

GRAND VISION.

By
J.M.P.Cole.

AUTHOR :
J.M.P.Cole,
Lot 249, Claremont Resort,
431 Park Ridge Road,
Park Ridge, Q. 4125.
AUSTRALIA.

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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 Yous 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."

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