there, looking at her, with a faint grin starting to form at the corners of his mouth. All right my friend, she thought, if you want to play this sort of game, let's get right into it. Aloud she said, "Is the ACTU frightened at that prospect, Mr O'Rourke?"

"Frightened?" O'Rourke couldn't believe his ears. Nobody, but nobody, accused Arthur O'Rourke of being frightened. Not of anything. Not since he'd been a strapping sixteen year old. Not unless they wanted to finish on their back in a screaming heap.

"Frightened?" he said again, "Of a party of Independents? You need your head read, girl. The ACTU's afraid of no one. We're a power unto ourselves."

"That may well be," Christine smiled, happy to have stung him, to have got under his skin. "But if the PPA does win government at the next election you won't have your Federal Labor friends in power and at your beck and call, will you?"

"That won't worry us. We can suggest strongly to this new mob, and any other party for that matter, what should be done in matters of concern to us just the same as we've been doing with the Labor Governments these past years."

"So you're not concerned at all?"

"Not a bit. We've got no reason to be. This new mob are no chance of getting in."

"Why is that?"

"Cos we're going to tell all our Union members to give them a miss ... to vote Labor ... and if any don't, then vote for the Coalition and leave this mob till last."

"Sounds to me as if you are frightened of them," Christine laughed lightly.

"No way. Not frightened. But we don't want them in government."

"Why?"

"Because both major parties realize they have to work successfully with the Union movement for the good of the country, and this new mob won't know the rules."

"And have the ACTU and the last few Federal Governments being doing that? ... working together successfully for the benefit of the country?"

"Yes."

"And for the benefit of the people?"

"Of course."

"And for the workers? ... for your union members?"

O'Rourke eyed her suspiciously. Snaky bitch. She's up to something, he thought. "Yes, of course," he said, but he sounded a little hesitant.

"Then tell me, Mr O'Rourke," said Christine, "why is it that with this successful alliance between past Governments and the ACTU ... why is it that, for the last two to three years, unemployment has been hovering around ten percent and a million people cannot find work?"

Years ago, in a pub brawl down by the Melbourne waterfront, a hulking stevedore had king hit O'Rourke and sat him, dazed and bleeding, on his backside. Today he wasn't bleeding but the stunned feeling was the same. His limbs and brain seemed to be totally paralysed. This bloody bird had clobbered him when he wasn't looking, just like that bloody stevedore. Hell, what could he do? What could he say?

Christine held the silence for five long seconds, maximizing his embarrassment. Then she spoke again.

"Mr O'Rourke," she said, "is the ACTU concerned at this unacceptably high level of ten percent unemployment?"

An olive branch! An opportunity to save face! O'Rourke grabbed at it. "Of course we are. We're horrified," he said, "but there's nothing we can do."

"Couldn't you instruct your union members to refuse to work overtime? Then employers would have to employ more staff to do the same amount of work and at a lower cost than paying overtime."

O'Rourke looked thoughtful, his mind racing. "I don't think we could do that," he said at last. "Our members wouldn't like that. Their incomes would reduce if their overtime cut out."

"You mean your working members wouldn't like it. Your unemployed members would love it, wouldn't they?"

"I guess so, but we've got to look after the majority. Their incomes would drop dramatically without their overtime."

"But they're getting their overtime pay from the pockets of their unemployed fellow unionists. That's hardly fair, is it?"

"Well, that's the way it is."

"Then what's happened to the old Australian workers' mateship we hear so much about ... one for all and all for one, and all those old standards?"

O'Rourke glared at her.

"It seems to me that the old union boast of standing by your mates is just a myth then," Christine taunted him. "It's there in the good times, but in the bad times it's Bugger You, Jack, I'm All Right ... if you'll excuse my quotation. Is that how you see it Mr O'Rourke?"

O'Rourke could feel anger and rage rising within him. He'd come here this evening to show up this rotten smart aleck but it wasn't his night. Nothing was going his way. He searched his mind frantically for some magical words to get himself out of this bog into which he seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper. And then, without seeing the danger, he uttered the words which were to cost him his presidency at the next election of ACTU office bearers.

"Miss Jordan," he said, "the Union movement always stands behind its members. But in these unusual circumstances in which we find ourselves today, we have to support the majority. We could not let ninety percent of our members suffer reductions in their wages as you suggested. If we did, they would throw out our executive at our next election."

Christine looked at him with loathing in her eyes. "So," she said, "it's more important that you and your executive retain your highly paid positions and the employed ninety percent of your members retain their overtime pay than it is for your unemployed members to have a job. Thank you for speaking with me, Mr O'Rourke. I'm sure the people of Australia watching this evening will be greatly impressed by this illustration of the true mateship existing in the Australian Union movement nowadays."

Channel 5 then broke for commercials.

As the first twenty-second commercial commenced, Christine rose from her chair and went to meet her next guest, Maureen Gibson, who was being ushered into the studio. The two women, who had never met before, chatted briefly in a friendly manner before seating themselves, smoothing their clothing, poking their hair into place and waiting the last few seconds of the countdown.

Maureen Gibson was fortyish and friendly. Of medium height and weight she looked a picture of good health and two years as the only Independent politician in the Queensland Parliament had not yet lined her full, homely, open face. She looked like a person you could put your trust in and you could almost see the honesty shining out of her deep brown eyes. Christine, who was instinctively a good judge of character, liked her immediately.

"Before we talk about the new People's Party of Australia, which is the reason I invited you to join me this evening, Mrs Gibson," Christine said, after she'd completed her introduction, "let's have a little get to know you chat."

"That would be lovely, Christine, but please, please call me Maureen."

"All right, Maureen," Christine smiled. "That's much less formal. Now, tell me, how have you liked your first two years in State politics?"

"Let's just say it's been a real eye opener, Christine."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it's like a childish circus most of the time and I am now firmly convinced that this adversarial system of party politics in government is a dismal failure."

"That's very interesting. But before we discuss that further, tell me, what decided you to stand for State Parliament, and why as an Independent?"

"Christine, I think it's hereditary," Maureen Gibson laughed lightly. "My Grandfather was an Independent in State Parliament for three terms just after the Second World War and my father was a Shire Councillor for fifteen years, so I suppose it's in my blood."

"But why as an Independent? That must have been quite a battle ... to get elected as an Independent?"

"I decided that if I was elected, Christine, I didn't want to be pinned down. I didn't want to be told what I could and could not say in public. I didn't want to be told how I must vote. That's no way to represent an electorate. In our Shire Council, in my father's day, there was no party politics. They were all Independents. And the Council worked well, far better than our State Government does ... because they all talked about and decided matters together."

"So you decided that if it was good enough for Local Government then it was good enough for State also?"

"Yes. And that's what I told my electorate. I told them that if they voted for me, I would scream my head off to get the things done in our electorate that we needed and that I would have more chance than a party person because I could scream blue murder to the media without some political party telling me to quieten down or I'd lose my preselection for the next election."

Christine laughed joyously. "And have you had to scream much?"

"Only the first time. Then they got the message."

"And is your electorate happy with you?"

"Oh yes. And several other adjoining electorates have been taking notice also. I hear these things you know. And at the next election there's a good chance that we might have six or eight Independents elected."

"If that happens you could hold the balance of power."

"I know. Isn't that exciting? Then we could really do what our electors want done. Just like that Mr Radford's going to do Federally."

Christine judged the time was right. She'd gradually led Maureen Gibson to this point. "And do you like the concept of Mr Radford's new party, Maureen?" she asked.

"Oh yes. It's great. And with signed legal contracts guaranteeing their elected members will do the bidding of their electorates there is no chance of anyone failing to do so."

"And what about his electronic voting system?"

"That's simply brilliant. It's going to save millions of dollars at election times and it's going to make it so much easier to find out what the electors want."

"Do you think the people will use it?"

"Of course they will. The general public are sick of politicians ignoring them. They'll use his system all right. I think he'll have well over ninety percent of the voters using it."

"I'm sure Mr Radford will be very pleased to hear that, if he's watching tonight. Now, tell me, Maureen, with your family background in politics and your two years of actual political experience, how do you see Mr Radford's new party's chances in the approaching election?"

"Christine, I'm fairly sure they will have a very convincing win ... that they will win sufficient seats to form government."

"Fairly sure?" Christine queried.

"Yes. I say fairly because there's one thing that concerns me a little."

Christine's heart skipped a beat. What could it be? Could she and Mark and Mr Radford have overlooked something? Oh goodness me. Why hadn't she checked with Maureen Gibson before going to air? She knew, had known for ages, that you never, in a situation like this, ask an important question without first knowing the answer you are going to receive. To ignore this maxim is folly. And what should she do now? She'd have to ask Maureen what it was that she was concerned about, wouldn't she? Having opened the door, she'd have to walk through it. She couldn't just walk away, could she? Well? Could she? ... No! ... She couldn't! That would be showing fear. And it would also show bias. If she wasn't biased, she wouldn't be afraid, would she? Oh bother! Oh damn! Oh, Mr Radford, what have I done? Well, you silly girl, you're just going to have to ask the question ... come what may.

Christine straightened slightly in her chair, as if steeling herself against calamity. "Maureen," she said, and was surprised at how normal her voice sounded, "what is it that concerns you?"

"Well, with every other political party, we know who will be the Prime Minister if that party wins power and we know a lot about the person because they have been around for many years. However, with this new party, we don't know who their Parliamentary Leader will be, or the Prime Minister if they win government. We do know that Mr Radford senior is their President and that his son will stand for Forde and will be spokesman for the party, but we won't know their Parliamentary Leader until their members elect him or her from among their contestants who win seats. You see what I mean? And even the two Mr Radfords, although they look to be decent, honest men, are virtually unknown. That's what concerns me, Christine."

"And do you see that as a real problem?" Christine had to ask. She had to nail this down.

"Yes, I do. People like to know who will be in charge. They like to know him ... or her, as the case may be. Yes, I do think it's a real problem."

"But with this new party, at this stage, they don't even know who all their members are and which ones will be contesting seats, apart from Mr Mark Radford. There's no way they can solve that. Not yet."

"Yes, there is," Maureen Gibson said very softly, smiling sweetly.

"How?" Christine was feeling bewildered. For the first time ever, in any of her hundreds of interviews, she didn't know where the conversation was heading.

And then, Maureen Gibson, in her soft, motherly, yet decisive voice, uttered the words which were to change the remainder of Christine Jordan's life.

"You," she said, "could stand for a seat as a member of their party and they could declare that you would be their Parliamentary Leader and the first lady Prime Minister of Australia. With your popularity Australia-wide you'd win your seat with a tremendous majority and the party would win government in a landslide."

In the Channel Five executives car park a slim, girlish figure wearing wraparound dark glasses and with her hair tucked up under a gaily-coloured scarf slid gracefully through the open door and onto the front passenger seat of a Jaguar XJS V12 coupe.

"Well! What have we here?" asked the driver, with a huge grin, and then leaned over and kissed her.

"Come on. Hurry up, darling. Let's get out of here."

The olive-green Jaguar growled throatily, then slipped away powerfully into the night, its eyes blazing a path through the darkness as it hurtled northward, hour after hour.

On Saturday morning in Bundaberg, when Mark and Christine came back from their early morning walk, John Parker was sitting on his front patio sipping a cup of tea. He waved the front section of The Courier-Mail at them as they joined him and sat down.

"You've done it again, Christine," he said. "You've made the front page again."

He passed the front section to Christine. Mark moved his chair closer to hers and they both read together.

CHRISTINE FOR PM shouted the headline, right across the top of the front page. Below it was a normal head and shoulders photo of Christine - one of the front-on shots that The Courier-Mail used when featuring her.

The article below the headline quoted Maureen Gibson's remarks from the previous evening's Question Time program, legitimized the reasons she'd put forward and strongly supported her suggestion. Then followed some brief coverage of Christine's other interviews that evening.

There wasn't very much meat in the article and certainly nothing to worry about. What did concern Christine, however, was the last paragraph which said that the newspaper had not yet been able to discover the identity of the man Miss Jordan was photographed enjoying herself with last Sunday at the Kooralbyn Valley Resort's Country Club pool but they were continuing with their enquiries.

