

CHAPTER ONE

I stood at the edge of the grave and sprinkled a handful of soil onto the lid of the coffin, adding it to the mound of clay and carnations. It was a classy box, rosewood with silver handles, befitting its distinguished occupant.

Charles Joseph Talbot, MHR. A cabinet minister in three successive Labor administrations, twice as Minister for Industrial Relations and, until the previous week, member for Coolaroo and manager of opposition business in the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Australia. A pillar of the community. An elder of the tribe.

At sixty-four, Charlie Talbot was as dead as a man can get. It was hard to believe he was gone, even though it had happened right in front of me.

'You're in good hands, mate,' I murmured. 'The Lord's a Labor man.'

Charlie and the Lord went way back. Back to when he was a lay preacher, whatever that means, in the Methodist church. It was down that obscure tributary that Charlie had floated into the union movement, and thence into the Australian Labor Party. A world in which the Lord's name is not often invoked, except in vain.

I couldn't say if Charlie's faith survived the journey. It was not a subject we had ever discussed, although we'd talked of many things, often at great length, in the decades of our friendship. But whether he was now enrolled in the choir eternal or merely, as I suspected, compost, I knew I'd never forget him.

Ceding my place to the next mourner in line, I wandered a little further into the cemetery. It was an autumn afternoon, late in the twentieth century, and there was still enough lustre in the stainless-steel sky to have me squinting against the glare. I pulled a pair of

sunglasses from my breast pocket, lit a pensive cigarette and took in the scene.

After the interminable eulogising of the funeral service, the graveside formalities had been brief. The crowd was drifting away, gravitating down the gravel pathway to the cars at the graveyard gate. The widow was escorted by the federal party leader, a stout man, if only in the physical sense. She was still a good looking woman, Margot, no diminution of assets there.

Charlie's three daughters kept their distance, husbands and children clustered around them as they accepted condolences. Although she'd been married to Charlie for almost ten years, Margot was still the Other Woman as far as his children were concerned. The Jezebel who'd snared their grieving father while the flowers were still fresh on their mother's grave.

She slept elsewhere, the sainted Shirley. She was taking her eternal rest beside her mother and father at Fawkner cemetery, fifteen minutes up the road.

But even in death Charlie had civic obligations. And so it was here in Coburg cemetery, ceremonial burial site of the electorate he had represented for almost twenty years, that his mortal remains were interred. Here, cheek-by-jowl with the district's other deceased dignitaries, a hundred and fifty years of extinct aldermen and mouldering worthies. I suspected Charlie would find them dull company. Not that he was any too lively himself anymore.

Still, he had a pretty good view.

Melbourne is a city of many inclinations but very few hills. Its northern suburbs are almost unremittingly flat but the cemetery occupied the slope of a low ridge, screened from six lanes of traffic by a row of feathery old cypresses, so even the slight rise of the bone yard offered a rare vantage point. To the west stood the grim shell of Pentridge prison, a crane jutting from its innards. The old blue-stone college was currently being made over into luxury apartments

and B Division, home of the hardened, would soon be equipped for designer living. A gated community of the newer kind, vendor finance available.

The last two mourners were lingering at the graveside. Men of Charlie's vintage, dark-suited, they were conducting a hushed but animated conversation across the pit. I contemplated the bleached inscriptions and grievous angels for as long as it took to finish my cigarette, then crushed the butt with the toe of my shoe. At the sound, the pair turned and looked my way.

One of them cocked his head sideways, a summons. He was a compact, beetle-browed man with wavy black hair above an alert, self-assured face. His companion, a stoop-shouldered scarecrow of a man with thinning gingery-grey hair and a matching beard, opened his mouth as if to object, then closed it again. He pushed his thick-framed specta-

cles back up the bridge of his nose and watched me approach.

'Senator,' I said, dipping my head to the darker one.

Senator Barry Quinlan. The grey eminence of the Left faction of the Victorian branch of the Australian Labor Party. Punter, bon vivant, all-round philanthropist and currently the Shadow Minister for Telecommunications.

'Murray,' he nodded back. 'Sad occasion.'

As befitted a champion of the underdog, Quinlan took great care with his appearance. His tailored three-button suit and immaculate white shirt were set off with a Windsor-knotted black tie and expensive cufflinks. The morose beanpole beside him, by contrast, was so nondescript that he might almost have been invisible. But that, I reflected, was Colin Bishop's greatest talent.

'G'day, Col,' I said. 'Or is it Professor Col these days?'

When I'd last seen Colin Bishop, he was running the Trade Union Training Authority. Now he was Pro Vice-Chancellor of Maribyrnong University, a federally funded provider of post-sec-

ondary education in the fields of tourism, food technology and hospitality studies.

'Show some decorum, you cheeky bugger,' said Quinlan.

'A bit of respect for your elders and betters.'

Unholstering a silver hipflask, he toasted the coffin, took a shot and offered it around. I obliged, for form's sake, and passed the flask to Bishop. Col hesitated, then took a long slug.