"Oh, bother," said Christine. "They just never give up, do they? I wish they'd leave us alone, darling," she said, turning towards Mark, her voice dispirited.

Mark reached out, put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Don't worry, Chrissie," he reassured her. "There was no one I knew at the pool. They're not going to find out it was me, and even if they did, what the heck."

The rest of Saturday was a nice relaxing day for Christine. After breakfast, Mark and John Parker drove over the Burnett River to the North Bundaberg Golf Club while she and Alison went sightseeing in the city centre and surrounds.

Then, after a late lunch, Alison shooed Mark and Christine out of the house while she and John made preparations for the evening barbeque.

"There'll be four other couples and their nine children here this evening, Christine," she said, "and this place is going to be like bedlam, so you two pop off now and have a few hours to yourselves."

Christine Jordan was not on the front page of The Sunday Mail. There was plenty about her in the political and business sections, however, and about the new People's Party and its chances at the next election.

The Editorial took up Maureen Gibson's comment that Christine should stand for her local seat in Brisbane and that the PPA should immediately declare that she would be their Parliamentary Leader if elected. A quick telephone poll of some two thousand Brisbane residents by The Sunday Mail had shown that over fifty percent of them had joined, or were about to join, or certainly would vote for the PPA, and of those, ninety-four percent wanted Christine to join the party and become the next Prime Minister.

A special, large, nationwide political opinion poll, conducted after Bruce Radford's Tuesday interview but before Maureen Gibson's Friday evening comments, showed the primary voting intentions of those polled as being PPA 44%, Liberal/National 26%, Labor 17%, all other parties 5% and the undecideds 8%. The political columnist who quoted these figures stated that this would translate into a convincing win for the PPA if the election had been held that day. He also speculated that if Christine Jordan stood as a potential Prime Minister the result would be an overwhelming PPA victory.

"So there you are, Chrissie," said Mark. "That's what we've all been saying, darling."

He, Christine, Alison and John were sitting on the rear patio, looking out to the barbecue area and back garden, while the two children played happily in their sand pit underneath a large canvas sun-screen on poles.

"Anyway," said John, "whether Christine stands or not, the prospects look very bright for the party. Have you any progress news, Mark, from the other blokes up and down the coastline who you bludgeoned into opening local branches, like me?"

"Not yet, John. They all promised to ring me here this morning."

"Well, apart from that," Alison was watching the children as she spoke, "is there anything special you two would like to do today, because if not, John and I thought we might all go down to Elliott Heads for a swim and a picnic lunch."

"That sounds lovely, Alison," Christine said warmly."

Do you have any little girls at your house, Auntie Chris?" Joanne Parker asked, in her sweet four-year-old voice.

Christine was sitting on the Parkers' picnic rug on the beach below the sand dunes, her legs curled up under her, brushing the child's shoulder-length blond hair.

"No, I don't, Joanne," she said, grasping a handful of hair while she pulled the brush through a knotty section.

"Ouch," squealed Joanne, and then, "why don't you, Auntie Chris? Mummy says it's lovely having a little girl like me to play with."

"And I'm sure Mummy's right, darling," Christine smiled across the rug at Alison, busy unpacking the picnic basket.

"Then why don't you?" the child persisted.

Christine brushed a few more strokes. "I'd love to," she said, "but I'm a very busy lady at present. Maybe later on I will."

That seemed to satisfy Joanne and the brushing continued. Christine looked across at Alison again and rolled her eyes.

Alison grinned. "Well handled," she said.

"Why do I have to have my hair brushed every time I go swimming?" Joanne asked, a few minutes later.

"To keep your hair beautiful," said Christine. "You want your hair to look beautiful when you're a grown up lady, don't you?"

"Yes. But the brushing hurts sometimes."

"But only at the start. It's not hurting now, is it?"

"No. Not now the knots have gone."

Christine continued with the brushing, stroke after stroke, feeling the silky smoothness of the child's hair slipping soothingly through her slim fingers, marvelling at its fineness. As she did so, a dreamy state of semiconsciousness enveloped her and she hardly noticed the arrival of Mark, John and young Brent, who had been down chasing fingerlings in the shallow channels among the tidal sand flats.

"I love you brushing my hair now there's no knots," said Joanne.

"Do you, darling?"

"Yes ... you'd be a lovely mummy for some little girl."

Christine gave her a hug and a kiss on her forehead. "You're very sweet and I love you, Joanne," she said tenderly.

"And I love you and I love Uncle Mark too."

"That's nice, and he loves you also."

"Yes ... Auntie Chris? ... are you and Uncle Mark married?" Joanne's blue eyes were wide with innocence.

Christine nearly stopped brushing. Her dreamy, half-hypnotised state evaporated like a flash of lightning. "No, Joanne," she said, conscious of the sudden cessation of activity among the other three adults.

"That's a pity," said the child, and then, "cos if you were, you could have a little girl like me to play with. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yes, darling. It would be nice," said Christine, very softly.

After their picnic lunch, while John Parker played sandcastles with Brent, and Alison sat with Joanne, who was having her after lunch nap under the large beach umbrella, Mark and Christine went for a walk, hand in hand, Christine in her navy swimsuit with the white band around the neckline and Mark in his swim shorts and light cotton beach shirt unbuttoned all the way down and flapping in the breeze.

They started off along the sand flats by the riverbank and wandered along to the dense rocky wall at the narrow mouth where incoming tides swirl and batter their way through the constricted opening to the wide sand flats beyond. Then they walked up to the kiosk area and down to the sandy, rocky beach fronting the Pacific Ocean. They strolled along the beach, picking up shells, looking at them, discarding them. Mark picked up an old piece of gnarled driftwood shaped like a skull.

"Look," he grinned. "Just like you."

Christine punched him softly on his upper arm. "I hate you, Mark Radford," she laughed.

They left the beach and walked up onto the flat open grassy high ground that follows the steep cliff faces for kilometres to the north, high above the ocean. He showed her, as they passed, the weekend shack that he'd lived in alone for twelve months several years ago. It was unoccupied now and looked neglected and forlorn. She held his hand a little tighter. There was a sad part of his life buried here in this shack.

They walked on and on and eventually stopped near the cliff's edge. The rocky coastline stretched away northward into the hazy distance. The wind was very strong as it roared up the cliff face, whipped over the edge, plucking strongly at Christine's scarf, and howled away inland. Far below them, on a rocky outcrop poking out into the seething breakers, the tiny figure of a man in a spray jacket and swim shorts with a surf rod in his hands stood braving the elements. He seemed small and insignificant compared to the immenseness of the ocean and the power of its waves smashing themselves into misty spray.

"It's beautiful here, Mark. But it's humbling too," Christine said, almost reverently. "Did you come here often? ... when you lived here?"

"Yes, very often. I used to come and watch the sunrise, on the mornings when I woke early enough. Watch this great golden ball rise slowly out of the ocean. It's very impressive. And it was comforting."

Christine squeezed his hand gently and stroked the back of his fingers lightly with her thumb. "You must have missed her very badly," she said, her voice soft with feeling.

He was silent for a little while. "Yes," he said eventually. "I did miss her very badly ... for several years. She'd been gone for two years when I came here but the hurt was still there. I used to come up here almost every day, morning or evening, and walk along these cliff tops, and she'd be here. She was all around me. I couldn't touch her, but I could feel her presence. And her face was everywhere - in the sky, in the clouds, in the sea, in the grass, just everywhere I looked. She used to smile at me, and she used to laugh and grin and crinkle up her nose. But she never spoke. I used to talk to her all the time but she never answered. She was just there."

He paused for a minute or so, gazing out over the ocean to the horizon. Then he turned to her and there was a trace of a smile lurking around the corners of his mouth. "But that was years ago. She's been gone twelve years now," he said, "and I hardly ever think of her anymore ... especially now that you've come."

All of a sudden Christine knew it was time ... knew she was ready. Ever since before lunch, when she'd sat on the rug brushing Joanne's hair, the strangest feelings had been coming over her. Deep down inside her something was stirring ... something she'd never felt before ... a yearning ... a longing ... a desire for something she'd never had. Oh, what was it? It wasn't Mark, even though she wanted him desperately. Even though she loved him so much, and needed him, and ached for him. No, this was something quite different. And then, in a blinding flash of realization, as the wind from the cliff face whipped at her scarf and her dark glasses and the waves pounded mercilessly on the rocks far below, Christine knew what it was that she wanted.

Mark let go of her hand. He held her lightly by her upper arms and looked down lovingly into her upturned face. "You'd be a lovely mummy for some little girl," he said quietly, remembering Joanne's words at lunchtime. "Would you like to be a mummy?"

The world stood still for Christine. She felt as if she was frozen in an instant in time. Nothing moved, not even her heart. As she stood there, still as a statue, looking up into his wonderful face, she knew with instinctive certainty that he was going to ask her ... that he was going to ask her to marry him.

Like all young girls and teenagers and young ladies, Christine had dreamed and fantasized from time to time about being proposed to, and the scenes had always been different - the moonlit upper deck of an ocean liner, the vast, sandy wastes of the Sahara with a sheik on a white charger, the romantic setting of a rose-filled garden at sunset ... but never, no never, on a windswept cliff top high above a raging ocean, dressed in a swimsuit, with her hair piled up under a scarf that was threatening to blow away and her eyes hidden behind dark glasses.

"Would you?" Mark asked again, very gently, bringing her back to life.

Christine felt again that yearning deep within her, that yearning that had started as Joanne's hair slipped silkily through her fingers at lunch time, a yearning that was all entwined now with her love for Mark and her rising desire for him ... a strong, striving, driving yearning ... for motherhood.

"Yes," she said softly, and put her hands on his waist, feeling his warmth and strength and vitality.

"Would you like to have your own little girl to play with?" His eyes were twinkling but his voice was serious.

"Yes," she murmured, as she looked up at him.

"Our little girl?" He looked deeply into her eyes, behind her dark glasses.

"Oh, Mark! Oh, yes!"

She slipped her hands from his waist, took off her dark glasses and slid her arms up and around his neck, pressing her body against his, straining upward on tiptoe, reaching for his lips with her own as he wound his strong arms around her and held her to him.

"Chrissie, darling," he whispered, his lips a breath away from hers, "will you marry me?"

"Oh yes, Mark. Oh yes, darling," she gasped, her heart racing.

Then he bent his head a little more, and kissed her.

And then he kissed her again and held her close, oh, so close.

And then he went on kissing her and kissing her and kissing her, standing there on the cliff top, she in her swimsuit and scarf with her long hair starting to escape in streamers from beneath it, and he in his swim shorts with his beach shirt flapping like crazy in the wind, while seagulls wheeled and screeched above them and the Pacific Ocean pounded itself to pieces on the rocky shoreline far below.

From the depths of his lounge room chair John Parker looked at Mark and Christine, snuggled up together on the sofa, their after-dinner coffees cooling on the low table in front of them.

"So when's the big day going to be?" he asked. "Have you talked about that yet, or are you still up in the clouds?"

"No. We haven't discussed it yet," said Christine, "but probably in a few weeks time. There doesn't seem to be much sense in having a long engagement. Not at our ages."

"That's right," said Alison, "and you'll want to start a family fairly soon. It's harder as you get older and the risk of abnormalities in babies increases from your late thirties onward."

"Well, in that case," Mark grinned, "I guess I won't need that blow up mattress tonight, John."

"Oh yes you will, you sexy beast," Christine smiled up at him. "Being engaged is not the same as being married. The benefits aren't exactly the same."

"Pity!" said Mark, as he leaned over and kissed her.

Rex Marlow's weekend had been a disaster. During a family visit on Saturday morning his infant grand-daughter had vomited all over his shirtfront, leaving him smelly and foul tempered.

On Saturday afternoon he'd lost fifteen hundred dollars at the races, which he could ill afford, after a succession of eight heavy losing Saturdays in a row.

On Saturday evening he'd forgotten to take his speech notes with him when he was guest speaker at a Labor Women's Convention and he'd stumbled his way through twenty long minutes of embarrassment.

He'd been hoping for a better day on Sunday but it had started off badly when his wife, poor long suffering Ethel, had caught him kicking her Siamese cat, Fluffy. She'd been furious and had given him hell all morning, which was completely out of character for one so meek and mild who had put up with his sneering, overbearing, sarcastic arrogance for all her miserable married years.

Then, after lunch, he and the still smouldering Ethel had driven out to her brother's grazing property for the afternoon. He'd slipped and fallen on some loose soil while inspecting the wall of a new dam, which Henry had put in a few weeks before, and had rolled down the earth wall into half a metre of muddy water and liquid ooze at the bottom.

He'd trudged back to the homestead sodden and squelchy, had a shower and then sat around in Henry's dressing gown while his washed clothes flapped dry on the clothesline. He couldn't borrow any because no clothes in the homestead were large enough for his immense, bloated body. And to make matters worse, all the family, including those snivelling grand-children, had laughed at him until they were fit to burst. God! how he hated bloody children.

Of course, what had really fouled up his weekend the most was all the publicity that damn PPA mob had received in the Saturday and Sunday papers. And worst of all was the now growing call for that stinking rotten Jordan bitch to stand for the House of Reps and to try to become Australia's first woman Prime Minister. Oh! What a bloody disaster!

So by the time Rex Marlow stormed into his Prime Ministerial office on Monday morning, his foul moodiness was at an all time high.

"Get Les Scampi in here quick smart, Sarah," he snarled at his private secretary as he stomped past her, glaring and nodding at the other staff on his way in.

"Les, old son," he said to his press secretary when Scampi came into his office, "I've got a very important and urgent job for you."

"Right, Chief," Scampi said, and waited expectantly.

"I want some information leaked to the media," Marlow went on, "but I don't want it issued as a statement. I just want it dropped into their grubby little hands nice and softly in a we thought you would have known manner and at the conclusion of some other press release. You know. Just casually. You got the picture?"

"Yes. Sure Rex. But what press release do I give them as the main story?"

"Bloody hell! What do I care! That's your damn problem. Anything will do."

"Yes, Rex. What's the leak you want dropped then?"

"Les, you remember late last week there was a photo on the front pages of all the papers of that Jordan woman on her back with some bloke all over her like a rash?"

"Yes, Rex."

"Well, I know who the man is. Or rather, I'm damn sure he's who I think he is."

"Who?"

"Mark Radford. The son of that Bruce Radford who that Jordan bitch interviewed on her Question Time program last week about his damn Grand Vision."

"Well I'll be buggered." Les Scampi was surprised.

"We'll all be buggered if we don't fix this PPA mob, Les. And this is our chance, old son ... to fix them good and bloody proper."

"And you want me to drop his name into the media as being the mystery man?"

"That's right. And here's what you tell them. You say that we are surprised and horrified to learn that Mr Mark Radford, who is going to stand for Parliament as the leader of this new People's Party of Australia, was the man in the photo having a romp on the grass with Miss Christine Jordan and we understand that they had a whole dirty weekend together. You know, make it sound like a sixty-hour sex orgy."

"Geez, Rex!"

"And you particularly say that why we are horrified about this is because this is obviously the reason why this Jordan bitch, only don't say bitch, has been getting stuck into our Government so much lately on her program and why she gave this stupid, impractical PPA Grand Vision thing such a tremendous rap last week."

"I'm with you."

"And tell them we are sure this has all been a planned, subversive attack by Jordan aimed at bringing about the downfall of the Australian Government and that obviously everything has been slanted and loaded with bias to pull the wool over the eyes of the Australian people. You could even hint at foreign powers, only don't go too strong on that or no one will believe it."

"And how are we supposed to have found out all this, if I'm asked?"

"Never mind how we know. You just tell them we can't divulge the source but that we have been given information that Radford and Jordan spent a weekend together in Townsville three weeks ago, another weekend together the one before last, in Kooralbyn Valley, and we are sure they were together again this last weekend, and invite the media to check it out. OK? Oh, and be sure to emphasize the biased interviewing from Jordan because of it. You got all that?"

"Yes. Sure, Rex. This will stir things up."

"Oh, and another thing, and this is very important. Invite them, the media, to consider what sort of a Prime Minister a sex-crazed bitch like this, who's having it on every weekend in secret hideaways, would make ... you know, what would other countries think of us if a bloody sexo like her was our Prime Minister? Eh? What do you reckon? That should stop all this Jordan for Prime Minister clap-trap."

Scampi looked at Marlow's face, now flushed with excitement. Geez, you're a rotten swine, he thought. What a bastard of a thing to do to a person. He'd always felt that Christine Jordan was a really nice style of woman even though she'd been causing his party a lot of problems lately. Still, he'd have to do what Rex instructed or he'd be out on his ear. "Yes, Rex," he said. "That should stir up a hornet's nest all right."

After Scampi had departed, Marlow lounged back in his chair. For the first time in several weeks he felt happy. This bloody world wasn't such a bad place after all ... now that he'd stitched up that rotten Jordan bitch. Fool with him, would she? Not any more you stupid brainless smartypants bloody female.

That evening, when she walked into her unit, kicked off her shoes and sank down dispiritedly into her favourite chair, Christine Jordan was a worried woman.

Her afternoon had been almost totally destroyed by dozens of media phone calls, all wanting confirmation that Mark was the man in the Country Club pool photo. To all callers she had used the same reply - that she was not prepared to comment, that her private life was nothing to do with them and that she did not appreciate the media publicising her personal matters.

So the day, which had started off so wonderfully with a four-hour drive from Bundaberg to Brisbane sitting close to dear, darling Mark, and with a loving kiss in the executives car park, had gradually fallen apart at the seams and turned into one of the worst days of her life.

At work she'd had to keep herself under strict emotional control, show no fear or worry, be decisive, happy, pleasant and confident and carry on with her job in her usual friendly and highly efficient manner. But now, alone in her unit, it was altogether different. Now she didn't have to pretend. Now she could let go of those tight, self imposed controls. Now there was no one to see her tears.

When eight o'clock came and he knew she would now be home in her unit, Mark Radford rose eagerly from his chair in the lounge room where he'd been idly watching television with his parents, excused himself, went into his bedroom and rang Christine's number on his mobile phone.

By the time her telephone began ringing, Christine had almost recovered from her fit of the miseries. Knowing it would be Mark, she purposely strove to sound normal as she answered the call.

"Hello," she said, as brightly as she could.

Mark, however, knew instantly that something was not right.

"Chrissie," he said quietly, "is something wrong, darling?"

If he hadn't said that, she would have been all right. But his words and the sounds of concern in his voice were too much for her and she wept softly again. She tried not to, but she couldn't help it.

And it wasn't for herself that she was crying. It wasn't for herself that she was so worried. No. It was Mark she was concerned for, because the media were about to name him as the mystery man in that Kooralbyn photo, in spite of her refusal to confirm or deny it was him. She knew what the media were like. They wouldn't worry one iota about obtaining her confirmation or permission. They would go public, and particularly as Mark was the current contender for the eventual leadership of the PPA. This would be great copy for them and obviously it would hurt Mark's electoral

chances, and the PPA's chances also. And it was all her fault. Oh, you silly girl! How could you possibly have been so stupid? How could you?

"Chrissie, don't cry, darling. What's the matter, Chrissie?"

Mark's words brought her back to the present. She must stop crying at once. It wasn't fair for him to hear a sloppy female blubbing away on the other end of a telephone conversation. Get hold of yourself my girl. Poor Mark must be distraught for you.

"I'm sorry, darling. I just couldn't help it," she whispered, her sobbing now stopped and only the smallest of tremors still in her voice. "As soon as you spoke I just went to pieces, but I'm all right now."

Then she told him about her horrible day and about her fears for him and for the PPA. "We're both going to be plastered across all the front pages tomorrow morning and we'll be on all the TV news, except Channel Five," she said. "Lance will ban that. And we're sure to be the main topic of conversation on all the talk-back radio shows, and ... and ..."

Christine started to sob again. Just little muffled ones, like small, spasmodic catches of the voice, when the nervous system is playing havoc with the muscular controls.

"Anyway," she continued, after she'd recovered again, "I've made a decision. I thought it all through on the way back from the station this evening and while I've been sitting here waiting for you to ring."

Then, in her soft, sweet voice that he'd grown to know and to love so much, Christine told Mark what she'd decided to do.

Christine Jordan had been right. On Tuesday morning, all the national newspapers blazed the Kooralbyn pool photo and her and Mark's names across their front pages. They stated that their information was from reliable sources but that they had not been able to obtain confirmation or denial from Miss Jordan. Some of them hinted that this, in itself, was confirmation while others just accepted that their information was true and had not bothered checking at all.

Opinion was fairly evenly divided as to whether or not this apparently strong, personal relationship between Australia's most admired television compere and the current probable Parliamentary Leader of the country's newest political party had led to any bias in the conduct of various Question Time interviews by Miss Jordan over the past few weeks and what effect it was likely to have in the future. Three or four political columnists and two political editors, whose views were almost always slanted in favour of the Labor Party, howled blue murder and virtually accused Christine of plotting the overthrow of democratic government in the country.

One newspaper had obviously done its homework well, because it stated that Miss Jordan and Mr Radford had spent the weekend together three weeks ago at the Aquarius On The Beach hotel in Townsville and another weekend together a week ago in Kooralbyn Valley, when the photo was taken. In typical fashion, it did not say that they had separate suites on different floors at the Aquarius, nor that Christine had been a houseguest with Mr and Mrs Radford senior at Kooralbyn Valley.

Its inference was that she and Mark had been whooping it up at different locations all over the countryside every weekend and that obviously Miss Jordan's political interviews on Question Time would have been highly influenced by her secret lover's political aspirations. It then went on to speculate as to whether or not Channel Five could be aiding and abetting Miss Jordan in her nefarious crusade against the present Government.

However, the majority of papers took a more middle-of-the-road approach. Their general attitude was that they wished Christine well as regards her personal life whilst still questioning whether or not it had been possible for her, during the past weeks, to maintain complete impartiality in her political interviews in view of her apparent involvement with Mr Radford. Some also questioned whether or not she should continue political interviews in view of her personal situation.

And then there were some, whose columnists obviously liked Christine, who wished her every happiness, who considered she had always been fair, honest, truthful and unbiased in the past and would continue to be so in the future. A very wonderful person, they said, who told it as she saw it.

Lance Boswell had been away from Channel Five all that Tuesday morning and it was not until shortly after lunch that Christine Jordan was able to see him.

"Hi, Denise," Christine smiled, as she walked up to Lance's secretary's desk in the vestibule outside Lance Boswell's office. "Is he still free?"

Denise smiled back warmly. The two women were firm friends. "Yes, Christine. Go right in," she said.

As Christine walked into his office, Lance Boswell looked up from behind his immense mahogany desk, grinned broadly at her and waved an arm towards the chair in which she usually sat.

"And how's my favourite and most notorious publicity hound today?" he laughed. "You're certainly pulling in millions of dollars worth of free advertising these days. Fantastic, isn't it?"

Christine sat down gracefully, automatically adjusted her skirt and glanced briefly around the room. It was such a friendly room, more like a richly furnished study in some old English manor house than a modern day chief executive's office. She loved it. And she was going to miss it. She'd spent many hours in here with Lance - discussing, arguing, pleading, analysing. He'd been a great boss, and a good friend, and she was going to miss him very much. But she couldn't stay.

"Lance," she said, her voice unusually serious, "I've decided to resign, and I'd like to stop work as soon as possible ... as soon as you decide on someone to take my place on Question Time."

Lance Boswell was surprised. He wasn't really shocked, because he knew she'd been under a lot of pressure for the last few weeks, but he was definitely surprised. "Why?" he asked.

"Lance, Mark and I are going to be married. We became engaged last Sunday and we plan to marry in a few weeks time, but the main reason I'm resigning is I'm going to join the PPA and stand for Parliament at election time and very probably they'll want me to be their Parliamentary Leader. So you'll appreciate I couldn't possibly stay on as compere of Question Time. Not under those circumstances."

"Well, first of all, I'm very happy for you, Christine," said Lance, "and I'm sure you and Mark will be very happy and have a wonderful life together. But tell me, why all the hurry?" Lance had twinkles in his eyes now. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

"Oh no! Good gracious, no!" Christine was horrified. "How could you ever think such a thing?" Then she saw the laughter in his eyes. "Oh, Lance, you're such a tease," she said.