'Lard-arse Charlie,' he intoned, peering downwards.

'Wonder how they got him in that box?'

'Levered him in with fence pickets,' Quinlan suggested.

There was no malice in the banter. Life goes on. Big boys don't get soppy. We were just four blokes, chewing the rag. Charlie was the quiet one in the rosewood overcoat.

'And you were there when it happened?' said the senator, suddenly serious again.

I nodded. 'Sitting at the same table in the dining room of the Mildura Grand Hotel.'

It was a story I was already sick of telling. But these two were entitled. They'd known Charlie even longer than I had. 'We'd just finished our back-to-the-bush roadshow. Labor

Listens.'

Half a dozen of us trooping around the back-blocks in shiny new Akubras, listening to the yokels bitch about the axing of government services that everybody knew we had neither the present ability nor the future intention to restore. It had been a proper pain in the bum. A thousand kilometres in four days, preaching to the converted in community recreation facilities and civic halls.

'Charlie was in Mildura for some regional and rural gabfest in his capacity as Shadow Minister for Infrastructure. We all ended up at Stefano's for dinner.'

'As you would,' said Quinlan. Stefano's was the town's landmark eatery, five toques in the Age Good Food Guide. 'Did you try the saltbush lamb?'

Colin Bishop looked up from the coffin and sucked his cheeks impatiently.

'Let's just say we made a night of it,' I said. 'First thing next morning, the rest of the team took the early plane back to Melbourne. Charlie and I were booked on the noon flight, so we had time for a leisurely breakfast.'

Poor Charlie, under doctor's instructions to watch his weight, had settled for the fresh fruit compote. If only he'd known it was his last meal, he'd probably have ordered the lamb's fry and bacon.

'We were taking our time over coffee and newspapers when he started to make groaning noises. Not particularly loud so I didn't pay much attention. Just assumed he was muttering to himself as he read. Then, suddenly, the paper cascaded to the floor and he was clawing at his collar. He'd gone all pale and clammy and his eyes were bulging out of his head. Heart attack. Cardiogenic shock.'

Despite the repeated tellings, I still didn't quite believe it.

'What paper?' said Bishop, pushing his glasses up his nose, avid for detail.

'The Herald Sun.'

'Can have that effect,' nodded Quinlan. 'Although it's rarely fatal.'

Bishop eyed me keenly. 'Went quick, did he?'

'Here one minute, bang, gone the next. One of the hotel staff gave him CPR and the paramedics got there pretty fast but he was cactus by the time we reached the hospital.'

On the far side of the cemetery, a back-hoe started up. We were the only ones left now, three men in dark suits, perched on the lip of a grave. A trio of crows. Not a trio. What the hell was the collective noun for crows? A parliament? No, that was owls.

'Heart attack,' said Quinlan as we started towards the gate, hands in pockets. 'It's a caution. None of us are getting any younger.'

Bishop and Quinlan were well into their sixties, older than me by a generation. Quinlan seemed fit enough, buoyed by inexhaustible reserves of self-regard, but Bishop looked well past his use-by date, his skin loose and mottled.

'Let's hope he didn't suffer too much,' said Quinlan. 'I hear you were with him in the ambulance.'

I nodded. It was a short trip, just long enough to make me feel completely fucking useless.

'Unconscious, was he?' said Bishop.

'In and out.'

'No famous last words?'

'More a case of unintelligible last mumbles,' I said.

'Like what?'

'Jesus, Col, you want me to do a fucking impression?'

'Just asking. No need to get shitty.'

We clomped down the slope a bit further. There was a hint of humidity in the air and my skin prickled under my shirt.

'You mean to keep in touch, but somehow you never find the time.' Col was trying to make amends. 'Then you wake up one day and it's too late. Must be donkey's years since I last saw Charlie.'

Quinlan nudged the subject sideways. 'Our young protégé Murray has done well for himself, hasn't he, Col?'

'Mail room to the state legislature,' agreed Bishop, falling back into step. 'Who'd've thunk it?'

'Always a bright one, our Murray,' said Quinlan. 'I saw his potential right from the start, flagged him to Charlie.'

That was news to me. Very late news indeed, two decades old. Colin and I had been working for Charlie well before Barry Quinlan came on the radar. But claiming credit was one of Quinlan's

trademarks. He'd even been heard to maintain that he cut the deal that first got Charlie into federal parliament, all those years ago. If so, he hadn't got much out of it. Charlie was ever his own man.

'The transition will be smooth, I trust,' said Quinlan. 'No hugger-mugger from the locals?'

'How about we let Charlie get cold first?'

'Ah, Murray,' sighed the senator. 'Always the sentimentalist, God love you.'

Simultaneously we checked our watches, busy men, and stepped up the pace. The quick deserting the dead. We made our brief good-byes at the gate. As I headed for my car, I glanced back. Quinlan and Bishop had resumed their private conversation, leaning close and speaking intently. Quinlan's finger was stabbing the air and Bishop kept screwing his neck back towards Charlie's grave. Maybe it was yawning a little too loud for comfort.