"And what about this guy of yours? How does he like the idea? I thought he was going to be the party leader?"

"He was. But he never really wanted to. He was prepared to be spokesman for the party until after the election, when they knew which candidates had won seats and could then choose a Parliamentary Leader. Mark's been urging me to do this for days. He says I can do far more for the country as Prime Minister than I ever could on Question Time."

"I hate to admit it but he's probably right. You'd be a very great Prime Minister and with your popularity Australia wide you'd ensure the PPA won Government."

"You're not angry with me then, Lance? About resigning?"

"Of course not, Christine. I'm very sorry to be losing you though. You've been a sensation here and particularly since you bullied me into agreeing to your Question Time program. But life goes on and my loss will be the country's gain."

"Lance, you're so sweet," said Christine. He really was such a dear, she thought. A great big bear of a man to look at but a real teddy inside.

They talked then about the most suitable replacement for Christine and finally settled on Anita Hurley, who had stood in for her on several occasions very successfully.

"She's on holidays at present but she'll be back next week," said Christine. "So I'll spend the whole day with her on Monday and bring her up to date. She knows all my systems already, so one day with her will be enough. Also, we can do Monday night's show together."

"And you'll announce on tonight's program that you're leaving?" Lance confirmed.

"Yes. And if you're able to contact Anita this afternoon with the good news, I'll announce tonight that she's going to be my successor, commencing on Monday, when we'll be joint hosts for that evening."

"And we'll have a farewell party for you on Monday night, starting off on stage during the last section of Question Time."

"Oh, great! And can we have balloons and streamers and hooters?"

"Yes."

"And funny hats?"

"Yes."

"And will you say some nice words about me?"

"You know I will."

They looked into each other's eyes then - two close friends, at the parting of the ways, sharing a bond that would last forever ... unbroken by time ... while they both lived.

"I feel sad," said Christine, softly. "I think I'm going to cry."

Lance Boswell levered his giant frame out of his chair, came around his desk, put his hand lightly on her shoulder and held out his handkerchief. "I know how you feel," he said.

That evening, on her program, Christine Jordan told the people of Australia of her resignation from Channel Five and that the coming Monday night would be her last appearance on Question Time, as compere anyway, and that Anita Hurley would be her successor.

"I hope to come back from time to time, as a guest," she said, "because the reason I'm leaving is that I'm joining Mr Bruce Radford's new People's Party of Australia and I intend standing for Parliament at the forthcoming Federal election. And if I win a seat and if our party wins power and if they want me to, I will be very happy and very honoured to become your Prime Minister."

She paused then for a moment as the serious expression faded gradually from her face, replaced by a warm, loveable smile.

"And now," she continued, "I have another announcement to make ... a very happy announcement for me. I have become engaged to be married, to a very wonderful man ... Mr Mark Radford ... and yes, Mark was the man with me in the photo taken at Kooralbyn Valley ... that photo which has been in all your newspapers. And for the information of all those people who have been making innuendoes about us, I was a guest in his parents' home that weekend and our relationship has always been most decorous and very wonderful.

Christine then signed off the program, and as she was doing so her Floor Manager, Hans Gerhard, came on stage in view of the cameras and presented her with a huge bouquet of flowers. There were those among the camera crews who later swore that Hans had tears in his eyes while he did so.

CHAPTER 10.

Wednesday's newspapers throughout Australia were full of Christine Jordan - her resignation as Channel Five's Question Time hostess effective from the conclusion of next Monday evening's screening, her engagement to Mr Mark Radford, the man in THAT photo, and most of all, her decision to stand for Parliament at the coming Federal election which, according to current opinion polls, would see the new People's Party of Australia swept into power and herself almost certainly become the first female Prime Minister of the Nation.

They also advised that Mr Mark Radford had flown to Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart yesterday, spoken with several well known and highly respected local identities and arranged for the formation of local State branches. They published the names of the appointed Presidents, Secretaries and Treasurers of each branch as well as their contact telephone numbers and postal addresses.

Mr Radford, they said, would be doing the same thing in Adelaide and Perth today and in Canberra on Thursday on his way back to Brisbane.

They reported him as having said, at a very late media conference, that each branch would be responsible for endorsing Parliamentary candidates for the seats in their own States or Territories, that there could be more than one candidate endorsed for individual seats and that already some current members of Parliament had resigned from their previous parties, joined the PPA and offered to stand at the next election as PPA candidates. Mr Radford had refused to name them, however. At this stage I feel it is the prerogative of the people concerned, he was reported to have said.

At a specially called midday media conference in Canberra that Wednesday, Prime Minister Rex Marlow announced a snap election would be held in four weeks time from the coming Saturday.

"Why are you holding an election so soon, Prime Minister?" asked a young female reporter. "Are you frightened of the growing popularity of the PPA?"

"I'm frightened of no one!" Marlow thundered at her. "You smart alecks in the media have been making a big thing of this new mob, but they're nothing! They've got nothing going for them!"

"They've got Christine Jordan going for them now, Prime Minister," said the reporter, with a cheeky grin on her pixie face. "How do you think you'll go against her?"

"That sex-hungry female?" Marlow spat out. "She'll be no trouble for me! I eat pipsqueaks like her for breakfast every day of the week."

"But aren't you worried that she'll attract a very high percentage of the women's vote?"

"No way! The women of Australia won't have a bar of her. Women don't trust other women, and specially a sex-crazed one like her. You think they'd want someone like her as head of their Government? You gotta be joking!"

Shortly after midday the radio and television stations advised that Albert Bygrave had announced his resignation as Deputy Leader of the Coalition Parties, Parliamentary Leader of the National Party, his membership of the party, had joined the PPA and was seeking their endorsement for his present seat.

Half an hour later the resignation from Cabinet and from the Australian Labor Party of Harvey Ingram, Federal Treasurer, was announced, and a little later came the news that Warren Dickson, Minister for Communications, had resigned his Commission and his ALP membership, had also joined the PPA and hoped to become an endorsed PPA candidate.

By late afternoon, the total number of Federal Parliamentarians to have resigned from their political parties and joined, or applied to join, the PPA had risen to nine and there was intense media speculation that this present trickle of resignations was merely the forerunner of a flood to come.

After a late afternoon television news update at five thirty, Rex Marlow angrily turned off the portable TV set on his desk that he and Len Straun had been watching. The total of defectors from all political parties now numbered fourteen, and eight of them were from his own ALP. The scowl on his livid face was frightening. Perspiration was pouring off his massive body. Rex Marlow was furious.

Len Straun watched in trepidation as Marlow raised himself heavily out of his chair and started pacing back and forth across the room.

"We're finished, Len!" he stormed at Straun. "We're buggered, mate! That bloody bitch has scuttled us after all!"

Straun didn't speak. He'd learnt very early in their relationship that to say anything at all when Rex was in a really foul mood was just asking for trouble. Better to simply let him run. Let him work it out of his system. When he calmed down you could talk sensibly with him. But not now. When he was like this he was quite irrational ... and dangerous.

"And as for that bloody Harvey Ingram and that swine Warren Dickson, what a pair of rats they turned out to be!" Marlow thundered, continuing his heavy-footed pacing.

"Yes," said Len Straun quietly.

"One hint of trouble and they bloody jump ship! What stinking, rotten slobs! Of course, I should never have agreed to Harvey being appointed Treasurer by Caucus. That was a bad mistake. Any idiot who can't tell lies when he has to, doesn't deserve to be in politics. No bloody guts! That's his problem! Don't you reckon?"

"Yes," said Len Straun quietly.

"And who were those other six bastards who resigned? Those backbenchers of ours?"

Straun told him their names.

"Good riddance! They're no bloody loss! Not as individuals. But it's one hell of an embarrassment politically."

Marlow continued his pacing. He could feel fury building up within him. Perspiration was streaming off him. He reached for the hand towel in one of the drawers of his desk. "Damn! Damn! Damn!" he exploded, and kicked his wire wastepaper basket half way across the room, scattering crumpled pieces of paper all over the floor.

Straun half started to stand up to tidy up the mess, then thought better of it and sank back in his chair.

"What the hell can we do, Len?" Marlow growled. "We've got to put a stop to this bitch somehow."

Straun shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He didn't want to say anything because he knew from past experience that whatever he said would be wrong - would infuriate Rex further. But he couldn't sit there like a dummy, either, much as he wished to. Rex was looking at him, waiting for a response, with those small, narrow, mean-looking piggy eyes glaring at him from under those black, bushy eyebrows.

"I don't know, Rex. I've been trying to think of something effective for some time now, but I haven't come up with anything," he said.

"I shouldn't have had her frightened into resigning from that damn Question Time program. That's another bloody mistake I've made. Now the damn media have pushed her into standing for the Reps and she can see the Prime Ministership in front of her eyes. Blast! I should've left the bitch alone. Geez, Len, every time I go near her, something else fouls up."

"She certainly has been a problem, Rex. But I think old man Radford and his PPA are a bigger one. Pity he ever thought up this Grand Vision stuff."

Marlow looked at his Deputy in disbelief. "Geez, Len, you can be stupid at times. Radford wouldn't have thought up that concept. That Jordan bitch did. He's just a doddering old fool growing fruit trees in the scrub. No, it's that bloody Jordan! It's all been her idea ... right from the start. She just used Radford as a figurehead. She's the problem! That bloody bitch! She's caused all the damn trouble!"

Marlow was almost screaming now, his eyes wild and flashing, his chest heaving like a surging sea. Perspiration was pouring off him and his face was ruddy and twisted into an evil snarl.

"But I'll fix her! I'll fix the rotten bitch! Once and for all!" he shouted insanely. "I'll stitch her up all right ... for bloody good!"

The next morning, Rex Marlow sat slumped in his chair in his Canberra office. His red-rimmed eyes, strained from a sleepless night, looked wild and demonic. His dank, black hair was all dishevelled. His tie was askew and his shirt, wet with perspiration, was open at the neck where he'd ripped off the top button as he'd angrily tried to undo it to loosen his collar.

The last twenty-four hours, since ten o'clock on Wednesday, had been the worst hours of his life. Firstly, information had come to him that his popularity in the opinion polls in his own electorate was down to a horrendous thirty-seven percent. This was disastrous! He couldn't possibly win back sufficient support over the next four weeks to retain his seat.

Throughout the day, staff, Cabinet Ministers, party executives and the bloody media had kept interrupting his brooding, kept interrupting his thought processes, kept pestering him with inane questions and bleating at him like frightened sheep, until he felt he was going mad.

And when he'd returned home to The Lodge that evening it had been even worse. That stupid, whinging, whining wife of his, that useless bloody Ethel, had sobbed and sniffled all damn night at the now certain prospect of being unceremoniously dumped out of The Lodge and because of the growing fear that her fat, horrible, obnoxious, but income-producing husband looked like joining the other one million dole recipients in four weeks time.

Finally that evening he'd gone to bed early, mainly to escape from Ethel's perpetual wailing, but also to give himself some time to think without interruptions. Sleeping in separate beds, which they'd done ever since she'd found out about that voluptuous redhead at the Hobart convention years ago, at least had one benefit. You could spend time thinking clearly on current problems, undisturbed by other distractions or attractions, not that anyone in their right mind would call that ugly, skinny bloody Ethel an attraction.

As he sat almost motionless in his chair, with the door to the outer office closed to discourage interruptions, Marlow's mind was racing.

It was bad enough that his ALP seemed certain to lose government. It was bad enough that he seemed certain to be deposed as Prime Minister. Those two almost certainties were bad enough but they, at least, were bearable. That was party politics. That was something you could survive. But to lose his seat! That would be a bloody catastrophe! That would be the end for him!

Unknown to anyone except himself and his creditors, Rex Marlow was broke. Not only was he broke but he owed a fortune. And he had no assets. The house in Melbourne that he'd owned outright before becoming Prime Minister had been sold thirty months ago to settle some of his gambling debts. All his previous investments and his life insurance policies had been cashed in years ago for the same purpose. He would receive many hundred thousand dollars golden handshake from the government when he left Parliament but this was already committed to his bookies by way of promissory notes. So the cold, hard facts of the situation were that when he lost his seat, he and his unbeloved but loyal Ethel would not only be pitched out of the Lodge but would be homeless, penniless and unemployed as well - a truly frightening prospect.

While his Prime Ministerial income was secure his bookies had been happy to let him continue betting with them with ever increasing credit. But he knew with absolute certainty that this state of affairs was about to change dramatically and he also knew that the knives would be out for him once he lost his seat and was unable to pay the huge debts that were not covered by his retirement entitlements.

And so Rex Marlow was desperate.

All last night he had tossed and turned in his sleepless bed, vainly searching his mind for some answer to his problems. All last night he had sworn at and heaped curses down upon the head of the person responsible for his frightful plight ... the one person who had caused all his damn problems ... that bloody, stinking, rotten Jordan bitch!

In his deranged mind Christine Jordan was the sole cause of all his problems, and as the long hours of darkness had finally started to lighten, his demented brain had pushed forward a solution - a remotely possible way to save his world.

This solution appeared to be the only practical one. He was realistic enough to know that, outside of Parliament, he was unemployable. He didn't have any qualifications. He had no friends in industry or commerce. Even his own Ministers disliked or hated him. His only option was to do whatever was necessary to retain his seat, and in his present turbulent, illogical state of mind it seemed to him that this might just be possible if that stumbling block, that Jordan bitch, was somehow neutralized.

This one and only answer had come to him in the early hours of the morning. At that time it had seemed simple and safe. Now, however, in the clearer, more sensible light of day, he hesitated to take the step. He'd been sitting in his chair arguing with himself ever since he'd entered his office over an hour ago. He wasn't worried about the action he proposed. He was only concerned about the risk of being found out afterwards. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life in jail.

Finally he picked up the handset of his direct line telephone and rang a number at the Melbourne Markets which he knew by heart. His call was answered by the voice he knew and wanted. "Rex Marlow here, Benny," he said. "I've got an urgent job for you. And it's got to look like an accident."

Marlow explained what he wanted done and hung up the receiver. "That's bloody fixed you, you rotten bitch," he snarled.

On Friday morning Bruce Radford sat across the desk from Charlie Brent in Brent's office in the Beaudesert Star premises in William Street. "Right oh, Charlie," he said, "what would you like to know?"

"Bruce, as I said to you on the 'phone yesterday, now that Marlow has called the election for four weeks time, what I'd like to do this morning is get your views and thoughts on some of the wrongs in this country today, you know, the things that people are screaming about that have to be fixed and that haven't been discussed in previous media interviews. OK?"

"Sure. Fire away."

"And Bruce, I don't need long, in depth thoughts. Preferably one or two liners. Our locals won't read long, involved, political tirades, so I have to keep them short and to the point."

"That's fine by me," said Bruce, settling more comfortably in his chair. "Away you go."

"OK. Now, what are your thoughts on what the present and previous governments have called the Big Picture items, like our position on the World Stage and in the Asia-Pacific region?"

"I think it's a load of rubbish. Sure, we should be participant traders and have good relationships with neighbouring countries, but we should be concentrating on our own domestic issues first. When we are running our own country efficiently then we'll earn the respect of others, but not before."

"OK. What about immigration then?"

"Until unemployment is down to zero we should stop all immigration other than immediate relatives of current Australian citizens. Our present and past levels of immigration have been fuelling our unemployment problem."

"How about Buy Australian Made?"

"Its absolutely essential that we support our own primary producers and our own manufacturers and that we protect them where necessary with tariffs, subsidies or quotas – whatever's needed. This world wide level playing field concept is hogwash. All that would do is bring our living conditions down and decimate our own industries, and we've already done enough of that."

"What about Public Servants' and Parliamentarians' rorts and golden handshakes?"

"All rorts in all areas have to be ruthlessly stamped out. It's stealing! And as for the ridiculously high and in some cases continuing benefits after retirement, they should be no better than similar benefits in the private sector."

"Secrecy in government and non-disclosure clauses in agreements and contracts?"

Bruce Radford's eyes flashed and his face hardened. This was one of his pet hates. "The only matters that should be kept from public knowledge," he said, "should be any that relate to National Security and our relations with other countries. Our governments are supposed to be the servants of the people, not their masters. The government's knowledge should belong to the people, not be hidden from them."

"How about government sponsorship of sport and the arts?"

"This is stupid. The government's job is to provide the necessities from its revenue, not the luxuries. A lot of taxpayers, and that includes pensioners and the unemployed and the destitute, who all pay sales tax on every item they purchase, don't give a damn how many gold medals we win at the next Olympics. How many people want some of their taxes given to someone else to write a book or a play or to paint a picture? If people want to play sport or write books or whatever, that's fine, and good luck to them, but not with some of my money, thank you. If I did want to give them money I should donate it, not have it forcibly taken from me by taxation. After all, how many people's lives are going to be changed for the better by these payments, other than the recipients? Is that person on the street who's been waiting for an urgent operation for months, because of a lack of government funding, going to be helped because we won some extra gold medals?"

"Wow! Sorry I asked," Charlie Brent laughed. "Touch a raw nerve, did I?"

Bruce relaxed and laughed also. "I guess so," he said. "I just hate to see taxpayers' money being spent on luxuries at the expense of necessities. If we had a separate, optional tax for these luxuries, how many people would pay it, hey?"

"Good point. Now then, what about crime and punishment?"

"The penalties are not severe enough. Everyone except that small minority of do-gooders and civil rights activists agrees with this. Take a classic example, speed limits. If you jailed people and confiscated their cars for exceeding the speed limits, people wouldn't do it. If you make the penalty severe enough you can eliminate almost all crime, other than spur of the moment acts and crimes of extreme passion. Look at Singapore with their floggings. It just depends how serious you are in your desire to stamp out particular crimes. I would recommend a variety of penalties for various types of crimes and let the people choose the penalties, irrespective of how harsh."

"You'd get some pretty stiff penalties if you let the people choose them."

"Charlie, that's the whole basis of our party. Letting the people vote for what THEY want done. If the people vote for very harsh penalties then so be it. They're the ones being beaten up in their homes. They're the ones whose daughters are being raped and murdered. Do we really want to stop these things, or let them go on?"

"Yes, you're right. OK then, how about street kids and homeless youths?"

“First, we should not pay any money, except minimal pocket money, to kids to enable them to leave and stay away from their family homes. Paying them money just encourages them to leave and to get into crime, drugs and sex. What we must do for all children under eighteen years of age who are not employed in full time jobs and who have to leave home for genuine domestic reasons is to provide children’s homes run along the lines of boarding schools, with strict supervision, discipline, schooling and time management by plenty of highly qualified staff. Their total needs should be provided and rigorously monitored and if we do this properly we should solve this problem.”

“Very well. Now, how about pornography and morals?”

“One of the great sadnesses in this country nowadays, and indeed throughout many other countries, is the growth and almost legitimising of pornography and the gradual, continuous collapse of moral standards. We have the foulest language imaginable, explicit sex and horrendous violence thrust at us daily by television, radio, the press, movies, books and magazines. Our national ABC television station is the worst. Honestly, if you or I used the language in public that they put on our television screens we’d be arrested. The promoters of this filth and degradation say they are merely portraying life as it is. Well, I say they are portraying the worst forms of life. They should be portraying the good things, not the bad. They should be trying to lead us upward, not trying to drag us downward into depravity.”

“Spot on. I totally agree with you. Now, what about land resumptions for new roads, dams and so forth?”

Bruce was silent for a few moments. “That’s a ticklish one,” he said eventually. “I’m really opposed to the principle of governments throwing people off their properties unless it’s absolutely necessary, and particularly if it’s simply to increase other people’s convenience, like speeding up traffic or providing unlimited water for people to waste. However I do concede that there are times when it is absolutely necessary. Now, when this occurs, I feel that the people whose properties have been resumed should be paid ten times the realistic previous value so that they are really looked after.”

“How about toll roads?”

“There shouldn’t be any. Why should people who use newer roads or bridges pay tolls when people who use all the other roads don’t? That’s plain stupid. We all pay our taxes.”

“Racism?”

“There’s too much talk about racism, especially in the media. They’re fuelling it. I’m against any form of discrimination or favouritism and jobs for the boys. But I’m not against people being able to choose their friends and their employees. I believe all people, irrespective of race, colour, sex or religion should be equally eligible for everything, and that applies in all directions, up, down and sideways. But governments should never force choice. To do so is to destroy freedom, not to grant it.”

“Gays and lesbians?”

“Look, everyone knows it’s unnatural. They shouldn’t be persecuted because of their unfortunate bent but equally they should not be allowed to flaunt and encourage their lifestyles. And as for adopting children, who have no choice in their adoption, well, to me, that’s abhorrent.”

“Preferential voting?”

“The only way to go. Oops! Sorry. Optional preferential is the ultimately fair system. You see, with first past the post voting, if there are ten candidates it is possible for a person to win with only eleven percent of the total votes, even though the other eighty-nine percent of voters could well hate his guts. Preferential narrows the final vote down to a two person contest with all voters still having their say in the final choice. Optional preferential allows you to not vote in the final choice or even not at all if that is your desire. I’ve never believed in forcing people to vote if they don’t want to. That’s just stupid. But if you don’t vote, don’t whinge.”

“How about discipline for children by parents and schools?”

“It is absolutely ridiculous for parents to not be legally allowed to physically chastise their children, and I don’t mean brutalising them. No wonder some children are becoming uncontrollable. All past generations have had a smack across the bottom or on the legs and it didn’t scar them for life. Governments should keep out of people’s homes except in cases of cruelty and violence, and corporal punishment should be brought back into our schools.”

Charlie Brent looked quickly back through the notes he’d been taking. “Well, Bruce, you’re sure going to change this country,” he said.

“No Charlie. Not me. I’m not even going to be in Parliament. All I’m going to do, as Party President, is make suggestions from time to time and make sure our elected PPA members do what their electors want done. I’m not changing anything. I’m not deciding anything. All I’m intending to do is give the power of decision to the people.”

“Through your electronic voting system?”

“That’s right.”

“Bruce, what’s your program with that? With the usage of your EVS?”

“If we get elected to government we will immediately go ahead and install the EVS, because it will have been a major part of our election promises. That will probably take three to four months. Then, via the EVS, we will ask the

people do they want future elections conducted via the EVS. If seventy-five percent or more say yes, then we will change the Electoral Act to allow this. At some later stage, perhaps twelve months down the track, we will suggest to the public that they, the people, should do the actual voting, via the EVS, for acts put to Parliament instead of telling their members how to vote. If they say yes to this and after they have been doing it for say another twelve months, we will suggest to them that voting should be on an Australia wide basis rather than on a seat by seat one."

"Why would you suggest that?"

"Because it's fairer."

"How come?"

Bruce looked at Charlie Brent in disbelief. "Charlie," he said, "in a Parliament of a hundred and forty-eight seats, and one of them is Speaker of the House, you can pass bills if seventy-four electorates vote Yes. Now, each of those electorates could have decided to vote Yes by only a handful of votes. In the other seventy-three electorates you could have had one hundred percent vote No. In such a case the bill would be passed even though only some twenty-five percent of all the people voted for it. You see?"

"I see. Yes. Yes, that's true. But tell me, you said a minute ago that you'd change the Electoral Act if seventy-five percent of people said Yes, but a week or so ago you mentioned a two-thirds majority. Which is it?"

"What I will recommend is that any new laws envisaged should require a two-thirds majority but to change or to cancel an existing law should need seventy-five percent."

"Why the difference?"

"Only because if a law is already in force it originally must have been considered desirable and therefore should require a larger majority to alter it."

"Yes. OK. Well, that's all I have. Anything you'd like to add, Bruce?"

"Only this. In any society which governs its lives by majority rule, there is always the risk that minority interests and views will be swamped. With my new concept of giving total power of decision to the people, this risk obviously is going to be increased. We must never forget that minority interests must always be given fair consideration. We must continue to be tolerant. But this doesn't worry me because I have a great trust in the common sense and compassion of the vast majority of our Australian people. We have always bent down to help a fallen mate."

At seven fifteen on Friday evening, after she'd put Question Time to bed and finalized some minor matters, Christine Jordan went down to Channel Five's executives undercover car park. She dropped her handbag onto the front passenger seat of her white Commodore, turned on the ignition and fired up the motor. She looked dutifully right and left as she emerged from the entrance gates into Dunmore Terrace, turned right and drove down to Lang Parade and then right again towards Coronation Drive.

She'd been stopped at the traffic lights, where Lang Parade runs into Coronation Drive, for half a minute when a maroon Falcon, which had been parked in Dunmore Terrace opposite the entrance to Channel Five, pulled up behind her.

Christine didn't really notice it. She was barely conscious that a pair of car headlights had stopped behind her - not an unusual occurrence in any city.

When the traffic lights changed to green, Christine turned right into Coronation Drive and, later, right again into Sylvan Road at the Regatta Hotel corner. She followed Sylvan Road all the way along to the Toowong roundabout and thence to the Western Freeway.

The maroon Falcon did the same.

Christine did not take any notice of it. She didn't realize that the same car was behind her all the time. Her thoughts were of Mark and she drove simply by habit.

On the Western Freeway, as Christine's speed built up to the initial ninety limit, the maroon Falcon fell a little behind. However, it was still there fifteen minutes later at Browns Plains, where Christine turned right from Johnson Road onto the Mount Lindesay Highway.

After Browns Plains, as she left the suburban areas behind, Christine's speed built up again. In the one hundred K speed limit areas between Browns Plains and Jimboomba she was doing between ninety and ninety-five, her personal comfort zone, and consequently several vehicles overtook her, their glaring headlights creeping up from behind and then sweeping past in a rush of wind and engine noise.

But the maroon Falcon drove at the same average speed as Christine, sometimes creeping closer, sometimes falling further behind.

By the time Christine turned off the highway at Tamrookum for the narrow, winding, ten minute drive into Kooralbyn Valley, the maroon Falcon was a long way behind, its headlights seen only distantly.

And so, when Christine arrived at the Radford home, she had absolutely no idea that a maroon Falcon, with two men and a heap of high-tech equipment and other items on board, had made virtually the identical trip.

As soon as Christine stepped out of her car she was surrounded by a rush of welcoming arms.

"Oh! Christine!" Lilla Radford laughed joyously, tears of happiness in her eyes, as she hugged Christine to her. "We're so happy for you, Bruce and I. It's just wonderful ... so wonderful. And we know you and Mark will be very, very happy together. You two are a lovely couple and Bruce and I love you very much, dear."

"Thank you, Mrs Radford. It is very exciting, isn't it?" said Christine.

"Now, now, dear. You must stop calling me Mrs Radford ... now that you're part of the family, or going to be very soon. You must call me Gran, like my other girls do."

Christine smiled warmly and hugged Lilla right back. "Thank you, Gran," she said, "I'm going to love being one of your girls."

That evening, after Christine had eaten the light snack Lilla had prepared for her, they all toasted her and Mark's engagement with a bottle of champagne, and after Bruce and Lilla had finally torn themselves away from all the excited conversation and gone to bed, Mark gave Christine the ring.

"I have a very special present for you, Chrissie," he said, taking a little velvet covered case from his pocket and handing it to her.

She knew instantly what was inside.

With her heart thumping fit to burst, she slowly opened the lid.

There, in its bed of white satin, sat the most beautiful engagement ring she could ever imagine. The large, multi-faceted single diamond twinkled brilliantly with every slightest movement, while the encircling cluster of smaller emeralds flashed green fire, matching her eyes.

She loved it straight away. Suddenly tears came to her eyes. Tears of joy. Carefully she took the ring from its satin bed and slipped it onto her finger. It fitted perfectly. Through her tears she smiled down at it. It looked so exquisite on her slim, creamy white finger.

"Oh, Mark," she whispered. "It's so beautiful. It's so lovely. Thank you, darling."

Christine turned towards him on the large leather couch, flung her arms around his neck, pressed herself against his chest and lifted her lips to his, tears of happiness running down her cheeks and wetting his face.

"Oh, Mark, darling," she gasped, "I'm so happy. So very, very happy."

"Well, thank goodness for that," he laughed, brushing her tears from his face. "If you'd been sad I think I'd have drowned."

Just before dawn on Saturday morning Mark came into her bedroom. The sun had not yet risen over the crest of Polo Hill but the light was quite strong. He kissed her lovingly as she lay in the large king size bed. Then he pulled the top sheet down, just below where her white silk pyjama top hid her navel.

"Oh, you are bold!" she whispered. "Go on out of here while I put on my walking clothes."

They then walked the three-kilometre circuit road and had their early morning cup of tea with his father on their return, and when Lilla arose Christine helped her prepare breakfast.

After the meal, Mark and Christine went to get The Courier-Mail. They walked down the hill to the valley floor, hand in hand. They crossed a large horse paddock, cut across the racecourse encircled polo field and thence across the Cannon Creek dam wall and its overflow. They rounded the end of the airstrip and walked along to the general store near the aircraft hanger.

"It's quite a long way, isn't it, Mark?" Christine said, when they reached the general store.

"About the same distance as our early morning walk."

On the return journey they stopped on the dam wall and looked at the wild ducks swimming lazily on the water and in and out of the reeds at the water's edge.

"It's lovely here in the valley, Mark," Christine sighed. "So peaceful and picturesque. And the air is so fresh and invigorating. Not like all the smog in the big cities. I could stay here forever."

Mark looked at her. She was so slim and desirable, standing there at the edge of the dam wall in her cream T-shirt and shorts with the morning breeze stirring her black hair around the base of her neck and the tops of her shoulders. She didn't look big and strong and tough enough to run a country. He hoped the job wouldn't be too much for her, physically. She was so soft and cuddly. But then he remembered the steel he'd seen in her flashing green eyes as she'd lain on the beach sands of Radical Bay and he realized that her spirit and determination and the fire within her would drive her onward.

"Yes, it really is lovely here, Chrissie," he said quietly, "and we can come here regularly ... anytime we feel like escaping from the rush and bustle of the big cities and the pressure of politics."

"That will be nice." She smiled back at him and squeezed his hand.

They walked lazily back to the house then and joined his mother and father in time for morning tea.

The man on top of Polo Hill watched them all the way to the store and back with his binoculars.

After lunch Mark and Christine changed into their swim clothes and drove down to the Country Club for a swim in the pool.

"Now that we're engaged and it's common knowledge, I don't suppose anyone will take photos of us this time," Christine said, as they stood at the pool's edge.

"I must get a copy of that photo from The Courier-Mail," Mark grinned. "We could use it to start off our family album. You know ... you lying on your back with me at your throat and with that look of delirious enjoyment on your pretty little face."

"Don't be awful! It wasn't delirious enjoyment!"

"Well ... it certainly wasn't bored disinterest."

"Oh, you are a silly," she laughed, and pushed him into the water.

Late that evening, after Bruce and Lilla had retired to bed, Mark and Christine sat on the wooden bench in the garden room.

"You know, darling," said Christine dreamily, her head nestling lovingly against Mark's shoulder, one hand holding his as it rested on top of her thigh, "it's simply amazing how quickly things have happened to us. Do you realize it's only four weeks ago yesterday evening that we first met ... up in the New Horizons Restaurant in Townsville?"

"Yes," said Mark. "That was a wonderful weekend."

"And now, in two weeks' time, we're going to be married."

"Tell me," he asked, after a short pause, "when did you first know that you loved me? I know it wasn't the Saturday morning in Townsville, because you wouldn't swim with me and you nearly didn't have breakfast with me, did you? Remember?"

She smiled happily as memories came rushing back to her – memories of two wonderful days four weeks ago. "I don't really know," she said. "I think it was a gradual thing, not a now I'm not, now I am sort of thing. I know I liked you straight away, right from when I sat down at your table on the Friday night. But just in a he's nice sort of way. Not at all in a romantic way. Not right then. I was just very conscious of you, and I didn't really know why."

"Isn't that strange. The same thing happened to me. After you'd gone that evening, I was in my room looking out over the bay and I could still smell your perfume ... or I thought I could."

She smiled up at him. "I think it really first started for me on the Saturday morning, when we were walking, after we met on The Strand," she said. "Do you remember? You said to me you were glad I'd joined you for a while last night, and then you looked into my eyes and something spooky happened to me right then."

"Yes," he said, "and then you said, I'm glad too. See. I remember your exact words."

"And then you asked me to swim with you and I said no, and you looked so disappointed. Then you said what about sharing a breakfast table, and do you know what?"

"No."

"I felt right then that if I didn't say yes, I might never see you again. And I didn't know if I'd be sorry or not. But I had to find out. So I said yes. So I could have time to find out how I felt about you. I suppose that was probably the most important moment and decision of my whole life, even though I didn't realize it at the time."

"I don't know about that. I think if you'd said no and if you'd gone back to Brisbane after breakfast I'm sure I'd have tried to see you again when I came down here to Kooralbyn. I wasn't in love with you at that stage but I knew, even then, that I wanted to keep seeing you ... keep being with you."

"And when did you really know you loved me?" she asked softly, her eyes looking into his.

"I think I knew for certain on the beach at Radical Bay, when you had your fit of the miseries. When I held you in my arms to comfort you."

"You were so lovely to me then. And I think that was when I first realized it also."

He bent his head then and kissed her - softly, tenderly, lovingly ... and with all his heart. Then he let go of her hand, took her in both his arms and held her close against him, her arms around his neck, their thighs and tummies pressed together and her soft, warm breasts flattening against his chest, while their hearts beat rapidly and their love and desire enveloped them.

They stayed like that for ages, neither wanting to let go, while myriads of stars twinkled brightly above and the full moon passed slowly through the heavens.

Sunday was a lovely day for Christine Jordan. A day filled with happiness and joy and love ... and Mark. She was so happy just being with him ... touching him, listening to him, joking with him. Certainly his mother and father were there also, but somehow they seemed to be simply part of the background. The day was really just full of Mark ... dear,

darling, cheeky, loving Mark. Oh, he was so wonderful. And she was so happy ... so deliriously happy. Never before had she been so happy. Never before had her future looked so rosy.

On Monday morning at six o'clock Mark and Christine stood alongside her white Commodore in the driveway of the Radford home. Christine had already said goodbye and thank you to Lilla and Bruce who had then gone back into the house to let her and Mark have their farewell together.

"I still wish you'd let me drive you back to Brisbane, Chrissie," Mark said. "I keep remembering Roger saying you might be in danger. And there were those phone calls and that dog's head on your doorstep. I wish you weren't going."

"I wish I wasn't too, darling. But I promised Lance I'd spend all today with Anita, and then there's my final show tonight and my goodbye party afterwards. And we haven't seen anyone following us for nearly three weeks now, have we? I haven't had any phone calls or anything else for nine or ten days and now I'm leaving Question Time and that's common knowledge. So they should be satisfied, whoever was trying to scare me off."

"I know, but that's no guarantee. I'm still worried about you."

"Darling, you know what we agreed last night. If anyone was intending to harm me, they'd have done it by now."

"I guess so. I'm going to miss you, though."

"And I'm going to miss you too. But I'll see you tomorrow morning when you bring your mother to Brisbane to come shopping with me."

His anxiety was still showing on his face as he put his arms around her. He held her lightly so as not to rumple her suit ... just firmly enough to feel her pressing softly against him. He looked down at her smiling face. She was so beautiful. That glorious long black hair falling loosely to and around her shoulders, those soft, warm, loving lips, those sparkling green eyes so full of life and laughter.

He looked at her for a long, long time, as if he needed to remember every detail ... as if he might never see her again. The same way he'd looked at Tracey in that hospital bed during those last few agonizing minutes.

Then, with a heavy heart, he let her go.

"Bye, sweetheart," he said softly. "I love you, darling."

And then she was gone, and Mark walked slowly back into the house with lead in his shoes and a strange feeling of fear in his heart.

As Christine Jordan came down through the long, sweeping curves from the top of Cedar Grove Heights towards the corner of the Mount Lindesay Highway and Cedar Grove Road just south of Jimboomba, she glanced quickly at her wrist watch. It was six forty-three. She was making good time.

A few seconds later her Commodore roared through the long, gradual right hand bend after the Cedar Grove Road turnoff and straightened up for the three hundred metre level approach to the Scrubby Creek bridge and the subsequent gradual climb to the cutting at the top of the low ridge beyond.

Just before she reached the bridge, Christine glanced quickly up at the roadway where it ran through the cutting, some two hundred metres away, to see if there was any traffic coming over the top of the rise. Her eyes were just flicking back to the bridge approaches when she was conscious of a brief, bright flash of light in the sparse scrub alongside the top of the cutting.

The next instant her left front tyre blew out.

The tyre burst with a loud explosion of its suddenly released compressed air. The tremendously increased drag on that side of the vehicle immediately slewed the Commodore to the left, ripping the steering wheel from Christine's light grasp. The car left the road, its right hand headlight fracturing into hundreds of pieces of broken glass as the crumpling mudguard snapped a thin guidepost thirty metres from the bridge.

The land beyond the side of the road was considerably lower than the road surface and as the Commodore left the roadway and became airborne its left side dropped and it started turning over. Hurling through the air at close to a hundred kilometres an hour with its engine screaming like a demon, the vehicle crashed back to earth on its left side with a horrendous sound of tearing, scraping metal and smashing undergrowth. It tore through the small bushes and saplings, turned further over onto its back and slid, on its buckling roof and bonnet, into the creek.

Through most of the year Scrubby Creek carries very little water but on this day previous heavy rainfalls had raised its level considerably. So when the Commodore, still on its back, skated off the bank and plunged nose first into the creek with a massive splash, its engine still screaming, its wheels still spinning madly, it came to rest partially submerged in a metre of turbulent, muddy water.

When the vehicle left the roadway and started rolling over in midair, Christine screamed from fright and fear. She grabbed frantically but unsuccessfully at the steering wheel as her world began revolving.

Then the vehicle landed on its left side, and the windscreen and passenger side windows exploded inward, showering the cabin with masses of little pieces of flying broken glass which scratched and cut her face and bare arms, causing her to scream again and to try desperately to shield her face and eyes with her hands.

As the car nosedived upside down into the far side creek bank and came to an abrupt halt, the front end crumpled like cardboard, ramming the engine block and firewall backward into the cabin as the rest of the vehicle concertinaed under its momentum.

In the next minutest fraction of a second several things happened almost simultaneously. As the firewall, with the engine block propelling it, rammed backwards into the cabin, it pinned Christine's left leg against the front of her seat, snapping it like a carrot. Her chest, shoulders, forearms and her head, protected by her hands across her face, smashed forward against the steering wheel. Both her forearms broke against the bottom of the wheel, as did three fingers and her left thumb against the wheel's top. Her sternum fractured against the bottom of the steering wheel and her neck nearly snapped as her head, protected somewhat by her breaking fingers, smashed against its top.

The intense, nerve shattering, white-hot pain of her limbs and sternum breaking and the frightful bang to her forehead, as it broke her fingers and thumb against the steering wheel, producing frightening flashes of light and darkness alternately in her brain, made Christine scream and scream in terror and from the excruciating agony.

Never in her life had she even envisaged such pain, let alone experienced it. She felt sick in her stomach and on the verge of vomiting. Her nervous system was shot to shreds. Her brain seemed on fire and unable to function and she felt she was about to faint.

Then, as quietness again descended on the previously peaceful scene, broken only by the loud hissing of cold creek water vaporizing into clouds of steam from the extreme heat of the almost submerged engine block, a frightening sound came to Christine's ears ... the sound of surging water!

Hanging upside down in the overturned vehicle, suspended by her seat belt at her waist and chest, with the firewall pinning her broken left leg against her seat and with the steering wheel pressing very firmly against her fractured forearms and chest, Christine was virtually unable to move - except for her head and her right leg. Her head was hanging downward, close to the car's buckled roof, which was now the lowest part of the vehicle. She turned her head painfully to look in the direction of the sound ... and nearly fainted at what she saw.

Oh dear God! I'm going to die!

Through the broken front windscreen and the shattered side windows swirling creek water was pouring into the vehicle and the level was rising rapidly - so rapidly that already Christine's long black hair was swirling only a few centimetres below the crown of her head. She realized instantly, with the crystal like clarity of desperation, that in another handful of seconds the cabin of the car would fill to the level of the creek, whatever that might be, and that if she couldn't free herself almost immediately she would certainly drown.

Fighting desperately against almost unbelievable pain and frightened that she might faint, Christine tried valiantly to free either of her arms from between the steering wheel and her chest where they were immovably jammed. If she could free even one of them she could probably then reach the buckle of her seat belt, release the catch, slide sideways from behind the steering wheel, sit upward and raise her head high enough to save herself from drowning. She then should be able to reach the handle of her seat, release it and move the seat backward, away from her fractured left leg, thus freeing it also.

But she couldn't free her arms!

She couldn't free either of them!

And the water had reached the crown of her head!

Christine screamed again and again in almost unbearable agony and with terror in her frightened eyes.

She struggled and struggled, the sharp, continuous stabs of shockingly acute pain sapping her strength as broken bone ground agonizingly against broken bone.

The pain was unbearable.

She could struggle no longer.

It was no use.

The water rose from the crown of her head to the tops of her ears.

Christine screamed again, tucking her chin into her chest and raising her mouth and nose as high above the water as she could. She clenched her teeth against the pain in her crushed sternum, where her chin pressed against it, as she stretched upward in desperation.

She strained to free her arms again and again, but couldn't.

And she couldn't keep trying or she would faint from the pain.

And then her head would drop back into the rising water.

This was the end.

There was no hope.

She was going to drown.

Knowing she had only a few brief moments of life left to her, Christine's thoughts turned to Mark.

Oh, my darling, she thought, you're so wonderful. You're kind and thoughtful and considerate ... and so handsome, with your lovely curly fair hair and your teasing brown eyes so full of fun, and that cheeky grin. You always look confident and debonair. And you're so loving. I love you very much. And now I'm going to leave you. I don't want to, darling, but I can't help it.

Christine started to cry softly, her tears running down over her temples and the sides of her cheeks and falling into the rising creek water now staining red with her blood from the cuts and scratches on her face, hands and arms.

Poor Mark. Poor, darling Mark. He would be absolutely devastated, she knew. His life would be shattered again ... for the second time. Oh, you poor darling. Don't grieve for me for years. This time you have a mission to fill your days. You must carry on with your father's Grand Vision. You must do it, Mark. It's so important.

The water was now almost to her eyes, nose and mouth!

This was the end!

Christine screamed one last despairing time and frantically tried to wrench her poor broken and now twisted arms free. But couldn't! One last blinding flash of pain seared across her brain and then, mercifully, she fainted into unconsciousness.

As her poor bloodied face and head fell backward, her eyelids closed over her beautiful green eyes.

The water rose over her eyes and into her nostrils and into her sagging, open mouth.

But Christine Jordan did not move.

EPILOGUE.

The slim little six-year-old came skippity-skip through the flyscreened front door onto the concrete-floored patio at the front of the neat, modest, low-set bungalow. She was a pretty little thing with beautiful creamy skin, long wavy hair and sparkling eyes.

"Here you are, Gran," she said happily, handing a hairbrush to the elderly, white-haired lady seated on a cushion covered cane chair facing the water.

The child turned around and sat down very precisely on the plastic kiddies chair in front of her grandmother, carefully smoothing out the skirt of her pale green cotton frock, the way she'd been taught. She sat very still and erect on the chair with her head held high and her shoulders squared. Her knees were close together with the hem of her skirt almost reaching them. Her tiny, dainty, bare feet - it was too hot for shoes - were almost touching and were directly beneath her knees, while her slim little hands were clasped lightly and resting in her lap.

She was a sweet child and the apple of her grandmother's eye.

From the patio, the lush, green, manicured lawn extended, unbroken by shrubs or flower beds, to a low brick wall fencing off the house property from the footpath and the beachfront road which led to the city a few kilometres away.

The day had been very hot for April, even in the tropics, but now a cooling evening breeze brought some relief as the sun slipped slowly down towards the western ridges. It wasn't a strong breeze, but strong enough to ruffle white crests on the tops of the wavelets in the bay on the other side of the beachfront road. To the left a long stretch of land reached out into the bay, seeming almost to touch the huge, jungle-covered island rearing its massive green bulk upward out of the blue, blue water. A handful of fluffy white clouds straggled across the sky but there was no hint of rain in them.

In the shade, on the roofed patio, the grandmother started brushing the little girl's hair.

"Ouch!" said the child. "Oh, Gran! There's knots in it again!"

"Not very many, darling," said the grandmother, holding handfuls of hair tightly with her left hand while she pulled the brush through the knotty parts.

She loved brushing her grand-daughter's hair, this slim, white-haired lady, even though arthritis often hurt her gnarled fingers and her slightly twisted left thumb. She'd loved brushing her daughter's hair too, years before, and her niece's hair before that. There was something very soothing and peaceful and loving about it. A bringing togetherness. A time of closeness, and of sharing ... and of memories.

"There now, darling, all the knots are gone," said the grandmother, a little later. "Now we can go on brushing without any worries, can't we?"

"Does it look lovely again, Gran?" asked the child.

"Yes, darling. And it will look absolutely beautiful when mummy comes soon to take you and Jimmy home. As long as we keep brushing."

"Where's Jimmy now, Gran?"

"He's still down on the beach, fishing with Gramps."

"Jimmy loves fishing, doesn't he, Gran?"

"Yes, he does ... just like Gramps," said the elderly lady, smiling at her remembrances as she kept on brushing.

"Why do I have to have my hair brushed so much, Gran?" the child asked.

"To keep it beautiful. So it will still be beautiful when you grow up and become a lovely lady. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes ... I suppose so."

The grandmother went on brushing, stroke after stroke, marvelling at the silky smoothness of the child's long hair as it slipped softly through her fingers, just as all the children's hair had felt, down through the years.

"Gran," said the child, "were you a little girl once?"

"Yes, darling ... a long time ago," she smiled.

"And did you ever have long hair like mine?"

"Yes."

"And was it white then, like it is now?"

"No, darling. When I was a young girl my hair was black ... black as the night, just like yours."

"And did it shine and sparkle in the sun when the wind blew it, like mummy says mine does?"

The grandmother laughed softly. "Yes, I suppose it did," she said. "Gramps often used to tell me it did. In the sunshine, and under the lights at night ... and in the moonlight."

"Did your mummy brush your hair all the time, Gran, when you were a little girl?"

"Yes, darling. Until I was a big girl. Then I brushed it myself."

The child was silent for a while.

The grandmother went on brushing, loving the feel of the child's hair ... remembering.

"Gran ... " said the child, "this is a lovely place here, next to the beach. Have you always lived here?"

"No, darling. Gramps and I bought this house from some friends of ours ten years ago. That's before you and Jimmy were born."

"Gosh! That's a long time ago."

"Yes. It is for you, darling. But it's not a long time for older people."

The little girl crinkled her forehead, thinking. "Then where did you live before that? ... before I was born?" she asked.

"Well ... before Gramps and I were married I lived in Brisbane for thirty-six years and then Gramps and I lived in Canberra for twenty years and then, when we decided to leave Canberra, we bought this house."

"Why, Gran?"

"Because we have a lot of very good friends here, and in Innisfail and Rockhampton and Bundaberg, and also your mummy and daddy had come here to live because of your daddy's work, and ... because this is where Gramps and I first met ... it's a sort of magic place for us. We used to come here from Canberra for holidays several times each year ... just for a week or so at a time. We built that little shack of ours on the island, at Radical Bay, for our holidays. We love it there. It's so beautiful and peaceful ... one of the nicest places in the whole world. It's always been a very special place for us."

"You and Gramps have been married for a long time, Gran," said the child, wide eyed.

"Yes ... I suppose thirty years is a long time. But sometimes it just seems like yesterday."

The elderly lady's green eyes were misty. She stopped brushing for a moment or two, dried her eyes with her fingertips, then started brushing again.

"Mummy says you and Gramps still love each other very much and that's why you're always so happy."

The grandmother stopped brushing as her eyes misted over again. She took her tiny lace handkerchief from her pocket and dried her eyes as her gaze switched down to the beach ... down to that tall, slim, broad-shouldered man standing at the water's edge alongside a young boy. They both had fishing rods in their hands. Even at fifty metres distance she could see his short curly hair, that was still fair, and she just knew he'd be wearing that cheeky, debonair grin that had almost never left his face over all the years. Oh, he was so wonderful ... so handsome ... and she still loved him so much ... so very, very much.

She wiped her eyes once more, as her composure returned, and started brushing again. "Your mummy's a very nice lady, and very perceptive," she said, "and she's right. Gramps and I do still love each other very much and that is why we're so happy. Gramps is very kind and thoughtful and considerate and a really lovely person."

The little girl turned around on her chair and hugged her grandmother's knees. "And so are you, Gran," she said, very sweetly.

The grandmother smiled, and stroked the top of the child's head with her left hand, then dropped it down into her lap. The child looked at the hand as she did so. There were scar marks on the back of the hand, and on the forearm - scars that had almost faded away with the passing of thirty years.

"Gran, how did you get those scars on your arm?" asked the child.

The grandmother was silent for a moment, as painful memories returned. "I was in a car accident years ago," she said eventually. "My car ran off the road into a creek in the country and I nearly drowned. I was trapped in the car."

"Ooh, Gran, how did you escape?"

"I was very lucky. A man who was riding his horse in the woods saw what happened through a gap in the trees and he galloped over and pulled me out of the car just in time to save me."

"You must have been very frightened, Gran?"

"Yes, I certainly was. But that was a long time ago now."

The little girl looked down at the hand again. But this time she wasn't looking at the old wounds. She was looking at the ring – a ring of pure beauty - a ring that flashed white and green fire at the slightest movement.

"I just love your ring, Gran," said the little girl, so like her grandmother in so many ways. "It's so beautiful. Did Gramps give it to you?"

"Yes, darling. He did. And it is lovely, isn't it? I simply adore it."

The little girl laid her head on her grandmother's knees, still hugging her legs. "Gran ... " she said, "why do Mummy and Great-Aunt Leanne sometimes call you P.M.?"

The grandmother stroked the child's hair softly. "Oh, it's just a nickname I was given years ago," she said quietly.

"How long ago is that?" asked the child.

"A long, long time ago. Way back during the last days of party politics in Australia," the elderly lady's eyes became dreamy, "when a very clever and kind man gave a very great gift to the people of our country."

"What's party politics, Gran?"

"It's something you'll learn about in your history lessons when you're a little older, darling."

"And what did the man give them, Gran?"

"He gave them the gift of true democracy."

The little girl hugged her grandmother's legs again. "I love you, Gran," she said sweetly.

"And I love you too, darling," said Christine Radford.

T H E E N D .

SCENES INDEX - GRAND VISION by J.M.P.Cole.						
Page #	CHAP	Scene	Week	Day	Time	
1	F	Forewords				
2	P	Prologue - Man with rifle				6.03 am
2	1	QT interview - Marlow (Voyager)	1	Wed		6.30 pm
-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3	1	Mark Radford - Rockhampton.	1	Thur		4.00 pm
4	1	Bruce & Lilla Radford, Kooralbyn Valley	1	Thur		4.00 pm
-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4	1	Mark driving Rockhampton to Townsville	1	Fri		am/pm
5	1	Rex Marlow & Len Straun (Canberra) - what to do about Christine	1	Fri		11.00 am
5	1	Christine flies to Townsville	1	Fri		midday
5	1	Mark at his brother Barry's house	1	Fri		6.30 pm
6	1	QT - Keith Anderson & Barry Radford	1	Fri		6.30 pm
7	1	QT - Employees in car park	1	Fri		6.30 pm
8	1	QT - Local Mayor and people in Mall	1	Fri		6.30 pm
8	1	QT - Teddy Anderson - Cape Pallarenda home	1	Fri		6.30 pm
10	2	New Horizons Restaurant dinner - Radfords & Christine	1	Fri		9.00 pm
11	2	Mark in his suite - recalling evening	1	Fri		10.00 pm
-	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	2	Mark & Christine - walk to Kissing Point	1	Sat		6.00 am
13	2	" " " - breakfast	1	Sat		8.00 am
14	2	" " " - drive her to city (followed)	1	Sat		10.00 am
15	2	" " " - Castle Hill drive (followed)	1	Sat		5.00 pm
16	2	Christine in her room thinking about Mark	1	Sat		11.00 pm
-	-	-	-	-	-	-

16	2	Mark/Christine - early walk/day on Magnetic Island.	1	Sun	am/pm
20	2	" " " - Ferry ride – Mark's father's Grand Vision	1	Sun	5.00 pm
20	2	" " " - Dinner - sit in moonlight/love scene	1	Sun	9.00 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
21	2	" " " - Airport/Mark waves from Castle Hill	2	Mon	6.00 am
21	3	QT - Rowena Roberts - Immigration/Unemployment	2	Mon	6.30 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
24	3	James Farrington/Albert Bygrave - lunch at restaurant.in Melbourne discussing QT & Christine	2	Tue	12.30 pm
25	3	Mark & Roger Perelli - cane farm, Innisfail	2	Tue	5.30 pm
26	3	QT - Harvey Ingram (Treasurer) - Taxation	2	Tue	6.30 pm
28	3	Mark & Roger - barbecue	2	Tue	7.00 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
30	3	Marlow tells Straun "must frighten Christine off"	2	Wed	9.30 am
30	3	Christine gets threatening phone call at work	2	Wed	3.00 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
31	4	QT - Farrington - Unemployment	2	Thur	6.30 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
33	4	Christine at work gets another threatening phone call	2	Fri	10.30 am
33	4	Mark - Cardwell - sees ASIO agent - ???	2	Fri	2.30 pm
34	4	Christine at home in Brisbane. - Mark rings her	2	Fri	8.30 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
35	4	Christine's long week - interview segments	3	Mon - Fri	
37	4	Mark - Townsville to Mackay	3	Mon	am-pm
38	4	Mark - Dolphin Heads - sees ASIO agents	3	Mon	5.00 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
38	4	Mark - Mackay to Rockhampton	3	Tues	am/pm
40	4	Dolphin Heads - 2 ASIO cars in Carpark	3	Tues	am
40	4	Mark - Rockhampton/Bundaberg/Brisbane	3	Tues-Fri	
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
41	5	Mark picks up Christine at Channel 5	3	Fri	7.00 pm
42	5	Mark & Christine – car park love scene	3	Fri	7.10 pm
44	5	Mark & Christine arrive Kooralbyn	3	Fri	8.50 pm
44	5	Christine in bedroom - sees Tracey's photos	3	Fri	11.00 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
44	5	Christine & Lilla in kitchen preparing breakfast	3	Sat	8.00 am
45 (L34)	5	Christine & Bruce in garden room - Grand Vision discussion	3	Sat	9.00 am
50	5	Christine/Mark/Bruce/Lilla - continue GV discussion and planing	3	Sat	11.00 am
51	5	Christine/Mark/Bruce plan QT format - Lilla in kitchen, thinking	3	Sat	12.30 am
51	6	Mark/Christine - walk - ? go into politics etc.	3	Sat	4.30 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
53	6	Christine & Lilla in kitchen/breakfast	3	Sun	8.00 am
53	6	Christine & Mark - Polo Hill walk	3	Sun	2.30 pm
54	6	Christine & Mark - Country Club swim	3	Sun	3.00 pm
55	6	Van still on top of Polo Hill	3	Sun	4.30 pm
55	6	Roger Perelli rings Mark after dinner	3	Sun	8.30 pm
56	6	Mark tells Christine being followed/worried - she tells him about phone calls	3	Sun	10.00 pm
-	-	- - - - -	-	-	-
58	6	Mark in Brisbane- Compac/mobile phone/Total Security	4	Mon	10.00 am
59	6	Roger rings Mark on car phone, outside Christine's unit	4	Mon	2.00 pm
60	6	Mark in Christine's unit. Sees family photo	4	Mon	2.30 pm
61	6	Mark & Christine - dinner at Oxleys - Christine tells Mark more phone calls and police called by Lance	4	Mon	8.00 pm
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62	7	Farsley rings Markwell re Grand Vision program - Markwell tries to ring Straun	4	Tue	7.45 am
64	7	Bill O'Brien picks up Kooralbyn photos	4	Tue	4.30 pm

63 (L 9)	7	QT Grand Vision interview Bruce Radford	4	Tue	6.30 pm
70	8	Mark, Bruce, Lilla at Coronation Hotel - Newspaper reports	4	Wed	8.00 am
71	8	Marlow & Straun - what to do about Grand Vision? and put more pressure on Christine. break a leg? /phone call	4	Wed	9.00 am
71	8	Farrington & Bygrave - what to do about Grand Vision?	4	Wed	9.00 am
72	8	Mark, Bruce, Lilla at home - Media - Roger rings Mark	4	Wed	10.30 am
73	8	Wed night TV/Radio - statements by Marlow/Farrington on Grand Vision – QT interviews people on street and announces “Poll Phone In” result.	4	Wed	6.30 pm
74	8	Christine finds dead dog on her doorstep.	4	Wed	7.30 pm
74	8	Christine sees Courier-Mail pool photo - worried	4	Thur	6.00 am
75	8	Courier-Mail Ice Maiden Melts photo & article	4	Thur	6.00 am
75	8	Christine thinks of ramifications - cries	4	Thur	6.10 am
76	8	Christine rings Mark re article and dead dog.	4	Thur	6.30 am
77	8	QT interview - Ernie Hardcastle (ALP President)	4	Thur	6.30 pm
79	8	QT interview - James Farrington	4	Thur	6.30 pm
80	8	QT phone poll result - 63%/37%	4	Thur	6.30 pm
80	9	QT interview - Arthur O'Rourke (ACTU President)	4	Fri	6.30 pm
82	9	QT - Maureen Gibson (Qld state Independent)- Christine Jordan for PM	4	Fri	6.30 pm
83	9	Christine & Mark - car park/scarf - leave for Bundaberg	4	Fri	7.30 pm
84	9	Bundaberg – Courier-Mail - Christine for PM	4	Sat	7.00 am
84	9	Bundaberg - rest of day	4	Sat	am/pm
84	9	Bundaberg - Sunday-Mail - Poll results	4	Sun	9.00 am
84	9	Elliot Heads - Christine brushing Joanne's hair	4	Sun	1.00 pm
85	9	Elliot Heads - Mark & Christine - walk/marriage proposal	4	Sun	2.30 pm
87	9	Bundaberg - Last evening, in lounge room	4	Sun	9.00 pm
87	9	Marlow's bad weekend/Les Scampi (Mark's name/mystery man)	5	Mon	9.00 am
88	9	Christine in unit/worrying/bad day/cries.	5	Mon	7.30 pm
88	9	Mark rings Christine - she worries, cries, makes a decision and tells Mark.	5	Mon	8.00 pm
89	9	Tues papers - Christine & Mark - ? bias - Yes/No/Maybe	5	Tue	am
90	9	Christine & Boswell – she resigns & tells reasons	5	Tue	2.15 pm
91	9	QT - Christine announces resignation and stand for Parliament and engagement to Mark	5	Tue	6.30 pm
91	10	Wed papers – Christine’s resignation/engaged/stand for Parliament	5	Wed	am
91	10	Marlow calls snap election	5	Wed	Noon
92	10	Radio and TV reports on Parliamentarians resigning	5	Wed	pm
92	10	Marlow & Straun - We are doomed/fix that bitch	5	Wed	5.30 pm
93	10	Marlow in his office - fuming/phones someone/fix Christine for good.	5	Thur	9.00 am
94	10	Bruce and Charlie Brent	5	Fri	10.00 am
97	10	Christine drives to Kooralbyn - followed!	5	Fri	7.15 pm
97	10	Christine arrives at Kooralbyn	5	Fri	8.45 pm
97	10	Mark gives Christine engagement ring	5	Fri	10.30 pm
98	10	Weekend gloss over & remember Townsville	5	Sat & Sun	
99	10	Christine leaves Kooralbyn to drive to Brisbane	6	Mon	6.00 am
100	10	Christine crashes into Scrubby Creek/drowning	6	Mon	6.45 am
102	EP	Epilogue - 30 years later in Townsville.			

